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## WILKIE'S STORY: DOMINANT HISTORIES, HIDDEN MUSICIANS, AND COSMOPOLITAN CONNECTIONS IN JAZZ

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In this chapter, I want to examine the relationship between established traditions and hidden histories to explore ways in which local musicians play a part in creating, informing and disrupting dominant narratives. As Tim Wall and Simon Barber have stressed in their study of Birmingham-based musician collectives, researching local musicians can challenge both the totalizing histories that define jazz and the dominant representations of British jazz. By examining the lives of local jazz musicians, we have the potential to create valuable alternative narratives that shed light on the unique distribution of music in different regional and historical contexts (Wall and Barber 2015, 119-120).

Furthermore, rather than viewing the work of a musician in one isolated setting, I want to consider the relationship between local musicians and global events, between hidden histories and dominant histories, and to explore ways in which jazz both reflects local sensibilities and has functioned as a transnational music over time, informed by cosmopolitan influences and international encounters. I want to use the personal or family archive as a route to the discovery of new insights into specific historical periods and cultural contexts and, through one musician's story, offer an alternative to limited representations of jazz history. Family archives can be used as a basis for discussing the hidden histories of musicians and the role they play in the ecologies of jazz; I want to show how archival materials such as these can provide compelling examples of hidden musicians who have contributed to the development of jazz in complex and multidimensional ways. Finally, I aim to reflect on the historical relationship between musicians, entrepreneurs, promoters and audiences, exploring the multifaceted roles that musicians have performed historically, and continue to play, and how these hidden roles inform jazz discourses more broadly.

### **Constructed, hidden and micro histories**

Over the past 30 years, the development of New Jazz Studies has led to the creation of new, cross-disciplinary perspectives on jazz history, where naturalized presentations of the past have been replaced with complex cultural readings of history and historiography. Indeed, as this Companion demonstrates, jazz research now features a plurality of methods that have sought to disrupt ever-popular canonical, linear and causal narratives (Whyton 2010). In his influential essay *Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography* Scott DeVeaux demonstrated how what we come to understand as jazz history is often shaped by ideological choices, mediating

influences, and the constantly changing values of particular cultural groups. In constructing a tradition, decisions about what is included and excluded from history often fall to institutions charged with creating and preserving a sense of shared cultural heritage, or to influential gatekeepers who seek to celebrate and champion certain cultural forms over others. Within a jazz context, one only needs to consider the output of Martin Williams - whose books and work on the Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz (Smithsonian P6 11891) attempted to define the jazz tradition - to get a clear idea of the way in which the history is both narrated and often invented. For example, DeVaux describes the way in which Williams truncated Louis Armstrong's 1926 recording "Big Butter and Egg Man" for the Smithsonian collection in order to construct an idealized view of jazz history:

"[W]hat was left out? The first thing removed was a full chorus by the other star performer, the vaudeville singer May Alix. Relatively little is recorded in jazz history about Alix. We know that she worked at the Sunset Café, and that she used to do splits on stage. But such vague information about vaudeville performers is typical in jazz history, despite the fact that some of them (like Butterbeans and Susie) occasionally crop up on early jazz recordings. Alix's presence — and ultimately, her absence from the Smithsonian — tells us a good deal about boundaries. Eliminating her from the recording helps to separate jazz from two things simultaneously: gender and commerce" (DeVaux 2005, 24).

This example offers a simple demonstration of how jazz history can be written and rewritten to support particular ideological constructions of the past. Somewhat problematically, the constructed nature of traditions is often overlooked or downplayed, as a sense of the past becomes naturalized and history is presented as fixed and unchanging. Here, it is important to remember that all histories are written in retrospect and are often fraught with contradiction; what jazz means is very much dependent on cultural perspective, or the values that are expressed in different times and places.

