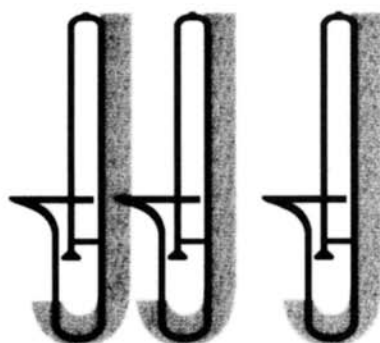


**JOSHUA BERRETT
LOUIS G. BOURGOIS III**

**THE MUSICAL
WORLD OF**

J. J. JOHNSON

THE
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OF

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studies in jazz

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To our wives—

Lynne Berrett and Robyn Bourgois

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Foreword

J.J. Johnson is a magnificent instrumentalist and composer, and we are proud to be able to say that this monograph was produced with his cooperation. Johnson has been interviewed and profiled regularly in the literature of jazz, and David Baker published a valuable short volume of his transcribed solos with commentary. But Johnson has never been the subject of a full-length study. Since I am one of Johnson's biggest fans, it is my pleasure to have played a role in the development of this book.

Berrett and Bourgois bring an ideal combination of credentials to this project. Bourgois, a professional trombonist, analyzed Johnson's early style and compiled a discography as part of his doctoral dissertation. Berrett, a musicologist combining an interest in style analysis and cultural history, has published in the areas of both classical music and jazz, including a major article on Louis Armstrong and opera.

They present in this volume a number of surprises: details of Johnson's youth, including his school report card and his first compositions; interviews with Johnson, family members, and associates; a thorough investigation of Johnson's classical roots as a writer. Johnson is a marvelous writer, and it is one of the greatest strengths of this volume that his work as a composer is highlighted. In my opinion Johnson has not received his due in this regard, and this book should help rectify that.

In 1995 Johnson was voted into the *Down Beat Hall of Fame*, and in 1996 he won a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Masters Award. This book is, therefore, a timely addition to the *Studies in Jazz Series*. Congratulations are due Berrett and Bourgois for an impressive achievement, and J.J. Johnson, the man of the hour, past, present, and future.

Lewis Porter, Guest Editor
Associate Professor of Music
Rutgers University at Newark

General Editors, *Studies in Jazz Series*:
Dan Morgenstern and Edward Berger

Preface

J.J. Johnson, spiritual father of modern trombone, has been a major presence on the international jazz scene for more than half a century. In 1946, during the heyday of 52nd Street, Johnson was overheard by Dizzy Gillespie working on “some of the sounds he’d been hearing from Gillespie, Parker, and Monk.” The occasion was a defining moment, for it was with his comment that Gillespie in effect welcomed the Indianapolis native into the inner circle of beboppers and helped launch a career in which Johnson would soon become the supreme exponent of a “post-tailgate” style. “I’ve always known that a trombone could be played different, that somebody’d catch on one of these days. Man, you’re elected.”

In adapting his instrument to the bebop language, Johnson developed levels of accuracy, clarity, and speed that have never been surpassed. Yet unlike one misguided Philadelphia club owner, Johnson would be the last to characterize himself purely and simply as “the fastest trombone player alive.” He is attuned to something a lot more subtle—the matter of syntax, a sense of style and taste appropriate to the nature of the musical utterance. For example, he has spoken with great affection about Dickie Wells and his great gift for playing very few but very well chosen notes. Similarly, the understated lyricism that Miles Davis achieved in “So What” has filled him with a sense of wonder.

J.J. Johnson, like many great artists, is his own severest critic, one who is forever on a journey of self-analysis and discovery. He has, with characteristic candor, spoken repeatedly of the need to avoid “just another day at the office,” of the urge to “expand the envelope.” His instrument has been but the means to an end in a career that, while identified with bebop, has exemplified jazz at its most elastic and inclusive; the trajectory of his career has intersected with virtually every major development in jazz over the past half-century. A lot more than a trombonist, he has also made his mark as an arranger and composer, one who has embodied influences from Basie to Bartók, funky blues to Britten, hard bop to Hindemith, swing to Stravinsky, disco to Schoenberg. Whether it is performing at Norman Granz’s “Jazz at the Philharmonic,” with members of the London Philharmonic, with Kai Winding, or as a member of Miles Davis’s historic “Birth of the Cool”

ensemble, or writing for blaxploitation movies, for TV series such as *Mike Hammer*, or composing for the concert hall in the third-stream mode, Johnson has done it all.

Over the span of some fifty years, J.J. Johnson has had his share of media attention in the form of polls conducted by *Metronome*, *Down Beat*, *Esquire*, and the French Jazz Academy, or as the recipient of an “American Jazz Masters” fellowship awarded in 1996 by the National Endowment for the Arts, and more. Then again, he has not completely escaped the pathologies that have afflicted the lives of jazzmen. In 1959 J.J. Johnson, arrested earlier in his career on a misdemeanor, was one of three “nominal plaintiffs” in a highly publicized, precedent-setting, cabaret card case argued in the New York State Supreme Court that forever changed the balance of power between nightclub jazz performers and the New York Police Department.

Yet Johnson has been the subject of only sporadic articles and book chapters covering various facets of his career—his style, his recordings, his preferences in instruments, his long-standing conflicted loyalties between being a composer-arranger and a performer. For all the fifty years or more that he has been before the public, there have been only two other extended critical studies. These are David N. Baker, *J.J. Johnson: Jazz Monograph Series* (New York: Shattinger International Music Corporation, 1979) and the unpublished doctoral dissertation of Louis G. Bourgois III, *Jazz Trombonist J.J. Johnson: A Comprehensive Discography and Study of the Early Evolution of His Style* (The Ohio State University, 1986).

The present book—the first-ever comprehensive biography, filmography, catalog of compositions, and discography of J.J. Johnson—therefore fills a major gap in jazz scholarship. It interweaves the many strands that define the man, his musical style, and the cultural contexts that have given meaning to his career. Although this has been a fully collaborative effort overall, the areas of individual responsibility in producing the actual book have been distinct and separate. The discography, filmography, catalog of compositions, typesetting of music and text, and editing of graphics and photographic images are the work of Louis G. Bourgois III. As primary author, Joshua Berrett is responsible for all other parts of the book, while at the same time clearly drawing upon the Bourgois dissertation in much of the discussion of Johnson’s early style.

The indirect origins of the book date back to 1988, when Berrett received a grant to participate in the Summer Institute on Jazz Education, which was directed by Lewis Porter at Rutgers University (Newark Campus) and cosponsored by the Institute of Jazz Studies. It was Porter who strongly encouraged Berrett in his research of materials borrowed by jazzmen from nonjazz sources, what they reveal about the creative process, and what they signify about the larger cultural context. The happy outcome was Berrett’s article “Louis Armstrong and Opera” published in *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 76 (Summer 1992).

A short time later it was again Porter who brought to Berrett's attention the research that Bourgois had completed on J.J. Johnson, not to mention his eagerness to find an appropriate collaborator with whom he could develop the material into a full-length book. It is clear that Porter had the perspicacity to realize that the "fit" between Berrett and Bourgois was just right. Indeed, Bourgois responded most enthusiastically to the proposal for a collaboration, and one good thing led to another.

