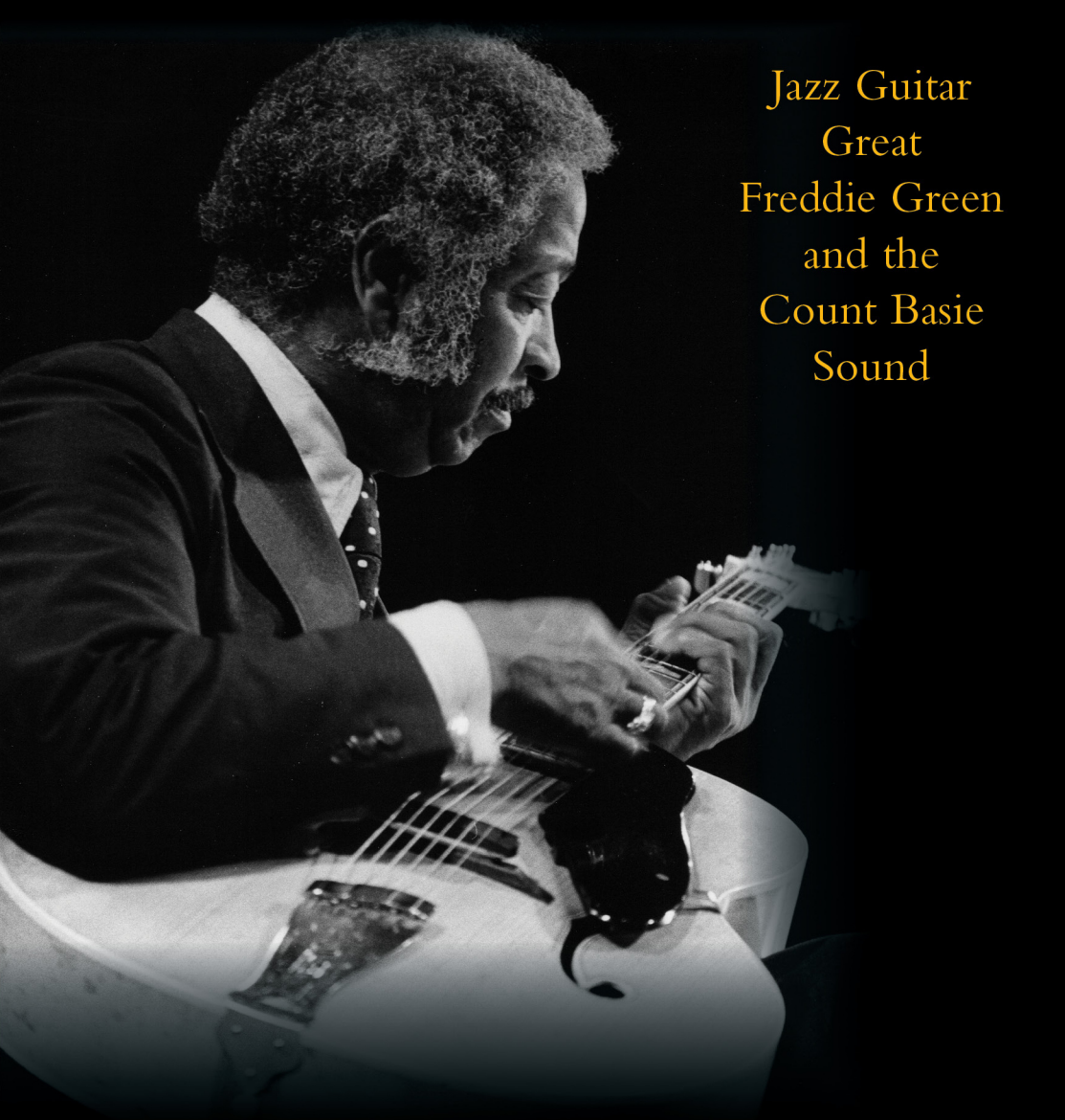

Jazz Guitar Great Freddie Green and the Count Basie Sound

# RHYTHM IS MY BEAT

ALFRED GREEN

# Rhythm Is My Beat

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# Rhythm Is My Beat

*Jazz Guitar Great Freddie Green and the Count Basie Sound*

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***"Nana,"*** *Anna Simmons Mosley*
***"Mr. Rhythm,"*** *Freddie William Green*
***"The Count,"*** *William James Basie*

# Contents

# Foreword

Many lament the inability to clearly hear archtop rhythm specialist Freddie Green (before the advent of amplification, guitarists of the big band era are often said to have been more felt than heard), but after all, for the most part he did play a self-effacing supporting role throughout his lengthy career, fifty years of which was spent as the keystone of Count Basie's peerless rhythm sections. As you'll learn from this lovingly written, colorful, but sometimes bittersweet biography by son Al (who I originally crossed paths with shortly after his father's death in 1987 while writing "Freddie Green Remembered" for *Guitar Player* magazine), Freddie, who came to be known as "Mr. Rhythm," tried to use an amplifier, but members of Basie's rhythm section wouldn't have anything to do with it. So he remained acoustic, setting the stage for the birth of a legend.

Over the years, I've played in my share of big bands and have seen the instructions that are included on some guitar parts: "like Freddie Green" (or words to that effect). While such directions reflect Green's iconic status, they can't be taken too literally. After all, to play exactly like him you'd need not only the obvious accoutrements (same guitar, pick, etc.; the easy but perhaps costly part); you'd also have to have the same spirit and sensibilities, which is an impossibility. Green was a singularity. No other guitarist had or has his same light but authoritative sense of swing, melded with a liquid harmonic sense. When he played, he became one with a rhythm section—

inseparable—which continues to vex guitarists wanting to know how he did what he did. But that seems to have been how it was meant to be.

Jim Hall (in his oft-quoted 1983 *Guitar Player* cover story, which I had a hand in) said, "If you pruned the tree of jazz, Freddie Green would be the only person left." Apart from the importance of rhythm in jazz, that statement seems to acknowledge that Mr. Rhythm was at the center of one of its most important periods, one that witnessed the emergence of the likes of Lester Young, Buck Clayton, Jimmy Rushing, Helen Humes, Billie Holiday, and many others, all of whom passed through the Basie band. At the same time, he was also the center of the band's rhythm section—an unprecedented position for a guitarist—where he served as not only its focal point but also its rhythmic conscience.

