

Central Avenue Bop

by Maxine Gordon

Jazz history is sometimes—too often!—told as a sequence of turning points: A journey from one seminal moment to another, with lingers at the milestones where everything—cultural, aesthetic, and even political—supposedly coalesces into “the new.” One of these moments happened sixty years ago at the Elks Club on Central Avenue in Los Angeles. On July 6, 1947, Wardell Gray and Dexter Gordon locked musical horns with their tenor saxophones. Portions of the night’s playing were released on a series of four 78s on the Bop! Records label. Appropriately titled *The Hunt*, this two-tenor duel, with Wardell Gray and Dexter Gordon alternately chasing and outdoing each other, was spread over 8 parts of three minutes each.

But, apart from the sheer excitement of the battle, why is this concert so mythological and historically significant? After all, both musicians had dueled before; one month earlier, they recorded *The Chase*, a much more commercially successful recording, which was released on Dial Records on two sides of a 78. (*The Chase* was so successful that *The Hunt* was marketed as merely a Gray-Gordon duel although their session was only part of a full night’s gig that included musicians such as Howard McGhee, Sonny Criss, and Hampton Hawes, playing brilliantly on trumpet, alto saxophone, and piano.) The 1947 musical battle-cum-duet, which followed two nights of Independence Day celebrations, has become a deliverance moment for that ubiquitous postwar jazz style, bebop. That the concert has become enshrined should be no surprise, though, given the quality of the

playing, the mythic venue, and the stature of the other players who were on hand that night.



The two-tenor battle has become a key element in jazz performance, and Dexter and Wardell were the quintessential bebop tenor battle musicians. (Al Cohn and Zoot Sims, Sonny Stitt and Gene Ammons, Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis and Johnny Griffin, and John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins carried on the tradition.) As Dexter explained, “It wasn’t somebody would say, ‘I can play better than you man,’ but actually...that’s what it was...You’d think, damn, what ... was he playing? You’d try to figure out what was going on. To a degree, that was one of the things, to be fastest, the hippest. The tenor player with the biggest tone—that takes ball, that takes strength.” This classic call-and-response form is a duel where the tenor players trade choruses of equal length that

decrease with each lead: first 32-bars, then 16-bars, then 8-bars, and finally 4-bar exchanges. Each chorus requires that the musicians try to say much in less time, increasing the intensity as the chorus length decreases. At just under seven minutes in length, *The Chase* was one of the longest jazz recordings of its day, but this did not seem to deter fans. The sales even surpassed the Charlie Parker sides on Dial Records.

But *The Hunt* also accrued its mythology because of its mention in two iconic books by Beat writers John Clellon Holmes and Jack Kerouac. John Clellon Holmes (1926-1988) was a writer, poet, and professor, best known for his 1952 book *Go*, considered the first “Beat” novel, which depicted events in his life with friends Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, and Allen Ginsberg. In *Go*, he writes, “The Hunt: listen there for the anthem in which we jettisoned the intellectual Dixieland of atheism, rationalism, liberalism—and found our group’s rebel streak at last.” Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) hardly needs an introduction. Not only is he the most famous Beat writer, he is credited with creating the term “Beat.” In his novel, *On the Road*, the defining work of the postwar Beat Generation, he writes: “They ate voraciously as Dean, sandwich in hand, stood bowed and jumping before the big phonograph, listening to a wild bop record I had just bought called ‘The Hunt,’ with Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray blowing their tops before a screaming audience that gave the record fantastic frenzied volume.”

Dexter and Wardell recorded *The Hunt* at the Elks Auditorium, also known as the Elks Hall, the Elks Ballroom, and the Elks Club. Mention Elks or its street, Central Avenue, to a jazz fan and you will likely elicit a knowing bebop nod of the head and an insider’s

smile; the mythology has immortalized the place and its better events. Listening to *The Hunt* reveals that the song “Cherokee” (also referred to as “Geronimo” and “Cherrykoke”) sends the crowd into a frenzy—and rightly so. The playing sounds incredible, not least because of Dexter’s sinuous lines that carry most of the song until Wardell joins in and intensifies the heat for the last two or three minutes. Sheer delight for the crowd then and listeners now. The concert recording is a reminder, though, that this music, bebop, emerges out of a thriving cultural community. Two thousand people *with* the music and *with* the musicians, listening and dancing. It’s a Bebop moment, alright — Sunday, July 6th, 1947. But, what do we really know?

