

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.)

By Hal Smith
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Chicago pianist Oro "Tut" Soper once said, "A Chicago Jazz musician will always have to fight to keep a free, wild heart." For over 60 years, clarinetist Frank Chace fought for that same freedom.

Chace was born in Chicago on July 22, 1924 — over three years before the first classic recordings that would define the Windy City's musical style. As a youth he played flute, but did not stay with the instrument. In 1943, while attending Yale University, he was drafted by the U.S. Army. The Army is often castigated, justly, for its treatment of musicians such as Lester Young. Luckily for Frank Chace, his Army hitch yielded a benefit — a posting to New York, which resulted in an opportunity to hear Pee Wee Russell at Nick's. Chace was instantly drawn to Russell's idiosyncratic sound. He took up clarinet and used Pee Wee Russell's music as a template for his own playing.

His first recordings were made with the "Cellar Boys" in New York in 1951. The personnel included three musicians who became lifetime friends of Chace: guitarist Marty Grosz, multi-instrumentalist John Dengler and pianist Dick Wellstood. (The great New Orleans bassist Pops Foster and Jelly Roll Morton's drummer Tommy Benford also played on the records).

Later in 1951, Chace played with



Wild Bill Davison at George Wein's Storyville Club in Boston. Two of the evenings with Davison were recorded and several tracks were issued on the *Savoy* label.

In 1952, Chace played at the Barrel in St. Louis. The band included another lifelong friend, pianist Don Ewell. Live recordings made at the Barrel indicate that although Pee Wee Russell was still his main inspiration, Chace had also listened to Omer Simeon, Johnny Dodds, Frank Teschemacher and Darnell Howard.

After the St. Louis job ended, Chace established permanent residence in Chicago. In 1955 he played with the Salty Dogs. He also recorded with pianist Dave Remington for the *Jubilee* label and with Natty Dominique's New Orleans Hot Six for Windin' Ball. (Dominique's group also included the

legendary Baby Dodds and Lil Hardin Armstrong). Two years later Chace played a concert in Minneapolis with Doc Evans, later issued on a *Soma* LP.

One of Frank Chace's greatest performances was recorded in 1957, when Marty Grosz organized a recording session for the *Riverside* label. The record, "Hooray For Bix," by the Honoris Causa Jazz Band, featured Chace on clarinet and bass sax. The other sidemen were Carl Halen, cornet; Bud Wilson, trombone; Bob Skiver, tenor sax and clarinet; Tut Soper, piano; Chuck Neilson, bass; and Bob Saltmarsh, drums. Bill Priestley, a longtime friend of Bix Beiderbecke, played cornet and guitar on a few tunes. Grosz played guitar, led the band and wrote the arrangements. His charts were based on the sound of Bud Freeman's Summa Cum Laude band (which was also the inspiration for the band name). Chace is in top form throughout the record, but his first chorus on "Sorry" is the crown jewel of the session. After the four-bar introduction by the horns and string bass, the horns play the melody in tight harmony. Chace floats above the ensemble, joyfully deconstructing the melody in the best tradition of Pee Wee Russell. His use of extended harmonics and rhythmic suspension is as close to "free jazz" as one can get in a swing setting. This breathtaking chorus is Chace's supreme moment and one of the most inspired solos in the history of recorded jazz!

Continued in the July-August Rambler

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