Chasing the Blue Note

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A Jazz Life Across Five Decades and Three Continents

by

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Self Published

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

First edition, 2025

ISBN 978-0-00-000000-0

Published by Self Published

Preface

The first time I heard Miles Davis play *Kind of Blue*, I was twelve years old, sitting on the fire escape of our Harlem apartment on a sweltering August night. The music drifted up from Mr. Peterson's record player three floors down, and it stopped me cold. That trumpet spoke a language I didn't know I'd been waiting my whole life to learn.

This memoir isn't a comprehensive history of jazz—plenty of scholars have written those books. This is simply the story of one musician's journey through the world that music created. From basement clubs in Greenwich Village to concert halls in Tokyo, from struggle to recognition and back again, I've lived the life that twelve-year-old boy on the fire escape could only dream about.

To everyone who shared a stage, a conversation, or a moment of truth with me along the way: this music belongs to all of us. I was just lucky enough to carry it for a while.

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Chapter I

Harlem Nights

Growing up in 1960s Harlem meant living inside a cultural revolution. Our neighborhood vibrated with possibility—the Apollo Theater marquee glowing like a beacon, the sound of Motown spilling from car radios, and on every corner, someone had something to say about where Black America was headed.

My mother worked double shifts as a nurse, and my father drove a taxi six days a week, but Sunday mornings were sacred. That's when our cramped apartment transformed into a concert hall. Dad would pull out his old records—Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie—and we'd listen in reverent silence. He'd close his eyes and snap his fingers, lost in the music, and I'd watch him become someone else entirely.

At fourteen, I convinced my mother to let me use my summer job savings for a used saxophone from a pawn shop on 125th Street. The instrument was battered and the pads leaked, but when I first made it sing, something clicked into place. My father's eyes welled up when he heard me play. He never said much, but the next week, he came home with a book of Charlie Parker transcriptions and said simply, "Study these."

That saxophone became my passport to a larger world. I practiced until my lips went numb, until the neighbors complained, until I could

play "Confirmation" at tempo without missing a note. Music wasn't just something I did—it became who I was.

Chapter II

The Village Years

By nineteen, I was haunting the jazz clubs of Greenwich Village, sitting in whenever someone would let me, absorbing everything like a sponge. The Village Vanguard, the Blue Note, the Half Note—these weren't just venues, they were universities, and the curriculum was taught by living legends.

I met Tommy Chen at a jam session in a basement club that held maybe forty people. He was a pianist from San Francisco with technique that made me reassess everything I thought I knew about music. We played together that night until 4 AM, trading ideas, pushing each other, finding that rare chemistry that turns musicians into a band.

We were broke, we were hungry, and we were absolutely fearless. We'd play five sets a night for tips and free drinks, then stay up until dawn working on original compositions in Tommy's railroad apartment. Those were the years of education by fire—learning to read an audience, to recover from mistakes so smoothly no one noticed, to make something beautiful out of whatever the moment gave you.

The breakthrough came on a Tuesday night in February, when a talent scout from Blue Note Records happened to be in the audience at the Village Gate. Six weeks later, we were in Rudy Van Gelder's studio

in Englewood Cliffs, recording our first album. I was twenty-two years old, and I thought I'd made it.

Chapter III

European Sojourn

Success in America was sweet but fleeting. Our album sold modestly, we got some good reviews, but the bookings dried up as quickly as they'd come. In 1975, when Tommy suggested we try our luck in Europe, I packed a single suitcase and left everything else behind.

Paris welcomed us like long-lost family. The French took jazz seriously in a way American audiences sometimes didn't. They'd analyze our improvisations, debate our musical choices, and pack clubs seven nights a week. We found ourselves playing alongside African musicians, Brazilian guitarists, and European classical players who were exploring jazz. The music evolved in ways I never could have imagined back in New York.

I lived in a sixth-floor walk-up in the Marais, practiced on a roof overlooking the Seine, and fell in love with a painter named Simone who taught me that art was a conversation that crossed all mediums. She couldn't read music, but she understood what I was trying to say with my horn better than most musicians did.

Those three years in Paris stripped away everything I thought I knew and rebuilt me as a musician. I learned to listen more than I played, to

value silence as much as sound, and to understand that jazz wasn't an American art form—it was a human one.