From a notice in *Down Beat* on July 2, 1947, we know that this was “[t]he first in the Jack Williams Presents Jazz Concert Dance Series,” and that Williams was “out to prove that the same kind of music that draws people to jazz concerts will pull customers who are chiefly dance-minded.” And draw the crowd it did.

Promoter Will Try Jazz Concert-Dance

Hollywood—Jack Williams, sometime manager to Howard McGhee, is taking a shot at promotion, and incidentally has added a new wrinkle to the game, with presentation of a “jazz concert-dance” at the Elks auditorium (Central Ave.) July 6.

Williams promises an all-star group consisting of McGhee, Lucky Thompson, Dexter Gordon, Barney Kessel, Red Callender, Harry Babasin and other top solo men.

Williams says he is out to prove that the same kind of music that draws people to jazz concerts will pull customers who are chiefly dance-minded.

Down Beat July 2, 1947

Ralph Bass recorded the event, and made an offer to Herman Lubinsky of Savoy Records to release the material on Bass’s newly formed *Bop!* Label.¹ “The concert was one of the best that I have ever heard,” Bass wrote in a letter to Lubinsky dated July 10, 1947, “and the recordings should make history. For the first time a Jazz Concert was given in a dance hall so that people could dance as well as listen. It was held in the heart of the ‘Black Belt’ in Los Angeles, and was attended principally by colored people. Instead of being a formal and stiff affair as conducted by Norman Granz and other impresarios, this one was held before an audience that was standing or dancing and inspired by 2,000 people who were shrieking encouragement to the musicians, so that the results were clearly felt by the musicians.” While we are celebrating the beauty of Central Avenue in 1947, however, we should note that it was not until 1948 that the U.S. Supreme Court finally ruled against restrictive covenants in housing, which were strictly enforced in Los Angeles. Ralph

Bass's recording, then, is a testimony to celebration in the midst of oppressive social circumstances.

Bass goes on to say, "Particularly there is one album in which Wardell Gray and Dexter Gordon battle for 10 minutes with their tenors. There is so much excitement in this particular set that you cannot help but feel the intense rivalry between these two who are continually encouraged by their followers, and in my opinion, as well as others, this is wilder than the Illinois Jacquet solo in the 'Jazz at the Philharmonic' album now currently selling so well." He is talking here about *The Hunt* (which was based on "Stompin at the Savoy") and, though clearly a promoter of his recordings, does not exaggerate when he describes the crowd response.

The Elks Auditorium (aka the Elks Ballroom aka Elks Club) was on the first floor of the Elks Hall (also called the Elks Temple) at 4016 South Central Avenue.² (Indeed, no small amount of confusion has arisen from the multiple names). The auditorium had a beautiful stage, a balcony, and was large enough to hold a crowd of 2,000 people. On the second floor was another, smaller auditorium, where there were Saturday and Sunday afternoon matinee dances.³ In April 1947, the third floor opened as the Elks Hawaiian Cocktail Lounge. On the night before these historical recordings were made, a dance was advertised in *The California Eagle* at the Elks Hall with a "12-piece Unity Band; Fun, Refreshments, Friendliness; Spirit of '76 Decorations." The L.A. Communist Party sponsored the dance and tickets were \$1.20 (tax included). A jam session called the "Hottest Jam Session in Town—Midnite On" was also in the same ad. In fact, Elks Hall

was constantly jumpin'. Dances were sponsored by Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, the Royal Syndicators, the Eleven and One Charity Club, the Original Calvarette Social Club, and Les Bonboniere. Women's social and charity clubs were also at the center of life in the Central Avenue neighborhood. Not all the life was nightlife.

HOTTEST JAM SESSION IN TOWN—MIDNITE ON

LET 'FREEDOM FLING'
DANCE — SATURDAY — JULY 5th
 — 8:30 On —

- 12-Piece Unity Band
- Fun, Refreshment, Friendliness
- Spirit of '76 Decorations



Elks Hall **4016 S. Central** **Los Angeles**
 (Auspices L. A. Communist Party) Tickets on Sale \$1.20 (tax incl.)

We now have the good fortune to hear the entire recording of the three-hour concert and dance at the Elks Auditorium on that historic Sunday, July 6th, 1947. The recording was done on two portable disc cutters with the discs overlapping to capture all the music and announcements. The sound quality is poor compared to today's technologically superior recordings, but the playing is no less impassioned or infectious. Moreover, it's worth

listening to the recording to understand what jazz musicians were doing at that time and how involved the audience was in this Bebop moment.

