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Ohio Jazz
A History of Jazz in the Buckeye State

David Meyers, Candice Watkins, Arnett Howard & James Loeffler

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THE Ispress
All Americans come from Ohio originally, if only briefly.

—Dawn Powell
I am pleased to announce the publication of *Ohio Jazz: A History of Jazz in the Buckeye State* by David Meyers, Candice Watkins, Arnett Howard and James Loeffler.

Jazz history is a medley of artistic innovation, musical evolution and colorful characters. From field hollers—rhythmic call-and-response songs sung by slaves to spread messages or pass the time—to icons like Louis Armstrong, jazz has ineffably changed the soundscape of modern-day music. Yet beyond the legends and bright lights, local musicians have influenced the course of history from smoky bars and secluded coffee shops. Washington Post music critic Geoffrey Himes points to small communities as hotbeds for creativity:

"Should we focus only on the artists who developed a national reputation? Or should the narrative also include those artists who stayed hunkered down in their hometowns to stay close to their families, devote themselves to the local scene and hone their craft? If those players attained technical mastery and distinctively original voices, shouldn’t they too find a place in history books?"

In *Ohio Jazz*, the authors spotlight these remarkable local musicians, making decades of research accessible to the Ohio music community. *Ohio Jazz* begins in the late nineteenth century—when rags became so popular that the Cleveland Plain Dealer reported that a horse had "foxtrotted" across a sidewalk dragging a Wells Fargo Express wagon behind it, after it heard a popular ragtime tune emanating from a phonograph—and ends with a look at the future of jazz.

Along the way, meet the most influential Ohio jazz singer, Jon Hendricks, who was hailed by Al Jarreau as "pound-for-pound the best jazz singer on the planet—maybe that’s ever been." Enter the worlds of Cincinnati native Mamie Smith, who recorded the first vocal blues track "Crazy Blues" in 1920 and sold one million copies in a year, and Austin "Skin" Young of Columbus, Ohio, whose sensational singing style inspired the illustrious Bing Crosby. Learn how the roots of free jazz, a style of playing that was characterized by openness to all influences and a freedom from all rules, were firmly planted in Ohio.

*Ohio Jazz: A History of Jazz in the Buckeye State* may well change what you think about jazz. And Ohio. The book will retail for $19.99 and be available throughout the state and online at www.historypress.net.

Many thanks,

**Katie Parry**
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635 Rutledge Avenue
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The history of jazz is largely the story of a few key cities—none in Ohio. As a result, most jazz historians give short shrift to the Buckeye State, regarding it as a go-through rather than a go-to place. However, the fact is that jazz has been practiced in Ohio and with a vengeance. For thirty years, these authors have been researching and documenting the history of music, particularly jazz in Ohio. Their 1999 “Jazz Ohio!” exhibit at the Ohio Historical Society ran for twelve months before portions of it were moved to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The exhibit inspired this book, and much of what you will read here has never before been brought together in one place.

The authors of Ohio Jazz: A History of Jazz in the Buckeye State previously collaborated on Columbus, The Musical Crossroads (Arcadia, 2008) and Listen for the Jazz: Key Notes in Columbus History (Arts Foundation of Olde Towne, 1990–92). David Meyers has spent nearly thirty years documenting the history of music in central Ohio and was formerly host of Bring ’Em Back Alive, a weekly radio program on local music history. An artist and community activist, Candice Watkins is a driving force behind two of the city’s largest annual music festivals: Hot Times and ComFest. Arnett Howard, arguably the best-known musician in Columbus, has devoted much of the past three decades to interviewing many of the pioneering jazz musicians in the community. And James Loeffler, former publisher of the Antique Review, is a well-known collector of jazz recordings and a board member and former president of the Central Ohio Hot Jazz Society.
Ragtime was dance music, but it had an image problem. Born in brothels, juke joints and dance halls, it featured provocative movements that were considered naughty, if not downright obscene, by polite society. That changed in 1914, when Vernon and Irene Castle made a whirlwind tour of the United States, playing thirty cities in twenty-eight days.

The Castles—one a British entertainer, the other the daughter of an American doctor—quickly taught the rest of the country how to dance. Irene later recalled the basis of their appeal: “We were clean-cut, we were married, and when we danced there was nothing suggestive about it.” They were pioneers in other respects, too. The ten-piece band that accompanied them was composed entirely of African American musicians, led by the remarkable James Reese Europe.

Americans had wanted to dance for a long time. A dancing school opened in Cincinnati in 1799, a mere eleven years after the arrival of the first settlers. Between 1912 and 1914, “over one hundred new dances found their way, in and out of our fashionable ballrooms.”

