

## BLUES BACKSTAGE: THE GROVER MITCHELL BIG BAND

by *Bob Bernotas*

*Photography by Lesley Peacock*

**S***unday, 11 p.m.:* As the chartered bus carries the Grover Mitchell Big Band back to Manhattan, the trombonist-leader leans back in his seat, sips a beer, and reflects on the long day now ending.

“I feel good,” Mitchell announces. “You know, I get on a high when things go right and you get your energy going. And I was playing pretty good tonight – that always makes me feel good. Some nights when it just don’t happen, I can be just the opposite. It’ll take me two hours to wind down now.” The ensembles were tight, the solos were hot, and the band was swinging. But Mitchell is talking about more than the performance. Just beneath the surface it’s easy to see that his satisfaction is tempered with relief.

After two stints as Count Basie’s lead trombonist (1962–70 and 1980–84) and more than ten years at the head of his own thirteen-piece band (plus singer), Mitchell knows all the hassles, the headaches, the hundred-and-one things that can – and do – go wrong. He has suffered fragile egos and unreliable characters. He has had to search for ensemble-oriented players in a world of soloists. And he realizes that even in good economic times, big band dates are as almost as rare as World Series games in Chicago.

***The previous Friday, 2 p.m.:*** The Grover Mitchell Big Band assembles at the tiny dance studio–rehearsal hall on West 46th Street on a brutally humid late August day, the worst day of an otherwise mild New York summer. In two days they will play a jazz festival on Long Island, and Mitchell has called this rehearsal to break in the new sidemen and subs.

As they set up their horns and look over their parts, the players joke casually, often at their leader’s expense. Someone mentions that Mitchell had worked with Lionel Hampton, and saxophonist Bill Ramsay asks in mock astonishment, “Hey Grover, are you really younger than Hamp?” The sixty-two-year-old Mitchell grins and replies to his ex-Basie mate, “*Everybody’s* younger than Hamp.” The players chuckle and then laugh abundantly when lead trumpeter Byron Stripling chimes in, “Grover, were you at the Last Supper?” It’s always hip to bug the cat who’s paying you.

But the levity does not ease Mitchell’s tension. Four of his twelve musicians are not there. Bass trombone–tuba player Herb Besson is bedridden with a badly sprained

back, so he sent Tim Newman to sub. Tenor saxophonist Don Braden told Mitchell that he would be late getting in from Boston, where he had a business appointment. Two others have not shown and have not called. "All you can do," Mitchell laments, shaking his head in disgust, "is call these guys up and listen to them say, 'Yes, I'll be there,' and hope for the best."



**Mitchell and bass trombonist Tim Newman (subbing for Herb Besson) sweat through a chart at the "rehearsal hall" – a narrow, poorly ventilated dance studio. Those objects to Newman's right are *not* the heads of ex-sidemans who missed rehearsals.**

One of the absentees is a veteran of the band who, it seems, actually missed a couple of gigs because he forgot about them. "Those convenient 'forgets,'" Mitchell grumbles. The other delinquent sideman is, of all things, a French horn player. "I *know* French horn players don't work," Mitchell declares, "so when French horn players start messin' with me, look out!"

Mitchell has the band run down a couple of charts, "just to put your eyeballs on them." Thelonious Monk's "Well, You Needn't" twice bogs down during the tricky 6/4 coda. "We'll have the ending rehearsal tomorrow," suggests drummer Dennis Mackrel, tongue in cheek, who then offers some advice that helps solve the problem.

After the next tune, "Bosko's Business" by Ernie Wilkins, the band takes a break, and at Mackrel's urging, Mitchell tries calling the two delinquents. The first, he discovers, is in the midst of some personal trials. "He split," Mitchell reports. "Left his wife and kids. He took up different residence." There is no answer from the French horn player. As the band members retake their seats, Mitchell moans to no one in particular, "Oh man, these cats got me fucked up!"

“Grover, man, this is New York,” Stripling counsels. “There’s tons of cats.” Mitchell nods, but he decides there is no point in attempting “Creole Love Call” without the French horn, which is integral to alto saxophonist Jerry Dodgion’s elaborate arrangement. Instead he calls on singer Milt Grayson, who wraps his rich, sonorous baritone around “Love You Madly” and “Lost in Loveliness.” Mitchell feels that Grayson should cut the band off at the end of his numbers. “Be Joe Williams,” he tells the singer.

