

## Detroit Jazz, 1922–1954

Gary Carner

Detroit's amazingly rich jazz history dates back to at least the early 1920s, when small combos performed in black theaters, cabarets and restaurants. Alive with booze, money, gambling, entertainment and prostitution, Detroit "was as wide open as a politician's pocket on election day," wrote the clarinetist Mezz Mezzrow. "The town was having itself a ball all around the clock."

One of the city's first notable jazz groups was the Kentucky Jazz Band. Led by the pianist Hank Duncan, it featured the trombonist Jimmy Harrison, who spent his early years in Detroit and later moved to New York, where he joined Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra. Harrison became known as jazz's first great trombone soloist, though to this day is little known because of his early death in 1931.

Throughout the 1920s, Detroit's Koppin Theatre was one of the best places for hearing black musical acts of all kinds. Its shows ranged from small jazz ensembles to traveling revues that showcased many classic blues singers, such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Detroit's large jazz bands typically played for dancers in the city's ballrooms. One of the most popular was an eleven-piece ensemble led by the violinist Earl Walton. In residence at the Palais de Danse (at 7336 East Jefferson Avenue) for most of the decade, Walton's band included trumpet soloist Charles Gaines, and, later on, Detroit alto saxophonist Ted Buckner. His brother, Milt, also joined the group, becoming Walton's staff arranger.

In 1922, the French-born pianist and impresario Jean Goldkette was hired as the Music Director of the Detroit Athletic Club, where Adams's father heard him perform. A year later, Goldkette and the drummer Charles Horvath (with whom he had been gigging at the Graystone Ballroom) established a booking company, Jean Goldkette's Orchestras and Attractions. They first took over Graystone's management, then for the next thirteen years expanded their reach, running several Detroit theaters and as many as twenty different orchestras. To this day, Goldkette is mostly known for his 1926–1927 band that included cornetist Bix Beiderbecke and saxophonist Frankie Trumbauer. About that group, Rex Stewart wrote, "Goldkette's orchestra was, without any question, the greatest in the world and the first original white swing band in jazz history. . . . No other white orchestra boasted such an array of skilled jazzmen at one time."

Another influential Detroit big band at the time was McKinney's Cotton Pickers. Beginning in 1926, it was hired by Goldkette to perform at Detroit's Arcadia Ballroom. A year later, Goldkette poached noted arranger Don Redman from Fletcher Henderson's band to front the Cotton Pickers. As part of the deal, Goldkette offered Redman an indefinite run at the Graystone. Under Redman's leadership, the eleven-piece band, with trumpeter and co-arranger John Nesbitt, rose to national prominence. Their recordings for the Victor label, radio broadcasts that emanated from WJR in Detroit, and tours throughout the United States made them one of the most important big bands of the 1920s. When Redman left in 1931 to establish his own orchestra, Benny Carter was recruited to take his place.

McKinney's Cotton Pickers was the first black band to play the Graystone, paving the way for appearances by Luis Russell (with Louis Armstrong), Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and Fletcher Henderson. Besides Goldkette, other white bands performed at the Graystone, too, such as the Casa Loma and Henry Biagini Orchestras. For African-American patrons, though, it didn't matter whether the group's composition was black or white. They could only gain admission on Monday nights.

Detroit's entertainment industry was strictly segregated. Additionally, "the marketing of black bands and black entertainment to white audiences as an 'exotic' commodity," wrote Bjorn and Gallert, "was a common pattern throughout the interwar years":

We can see this in band names . . . but also in the phenomenon of the black-and-tan cabarets. These cabarets were located within the black community but provided entertainment for mainly (though not exclusively) white audiences. . . . The popularity of black-and-tans for "slumming" white audiences began in Detroit around the middle of the 1920s but their heyday was the 1930s, when Paradise Valley became the musical entertainment center in the city. Around the intersection of St. Antoine and Adams, the city's major bands could be heard in several black-and-tans, such as the Plantation, the Chocolate Bar and Club Harlem.

Paradise Valley was a cluster of more than twenty nightclubs a few blocks from downtown Detroit. Extending from Gratiot and Adams on the south to Vernor on the north, and wedged between Hastings and Brush (two blocks east of Woodward), The Valley was Detroit's 52<sup>nd</sup> Street. It was "a gorgeous place to be," remembered alto saxophonist Maurice King. "Safe; everybody had a ball going from place to place. All the entertainment was there. That's where all the big stars went."

