

With roots in Texas gospel and blues, Ramey put his stamp on some of the most important music of the era, playing bass alongside such musical giants as Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Billie Holiday, Sonny Rollins, Thelonious Monk, and fellow Texan, Charlie Christian. Ramey had the rare ability to play two styles—swing and bebop—and, after his return to Texas in 1976, he reminisced about the role he played in the transition from one to the other. Always generous to interviewers, such as Stanley Dance, Ross Russell, François Postif, and Nathan Pearson, Ramey's memories detail how modern jazz evolved in Kansas City and New York in the 1930s and 1940s.² In addition, his friendships with Parker and Young provide insight into the music and personalities of two of the greatest saxophonists and improvisers of the twentieth century.

Eugene Glasco Ramey (1913-1984) came from a family of Austin musicians who performed in Elgin, Taylor, and Bastrop, and sang at the Governor's Mansion and the Stephen F. Austin and Driskill Hotels. Ramey was born on the corner of 13th and Red River Streets, where Brackenridge Hospital now stands. His middle name came from his maternal grandparents: John Glasco, who was half Comanche Indian, and Glasco's wife, who came on a slave ship from east Africa (Madagascar) when she was five.³

Ramey never met his paternal grandfather Jack, but Ramey patted his foot when he played the same way Jack did when he played the violin. Ramey's father, a teamster and horse trainer who played banjo and sang, died when the boy was four. Ramey played the ukulele, temple blocks, snare drum, and trumpet as a child, before switching to the sousaphone as a teenager. He sang in church and camp meetings and while picking cotton with his family. He was also an athlete (related to prizefighter Jack Johnson), excelling in basketball and, with his wiry frame, riding the bench in football. Before and after graduating from Austin's Anderson High School in 1931, Ramey played tuba and sang in the choir, performing at clubs and dances with local groups the Moonlight Serenaders and George Corley's Royal Aces. With Corley's group, Ramey met tenor saxophonist Buddy Tate, with whom he often played in later years.⁴ To help make ends meet, Ramey mowed lawns, washed dishes, and shined shoes.⁵

Jazz and blues abounded in Austin in the 1920s, as Ramey was growing up. During the summer, he never missed the brass band concerts held in a large park where Interstate 35 now cuts through town. King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, and other prominent artists performed in the capital city. Regional groups also impressed the youthful Ramey. "There must have been eight or ten bands in San Antonio. And we knew four or five in Houston. There must have been twenty bands in Dallas and Fort Worth."⁶ His favorite group, Eddie and Sugar Lou's Band (featuring Oran "Hot Lips" Page on the trumpet) originated in

Tyler but moved to Austin. Alphonso Trent's concerts from the Adolphus Hotel in Dallas played on WFAA radio and, over the noon hour, Ramey heard the Herman Waldman Band's "society swing" broadcast from the Gunther Hotel in San Antonio.

Many of these groups came to be known as "territory bands," because they normally played within a limited region, or "territory," that was usually within a day or two's drive of a "home" radio station, on which they regularly performed. During the 1920s, many of these territory bands congregated in Kansas City, Kansas. George E. Lee, the Benny Moten Orchestra, the Blue Devils, and Andy Kirk's Twelve Clouds of Joy were among the most famous.⁷ However, territories also could be "taken over" from one band by another in turf "battles" that pitted the groups against each other.⁸

Territory bands generally emerged out of vaudeville, minstrel shows, carnival acts, and dance bands. The black vaudeville circuit of the early twentieth century centered on the TOBA (Theater Owners Booking Association) organization. As the westernmost stop on TOBA's circuit, Kansas City was the repository of groups who disbanded there, often stranded without the means to return to from wherever they originated. As an important railhead and agricultural center, the city's economy was able to support these musicians. Bill "Count" Basie, whose band formed out of Moten's and the Blue Devils, was the best known of the large piano-led orchestras that formed from these groups of stranded musicians.⁹

Ramey had always planned on getting a college degree, but he was drawn to Kansas City's vibrant music scene. In 1932, he moved north, hoping to use a modest musical scholarship to attain an electrical engineering degree from Western University, located on the city's outskirts (near where John Brown sneaked slaves across the Missouri River in the 1850s). Ramey considered majoring in journalism or teaching elementary school music, but he soon became more interested in playing professionally. Within a year, he had organized his own group while still performing in the school band. He even played on a flatbed truck for Republican Alf Landon's 1932 gubernatorial campaign.¹⁰ When the school's band director told Ramey to help himself to Western University's storeroom of instruments, Ramey grabbed a double bass and the same silver Conn tenor saxophone that would later become Lester Young's favorite.¹¹ The bass was new but had been broken during a move. For seventeen dollars, Ramey repaired it and began studying and playing.

At Kansas City's 1932 Battle of the Bands, Ramey met Walter Page (Hot Lip's half-brother), leader of the Blue Devils and later bassist for Count Basie's Orchestra.¹² Page, who also played the tuba, tutored Ramey on bass, teaching him how to restrain his sound and support soloists while working within a rhythm section. Page showed Ramey how to "run a straight line" rather than increasing and decreasing with the orchestra's pace. Page

believed that the bassist should slow down slightly as the melody sped up and "put some body into it" when the rest of the orchestra slowed. He taught Ramey to "go into a Latin beat" or some kind of accent that did not interfere with a piano solo, and to wait for the drummer, if the drummer got off the beat. And if he sensed other musicians "dozing," Ramey learned from Page how to wake them up by playing loudly.¹³

Ramey converted more fully to playing bass in 1933, while he continued to play tuba in Western University's marching band. At first, he pasted a chart on the instrument that showed where his fingers should be to play the various chords. The bass was an odd fit, because Ramey's hands were double-jointed and he could not generate much pressure on the balls of his fingers. However, he adapted quickly.¹⁴ Ramey also soon became popular among area musicians who appreciated his warmth, intelligence, and humor.¹⁵ Aside from becoming proficient on the bass, he was also one of the few players who owned a car, which made him an even more valuable asset.¹⁶ Basie's saxophonist, Lester Young, befriended Ramey and invited him to play at the Sunset Club. They became lifelong friends and renewed their collaboration in New York in the 1950s.

Ramey finished classes in 1934 with a printer's certificate and landed his first full-time gig in 1935 with pianist Margaret "Countess" Johnson at the Bar-La-Duc and State Line Tavern.¹⁷ By then, Ramey was married and had a daughter, but the band often played through the night. Ramey caught up on sleep at his university job after doing a little painting and stuffing the boiler full of coal.¹⁸ Around this time, he also played with Oliver Todd's band, Eddie Barefield, and Bus Moten (Benny Moten's nephew, Ira "Buster").¹⁹ In between these gigs, he played dance-a-thons and skate-a-thons with a group called the Rink-A-Dinks.²⁰ He practiced with Young and another saxophonist, fellow student Ben Webster.

Ramey's big break came in 1938, when he joined the Jay McShann Orchestra, which included Charlie "Bird" Parker on sax.²¹ Ramey paired with drummer Gus Johnson, a fellow Texan, in a rhythm section that onlookers compared to Basie's duo of Walter Page and Jo Jones. Johnson knew Ramey from singing in the same African Methodist Episcopal Church choir (Ramey sang tenor), and the two began a long partnership that lasted beyond the McShann era. Ramey also was instrumental in bringing a lot of Countess Johnson's men over to McShann, and he helped



arrange some of the music.²² Charlie Barnet's all-white band wanted Ramey, but McShann deflected the offer before Barnet ever spoke to Ramey.²³

With Ramey on bass, McShann's rhythm section quickly jelled, and, in 1938, the band was voted "promising new players" in *Down Beat* magazine.²⁴ They played regularly at Martin's-on-the-Plaza, where Ramey came up with a song in honor of the chicken-in-a-basket the club promoted. Martin's was in an upscale white neighborhood that introduced zoning laws to control the type of music McShann played. "Hot tunes" were restricted until after midnight; earlier in the evening, the band stuck to such tunes as "Hawaiian Paradise" and "Somewhere over the Rainbow."²⁵

Kansas City, Kansas, where Ramey lived at that time, was dry, but the combination of a crime-driven economy and moral permissiveness made the Missouri side of town more unrestrained, despite being more clearly segregated. In the neighborhood around Vine Street, between 12th and 18th streets, there were at least fifty cabarets during the 1930s. "18th and Vine" became analogous to New Orleans's Basin Street or Memphis's Beale Street as a musical hotspot.²⁶ 12th Street divided white and black neighborhoods. Some bars, including the Reno Club, where Basie played, were split down the middle with segregated bars, seats, and dance floors on each side.²⁷

Depression-era Kansas City, Missouri was known as "Tom's Town," after its corrupt mayor Tom Pendergast.²⁸ The Pendergast dynasty dated to the 1870s, when Tom's older brother, Jim, loan-sharked and ran a gambling ring from his saloon. His enterprise diversified, and, when Jim's health failed, Tom took over the family's liquor, gambling, construction, and prostitution businesses. By the 1920s, Tom had bought his way to political power and controlled the city's wards. Gambling was ubiquitous, and bootlegging thrived under gangster Johny Lazia. Liquor enforcement was so lax, that there was not a single felony conviction for production or sale during Prohibition.

