



Frisko Cricket

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WINTER 2010

HISTORY, BUNK, & "THE HOT JAZZ SOCIETY OF SAN FRANCISCO"

by William Carter

"History is more or less bunk."
- Henry Ford

In the spring of 2009 your foundation received a stack of photocopied letters courtesy of Director Leon Oakley and his friend Ron Moores, who explained that one John Lemna of Orlando, Florida "had come across the letters at a jazz festival somewhere in New England. The letters had been found on a table with a sign saying 'free take one.'" Copies were also passed on to the editor of "Just Jazz" in England. They bore the letterhead of the Hot Jazz Society of San Francisco in 1947 and 1948. We have been able to discover little about that organization, although its fifteen listed sponsors do include some familiar names from various walks of life: Rudi Blesh, Harry Bridges, Bill Colburn, Hal McIntyre.

Such stuff is perfectly suited to the legend and mystery that continue to swirl around the writer of the letters -- Bunk Johnson.

A well known New Orleans trumpeter

and bandleader in the early 20th century, Bunk was a pioneer in helping transition late instrumental ragtime into classic jazz. Acting on a conversation with New Orleans-born Louis

Armstrong, who had revered such mentors as Bunk and cornetist King Oliver, historian William Russell rediscovered Bunk in 1939 in rural Louisiana.

At that point fresh interest in the original, small-band forms of jazz was beginning to bubble up worldwide. Russell and others got Bunk playing again and arranged visits and gigs

around the U.S., which included a recording session with members of the Yerba Buena band in San Francisco. SFTJF's Emeritus Director Charles Campbell met and heard Bunk in Los Angeles during World War II; contrary to the delicate, dance-like impression many people got from Johnson's recordings, the musically astute Campbell declares, "Bunk was the most power-



Louis Armstrong and Bunk Johnson. Photo by unknown

CONTENTS

HISTORY, BUNK, & "THE HOT JAZZ SOCIETY OF SAN FRANCISCO" by William Carter	1
BUNK'S LAST LETTERS TO DAVID W. BELL with notes by Scott Anthony	3
HISTORICAL NOTE Bunk Johnson obituary from the New York Times, 1949	9
MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION AND PRODUCT LIST	11

ful trumpet player I ever heard."

In 2000 two British-born aficionados, Mike Hazeldine and Barry Martyn, published an exhaustively researched book, Bunk Johnson, Song of the Wanderer. Highly recommended, it is available from Amazon or direct from Jaz-zology Press, 1206 Decatur Street, New Orleans, LA 70116. Hazeldine and Martyn evidently had access to the letters we have received, or at least to the facts referred to therein.

However, the mystery of the letterhead persists. It includes a photo of Louis with Bunk, announcing, with exaggeration, the former as student and the latter as teacher. ♪

Note: The following is an excerpt from a 1998 article by our former board member, the late Phil Elwood, in the *San Francisco Examiner*:

"In '39-'40 the Hot Jazz Society of San Francisco, a group dominated (at first) by argumentative

record collectors, met regularly in a former Annie Street speakeasy called the Dawn Club. Like the Hot Club of France which met in a Paris bistro, the S.F. Hot Jazz Society (after a few meetings) made live music a part of its agenda.

After listening one meeting to Saunders King, a fine amplified guitarist who sang like Nat "King" Cole, and his "modern swing" unit, and the next month to Lu Watters and his traditional New Orleans-style Yerba Buena Jazz Band, the Hot Jazz Society membership opted for the Watters band, who soon got a regular weekend gig at the Dawn Club making a few records before the wartime draft snagged most of them. "

Read the entire article:

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/e/a/1998/02/27/WEEKEND14362.dtl&hw=INFORMATION+SOCIETY&sn=055&sc=252#ixzz0bPBD14JJ> ♪

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BUNK'S LAST LETTERS, 1946-1948

