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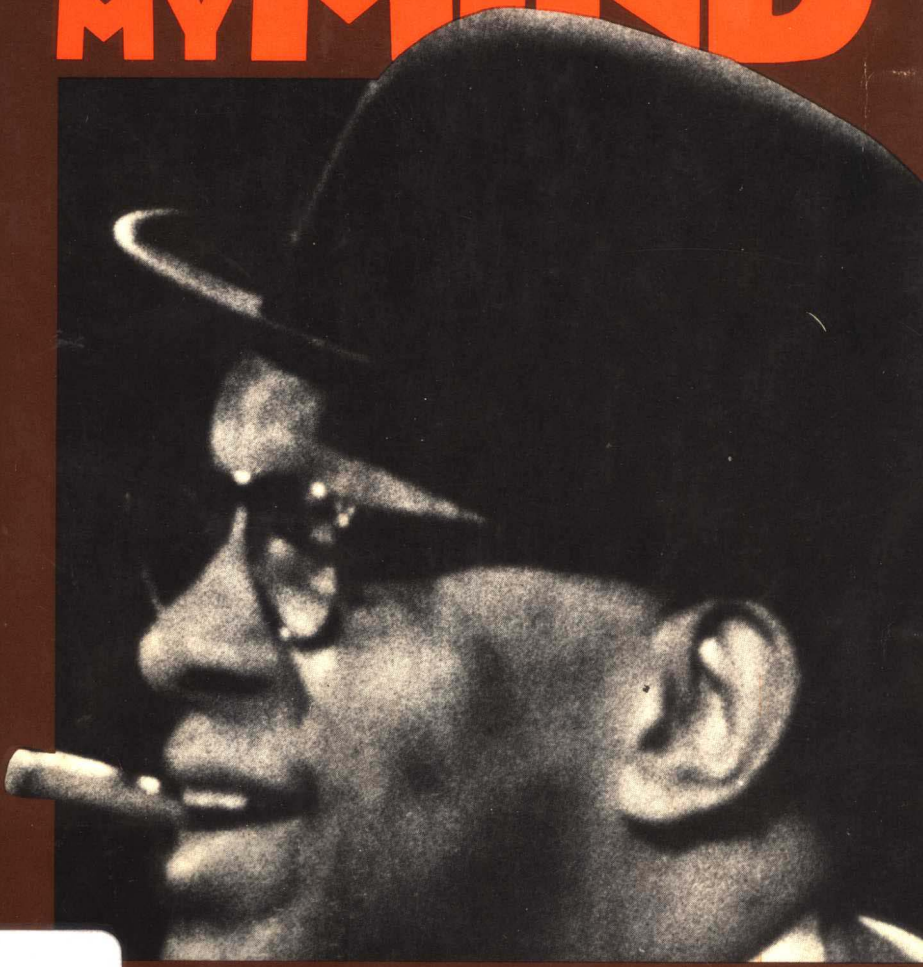
MUSIC ON MY MIND



E MEMOIRS OF AN AMERICAN PIANIST

ILLIE THE LION SMITH

George Hoefer

Music on My Mind

THE MEMOIRS OF

AN AMERICAN PIANIST

by Willie the Lion Smith

with GEORGE HOEFER

Foreword by DUKE ELLINGTON
New Introduction by JOHN S. WILSON

A DA CAPO PAPERBACK

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NEW INTRODUCTION TO THE 1978 PAPERBACK EDITION

The Lion, as he does not hesitate to tell us in the first words of this book, is here.

That was the way he invariably introduced himself: Derby hat cocked over one eye, cigar clamped in his mouth, he sat down at the piano and declared himself—"The Lion is here."

When this book was first published in 1964, the Lion *was* here—in person, corporeally and, always, verbally. Very verbally. In the latter stages of his career, the Lion spent as much time talking to his audiences as he did playing the piano or singing.

Despite his death in 1973, the Lion is still here in the pages of this book in which George Hoefer has caught the flavor of the Lion's style—a colorfully convincing mixture of braggadocio and irrefutable fact.

But the book is more than a reflection of one of the most colorful personalities spawned in the jazz and show business worlds in the years just after World War I. It takes us into an area of jazz development that has been largely ignored by jazz historians.

