

## Talking Jazz

### A Jersey Jazz Interview with Charlie Rice

By Schaen Fox

**I**f you travel to the City of Brotherly Love and visit Ortlieb's Jazzhaus, you might see 89-year-old Charlie Rice. A lifelong and highly praised jazz musician, he remembers when the jazz scene in Philadelphia was a close rival to that in New York. He worked in many of the city's legendary clubs and with many of the musicians who left Philly for greater fame.

This past year, he has been in the news again, not for his artistic powers but unhappily for criminal charges from his decades-long day job. He was accused, along with others, of taking gas illegally from the Camden Board of Education. After reading about his plight, I contacted him by phone last December to begin this interview. His legal battle so absorbed his time that we were unable to finish until early June after the New Jersey Attorney General dismissed all charges.

His vindication is one more triumph for The Jazz Bridge Project, a relatively new entity that is gaining attention for its good works. Co-founder Suzanne Cloud has enlisted the help of a number of people, including Pat Martino, to focus on the needs of jazz artists in the South Jersey/Philadelphia region. Suzanne explained how they helped Charlie:

*"We set up a fund called the Charlie Rice Legal Defense Fund and raised \$17,000 dollars for his defense with two benefits at the Clef Club, a jazz vespers at his church in Camden, Larry McKenna and Sam Reed jamming at Ortlieb's, as well as making a film about him that did well on YouTube before the charges were finally dropped. We hired the best darn criminal defense attorney (Michael Pinsky) to represent him. You can read it all on our web site at [www.jazzbridge.org](http://www.jazzbridge.org) and click on Press or just Google Charlie's name and all the info from the Philadelphia Daily News will come up."*

**JJ:** I read that you were born and raised in Philadelphia, is that right?

**CR:** Right.

**JJ:** And before you started drumming, you were a professional tap dancer. When did you start?

**CR:** Oh, when I was a kid. I guess I must have been six years old. But, what happened is a lot of the clubs used to have little shows and that started drying up. I said that's not going to make it. [Chuckles] So I always liked drums anyway, and I knew a lot of drummers. They said all I had to do was sit in and they'd tell me certain things.



Charlie Rice. Photo by Richard Timbers II.

**JJ:** About how old were you when you switched?

**CR:** About 20; [it was] a late start. I ended up playing in a couple of big bands. Then I discovered the Downbeat [Club] in back of the Earle Theater. That is where Dizzy and all of them used to work, even before Dizzy got a band. I became friends with a very, very good drummer Chick Keeny [who] was working at the Downbeat. So he came to me one day and said, "I'm getting ready to go with Charlie Ventura. Why don't you take this gig?" That's how I got the job. I think that was one of the best things that happened to me. I worked there for about four years, '46 to '49, in that neighborhood. That's where I met Red Garland. He was working with Hot Lips Page and got stranded in Philadelphia. Some guy brought him to the Downbeat — that was the testing ground. He sat in and played so good that Nat Segal [the owner of the club] hired him too. [Then] he had two piano players. [Nat] was a clarinet player, so he understood musicians. I think he had the first jazz concert at the Academy of Music and he put us on that. They had Bud Powell and the drummer Specks Powell and Georgie Auld's band. Georgie had a hell of a band and Woody Herman had a corny band for a long time. I think what happened is Georgie couldn't keep his band and Woody took that band and that's where all that stuff like "Four Brothers" comes from.

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**JJ:** I've read that that was a good time to be a jazz musician in Philadelphia.

**CR:** Oh man, everybody had music, everybody. I'm talking about the little bars on the corner, all over. The guys would come from New York and say, "Man this is it!" At that time Dizzy would work a couple of days with us, sometimes a whole week. Hank Jones, Bud Powell, Fats Navarro, Kenny Clark, a lot of guys would come there and do a single. What made it so great [was] when the Earle Theater's last show was over, all those guys would come over to the Downbeat.

**JJ:** Did anyone make a special impression on you?

**CR:** They all did.

**JJ:** Well, what was it like working with Red Rodney?

**CR:** Red was in the Downbeat when I came there. He was a very good trumpet player, a little crazy, but you know...I got along with him fine. He became like a little thug. He used to carry a big knife and I said, "Listen man you better put that thing away before somebody hurts you." He just worshiped Charlie Parker and Dizzy. He made a lot of guys sick talking about [how] they were gods (chuckles) and that's who he used to hang with. They were always doing crazy things.

**JJ:** Well, did you work much with Dizzy?

**CR:** I didn't really have any contact with him at the time. He was working with Frankie Fairfax, and I used to hear people talking about Dizzy Gillespie, but I didn't know him. [The first time] I saw him was at a dance, but I didn't think anything [about it], just another musician.

**JJ:** Most musicians spend a lot of their time traveling, but you didn't. Why not?

**CR:** I didn't want to travel. Eddie Cleanhead Vinson was so impressed with us that he fired the band he had and hired us — Red Garland, John Coltrane, Sax Young, Johnny Coles, Eddie Roads and me. I enjoyed the band but we went down South and they had those roads, one way coming and one way going, and we were in the car [crossing a] little bridge with a tractor trailer coming the opposite way. It was snowing, [and] the driver swerved, and we went over an embankment. The only thing that kept the car from turning over was it dug in the snow. So, right then and there I said, "This ain't for



Photo courtesy of The Jazz Bridge Project.

me." [Chuckles] We made the tour and came home and [Eddie] was telling me that we were going to go towards Florida and I said, "I'm not going." So, when I didn't go, Red didn't go. We stayed in Philly. That was the end of my one-nighters for a while. It was dangerous.

**JJ:** It sounds like you and Red were close.

**CR:** We were very good friends. In fact, I wasn't there when Eddie Vinson hired all those guys. He was going to take this drummer and Red said, "No, I've got a drummer that you'll like better." That's how I got the gig. Outside we really didn't hang around with the same people, but we still had a good relationship. And Red wasn't a hard guy to get along with. He was friends with most of the guys.

**JJ:** Well, I must ask about John Coltrane.

**CR:** I knew Trane because we used to all go to jam sessions and he was just a young guy around Philly. I think he worked with Earl Bostic for a while. He was the nicest, humblest guy you could meet. He never talked about nobody; never put nobody down. That is the God's honest truth.

**JJ:** Was he already so focused on his music when you met him?

**CR:** Yeah. When we were on the road, him, Sax Young and Johnny Coles were always in the room practicing, going through some books, that stuff — always.

**JJ:** Would you tell us about the last time you saw him?

**CR:** The last time...He had left Miles and was having trouble with Elvin Jones. He showed up late or didn't show up, because Roy Haines was working with him. He was telling me, "You know, Rice, when I got ready to leave Miles, I went and told him I wanted to go out on my own and he just said, 'OK.'" I guess Trane figured that's what Elvin should do instead of acting up. Then he was telling me he was getting ready to try going out further. I said, "Well Trane, you go out any further with your music you are not going to have an audience." He just laughed. Sure enough, he started with two drummers, that kind of stuff. I think he was sick then, I really do. I don't think he talked about it, but I think Trane knew something was happening then. But, he was always the most pleasant person you could meet. Anybody you talk to in Philly that knew Trane will tell you the same thing — a wonderful person. We came up together, Benny Golson, Trane and I. Lee Morgan was younger than all of us, but we all sort of came up together.

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**JJ:** OK, what did you think of Lee Morgan?

**CR:** [Chuckles] Lee Morgan was sort of a wise guy. He was all right with me, but just some of the things he was doing I disapproved of and it got worse when he went to New York.

**JJ:** Were you surprised when you learned about his murder?

**CR:** No, not really. I really wasn't because of the kind of guy he was, especially in New York. Now I didn't know how he was with [that] woman, but knowing Lee he must have treated her awfully bad. Jimmy Merritt was with him and he was telling me [that] it was the worst thing he ever witnessed. Lee had smacked her and [then] went to the bar and she just unloaded that pistol. [And] he had bought that for her.

**JJ:** Would you tell us about Clifford Brown?

**CR:** Oh, there's another sweetheart. Another humble guy, great musician never talked about nobody. Him and Trane, both of them — the same way, but there's not much to tell, he wasn't around

that long. Dizzy had a [gig] and let Brownie sit in and they played "A Night in Tunisia" and Dizzy pointed to Brownie to take the trumpet break and Brownie played so much that Dizzy kept him playing chorus after chorus after chorus. That made Brownie a star. Nice guy man, a nice guy.