—Jim Ferguson

# Preface

Should Freddie Green, jazz master of the acoustic rhythm guitar, be:

- buried in his sound that is seldom heard but always felt?
- hidden in the enigma of his innovative technique?
- locked away in his fifty-year loyalty to one band?
- consumed by his role as the sacrificial guardian of Count Basie 4/4 time?
- questioned for his lack of single-string solos?
- trapped in his elegantly understated persona?

I suspect jazz aficionados would say not. Freddie Green's story must be told in spite of his not being a household name. But if the biographer is the son of this iconic jazz figure, how then does he write a biography without ultimately morphing it into his autobiography . . . I submit, with a great deal of thought. However, having said that, a few father-son vignettes are in order, hopefully in a less intrusive way when presented as front matter.

In the early 1940s, Freddie Green made his first trip with the Count Basie band to his beloved hometown of Charleston, South Carolina. Family and friends anxiously awaited the return of their home-grown celebrity. Neighbors like the Purvises, "Big Mama" Janie Robinson, the Cunninghams, and even uninvited ones, gathered with their children to get a glimpse of native son Freddie Green, and hopefully that of "The Count" himself as

they invaded Uncle Willie's yard. As a four-year-old not understanding all the attention Dad was receiving, I begin to throw a tantrum. "Why are all these people grabbing at my Daddy? He's mine! Go home!" I began to jump up and down and yelled, "Daddy, Daddy, me, me!" The crowd moved in tighter, closing the circle around the celebrated Charlestonian and pushing me farther to the perimeter. Suddenly, Dad emerged from the pack of adults, reached over the swarm of curious children, plucked me out, and whispered, *"You don't have to shout to be heard. I always know you're there."* How appropriate that this sentiment also characterized Freddie Green's music, creating a sound at times barely audible, yet when missing, the silence was deafening. He lived his life in much the same way, quietly attracting admiration and respect *but always at arm's length*. Get too close or too intrusive and the laconic Freddie Green emerged. Despite his reputation as the finest acoustic rhythm guitarist in the history of jazz, Freddie Green, "Mr. Rhythm," was a private enigma. He understood that being an entertainer demanded a certain amount of public access but he would not hesitate to take control with a stern: "Hey, wait a minute now!" when he felt put-upon.

At age nine I had already developed my Freddie Green persona; I studied his gait, his speech patterns, his guarded laughter when in public in contrast to his robust belly laugh presented at some family gatherings. I wanted to be him, play his music, dress nattily in classic tweeds as he did, and follow his global footsteps. I felt fortunate that I had a father to imitate, albeit mostly from memory dictated by the rigors of his profession. However, even when Dad was at home in New York, time spent together was still at a premium. When Basie went on break, Dad rarely said no to sideman studio gigs from session leaders eager to have Freddie Green anchor their sound. And if an open itinerary occurred while in some warm climate like Los Angeles or Florida, Dad's passion for golf may have trumped his flight home. The time set aside for father and son often ended in disappointment. In an attempt to allay the hurt of a broken promise, the pledge of an even bigger and better outing on our next elusive date was offered up. Was it to lessen the pain of his son's disenchantment or perhaps to spare himself the guilt and possible rejection by his youngest? Unfortunately, my response was never a healthy temper tantrum but a rational decision to tuck away my feelings and allow myself to embrace the rare moment with him before he quickly disappeared again. My feelings toward the Count Basie Band (Dad's extended family) tempered, as I slowly became envious of the amount of access they had to him that I didn't.

Our relationship developed into one of *best buddies*. However, this was a disservice to both of us because it became increasingly more difficult to

address my needs as a son or his as a father. Best friends can distance themselves at a moment's notice without having to carry as much emotional baggage as does family. Thankfully, with the passage of time and maturity, we were able to develop a more *father-son* relationship and *aggressively* pursued each other at every available opportunity, particularly during the last ten years of his life.

At the age of ten or eleven, Dad sat me in the fourth row of the Apollo Theater on an aisle seat so that he could easily see me from the stage. He filled my lap with goodies from the concession stand and told me not to move until he came to get me. The curtain opened, the motorized bandstand moved forward, and the band started to swing to an excited Apollo crowd. I anxiously waited for Freddie Green to take center stage to share the spotlight with soloists like Paul Gonsalves (tenor sax) or Harry "Sweets" Edison (trumpet); however, much to my dismay he just sat there going chunk, chunk, chunk. But how could this starstruck "Rhythm and Blues" groupie kid understand that his father was just chunk, chunk, chunking away at jazz history? It was not until my late teens that, like a tsunami, a wave of heightened awareness of Dad's iconic status in the jazz world and in the art of playing acoustic rhythm guitar internalized. By the age of forty, I was consumed by a desire to understand the genesis of comments like that of jazz historian and composer Gunther Schuller in his book *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz 1930–1945*, where he asserts:

> Reams have been written about the Basie rhythm section and with good reason, it is and always has been one of the most consistent and resplendent joys in all of jazz, almost always relied upon, and almost always living up to expectations. There is a reason for that, and that reason is Freddie Green.

In May of 1983 Dad and I spent approximately thirty-eight uninterrupted days together at my house in San Diego. After finishing a gig at the Fox Theater in St. Louis, Dad was hospitalized on May 2 with problems of an enlarged prostate. The Basie band left immediately for Texas leaving their celebrated guitarist behind. He was particularly disappointed because after Texas the band flew to Japan, one of his favorite countries. He and I decided it would be best for him to recuperate in San Diego and wait for the band, which was scheduled to play the San Diego Zoo after Japan. Happenstance would have it that I had just taken a two-week vacation awaiting the birth of my son Justin, so the timing was perfect.

I suspect that it was his hospitalization at the age of seventy-two and his having been left behind after nearly five decades of uninterrupted service to

the Basie band that brought to his consciousness the question of his mortality. This awareness, I submit, caused him to purposefully initiate extended dialogue about his life in Charleston, his family, and the roads traveled with the Basie band. Our talks were spontaneous, often triggered by a period in time, a musician's name, a particular Basie tune—anything that would ignite a memory that manifested in vivid, extended Freddie Green anecdotes. For example, at dinner I mentioned that I was concerned that his right eye looked a little pinkish. Dad said it was bothering him a bit but thought it may have come from riding the Basie bus leaning his head on the window with the air-conditioning vents right there. This comment segued into stories of the early Basie band riding the segregated roads traveling south.

