

From Brooklyn to Big Time – The Paul Cohen Story (Part 1)

By: Mort Kuff

This is the story of a kid from Brooklyn who dreamed an impossible dream. He didn't know that it was impossible so he did it; he made it come true.

Born in Brighton Beach on October 3, 1922, Paul Cohen was but 8 years old when his Father handed him a cornet and said simply, "Here, play!"

Paul was into sports and what he loved the most, was to play ball with his pals. Being a smart kid, he caught onto the situation quickly. He understood that the quickest way he would be able to join his pals outside, was to follow his Father's orders and learn to play that musical instrument. He claims that it came naturally to him. But, as anyone who ever picked up an instrument and endeavored to learn to play it while learning to read music at the same time knows that it takes real concentration, perseverance and practice, practice and more practice.

sen to provide the reader with a sampling of this man's experiences as he traveled the long road to the top of the music profession, is to present a few episodes just as I jotted them down in a series of impromptu conversations and informal interviews primarily, at the NW Focal Point Senior Center in the lovely little town of Margate, Florida. Paul indulged me as I would take opportunities to pop questions at him, in between his warm-up exercises on the trumpet, as he awaited the 15-17 musicians who straggled-in and took their places on the stage for his weekly rehearsals.

I formed the habit of attending these rehearsals shortly after moving to Florida in late 1998. I always arrived early to voluntarily set up the chairs and music stands in preparation for Paul's every-Thursday rehearsals. Once a big-band groupie; always a big band groupie. The Big band sound has been my music since I was about 13 years old; it's still my passion.

pressions of Tommy Dorsey, Paul's brow furrowed a bit and his language became decidedly more 'salty.' "TD" was an extraordinary trombone soloist and orchestra leader who was known for being deadly serious

the Golden Era of big bands and so, woe unto the musician who didn't measure up or who didn't give his best effort at every performance.

Tommy was not above using harsh language to express him-



Paul Cohen; a feisty kid from Brooklyn plays lead trumpet with Count Basie, hangs with Dizzy and Lady Day, and then at 85, started his own band

Also, he has some choice nicknames for the Italian musicians in his band. Tommy Dorsey could be rough.

On occasion, things would get contentious. And within the orchestra, there was a private feud between boy singer Frank Sinatra and the talented drummer Buddy Rich, that often erupted while they were on the bandstand. It is the stuff of legends. After their time with the Dorseys, they did become quite close and were known to help each other advance their careers. Paul liked them and kept in touch with both Frank and Buddy.

Paul says that he learned a lot from "TD" about being a key player in a big band during his time with the Dorsey Brothers organization.

Paul joins the Charlie Barnet Orchestra: Charlie Barnet was the first big name band to take young Paul Cohen 'on the road'. In just two short years after graduating high school in Brooklyn, Paul was such an accomplished trumpet player that he was invited to join Barnet's band. He played in that group for two years. He learned to meet and overcome the challenges.

ask the guys in the band, they would tell you that it is a 'bear' to play – and play right.

Tommy Dorsey called Paul Cohen, "Callahan", as if he couldn't remember his name, when he was unhappy for whatever reason.

During one of our interviews, I asked Paul about, 'Skyliner'. He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and said, "Barnet really had a tough time settling on a tempo for that number." Paul recalled that the band was at a venue well in advance of the starting time, when Barnet decided to rehearse, "Skyliner". He couldn't find a tempo that satisfied him even though according to Paul, he kept the band working on that number over and over, for nearly two hours. Sometime later, Barnet finally hit on a tempo that pleased him and the number was included in the next recording session. Paul was there and played on that famous recording.

Evidently, all the effort was worth it because that tune be-



Pictured here is Paul Cohen rehearsing with this band

And so, that's what he did. Paul learned to play the horn and he played it with confidence at an early age. He kept at it, playing through his early years while attending P.S.209 and right into Lincoln High School where he played trumpet in the school's Marching Band, at assemblies and at every opportunity there was, to play music. He graduated from Lincoln High in 1940 and one thing he knew for sure, his life from then on would be, 'music'.

