

## This Day in History... August 21, 1904

### Happy Birthday Count Basie!

William James “Count” Basie was born on August 21, 1904, in Red Bank, New Jersey.

Basie’s mother taught him to play piano when he was young and he began performing in his hometown as a young teenager. He learned to accompany the silent films that played at the local theatre. Basie preferred drums at first, but by the time he was 15 he realized his true talent was on the piano.

By the time Basie was in his early 20s, he was touring with vaudeville acts and traveled to the jazz centers in Kansas City, St. Louis, and Chicago. In 1928, he got his first taste of the big band sound and joined a Kansas City band under the direction of Bennie Moten the next year.

The band, with Basie’s musical contributions, began playing a style of music that soon became known as swing. After playing with Moten’s band for a number of years, Basie formed his own. One night they were broadcasting on a local radio station and had some time to fill at the end of the program. The group began improvising, and that session produced a song Basie called “One O’Clock Jump.” It became the band’s signature songs for many years.



*Stamp from the Celebrate the Century series*

In 1936, Basie got the nickname “Count” from a radio announcer in Kansas City. At the time, he went by Bill Basie, and the announcer said that was too ordinary of name. Citing names like Earl Hines and Duke Ellington, the announcer said he’d call Basie “Count,” and the name stuck.

By 1936, his band was called Count Basie and His Barons of Rhythm. They became known for their strong rhythm section and for using two tenor saxophones instead of just one. Other bands were soon copying the sound. That October, the band recorded some of their music. The producer later called it “the only perfect, completely perfect recording session I’ve ever had anything to do with.”

Basie’s band continued until after World War II, when it seemed big band music had gone out of style. After disbanding his large group, he began touring with smaller bands. In the late 1950s, the Count made his first tour of Europe. Jazz was popular there, and his music was well received. He even played for Queen Elizabeth II.

Count Basie was able to continue playing his piano and leading bands for decades. He played for such great soloists as Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, and Tony Bennett. During his career the Count earned nine Grammy awards and made a permanent mark on American music. He passed away on April 26, 1984, in Hollywood, Florida. The Count Basie Theatre in Red Bank is one of several places named in his honor.



*From the Big Band Leaders set*

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