

They Called it Jazz

Frank Chace — Free Spirit of the Clarinet

(This is the 69th in a series of biographies of great traditional jazz musicians. Continued from the May-June Jazz Rambler.)

By Hal Smith
President, AFCDJS

Another highlight for the clarinetist in 1957 was the opportunity to meet Lester Young when both were performing in Indianapolis. One night, after their club date, drummer Buddy Smith offered to take Chace to the hotel where Young was staying. The other musicians gathered around "The Prez," but Chace hesitated. Young finally asked the shy clarinetist to join the throng, addressing him as "Long-Distance Man." Compare Lester Young's introspective clarinet playing on "I Want a Little Girl" (with the Kansas City Six) with Chace's on "For No Reason at All in C" from the "Hooray For Bix" session. In Lester Young's own words, "See if you hear something."

In 1959, Chace was reunited with Don Ewell and John Dengler when Grosz assembled a recording band for the *Audio Fidelity* label. The band, with Max Kaminsky, Cutty Cutshall, Gene Schroeder (alternating sessions with Ewell) and Don Maclean, recorded enough material for two LPs — "Roaring Twenties at the Gaslight" and "Banjo at the Gaslight Club." As good as these recordings are, Chace is even better on some private tapes made during the same period. One of these, a session at Bill Priestley's home in the summer of 1959, features the clarinetist in a trio with Ewell and Grosz. Musicians and jazz fans agree that Chace's playing on

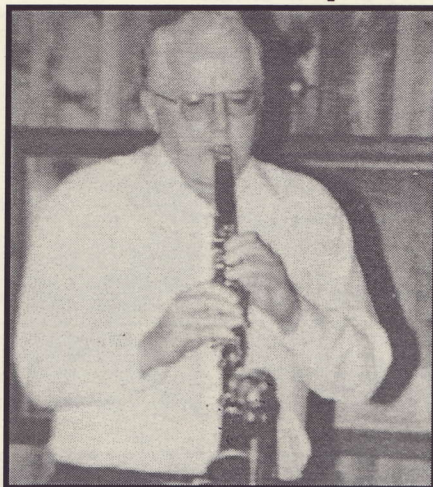


photo by Don Hoos

"I Can't Believe that You're in Love With Me" ranks with "Sorry" as one of his greatest performances.

During the early and mid '60s, except for a brief stint with Muggsy Spanier, Chace worked with the Salty Dogs and also led his own bands. One such group included veterans Johnny Mendel, Floyd O'Brien, Tut Soper and Jim Lanigan as well as younger musicians, Bob Skiver, Grosz and Wayne Jones. When this group played for the Chicago Historical Society in 1964, they were joined by a very special guest, Gene Krupa!

A late-'60s Chicago recording session by guitarist/vocalist Jim Kweskin resulted in three more classic Chace solos. The album, "Jump For Joy," released in 1967, paired Kweskin with cornetist Ted Buttermen's Neo-Passé Jazz Band. In addition to Buttermen, the personnel consisted of Chace (clarinet and bass sax); Kim

Cusack, clarinet; Johnny Frigo, violin; Grosz (guitar, banjo and arranger); Truck Parham, bass; and Wayne Jones, drums. Fellow reedman Kim Cusack called Chace's playing on "You're Not the Only Oyster in the Stew" "one of the sublime moments in jazz." The clarinet choruses on "Memphis Blues" and "There'll Be Some Changes Made" are two more outstanding examples of Frank Chace at his best.

Recently, the *GHB* label released a two-CD set of Chace playing with a specially-assembled band in 1967 at the Emporium of Jazz in Mendota, Minnesota. The group included Bill Price (cornet), Jimmy Archey (trombone), Don Ewell (piano), Bill Evans (bass) and Sammy Price (drums). A cursory glance at the personnel and their stylistic differences might cause concern. However, the musicians, particularly Chace and Ewell, sound wonderful together.

About Chace, musician/author Richard Hadlock explains, "Most jazz players learn to adjust, at least somewhat, to shallow audiences, wrongheaded entrepreneurs, pandering bandleaders and jaded or inept sidemen.

