

B. J. PAPA

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B.J. Papa, a jazz musician, band leader and composer, remembers his adventures in North Beach, San Francisco, from 1955 to the present. He lived through the time of the Beat Poets and played background saxophone and piano as they recited their poems. He also played in the Fillmore, the Tenderloin and the Haight districts, as well as many places in North Beach.

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[B.J. Papa died August 31, 2008. He lived on Washington Square in North Beach at Casa Melissa. At the end of this interview, see: "Notes on B.J. Papa".]

B.J. Papa – February 25, 2008

**Interviewer: Catz Forsman at Caffe Trieste Coffee House,
601 Vallejo Street at Grant Avenue, San Francisco, California**

CATZ FORSMAN: Could you could talk about your earliest arrival here in North Beach?

B.J. PAPA: Around 1955 when I came. I was just getting interested in music at the time. I think at that time the poets were having [readings] - Ginsberg – I'm not quite sure of the exact year "Howl" came out. Was it '56?

CATZ: That sounds about right, yes.

B.J.: O.K. They were all close – [Lawrence] Ferlinghetti, [Kenneth] Rexroth, Kenneth Patchen, Bob Kaufman, Lloyd Buckley. They were all around at that time, around '55, '56. I started playing music around '57. Within the next several years you had all these venues. Of course, Trieste opened in '56. I remember that, but it seemed like it was more of a coffee/espresso [place]. I mean it was very popular because it was new and the espresso, the cappuccinos and all that stuff. But up the street you had Miss Smith's Tearoom, which later became the Coffee Gallery. Across the street where the Thai restaurant is now was the [Co-Existence] Bagel Shop and where the Grant & Green is was the Camel Club, as I remember it. Then down Green Street going towards Columbus and Stockton you had The Anxious Asp and The [Jazz] Cellar and they both had music. The Cellar was like a basement kind of a thing and a lot of the poets read

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BJ Papa, Young and Old

there. Bill Weejawn and Sonny Nelson [drummer for the Cellar Jazz Quintet] were the proprietors of The Cellar, which was a very lively spot because it was down in the basement. It's where Café Sport is; it's right next [door]. So some of the musicians that were there at that time was like Max Hochstein, a bass player, a pretty well-known player. Larry Lewis was another of the bass players that also played there. Sonny Nelson, he was the owner but there were a lot of other drummers that came in like Bob Marchese. He was one of the drummers that came in there. Rue Mo, who was a legendary saxophonist, that was in town that lived out here. Also[there was] Pony Poindexter. So you had all these really talented musicians along with the spoken word and Patchen and Kaufman and Rexroth. I'm trying to think whether I saw Lawrence Ferlinghetti there but he was around, so he was there. Johnny Mathis used to hang out at Miss Smith's Tearoom and that's where I first saw Bob Kaufman. It later became the Coffee Gallery. So all these things were happening in the Fifties. There was a place up past Union called The Place. It was like really a very offbeat kind of a [chuckle] – you know, it was very strange, in other words. There was a big guy named Eric Nord who the old-timers hung around with. He had a warehouse back over by the Embarcadero and he used to have these great parties. [Eric Nord started the Hungry i nightclub which was later bought by Enrico Banducci.]

CATZ: At The Place?

B.J.: No, at his warehouse. The Place was like a mixed bag. You never knew what to expect. It was one of those kind of places. That's why I guess they called it The Place.

It was very interesting. It was kind of a dark room. There was so much excitement going on because of just the nature of what was happening. After "Howl" came out the press really came down – because of the language, I guess, the press made a big deal out of it. So it brought more people to the area. I mean in the Sixties it was like Haight Street here in the late Fifties, going into the Sixties. North Beach was the place because you had the International Settlement, which was down on Pacific Avenue between Montgomery and Columbus Ave.]. Then you had all of the activity that was happening on Broadway. You had the [The] Jazz Workshop, which was one of the reasons – being a musician - that brought me over to the area because of all the great bands around here. The name people came there. You also had the El Matador. This is going into the late Fifties, into the Sixties. You also had Basin Street [West], which was on the corner of Montgomery and Broadway. It's the big building where the Cow something is now, not where the club for the women [is] across the street, but on the southwest corner. That big building on the corner.

CATZ: Of Broadway?

B.J.: Yes, and Montgomery. So it was right across the street from what they call Girls or something now. That used to be Basin Street West. On the corner of Kearny and Broadway you had the Off-Broadway Club and there was entertainment there. So you had all these different varieties of entertainment. You also had the Brewery, which was the LePlanter Club at that time – where the Pacific Brewery is down there. That was the LePlanter's Club. Then you had Mike's Pool Hall where the hotel is next to the Garden

of Eden. It used to be Little Joe's – one them Joe's. So that was another happening place because they had just one pool table – maybe they might have had more than one, but I know they had one and there used to be some big-time betting on those pool things. There was a couple of guys that were really very talented. A partner of mine, a Puerto Rican guy from New York, he taught most of the Chinese kids, the young cats, that was hanging out, how to shoot.

CATZ: How to shoot pool?

