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BIG BAND NEWS

by Music Librarian **CHRISTOPHER POPA**

BASIE and the BAHAMAS



Although Count Basie had a home at 174-27 Adelaide Road, near 175th Street, in the St. Albans neighborhood of Queens, New York (he moved there in 1946 and the Landmarks Preservation Commission named the area an historic district in 2011), he and his family also owned a five-bedroom home on two acres in Freeport, the Grand Bahamas starting in the early 1970s.



Though he seldom got there more than several times a year, the Bahamas offered a beautiful, warm setting which Basie, then in his 70s, his second wife, Catherine, and their daughter, Diane, could enjoy together.





Basie [r.] with his wife Catherine [l.], and daughter Diane [ctr.] in their New York home in 1957.



Above in a photo by Chuck Fishman, Basie plays a melodica for his bulldog Graf, as they sit poolside at his residence in Freeport, Bahamas in March 1979. (He later had another bulldog named Willie.)

“Even with its imported pink marble outer wall and columns, it is an unpretentious house,” Pamela Noel stated in an article, “Count Basie’s Quiet Retreat In The Bahamas,” in Jet magazine. “The neatly manicured front lawn with tropical flowers, palm trees, and white statuettes is only slightly larger than that of the house next door. There is little evidence that one of America’s greatest band leaders is in residence. Well, maybe the funny-looking blue and white Jeep with the fringed top in the carport does give a clue. The license plate simply reads ‘BASIE.’”

“We came down here on one of those club trips of Catherine’s,” Basie explained to Noel. “We were doing a tour and looking at places. She saw this place. We got out and just walked around with everybody else. I thought it was pretty nice. “ After the visit, Basie went back on the road. “When I got back, she said, ‘Well, you know that little house you said you liked? Well, you got it!’ It was this house.”



Basie and Catherine, in a photo by Ron Galella, taken at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. in 1981.

An attractive and outgoing woman, she was a native of Cleveland, Ohio and had been a singer and a dancer. They were married on July 12, 1942 and were together more than 40 years (she even kept the Orchestra's financial books in later years). Their only biological child, Diane, was born February 6, 1944 (and Basie named his music publishing company after her).

While in Freeport, Bahamas, Catherine and her husband started what was first known as the Catherine Basie School for Exceptional Children.



And the Port Lucaya Marketplace in Freeport, shown above, was named "Count Basie Square" in his honor.

After Catherine died of a heart attack in April 1983 at the age of 67, life wasn't easy without her. "I still feel her," Basie told writer Noel. "I talk to her every day; most assuredly three times a day in prayer."

When at home in Freeport, he relaxed, sitting in a rocking chair in front of the television ("The Price Is Right" was his favorite program) or lounging on the patio. He also spent part of the day doing exercise, including using a walking machine and stretching in his solar-heated pool, following a series of health problems including a heart attack and stroke during the 1970s.

To paraphrase an old expression, Basie's Freeport home is where the heart is.

"Getting down here means one beautiful thing to me, and that's coming to see my baby," Basie in 1984 said of his daughter Diane who lived there year-round. "She is her father's heart and the only star in the house, even when the Count is home," writer Noel reported. "There are also family and friends whose company he enjoys and who help care for Diane when he is away."

On April 14, 1984, the day after a one-nighter at the University of Vermont in Burlington, Vermont, the Count was taken ill. He passed away from pancreatic cancer on April 26, 1984 at Doctors Hospital in Hollywood, Florida.

Basie was survived by daughter Diane (whom he called "Princess") and left his \$1.5 million fortune in a trust to provide for her.



Count Basie had appointed his informally adopted son Aaron Woodward III [above], an ordained Baptist minister and an accountant by profession, to be Diane's guardian. (Over the years, Basie had informally adopted several "children," including Woodward, Lamont Gilmore of New York, and Rosemarie Matthews of Philadelphia.)

Woodward was removed from his role as Diane's guardian in 2012, after he failed to account for \$70,000 that belonged to her.

According to court papers, Diane Basie, who was age 71 in 2015 and living with caregivers in Florida, was "severely retarded and only marginally communicative."

From 1984 to 2009, Woodward also held various top-level positions (eventually CEO) with Count Basie Enterprises, Inc., the administrative operation behind The Count Basie Orchestra. Though the Orchestra filed a bankruptcy petition in 1987, listing the Internal Revenue Service as its major creditor in the amount of \$330,000, it continued to operate following Basie's death under a succession of leaders - namely Eric Dixon, Thad Jones, Frank Foster, Grover Mitchell, Bill Hughes, Dennis Mackrel, and, since 2013, trumpeter Scotty Barnhart .

BASIE ORCHESTRA ITINERARY

Oct 11, 2019—Visalia Fox Theatre, Visalia, California

Oct 12, 2019—Bakersfield Fox Theater, Bakersfield, California

Oct 13, 2019—Avalon Casino Ballroom, Avalon, California

Oct 15-16, 2019—Yoshi's, Oakland, California

Oct 17, 2019—Chapman University, Orange, California

The Orchestra still boasts two members handpicked by the Count: trombonist Clarence Banks and vocalist Carmen Bradford.

LATEST BASIE RELEASES



I wish that I could report that there is some previously-unissued Count Basie music now available, or even a new CD by today's Basie band. Unfortunately, at the moment the most recent offerings are merely repackagings of old Basie LPs, like the above album from Vinyl Passion that presents the Count and His Orchestra live on September 7, 1956 at the Konserthuset in Gothenburg, Sweden. Ironically, the record was first issued in 1957 by Verve as “Basie in London” (MG V-8199) and that misleading title continues to be used here.



Matchball Records has put out the album “Count Basie: Chairman Of The Board,” originally released in 1959 by Roulette (SR 52032). They have added some bonus selections from the same sessions and a few live versions of the tunes, but nothing that wasn't already out on an authorized label.

What prompted this “Basie in the Bahamas” issue of the “Big Band News” was the category 5 hurricane “Dorian,” which formed on August 24, 2019, dealt a severe blow to the Bahamas, then dissipated on September 10, 2019.

Here are several images showing a sample of the devastation, as the death toll continues to rise:

