Playing the Changes: The Life and Legacy of Milt Hinton

**ILLUSTRATED EXHIBITION CHECKLIST**

Milton John Hinton (June 23, 1910-Dec 19, 2000) was a legendary bass player and photographer. Over the course of his seven-decade career, he became one of the most recorded bassists in history. He also took tens of thousands of photographs that capture his behind-the-scenes life in music.

As the grandson of a slave growing up in rural Mississippi, Milt knew the realities of racism. Discrimination continued during his Jim-Crow-era travels with the Cab Calloway Orchestra. Later, in the 1950s, segregation persisted when Milt worked to break through the color line in New York recording studios.

But Milt knew how to play the changes. Musically he worked with performers across the spectrum of styles. Socially he navigated the evolving expectations of what it meant to be an African-American in the U.S. in the 20th century.

Through it all he combined talent with perseverance to overcome life’s adversities. And over the course of a storied career, Milt’s successes as a musician, photographer, mentor, husband, and father created a legacy that will last for generations to come.

Panel 01

**From Mississippi to Chicago**

Milt Hinton was born into extreme poverty in Vicksburg, Mississippi. His father abandoned the family when Milt was an infant, leaving his mother, whom Milt called “Titter,” to provide for her only son. Racism was a part of everyday life, and Milt once described his horrific encounter with a crowd lynching an African American man as one of the clearest memories of his childhood.

His family moved to Chicago in 1919 where they experienced new economic and musical opportunities. As Milt recalled, “That’s when I realized that being black didn’t always mean you had to be poor.”

Musically, the hot jazz of King Oliver and Louis Armstrong was taking the city by storm. Titter gave Milt his first instrument—a violin—for his 13th birthday, and he soon joined the high school orchestra. Later he took up saxophone and tuba to march in the city brass band.

By the early 1930s Milt shifted to double bass, and he never looked back, gaining his first taste of fame in bands led by pianist Tiny Perham and violinist Eddie South.

Panel 02

[50 black-and-white photographs by Milton J. Hinton, along with ten freestanding biographical panels]

To request additional information, email: con.special@oberlin.edu
On the Road with Cab Calloway

In 1936 everything changed for Milt when he joined the world-famous Cab Calloway Orchestra. Cab’s band did it all—holding residencies at New York’s Cotton Club, playing on national radio shows, touring the country, and starring on the big screen.

Though they travelled on a private Pullman railway car and earned a great salary, the band still dealt with racism. Jim Crow was in full effect, and accommodations on the road were separate and anything but equal.

The Calloway band included some of the best players of the era: Dizzy Gillespie, Ben Webster, Chu Berry, and Illinois Jacquet, just to name a few. The musicians were stars, but by the 1950s big bands were losing their popularity, and Calloway was forced to break up his orchestra.

Milt returned to Queens, NY, where he and his wife had bought a home a few years earlier. With one brief exception, it would be decades before Milt would go back on the road.

Background image: Milt on his porch from Cab Calloway, 1961–1968

An Insider’s Lens

Milt received his first camera as a gift in 1935, and he took over 60,000 photographs over the next six decades. His insider’s view captured revealing moments about the life of a musician on the road, in the studio, and in performance.

Selections from the Milton J. and Mona C. Hinton Collection
Oberlin Conservatory Library Special Collections

Panel 03

Family Life

Milt first met Mona Clayton in Chicago in 1939 when she was singing in a church choir directed by his mother. The two quickly fell in love and were inseparable for the next sixty years. They became role models to many and were a legendary couple in the jazz community.

Mona began traveling with the Calloway Orchestra in the early 1940s—the only musician’s wife or girlfriend to do so. She was a trusted confidant and a reliable financial advisor for many band members.

She also handled the family’s finances, tracked Milt’s freelance work, coordinated public relations, and even drove Milt to gigs (Milt stopped driving after a terrible car wreck he was in as a teenager). And she did it all while caring for their daughter Charlotte, who was born on February 26, 1947.

Milt also reconnected with his father in the 1940s. Though the two never grew close, they met up a time or two while Milt was on tour and exchanged a few letters over the years.