In exchange for votes and tolerance of Pendergast's crude tactics, citizens got food, fuel, clothing, and shelter. Consequently, his rackets helped shield the city from the extreme Depression-era poverty experienced elsewhere. Not surprisingly, these were also the peak years of Kansas City jazz. Pendergast's mobsters enjoyed partying in local clubs, thus providing ample employment for musicians, although they were denied union wages. Musicians were told when and where they would work. For example, Ramey was once told he could "not quit" when he tried to move to another club. For Ramey, Pendergast's machine went with the territory; it was a necessary evil whose existence made it possible to earn a living doing what Ramey loved.²⁹

The phrase "Goin' to Kansas City" soon was coined as a network of musicians from jazz-rich Texas and Oklahoma gravitated toward the town's thriving nightclubs. Basie's trombonist Eddie Durham was from San Marcos, Texas.³⁰ McShann was from Oklahoma, and his drummer, Gus Johnson, was born in Tyler,

Texas, and raised in Houston and Dallas. Walter Page's Blue Devils formed in Oklahoma City. Torrance Holder, leader of the Clouds of Joy, was from Muskogee and operated out of Tulsa and Oklahoma City before Andy Kirk took over in 1929. Their saxophonist Buddy Tate hailed from Sherman, Texas. Work was not always steady, but it was seen as a stepping stone to bigger and better things. Musicians could generally earn around \$2.00 for a 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. shift. Ramey recalled that Kansas City was "a big city for the Southwest, a kind of focal point for people to go to for an urban center in those days . . . it was like the first stop. The next stop, if they made it, was Chicago."³¹

The musicians drew on a rich pool of regional influences.³² Texan Scott Joplin had helped make Missouri a hotbed for ragtime, and many of the early keyboardists in Kansas City were brought up in that tradition; but blues formed the backbone of jazz, along with classic New Orleans Dixieland music. Texans in Kansas City tended more toward straight blues or "boogie-woogie" styles than did musicians from Missouri and Arkansas, where ragtime and Dixieland were more pronounced, but all the elements mixed and were region-wide.³³

Ramey credited another genre as his main adolescent influence, namely the religious spirituals that constituted the core of his family's music. When Ramey was young, his family often would "harmonize all the spirituals and all those old good church songs." The call-and-response, hand-clapping style of Southern gospel music shaped Ramey's sense of rhythm. Looking back on it later in life he was "persuaded that jazz was born at those reunions."³⁴

Kansas City rhythm sections were characterized by the same steady, but understated, beat. In contrast to the louder, more prominent rhythm section typical of Dixieland jazz bands, the more subtle beat of Kansas City rhythm sections allowed soloists greater prominence on instruments, such as the saxophone. Ramey carried this style, which he referred to as the "Baptist beat," into his work with McShann.³⁵ The rhythm section was the motor that drove the band, but it retreated into the background to give horn soloists more room to maneuver. Ramey said, "We began to find out that the Kansas City style was that the drummer's foot was never supposed to be so loud . . . the bass drum wasn't supposed to be . . . it's called a 'big-foot drummer'."³⁶ His style led jazz writer Ross Russell to characterize Ramey's bass as "steady and unobtrusive . . . felt more often than heard . . . the pivot man around whom [McShann's] band pulse centered."³⁷

The Baptist beat was conducive to the freedom and improvisation that defined the "gutbucket" Kansas City sound. Soloists would hang back a fraction behind the beat and catch up at the end of the phrase, giving it a lazy, bluesy sound. Ramey recalled that Lester Young had a "very spacey sound . . . he would play a phrase and maybe lay out three beats before he'd come in with another phrase."³⁸ For Ramey, "Eastern rhythms were like a metronome," whereas "that Western thing gave you a chance to

relax." Harkening back to his religious upbringing, he described that "churchy feeling" as being "like a camp meeting completely imitated from one of those revival meetings, where the preacher and the people are singing, all that living, and there's happenings all around . . . it's something you're bound to feel."³⁹

Music in Basie's and McShann's bands was rarely written down. Ramey remembered that the songs relied on a loose structure with only the first and last chorus agreed on beforehand.

in the spotlight. However, unlike soloists, they had no chance to rest, since they had to provide the rhythm section on every song from start to finish. Numbers were known sometimes to last over two hours, causing bassists and drummers to suffer from fatigue and chafed fingers. When a good session was going, word got out and musicians carried their instruments long distances, sometimes across the Missouri River, to take part.⁴⁸

Jo Jones of the Basie Orchestra remembered the spook

The Baptist beat was conducive to the freedom and improvisation that defined the "gutbucket" Kansas City sound.

In between was nothing but riffs [the short, rhythmically marked phrases or two to four bars] . . . this guy sets a riff over there and this one sets a riff over here and so on. Just things they thought of in their mind you know? But it turned out that it was even better, although it didn't help the publishing business . . . they'd hire somebody to copy it down and make arrangements.⁴⁰

The social atmosphere of Kansas City's clubs matched the music's freedom.⁴¹ The city was home to marathon after-hours jam sessions that followed the evening's regular performance. After clubs closed around 2 a.m., musicians stayed behind for "spook breakfasts," so named because they lasted late into the night. Clubs also opened after midnight on "dry" Sundays, not closing until the afternoon hours of "Blue Monday."⁴²

Ramey recalled seeing Young and Coleman Hawkins "duel" musically through the night at the Cherry Blossom until noon the next day, causing "Hawk" to miss a date in St. Louis.⁴³ Outsiders, such as Benny Goodman and agent John Hammond, found these sessions to be the most remarkable trait of Kansas City nightlife.⁴⁴ Pianist Mary Lou Williams recalled how Thelonious Monk came through town as a teenager in the 1930s, "with either an evangelist or a medicine show," and jammed every night in a style that he called "zombie music" because it was only played after hours.⁴⁵ Monk later included Ramey in his first New York trio in the late 1940s.

Improvisation was the key to success at spook breakfasts. The adage in Kansas City was "say something with your horn."⁴⁶ Riffs carried a melody that could be expanded upon, and everyone knew these melodies by heart.⁴⁷ What counted was the ability to generate fresh ideas. If a player repeated himself or used another's ideas without "turning them inside out," his turn was up and someone else stepped in. Rhythm men, such as Ramey, were not

breakfasts as being motivated purely by the joy of playing. "They weren't cutting sessions or contests . . . the idea of the jam session then wasn't who could play better than somebody else . . . it was a matter of contributing something and of experimentation."⁴⁹ However, Ramey saw the sessions in a competitive light. Though musicians bent over backwards to help each other, Kansas City was a place where they loved to "battle each other with



all guns blazing." He likened the sessions to tribal initiation rites and called the elimination cycle of jams "constant tests of manhood."⁵⁰ Experienced musicians tried to throw off newcomers by transposing into difficult keys unexpectedly or increasing the tempo beyond the point at which a blower could fit his notes into the bars.

One of the newcomers who failed his first initiation rite was Charlie Parker. Parker was a precocious teen full of strange ideas,

was a worrier whose natural instinct was to help keep Parker on the straight and narrow. Much of the bitterness that characterized their later friendship stemmed from Ramey's inability to always do so, especially in relation to Parker's drug addiction. In many ways, Parker embodied the best and worst of Kansas City nightlife. Aside from being a center for transportation, wheat, and cattle, Kansas City was also the Southern Plains' hub for morphine, cocaine, and heroin traffic. By assuming a role as guardian, the

Parker was a precocious teen full of strange ideas, such as double time and scrambled harmonic schemes. Ramey saw little promise in the young

such as double time and scrambled harmonic schemes. Ramey saw little promise in the young Parker. Ramey recalled his first meeting in 1934 with the "evil, spoiled kid," and described an awful noise coming out of young "Bird's" horn. Ramey called it "that Sweet Lucy sound," after the California muscatel and white port favored by local winos. Ramey sometimes called the noise "playing the flask." One night Ramey accompanied Parker to the Reno Club for a spook breakfast. What ensued became a famous incident, dramatized in numerous books and in Robert Altman's 1996 film *Kansas City*, when the inexperienced saxophonist was "gonged off" the stage for screwing up. Ramey stood by Parker and gave the embarrassed teenager encouragement. Instead of saying "I told you so," he complimented him on what he had done right, and encouraged him "not to let it get under [his] skin." Parker vowed to come back "and fix those cats."⁵¹ Accounts of subsequent episodes in which Parker made rival bands "look like a troop of Boy Scouts" are too voluminous to document here.⁵²