Detroit bassist Al McKibbon was a fixture in Paradise Valley for many years before leaving town in 1943 to perform with Bud Powell, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and many other internationally known jazz musicians. McKibbon's first gig with kids his own age was in 1935, with pianist Ocie

Barnett's band. Her two brothers played saxophone. (Louis, the tenor player, later played with Maurice King and Aretha Franklin.) Cut Collins, Ocie's husband, played drums, and their trumpeter was Henry Purifoy.

When McKibbon was sixteen or seventeen, he and Purifoy also played a long gig of at least a year at the B&C, at 1730 St. Antoine, in the heart of Paradise Valley. They worked from 9–2am, seven nights a week, with two added matinees. "That was a place that had an old-time vaudeville format," said McKibbon.

They had a bunch of singers, male and female, and they would do what they called "ups." They did turns coming up to entertain. We had a five-piece band behind them. They would play, and the girls would go around to the different tables and pick up the tips, sometimes not with their hands! We played whatever was the popular tunes of the day; and blues, of course. I never played rock'n roll. That was never a part of it when I was a kid, never. Even before that, I played with a dance band. They had two or three or four dance bands around there. We tried to play like Basie or Jimmie Lunceford or Duke Ellington.

Detroit's sophisticated jazz scene of the mid-thirties and early forties was one of America's very best, remembered McKibbon. "There were all those people there, all playing good," said McKibbon. "They had some tenor players and piano players that used to wipe everybody out! There was one tenor player named Lorenzo Lawson. He went to audition for Basie's band. The rehearsal was late, and he said, 'The hell with them,' and went home." Lawson played like Lester Young and was never recorded. Still another local phenomenon was pianist Lannie Scott. Originally from Cleveland, he played at the Paradise Bar and sounded very much like Art Tatum, with whom he was close friends.

Hank Jones remembered both Scott and still another Detroit pianist, Morgan Garreau, who also played in a virtuosic Tatum style. Tatum and Scott had a trick they liked to do, recalled Jones. They'd cross their legs and play "Tea for Two," smoking a cigarette with their right hand while playing the tune "completely and fully with the left hand," he said.

There were many other outstanding soloists in Detroit at that time, recalled McKibbon. "Trombone Smitty: I thought he was fantastic!" said McKibbon:

He used to take his horn out of pawn, and play the job and put it back. There was another guy there by the name of Cubby. . . . He played the Cozy Corner with [McKibbon's cousin, the drummer] J.C. Heard. Bill Johnson played trumpet. . . . Frank Fry: he was a hell of a trumpet player! There

was another name: Buddy Lee. He used to teach a lot of trumpet players that came through there. .

. . Maurice King, the saxophone player: I used to be in his band.

In the late 1930s, McKibbon also had a trio with guitarist Ted Smith, who played a lot like Charlie Christian and later toured with Andy Kirk. Also, McKibbon played at the Three Sixes with Ted Buckner's band. Its rhythm section was rounded out by Hank Jones and Kelly Martin. (Martin later played a very long run with pianist Erroll Garner.) Other notable Detroit bands of that time were led by Hal Green and Gloster Current. Current's brother, Lester, played trumpet. He, too, had a good band, though he became more known for his work with the N.A.A.C.P.

The legacy of Detroit's best musicians squashing the egos of visiting instrumentalists goes back at least to the mid-thirties. One such instance, remembered McKibbon, took place a few years later. In 1943, "Lionel Hampton came through there with his first big band," said McKibbon. "Carl George, his lead trumpeter, said, 'Hey, I'll come down and play some *first* with you guys.' 'Oh, fine,'" said McKibbon tongue-in-cheek. "He came in the door and Howard McGhee was hitting altissimo-something. He never took his horn out! Two sets; he listened to *us*."

