

# THE NOVEL CITY

## JAZZ FIRES BURNING

The story of jazz legend Hank Geer.

By Scott Lax



**1** 934. Franklin Roosevelt is finishing his first of four terms as President of the United States. Dizzy Dean pitches the St. Louis Cardinals to a World Championship. Adolph Hitler prepares to declare war on the world while Arturo Toscanini conducts his sublime symphonies throughout Europe. And in Cleveland, 12-year-old Henry Gersphacher prepares to play his first job as a professional musician: the calliope player in Clyde Beatty's Circus. Henry collects the wood and stokes the boiler to keep the fires burning under the big calliope. He sits down. His fingers touch the keys, and the heat from the boiler sends air through the pipes that make such wondrous sounds. Little Henry Gersphacher laughs—he's a musician now, and in the magic that rises from the fire and steam he finds the source of the joy and purpose that will stay with him long after Dizzy Dean and Hitler and Roosevelt and Toscanini are gone.

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1996. Election night. Hank Geer, 74, and I sit at the bar at Sammy's in the Flats. Bill Clinton has just been re-elected. Dennis Kucinich resurrected. the school levy finally respected and casino boats soundly rejected. But we don't talk about politics. In this place, politics are secondary to jazz. This is the grown-up Henry Gersphacher's corner of the world, where he plays his music six nights a week, and

this is where you come to listen to the man who has played for so long and taught so many.

To listen to Hank Geer perform jazz and to hear him talk is to be enveloped in the cool mist of American music's better days. And there's his look, of course—utterly hip, but not in the postmodern, ironic, retro way. His is authentic hip a look put together when to look like this was to declare your camaraderie with your black brothers and with the jazz cats who helped to push away the boundaries in music and race and society.

Always there is the black beret, tilted just so; the white, neatly clipped beard; the white shirt and silk scarf around the neck. There's the khaki sport jacket with lots of pockets, the black pants and shoes, the burning cigarette

and golden glass on the piano. Hank Geer looks like his music. Marilyn Holderfield has sung with Hank since 1977. "Everything goes back to his music," she says of her friend and musical mentor. "He lives jazz."

And this is true, for all I can see. I've watched Hank back up singers at Sammy's on his sax and piano for 15 years, and I've listened as he talks about life. He starts with any topic, — the architecture of Sammy's, say. Then he weaves in sculpting, plumbing, primitive man, 13th chords, burlesque, cooking, Russian composers and how it's possible to think in different harmonics. Finally, he seamlessly draws the subjects together with music. *Always* with music.

Tonight his eyes widen and he puts his hands on his head,

as if keeping the wonder of it all from overwhelming him. In the course of his dissertation he laughs, grimaces, sings, shouts, whispers.

He talks about language, how musicians throughout the world couldn't understand one another until Bach came along and standardized the musical literature.

"Everybody had a different language, all derived from different alphabets. You had musicians in Spain, France, Germany, Italy, but nobody could understand anybody else."

The standardization of the musical literature has become, he says, "The seventh wonder of the world. Every system fits into that [musical] system."

His voice drops to a quiet, awed pitch.

"The only international language belongs to the musicians," he says. "How lucky we are."

But you must hear him play to understand, hear him blow air through his horn and listen to the notes leave his fingers and fill the piano, to feel this lifetime of passion and devotion.

I have heard him say numerous times, to singers and musicians, to his fans, to no one in particular: "You've got to keep the jazz fires burning."

He's done his part. From that day in 1934 when the calliope's pipes first opened up at young Henry Gersphacher's urging, Hank Geer's fire still burns. ■