Much to Bourgois's credit and grant-writing savvy, a collaborative research grant was awarded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for the period July 1991 to June 1993, with extensions granted through 1996. The Endowment committed itself to funding 80 percent of the award, with the respective grantee institutions—Kentucky State University and Mercy College—providing an equal share of the balance. This institutional support is hereby gratefully acknowledged, as is the invaluable help and encouragement received from Elizabeth Arndt at the NEH. Again, Lewis Porter's contributions as project consultant were vital to our success. The grant provided support for the conducting of archival research and personal oral history interviews in New York, Indianapolis, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Additional interviews were conducted by telephone with interviewees across the United States. Archives and public records searched include those of the Indiana Historical Society, the Crispus Attucks Center, the Indiana Humanities Council, the Public Records Office of the City of Indianapolis, the Indianapolis Public Library, the Film and Television Archives of the University of California—Los Angeles, the Hogan Jazz Archive (Tulane University), the Institute of Jazz Studies (Rutgers University), Indiana University, Broadcast Music Inc. (New York and Los Angeles), RCA Records archives of the Bertelsmann Music Group, Inc. (BMG), the New York Public Library, the New York Police Department, and the Museum of Television and Radio.

Oral history interviews were conducted in person or by telephone with George Avakian, David N. Baker, Rosemary Johnson Belcher, Benny Carter, Jimmy Coe, Maxwell T. Cohen, Robin Eubanks, Tommy Flanagan, Joy Nolcox Gaddie, Robert Gangel, Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Golson, Joe Gourdin, Dorothy Greenberg, Earle Hagen, Slide Hampton, Jimmy Heath, Conrad Herwig, Billy Johnson, J.J. Johnson, Kevin Johnson, Dick Katz, LaVon Kemp, Bert Kossow, Erma Levin, Walter Levinsky, Rod Levitt, Z. Richard Lieb, Peter Matz, Tommy Newsom, LaVerne E. Newsome, André Previn, Rufus Reid, Don Sickler, Gilbert Taylor, Mary Ann Topper, Steve Turré, and Josephine Weathers-Rogers. Edward Berger, Laura Calzolari, and Dan Morgenstern helped smooth the way for approaching specific interviewees. Our deepest thanks to one and all.

Finally, there are those individuals who generously provided access to rare material, particularly Gilbert Taylor (Crispus Attucks Center), Tom Everett (Harvard University Bands), Mary Ann Topper and her very special assistant, Anna Marta Sala (The Jazz Tree), Michael McGehee (BMI Artist Relations—Los

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The coauthors are deeply grateful to their wives, Lynne Berrett and Robyn Bourgois, for their support and encouragement. Joshua Berrett is grateful to his sons Jesse and Dan, his daughters-in-law, Susan and Julia, and to other family members for their unfailing support and interest. Emma Jane and George Bourgois are owed a debt of gratitude for their continuing support and encouragement of their son since his initial discographical study of J.J. Johnson began in 1973. Without a doubt, the moral support of close family has been indispensable in bringing a project of this scope to fruition.

Chapter 1

Early Years in Indianapolis, 1924–42

The summer of 1967 pulsed with a unique sense of excitement, what with such events as the release of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album, the Monterey Pop Festival, the burgeoning of "flower power" and "love-ins." Far removed from this pop-rock world another kind of event was taking place in Indianapolis, Indiana—one filled with impressive dignity and enormous pride. In the late afternoon of Sunday, June 4, 1967, Crispus Attucks High School, the only public high school for blacks in Indianapolis, held vesper ceremonies as part of its fortieth anniversary year. James Louis (J.J.) Johnson, arguably the preeminent trombonist of modern jazz, was awarded the school's distinguished alumnus citation.¹ Surrounded by family, local colleagues, and the very teachers who had nurtured his musical growth at Crispus Attucks from 1937 to 1941, J.J. Johnson was clearly enjoying his own "love-in."

Norman L. Merrifield, music department head at Crispus Attucks from 1934 to 1942 and 1946 to 1967, who happened to be retiring that year, reminisced about his famous pupil for a local newspaper. He recalled that J.J. had been in the school band only six weeks when Merrifield realized that he had an exceptional talent on his hands. What astounded him was that the young teenager made as much progress in those six weeks on his school-supplied trombone "as the average boy makes in a year . . . [and] at the end of a year, he knew as much as I knew about the trombone."² The extent of the bonding between the young man and his "bent and beat-up" horn was plain for all to see, particularly his mother, Nina Gieger Johnson. "He'd lay that trombone right down beside him when he went to bed at night. In the morning . . . the first thing he'd do [was] blow a couple of toots on that trombone."³ Johnson's sister, Rosemary Johnson Belcher, the first of two younger siblings, vividly recalled this phase of her brother's life with a slightly different twist. "He ate and slept with the horn. He was more concerned about the horn than he was [about] girls."⁴

Johnson's early years were spent in a world centered around church and home, a life dominated by two dramatically contrasting parents. Not only did they worship separately at different churches on opposite sides of the same street—James Horace

Johnson at the New Baptist Church and Nina Johnson at Phillips Temple, C.M.E. (subsequently renamed Grace Memorial Church, C.M.E.);⁵ they were also opposites in terms of personality—the mother demonstrative, adoring of her son, and prone to be bossy, the father a man of very few words, stern, strict, and reportedly cruel at times. The children were brought up in both churches, attending Baptist Sunday school with the father and Methodist services with the mother; it was a “forced issue” that continued through their teenage years.

Even though Nina Johnson “couldn’t tell one note from the other,” it was she who encouraged the children in their music and hired a neighborhood male teacher to come to the house and give each child lessons on the family upright piano.⁶ In recalling those years Nina Johnson remarked about her son, who must have been between about nine and eleven years of age at the time, “I never had to make him go to the piano and practice.”⁷ Memories of James Horace Johnson are far less flattering. Rosemary Belcher brought up an incident she said she could never forget that occurred around the same time.

My father sang in the choir . . . my sister, my brother, and I were sitting together, and my brother broke wind and we laughed . . . you know, like kids, we thought it was funny. My father did not miss a note. He came out of that choir, down the aisle to where we were sitting, and popped crap out of my brother, and walked right on back up in the choir. And he [J.J.] did not cry out.⁸

Brother Johnson, as he was known to his Baptist brethren, wanted all to know that he was “really raising” his kids, even though it meant beating them. One can speculate that Johnson deeply internalized these strictures, coming to display in later life a certain “Mr. Clean” image, personifying a musician who for most of his career has resisted the temptations of drugs, alcohol, and womanizing.⁹ Again, he has confided to his sister how cruel and unreasonable he found his father to have been, and how he could never raise his own sons that way. “You know I could hate my father. I could.”¹⁰ But later years seem to have brought father and son closer together.¹¹

The Indianapolis world of family, school, church, and community that shaped J.J. Johnson’s early life was touched by a sense of solidarity, a need to close ranks and clutch tightly that which it held dear. There was a special tension exerted by the Ku Klux Klan, which was approaching its peak of influence at the time J.J. Johnson was born on January 22, 1924. Grand Dragon David Curtis Stephenson (“I am the law in Indiana”) was lording it over many areas of state government. At the Republican state convention that year many who were to win elective office—from school board candidates, to the mayor of Indianapolis, to the state governor—clearly owed allegiance to the Klan. But by 1928 Stephenson had been convicted of murder, many of his political cronies indicted, and the ranks of the Klan left in disarray. That same year the *Indianapolis Times* won the Pulitzer Prize for its exposé of political corruption, tainted by Klan connections. Yet despite its