B.J.: Yes.

CATZ: Chinese kids?

B.J.: Well, they were young, you know. I was working at Mt. Zion Hospital at the time when I was going to school trying to learn how to play. So I met Arthur Chan and he introduced me to most of the cats. We were all around the same age, twenties. So all the Chinese cats used to come to LePlanter's club and then they would go from there to Mike's Pool Hall and they'd get their pool lessons. The first time I saw Bob Kaufman was in Miss Smith's Tearoom ...

CATZ: The Coffee Gallery.

B.J.: Well, it is the Coffee Gallery now but it was Miss Smith's Tearoom [then]. The woman that owned the place was one of the women that helped Johnny Mathis career get started. But anyway, my first impression of Bob Kaufman was here's this guy; he was a good-looking guy before he got all messed up. It was like he was holding court in there. He was gyrating.

CATZ: So you played jazz, right?

B.J.: Yes, yes, I played jazz.

CATZ: What instrument did you play?

B.J.: I was a saxophonist for many years; saxophone person for many years. That's what I played when I was over here. Now at the Anxious Asp there were two musicians, well, maybe three that kind of stuck out. Dick Pardee, who's still alive, but I don't see [him]. As far as I know he is still around. [And then there was] Omar Tanguay a trombone player and Frank Phillips, who played an unusual large trumpet... It had another name. I can't think of the name of it right now. And [there was] Bob Selig – Bob Selig was a saxophonist. He was very famous when Miss Smith's Tearoom became the Coffee Gallery. That was one of his main [venues]... He played the house there for [years]. They kind of rotated but Bob Selig was always there. He wore one of those porkie pie hats like Lester Young. Well, that's my start here in North Beach in terms of hanging out, getting a chance to play along with some of the poets like Patchen and

Rexroth. Rexroth was a great lover of jazz music. He wrote about it in the newspaper, I think for *The Examiner*. And Ralph Gleason wrote for *The Chronicle*. Ralph Gleason was another famous writer that hung out and was on the scene. They all were on the scene but some were more into the music and others were more into the spoken word, whatever was their thing. I used to see Ginsberg read "Howl," and Kenneth Patchen. Ron McClure was another one that was on the scene.

CATZ: Michael McClure.

B.J.: Right. Michael McClure. Yeah, well, he lives up in the Haight. When you go back fifty years, it's a long time. But the places in the Fifties and the Sixties are still fresh in my mind; what was happening [then]. The Saloon was there, naturally. There were several other of those small venues off the beaten path that was happening. Ruth Weiss, yeah, she was around then. [Weiss was a Beat poet who gave live jazz poetry readings in the 1950's.] She was quite a figure in those days. You had the legendary Cowboy who was in *The Connection* that Freddie Redd did; the play in New York. The offbeat play. [It was also made into a movie by the same name.] Clay was in that.

CATZ: Who was that?

B.J.: They did a play called *The Connection*, Freddie Redd wrote the music and it was about Cowboy. Cowboy was the man. He was the connection for the drugs but he was a trumpet player and he lived here in San Francisco.

CATZ: Any stories, adventures that stand out?

B.J.: Well, there are quite a few, I guess. One of them was [when] Art Pepper [Alto Sax Player] was in town and, so the story goes. Lorraine got pissed off at him for some reason, something went down. But, anyway, she dunked his horn in the bathtub. He was playing at The Jazz Workshop at the time so it was a big deal because you put a saxophone in a tub of water [chuckle]... Well, that was quite a deal.

CATZ: What, he came out to play and it was full of water or something?

B.J.: No, he couldn't play it. He had to borrow a horn. Art Pepper was quite a name in terms of West Coast jazz music. Also Vince Guaraldi was around so he used to play at the Telluride Club [?]. There's a picture of a guy standing in front of the Coffee Gallery with one of those little bean hats on. His name was Rudy Amundson. It's a very famous picture because when they do the Beat thing there's a big scene around these guys. So it came out in the *Image* magazine in *The Chronicle*. The guy that owned Gump's Gallery used to live up near Argus [?] and he used to hang out with Jeremy Ets-Hokin, who was a philanthropist or something. But Gump owned Gump's Gallery. He was a very famous man. At the time that I met him - I met him in the hospital when I was working up at Mt. Zion. He had a sports car and he hit a tree in Tahiti and messed himself up pretty badly. So he was kind of a pain in the ass because there's a difference in being sick and then being kind of incapacitated because you're not really

sick in the classic sense. You just can't do for – you've got broken bones. He really fucked himself up. But, anyway, he wrote a symphony. He found out I was a musician some kind of way. I just didn't want to get involved with him because he was kind of... you know. He had the best doctors. But, anyway, he used to come to The Jazz Workshop.

CATZ: Who was this again?

B.J.: The guy that owned Gump's Gallery.

CATZ: His name was Gump?

B.J.: Yes, his last name was Gump, I'm trying to think of his first name. I want to say Richard but I'm not quite sure. He lived right up the street, you know where Argus is?

CATZ: Argus Gallery?

B.J.: Yes.

CATZ: I think so, yes.

B.J.: Well he lived right there. I didn't know that at the time but then he started coming to the Workshop. It took him awhile to mend. But he was on the scene. The Coffee Gallery was like a place; everybody came to the Coffee Gallery. [1353 Grant Ave.]

CATZ: So it was kind of the Trieste of its day.

B.J.: Well, yes, especially for entertainment. One of the great stories [is] that Duke Ellington was in town and Pony Poindexter was playing there and singing there was Carol Sloane [a jazz singer]. So word was out this Sunday afternoon that Duke was coming down to the Coffee Gallery, which he did. So even before you got there the place was packed. When he arrived he had an entourage of maybe twenty-five people and it was like the gates of Heaven had opened up when he walked in the joint – the Coffee Gallery, the great Duke Ellington. It was like magic.

CATZ: Yes, I bet!

B.J.: The scene, in terms of – as I remember it, it was like the Haight later. Grant Avenue was packed with people every day and every night. The thing that happened with the parties that Eric used to give – I think it was a woman got fucked up and fell off the roof. That kind of put a freeze on [everything]– because there were a lot of wild parties going but his parties were like where everything was going on.

CATZ: You referred to the Jazz Workshop. Where was that?



Caffe Trieste

B.J.: It was right – do you know where the parking lot is?

CATZ: On Broadway?

B.J.: Yes. It was in the next block between Kearny and Montgomery, not the one between Kearny and Columbus. It was right across the street where that grocery store is. It was right across the street from there and that used to be – I forget the name of it right now – a belly dancing club where they played Eastern music right at the table. Then you got the Broadway Studio, so it's right in that little Hawaiian thing. It was right there. About maybe ten years ago when they were doing the retro thing they called it something else.

CATZ: It wasn't Mabuhay Gardens, was it?

B.J.: No, it was right down the street from Mabuhay, no. It was right down the street from there. It was adjacent to a club that had a Hawaiian kind of theme to it. I think it might still be there. It was right next to that. In the Eighties when the people started dressing in like that retro age thing, dressing in that style, it was called something else.

CATZ: But it was the Jazz Workshop during the Fifties.

B.J.: It was the Jazz Workshop during the Fifties and the Sixties.

CATZ: What do you mean “Jazz Workshop”?

B.J.: Well, that was just the name of the ...

CATZ: And it was a club?

B.J.: It was a club, yes. I saw Theolonius Monk, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Cannonball; they all came there. [Monk was a jazz pianist who founded bebop; Coltrane was an alto and tenor saxophonist who worked in Dizzy Gillespie's band; Davis played jazz trumpet; Cannonball Adderley an alto saxophonist was a member of the Miles Davis Sextet.] It was the premier – because once The Blackhawk closed then The Workshop became the premier jazz venue for bringing name people from out of town like Horace Silver [tenor sax and jazz pianist of hard bop] and all those people. They played there. You had the El Matador. The El Matador was [where]– well, you got the hostel on the corner there, that alley.

CATZ: The Green Tortoise [hostel].

B.J.: The Green Tortoise, yes, right. The El Matador was kind of adjacent to that [492 Broadway].

CATZ: What was that?

B.J.: The El Matador was like a very slick looking room, I think they had pool tables in it. But it was kind of like a club and then they started having some entertainment later on. Then there was Sugar Hill, which was also on Broadway, so you had all those different music venues. You know, it was just party, party, party all the time. People were very loose and the press just fed into that, so that brought more people. Then all of a sudden in the Sixties The Condor [came]... I can't think of the name of what it was before The Condor. They used to have acts in there. Teddy Shaw [?], Bobby Cramer. It was kind of like a blues house. Then all of a sudden here come Carol Doda and the dynamic started changing.

CATZ: The strip clubs ...

B.J.: Yes, they started bringing strips. Because, before then the International Settlement was like the place for burlesque and all of that. I saw Sally Rand there and all those big-time burlesque people of that era. But then once The Condor put that topless thing out and Carol Doda – the rest was history.

CATZ: Really. All the clubs went to strip.

B.J.: Well, the Jazz Workshop still went on; the jazz thing still was happening but the emphasis was kind of changing in a way in terms of the music. Grant Avenue was still happening. But then when that went down – I spent, say, from '55 to maybe '63 down

here all the time, other than when I'm up in the Fillmore down at Bop City and stuff. There were other places to play music. But, of course, jazz was the thing that brought jazz musicians and the poets of that time together. They all did things, those that were here at the time, the names that I named. Those are the ones that I can remember and they all did things with jazz musicians. Dick Pardee and Omar Sagway was really into the mix and they worked a lot, more so than I did, because I was just starting out so I couldn't really play that well. I got started. I had to get started someplace.

CATZ: Yes, you've got to start somewhere.

B.J.: You know, you have to take your lumps. But it was very exciting, that was an exciting time for a 20-year-old kid, man, like myself. I never seen no shit like this. It was really just – really out of their gourd. The guy that was standing in the door, who had the hat on, is a really funny picture. What's his name that did a lot of [photography]... He just died recently?

CATZ: Photography.

