

Charles Peterson and the Life Magazine photo story on Panassié

Bo Lindström

On October 1, 1938, Hugues Panassié and Madeleine Gautier boarded the Red Star liner *S.S. Pennland* in Antwerp, Holland. They arrived at Hoboken, New York in the morning of October 12th. Panassié's profession on the immigration form was originally stated as "Musician" but changed, in pencil, to "Music writer". As Panassié stepped ashore Mezz Mezzrow invited him to stay with the Mezzrow family at 126th Street near 7th Avenue in Harlem. Panassié's main mission for this U.S. visit was to make records for the Swing label.

For two consecutive days, on October 20th and 21st, the skilled *Life Magazine* photographer Charles Peterson accompanied Panassié, shooting a photo diary.

Charles Peterson¹, born in 1906, was a son of Scandinavian immigrants who settled in northern Minnesota, and was raised on a Red River Valley wheat farm. In sharp contrast to his rural upbringing, he took up guitar and banjo during high school in Crookston, and became professional enough during college to join the big dance bands playing the resort communities and even enjoyed a residency at the Dakota Hotel in Grand Forks, North Dakota.

Dropping out of college before graduation, he later attended, Tulane, Wesleyan, Cal Tech and University of North Dakota. In New York and hooked up with musicians fresh from Chicago, sharing rooms with Pee Wee Russell. Among his first gigs was a stint with Wingy Manone at the Rosemont Ballroom in Brooklyn. From these early New York gigs, he soon found a permanent chair with the newly founded Rudy Vallee and his Connecticut Yankees for three years. This provided Peterson with an entrée into the New York music business including major label recording sessions, night club residencies, radio broadcasts, and major theater venues such as the Paramount and Roxy, and even two feature film musicals with the Vallee Band. For some time he was the house guitarist at Columbia Records.



Charles Peterson

¹ Charles Peterson is not to be confused with the rock photographer of the same name born in 1964, known for his work depicting the rise of the Northwest music scene in the late 80s to early 90s.

After marrying Virginia Peterson and the birth of their son Don in 1931, Charles decided to leave the constant touring in favor of his family. In 1934, Peterson switched careers and entered the Clarence White School of photography upon the advice of Edward Steichen who he met while Steichen was photographing the Vallee Band a year earlier. Following a year with the Clarence White School, Peterson immediately found work with New York advertising agencies and magazines such as Town & Country, Saturday Evening Post, and Colliers.

By 1936, his photo efforts were concentrated in the music world, particularly in the areas he knew so well: the big swing bands and the small jazz groups. During the mid 1930's, Peterson took rooms over the clubs on 52nd Street and went out on nightly forays into the hot spots throughout New York to capture the action on film. He shot not only in the clubs but also back room jam sessions, recording dates, and big theater performances.

