

How “The Kid from Red Bank” Came to Newark: Processing the Count Basie Family Papers and Artifacts at the Institute of Jazz Studies

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When David Hartman asked William “Count” Basie (August 21, 1904 –April 26, 1984) how he would like to be remembered during their August 17, 1983 interview on *Good Morning America*, he responded, “Two words: ‘Nice guy.’” Today, as evidenced by the Count Basie family papers and artifacts at the Institute of Jazz Studies, Count Basie was clearly known in his lifetime for his geniality, but of course far more for his musical contributions, influence, and celebrity success. Count Basie’s international renown as the leader of the Count Basie Orchestra and his remarkable career spanning nearly seven decades has been documented in his autobiography, countless articles, films, broadcasts, interviews, textbooks, monographs, discographies, exhibits, and of course, the extensive body of recordings he left behind.¹ However, with few exceptions, “Bill,” as he was known by family and friends, was terse and mostly kept quiet in the public eye about his personal life, instead focusing on music and career in his public-facing identity. With the opening of his papers at the Institute of Jazz Studies (IJS) in November 2022, the available documentation of all things Count Basie—his career, experiences, relationships, belongings, home life, and interests—has substantially increased and will lead to new inquiry into his impact, life, and legacy.² Importantly, the collection also contains the papers of Catherine Basie (*nee* Morgan, December 3, 1914 – April 11, 1983) and documents the life of their daughter, Diane Basie (February 6, 1944 – October 15, 2022) and the extended family and friends in their orbit.

The Institute acquired the collection in 2018 from the William J. Basie Trust. Most of it had been packed for storage after Count Basie’s death in 1984 and kept in commercial warehouse facilities until it arrived at the IJS in early 2021. When Institute faculty and staff were first able to evaluate the collection in

¹ See the IJS Research Guide to Count Basie for a substantial list of books, articles, videos, and recordings featuring Count Basie and his music. Hershorn, Tad. “Count Basie,” last modified May 9, 2023, <https://libguides.rutgers.edu/countbasie>.

² The finding aid for the collection is available at <https://libraries.rutgers.edu/basie>.



person for acquisition, beyond being starstruck at the opportunity to look through the Basie family's belongings, I was overwhelmed by the collection's sheer size. It was the largest and most important collection I had faced in my career and the biggest acquisition in the Institute's history. Based on measurements of the shipping crates that housed the collection and the boxes in the offices of the Basie estate's Trustee, Joy Rosenthal, the total volume of materials, including archival papers and artifacts, appeared to be nearly 500 cubic feet! Thankfully, collections tend to shrink substantially as they are processed because archivists use storage space as efficiently as possible and make appraisal decisions such as removing duplicates. (The initial measurements also included all the packing materials used in shipping the collection.)

Now that the archival materials have been arranged, described, and rehoused into 105 boxes, we can accurately measure their extent—51 cubic feet, which still does not reflect the hundreds of artifacts and items that came with the acquisition. The IJS is currently finishing work to conserve, describe, and rehouse this portion of the collection, roughly 650 individual items, with an expected completion date later in 2023. Given these include Count Basie's Hammond organ, composer's piano, motorized wheelchair, rocking chair, artwork, stereo equipment, awards and trophies, and a portion of his wardrobe, a more accurate measurement of the collection's full extent will certainly be much larger.

The archival materials in the collection include personal papers, business records, a limited amount of notated music, extensive photos, and audio and home movie recordings. The majority of items date from the time period between the mid-1950s to the early 1980s. When we started sorting through everything, it became clear that the way the family had organized and kept the materials was not maintained when the collection was packed and inventoried. Despite the relative chaos we found when unpacking the boxes, we also noticed pockets of similar kinds of materials, groupings of materials with the same topical focus, as well as the conspicuous absence or infrequent appearance of other materials that we expected might be more plentiful. Further, it was apparent that Catherine Basie led a life quite apart from that of her husband, given he was more often on tour with the Basie Orchestra than at home, and that their daughter Diane was born with cerebral palsy and required full-time care. These observations led us to arrange the collection into ten series (i.e., archival terminology for large groupings of materials): Count Basie, Catherine Basie, Family and Friends, Correspondence, Scrapbooks, Clippings and Publications, Recordings, Photographic Prints and Negatives, Financial and Legal Records, and Artifacts. Within each of these larger groupings, we created

