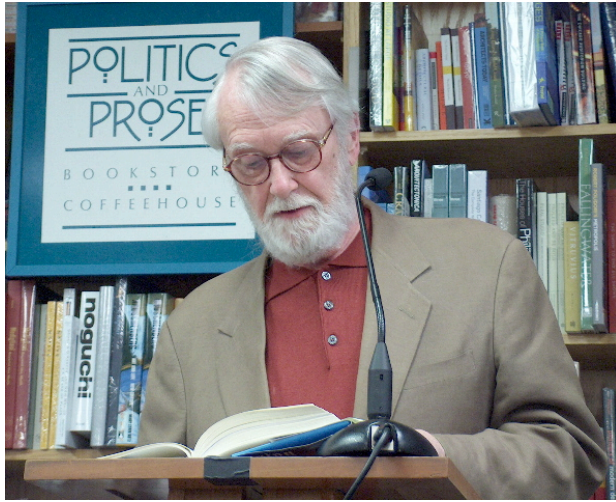


From Classics to Jazz

By W. Royal Stokes



W. Royal Stokes at his Politics & Prose April 2, 2005 Washington, D.C. book signing for *Growing Up With Jazz: Twenty-Four Musicians Talk About Their Lives and Careers* (Oxford University Press).

Photo by Erica Hartmann Stokes

I am now and then asked how it came about that I departed the academic life in 1969 after a decade of teaching Greek and Latin languages and literature and ancient history at five universities and became a writer and lecturer on the subject of jazz and, for fifteen years (1972-87), hosted my radio shows "*I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say. . .*" and *Since Minton's* on public radio, playing records from my personal collection of LPs and CDs.

I should point out that I was no newcomer to jazz, having come to love the art form in my early teens in the 1940s. I was such an avid collector of 78 rpm discs — spending most of my newspaper route earnings and allowance on acquiring boogie woogie, blues, traditional jazz, Swing Era, and bebop records — that by the age of sixteen I had amassed 500 of them, a huge collection for a youngster of that time.

Essentially, in switching fields, I returned to my first love, turning my hobby into my profession and my profession into my hobby. Not that I have ever fallen out of love with the Classics. I still read Greek and Latin prose and poetry for enjoyment and edification and usually have next to my reading chair a volume of secondary material on one or another aspect of the Greek and Roman worlds.

A brief account of my education and professorial posts will be of interest to readers of this [newsletter](#). I earned my 1958 B.A., in history, and my 1960 Classics M.A. at the University of Washington in Seattle. Among my undergraduate professors were Harry Woolf, my advisor, from whom I took History of Science and Medieval History (Harry became Director of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, from 1976-87 and then Professor-at-Large there); Solomon Katz, history department chair and later provost of the university, whose lecture courses on Periclean Athens, Roman Republic, Roman Empire, Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic Age, and Byzantine Empire I took; and Giovanni Costigan, recognized as the university's greatest lecturer, from whom I took several semesters of English and Irish history. I also took history courses on the French Revolution and the U.S., German and Scandinavian literature in translation, the history of architecture (my original major) from Arthur P. Herrman, Dean of the College of Architecture and Urban Planning, and earned the required science credits in mathematics.

I took first-year Greek from Classics department chair John B. McDiarmid, an authority on Theophrastus and Greek philosophy, and was in his graduate-level seminars on the Presocratics, Aristotle's *Poetics*, Aeschylus, and Pindar. I took Greek composition from Plato scholar Thomas G. Rosenmeyer and was in his seminars on the *Phaedrus*, Homer, and (as the only student registered for it) Greek Lyric Poetry. I was in Robert Lenardon's seminars on Herodotus and Thucydides. Paul Pascal, William Grummel, and Bill Read were my Latin professors, the first with courses on Tacitus, Latin Elegy, and Roman Comedy, the second on Lucretius, Ovid, and Comparative Greek and Latin Grammar, and the last on Cicero, the *Aeneid*, and Latin composition. Virgil authority Viktor Pöschl, a visiting professor for a semester, offered a seminar on the *Eclogues* that faculty often sat in on. Paul Pascal directed my M.A. thesis on the personality and afflictions of the Emperor Claudius.

Arriving at Yale University in 1960, I was granted credit for my two-year M.A. and required to do only one year of course work before commencing on my dissertation. This was Greek tragedy authority Bernard Knox's final year at Yale, Harvard having enticed him away as the first, and lifetime, Director of their newly founded Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, D.C. I was fortunate that he was that year offering Sophocles, for he had already published *Oedipus at Thebes* and was working on his 1964 *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy*. So I registered for the year-long seminar as my literature requirement and the class of about ten doctoral candidates read five of the plays with Knox and were responsible for the remaining two on their own.

