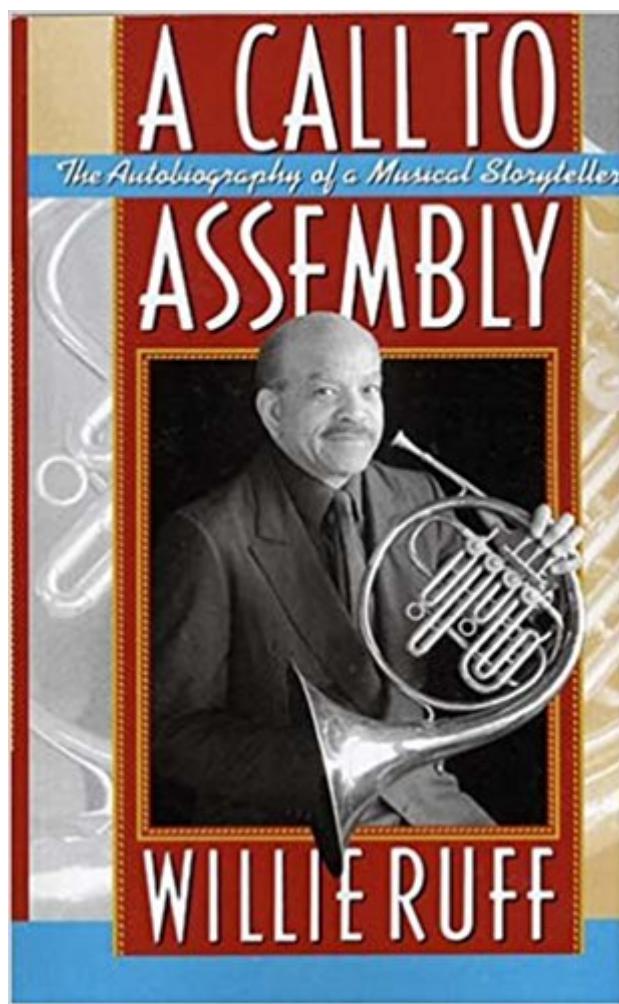


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A Call To Assembly: The Autobiography Of A Musical Storyteller



Synopsis

Music came to Willie ruff early in his Alabama boyhood. It came from Mrs. Nance, the solo bass drummer of the Sanctified church, whose beat "gave her right arm the churning motion of a set of steam locomotive wheels." It came from singing at the grocery store for candy, and from the "chitlin struts: at his home, with young Willie sprinkling cornmeal on the floor to make "gliding" easy for dancing. It came from eavesdropping on the porch ladies, listening to the rhythm of their revelations. It came from the Sheffield School for Colored the day the second grader met a storied Alabama neighbor, W.C. Handy, who played his St. Louis Blues on the trumpet and spoke to the children about "the music of the Negro race." Music and learning ("Can't nobody take nothin from outta your head," said his first mentor, Daddy Long) set the course of Willie Ruff's life. He sopped up music and learning when he joined the army at age fourteen, coming under the influence of various fatherly music masters. While he was an undergraduate at Yale, it was Paul Hindemith's magnetic presence that expanded Willie's musical horizons. Later, playing the French horn with the Lionel Hampton band and forming the "Duo" with his old piano-playing army sidekick, Dwike Mitchell, Willie learned firsthand from powerful influence like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Max Roach, Dizzy Gillespie. And through his years at Yale as a professor of music, the quest for learning never stopped. But music wasn't all. A powerfully recurring theme of *A Call to Assembly* comes from Willie's curiosity about the black soldier in American history. It began when he was in grade school and witnessed an air show by an all-black squadron of fighter pilots from Tuskegee. Later, in the army, Willie met some of those pilots who had fought over Germany and Italy and risked courts-martial to gain the same rights white officers enjoyed. Years later, through a set of extraordinary circumstances, he came across a statement written in 1902 by another Alabama neighbor, an ex-Confederate general who commended the valor of Negro soldiers fighting in the Spanish-American War. It was, Willie writes, as if this general "laid a hand on me from the grave and gave me pride and understanding." Willie Ruff's is an exhilarating story, told in a distinctive voice that rings clear and true, smart and funny, and is always moving.