Paul learned to play the horn and he played it with confidence at an early age

Just a few months after graduation, he took a courageous giant step. He left his home in Brooklyn and moved into the Forest Hotel, a residential hotel at 8th Avenue & Broadway in Manhattan, populated by musicians who could only afford to pay a couple bucks per night, for a room. Next, he joined the American Federation of Musicians Local 802 in NYC in 1940 and he began to pick up jobs.

At this point, let me explain: Attempting to do a full, chronological history of Paul Cohen's 80+ years in the music biz, would mean writing a very thick book – and that's not what I'm about, here. The way I've cho-

The musicians come and go but, the Paul Cohen big band still continues to rehearse in the spacious Multi-Purpose room at the Center, just as it has for nearly the quarter of a century that Paul has been leading this gig.

The room holds about 125 enthusiastic seniors who remember the long-ago days when they danced to the music of the big name bands. Now, there is no dancing permitted and no requests are tolerated. Paul Cohen's band rehearsals are serious rehearsals, designed to keep the musicians sharp and to prepare for the next concert date. There is no charge to Members of the Senior Center who attend the rehearsals. They love the music of Count Basie and other great bands of the 1930s-40s and through the WWII years, as played by Paul Cohen. So far, no one has asked for his money back.

Paul with the DORSEY BROTHERS Orchestra: Paul had good things to say about the musicians he played with when he joined the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra. Paul played 'Lead Trumpet' for the majority of the five years he was with that organization. He sat next to Flea Campbell, Johnny Amoroso and numerous others – always the very best; each one a top-notch trumpet player.

When I asked about his im-



Paul Cohen during his big band days. Wearing a white tux became second nature to him after a lifetime of great performances



Paul Cohen says that within the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, there was a private feud between boy singer Frank Sinatra and the talented drummer Buddy Rich (pictured above) that often erupted while they were on the bandstand. It is the stuff of legends. After their time with the Dorseys, they did become quite close and were known to help each other advance their careers.

about every aspect of his orchestra – and slightly less serious about his tipping the bottle to ward off the 'chill' of night after night of one-night-stands on the road with a big band.

On the bandstand however, he was keenly aware of how his band sounded. He had a reputation to uphold as one of the top popular big bands of

self. Although he didn't always bother to call out a player by his given name, there was never any doubt about who was the target of his ire at the moment. "TD" could summon up his Irish temper in a micro-second, and he often did. He called Paul Cohen, "Callahan", as if he couldn't remember his name, when he was unhappy for whatever reason.



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Charlie Barnet's recording of, 'Skyliner' is one of the classic swinging numbers that every big band aficionado loves; I've never met anyone who knows that number who doesn't love it. Although, I have noticed that whenever Paul includes that chart in one of his rehearsals, it seldom fails to send the musicians into a tizzy. It is a complex and extremely demanding chart. Sounds great when played properly but, if you were to

came a runaway hit and one of Charlie Barnet's all-time big sellers. Next time you hear Barnet's version of 'Skyliner', take note of the tempo and listen very carefully for the trombone 'chase'. It is a prime example of musical precision. I'm guessing that after you hear it, you too will be able to appreciate how handsomely all that rehearsal time paid off. Charlie Barnet, Paul Cohen, perfection – they seem to go together.

(TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

The Jewish Voice

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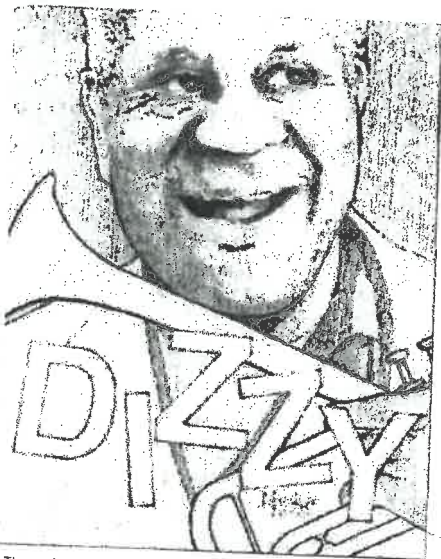
(CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK)

Dizzy Gillespie didn't hold back:

When 'First Call' musicians are contacted for a recording date or to play a live show but, already have a commitment that conflicts, it is the usual thing for them to recommend another player to fill that spot. Doing so keeps them in the good graces of the 'Contractor' who puts together the musicians for events.

That's why it is incumbent upon 'First Calls' to refer the very best replacement they can. Not only does it provide the musician they recommend with a paid gig but, it helps to strengthen relationships all around thereby, enhancing the potential for the favor to be returned at some time in the future. As the old saying goes, 'One hand washes the other.'

Here's what happened when the always-in-demand trumpet virtuoso and free-wheeling scat singer, Dizzy Gillespie, recommended his pal Paul Cohen to a Contractor who asked: "Can this guy read music?" With his typical wide grin, Gillespie responded: "Can he read music? Let me tell you Man, Pauly Cohen can read music from around the corner." That was that.



The always-in-demand trumpet virtuoso and free-wheeling scat singer, Dizzy Gillespie, (pictured above in a cartoon done by Mort Kuff) recommended his pal Paul Cohen to a contractor who asked: "Can this guy read music?" With his typical wide grin, Gillespie responded: "Can he read music? Let me tell you Man, Pauly Cohen can read music from around the corner." That was that.

Paul 'Does Lunch' with Benny Goodman: I had been aware that Paul played in Benny Goodman's Orchestra for a brief while. When I asked him about it, he surprised me with this story. It seems that Paul, who was never shy about discussing his monetary compensation, was dissatisfied with the money Benny was paying him and wanted to talk about a raise. Benny said they could discuss it over lunch.

Paul told Benny that he had been paid considerably more when he was with Artie Shaw and felt that he was worth a lot more to the Goodman Orchestra. Benny said that Artie Shaw was already



Today at age 94, Paul Cohen still holds sway at his every-Thursday big band rehearsals in Margate, Florida. And, to say that he is still quite serious about his music, is to understate it.

getting the pay he felt he deserved in exchange for his musicianship.

Inside the music biz, the word was that Benny was a fairly tight-fisted guy when it came to handing out the bucks. It was also widely known that he rarely picked up a lunch or dinner check. Paul said that while he had just quit the band and wasn't going to make the road trip with him, he would show Benny that he, meaning Paul, was the bigger man and so, he picked up the lunch check.

Benny accepted Paul's resignation and the free lunch. That was Benny Goodman. He was unquestionably, a true genius on the clarinet but was he a good guy to work for? ... not so much.

Paul discusses Composers & Arrangers:

Whenever Paul announces the next number at a rehearsal or a concert, he invariably gives credit to the composer and/or the arranger. Frank Sinatra always did the same. I asked Paul if he had favorite composer/arrangers since he had known so many of them, so well?

Without hesitation, he named Sammy Nestico and Neil Hefti. Both had contributed numerous arrangements to Count Basie's repertoire. Sammy Nestico composed and/or arranged for ten (10) hit albums recorded by Count Basie.

It should be noted that each album contained 10-15 or more individual numbers for which Nestico wrote the arrangements. That body of work formed a large part of the Basie band's basic sound. Nestico's charts were a big factor in Count Basie's popularity.

