

Swingin' with Preston Love

By David L. Bristow

[Preston Love](#), 1921-2004, was a renowned jazz saxophonist and bandleader. This article first appeared in *Nebraska Life*, September/October 1999.

Arriving at Omaha's Dreamland Ballroom one night in September 1943, a young Preston Love had no reason to suspect that his life was about to change. He had come to hear Count Basie and His Orchestra, and that was good fortune enough for one night. Love adored Basie and his music, and revered Basie's orchestra like a pantheon of gods—especially Earle Warren, the lead alto saxophonist. Whenever Basie came to town (and he played Omaha regularly in those days), Preston Love was there, down front. He listened carefully when the band was playing, and chatted with Warren when it was not.

This was not just a case of youthful hero-worship. It may have started that way, but by 1943, Love was 22 years old and was himself a promising young alto sax player. For years, he had “studied the band as you would study medicine.” And by playing with a succession of regional bands, the young Omahan was starting to make a name for himself.

But that didn't prepare him to hear Earle Warren say,
“Hey, boy, I've been looking for you.”

Basie's lead alto man—looking for *Preston Love*? For *what*?

Warren explained that he was suffering from a stomach ulcer and needed medical treatment. He'd have to leave the band for several weeks. Therefore, Basie needed a replacement, and needed one soon. Warren said that he'd been told that there was a young man in Omaha who sounded just like him.

“I thought he was joking and kept laughing,” Love recalls. His mood changed when he realized that Warren was serious, and that Basie wanted an audition on the spot. As in *right now*. On stage. In front of a hometown audience.

“I almost panicked with fear,” Love says, “But Earle reassured me.”

Within minutes, Love's sax was sent for, an extra chair was placed beside Earle Warren's, and Love climbed up on stage to the murmurs of the crowd. Basie called the next tune, and the band began to play. At a certain point, Basie motioned for the band to play softly, so he could better hear Love's saxophone.

"I remember it sounding as though I was all alone," Love says, "with no sound but mine on the stage."

And to everyone's surprise—except to Preston Love and to those who knew of his obsession with Warren's style—it was a sound uncannily similar to that of Earle Warren.

And then there was no doubt in anyone's mind, not among the orchestra or the audience. After playing for an hour with the band, Love received word from Basie's valet to be at the Union Station next morning at eight-thirty.

So began Preston Love's first foray into the big time. It would not be his last. Though his first stint with Count Basie lasted only six weeks until Earle Warren's recovery, a second tour with the band lasted two and a half years. And as the years went by, the names on Love's resumé began to accumulate: Billie Holiday, Ray Charles, the Temptations, Smokey Robinson, Diana Ross, Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin—and that is only a partial listing. Love's musical talent has, in a very literal sense, taken him around the world. But it all began in Omaha, Nebraska, and that is the thing of which Love wants to remind us.

"Where you are sitting now," Preston Love explains from his office at the *Omaha Star* on North 24th Street, just across from the building that used to be the Dreamland Ballroom, "is in the middle of where there were *hundreds* of great players, *black* players."

During the 1930s and 40s, Omaha was a booming regional center of jazz. In an era in which every small town had its own dance hall, countless bands toured incessantly to bring live music to every corner of the nation. In the vast territory of the upper plains—from Wyoming to Minnesota—those bands were likely to come from Omaha. "We were centrally located," Love says, "And this was the hub, the booking center for the

biggest dance territory in the world ... we played all the dance pavilions and ballrooms in the Midwest. Minnesota had thousands. Nebraska had hundreds... all the bands were working six or seven nights a week. So therefore, to service these bands, we brought musicians from all over the country to Omaha because the employment was here. There were some other cities—like Kansas City, or Oklahoma City—where they had some bands, but Omaha was the hub because we were centrally located. So these hundreds of black musicians came here. From these were some *great* players. The proof of it is where did they go, those who were good? *Ellington. Basie.* ...Every band of any note had several ex-Omahans. They might not have been born in Omaha, but they lived here for several years while they played.”

A good example is Jo Jones, a drummer who joined Count Basie’s band in 1935. “He came here in ’31,” Love recalls, “He was working a joint at 24th and Franklin, down the street here, for three dollars a night. And Basie brought him to Kansas City, and he revolutionized the way jazz was played.” To this day, Jones is often referred to as the “father of modern drumming.”

It’s difficult to comprehend the surplus of jazz talent that Omaha possessed in those days. The ease with which a local band could replace a musician is astonishing. Love remembers that “on a couple of occasions we’d be leaving town with Lloyd Hunter’s band, to go out on tour. The first trumpet doesn’t show up. ‘Drive on there, man, on Erskine, and get Bruce.’ ‘Drive on, there, and get so-and-so.’ ‘Hey man, not working now? C’mon, get your stuff and jump in the bus.’ And we’d leave town with great players.”

We Don’t Serve Any Colored Race.

So read a sign that Preston Love saw in a café window in 1956-57. Not in Alabama, not in Mississippi—but in Omaha, Nebraska. Perhaps the sign was a little blatant by Omaha standards, but the tradition it proclaimed was real enough. For Preston Love it meant knowing that he would not be served in certain places of business. It meant having to sit in the balcony while at the Orpheum Theatre—even when Count Basie and his all-black orchestra occupied the stage.

For Count Basie and his musicians, it meant being unwelcome in the white-owned hotels and having to stay in black-owned boarding houses.

Looking out the front window at the *Omaha Star*, Love can point to the former locations of some of these boarding houses:

“Duke stayed around here, with Mrs. Evans. Cab [Calloway] used to stay over here. The first time I saw Ella Fitzgerald and her band, they were staying about two blocks from here... I think Duke stayed at the Fontenelle once, which was the big hotel, but he couldn’t eat in the dining room. He had to eat in his room.”