subseries to further facilitate easy access to specific items, types, or groupings of materials, following standard archival practice. For example, in the Count Basie series, the subseries “Performances” covers any performance in which Count Basie played a part—whether in a recording studio, on the bandstand, or live on the radio. Some of my favorite items in this grouping are three tour ledgers, listing the band’s and/or Count Basie’s personal tour-related expenses. One of the ledgers, from 1939, documents the band’s performance at the second Spirituals to Swing concert in Carnegie Hall, which left Basie with a cash balance of \$29.00 after the band and all expenses had been paid (roughly the equivalent of \$630.00 in 2023!). The band performed the previous night in Newark, an example of how the collection richly documents Count Basie’s New Jersey roots and lifelong connection to his home state.

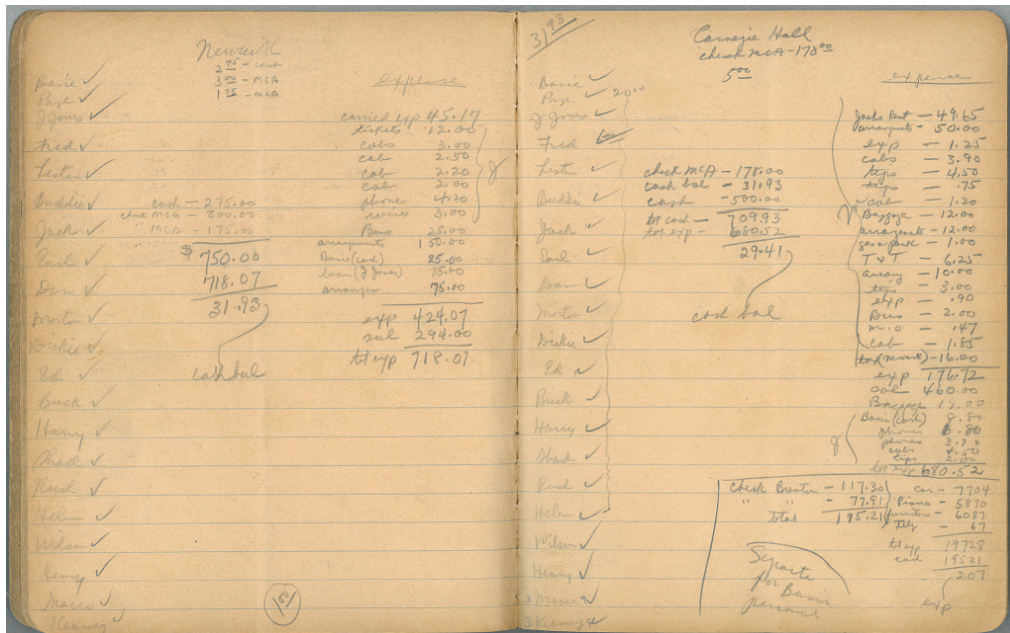


Figure 1. Count Basie Orchestra expense and income ledger notebook, 1939. Count Basie family papers and artifacts (IJS.002), Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University Libraries.

More than anyone, Catherine Basie is the person responsible for saving the documentation in the collection about Count Basie. Most of Count Basie’s correspondence and band-related paperwork was funneled through the band’s management, however Catherine kept concert programs, plentiful photographs, scrapbooks, tour documentation and paperwork, fan mail, recordings, ephemera from the times she traveled with the band, correspondence connected to significant performances, letters and music from would-be arrangers for the

Count, advertising materials about recordings, and all of her husband's awards, trophies, keys to the city, and honorary degrees. (Ostensibly, Count Basie and other family members also had some role in determining what materials were added to the family's archives, particularly Aaron Woodward III, one of the Basie family's unofficially adopted children. However, based on the collection's contents, Catherine was far more likely to have been the person who made the decision to keep the vast majority of materials.)

