

# William (Count) Basie

Pianist and Bandleader  
1904-1984

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by David Conrads

In the rich and celebrated musical history of Kansas City, few individuals are more closely associated with hard-swinging, riff-based Kansas City jazz style than Count Basie. The Count Basie Orchestra became both the best known and the longest-lived big band to emerge from this region, and Basie made Kansas City jazz nationally and internationally renowned.

Bill Basie was born in New Jersey and studied the piano with his mother and, informally, with Fats Waller. By the mid-1920s, he was touring on the vaudeville circuit. Stranded in Kansas City in 1927, Basie got a job as the accompanist for silent movies at the Eblon Theater. An outstanding musician, he joined Walter Page's Blue Devils in Oklahoma in 1928 and was lured away to the Bennie Moten Orchestra the following year.

As a member of the rhythm section of the Moten band, Basie played a key role in the development of the Kansas City style of jazz. After Moten's untimely death in 1935, Basie and saxophonist Buster Smith continued the Moten tradition, putting together a nine-piece band made up of many former members of the Blue Devils and the Moten band. The Barons of Rhythm played in Kansas City at the Reno Club (where Basie acquired his nickname), and their performances were broadcast over an experimental short-wave radio station. This exposure led to contracts with a national booking agency and the Decca Record Company.

By 1937, the Count Basie Orchestra, enlarged to a 13-piece band, had become one of the leading big bands of the era. Their early recordings, including "One O'Clock Jump," "Jumpin' At the Woodside," and "Taxi War Dance," marked the pinnacle of Kansas City jazz, and by the end of the decade, the band was an international success.

The popularity of big bands waned after World War II, and Basie was forced to disband in 1950. He reorganized a big band in 1952 and continued to tour and record into the 1970s.



**Sources**

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