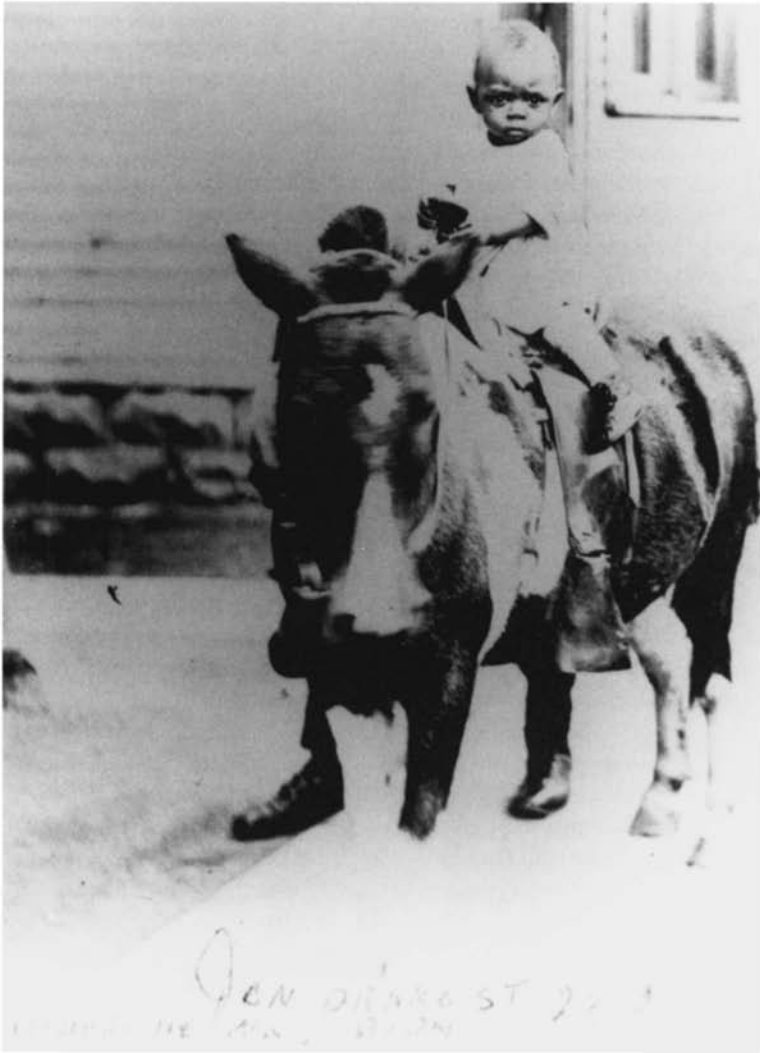


Fig. 1.1 J.J. Johnson, two and a half to three years of age, seated on a pony in front of the house on Jon Drake Street where he was born (an unidentified man is in the background). Photograph courtesy of J.J. Johnson.

precipitous rise and fall within that decade, the Klan came to exert an effect on black public education in Indianapolis that was far-reaching and long-lasting.

In fact, the very origins of Crispus Attucks High School can be traced to a Klan-inspired petition by the White Supremacy League of 1922. On December 22 of that year the Indianapolis Board of School Commissioners passed a unanimous resolution authorizing the creation of a “colored high school.” Named after Crispus Attucks, a runaway slave and the first martyr of the American Revolution in the Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770, the school opened its doors in September 1927.¹² As a result, the practice of allowing black children to attend integrated high schools, in effect since 1877, was overturned. This is not, however, to ignore the realities of day-to-day de facto segregation, which were in place well before. Coming in a steady northward stream since after the Civil War, the black population tended to cluster in the western part of the city toward White River and within a neighborhood of streets branching off from, and intersecting with, the artery of Indiana Avenue.¹³

Crispus Attucks was a revitalized school with an optimistic air about it when J.J. entered as freshman in September 1937. The tone of the decade had been set when Dr. Russell Adrian Lane, one of the school’s original English teachers, was appointed acting principal in 1930 and named principal in 1932—a position in which he was to remain until 1957. Trained not only in English, Lane had also earned a degree from Howard University Law School and had undertaken graduate study at the University of Heidelberg. He was a man who viewed his assignment as a challenge and an opportunity, soon earning the plaudits of the local press, particularly for his communication skills—“He is a remarkably engaging conversationalist with a healthy hobby [*sic*] of looking his interviewer in the eye.”¹⁴ At the same time Lane was able to build on the tradition of excellence established by the formidable founding principal of Attucks, Matthias Nolcox, personal friend of Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver, who had almost single-handedly recruited the school’s teaching faculty from the midwest, the deep South, Florida, and the northeast. None was without a master’s degree, and there were a number with doctorates.

Nolcox “did not allow excuses not to be educated” and was unshakable in his commitment that “anything less than the best” was simply not good enough for the school.¹⁵ At the same time such a commitment could exact a heavy price. Joy Nolcox Gaddie has recounted an incident that more than likely cost her father his job or certainly helped precipitate his ouster as principal of Crispus Attucks. The school board had apparently ordered new auditorium chairs for Attucks, but had no intention of actually delivering them. Instead these chairs were to go to an elite local high school and the used ones brought over to Attucks. Undeterred, Nolcox stood in front of the doorway, arms outstretched and stopped the movers; he told them to take the chairs back where they came from and to bring the new ones to their rightful place.



Fig. 1.2 Crispus Attucks High School, November 1938, after construction of a new annex. The sign in the lower right proclaims, "Open House. American Education Week. Friday, November 11, 1938, 7:30 P.M. Come in. See your new building. Teachers, exhibits, etc." Photograph courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

Less confrontational and more pragmatic, Russell Lane had the special gift of translating the ideals of Nolcox into action within an imperfect world where one sometimes had to be selective about the battles one fought—a world in which “separate but unequal” was the norm. Fortunately, battles were won fairly easily when it involved the physical plant or the recruitment and retention of highly qualified, dedicated faculty. For example, in 1937, the year J.J. Johnson entered, Dr. Lane was able to win a \$275,000 appropriation for an annex to accommodate additional classrooms, music rooms, two laboratories, a gymnasium, and a new industrial arts section. This construction was driven largely by enrollment growth, with numbers in J.J.’s senior year almost doubling the total recorded for the school’s initial year—2,450 students for the 1940–41 school year as compared with 1,354 for the 1927–28 school year. Even more important were the changes made in the curriculum and faculty of the music program. Two teachers, Norman L. Merrifield and LaVerne Newsome, hired by Dr. Lane in 1934 and 1936, respectively, were a fresh and vital presence, helping nurture J.J. Johnson’s musical growth at Attucks from 1937 to 1941.

