

ONCE UPON A TUNE IN AMERICA

JazzUK contributor PETER VACHER'S new book of interviews *Soloists and Sidemen: American Jazz Stories*, catches the authentic voices of 30 working jazz musicians talking about their lives. In these extracts, Benny Goodman drummer Nick Fatool and jazz-and-gospel saxophonist Vi Redd give a little of the flavour.

NICK FATOOL

In 1978, I was staying at clarinettist Joe Darensbourg's home when he announced he was going out for a haircut. Would I like to accompany him? Joe's barber turned out to be one of the most valued drummers of the big band era. Nick Fatool was also a generous host and a gracious interviewee. He died in September 2000, aged 85.

'How I started, let's see, I used to beat on a chair with two rungs out of the chair. So my father used to throw me out of the house. He'd say, "too noisy - get outta here." We had a two-storey house, and my mother rented the top part to this other couple. The guy was a drummer and I used to hear the drums from down below. It sounded so good to me. You know, the sound of it, so that I kept practising

and listening to him. Anyway, he owed us a month's rent, \$15. So my mother said, "if you teach my son, like give him ten lessons, a dollar and half a lesson!" He said, "I'll be glad to do it." Hell, I used to go up there every week and that's how I started. I was about ten years old.

'When I was fourteen, I worked in a nightclub. And I had to wear spats. I bought a tuxedo, spats, shirt and everything they wanted for \$12. I'd work at this nightclub, get to bed at 4 o'clock in the morning, get up at 7 and go to high school. I used to have all the music books in front of me in the algebra class. So when the guy says, "what's the shortest distance between two points?" I'd say I didn't know, and he threw me out of the class.

'I got along good with Benny



(Goodman) for about a year and then he started picking on guys. Not on me especially, 'cause I didn't look at him too much. Anyway, I think he liked me because Gene Krupa was such a great showman that I think he wanted a drummer just to play. I tried to play as good as I could in back of Benny.

'So he comes up to me after about three months and he says, "how do you like the band?" I said, "well, Benny, it's a pleasure." How could I say anything else? It was. And he says, "I told Leonard Vannerson to give you a raise of \$25." At that time I was getting \$175 so he gave me a raise to \$200. This is in 1939. So Leonard came up and said, "what the hell did you do to Benny to have him give you a raise? He's never given anybody a raise in his life." I said, "I just keep away from him. I just play as good as I can in back of him, and I don't say anything to him!"

VI REDD

When alto saxophonist and vocalist Vi Redd appeared at Ronnie Scott's in September 1967, she was so successful that her engagement was extended until Christmas. Although she toured in Europe with Count Basie the following year, she did not return to London until October 1993 when she played another much-lauded season at the Pizza Express in Dean Street. I taped her account of her career at that time. Her original inspiration was clearly her Louisiana-born drummer father, Alton Redd.

'He was the most benevolent man I've ever known, always concerned about other people. Papa Jo Jones was crazy about Daddy. He told me Daddy would always come down to the train station in Los Angeles to pick them - the Basie guys - up, and ride them into town two or three at a time. This

was when black musicians couldn't get places to stay.

'He used to call all over town for musicians, and mother said, "I don't know, Alton, why are you calling this place and that? Your daughter can do it." I guess he had his chauvinist thing going too. So finally, I had to hire him, and after that we used to get together all the time.

'Bebop was just thrust upon me. In 1948 when I went to college, I got a band together. Martha Young was the piano player, she was Lee and Lester Young's niece, just a lovely person. My brother played drums. I played saxophone. My first husband, Nathaniel Meeks, played trumpet. All of Nathaniel's friends were into bebop and Nat used to play all the bebop songs; he had all of Dizzy's records. Martha and I were just caught up in it, and, oh, I loved it.

'People like Teddy Edwards and Sonny Criss were ahead of me, they were really gigging then. But we all knew each other. Hampton Hawes was a nice, nice guy. He got into the drug scene and then he got out of it, received a pardon from one of the Kennedy brothers. Hamp's father was a Presbyterian minister and didn't approve of jazz. But Hamp used to sneak the guys into the rectory and they'd have jam sessions there. I saw Charlie Parker once, it was at the musicians' union office. Local 767. He was having trouble getting to play because he had come from New York and didn't have his union card. When I saw him that day, he was saying "please talk to Elmer Fain, the union business agent, I gotta work my job tonight." I said, "is that Bird? He's so humble."

Peter Vacher's Soloists and Sidemen: American Jazz Stories, is out on Northway Publications, price £14.99