My other three courses at Yale were under C. Bradford Welles (Greek History); Ann Perkins (Archaeology); and Ralph Ward (Comparative Linguistics, and during my dissertation year I took Greek Dialects from him). My dissertation, *Studies in Homeric Formulas*, was directed by Christopher Dawson and its principal reader was Adam Parry. I received my Ph.D. in June 1965.

As a commentary on those times I offer (from the perspective of my commitment to women's rights since my twenties — I was thirty upon commencing my Yale doctoral studies in 1960) some observations on how limited were the opportunities for women in academe back then. Ann Perkins, who had joined the all-male Yale Classics department in 1949 when in her mid-thirties, was by 1960 a much published authority on Middle Eastern archaeology and the art history of Greece and Rome and had served as a visiting professor at Columbia University and Harvard. In 1959 she was appointed for a year to the post of American specialist representing the U.S. Department of State for a tour of duty in the Middle East, in which capacity she participated in conferences, lectured, and taught classes on ancient art history in Egypt, Iraq, and Iran. Yet, after a decade at Yale, she was not permitted to instruct undergraduates and was still an untenured research associate. She left Yale in 1965, accepting a tenured position at the University of Illinois, where she remained as a beloved teacher and distinguished scholar until her retirement in 1978. Ann died in 2006 at the age of ninety-one.

I have, since departing academe, been most gratified to witness the burgeoning presence of women on Classics faculties throughout the nation as well as to note the myriad publications by them. As Bob Dylan sang, "The Times They Are a-Changin'."! I only add, with pride, that I have for four decades been known as an outspoken critic of the obstacles that are put in the way of women instrumentalists making their way in the "boys' club" of the jazz world, which, sadly, lags behind the greater society, the government, the military, the professions, and other performing arts with respect to providing opportunities for women.*

I occasionally talked on the telephone and corresponded with Bernard Knox over the years. We exchanged gift copies of several of our books during the 1990s, Bernard inscribing his *Backing Into the Future*, "REGIO OLIM DISCIPULO ET NUNC MAGISTRO NOVAE DISCIPLINAE HUNC LIBELLUM D. D. BERNARDUS."

When Bernard died in 2010 the *Washington Post* published my Letter to the Editor briefly reminiscing about him. It read:

As a graduate student at Yale I had the good fortune to be in the late Bernard Knox's [see Obituaries August 20] 1960-61 seminar on Sophocles. It was the most stimulating course I ever took, offered by him during his final year at the university before assuming the directorship of Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies in D.C.

Professor Knox never spoke in class of his wartime experiences, namely, manning a machine gun in the Spanish Civil War in 1936 or parachuting behind enemy lines in France and commanding an infantry company of the Italian underground during WW2, but hints of them sometimes surfaced in subtle fashion. For example, when we were reading the tragedy *Ajax* (who went mad during the Trojan War), he looked up from the Greek text at some point to observe that, once past his twenties, a man was no longer fit for combat.

In 1974, upon receiving the birth announcement of our older son Sutton Royal Stokes, the late Tom Rosenmeyer wrote to us from Los Angeles expressing astonishment that, unbeknownst to him, two of his former students had married. Allow me to explain. Erika had arrived at UW from Vancouver as a Classics major four years after I had left for Yale.

Except for Bernard Knox and the two who are still with us, I long ago lost contact with my former professors. I am still in touch with Paul Pascal, a jazz fan, and have sent him copies of my books. I recently resumed contact with Robert Lenardon, who was Book Review Editor of the *Classical Journal* in the 1960s. We exchanged gift copies of our books, he sending me the magisterial *Classical Mythology*, which he is co-author of.

My decade of instructing took place at five institutions. I was a teaching assistant for the two years that I worked on my M.A. at the University of Washington. During the 1960s I taught at the Universities of Pittsburg and Colorado, Tufts University, and Brock University (Ontario). A bonus of my year at Pitt was the fall semester's presence in the Classics department of Sir Ronald Syme, a visiting Andrew W. Mellon Professor.

I taught all levels of the two languages, Greek and Latin literature in translation, and undergraduate courses and graduate seminars on, for example, Homer, Greek Lyric poetry, Thucydides, Herodotus, Virgil, and Latin Elegy. In Naples I gave a course on the History of the Western Greeks and in Boulder a survey of ancient history from the Sumerians to the fall of the Roman Empire and an undergraduate honors seminar on the Roman Republic.