A graduate of Northwestern University who had studied elsewhere in the Midwest as well as at Trinity College of Music in London, Norman Merrifield headed the music department from 1934 to 1942 and resumed the position in 1946 (after service in the U.S. Army as a band director) to eventually retire in 1967. He was revered as an educator, pianist, choral director, band director, composer, and arranger of spirituals and Crispus Attucks songs. But above all he stood for quality. As Gilbert Taylor, curator of Crispus Attucks Center put it: “He established an excellent department. He required that anybody majoring in music or anyone taking music take harmony and theory; and he was very, very insistent on that. He was dedicated beyond any call of duty.”¹⁶ Merrifield’s close colleague of many years, LaVerne E. Newsome, also a graduate of Northwestern, taught orchestra, string music class, and music appreciation, and team-taught a humanities course. Like Merrifield, he was dedicated to his students to a remarkable degree. On the occasion of his retirement in 1973 Newsome was presented with a plaque which read: “For outstanding leadership as an educator in the field of music, unselfish devotion in providing guidance, and exceptional teaching expertise which has produced many outstanding musicians.”¹⁷

What made the musical learning experience at Attucks so special was the unique tension between the culture of commitment on the part of the faculty and the larger climate of discrimination. As LaVerne Newsome put it: “Our students didn’t have the benefit of private teachers . . . most of the students got their instrumental experience through the school. That’s the way they got their training. A youngster who was talented . . . we’d tell him to come back after school and we’d give him some extra help.”¹⁸ Gilbert Taylor said it even more pointedly: “Teachers were often at school until 9 o’clock doing private lessons. It wasn’t anything they were paid for. But if they saw you had any potential at all, they would stay with you.”¹⁹

When it came to the instruments themselves, “they tried a lot of things with Attucks; they tried to send all the new instruments to other schools and would send us the leftovers.”²⁰ LaVerne Newsome recalled that the school often had to settle for even less than that.

Before I came here Merrifield was asked by the principal to go around to the pawnshops, the various pawnshops on Indiana Avenue . . . then we were encouraged to go up to people’s attics . . . But, at the same time, the other high schools were getting brand-new instruments, very shiny instruments. We wanted to know why, what was happening. We couldn’t get a satisfactory answer.²¹

But LaVerne Newsome was undaunted. In 1940, the year in which J.J. Johnson entered his senior year, Newsome organized an orchestra–band parents club.

One of the purposes of that group was to supply instruments, to buy instruments, to encourage youngsters to improve. They bought a number of instruments, I would say at least a thousand dollars of instruments, or more than that . . . the school board provided a core of instruments, a very small number of instruments. For some reason Attucks High School did not get . . . comparable treatment.²²

Things could sometimes get absurd as when a budget request by Newsome was rejected and Norman Merrifield went to the downtown office of the superintendent and his assistant to raise “unholy hell.”

[The budget item in question] was a batch of liquid sterilizers costing less than \$25.00 to be used for mouth pieces on wind instruments. . . . I explained that . . . Attucks had six trombone mouth pieces and 18 players. Without the sterilizers we were contributing daily to the epidemic of colds, sore throats and influenza that had recently hit the community. The item was accepted; in fact, the entire budget was hurriedly accepted . . . the only time in this teacher’s tour of duty.²³

This was the kind of world that J.J. Johnson entered in the fall of 1937, a world in which he was to bond with that “bent and beat-up” horn during Norman Merrifield’s instrumental music course the following fall.²⁴ It was in this course that he received his earliest training on the trombone, astonishing Merrifield in the process, after having switched to the instrument following a frustrating time on the baritone saxophone. “The school had a baritone saxophone that I played that was in such miserable shape and in such horrible condition, and so unplayable, that I was encouraged to take up another instrument that the school owned, and it turned out to be trombone.”²⁵ In a high school beset by acute shortages of adequate instruments, the baritone saxophone was, in fact, the closest available approximation to the tenor saxophone of his idol, Lester Young, to whom he was listening after school hours. Johnson elaborates:

During those same years I became involved with a circle of guys . . . who were into listening to Lunceford, to Basie, and Earl Hines . . . I remember with fondness how joyous it was for all of us just to get together and listen to these records. . . Pres was our hero. We were all big Lester Young freaks. We knew all of his solos, note for note. We couldn't play them, but we could sing them . . . we'd just get together and listen, listen, listen, listen, listen.²⁶

And in a more analytical frame of mind, J.J. Johnson once remarked to Leonard Feather: "Lester was the forerunner of progressive jazz. My thing, maybe more than any other jazz musicians at that time, was the linear approach, and Lester epitomized that."²⁷

During these impressionable high school years Johnson was profoundly affected by other players as well, particularly trombonist Fred Beckett (1917–1946). His was a lean, dry, clean, linear sound, similar to that of Lester Young. Johnson recalled to Leonard Feather: "Beckett was the first trombonist I ever heard play in a manner other than the usual sliding, slurring, lip trilling, or 'gutbucket' style. He had tremendous facilities [*sic*] for improvisation; in general, Beckett's playing made a lasting impression on me."²⁸

Lead trombonist with the Kansas City band of Harlan Leonard and His Rockets (1939–40), Beckett vividly exemplified two contrasting "proto-Johnson" stylistic facets in two recordings from this period—"À la Bridges" and "Skee." Whereas "Skee," in its use of Pres-like motives, anticipates Johnson's detached, articulated style, "À la Bridges" illustrates the linear and triplet-filled approach that Johnson was to later follow in his 1944 recording of "Body and Soul." In the course of each phrase he generates melodic tension by ascending into the upper register, outlining the basic harmony in the process, while a sense of release comes with descending lines using scalar figures sprinkled with chromatic passing notes.

The image shows three staves of musical notation for a trombone solo. The first staff begins with a tempo marking of quarter note = 200 and a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb). The melody starts with a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, Bb4) and continues with a series of eighth notes ascending to G5, then descending. The second staff continues the melody with a chromatic descending line (F4, Eb4, D4, C4) and a triplet of eighth notes (Bb3, Ab3, G3). The third staff features a triplet of eighth notes (F4, G4, Ab4) and continues with a descending line (G4, F4, Eb4, D4, C4) and a final triplet of eighth notes (Bb3, Ab3, G3). Chord symbols Eb7, Ab7, Bb7, and Fmi7 are placed above the corresponding measures.

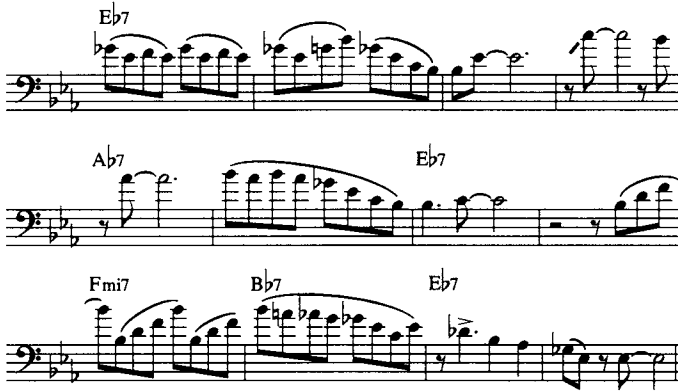


Fig. 1.3 “Skee,” Fred Beckett solo, recorded January 11, 1940.