What we now know is that there were a series of sets organized by the promoter featuring the top jazz talent of the day. Previously, this music was released around Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray, particularly *The Hunt*. Many a jazz fan has fought it out over whether Dexter or Wardell won the contest on that Sunday. Dexter said he would have to give it to Wardell (but then again, Dexter was a very generous man). Subsequent albums implied that these were Dexter-Wardell dates. Of course, this is not the case at all. Both musicians were, in fact, playing as members of Howard McGhee's band. Now that we have a chance to hear the concert in its entirety, we can better choose our favorite tune. My personal favorite is "After Hours Bop," because of Dexter's amazing solo—not to mention those of Howard McGhee, Sonny Criss, Trummy Young, and Red Callender as well; trumpet, alto saxophone, trombone, and bass igniting the stage and crowd at Elks.

There is more than one style of jazz on this recording, just as there was more than one style of music being played on Central Avenue. You can hear the young beboppers stretching out and you can hear the older musicians like Wild Bill Moore, Gene Montgomery, and Al Killian playing in a modern style of the times. One of the most remarkable things about this music is that the "older" musicians were only in their thirties, and the younger ones were indeed very young indeed. Hampton Hawes was 19 years old, Sonny Criss was 20, Dexter was 24, Wardell was 26, and the established bebop bandleader and trumpeter Howard McGhee was only 29 years old. When we limit our

ears to narrow categories, we miss out on lots of great music; this recording forces our ears to listen expansively.

No single moment can be given credit for bringing bebop to Los Angeles but we can point to a series of events that led up to this July dance concert at the Elks Auditorium. Jazz fans of a certain age can tell and re-tell the story of the December 1945 arrival of a train from New York City at Los Angeles' Central Station. At this key moment in the history of jazz, a train carried Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Milt Jackson, Ray Brown, and Stan Levey to their legendary opening-night appearance at Billy Berg's Club in Hollywood on December 10, 1945 and, as the legend goes, introduced the West Coast to bebop. We know that Dizzy stayed in Los Angeles until February 1946. Charlie Parker's stay in the sun is a chapter unto itself.

This legend dissolves in a packed auditorium at the Elks Hall on Central Avenue where the Coleman Hawkins' band, featuring Howard McGhee on trumpet, Sir Charles Thompson on piano, Oscar Pettiford on bass, and Denzil Best on drums, played a dance months earlier on February 11, 1945.⁴ If it is true that "Coleman was the one who opened the West Coast up as far as modern sounds in jazz," as Howard McGhee has said, we may consider the scope of Hawkins' influence in an entirely new way. But then, what about Billy Eckstine's band with Fats Navarro, Gene Ammons, Leo Parker, Tommy Potter, Art Blakey and Sarah Vaughan? They had an engagement in February 1945 at the Plantation Club in Watts⁵ and had recorded for the Armed Forces Radio Service "Jubilee" programs some time before Coleman Hawkins arrived in Los Angeles.⁶ But,

are single dates or moments sufficient evidence for the *arrival* of this new music in Los Angeles, or should we consider something more?

When Coleman Hawkins left for New York in July 1945, after his engagement at Billy Berg's and appearances on Norman Granz's new Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts, Howard McGhee stayed on in Los Angeles, forming a band with Teddy Edwards, whom he convinced to switch from alto to tenor saxophone. These young musicians were at the center of a scene that developed in the after-hours spots and clubs along Central Avenue. This scene was so wonderful that, in spite of the social disadvantages, Howard McGhee has said that he thought California "was like heaven on earth." (Some musicians referred to Los Angeles during that period as "Mississippi with palm trees.")⁷ McGhee's paradise was mainly the clubs where he and his peers played to everyone's delight.

On July 10, 1947, the *California Eagle*, one of the oldest Black-owned newspapers in the U.S., reports on the arrest of Howard McGhee and his wife Dorothy "on charges of possessing marihuana cigarettes and residue of marihuana ashes about the premises." The article says that "McGhee and his wife were first apprehended while seated in a downtown theatre by officers who evidently didn't like the Negro-white association. They were taken to Central Division jail where officers asserted Mrs. McGhee resembled a blonde woman suspected of robbery." So much for "heaven on earth."