The twelve-piece powerhouse Club Congo Orchestra, based at the Norwood Hotel, showcased the very best musicians in Detroit: trombonist Matthew Gee; saxophonists Wardell Gray, Teddy Edwards, and Lorenzo Lawson; pianist and arranger Johnny Allen; McKibbon; and both Ted Smith and Kelly Martin. It was led at first by Martin, then co-led by McGhee. Allen, originally from Chicago, had attended school with Nat Cole. Allen's charts for the Club Congo Orchestra, modeled on those played by the Earl Hines Orchestra, swung hard. Much like the Hines band, too, the Club Congo Orchestra was an early incubator of musicians (Gray, McGhee, Edwards, McKibbon) who would make a name for themselves playing bebop with major bands in the 1940s.

Matthew Rucker, another important Detroit bandleader, started his big band in 1938. Yusef Lateef joined it that year while still in high school. The bulk of Rucker's charts were written by Milt Buckner. "It was incredible how he'd do it," recalled Lateef about Buckner. "He stood up and would write arrangements like he was writing a letter. He would write for every piece in the band." A few weeks after Lionel Hampton first heard Buckner's charts performed by Rucker's band, he hired Buckner for his own group.

In the 1930s and '40s, Paradise Valley also became known for its intense after-hours jam sessions. After the bars closed, nightly jams at the Frogs Club on East Adams and other hotspots gave touring musicians a place to perform with Detroit's best players. Musicians could stretch out as soloists, match wits, and exchange ideas into the wee hours of the morning.

Clearly, Paradise Valley was abuzz well before 1938, when Maurice King first arrived in town, and it stayed that way until June 20, 1943, the tumultuous day when the Detroit Riot erupted. At the epicenter of the riot was the Canfield Police Station. “In Detroit,” said McKibbon, “there was one station there called Canfield Station that was notorious, and we always said that they didn’t hire a cop there that didn’t have a red neck from Georgia. It was bad. I’ve heard people come out of Detroit and say, ‘Well, I wasn’t segregated against.’ No, because you stayed in the ghetto, you didn’t venture out. It was very, very bad!”

The unrest stigmatized Paradise Valley as a dangerous place. Suddenly, affluent white industrialists and show business personalities stopped visiting. As a result, nightclubs began to open outside of the Grand Boulevard perimeter, either closer to Wayne University, out on the Near West Side, or in the Oakland area on the north side, near Holbrook and Oakland Avenue. Klein’s and the Blue Bird, for example, were two clubs that opened west of Woodward. The Bizerte, Club Zombie, Royal Blue, and Lee’s Sensation all opened close to each other in the North End.

“When we came up,” remembered Billy Mitchell, “music was everywhere.”

There was Sunnie Wilson’s Forest Club, the Pine Grove, Cecil Lee’s Sensation. You just can’t learn it in school. We learned it by experience. I could take my horn on any night and could go to four, five places. Every place had a band, they had an emcee, they had a little show, they had a shake dancer or a comedian. You could play, and see the people that could really do it. I learned from people like Harold Wallace.

Wallace was an esteemed Detroit saxophonist and arranger who wrote charts for the Howard Bunts Orchestra, a local big band that rivalled the Cotton Pickers. Wallace later directed a nonet at the Club Zombie, a classy black-and-tan with valet parking, that backed famous vocalists such as Lena Horne and Billy Eckstine.

By the time that Adams moved back to Detroit in 1947, Paradise Valley was showing signs of decline. Although several new clubs near the Graystone Ballroom—the Chesterfield Lounge, and the Flame and Frolic Show Bars—had opened on John R within two blocks of each other in the late ’40s, and the Paradise Theatre on Woodward, not far away, still continued to present jazz acts until 1951, the Valley by then was dominated by Hastings Street, which had morphed into central Detroit’s red-light district. “I played on that street for ten damn years,” recalled pianist Charles Boles. “I saw them shoot a prostitute in the back and kill her,” said Boles about the Detroit police. “Her name was Charlene. I’ll never forget it.” Customarily, as a way of averting jail time, the police coerced prostitutes into either

giving them free sex or financial kickbacks. “She refused to give them any money,” said Boles, “and she wasn’t going to give them booty that night. She was tired of screwing the police for free. That was in the fifties.” Today, what remains of Paradise Valley, and its past glory as one of America’s preeminent jazz districts, is a few dilapidated blocks south of East Grand Boulevard.

