

Jump Town

By JOY RAMOS AND BOB DIETSCH

Whenever you drive along Interstate 5 or attend a sports game at the Rose Garden Arena, realize that you are on the very spot that made Portland "The Jazz Capital of the West Coast" between 1944 and 1954. This was before Urban Renewal completely disseminated a rich, Black culture centered around its music.

Jazz was played in its highest form on Williams Avenue. There was no other time in history when so many musical forces came together as they did. Jazz was King.

Over fifty years ago, many Portlanders were oblivious to the flourishing Jazz scene on Williams Avenue. To others, it was a thrill seeker's Paradise found. Williams Avenue reputedly had the "Best booze, Best gambling, Best broads and Best food."

The Dude Ranch (on 240 NE. Broadway) stood out as the "Hottest Black and Tan Supper Club" west of the Mississippi. Waitresses wore cowgirl outfits bearing pistols with caps in it. On the walls were murals of Black cowboys. Jazz was part of the venue. There were floor acts from 'Shake' dancing (strip-

ping) to juggling.

Gamblers flocked to the Dude Ranch from all over the world to play, trying their luck at dice, cards or numbers (lottery).

The Dude Ranch reached its zenith when Thelonius Monk played with Jazz All stars on December 4, 1945. Today, the Dude Ranch still



Photo by Lee Tanner
Internationally renown jazz artist, Thelonius Monk played at "The Dude Ranch" in Portland.

stands as evidence of Portland's greatness in the Jazz arena. It is now the Multi-Plastics Building.

Second in popularity on the Entertainment Strip was McElroy's. Pat McElroy ran this joint as a dance hall. Black bands played here to a responsive audience. Musicians didn't want you to sit around. Dance competitions

were held to determine who's the best and many came from all over the country. By the end of a contest, dancers would be soaked. If someone threw a handkerchief near you, that meant that your moves were too 'hot,' so tone it down.

Another musical delight was being at the Savoy night club. This was where Jam sessions would go on for 24 hours. Only the best Jazz musicians played against each other as a test of prowess. Wardell 'The Greyhound' Grey proved his musical genius of improvisation at the Savoy. His style left others in awe. He was the paragon of Jazz musicians by outdoing others at 'head cutting' contests with his fast tempos edited on the spot. Wardell Grey went on to earn international recognition. What remains as evidence of his playing at the Savoy is a compact disc entitled "Sonny Criss - California Boppin 1947."

The vice lord of Williams Avenue was Tom Johnson. Mayor Dorothy Lee determinedly closed down his Keystone Club. She worked with members of the church community to make gambling illegal. As an immediate consequence, Mayor Lee lost all political power after her entanglement

with the vice.

The high demand for liquor and 'race records' was met through Portland's railroad porters. They were secretly paid off to smuggle in cases of booze that were sent off to the night clubs for distribution.

Many clubs on Portland's Entertainment Strip required that you bring your own booze. You gave your bottle then received a mixer and charged for it.

This routine was called 'The Bottle Lock.'

'Race records' were dropped off by railroad porters at a local hang-out called Madrona's. It was opened by Charlie Garrett in 1936. He was the first distributor of juke boxes. If a buyer wanted to purchase a 'Canned Ham' (juke box), he had to pay

\$1,000 to own one or rent it.

Madrona Records was the only place to get Gospel, Spirituals, Bop, Jump and other kind of Black music. Records made of shellac were sold at highly inflated prices.

Wherever Jazz was played, there would often be booze, gambling and hussies. The underworld thrived on greed

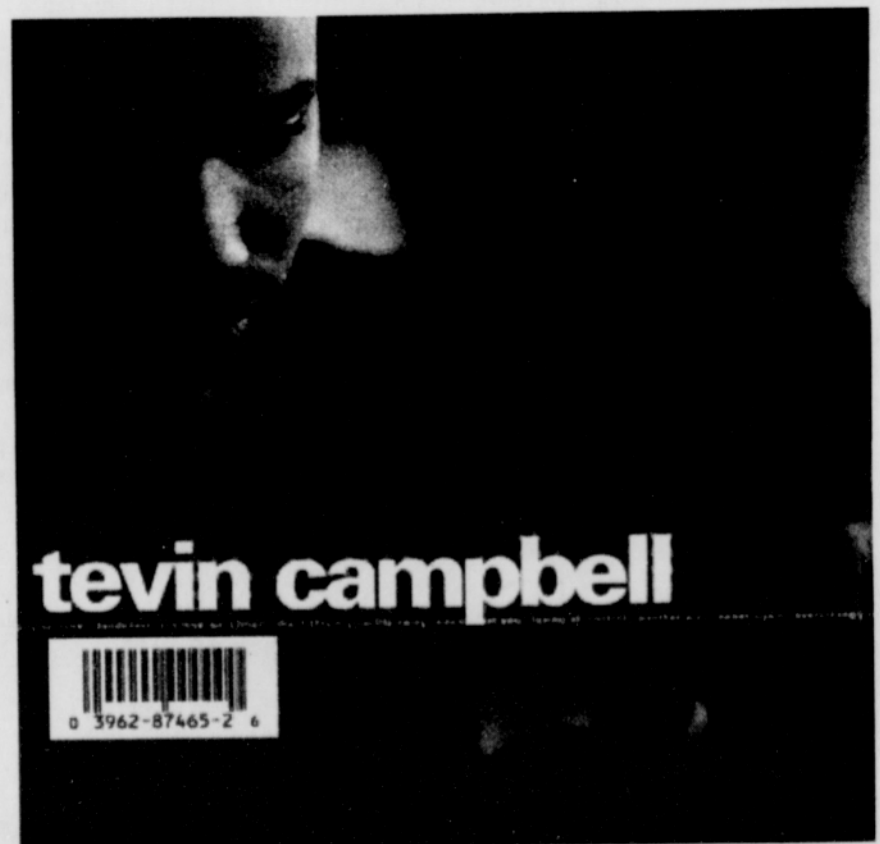
and corruption. One way of making a horde of money was to turn your house into a Sin Shop like the offerings at night clubs. These ventures often clashed with respectable-minded Portlanders. Williams Avenue was where Jazz became a lifestyle for survival and entertainment.



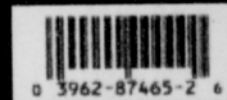
Photo Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society
Urban Renewal involved removing Portland's Jazz Entertainment Strip and installing Interstate 5. In 1961, the new construction completely disseminated a rich, Black culture centered around its music.

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