TO DAVID W. BELL

See all the letters at <http://www.sftradjazz.org/bunkletters.php?c=zxcvb>



LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND "BUNK" JOHNSON
(Student) (Teacher)

Hot Jazz Society
of San Francisco

1/25/47,

Sponsors:

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Bill Colburn
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Ray Geraldo
Don Hambley
Emelia Hodel
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Sarah Sherman
Peter Tamony
Vernon White

Dear David,

Answering to your letter of Dec 3rd, as I ware unable to answer it by return mail? now that is becouse. I hvae been sick in bed. with a real bad chest cold. but Im up again now, an able to write again.

now Friend David, yeas I did receive Everything. that you sent to me. an ware real glad. an Im also wishing you. a great success this New Year. an a lost of Joy an Happenest too.

say Dave by the way. I wrote our Friend Don Ewell. a real long letter. yesterday in the after noon. an he is out of work at this present time. so here is his Adress. if you would like to write him. 312 N Rampart St. New Orleans La, an he will get your mail at once.

now David will you get in touch. with my Friend Bill Noughborough. an ask him for that large Envelope. with my music in it. an will you please send it to me at once. now you can send it C.O.D. my mail. my Friend.

an here is something Els. I would like to know if you know. do you know. or would you know. of anyone that have a real good 38 Revolver. that I could buy. if so will you get it for me. an pack it an Express it to me. C.O.D. at once. an I will take care of it. as soon as it arrive's here. so will you look one up for me.

now I have a few Shot Guns. but not a good Revolver at all. so will you do your very best. in trying to locate one for me Dave. as soon as you can. an send it out here to me. now they have them out here in New Iberia. but a Negro cannot buy one. becouse they donot sell them to Negro's at all. some town to live in Pal.

say Dave Maud ask me. to as you. would you sell her a Record Recorded by Joe Turner. the Title is My Gal's A Jockey. an on the other Side is. I Got Love For Sale. Joe Turner. with Bill Moore's Lucky Seven Band. an she will pay you for it. or you can send it C.O.D. too. an you be sure to write me at once. an let me here from you my good Friend. now I will close. looking to here from you real soon. so good luck an good nite.

Bunk seems to be almost obsessed with getting hold of a "real good 38 Revolver."

Sincerly Yours,
Willie (Bunk) Jhonson,
638 Franklin St.,
New Iberia La,

Willie (Bunk) Johnson,
638 Franklin St
New Iberia La,

1/13/48.

Dear David, -Marilyn,

Just a letter to let you all hear from me. an also to thank you all for my chirstmas gift that swell check. plus all of the other things that you all have done for me in chicago.

an my wife she join in with me. wishing you all a merry christmas an a happy new year. an a great success all the year through. now David I would like to know. just when you all are planning on making that trip to new york.

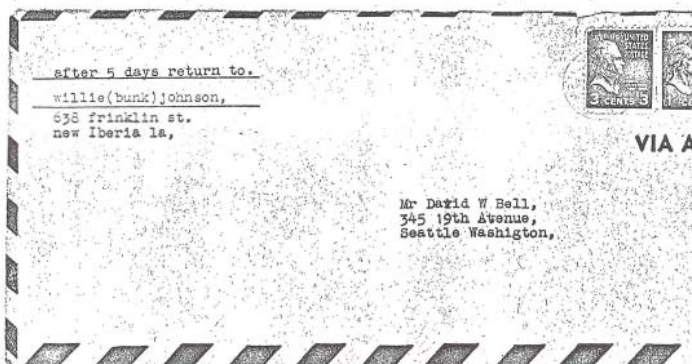
or you all are going thair to live for good. an if so will you let me know the whole set up about it. that is so I will try an meet you all thair.

now David I'm here at home but no work. an this dam town is real dead for a working man. so I'm planning on moveing away from here. sometime this year real soon. so will you please keep in touch with me pal now I have a real good band in new york David. but donot have any job for the band.