The gonging incident was typical of Ramey's paternalism toward Parker. Ramey first met Bird when he was twenty-one and Parker was fourteen, a year before Parker married and dropped out of high school. Ramey was with Oliver Todd, and Parker played with Lawrence "88" Keyes.⁵³ They remained friends until Parker's death in Harlem in 1955, but their relationship was not one of mutual dependency. Parker leaned on the stable Ramey for support in the same way that Lester Young and Stan Getz later would. Ramey recalled that Parker and fellow McShann saxophonist John Jackson "were like two children at the time, and I was their chaperon." Ross Russell contrasted the personalities of Parker and the "resolute, self-contained" Ramey as analogous to their respective musical roles of soloist and rhythm man. "Gene Ramey and Charlie Parker were opposites in almost every respect. Ramey was a skinny young man who wore spectacles and looked like a divinity student . . . the temperament seemed to go with the trade."⁵⁴

Ramey thought Parker's personality problems resulted from his mother's coddling him as her only child. Ramey, meanwhile,

burden of keeping Parker clean enough to maintain himself as a professional musician fell on Ramey's shoulders. When Bird was distracted by the need for a fix, Ramey used music to get his mind off of it. As Ramey said,

I found that this is the only thing that I could do to keep him from doing the thing, you know? . . . I'd get his eye, I say man, let's go somewhere and jam. He'd forget about it right away . . . I'd say I got some ideas. I didn't have any ideas for him, but it was just enough to get him away and he would jam . . . we'd jam day and night.⁵⁵

Ramey's account also highlights Parker's creative process.

Bird was a most receptive being. He got into his music all the sounds right around him—the swish of a car speeding down a highway, the hum of wind as it goes through the leaves . . . everything had a musical message for him. If he heard a dog bark, he would say the dog was speaking. Sometimes on the dance floor, while he was playing, women would perform in front of him. Their attitudes, their gestures, their faces would awaken in him an emotional shock that he would express musically in his solos.⁵⁶

Ramey credited Parker for McShann's band being able to spend almost all of its spare time rehearsing. "We used to jam on trains and buses; and as soon as we got into town, we'd try to find somebody's house where we could hold a session. All this was inspired by Bird, because the new ideas he was bringing to the band made everybody anxious to play." At other times, the band would play in city parks in the middle of the night. "Cops very seldom bothered us; they used to come out there to enjoy the music themselves."⁵⁷

The factors that gave Kansas City its musical vitality—loose arrangements featuring horn soloists and the competitive stress

on individuality showcased by all-night sessions—made it a key birthplace of bebop.⁵⁸ Jazz educator and composer Ahmad Alaadeen recalled that Sonny Stitt, Dexter Gordon, and Miles Davis viewed Kansas City as the force behind modern jazz, and visited there “to find the energy or spiritual force” that nourished Parker and others.⁵⁹

In the 1930s, artists in the Basie and McShann Orchestras considered their style to be dance music, or what became known as swing. In retrospect, though, Young and Parker were “bopping” even at this early date. Ramey recalled how he and Young, who, at that time Ramey called “Red” not “Pres” or “Prez,” used to play for hours with Young “running his cycles,” progressing through different key signatures in the middle of a song. They called it “running out of key,” but in Ramey’s estimation, “he [was] the first one that started what they later called bebop.”⁶⁰

In the meantime, artists living in New York, including Thelonius Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, Kenny Clarke, and Charlie Christian were laying their own groundwork for the bebop revolution. Texas-born Christian, electric guitarist with the Benny

at KFBI radio, and toured the country in 1940–41.⁶² McShann and his group played the Regal Theater in Chicago, Paradise Theater in Detroit, and up and down the West Coast. They also recorded for Decca Records in Dallas in 1941. The recordings do not represent the orchestra’s true range, however, because Decca co-owner Dave Kapp preferred their blues numbers with vocalist Walter Brown over their jazz instrumentals. Nonetheless, the band scored a big hit from these sessions with “Confessin’ the Blues,” which sold over half a million 78s with “Hootie Blues” on the B-side.⁶³

“Confessin’” gave manager John Tumino the leverage to book McShann at the famous Savoy Ballroom in New York City. By February 1942, McShann and his group were settled in the Big Apple playing famous halls and searching for a more lucrative recording contract. On the way east, Ramey drove McShann’s Buick directly over the mountains instead of on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, thinking he had discovered a shortcut. When this route proved to be longer and more difficult, they arrived at the Savoy in a rather ragged condition. However, they still raised the roof

Parker left for good in October, 1942, by then, Ramey’s relationship with Bird had soured to the point at which Ramey was glad to see Parker go.

Goodman Sextet, removed syncopation from his rhythms and made use of discordance, both traits of bop music. As Calloway’s trumpeter, Gillespie was experimenting with harmony and phrasing so radical that Cab Calloway labeled his music “Chinese” and kicked him out of the band. Drummer Clarke was moving the main beat to the cymbals in order to free up the bass drum and tom-toms for accents, partly because his foot could barely keep up with the faster pace of bop. Clarke and Monk began playing regularly at Minton’s on 52nd Street, one of the first clubs in which bop flourished.

New York City was the hub of the jazz world by 1940. Basie left for the East Coast in 1936, later commenting, “I’m glad I got out of [Kansas City] as fast as I did, because [Jay McShann] was breathing down our backs so hard. We had to get out and move over and let this cat in.”⁶¹ The real problem was that the golden age of Kansas City music was drying up, and the Clouds of Joy followed Basie to New York. After Mayor Pendergast’s 1938 imprisonment for income-tax evasion, musicians could no longer rely on the employment crime bosses provided. The “Union Station Massacre” of four policemen by Pretty Boy Floyd in 1933 had drawn attention to the city’s organized crime, as had rigged elections in 1936.

However, McShann’s band thrived in Kansas City, even as the local situation deteriorated. The band was headquartered in Kansas City and Wichita, where it made its first recordings

in front of bandleader Lucky Millinder, who had taunted them earlier with a postcard that read, “We’re going to send you back to the sticks.”⁶⁴ Parker had been in New York before, failing to really get heard, but, this time, the McShann Orchestra gave him a vehicle to get noticed. With Bird leading the way, the band became a hot item, playing regularly on national broadcasts.

McShann faced off against the Savoy Sultans, Cecil Scott, Erskine Hawkins, and the Chick Webb Orchestra, reducing their overmatched counterparts to (once again) “a bunch of Boy Scouts.” They were not undefeated, though. Ramey described Calloway “single-handedly winning a battle of the bands against McShann with an athletic display of somersaults and chair-vaulting, all while singing.”⁶⁵ Local musicians, such as Gillespie sometimes sat in with the band. With blind Al Hibbler (who later joined Duke Ellington) on vocals, McShann played the Apollo Theater and toured New England, the Atlantic seaboard, and South, where the band twice had money stolen and experienced frightening run-ins with racist police.⁶⁶

However, while bop flourished in the early 1940s, the swing wave broke for other reasons. Whereas small groups played bop, swing relied on big bands that lost members to the service during World War II. The war effort also caused the suspension of record production by the American Federation of Musicians for two years to conserve vinyl.⁶⁷ Swing relied on the sale of dance records and

consequently suffered more than bop from the two-year vinyl rationing. Parker was the talk of New York, but he was on and off again with the band after being caught stealing five dollars from singer Walter Brown's wife. Just as McShann's orchestra was gaining recognition, it was coming apart, and Parker left for good in October, 1942. By then, Ramey's relationship with Bird had soured to the point at which Ramey was glad to see Parker go.⁶⁸

There also were tensions in the group beyond Parker's antics. When intoxicated band member Bob Merrill threatened him with a glass pitcher, the normally mild-mannered Ramey knifed him, cutting him from ear to chin. Shaken, Ramey quit the band in 1943 and returned to Kansas City to work first in a packing plant, then at the railroad station. There he realized how privileged he had been to play bass for a living. Contrite (and knifeless), Ramey rejoined the group shortly thereafter in Chicago and served as its director when McShann joined the army later that year. But with McShann gone, the band lost direction. The original idea was to call the band "Jay McShann and his band, featuring [vocalist] Walter Brown, under the direction of Gene Ramey." However, Tumino decided that was too misleading with McShann gone and changed the title to "Walter Brown and his band, under the direction of Gene Ramey." Ramey's problem was that he despised Brown, thought he "knew nothing about music," disrespected him as a heroin junkie (a "far worse dope addict than Bird"), and disliked his "nasty" voice. Ramey loved voices like Frank Sinatra's that were smooth and could hit all the notes, but Brown's nasal singing grated on his nerves. Ramey had been willing to put up with Brown to satisfy McShann but,

without Jay around, Ramey could not make himself direct a band that headlined Brown.⁶⁹

The knifing had also turned some members against Ramey, and he gradually drifted into other engagements after he realized how many "silent enemies" he now had. He found out "those guys really hated my guts," even though he had helped many of them get into the band.⁷⁰ New versions of the McShann group resurfaced

in the 1940s and beyond, but the classic incarnation broke up at this point. For most of 1944, Ramey toured with bandleader Louis Russell, whose outfit accompanied singers, such as the Ink Spots and Ella Fitzgerald. When McShann returned after the war, he relocated to the West Coast, where the influx of black migrants to Los Angeles and San Francisco established new centers for the rootsy jazz he loved.

