

Jazz Legend Born 100 Years Ago This Month

WENDI A. MALONEY



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Lester Young, far right, plays with other musicians at the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C., circa 1941.

Lester Young was born in Woodville, Mississippi, on August 29, 1909. Widely cited as one of the great jazz musicians of the 20th century, Young was known by friends and fans as “Pres,” short for “president of the tenor saxophone.” Nearly 200 copyright records exist under his name, the most recent being a compilation, *The Definitive Lester Young*, published in 2000.

Soon after Young’s birth, his family moved to Algiers, Louisiana, near New Orleans, a hub for jazz innovation. Young’s father, Willis, had studied at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and played multiple instruments. His mother, Lizetta, played the piano. Willis taught Lester and his siblings, Lee and Irma, to read music and play instruments as children, and Lester played trumpet, alto saxophone, violin, and drums as a youngster.

When Lester’s parents divorced in 1919, Willis moved Lester, Lee, and Irma to Minneapolis and formed a family band that toured backwater towns with small circuses, playing at preshow

parades and accompanying acrobats and bareback riders. As Lester grew older, he clashed with his father, and he quit the family band in 1927.

He spent several years thereafter playing nightclubs and dance halls. It was during this time that he adopted the tenor saxophone and first played with famed jazz pianist Count Basie. In 1936 he joined Basie’s orchestra in Kansas City and traveled with him and two other musicians to Chicago to make his first recording. Young “burst upon the world with a mature style that appeared to owe nothing to anyone or anything that had gone before,” writes David Perry in *Jazz Greats*. Also in 1936, Young registered his first copyright for a song titled “Let’s Pretend We’ve Never Loved.”

While playing with Basie, Young accompanied celebrated blues singer Billie Holiday with a small band. The two became lifelong friends, and Holiday is credited with designating Young the “Pres”; he invented the name “Lady Day” for her. His stature was such that he was asked to play in the first jazz concert ever held at Carnegie Hall.

Like his music, Young’s personal style was unique. “His walk was light and pigeon-toed, and his voice was soft,” writes jazz critic Whitney Balliet in an essay reprinted in *A Lester Young Reader*. “He was something of a dandy. He wore ankle-length coats and porkpie hats.... When he played, he held his saxophone in front of him at a 45-degree angle.”

Young, who drank heavily, died in 1959, five months before his fiftieth birthday. In an obituary, critic Ralph Gleason recognized Young as “one of the three great instrumental soloists of jazz who changed the course of this music—the other two, Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker.” ©