**JJ:** So many musicians eventually left Philly for New York. Why did you stay?

**CR:** I didn't want to live in New York. The first job I was offered in New York was [from] Eddie Lockjaw Davis. He worked with us for a week at the Downbeat and told me, "Look I got the job at Minton's and I can stay there as long as I want." He wanted me and Red to go with him and I turned that down. The guy that had the band at the Apollo, Rubin Phillips, twice tried to get me to take that job. He said, "Charlie why don't you come over here and get in the band? You don't even have to wait for your union card; I'll get it right away. All these guys like you and they will help you with the show and everything." I just couldn't live in New York. I really couldn't. I love to go there, but I was married and I know guys that went over there and they didn't have anything to eat, hardly.

**JJ:** You did go back out on the road with Louis Jordan. What was that like?

**CR:** Oh, it was wonderful. He was such a good showman and the music was good, even though it wasn't my kind of jazz. It was good feeling swing music when he hit the stage. [But] I was warned about him before I went into the band. Bill Doggett told me stuff that Louis used to do. [Bill said], "He's going to pay you good money, so to hell with him; stay there and take his money." That's what I did.

**JJ:** What kind of stuff?

**CR:** One night he was singing and couldn't think of the next line in the song, so he turns and said to me, "Don't change the beat on that." And Dottie Smith, a very good singer, was with us and she said, "Did you change the beat?" I said, "Hell no." I kept right on playing. [Afterwards] we were changing our clothes and, to make himself sound right, he said to me, "Charlie what you did was all right, but keep it on the beat." I never answered him to this day and he's been dead about 20 years now.

I took Chris Columbus's place and [Louis] and Chris used to really have at it. Chris said they were getting ready to make an album with a 30-piece band behind them. Louis put his horn up to play and it squeaked. [Chuckles] He turned and told Chris, "I told you not to play the thing that way." Chris got off the drums and told him, "You -----, I'm gonna mop the floor with you." And Louis said, "I didn't come here to fight. I came to play music." And Chris said, "Well damn it, let's play. Don't you do that to me."

**JJ:** How long were you with Louis?

**CR:** Two years. Eventually Louis fired me and the bass player. The way he did it, he said, "We are going to take a couple of weeks off, and when we come back, we've got a whole lot of work lined up." [About] three weeks went by and finally somebody said they saw Louis on TV, and I said, "Oh I see what he did." You see if you are in a band and the leader takes two weeks off, he doesn't have to call you back. It's like two weeks' notice.

**JJ:** That's kind of low.

**CR:** Yes it is, but at the same time, if you get a better job, you don't have to go back. So, I stayed out of the band for quite a while. Then I ran into the bass player, Jimmy Mosley and he said, "Guess who I'm working with? Louis Jordan!" I said, "Oh yeah? Good." So he said, "We're having a lot of trouble with drummers. What are you doing?" I said, "Not too much." [He said,] "Why don't you call him up? I said, "No, I wouldn't dare, just tell him you saw me." You know he called me the next morning, "Charlie, how are you doing?" Real friendly, like nothing had happened. "Listen, we've got a whole lot of work lined up and I'd like you to come back." I started to

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say, "No." but I said [to myself,] "Don't be stupid." So I went back and stayed five years.

**JJ:** Why did you finally leave?

**CR:** Well, things began to fade. Louis wasn't doing that well and I decided to stay home because I worked a lot around Philly anyway.

