

WEST VIRGINIA GAZETTE

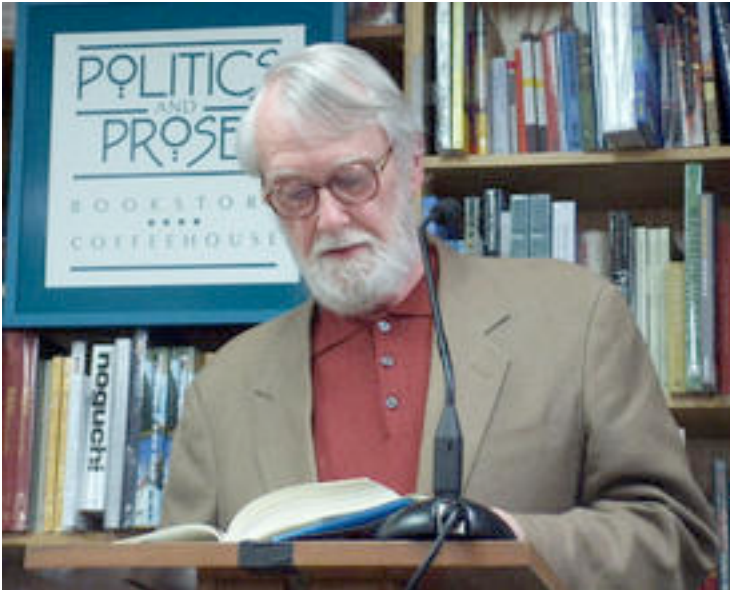
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The jazz writer

Music critic and former classics professor W. Royal Stokes semi-retires to Elkins

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- By Bill Lynch, Staff writer

Retirement, at least semi-retirement, suits jazz critic, writer, and editor W. Royal Stokes just fine. The longtime Washington-based writer, former DJ, and Yale-trained former classics professor enjoys his new life in Elkins. Stokes managed to turn what he was passionate about into a second career. A classics professor who taught Latin and Greek, he grew up with a deep love of jazz and the blues.



W. Royal Stokes at his Politics & Prose April 2005 Washington, D.C., book signing for *Growing Up With Jazz: Twenty-Four Musicians Talk About Their Lives and Careers* (Oxford University Press, 2005). Photo courtesy ERIKA

ELSE

Stokes doesn't consider his coming to West Virginia three years ago as the end of his career. It's just another unexpected turn of events. There have been many over the years. He never intended to have any kind of career in jazz music. He never meant to be a jazz critic, let alone a disc jockey, a jazz magazine editor, or even a fan. Growing up in Washington, D.C., and Gibson Island, Maryland, during World War II, what little Stokes knew about music was whatever he picked up from the sound throbbing through the wall separating his bedroom from his elder brother's. At the time, he wasn't even listening.

"I paid no attention to the noise coming from my brother's bedroom," Stokes said. "It didn't make any sense to me."

Stokes might have kept his distance, but then his brother Bill joined the Navy. He shipped out in 1943 when Stokes was 13. He'd be gone for years, but he didn't lock his bedroom door.

"Naturally, when he left, I had to explore his room," Stokes said.

He discovered a turntable and a slim collection of 78s, 10-inch shellac records that held three minutes of music on each side. These were boogie woogie records by Meade Lux Lewis and Albert Ammons, popular players in the 1940s.

Without the filter of plaster and brick, he fell in love with the rolling bass figures. Boogie woogie led to the blues, which took him to traditional jazz, Swing Era big bands and combos, and bebop. He became a fanatic. By the time he graduated from high school, he'd turned his brother's collection of six into 500 records.

"I spent my allowance money. I spent whatever money I earned from my paper route."

The music was a passion, but it wasn't really a profession. The closest he ever came to playing was a brief flirtation with the drums. Mostly, he just tapped along to the backbeat while listening to his records. In 1948, he left home for the University of Washington, where he studied the classics, then went on to Yale for his Ph.D. Stokes taught Latin and Greek

languages and literature at Pitt, Tufts and the University of Colorado. He quit teaching in 1970 and moved back to the D.C. area with his wife.



Stokes' career as a DJ and music writer introduced him to a variety of people such as comedy legend Bill Cosby. Photo courtesy GENE MARTIN

In 1972, while listening to a jazz program on WGTB, a public radio station out of Georgetown University, Stokes heard a piece of music that sounded familiar, but not. He recognized the style, but not the artist. He called the station. It turned out to be a piece by Ray Charles, but it was in an earlier boogie woogie jazz style. He struck up a conversation with the radio host, who asked him if he knew something about "this old music." He asked Stokes if he had any records and if maybe he'd like to bring them down to the station.

Stokes became a regular guest on the radio station. After several months, they offered him his own Saturday morning show. He called it *I thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say*, a line from a song by Jelly Roll Morton. A couple

of years later he added a Wednesday evening show, *Since Minton's*, referring to Minton's Playhouse, a Harlem jazz club founded by legendary tenor saxophonist Henry Minton. Stokes stayed a music host for 15 years, working at WGTB, then moving over to WPFW in the 1980s.

Working at the radio station led to writing for *The Washington Post*. Stokes had a friend with the paper, so he asked him to help smooth the way and point him to the right person to talk to.

"I just went down to the paper and offered myself as a jazz critic," he said. "At the time, they already had an in-house writer who wrote on jazz and many other subjects, but he seldom went out to review."

Stokes was willing to go to the clubs and theaters and listen. It wasn't exactly like work. He wrote articles as a stringer for the *Post* and published other pieces elsewhere. Eventually, he became the *Post's* official jazz critic. He stayed with them for 10 years before taking on the editorship at *JazzTimes*.

"But I really wanted to get a book published," Stokes said.

Stokes knew Martin Williams, a jazz critic and historian who directed the Jazz and American Culture programs at the Smithsonian from 1971 to 1981. Stokes called Williams and asked for some advice on getting his book about jazz published.

"He said, 'Sure,' then gave me the number for his editor at Oxford University Press."

The little jumps and pirouettes from one thing to the next during Stokes' career sound easier than they actually were. None of it would have been possible if he didn't have an earnest and abiding love of the music. It also happened that he kept the company of others who also loved the music, too.

Stokes has several books about jazz to his name, three collections of profiles of jazz and blues musicians through the scholarly Oxford University Press and a fourth, *Swing Era New York: The Jazz Photographs of Charles Peterson*, published by Temple University Press. His latest,

Growing Up With Jazz: Twenty-Four Jazz Musicians Talk About Their Lives And Careers, was recently reprinted in paperback.

The longtime Washington-based writer, former DJ and Yale-trained former classics professor enjoys his new life in Elkins.

There's enough to do. His wife, Erika Else, a retired librarian, is an enthusiastic skier. They chose the Potomac Highlands because they both love to kayak, bicycle, and hike, and he raves about the local arts and music scene.

"We've fallen in love with [the] Cajun and Zydeco music" they've heard around town, the 78-year-old said. "And the Augusta Festival here is just wonderful."

Between the endless hours of recreation, Stokes still manages to work in a lot of writing. He does liner notes for CDs and contributes magazine articles here and there. He's also working on two separate book projects.

"Today I'm writing a tribute to one of my musical heroes: drummer Louie Bellson," he said. "He passed away recently." He said the tribute will appear in *Jazz Notes*, the quarterly journal of the Jazz Journalists Association.

Three years ago, his wife Erika retired and Stokes followed her. They sold their home in Silver Spring, Md., and came to West Virginia. Their schedule is more leisurely, but not quiet.

"You know how it is. I'm a writer. I don't get to retire."