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My Own Private Library: A Peek Inside the Personal Library of a Librarian

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My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY

Eons ago in my schoolboy days, I made the daily walk from Metcalf Elementary to Milner Library, the original (read: old) library on the quad of Illinois State University (ISU). ISU was founded as a teacher training institution for the state, and Metcalf was its laboratory school. My father was an administrator for the university and his office was two buildings over from Milner. Until I was old enough (in my mother's opinion) to walk the mile to our home after school, I was told to meet my father at his office, and he would drive us both home. That, of course, meant I had about 90 minutes to kill at the end of every school day. And I killed them in Milner Library.



I loved the place. I would take random self-guided tours through the stacks—a great, multilevel, battleship-gray skeleton around which the brick and stone edifice was built. I would pluck an old book from a shelf and leaf through it, savoring the smell and feel of it. But mostly I would find dead-end aisles that I would haunt, feeling somehow comforted by having floor-to-ceiling shelves of books on either side of me in the narrow space. It was womblike.

Unconsciously, I tried to replicate that in every home I've ever had. Always, always there has been at least one wall filled floor to ceiling with books. I moved several times before I realized why I was doing that. It doesn't take a psychoanalyst to figure out I've been trying to

recreate the comfortable feeling I got hunkering down on a rolling step stool deep in the stacks of Milner Library. Of course, my current home is no exception. One wall. Floor to ceiling. But this home is unique because this wall houses the fruits of the book collecting I did between 2004 and 2015. In Library of Congress call number speak, the entire wall runs from ML 102 to ML 3849. All jazz history and biography. And there are some unique items on my wall, including local and regional jazz histories published in small batches by local jazz societies.

One such local gem is *To a Harmony with Our Souls: A History of Jazz in Central Pennsylvania*, published in 2005 by the Central Pennsylvania Friends of Jazz. Lavishly illustrated, the book provides biographies of jazz musicians who lived and worked in Central Pennsylvania, stories of touring jazz groups who performed over the years in the area, and a rundown of the various venues that presented jazz to midstate Pennsylvanians as far back as the 1930s. In all I have 66 books in my collection on jazz in specific cities, regions, and foreign countries. Some tell the stories of unlikely places and times for such an American art form, including one on jazz in Finland, one on jazz in Saskatchewan, and two on jazz in Nazi Germany.

One of several first editions in my collection is the notorious *Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus*. First published in 1971

by Knopf and still in print to this day in a paperback edition, it was marketed as the autobiography of bassist and composer Charles Mingus. A conventional memoir it's not. In fact, the book is often described as being more like a Beat novel. It's a page-turning read, but when you get to the end of it you realize you know little more about Mingus's life as a musician and composer than you did when you began on page one. You are, however, aware that you've had an intimate—if not pornographic—peek into his mind. Ultimately the book can be understood as the lurid fantasies, or perhaps even delusions, of a musician considered by many to have been a genius.

Of the more than 450 books on my wall of shelves, 250 are classed as biography (ML 410 through ML 429). Of these biographical works on jazz musicians, band leaders, and producers, 61 are first person memoirs or oral histories. Unlike Mingus's tome, one true memoir is a unique little volume titled *I Ran Away with an All-Girl Band*. Penned in 1999 by saxophonist Patricia Wolff, it's well-told recollections of her years touring with Freddie Shaffer's Victory Sweethearts. In 1940, at the age of 14, she joined the sax section of the all-female thirteen-piece band. She stayed with them for eight years. She brings the war era evocatively to life, telling moving and funny stories about those years with grace and style.

Wolff's memoir is of happy days and a fulfilled life. Inevitably in a collection of jazz musician biographies, one also finds stories of tragedy, addiction, and death. Joe Albany was an excellent, trailblazing but underappreciated pianist. A foundational player in the Bebop movement, Albany found himself living in a flop house in Los Angeles. And addicted to heroin. His daughter, A. J. (for Amy Jo, named after two polar opposite sisters in *Little Women*), wrote a moving, episodic memoir of her life being raised from the age of five by a single, drug-addicted dad. Titled *Low Down: Junk, Jazz, and Other Fairy Tales from Childhood*, she articulately presents her unique life and upbringing, introducing the reader to a cornucopia of fascinating places and even more fascinating people she experienced because she was Joe Albany's daughter. Though she doesn't soft-pedal the tragedy and pain she endured, her memoir is completely devoid of self-pity. Published by Bloomsbury in 2003, it was adapted for the screen in 2014.

There's your peek at my current floor-to-ceiling wall of books. I still find comfort in having them there. Now, if only I could hear all that music inside all those volumes...

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