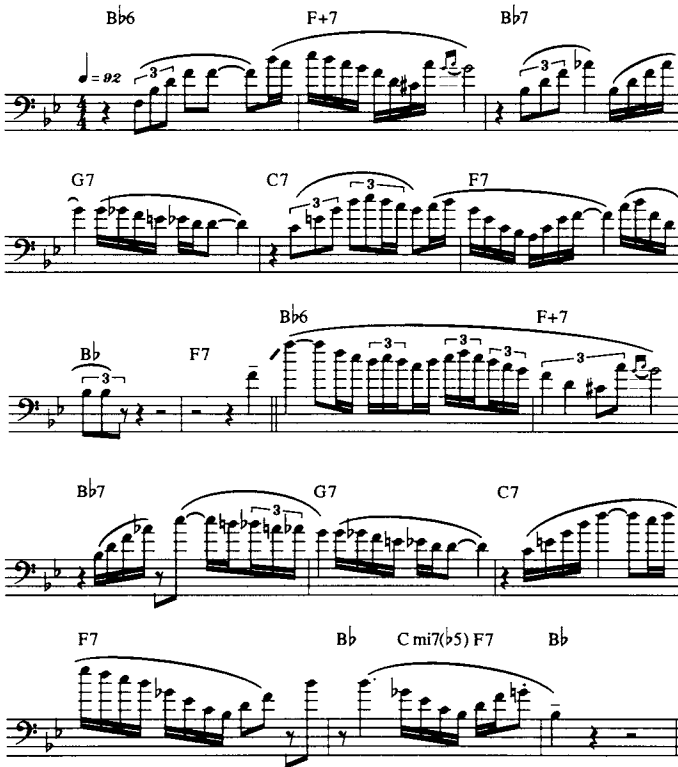


Fig. 1.4 “À la Bridges,” Fred Beckett solo, recorded July 15, 1940.

The Kansas City background that is common to both Lester Young and Fred Beckett forms part of a larger context. Young's early association with bands such as those of Bennie Moten, Clarence Love, Count Basie, and Andy Kirk is rather well known—as is Fred Beckett's work with Harlan Leonard and His Rockets. What is also provocative, in terms of style dissemination and its analysis, is how the careers of Andy Kirk, Clarence Love, and those working with them on the Kansas City scene were soon to touch the life of Johnson shortly after he completed high school.

During these early formative years Johnson's roving ear was attracted to other trombonists as well, among them two fixtures in the bands of Count Basie and Jimmie Lunceford—Dickie Wells and Trummy Young. Speaking about Dickie Wells: "He was a guy who didn't play many notes. It wasn't exhibitionistic, it wasn't terribly dramatic. There was just something about it that grabbed you."²⁹ As for Trummy Young, he represented for Johnson not only remarkable trombone playing, but something more.

I was particularly attracted to, and influenced by, in the early years, Trummy Young. There was something . . . that was very unique, very distinctive . . . I'll never forget a recording he made, with Lunceford, I believe, on "My Gal Sal," where he took a four-bar break. This four-bar break was so outstanding that for a long time—I never heard it in person . . . only on the record—I thought it was a trumpet playing. I was amazed when someone said: "That's not a trumpet J.J., that's Trummy Young playing that break." He was playing so high on the horn, he was playing in the trumpet register . . . so clear and so articulate. That's what tricked me. He played with a great sense of humor. You could just hear the warmth and humor in his playing. . . . He was a beautiful person to know. To know Trummy was to love Trummy.³⁰

Listening to these trombonists was an integral part of Johnson's early musical experience—included in the welter of multiple musical styles and impressions. And it is in this context that his course of formal music study in high school should be considered. Instrumental music was one of a roster of twelve courses that he took in order to fulfill his requirements as a music major. In fact, his complete transcript identifies him as a student with two majors (English and music) and two minors (Spanish and math). In addition, the transcript hints at some practical concerns as well—how to survive as a young black man in time of war—with courses taken in general shop (metalwork) and shoe repair.

Given the time and place, J.J. Johnson's formal musical education was almost exclusively centered around a Eurocentric classical repertoire, spirituals, hymns, and such. The bill of fare for senior vespers and commencement of May 1940 (on page 12) is illustrative.³¹

Adding to his kind of musical diet was the high school appearance every spring by Fabien Sevitzyk and the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. LaVerne

Norman Merrifield			LaVerne Newsome		
Date	Course	Grade	Date	Course	Grade
1/38	A cappella I	B	1/40	Orchestra	B
6/38	A cappella II	B	6/40	Orchestra	B
1/39	Instrumental music	A+	6/41	Music appreciation I	B
1/39	A cappella III	B			
6/39	A cappella IV	A			
6/39	Band	A			
6/39	Harmony I	C			
1/40	Band	A			
1/40	Harmony II	B			

Fig. 1.5 Music courses completed by J.J. Johnson at Crispus Attucks High School, separated according to teacher.

1938 Academic Year			1939 Academic Year		
Date	Course	Grade	Date	Course	Grade
1/38	English I	C	1/39	English III	C
1/38	Algebra I	B	1/39	Geometry I	C
1/38	Spanish I	A	1/39	Military Training I	A
1/38	Physical Training I	C	1/39	General Shop I/Metal	B
1/38	A cappella I	B	1/39	Instrumental Music	A+
6/38	English II	C	1/39	A cappella III	B
6/38	Algebra II	B	6/39	A cappella IV	A
6/38	Spanish II	B	6/39	Band	A
6/38	Physical Training II	C	6/39	Harmony I	C
6/38	A cappella II	B	6/39	English IV	C
			6/39	Geometry II	B

1940 Academic Year			1941 Academic Year		
Date	Course	Grade	Date	Course	Grade
1/40	Spanish III	B	1/41	Mechanical Drawing I	B
1/40	Orchestra	B	1/41	U.S. History VIII	C
1/40	Band	A	1/41	Civics-State	B
1/40	Harmony II	B	1/41	Chemistry II	C
3/40	English V	C	6/41	Economics	C
6/40	Orchestra	B	6/41	Health	B
6/40	English VI	B	6/41	Mechanical Drawing II	B
6/40	U.S. History VII	C	6/41	Shoe Repair I	C
6/40	Spanish IV	B	6/41	Music Appreciation I	B
6/40	Chemistry I	C			

Entered: September 7, 1937
 Graduated: June 11, 1941
 Rank: 109 of 230 in graduating class

Fig. 1.6 J.J. Johnson’s official Crispus Attucks High School academic record.

Senior Vespers

SUNDAY, MAY TWENTY-SIXTH
5:00 P.M. SCHOOL AUDITORIUM

- 'Father, O Hear Me' (Handel-Christiansen) A Cappella Choir
Norman L. Merrifield, Director
Invocation — 'The Lord's Prayer' (Malotte) Anna Hearn
Marion Burch, Accompanist
'Break Forth O Beauteous Heavenly Light' (Bach) A Cappella Choir
Sermon — 'Resources for the Tasks We Must Face' Reverend R. T. Andrews
'Emitte Spirituum' (Schuetky) A Cappella Choir
Announcements Mr. Russell A. Lane
Benediction Reverend R. T. Andrews



Commencement Program

FRIDAY, MAY THIRTY-FIRST
CADLE TABERNACLE
PRECOMMENCEMENT CONCERT
CRISPUS ATTUCKS HIGH SCHOOL ORCHESTRA
7:30 TO 8:00 P.M.

- 'Triumphant March' (Sigurd Jorsalfar) Grieg
'Andante' (Surprise Symphony) Haydn
'Calif of Bagdad' Boildieu
LaVerne Newsome, Director

8:00 P.M.

