FOURTEEN

The Cotton Club

The Cotton Club was a club in New York that opened in the mid-1920s. It was Harlem’s most famous night spot until 1936, when it moved downtown to Broadway. It was never as successful there as it had been in Harlem – part of the excitement was going uptown to hear the music. The Cotton Club was the great center, the sounding board, the place to get exposure for the black artists of that period. It was the making of Duke Ellington, who went there from the Kentucky Club in 1927 when King Oliver turned down the job because the money wasn’t good enough. Duke was there for five years, with a radio remote every night. When he went out to Hollywood in 1930 to make his first movie, Check and Double Check, the management brought in a young singer and dancer by the name of Cab Calloway. It was also the making of Cab. Up and coming songwriters of the day wrote the shows for weekly salaries of $75. The first team was Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh and after them came Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler, and later, Rube Bloom. Ethel Waters introduced Stormy Weather at the Cotton Club; Lena Home started her career there at the age of 16 as a chorus girl. Bill Robinson danced there, as did the Nicholas Brothers, who started there as kids. It was the place for black talent to be seen and heard, but there was an irony about it. The place was run by white gangsters, and, although the club featured all-black entertainment, it was impossible in the earlier years for a customer of darker color to get through the front door. The chorus girls all had to be light-skinned, or “paper-bag brown,” as it was called. The first girl to break this color line was Lucille Wilson, who later became Mrs Louis Armstrong. She was such a sensational dancer that Harold Arlen persuaded the management to bend its rules and hire the dark-skinned entertainer.

In 1982 I heard rumors that a picture was being planned about the Cotton Club. I had read Jim Haskin’s book The Cotton Club, which had given producer Bob Evans the idea for the film. My eventual involvement came about in a very circuitous way. It started out with a phone call from a man I had known for many years, Jerry Wexler. Wexler and the Ertegun brothers, Ahmet and Nesuhi, founded Atlantic Records in the 1940s. It started out as a small jazz label, got into black soul music after the war and prospered through the 1960s and 1970s, finally joining forces with Warner Brothers Communications to become one of the giants of the recording industry. Jerry, like the Ertegun brothers, became a big wheel but never lost his basic grass-roots enthusiasm for jazz. He is still a jazz
buff who likes nothing better than to sit around and talk about Red Allen. In the formative stages of the movie he was asked by Evans to be musical adviser. Jerry felt that I was the ideal musician to do the Ellington re-creations. He told me that most of the people in the movie business don’t know beans about jazz and hadn’t heard of me. He suggested that I put together a tape of stuff I had done in the Ellington vein with examples of my alto playing à la Johnny Hodges. He played it for Greg Hines and Evans, who were impressed. At the time, we were working at Condon’s Monday nights with the Bechet Legacy. Jerry started bringing in various people connected with the movie to hear the band.

The producers sent me a copy of the script by Mario Puzo, author of *The Godfather*. It seemed kind of phony, but when did Hollywood ever treat jazz realistically? One night Jerry came in with an executive from Paramount. As we sat around talking, the conversation turned to a compelling book that Jerry and the other guy were currently reading, *Ironweed* by Bill Kennedy. Pug joined in, saying that Bill was one of her dearest friends from Albany — someone she’d known for 20 years. Jerry’s ears pricked up and he asked if Pug could arrange for Bill to meet him sometime with a view to discussing a movie option on another of Kennedy’s books, *Billy Phelan’s Last Chance*. After that I didn’t see Wexler for a few weeks. One day I read in the paper that Francis Ford Coppola had been hired to direct *The Cotton Club* and had fired Jerry Wexler, bringing in Ralph Burns to write the score. Well, I figured, that’s it for me, so I forgot about it and concentrated on getting gigs for the Bechet Legacy. Later I heard that Coppola had said, “What’s this about Bob Wilber? He’s a dixieland clarinet player. I want Ralph Burns — he knows jazz and knows movie scoring.”

A few months later the Legacy had a concert at the Village Gate, part of the annual Greenwich Village Jazz Festival. Pug got a call from Bill’s wife, Dana, saying they were coming to town with their son Brendan, and could we get together. Pug said we were playing at the Gate that night — we’d leave three tickets at the box office and meet for supper after the concert. Dana and Brendan showed up, saying that Bill was busy. After the concert, which was very poorly attended, we went to a Chinese restaurant across the street, where Bill joined us. He’d just come from the Sherry-Netherland Hotel, where he’d been closeted for the last 18 hours with Francis Coppola, working on a new script for *The Cotton Club*. I was flabbergasted. Already feeling down because of the meager turnout for that night’s concert, this latest news was a bitter blow. I’d lost the opportunity to break out of the jazz world into a world of high exposure and big money. Here was Pug’s old friend, who had struggled for years to gain recognition, now the writer of the year, with offers coming in from every direction. Bill, sensing my disappointment, took Pug aside and said, “Don’t worry, Pugalla. Bob is so talented he’s going to get the recognition he deserves. Someone’s going to notice.”

We took a three-week engagement at Jaylin’s Club in Berne, Switzerland, with the Legacy. On our second night there we got a phone call from New York. It was Bill Kennedy, who had been trying frantically to track me down. He told me they were having problems with the movie. Ralph Burns had written and recorded a