One of the most extensive sources of information can be found in the collection's Clippings subseries. Spanning the years 1938-1984, the clippings cover a wide variety of topics that document the lives of Bill, Catherine, and Diane Basie as well as their interests. Catherine Basie's career as a burlesque dancer, her substantial contributions as a civic leader and the wide array of organizations she supported and participated in (e.g., the Rinkeydinks, a national women's club with a membership primarily comprised of women married to professional jazz musicians that regularly sponsored charity events), and issues and current events that were important to her are well-represented in the subseries. It also provides rich and extensive documentation of Count Basie's career and celebrity, including clippings from many newspapers, magazines, and other publications unindexed by current reference sources for jazz and historical research. Archivists generally limit their research time when processing collections to find only information necessary to describe a collection sufficiently for future use. In processing the collection, however, we began to notice that the clippings documented performances and details that have yet to be included in the literature about Count Basie and the band. Plentiful additional clippings are available in the Scrapbook series, all of which have been digitized and will be available online later in 2023 (further details below). In short, the clippings in the collection provide an invaluable source of new insight into the Basie family. The high informational value of the Clippings subseries and the clippings in the scrapbooks put them close to the top of materials that will likely prove to be of great interest to researchers.

Although the Basie family's collection contains a limited amount of notated music, the Recordings series is fairly substantial and includes unreleased live performances of the Count Basie Orchestra in various locations between the early 1950s through the 1980s, 1940s Armed Forces Radio Service broadcasts of the band and later broadcast interviews and performances through the early 1980s, and recordings from labels and studios featuring some of Basie's work with Frank Sinatra, Milt Jackson, Oscar Peterson, and others. In addition to documenting Count Basie's music, the Recordings series provides an intimate and behind-the-scenes look at the Basie family, as it includes personal

recordings made by or for them such as tapes from Louis Armstrong and George Spink, inscribed commercial releases from friends and admirers, and my personal favorite, a slew of silent home movies recorded in the 1960s and 70s. These capture the family's holiday gatherings, poolside time with family and friends at the Basie's home, and trips they took, including footage of the March on Washington filmed by Catherine Basie in 1963. Select footage is available for review on site at the Institute, but the majority of the Recordings series requires additional reformatting for preservation purposes before the recordings will be readily available at the Institute.

The Correspondence subseries, like the clippings and recordings, is also among the richest sources of information in the collection and offers substantial context for materials in other series. With nearly fifty folders of Bill Basie's correspondence (including nineteen folders dedicated to simple autograph and photograph requests) and thirty-eight folders of Catherine's correspondence, the letters, telegrams, postcards, memos, greeting cards, and related enclosures and attachments included in this series provide a first-hand look at the Basies' network of friends, family, and associates. In particular, the subseries demonstrates the extent of Catherine's correspondence and involvement in a variety of causes and charities, including her activism during the Civil Rights Movement. A sampling of notable correspondents in the collection includes: Joseph P. Addabbo, Willard Alexander, Eubie Blake, William Booth, Jimmy and Rosalind Carter, Martin Charteris (Private Secretary to the Queen of the United Kingdom), John Clayton, Sammy Davis Jr., Billy Eckstine, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Gerald Ford, Redd Foxx, Earl Garner, Jackie Gleason, Norman Granz, Joseph Rudolph Grimes, William Randolph Hearst, Milt and Mona Hinton, Bob Hope, Buddy Howe, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Harry James, Lyndon Johnson, Quincy Jones, Harold Jones, Robert F. Kennedy, Stan Kenton, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King, Jerry Lewis, Joe and Martha Louis, Florence V. Lucas, Thurgood Marshall, Ralph Nader, Jeanne Nyilas, Oscar Peterson, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Paul Quinichette, Ronald and Nancy Reagan, Buddy Rich, Rodman and Nelson Rockefeller, James R. Shepley, Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughn, Muddy Waters, the Whitman Sisters, Roy Wilkins, and Joe Williams, among many others. The subseries also contains several items that shed light on Bill and Catherine's marriage and some of the hurdles they overcame as a couple, including a scathing and revealing letter to Bill from an unidentified singer with the Basie band (almost certainly Bixie Crawford, based on the letter, clippings about a tiff between Catherine and Crawford and the ensuing legal proceedings against Catherine for tossing a cocktail in Crawford's face, all of which is also available in the collection).

