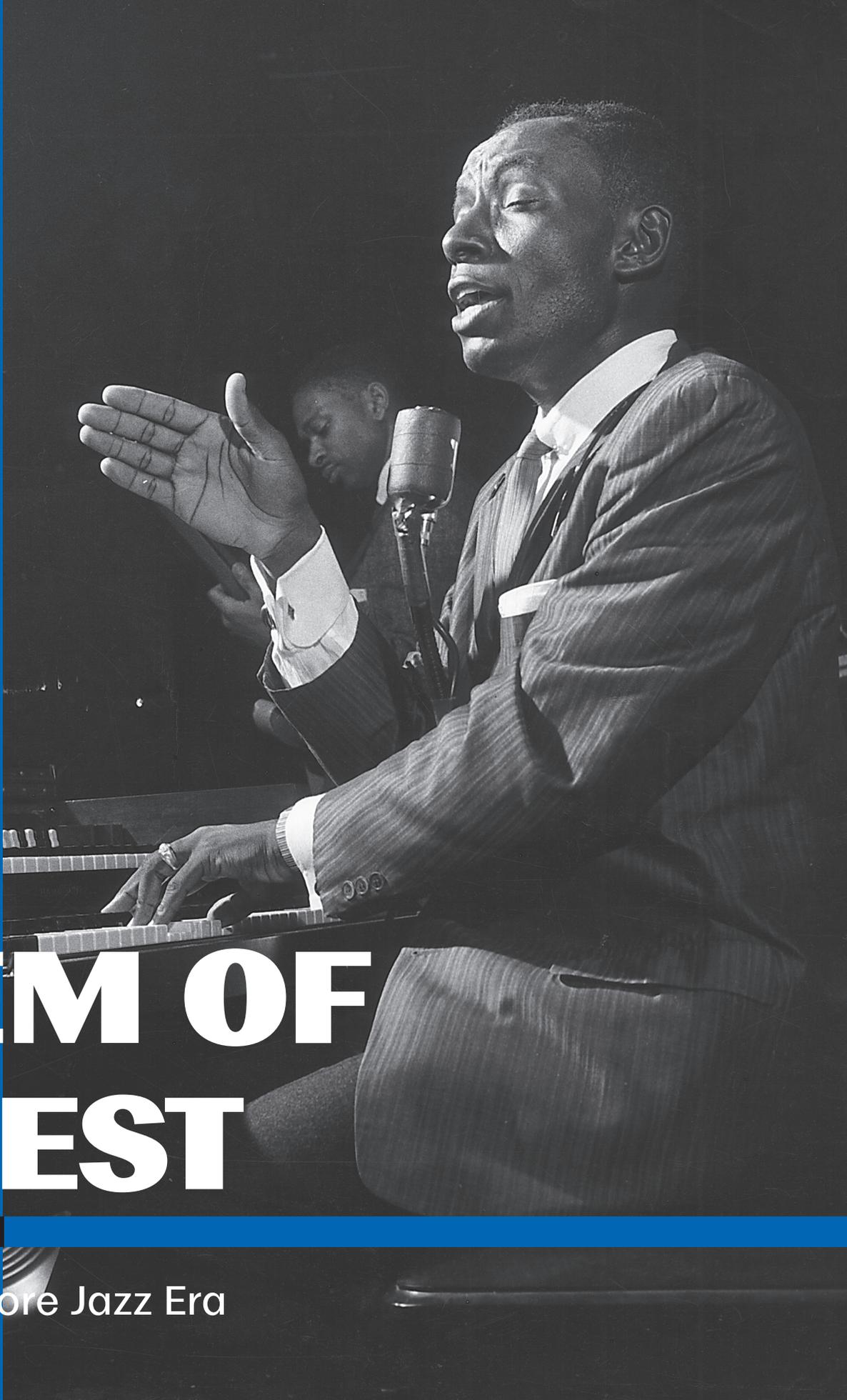


**Elizabeth Pepin Silva  
and Lewis Watts**



# **HARLEM OF THE WEST**

The San Francisco Fillmore Jazz Era

# Vout City / Bop City

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## 1690 Post Street

*One of the most famous Fillmore Clubs, Bop City, on Post Street at Buchanan, got its start in 1949 as Vout City. The club was run by the colorful musician Slim Gaillard, who had a good ear for music, but had lousy business sense. The club quickly folded, leaving Charles Sullivan, who owned the building, to find a new tenant. Sullivan approached Jimbo Edwards, who was working as a car salesman at the time, about the space. In 1950, Edwards agreed to open up a café, calling it Jimbo's Waffle Shop. When local musicians discovered an un-used backroom and began holding after hours jam sessions, Bop City was born.*

*The club quickly became a magnet for every famous and not so famous jazz musician visiting San Francisco. However, by the early 1960s, Bop City began to struggle, as redevelopment was in full swing, driving people from the neighborhood. The agency bought the building and relocated the club to another space before it closed for good in 1965. A few years later, the Victorian that housed the famous club was moved around the corner to 1712 Fillmore Street, and once it was restored, for the next 33 years, the building became home to Marcus Books, a store dedicated to African American reading and educational material. Although the store received a historic landmark designation from the City of San Francisco for its contribution to neighborhood arts and culture, the building's owner evicted the business in 2014. The storefront is currently occupied by a day spa / salon.*

**Frank Jackson:** Slim Gaillard came here from L.A.. Business-wise, I don't know how he got to open Vout City. I worked there for two months. Then Slim left and Jimbo took over, and it became Bob City. It was just like Slim to take off one day!