Within this context, studying hidden or local histories can offer jazz scholars a powerful means of addressing these issues; hidden histories not only offer an alternative to dominant narratives about the past but they also provide added layers of complexity to the historicizing process. Published at a similar time to a number of seminal New Jazz Studies texts, Ruth Finnegan's book *The Hidden Musicians* offered a challenge to traditional representations and modes of understanding music through an ethnographic study of local music scenes in Milton Keynes. Her influential work highlighted the importance of amateur music making in everyday life, and unveiled the overlapping infrastructures, dynamics, and organizational characteristics of local musical networks that, until that time, had frequently remained hidden to participants and audiences alike. In her introduction to the revised 2007 edition of the book, Finnegan also highlighted a range of areas where the concept of the "The Hidden Musician" could be expanded and developed in future, for example, to include studies of professional contexts for music making, the impact of mass media and technology on changing representations and understandings of music, or on the contribution of minority groups to the development of local scenes (Finnegan 2007, xi-xv). These issues have as much relevance to jazz studies today as they did thirty years ago. For example, understanding the role musicians play in everyday life, what jazz means to people in different contexts, and how the music has been invented, adapted and transformed across time and place, are pressing issues for jazz researchers today. Equally, it is important to understand why certain musicians and minority groups have been excluded from popular histories of the music.

In his book *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music*, George Lipsitz suggests that the study of hidden histories inevitably involves a blending of the public and private, given that details about musicians not featured in dominant narratives will equally not be featured in the holdings of official archives, public libraries and museums. In putting together his study of the hidden in popular music, Lipsitz promotes the need to examine the ‘alternative archives of history, the shared memories, experiences, and aspirations of ordinary people, whose perspectives rarely appear in formal archival collections.’ (Lipsitz xi) Lipsitz’s efforts to present a multitude of perspectives and the politics of narrative evoke the broader field of microhistory, where scholars have advocated the need to move historical research beyond what is published or held in public archives. Building on this, microhistorians are not only interested in facts but also in perspectives and they have also been keen to build the narrative procedures of research itself into their own work, to include identifying agendas (including their own) and the limitations of documentary evidence, as well as highlighting techniques of persuasion and interpretative constructions. This acknowledgment of perspective, narrative procedures and potential biases breaks with the traditional idea of historical writing being absolute, assertive and authoritarian, and reality being understood as purely objective. As Giovanni Levi states, “Microhistory tries not to sacrifice knowledge of individual elements to wider generalization, and in fact it accentuates individual lives and events. But, at the same time, it tries not to reject all forms of abstraction since minimal facts and individual cases can serve to reveal more general phenomena” (Levi 109). Microhistorians have sought to identify contradictions within standard historical representations and, subsequently, the social is not perceived as an object to be studied but is instead regarded as a set of ever-shifting relationships.

Microhistories enable a rethinking of previously assumed knowledge by focusing on the detail of individual lives or moments in time. The change in scale and focus of investigation provides a means of injecting new life into previously represented subjects to reveal new meanings for historians. For Levi, microhistory promotes the “belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved” (Levi 96-97) and that by focusing on specific details in everyday life, general concepts about the historical process can be exemplified.

Taken as a whole, work on constructed, hidden and microhistories promotes a fluidity of understanding the past that rejects binary constructions and rigid typologies. The challenge for jazz scholars today is not simply to replace dominant and canonical narratives with alternative local and hidden histories. Indeed, by resisting binary formations of history, it is important to explore intersections between local and dominant histories, to consider how the lives of hidden musicians both within and outside the US have informed and been informed by the household names of jazz, and to examine how dominant narratives around jazz have been formulated and sustained. By doing this, it would be possible to move the field of jazz studies forward by creating a more complex and holistic picture both of the historicizing process and the ecologies of jazz, as well as the multifaceted roles musicians play in everyday life. To illustrate some of these points, I want to draw on a recent encounter with the family archive to demonstrate how the hidden and the dominant, the private and the public, the local and the global, intersect.

