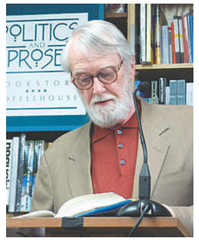
For W. Royal Stokes, a life filled with riffs

The longtime jazz critic's new book is a collection of his reviews and profiles

BY CHRIS RICHARDS



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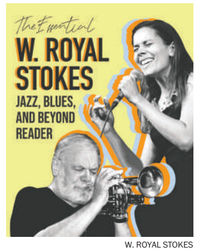

W. ROYAL STOKES

RAFAEL CRISOSTOMO FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

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In top photo, W. Royal Stokes sits with jazz singer Dee Dee Bridgewater, who is holding a copy of his book "Swing Era New York: The Jazz Photographs of Charles Peterson," in 1994 at D.C.'s Coco Loco. His latest book, "The Essential W. Royal Stokes Jazz, Blues and Beyond Reader," compiles his life's work as a critic. Stokes has profiled an array of jazz performers, including singer-pianist Shirley Horn, above right, and saxophonist Deanna Bogart. "I *have* to perform," Horn told Stokes for a 1987 Washington Post profile. "There's something that drives me. If I go too long without performing, I get crazy." Based in Washington in the '80s, the late singer and pianist made regular appearances at the now-shuttered One Step Down. In the late '70s, Stokes became a champion of female instrumentalists. "I'm not playing to just get by or look like a girl playing a horn," saxophonist Deanna Bogart told Stokes for a Washington Post profile in 1984. "I need to play as good as any guy up there."

"One foot back in the past, one foot into the future." That's how the critic W. Royal Stokes describes the way he hears jazz after living 90 years on this dizzy planet — and it makes for a pretty good description of how we experience life, too. It's a continuity, a perpetual improvisation, a negotiation between what we know and what we don't, a story that moves in ways we can't predict.

No one could have predicted Stokes's zigzag jazz life, including him. Born in D.C. in 1930, he was a teen obsessed with boogie-woogie records; then a student turned professor of Greek and Latin languages and literature and ancient history; then a turned-on-tuned-in-dropped-out hippie roadtripper; then a volunteer radio DJ; then a voracious music scribe who published his first jazz review at age 42; then a freelance jazz critic for The Washington Post and, later, an editor at JazzTimes magazine.

His latest book, "The Essential W. Royal Stokes Jazz, Blues and Beyond Reader," compiles his life's work as a critic, and it overflows with concert reviews documenting D.C.'s eternally busy jazz scene, as well as heaps of interviews with the players, many of whom Stokes encouraged to reminisce as far back into their lives as possible.

You can't begin to understand a musician "unless you know how they came up," Stokes says over the phone from Elkins, W.Va., where he has lived since 2017. "Mary Lou Williams said when she was the age of 3, she was already reaching up, trying to pick things out on the piano keys when she couldn't yet reach the keyboard."

As for Stokes, his fascination with jazz began with childhood dives into his big brother's record collection — and it was confirmed a few weeks before his 18th birthday on a trip into the nightlife to see Louis Armstrong's All-Stars. But as ecstatic as that night felt to him, Stokes didn't see a future for himself in that world. He remembers a family ride in his parent's station wagon roughly a year later, in the fall of 1949. The topic of conversation: Royal's career plans. His brother suggested he become a jazz historian. He was touched, but his parents scoffed.

Stokes served in the Army in the early 1950s, during the Korean War (he spent it all in artillery training and never left the United States), then returned to academia, eventually earning his PhD from Yale in 1965 and teaching at a handful of universities. Then, in 1969, he decided to leave his post at the University of Colorado and hit the road. "I think I was restless," Stokes says. "I wanted something more connected with the current world."

He and his future-wife, Erika Hartmann, drove a Corvair Greenbrier van from Colorado to Texas to New England, finally landing in D.C. in 1970, where Stokes got a job washing dishes at a vegetarian restaurant in Georgetown.

Off the clock, he spun jazz records at Georgetown University's WGTB and began writing about the music for a local newsletter, Tailgate Ramblings, which published his first jazz writing in 1972. Stokes approached The Washington Post in 1978, and before long, he was phoning in concert reviews from various area jazz venues for publication in the next morning's newspaper.

He suddenly had a lot in common with the improvisers he was out covering. "The majority of those reviews were written sitting in my car for an hour deciphering the notes that I had taken at the One Step Down or the Kennedy Center," Stokes says. "When you know you have to make a phone call at midnight, the intellectual adrenaline comes to the fore."