B.J.: A lot of his stuff is in the

CATZ: Rosenthal?

B.J.: Not Rosenthal. He's a well-known photographer here, he took a lot of pictures – a lot of his work is in that hotel over there, The Bohemian. He took a lot of the pictures of that time and you could probably go to the Beat Museum and find his work. I can't think of his name right now. But he took that picture and the guy who had the hat on was a saxophonist from the East Bay, from Oakland, his name was Rudy Anderson. Rudy Anderson. He left shortly thereafter to go to New York. At that time a lot of my friends, that were a little bit more advanced than me, they were making that move to go back to New York. I ain't ready to do that yet. Get together, to go back to New York and come out. But, anyway, he was in, I think, Montana, or one of those states and his hand was decapitated [sic] because the car he was riding in ran into a big rig.

CATZ: Oh, man. My god.

B.J.: But that image of him standing in front of the Coffee Gallery with his horn and everything is right there. It was just so ironic that when that picture was taken, right after that he left to go back to New York. I used to play at the Coffee Gallery with the Bishop. I played both saxophone [and piano]. Then I could always kind of count on the piano as something [I could do]. There was always excitement. You never knew what would happen. Love was in the air... women, drugs. Also I met Howard Hesseman, do you know who he is?

CATZ: No.

B.J.: He's an actor. When The Committee formed here I had met Mel Stewart, he was one of the members of The Committee. [The Committee was an improvisational satirical review founded by veterans of Second City in Chicago] Howard was kind of like a gofer, what they call gofer. He was learning his skills. So he was around then. He was having the best pot. And he was so fucking paranoid. He was really paranoid. But he went on to do that... I've seen him on television around. I think the one that was out of Cincinnati, WR-something. [WKRP. A popular T.V. sitcom where Hesseman played the role of a counterculture deejay, Dr. Johnny Fever]. I think it was Pamela Anderson, when she was young, she might have been on that program [Loni Anderson]. But, anyway, he went to Hollywood. So he was around and his claim was like, he was connected to The Committee.

CATZ: I saw The Committee when I was ten.

B.J.: Well, then you probably saw Mel Stewart. He was a black guy that was in that. He was also a saxophonist out of Cleveland himself, Cleveland, Ohio. He grew up with Bill Hartmann and several famous Cleveland musicians that made big names for themselves. But he was into playing and that's how I met him because he was a saxophone player. So I got a chance to hang out with some of the people in The Committee. I knew Howard through another saxophonist, the guy I told you about, Cowboy. His nephew was a saxophonist, Leslie, and we were friends. So all the trumpet players were my main teachers and Cowboy was one.

CATZ: Did you ever take any formal lessons?

B.J.: Yeah. I went to a little small school called Music and Arts. It's up on Jackson. It's no longer there. I think it closed. But, yeah.

CATZ: Was it like a classical approach or...?

B.J.: It was classical.

CATZ: You learned traditional music and then went into jazz?

B.J.: Well, you know, jazz was what I wanted to do anyway so I used my G.I. Bill and went to Music and Arts up there.

CATZ: Up there being where?




B.J.: On Jackson. You know where the park is on Jackson between Scott and ...

CATZ: Yes, Jackson Square.

B.J.: Yes. That building that they closed, it's a very impressive looking building. It is where the Music and Arts was. If you listen to KDRC, the classical station, there's a



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woman named [Diane] Niccolini that comes on. Her mother used to teach there. She does a program on KDFC.

CATZ: So what instrument did you study up there?

B.J.: I studied the saxophone and piano. I had a Russian teacher named Mr. Dunakis and he was really a taskmaster. He knew when I was unprepared. And you know when he knew. He would count the damn thing off faster than I could play it. He had this sense... he knew you hadn't spent the [practice] time so he would bust me. [chuckle] When he'd get ready to start he'd raise that foot up [chuckle]. That's the way he would count with his foot. [chuckle] He was no fool and he'd catch me flat-footed. So it really made me think.

CATZ: So the saxophone – what kind of music did you play on the saxophone if it wasn't jazz?

B.J.: Oh, etudes and classical music. I don't use it in the symphony but in the music book. You do Bach. You do Mozart. You have all those things. You have all those etudes and stuff also. Then, like I say, I just studied piano.

CATZ: You probably got some good training out there.

B.J.: I did. I did. But my main training was at Bop City in the Fillmore.

CATZ: Where was that?

B.J.: It was – Bop City is Marcus bookstore on Fillmore Street.

CATZ: O.K., I know where that is.

