

## DEEP DEUCE AND THE CULTIVATION OF JAZZ IN OKLAHOMA

Led by certain influential musicians who lived and performed in an area of Oklahoma City called Deep Deuce, jazz music has a significant history in Oklahoma.

Deep Deuce, also called “Deep Second,” located just north of Bricktown in downtown Oklahoma City and centered around Northeast 2nd Street, is known for its historical importance as the center for Black culture in Oklahoma City. In the early 1900s, in a segregated Oklahoma City, Deep Deuce became an entertainment and business center for the Black community. The area boasted restaurants, night clubs, barbershops, doctors’ and lawyers’ offices, beauty shops, clothing stores, a cab company, a movie theater, and many other businesses. Additionally, Deep Deuce was a staging ground for the fight for civil rights. The *Black Dispatch* newspaper, headquartered in Deep Deuce, used the power of the press to fight against segregation in housing, education, transportation, and other public facilities. The Calvary Baptist Church, one of the few buildings in Deep Deuce still remaining today, not only served as the religious center for Oklahoma City’s Black population, but also as a place to organize. The Church served as the site where Oklahoma students planned “sit-ins” at segregated lunch counters and where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke at a “freedom rally.”

Perhaps most significant, during the 1920s and 1930s, Deep Deuce became a thriving center for jazz music, and its musicians helped shape the future of jazz in Oklahoma and across the nation. Jazz, too, was marked by segregation, so it is not surprising that one of Oklahoma’s earliest and greatest jazz bands, the Oklahoma City Blue Devils, was an all Black band that honed their talents with other Black musicians and primarily played for Black audiences.

Beginning in 1924, for a period of about eight years, the Blue Devils, were among the finest bands in the Southwest. The Blue Devils often played at the Ritz Ballroom in Oklahoma City in addition to other music venues in Deep Deuce such as Slaughter’s Hall, Ruby’s Grill, and the famous Aldridge Theater. Notable members of the Blue Devils included Walter Page, Oran “Hot Lips” Page, Eddie Durham, and later, Lester Young, William “Count” Basie, and Jimmy Rushing. Many of the early Blue Devils members, including Basie, Durham, Young, Page, and Rushing, eventually became the Count Basie Orchestra, a musical group that revolutionized American jazz by establishing swing as a predominant jazz style and initiating jazz as a serious artform played not only in clubs but in theaters and concert halls.

Jimmy ‘Five by Five’ Rushing, originally with the Blue Devils before spending nearly twenty years with the Count Basie Orchestra, was born and raised in Deep Deuce. He had a distinctive and soaring singing voice. During his earliest performances, microphones were not available. Fortunately for Rushing, his voice could compete with the loudest horns in any band. Throughout his career, he lent his voice to many of the best jazz bands, participating in the evolution of blues to jazz.

Another Deep Deuce legend was guitar prodigy Charlie Christian. In 1937, Eddie Durham introduced Christian to the electric guitar, an instrument that, at the time, was not yet available to the public. In 1938, when electric guitars appeared on the market, Christian picked one up for himself. Soon, Christian earned a spot in Benny Goodman's band. Goodman was one of the nation's leading jazzmen of the time and one of the few white jazz musicians who would hire Black musicians. Performing with the Benny Goodman Sextet, Christian brought the guitar out of the rhythm section and into the forefront as a solo instrument. He introduced jazz audiences to single string solos on the amplified guitar, forever changing the way the guitar would be featured across multiple genres of music.

While many Oklahomans made an impact on the development of jazz music, the influence of Rushing and Christian were most significant.

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