"Not clarinetist Frank Chace, however. Over the 30-some years I've been observing his largely hidden talent, I have heard story after story to do with Frank's losing out because he wouldn't play 'pretty' or 'straight' or 'traditional' or some other term that meant going outside his own way of making music....

"There have been occasions when Frank simply would not take a paying

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Frank Chace ...

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but dumb job. At other times he hasn't been hired or was let go because someone wanted to hear, say, "Stardust" and didn't recognize Frank's version of it. The result is that Frank Chace has kept one of the lowest profiles among outstanding jazz players."

During the 1970s, Chace also listened closely to the music of John Coltrane and other modern jazzmen. In the right setting, his solos often went farther "out" than ever before!

This writer's first encounter with Frank Chace was on April 28, 1985. Pianist Butch Thompson assembled a band to play a concert for the Good Time Jazz Club in Libertyville, Illinois. Butch invited Frank to play clarinet, in a group that included Charlie Devore, cornet; John Otto, alto sax; Jack Meilahn, guitar; Bill Evans, bass; and myself on drums. It was an unbelievable thrill to hear that intense, wailing, clarinet coming from directly in front of the drums! The concert flew by much too fast, and my only contact with Frank Chace for the next year would be written correspondence. The letters are

priceless, especially for the humor. In one exchange, he obviously remembered the salutation on my first letter ("Dear Mr. Chace"). At the end of a very funny letter, which ran to several pages, he signed off as *Your Friend, Mr. Chace*.

In 1986, he was flown to New York, to perform at the JVC Jazz Festival's "Chicago Jazz Summit." An LP was subsequently issued, featuring several instrumental combinations recorded live at the festival. Unbelievably, Chace is only heard on **one** track. However, it is a rip-roaring version of "At the Jazz Band Ball," played by Yank Lawson, George Masso, Eddie Miller, Truck Parham, Ikey Robinson, Barrett Deems and festival producer George Wein. Though we can wish that Chace was heard on more tracks, it is safe to say that his two idiosyncratic choruses are easily worth the price of the record!

My final gig with "Mr. Chace" was in 1987, another concert for the Good Time Jazz Club. On that occasion, I led the "Chicago Loopers" which also included Tom Pletcher, cornet; Tom Bartlett, trombone; Joe Johnson, piano; and Dan Shapera, bass. Frank's playing that day — passionate, rasping, keening, whispered — was other-

worldly. It was an indescribable high.

He continued to play with unlimited creativity for nearly 20 more years. In 2001, Drummer Wayne Jones played with Chace at a gig sponsored by Delmark's Bob Koester. He reported that "Frank sounded not the least dimmed by the passing years."

Frank Chace died on 28 Dec., 2007. He never gave up that fight to keep a wild, free heart.

Following is a list of recent CD issues that feature Frank Chace:

- Salty Dogs 1955 (*Windin' Ball* CD-105)
- Marty Grosz & the Honoris Causa Jazz Band: Hooray for Bix (*Good Time Jazz* 10065-2)
- Marty Grosz & the Cellar Boys 1951/ Honoris Causa Jazz Band alternate takes 1957 (*J&M* CD-004)
- Jim Kweskin with Ted Buttermann & the Neo-Passé Jazz Band: Jump for Joy (*Universe* UV0051)
- Jimmy Archey & Don Ewell at the Emporium of Jazz 1967 (*GHB* BCD-461/462)
- Chicago Jazz Summit (*Atlantic* 81844-2)

These sessions are currently being prepared for release on *Jazzology*:

- Jabbo Smith - 1961
- Butch Thompson and his Boys in Chicago - 1985

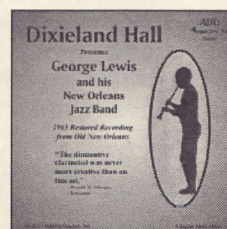
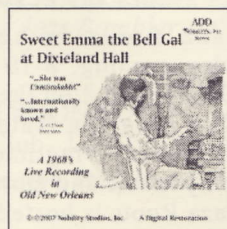
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