My four years with Tufts twice took me for a school year to its Tufts in Italy study-abroad year in Naples. It began, under the direction of Classics department chair Van L. Johnson, as a Classics and Italian history and culture program and expanded to include music, art, and sociology. Greek and Latin literature selections were geared to Southern Italy and Sicily. Students and faculty took once-a-week day trips to sites within a driving distance from Naples and we spent week-long stays in Rome, Florence, and Venice. In April we traveled to Sicily by sea and made a ten-day bus trip around the island. Christmas trips to Greece, Sardinia, and North Africa were optional and at your own expense. The director of Tufts in Italy for most of its existence was the late John H. Davis, first cousin of Jackie Kennedy. John had lived in Naples for a dozen years before he joined the program and after he resigned and moved to New York he was the author of a memoir and books on the Bouvier and Kennedy families, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the Mafia.

I organized a Thirtieth Reunion for the students and faculty of the entire eight years of the program's 1960s history. It took place on a Sunday afternoon in October 1997 at my former colleague the late archaeologist Miriam Balmuth's home in Winchester, Massachusetts. One who attended the reunion was Deborah Dickmann Boedeker, my student in Naples, 1966-67. She had become a Brown University professor of Classics and was co-director (with her second husband Kurt Raaflaub) of the Center for Hellenic Studies. Not only that, she had for two years in the early 1970s been a professor at Georgetown University while I was

broadcasting my radio show on the university's FM frequency. That we could have encountered one another on campus was an amusing thought for us. A month or so after the reunion, at Debby's invitation, I had lunch with her and that year's fellows at the Center.

My final year of teaching was as Visiting Associate Professor of Classics and History at the University of Colorado, 1968-69. During that school year I decided to change career direction and pursue post doctoral studies in jazz history in the University of Chicago's history department, then chaired by the late John Hope Franklin, and I was enrolled for that fall, with a fellowship.

But I got sidetracked. I had met Erika Hartmann, a 24-year-old graduate student in Classics. The Boulder campus was a way station for the radical factions of the times as they traveled east or west. For example, the Hog Farm visited the campus for a week in October, Joan Baez turned up one day and sang anti-war songs at an outdoor anti-war rally, and the Living Theater presented their *Frankenstein* in the university's largest hall. When S. I. (Sam) Hayakawa, the conservative president of San Francisco State College, attempted to speak in that same venue, in the fall of 1968, he was drowned out by screaming protestors and left the stage without delivering his speech. I arrived late and, standing in the rear of the balcony (it was an S.R.O. audience!), watched as bottles and other objects were thrown at Hayakawa as he sat calmly in a chair and police arrested and dragged protestors out of the building. A decade and a half later I met then U. S. Senator Sam at a jazz-connected reception (he was a fan) at the British embassy in D.C. and chatted with him about what had transpired in that UC hall. He chuckled at the memory.



W. Royal Stokes, age 40, a year-and-a-half into his and Erika's hippie period after their arrival in the D.C. area from Maine. December 1970. Photo by Erika Hartmann

In the spring of 1969 I found myself very sympathetic to the notion of "dropping out." At the end of that school year Erika and I decided to join the counter culture, trading our VW Beetles

in on a Greenbrier van and spending the next year-and-a-half traveling the hippie circuit from Boulder to Austin to New Hampshire to Maine to Boston, stopping at many points in between. On my fortieth birthday, in June 1970, I became manager of a South Harpswell, Maine, rock group, Uncle Nub.

A week or so before Christmas 1970 Erika and I found ourselves visiting my family in Washington, D.C., my native city. The visit turned into a thirty-five-year stay. I soon found work as the dishwasher and bread baker of the vegetarian restaurant YES!, which was located in D.C.'s Georgetown. This lasted for a year and then I went to work for the food co-op GLUT, near the outskirts of the city in Mt. Rainier, Maryland, as recycling organizer, clerk, and truck driver. After that I was mail room supervisor of D.C.'s International City Managers Association for a year. For a while I even had my own business doing yard work. These kinds of experiences, along with Erika's and my immersion in hippiedom, have served as background for my fiction writing, as yet unpublished. My jazz radio, journalistic, and book-authoring second career gradually came into being in the 1970s.