New Orleans has been so firmly established as the birthplace of jazz that it seems unthinkable that the music might have been bubbling up in other parts of the country. The musical exodus at the end of World War I when

jazz went up the Mississippi River from New Orleans to Memphis, St. Louis and Chicago has become such a cliché that one would hate to spoil the picture by suggesting that it was already there. And as for such distant areas as the northeastern states, the histories would have us believe that they were untouched by jazz in those years.

But the Lion is here to tell us a different story. One does not have to take at total face value his statement to Leonard Feather (in an interview recorded on "The Lion Roars," Dot DLP 3094) that jazz started in the brickyards of Haverstraw, N.Y. The Lion invariably saw things from a personal point of view and it is probably true that, for him, jazz started in the brickyards of Haverstraw. But he went on from there to become part of a busily, creatively active East Coast jazz scene that ran from Washington and Baltimore through Atlantic City to Harlem, that began at the turn of the century and has continued ever since.

The musical fermentation that produced jazz was going on in saloons and cabarets along this coastal strip at the same time that a similar process was taking place in the dance halls, the streets and the parks of New Orleans. Out of this milieu came Duke Ellington and Claude Hopkins in Washington, Eubie Blake in Baltimore, James P. Johnson in New Brunswick, the Lion in Newark, Luckey Roberts in New York and an assortment of exotically named pianists in Atlantic City and Harlem.

The Lion was there. He was an inquisitive teenager in 1914 when he heard Eubie Blake in Atlantic City, and heard a pianist named Kitchen Tom playing a walking bass figure that, thirteen years later, became known as "boogie woogie" when Pinetop Smith introduced it to Chicago.

The curtain on the vitalizing jazz life on the East Coast was drawn for the first time by the Lion's recollections. He knew the territory. And he worked it.

Through the Lion, we see the relatively unreported jazz life on the East Coast from the inside. From his piano bench, he presided over jazz activities in Harlem in the twenties, seeing everything, hearing everyone and cutting anyone who came within fingering distance of his piano.

When the Harlem prohibition era passed and jazz moved downtown in New York as Swing, the Lion went with it. But he retained his own combative style at the piano, cigar jutting out of his mouth, derby slanting rakishly over his forehead. And in the years after World War II, when new styles of jazz came in, the Lion carried on as a living vestige of the music that had once been at the heart of the city's jazz life.

As the years passed and the fingers lost their flexibility, the voice went dry, he came more and more to present himself as a character, as a musical elder statesman. He reminisced and philosophized as much as he played. When, late in the 1960s, he had teamed with a compatible pianist, Don Ewell, to relieve himself of some of the playing load, the Lion was still a non-stop talker, both on the stand and off.

"You never know what you're missing," he once said, "if you pass up talking to some man."

There was never more truth in that statement than when it was the Lion who was doing the talking. The jazz world never quite caught up with the Lion while he was alive. It never realized what it was missing.

But the Lion is still here in these pages, still talking. And this time what he is saying is a definitive part of the history of jazz.

JOHN S. WILSON
April 1978

To Silvertop, better known as Jane

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

They tell me that if you get somebody to write your book for you there's something funny about it. Well, let's have none of that. Nobody wrote this book for me but this book wouldn't *be* if George Hoefer hadn't put the words down on paper. But almost all the words he got from me. You ask *anybody* if anybody ever said anything for the Lion. They're lucky if they get to say it with him.

I owe thanks also to Dr. and Mrs. Arthur Logan. The doctor, one of the world's best men, is co-director of the upper Manhattan medical group and he is responsible for keeping a good many good musicians alive. His beautiful wife, Marian, once worked at Doubleday and she brought me together with the publishers.

And, of course, those cosmic influences had a lot to do with it. The Lion, a Sagittarian, has an affinity for those born under the sign of Leo. My two August-born colleagues, George Hoefer and Sam Vaughan, were sent to me by the spirits because sympathetic planets are in all our houses.

Yeah, the Lion roars when the vibrations are right!