By the age of twenty-three, William J. Rader of Columbus, son of a prominent farmer, had established himself as the most proficient teacher of dancing in the capital city. In 1898, he founded the Professor W.H. Rader Academies of Dance, possibly the first franchised dancing schools (Arthur Murray didn’t start his own until 1925). Rader insisted, “The exercise of dancing is not only conducive to health when properly taught, but is equally efficacious in promoting physical development.”
By the time the Castles brought their act to Ohio, they found that the state of dance in the Buckeye state was not to their liking. The problem, as Irene put it, was “the farther we come from New York, the more exaggerated seems to be the dancing. The dip, bend and kick went out a year ago. What we teach is simple, graceful dancing.”

Dancing was a very important form of recreation, not just in Ohio, but also across the entire Midwest. Virtually every community in the state had a venue of some sort where dances were held. As a result, the demand for dance bands playing the new syncopated style was enormous. Biographer Edward Jablonski believes there were more than sixty thousand dance bands across the nation at the beginning of the 1920s.

Charles A. Parker, an African American barber and violinist from Columbus, managed as many as thirty-eight bands throughout the Midwest. Billed as “Comedians with Rag Time Orchestra,” Parker’s Popular Players played everything from “tea music” to “jass.” His biggest competitor was Thomas “Tom” Howard, a Columbus restaurant owner. Howard handled such groups as the People’s Orchestra, the Orchestra Deluxe and the Whispering Orchestra of Gold.

Both Parker and Howard benefitted from Columbus’s proximity to the large populations of Cleveland, Toledo and Detroit when it came to booking one-nighters. While all of those cities had capable groups of their own, competition was keen, and bands frequently invaded one another’s territory.

Sammy Stewart, a pianist and arranger, left Parker’s Popular Players in 1918 to form his own band, Sammy Stewart’s Singing Syncopators (later known as the Ten Knights of Syncopation). Some of Parker’s best men joined him. According to his New York Times obituary, Stewart was one of the first midwestern conductors to use Paul Whiteman–style symphonic jazz arrangements. He was also credited with introducing choral singing by members of the orchestra. However, his greatest accomplishment was when he took his band to Chicago in 1923 and quickly established it as one of the top five in the city, effectively breaking free of the territory band niche.

A year later, Stewart took his orchestra to Paramount Studios to record “My Man Rocks Me,” “Manda” and “Copenhagen” in the symphonic jazz style that had won over the Windy City. Four more years passed before they recorded again, but the formula was the same. In between, however, Dixon’s Jazz Maniacs, a trio of Stewart’s musicians (banjoist Lawrence Dixon, reed player Vance Dixon and pianist Kline Tyndall), showed they could also play “hot” when they had the chance, cutting loose on “D A D Blues,” “Tiger Rag,” “Crazy Quilt” and “My Man Just Won’t Don’t.”
Another veteran of Parker’s Popular Players, violinist Earl Hood stayed behind to organize his own Columbus dance band. Had he chosen to go the “territory” route, there is no question he could have been successful. However, Hood had a good day job with the county auditor’s office and did not want to give it up. Instead, the Earl Hood Orchestra settled in as the house band at Valley Dale Ballroom and served as an important training ground for many future stars, most notably Harry “Sweets” Edison, Melvin “Sy” Oliver and Lawrence Dixon.

During its era, this band was acknowledged as the gold standard in Columbus, and Hood insisted he had no local competition—with the exception of “Skin Young’s Band.”

Austin “Skin” Young was a Columbus singer who also played guitar and banjo. Picked up by Paul Whiteman after a stint with the Mason-Dixon Orchestra, he was soon pulling down one of the largest paychecks in the band—a band that included such heavy hitters as Bix Beiderbecke, Jimmy Dorsey, Tommy Dorsey and Frankie Trumbauer.

However, another group was also winning fans in Columbus. A regular attraction at Olentangy Park’s Moonlight Gardens, Eddie Mitchell’s Orchestra was, according to an article in the Ohio State Journal, “a musical organization rated as one of the best of its kind in the country.” A couple of lively tunes

Parker’s Popular Players was one of thirty-eight bands managed by barber and violinist Charles A. Parker in the early 1900s. LFTJ.
recorded at Gennett Studios in 1925, “Pleasure Mad” and “Pickin’ ’Em Up,” include an accordion break!

Less than fifty miles away in Springfield, Kentucky-born William McKinney, a former circus drummer, joined the Synco Septet (later Synco Jazz Band) around 1920. Three years later, he quit the drums in order to concentrate on managing the band. After relocating to Detroit in 1926, McKinney expanded the group to ten pieces and renamed it McKinney’s Cotton Pickers. With arrangements by Benny Carter and others, the band’s fame spread far beyond the bounds of a typical territory band.