**JJ:** But it was around that time that you went on a Far Eastern USO tour. What was that like?

**CR:** Yes, that was a classic. When the 421 Club was having jazz, Art Blakey, Oscar Pettiford, and [maybe] Miles came over to make a gig, and Art made me get up and play a couple of tunes with them. Later on I got a call from Oscar, "Hey Charlie we're doing this USO tour, would you want to make the gig?" I said, "Yeah, I'd love to." [It was Oscar Pettiford

on bass; J.J. Johnson, trombone; Rudy Williams, saxophone; Howard McGhee, trumpet; Ketter Betts, guitar and myself. We didn't have a piano player. I guess we worked about 20 weeks over here and they liked the group so well they said, "We want to send you to the Far East." We went to San Francisco, Hawaii and then every island in the Pacific, just about, flying every day [and] my stomach stayed on edge. One time this guy picked me up in a helicopter and said, "Come on Mr. Rice, we are running late." I got in and sat down, but the door was open. I was leaning over to close [it] and this sucker took off sideways and I almost went out. So all of this is why I wanted to stay home. [Chuckles]

**JJ:** Well, what was Oscar Pettiford like?

**CR:** He was terrible. [Chuckles] If he got a few drinks in him he was really hard to handle and he got juiced a lot over there. Keeter went along with him, but he wasn't as bad. The Special Services officer came to us and said, "Look, can you do without Oscar Pettiford?" We told him "No, he's the bass player. We need him." He said, "Well look, if he acts up any more, we are going to have to send him home." Which he did. Oscar and Keeter got in a fight on the plane and the captain said, "Turn this plane around, I want these guys off of here." I thought he was talking about all of us, but they just put Oscar and Keeter off. The next day they sent Keeter over to [us] and they told Oscar to go home.

**JJ:** How did the band sound without him?



LOUIS JORDAN And His TYMPANY FIVE

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Charlie Rice, 2nd from left, in a press photo of Louis Jordan and his Tympany 5. Courtesy of The Jazz Bridge Project.

**CR:** All right because we had been playing a lot without him anyway.

**JJ:** What about Howard McGhee?

**CR:** Well, he stayed pretty high most of the time [because] you could buy whiskey by the tons. In fact, Oscar took a case with him. Now why he did that, I don't know. Most of the guys were all right.

**JJ:** I guess some of that might have been due to the Korean winter.

**CR:** I've never felt cold weather like that. I don't care what you had on, it went through everything and those Koreans were walking around in shirts and rubber shoes. We were supposed to play for an hour and the guy's lips were freezing to the horns. Some places we got to play for maybe 20 minutes. They had big pot bellied stoves on each side of the bandstand. That did a little something, but not much. We had to wear army clothing and I'd been given the high boots and I told the guy "I can't play in these things." So they gave me a pair of shoes like the officers wear and when I turned around to pick up the boots, somebody had stolen them.

**JJ:** How was your reception from the troops?

**CR:** Beautiful.

**JJ:** I also want to ask about your time with Chet Baker.

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**CR:** When I first worked with Chet he had Phil Urso, a good tenor player. We went to Chicago and Phil got busted [Chuckles] and we hadn't even started playing. And Chet was messed up. He was running around looking for this junkie in this bad neighborhood. He jumped out of the car and was talking to these guys and [then] they all went inside. I told Skip Johnson, the bass player, "This is crazy. We are going to miss this gig and be all messed up if I don't do something." I got out of the car and went in and called him aside. I said, "I was talking to a guy I know and he told me they are getting ready to get you busted." He said, "He told you that? Come on." He had told me that he was in jail in Italy and that it was really, really bad. They threw him in with a lot of nasty people so, that's how I got him out. I always got along with him. Those guys would be in the car smoking pot and he'd say, "Put the windows down because Charlie doesn't do this." [Chuckles]

Chet liked the way I played. He called me and I knew I was messing with the wrong guy, [he] was strung out then, but he always treated me great. I toured with him in Germany, Switzerland, Austria and places like that. [At first] I wasn't going to go. He called me three times, "Oh Charlie, please ... your room is already taken care of, you don't have to pay for [that] and people will be inviting you out to dinner." (Which didn't happen much.) My wife said, "You've never been to Europe." So I took the gig. His agent called and asked me if I could pay my way over and be reimbursed. I said, "Working with Chet Baker? No good, you have to send me a round trip ticket," which he finally did. The first night, it comes time for us to go up on the stand, he wasn't there. When he came in [he said,] "What's the matter? Everybody's upset." I said, "I'm not upset, because if you start this bull of missing gigs or whatever, I'm going home." So, he made all the gigs. Chet had told me, "We're only going to work maybe three days a week and you'll be able to go [tour] around." Man, we worked 15 days straight. [Laughs] We worked all the time, so I didn't get a chance to travel to different places; but I didn't mind. I lost a whole set of drums fooling with him [though].

