

“One O’Clock Jump”—Count Basie and His Orchestra (1937)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by John Wriggle (guest post)*



Count Basie

The swing big band anthem “One O’Clock Jump” was jazz pianist Count Basie’s biggest hit and signature theme song, but also a potent demonstration of the bandleader’s musical identity. The 1937 recording for Decca Records signifies an iconic bandleader, an iconic orchestra, and an entire musical genre--“Kansas City jazz”--showcasing the contributions and innovations of its performers with remarkable concision.

Born August 21, 1904, in Red Bank, New Jersey, William James “Count” Basie performed ragtime-flavored piano at venues in Asbury Park during his teenage years. In 1924, he ventured to New York City, where he picked up work backing blues and novelty singers on vaudeville tours across the Midwest. He also explored the Harlem stride piano scene, where piano and organ virtuoso Thomas “Fats” Waller became a mentor of his. But Basie’s aspirations were relatively modest until, on another Midwest tour with a burlesque show in 1927, he heard a local territory band called the Blue Devils. In his autobiography “Good Morning Blues,” Basie called this experience “probably the most important turning point in my musical career.”

The Blue Devils were an Oklahoma-based ensemble that featured hot jazz solos, collectively improvised ensemble riffs, and the blues, combining the emerging swing “big band” concept with local dance styles. Band members comprised a revolving cadre of musicians who shared similar musical taste and vision. Other jobs were played for money, but the Blues Devils were about the music; Basie was enthralled and eventually succeeded in joining the band, where he met future associates including vocalist Jimmy Rushing, trumpeter Oran “Hot Lips” Page, trombonist-guitarist-arranger Eddie Durham, and saxophonist Buster Smith. This brotherhood of stylistically committed musicians--“once a Blue Devil, always a Blue Devil”--provided the model for Basie’s musical vision.

The Blue Devils only recorded once (in 1929, without Basie) and would eventually disband entirely as members found more regular employment elsewhere. Many of the Blue Devils, including Basie, also worked with Bennie Moten's Kansas City Orchestra. Moten's 1929-32 recordings for Victor Records document the evolution of Basie's piano style, as well as his ensemble arrangements (often developed in partnership with Durham). Following Moten's untimely death in 1935, Basie re-united his Blue Devil/Moten comrades into the nucleus of the Count Basie Orchestra. Radio broadcasts from Kansas City brought the ensemble to the attention of legendary promoter John Hammond, and Basie's Blue Devil-inspired concept was transported to New York.

Among their repertoire was a collectively conceived 12-bar blues "head arrangement"--created at least in part by Smith and Durham, and initially known as "Blue Ball"--that became the foundation for Basie's "One O'Clock Jump." Waxed for Jack Kapp's Decca label on July 7, 1937, this simple riff-driven routine supporting a series of improvised solos cemented the band's reputation and helped introduce Kansas City-style big band swing to the nation. Unfortunately, Basie was never able to fully capitalize from the record's success, due to a contract-signing swindle that had left the bandleader without any royalty income.

The recording features some of the most influential jazz innovators of the Swing Era. Basie himself often melded multiple piano techniques, shifting between left-hand stride, rolling boogie-woogie, and sparse single-note phrases--sometimes within a single solo (hear "Oh, Red!" from 1939). For a four-piece dance band rhythm section (including guitar, bass, and drums) to accommodate these sudden shifts, they had to be loose, light, and agile, while also laying down a solid dance groove. Bassist--and former Blue Devil--Walter Page provided the walking bass line foundation that would become the model for modern jazz bassists. Drummer Jonathan "Jo" Jones delivered the loose cymbal work that helped establish the hi-hat (versus the bass drum) as the central timekeeper of popular dance music. In combination they became known as the "All-American Rhythm Section," as competing bandleaders (Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, and Harry James were all vocal fans) strove to emulate Basie's hard-swinging--yet seemingly weightless--sound.

"One O'Clock Jump" begins, characteristically, with piano and rhythm section; Basie's boogie-ish left-hand oscillation recalls Waller's technique opening "Yellow Dog Blues" (1932). At the top of Basie's second chorus (0:28), a tremolo-infused right-hand phrase provides what might pass as "Jump's" theme melody: a passage duplicated in subsequent performances, and loosely mimicked in Gene de Paul and Don Raye's "Milkman, Keep Those Bottles Quiet" (1943). The solo closes with a modulation from the key of F to D-flat--apparently a favorite device of Basie's, as heard in similar tonal shifts built into "Time Out" (1937) and "Shorty George" (1938).

Following the piano modulation, additional solo choruses--extended in live performance, but limited to 12-bars each in the studio recording--feature Herschel Evans (tenor sax), George Hunt (trombone), Lester Young (tenor sax), Buck Clayton (trumpet), and Page (bass). Young--another Blue Devil alum--demonstrates the timbre and linear conception

that inspired the later “cool” bebop styles of Charlie Parker and Stan Getz. “One O’Clock Jump’s” inclusion of two different tenor sax soloists was a noteworthy stunt at the time, and helped to establish the reputation surrounding the band’s “tenor battle” rivalries—a concept that the orchestra maintained through the next half-century. Page’s solo chorus features a delicious example of Basie’s trademark piano accompaniment style: sparse, upper-register nudges and pokes that gently spur, or sometimes comment upon, the proceedings underneath.

To close the piece, the studio recording allowed for three 12-bar choruses of climactic ensemble riffs. Syncopated sax-versus-brass section riffing was already a proven method to build energy for swing dancers, but “One O’Clock Jump” stands out here as well. The saxophone riffs are first introduced as one-bar phrases, then four-bar phrases, then broken back down into one-bar phrases, giving each successive chorus its own memorable identity. The four-bar figures of the second chorus evoke another Waller precedent, recalling the opening and closing passages of “Six or Seven Times” (1929); the longer phrases also lend a more vocal quality to the performance, reflecting the three-phrase structure of “classic” blues lyric form.

Basie’s later renditions of the piece—including studio recordings for OKeh Records (1942) and Verve (1956)—similarly documented the contributions and stylistic evolution of those orchestras’ personnel. Performing until his death in 1984, Basie never presented “One O’Clock Jump” as a museum piece, but as a living testament to the Blue Devils and Kansas City jazz.

John Wriggle is a jazz musicologist, arranger, and author of "Blue Rhythm Fantasy: Big Band Jazz Arranging in the Swing Era."

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.