

Charlie Cox

Based on an interview by Dan Kochakian on April 10, 1984, and appearing in *Whiskey, Women, And...* No. 15, December 1985. Charlie Cox died Feb. 22, 1985.

I was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts on October 13, 1917. My father was a very fine singer. He had a tenor voice and admired Roland Hayes. I always had music around me as I grew up.

I took lessons and came home from school to practice during my lunch hour. I loved to play.

My parents gave me both piano and violin lessons. My first teacher didn't show me how to hold the violin right and when I went to another teacher, it meant changing the position and I lost interest, so I stayed with the piano and developed that.

I started playing in nightclubs before I finished high school. In my last year of high school, I played little cafes in North Cambridge with a guitar player. When I graduated, I got a scholarship to the New England Conservatory of Music, and I used to play for the chorus and orchestra.

During my high school years, the RKO Keith Theatre was a big showplace. I used to hook there from school to see Cab Calloway, Earl Hines and Duke Ellington.

I worked my way through the Conservatory playing nightclubs like the Checker Caf  and the Crawford House which was in Scollay Square, which was full of theaters and cafes. This was the first stop the sailors made. I replaced Preston Sandiford at the Crawford House, and I played for Sally Keith, the famous stripper, there. During this time, I also tuned pianos and rehearsed singers.

Clubs then were all over: along Massachusetts Avenue, Johnny Wilson's on Tremont Street, Candy's Grill on the other end by West Springfield Street, the Hi-Hat. In Scollay Square; we had the Imperial. All the clubs and little bars had little trios as the house bands. All of the clubs had music before TV came in. People always went out to get their entertainment.

I did a couple of tours with shows to Portland, Maine. I got a lot of show experience that way.

Harry Hicks had a club on Tremont Street called the H & H, and the musicians used to go there to get contacts for work. The bands used to rehearse there. We'd be there during the day and play cards and wait for our bookings. That's where I got my experience, by being part of the group that met there.

In the '40s and '50s, I jumped around among the clubs. I was in the house band at the Checker Inn for a long while during the war in the '40s. Lloyd Trotman was on bass, Bey Perry was on drums, and his brother Joe was on tenor ; and the leader was Sherman Freeman. Joe Neville was the first leader, and when he went into the service, Sherman took over. We were right near the stage door at the RKO Keith, so when the big shows came in, they came over and used to sit in with us. Cab Calloway, Lionel Hampton and Illinois Jacquet would jam with us. It was quite a thrill.

From 1955-58, I played with Paul "Fat Man" Robinson and we traveled to Florida, Philadelphia and the provinces in Canada. This was the first time I traveled this much with a band, because most of the work was centered in Boston at different clubs. Andy McGhee (tenor sax), Oscar Dunham (trumpet) and Bill Tanner (bass) were in the band. Bill used to hold the bass up and walk around with it, a big double bass. Fat Man played alto sax just like Louis Jordan with the same solos and sang the numbers just like Louis. We had a drummer from New York, Eddie. I can't think of his last name. We did some recording for DECCA in 1957. They released a couple of songs, but DECCA was also recording Louis Jordan at the time, so they didn't really push our records. Louis was fading out, but he was still big then.

I played the Hi -Hat with Fat Man. In between, I used to play with Errol Garner. I used to stand up to play the piano then. Fat Man used to wonder how I did it. I felt good doing it and Fat Man liked it because it was different.

I also played the Knickerbocker Club on Stuart Street with Fat Man. Right next door to that was the 1, 2, 3 Lounge where the Jones Brothers worked. You could go from one into the other.

Fat Man's family broke up and he had financial difficulty, so he broke up the band and drove a cab in Cleveland, Ohio, his home. He died five to six years after that in the early 1960s.

With the band broken up, I played strip clubs downtown, the Tic Toc and the Gilded Cage for a long while. This lasted

to about the mid-1960s. I wrote for the singers and dancers. I did arrangements for Stepinfetchit. When he came to the RKO, he came to our club and told me to come up to his dressing room where he told me what he wanted. He was going to New York to the Keith Theatre and I went there and listened to the show, to the music. He was quite a fellow.

I did an arrangement for Earl Hines when he was at the Tic Toc Club.

Around 1970, I went into Berklee (College of Music) to teach. I was tuning the pianos down there, and I would play them. They asked me to teach. I told them that I didn't think so, but I changed my mind soon after and taught there until 1981. It was a nice experience, but it got to be too hectic and the money wasn't that great. I was sitting in class thinking how much money I could make tuning pianos.

Through my career, I've played with many other Boston musicians. Bob Chestnut taught screenwriting at Berklee. He had a band, and I worked with him one time downtown.

When I worked with Jackie Jackson, we used to go up to New Hampshire and play the ballrooms up there.

Jabbo Jenkins used to come down to the Checker Inn and the Paradise in Bowdoin Square to play with us. He was a fine trumpet man. I played with Stanley "Chip" Harris at Chickland in Saugus.

I used to fill in for Sabby Lewis whenever he wanted to take off.

I never played with Tasker Crosson. His band wasn't the best. We used to call it a "schoolin' band" because guys would join Tasker to learn to read, then Joe Neville would take them for his band. The guys who went with Tasker's band were almost amateurs.

Danny Potter used to play with me. He was a nice sax player.

Lawrence Bardouil plays piano with Charlie Harris, who sings and plays cocktail drums. They play at Walter's Restaurant in Brookline and they've played at Mama Catina's in East Boston.

Charlie Hooks, a trumpet and sax man, and I played at Izzy Ort's on Essex Street downtown, a big showplace. Charlie's in Detroit now.

Eugene "Killer" Caines gave up the trumpet and went to work for the MBTA, and Bill Dorsey, another sax player, is a reverend now.

Blanche Calloway sang and danced. She was a traveler like her brother, Cab, and used to come back and forth. When she came to Boston, she got her band together. It was most likely Joe Neville's band that she'd use. They'd travel with her. The time that I played with her, we were up at the Tic Toc and they were going to the Apollo Theater in New York. I didn't want to go because I was in the Conservatory at the time. I didn't realize how good it would have been. So I sat out, and Ernie Trotman, a very good piano player, went with them. I had taken Coleridge Davis' place. Eugene Caines was there then, too.

The Black Cat in Wilmington was one of the biggest show spots. It was part of the circuit with the Boston clubs including the Red Roof and the Log Cabin Inn. Wally's Paradise was the Little Dixie first and featured Sammy Davis and his father and uncle. They used to pass Sammy off as a midget. He was about 14 or 15 and wasn't supposed to be in clubs. They used to be the Sam Marston Trio.

The Little Dixie used to put on some fine shows. Frank Wess used to come there.

I also played with Al Hibbler and with Pete Brown and Bey Perry at the Hi-Hat.

From 1966-70, I was the house pianist at the Carousel in Framingham playing for the big bands for the shows: Diana Ross and the Supremes, Liberace. I tuned his piano and played fill-in parts with the orchestra. Frank Connolly, the man who ran the Carousel, took me up to the racetrack in New Hampshire where I played for Judy Garland.