As maddingly unjust as segregation was, it allowed the flourishing of a uniquely African-American culture—which included uniquely African-American music. “Whites didn’t fool around with that jazz or blues thing then,” Love insists. “They didn’t talk that stuff. It was considered exclusively black—rightfully so—in that day.”

Whites didn’t play jazz? What about Glenn Miller, Stan Kenton, or Benny Goodman, the “King of Swing”?

This is where the word *jazz* gets tricky. Later in our conversation, Love suggested that the white orchestras, and *not* the black ones, were the ones playing “jazz.”

Confused? Consider the following incident, witnessed by Preston Love at a Duke Ellington show in Omaha: Two white kids near the stage begin talking with Ellington between songs, one of them making some inane comment such as,

“Mr. Ellington, you’re playing some *jazz!*”

Stating the obvious? No. Duke corrected his young admirer:

“Well, I don’t know that our music is *jazz*,” he said, “I wouldn’t use that word—it’s *improvisational* music...”

“We never used the term *jazz*,” Love explains. “That was taboo. That’s corn.” Jazz was what the squares played. Black musicians had a derisive vocabulary to describe inauthentic white versions of their music—*cornball*, *ricky-ticky*, *ta-ta-ta-ta*.

“We considered Glenn Miller’s version of ‘In the Mood’ (written by a black musician, Joe Garland) and Tommy Dorsey’s ‘Boogie Woogie’ as corny and laughable,” Love says.

White audiences didn’t share that opinion, but they heard the distinction as well. When the Preston Love Orchestra began touring the Midwest in the 1950s, Love already knew from experience that “no matter how good your repertoire was from the standpoint of swinging... you must play at least fifty percent of the music in the Lawrence Welk and Guy Lombardo style to please the dancers in that area.”

Though the term *jazz* eventually became acceptable to black musicians, these days Love prefers to describe what he does as *black music*. By this, he isn’t saying that whites can’t play it authentically; in fact, Love was hiring white musicians for his orchestra as early as 1950, when integrated bands were still very rare. What he *is* saying is that the thing at the heart of jazz and the blues—the thing that defines them—is something that came directly from the African-American experience. That something is often called the *blue note*.

“It’s hard to catch when you’re playing,” Love says of the blue note. “I might play a whole night and never get close. Great players catch it all the time, great soloists. Hard to catch, and it’s certainly hard to define. Indefinable. But it is what it is.

“There’s a particular interval in harmony—in any harmony, when you’re improvising—that seems to make it have credible dignity. It’s the blue note. That bluesy (not necessarily the blues music) thing that gives it meaning, that ties it all together and makes sense of what you’re doing.”

It isn’t a matter of technical skill. Consider drummer Buddy Rich, a fabulous technician who billed himself as “The World’s Greatest Drummer.”

“No, he was *not*,” Love insists. “He wasn’t close. I could name you fifteen black drummers without taking a breath who had that rhythmic thing and that *feeling* thing a hundred times more than he did. I don’t know if they had better *technique* than he did....

“Some of the great players of history *never* caught it. Benny Goodman never caught the blue note once. And it was an exclusively black thing in most cases, because we thought that way, and because we were trying to express and *find* that

thing. And every now and then I'll catch it—and it is like having an orgasm. It is a fulfillment within itself... That blue note is *essential* to jazz. It tears at your heart, even in the fastest, the most complex piece of music. If they get that blue note, *it's a son-of-a-bitch.*"

The scores of jazz musicians are gone from Omaha now, gone the way of the big bands and the small-town dance halls. "We atrophied as a music center with the advent of television, air travel, and faster transportation," Love says. "The ballrooms all ceased to exist. So therefore, the musicians of stature, of caliber, stopped living here... Every musician here, almost, has to have a day job to make a decent living."

Love is not speaking of the local classical scene (which he praises), but of jazz and the blues. "The future is grim, for certain places," he says. "There'll always be black music of some kind, but it's become so 'integrated' that we're losing our identity in it. And the authenticity and the tradition is dying, because everybody has to play a certain way to be popular... That creative African-American thing has just died. The purpose was to express ourselves—we didn't make any money. Not that much. It wasn't much about money, so we expressed ourselves while the Glenn Millers, the Benny Goodmans played great dance music for the white audiences."

At age 78, Preston Love is still expressing himself—and through a variety of media. There's his his weekly jazz column in the *Omaha World-Herald*, his 1997 autobiography, *A Thousand Honey Creeks Later*, and especially, there's his music. Come to the Destiny Cafe in Omaha's Old Market any Friday or Saturday night, and you'll be drawn upstairs by the sound of Love's four-piece band.

Old jazz men don't retire. Certainly not when they sound as good as Preston Love does. Alto sax, tenor sax, flute, even vocals—he handles each with such ease and grace (and energy!) that age seems irrelevant. On a good night, the Destiny is filled with a responsive, diverse crowd—black and white, young and old, male and female—and the band and the audience draw energy from each other, in a jazz conversation that crosses barriers of time and race.

They come upstairs in tuxedos and prom dresses, about half a dozen teenagers out on the town. It's Saturday night, and the teens have come to hear Preston Love and his band. Nothing unusual about that.

Except those matters of age, and race, and popular music styles that change as often as the weather.

Think of it this way: these kids—young adults now, dressed to the nines and sitting politely around a few small tables—were born about the same time as MTV. Preston Love was born about the same time as radio. One might wonder, just what—to put it bluntly—could this living relic of the big band era have to offer that these teenagers would want to hear?

Love answers the unspoken question with his saxophone. And as the familiar opening notes of “In the Mood” burst from his horn, a remarkable thing happens. The young people respond to those notes just as their grandparents did when the song was a hit in 1941: they spring up from their chairs and jitterbug.

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