so if you should hear of any good job. playing at some good nite club in washington. please let you know at once. say by the way David can you get me some buckshots. an send them out here to me. as we can not get any here in Iberia. they will not sell them to the negroes. at all. so I'm asking you to send me a box of them Dave. before the seasc is over for my kind of hunting.

now David. you an your wife must take good care of each other. an you write me real soon pal. an let me hear from you all. an I will do the same too. now I will close looking to hear from you all by return mail. so good luck an good day my great friend David W Bell,

Sincerly Yours,
Bunk Johnson,



1/14/48,

Willie (Bunk) Johnson,
638 Franklin St.
New Iberia La,

Dear Dave- Marilyn,

Just a letter to let you all hear from me. an also to thank you all for you fine letter. an my shells an the two bucks. an do wish that I could see you all at this present. an have a real good talk with you an Marilyn. about a good meny of things.

now David back to the shells. now my good pal it was some buck shots what I had ask you to try an get for me. as we cannot get nothing li- le that out here. they will not sell them to the poor negro's at all. so it is real hell for us to go deer hunting. an it takes the buck shots to do the work. an that is the thing that we cannot get out here. bue anyway I thank you for the ones that you sent out here to me.

now Dave here is just what I wishing. I hope that you an Marilyn will move back out to chicago an live again. as you all are better knowing in chicago. an all of your good friends an pals are in chicago. an I do think that it is the best place. for you an Marilyn to live becouse you an her know that city in an out. from bottom to the top of it.

so I'm praying that you all will see it. that same way Dave an go back out to chicago an settle down for good. becouse that is the place for you an her to live. an she will be near all of her dear family. an it will cost you all lest alots. for you an her to go an see them an my fine dog.

so I hope that you will try. an get a place in chicago an move back to the land of dream. an go in to some kind of business like a bar an grill. an put Don -me- a good drumer in it. an have music in it everynite just like the Victory Club an the jazz Ltd, an a meny or more is running in chicago.

now Dave why don't you write John Schenck. as he always said when he wo- uld get his \$10,000.00, that he wanted to go in to some kind of busines an that is the last news. that I receive from our good friend Bill Loug- hborough. now I'm real sure. that Bill said some real good news about Joh- being in new york for a few days. then he would on out to chicago. for t be at home on the date of getting that money of his.

so now you write him an findout. if he is still planning on going in to some kind of business. now Dave Bill told me in his last letter. that ou friend John Schenck. told him that when he would get his money. that his plans ware to go back out on the coast to frisco. an open up a place an he would use. Chippie Hill-Lee Collins to play for him. in sted of me an he know's that he owe me just about \$800.00. an he also owe Ewell for t time that he use Don-Me. now that is including all of our expense. an no he donot want to know me an do owe me. but I hope that you will talk to him. about the way that he treated me. after having me to come out to ch- cago an be with him. so I'm closeing an looking forward to hear from yo an Marilyn real soon. so you all take it real easy. an good luck an good day. an write me an Maud soon. so Maud is joining me sending you all our verybest regaeds,

Sincerly Yours,
Bunk Johnson,



LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND "BUNK" JOHNSON
(Student) (Teacher)

Hot Jazz Society

of San Francisco

4/8/48,

Willie (Bunk) Johnson,
638 Franklin St
New Iberia La,

Sponsors:

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Rudi Blesh
Harry Bridges
Bill Colburn
Alfred Frankenstein
Ray Goraldo
Don Hambley
Emella Hodel
Ted Lens
Hal McIntyre
Alice I. Rivers
H. Irving Rosenberg, Jr.
Sarah Sherman
Peter Tamopy
Vernon White

Dear David-Marilyn,

Your kind letter have been receive. an we ware real glad to hear from you all. an do hope that you all are in real good health. an you all are enjoying the very best of health at this present time.

now Dave I must say. that you an Marilyn are the best friends that we have at this present time. an we do think alots of you all an we will never forget you all as long as we live.

