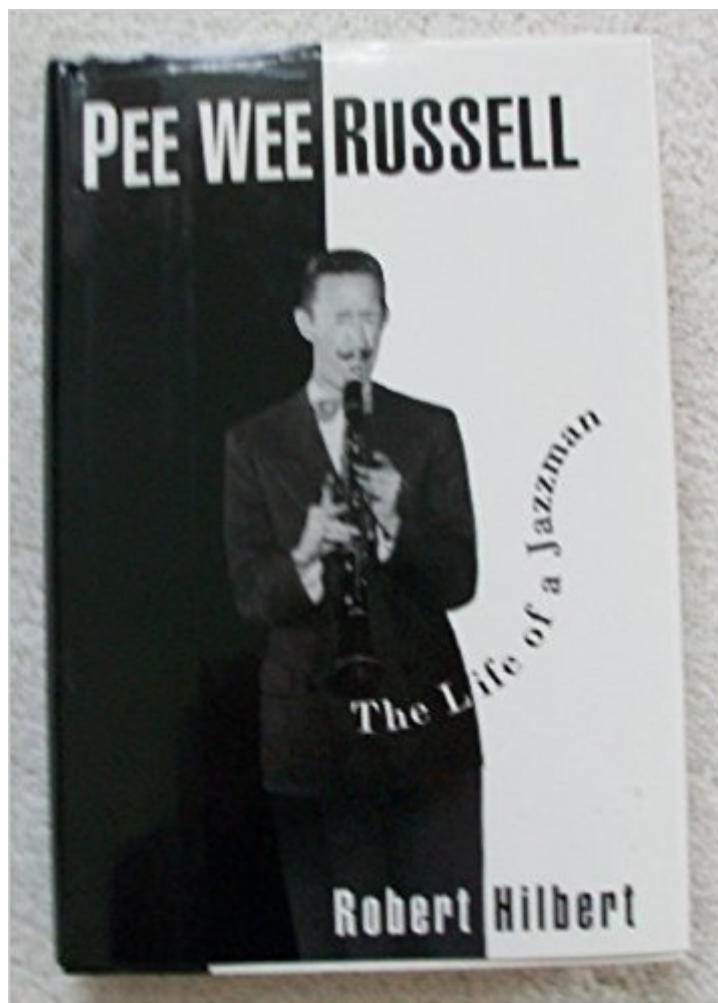


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# Pee Wee Russell: The Life Of A Jazzman



