

Bassist

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Bass greats



Between his difficult childhood and final descent into alcoholism, John Kirby built a reputation as one of the finest early string bassists.

John Fordham revives his memory

THE MUSIC OF JOHN KIRBY'S sextets from the 1930s and 1940s might forever have remained in the dusty attic of jazz curiosities, but for the sharp-eared Don Byron. The contemporary clarinetist has recovered and re-recorded the Kirby band's meticulous arrangements and elegant style, reminding today's audiences of what a distinctive ensemble it had been.

Kirby was born in Baltimore on 31 December 1908 and died in Hollywood of alcoholism and diabetes on 14 June 1952. He was best known to jazz historians as an innovative bandleader and shrewd judge of promising sidemen who would eventually become significant figures themselves. But he was also a fine double bassist from that pioneering period in jazz bass history, when the deployment of the instrument had been barely tested and the tuba was the dominant low-register voice. Kirby was the first string bassist in the immensely influential Fletcher Henderson Orchestra of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Though Henderson's orchestra had helped pave the way for the subsequent explosion of big band popularity with its bold splicing of rich arrangements and powerful solo improvising, its rhythm section had initially sounded clunky and leaden in contrast with its front-line vivacity. Kirby's rhythmic feel and lighter touch loosened the Henderson sound and helped it to float.

Abandoned as a child, Kirby had an unhappy upbringing in an orphanage and his early professional life was a model of unrelenting self-motivation. He had played trombone at first, but took up

the tuba when his instrument was stolen on arrival in New York in 1924. Kirby's first regular work as a musician was on tuba and then aluminium-bodied string bass in the novelty dance band of Bill Brown and his Brownies. He continued to play this dual role in his time with Henderson from April 1930 to March 1934, at the end of which period the orchestra was in decline and temporarily disbanded. He brought new life and energy to Fletcher Henderson's band, and the effect is clearly audible on hits like 1930's *Chinatown, My Chinatown*.

Kirby adopted a wooden double bass in 1933, and worked in the swing orchestra led by dynamic drummer Chick Webb from 1934 to 1935, still intermittently playing for Fletcher Henderson, and with saxophonist/arranger Benny Carter's Chocolate Dandies later in the decade. He had made a name for himself as one of only a handful of string bassists in the swing era whose tone was full and resonant, whose pulse was energetically strong and whose phrasing was evolving a subtle and understated originality. He also shared, with Walter Page and later Milt Hinton, the bass playing duties on some of the young Billie Holiday's breakthrough recordings as a leader. Holiday's revolutionary approach to jazz singing partly hinged on the integration of the vocalist's lines into the ensemble sound, and Kirby's combination of a solid pulse and a restrained sense of space was ideal for it.

But Kirby's biggest claim to fame surfaced in May 1937, at the Onyx Club in New York. After various early permu-

tations and reshuffles, Kirby emerged as a somewhat reluctant bandleader from a pool of inventive swing players including trumpeter Charlie Shavers, clarinetist Russell Procope and later singer Maxine Sullivan, whom Kirby married in 1938. For the next four years, the Kirby sextet became widely popular through recordings and broadcasts, specialising in an approach quite opposed to the familiar showy bravura of swing. The sextet pioneered a tautly arranged, elegant but unfalteringly swinging 'chamber jazz' that some observers regard as a precursor of the next decade's 'cool school'. Kirby and Charlie Shavers audaciously deployed original tunes, sometimes with quirky phrase lengths quite different from swing's usual neat subdivisions, over the chord patterns of familiar ones. This was a playful creativity that was to figure significantly in the methods of the bebop generation to follow.

With bebop a growing undercurrent on the New York jazz scene, 1942 was to be the high water mark for the Kirby band. Members were drafted into the forces or died, Sullivan divorced Kirby, and the bandleader, suffering from diabetes, drifted into alcoholism. There were attempts to revive the sextet with new members, and Kirby moved to Los Angeles to work with Benny Carter, dying there in 1952.

Through the recent work of bandleaders Claude Tissendier, Don Byron and bassist/leader Wayne Roberts, the short-lived but exotic flower of the Kirby sextet's unusual music has been allowed to bloom again. **DB**