In addition to the history lesson, he made sure I knew of the vast amount of music manuscripts, photos, contracts, original copies of tunes he had written, along with an array of memorabilia amassed in two closets in his New York apartment. It seems odd to me now that neither he nor I ever mentioned a book or a repository for his papers during those talks. I just thought he was preparing me for what he felt was inevitable: someone seeking me out as a resource to address his legacy.

About a week after Dad's death in 1987, I received a call from the celebrated author Albert Murray, Count Basie's co-author of *Good Morning Blues: The Autobiography of Count Basie*, extending his condolences and offering to write Freddie Green's biography. I said I was honored, but we were still grieving and needed time to process such important decisions. After our conversation I was flooded with emotion and anxiety pushing *me* to pay homage to Dad, pushing me to write his biography.

Since then, having examined his papers and read old correspondence from authors wanting to write his autobiography or a Freddie Green guitar style workbook, I feel now with comfortable certainty that Dad was providing me the essentials to write his story. It was not his style to ask directly, but his intuitive confidence assumed that ultimately I would.

In possession of Dad's history lesson, his papers, and his extensive memorabilia, along with the inevitable introduction to Freddie Green historian/guitarist Michael Pettersen through the freddiegreen.org website (created and maintained by Michael with web designer/guitarist Carl Severance), I quickly established a common interest in working with Michael on a Freddie Green biography. With a clear understanding of division of labor with my writing the text and Michael generously compiling the appendices on "the Freddie Green Style," the research began. From the Atlantic to the Pacific and the continent of Europe, more than thirty jazz musicians, historians, educators, fans, family, and friends shared in detail their Freddie Green experiences in interviews conducted by both me and Michael.

From its inception, I was plagued with the question: could I trust myself to give an unbiased accounting of guitarist Freddie Green? To help minimize this concern, a conscious effort to inject myself into the text in the first person or to identify Freddie Green as "Dad" happens *only* when not doing so might confuse the reader or call into question the source of such intimate material. I felt Freddie Green's story had to be written as much as was humanly possible in his voice with this author as the presenting medium.

Portions of Green's dialogue are extracted from the unprecedented (Freddie was always distrustful of interviews) five-hour interview with British jazz critic and author Stanley Dance and his wife, jazz journalist and producer Helen Oakley Dance, conducted on January 14, 1977, commissioned by the Smithsonian Institute and housed at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University. Extracting its content verbatim and in its entirety would have interrupted the flow of text, but more importantly, it would have missed the subtle Freddie Green nuances imbedded in the Dance interview that ultimately breathe additional life into the musician and the man.

Adhering to a strict chronology is important; however, turning a blind eye to material that presents in the future that supports or questions the past, often produces wry, regimented facts void of inquiry. For example, not having weaved a Freddie Green statement made in 1977 into the text of the 1930s that questions his recall of when his first child was born could have gone unnoticed in a straight timeline approach. To further accommodate a fluid chronology, the tenure of musicians in Basie's band has been locked in parentheses—e.g., tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves (1946–1949)—allowing musicians' comments and anecdotes to move a little more freely. And to further recognize the musicians as they emerge throughout the text, their instruments are identified thusly: (tp) trumpet, (btb) bass trumpet, (flh) flugelhorn, (tb) trombone, (btb) bass trombone, (as) alto saxophone, (ts) tenor saxophone, (bs) baritone saxophone, (cl) clarinet, (f) flute, (p) piano, (g) guitar, (b) bass, (d) drums, and (vo) vocals. Lastly, to ensure that the text is chronologically friendly, a formal chronology is provided in the front matter, listing milestones in Freddie Green's professional and personal life. The Count Basie band rosters were like swinging doors on a western saloon—a constant coming and going of musicians. However, throughout Basie's "Old Testament" Band and his "New Testament" Orchestras, there were certain rosters that were more musically noteworthy than others (e.g., the band of October 13, 1937). The musicians of those strategic bands that helped shape the character of the Basie sound or any others that were critical in telling Freddie Green's story punctuate the text.

# Acknowledgments

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contributors whose voices lend credence to Green's status as a jazz icon: Dr. Mark Allen, James Chirillo, Dr. Trevor De Clercq, and Carl Severance (musician and creative webmaster for the Freddie Green website). To Sr. Editor Bennett Graff and Assistant Editor Monica Savaglia, thank you for your support and technical/editorial guidance.

My eternal gratitude to the wonderful editorial skills of my first editor, my sister, "the Little Colonel," Carol Poteat-Buchanan. Her attention to detail, particularly the flow of the narrative, kept this author focused. What I considered drudgery, she called a labor of love.

And finally, I would be skin and bones anchored to this chair were it not for the care of my loving wife, Judy, checking in with her plate of bruschetta or homemade pizza made especially for me without cheese, and a glass of wine that sustained me until dinner. And for her sacrifice, love, and care throughout this author's journey—my eternal gratitude, my eternal love. And to Justin, Jamie, and Tracey, all pushing their Dad to get it done, "Thanks, I needed that."

And for excerpts drawn from other published works: *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz 1930–1945*, by Gunther Schuller (1989), 360w from pp. 226–227, 241, 245, 262, "By permission of Oxford University Press, USA." Excerpts from GOOD MORNING BLUES: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF COUNT BASIE by Count Basie as told to Albert Murray, copyright 1985 by Albert Murray and Count Basie Enterprises, Inc. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Random House LLC. All rights reserved. Excerpts from pp. 79, 190, 211 from *A Thousand Honey Creeks Later: My Life in Music from Basie to Motown* by Preston Love, 1977. Reprinted by permission of Wesleyan University Press. I am eternally grateful for the massive compilation of Count Basie data: recording dates, rosters, musicians, band itineraries, list of arrangers, and tune titles all packaged in "the "almanac" of a musical career spanning seven decades" and housed in Chris Sheridan: *Count Basie: A Bio-Discography*, published by Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1986.

# Chronology

**1911** Freddie Green (hereafter FG) is born March 31.

**1922** FG's father dies; his mother is pregnant with her second child.

**1923** Clarence Green, Freddie's brother, is born.

An undisciplined youth, FG is sent to New York to live with his maternal aunt, Nana.