Even when it was composed in the heat of the moment, Stokes's jazz writing always looks forward and backward at once. In the "Reader," there's a 1979 Post review of the Art Ensemble of Chicago performing at the Bayou in Georgetown on a Thursday night in which Stokes describes the group's intense exploration of West African rhythm as "a paean to the past and window to the future." In another "Reader" piece from 1983, he opens a short Post profile of Don Cherry, one of the more pathfinding jazz thinkers of the time, by noting Cherry's affinity for his legendary forebears Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke.

That approach became something of a philosophy for Stokes. "In my reading and my research of the classics, I always had the sense that the tradition was so important. No Greek or Latin poet could escape the influence of Homer, for instance." he says. "I look at jazz in the same way: a continuum."

If the past is to remain vital to the future of jazz, it's important to document the present accurately — which might be why Stokes became a champion of female instrumentalists in jazz after attending the Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival in 1978. His "Reader" includes pithy profiles of pianist Shirley Horn, saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom, pianist Dorothy Donegan, saxophonist Deanna Bogart, trombonist Melba Liston and many others — most of which find Stokes thoughtfully stepping out of the frame, allowing these undervalued artists to speak for themselves.

"I could see how women were being treated then, and they're still being treated that way today," Stokes says. "They're still seldom [booked] at festivals, they still have fewer jobs in the clubs and concert halls, and this remains very disturbing."

His advocacy helped Stokes earn a lifetime achievement award from the Jazz Journalists Association in 2014, and the prize itself, a glass obelisk, currently sits on a shelf in his home near his other books, including four additional jazz tomes and a trilogy of novels. Stokes says he's working on another book, too: "an epistolary memoir," he says.

What keeps him writing at 90? The same thing that keeps him brushing his teeth. It's habitual. "I wrote a detective story — a five- or six-page detective story — at the age of 10. And that was 80 years ago!" Stokes says. "So it's always been with me. And I've always been a reader. You learn how to write by reading."

Here's a more difficult question: Having committed decades of his life to bringing people closer to this marginalized music, what's kept *him* interested in jazz? There's a long pause. "It has so much soul," he says. Then, an even longer pause. "And it swings." These little silences feel cavernous, almost musical. The harder Stokes tries to describe what jazz is, the more it seems like he's trying to describe what life is. "And I don't know what to say beyond that."

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For more information about "The Essential W. Royal Stokes Jazz, Blues and Beyond Reader" visit *wroyalstokes.com*.

A jazz critic's curated playlist

At 90, Stokes has heard more jazz than most of us — and after nearly 80 years of listening closely, here are the five recordings he deems most essential, described in his words, listed in rough chronological order.

Most can be found on streaming services, including Spotify and Apple Music. All of them can still be tracked down in physical form, new or used, via retail sites, including Discogs and Amazon.

MVD ENTERTAINMENT

Mary Lou Williams, "Collection: 1927-1959"

A lovely sampling of the contributions to the art form from the "First Woman of Jazz" as pianist, band and combo leader, composer, and arranger — from her early membership in the big band of Andy Kirk to later work with the likes of Benny Goodman, Coleman Hawkins, and British artists Tony Kinsey and Allan Ganley.

JASMINE RECORDS

Benny Goodman, "Carnegie Hall, January 16, 1938 — The Complete Concert"

Truly a magic event that has been described as one of the most important jazz concerts in history. Trumpeter Harry James, pianist Jess Stacy, singer Martha Tilton, drummer Gene Krupa and members of the Count Basie and Duke Ellington bands are among the dozens of jazz luminaries who liven up the evening.

Bunk Johnson, "Last Testament"

A recording made during this first-generation jazzman's 1940s comeback that provides proof of how polished and original a musician this trumpeter and bandleader was. Trombonist Ed Cuffee, clarinetist Garvin Bushell, pianist Don Kirkpatrick, guitarist Danny Barker, bassist Wellman Braud and drummer Alphonse Steele are his musical companions for this charmingly swinging studio session.

UPTOWN JAZZ

Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, "Town Hall, New York City, June 22, 1945"

A historic gathering featuring the two founding fathers of bebop, the initial style of modern jazz. Tenor saxophonist Don Byas, pianist Al Haig, bassist Curley Russell and drummer Max Roach fill out the all-star combo.

Art Ensemble of Chicago, "Live in Berlin 1979"

A glorious introduction to the new sounds that were to follow from the 1970s onward. On the stage are the visionary combo's original members: Lester Bowie, trumpet; Joseph Jarman and Roscoe Mitchell, reeds; Malachi Favors, bass; and Don Moye, percussion.

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