Chapter IV

Coming Home

Returning to New York in 1978 felt like visiting a familiar place for the first time. The city had changed, I had changed, and somehow we fit together differently now. I brought with me a notebook full of compositions influenced by Parisian streets, North African rhythms, and long conversations about art with Simone.

Starting over in your late twenties is humbling. The new generation of players didn't know who I was, and the old guard had moved on. I took whatever gigs I could get—wedding bands, theater orchestras, teaching saxophone to teenagers in Queens. Every job was a chance to play, and I'd learned in Paris that all playing was practice.

The turning point came when I started teaching at a community music school in Brooklyn. There's something about explaining music to beginners that forces you to understand it at a deeper level. My students asked questions that made me reconsider assumptions I'd held for years. And watching them discover the joy of making music reminded me why I'd fallen in love with it in the first place.

One of those students, a kid named Devon with more enthusiasm than technique, brought his uncle to a recital. The uncle turned out to be a producer at Columbia Records. Six months later, I was back in

the studio, recording the album that would finally put my name on the map.

Chapter V

The Road and Its Lessons

The next two decades were a blur of airports, tour buses, and hotel rooms. We played Jazz at Lincoln Center, the Monterey Jazz Festival, venues in Tokyo, São Paulo, and Lagos. The music became my life in a way it had never been before—not just what I did, but how I understood the world.

Every city taught me something. In New Orleans, I learned about the deep roots of the music I'd been playing all my life. In Cuba, I discovered rhythmic complexities that transformed my sense of time. In South Africa, I played with musicians who showed me how jazz could be both an art form and an act of resistance.

But the road takes its toll. I missed weddings and funerals, birthdays and quiet evenings at home. My marriage to Simone didn't survive the distance—she needed roots, and I was always in the air. We parted with love and regret, understanding that sometimes the things we need most are incompatible.

The music gave me the world, but it asked for everything in return. I don't regret the choice—how could I?—but I learned that every yes to the road was a no to something else. That's the bargain every traveling musician makes, and you don't fully understand it until you've lived it.

Chapter VI

Legacy and Letting Go

At seventy, my embouchure isn't what it used to be, and my fingers don't fly across the keys like they once did. But I've learned that jazz isn't about athletic prowess—it's about truth, and I have more of that to share now than I did at twenty-two.

These days, I spend more time teaching than performing. I run a jazz workshop in Harlem, not far from that fire escape where I first heard Miles. I see myself in these young players—their hunger, their fearlessness, their certainty that music can change the world. Maybe they're right.

I've been thinking a lot about what we leave behind. Not the recordings or the reviews—those are just artifacts. What matters is the music we passed on, the players we inspired, the moments of beauty we created that existed only once and then vanished into memory.

Last month, one of my students came to me after class. She'd been struggling with improvisation, too worried about playing wrong notes to play anything at all. "I finally get it," she said. "It's not about being perfect. It's about being honest." I thought about that twelve-year-old kid on the fire escape, hearing Miles Davis for the first time, and I smiled. The music continues, passing from one generation to the next,

forever chasing that elusive blue note that makes everything else make sense.

Chapter VII

The Sessions Continue

Jazz taught me that life is improvisation—you can't plan for every moment, but you can learn to respond with grace when the unexpected arrives. The best solos emerge from listening deeply, taking risks, and trusting your preparation even as you leap into the unknown.

Looking back across five decades of playing, I see that the music was never really about me. I was just one voice in an ongoing conversation that started long before I picked up a horn and will continue long after I'm gone. That's not humbling—it's liberating. The pressure of being "great" dissolves when you realize you're part of something greater.

My father died in 1992, but before he passed, he told me he was proud. Not of the records or the reviews—he'd never been much for that kind of thing—but proud that I'd found something worth dedicating my life to. "You made the music matter," he said. I think about those words often.

The sessions continue. Every week, a group of us still gets together in a studio in Brooklyn—musicians in our sixties and seventies, playing for the pure joy of it. No audience, no recording, just the conversation. That's where the music lives—not in the accolades or the accomplishments, but in the eternal present tense of players listening and responding to each other.

When I put my horn to my lips now, I'm not thinking about all the stages I've played or the notes I've recorded. I'm thinking about the sound I want to make right now, in this moment, with these people. That's all jazz has ever been, and it's more than enough.