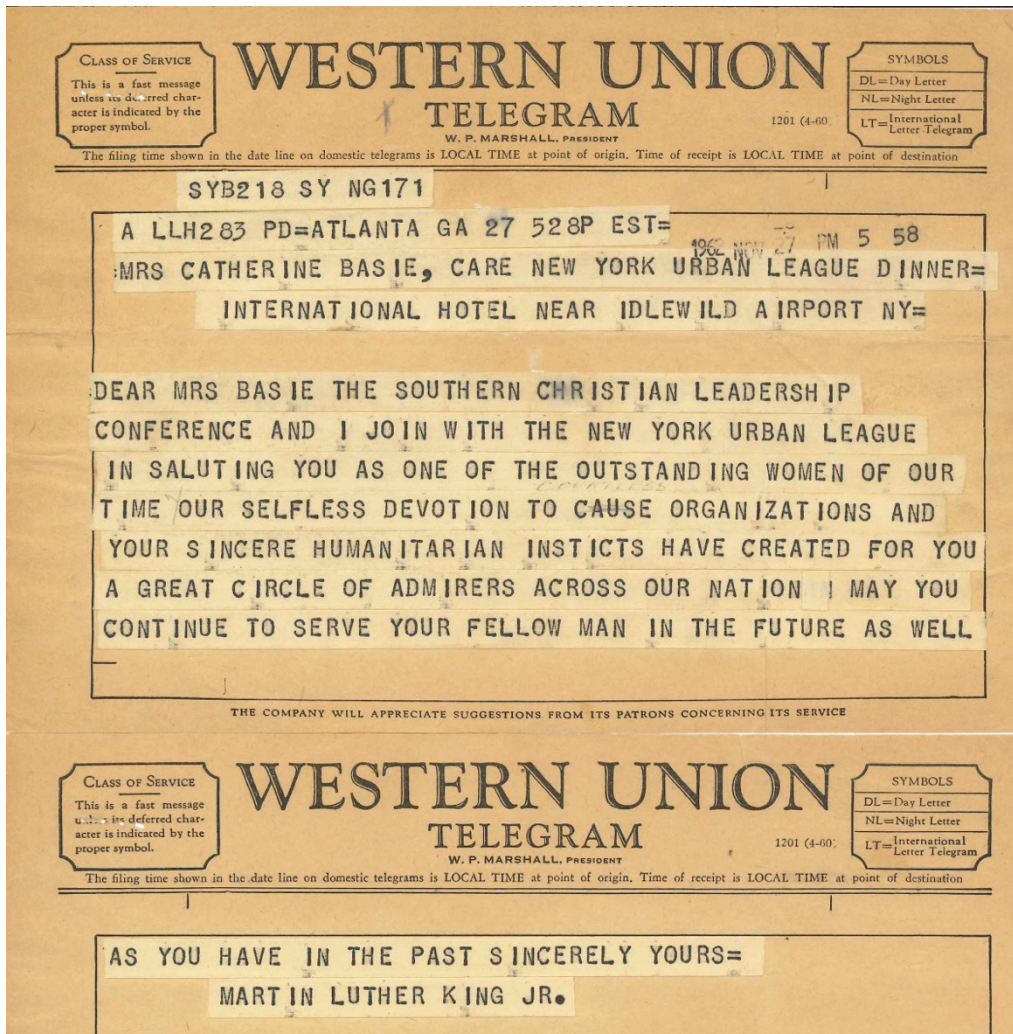


Figure 2. Congratulatory telegram from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Catherine Basie on her Urban League honors in 1962. Count Basie family papers and artifacts (IJS.0002), Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University Libraries.