**JJ:** What happened?

**CR:** We was in Aspen, Colorado and they lied to me. I shouldn't have [gone] on that gig; but they told me it was a real rich guy and he wanted to have some jazz for a couple of weeks. The guy [was] trying to have a jazz club, and it didn't work out. To

make a long story short, the guy loaned Chet his camera and Chet took it. [Then] Chet was supposed to pick my drums up because I got a taxi plane to go back to Denver, so they wanted to charge me a whole lot of money to carry my drums. So Chet was driving back and he said, "Look Charlie, leave the drums there and I'll pick them up and bring them to Denver." Which I did; and he came to Denver and he didn't have my drums. He forgot all about them. I should have known better; the guy that had the club got them and kept them. I called the law enforcement out there but they didn't do anything about it; and that was the end of that.

**JJ:** That's sad, but how did you avoid the drug scourge that claimed Chet and so many others?

**CR:** Well, that wasn't a new thing. I knew junkies when I was 14 or 15 years old. I used to look at people getting juiced, picking up cigarettes off the street to smoke them and doing certain things. I said to myself I don't want to get into that kind of bullshit. I always want to keep my wits and know what I'm doing at all times. I never let nobody influence me to do anything.

**JJ:** Why did you decide to leave Philadelphia for Camden, New Jersey?

**CR:** Oh, my wife [and I] were trying to find a home. When I did the USO tour she got us a little townhouse in Woodbury. So we lived [there] for years. When I was with Louis Jordan, I said I better buy myself a house while I'm making a little money. I didn't want to move too far because if I did, nobody's going to call me for a gig in Philly. So I found a pretty quiet neighborhood right near a highway and that's where I stayed. I can get to downtown Philly quicker than a lot of people can from North Philly.

**JJ:** Would you tell us about your recent trouble?

**CR:** They gave me the job servicing vehicles — putting gas in the trucks [at the city lot]. Now they're suppose to furnish me with a vehicle to go there, but they didn't have any. So I end up driving over there five days a week [in my] own car. I can't go in the building; it is almost a block away [from the pumps.] I have

to sit in my car and run [it] to keep warm or for the air conditioning. Plus at the end of the week I have to get my car cleaned because I don't want it to smell like gas. I'm burning all this gas using my car, which I didn't want to do, when the state comes in and said I was taking gas. I said, "Sure I'm using gas. The Board of Education pays for it." Still, they put criminal charges against me — "misconduct."

**JJ:** How long have you been employed by the Board?

**CR:** Twenty-six years. They suspended me without pay. My lawyer said, "Well it seems like they want to do you in, so put in for your pension." I took my papers to the Board of Education and they took them and won't send them in. They were trying to take my pension away. Unless this was a kangaroo court, I was pretty sure I was going to beat it. I wish they would have separated our case from the rest, because ours was really different. The [other] people were bringing their cars [and] taking gas. I was there on my job. They really crucified me. I couldn't get my pension [or] unemployment. If I hadn't saved a few pennies, I don't know what I would have done.

**JJ:** How did the Jazz Bridge get involved?

**CR:** I've [known] Suzanne Cloud from before. [I used] to go down to the Chicken Bone Beach jazz concerts in Atlantic City every Thursday with a friend of ours. We met [Suzanne] and we became friends by riding on the train together [to the concerts]. But I hadn't even thought about them [when] Suzanne called me and said, "You're in the union, they are supposed to get a lawyer for you."

I said, "Well they didn't." So she said, "Well let me see what we can do." I tell you, if it hadn't been for them, I don't know what would have happened. I'd never been in no mess like that and I didn't know what to do.

**JJ:** Did the school board have to restore you back pay?

**CR:** Yeah.

**JJ:** I'm so pleased justice prevailed. Thank you for doing this interview.

**CR:** You're welcome. Take care.



Photo by Richard Timbers II.

*Schaen Fox is a longtime jazz fan. Now retired, he devotes much of his time to the music, and shares his encounters with musicians in this column.*