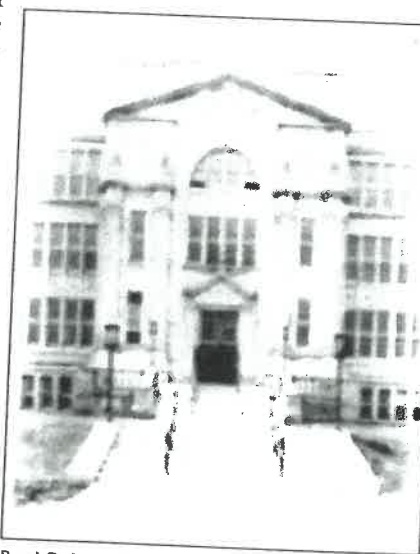


Hawkins and the Cab Calloway orchestras, in addition to arranging for recording sessions by the one and only, Billie Holiday.

Paul played with nearly all the top bands at one time or another.

During his many years of playing Lead Trumpet, Paul was comfortable in every category of pop music — Big Bands, Latin Bands, Society Orchestras, Pit Bands for Broadway shows, Recording Sessions, NBC Studio Orchestra, Radio & TV shows and in hundreds of concert dates throughout the USA, all over Europe, Japan and Puerto Rico ... just to name a few.

Let me share with you, a random listing of names he mentioned during our interviews: Count Basie of course, Benny Goodman, Tommy & Jimmy Dorsey, Gene Krupa, Artie Shaw, Woody Herman, Charlie Barnett, Lionel Hampton, Russ Morgan, Tommy Reynolds, Tito Puente, Tito Rodriguez, Myrta Silva, Pupi Campo, Noro Morales, Roy Eldridge, Duke Ellington, Glenn Miller, Earl 'Fatha' Hines, Jimmy Lunceford, Glen Gray, Don Sebesky, Claude Thornhill, Ray McKinley, Quincy Jones, Lester Lanin, Buddy Rich, Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, Sammy Davis, Jr., Anita O'Day, Paul Barron, Arthur Godfrey, Myer Davis, Teddy Wilson, Coleman Hawkins, Ziggy Elman, Charlie Shavers, Harry James ... and I'm certain, a bunch more that to my regret, I never recorded in my notes. One could say without fear of contradiction — "Paul Cohen has been there, done that".



Paul Cohen attended Abraham Lincoln High School in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn where he played trumpet in the school's Marching Band, at assemblies and at every opportunity there was, to play music. He graduated from Lincoln High in 1940 and one thing he knew for sure, his life from then on would be, 'music'.

Vocalists:

Pressed to name a few of his favorite vocalists, Paul put Frank Sinatra and Judy Garland at the top of his list. Having played numerous times in orchestras that backed up these two giants of the music business for so many years, Paul had nothing but high praise for 'Frank' and 'Judy'.

He said that Judy Garland was his all-time favorite female performer. He gazed off into the



One of Paul Cohen's fav composers was Sammy Nestico (above). Nestico composed for 10 hit albums recorded

He was alone in the spotlight, a giant audience he'd ever played that it was his time to shine. He stated that he played for his own satisfaction. He never related that he received approval from that august audience from the Boss, Count Basie.

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It sounded to me as if it was a highlight of his career. He said that although from the tone of his voice that was the clear impression, what surprised to learn that he never mentioned the event on when I've listened to him in the Basie Band.

Paul treasures a black & white self with Count Basie, signed with dedication: "Paul, so glad to think those few words say it all. 5-year, close, personal relationship with Basie."

I'm so glad I thought to this precocious "Kid from Ithaca" to the Big Time. Today at 94, he still holds sway at his every rehearsal in Margate, Florida. He is still quite serious about his music.