Erika earned a Master of Library Science degree from Catholic University and in 1972 commenced a three-and-a-half-decade career as a librarian in the D.C. area. The first half of that career was spent with the District of Columbia Public Library — her final five years of which were as the executive of the Mt. Pleasant branch — and the second half as a Media Specialist with the Montgomery County, Maryland, school system.

During the 1970s and '80s I made use of my lecture skills and taught jazz appreciation courses at the Smithsonian, YWCA, Mt. Vernon College, the National Parks Service, a University of Virginia branch in Arlington, and George Washington University. I also served as the *Washington Post's* jazz critic for a decade, was editor of *JazzTimes* and *Jazz Notes* and book review editor of *Jazz Line*, wrote scripts for NPR's *Jazz Live!*, contributed articles to *Down Beat*, *Mississippi Rag*, *Ms.*, *Civilization*, *Washington City Paper*, *Forecast*, *Washington Review*, and other publications, both print and online, and set up my own website and blog. I estimate that my byline has appeared on 2000 or so articles and reviews over the past four decades.

Beginning in the mid-1980s I began to cover European jazz festivals and in 1986 I was invited to accompany, as reporting journalist, a sister-city arts exchange between Washington, D.C., and Bangkok, the former sponsoring two jazz singers with their combos plus a modern dance company, the latter sending Thai dancers for concerts in D.C.'s Kennedy Center.

In addition to compiling my three Oxford University Press collections of jazz and blues musician profiles, I spent a year researching the work of a pioneer jazz photographer, the culmination of those efforts coming together in my *Swing Era New York: The Jazz Photographs of Charles Peterson*, published by Temple University Press in 1994. I am currently writing a memoir, compiling materials from my archives for *A W. Royal Stokes Jazz, Blues & Beyond Reader*, and seeking publishers for a trilogy of novels that I have been working on for two decades and

a second volume of the photographs of Charles Peterson. I'll be eighty-three in June but have no thoughts of retiring.



Erika E. and W. Royal Stokes at a surprise Fifth Anniversary Celebration of Royal's WGTB radio show "I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say..." January 29, 1977. The event was surreptitiously arranged by Erika and held in the Healy Building on the Georgetown University campus.

Cornetist and singer Wild Bill Whelan led the band (with Country Thomas on clarinet) that provided the music for the 200 or so who attended. Royal's (then bearded) brother Bill is on the left. Photo by Howard Allen

Why did I choose to take such a path away from a role that I had spent years training for and then practicing as a profession for a decade? Well, first of all, the late 1960s were a time of turmoil, both within and without academe, and the times encouraged life and career changes. In my late thirties at the time, I was swept up in the momentum of those times.

As to my choice of a new direction to take, there was my lifelong love of jazz and blues. Also, I long ago recognized a connection between jazz and my special author and dissertation topic, Homer. When I took my first courses on Homer in the mid-1950s, I dug into the supplemental reading assigned to us and learned of the oral nature of the composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. A startling connect with jazz was revealed to me.

Homer was winging it, to some degree, just as a jazz musician does, I immediately concluded upon reading the 1930s articles of Milman Parry, the Californian and young Harvard professor who, in the early 1930s, made the discovery of Homer's oral art by observing and making recordings of Yugoslavian oral poets, one of whom, over a two-week period, performed for him a poem the length of the *Odyssey*.

Parry's field research convinced him that Homer did not recite fixed-language poems to those gathered to hear him sing of Achilles, Agamemnon, Menelaus, Helen, Paris, Hector, Penelope, Telemachus, the ten-year siege of Troy, and Odysseus' decade-long journey home after the war's conclusion. He *improvised* his performances, making use of an age-old artistic *modus operandi* that is still extant here and there in our world, a poetic language handed down orally across the generations, a compositional system made up of individual words and verse parts that fit neatly, as needed, into the dactylic hexameters in which Homer composed as he performed.

I immediately saw the like nature of Homer's and a jazz musician's methods of improvising and several years later chose an aspect of Homer's formulaic language as the subject of my 1965 Yale University doctoral dissertation, *Studies in Homeric Formulas*. I left it to others to demonstrate that formulaic composition is a significant element in jazz improvisation and blues composition.**

It is no implied criticism of my teachers and former colleagues, or of classicists of today, to say that the pleasure I derived from teaching Classics back in that day began to diminish and so I determined to devote myself to the contemporary world, sidelining, but far from ignoring, my interest in Classics.

