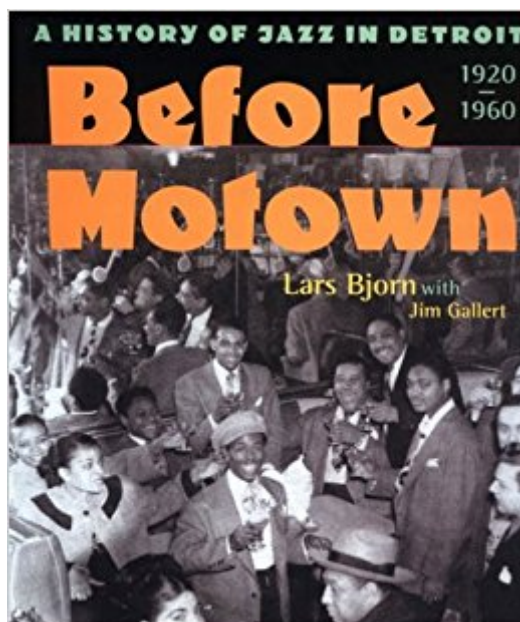


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# Before Motown: A History Of Jazz In Detroit, 1920-60



## Synopsis

When most people think of Detroit and music, they think of the Motown sound. But what many people forget is that Detroit has a remarkable jazz history, which became a major influence in what came to be known as the Motown sound. *Before Motown* is the first book about the history of jazz in Detroit. It shows the significant impact Detroit has had on the development of jazz in America, with its own sound, distinct from that of the other jazz centers of Chicago, New Orleans, St. Louis, or Kansas City. Starting with the big bands in the 1920s, with groups like the McKinney's Cotton Pickers and Jean Goldkette's Orchestra, and continuing into the 1950s, Detroit experienced a golden age of modern jazz centered around clubs like the Blue Bird Inn. That jazz scene comes alive in interviews with musicians and club owners, combined with unique period photographs and advertisements. In addition, Detroit's vital jazz scene is placed in its social context, particularly within the changing relations between blacks and whites at the time. Long overdue, *Before Motown* tells the story of Detroit jazz as it really happened, told by the people who lived it. More importantly, it shows how life can mirror art in the most pragmatic of American cities, Detroit. Lars Bjorn is Professor of Sociology, University of Michigan, Dearborn, and the author of numerous articles and publications about jazz. Jim Gallert is Vice President of the Jazz Alliance of Michigan and a veteran jazz broadcaster. He has been involved with the Detroit jazz scene for over twenty-five years.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Besides the auto industry, Detroit is best-known for Motown the jubilant pop tunes of '60s bands like the Temptations. But Detroit produced music before the '60s, argues Lars Bjorn in *Before Motown: A History of Jazz in Detroit, 1920-1960*, written with veteran jazz broadcaster Jim Gallert.

Swedish-born Bjorn, a sociology professor at the University of Michigan, explores the city's music scene from its pre-Big Band era to its 1950s "Golden Age" to rhythm and blues. Copiously researched Bjorn and Gallert interviewed over 90 club owners and musicians with never-before-published b&w photos and period advertisements, this large-format book will appeal to jazz enthusiasts and Detroit denizens. For the many European fans of American jazz, Plymbridge will make it available in the U.K. and Europe. ( Aug. 13) Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

During jazz's formative years, a surprisingly large number of influential performers hailed from Detroit and its environs. Much activity centered on the influence of Wayne State University's music department, where musicians took classes as well as planned various promotional and educational events for the city. They created a strong musical community that artists such as Yusef Lateef continue to this day. All of this is brought to light in this engaging, intense review of the musical developments of Detroit's jazz artists apparently the first book-length treatment of the topic. In addition, Bjorn (sociology, Univ. of Michigan) and jazz broadcaster Gallert provide a source of social commentary, tying the musical activities to life for the predominantly African American community. Over the last 20 years, the authors conducted 93 interviews with the scene's movers and shakers. In July, the Motor City celebrated its 300th birthday, so this title is also timely. Highly recommended for academic, large public, and music libraries. William G. Kenz, Minnesota State Univ., Moorhead Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The book covers most of the clubs and performers who were a part of the Detroit jazz scene. For some folks this may come as a surprise that there was a very prolific jazz scene before Motown started. If you review many of the performers in jazz from 1930's to 1980's or so you will find a large percentage of them from Detroit, or moved to Detroit to be involved in the jazz scene. Great read.

Great!

This is a book for all the "young' uns" who think they know Detroit's rich musical legacy but somehow always forget or ignore the story of jazz in the city. Or more likely, they just didn't know.

The writers obviously did their homework and pay tribute to hot spots like the Graystone, Blue Bird Inn, Flame bar, Forest club, and more, which sadly has fallen into that same deep hole so much of the city's past has gone into. Readers will learn a lot from this excellent book.