B.J.: They moved that building. That's Bop City. It used to be on Post between Buchanan and Laguna. It was an after-hours place that opened at 2:00, [and went from 2:00 to 6:00 a.m.]. All the energy in terms of my growing up – I grew up in the Fillmore when I came into San Francisco. My music started in the Fillmore because the Fillmore was like the Harlem of the West. Bop City was the main competition. Herb Caen used to write about it all the time because he hung out there. Jimbo [Edwards] was the proprietor. Frank Sinatra, Bird [Charlie Parker], all the great musicians came to Bop City. They had this little small room outside, a little kind of a kitchen where they did waffles – fried chicken and waffles [chuckle]. It was like their specialty; and other traditional stuff too. But all the great musicians came to Bop City. so naturally as a young musician – I mean I had to get up and go to work - I stayed up playing there all night so I was pretty wiped out going to work. But I saw all the great musicians there. That was my inspiration. I learned far more there than I did at that school. By the time 1960 came around, I was able to hang and do a lot of stuff over here in North Beach. When I first started out I was mainly on the sidelines just listening, just observing. But my experience in learning how to play was there in those after-hour places, Bop City

being number one. Then we had Souville, which was over on McAllister Street. That stayed open all night. Then you had all those places in the Tenderloin that stayed open all night. You had the Streets of Paris and 181, The Tubas, Emanuel's. They were all just centrally located in that little area around Ellis and Mason and Turk. So you had all these places where you could go play.

CATZ: So you worked during the day?

B.J.: I did and then as I got better I went on to part-time so I had a little bit more time to hang out when I went to part-time.

CATZ: Part-time?

B.J.: Well, mainly part-time just to pay the rent. Then by '64 – at that time the energy shift went from here to the Haight.

CATZ: So were there jazz clubs in the Haight?

B.J.: You had The Haight Level and The Jukebox. The Jukebox was where the bookstore is next to where the Gap is on Haight Street. I don't know if the Gap is still open now or not but that used to be a hardware store. That little bookstore used to be The Jukebox.

CATZ: O.K. And [it was a] jazz club?

B.J.: Yes, it was. It was The Knothole back in the Fifties when I first started playing and then it became The Jukebox. I was doing the Haight thing.

CATZ: And the other club was called?

B.J.: The Haight Level. That's where there was major jazz because it was bigger and it brought in names. Those were the two places that had jazz on Haight Street during all that madness.

CATZ: Was there anything going on in North Beach during the Sixties?

B.J.: Oh, of course. It went on but in terms of – you still had the Coffee Gallery. The Keystone Corner hadn't opened but there were places. The Jazz Workshop was still happening over here. The El Matador was happening. The Off-Broadway was happening and Basin Street West was happening. But the energy kind of shifted in terms of jazz. The poets were still here, some of them. There was a big directional shift because all of a sudden blues became very prevalent. They always had the Grant Avenue Street Fair, which was the oldest street fair, I guess, in the country. It's changed dramatically now.

CATZ: And that was on Grant Avenue then?

B.J.: Yes. The same spot from here [Grant and Vallejo] back up to maybe Filbert. It wasn't in the park. It was just on Grant Avenue.

CATZ: What do you remember about that?

B.J.: Well, you know how it is. The artists brought out their stuff. The Coffee Gallery had music. There were music venues up and down the street but it wasn't like the bands that you have now. The music venues were mainly inside.

CATZ: Music venues incorporated into the storefronts themselves.

B.J.: Yes, right. The fair was more about craft people and artists displaying their crafts and work. That was the theme. Janis [Joplin] was around at the time. I think the Grateful Dead used to be The Warlocks or something. Not all of them but, I mean, Jerry Garcia was in at that time.

CATZ: Do you remember those guys? Did you ever meet those guys?

B.J.: Of course.

CATZ: Around here or in the Fillmore?

B.J.: No, I met them here. Yeah, I used to see Janis perform at the Coffee Gallery all the time. I did come over here. I was more over here like in the late Fifties and early Sixties. Damn near every night sometimes. So whatever was happening and it was always something happening.

CATZ: You'd just get on the bus and come down to North Beach.

B.J.: I'd get in a car. We'd drive over.

CATZ: Was parking not too bad?

B.J.: Parking has always been horrible but, you know, certain people have good parking karma. [laughter] We used to come from the Fillmore, get on the Central Freeway, boom, boom, boom, you come off on Broadway, shoot up Broadway, boom, you're here. I hardly ever came over on the bus. I'm sure I did. [chuckle] No, we'd jump on that freeway, man, and go down Gough. [imitating speeding sound].

CATZ: Zoom.

B.J.: And come around over there to Embarcadero and then come off on Broadway, yes. You remember that freeway?

CATZ: Yes. I wasn't much a part of North Beach then though.

B.J.: You remember the earthquake [in 1989] and then they tore it down. That used to be a major route to come from the Western Addition or the Fillmore where I lived. Just get on that freeway and, boom, you're here, instead of trying to deal with all the traffic and this and that coming across town.

CATZ: Did you have any kind of adventures or stuff around North Beach?

B.J.: You mean now?

CATZ: No, in those days?

B.J.: You know, I just felt – I was a student too, so I'm learning. So I had to focus on trying to learn and have a good time at the same time. I kind of did them both. I did whatever was there.

CATZ: Work, school, and play.

B.J.: Yeah. Yeah. I had good people. Most of them were into drugs but, you know, hey, they taught us all, the cats I grew up with. That's why – you can't take it with you so I have to give back. The guys were pretty direct. So you want to hang, you get the shit right. You don't have half-steppers. They would call you on it. Took no prisoners.

CATZ: What do you mean by that, "half-stepper"?