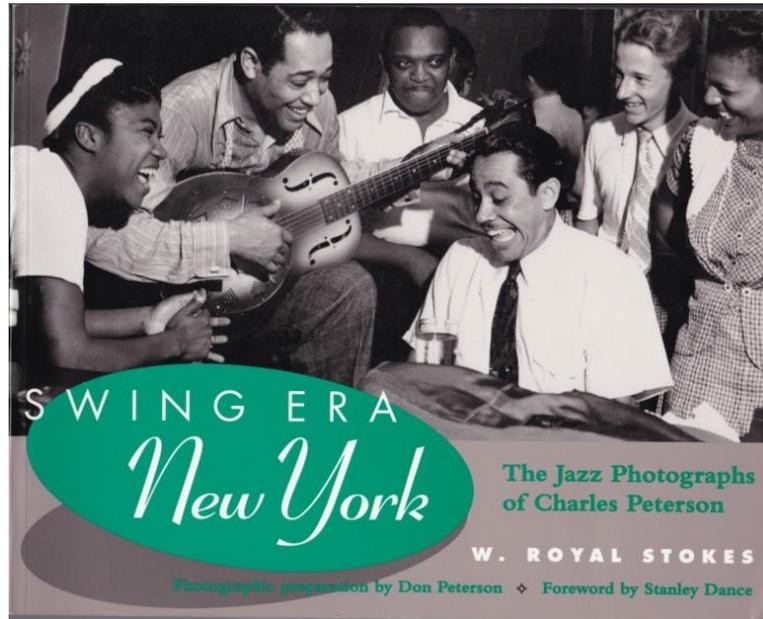


Charles Peterson and Pee Wee Russell

By the late 1930's, his jazz coverage was showcased in Life Magazine, and the other slicks and he became the photographer of choice for bands needing publicity stills and record producers needing photo coverage for the liner notes accompanying their albums.

Peterson entered the U.S. Coast Guard during the war years in the 1940's. After the war, his work in jazz photography dwindled and he went to work as a photographer and ad writer for Ingersoll Rand. His diverse talents also brought him into other businesses such as ad copy writing, fire escapes, and real estate. During the last ten years of his life, he lived with his son, Don, and his family in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and spent much of this time organizing his vast negative collection and writing up caption data and background information for all of his past shooting sessions. He died in 1976. Today, his son, Don Peterson, markets the collection and houses the negatives under archival conditions. The pictures are continually sought after by reissue record companies, publishers, and jazz authors. The best of his work has been digitized by Getty Images and enjoys widespread usage across a range of media outlets.

Jazz historian W. Royal Stokes has published a collection of Peterson's best work in the 1994 book "Swing Era New York" at Temple University Press in collaboration with Don Peterson. This book is utterly recommended.



The pictures published by *Life* comprised Hugues Panassié with Maxine Sullivan at the Onyx Club, Fats Waller at the Yacht Club, Jack Teagarden and George Wettling at the El Rio during a lunch with Paul Whiteman, Sidney Bechet and Zutty Singleton at Nick's in Greenwich Village, and Panassié playing clarinet with Tommy Dorsey. These photos were published in *Life* on November 7, 1938, enclosed at the end of this document. When Panassié received his *Life* copy, he was rather disappointed with the editorial contents and made an unavailing visit to the editorial office to make a complaint about this.

In the *Life* November 7th issue, Panassié also gives his views of his ideal jazz orchestra. The members of this dream orchestra were Louis Armstrong, trumpet; Jack Teagarden, trombone, Milton Mesirov (Mezz Mezzrow), clarinet, Sidney Bechet, soprano sax, Earl Hines, piano, Albert Casey, guitar, Pops Foster, bass, and Zutty Singleton, drums. Some of these names are obvious but his choice for clarinet might have been a gesture of courtesy. Panassié, however, repeated his inconceivable admiration for Mezzrow many times in the years to come.

