

\$16.95 hardcover • 978-0-8234-2362-0 • E-book available

The Making of
Benny Goodman and Teddy Wilson:
*Taking the Stage as the First
Black-and-White Jazz Band in History*
A Conversation with
Lesla Cline-Ransome and James E. Ransome

What was your inspiration behind the book? What about the story interested you?

Lesla: I was inspired by the Ken Burns documentary, *Jazz*, and the glimpses it provided into the inner lives of jazz musicians. One of the highlights of the series for me was the story of Benny Goodman and Teddy Wilson. I thought it would be interesting to explore and contrast how two people, from two entirely opposite racial, economic, and social backgrounds were joined together by their love of music.

James: I am a huge fan of the Swing era, which I fell in love with while watching Ken Burns' Jazz documentary. I loved the rhythm of Lesla's words and the opportunity to paint scenes from that time period.

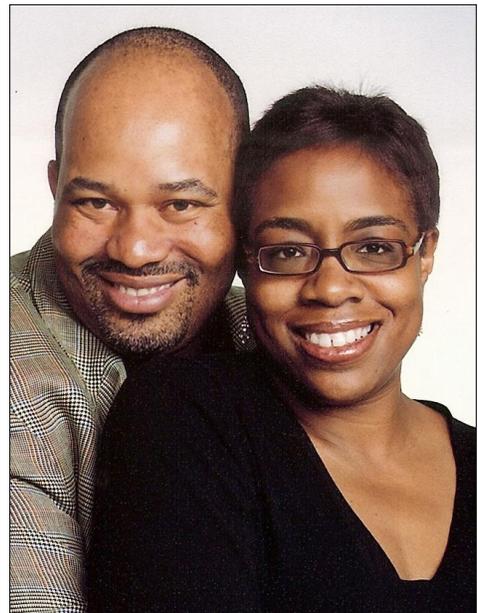
What was the research process like? Did you uncover anything unexpected?

Lesla: I listened to a lot of jazz—so much that I was humming Benny Goodman songs in my sleep. I watched and read the Ken Burns Jazz documentary and read the accompanying book along with many biographies of jazz musicians. I even made my daughter play her clarinet for me while I cooked dinner so I could fully absorb its sound quality. I was surprised to discover that even though Benny and Teddy made beautiful music together onstage and in studios, Benny was very shy and private and the two never became friends.

James: Not too many surprises, but I loved the research process. I looked at a lot of photographs and I have a number of books from the era in my studio. I did online searches, and, of course, went to as many jazz concerts as I could.

***When was the first time you ever listened to jazz music?
Do you remember what you thought or how you felt?***

Lesla: I grew up in a household filled with jazz music. Both of my parents were jazz fans and we often listened to



many of the jazz greats—Erroll Garner, Miles Davis, Oscar Peterson, and many more. My father would close his eyes and tap his feet to the music and could tell us every musician and instrument. I always liked jazz but I do remember wishing I could dance to it.

James: The first time I remember hearing jazz was when I was a teenager. There were a few songs that crossed over into popular R & B and were played on the radio. And then there were a number of R & B singers who had jazz influences in their songs. I struggled to understand the music and felt that maybe I was too unsophisticated, which is one of the reasons I feel a book like this is so important for young readers. It wasn't until I saw the Ken Burns series and learned the history of jazz, did I really begin to appreciate it. It is now the only music I listen to in my studio when I am painting.

What makes this book special to you? What important message do you feel it brings to young readers?

Lesa: I think this book celebrates the passion of two artists while demonstrating that race and background are secondary to the common goals that bind us.

James: Segregation is such a dark period in American history. I think sometimes it is hard for those who have not grown up in that period to understand that in public, while everything was segregated, people have always been integrated when it comes to playing music.

“Did You Know” . . .

Name three of your favorite authors/children’s book authors of all time.

Lesa: It is so hard to narrow it down, but I would say Laurie Halse Anderson, Jacqueline Woodson, and M.T. Anderson.

James: Virginia Hamilton, Jacqueline Woodson, and Lesa Cline-Ransome.

What book have you most wanted to read, but haven’t yet?

Lesa: I’ve listened to portions of audio versions, but never fully read the Harry Potter series.

James: The Laurie Halse Anderson books *Chains* and *Forge*.

What book from your childhood changed your life? Adulthood?

Lesa: I read *To Kill a Mockingbird* when I was thirteen and I was so struck by Harper Lee’s compassionate depiction of characters in a small, southern town, I read it nearly 10 times in one summer. Also, as a child I loved Laura Ingalls Wilder *Little House on the Prairie* series because I loved that it portrayed women as smart, tough and resilient. As an adult, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* richly weaves a difficult part of history into poetry.

James: Two books changed my life—Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and every single book by George Orwell.

Who is your favorite children’s book character and why?

Lesia: Elijah from *Elijah of Buxton* because he makes a brave but difficult choice.

James: Joey Pigza from Jack Gantos' *What Would Joey Do?*.

If you could live in any book, which would it be?

Lesia: Strangely, I would live in *The Hunger Games*—I love the man vs. nature and man vs. man aspect of dystopian novels.

James: *Back Home* by Gloria Pinkney.

If you could have a magical talent (i.e., becoming invisible or the ability to fly), what would it be?

Lesia: X-ray vision to see what my kids are constantly texting, tweeting, and instagramming.

James: I would love to be invisible so I could paint without being disturbed.

What is your favorite food?

Lesia: I love meatloaf and mashed potatoes. Sadly I almost never eat it because everyone in my family *hates* meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

James: Any type of fish.

Has it changed since childhood?

Lesia: As a child I loved spaghetti and meatballs and meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

James: I didn't have fish a lot as a child, but I devoured it every chance I could.

What food did you hate growing up but came to love in adulthood?

Lesia: I hated lima beans, asparagus, and beets, all of which I now love.

James: Spinach and coleslaw. My friends told me they were horrible so I avoided them but one day I tried them and loved them.

Who was your hero growing up? Who is it now?

Lesia: My mother (who is 89 years old) has always been my hero. She is smart, patient, supportive, funny, compassionate and an avid reader.

James: Muhammad Ali was my hero growing up. Also, I've always been a big football fan, so I also admired quarterback Bob Griese from the Miami Dolphins. My hero now is rap mogul, Russell Simmons.