FOREWORD

My name is Edward Kennedy Ellington; also Duke Ellington. Before I left Washington, D.C., to come to New York I spent all my time listening to piano players: Doc Perry, Lester Dishman, Louis Brown, Turner Layton, Gertie Wells, Clarence Bowser, Sticky Mack, Blind Johnny, Cliff Jackson, Claude Hopkins, Phil Wurd, Caroline Thornton from Washington, Luckey Roberts from New York, Eubie Blake from Baltimore, Joe Rochester, Harvey Brooks from Philadelphia—and all the others who passed through Washington. So you see that makes me an eligible dilettante. Eligible also to speak about another piano player, to play him an introduction:

THE LION

The Lion—Willie the Lion—Willie the Lion Smith—what a wealth of subject tingle! Would that I were sufficiently prolific to expound on the endless excitement and adventure of my first meeting and total exposure to this melodic, harmonic kaleidoscope.

Sonny Greer and I were real tight buddies and, naturally, night creatures. Our first night out in New York we got all dressed up and went down to the Capitol Palace. Greer had always told me that he and the Lion were real buddy-buddies and that we would not have to worry about anything where

spending money was concerned (we had none); so down the steps of the Capitol Palace we start.

My first impression of the Lion—even before I saw him—was the thing I felt as I walked down those steps. A strange thing. A square-type fellow might say, "This joint is jumping," but to those who had become acclimatized—the tempo was the lope —actually everything and everybody seemed to be doing whatever they were doing in the tempo the Lion's group was laying down. The walls and furniture seemed to lean understandingly —one of the strangest and greatest sensations I ever had. The waiters served in that tempo; everybody who had to walk in, out, or around the place walked with a beat.

Downstairs, Sonny took the lead waving at people, people I know he did not know, but some of them figured, I suppose, "Well, maybe I know that cat from someplace," and waved back, and some even invited us for a drink, which of course we always accepted. When Greer got to the Lion (incidentally the Lion was from Newark and Greer from Long Branch) Greer ups and says, "Hey, Lion, you remember me, Jersey-boy Sonny Greer"—he then proceeded to rattle off a few names of hustlers, pimps, etc.—from Long Branch.

"I want you to meet the Duke," says Sonny. "He is just a yearling, you know. Hey, Duke, come on over, shake hands with Willie Smith the Lion, my man."

The Lion extends his hand and says, "Glad to meet you, kid," —and, looking over his shoulder—"Sit in there for me for a couple of numbers. D-flat. As one of those Western piano plonkers just fell in, I want him to take the stool so I can crush him later," he adds.

This is the great thing about the Lion: a gladiator at heart. Anybody who had a reputation as a piano player had to prove it right there and then by sitting down to the piano and displaying his artistic wares. And when a cat thought that he was something special, he usually fell into that trap (or, you might say, into the jaws of the Lion) and he always came out with

his reputation all skinned up, covered with the lacerations of humiliation, because before he got through too many stanzas the Lion was standing over him, cigar blazing.

Like if the cat was weak with the left hand, the Lion would say, "What's the matter, are you a cripple?" Or, "When did you break your left arm?" Or, "Get up. I will show you how it is supposed to go."

The Lion has been the greatest influence on most of the great piano players who have been exposed to his fire, his harmonic lavishness, his stride—what a luxury. Fats Waller, James P. Johnson, Count Basie, Donald Lambert, Joe Turner, Sam Ervis, and of course I swam in it. Most of it still clings—agreeably. Even the great Art Tatum, as great as he was—and I know he was the greatest—showed strong patterns of Willie Smithisms after being exposed to the Lion. I have never heard anybody accompany a singer like the Lion (they used to sing twenty or thirty choruses, each one different), and every supporting phrase that Willie played fit like a glove and drove her into her next melodic statement.

I love him—he is wonderful. I can't think of anything good enough to say about the Lion, Willie the Lion, Willie the Lion Smith.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Willie the Lion Smith is a pianist, a composer, a gunner, a rabbi, a Harlem oral historian and raconteur, and a patron of other jazz musicians.

No book can capture a man completely, and Willie the Lion's is not an exception. Missing from these pages is the sound of his voice: a grainy but gentle tone with an occasional friendly growl, a soft whisper, a deep chuckle. Music, as he says, is on his mind and it is in his talk, too.

He stammered as a child but he seldom stammers now. When he does, it is either because he has received a momentary setback in his durable conviction that life and all the people in it are beautiful, or because he does it on purpose at the piano. "I have played in a stammering way at times," he said in one session as we worked on the book, "looking for another strain. I call that 'searching.'"

