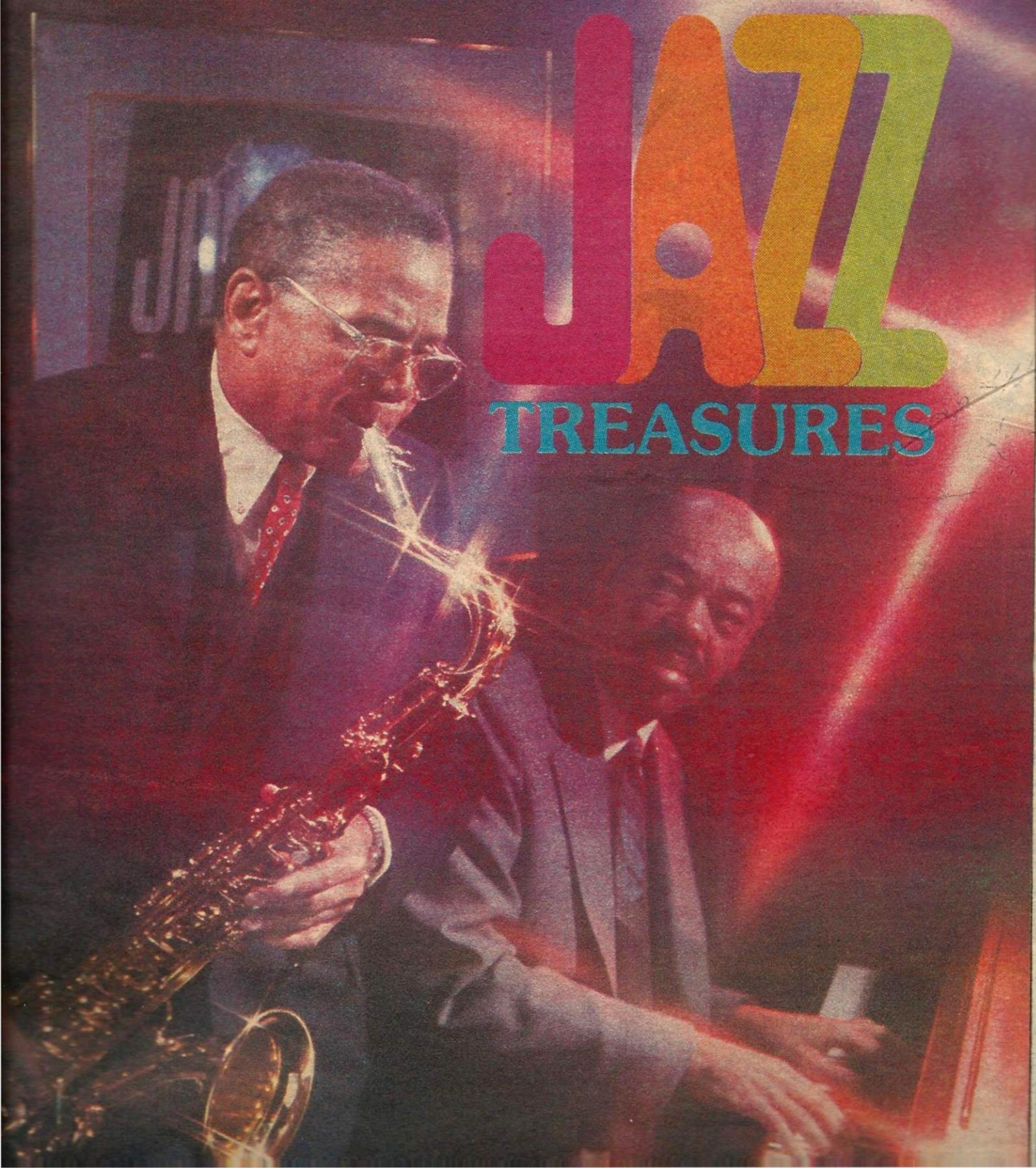


# Let's Go

MILWAUKEE SENTINEL

Friday, February 10, 1989

## JAZZ TREASURES



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## Masters of music keep tradition alive

*"The majority of what we know of as the essential components of jazz music comes from black culture. And certainly the majority of the innovators over the years have been black. . . . That hasn't always been recognized. The first jazz band to make a record, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, was white."*

— Ben Sidran: jazz pianist, broadcaster, scholar, author.