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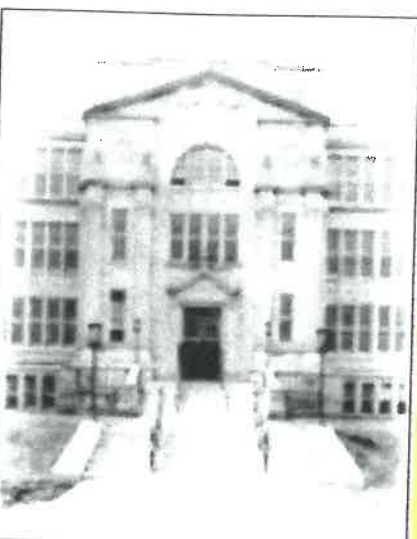


Paul Cohen played in Benny Goodman's Orchestra for a brief while

Jack Daney was mentioned by Paul as one of his favorites; he contributed several swinging tunes that appear frequently on Paul's play list. Several others were mentioned including, piano player Buster Harding, Paul considered him a top arranger and it's easy to see why.

Lavere 'Buster' Harding (1912-1965) was closely associated with the Teddy Wilson, Coleman

names he mentioned during our interviews: Count Basie of course, Benny Goodman, Tommy & Jimmy Dorsey, Gene Krupa, Artie Shaw, Woody Herman, Charlie Barnet, Lionel Hampton, Russ Morgan, Tommy Reynolds, Tito Puente, Tito Rodriguez, Myrta Silva, Pupi Campo, Noro Morales, Roy Eldridge, Duke Ellington, Glenn Miller, Earl 'Fatha' Hines, Jimmy Lunceford, Glen Gray, Don Sebesky, Claude Thornhill, Ray McKinley, Quincy Jones, Lester Lanin, Buddy Rich, Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, Sammy Davis, Jr., Anita O'Day, Paul Barron, Arthur Godfrey, Myer Davis, Teddy Wilson, Coleman Hawkins, Ziggy Elman, Charlie Shavers, Harry James ... and I'm certain, a bunch more that to my regret, I never recorded in my notes. One could say without fear of contradiction - "Paul Cohen has been there, done that".



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He said that Judy Garland was his all-time favorite female performer. He gazed off into the distance when he spoke of her talent - and no wonder. How great it must have been for him to have worked so closely with these super-legendary artists. The kid from Brooklyn had made it to the highest stage of the pop music biz.

A surprising phone call with Paul Cohen:

During a phone call I made to Paul in November 2016, it occurred to me to ask him if he ever played Carnegie Hall. He said that he did, once. He said it was on the occasion of the Count Basie Orchestra in-concert at Carnegie Hall, NYC, sometime in the 1970s. Paul said that Basie asked him to play one of his favorite ballads, "Poor Butterfly". Basie had ordered a special arrangement written for Paul and wanted to feature him in this very special concert.

Paul recalled that when the time came for his solo and he was introduced, he walked to his spot on the stage in front of the Count Basie Orchestra.



One of Paul Cohen's favorite arrangers/composers was Sammy Nestico (pictured above). Nestico composed and/or arranged for 10 hit albums recorded by Count Basie

He was alone in the spotlight, facing the most elegant audience he'd ever played before. He told me that it was his time to shine.

He stated that he played his solo perfectly - to his own satisfaction. He noted that fact proudly as he related that he received an enthusiastic ovation from that august audience and above all, a smiling approval from the Boss, Count Basie.

Whenever Paul announces the next number at a rehearsal or a concert, he invariably gives credit to the composer and/or the arranger

It sounded to me as if this was the crowning highlight of his career. He didn't actually say that, although from the tone of his voice on the phone, that was the clear impression I got. I was somewhat surprised to learn this, as I'd never heard him mention the event on any of the occasions when I've listened to him recollect his days with the Basie Band.

Paul treasures a black & white photo of himself with Count Basie, signed by Basie with this dedication: "Paul, so glad to have you with us." I think those few words say it all for Paul and his 5-year, close, personal relationship with Count Basie.

I'm so glad I thought to ask that question of this precocious "Kid from Brooklyn who made it to the Big Time". Today at age 94, Paul Cohen still holds sway at his every-Thursday big band rehearsals in Margate, Florida. And, to say that he is still quite serious about his music, is to understate it.



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