### **Exploring the family archive: Wilkie’s Story**

My mother-in-law recently handed me a box of materials that belonged to her uncle William – or Wilkie - Davison. On presenting the box of materials, she said that she was not sure about the contents and whether any of the materials had any meaning in relation to Wilkie’s career or broader value in terms of jazz history. Wilkie was a clarinet and saxophone player who developed a career as a multi-instrumentalist and entrepreneur from the late 1920s onwards. According to family recollections, Wilkie began his career as a brush salesman and began playing music as a sideline amateur pursuit.

Opening the box, I was surprised to see a range of materials from different parts of Wilkie’s musical life including photographs (many of which were signed or had personal messages inscribed on them), press clippings, brochures, festival programs (including a copy of the 1948 Nice Jazz Festival program) and correspondence linked to specific engagements Wilkie was coordinating as a bandleader and intermediary. The materials spanned a 25-year period, dating from the late 1920s to the early 1950s.

On first inspection, many of the materials appeared unrelated; there were general publicity photographs, letters and programs, but following the dating and chronicling of materials, cross-referencing certain information with the UK National Jazz Archive and undertaking conversations with family members, three overarching themes emerged that feed directly into the discussion of constructed and hidden histories outlined above. These themes are by no means exhaustive but provide an illustration of the potential of the studies of local musicians and family archives to reveal the powerful and dynamic networks that underpin the transnational development of jazz.

### **Adapting to change – entrepreneurial spirit**

Looking through the materials, I was immediately struck by the way in which Wilkie’s career exemplifies an entrepreneurial spirit. As a musician working from the late 1920s to the 1940s, the personal archive reflected the period’s musical and cultural changes compellingly, from photographs of the Shanghai Five (image 1.1) dating from the late 1920s to letters of thanks for performing at a benefit concert for the Bakelite Company in 1941 in support of the war effort. Wilkie was clearly adaptable, performing music that catered for the needs of the time and reflected contemporary attitudes.

<IMAGE 1.1 HERE>

For example, consider the Shanghai Five. Wilkie’s materials include an original program from a dinner, cabaret dance at the Hotel Metropole in London in 1928 which featured the Shanghai Five as the resident band, alongside a couple of photographs of the group on stage. Within the context of the late 1920s, Shanghai could be seen as a simple novelty signifier of the exotic, a marketing gimmick to appeal to British cafe society. However, in an era where the American jazz age was at its peak, Shanghai would have meant something to British audiences. The Chinese city would have appealed to British dance band society as a symbol of the internationalization of the music, the performers, and Britain’s connections with one of the world’s largest cities (indeed, around this time, Shanghai was regarded as the Paris of the East, the cabaret and jazz center of Asia). As Catherine Tackley has noted, British dance bands in the mid-1920s, such as the Savoy Orpheans, promoted themselves as ‘international orchestras’ and the activities of American musicians in

Britain were increasingly opposed during this time (Parsonage 2005, 172). Indeed, British dance band culture was undergoing a transformation while the relationship to America was being renegotiated. In this context, Shanghai performs as a useful signifier of the exotic and as a marker of the internationalization, industrialization, cultural hybridity and immigration identified by E Taylor Atkins as crucial to the jazz age (Atkins 2003). Furthermore, the group also reinforces Tackley's theories of British dance band music at this time as being simultaneously modern, novelty based, and striving for a distinctiveness that set it apart from America (Parsonage 2005, 173).

There is a definite sense of adapting to change within these materials and the ability to transform musical line-ups and repertoire according to context. A simple example is found in a letter from the early 1940s where a patron writes to thank Wilkie for his band's performance at a yacht club and enquires about the name of the band, *The Hired Assassins*. The letter asks, "[H]ave you so named yourselves thus, or is it because you borrowed it from me, as it is an expression used by yachtsmen when they get their boats sailed away by an amateur friend, or a friendly amateur – anyway, someone, that isn't paid."

Clearly, as an artist, the naming of bands to suit different contextual needs provided a simple way of engaging with audiences.