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Customer Reviews

Jazz musician Ruff has come a long way from the poor black neighborhood in Sheffield, Ala., where he grew up learning about music any way he could--from the boy next door, the drummer at the Sanctified Church, the sound of the steam-driven calliopes on Tennessee River stern-wheel paddleboats. At 14, seeing a way out of poverty, he lied about his age and enlisted in the Army, where he reveled in daily showers, plentiful food, new clothes and, above all, opportunities to make music. He joined the all-black band as a drummer, but when told he would have to leave because there were too many men on drums, taught himself French horn so he could stay (until then, the band had no French horn players because the instrument was considered too difficult for blacks). After receiving a high school equivalency diploma, he left the service and entered Yale (one of nine black students enrolled in 1949), studied with Paul Hindemith, played in the New Haven Symphony Orchestra and earned a master's degree. Turning down Erich Leinsdorf's invitation to play horn with the Buffalo (N.Y.) Philharmonic, Ruff chose a career in jazz, first appearing with Lionel Hampton and later forming ok with performing earlier? a duo with the brilliant pianist Dwike Mitchell. A composer, filmmaker and professor of music at Yale, Ruff travels all over the world teaching people about jazz. He seems to have unlimited talent and energy. His book is an account of his own remarkable life, but it is also a tribute to many people who have helped and inspired him: his mother, who taught him how to keep his dignity and survive the South's brutal segregation laws; John Brice, the bandmaster who was determined to make the 766th Air Corps Band at the all-black air base in Lockbourne, Ohio, a symphonic ensemble to rival the all-white Army Air Corps Band in Washington, D.C.; the secondhand clothier in New Haven who gave him memorable advice on how to survive at Yale: "Dress British, think Yiddish." Ruff tells his inspiring story wonderfully well. Photos not seen by PW. Author tour. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Overcoming the odds of growing up black in Alabama in the 1930s, Ruff became a Yale-educated, world-traveled advocate of jazz. Here, the bass and French horn player recalls his work as a teacher, impresario, and cultural diplomat. Although neither a celebrated jazz "star" nor a trend-setting innovator, Ruff performed with many of the greats, including Lionel Hampton and Miles Davis, as well as the Mitchell-Ruff Duo. Although burdened by stilted dialog, Ruff's engaging story sheds light on both racism and the development of jazz. However, libraries with limited jazz collections should first obtain biographies of major figures such as Ellington, Mingus, and Coltrane.- Paul Baker, CUNA Inc., Madison, Wis.Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I just finished listening to Mr. Ruff talk with the late great Marian McPartland for an hour on her classic Piano Jazz show, and it left me hungry to hear more of his erudite, articulate, eloquent voice. So I bought this, and I know I will enjoy it a LOT: Mr. Ruff has made great use of his remarkable life, and I look forward to learning more about it.

Willie was a personal friend of ours in the Sheffield area. I didn't know he had written a book until my daughter told me. It was such fun to read this personal story from a long lost friend. He captured the feeling and reality of the area as it was when he was a youngboy. He is a truly renaissance man and I would love to be able to touch base with him again.

One of the most well written and informative books I have ever read.

I think this should be required reading in every high school. A clear story on how to conquer adversity with persistence and determination. Interesting, well written, and inspirational.

Professor Ruff's amazing life story in this book goes full cycle, from the Tennessee Valley of the 1930s, to Moscow and Shanghai and Africa and Los Angeles and New Haven, then back to the land of Gen. Joe Wheeler and W. C. Handy and Helen Keller. Someday North Alabama will be known for all four, Wheeler, Handy, Keller, and Ruff. His story is that good and that well told, and his success in his chosen fields of music, pedagogy, and writing is remarkable. He is among the most successful people to come out of the Shoals area of Alabama by a dam site. I regret that it took me so long to discover this book. It might have taken me even longer than 20 years if it weren't for Neal Starkey, a bass-playing friend at the annual W. C. Handy Festival in the Shoals. The book's non-informative

title is its only negative, in my opinion. I think of it instead as "From Pickaninny To Impresario."

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