In 1922, the Scott brothers (Cecil on reeds and Lloyd on drums) formed their own Springfield-area band, Scott’s Symphonic Syncopators, to compete with McKinney’s group. Soon, Lloyd gave up drumming to become the Syncopators’ manager. Renamed Cecil Scott and His Bright Boys, the band was known for its hot arrangements and hot musicians, particularly trombonist Dickey Wells and trumpeter Bill Coleman. By 1929, the ten-piece ensemble was operating out of Harlem, where it remained active into the early 1930s.

About the same time, Springfield native Lois Deppe formed a band in Pittsburgh with a teenage pianist, Earl Hines. Calling themselves Deppe’s Serenaders, they made a pilgrimage to Richmond, Indiana, in October and November 1923 to record six tunes, including “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” “Dear Old Southland” and “Congaine.” Sammy Stewart wound up taking several of Deppe’s musicians (including Hines) for his own group.
Saxophonist Milton “Milt” Senior, an original member of the Synco Septet (and the earlier Willis-Warmack-Willis Trio out of Dayton), moved 130 miles north to Toledo, where he started the Milt Senior Synco Septet and a few other combos. Finding it difficult to compete with the bands coming out of Detroit, Senior became one of the region’s most prominent booking agents instead. A good eye for talent, he hired a teenage Art Tatum for one of his bands. When the young pianist left a year later, Senior quickly replaced him with somebody almost as good, Theodore “Teddy” Wilson.

One of the most prominent bandleaders in northwest Ohio was Piqua’s Harold Greenamyer (1899–1982). In 1922, Greenamyer hired a seventeen-year-old cornet player from Ogden, Utah, named Ernest Loring “Red” Nichols. (Nichols remained with the band for a couple months before continuing his climb to fame and fortune with his own group, the Five Pennies.) Greenamyer’s band also included drummer “Humpty” Horlocker, who is credited with making the first drum sticks when the Rogers Drum Company in Covington (twenty-five miles north of Dayton) got its first stick machine.

The fact that many banjo players became bandleaders reflects the importance of the instrument in the development of syncopated rhythms.
Marion McKay, possibly from Indiana, led a territory band that made the rounds throughout Cincinnati, Detroit and Cleveland, with occasional side trips to New York and California. His brother, Ernie, on clarinet and sax, and pianist Henry Lange were also members of the group. Marion McKay and His Orchestra cut numerous sides for Gennett, including “Doo-Wacka-Doo” (1924). In 1927, when they were playing at Castle Farms near Cincinnati, they switched places with Jean Goldkette’s Orchestra in Detroit.

Henry W. Lange (1896–1985), once billed as the “Monarch of the Ivories,” was inspired to become a musician after attending a concert by his hometown Toledo Orchestra. As a member of the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, he was one of a trio of pianists, along with composer George Gershwin and arranger Ferde Grofe, for the premiere performance of “Rhapsody in Blue” in 1924. The same year, he took over Marion McKay’s band and renamed it the Lange-McKay Orchestra. They cut three tracks for Gennett: “Sweet Little You,” “Tea For Two” and “Leaky Roof Blues.”

Despite the name, J. Frank Terry’s Chicago Nightingales was a Toledo-based band that got its start in the mid-1920s and, undoubtedly, gave Milt Senior a run for his money. Apparently, Terry believed that having “Chicago” in the band’s name would make it more bookable. In addition to trumpeter and arranger Terry, the band consisted at various times of Richard “Dick” Vance (trumpet), Edward “Eddie” Barefield (sax), James “Jimmy” Shirley (electric guitar), Elbert “Skippy” Williams (tenor sax) and Emmett Berry (trumpet), not to mention Doc Cheatham (trumpet) and Ben Thigpen (drums).

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the name Austin Wylie (1893–1947) was synonymous with Cleveland’s Golden Pheasant Restaurant, home base for his popular orchestra. Wylie seldom ventured out except for quick trips to New York City to record (sometimes with Piqua’s Harry Reser on banjo). Several name musicians and bandleaders passed through the ranks of the Wylie band, including Claude Thornhill, Vaughn Monroe (1911–1973), Tony Pastor, Billy Butterfield and Arthur Arshawsky (better known as Artie Shaw). At seventeen, Shaw took over as arranger and musical director for Wylie. When Shaw later formed his own group, Wylie managed him.

One of Wylie’s major competitors was the Emerson Gill Orchestra, heard regularly on live remote radio broadcasts from Cleveland’s Bamboo Gardens. When the Okeh label began making “location recordings” with mobile trucks in 1924, Gill’s group was one of the first to sign up. Over the next two years,
they recorded nine songs, including “Birmingham Bound” and “My Name Will Always Be Chickie” (with vocals by Pinkey Hunter).

The Marion Sears Orchestra was formed by saxophonist Marion Sears (1902–1989), brother of tenor sax titan “Big Al” Sears (1910–1990). Both were born in Illinois, but in 1918 (when little Albert Omega was in second grade) the family moved to Zanesville. During the late 1920s, Al briefly worked in his big brother’s band before playing with Chick Webb, Andy Kirk and Lionel Hampton. Meanwhile, Marion was hired as the house band at Cleveland Cedar Gardens (1924–1940s). His seven-piece ensemble quickly attracted some of the best up-and-coming musicians in the region.