Jazz pianist Melvin Rhyne leaves the grand piano in the Wyndham Milwaukee Center hotel's elegant lobby lounge and sits at the bar after a swinging Wednesday night performance before a meager handful of inattentive, well-heeled patrons.

He's 52 years old, slim and dapperly dressed in a finely tailored brown sports coat and tie. Sipping a soda, Rhyne relates just how obscure his art — jazz — is to most people.

"Even my own mother has asked me for years, 'Why are you doing that kind of music? Why do you mess with it?'" he says quietly.

And his daughters, 29 and 30 years old, refused to follow his lead and become musicians.

"They wouldn't touch it. They told me, 'Dad, if you're so great, how come you're not rich?'"

While it might not be widely recognized, Rhyne and several other black jazz musicians living in Milwaukee are masters of the music.

But Rhyne's daughters are partially right: Although some black jazz artists in this country have achieved considerable financial success, Milwaukee's current greats have persevered for years without great acclaim or remuneration — at least in dollars.

To commemorate Black History Month, Let's Go asked several accomplished black jazz musicians to discuss their art and lives.

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Reed player **Berkeley Fudge** has been playing music since high school and doesn't regret falling in love with jazz despite the limited financial rewards it has offered.

Fudge, 51, a Milwaukee native, plays Friday and Saturday nights at the Hyatt Regency Milwaukee's Atrium Lounge, and teaches at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music and in the Milwaukee Public Schools.

For Fudge, as with many of the musicians interviewed, playing jazz is an irrepressible part of living.

"It deals with so much of you," he explained. "It's a very expressive music. It's not something you've got to do like someone else. It's not what I call a surface music; you've got to dig down if you want to get something out of it."

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Fudge said the black role in jazz also attracted him to the music.

"It represents my people," he said. "This is our music. This is what we brought here. So it's an ethnic thing. So that's important for me, too."

But he emphasized that race does not determine who can master any style of music, including jazz.

"It is a black music regardless of who's playing it. We're the originators of this. . . . It's coming from a class of people, but you've got other people who like it, not just those people."

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As a teenager growing up in Indianapolis, **Melvin Rhyne** hoped to become an electrical engineer, "but I wound up in the band room more than anything else," he said, laughing at the memory.

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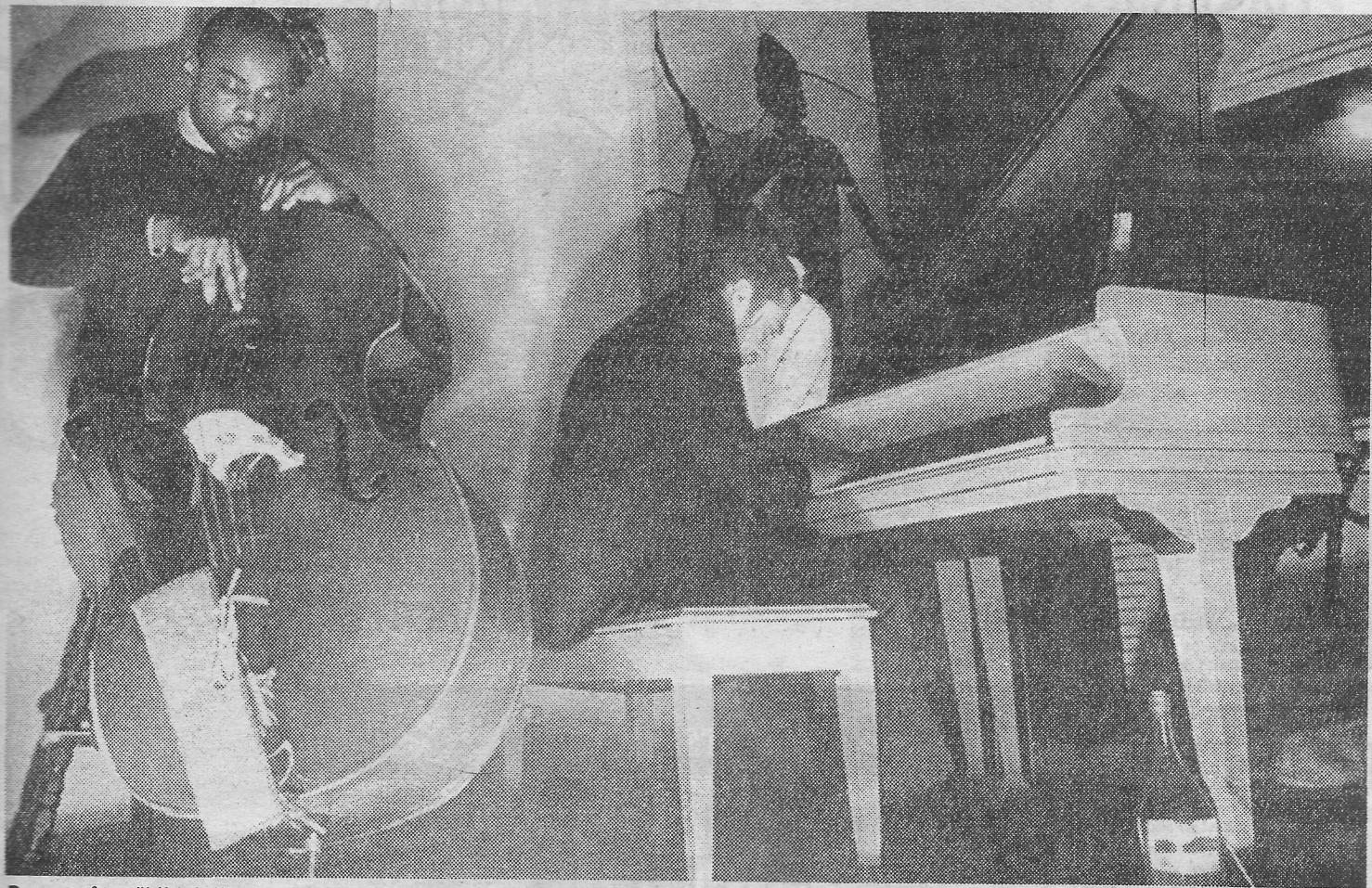
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**Bassist Gerald Cannon**, who recently returned from a successful year of playing in New York City, is high on Milwaukee's jazz musicians but unhappy with local opportunities, especially for blacks.