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Panel 04

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Touring with Louis Armstrong

Though Milt cherished time with his family in Queens, work was scarce as he established himself in the New York scene after years on the road. So when Louis Armstrong came calling in 1953, Milt took the job even though it meant going back on the road. He signed a one-year contract but stayed only eight months, touring with Armstrong across the U.S. and Japan.

An opening in the house band for the Robert Q. Lewis television show in New York motivated Milt to leave the Armstrong tour. Not even the discouragement he received from Joe Glaser, Armstrong’s intimidating manager who was known to have ties to organized crime, could keep Milt from returning home to his wife and child.

In the Studios 1

It was a chance encounter with the entertainer Jackie Gleason—one of Milt’s first big breaks in the New York studios. As a result, he became one of the few African Americans to play in the studios on a regular basis. His exceptional professionalism, musicianship, and reliability made him a trusted resource, and soon he helped other aspiring musicians like George Duvivier, Clark Terry, and Richard Davis follow in his path.

Seeing Sound

One of Milt’s favorite times to take photographs in the studio was during playbacks since he could put his bass down and think about framing the shots. Many of his most revealing photographs were taken during these breaks, where Milt created insightful portraits of performers hearing and thinking about their own music.

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[fifty black-and-white photographs by Milton J. Hinton, along with ten freestanding biographical panels]
In the Studios 2

By the mid-1950s, Milt was a first-call bassist in the New York studio scene. He played on more than a dozen record dates each week, documenting them all in small datebooks he always carried in his shirt pocket. From historic sessions with jazz greats to playing with some of pop music’s biggest stars to making movie soundtracks and commercial jingles, the studios provided a range of musical opportunities for Milt.

Between sessions, when there was time to kill, Milt was a regular at Bebe’s Corna, a hangout for studio musicians in New York’s midtown. On a rare day off, the hangout shifted to Milt’s basement, where musicians ate together, made music, and recorded interviews with each other reminiscing about their experiences in music.

Selections from the Milton J. and Morita C. Hinton Collection
Oberlin Conservatory Library Special Collections

After the Studios

By the late 1960s studio work had dropped off in New York City, so Milt went back on the road. When he wasn’t on tour with Barbra Streisand, Pearl Bailey, Paul Anka, or Bing Crosby, he gigged around New York at spots like Michael’s Pub and Zinno’s. He was a regular at Dick Gibson’s famous jazz parties in Colorado, and he played with all-star lineups at top jazz festivals around the world.

Wanting to share his unique place in jazz history, Milt began teaching at Hunter College and Baruch College in the early 1970s, and he was often a guest artist at institutions across the country. As a 70th-birthday present, family and friends set up an educational fund in his honor that provided scholarships to aspiring student bassists.

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A Respected Elder Statesman
By the 1990s Milt was revered as an elder statesman in jazz. In addition to seven honorary doctorates, he received awards from local, state, and national organizations—too many to count. The 1993 National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master Fellowship was a highlight: the highest honor the U.S. could bestow on a living jazz musician.

Invitations to events at the White House were a regular part of Milt’s life, and his musical contributions were memorialized through countless tribute concerts. When Milt died at the age of 90 on December 19, 2006, letters poured in from dignitaries, fans, and protégés whom Milt had inspired over the years. More than 2,000 friendly and family attended the memorial service celebrating his life.

Milton Hinton’s Legacy
Milt gave so much to so many. His music brought beauty and joy to those around him. His photographs documented an insider’s view of his life in music. His devotion to educating young musicians helped pass the torch to the next generation.

Since 2014, Oberlin College has been proud to contribute to Hinton’s legacy. Four of Milt’s basses are now regularly played at Oberlin, and thirty-four of his most acclaimed photographs are in the collection of Oberlin’s Allen Memorial Art Museum. The Milton J. and Mona C. Hinton Collection in the Conservatory Library enables scholarly study of Milt’s life and supports Oberlin’s Milton J. Hinton Institute for Studio Bass.

Milt once described his work as an educator as “a column duty.” As he put it, “I’ve always tried to help young people. If someone wants to improve, if they have a sincere desire to learn, I’ve always tried to be there to give them whatever I can.” Through the extensive legacy he leaves behind, Milton John Hinton will continue to do just that.

