Passage III

HUMANITIES: This passage is adapted from the article "The Quiet Sideman" by Colin Fleming (©2008 by The American Scholar).

Near the end of his eight years as a recording-session musician, tenor saxophonist Leon "Chu" Berry landed a short-lived spot with Count Basie's orchestra. Standing in for one of the Basie band's two tenor giants, Berry took a lead solo on "Oh, Lady Be Good," the 1924 Gershwin song that Basie had played for years. In the 28 seconds that the solo lasted on February 4, 1939, we are treated to no less than the musical personification of mind and body working together in divine tandem. When you hear the recording for the first time, you're likely to wonder why you've never heard of Chu Berry before.

Why you've never heard of him is pretty simple: a lot of hard-core jazz buffs don't know much about him. Berry was a solid session player who turns up on recordings with Basie, Bessie Smith, Fletcher Henderson, and Billie Holiday. But he did not cut many sessions himself as a leader, and when he soloed, he worked within the recording constraints of the era and the swing genre—fast-moving 78s with solos often lasting for a mere 32 beats.

The people who loved Berry were, not surprisingly, other tenor players, a situation leading to the dreaded "musician's musician" tag. But that's not nearly praise enough to describe Chu Berry, who, when given opportunity, displayed a musical dexterity that would be envied by future generations of horn men.

Berry faced the lot of other horn players: having to grind it out long and hard until something memorable burst through; the prejudices and expectations of the listening public; and the accepted wisdom of what is and isn't art in a given medium. In this case, swing was fodder for dance parties, not music worthy of study.

Oddly enough, Berry's geniality might help explain his failure to court history's favor: it wasn't in his nature to call attention to himself or his playing. Born in 1908 into the black middle class in Wheeling, West Virginia, the laid-back, affable Berry attended West Virginia State in Charleston, where he switched from alto sax to tenor and exhibited the willingness to fit in that characterized his presence in so many dance bands. He was the rare artist who refused to put his interests above those of the band, even if that meant playing ensemble passages rather than taking a healthy allotment of solo breaks.

College proved a training ground for Berry the bandsman, as he teamed up with a number of amateur outfits. He never played simply to show off. Instead, he tried to bring out the positive attributes in any given situation or setting. Later, when Berry is performing with the Calloway ensemble, we hear some ragged, out-of-tune playing until Berry's first few solo notes emerge. The other players, no longer languidly blowing through their charts, immediately surge up behind him, all fighting-fit. Once Berry finishes his solo, the shenanigans resume.

After making his way to New York, Berry immediately became a presence and soon was in demand. The great jazz orchestras of the swing era were fronted by musical directors/arrangers—Duke Ellington was preeminent—who drew the acclaim. The sidemen were musical traveling salesmen who sold someone else's wares in the best style they could manage. It was with Fletcher Henderson that Berry began to ditch some of the sideman's subservient trappings. For starters, Henderson wrote in keys that were rare for the jazz orchestras of the day, and his somber, indigo-inflected voicings were ideal for a player of Berry's introspective approach to his instrument: Berry sounds as if he's being swallowed by his sax. "Blues in C Sharp Minor," for instance, is odd, haunting, and ultimately relaxing. A Berry solo in it is slightly off mike, making the listener feel as though he's been playing for some time before we finally hear him. The effect is unnerving, as if we weren't paying close attention.

In June 1940, Cab Calloway granted Berry a showcase piece, "A Ghost of a Chance," the sole recording in Berry's career to feature him from start to finish. It was his "Body and Soul," a response to Coleman Hawkins's famous recording, intended not as a riposte to a rival, but as the other half of a dialogue. Its rubato lines are disembodied from the music meant to accompany it, which is spartan to begin with. This may be Berry's one and only instance of indulgence on a record, a cathedral of a solo in its flourishes, angles, ornamentations, reflexivity. If sunlight could pass through music, "A Ghost of a Chance" would funnel it out in the broadest spectrum of colors.

21. Based on the passage, how did Berry's personality affect his career?

A. His ambitious, competitive personality was off-putting to other musicians, who were reluctant to play with him.
B. His genial personality endeared him to other musicians, but his career suffered when he spent more time socializing than practicing.
C. His modest and easygoing personality kept him out of the spotlight and, consequently, he received less attention as a performer.
D. His shy, introspective personality was misunderstood as snobbish arrogance, so he was offered few recording-session jobs.

22. The author mentions Berry's solo in "Oh, Lady Be Good" primarily in order to:

F. illustrate why most people haven't heard of Berry.
G. provide an example of Berry's musical excellence.
H. contrast Berry's later work with Berry's early work.
J. establish that Berry's solo was better than Count Basie's.

23. The author points out that many serious jazz enthusiasts know little about Berry primarily in order to:

A. criticize scholarship that has provided an unbalanced history of jazz.
B. demonstrate that the author is more knowledgeable than most jazz scholars.
C. illustrate the secrecy Berry demanded in order to preserve his family's privacy.
D. explain why it's likely that readers would be unfamiliar with Berry.

24. According to the author, Berry's solos as a recording-session musician were often very short because he:

F. wasn't a very good saxophone player until late in his career.
G. drew more attention playing ensemble passages.
H. worked within the recording constraints of the era.
J. preferred playing many short solos to playing a few long ones.

25. The author indicates that during Berry's time as a musician, swing music was primarily regarded as:

A. an opportunity for soloists to show off their skills.
B. a genre to be most appreciated by young people.
C. musician's music that lacked a popular audience.
D. music for dance parties but not music for study.

26. As it is used in line 35, the word *court* most nearly means to:

F. seek to attract.
G. romantically pursue.
H. dangerously provoke.
J. pass judgment upon.

27. In the seventh paragraph (lines 57–75), the author compares sidemen to traveling salesmen in order to:

A. make clear how often musicians had to travel.
B. indicate that musicians often had side jobs.
C. illustrate sidemen's supportive role in a band.
D. show how hard sidemen worked to get hired.

28. The author describes Henderson's "Blues in C Sharp Minor" as:

F. innovative, indulgent, and colorful.
G. fast-moving, memorable, and eerie.
H. artful, sublime, and unexpectedly upbeat.
J. odd, haunting, and relaxing.

29. According to the author, what is unique about the June 1940 rendition of the song "A Ghost of a Chance"?

A. It's the only recorded piece that features Berry from beginning to end.
B. Berry plays an alto saxophone instead of his usual tenor saxophone.
C. It was the only public performance Berry gave in 1940.
D. Berry showcases his unrivaled ability to play a solo that blends into the background.

30. The author uses the phrase "a cathedral of a solo" (line 85) most likely to create a sense that Berry's solo was:

F. an intricate, awe-inspiring masterpiece.
G. a somber, mournful hymn.
H. a crumbling remnant of Berry's once-great skill.
J. a testament to Calloway's band leadership.