Swing was in relative decline by the end of World War II anyway, giving way to the newer sounds coming out of Bird's horn. Parker's brilliance had brought McShann national exposure, but his subsequent fame overshadowed the band's reputation. Monk and Kenny Clarke heard about



Parker, who was then at Clark Monroe's Uptown House, and invited him to Minton's. At this point, Ramey served informally as Parker's agent.⁷¹ According to Clarke, "Bird was playing stuff we'd never heard before. He was into figures I thought I'd invented for drums . . . Bird was running the same way we were, but he was ahead of us. I don't think he was aware of the changes he had created." Historian James Lincoln Collier wrote that Parker and Gillespie simultaneously made changes that "were in the air, and would have come about anyway." They were playing the same style of chromatic chord movements that revolutionized

classical music in the nineteenth century, as well as making a more systematic use of simple chord replacements.⁷²

For Collier, the real innovations of bop were rhythmic. Parker mixed triplet figures with eighths and sixteenths in such a way that phrases created passages that "leap into the sky, for a moment escaping the gravity pull of the down beat." The phrasing among boppers often shifted from the "on" beat, the first and third beats of a measure, to the "off" beats, the second and fourth. Collier wrote that, "although many younger listeners do not find the music of Hawkins and Young much different from that of Parker and Gillespie . . . so profound did the bop revolution appear at the time that not one established swing player ever succeeded in playing bop. And it was mainly this shift which caused the trouble."⁷³

However, Collier was not entirely correct in his assessment. Ramey possessed traits that allowed him to make that difficult transition from swing to bop, and McShann's breakup gave him the opportunity to work full-time with other artists around 52nd Street. Ramey's teenage idol, "Hot Lips" Page, provided him with a bridge from Kansas City to New York musicians, as did Ramey's friendships with Young and Parker.⁷⁴ Ramey was experienced in playing with both saxophonists, and he was attuned to the subtle shifts in bop phrasing.⁷⁵ His background with territorial jazz and gospel familiarized him with varying rhythms and how to handle moving from the "on" to the "off" beat.⁷⁶

Austin writer John Bustin points out that Ramey "was right in the middle of it all, occupying the unique position of being able to stand with a foot in both worlds by virtue of having started off as a 'swing man' but now possessing a key to the dissonant harmonies of bebop through his association with Charlie Parker." Another writer, Robert Bergman, calls McShann's orchestra an "incubator to bop." As Ramey explained, "He [Parker] and I had run through those changes for months before anybody else had ever heard them, so when we hit New York, I had all those bop numbers down cold."⁷⁷

In addition, the speed of some bop forced rhythm sections to turn to the bass rather than the drums or piano as the center of the rhythm section, and the bass got more popular with the advent of amplification in the late 1940s. When drummers began to solo, they relied more than ever on bassists to keep the beat. Ramey recalled that

When Max [Roach] and them developed, that's really how we managed to stick in there as long as I did with

all of them, Monk and Diz [Gillespie] and all of them, because they needed a heavy bass player, strong player to carry the beat while the drummer was . . . carrying on, you know, so [Dillon] Curly [Russell] and I, we managed to go from one club to another.⁷⁸

Thus, Ramey played in numerous small combos during the era that saw the birth of "modern jazz." Collier was right for the most part about the difficulty of transitioning from swing to bop. Few big band musicians of the swing era could play in the emerging new style. Many sidemen lost out on the revolution simply because bebop was played by smaller groups. Others could not reconcile the different rhythms of bop, which fluctuates between frantic and slow paces, and swing, which maintains a steady beat aimed at a dancing audience.⁷⁹ Consequently, as dance music and Dixieland survived into the 1940s, most musicians found themselves in either the traditional or modern camp. Ramey bridged that gap, working closely with swing masters and boppers, and in the New Orleans Revival.

Thelonius Monk recognized Ramey's versatility and made him part of his first trio, along with drummer Art Blakey. During the formative period of Monk's career, 1947-1952, Ramey was his preferred bassist. His steady beat was the perfect complement for Monk's meandering excursions—a challenging opportunity for him to "run a straight line" in the manner Walter Page taught him. However, critic Gunther Schuller did not find the trio interesting, placing part of the blame on

Ramey's "plunky bass."⁸⁰

Texas jazz historian Dave Oliphant was more sympathetic, writing that Ramey was "able to anticipate precisely where Monk was heading and to supply the perfect note that would complement the pianist's melodic lines, his decorative runs, or his ringing note cluster . . . [in "April in Paris"] he feeds Monk the notes he obviously wants to hear . . . leading him back from his jazz explorations to the original melody."⁸¹ These sessions are indeed worth the while for any fan of bop, if Monk can even be so narrowly defined. The first volume of *The Genius of Modern Music* (1947) is the most important album Ramey played on.

Ramey enjoyed working with artists who straddled different styles. With "Messie Bessie," the Czechoslovakian bass he purchased in New York, he backed up Art Tatum and Billie Holiday at the Famous Door, fellow Austin native Teddy Wilson at Ember's, saxophonist Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis at Minton's, Miles Davis at Birdland, and swung with his old friend Ben Webster at Minton's and the Onyx Club.⁸² Some of his best recordings



from the late 1940s come from his work with Lockjaw, trumpeter Fats Navarro, and pianist Todd Dameron. Navarro came up with Andy Kirk, and his background in territory swing would have made him a likely prospect to team with Ramey more had he not died young of tuberculosis in 1950. Ramey worked both within the smooth "birth of the cool" movement fostered by Miles Davis and Gil Evans, and its funkier counterpart—hard bop, or postbop—which combined blues and gospel of the sort Ramey was reared on with more modern sounds. His best work in the harder bop vein came with Texas trumpeter Kenny Dorham, Blakey, and pianist Horace Silver just prior to the formation of Blakey's Jazz Messengers.⁸³ Their work can be found on *Horace Silver Trio: Spotlight on Drums* (1953).

Opportunities came Ramey's way, because of his versatility, dependability, and reputation for being easy to work with. The list of luminaries Ramey played with in this period reads like a jazz hall-of-fame. Besides Monk, Silver, Blakey, Navarro, Holiday, Wilson, Webster, Gillespie, Hawkins, Getz, and both Davises, Ramey played with Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Sarah Vaughan, Dexter Gordon, Lou Donaldson, Earl Hines, Dorothy Donegan, Buddy Rich, Eartha Kitt, Big Sid Catlett, Jimmy Rushing, Tony Grimes, Ike Quebec, Lennie Tristano, Eddie Condon, Sol Yaged, Cootie Williams, Ruby Braff, George Shearing, Jimmy Forrest, Cozy Cole, and Houston native Illinois Jacquet. In 1948, Ramey opened Birdland with Blakey, Miles Davis, Bud Powell, Sonny Stitt, and J.J. Johnson, and later recorded on the *Birdlanders* albums in a quartet with French pianist Henri Renaud, saxophonist Al Cohn, and drummer Denzil Best. Ramey worked briefly with Count Basie in 1952-53, reuniting him with Gus Johnson and former McShann saxophonist Paul Quinichette.⁸⁴ Ramey worked again with Quinichette when recording with Coltrane. *Cattin' with Coltrane and Quinichette*, recorded in 1952 and 1957, is a good example of what came to be known as "mainstream" swing-based jazz. The 1995 re-release features Ramey and Johnson on the last three numbers.