"I think there needs to be more awareness of the unsung heroes of Wisconsin," he said, listing black players such as Manty Ellis, Fudge, Beverly Pitts, Penny Goodwin, Hattush Alexander (see accompanying article), Tony

# Clubs put jazz in the spotlight

The atmosphere inside **Eddie Jackson's Supper Club** exudes New York's jazz-infused 52nd St. of the '40s, belying its residential South Side location at 2400 S. Logan Ave.

It's about 10 p.m. Monday night, and the dimly lighted barroom is packed with patrons,

There's Mel Rhyne on organ, evoking smoky after-hours clubs past, with his bluesy, no-holds-barred jazz riffs; and Hattush Alexander on tenor, playing with little visible emotion but setting off shivers across the aural plane as he blows fluid musical poetry tinged with sadness.

The three men comprise this jam session's house group. The group is augmented by a changing cast of musicians — trumpet, saxophone, trombone, vocals — as it works through standards such as "Bye Bye Blackbird," jazz favorites such as "All Blues," even a James Brown number.

King and the late Jim Duncan."

"They are definitely heavy musicians," he said, adding that their New York peers hold some in high esteem.

A Racine native, Cannon, 30, went to New York after playing for years with pianist David Hazeltine at Chip and Py's, a Soho-style restaurant.

Cannon, who began playing professionally at age 9 with his father's gospel group, found that blacks had much greater opportunities in jazz in New York than Milwaukee.

In New York, Cannon worked with Dexter Gordon and Art Blakey, and joined Adam Makowicz for a tour of European jazz festivals. In Milwaukee, despite years of playing, Cannon feels he was barely noticed.

He said several other young black jazz musicians — including brothers Carl and Eddie E.J. Allen — had to leave Milwaukee and move to New York to find success.

"I think it's kind of sad the way the jazz scene is going on here. There's not a lot happening here, not like there used to be. . . . I feel fortunate to have this gig," said Cannon, who has rejoined Hazeltine at Chip and Py's before returning to New York.

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Guitarist **Marty Ellis**, a stalwart member of the local jazz community, senses an improvement in Milwaukee's jazz climate, especially because the music now is heard in Downtown clubs for the first time in years.

Ellis, 56, played with numerous big-name jazz stars during his long career but decided to make his hometown his home base despite a stint in New York, where the "politics" of the music scene turned him off.

He predicted that Milwaukee soon will see a much-needed club featuring national jazz artists.

"I expect it at any minute, and I expect most of the hotels Downtown to be featuring this type of music."

Ellis said the city's attitude toward jazz was changing because of attitudes of openness spawned by the new mayor and county executive.

