



JAZZBEAUX  
SAN FRANCISCO, CIRCA 1963  
COURTESY OF PATTI COLLINS

ANON

# Jazzbeaux Got There

*Al “Jazzbeaux” Collins, notorious jazz personality, and creator of the Purple Grotto, his radio show that lived in its listeners’ imaginations, passed away on Tuesday evening, September 30th, 1997, at his home in Mill Valley. He was seventy-eight. He was one of my teachers.*

I remember Jazzbeaux from the radio. He broadcast live from a state of mind he called the *Purple Grotto*, a stalactite- and stalagmite-daggered cavern, three stories below street level, somewhere in downtown Manhattan.

He described it so well, and in so few words, that he put you there with him, into the *Purple Grotto*. He filled it with characters from his imagination. There was Harrison, the purple Tasmanian owl, who stared at you through two red eyes. I remember Scoffer, who lived in the bottomless purple pit and ate the labels off old 78s. And there was Jukes, the chameleon, who lived in a box made by Dr. Caligari, the cabinet maker. The box that Jukes lived in, Jazzbeaux called the “Jukesbox.”

From his Purple Grotto, Jazzbeaux cast his purple spell.

He played jazz records, and Jazzbeaux had great taste in music. Between cuts he rapped at you in '50s bop-talk about whatever pleased him: about jazz, which he loved and spoke of succinctly; or about the cut he had just played.

Or he'd tell one of Steve Allen's "Bop Fables" — the Little Red Riding Hood stories Steve rewrote into hipster vernacular. Or he'd have the cats in to play live on his show. He'd have cats like Count Basie — Al's favorite jazz was big band and his favorite big band was Basie's. Cats like Louis Armstrong, Teddy Wilson, and even Art Tatum. Tatum, maybe the greatest jazz pianist who ever lived, played live on the Grotto for six months straight.

Miles Davis once called Jazzbeaux up — yeah, Jazzbeaux knew Miles — and Miles, knowing how Jazzbeaux dug a good car, asked Al to take a ride with him in his new Ferrari. Sure, Jazzbeaux went. He said it was a gas.

Al was so strong in the New York scene that MAD magazine caricatured him for a while. He was one of the few hosts of the Tonight Show, doing a stint following Steve Allen and preceding Jack Parr.

He recorded "Grimm Fairy Tales for Hip Kids." This was an album of Al reading Steve Allen's "Bop Fables," while Steve played piano. It sold 750,000 copies.

So, all the cats hung with Jazzbeaux, and Jazzbeaux was one of the cats.

A pioneer in radio, he invented the man on-the-street interview in 1949: In his version, Al would lie down flat on his back at some downtown street corner — like he was gone — and when someone came over and bent down to look at him, he would stick a mike in his face and start interviewing the guy.

Jazzbeaux invented the art of talking on air over soft background music, usually by a piano trio like Nat King Cole's.

"That made my audience feel that somethin' was going

on, somethin' was happenin' in the Grotto where I was talking," Al told me.

During his show, Jazzbeaux would take phone calls from his listeners off the air, while he was playing a cut. If he found a caller that he was having a good time with, he'd take him on-air when the cut ended. He was a master of these on-air interviews and had off-the-wall discussions with his callers. The ones who gave him the biggest laughs would become mainstays on his show for years, checking in regularly to update Al on their stuff.

Jazzbeaux was an independent. He never let management dictate a play list to him; he played what he wanted, and he did what he wanted. One evening, Count Basie came by with his entire band. They played live on the *Purple Grotto* for two-and-a-half hours straight. Jazzbeaux didn't air a single commercial the entire time. The station manager was furious, and nearly fired him the next day.

"I wouldn't have cared," Al told me. "We had a blast!"

The Purple Grotto was a magic show born in a magic era of radio. Jazzbeaux took it with him for some fifty years, from New York to San Francisco, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh and finally, back to the Bay Area. He was last on-air with the Purple Grotto at KCSM radio at the College of San Mateo on September 20th, ten days before he passed. It was prostate cancer that finally caught up with him.

Early in the spring of 1997, Al and I drove to Carmel to dig Mose Allison. Mose was playing a concert at KRML radio, the local jazz station. The station had invited Al down to be their guest at the show and were offering to put him up at a fancy inn.

Al said, "Yeah, but you've gotta put up my driver too. I don't travel without my driver, ya know."

The station said, "Driver? ... uh, no problem, Al."

Fortunately, Al asked me to be the driver.

It was a beautiful day, the sun was shining on the Pacific, the early spring flowers were in bloom, and as we drove, I asked Al about his beginnings in radio.

“I looked around and I saw what the other guys were doing and I said, ‘No, I don’t want to do that. That’s not funny, that’s not refreshing. Let’s talk about something that’s *fun*.’

“That’s my whole philosophy. The more laughs I can get and the less serious I can get, the more I like it.

“I don’t believe in settling the great questions. A lot of people want to know why we’re here. I’m satisfied with just knowing that we are.”

And then he said this, carefully:

“I just want to get so relaxed, so mellowed out, that no matter what happens on my show, no matter what any of my guests say or do, I will be totally in the groove with it and flow with it perfectly.”

He looked out the window; the Pacific Ocean sparkled in his eyes. Then he looked back at me and said:

“And I haven’t got there yet.”

I was surprised to hear Al say this — he was the king of laid-back — so later when we were at the inn, I asked him, “Did I hear you right, Al, that you haven’t got there yet?”

He looked over at me and said, “Yeah. Not yet.”

Al was a little Buddha on his way to enlightenment. And on that September Tuesday evening, in the arms of his wife Patti, with a picture, it is said, of Count Basie hanging over the bed, Jazzbeaux got there.

Hello Al. May your message of jazz and laughs live up the heavenly big band forever.



MY FRIEND AL COLLINS  
MILL VALLEY, CIRCA 1995

BY BILL AMATNEEK