The 1950s were rewarding but difficult years for Ramey, both musically and socially. He thought heroin was changing the music, steering trumpeters, in particular, toward what he called a "straight symphonic sound" rather than the "buzz" he was used

to. Ramey lamented that they would never "play an imitation of a hog grunt," and that saxophonists on heroin strayed from "growling" their horn. Ramey sensed that drugs were socially divisive, separating drinkers from "the doping crowd." Ramey smoked marijuana in his youth but now found himself ostracized from younger musicians, along with fellow drinkers Roy Eldridge, Ben Webster, and Coleman Hawkins.⁸⁵

Musically, Ramey could play with boppers, but he was never completely at home with modern jazz. Part of the problem was that bassists, such as Oscar Pettiford and Jimmy Blanton, were now soloing, and Ramey was not comfortable as a soloist.⁸⁶ Because of Ramey's problems leading McShann's band after Jay's induction into the service, the American Federation of Musician's New York chapter (Local 802) blamed Ramey for their breakup, and he suspected that they conspired to end his work as a soloist.⁸⁷

However, Ramey never thrived on soloing anyway, remarking once, "I never appreciate the guys who want the bass fiddle to stand out all alone in the rhythm section."⁸⁸ He wanted it known that he could step into the limelight if he so desired, though. Ramey recalled how he "tore up" Pettiford once back in the Midwest, but now the vengeful bassist taunted him for not soloing. Apparently, Pettiford kept saying, "Man you can't play . . . I'm going to get you . . . you ain't got shit! . . . you ain't no bass player," until finally "I went up there and tore him up so bad he got drunk and couldn't play anymore . . . I had to finish the night for him."⁸⁹

Likewise, Ramey could handle the speed of bop but did not enjoy it. He disliked the "metronome" or "machine-gun" beat of bop. "Now take [drummer] Max Roach. I know Max well and we've played together many times, but we always have a lot of difficulty getting anything really going."⁹⁰ The tension is evident on Sonny Rollins's *Volume One* (1956), where Ramey and Roach work together more effectively on the slower and medium-paced pieces than the faster tunes. In one 1962 interview Ramey implicated whites (and indirectly insulted blacks) for this turn of events:

Jazz that is too modern has lost [its] evangelical side in favor of a cold and cerebral pursuit. This direction is not without interest, musically speaking, but it is normal that





Woody Herman, courtesy of Storyville Records.

the black American people, in the search of something from the heart, have not introduced any extensions of the movement that have been too intellectual. In my opinion, in order to survive, jazz must stay an art of the people.⁹¹

Developments in the horn section upset him too, but here he pointed the finger at African Americans. Ramey believed that, while Bird and Young soloed, they still swung *with* the band, whereas modern soloists were guilty of overt individualism. “Well, I have got to say it again that I love Kansas City music. I don’t go for acrobatics on a horn. I call it calisthenics. All notes—and they’re saying *nothing*.”⁹² Ramey loved Coltrane’s saxophone early on, but, eventually, lost his affection for it.

He could blow when he first started with Miles Davis, but he started playing this avant-garde or whatever. To

me it gave the impression of a fierce battle in the jungle, like all the animals are stampeding. It’s frantic and it can be moving, but what is it saying, other than there’s torment in the world?⁹³

Speaking of bop (and perhaps of Ornette Coleman and Johnny Griffin), Ramey also said, “Guys now want to run all the changes and they don’t care if it swings or not. They just want to hit a jillion notes, and they don’t leave any spaces. Spaces are important in jazz.”⁹⁴ However, for Ramey, quality was not ultimately based on a specific style, race, or region (such as Kansas City) as much as it came from “the soul . . . [where] true jazz is sanctified.” Ramey’s most vivid impression of that spirit came in New York City playing with Milt Jackson. “Often I would see him playing the vibraphone as if he had been at church, concentrating, almost praying.”⁹⁵

Ramey shared these sentiments with Lester Young, which made him an excellent fit to accompany "the President." Ramey was the best man at Young's wedding in 1946 and watched over Young's kids when he was out of town. Ramey even consoled the distraught saxophonist when his cat "Symphony" jumped out the window to his death.⁹⁶ Both musicians played in other combos, but Ramey's most consistent work from 1951 to 1956 came with Young. They toured together for all of 1951.

Young wanted no acrobatics whatsoever from the rhythm section that might interfere with his soloing. He just wanted the drums to "give me some tinkdee-boom, that's all . . . or you'll put me in the basement." The same went for bassists, whose job was to "straighten him out" when he "ran out of key," but not dominate his playing. As Prez put it, "Give me some food, and let me eat."⁹⁷ Ramey and Young played in various combinations and part of every year with Norman Granz's *Jazz at the Philharmonic*, which exposed them to different venues than the smoky clubs and dancehalls in which they were accustomed to playing.⁹⁸

In January 1956, Ramey and Young recorded *Jazz Giants* on Granz's Verve label with Vic Dickinson on trombone, Roy Eldridge on trumpet, Teddy Wilson on piano, Freddy Green on guitar, and Jo Jones on drums. Young, Wilson, Ramey, and Jones cut another record of standards the next day, *Prez and Teddy*, which better recaptures the vibrant and creative Young of earlier years. On both albums, Ramey is at the top of his game with a group of swing-era musicians he knew well. He pointed to these "fantastic" sessions as his favorite recording memory.⁹⁹

Young's health deteriorated in the 1950s, due to alcohol and drug abuse, epilepsy, and an old head injury. He also thought he had suffered permanent brain damage from being beaten up in disciplinary barracks during his army duty in Alabama. The guards there did not appreciate Young's white wife stopping by to visit and would routinely take "target practice on his head" when they drank. The "disciplinary barracks blues," as he liked to call them, combined with intoxicants to sap Young's coordination and speed. By the mid-1950s, he had lost his taste for food and, musically, Ramey noticed that Young began to "take shortcuts to get out of holes." Young was also losing confidence, apologetically "asking other musicians if he could join them, if it wasn't too much of an inconvenience."¹⁰⁰

Parker was sliding downhill even faster than Young, and Ramey's relationship with him worsened in New York. Parker was now soaking his reed in Benzedrine to wake himself out of his drug-induced stupor when he played.¹⁰¹ To Ramey, Parker was a con artist who traded on the love and esteem that fellow members of the McShann Orchestra bestowed on him. Parker, in turn, once told Ramey, "Gene, I'm gonna punch you in the mouth to get you off of me; you're too much like my daddy." Parker was leaning on Ramey too much, and the older musician told him "not to call upon me unless [you're] in serious trouble," which

he often was.¹⁰² After Parker left McShann, Ramey remembers Parker coming into his dressing room begging for money. "He looked like an unmade bed. It was six degrees below zero and Bird was wearing a T-shirt, no socks, and an expensive black overcoat." Shortly before Parker's death, Ramey recalls placating him as he stood drunk over a frightened stage manager with a fire ax in his hand.¹⁰³

Ramey also resented the lack of respect Parker showed Young, whom Parker never credited as an influence. After Jo Jones gonged the teenaged Parker off the stage, Parker toured the Ozarks with George E. Lee's orchestra. When Parker returned, he could play all Young's solos note for note.¹⁰⁴ Ramey saw a clear line of progression from Louis Armstrong to Young, and from Young to Parker and Billie Holiday.¹⁰⁵ Ramey recalled that "Lester would always start off on a beautiful note in harmony" and that he got that idea from Armstrong and passed it on to Holiday. Parker picked up that trait, "always searching for this note that conditioned the rest of the phrase, the rest of the solo even. He never told me he discovered this idea in the phrasing of Lester, and I don't even know if he was conscious of it, but I am sure that it was listening to the records of Prez that he picked up this way of playing." Ramey thought Parker's style owed a lot to Moten-Basie altoist Buster Smith, but that Young taught Parker to "attack the music."¹⁰⁶

In the 1950s, Ramey grieved the deaths of many of his closest friends. Between 1954 and 1960, he served as a pallbearer at the funerals of Young, Parker, Holiday, and Walter Page. Hot Lips Page and his old rival Pettiford also passed away.¹⁰⁷ Ramey had no intention of dying early or letting his children come under the influence of the bebop lifestyle. Once following a dinner at Ramey's home, Thelonius Monk pulled out a marijuana joint, but Ramey insisted that he not smoke it in front of Ramey's son. Monk persisted, remarking that "the boy's gotta learn sometime." Ramey said that he can learn it outside the home then, not inside.¹⁰⁸

By the early 1960s, Ramey was separated from his third wife and decided to secure himself financially working as a guard at Chase Manhattan Bank. He also trained other guards in about forty different branches. At one point, he was offered the opportunity to play with his childhood idol, Louis Armstrong, but Ramey decided to stay with Chase Manhattan, so he could continue helping raise his two daughters.¹⁰⁹ He continued performing with Wilson and Basie veterans, Buddy Tate and trumpeter Buck Clayton, and Ramey played Dixieland with Jimmy Rushing, Peanuts Hucko, Mugsy Spanier, Dick Wellstood, and Buster Bailey.¹¹⁰