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Photo 01: Lammar Wright, Mario Bauza, Foots Thomas, Eddie Morton, Cab Calloway, and Bennie Payne, train station, Atlanta, c. 1940

Photo 02: Danny Barker and Dizzy Gillespie, train, c. 1940

Photo 03: Cab Calloway with winner of the Cab Calloway Quizzicale, Florida, c. 1941

Photo 04: Quentin “Butter” Jackson, Jonah Jones, and railroad workers, New Orleans, c. 1941

Photo 05: Danny Barker, Springfield, Illinois, c. 1945
[fifty black-and-white photographs by Milton J. Hinton, along with ten freestanding biographical panels]

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Photo 10: Louis Armstrong, hotel room, Seattle, 1954

Photo 11: Cannonball Adderley, recording studio, New York City, c. 1958

Photo 12: Bill Evans and Art Farmer, recording studio, New York City, c. 1959

Photo 13: Billie Holiday, recording studio (her last recording session), New York City, 1959

Photo 14: Dinah Washington, recording studio, New York City, c. 1963

Photo 15: Danny Barker and Hot Lips Page (foreground) and other patrons including Barney Bigard, Willie "The Lion" Smith, Claude Jones, and Wellman Braud, Beefsteak Charlie’s, New York City, c. 1954

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ILLUSTRATED EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Photo 16: J.J. Johnson, Osie Johnson, and Miles Davis, recording studio, New York City, c. 1956

Photo 17: Ben Webster, Beefsteak Charlie’s, New York City, c. 1960

Photo 18: Sam Cooke and Ernie Wilkins, recording studio, New York City, 1960

Photo 19: Joe Williams and Jimmy Jones, recording studio, New York City, c. 1960

Photo 20: Aretha Franklin, recording studio, New York City, c. 1961

Photo 21: Eddie Bert, Charles Mingus, and George Wein, rehearsal, New York City, c. 1963

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Photo 22: Marion Evans and Tony Bennett, recording studio, New York City, 1967

Photo 23: Barbra Streisand, recording studio, New York City, c. 1964

Photo 24: Willie “The Lion” Smith and Duke Ellington at the piano (Duke’s 70th birthday party), the White House, Washington, D.C., 1969

Photo 25: Dick Gibson and jazz party musicians, including Larry Ridley, Ray Brown, Alan Dawson, Butch Miles, Kenny Davern, Bucky Pizzarelli, and Gus Johnson, Denver, 1972

Photo 26: Dizzy Gillespie, Grande Parade du Jazz, Nice, France, c. 1981

Photo 27: Sarah Vaughan, Pearl Bailey, and Ella Fitzgerald, rehearsal, television studio, Pasadena, 1979

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Photo 28: Wynton Marsalis, Frank Wess, and Todd Williams, rehearsal, Lincoln Center Classical Jazz Orchestra, New York City, 1989

Photo 29: Benny Carter and Marion McPartland, on tour in Europe, 1991

Photo 30: Roy Hargrove, recording studio, New York City, 1991

Photo 31: Mona Hinton, Ike Quebec, Doc Cheatham, Mario Bauza, and Shad Collins, Georgia, c. 1950

Photo 32: Jonah Jones and "Holmes" (Cab Calloway's chauffeur), Little Rock, Arkansas, c. 1941

Photo 33: Billy Taylor, Nat Hentoff, and Eddie Bert, recording studio, New York City, c. 1954

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Photo 34: Quincy Jones, recording studio, New York City, c. 1959

Photo 35: Jimmy Cleveland, Gerry Mulligan, Bill Crow, and Art Farmer, television studio, New York City, 1958

Photo 36: Benny Goodman, concert rehearsal, New York City, c. 1956

Photo 37: Ron Carter and Bob Cranshaw, recording studio, New York City, c. 1971


Photo 39: Branford Marsalis and Jeff "Tain" Watts, recording studio, New York City, 1988

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Photo 47: Lammar Wright, train, c. 1940

Photo 48: Walter “Foots” Thomas, backstage, New York City, c. 1940

Photo 49: Kai Winding and Tony Scott, recording studio, New York City, c. 1954

Photo 50: Willie “The Lion” Smith, Dizzy Gillespie, Eubie Blake, and Herman Leonard (with cameras), Newport Jazz Festival, Rhode Island, 1971

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