- Processional — 'War March of the Priests' (Mendelssohn) Orchestra
LaVerne Newsome, Director
Invocation — 'Prayer' (Arr. from Beethoven) A Cappella Choir
Norman L. Merrifield, Director
'Silver' (Harris) Girls' Glee Clubs
Hortense Bullock, Director
Marion Burch, Accompanist
Address — 'The Illusion of the Far' President Rufus Clement
Atlanta University
'I Must Go Down to the Sea' (Mitchell) Boys' Glee Clubs
Marion Burch, Director
Hortense Bullock, Accompanist
Presentation of Diplomas Mrs. Carl Manthei
Member of Board of School Commissioners
'Praise Ye the Lord' (Randegger) Combined Glee Clubs, Choir and Orchestra
Marion Burch, Director
Hortense Bullock, Accompanist
Scholarship Awards Mr. Russell A. Lane
Taps and Reveille
By Paul Overbey, '39
(Audience is asked to stand)

Fig. 1.7 Senior vespers and commencement programs of Crispus Attucks High School, Indianapolis, 1940.

Newsome made elaborate preparations for these events, knowing full well that this would probably be the only experience most students would have of hearing a symphony. He wrote program notes, distributed seating charts, played recordings of selections on the program (records were also loaned to any department heads who were interested), had students identify instruments, and presented biographical information on each composer.

All of these musical offerings are of a piece with the standards of intellectual rigor and artistic accomplishment that were characteristic of post-Reconstruction black American life. The prevailing attitude on the part of the black leadership encouraged a blending of the African heritage with European art music—a means of ennobling the “race” and lending it respectability.³² It is in this context that we can appreciate anew the achievements of Matthias Nolcox, founding principal of Attucks and a man who moved in the social circle of Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver, his successor Russell Lane, and musical mentors like Norman Merrifield and LaVerne Newsome. These values were, of course, hardly unique to the Indianapolis black community. In fact, what is compelling is how strong they were elsewhere as well, in Kansas City, for example, where the likes of Major N. Clark Smith and Charles T. Watts, among others, exerted a decisive musical influence of a similar sort on the early career of Clarence Love and many others.

Regardless of the type of repertoire involved in more formal high school events, however, Johnson displayed a personal seriousness and sense of commitment then that was prophetic of his later brand of meticulous professionalism. LaVerne Newsome has shared the following reminiscence about J.J. Johnson in his senior year, when Newsome conducted the orchestra:

He came into the [orchestra] class as just another student. I didn't know a thing about him. But after he started playing I began to look at him a second and third time. A very good player, a rather quiet person in class. He was concerned about doing a good job and trying to meet the standard that you were expecting from him, which was kind of unusual. . . . He was amenable to suggestions you'd make, that you'd give him to improve his playing, or to get to a particular spot that you wanted to take it in that particular piece. . . . Very intense, very determined, and a hard worker. Worked quite hard after rehearsal. The next day, after rehearsal, he had it just the way you wanted it.³³

As is already apparent from his early record-listening habits, what Johnson was doing outside of school was of far-reaching significance. LaVerne Newsome recalls, “J.J. Johnson and [later] David Baker . . . many of the other folks, the brass players, they would steal time after school and step down to the Avenue and sneak in there and listen and play. We weren't supposed to know what was going on.”³⁴ Indiana Avenue, or the Avenue, was the city's Funky Broadway. In its heyday, the 1930s through the mid-1950s, it was an avenue with “soul,” pure and

unadulterated, an avenue revealing “the first and last kernel of naked humanity.”³⁵ It was strung with nightclubs such as Henri’s, the Cotton Club, Ritz Lounge, Trianon Ballroom, Red Keg, George’s Bar, the Pink Poodle, and, last but not least, the Sunset Terrace. Noble Sissle, Ethel Waters, Josephine Baker, Cootie Williams, Tiny Bradshaw, Wes Montgomery, the Ink Spots, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Jimmy Lunceford, and Benny Carter were among the many who appeared on the Avenue.

But the Avenue was a lot more than nightclubs. It was home to a cross-section of the black community, with its share of teachers, lawyers, doctors, dentists, postal clerks, custodians, merchants, cooks, and more. At the north-western end stood Lockefield Gardens, a twenty-two acre complex of fifteen apartment buildings, a community within a community accommodating 729 families bounded by Indiana Avenue and Blake, Locke, and Walnut Streets. A WPA project dating from 1932, it was once described by a resident as “one of the best things that’s happened for colored people since Abraham Lincoln.”³⁶ At the southeastern end of the Avenue stands an imposing four-story triangular Afro-Egyptian art deco building that has now taken on a new life—the Walker Center.³⁷ Originally built in 1927 by Madame C.J. Walker, the first black woman millionaire, it housed the national headquarters of her company, which manufactured ethnic beauty and hair care products. But it was, and remains, primarily for its theater and casino that the Walker Center holds musical and cultural interest as it dominates the landscape where North and West Streets and Indiana Avenue converge.

During these early impressionable years of J.J. Johnson’s life, Indiana Avenue represented an avenue of dreams. Soon, however, during the period 1941–42, decisive events at the Sunset Terrace would change the course of his career. This could happen only after he had sufficiently internalized the sounds he heard on records, honed his skills outside of school in and around Indianapolis, and established a presence on the local jazz scene. Some of the earliest playing that resulted most likely started at home on the front porch. Rosemary Johnson Belcher has vivid memories:

When we were kids I used to tell her, “Mom, I wish you’d make him stop all that noise.” He’d be on the front porch playing loud, ’cause [the] trombone is loud anyway. And it used to get on my nerves and I’d tell her it would embarrass me, you know, never dreaming that he would grow up and be famous like he is. . . . He and Erroll Grandy, who played piano, and Eldridge Morrison, who played trumpet; and they would all be at the house.³⁸

Erroll “Groundhog” Grandy, some six years Johnson’s senior, is considered the “godfather” of Indianapolis jazz, the driving force behind the Naptown Sound.³⁹ Afflicted with cataracts and chronic eye problems while still in high school, Grandy was virtually blind for much of his life. This, however, did not deter him from becoming a beloved mentor to many jazz musicians who got their start in Indianapolis—among them Wes Montgomery, Freddie Hubbard, Slide Hampton,

J.J. Johnson, and his close local friend and fellow musician of many years, Jimmy Coe. As Clem Tiggs put it in his eloquent obituary: “Erroll just got another promotion in God’s division.”⁴⁰ Everyone who came his way had a unique chance to learn something about music. In fact, in the case of J.J. it seems that Grandy’s blindness opened his own eyes to the world of arranging. According to Jimmy Coe, “This is the way J.J. got into arranging. Erroll would play the arrangements on the piano, and he had real long fingers. He could make excellent chords, and J.J. would write it out for him.”⁴¹

During the 1938–39 academic year J.J. Johnson, joining Jimmy Coe and Erroll Grandy, began working after school hours with LaVon Kemp, another remarkable local mentor. He was ten years J.J.’s senior and also a Crispus Attucks graduate. Saxophonist, arranger, and bandleader LaVon Kemp had organized a band for young people at the community center on Fayette Street, one block over from Crispus Attucks High School and Indiana Avenue. Jimmy Coe recalled: “We . . . went into LaVon Kemp’s band. At that time he was employing [musicians] who could read well.”⁴²