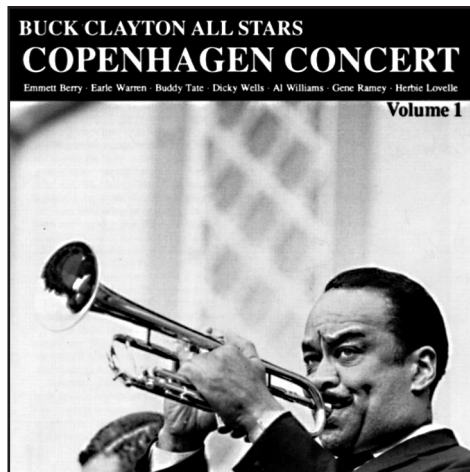
Clayton and Tate's recordings from 1960-61 capture the swinging spirit of the Kansas City era with Ramey and Johnson reuniting in the rhythm section. Their combos toured Europe in 1958 and 1961.¹¹¹ A Swiss television station captured the group on a video titled *Buck Clayton All-Stars*, and they are featured on singer Jimmy Witherspoon's *Olympia Concert*, recorded in

Paris in 1961. Johnson and Ramey also excel on pianist Earl Hines's *At the Village Vanguard* (1965). Ramey crossed over into folk rock backing up Bob Dylan on "Don't Think Twice it's All Right" (*Freewheelin'*, 1963), but Ramey did not care generally for what he saw as the bassist's monotonous role in rock.¹¹² He found time to go to Toronto with the Village Stompers for their performances of *Fiddler on the Roof*.¹¹³ He toured Europe again with Clayton's All-Stars in 1963 and the reunited McShann Orchestra in 1969. Around this time, McShann's reputation was revived as a purveyor of mainstream jazz, and Ramey toured France, Belgium, and Spain with an outfit that included Webster, Paul Gunther, Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinton, and John Lee Hooker.¹¹⁴

However, by his own admission, Ramey was drinking too much with Webster, Hawkins, and Eldridge, and that was the vice that drove him from New York. His wake-up call came when Hawkins's liver gave out in 1969 due to too much Scotch whiskey. In the early 1970s, Ramey began considering a move back to Texas. He returned to Austin for good in 1976 to escape the nightlife and to run a small farm near Round Rock. "I was running away from whiskey," he said candidly.¹¹⁵ Ramey later commented that coming home "dropped his blood pressure 60 points," and that he initially hoped to just "sit on the porch and watch the sun go down behind the hills."¹¹⁶

During Ramey's first year back in Texas, he kept out of the public eye, partly because he considered Austin "jazz-locked" (as in land-locked).¹¹⁷ Gradually, though, he found his way back on stage and evolved into the godfather of Austin jazz. In 1977, he said, "I would like to, you know, find some guys where I can just jam, and keep my fingers in shape." He followed up by touring Europe again with McShann in 1977 and 1979.¹¹⁸ By the early 1980s, Ramey was pumping life into the Texas jazz scene, playing with Jim Cullum, Jr., and with Herb Hall in San Antonio.¹¹⁹ While the farm in Round Rock may have suffered, Austin was rejuvenated with Ramey's regular appearances at Chez Fred and Piggy's.¹²⁰

Keeping the lessons of Parker and others in mind, Ramey never allowed junkies to sit in with younger players when he performed at Austin's Hyde Park Theater. His agent at the time, Doug Shea, remarked on the unassuming way that Ramey energized younger players, becoming a "unifying force in an otherwise fairly disjointed jazz scene." He was expected at Chez Fred on December 8, 1984 and, when he failed to show, band members found him dead of a heart attack in his home at 1605



Cedar Street.¹²¹

Shea emphasized the fact that Ramey was thriving both personally and musically at the time of his death.¹²² He had played with B.B. King at the Chicago Blues Festival that summer, and was scheduled to play a fundraiser for the Ethiopian famine at Antone's on December 9th, which ended up turning into an impromptu tribute to Ramey's life and career. He never got around to the autobiography he was going to write with John Bustin, or the reunion with Blakey's Messengers on PBS. He was, however, made an honorary admiral in the Texas Navy. Ramey loved Texas and, toward the end of his life, remarked that

he was "an Austinite that got transplanted for a few years."¹²³

Ramey will be remembered as an important figure in jazz history. He was neither a famous soloist nor an innovator, but he was an accomplished musician who overcame the double-jointedness of his fingers to become a leading jazz bassist for over thirty years. One of Ellington's bassists, Aaron Bell, expressed his admiration for Ramey's "fire and drive," counting him among his favorites. Stanley Dance called Ramey "one of the swingiest bassists in jazz history," and he was Buck Clayton's favorite.¹²⁴

Ramey's diverse musical background afforded him the experience necessary to bridge the difficult gap between swing and bop when he moved to New York. That versatility, and his connections to jazz nobility, were the keys to his longevity. Ross Russell remarked that, "Good bass players remained in the background, buried in the rhythm section, charged with the unglamorous but exacting job of keeping time, the dependable petty officers of the jazz organization. Their stock in trade was the big sound, the remorseless beat, and smooth-running changes."¹²⁵ Given this profile, the timekeeper from Texas fit the bill. Both personally and musically, Ramey remained in the background and worked as a steady officer in the jazz nightlife of Kansas City, New York, and Austin. ■

Selected Gene Ramey Discography (arranged chronologically):

Jay McShann, *Blues from Kansas City*, 1941-43
(Decca/MCA/GRD 614)

Charlie Parker with McShann, *Early Bird*, 1940-44
(Stash Records 542/Spotlite 120)

Thelonius Monk, *Genius of Modern Music*, Vol. 1, 1947
(Blue Note 781510-11)

Dexter Gordon, *Dexter Rides Again*, 1947
(Savoy 0120)

Fats Navarro, *Nostalgia*, 1947



Woody Herman, courtesy of Storyville Records.

(Savoy 0123)
George Shearing, *So Rare*, 1947-49
(Proper/Savoy 1117)
Stan Getz, *Stan Getz' Quartets*, 1949-50
(Original Jazz Classics 121)
J.J. Johnson, *J.J. Johnson's Jazz Quintets*, 1950
(Savoy 0151)
Miles Davis, *Birdland Days*, 1950-52
(Fresh Sound 124/Charly Le Jazz 23)¹²⁶
Lou Donaldson, *Lou Donaldson Quartet, Quintet, Sextet*, 1952
(Blue Note 1537)
Horace Silver, *Horace Silver Trio: Spotlight on Drums*, 1952-53
(Blue Note 80906)
Art Blakey, *Hooray for Blakey*, 1953
(Session 110)¹²⁷
Count Basie, *New Year at Birdland*, 1953
(Tokuma [Japan] 30142)
Various Artists, *The Birdlanders*, Vols. 1-2, 1954
(Fantasy/OJC 1930-1 2)
Ruby Braff, *The Mighty Braff*, 1955
(Affinity 757)
Sonny Rollins, *Sonny Rollins: Volume One*, 1956
(Blue Note B21Y-81542-2)
Lester Young, *Masters of Jazz: Lester Young*, 1951-56
(Storyville 4107)
Lester Young, *The Jazz Giants*, 1956
(Verve 825 672-2)
Lester Young-Teddy Wilson Quartet, *Pres & Teddy*, 1956
(Verve 831270)
Teddy Wilson Trio, *Complete Verve Recordings*, 8 Vols., 1952-57
(Mosaic 8-173)
John Coltrane, *Cattin' with Coltrane and Quinichette*, 1957
(P 7158/OJC 460/Dcc 1995)
Vic Dickenson & Joe Thomas & Their All-Stars, *Mainstream*, 1958
(Atlantic 1303)

Buster Bailey Quartet, *All about Memphis*, 1958
(Master Jazz Recordings 8125)
Illinois Jacquet, *Flying Home: The Best of the Verve Years*, 1951-58
(Verve 521644-2)
Jimmy Rushing, *Rushing Lullabies*, 1959
(Columbia 1401)
Jimmy Forrest Quintet, *All the Gin is Gone*, 1959
(Delmark 404)
Buck Clayton All-Stars, *Copenhagen Concert*, 1959
(Steeplechase 36006)
Buck Clayton-Buddy Tate, *Buck and Buddy Blow the Blues*, 1961
(Swingville/OJC 850)
Jimmy Witherspoon, *Olympia Concert*, 1961
(Inner City/Vogue/Jazz Legacy 7014)
Lennie Tristano, *The New Tristano*, 1955-62
(Rhino/Atlantic R2 71595)
Earl Hines, *At the Village Vanguard*, 1965
(Columbia 462401)
Claude Williams, *Fiddler's Dream*, 1977-80
(Classic Jazz 135)

Films in which Gene Ramey appears:

Buck Clayton All-Stars (1961)
Born to Swing (1973)
Hootie Blues (1978)
Last of the Blue Devils (1979)

NOTES

1. The author would like to thank John Bustin, Doug Shea, Rick Lawn, and Jay Trachtenburg for discussing their memories of Ramey in 1994, John Wheat for guidance at the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin, Dawn Allen for translating François Postif's 1962 article from French, and the anonymous reviewer at *The Journal of Texas Music History* for editorial suggestions.

