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Music

DULUTH PIANIST SADIK HAKIM,
UNSUNG HERO OF MINNESOTA JAZZ

Forgotten Man

BY TOM SUROWICZ

ANYBODY OUT THERE INTERESTED IN TIME travel? If so, let's jump back about four decades to the heyday of bebop and recall fabled 52nd Street, Birdland, Symphony Sid radio broadcasts, zoot suits, and berets — the whole dizzy atmosphere. Minnesota was not exactly a jazz capital — then or now — but some of the state's musical paragons had an undeniable impact on the improviser's revolution of the times, and their stars only glow more brightly with the passing of decades. Oscar Pettiford was *the* master bassist of small-group bop, the first-chair innovator on his key instrument, and the genius member of a formidably talented Minnesota musical family. Pettiford could be irascible and undisciplined off the bandstand, but his maverick solo work and thoroughbred-paced section playing was the stuff of legend. Bop's pre-eminent bassist was also a decent composer (check out "Tricotism," for starters), a wizard of a bandleader, and a

Bird, issued first by the great Japanese label Trio Records, has found its way onto CD, courtesy of the equally fine Swedish label Storyville Records, which in turn imports hundreds of interesting jazz and blues titles to the United States through its New York outlet/office. So, after just nine years and a revamping of audio technology, Hakim's *Lazy Bird* — an LP recorded by three Yanks — is finally available to the American record-buying public. That's the jazz biz — short for Byzantine. It's nothing new. The easiest way to get respect is to apply for a passport.

Since all these alert foreigners went to the trouble of releasing Hakim's nine-song date, the least I can do is publicize and review it, right? Clearly there's need to put this forgotten man's work into context, however. So first, let's talk about Hakim's history. Get ready to be impressed.

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a decent composer (check out *Iconism*, for starters), a wizard of a bandleader, and a damn fine cellist — probably the first one of any consequence in jazz.

The exalted saxophone of Lester Young is also claimed by Minnesota music boosters. Young, a light-toned, *extremely* influential swing band giant and proto-bopper (Count Basie Orchestra, Billie Holiday recordings, Jazz at the Philharmonic, etc.), spent his formative high school years in the Twin Cities and still has family hereabouts. Iconic jazz figures don't come much bigger than the man associates and fans called the "Pres."

History books, reissue labels, and public radio DJs have taken pretty good care of such seminal musicians as Pettiford and Young — the jazz generals. This week, I'd like to talk about one of their sergeants-at-arms, another son of Minnesota — from Duluth, to be exact — the very capable, swinging, reliable, quirky, portentous, and altogether fine piano man Sadik Hakim.

Hakim's legacy is huge, but his home state profile is subterranean. The friendly folks at the Minneapolis Public Library couldn't find a picture of this native son. Hakim's U.S. recordings as a session leader are rare and nearly all out of print. There's no plaque for the guy in Bill Wanner and Jerry Kennelly's ad hoc Minnesota Jazz Hall of Fame, formerly housed at the Artists' Quarter. A phone query to the Duluth Musician's Union office turned up nothing — the mystified fella on the other end of the line had to have the name Sadik Hakim spelled out slowly, repeatedly. Even the ever-diligent Leigh Kamman, dean of broadcasting and keeper of the deathwatch at MPR, was unaware of the bopper's passing in '83. That means *The New York Times* likely missed the event in its obituary section. Certainly local papers such as the petrified *Star Tribune* had no testimonials to Hakim — good, bad, or indifferent.

This is a sorry state of affairs. Jazzmen are traditionally underrated in the music community, and Hakim was no star player. Yet his work is still prized enough overseas to be issued regularly on LP and compact disc. Indeed, an LP by Hakim called *Lazy*

Wily. Get ready to be impressed.

Hakim was born in either 1919, 1921, or 1922 — take your pick, depending on the jazz dictionary or encyclopedia consulted. The only thing that ain't in dispute is that he came from a family that was musically inclined and adept, and based in Duluth. Hakim's grandfather was a music professor, while his mother played in chamber classical groups. Hakim studied theory with granddad but had no formal piano lessons. His given name at the time was Argonne Thornton — the moniker Sadik Hakim came later, after a religious conversion.

Sadik must have shown considerable natural ability at the keyboard, and he must have been some sort of a prodigy. He took to the road before age 20 and almost immediately was employed by some of the biggest names in jazz.

A capsule summary of Hakim's credits would include the following:

- Touring with Ben Webster (1944-45), Lester Young (1946-48), James Moody (1951-54), and the Buddy Tate Orchestra (1956-59).