Nana and Freddie move to Harlem from "Hell's Kitchen."

**1926** FG drops out of Frederick Douglass Junior High School.

**1928** FG's mother marries Rev. Isaiah W. Bennett on March 22.

Half-brother Joseph G. Bennett is born prematurely on September 16.

**1929** Freddie's mother dies, and he returns to Charleston with Nana to bury her.

FG marries childhood sweetheart, Rosie Leotha Elmore, in Charleston in February.

Together with Samuel Walker Jr., a friend and Jenkins Orphanage band student, FG learns music theory and harmony tutored and mentored by Professor Blake, music instructor at the Jenkins Orphanage.

FG pawns his ukulele for the more resonating banjo and plays his first job with the Nighthawks, a local Charleston band that includes tenor saxophonist Lonnie Simmons.

**1930** FG tours Maine as the baritone singer with the orphanage barbershop quartet and abandons them in New York, when the band visits the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. Freddie again lives with Nana, who gets him a few jobs playing the house party circuit with stride pianists.

Freddie Green Jr. is born in Charleston on October 15.

**1931** FG's wife and newborn son join FG in New York.

**1932** FG's daughter Miriam Costello Green is born September 20 in Roper Hospital, Charleston.

**1933** FG gets job playing with Lonnie Simmons (ts) and Eric Henry (p) at the Yeah Man Club in Harlem and switches from banjo to guitar at the insistence of the club's manager.

**1934** FG joins stride piano player Willie Gant in a duo format as rhythm guitarist to keep customers dancing.

**1935** FG's daughter Ruby Eloise Green is born on June 2.

**1936** FG's wife, Leotha, dies during premature stillbirth of fourth child.

FG joins Lonnie Simmons's Rhythm Chicks at the Black Cat Club where he meets dancer Hattie Welch.

**1937** Circa January 2 promoter John Hammond arranges a jam session/audition so that William "Count" Basie can hear and play with Hammond's young protégé, guitarist FG.

FG's first recording date with Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman, Teddy Wilson, and Basieites Buck Clayton, Lester Young, Jo Jones, and Walter Page on January 25.

Basie hires FG, who is to meet the band in Pittsburgh on February 1 for their engagement at the Chatterbox in the luxurious William Penn Hotel.

FG plays with small Basie group on March 14 at mega jam session in New York City, to launch Irving Mills's Master and Variety record labels.

Billie Holiday joins the Basie band mid-March.

Basie's first Apollo engagement with vocalists Billie Holiday and Jimmy Rushing, March 19 thru 25.

FG and Billie Holiday start a relationship and become close friends with Buck Clayton and Lester Young.

FG records with singer Mildred Bailey on June 29.

Prolific arranger, trombonist, and guitarist Eddie Durham joins the Basie band on August 9, recruited by John Hammond.

**1938** FG plays *chorded* solo at Sol Hurok's Benny Goodman Carnegie Hall Jazz Concert on Sunday, January 16.

Count Basie vs. Chick Webb in Battle of Swing at the Savoy Ballroom on Sunday, January 16.

On February 28 Hattie Welch gives birth to Freddie's fourth child, this author, Alfred Green.

Billie Holiday leaves the Basie band after final show at the Apollo Theater on March 3.

Hattie Welch ends relationship with FG.

*The Kansas City Five* (March 18) and *Kansas City Six* (September 27) recordings evidence a stylistic change in FG's playing and also present FG as a vocalist singing "Them There Eyes."

Helen Humes becomes Basie's new singer circa early June.

Harry "Sweets" Edison (tp), fired from "Lucky" Millinder's band, joins Basie January 3 and becomes close friend with FG.

July 11 is the beginning of Basie's extended stay at the Famous Door Club in New York.

FG and James P. Johnson record with Pee Wee Russell on *Rhythmakers*, December 15.

**1939** Herschel Evans, one of the two iconic battling tenors, the other being Lester Young, dies on February 9.

FG records with Glenn Hardman and Joe Sullivan on June 26.

FG, Charlie Christian, Benny Goodman, Count Basie, Lester Young, Buck Clayton, Walter Page, and Jo Jones assemble for John Hammond's "From Spiritual to Swing" recording session.

Charlie Christian gives his friend and roommate FG an amplifier that Freddie experiments with, trying to adjust the electric sound to meld with Basie's rhythm session, to no avail.

**1940** FG wins *Pittsburgh Courier*'s All-American Band Contest in the guitar category over guitarists Charlie Christian and Floyd Smith.

Basie threatens to break up his band.

"I'm not breaking up my band," says Basie in November.

Lester Young leaves the Basie band on Friday, December 13.

On December 13, Jimmy Rushing records the controversial tune "It's the Same Old South" written by Jay Gorney with lyrics by Ed Eliscu.

**1941** Helen Humes leaves Basie to go solo.

FG wins *Metronome*'s Guitarist of the Year reader's poll.

FG's composition "Down for Double" recorded with Basie band November 17.

**1942** FG is jailed in Hollywood and misses the filming of Basie in *Reveille with Beverly*.

**1943** Bassist Walter Page is drafted.
FG's composition "Jumpin' for Maria" (aka "Green") is recorded with Basie band on June 7.
Lester Young returns to fill vacancy left by Don Byas.

**1944** FG absent from marathon transcription session (8:05 a.m. to 11:35 p.m.) for Lang-Worth.
FG has his physical examination at the military induction center.
FG files for a "Delayed Birth Certificate" at Charleston County Health Department on February 17.
On March 20 FG is classified physically unfit to serve in the military.
Lester Young (ts) and Jo Jones (d) are drafted at the end of September.
FG becomes the "All American Rhythm Session" keeper of the flame.

**1945** FG and Elman "Rudy" Rutherford's composition "High Tide" is recorded on May 14.
FG has his first recording session as a leader for the Duke label, *Freddie Green and His Kansas City Seven*.

**1946** Jo Jones rejoins Basie in April after being discharged from the military.
FG records with Benny Carter on *The Fabulous Benny Carter Band*, January 1.
FG records with Illinois Jacquet on *Jumpin' Jacquet*, January 7.
FG marries his second wife, Bernice Johnson-Green.