2. Stanley Dance Interview with Gene Ramey, Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Project (September, 1978), John Cotton Dana Library, Rutgers Institute of Jazz Studies; Nathan W. Pearson, Jr. and Howard Litwack Interview with Gene Ramey, Smithsonian/National Endowment for the Humanities (Austin, Texas, January 9, 1977), The Kansas City

Oral History Collection, University of Missouri, Kansas City.

3. The name Glasco (or Glasgo) probably means one of Ramey's ancestors was a slave owned by someone from Glasgow, Scotland. François Postif, "Gene Ramey: J'ai été le chaperon de Charlie Parker et l'un des rares amis de Lester Young," *Jazz Hot* #174 (March, 1962), 20.

4. George Corley's Royal Aces later merged with Torrance "T" Holder after Holder's earlier "Clouds of Joy" Orchestra was taken over by Andy Kirk. Tate ended up with Count Basie.

5. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 1, 2-40, and Dance, *The World of Count Basie* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1980), 257-261; Gene Ramey, *Handbook of Texas Music* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 251.

6. Pearson & Litwack Interview with Ramey, 4; Nathan W. Pearson, Jr., *Goin' to Kansas City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 39.

7. Lawrence Welk's band from North Dakota was an upper Midwestern territory band that survived into the late twentieth century.

8. Franklin S. Driggs, "Kansas City and the Southwest," in Nat Hentoff and Albert J. McCarthy, *Jazz: New Perspectives on the History of Jazz by Twelve of the World's Foremost Jazz Critics and Scholars* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1959), 199.

9. Benny Moten died in 1935 during a botched tonsillectomy. The doctor accidentally severed his jugular when Moten, who was on local anesthetic, suddenly twitched. Ross Russell Papers, Box 25-26, Folder 5, Humanities Research Center, Austin, Texas.

10. Landon was the only Republican Governor to win re-election in 1934. He then ran for President as the anti-New Deal candidate in 1936. Landon was endorsed by 80% of the country's newspapers and supported by many conservative Democrats, but lost to FDR in a landslide, winning only Vermont and Maine.

11. Dance, *World of Count Basie*, 262.

12. Page was tutored by Major N. Clark Smith, veteran of the Spanish-American War, who taught at Lincoln High School. He later attended the University of Kansas and taught at Lincoln himself. Driggs, "Kansas City and the Southwest," 196, 204.

13. Leonard Feather and Ira Gitler, eds., *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 546; Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 3, 33-35; Postif, "Gene Ramey," 28.

14. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 3, 35-37.

15. Dave E. Dexter, Jr., *The Jazz Story: From the '90s to the '60s* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), 78, 141, 147-148.

16. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 6, 5.

17. Margaret Johnson was reputedly Lester Young's lover for many years. She later took the place of Mary Lou Williams in Andy Kirk's band, but died in the late 1930s. "In her own Words" (Mary Lou Williams Interview), *Melody Maker* 30 (May 22, 1954), 13.

18. Dance, *World of Count Basie*, 265-266.

19. Barefield, who grew up in a small town outside Des Moines, Iowa, was typical of the musical nomads who eventually found a home in Kansas City. Later he played with Ella Fitzgerald (1942), Duke Ellington (1947), and the Ringling Brothers Circus.

20. Postif, "Gene Ramey," 23.

21. Parker was called "Bird" because when McShann's bus ran over a chicken (which he called "yardbirds"), Parker picked it up and insisted on having a cook in the next town prepare it for dinner. Driggs, "Kansas City and the Southwest," 229. Jay "Hootie" McShann did drink, but he got his nickname from "playing all night like a hoot owl." Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 3, 27 and Reel 6, 4.

22. Two of Ramey's numbers, "Say Forward I'll March" (later known as "Hamp's Got a Duke") and "Let's Get Started," were expanded

and recorded by Duke Ellington. Dance, *The World of Duke Ellington*, 2d ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981 [1970]), 166-167.

23. Dance, *The World of Count Basie*, 272.

24. The band later dedicated a song, "Dexter Blues," to *Down Beat* writer Dave Dexter for giving them a boost. Dexter was familiar with McShann from his days as a writer for the *Kansas City Journal-Post*. The *Down Beat* piece led to a six-week engagement for McShann and Ramey with other musicians in Chicago that gained McShann exposure. Another lengthier article by *Down Beat*'s technical writer and musicologist, Sharon Pease, followed. Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 169; Dance, *The World of Count Basie*, 272.

25. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 3, 3-16.

26. Chuck Haddix, "18th & Vine: Street of Dreams," *Artlog* 13, #1 (January/February 1992), 1.

27. Frank Büchmann-Møller, *You Just Fight for Your Life: The Story of Lester Young* (Westport, Ct.: Praeger, 1990), 42; "In her own Words"

(Mary Lou Williams Interview), *Melody Maker* 30 (May 1, 1954), 12.

28. Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 83.

29. Pearson & Litwack Interview with Ramey, 20.

30. Durham also contributed to Jimmie Lunceford's and Glenn Miller's bands as a composer. Dave Oliphant, "Eddie Durham and the Texas Contribution to Jazz History," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 96 (April, 1993), 491-525.

31. Pearson & Litwack Interview with Ramey, 16; Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 3.

32. Ross Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 53-64.

33. Kansas City was the home of "blues shouter" Big Joe Turner and piano player Pete Johnson, credited as originators of the boogie-woogie style. Kansas City was thus influential not only in the history of jazz, but also Rock'n'Roll. Seattle Experience Music Project.

34. Postif, "Gene Ramey," 20.

35. Author Interview with Rick Lawn, Austin, Texas, April 27, 1994.

36. Pearson & Litwack Interview with Ramey, 52; Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 116.

37. Russell, *Bird Lives! The High Life and Hard Times of Charlie (Yardbird) Parker* (New York: Charterhouse, 1973), 110.

38. Quoted in Møller, *You Just Fight for Your Life*, 44.

39. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 4, 15-20.

40. Russell, *Bird Lives!*, 57-58.

41. Ramey played in various clubs, including The Greenleaf Gardens, Century Ballroom, Casa Fiesta, The College Inn, Tootie's, Mayfair, Bar-Le-Duc, Street's Ballroom, Paseo Park and, in the summer, Fairyland Park. Jean Buzelin (transl. from French by Joyce Waterhouse), Liner Notes to *Jay McShann: Kansas City Bounce* (EPM/Jazz Archives, 1940-1949); Ross Russell Papers, Box 14, Folder 3, Humanities Research Center, Austin, Texas.

42. According to Ramey the term "spook breakfasts" was not racially motivated, but derived from the fact that they began in the dark hours of the early morning. Pearson & Litwack Interview with Ramey, 49. For Blue Mondays, see Haddix, "18th & Vine: Street of Dreams," 1-2.

43. "In her own Words" (Mary Lou Williams Interview), *Melody Maker* 30 (May 1-8, 1954), 12-13; Dance, *World of Count Basie*, 267.

44. Pearson & Litwack Interview with Ramey, 45-48; Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 111.

45. Nate Hentoff and Nat Shapiro eds., *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya: The Story of Jazz by the Men Who Made It* (New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc., 1955), 311.

46. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 2, 34.

47. Dance, Interview with Eddie Durham; quoted in Møller, *You Just Fight for Your Life*, 43. Good examples include Young's "Lester Leaps In" and Basie's "One O'Clock Jump."

48. Russell, *Bird Lives!*, 27.

49. Hentoff and Shapiro, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*, 293.

50. Pearson & Litwack Interview with Ramey, 49; Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 118; Russell, *Bird Lives!*, 26.

51. Russell, *Bird Lives!*, 83-85.

52. For one such account, see Liner Notes to *Jay McShann: Kansas City Bounce*.

53. Postif, "Gene Ramey," 21.

54. Postif, "Gene Ramey," 23; Russell, *Bird Lives!*, 72.

55. Adrian Hope, "You Can Bank on Gene," *Melody Maker* 48 (May 6, 1972), 50.

56. Russell, *Bird Lives!*, 116.

57. Robert Reisner ed., *Bird: The Legend of Charlie Parker* (New York: A Da Capo Paperback, 1977), 186.

58. "In her own Words" (Mary Lou Williams Interview), *Melody Maker* 30 (May 22, 1954), 14.