### **Behind the scenes – hidden information and the role of intermediaries**

Looking through Wilkie's materials, I was also interested to read a number of letters and personal notes that would normally remain hidden. The family archive provided insights into the workings of bands of the 1930s and early 1940s by including details of payments to artists, comments about the economic conditions of the period, details of practicalities for the travel and accommodation of musicians, the organization of tours from Witley in Surrey to Brackley in Northamptonshire to Birmingham during war time. The correspondence also provided evidence of how promoters would secure engagements, ensure professional standards, and guarantee that patrons would be catered for. For example, Wilkie had been bandleader of a group that had performed regularly at the Grand Hotel in Eastbourne in the early 1930s, and the archive contained several letters from Edgar Jackson, the former Editor of *Melody Maker* and former manager of Jack Hylton, who was, at that time, responsible for programming music at the Hotel. It is worth noting here that Jackson is a controversial character in British jazz history. Derek Scott discusses Jackson's role as playmaker in establishing codes for what was acceptable as "British jazz" in his book *From the Erotic to the Demonic* (New York: Oxford University Press). For example, Jackson was critical of Ellington's early music and was accused of favoring a highbrow white conception of jazz over black American counterparts. Parsonage (2005) counters this argument with a discussion of the limited availability of recordings around this time as well as a discussion of British dance band culture, the changing relationship of Britain to the US, and the novelty roles performed by groups around this time. Within the family archive, letters from Jackson ranged from detailing the practicalities of engagements and justifying the terms of contracts, to criticisms of the band's organization and attitudes to rehearsals the previous year, stressing the importance of "keeping in" with patrons of the time. The variety of musical performances is impressive, with letters outlining the need for musicians to perform novelty cabaret acts, music for children's fancy dress balls, music for local clubs and societies, benefit concerts, hot numbers

for dancing and so on, which clearly emphasizes the versatility of music making throughout this period.

Wilkie had acted as an intermediary between different promoters, local, rural and suburban venues, and musicians, and the family archive also includes several letters of correspondence dating from the early 1940s which relate to the booking of Stephane Grappelly as a guest performer with various groups. One letter outlines the details of a booking involving Grappelly as guest but also requests Wilkie to follow up with the artist, given that he was on closer terms with the violinist. The archive even includes flyers such as one from 1941 where Grappelly is listed as a guest alongside Chappie D'Amato (note the Gallic spelling of Grappelly).

### **Hidden histories and transnational encounters**

As well as general publicity materials, signed festival programs and artists' photographs, where renowned musicians had written a note of thanks or friendship, the box also contains several press publicity photographs, a couple of European brochures, and a handwritten map of Diemen in the Netherlands with instructions on how to find a contact's house. Some of these materials appeared perplexing at first – for example, there seemed to be a disproportionate amount of publicity materials for the American trumpeter and vocalist Valaida Snow – including a handwritten note on a photograph from Snow to Wilkie's wife (image 1.2) - and the connection between Wilkie and the American artist was far from clear.

< **IMAGE 1.2 HERE** >

No surviving family members had any recollection of Wilkie's performance activities and my mother-in-law's primary recollection of Wilkie's playing was of his multi-instrumentalism as a clarinet and saxophone player. However, unknown to me at this point, she stressed that in addition to playing clarinet and saxophones he was well regarded as a double bassist in his later years. After searching the National Jazz Archive's digital collection, I came across two references to Wilkie's bass playing, one of which identified him as the bass player for Valaida Snow's group in her 1936-1937 tour of the Netherlands and Switzerland. One photo of the musicians (minus Snow) is inscribed on the back 'The Band broke all attendance records at The Tabaris – Den Haag (image 1.3). Holland 1936', and while Snow remains a relatively neglected and enigmatic figure in jazz history, she played a significant role in the international spread of jazz in the 1920s and 30s, taking the music to places it hadn't been heard before.