What's this .... Lyrical Life Before Berry Gordy? In Motown? And how! Bjorn & Gallert gracefully waltz their way through this story as broken down by decade (1920s thru 50s), with the stage set in each respective chapter by an analysis of pertinent peripherals -- the economic overtures, associated demographics and resultant "shifting sands" of the years' various musical venues. Then it's on with the show, kicking off with a historical backdrop summarizing the rise of Detroit as Motor City and the consequential influx of black laborers from the South who packed along their Blues; with the authors staking claim that it was the spontaneous combustion of the mixing of Blues with Society Bands that eventually became known as jazz, right after WWI. The 20s, of course, were subsequently a time of Big Band Jazz in Detroit as elsewhere, and the book focuses on the local and regional successes of McKinney's Cotton Pickers and the Jean Goldkette Orchestra. As swing music then precipitated during the 30s, Paradise Valley (near today's Comerica Park) became the center of black culture in the area, providing fertile ground indeed for a good many such bands, a number of which the authors touch upon. Personally, as a Basie-KC man & fan I wasn't as much interested in this section of the book, however, I did take special notice of two items, (1) the vivid, warm recollections of the Bennie Moten band's appearance in Detroit in 1932 (with the authors reiterating & underscoring Detroit's importance as a stopover for nationally touring black performers) and (2) the inspiration that those days afforded to young locals like J.C. Heard, a future world-class drummer who ultimately came back home during the 60s and whose son (Eric) I attended high school with. At any rate, you'll soon find out for yourself the best is yet to come as the authors delve into the 40s, when Southeastern Michigan really began strutting its stuff; that is, if the names Milt Jackson, Wardell Gray, Teddy Edwards, Howard McGhee, Lucky Thompson, and Sonny Stitt mean anything to ya. Most of these cats were more-or-less aligned with what the authors term the "transmission belts" of local bebop talent -- the renowned Cass Tech music department and the Club Congo Orchestra -- forming a talent pool oozing with innovation that quickly matured and in many respects crested, just like bebop itself, on Central Avenue in L.A. right after the war, while effectively forming with yet another native Detroiter, Slim Gaillard (unfortunately ignored by this book), the backbone of support for Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker -- the two having gone Out West to engage their historically dreamy Billy Berg's gig. And while jazz in general later took a dive and possibly faced extinction as the 40s turned into the ugly McCarthy-Korea era, Detroit abstained thanks largely to the emergence

of the Blue Bird Inn, still standing just west of Woodward not far from the current Motown Museum. The Blue Bird was "cutting edge" by all accounts, fostered at one time or another by the likes of Billy Mitchell, Elvin Jones and his brother Thad, Donald Byrd, Tommy Flanagan, Yusef Lateef, Frank Foster and Pepper Adams. (Need I say any more? If so, then please consider Kenny Burrell and Paul Chambers, too, although both were making their marks elsewhere in the vicinity.) No doubt, it was that Blue Bird spirit which prompted Dizzy Gillespie and local Dave Usher (later to be manager of TV's Soupy Sales, a huge promoter of jazz himself) to team into their own record company, Dee Gee, right in good 'ol Detroit (and though short-lived, the duo prepared some historically significant product). Furthermore, Bjorn & Gallert describe noteworthy stints at the Blue Bird by Charlie Parker and Wardell Gray, amongst others. Most interesting of all are the Blue Bird appearances of Miles Davis, consisting of two extended stays: the first in '53 during his well-known withdrawal from drug abuse, and the second in late '54 that seems to have catapulted Davis into a creative period unrivaled in jazz lore. That period, culminating in 1959's *Kind of Blue*, was the cornerstone of a national jazz resurgence (and its Last Great Stand) that was notably bolstered by -- you betcha -- the Blue Bird Bunch already introduced, many of whom opted for the greener pastures of the Big Apple starting around the mid-50s. The comeback of jazz as proffered also oddly coincided with the death of Charlie Parker, who in fact spent a good chunk of time in Detroit just weeks before his 3/12/55 passing; according to this book's authors, Parker played the Madison Ballroom from Feb. 4-6, also appearing on Soupy Sales TV about this time. I myself was born just a couple of blocks away from the Madison (at Hutzel Hospital, adjacent to Wayne St. University) on Feb 13th. And by golly, if I'd only had the guts to run away from home two days later, I could have caught Parker at the Rouge Lounge just downriver, where he played Feb. 15-20 -- damn! Anyway, if you're into the history of American roots music, you're thus fully advised to secure and devour this extremely relevant work. Besides jazz, the book offers much about R&B and, as alluded to earlier, urban blues (especially John Lee Hooker) -- not to mention its chock fullness of rare pix and a pleasingly pointed, concise list of recommended listening.

Of course nowadays they would just look at you like you were crazy, but in Detroit from the 30's through the 50's they would have taken you to one of the places described in this book: Club Plantation, the El Sino, the Greystone Ballroom, the Forest Club, Frolic Show Bar, Flame Show Bar, Cozy Corner, Blue Bird Inn, Sportree's Music Bar, or any of about 90 others. This book has the maps, pictures, facts, anecdotes, and solid economic and social explanations to bring this era alive. This history has already been so erased from the face of Detroit that there are hardly even any

decaying buildings left. All is empty lots with bricks sticking out of the soil; places as evocative as the service drive of an expressway. Who could know that Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Bix Beiderbecke, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, played or spent time here? How else could you know about Detroit musicians like drummer J. C. Heard who fanned out across the country, blending their talents into the bands of Lionel Hampton, Fletcher Henderson, Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, and many others? You might read this book to see how the Detroit influence added to the influences of New Orleans, New York and Chicago to the world of jazz. Or you might read it to find out why Detroit is where it's at in its own musical history. Or if you lived in Detroit, you might read it to understand the significance of the mute things around you, through which maybe you drive to work each day. But man, read it!

My uncle, Joe Jaffee owned the Parrot Lounge along with Al Green and others. He told some cute stories of the club, including the time he got mad at Billy Eckstine for smoking marijuana. The parrot, as legend goes, became so foul-mouthed from listening to the drunken customers, that my Uncle finally had to get rid of it. This book is extremely well-researched; maps are included of where the spots were located, and the pictures are very vivid. There was a recent book published about Detroit's history that completely ignored the nightclubs, and this book fills in the gap. In fact, in most books that have been written about Detroit's nightclub scene, you always see Al Green and the Flame, but never a word about the other clubs and or owners. This book is definitely a must-have for music lovers and historians alike.

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