At this point in the rehearsal, Mitchell pauses to announce the uniform for Sunday’s gig. “Wear your blue, double-breasted blazer,” he instructs the band. “If you don’t have a blue, double-breasted blazer and you’ve got a blue suit, wear the coat off that.”

He completes the outfit – light blue shirts, beige pants, and red ties. (From the reaction of some of the newer members, there will be a run on beige pants in Macy’s and Stern’s tomorrow.) The ties, it seems, are especially important to Mitchell. “Not a tie with red dots or little stripes,” he insists. “A *red* tie. If you don’t have a red tie, call me and maybe I can get you one.” Then, perhaps sensing that he’s going over the top, Mitchell concedes, “Maroon is OK.” Those details can make any bandleader a little crazy.

“This is the uniform when we’re not wearing the tuxedos. It’s a nice outfit – you could go out dressed like that.” The band finds this amusing but Mitchell persists. “We’re gonna play some extraordinary music and were gonna have some extraordinary people playing it. And we’re gonna look like some hip motherfuckers – no Local 802 gray suits.”

Byron Stripling’s attention has begun to lag – he’s been in the band for a while and heard this all before – when Mitchell’s last remark catches his ear. “What kind of motherfuckers we gonna be?” he asks in mock seriousness. This really cracks up the players, but their leader is undaunted. “Everybody’s wearing the gray suits,” he emphasizes. Then he’s back on the ties. “If you need a red tie, I’ll get you one. In fact, you guys who have been in the band for a while, I bought \$80 worth of red ties for you motherfuckers, and I haven’t seen *one* of them.”

“I played in a band,” Jerry Dodgion claims, “where the ties cost \$80 *each*.” After a small laugh he hits his punch line with the timing of a Catskills comic. “So they fired the guy who bought the ties.” This breaks everyone up, and finally Mitchell is satisfied that he has made his point. Jerry Dodgion is a good man to have in your band. “As things get more and more tense,” baritone saxophonist Kenny Berger notes afterwards, “Jerry seems to get calmer and calmer.”

Grayson runs through three more tunes – “Don’t Get Around Much Anymore,” “Misty” (at this point Don Braden arrives), and “Day In – Day Out” – and leaves the hall. Mitchell

is not sure what to call next. “I got tunes I can’t play ’cause this motherfucker ain’t here.” He turns and speaks with righteous contempt to the empty French horn chair next to him, “*And that’s what you are, boy.*”

Mitchell settles on “Hip Shakin” by Frank Foster, the title tune of the band’s latest album, and it goes well. “I’ll buy that record,” he jokes. Then he decides to see if they can make “Creole Love Call” work. It’s clearly a favorite with the band, but it sounds empty without French horn and Mitchell’s annoyance grows.

They play through Billy Strayhorn’s “Isfahan,” return to “Well, You Needn’t” (for Braden’s benefit), and tackle “Big Daddy,” a “Rhythm” changes burner that features the young tenor man. By this time it’s 5 p.m. and they have to split. Mitchell announces that the bus will leave from this spot at 3 p.m. on Sunday. He appears a little bugged – or at least apprehensive – when four of the musicians say they will drive out to the gig on their own.

Fellow ex-Basie-ites Bill Ramsay and Dennis Mackrel stay behind to help pack the stands and books. Mackrel, who joined Count Basie in 1983 when he was only twenty years old, is a gifted composer-arranger as well as a trusted problem solver and adviser on whom Mitchell relies heavily. On his recommendation the trio heads off to the Popeye’s north of Times Square to eat fried chicken, reminisce about their days in the Basie band, and plan for Sunday’s gig. It’s fun but eventually Mitchell has to leave – he’s got to find a new French horn player.



**Mitchell waits pensively for the bus – and the band. “All you can do is call these guys up and listen to them say, ‘Yes, I’ll be there,’ and hope for the best.”**

**Sunday, 2:30 p.m.:** Mitchell is, of course, the first to arrive at the rehearsal hall, along with Bill Ramsay. Ramsay, a valuable utility player, flew in from his home in Tacoma,

Washington, for this gig and is sleeping on Mitchell's sofa. Normally heard on baritone, today he will fill one of the tenor chairs while Kenny Berger handles the baritone book. "I said, 'Grover, I'm not a tenor player,'" Ramsay laughed. "He said, 'You're playing tenor on this gig!'" In a couple of months he'll return to play lead alto in Dodgion's place. Herb Besson's back is better, thanks to muscle relaxers and painkillers. Still, he's relieved to be playing only a one-hour set, and for most of the trip he'll lie stretched out across the back seat of the bus.