By the late 1940s, Detroit’s jazz scene featured an abundance of fine musicians who were playing in the bebop idiom. Milt Jackson, Wardell Gray, Sonny Stitt, Howard McGhee, and Lucky Thompson had paved the way by working with Charlie Parker. Soon, other Detroiters their age were showcasing the new music. One was drummer Art Mardigan, who recorded with Fats Navarro and tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon. Mardigan returned to Detroit in 1946 to take up a residency at the Rouge Lounge, and then work at the Bowl-O-Drome and Club Sudan (formerly the Club Congo). “He had a great feel,” said Bob Pierson. “You could hear the beat of the stick on the cymbal. He had the best sound out of the cymbal I’ve ever heard. . . . A lot of guys that played around Detroit got that from him.” Detroit percussionists had a different approach, explained bassist Pete Leinonen. “Most really hip drummers are aware that the Detroit cats played a little bit different,” said Leinonen. “I think it has to do with the kind of eighth notes on the ride cymbal that I don’t hear from any other drummers.”

Another notable player on the Detroit scene was trumpeter Edwin “Youngblood” Davis. He led a band at Club Sudan that included bassist Alvin Jackson, Milt’s older brother, and drummer Leon Rice. Tommy Flanagan and Kenny Burrell, while both still in their teens, worked in his band. “They had a great quintet,” said drummer Eddie Locke. Joe Alexander was in the front line, and at various times Lucky Thompson and French horn player Julius Watkins were guest soloists.

The best place to hear hard-swinging bebop in Detroit was at the Blue Bird. Its first bebop house band included Abe Woodley. “Abe was something!” remembered Bob Pierson. “I’ll tell you, next to Milt he had the best feel I ever heard on vibes, and he could play some *great* bebop piano too!” Frank Foster agreed. “Abe was comparable to ‘Bags.’ He should have gotten out and gotten [recognition]. When he locked up with ‘Bags,’ man, you knew who was who but there was no great difference in terms of comparative ability.” Alto saxophonist Eddie Jamison, who had a distinctive, soulful sound, was a frequent guest artist with the group. So, too, was baritone saxophonist Tate Houston, until he was replaced by Foster. Beginning in July 1949, Wardell Gray worked with the Blue Bird house band for two months. The following year he was recorded live at the club. Charlie Parker also sat in at the Blue Bird in 1949, a further indication of the Blue Bird’s status as Detroit’s bebop citadel.

In early 1951, when Billy Mitchell was asked to form his own band to replace Phil Hill’s, its rhythm section coalesced, after some trial and error, with pianist Terry Pollard, Beans Richardson, and Elvin Jones. Two years earlier, after his release from the Army, Jones was yet another musician who

stood outside the Blue Bird, listening closely to the band. Although invited in to play, Jones was too intimidated to accept Art Mardigan's offer. Little did Jones know that a few years later he would be assuming Mardigan's chair in the Blue Bird band. Adams, Barry Harris, and Tommy Flanagan, however, were far more brazen. Even before they were 21, just like Elvin Jones all three frequently sat outside the club, listening intently, but they did accept Phil Hill's invitation to come in and play a few numbers.

Sometime in late 1952, Elvin's older brother, cornetist Thad Jones, joined the Blue Bird band. Many years later, Thad Jones said that playing in the group was "one of the high points of my playing career." In 1952, only Dizzy Gillespie was Thad's equal, asserted Roland Hanna. "Miles would stand under the air conditioner," remembered Hanna, "with tears running out of his eyes when he heard Thad play." Thad, said Bess Bonnier, "had so much in his head of his, you were just mesmerized when he played." Charles Mingus, so amazed with Thad's playing at the time, felt compelled to write a letter for publication in *Down Beat* about his experience:

I have just heard the greatest trumpet player that I've ever heard in this life. . . . The cats call Thad Jones the "Messiah of the Trumpet." . . . Thad was too much for me to believe. He does things that Diz and Fats made difficult for the trumpet. The things Miles never made. The things Diz heard Bird do, and Fats made us think were possible. . . . Here is Bartok with valves for a pencil that's directed by God.

As Mingus implied in his letter, Thad Jones's writing for the Blue Bird quintet was just as provocative as his playing. Tommy Flanagan, who in 1953 took Terry Pollard's place in the Blue Bird's rhythm section, certainly felt that way. "It was the most advanced group in the city at that time. And it was pretty much acknowledged all over the country; people used to come through. The place had a reputation: There's this trumpet player, Thad Jones, who writes these tunes."