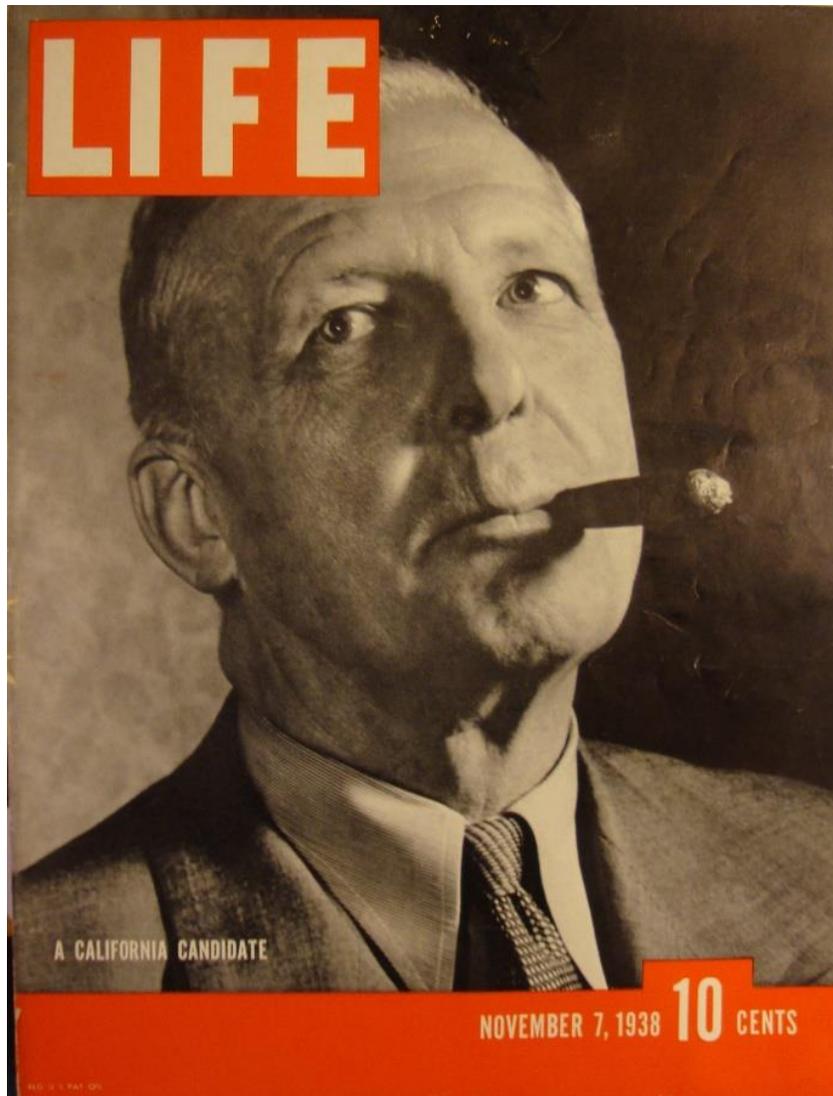
It is very unfortunate that Peterson did not follow Panassié just a few weeks later when Panassié had found Tommy Ladnier. Peterson actually captured the whole Port of Harlem Seven session with Sidney Bechet, recorded the day before Tommy Ladnier's funeral and including the Blues for Tommy recording. A paragraph on Charles Thompson was included in the manuscript for the Traveling Blues book but had to be deleted due to lack of space in the printed version.

By courtesy of Don Peterson who generously provided photos and biographical details. These photos are compiled in a separate document. Some of these Peterson jazz photographs as well as photos taken at other instances are also available at the Getty Images site at:

<http://www.gettyimages.se/foton/charles-peterson?excludenudity=false&page=1&phrase=Charles%20Peterson&sort=best>

The November 7, 1938 Life Issue

Cover depicting California Democrat Governor Candidate Culbert L. Olsson photographed by George Strock





HUGUES PANASSIÉ (LEFT) HEARS MAXINE SULLIVAN, CREATOR OF THE SWING VERSION OF "LOCH LOMOND," SWING ANOTHER CLASSIC, "NELLIE GREY," AT THE ONYX CLUB



LIKE A BULLFROG "FATS" WALLER BOOMS FOR CRITIC PANASSIÉ IN THE YACHT CLUB'S NAUTICAL ATMOSPHERE

FRENCH SWING AUTHORITY MAKES FIRST PILGRIMAGE TO NATIVE LAND OF JAZZ

Four years ago, when swing musicians were starving for recognition in the U. S., a young man in a chateau in southern France wrote a book called *Le Jazz Hot*. In his book he informed his fellow countrymen of the glories of a great new art. The author, Hugues Panassié, had discovered this art in 1927. Stricken with paralysis he spent his convalescence beside a phonograph. One of his records was *Singing the Blues*, with a cornet solo by Bix Beiderbecke. Panassié's chateau library was soon stacked high with swing records; its walls re-echoed to the sound of the saxophone, on which he strove to play his own swing.