**1947** FG and Snooky Young's composition "Free Eats" (aka "Jumpin' Jive") is recorded on January 3.
FG, Count Basie, and Milton Ebbins's composition "I Ain't Mad at You," is recorded on May 22.
FG records with Sir Charles Thompson on *Takin' Off*, June 1.
It is the demise of the big bands; in other words, Harry James, Woody Herman, Tommy Dorsey, Les Brown, Benny Carter, and others disband.

**1948** A steady stream of Basie personnel leaves the band, but Basie soldiers on. Jo Jones, Walter Page, "Snooky" Young, Gus Johnson, and Wadell Gray exit.

**1950** Basie breaks up his band January 8 and starts new septet, surprisingly without his guitarist, FG.
Basie's new agent, Willard Alexander, books Basie's septet into the Brass Rail in Chicago on February 8.
Jimmy Rushing leaves Basie and forms his own group.
Between January and May, FG plays with Lester Young's combo at Birdland at night and runs an elevator during the day.

FG surprises Basie and reinstates himself in the band in mid-May.

**1951** FG records with Paul Quinichette on *The Vice Pres.*, October 5.

In July this author as a young teen travels with his dad, FG, and the Basie septet.

**1952** FG records with Charlie Parker on *Night and Day*, March 25.

FG's composition "I Don't Know Yet" is recorded with the Basie band on May 4.

**1953** Arrangers for Basie's New Testament band are challenged by Basie and FG.

FG records for Norman Granz on August 8– (*Jam Session #4*).

FG's composition "Right On" is recorded with Basie band on December 31.

**1954** Basie's first foreign tour is to the continent of Europe, starting on March 12.

FG records with Brother John Sellers on *Brother John Sellers Sings Blues & Folk Songs*, January 1.

FG records with Urbie Green, *On Time Modern*, August 17.

Sonny Payne (d) and Joe Williams (vo) join Basie at the end of December.

**1955** FG records with Al Cohn on *Natural Rhythm* (from LP *The Natural Seven*), August 17.

Joe Williams/Basie record "Everyday I Have the Blues," "Alright Ok You Win" and "The Comeback," on May 17, which boosts the band's ratings and revenue.

FG's composition "Corner Pocket" is recorded with the Basie band on July 26.

Don Wolf writes lyrics to FG's composition "Corner Pocket" and names it "Until I Met You."

FG's album *Mr. Rhythm* is recorded for RCA Victor on December 27.

**1956** FG records with Big Joe Turner on the *Boss of the Blues: Big Joe Turner Sings Kansas City Jazz*, March 6.

Basie returns to the Continent from September 1 to September 12.

**1957** British critics name FG favorite guitarist in *Melody Maker* Poll.

FG's wife, Bernice, dies of cancer.

Basie's first tour of Great Britain from April 1 to April 22 includes Princess Margaret in attendance for two shows at the Royal Festival Hall.

**1958** FG wins the Down Beat Critics Poll Award.

Basie's second trip to Great Britain begins on October 24, with the Royal Command Performance at the Palladium in London on November 17.

**1960** Basie tours and records with Frank Sinatra.

**1961** Joe Williams leaves Basie to go solo on January 12.

**1963** Count Basie tours Japan for the first time.

**1966** FG's surrogate mom, Nana Anna Simmons-Mosley, dies of heart attack on December 20.

**1970** FG, riding in a taxi after a gig, suggests to his driver, cabbie Tim Hauser of the Manhattan Transfer, that they should record his tune "Corner Pocket."

**1975** FG and Herb Ellis record their album *Rhythm Willie* on May 16 for the Concord Jazz label.

**1976** Count Basie has a heart attack in September and lays out for almost three months.

**1977** FG's eldest son, Freddie Green Jr., dies of heart attack on October 1.

**1979** Basie's signature tune, "One O' Clock Jump," is inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame.

**1980** Basie has a viral infection that immobilizes him and causes him to use a go-cart to get around.

**1981** FG is presented the Westbury Jazz Fan Award.

**1982** The Manhattan Transfer wins a Grammy for FG/Don Wolf's "Until I Met You."

**1983** The Countsmen European Tour runs from October 23 to November 12.

Catherine Basie dies on April 11 at home in the Bahamas of a heart attack.

FG has an operation and is missing from Basie's roster for approximately forty-two days.

**1984** Count Basie dies of cancer in Hollywood, Florida, on April 26.

FG gives his eulogy at Basie's funeral at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, April 30.

FG leads the band briefly before Cab Calloway, Thad Jones, Frank Foster, and others.

FG meets President Reagan when the Presidential Medal of Freedom is awarded posthumously to Count Basie on May 23.

FG signs George Wein's contract for the Kool Jazz Festival at Carnegie Hall on June 30.

**1985** FG signs a contract to participate as a member of "The Count Basie Alumnus" in the International Jazz Festival from May 4 to May 12 in Bern, Switzerland, and other cities.

FG is featured in the March 4 issue of *People* magazine: "Now That the Count Is Gone, More Than Ever the Basie Legacy Resides in the Wrist of Guitarist Freddie Green."

FG is awarded the Kansas City Jazz Heritage Award, August 21.

FG is presented with the International Jazz Hall of Fame William (Count) Basie Memorial Award, August 21.

FG is mugged and struck in the head at a gas station in New York a few days before Christmas.

**1986** FG becomes ill in Japan and is treated at Jikei University Hospital.

FG is paid not to play with the Basie splinter group "The Great Basie Eight—A Tribute to Count Basie."

FG records with Ray Brown (b), John Clayton (b), Jeff Hamilton, and Jeff Clayton for the *Superbass* album.

FG is a Grammy nominee for his work on the *Swing Reunion* album.

**1987** FG meets his son (this author) at the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles on February 23 for the 29th Grammy Awards and dinner/dance.

FG's last recording session/video date, with Grammy winner and singer Diane Schuur and the Count Basie orchestra.

Freddie Green, Mr. Rhythm, dies on March 1 in Las Vegas of spontaneous intracranial hemorrhage.

FG's funeral service is held at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Manhattan on March 6.