From the early fall through January 1954, Miles Davis, who was living in Detroit at the time, was the Blue Bird's featured soloist. Both Billy Mitchell and Thad Jones had accepted jobs out of town, and for two months the entire band was replaced by saxophonist Moon Mullins, trumpeter Willie Wells, and the rhythm section of Bu Bu Turner, Major Holley, and Freddie "Froo" Metcalf. Bob Pierson heard the early 1954 band with Miles and Pepper in the front line, before Thad Jones returned. "It was great," he said. "As good a band as you ever heard. They were boppin,' playing the heads on standards and straight-ahead bebop. Miles was drying out at the time. Gorgeous; he sounded marvelous." A few months after he moved back to New York, Miles returned to the Blue Bird for a six-week run beginning in August, 1954.

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Apart from the many legendary Detroit jazz musicians over the years who made a name for themselves, so many other superb Detroit players remain totally unknown. One of the most significant was pianist Willie Anderson. Before the dazzling generational triune of Roland Hanna, Barry Harris, and Tommy Flanagan came of age, “Willie A” was the city’s finest jazz pianist. In the mid-40s, he had a group, the Four Sharps, with Milt Jackson, and was the featured soloist on the 1950 Charles Johnson date for Prize that included Adams and Yusef Lateef. Anderson had perfect pitch and a world of technique but couldn’t read music. Dizzy Gillespie tried unsuccessfully to recruit him for his band. So did Benny Goodman, Billy Eckstine, and Coleman Hawkins. “He never went further than the Three Star Bar,” said pianist Hugh Lawson. “So many big names tried to get him out of Detroit,” said Clarence Beasley. “He never had the confidence in himself because he never had the formal training, the building blocks that he could use. He simply refused to go out of town with these bands . . . but, my God, did he have a reputation for being one of the finest pianists locally. He was a fantastic jazz player.”

Four other Detroit pianists who remain in the shadows are Will Davis, Ted Sheely, Bu Bu Turner, and Willie Hawkins. Although Davis roomed with Pepper in 1962 for a few months in New York City, much like Anderson he refused to travel. Nonetheless, Davis had a rich pedigree, recording with Sonny Stitt and Howard McGhee in ’40s, playing the Crystal in 1954 with Charlie Parker, and recording with Kenny Burrell in the ’60s. Adams worked with him in Detroit at Club 12, and, over the years, Tommy Flanagan recorded some of his tunes. Ted Sheely played with Billy Mitchell at Sportree’s Music Bar on Hastings Street, and for a time with the Blue Bird house band that included Mitchell, Thad Jones, and Beans Richardson. In the 1960s and early ’70s, he was a member of the Motown family of musicians, and also functioned as Aretha Franklin’s accompanist. For more than twenty years, he led his own trio in Detroit.

Bu Bu Turner was a “great player, great accompanist, too, for a horn player,” said Bob Pierson, “and he could burn his ass off playing jazz.” Much like Willie Anderson, Turner played by ear and couldn’t read music. He recorded with Adams in 1952 for Vitaphone, and gigged with him at the Parrot Lounge, where Turner led the house trio that included bassist Ali Mohammed Jackson and either Ali’s brother, the drummer Oliver Jackson, or Lawrence “Jacktown” Jackson. The blind pianist Willie Hawkins, for his part, was a very close friend of Art Tatum and yet another Tatum disciple. He was the house pianist at Freddie Guinyard’s, and would spar with Tatum deep into the morning. Roland Hanna, who greatly admired Hawkins, said that he was the only one in town who would push Tatum to play his



best. Although he only played in F-sharp, according to pianist Gerald Wiggins, “he had all of Tatum’s stuff. This used to knock Tatum out.”

Still another Detroit legend is Claire Roquemore. “There was this great trumpet player named Claire Roquemore. . . . He was one of the best I ever heard,” wrote Miles Davis in his autobiography. “He could play anything,” remembered Charles Boles:

He’d wear Miles out. He’d wear anybody out. Donald [Byrd] didn’t want to get on the bandstand with him. He ended up being strung out, and he didn’t go anywhere. He would always be around, when he could keep it together, and kick everybody’s butt. He was at Barry’s house all the time.