< **IMAGE 1.3 HERE** >

Snow's pioneering work as a vocalist and trumpeter gained her fame and notoriety at the time – she was dubbed 'Little Louis' after Louis Armstrong - and her colorful career is shrouded in myth, sensation and tragedy.<sup>1</sup> According to the late Swiss researcher Theo Zwicky:

Valaida and the group played around Holland before coming to Switzerland in May 1937 for a four-week booking at the Sihlporte, at that time an old-style Viennese Coffee House. The engagement was such a success that they were invited to stay on for a further two weeks. After this, Valaida and the group returned to England for a short time and then went to Vienna with a similar line-up, minus Derek Neville [and Wilkie Davison], but adding Norman Brown, an American Negro, at one time associated with the Mills Brothers, on guitar. When the Nazis annexed Austria, they arrested bass player Louis Barreiro, an African with a Spanish passport, and handed him over to the Franco government, who shot him. The pianist and arranger Gun Finlay was an emigre German Jew and he was taken by the Nazis (Zwicky 1981, 11-12).

Now the map and publicity materials finally made sense and the versatility and complexity of international connections became all the more apparent. Here, Wilkie's work not only took on an important international dimension but the place of jazz within a highly political and precarious European backdrop was also striking.

The international dimension of Wilkie's work gained in complexity in the post-war period, as he became a founding partner of the internationally successful Berg Larsen mouthpiece company in 1945, a company that, over its history, has boasted an array of iconic devotees from Charlie Parker to Sonny Rollins. An early advert for the company includes a quote from Charlie Parker stating "This is the best mouthpiece I've ever played," listing Wilkie's address in suburban Potters Bar (image 1.4)

< **IMAGE 1.4 HERE** >

On the Berg Larsen website today, Bill Clinton is listed as a major advocate of the company's classic mouthpieces and renowned contemporary saxophonists such as David Murray, Bob Mintzer, and Tim Berne continue to use Berg Larsen mouthpieces. Considering Wilkie's involvement in the founding, production and promotion of Berg Larsen, we can consider this as a compelling example of how a local musician's activities and entrepreneurial activities engaged with, reflected, and supported the international spread of jazz culture. One only needs to contrast photographs of the Berg Larsen workshop (image 1.5) – which was effectively a small shed in rural Potters Bar in what was then in Middlesex - to their showroom in New York (image 1.6) to develop an immediate sense of how the local and global have intersected and related to each other throughout history.

< **IMAGE 1.5 HERE** >

This image show the Berg Larsen workers (the caption "Our Girls including Daisy and Flora" written on the back of the photograph) outside the Potter's Bar building. The next is of the showroom in New York which was located close to Times Square, two blocks down from Radio City Music Hall on W48th street.

< **IMAGE 1.6 HERE** >

The final image (Image 1.7) is of Wilkie behind the counter in the showroom – again, a handwritten caption on the back of the image simply states "another salesman."

< IMAGE 1.7 HERE >

Materials from the mid 1940s onwards relate to the promotion and development of contacts for Berg Larsen and encounters stemming in particular from the first Nice Jazz Festival in 1948. Nice is widely regarded as the first international jazz festival in Europe and the inaugural event included a stellar line-up of American stars and European artists, including Louis Armstrong and his all-stars, and European artists including Django Reinhardt, Stephane Grappelli and Claude Luter.

Wilkie's attendance at the event was clearly aimed at promoting Berg Larsen and there are several signed photographs, memos, and comments on the original program from artists and agents Wilkie had encountered during the event. There are notes from Jack Teagarden – who expresses an interest in developing a business idea with Wilkie - Lucky Thompson, who simply writes “My boy – from your boy” and a couple of messages from Rex Stewart including a signed photograph with the inscription “To the wonderful Wilkie. Gee I wish I could use a Sax mouthpiece on my cornet. Anyway, best wishes Rex.”