B.J.: You know, you got to be serious.

CATZ: About music?

B.J.: Yes. You want me to teach you something, you're going to pay attention. Don't come up with the shit if it's not right. You know it's not right. Get it right. Most things in life is about discipline. You have to have discipline to play music. You got to have it. It will humble you, okay.

CATZ: Yes.

B.J.: I'm kind of hard-headed so [chuckle] I bumped my head. [laughter] People, if they care about you, they'll pull your coat and say, "Hey, come on, man."

CATZ: They'll let you know what's what.

B.J.: Yeah.

CATZ: Yes, that's true.

B.J.: That's very true. Like I say, those guys with Harleys[?], they were all good musicians. They had been in those bands in the Forties. They were very good fight leaders and all that stuff. So I had to develop all that in spite of wanting to hang out in North Beach and do all that, which I did. But I finally got the message. I wish I could remember more stuff to tell you because of all the experience and the people that were around at that time. So you can think of a ten-year period before the Haight was [happening] and Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and all those guys, they were fucking nuts.

CATZ: Is that how they came off, as kind of nuts?

B.J.: Well, they came off – because they were so brilliant in terms of what they did. But I mean they were very eccentric in their behavior. It was outrageous. I met Jack Michelin later on. He was in New York. Jack's one of my favorite people. He's a hell of a dude.

CATZ: Cops give you any problems?

B.J.: Cops gave everybody problems. There's a man who was at – those people were outrageous, they were out of control over there. Get a grip on it. They were smoking dope on the street and they were doing all this weird behavior, you know, so the cops are cops. I personally didn't have any problems with the police because I stayed out of their way as much as I could. A lot of other people got hassled. Ginsberg went to jail

and they liked to take their clothes off. I mean their behavior was kind of – later on in life I understand more than what I understood about them [then]. They were just poets that everybody looked up to or was aware of, but their behavior was.... You can just go in the Beat Museum and look at some of those pictures.

CATZ: Yes, pretty outrageous.

B.J.: Yes. So you know the establishment was, “You got to clean this shit up.” But how? I mean there were too many people and not that many policemen and, even so how do you control something that big and powerful? Of course, they didn't stop here in the Sixties, they kept on going. They kept on going in the Seventies. North Beach has always been somewhat of – what's the word, Mecca – a Mecca.

CATZ: Cutting edge.

B.J.: Yes, always. It's gotten kind of rundown now and a little bit more trashy.

CATZ: Well, it's gotten expensive to live here.

B.J.: Yeah, but I'm just saying, the trip itself is not what it used to be. I mean North Beach has always been a Mecca. You come here for New Year's Eve. There is Chinese New Years. Things that draw. North Beach has always had something going



The Gathering Café – Grant Avenue, 1990's



The Gathering Café – Grant Avenue, 1990's

even when the shit was happening up in the Haight. It was always something happening over here. Grant Avenue has always been ... it reminds you of Europe.

CATZ: Yeah, it has all the flavor.

B.J.: And the Grant Avenue Fair was, I think, the oldest fair in the country. The emphasis was more on the art and crafts and that kind of a deal, not so much – the music was, like I say, in the storefronts. North Beach has always had something going. Then in the Seventies when the Both And closed over on Divisadero Street, then The Keystone Corner opened up so that brought me back over here again to hang out. There's always been little small venues where you could play at over here. So I feel really privileged. I never thought I'd live over here now, to be a part of the community.

CATZ: So if you walked into the Coffee Gallery then it would be the same sort of kind of living room family atmosphere as Café Trieste is?

B.J.: Yeah, but it was a bar and they sell alcohol so it's a little bit different than Trieste because of that reason. It's not a coffee house, even though they called it the Coffee Gallery.

CATZ: It was more of a bar?

B.J.: It was more of a bar, yeah.

CATZ: What about this place? You got any memories of this place? [The Caffe Trieste Coffeehouse]

B.J.: I hate to say this but probably [when] Johnny [Gianni] opened this place back in 1956, I don't think he appreciated an African-American clientele at that time. It was pretty much all white.

CATZ: It was the Fifties.

B.J.: Yeah, and it was very busy. So when I see the picture of Mamaand Bill Cosby I say – sorry, that was then; this is now. Other than it was always busy.

CATZ: This place was?

B.J.: Yeah, that I remember. At night when I came by... At my age, I mean, always beautiful women in here.

CATZ: Your comfort zone was probably more at the Coffee Gallery, right?

B.J.: Oh, yeah, absolutely, or the Bagel Shop or there were a number of places. I didn't know what a fucking cappuccino was. [chuckle] I knew what coffee was though. But he brought a certain attraction to this community when he opened up this place. I heard

– because not hanging here for a number of years - that it might have some low points but he's been able to survive fifty years. That's saying a lot. He should own the building, you know what I mean. He should own the building. But this was a very attractive place in 1956 when he opened. A very attractive place, always crowded and very dynamic looking women, very attractive women. But they were all over the place though too.

CATZ: All over North Beach?