CHAPTER ONE

# God Said, "Let There Be Rhythm" and Freddie Green Heard the Call

*If you prune the tree of jazz, Freddie Green would be the only person left.*

—Jim Hall[1]

Freddie Green, acoustic rhythm guitarist, is an American institution. He carried his guitar for more than fifty years as if it were his toolbox headed for the assembly lines of Detroit or the coal mines of West Virginia. Green was self-taught and used his ingenuity, tenacity, and musicianship to ensure that the machinery that depended on him, the Count Basie Orchestra, always ran with precision—rhythmically oiled so that all moving parts (the ensemble) functioned as one and above all . . . swung like mad! The standard established by Freddie Green continues to be the yardstick for measuring different genres of rhythm guitar playing. Jazz, western swing, country, rock, and even the far-reaching Scottish Shetland music have all referenced "Play in the Freddie Green Style." Freddie Green "Mr. Rhythm" gave the world of music, the DNA to Swing.

Freddie's jazz journey found its musical beginnings in his close association with the Jenkins Orphanage Band in the city of Charleston, South Carolina.

## The Jenkins Orphanage Draw

*The Jenkins Orphanage had about five different bands that traveled all over the city and would play on different street corners to pick up money to help the orphanage. They used to come into my neighborhood, and I would stop whatever I was doing and follow them all over the city.*

—Freddie Green[2]

Happenstance led the Reverend Daniel Jenkins, a descendant of slaves and a devout, compassionate man, to four unattended and hungry children that lacked sufficient clothing to ward off the cold. Reverend Jenkins and his wife, Lena, provided them food, shelter, comfort, and hope. That experience ultimately gave life to a vision that embraced the needs of all of Charleston's black orphans. Reverend Jenkins' Orphan Aid Society, supported by his congregation with donations and grants from the community, evolved into the Jenkins Orphanage. Its children and family advocacy were the foundation of its services. The orphanage became renowned for its marching brass band, aka the Picaninny Band, that toured the East Coast and even mesmerized European royalty on trips abroad. Known for its musicianship, syncopated rhythms, and a shared exuberance radiating from its young black musicians ages five to twelve (student band members often stayed on well into their teens), the band developed into a source of revenue that helped sustain the orphanage.[3] However, the benevolent Reverend Jenkins was also known for holding a tight grip on the rambunctious personalities and with a firm hand maintained discipline. Doling out extended hours working on the orphanage farm and/or whipping behinds usually got the attention of his few unruly charges.

Young Freddie Green, like many *non*orphans with solid family support, viewed the Jenkins Orphanage Band as a world that reflected his dreams. He was enamored with their music, emulated their bravado, and envied their sense of future. The band's high energy and swagger seemed to defy openly the oppressive "Jim Crow" culture that stifled the spirit of blacks throughout the South. Freddie stayed as close to the band as he could, like a magnet, strategically positioning himself with each encounter on the baseball diamond, in the streets, or at Sunday school. No matter where Charleston "raga-muffins" (an endearing term Freddie's maternal "Uncle Willie" used for all black children under the age of twelve) were, they listened anxiously for the distinct brass sound of the Jenkins Orphanage Band playing in the distance. Freddie and swarms of children with great anticipation spilled into the streets, even at the risk of punishment for chores left undone, ready to enve-

lope themselves in the excitement as blaring horns drew nearer. The possible "whoppin" at the end of the day seemed worth it. Marches played to a ragtime beat, shiny buttons on often ill-fitting-uniforms, and the band's public acclaim were all trappings that convinced the young impressionable Freddie that he wanted to be in that band; he wanted to play that music. Along with the cheering crowds and screaming brass, Freddie followed the band through the streets of Charleston, marching in time alongside his orphanage friends pretending that he was one of them. He often veered off to join the band's splinter groups playing on street corners for donations. Freddie added his talent by singing Irish songs and doing his "Geechie" dances associated with the rhythm, music, and traditions of West African descendants living on the neighboring John's Island where a Creole English called "Gullah" evolved. Freddie's performance was so convincing that his not having an official uniform or formal membership in the Jenkins Orphanage troupe went unnoticed by generous onlookers feeding the collection plate.

In 1912 the Jenkins Orphanage's application for enrollment read: "All applicants must bear the names of two reliable citizens. Only orphan boys and girls, without father and mother are received in the Orphanage Institute, 20 Franklin Street, ages ranging from 5 to 12 years. They are taken free of charge. Children are received without question from the Courts and Police Station."[4]

In spite of the orphan-only policy, black parents applied anyway, eager for a chance to provide their children with skills not just in music but in any of the practical trades being taught at the orphanage. Classes in upholstery (taken as a nonorphan student) would ultimately translate into employment for Freddie Green while he pursued a full-time career in music. The orphanage was a glimmer of hope for many black Charleston parents who saw the institution as an opportunity to "somewhat" overcome the inequities of a social system of exclusion. This was a chance for their sons and daughters to experience a sense of participation in the world beyond the confines of their despotic society. The Jenkins Orphanage Band would be Freddie Green's ticket out.

## Lineage

Frederick William Green was born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1911 to Eloise Simmons Green and Oscar Green, residents of Charleston's third ward. The County Health Department reported no original birth certificate filed at the time of Freddie's birth. The law in South Carolina did not mandate the filing of birth or death certificates until 1915. How-

ever, the Charleston Health Department had on record a "Delayed Birth Certificate" for Freddie Green filed on February 17, 1944, when he was thirty-three years old. The only other evidence of Freddie's actual birth date is anecdotal as passed down by family, acknowledged at celebrations, and remembered by Freddie.

Freddie's maternal grandparents, Harriet and William H. Simmons Sr., had nine children. Freddie's mother, Eloise, was a surviving twin whose sister Mary Isabel died a year after their births. Siblings William Jr. (Uncle Willie) and Anna Laura (Aunt Nana) were influential in Freddie's development into manhood. Nana in particular was his rock and his ardent supporter as he worked toward his goal of becoming a musician. Freddie did not know either of his paternal grandparents. The "Thirteenth Census of the United States 1910—Population" listed Freddie's father, Oscar Green, as head of household at the age of seventeen and sole provider for his younger sister, Julia, age twelve. Oscar's older sister, Essie Green Perry, may have been married by then and lived apart. Oscar Green married Eloise Simmons in the summer of this census year.

