



JUDITH GILSON

Associate professor of art Lewis Watts at an exhibit of his vintage jazz images in San Francisco

Jazz Detective

By Scott Rappaport

Most people know San Francisco's Fillmore District because of its historic auditorium, immortalized by legendary rock promoter Bill Graham in the late 1960s. But long before the neighborhood attracted bands like the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane, the Fillmore was home to a booming jazz scene—a community so laden with clubs and virtuoso players in the 1940s and '50s, it became known as the Harlem of the West.

With more than two-dozen venues located within one square mile, it was not unusual to spot jazz greats like Billie Holiday, John Coltrane, or Dexter Gordon hanging out or taking the stage to jam with local musicians after returning from their gigs “for whites only” in downtown Bay Area clubs.

The San Francisco Redevelopment Agency tore down the neighborhood in the mid-1960s—ostensibly to improve it—and the community literally vanished. But a new

book *Harlem of the West: The San Francisco Fillmore Jazz Era*, coauthored by UC Santa Cruz associate professor of art Lewis Watts, unearths the community's glorious past. Filled with rare archival photographs of such jazz legends as Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, Johnny Mathis, and Charlie Parker—plus accounts from neighborhood residents and musicians who were there at its peak—the book celebrates a nearly forgotten chapter in jazz and African American history on the West Coast.



“This is the first time that this history has seen the light of day,” observes Watts, who spent more than a decade collecting and painstakingly restoring more than 200 photos for the book. “Any physical trace of that community is long gone.”

The spark for the book was ignited in 1990 when Watts was working on a photography project in the Fillmore District—located between the city's Haight District and Pacific Heights. As he explored the neighborhood, Watts came upon Red Powell's Shine Parlour, across the street from the Fillmore Auditorium.

“I wandered into Red's shoeshine shop, and on the walls were all these great photos of people like Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, Duke Ellington, and Ray Charles,” recalls Watts. “I asked Red if I could photograph his wall. But he was having none of it—he basically threw me out of his shop.”

When Watts returned to Red's only a few months

later, the shop was empty, with no sign of either Red or the photographs. Although he feared that the collection was lost for good, Watts continued to inquire about the photos. Finally in 1996, while doing additional research for the city's redevelopment agency, Watts asked a barber working across the street from Red's if he had any idea where the priceless photos might be. “I was thrilled by his response,” says Watts. “He told me they were in his back room.”

It turned out that Red had suffered a fatal stroke just a few weeks after Watts had visited. The landlord had closed up the store and took everything off the walls. But as he was preparing to dump it all in the trash, the barber—Reggie Pettus—had rescued all of the photos and memorabilia from certain oblivion. Pettus kindly allowed Watts access to the archive.

“There were a lot of snapshots and 8-by-10 glossy photos pinned on walls,” says

Images from *Harlem of the West*



Eartha Kitt with neighborhood children, 1950s



R&B singer Ruth Brown at the Booker T. Washington Cocktail Lounge, circa 1950s



Dexter Gordon jamming at Bop City, 1950s



Duke Ellington (front row, center) and friends in the Manor Plaza Hotel, circa 1950s

Jazz Detective *continued*

Watts. “Some were framed and mounted, but a lot more were stuffed in Safeway bags and in boxes. Shoeshine parlors, barbershops, and beauty parlors have traditionally been the historical archives of the African American community.”

Watts arduously took on the process of digitally restoring the images, many of which were damaged and faded with marks and waterstains, or had corners ripped off. “The idea was to bring back the detail and represent the intent of the photographs,” explains Watts. “That was my responsibility to the original photographers.”

Watts used the photo collection for his agency report on the Fillmore neighborhood and also curated an exhibition of them that was displayed outside the City Hall Office of then–San Francisco mayor Willie Brown, and later in the Arts Commission Gallery across the street. This generated even more photos and memorabilia.

“When I first found Red’s photos, there were no labels, no identification,” says Watts. “But as we exhibited them in the community, we built the history. People began sharing their stories, and we ended up discovering other photographers or their families, as well as their photographs.”

By 1998, Watts had joined forces with coauthor Elizabeth Pepin, whom he

met when she was conducting research for a PBS documentary on the history of the Fillmore District. Pepin had been employed by Bill Graham Presents as manager and historian of the Fillmore Auditorium in the mid-1980s. Since both Watts and Pepin were making plans to create a book about the Fillmore community, they decided to collaborate on *Harlem of the West*.

“Elizabeth primarily handled interviews and text, and I handled obtaining, restoring, and curating the photos,” says Watts, who joined the UC Santa Cruz faculty in 2001, halfway through the 10-year project.

The book was published in January by Chronicle Books and celebrated with an exhibition, reception, and concert in February at the San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum. Performing at the event was the Fillmore Jazz Preservation Big Band, a 20-piece orchestra featuring many top Bay Area jazz musicians under the direction of UC Santa Cruz director of jazz studies Karlton Hester.

Harlem of the West captures a joyful and momentous era in the country’s African American musical history. It serves as a reflection of a magical place at a remarkable time. And, as Watts optimistically notes: “Knowledge of the past can hopefully lead to a renaissance in the future.”

Harlem of the West is available from Bay Tree Bookstore; see page 29.



Advertisement for Louis Armstrong at the New Orleans Swing Club, 1950s



Charles Sullivan (left), one of the most active promoters of African American music west of the Mississippi. In the middle is Lionel Hampton wearing Wesley Johnson Sr.’s cowboy hat.



Billie Holiday, her beloved Chihuahua, and Wesley Johnson Sr. at the Club Flamingo, in the early 1950s



Patrons of the Texas Playhouse, early 1950s



John Handy, Pony Poindexter, John Coltrane, and Frank Fisher at Jimbo’s Bop City, 1950s