59. Haddix, "18th & Vine: Street of Dreams," 4.

60. Pearson & Litwack Interview with Ramey, 59; Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 187.

61. Dance, *The World of Count Basie*, xvi.

62. These recordings are included on Charlie Parker with Jay McShann and His Orchestra, *Early Bird* (Stash Records, 1940-44).

63. Dance, *The World of Count Basie*, 254.

64. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 4, 42.

65. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 4, 42-48 and Reel 5, 3-4; Dance, *The World of Count Basie*, 276-277. Lucky Millinder's drummer, Panama Francis, described how McShann was still bringing down the house at 3:00 a.m. Liner Notes to *Jay McShann: Kansas City Bounce*;

Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 181.

66. In Natchez, Mississippi, Walter Brown and Charlie Parker were jailed for smoking on the screened porch of the rooming house

in which they were staying. Though at home, they had left the porch light on, which exceeded the 11:00 p.m. curfew for blacks. Ramey remembered that, "when they [Brown and Parker] joined us [later] in Little Rock, they had knots on their head big enough to hang a hat on." For Ramey, this was just a continuation of his childhood in Austin, where "when we were kids, they'd get some guy, tar him, lynch him, and drag him through the black neighborhood" to set an example. On another occasion in Baton Rouge, the band was pulled over on suspicion of "being Yankee Niggers." Brown also got arrested for picking ditchweed along the road north of San Antonio. Ross Russell Papers, Box 10, Folder 6, Humanities Research Center, Austin, Texas; Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 4, 33-35. The band lost music in Baltimore and money in Martinsville, Virginia and Augusta, Georgia. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 5, 7-8.

67. See "Put Full McShann Ork on Wax," *Down Beat*, July 1, 1942; This two-year suspension of recordings has made it more difficult for historians to trace the origins of bop.

68. Pearson & Litwack Interview with Ramey, 96-97.

69. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 5, 9; in 1962, sixteen years before the Dance interview, Ramey said Brown had an "excellent voice." Postif, "Gene Ramey," 23.

70. For Gene's role in the band in 1943, see Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 4, 2 & 28 and Reel 5, 11-14.

71. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 5, 6.

72. James Lincoln Collier, *The Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History* (New York: Delta Books, 1978), 348-349.

73. Collier, *The Making of Jazz*, 352-354.

74. Bill Simon, Liner Notes to Lester Young and Teddy Wilson, *Pres and Teddy* (Verve, 1956).

75. Author Interview with Jay Trachtenberg, Austin, Texas, April 30, 1994.

76. Groups, such as Louis Armstrong's Hot Fives, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, and Benny Goodman's trios and quartets, did not include a string bass.

77. John Bustin, "First Bass Man," *Third Ear* (August, 1983), 110; Dan Morgenstern, Liner Notes to Charlie Parker with Jay McShann and His Orchestra, *Early Bird* (Stash Records, 1940-44); quoted in Oliphant, *Texan Jazz* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 128.

78. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 5, 22 & 31 and Reel 2, 3-4.

79. For reminiscences from this era, see Ira Gitler, *Swing to Bop: An Oral History of the Transition in Jazz in the 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 63-65.

80. Gunther Schuller, "Reviews: Recordings," *Jazz Review* 1 (November, 1958), 23; quoted in Oliphant, *Texan Jazz*, 417.

81. Oliphant, *Texan Jazz*, 245-247.

82. Doug Ramsey, "Bass Hit," *Texas Monthly* 9 (May, 1981), 4; Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 5, 29.

83. Dorham was born in Fairfield, Texas, between Waco and Palestine, but went to high school in Austin after Ramey left town. Ramey's cousin taught him to play trumpet. Oliphant, *Texan Jazz*, 248, 253; Dance, *World of Count Basie*, 259. See Oliphant's article, "Kenny Dorham and Leo Wright: Texas Bebop Messengers to the World" in *The Journal of Texas Music History* 1, #1 (Spring, 2001), 15-23.

84. Ramey quit Basie when he discovered that some members were trying to get Gus Johnson out of the band. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 6, 6; Ian Carr, Digby Fairweather and Brian Priestley, eds., *Jazz: The Rough Guide/The Essential Companion to Artists and Albums*, 2d. ed. (New York: Penguin Books Rough Guides, 2000), 627; Feather and Gitler, eds., *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Jazz*, 546.

85. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 5, 33-36; Dance, *World of Count Basie*, 280.

86. Ross Russell Collection, Humanities Research Center, Austin, Texas, Box 4a, Folder 2.

87. Ramsey, "Bass Hit," 3-4.

88. Dance, *The World of Count Basie*, 263.

89. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 5, 14-15.

90. Hope, "You Can Bank on Gene," 50; Author Interview with Jay Trachtenberg.

91. Postif, "Gene Ramey," 20.

92. Hope, "You Can Bank on Gene," 50.

93. Ramsey, "Bass Hit," 4.

94. Bustin, "First Bass Man," 110.

95. Postif, "Gene Ramey," 20.

96. Møller, *You Just Fight for Your Life*, 138.

97. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 5, 31; Postif, "Gene Ramey," 28.

98. The JATP concerts featured staged jam sessions that incurred the wrath of purist critics. The series nonetheless had a positive social impact due to Granz's insistence that his musicians only play to integrated audiences. He also mixed musicians in such a way that he helped heal

the rift between modern and traditional ("moldy figges") musicians, helping to create what Stanley Dance called "mainstream" jazz. And Granz's promotions influenced the development of festivals such as those at Newport and Monterey. Alyn Shipton, *A New History of Jazz* (London & New York: Continuum, 2001), 632-640; See also Dave Oliphant, "The Wisconsin-Texas Jazz Nexus," *The Journal of Texas Music History*, 4, #1, 11.

99. Postif, "Gene Ramey," 28.

100. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 5, 39-40; Postif, "Gene Ramey," 28.

101. For Gene's relationship with Young in this period, see Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 5, 20, 31, 37-40.

102. Reisner, *Bird*, 184-189.

103. Russell, *Bird Lives!*, 142; Reisner, *Bird*, 189.

104. Trumpeter Roy Eldridge also influenced Parker around this time with his broadcasts from Chicago. Stanley Crouch, Liner Notes to Charlie Parker, *The Complete Savoy & Dial Master Takes, 1944-47* (Savoy 17149), 22, 24.

105. Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 4, 7.

106. Postif, "Gene Ramey," 22.

107. Bustin, "First Bass Man," 108.

108. Author Interview with Doug Shea, Austin, Texas, April, 20, 1994.

109. Dance, *The World of Count Basie*, 282.

110. Carr, Fairweather and Priestley, eds., *Jazz: The Essential Companion to Artists and Albums*, 627.

111. *Buck and Buddy* (1960) contains a Ramey solo on "High Life." Oliphant, *Texan Jazz*, 114.

112. Postif, "Gene Ramey," 23.

113. Nat Hentoff, Liner Notes to *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (Sony, 1963); Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 5, 43.

114. Ross Russell Papers, Box 10, Folder 6, Humanities Research Center, Austin, Texas.

115. Bustin, "First Bass Man," 108.

116. Michael Point, "Gene Ramey Remembered as Father of Austin Jazz," *Austin American-Statesman*, December 10, 1984.

117. Ramsey, "Bass Hit," 2.

118. Pearson & Litwack Interview with Ramey, 111; Dance, Ramey Interview, Reel 5, 44.

119. Ramsey, "Bass Hit," 4.

120. Point, "In Tribute to an Austin Master," *Austin American-Statesman*, December 8, 1989; Point, *Duende* (June, 1988), Ramey Biographical File, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

121. Joe Vargo, "Jazz Musician Gene Ramey Dies at 71," *Austin American-Statesman*, December 9, 1984.

122. Author Interview with Shea; Jay Trachtenberg, "Gene Ramey: A Tribute," *Austin American-Statesman*, December 21, 1984.

123. Point, "Gene Ramey Remembered."

124. Bell worked with many artists, including Kirk, Holiday, Young, Wilson, Gillespie, and Stan Kenton. He was with Duke Ellington in 1960-62. Dance, *The World of Duke Ellington*, 209; Liner Notes to Earl Hines, *Live at the Village Vanguard* (Columbia Records, 1965), 3; quoted in Oliphant, *Texan Jazz*, 173, 397n; Buck Clayton, *Buck Clayton's Jazz World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 215.

125. Russell, *Bird Lives!*, 72.

126. Ramey does not appear on the Blue Note release of these sessions, *Birdland 1951* (Blue Note 4177).

127. The tracks Ramey appears on can also be found on Landscape's 1993 release Kenny Dorham, *New York 1953-1956 and Oslo 1960* and Horace Silver's *Birdland* (Royal Jazz 515).