- Recording with Dexter Gordon on Savoy, Lester Young on Aladdin, James Moody on Prestige, and Charlie Parker on Savoy — the legendary "Ko-Ko" date of 1945, also featuring Dizzy Gillespie, one of the most important, hallowed moments in the annals of bop.

- Recording as a leader/soloist for several labels, including CBS (on the double-LP sampler called *I Remember Bebop*), Progressive Records (*Sonny Stitt Meets Sadik Hakim*), plus various Canadian and Japanese outfits.

- Touring triumphantly in Japan, playing large concert halls (1979-80).

- Working for the better part of a decade in Canada, starting in 1966, at Montreal nightclubs; in the studios of the CBC radio network; and in Canadian television.

Hakim's biggest claim to fame would certainly be playing with Bird and Diz on Savoy — the session is still in print as *The Savoy Master Takes*. Parker was a fresh-faced rookie in the recording studio, but his sound and ideas turned the music world on its ear.



CAROL FRIEDMAN

**The late Sadik Hakim plays again,
on a new CD called *Lazy Bird*.**

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Hakim had met the saxophonist five years earlier, in 1940, at a Chicago nightclub. An immediate jam party ensued, and a lifelong friendship began. (At one point Hakim even lived with Bird in New York City.)

But nearly as important was Hakim's personal-favorite record date, the one with Lester Young that yielded "Jumpin' With Symphony Sid." Knowledgeable sources maintain that Hakim was the uncredited composer of that classic up-tempo selection.

The pianist's significant contribution to postwar jazz history did not go completely unnoticed in his home state. After Hakim's sojourn in Canada and a year of European touring, he returned with a trio as the star guest of a 1976 festival in Duluth. Presumably that event prompted some lakeshore publicity and a civic proclamation or two — it's noted in the *Grove Dictionary of Jazz*.

Following the festival, Hakim returned to the Big Apple, where he worked semi-regularly in club settings. His two tours of Japan were no doubt latter-life career highlights, and they prompted several recordings — both audio and visual — including the tracks on *Lazy Bird*, taped at Iino Hall in Tokyo.

One more point before considering the Storyville CD release. Hakim adopted the Muslim faith and underwent a religious and political conversion, not in the fashionable '60s — the days of fist-clenching "Black Power" displays and Malcolm X hero worship — but in the late '40s. The only thing more unusual than a jazz luminary from Duluth had to be a Muslim from the Twin Ports. Might this embrace of Islam have contributed a bit to Hakim's subsequent lack of notice on his chilly home turf? There's no telling.

That's the end of my bio spadework. Now let's consider the music. *Lazy Bird* is a relaxed wade into the bop mainstream, a good trio session of the classiest lounge sounds around. Hakim does several tunes associated with Charlie Parker, including "Now's the Time," "Yardbird Suite," and "My Little Suede Shoes." The latter selec-

tion is transformed into a jaunty Latin bounce. He also tackles jazz standards ("Body and Soul"), adult pop chestnuts ("Stella by Starlight"), and savvy originals. A Hakim-penned number called "48th Street" reminds listeners of the pianist's ability to swing brightly and convincingly.

A highlight is the title track "Lazy Bird," a John Coltrane composition, on which drummer Clifford Barbaro gets a full head of steam rolling. "Lazy Bird" offers three minutes and nine seconds of pure jazz bliss. Hakim is inspired by the song's racetrack tempo, resilient chord pattern, and signal melody. He attacks the keyboard in quirky, all-star fashion. Bassist Errol Walters wrestles his way through a pungent, muscular pizzicato break, and drummer Barbaro's solo is brief, splashy, and explosive — it's a roof-raiser. Great song, great performance.

Hakim's straightforward, gorgeous reading of "Body and Soul" is another standout cut, albeit qualified. On this set-closer, bassist Walters does his level best to wreck the lyrical, offhand, romantic, and delicate mood. His episode in bowing is gnarly and unintentionally comic. It crosses the line between idiosyncrasy and ineptitude. Hakim shows his grace and professionalism by framing this sawing in the best, most comely, economical way. While Walters represents the lumbering, imperfect "Body," Hakim redeems things with his sonorous depth of poetic "Soul."

Most of *Lazy Bird* is less eventful. Walters sticks to plucking his strings, and Hakim cruises through old favorites. The net effect is subtle, satisfying, one step from sublime. I can't argue that *Lazy Bird* is an indelible jazz classic or that it's essential to anybody's complete piano trio collection. Certainly any title on Storyville Records will be a challenge to track down in local shops — try the Electric Fetus first. But the CD does provide a good enough introduction to an unjustly obscure Minnesota talent, a man who traveled in the fastest company around. Duluth may not see his like again. ■