B.J.: Oh, yes. North Beach in general but, you know, a lot of the activity was on Grant Avenue and Green. Like I say, The Cellar, The Anxious Asp, and the Coffee Gallery, the Bagel Shop. There's a couple of other places you know, but those places stand out and the Camel Club, where the Grant & Green is now on that corner of Grant and Green, the Camel Club. Of course, Sabini's was there and Gino & Carlo's.

CATZ: That place [Gino & Carlo] has been here a long time, hasn't it?

B.J.: I know. Well, Anxious Asp was right – pretty much where Golden Boy is in the next storefront over. They kind of reconfigured the structure. You have to remember Gino & Carlo's was in that alley and Anxious Asp was adjacent to that or the next building.

CATZ: The Anxious Asp was ...?

B.J.: It was a bar.

CATZ: A jazz bar and jazz poetry?

B.J.: Yeah. A lot of jazz. Maybe more jazz than poetry but I think both because the poets were all over. They were everywhere. Those main guys...

CATZ: Did you ever play any jazz with poetry [readings]?

B.J.: I did, yeah. I did it at The Cellar. That was my first experience, because Bill Weejawn, was on the piano, and Sonny [Nelson], was the drummer. We would come over and the old cats would say, "Hey, let them do what they can do. The poets would read. Well, you could just honk or whatever. You know what I'm saying? There was no structure. It was just play whatever you feel. It was kind of be sensitive to the word itself.

I think I've been blessed in a way of being on both sides of the Twentieth Century, and to witness all these amazing transformations... especially in my field of music. But just in general, the overall things, the last fifty years. To see that and to see how this Puritanical country has gone behind people like Ginsberg and those guys, William Burroughs. That was on the cutting edge of something and they just went on and put it out there and said, "Hey, freedom of speech. Deal with that." So it challenged the

Constitution. It made the media look at things in different ways in terms of people's rights to say what they wanted to say.

CATZ: Yes, yes.

B.J.: But it came down to print. When they said, "Howl" and "fuck" and whatever. Man, they just stepped on that, man.

CATZ: Yes, what a transformation.

B.J.: Yes. So all of that, I think, led up to the behaviors that we experienced in the Sixties. They just extended it. They damn near made a quantum leap in terms of behavior. So it's always been about the ages, what you can do and what you can't do. Then if the government wants to clamp down on you they sic the fucking newspaper on you.

CATZ: Well, the newspaper also can be the liberator too.

B.J.: That's true but, I mean usually they're always negative about something new until they understand what it is that's happening. Then they get it. But at first, you know ...

CATZ: No way.

B.J.: No way. Especially when it came down to print, the spoken word... When you write it down in a book it comes to censorship because

CATZ: Yeah.

B.J.: Yeah. But for me, being 20 years old on Grant Avenue in '56 [chuckle], I knew something. I wasn't stupid. [chuckle] I could see that here's something pretty powerful that's going down.

[End recording]

Notes on B.J. Papa

[This information was supplied by Mary Helene Lolli, B.J. Papa's Executor, in 2008.

B.J. Papa lived in North Beach at the end of his life from 1998 to 2008. His music was played in the Black Cat, Pearl's, the Washington Square Bar and Grill, Café Prague, The Gathering Café, Rose Pistola, Caesar's Restaurant, La Gondola, the North Beach Jazz Festival at Caffè Trieste (a yearly event), and the Poet's Gathering, organized by Bob Booker. He was a mentor to many young musicians and created music in small places such as Café Prague.

B.J.'s mother, Gladys Jackson, was a music teacher and a graduate of Tuskegee University, an unusual accomplishment at that time. She encouraged B.J. in his musical education. B. J.'s other love was baseball and he played in Mobile, Alabama as a boy and in the minor leagues. He and Willy McCovey grew up together and played baseball together. His father, Willie Jackson, played baseball with Hank Aaron. When B. J. was stationed at the Presidio in San Francisco in the army, he played on army teams.

B.J.'s family moved to San Francisco from Alabama when he was a teenager but the family returned to Mobile. B.J. decided to stay in San Francisco and did not return with them. After the army, he worked at Mount Zion hospital and began to study jazz seriously.]

BJ Papa – influential S.F. jazz musician

By Jesse Hamrin
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

A musical tribute will be held Sept. 28 for BJ Papa, a San Francisco jazz pianist who hosted jam sessions around town for decades and nurtured many young musicians who passed through them.

His given name was William Jackson and he died of liver disease Aug. 31 at his North Beach home. He was 72.

"There are many of us that graduated from the University of BJ," said singer Kim Nalley, who hosted her craft and expanded her repertoire under his tutelage. "We never paid tuition, but we received the best jazz education that can be had, on the bandstand and at the jam session." Nalley, who played with him

at the Wild West in Bernal Heights, Cafe Du Nord and numerous other spots, hired the pianist to run the Sunday night jam session at Jazz at Pearl's when she took over the now-closed North Beach club several years ago.