"Milwaukee has been short on sophistication for years," he said. "It seems that all of a sudden people are becoming a little more sophisticated."

He said he and Milwaukee share a slow, cautious attitude when initially presented with change.

"You take your time, but when you do step in the ring, it's all over," Ellis said.

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Pianist and organist **Beverly Pitts**, a 25-year-veteran of Milwaukee's club scene, said she had been doing well playing jazz, and sometimes commercial music, until a few years ago, "when disco came in and other kinds of music, and (club owners) wouldn't hire you to play jazz. They'd hire a disc jockey."

But she believes jazz in Milwaukee is in the midst of an upswing, of which she hopes to become a part.



**Berkeley Fudge:** "It's a form of expression I use to express my feelings outside of talking."



Allan Y. Scott / Sentinel photographer

**Hattush Alexander:** The saxophonist, who came to Milwaukee for a gig in 1958, decided to stay.

"It was impossible to make it for awhile. I could make it for awhile, but not steady enough. You don't know if you're going to make it this night or not."

Alexander instead spent time as a university clerk for the University of Wisconsin, where he began working in support services in 1966.

But at night — at least for a while — Alexander takes out his horn and plays. He plays jazz, filling clubs with his fluid and poignantly expressive playing.

Alexander needn't work for a living. He plays commercial music, but he prefers to play bebop-style jazz. "I keep my horn in the closet, but I play it at night," he says. "I'd rather just do it myself, I'd rather wash up and play it myself."

"I'd rather just do it myself, I'd rather wash up and play it myself," Alexander said. "I don't care if I'm not paid for it."

Although Alexander has been in Milwaukee for many years, David Hazeltine, a man of jazz studies at the University of Wisconsin, said the saxophonist is a local jazz world icon.

"For all people studying jazz, he's a legend," Hazeltine said. "I think he's a wonderful player. He's a wonderful being in Milwaukee, he's a wonderful person. He plays. . . . He's kind of a legend. He's the cat here."

Alexander, a slender man with a gentle smile, plays humbly.

"I appreciate that, and I'm not drawing out the words. I'm not trying to be an individual and have my own style. I'm just trying to mean."

Alexander was born in Milwaukee from a music college in 1934. He began playing jazz in the early 1950s, and has been performing in Milwaukee ever since.

# Alexander plays 31-year gig

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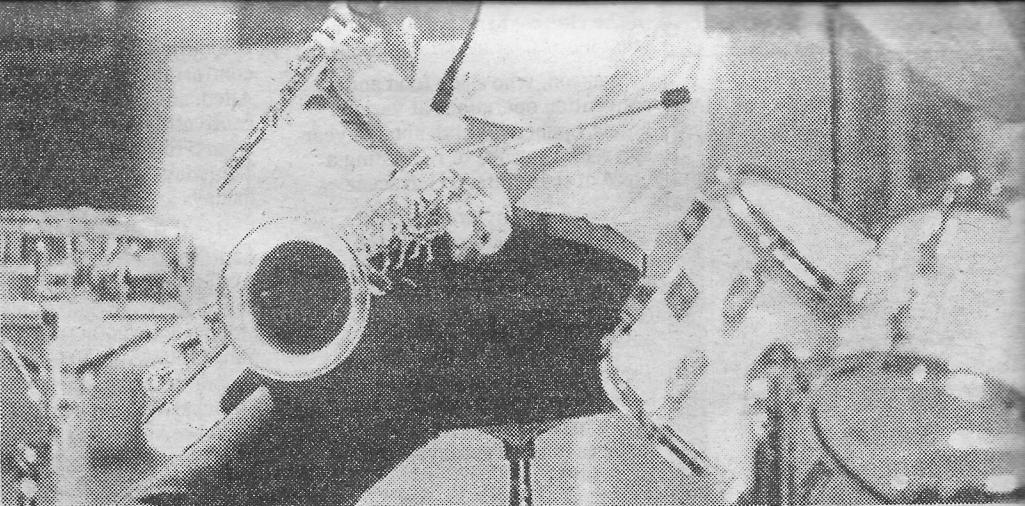
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Why are things looking up for jazz?

"I don't know. I don't think it'll ever die, it just might get a little sick."

"It should never die, because it's really our heritage. That's why we want to keep it alive — not only black people. But we have to keep it alive because it's our heritage. We don't have a choice. We have to have something to pass on to our grandchildren and their grandchildren. It was passed on to me from my grandfather and my grandfather to my mother and me and my sisters and brothers."