Roquemore “was a wonderful, young, Caucasian-looking trumpet player,” remembered Roland Hanna. “He was very fair-skinned, blonde-haired. He probably had a white mother and a mixed father. He looked white but he wasn’t white. He was mixed. Whenever Claire had a gig, he’d use Pepper.” When Charlie Parker came to town, he would ask, “Where’s ‘Roque?’” Teeter Ford, still another obscure trumpet player who never fulfilled his immense potential, replaced Roquemore in Barry Harris’s group (with alto saxophonist Sonny Red) in the early 1950s. He had a better tone than Roquemore, said Frank Gant, but not Roquemore’s extraordinary breath control. Harris believed that Ford would eventually become jazz’s greatest trumpeter.

There were some extremely accomplished older tenor players in Detroit, too, who remain completely unknown, such as Moon Mullins, Tommy Barnett, Lefty Edwards, Warren Hickey, Lamonte Hamilton, Joe Alexander, and Lorenzo Lawton. Barry Harris admired Cleophus Curtis, a supremely lyrical trumpeter who also played tenor saxophone. He recorded on tenor with Jay McShann in the mid-forties.

Trumpeter Willie Wells was yet another elder statesman. Pepper first heard him when, as a teenager in Rochester, he listened to a late-night Fletcher Henderson big band radio broadcast out of Nashville. In 1947, Wells recorded with Sonny Stitt, and he appeared that year on Oliver Shearer’s demo, which served as Adams’s very first recording date. Wells, another casualty of narcotics, started deteriorating in the 1950s.

Alto saxophonist Kenny Pinson, another obscure Detroit based musician, played a steady gig at the Crest Lounge or Brady Bar for a few months in 1955 with Adams and Curtis Fuller. “Those three guys together—Pepper Adams—oh, man, they were fantastic!” said Maurice King. Before that, Pinson toured in the early fifties with Woody Herman’s Third Herd. “He was more or less an admirer of mine,” said King. “He just went off the bitter end, but was superb!”

Barry Harris felt that saxophonist Cokie Winfrey was another important local player. “When I knew him,” said Rudy Tucich, “he played tenor sax. He was a very nice cat. He sat in at the World Stage and at Klein’s. A good tenor player. I remember he had his own sound, kind of like early Coltrane.”

Then there was drummer Benny Benjamin. “He was a *bad* sucker!” remembered Frank Gant. Benjamin “could play in any kind of groove: bebop or the blues. He had the feeling. He was a bitch!” A few years after playing the drums in Roland Hanna’s 1954 trio (with bassist Ray McKinney) at Chic’s Show Bar, Benjamin joined Motown’s stable as a staff musician, ensuring both his livelihood and anonymity. Tim Kennedy, another fine Detroit drummer, about five years older than Adams, played with tenor saxophonist Illinois Jacquet. Another percussionist, Leon Rice, played with Edwin “Youngblood” Davis in 1946 at the Club Deliese, at the Club Sudan when Burrell and Flanagan were in the band, and at Friday night jam sessions at the Civic Center. Apart from his jazz work, Rice led a percussion ensemble in Detroit that served as Max Roach’s inspiration to establish, in 1970, his celebrated percussion group M’Boom.

Detroit also has a very long history of excellent bassists, dating back to at least Al McKibbon. An especially talented one, according to Bob Pierson, was Jimmy Glover. Another was Ali Mohammed Jackson, who played with Pepper over the years, including gigs with Little John and His Merry Men. The esteemed bassist Sam Jones, an admirer of Adams, cited Ali Jackson as his greatest influence.

The use of narcotics, a distaste for travel, a misguided belief that remaining in a small market would enhance their career, or just avoiding the challenge of making it among the rabble of New York City, where the recording industry and so many of the leading jazz bands were based, doomed these musicians to the creases of history. When Adams looked back on some of them in 1982, he told the Toronto radio host Ted O’Reilly, “there were some fine players of our era that did stay in Detroit. In the long run, it has not done that well for them. You can’t continue being a local player there for twenty, thirty years at a time.”

### SOURCES

All quotes are from interviews that the author did with each subject, or from sources cited in Works Cited.

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“When I knew him . . . kind of like early Coltrane”: Rudy Tucich email to Gary Carner, 2019.

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