### Conclusion

Wilkie's story points both to the need to unearth “other” stories of local musicians – the hidden histories that don't always form part of official narratives but which can breathe new life into established discourses - and to think about relationships and connections between individuals and collectives, the past and the present, and the local and the global.

These forms of study can move us on from reductive and binary configurations of jazz toward an understanding of the complexity of relationships within jazz history; Wilkie's story and personal archives like these can enable us to start a conversation about the realities of the jazz world, the connectedness of people in different cultural settings and operating at different strata of the industry, and the development of jazz as a transnational practice. From this, a more layered and sophisticated reading of the networks, influences, and transnational workings of the jazz world helps to inform cosmopolitan understandings of the music. When I discuss cosmopolitanism here, I would invite us to move beyond the well-trodden idea of the cosmopolitan as being simply a “citizen of the world,” toward an examination of the discourses and global networks that exist outside the confines of the nation state. Jazz cosmopolitanism inevitably involves a desire to interrogate and understand a sense of multi-local belonging through music, as well as Stephen Feld's idea of “genealogies of listening” – how people discover music and perform and imagine a connectedness through listening - and the “agency of desire for enlarged spatial participation” (Feld 2012, 49). When we think about jazz cosmopolitanism, we also need to be mindful of, and sensitive to, the dominant African American narrative and the prevalence of American exceptionalist readings of jazz history. Indeed, in this study I am not trying to add Wilkie to the jazz pantheon or Potter's Bar to the mythic places of jazz origin. But we do need to be open to other histories, networks and transnational practices that shape the meanings of the music around the world. This need is neatly summarized by Kwame Anthony Appiah:

The connection people feel to cultural objects that are symbolically theirs, because they were produced from within a world of meaning created by

their ancestors – the connection of art through identity – is powerful. It should be acknowledged. The cosmopolitan, though, wants to remind us of other connections (Appiah 2006, 134-5).

Looking through the archival materials presented to me by my mother-in-law, I thought about the inter-relationship between dominant jazz narratives and other cosmopolitan connections; in Wilkie, there was someone who was engaged with the transnational realities of jazz, someone who was immediately “other,” who drew on and existed outside the official narrative of jazz history but, in his own way, contributed to that dominant history through his ongoing musical activities as musician and bandleader and the entrepreneurial activities of the Berg Larsen company. I thought about how this one box of materials illustrated the ecologies of jazz through the life of a musician. It illustrated the multifaceted – but often hidden – roles that musicians have performed historically, whether as leaders, mediators, sidemen or advocates. It also challenged binary ways of thinking in terms of the local and global, the national and the transnational, the professional and the amateur, and the way in which dominant jazz histories tend to be reductive and totalized. The personal archive, when combined with established research methods and infrastructures, can also prove enlightening and offers a route to the discovery of new insights into specific historical circumstances and cultural contexts. When combined with other archival resources, further nuance and complexity can be revealed and new voices can emerge.

If we think about the ecologies of jazz in this way, we can begin to develop a meaningful conversation about jazz’s power to facilitate connections between people and to promote cultural understanding, at the same time as understanding why certain aspects of jazz history remain hidden or become obscured over time. When working in this way, dominant histories are not rejected but are re-appraised, as we gain a more complex understanding of the connectedness of different jazz histories and people’s experiences of the music in everyday life.

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### Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Krin Gabbard describes the way in which Snow, as a trumpeter, bypassed a lot of the ordeals of playing in male-dominated orchestras by becoming an all-round entertainer. "Always dressed in highly feminine clothes – evening gowns as well as skimpy chorus girl outfits – she presented herself as a singer/dancer who worked the trumpet into her act. She was careful to lift the trumpet to her mouth in a graceful, alluring fashion. Then she would play stirring jazz solos in the style of Louis Armstrong" (Gabbard 2008, 66). For further information on the life, music and myth-making associated with Snow, see Mark Miller, *High Hat, Trumpet and Rhythm: The Life and Music of Valaida Snow* (Mercury Press 2007)