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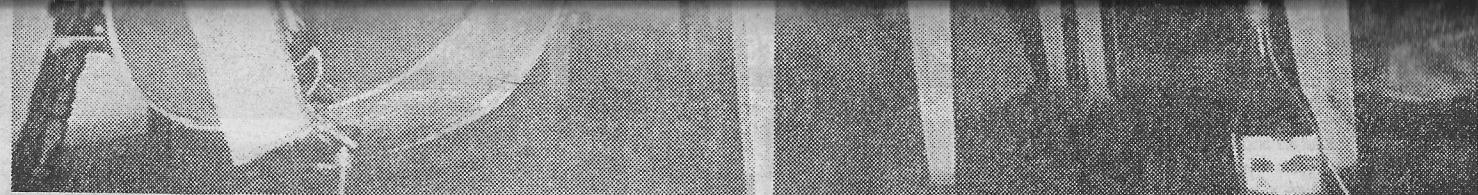
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**Eddie Jackson:** "The time is right. The public wants something (it) can listen to."

## Clubs put jazz in the spotlight

The atmosphere inside **Eddie Jackson's Supper Club** exudes New York's jazz-infused 52nd St. of the '40s, belying its residential South Side location at 2400 S. Logan Ave.

It's about 10 p.m. Monday night, and the dimly lighted barroom is packed with patrons, jammed around small tables or sitting at the large oval bar that dominates the room.

The crowd is excited and friendly, some carrying instrument cases, but mostly attuned to the men in the corner and the wild, grooving music they're making.

There's Mel Rhyne on organ, evoking smoky after-hours clubs past, with his bluesy, no-holds-barred jazz riffs; and Hattush Alexander on tenor, playing with little visible emotion but setting off shivers across the aural plane as he blows fluid musical poetry tinged with sadness.

Both men are in casual clothes tonight, having forsaken the ties and sports jackets they usually wear while working. They're joined by Victor Campbell, who lets you know you're hearing JAZZ tonight with driving cymbals and solid pounding on his drums.

The three men comprise this jam session's house group. The group is augmented by a changing cast of musicians — trumpet, saxophone, trombone, vocals — as it works through standards such as "Bye Bye Blackbird," jazz favorites such as "All Blues," even a James Brown number.

Eddie Jackson, owner of the supper club, takes time from chatting with patrons to recall Downtown in the '50s and its clutch of clubs near N. 5th St. and W. Wisconsin Ave. — The

SEE PAGE 22 / CLUBS



Sentinel photo

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"It was impossible to make it," he explained. "You could make it for awhile, but it's not steady. It's not steady enough. You don't know if you're going to work this night or not."

Alexander instead spends his days as a shipping mailing clerk for the University of Wisconsin — Milwaukee, where he began working full time in non-academic support services in 1966.

But at night — at least three nights a week at present — Alexander takes out his tenor and blows from his heart, filling clubs with improvised melodies that are as swinging, fluid and poignant as any played today.

Alexander needn't work a day job — he could easily play commercial music or teach to make a living. But he'd prefer to play bebop-drenched jazz — nothing else — and keep his horn in the closet the rest of the time.

"I'd rather just do it when I can do it, and when I can't do it, I'd rather wash your car — anything — dig a ditch," Alexander said. "I don't want to mess up what I love."

Although Alexander hasn't played full time for 26 years, David Hazeltine, a jazz pianist, teacher and chairman of jazz studies at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music, said the saxophonist is an important figure in the local jazz world.

"For all people studying jazz, I would recommend hearing Hattush before anybody in Milwaukee," Hazeltine said. "I think he's a world-class tenor player and as far as being in Milwaukee, he's been an influence on everyone who plays. . . . He's kind of the father of saxophone here. He's *the cat* here."

Alexander, a slender, unassuming man, takes such praise humbly.

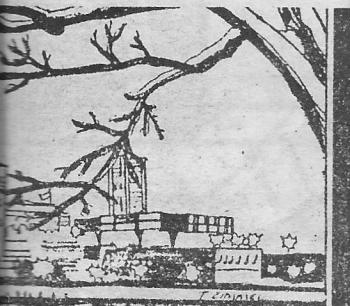
"I appreciate that, and it makes me feel good," he said, drawing out the words slowly. "I tell everybody I'm just an individual and have imperfections, you know what I mean."

