

Good Morning Blues: The Autobiography of Count Basie as told to Albert Murray, with a new introduction by Dan Morgenstern
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Reviewed By Paul Devlin

Da Capo has just released a new edition of this book which Quincy Jones called "indispensable to any appreciation of our musical culture". This is the story of Count Basie, the legendary piano player and bandleader who was especially known for swinging the blues, as told to Albert Murray between 1978 and 1984, and published to great fanfare and stellar reviews in late 1985. With a new and valuable introduction by Dan Morgenstern, eminent jazz critic and Director of the Institute for Jazz Studies at Rutgers University, *Good Morning Blues* will hopefully find its place on the bookshelves of young jazz fans.

"When Albert Murray told me that he was going to be, as he put it, Count Basie's co-writer on the great man's autobiography, I was both baffled and elated", writes Morgenstern in the introduction to what has to be one of the finest American memoirs. "Elated", he continues,

because Basie...had for years been stalling journalists and scholars with the excuse that he was saving anything worth talking about for a (hypothetical) book; baffled not so much because I knew Murray had other literary irons in the fire, but because these two, on the face of it, made such an odd couple. Basie was laid back, laconic, taciturn, the incarnation of the man-of-few words, while Murray was intense, animated, a brilliant and enthusiastic talker, a veritable verbalist. What I should have known is what this wonderful book made obvious: that Albert Murray is also a brilliant listener, and that these two men shared a remarkable gift for editing – Basie of music, Murray of speech.

(It is difficult to imagine a review, summary, or assessment of this book that could be better than Morgenstern's introduction.)

William James Basie was born in Red Bank, New Jersey in 1904, to poor parents who were born in Virginia during Reconstruction, and he died in 1984 as a wealthy man, a cultural icon, universally loved and admired. Basie's is the quintessential American success story, told here with great style. His band is known for such classics as "Doggin' Around", "Jumpin' at the Woodside", "One O'Clock Jump", "Everyday I Have the Blues" "Swingin' the Blues", and "Moten Swing", and many other masterpieces. At various times his band featured such famous vocalists such as Billie Holiday, Jimmy Rushing, Helen Humes, Joe Williams, and Joe Turner, and featured some of the greatest musicians of all time such as the legendary tenor saxophonist Lester Young, drummer Jo Jones, and trumpeters Buck Clayton, Clark Terry, and Sweets Edison, among many others. Basie's band also recorded and performed with Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., and Tony Bennett.

This story of his life is not any kind of confession or gut-spilling tirade. He does not complain about personal problems. At the same time Basie is not shy about admitting that he liked his share of drinking, gambling, and women. He was also a paradigm of professional conduct. Certainly he had a natural talent for management, not only keeping a jazz band together all those years, but maintaining harmony, no pun intended.

Basie set an example to be followed, but had no pretensions of being any kind of spokesman. He was not one drone on about aesthetics for the media or engage in glib political slogan-slinging. The brutal injustices of the Jim Crow era which he encountered for much of his life are not ignored or written out of history, but they are certainly not dwelt upon. This book is free from sociological analysis and political pontification. It is also free from psychologizing. There is no sappy recounting of any troubled childhood, and there is no

cheesy rebellion. To borrow of a phrase Caryl Emerson once used to describe Mikhail Bakhtin, Basie was "completely alien to a victim mentality".

Basie refrains from delving into the lives of those he worked with and befriended in his long professional career, whether they be famous, infamous, or unknown. He knew many of the greatest entertainers of the 20th century, from Billie Holiday to Frank Sinatra. Certainly he took all sorts of sordid details about many interesting characters to his grave. In this stance of classy omission, *Good Morning Blues* predates the Pulitzer-Prize winning memoir of long-time Washington Post owner Katherine Graham (*Personal History*: Knopf 1997) and that of long-time Chase bank president and prominent philanthropist David Rockefeller (*Memoirs*: Random House 2002). Rockefeller claimed to have gotten the idea to leave out the tell-all details of famous people he knows from his friend Mrs. Graham (*N.Y. Times*: October 23, 2002), but Count Basie did it before them. (Murray has noted that W. Somerset Maugham did the same thing in *The Summing Up*.) Perhaps it is due to a sense of decorum that belongs to those particular generations, but less us hope that such dignified autobiographical practice is not a limited historical phenomena.