## Rooted in Music

Freddie recalled that his childhood in Darts Court just off Rutledge Avenue was "always jumping musically." The Court was a family of twelve two-story wooden-framed houses. Freddie and his parents lived at number seven and paternal Aunt Essie and her sister, Aunt Julie, lived across the courtyard at number ten where Freddie's father would go to play Essie's pump organ. Oscar occasionally played for the church. In the 1977 interview with British jazz critic/writer Stanley Dance and his wife, journalist/producer Helen Oakley Dance, when asked was his father religious, Freddie laughed in the negative.[5]

Freddie was surrounded by music; he heard his mother's voice ringing from the pews of Morris Brown AME Church. He sang alongside her as she prepared the family favorites of baked macaroni, fried chicken, collard greens, or okra soup, ladled over long-grain white rice. He gathered kindling and chopped wood to stoke the fire Eloise needed to bake her sweet potato pie which permeated the air with the smell of cinnamon. Freddie remembered that baking was her specialty. He helped peel the sweet potatoes, ensuring his right to lick the wooden spoon used to mix the pudding-like batter. He replaced the weighted lids of the ominous black cast-iron stove after checking the fire to start his bath water to boil. In the winter, his mother positioned the oversized tin washtub precisely in the middle of the kitchen floor, filled it, checked its temperature, and called her son to the sauna-like setting. The

steam ensured Freddie's comfort in the dead of winter while his mother sang and scrubbed his back. Freddie also absorbed the melodic sounds that accompanied the rhythmic bending of his mother's back. Her arms scrubbed back and forth in 2/4 time on her washboard. She sang: "Ananiah, oooh Ananiiiiah, oooh see what, de Lord has done. Ananiah, oooh Ananiiiiah, oooh see what, de Lord has done." It was as if she only knew that one stanza and would lapse into humming the melody repeatedly when the words eluded her.

From across the courtyard, Aunt Essie would be busy doing her white patron's laundry (she, like Freddie's mother, Eloise, worked as a domestic). Essie meticulously separated the white from the colored clothes and placed them in two enormous black cast-iron three-lagged kettles perched over open flames in the backyard. With sweat dripping down from her tightly wrapped bandana, and with her sawed-off broom handle in hand, Essie's rotund figure poked and stirred the kettles bubbling over with brown Octagon Soap. All the while Freddie could hear her solos ringing out as she practiced for Sunday services.

In 1920 Freddie also absorbed the dusty lyrics of Perry Bradford's "Crazy Blues," recorded by Mamie Smith ("the first vocal recording with choruses based on a twelve-measure structure")[6] and flowing out of a Darts Court window whose frame was in desperate need of a carpenter's level. At the end of the Court he heard the familiar voice of his ten-year-old sweetheart, Rosie Leotha Elmore, singing out his name . . . Freddieee. His early exposure to music, like Aunt Essie's laundry, was bubbling over.

## Pompe Ride de Rooster

Freddie remembered little tunes improvised as a child to taunt street characters. They sang about "Bunk-um Bell's" big behind jutting out so far that Freddie and his friends believed they could sit on it or the half-inch crust on "Barefoot Rhiner's" feet that looked like the sole of somebody's shoe. The infamous "Pompe," the one white police officer who patrolled the ward while riding a bicycle (tagged "The Rooster"), was a frequent target for Freddie and his playmates. Hiding in the bushes, Freddie (in a low-country "Gullah" dialect spoken by inhabitants of John's Island) taunted the cruising cop: "Pompe ride de rooster, ee ride um like ee usta." Before Pompe could get his bearing, Freddie had hightailed it. His friends also scattered like ants—each hoping that he or she would not be the one that Pompe decided to pursue. Many years later, embracing his childhood memories caused Freddie to leave among his manuscripts a handwritten transcription of "Pompe Ride de Rooster."

## The Sponge

Freddie fed his ferocious appetite for music, movies, stage shows, or any entertainment genre passing through his hometown. He frequented the Lincoln Theater at 601 King Street, the only black-owned theater in Charleston. Damian Ireland Thomas, owner of the Lincoln Theater (whose large brick house was across the street from Freddie's Uncle Willie), in writing to the black owner of the Douglass Theatre, in Macon, Georgia, boasted that white theater owners in Charleston often showed up at the Lincoln Theater and left envious of Thomas's state-of-the-art projection system.[7] However, had they ventured to the outdoor toilet, they would not have been impressed with the concrete trough running alongside of the building that served as a urinal. Rather than stand next to a row of strangers holding his nose while trying to pee, Freddie often tightened his muscles, held his water, and ran home after the movie to the privacy of the family outhouse (and held his nose).

Freddie's mother was apprehensive about his obsession with the secular music world. Whenever he strayed from home, Eloise did not have to look far, for Freddie had already defined the corridors in which he traveled: "I liked everything about the theater, the lights and what they were doing on stage, and how they did it. I used to go and just watch them attentively."[8] Barnstorming minstrel shows like the all-black Silas Green from New Orleans were sheer magic for him. He watched while black laborers drove spikes, raised poles, and hoisted tarpaulins to form the one-stage tent on Charleston's Harmon Field. Much to Eloise's dismay, Freddie was obsessed with his little rhyming ditty "Silas Green from New Orleans, yeah . . . Silas Green from New Orleans," and would repeat it constantly until opening day of the show where one would find him perched on the edge of his seat. He quickly got a reality check when he heard his mother screech, "Freddie, pleeease!" He soaked up the performances of Silas Green and Lilas Bean and mimicked what he remembered. However, Freddie weighed the implication of their slapstick comedy (like: "Your head sets on one end of your spine and you sets on the other")[9] before repeating it in front of his parents or any other churchgoing adult. After carefully censoring the show's material, Freddie would belt out a tune or do a dance that he was certain would delight Eloise and Oscar and win him favor.

The traveling show of the Four Whitman Sisters, whose repertoire included song, dance, and banjo playing, was another of Freddie's favorites: "They had two kids that used to dance, 'Pops' and Louie. They were terrific tap dancers."[10] The Whitmans were financially successful "high yella" (very light-skinned) mulatto women who blackened their faces during their show.

At times they used their performance as social commentary, daring to adorn themselves with blond wigs while dancing with another sister dressed as a male in black face. This probably caused a great deal of anxiety for their black audiences. Freddie was old enough to be aware of the implication of such an act in his racially charged city.[11]

## The Two Trees

In the middle of Charleston's Ashley Avenue, there stood an oak tree, monumental in size (from Freddie's ten-year-old perspective), where foreboding remnants of frayed hangman's ropes dangled. Freddie and his peers knew it as a tree of death and repression and quickened their pace as they passed it during the day—at night they hauled ass anxiously, never looking up, nor back. Uncle Willie lived at 318 Ashley Avenue, a two-minute dash from the infamous "Hangman's Tree."

