



Pee Wee Russell: The Life of a Jazzman

Robert Hilbert

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"No jazz musician has ever played with the same daring and nakedness and intuition," Whitney Balliett wrote in a *New Yorker* profile of Pee Wee Russell. "He took wild improvisational chances, and when he found himself above the abyss, he simply turned in another direction, invariably hitting firm ground." Gunther Schuller, America's preeminent jazz historian, also had high praise for Russell, saying that "he defined and exemplified what it is to be a true jazz musician.... The unorthodox tone, the halting continuity, the odd note choices--are manifestations of a unique, wondrously self-contained musical personality.... He was also one of the most touching and human players jazz has ever known." Clarinetist Pee Wee Russell was indeed one of the great innovators in jazz history. Now, in *Jazzman*, Robert Hilbert provides the first full-length biography of this unique jazz stylist.

Based on hundreds of interviews with musicians and friends, *Pee Wee Russell* fills in much that was not known about Russell's life, illuminating his fifty year career from his early days as a teenage dance band musician, to his final work with musicians such as Thelonious Monk and Gerry Mulligan. Hilbert draws a vivid portrait of Pee Wee's early friendship with legendary Bix Beiderbecke (fond of Stravinsky, Debussy, and Ravel, both Bix and Pee Wee delighted in the new techniques of modern composers--dissonance, whole-tone scales--and their styles reflected this). The author describes Russell's early work in Chicago and Hollywood, his first taste of the big time in New York as a member of Red Nichols's band, Pee Wee's success as one of the first stars on "Swing Street" (52nd Street in New York City), as a member of Louis Prima's band, and his decade-long association with Nick's, a famous Greenwich Village jazz spot. In addition, Russell lived a bohemian existence, and Hilbert does an excellent job of capturing his colorful life and times. But we also see the down side of a musician's life--Russell was one of the monumental drinkers in jazz history, and after separating from his mercurial wife Mary in 1949, he lapsed into complete dissipation, landing in a charity ward of San Francisco County Hospital, with only 73 pounds on his six-foot frame. He recovered once his wife returned, and went on to his finest years, only to fall apart again when she died suddenly of cancer. Russell died in January, 1969, a few weeks after playing at President Nixon's inauguration.

"His was the pure flame," Robert Hilbert writes of Pee Wee Russell. "Hot, gritty, profane, real. No matter what physical or mental condition Russell was in, night after night he spun wondrous improvisations. No matter how disjointed his life, how scrambled his mind, how incomprehensible his speech, his music remained logical and authoritative, elegant and graceful, haughty and proud." In *Pee Wee Russell*, Hilbert does full justice to this remarkable figure in American jazz.

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