And yet the book is full of colorful and amusing anecdotes, mixed with the keen insights gained from six decades on the road. Among Basie's many anecdotes and insights that I find humorous and intriguing, just for example, is something Basie noticed while playing at the Golden Hakisaki club in Tokyo in the early 1960's:

I actually saw three bands rotating in there...one night. I never saw anything like that before anywhere. By the way, I think they must have more big bands in Tokyo than we have in the whole United States. Just in Tokyo. That's the way it seemed to me. I think they must have had at least two great big bands in each one of those clubs over there, and they were good bands, full of good musicians. They can play anything they hear. I mean, they're such exact musicians that sometimes when they work from recordings of live performances, they write in the mistakes without realizing it. That's just how precise they are. Which reminds me of something that happened to me over there on one of those trips.I happened to arrive a little late...but when I stepped inside the lobby and heard the music, I said, 'Damn, the band is on. Am I that late?' Because it was those Japanese cats playing one of our tunes as tribute to us, and for a couple of bars they had me fooled. I said, 'Jesus Christ!'

Basie did not write much music, but knew how other's music would sound best, and that was a key to his band's astounding success. One of Basie's great artistic achievements was his musical economy. Morgenstern writes in the introduction that Basie knew what to leave in and "*exactly* what to leave out." His piano style was a pared-down version of the Harlem-stride style of the 1910's and 1920's. Basie's achievement on the keyboard, as Murray has pointed out time and again over the years in critical essays and interviews, is analogous to Hemingway's achievement on the typewriter and Matisse's achievement on canvas. (Murray was saying these things in print at least twenty-five years before Alfred Appel's shameless and half-baked *Jazz and Modernism*: Knopf 2002) Murray discusses this, and other fascinating issues regarding the collaboration in *Comping for Count Basie*, an essay about the book that should be read in addition to it, to be found in his *The Blue Devils of Nada* (Pantheon 1996, Vintage 1997).

Basie's music is as relevant today as it ever was, and so is his life's story. Da Capo published an edition of this book in 1995, and this new re-printing is timely and well-designed. The 1995 edition showed Basie, half turned around, with a cigarette in his hand, smoke drifting toward the ceiling against a blue background. This new cover is much more catchy, and features a better picture, minus the cigarette. Da Capo (a division of the Perseus Group) is one of the largest (if not the largest) publishers of books on jazz, and has many classics on its list (including Duke Ellington's autobiography *Music is My Mistress* and Albert Murray's *Stomping the Blues*). This new edition is certainly to their credit. The popularity of Basie's music has never subsided, and larger music stores usually has a decent selection of his work. An overview of his music is impossible to discuss here (it is not only beyond my own expertise, but would take up far too much space), but there are many "greatest hits"-type albums out that provide an introduction.

The text is not Basie's words as tape-recorded and transcribed by Murray. They are Basie's words re-told by Murray, beautifully, after years of interviews and extensive archival research and fact checking. Morgenstern writes "such a minor miracle could only have been wrought by a writer able to combine the very different requirements of reporter and poet – the former to sort out and render the many facts of a rich and long professional life; the latter to capture every nuance and rhythm of the speech and thought of a man who, while often disarmingly straight-forward and self-deprecating, was as complex and mysterious as any artist worthy of the name."

For Further Interest:

-*The Last of the Blue Devils: The Kansas City Jazz Story* (DVD, 2001)

-*Masters of American Music: Count Basie – Swingin' the Blues* (VHS, 1992)

-*The World of Count Basie* by Stanley Dance (Da Capo, 1985)

-Catherine and Count Basie Middle School #72 is located at 133-25 Guy Brewer Boulevard, Jamaica, NY, 11434