The new music came to the musicians and fans over the radio, and through the 78s that were like gold out west. There was a shoeshine stand run by the infamous Moose the Mooche (his given name was Emery Byrd and he was said to be a drug dealer who traded

goods to Charlie Parker for half of the rights to his publishing) where patrons could get the latest recordings. Rumor has it that he got them from the Pullman porters riding the Santa Fe Chief on the Chicago to Los Angeles run. Apparently there was a roving dealer named “Bebop,” who operated with a portable playback and fibreboard record case, setting up store in cafeterias or on the sidewalk—anywhere he could find an electrical outlet. The barbershops along Central Avenue had record players and, according to Dexter Gordon, musicians walked with their valued 78s and would play them wherever they could find a machine. As Dizzy Gillespie said: “This music was being played everywhere there were young musicians. It was the music of the time and we were always working on it.”

During 1947, there was a curfew in effect for clubs, but the after-hours scene on Central Avenue was thriving — Jack’s Basket Room, Lovejoy’s, Brother’s, the Brown Bomber, Club Alabam, the Downbeat, the Finale, and of course, the Elks Auditorium. The mention of Central Avenue and the legendary jam sessions in the late ‘40s usually brings the conversation around to Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray. They first met when Dexter was with Lionel Hampton’s band in Detroit and Wardell was playing at the Congo Club there. They became friends and the next time they saw each other Wardell was playing with Earl Hines in Chicago. When Dexter moved back home to Los Angeles in 1946, he and Wardell started jamming together at nightly jam sessions. According to Dexter, “At all the sessions, they would hire a rhythm section, along with, say, a couple of horns. But there would always be about ten horns up on the stand. Various tenors, altos, trumpets and an occasional trombone. But it seemed that in the wee small hours of the morning—

always—there would be only Wardell and myself. It became a kind of traditional thing. Spontaneous? Yeah! Nothing was really worked out... We were coming out of the same bags—Lester and Bird. Bird was never really a mystery to me because he was coming out of Lester. And others, too... But it was the same lineage. That's where I was. That's where Wardell was..."⁸

Thanks to the magnificent Oral History Project at UCLA and the publication of *Central Avenue Sounds*,⁹ and the autobiographies of Hampton Hawes, Roy Porter, Red Callender, Marshall Royal, and Buddy Collette, we have testimony to the events that shape the story of bebop in Los Angeles. I have been very fortunate to have spent countless hours listening to Dexter Gordon talk about these times on Central Avenue—about Wardell and Sonny Criss; about his boyhood friend, Reverend Hawes' son, Hampton; and about his youth on the Eastside (one word, not two, according to the fans who were on the scene) of Los Angeles. Now that we also have the music of that one night at the Elks Auditorium, the picture becomes clearer for all of us who love this great music and the artists who created it.

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© 2007 Maxine Gordon
Ph.D. Candidate, History (African Diaspora), New York University
Senior Interviewer and Jazz Researcher, Bronx African American
History Project, Fordham University

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Notes

¹ Ralph Bass was a producer for Black & White Records in the 40s, famous for his recording of “Open the Door, Richard” with Jack McVea in 1947. After his recording at the Elks Auditorium and his deal with Herman Lubinsky at Savoy, he worked at Savoy Records from 1948-1951. He went on to be a successful r&b producer and was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1991.

² This location is currently home to the mosque, Masjid Felix Bilal and the Center for Advanced Learning.



³ These recollections come from the brilliant mind of alto saxophonist Jackie Kelso (Jack Kelson) who played alto saxophone with the Count Basie Orchestra and was an altar boy with Dexter Gordon at St. Philip’s Episcopal Church. See *Central Avenue Sounds*, p. 203-232.

⁴ This band can be seen in the film, “The Crimson Canary” featuring Noah Beery, Jr. (1945, John Hoffman, Director) playing Hollywood Stampede.

⁵ The Plantation Club was at 108th Street and Central Avenue. Watts was a considerable distance south of “the Stem” so the club owner, Joe Morris, offered bus service along Central Avenue.

⁶ Fats Navarro took one of his first recorded solos with Eckstine on the tune “Love Me Or Leave Me” (an air shot from the Plantation Club in Hollywood, CA in February 1945).

⁷ Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, p. 386.

⁸ Stan Britt, *Dexter Gordon: A Musical Biography*, New York: DaCapo, 1989, p. 18.

⁹ Clora Bryant, Buddy Collette, William Green, Steven Isoardi, Jack Kelson, Horace Tapscott, Gerald Wilson, and Marl Young, eds. *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

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