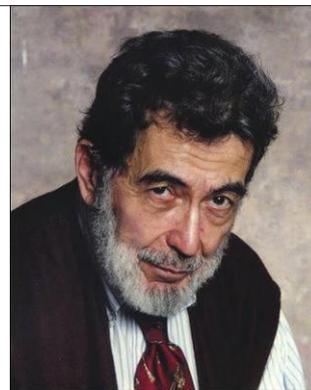


When Jazz Musicians Become Jazz Historians

BY NAT HENTOFF



In 1955, when Nat Shapiro and I assembled *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya: The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men Who Made It*, we wanted to demonstrate that many of the musicians themselves could tell of their *lives* – off and on the stand – more memorably than jazz critics and historians. From our own interviews with creators we knew and extensive interviews others had written elsewhere, here and abroad, scores of these swingers, from Louis Armstrong and Baby Dodds to Mary Lou Williams and Charlie Parker, have led global listeners inside their music in that book.

And now, a revealing and intriguing musician-autobiographer is 24-year-old pianist-composer Joe Alterman. Since coming to New York from his boyhood home of Atlanta, Georgia, he has attracted the admiration of a considerable number of listeners and established players with his swinging knowledge of the roots of this music and his own singular, often lyrical story-telling.

I first got to know and hear Joe when he was a student at New York University's jazz division. One day, I was surprised to learn that he had gotten himself a two-night gig at the legendary quintessence of New Orleans jazz for decades, Preservation Hall.

"I wanted to get the feel," he told me, "of what the music was like back then when people came just to enjoy themselves."

Knowing how interested I was in this trip to a jazz tie that still exists in this New Orleans setting, Joe sent me a report: "My Preservation Hall Experience." It gave me such pleasure and insight that I feel the natural audience joining Joe at Preservation Hall is

the readers of *JAZZed*. (I have reported on his singular lyricism and jazz pulse in *The Wall Street Journal*, May 2, 2013: "Joe Alterman Strikes a Chord").

What especially got to me was Joe describing the audience there now – as it always has been essentially – at Preservation Hall:

"JAZZ IS ALL A FEELING, A NATURAL DEEP HUMAN FEELING, AND SUCH FEELINGS DON'T DIE."

"These people weren't the same people I'm used to seeing over and over again at New York City jazz clubs. These people were regular, ordinary people, really swinging to jazz music, a music that had been de-

clared dead more times than once.

"I'd watch the people as they took their seats. It was easy to spot a newcomer to jazz: a youngster who had been dragged there by his parents, a curious person, or persons who were there simply because they had to go there. How could you visit New Orleans and not go to Preservation Hall?

"I'd watch these people as the music overtook some of them for the first time. First I'd see the smile. Then I'd watch the foot, too. I'd see the first time that their shoulder would move, up and down, to the

guest editorial

rhythm of the song. I'd watch shy looking children start clapping and yelling loudly as they sat next to their parents who were doing the same.

"It was almost as if they couldn't help it – that the music had really entered them and filled their insides with joy.

"And I thought to myself: And they said this jazz is dead. How could it be?"

Joe then suddenly remembered when McCoy Tyner asked him if he loved playing the piano.

"I do," Joe told him.

"Tyner smiled, looked me dead in the eye and said, 'Well, never give it up. It's a life force.'"

The 24-year-old continued: "I never realized how true that was until I watched these people. Jazz music is a feeling that is different from all others in this inner sense. It's impossible for it to die."

That reminded me of what New Orleans soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet said to me after he finished a set at the Savoy Café in Boston when I was 19: "You can't keep this music down wherever it wants to go."

And Joe Alterman, sitting alongside the joyous parents and their children at Preservation Hall was thinking to himself, "No matter what is bothering me, no matter where I am in the world, I can sit down at the piano and feel at home on the bench. I remembered a quote by Nat Hentoff of how Ben Webster's ballads were once his cure for illness and I realized how jazz, more than any therapy of medicine I'd ever been prescribed, has cured me most."

That was more than an illness of mine. I was 19 and Frances Sweeney, a woman who by herself ran a wholly independent, courageous newspaper in anti-Semitic Boston, had just died and at home, I played Ben Webster ballads hour after hour, as my mother thought I'd gone crazy. A devout Catholic, Frances had given me my first job (no pay) as a journalist helping expose groups financing anti-Semitism in Boston. The loss of her was so deep that she has

never left me as the most influential person in my life.

But the therapy of the life force of jazz that Joe Alterman described at Preservation Hall has also never left me. And I've never forgotten an evening there long ago when trombonist Jim Robinson lifted me up as I never had been before.

In grateful awe, I went up to him at intermission and he told me: "I enjoy playing for people who are happy. If everyone is in a frisky spirit, the spirit gets into me and I can make my trombone sing. If my music makes people feel happy, I will try to do more. It gives me a warm heart and that gets into my music."

Hear Me Talkin' To Ya begins with Danny Barker growing up in New Orleans well before Preservation Hall opened its doors in 1961:

"A bunch of us kids playing would suddenly hear sounds. The sounds of men playing would be so clear, but we couldn't be sure where they were coming from. So we'd start trotting, start running. 'It's this way! It's that way!' That music could come on you any

time like that."

Joe Alterman found that music before he ever got, much later, to New Orleans. Now, in New York and wherever else he's at his piano, he says: "There is no greater thrill than watching a newcomer to jazz. [They're still coming] for the first time... Jazz is all a feeling, a natural deep human feeling, and such feelings don't die."

Provided the person playing this music also has this feeling. And with jazz bands in many more schools around the country, many more players and listeners will share that feeling – paying no mind to the frequent wishful obituaries of this music.

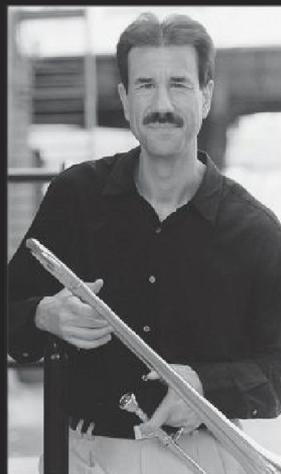
Nat Hentoff is one of the foremost authorities on jazz culture and history. He joined DownBeat magazine as a columnist in 1952 and served as that publication's associate editor from 1953-57. Hentoff was a columnist and staff writer with The Village Voice for 51 years, from 1957 until 2008, and has written for The Wall Street Journal, Jazz Times, The Atlantic, and The New Yorker, among many other outlets.

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