

Books | BY TED PANKEN

Terry Memoir Revels In Humor, Passion

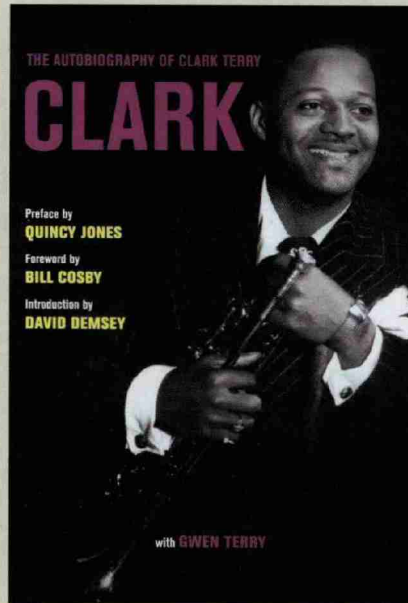
Midway through his sparkling memoir, *Clark: The Autobiography of Clark Terry* (University of California Press), the author brings readers backstage at Washington D.C.'s Howard Theater, circa 1948. Count Basie, his most recent employer, is informing his "Old Testament" band that the end had come. As he does throughout the book's 58 chapters (co-authored with Gwen Terry, his wife), the trumpet grandmaster, who turned 90 this year, addresses the scene with emotion, humor, concision, acuity and analytical discernment.

"We all knew about Basie's monumental debts from losing on those damn ponies," he writes. "And since we'd also been bitten with the sweet and sour sting of gambling, nobody said a word."

Terry then encapsulates the salient qualities of his bandmates, not one of them "a copycat of anyone in the world," each having "mastered a sound that reflected his unique personality." Dickey Wells, he writes, "was older than most of us, and I admired his neatly trimmed moustache. He was a master of the slide trombone, with his octave jumps, slurs, slurps, and bends that sent notes swirling. His sound was gut-bucket raw and soul-stirring. One of his features was using a tin straight-mute. He'd hammered lots of nail holes in it. He held it reversed in the bell of his horn, and it made a very signature kazoo-like sound, like a magnified version of an old comb covered with tissue paper."

A host of similarly pithy, eloquent evocations of the picturesque cast of characters with whom Terry has crossed paths during his brilliant career appear as the narrative unfolds. We meet Duke Ellington and his band members. Quincy Jones and Miles Davis appear at different stages of their lives. Terry paints a vivid portrait of his impoverished childhood in St. Louis—early adventures with colorfully nicknamed friends, constructing his first trumpet from scavenged junk, learning to box proficiently, navigating an ambivalent relationship and eventually falling out with an exceedingly strict father, receiving the loving kindness of his older sister. His journey takes him on the ballyhoo with a carnival band and Depression-era Mississippi Valley juke joints. He also observes the gangsters who ran big venues in St. Louis and idiosyncrasies of the musicians who played for them.

Terry writes matter-of-factly about race, spinning no small number of stories that illuminate the challenges black troubadours faced on the road during Jim Crow days. Humor is



never far away, though—read Terry's account of sharing an upstairs room with Basie in a private home in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., and try not to laugh. He reveals unabashed pride at his World War II service at Great Lakes Naval Training Center, where he helped whip into shape a host of all-black bands. He picks apart the pros and cons of integrating Charlie Ventura's first-rate swing band and, 15 years later, the "Tonight Show" orchestra, a gig that granted Terry first-call status on New York's peripatetic "Mad Men"-era studio scene.

He offers equal time to the sensuous, profane, erotic components of his character. Terry drinks, cusses, devours tripe sandwiches, attends to bodily functions, gambles without much skill, is expelled two months before graduation for impregnating a girl with whom he enters unhappy matrimony. As he moves into and through his 20s, he liaisons with shapely women of dubious virtue, neglects his son and eventually settles into love and a stable, mature marriage.

Nothing if not a blues epic, the narrative is also a true-grit portrait of a diligent, inspired artist. From the end of his first decade through his ninth, Terry focuses on his craft, and evolves into one of the great virtuosos on the trumpet timeline, a disciplined master of the art of section playing and a formidable improviser. At the cusp of the '70s, he transitions from the studio assembly line to a freelance career revolving in equal measure around jazz education—he plunged into it with the same fierce passion that marked all his prior activity—and leading ensembles of various sizes.

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