With the National Youth Administration as his sponsor, Kemp met with his group about three times a week, grooming his students to be good readers and ensemble players rather than promoting potential soloists.⁴³ It offered training opportunities to high school students who were both black and members of Indianapolis Local 3 of the American Federation of Musicians. Part of that training involved recreating charts off records by Jimmy Lunceford, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Fletcher and Horace Henderson, and Duke Ellington; it was an activity that sharply honed the skills of not only J.J. but also Jimmy Coe and fellow trombonist Robert Fisher. And the results were impressive. In the spring of 1939 the band began its own regular radio program, performing on WIBC every Saturday for several weeks. Longer-lived and more widely appreciated was the array of performances at such Indianapolis venues as the Walker Casino and Attucks auditorium as well as in outlying towns like Madison, Indiana, and Danville, in east central Illinois. An unidentified local newspaper reports enthusiastically about the band’s return engagement on Labor Day 1939 in that Illinois town. “The Hiram Boosters Club and their friends swung until the wee hours at the beautiful and swanky country club in Harrison park.” Most important, the review concludes with what must be one of the earliest references in newsprint to J.J. Johnson’s playing:

One of James Coe’s latest arrangements, “By the River Saint Marie,” was sung by Emerson Senior in his own inimitable style with Kemp taking a mellow chorus on his alto. Last, but not least, Robert Fisher and James Johnson were outstanding with their trombone duet on “Heaven Can Wait.” The band is expected to return again soon.⁴⁴



Fig. 1.8 Indianapolis's "Colored" YMCA Branch Building (built in 1912), where the National Youth Administration-sponsored LaVon Kemp Orchestra rehearsed. The signs in the windows state "Some Doings. Colored YMCA. ?" Photograph courtesy of Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

Some time in the early 1940s J.J. Johnson was to pay tribute to his mentor by writing for him a theme song entitled “Kemptone” for which parts exist in manuscript—piano, trombone, trumpet, alto and tenor saxophones, bass, and drums. “Kemptone” is a snappy number replete with two-measure riffs, very much in the Basie mold. Cast mostly in B-flat, it consists of an introduction, a thirty-two-bar head, an interlude, and a full chorus blocked out for solo trumpet which, in turn, leads to a climactic eight-bar drum break. The concluding fifteen bars in D-flat, essentially a half out chorus, require the drummer to “push it.”

Many of the other details of J.J. Johnson’s high school years as well as the sixteen months spanning the time between his graduation in June 1941 and his joining the Benny Carter band in October 1942 remain sketchy at best. Nor is it clear just when it was that he last played with LaVon Kemp’s group. It is, however, safe to assume that uncertainty about his professional future, not to mention anxiety about the war must have taken their toll.⁴⁵ At the same time he was edging into a faster-moving, more exciting world, one largely controlled by the Ferguson empire.

Denver Darius Ferguson and his younger brother, Sea H. Ferguson, embodied a special combination of business savvy, scandal, and civic leadership.⁴⁶ Married four times, Denver Ferguson, “a sepia Horatio Alger,” set up a printing business in Indianapolis around 1919. He was soon involved in a “contract deal” for the production of lottery ticket coupons, including “number tickets,” “baseball tickets,” and such. The Ferguson organization eventually was to boast a catalog of over one hundred items in the “tally card” line, serving customers, among them big sporting figures, in thirty-odd states and abroad. As kingpin of the sporting world he built the Sunset Tavern on Indiana Avenue at Blake in the late 1930s, shortly thereafter adding the Sunset Terrace Club. At about the same time he organized the Ferguson Brothers Agency (also known as the Ferguson Booking Agency) located on Senate Avenue, the purpose of which was “to promote or book orchestras, bands, and popular artists of the amusement world.” The bands of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and many territory bands were among the groups handled by the agency. But by 1949 the federal government was hot on the trail of Denver Ferguson for income tax evasion, and “one of the big boys on the Avenue” found his properties being padlocked. Meanwhile, Sea H. Ferguson had his brush with the law as well. Owing some seven years’ worth of taxes, he was one of the city’s top gambling figures, owner of a bowling alley, liquor stores, rental properties, and the Cotton Club. He also sponsored a basketball team, furnished uniforms for a team at Attucks, and received a presidential citation for World War II service.

Intersecting with this local underworld were several bands moving through Indianapolis, appearing at Denver Ferguson’s Sunset Terrace, that touched the lives of Johnson and his friends. Among them was the band of Tiny Bradshaw (1905–1958), singer and drummer who had previously performed with Horace

Kempton

$\text{♩} = 200$

Trumpet
Altp Sax
Tenor Sax
Trombone

C mi7 Db mi7 C mi7 F9

C mi7 Db mi7 C mi7 B7 Bb Gb9 F9

A C mi7 B7 Bb D mi7 Db mi7 C mi7

A.S.
T.S. 8vb.

F7
Trp.
Tbn. 8vb.

1. Bb C mi D mi Db7
2. Bb B7 Bb B7 Bb

A.S.
T.S.

A mi7 Ab7 G7

Trp.
A.S.
T.S.
Tbn. 8vb.

G mi7 Gb7 F7

C mi7 B7 Bb D mi7 Db mi7 C mi7

A.S.
T.S. 8vb.

Fig. 1.9 Score to J.J. Johnson composition, "Kempton."

C mi7 F7 B♭ B7 B♭ B7 B♭ B C mi7

Trp. Tbn. 8vb. A.S. T.S. Trp. A.S. T.S. Tbn.

D♭mi7 C mi7 F9 C mi7

Tbn. 8vb. -----

D♭mi7 C mi7 B7 B♭ C Trumpet Solo

solo break 32

Solo on changes A to B

D Drum Solo E (*push it*) E♭mi7 D7 D♭Ma7

Trp. A.S. & Tbn. T.S.

Trp. A.S. Tbn. T.S. F mi7 E mi7 E♭mi7 A♭9 D♭Ma7

D♭Ma7 E♭mi7 D7 D♭

piano in unison with horns ----- D7 D♭Ma7

Alto Kemp-tone

The image shows a handwritten musical score for an alto saxophone. At the top, the word "Alto" is written above a short horizontal line, and the title "Kemp-tone" is written below a longer horizontal line. The score itself consists of ten staves of music. The first staff is empty. The second staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature (C). The music is written in a rhythmic style with many eighth and sixteenth notes. There are three circled letters: (A) above the second staff, (B) above the eighth staff, and (C) to the left of the ninth staff. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a final note on the tenth staff.

Fig. 1.10 Manuscript alto saxophone part to "Kemp-tone," mm. 1-58, in J.J. Johnson's hand. Manuscript courtesy of LaVon Kemp.