Alexander was born in St. Louis, where he graduated from a music college in 1950 with a major in reed instruments and a minor in piano.

He recalls seeing the great Charlie Parker many times playing in St. Louis clubs back then.

"I didn't have nerve enough to pull my horn out," Alexander said, punctuating the memory with a characteristic chuckle. "If I happened to have my horn when he was up there playing, I'd try to hide it."

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# Jazz clubs on the upswing

## CLUBS / FROM PAGE 20

Lampost, The Downtowner, The Brass Rail, The Red Room, The Schroeder Hotel, The Wisconsin Roof, Fazio's, Stakota's.

In that era, the group of nightclubs might host four or five big bands on a single night, he said. Jackson, now 52, frequented the jazz spots "even when I was too young. I knew a lot of the club owners, and they could trust me and let me sit in a corner."

Jackson, who's run food and convention operations at various hotels, opened his club about a year ago with the hope of recreating a piece of that vintage club scene.

"It's one of my dreams. It's something I've always wanted. . . . I think the time is right. The public wants something (it) can listen to, enjoy themselves to — live entertainment."

Monday night jam sessions, which include free hors d'oeuvres, run from 8:30 p.m. to 1 a.m. The club also features music Tuesdays through Saturdays.

Let's Go also recently sampled jazz at:

**The Estate**, 2423 N. Murray Ave., a tiny but cozy club, features Hattush Alexander with the John Foshager Trio from 9:30 p.m. to 2 a.m. Fridays and Saturdays and jam sessions 9

p.m. to 1 a.m. Wednesdays and Sundays.

**Chip and Py's**, 815 S. 5th St., a stylish restaurant with a bar area, features the uncompromisingly straight-ahead duo of pianist David Hazeltine and bassist Gerald Cannon from 8 p.m. to midnight Fridays and Saturdays. (Great scallops, too.)

In the **Wyndham Milwaukee Center's lobby lounge**, 139 E. Kilbourn Ave., an intimate and comfortable Downtown room, Jackie Allen, an accomplished and captivating jazz vocalist, holds forth from 5 to 9 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays and 8 p.m. to midnight Fridays and Saturdays.

**Hyatt Regency Milwaukee's Atrium Lounge**, 333 W. Kilbourn Ave., features jazz by a variety of musicians from 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, 6 to 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. during Sunday brunches. While the music is good, the room has a distracting hotel ambiance, including passing elevators and noise from a nearby reception hall.

The following clubs and restaurants also regularly feature jazz. None of the clubs mentioned in this story have cover charges. Schedules frequently change, so call ahead for updated information.

**Brass'**, 16755 Lisbon Rd., Brookfield, first Sunday of month during brunch.

**Cafe Melange**, in the Wisconsin Hotel, 720 N. Old World Third St., 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. Thursdays.

**Jazz Oasis**, 2379 N. Holton St., 9:30 p.m. to close Fridays, Saturdays and Mondays (jam session).

**John Hawk's Pub**, 607 N. Broadway, 9:30 p.m. to 1:30 a.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

**Mr. Bear's**, 1247 N. Water St., 8 p.m. to midnight Fridays and Saturdays.

**The Packing House**, 900 E. Layton Ave., 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays; 7225 N. 76th St., 8:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

**Pazzz**, 5401 W. Good Hope Rd., 8:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. Saturdays.

**The Red Mill**, 1005 S. Elm Grove Rd., Brookfield, 7:30 to 11:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays; 8 p.m. to midnight Fridays and Saturdays.

**Shakers**, 422 S. 2nd St., 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Mondays through Fridays; also Saturday nights.

**Something Different**, 5666 N. Teutonia Ave., 9:30 p.m. to 1:30 a.m. Fridays and Saturdays; 8 p.m. to midnight Sundays.

**Third Street Pier**, 1110 N. Old World Third St., 5 p.m. to midnight Tuesdays through Saturdays; 5 to 9 p.m. Sundays.

—Jeff Bentoff

## Alexander a role model

### JAZZ / FROM PAGE 21

He made his way to Indianapolis in the early '50s, rehearsing with the great guitarist Wes Montgomery and Wes' brother, Buddy. But Alexander said he got fed up with "the ups and downs of the music world in general" and left the group before Wes became a guitar legend.

Alexander returned to St. Louis, quitting music for a year, but eventually joining a 16-piece orchestra part time.

He later toured with the four-piece combo that brought him to Milwaukee in 1958.

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