It was one in a long list of joints where BJ Papa presided over the informal sessions where jazz musicians have traditionally cut their teeth. A bebopper whose spare, rhythmic style was shaped by his love of Thelonious Monk, he performed at countless clubs, bars and cafes in North Beach and other San Francisco neighborhoods, among them Mission Rock, Tropical Haight, Souville, the Streets of Paris and Cafe Prague. Saxophonists John Handy and Bishop Norman Wil-



BJ Papa helped many young players at his jam sessions.

gan taking saxophone lessons after leaving the service. (He told Nalley he switched from saxophone to piano because he couldn't afford to get his horn out of lock and there was always a piano around.) He heard Charlie Parker, Dexter Gordon and other stars in late-night sessions at the fabled Jimbo's Bop City in the Fillmore district.

"Dewey Redman, John Handy, Frank Butler and a lot of others, they all helped me," BJ Papa told writer Jerry Karp in 2005, two years after the Upper Grant Avenue Art Fair Association honored him for his contribution to the music scene and the culture of North Beach.

Some of the musicians he helped, including Nalley, bassist David Ewell and trumpeter Henry Hung, will honor him from 2 to 8 p.m. on Sept. 28 at Mojito, 1337 Grant Ave., San Francisco. It's free to the public.

For more information, go to www.bjpapajazz.blogspot.com.

E-mail Jesse Hamrin at jhamlin@sfchronicle.com

San Francisco Chronicle, September 17, 2008

It was standing room only when the Bishop performed on Sunday nights with the B.J. Papa Band at the now defunct Gathering Café on Grant Avenue in the North Beach District of San Francisco. Friends and neighbors, musicians and dancers all seemed to join together in a musical celebration of the kind of bebop and showmanship that made it impossible for anyone to sit still. The atmosphere was always charged with high energy, the music outrageous at times and the experience of rockin' back and forth with the Bishop blowing smoke from his Selmer alto saxophone was gratifying and fun-loving, to say the least. Requests were often accepted by the band, and everyone in the small, intimate club participated in the music by keeping time with the rhythm, finger-snapping or foot-tapping to the pulse of jazz whirling on a carousel of sound through the phantom night. "Our Sunday night audience is the best," B.J. proclaimed at every session, and indeed it was.

JAZZOGRAPHY
Mars Breslow and Dan Guaraldi
Larkdale Press, 2000



At the Black Cat - Broadway

Poetry and Politics

North Beach was graced with a gathering of historical proportions on Dec. 10th when a group of poets, post-Beats and friends converged on Broadway and Kearny at the Blue Bar to show their support for District 3 supervisor candidate Aaron Peskin. "Poets for Peskin" was as much an homage to North Beach's past as a bridge into its future as it helped propel Aaron to victory in the district's runoff election against Lawrence Wong.

This pre-election party featuring poetry & jazz was a classic North Beach scene. The packed house was treated to the jazz of North Beach favorites BJ Papa and Bishop Norman Williams. Readings by Philip Lamantia, Bob Booker, Merle Goldstone, Don Paul and Kush, among many others. And the man of the hour himself, Aaron Peskin who stated, "Poets are the unwritten legislatures of our time and have been throughout time."

**North Beach Journal
January, 2001**

The Artists Guild of San Francisco presents

The
3rd Annual

ARTOPIA Festival

BEAT, BEBOP & BEYOND

Washington Square Park, North Beach

Saturday, July 10, 2004

1:00 to 3:00 pm

Art Show: 9:00-5:30 by the Artists Guild of San Francisco

ART - POETRY - JAZZ

With:

The B J Papa Band

"The Bishop" Norman Williams, alto sax

Billy Tolliver, drums

Andy Woodhouse, bass

& B J Papa, keyboard

& Special Guests:

Esteban Camacho, congas

Lewis Jordan, clarinet

Renee Robles, flute

Poets:

Genny Lim, Al Robles,

Don Paul, Camincha, Kush,

Charles Curtis Blackwell,

Fanny Renour, Gary Becker,

Ron Jones, Tony Vaughan

& Youth Speaks with James Kass

& The Living Word Project

Hosted by:

Bob Booker

Celebrating the Artistic Spirit
& Beat Culture of North Beach

In Memoriam

Allen Cohen (1945-2004)

with Ann Cohen on harp

In Memoriam

Thom Gunn (1929-2004)

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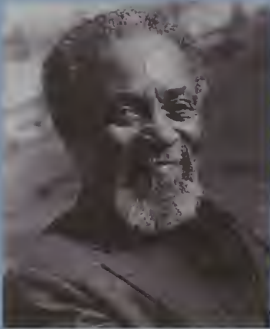
Event Produced by The Artists Guild
of San Francisco & Unity Foundation

Associate Producers Bob Booker & Will Dodger

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ARTOPIA Festival, 2004

BJ PAPA MEMORIAL



One of North Beach's Great
Characters and a Fine Jazz
Pianist - BJ Papa Died Recently

February 9, 1936 - August 31, 2008

A Musical Celebration of the Life of BJ Papa

September 28, 2008

Mojito, 1337 Grant Avenue
San Francisco

2 pm - 8 pm

Musician info: www.bjpapajazz.blogspot.com

**BJ Papa Memorial
September 28, 2008**