In terms of visual evidence, the Scrapbook and Photographic Prints and Negatives series respectively offer images spanning the late 19th century through Count Basie’s death in 1984. More than any other series, these two provide the most documentation of Diane Basie’s life and her relationship with her parents and family. The earliest photos are family portraits of Bill’s parents and Catherine’s parents and relatives, and there are many photos of Catherine during her years as a burlesque dancer as well as of the Basie band in its early years. The majority of the images in the scrapbooks and photo series date from the 1950s-

1980s, and they feature everything from photos of the family's dogs to vacation shots to signed artist prints of Count Basie. Images featuring the Count Basie Orchestra are plentiful, with the preponderance from the band's later years, and the photo series includes five family photo albums with candid shots, many of them likely taken by Diane on her Polaroid camera, which is also a part of the collection. Several of the photo albums and all the scrapbooks have been digitally preserved and will soon be available online.



Figure 3. Diane Basie (seated at piano), Bill Basie, and the Basie's dog Graf ("Count" in German) enjoy some music making at home in this candid scrapbook photo. Count Basie family papers and artifacts (IJS.0002), Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University Libraries.

The acquisition also came with a sizeable collection (8.5 cubic feet) of Count Basie Orchestra arrangements and limited correspondence from the time Basie trombonist Bill Hughes led the band after Basie's death. These materials comprise the majority of the scores and parts in the acquisition, as the Count Basie family papers contain only a handful of charts played by the Basie Orchestra. Angela Lawrence, formerly IJS Processing Archivist and now the Rutgers University-Newark Archivist, led the 2018 cohort of the Institute's Jazz Archives Fellows—Anna Hinckley, Robin Margolis, and Kevin McCauley—in

processing the Hughes materials. An inventory is available from the Institute on request, with a complete finding aid to be published online in the near future.

Although the material previously held by Bill Hughes was in relatively good condition, from the outset we knew that the Basie collection's preservation would require substantial resources and that the Institute would face some obstacles in acquiring such a large collection with many artifacts. Prior to coming to IJS, it was subject to poor environmental conditions and was not stored in archival-quality containers or packed sufficiently to limit damage during shipping. Given much of the collection had been transported from New York City to the Bahamas when the Basie family moved to Freeport permanently in 1973 and then back to the States after Count Basie died in 1984, we discovered an unfortunate number of items had been broken and would require conservation treatment for stabilization and repair. Further, New York's high seasonal humidity levels and at least one major flood at the Basie's house in St. Alban's Queens led to mold and water damage and accelerated deterioration of the collection. With the family's move to the Bahamas, items already showing signs of mold damage were relocated to a subtropical Caribbean climate, further exacerbating their poor condition. The collection had also been inventoried more than once, and at some point in the distant past, numbered adhesive stickers had been placed prominently on most of the artifacts during an inventory, which would require treatment by a conservator for removal to avoid further damage to the surface of the items and ensure there was no lingering sticky residue. In short, to preserve the collection and make it accessible, the Institute would need to clean, stabilize, treat, and rehouse the collection before it could be made available for use.