A word about the history that follows. Willie's Boswell, George Hoefer, has made every effort to add reliable historical information in "Interludes" added to Willie's account. The author's own sense of history is immense; he seems to have known, almost from the start, that he was a part of something big. But the Lion's memory is not infallible. He can swing from a telling set of notes on the protocol of the Harlem night club to a perfectly outrageous or impossible story told winningly. Whatever contradictions or omissions there may be we

have not attempted to sort out or set straight. The facts, important as they are, and too much buffing up of the material seemed less vital than to stay with the Lion's version of what he saw and what he did.

He is, as everyone who knows him and as the reader will soon discover, not without ego and not without humility. For him jazz did not begin downriver somewhere, and he has seen more than one ragtime or show-business legend in dishabille. He can put a man down or build him up and with some men he does both. The result is that his ideas on life are delivered, as he remarked in another connection, with an effect "a little like cursing, a little like praying." But he does everything his way. "Always tell the truth," the Lion teaches, "it's going to cross you again. You got to pass my house to get to yours."

The Lion can say, unblinkingly, "I played a little Chopin, the last thirty-two bars of which I rewrote," because that is the way he thinks, that is the way it was, and that is his truth. Timme Rosenkrantz quoted him on the First World War. "It was a tough war," said Willie, "and I'm proud and happy that I won it."

There is at least one other thing missing too, of course: Willie's piano. Some of the talking part of his performances shows here, but music is its own medium. If you can find the Lion's records, play them before or as you read. They may say more than he has said here, or less, but they will certainly be in harmony.

They are almost all gone now—Fats, Bechet, James P., Jelly Roll, the men who figure in these pages and in Willie's memory. But Willie the Lion, bless him, is very much with us. "I can't sleep half the time," Willie once said to me, "because I've got music on my mind." Who would have it otherwise?

SSV

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Music on My Mind

I wake each morning and first start yawning
Then hum a beautiful tune as a vocation.
It's my line
*I've got music on my mind.**

The Lion is here. Full name: William Henry Joseph Bonaparte Bertholoff Smith. Quite a name. Takes in French and Jewish. What I'm going to tell you is all the true facts.

First, the Lion has always had music on his mind.

My mother used to say, "Willie, you've got a real truth to tell the people and you've got a God-given right to scream it at them. But you must remember—that sometimes the screaming won't do any good."

She spoke the truth. This world is full of chirpers, belchers, and flips from the funny papers who like to go out on the town. I learned to go home when my antennae picked up vibrations from the off-key kids and the whisky tenors. You might as well try making love to each member of a girl quartet at the same time as to try playing your music when the vibrations are

* From *Music on My Mind* by Willie the Lion Smith, with lyrics by Lillian Ross.

wrong. The Lion knows. He was born under Saturn, the get-it-the-hard-way planet.

A man's music comes from his heart and soul, flavored by the spiritual inspirations derived from the stars and his environment. When those bad vibrations reach you, you've either got to dominate them or give them silent treatment. I've learned it is better to duck than to hurry yourself out of this world by thinking you can roll with the punches. Loud people are like a bad drink of whisky—you either fight them or join them. Either way, it's a bad idea.

One night, Barney Josephson invited me down to his Café Society Downtown to entertain his customers. I was happy to help old Barney out, but when I walked in, ready to make my usual announcement, "The Lion is here!" a wave of hostile vibrations met me head on. The room was full of jabbering voices and the piano in the corner was hidden under a pile of mink coats. That crowd was there to be heard, not to listen.

My only announcement that night was quiet—"The Lion's here, but this ain't his lair." I went back home and called Josephson on the phone. "I only roar when the feeling is right," I informed him. "You need a cocktail-hour piano player."

An experienced performer just can't afford to have his reputation hurt, and that is what happens when you try to buck the current. There are and have been too many musicians allowing themselves to be pushed around like a herd of cattle.

Now what I'm going to tell you about the music business is all the true facts, because music has occupied my mind for a lifetime. I am climaxing sixty-five years on the scene. It has been a good life and no one in the music line has enjoyed it any more than I have. But there have been rough spots. That is what this book is all about—the good and the bad.

I've played it all, barrel house, ragtime, blues, Dixieland, boogiewoogie, swing, bebop, bop—even the classics. It doesn't make any difference what names the writers and the music