In the Introduction to my 2005 *Growing Up With Jazz: Twenty-Four Musicians Talk About Their Lives and Careers* I quote from my "main man," as we in the jazz world say of an individual whom we admire above others. Addressing the Board of Overseers of Harvard College a year-and-a-half before his death by self-inflicted gunshot in a Los Angeles hotel room at age thirty-three in December 1935, Milman Parry gave expression to my own sentiments in 1969 regarding the disconnect between past and present in the study of the Classics: "I have seen myself, only too often and too clearly," said Parry, "how, because those who teach and study Greek and Latin literature have lost the sense of its importance for humanity, the study of those literatures has declined, and will decline until they quit their philological isolation and again join in the movement of current human thought."***

By way of a deserved update to Parry's 1934 and my 1969 gloomy view of the teaching of Classics, allow me to concede that he and I were to be proved mistaken, for the field has indeed been enriched beyond his and my wildest expectations by its devotion to exploring such themes, for example, as the subjection of women, homoeroticism, gender, slavery, and LGTB lifestyles from the perspective of the modern world, as well as by its willingness to make sophisticated use of the tools of psychology, economic theory, anthropology, and other disciplines that were all but suspect to earlier generations of classicists.

So, how do the two fields of study, Classics and jazz, compare vis à vis their respective impacts? Yes, as Shelley proclaimed of the Western World, "We are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts, have their roots in Greece" — and in Rome, I hasten to add. And, when

one considers the worldwide spread of America's lone indigenous art form, so are we also, globally, all jazzers.

During the interview for a profile of me published three decades ago, the question came up of why I had made the switch from professing and researching Greek and Latin and ancient history to writing about, lecturing on, and broadcasting jazz. I simply replied, "I decided to devote myself to another area of classical expression, namely, the art form of jazz."

So is it really all that surprising, much less astonishing, that I found an intellectual and professional home in jazz after twenty years of devotion to the Classics?

Today, I am nothing more than a dilettante of Classics, for my expertise now necessarily resides in jazz studies. Toward this end I have over the past four decades immersed myself in the literature and sounds of this art form, interviewed more than a thousand musicians across the spectrum of jazz styles, spoken informally to another thousand or so, and attended thousands of performances here and abroad.

Upon Erika's retirement in 2007, we relocated to Elkins, West Virginia. Our son Sutton, daughter-in-law Amy, and our grandchildren Coen and Maya have settled here. Sutton was appointed Elkins City Clerk last year and Amy is an instructor in science at Davis and Elkins College three blocks from their home and up the hill from us. Our younger son Neale is a film archivist at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville.



Erika Stokes, grandson Coen Royal Stokes, and W. Royal Stokes checking out Ed Wise and his New Orleans Jazz Band at the Arts Center in Elkins, West Virginia. February 18, 2012. Photo by Sutton Stokes

I very much value my training in Classics and my decade of teaching it. They have enriched my life in many ways, enhancing my embrace of other pursuits and affording me both pleasure

avocationally and profit professionally. I write better and read with deeper understanding because of my knowledge of the languages, literature, and history of the Greek and Roman worlds. Classics even plays a role in the ongoing intellectual relationship that I have with my granddaughter Maya. For the past half year or so — she celebrated her first birthday in February — on the two or three days a week that Erika and I have her in our care, I read a couple of pages of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* to her. We're now at page 159. She enjoys it, in turn giggling or looking contemplative. Who knows what her speech patterns, not to mention her vocabulary, will be like once she starts talking!

Those wishing to further explore my career and interests can consult several online sources. I have a website (wroyalstokes.com) and a blog (wroyalstokes.com/weblog). There is a radio interview with me (<http://archive.wvpubcast.org/newsarticle.aspx?id=9260>) and two profiles, (<http://news.allaboutjazz.com/news.php?id=52144#.UPRuFhysFDQ>) and (www.wroyalstokes.com/archive/wrsGazette.pdf).

* See the review of my most recent book *Growing Up With Jazz* (http://wroyalstokes.com/growing_up_review.html). The opening sentence of the review says it all. Also, on my website, is my essay "Women in Jazz: Some Observations Regarding the Ongoing Discrimination in Performance and Journalism" (www.wroyalstokes.com/archive/women_in_jazz.htm).

** *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, edited by Adam Parry (Oxford University Press, 1971), page 413.

*** For the application of Parry's theories to jazz improvisation, see Luke O. Gillespie, "Literacy, Orality, and the Parry-Lord "Formula": Improvisation and the Afro-American Jazz Tradition" (*International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. 22, No. 2 Dec., 1991, pages 147-164). For the use of formulaic composition in blues, see David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition And Creativity In The Folk Blues* (Da Capo Press, 1987).