## Synopsis

"No jazz musician has ever played with the same daring and nakedness and intuition," Whitney Balliett wrote in a *New Yorker* profile of Pee Wee Russell. "He took wild improvisational chances, and when he found himself above the abyss, he simply turned in another direction, invariably hitting firm ground." Gunther Schuller, America's preeminent jazz historian, also had high praise for Russell, saying that "he defined and exemplified what it is to be a true jazz musician.... The unorthodox tone, the halting continuity, the odd note choices--are manifestations of a unique, wondrously self-contained musical personality.... He was also one of the most touching and human players jazz has ever known." Clarinetist Pee Wee Russell was indeed one of the great innovators in jazz history. Now, in *Jazzman*, Robert Hilbert provides the first full-length biography of this unique jazz stylist. Based on hundreds of interviews with musicians and friends, Pee Wee Russell fills in much that was not known about Russell's life, illuminating his fifty year career from his early days as a teenage dance band musician, to his final work with musicians such as Thelonious Monk and Gerry Mulligan. Hilbert draws a vivid portrait of Pee Wee's early friendship with legendary Bix Beiderbecke (fond of Stravinsky, Debussy, and Ravel, both Bix and Pee Wee delighted in the new techniques of modern composers--dissonance, whole-tone scales--and their styles reflected this). The author describes Russell's early work in Chicago and Hollywood, his first taste of the big time in New York as a member of Red Nichols's band, Pee Wee's success as one of the first stars on "Swing Street" (52nd Street in New York City), as a member of Louis Prima's band, and his decade-long association with Nick's, a famous Greenwich Village jazz spot. In addition, Russell lived a bohemian existence, and Hilbert does an excellent job of capturing his colorful life and times. But we also see the down side of a musician's life--Russell was one of the monumental drinkers in jazz history, and after separating from his mercurial wife Mary in 1949, he lapsed into complete dissipation, landing in a charity ward of San Francisco County Hospital, with only 73 pounds on his six-foot frame. He recovered once his wife returned, and went on to his finest years, only to fall apart again when she died suddenly of cancer. Russell died in January, 1969, a few weeks after playing at President Nixon's inauguration. "His was the pure flame," Robert Hilbert writes of Pee Wee Russell. "Hot, gritty, profane, real. No matter what physical or mental condition Russell was in, night after night he spun wondrous improvisations. No matter how disjointed his life, how scrambled his mind, how incomprehensible his speech, his music remained logical and authoritative, elegant and graceful, haughty and proud." In *Pee Wee Russell*, Hilbert does full justice to this remarkable figure in American jazz.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Jazz clarinetist Charles Ellsworth "Pee Wee" Russell was a revolutionary musician, Hilbert argues here with conviction. "His intense improvisations only began to sound 'right' to most critics during the last decade of his life. The groans and creaks he elicited from his instrument were thought to be the result of not knowing the correct way, but he chose to play his own way." But racism, Russell's alcoholism and other problems, the author maintains, have forestalled wider appreciation of the only musician to have played with both Bix Beiderbecke and Thelonius Monk. Russell was born in St. Louis in 1906, played in a Dixieland band when only 12, and worked with Bix by the mid-1920s. He moved to New York City in 1927, playing with Red Nichols and others, and Hilbert ably describes the bohemian milieu Russell found there. Hilbert movingly chronicles Russell's struggles with his career, club dates, marriage, recordings and image. By his untimely death in 1969, the 62-year-old Russell was finally gaining a broader audience. In this book, Hilbert gives the late clarinetist fitting tribute. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Celebrated clarinetist Pee Wee Russell told journalist Whitney Balliett he played each solo as if it were his last, and a sense of foreboding pervades the story of this man wracked with alcoholism. Known for his idiosyncratic clarinet style, Russell receives clear-eyed yet warm treatment from jazz scholar Hilbert, who portrays his subject's four-decade career with the use of sources that include an unfinished biography by George Hoefer, Russell's letters, and remembrances from such contemporaries as Eddie Condon, Bud Freeman, and Buck Clayton. Hilbert analyzes many

recordings and places Russell in his musical context. Recommended not only because it fills a gap--this is the first book-length study of the musician--but because it's well researched and well written.- Paul Baker, CUNA Inc., Madison, Wis.Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc.

One of two looks at the great Pee Wee Russell, a jazz man's jazzman.

There's not another bio of Pee Wee Russell but I don't believe a better bio could have been researched/written. The first time I heard Pee Wee, I thought that he must have been a bad player until I listened more and realized that the honks, screets and seemingly out of place notes were intentional. Placed in the context of how Pee Wee developed his music, Pee Wee was truly the Bix Beiderbecke of clarinet. Many times you'll read the word "poet" associated with Pee Wee Russell and I agree. Pee Wee Russell and Lester Young were both geniuses - and, both were very fragile and emotional artists. This book will give you insight into Pee Wee that you'll use to come to terms with his original and varied output. Pee Wee Russell was avant garde before there was such a thing known in jazz. Truly an original and unfortunately, highly overlooked when it comes to his creativity. Pee Wee spent a lot of his time as a side man and this is part of the dilemma. Pigeon-holed as a "Dixieland" musician, nothing could have been further than the truth. An original of distinction, Pee Wee is a lost treasure in the world of jazz and in the history of the music.

This bio paints a vivid picture of the truly original jazz artist Pee Wee Russell. The author shows how this highly intelligent and talented man was often wrongly belittled and portrayed as a buffoon, loser, or incompetent charlatan. The book covers his career in detail and does its best to bring Russell's artistry and personality to life. Well done.

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