now about the check that you sent to me. that was real great David for me to receive it. because we didnot have any money at all. an things at the present are real dead here with us. because we cannot get any work here at all. so that just keeps our mind all up set. to be at home an no work. an I am a man that do need a job of some kind.

so the position that I am in at this present. I just cannot get in my mind to start writing a book. because my mind is all up set about my expense's here to live off. an everyrthing is real expensive for every one these late days. for a man that have a family to take care of.

so as soon as I can get a job of some kind. I will start to write a big book all about my whole life. now David my great friend. to write a book. a mans mind must be all settled an he is at ease. an nothing for to worry about at all. then he can have good luck in writing that book an the book will come out real good. so I hope that you do understand me. because a man cannot have to meny things. in his mind when he would like to do one great thing. so will you look in to that. an you will find out that what I'm saying. is the right thing about writing a book or anything els.

now Dave I am also thanking you an Marilyn. for your great help that I receive from you all a few days ago. an we will always remember a real friend. an that is you an Marilyn. an I want to say Dave. that I'm praying that your letter to John Schenck. it will open up his heart an he will change a be a real man like you. an send me some money of somekind because I trusted him. an thought that he was a real fine man like you. an he had a word an that he would do. just what he said he would do an that was to pay me every thing that he ow'ed me. so it is all up to him he is the man with the money. now I am in hopes that he will do so immediately. because he is the one that is got me in this position to day. by keeping me in chicago three long months.

so I will close my great friend. an will be looking forward to hear from you an Marilyn. real soon again my real great friends. so good luck a good day to you all. an please write me an Maud real soon again,

Yuors Sincerely,
Old Man Bunk,

638 Franklin St.

New Iberia, La

Nov 2, 1948

Dear David

just a letter to let you ^{know} what happen
 5 Bunk. today about noon. He was at
 the type write. writing a letter when
 he fell out and couldn't call.

What draw my intence is when I
 heard the type write fell. and when I
 went to see he couldn't talk. he was
 not stiff. But he is talking now

So I done the best I new at the
 present was to call a Doctor. and the
 Dr Said his blood was high and
 it was like a light stroke please don't
 mention about the light stroke because
 I don't want him to worry.

He said he really Sorry you are so
 far from him, knowing that you would
 give me a great help in the line of
 money. if possible. So please send me

New Haven, Conn.
Dec. 18, 1948

Page 1 of the letter of December 18, 1948. Bunk is getting worse and he and Maude's situation is pretty desperate.

Dear Dave + Marilyn
Just these few lines to let you know that I had to rush Bunk to the hospital. Last.

They have to put him on Oxygen Because his wind was so short.

Now Dave I couldn't send him to a charity hospital because he it is out of town and Bunk couldn't of made the trip.

Now I don't know how many days Bunk will be in the hospital and don't know how every thing will turn out.

So I would be glad if you could send me what you are able to send and help me out with hospital expense.

Page 2 of the letter of December 18, 1948. "Now Dave Bunk is in a severe condition."

Now Dave Bunk is in a severe condition.

I am trying to do my very best with Bunk. So there for the hospital is the last place.

I wish you all a merry Xmas and a happy New Year.

Sincerely
Maude Johnson

HISTORICAL NOTE

NEW YORK TIMES OBITUARY

BUNK JOHNSON, 69, TRUMPET PLAYER

Jazz Stylist Who Began in New Orleans Dies --- Featured at 2 Town Hall Concerts

William Gary (Bunk) Johnson, noted Negro trumpet player, died on Thursday in his home in New Iberia, La., according to word received here last night by friends. He would have been 70 years old on Sept. 24.