Fortunately, the Institute successfully applied for two grants, which have enabled the preservation, conservation, and arrangement and description of the collection. The first, awarded August 2020, was a federal Save America's Treasures grant of \$443,500 to conserve and preserve the Count Basie family papers and artifacts, made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, National Park Service, National Endowment for the Arts, and National Endowment for the Humanities. The second grant the Institute received was a \$23,250 project support grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, to hire a Basie project archivist and purchase archival boxes and folders. We hired archivist Roxane Orgill, author of *Dream Lucky: When Franklin Was in the White House, Count Basie was on the Radio, and Everyone Wore a Hat*, for the job, and she and I started processing the collection in February 2022. The finding aid was published ten months later in November.

Conservation, preservation, and archival work is often invisible, and I would like to take the opportunity to highlight and acknowledge the many individuals and organizations who have assisted with and/or are continuing to work on the project. More than anyone, Project Coordinator Ben Houtman is responsible for how smoothly the project has gone because of his dedication, archival expertise, background in music and knowledge of Count Basie, attention to detail, organizational skills, ability to juggle multiple tasks in a short time, patience, willingness to overcome challenges, and positive attitude, not to mention the fact that he is a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet savant. Project Archivist Roxane Orgill has also been invaluable to the project and was essential to opening the papers for research. Even as a relatively new archivist, she immediately understood what needed to happen, what was important, how to make smart decisions, and when to ask for help. I greatly appreciate her intelligence, intellectual curiosity, experience and background in music and historical research, talent for writing, desire to learn, sense of humor, timeliness, and grace.

Although Roxane and I completed the bulk of the work to process the Basie archives, it was truly a group effort, with a total of fourteen people helping in some capacity with arrangement, description, and/or rehousing the archival materials. IJS Metadata Archivist Diane Biunno is leading efforts to provide access to the digitized scrapbooks, which should be available via the Institute's online research portal later in 2023. Other individuals who assisted include Project Coordinator Ben Houtman; Joy Rosenthal from the Basie Trust; Loren Schoenberg, Curatorial Consultant to the project; current and retired IJS faculty and staff including Iliana Bernal, Adriana Cuervo, Vincent Pelote, Tad Hershorn, and Wayne Winborne, the principal investigator for the Save America's Treasures grant; and Rutgers graduate students Kehinde Alonge, Riain Ross-Hager, and Jude Duane.



Figure 4. 2022 Jazz Archives Fellows Riain Ross-Hager (left) and Kehinde Alonge (right) stand in the Institute's reading room next to the boxes containing the Basie collection's Financial and Legal Records series, which they arranged, described, and reboxed as part of their fellowship. Photo by Elizabeth Surles.

Involving a variety of stakeholders who each contributed valuable expertise from an array of perspectives and backgrounds reflect the Institute's underlying goals for historical accuracy; limiting cultural bias in our process, workflows, and description; being transparent and deliberate in our approach (i.e. employing anti-racist archival practices as much as possible); strategic use of IJS resources; providing students with learning opportunities; and diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. One of the critical outstanding tasks in support of the latter is publication of the "separation list," which indicates the items we chose to separate from the collection for a variety of reasons: materials in unstable physical condition with little to no historical or informational value, published materials without annotations already available at the Institute or other publicly accessible archival and library collections, and items and materials that were duplicative. The separation list is currently available on request in draft form for the archival materials and will be published online after the separated artifacts have been incorporated.

The Count Basie family papers and artifacts are currently open for use at the Institute with an advance appointment. Future plans for the collection include the installation of "open" storage cases so that Institute visitors may see Basie's Hammond organ and composer's keyboard as well as exhibitions to feature the collection. For more information, please contact the Institute.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Elizabeth Surles serves on the faculty of Rutgers University–Newark, where she is Archivist at the Institute of Jazz Studies. She previously held positions at the Starr-Gennett Foundation, the American Alpine Club Library, and the Sousa Archives and Center for American Music. She earned master's degrees in musicology and library and information science and a certificate in special collections from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and she holds a BA in music and history from Lawrence University. Her research interests include early jazz vocalists as well as archival practice, and she has authored research studies, articles, reviews, and columns in various publications and scholarly journals and regularly presents at national, regional, and international conferences.