In 1933, Springfield’s Earle Warren, just out of high school, was leading his own band in Columbus when he was recruited to join Marion Sears. Alto saxophonist Earl Bostic, having left his native Louisiana to join Clarence Olden’s band in Columbus, also jumped to the Marion Sears Orchestra. Other musicians who filled out the roster were: trumpeter Freddie Webster, pianist and arranger Lavere “Buster” Harding, pianist Tadd Dameron and saxophonist “Bull Moose” Jackson. Harding (1912–1965) was a self-taught piano player from Canada who attended Cleveland Central High School. He later became an arranger for Teddy Wilson, Benny Goodman and Dizzy Gillespie.

A trumpet virtuoso in the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra, Cleveland’s Freddie Webster (1917–1947) died at thirty. More than forty years after his death, Dizzy Gillespie said Webster “probably had the best sound of the trumpet since the trumpet was invented, a sound that was alive, just alive and full of life!”

Drummer Bernard Joseph “Bernie” Cummins (1900–1986) got his start in his hometown of Akron and by 1919 was leading the Bernie Cummins Orchestra. His was one of the top dance bands during the next two decades. In addition to his brother, Walter (guitar/vocals), the group included future bandleaders Tommy Dorsey and Randy Brooks. The band’s recorded output varies from the “hot” style of 1924 to the smooth sound of the 1930s.

While playing an engagement at the Stockton Club in Hamilton, Ohio, during the summer of 1923, Cummins decided to take a job down the road at Cincinnati’s Toadstool Inn. This prompted his lead trumpet player, George “Red” Bird, to quit the Cummins band and organize his own group to take over the Stockton Club engagement. Bird immediately headed to Chicago in search of the right musicians.

The Stockton Club was a notorious spot for bootleg booze, gambling and music. Supposedly operated by the Purple Gang, a particularly violent group of mobsters based in Detroit, it benefitted from its remote location (between Hamilton and Cincinnati) and its proximity to railroad and interurban lines. As a consequence, it became a gangland meeting place.
In addition to Bird, the band came to include Min Leibrook (tuba/bass) and Al Gandee (trombone). Leibrook, a Hamilton native, went on to play with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra; Gandee, from Cincinnati, later joined Dave Piet’s Orchestra. A last-minute addition was a cornet player named Leon “Bix” Beiderbecke. They took their name, the Wolverines, from the Jelly Roll Morton song “Wolverine Blues.”

When the club was shuttered temporarily as the result of a New Year’s Eve free-for-all between rival gangsters, the Wolverines took a job playing at Doyle’s Dance Academy in Cincinnati, where their “sock-time” rhythm quickly became a sensation among the young, working-class dancers. Then, on February 18, 1924, they made a quick trip to Gennett Studios in Richmond, Indiana, to record covers of some tunes popularized by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. Beiderbecke was the star of these sessions, and soon everyone was talking about the “Young Man with a Horn.”

An astute businessman, Cummins took over management of the Wolverines after a gig fell through, booking the band at colleges in Ohio and Indiana. In May, the band returned to Richmond to cut several more sides, including “Riverboat Shuffle,” a tune it learned from composer Hoagy Carmichael, who just happened to be at the studio.

The Cincinnati-based Chubb-Steinberg Orchestra, led by violinist and vocalist Art Hicks, is best remembered for its fiery young cornetist, “Wild Bill” Davison. In March 1925, the band participated in a recording demonstration for radio listeners. While broadcasting live, it made a recording of “Because They All Love.” The wax master was then played back for the audience. A record was subsequently pressed and issued by Gennett, with the notation on the label: “Played—Recorded—Broadcast at the Cincinnati Radio Show.”

In actuality, the wax master would have been ruined during the playback process, so the version of the song that was released on record had actually been recorded at the Richmond studio in February. Nevertheless, through the medium of recording, and now radio, the market for jazz was expanding.

Radio and records were making overnight stars of dance bands from far-flung corners of the nation. Many restaurants, hotels and ballrooms originated remote radio broadcasts. However, the greatest exposure was given to those who were based in major cities. So Ohio musicians who wanted to make it big invariably had to leave home.
The Collegians

Imperial Serenaders
The History Press brings a new way of thinking to history publishing—preserving and enriching community by empowering history enthusiasts to write local stories for local audiences. Our books are useful resources for research and preservation, but it is their value as touchstones for community identity that drives us to publish works that national houses and university presses too often have ignored. Infused with local color, our books are highly readable, often brief and aimed at a general readership.

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If you would like to schedule an interview with the author, please contact

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