In the right-hand corner of Uncle Willie's backyard and visible from the avenue was the family's fig tree, "The Tree of Life." Its massive roots protruded out of the ground like ancestral fingers that had worked the soil for an eternity. The tree provided comfort for Freddie as a boy as it cradled him on its supportive limbs. It was a sanctuary for dreaming, fantasizing, and nourishing oneself on its succulent crimson fruit. Freddie knew when the figs were ripe by the increased activity of the fig eaters flying about. These green, iridescent, hard-shelled fruit beetles made wonderful companions for imaginative boys. Freddie would snatch an unsuspecting beetle while it munched on a fig. He then looped one end of his mother's sewing thread under the beetle's triangular shaped portion of its back, knotted it, and placed the other around his index finger. The beetle when released soared with Freddie running beneath it controlling its flight, pretending to be its pilot. The buzzing sound of the anxious beetle's wings simulated the roar of propellers. Freddie reeled his companion in at the end of the day, bottled it with a piece of fig, and secured the jar with a lid poked with air holes.

The tree was also Freddie's movie prop. Its strong limbs served as imaginary cowboy saddles to ride after a Buck Jones, Tom Mix, or Hoot Gibson Saturday Western matinee at the Lincoln Theater. Freddie often did yard work for Uncle Willie, hoeing and raking weeds in the sweltering midday heat to earn his movie fare. He would then retreat to the dappled shade of the fig tree's umbrella to cool off. Aunt Sylvia, the gentle spouse of Uncle Willie (the only one who could curb his well-meaning lectures gone awry), would treat Freddie to an ice-cold glass of sweetened water and a flat round cookie the size of a saucer called a "Johnny Cake."

Freddie's mother, Eloise, like her West Africa ancestors, believed in the healing power of roots, herbs, and the fig tree. A thick white substance oozed out of the fig's stem when snapped off. This white sap applied to ringworm (the common name for the contagious tinea capitis) was the traditional family remedy to arrest this fungus which sometimes infected Freddie and his Jenkins Orphanage friends who shared baseball caps on and off the field. The consequences were devastating for the gregarious Freddie because they meant isolation. He became a prisoner to a shaved head with white gook that covered his twenty-five-cent-size lesions. A tightly fitted rayon cap made from one of Eloise's sheer stockings covered her son's shame. The life-giving force of the fig tree manifested itself in many ways for Freddie and all who were willing to embrace it.

## The Sting

Like other houses in Charleston's flood zones, Uncle Willie's small three-room wood-framed house sat on brick columns that elevated it above the flood line. Flooding in Charleston presented opportunities for older black boys to fleece unsuspecting white motorists in distress. Freddie was too small to participate, and forbidden by his mother to wade in the floodwater (which could sometimes be over his head). However, Freddie would make a mad dash to the porch whenever there was a heavy rain, praying that it flooded so that he could watch the street theater unfold. Two teens would hide behind Big Mama Jennie's brick wall. They chose this spot right across from Uncle Willie's house because it was there that the water was the deepest and cars had to slow down at that point. With a rag in hand, one of the boys would sneak behind the slow-moving vehicle, soak his rag in the water undetected by the driver, and quickly stuff it into the exhaust pipe causing the engine to stall. These "good Samaritans" then suddenly appeared from nowhere at the driver's window, drenched, offering to push the stuck car to higher ground for a nominal fee. The drivers, afraid of being trapped until the flood subsided, were relieved that these two black boys came along when they did. Sometimes Freddie's friends were the ones hoodwinked by some "cracker" (a pejorative usually used to describe southern whites) who floored the gas pedal when his car hit solid high ground. As he sped away flinging water and mud everywhere, Freddie could hear them yell, "I ain't paying you shit, boy!" Either way, when his friends got ripped off or drivers found themselves bamboozled out of their coins, Freddie rolled on the floor of the porch in uncontrollable laughter. Uncle Willie often had a ringside seat from his front parlor window just in time to see the last sting go down. In a graveled tone

that was undeniably his, he reprimanded the neighborhood youth: "Hey, you scallywags! I know your mama, boy! Wait till I tell her what you doin' out here. Give that white man his money back and push him outta there before you get in trouble." The response was a quick "Yessir, Mista Simmons. Please don't tell Mama. We didn't mean no harm." Uncle Willie was an insurance agent for North Carolina Mutual, a black-owned company established in 1898. He was well known and highly respected and had earned the trust of his community. Uncle Willie often acted as a surrogate guardian (as did many black adults, parenting a neighbor's child). Freddie quietly tiptoed back in the house hoping that Uncle Willie would not find him guilty of willfully encouraging wrongdoing.

## Death of Dad/Birth of Brother

Freddie remembered that he was probably ten or eleven when his father died but could not provide details of his death. However, it soon became evident to Eloise and family that all was not well with her son. The burden of the loss of his father and the emotional absence of his mother, who was still grieving and now pregnant with her second child, weighed heavily on Freddie. He became disobedient, not doing his chores and sassing his mother. Writer Stanley Dance once asked Freddie if he was a quiet child: "No, my mother used to have a problem. Like every time she'd come home there was always something that I did. So I wouldn't say I was quiet. Every time that she came home there was always Freddie did this and Freddie did that."[12]

Uncle Willie, now head of the Simmons clan, assumed the role of father figure and took charge of his undisciplined nephew after the death of Oscar Green. He parented Freddie as he did his own children, St. Julian and Naomi, that is, with a stern voice, a firm hand, and a loving smile that exposed a twinkle from his one gold tooth. He had an ominous benign tumor the size of a golf ball protruding from the top-right-side of his closely shaved head. Uncle Willie's "knot" (as it was fondly referred to in his absence) commanded attention, yet you had better not stare.

After careful counsel with family members and with little objection from her son, Eloise decided that Freddie should complete his schooling while living with her widowed sister, Nana, who had migrated to New York. Nana was a willing participant and thought the change of venue for her nephew would be positive for them both. On August 17, 1923, Eloise gave birth to Freddie's brother, Clarence.

Accompanied by Uncle Willie's wife, Sylvia, Freddie boarded the train heading north with a brown-paper-sack lunch and a cap filled to the brim