One of Friday's absentees has ironed out his family situation and will make the gig. "He told me he forgot," Mitchell comments. "I said, 'You've been forgetting too much lately.'" There will be a new French horn player, Vincent Chancey.

Since the gig is only about fifty miles from Manhattan, the chartered bus seems extravagant. Mitchell disagrees. "You tell a bunch of musicians, 'We're gonna hit at 8:00 and you get out there the best way you can' – man, you are asking for trouble. I would rather spend the \$600 and get a bus and make sure everybody's there and my equipment's there on time and we're gonna do this damn job right. That's just the way I operate. I don't cut any corners."



**Ready to board – Herb Besson, Milt Grayson, Grover Mitchell, Bill Ramsay, Byron Stripling, and Kenny Berger. But where's that new French horn player?**

In all, seven of the twelve sidemen – plus singer Grayson, road manager Johnny Garry, and his assistant Mac – will take the bus. By 3 p.m. the bus is boarded, packed, and ready to go, but as it reaches the end of the block Mitchell realizes that he is forgetting something. "Wait a minute," he calls to the driver, "we gotta get the French horn player."

The bus begins to circle the block, and Mitchell asks the assembly, “Do you know what he looks like?” Stripling can’t resist: “You don’t want a horn player in this band anyway,” he tells Mitchell.

Luckily a guy carrying a French horn case is walking up to the rehearsal hall just as the bus turns the corner. Vincent Chancey gets in, takes a seat, and braces himself for the ribbing he’s about to get. “I knew I’d work for somebody who ran a tight ship one of these days,” he muses. “Somebody said, ‘Just find a bad trumpet player,’” Stripling claims. “Or a good trombone player,” Besson adds.

During the one hour and forty minute trip, the musicians nap, snack on junk food and fruit, write letters, joke, and swap golf stories. The bus passes the Hospital for Diseases of the Joints, and Mitchell calls out, “That was [former Basie saxophonist] Eric Dixon’s favorite hospital!” and most of the passengers laugh knowingly. (Rumor has it that Dixon would smoke the occasional joint.) But except for such sporadic outbursts, the bus is surprisingly quiet.

That is, except for the back of the bus, which is dominated by the raspy voice of Johnny Garry, road manager to the stars, raconteur, fountain of jazz lore, and legend. Garry’s presence takes some of the pressure off Mitchell. “Johnny’s great at getting us set up, getting the guys on and off the bus, whatever. If you don’t pay for that service, you’re cheating yourself,” the leader insists. “And Johnny has the best time of anybody.”



**Johnny Garry, road manager to the stars – clearly, James Brown is *not* the hardest working man in show business.**

Throughout the entire trip Garry regales everyone within earshot with tales of the days when he managed the original Café Society and Birdland, and served as Sarah Vaughan's road manager, lighting director, dresser, and confidant. To hear him tell it, the only thing he *didn't* do for her was sing the songs.

**Sunday, 4:50 p.m.:** The bus arrives at Heckscher State Park in East Islip, Long Island. Garry and Mac immediately unload the equipment and set up the stands and drums. "A wingowagon!" Garry exclaims when he sees the small mobile stage. The outdoor concert is scheduled to run from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m., with Mitchell's band on last, but because the opening act, Ray Barretto's Latin jazz combo, is late, the program will not start until nearly 5:30. Mitchell is visibly annoyed.



**Ray Barretto and his band have shown up at last. The look on Mitchell's face speaks volumes.**

Unlike many of these affairs, where the performers are lucky if they get a bowl of stale Cheese Doodles, the accommodations are first-rate – cheese, fresh fruit, bakery cookies, fried chicken, sandwiches. There also is an open bar, but few of the musicians indulge before the gig and none to excess.