Le Jazz Hot established Panassié as chief prophet to a growing Swing-conscious French public. By 1936 when the English translation of his book caught the tide of swing popularity in the U. S., swing addicts all over the world looked to him as their greatest authority.

Meanwhile Hugues Panassié had never seen or heard the great swing musicians in their native habitat. It was, therefore, a major event in the swing world when on Oct. 18, M. Panassié arrived on a pilgrimage to the swing centers of America. Night after night for two weeks he went from hot spot to hot spot, listening soberly and finding special delight in collecting match-book souvenirs (see insets). He found swing musicians riding the crest of popular enthusiasm, their music better than he had hoped. But they do not have the stature of the early giants. From somewhere, he is sure, will come a revival of the solid Swing of the Beiderbecke era. But it will come only when the public has learned to distinguish between Swing and what he calls "any noisy thing."

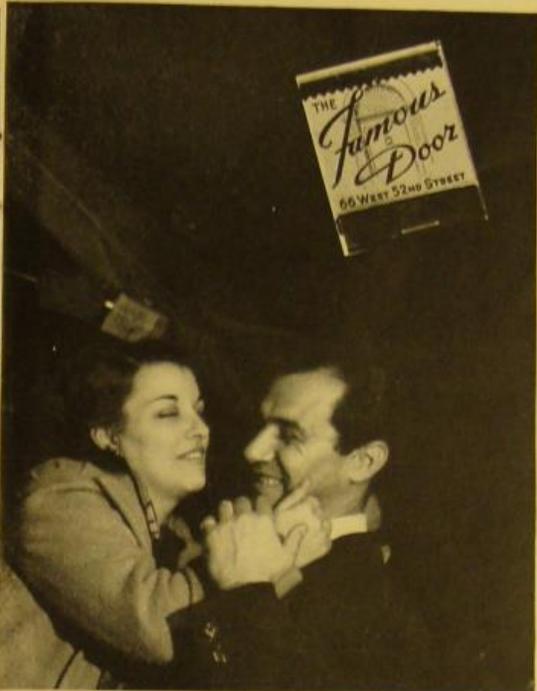
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"Jesterbags" get no compliments from M. Panassié. "They make much noise; they don't keep time," he says, "and they don't know much about." He expects



Two old stars, Jack Teagarden (center) and George Wettling (right) swing for Panassié at lunch given by Paul Whiteman at El Rio. Panassié admires Whiteman for his good musicians. Teagarden, his top trombonist, is a Panassié favorite.



swing quality to improve as soon as the plague is lifted. Meanwhile he found them everywhere. Jitterbugs above were reacting to Count Basie at the Famous Door.



Two new stars, Sidney Bechet (left) and drummer Zutty Singleton, won Panassié's approval at Nick's, one of the genuine swing night clubs. Nick's, once an unimpressive restaurant, has risen to top hot-spot rank on the quality of its swing.

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PANASSIÉ PICKS ALL-AMERICAN BAND



For LIFE, Hugues Panassié exercised the Swing fan's greatest privilege: that of setting up his own hypothetical perfect band. Torn among his favorites he ended up with a band of eight pieces. It represents a compromise between a list of those that Panassié considers best on their respective instruments and the group that he thinks would play best together.

1. **TROMBONE:** JACK YEAGARDEN
 2. **SOPIANO SA:** SIDNEY BECHET
 3. **TRUMPET:** LOUIS ARMSTRONG
 4. **CLARINET:** MILTON MESIROW

5. **BASS:** 'POP' FOSTER
 6. **DRUMS:** ZUTTY SINGLETON
 7. **GUITAR:** ALBERT CASEY
 8. **PIANO:** EARL HINES



Gertie Panassié, after two weeks of listening to hot music, takes a clarinet chorus of his own in a jam session backstage at the Paramount Theatre, mere for New York's jitterbugs. Playing beside him is Tommy Dorsey, the great trombonist.