Bunk Johnson was a legendary figure in jazz. He started playing the French horn as a school-boy in New Orleans, where his mother, Theresa, ran a Creole lunch room. He played first with Adam Oliviter's band. The other players followed the score, but Bunk was unable to read, and he soon switched to Buddy Bolden's band, where it was all improvisation and ear. In those days the competition between bands was so keen that during Mardi Gras and parades, they would drown each other out. Bunk was considered the originator of the New Orleans style of jazz trumpet playing.

He played continuously except for two interludes -- the Spanish-American and the first World Wars -- in both of which he served as an Army bandmaster overseas. Then, in 1931, he lost his teeth. He took to working in the rice fields and doing other odd jobs. Shortly before the outbreak of the recent war he was "rediscovered" by William Russell, who arranged to provide him with a set of store teeth. Bunk began again as a trumpet player and achieved greater fame than the first time.



Bunk Johnson in 1945
Photo comes from Jazzways Magazine. It was used as cover for a RCA Hot Jazz album.
Photograph by Skippy Adelman, 1945.
From <http://www.weijs.scarlet.nl/bjf.htm>
Web page created by Willem Weijs

He starred in a jazz concert in San Francisco, and then came to New York, where he made a series of records with his band for Victor, Decca and other leading record firms. In 1945, at the age of 65, he was band leader at the Stuyvesant Casino, Second Avenue and Ninth Street. He was lionized by the younger generation of jazz enthusiasts, and articles about him appeared in The New Yorker, Collier's and other publications.

In 1946 Bunk Johnson and his New Orleans Band were the featured principals of a jazz concert at the Town Hall here. He played his favorites, "A New Orleans Street Parade" and "Maryland, My Maryland." In 1947 he was again featured at Town Hall, under the auspices of the New York Jazz Club.

He was the teacher of Louis Armstrong, trumpet virtuoso.

Surviving is his widow, Maude. They had twelve children, eleven of whom were living in 1945, and ten grandchildren.

(The New York Times, July 1949)



[Paid advertisement]

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Created as a non-profit in 1981, the San Francisco Traditional Jazz Foundation stated, as its primary mission, the archival preservation of thousands of items related to the West Coast Jazz Revival that began in San Francisco about 1939. In 2009 SFTJF completed the transfer of the main body of those materials to the Stanford University's Music Library. Thereupon, your Foundation's Archive was closed; possible donors of jazz materials should now contact Stanford or other public repositories.

SFTJF's wider, ongoing aim is to help foster high-quality traditional jazz, regionally and worldwide. That mission is now carried out primarily via electronic media. The Foundation's main window on the world is our website -- www.sftradjazz.org -- where visitors are invited to become members at \$25 per year.

Benefits of membership include insider information and discounts to special events and products, and a subscription to our lively newsletter, the Cricket, now available electronically. Those wishing to continue receiving the Cricket on paper in the mail should please contact the SFTJF office manager.

Thank you for your generous support over the years. Contributions in categories beyond the basic membership level are tax deductible, and the names of those contributors are published annually (unless a contributor specifies anonymity).

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The San Francisco Traditional Jazz Foundation accepts gifts and grants in many forms, including historical items which shed further light on the history of traditional jazz on the West Coast, such as recordings, music, newspaper clippings, photographs and correspondence. Contributions of materials or funds are tax-deductible under IRS ruling status 501(c)(3).

SF JAZZ ON THE WEB

The San Francisco Traditional Jazz Foundation has an ever-expanding web site. The site includes sound files and photos of many San Francisco (and other) jazz figures from the 1930s to the present. Please visit us at www.sftradjazz.org. Join (or rejoin) the San Francisco Traditional Jazz Foundation today to begin taking advantage of reservations to special events, discounts on selected jazz books and recordings, and a year's subscription to *The Frisco Cricket*. If you are already a member, give the gift of Foundation membership to a friend! Use the form at right.



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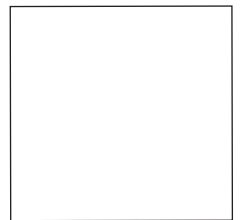
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