While Barretto's band delivers a smokin' set – proving that old adage, “better late than never” – Mitchell waits anxiously, not relaxing until the last member of his band finally arrives. Group Five, a vocalese act, goes on shortly before 7 p.m., as Mitchell's players start to warm up – well out of the audience's earshot, of course. Garry had told them that they would hit at 8 p.m., but well after that time the singers are still droning on. Backstage, the musicians grumble about the length and lameness of the set – which includes an insipid medley of TV commercial jingles – but thankfully their warm-up routines almost drown it out.

Out front, as this unseasonably pleasant summer day turns into a surprisingly cool summer night, the audience grows restless and begins to dwindle, chased by the rising tedium and the falling temperature.

**Sunday, 8:45 p.m.:** Finally, the nearly four-hour wait is over, and the Grover Mitchell Big Band opens its set with “Hip Shakin’,” followed by an Eric Dixon original, “B.B.B.,” and then a straight-ahead blues by Ernie Wilkins, “Almost Basie.” (“One time I announced this tune,” Mitchell recalled at Friday's rehearsal, “and a woman in the front row said, ‘but not quite!’”) Trumpeters Cecil Bridgewater and John Eckert – muted and open, respectively – and Bill Ramsay, on tenor, deliver solid solos as Stripling, that giant spark plug in the middle of the back row, claps and shouts encouragement to his mates.



**French horn player Vincent Chancey looks over “Creole Love Call” with Bill Ramsay, Kenny Berger, and the arranger, Jerry Dodgion. Chancey was called for the gig the previous night – “I didn’t know what to expect,” he admits.**

The band tackles Dodgion's intricate chart on "Creole Love Call," and it works out OK, new French horn player and all – not perfect, but undetectably imperfect. The subtle pleasures of pianist John Campbell, supported by bassist Marcus McLaurine and drummer Dennis Mackrel, set a strong, deep groove on "Bosko's Business."

After a miniset by the slim, dapper Milt Grayson – where does he keep that big voice of his? – Mitchell kicks off the closer, "Big Daddy," featuring "our *enfant terrible*," and Don Braden responds with seven brilliant choruses – each more thrilling than the last – plus an extended a cappella coda. Sitting next to him, a delighted Jerry Dodgion smiles broadly from beginning to end.

The diminished audience is also appreciative, but they're ready to leave – it's been a long day for them, too. On stage the players look at each other, wondering, "Are we gonna play an encore?" Besson, whose back is showing signs of fatigue, begins to walk off, tuba in one arm, bass trombone in the other. But he has to return to his seat because Mitchell decides to call "C Jam Blues," which is highlighted by Jerry Dodgion's tasty flute solo. At 9:45 the concert is over.

**Sunday, 10:30 p.m.:** The musicians have packed, polished off the remainder of the food, and enjoyed a taste or two, before they are hustled back onto the bus by Johnny Garry. "I think the French horn player should pack up the stands," he remarks, seizing one more opportunity to razz the new man. In a few minutes the charter pulls away, and for the first time today a real sense of ease comes over Mitchell.



**It's 11 p.m. – do you know where your sidemen are? Back on the bus Stripling and Ramsay settle in at the end of a long day.**

“It was late and it was cold,” he observes, “but the ones that really wanted to hear us stayed, so that’s the important thing. And the ones that were there were really enthusiastic.” Ramsay agrees. “It went good considering that half the program we played isn’t what we rehearsed.”

And he didn’t seem to mind playing tenor. “Oh, is that what I played, man? But you know,” Ramsay explains about his “Almost Basie” solo, “that wasn’t my usual style. Because I play E-flat instruments most of the time, I usually don’t have to improvise in the key of E-flat. On alto or baritone E-flat is G-flat concert and you almost never see that key. So I said to myself, ‘What would Lester Young play if he was drunk?’ and I just did that.”

The bus arrives back at the rehearsal hall shortly before midnight, and the musicians depart, say their goodbyes, and disperse. The band’s next gig together is in mid-October, and Mitchell prays that it goes as smoothly as this one.

But you’ve got to wonder, with all that a big band leader has to endure, why would anyone bother? “Guess I have to,” reflects Mitchell, resigned to his fate. This is, after all, the kind of music he likes best. But his weary smile says it all – leading a big band would be one cool breeze if all you had to worry about was the music.

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*In July 1995 Grover Mitchell became the musical director of The Count Basie Orchestra, a position he held until his death in August 2003.*



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