Henderson's Collegians at Wilberforce University, and with Marion Hardy's Alabamians, the Savoy Bearcats, and the Mills Blue Rhythm band in New York. Johnson elaborates:

The activity was very fragmented as far as big bands coming to Indianapolis. They would come through now and again. But they weren't always the big-name big bands. For example, one of the better ones was not really a big-time, big name, but an excellent orchestra with excellent arrangements. We were all in love with that band—Tiny Bradshaw. He had a wonderful band that played at the Sunset Terrace. . . . I remember sitting in with people on Indiana Avenue at one time or another. . . . It brings back fond memories of some days gone by that I look back upon, and have an inner smile.⁴⁷

Life behind the scenes, however, did not evoke such pleasant memories—certainly not for Joe Gourdin. He was a tenor saxophone and clarinet player with the Christine Chapman Orchestra, a group managed by the Ferguson Agency at about the same time that Johnson was playing with the Snookum Russell Orchestra.

When I first got with the band, I came up [to Indianapolis] and they had a dormitory. On the second floor, they had a bunch of beds like this [Gourdin motions to his cot] with mattresses, no sheets or pillowcases, you know. And, I thought that you could always go into the crummiest town in the world and you would always see a sheet or a pillowcase. They didn't have any, and I thought "Damn, this is crude." But, anyway, I stayed there one night, and then, eventually—the second night—it wasn't too bad. We only stayed there about three nights. Duke Ellington came there too. We were staying on the second floor of a ballroom called the Sunset.⁴⁸

In September 1941 Johnson was called for his first formal engagement at the Sunset Terrace Club—an appearance with the Clarence Love Orchestra performing under the direction of vocalist Pha Terrell. Even though it is quite unclear just how this all happened, general details of Clarence Love and Pha Terrell's backgrounds help provide some sense of context. Clarence Love was a musician with a checkered history. Born in Kansas City in 1905, Love had studied violin, piano, and mellophone there under such teachers as Charles T. Watts and William L. Dawson. His subsequent stints as a bandleader took him from Omaha, Nebraska, to the Southwest, to the Pacific. Probably one of his most successful spells was in the early 1930s in Kansas City, when he was working at the Blue Hill Gardens and El Torreon Ballroom in the battles of the bands. On those spring nights at the El Paseo some two hundred jazzmen, drawn from some ten or so bands, would wait their turn on the bandstand, staking their reputations on a single thirty-minute set. Tommy Douglas and Lester Young were among the many who passed through the ranks of the Clarence Love Orchestra. But a dispute over barbershop ownership—his father and the local union president had gotten into

each other's hair—somehow forced Clarence Love out of Kansas City. He next worked in Dallas with Eddie Heywood as part of the band from 1934 to 1937. Meanwhile, Love's co-leader of the time, Orlando Roberson, a vocalist from Kansas City, had gotten a promise of a Decca recording contract whenever the group reached New York. But it was not to be. "No sooner did Love bring the band into New York than Roberson jumped them right into Danville, Virginia to start their tour."⁴⁹ In the course of 1936 this tour apparently broke up in Lansing, Michigan, and a few stalwart remnants returned with Love to Dallas. But within a few years Love was leading a reincarnated band through the South, eventually winding up in Indianapolis at the Sunset Terrace Club, where he joined the Ferguson Agency. Pha Terrell, his lead vocalist at the time, was something of a draw. A former bouncer, dancer, and onetime singer with Andy Kirk, Terrell was remembered by Buck Clayton as follows: "The ladies carried on, passed out like they did for Frank Sinatra. Pha was a dapper kind of guy, wore nice clothes. He wasn't big, but strong. And a nice person."⁵⁰ Shortly after Johnson appeared with his orchestra, Love moved on to fronting an "all-girl orchestra" and subsequently settled in Tulsa, where he booked name bands.

This footloose life of a rather feckless territory bandleader was not to be for J.J. Johnson. Yet he was able to turn this very lack of stability and tight organizational structure to advantage by trying out his own arrangements with this and other bands. Then again, the rigors of daily life in such orchestras and their frequent one-night stands often translated into problems of player retention—resulting in the very vacancies that proved to be Johnson's gain. As Joe Gourdin put it:

The road was the closest thing you could get to being a hobo, and the guys who survived were the gentlemen. . . . [There were] a lot of bums out there, and they weakened to whatever their vices were. It'll eat you alive, and you have to be very, very strong. And without getting religious, you can say that the devil is alive and well out there.⁵¹

In March 1942, despite his father's reservations, Johnson joined yet another territory band managed by the Ferguson Agency—the Snookum Russell Orchestra. This group, it would seem, was one of Denver Ferguson's hottest properties. It was hyped in the local press as "the Nation's Number One swing band . . . positively the hottest dance band ever booked into the Terrace." The *Indianapolis Recorder* continues:

Russell's Orchestra is considered one of the outstanding Negro groups in the country, in demand wherever swing is played. Among the better known engagements of Snookum Russell and his orchestra [are] The Famous Door, Savoy Ballroom in New York, Apollo Theater, Howard Theater, Rockland Palace, and every large theater in the country.⁵²

Hired initially only to fill a vacancy, Johnson remained with Russell's group for close to eight months. During his tenure with the band he was able to hone his skills as an arranger even further; helping in this process was the opportunity to work alongside such musicians in this eleven-piece band as trumpeter Fats Navarro, tenor saxophonist Charlie Carmen, and bassist Ray Brown. Johnson's memories of Fats Navarro are especially fond: "Fats Navarro and myself became very, very dear friends. We sat together on the bus. We roomed together on many occasions. We were like brothers. He was a phenomenal player."⁵³ In any event, a variety of venues was the spice of these musicians' lives—whether in dance halls or tobacco warehouses. Joe Gourdin, whose tour of duty with the Christine Chapman Orchestra coincided more or less with Johnson's eight-month association with Russell, evoked the atmosphere of time and place.

When you got down to North Carolina—they didn't have ballrooms—you got into the tobacco warehouses . . . there were white bands, too, that did that, like Hal McIntyre, not the Benny Goodmans or the Duke Ellingtons, but the seconds—the Louis Primas, the Hal McIntyres, the Ray Anthonys—people like that. Each town [on the circuit] had a night—like maybe Tuesday night might be the night for Winston Salem, North Carolina. The payroll was structured around a certain whatever—the booking agent and the tobacco warehouse people. If Tuesday was the night for Winston-Salem, then you could see a sign up there where it said: NEXT WEEK LUCKY MILLINDER.⁵⁴

The Snookum Russell Orchestra was disbanded around the beginning of October 1942, and J.J. Johnson returned to Indianapolis. But the weekend of Saturday and Sunday, October 3 and 4, 1942, signaled one of the sweeping developments in his career, when, with band personnel constantly changing, the visiting Benny Carter found himself short of a trombonist. Thanks to a recommendation by vocalist Earl Coleman, Johnson played a couple of sets with the Benny Carter Orchestra at the Sunset Terrace. Carter was duly impressed, and this led to an association with the major jazz composer, arranger, and multi-instrumentalist that was to last some two and a half years.

Recently turned thirty-five—he was born August 7, 1905—Benny Carter had already established a compelling presence on the international jazz scene as leader and arranger. He had worked in that capacity with the bands of Fletcher Henderson and Don Redman, in addition to leading his own orchestra in New York. It was a group that included at various times sidemen at the cutting edge of early swing, such as Sid Catlett, Ben Webster, and Dickie Wells. From 1935 to 1938 Carter had worked in Europe, including serving as an arranger for the BBC and leading tours of England, France, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands. Upon his return to the United States in 1938 Carter had led a newly formed band at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. His subsequent appearance at the Sunset Terrace in October