**John Handy:** I actually went to Vout City. Slim was only there a short while. It wasn't as well-developed as Bop City later became. It was just basically a room with a few tables and chairs, and they had table service so that you could order. But really, it was bare bones.

**Eddie Alley:** Slim Gaillard was one of the most fantastic performers I ever knew in my life. He was a brilliant guy, but a nut in one way, and an eccentric.

**Frank Jackson:** When Jimbo first opened the club, he didn't know anything about jazz. He used to ask the musicians, "Is that person good, or is that one good?" After a couple of years, his ear got sharp and he could tell. He learned because he was very interested. And he wanted good musicians.

He would let anybody come in, and they'd get a chance. If they weren't making it, he would get them off the stand quietly and tell them to go home, practice for awhile and come back when they were ready. He'd do it nicely. He had to do that sometimes because some of those kids would go buy a horn and two weeks later they were trying to play, and that didn't work too well.

Besides music, Jimbo had special dinners. Louis was his cook, and he had fried chicken and chicken in the basket for \$5. I'm telling you, his chicken was really something else! Most of the time he'd run out of chicken quick.

**Lottie Claiborne:** Jimbo was a lovable person. Why so many of us would go there in the mornings. He would have chicken and biscuit and an egg—50 cents. And he would have grits and sausage or whatever, and it would be no more than a dollar. You hungry that time of morning, you know? Out in the back they would be jamming. Everybody that was somebody in the business would be there to jam. You know, to get their names on the back of the chairs. (LAUGHS)

**Danny Duncan:** Jimbo Edwards was just a wonderful colored gentleman. He looked like my daddy. Him and my father could pass for brothers. I worked there as a janitor when I was about 16. He let me come and earn a little money to clean up Bop City. The smell of it—oh, god. I used to hate that stale alcohol and beer and hard stuff mixed together and all that stuff.

**Allen Smith:** Jimbo was a sweetheart person. Everybody I know liked Jimbo. Nobody had a bad word to say about him. Very quickly, Bop City became THE after-hours spot.





Above: An early portrait of John "Jimbo" Edwards, taken soon after he opened Jimbo's Waffle Shop, early 1950s. *Frank Jackson Collection*

Opposite page: One of the earliest known photos of a jam session at Bop City, before the club became internationally known. Pianist Frank Jackson is behind the bass player. Early 1950s. *Frank Jackson Collection*

Previous page: The exterior of Bop City, mid-1950s. *Steve Jackson Jr.*

**Terry Hilliard:** Jimbo was a guy who really knew how to manage a club, you know, and he had that relationship with the police so that everything was under control. I never saw any fights, no problems. Everything was completely under control. He was really good. People felt safe to come down there, and all kinds of people came, all races. It didn't matter, you know? All kinds of people came through.

**John Handy:** Bop City was like a second home. Musically, for me, it was my first home. It was probably 1949 when I started going there. At times I was part of the house band. Bop City was not just a club; it was more than just that. So much more.

**Frank Jackson:** There were quite a few after hours spots in The Fillmore, but Bop City was the most famous. It was really a workshop for musicians, a place for learning. You got a chance to play with the good, the bad and the ugly! Musicians would sit around and talk to each other about musical things, about chords and putting things together, and how they execute and how they finger things. You were surrounded by all of that.

**Eddie Duran:** Bop City was a hangout for musicians after they were through doing their gig in different places 'cos it was an all-night venue. They would serve liquor after hours, but they would get it in a coffee cup because there was a curfew and that was something secretive, you know?

They started letting some of the players come in and sit in, and I would go. It was great 'cos they knew I could play. I had my amplifier ready to go, oh yes. Someone would suggest a tune to play, and since I knew a lot of jazz, we'd just start playing. Or someone'd call out a tune, and whatever tempo, and whatever key. That's why I always advised the younger players to learn to play in every key. Because I remember one moment at sitting in and I didn't know the key. But I would wait and I would say, "Thank god I don't have to take the first chords." So by the time two players had come on, I had it down. I knew the key.

**John Handy:** One night, I came over to The Fillmore from Oakland with some older musicians who had just graduated from my high school. One of them, Skippy Warren, a talented local bass player, owned the car. I was a junior in high school and had only been playing professionally for a year. We went to Bop City to sit in on the jam session. As we were waiting our turns, Paul Gonsalves, from Duke Ellington's band, got up on stage and began to play. He sat right next to me and played his heart out. And then, it was my time to speak. And apparently I did okay because the next time I saw Paul, he remembered me and my playing.

Being in a place like Bop City, I began to realize that there were so many people who were innovators and fantastic performers on their respective in-





Charlie Parker at Bop City, early 1950s. Steve Jackson Jr.



Jam session inside Bop City, taken from a rarely seen angle. *Jerry Stoll*

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“[A] consummate, tightly edited look back at an exuberant way of life.”—*Publishers Weekly*

In the 1940s and 50s, a jazz aficionado could find paradise in the nightclubs of San Francisco’s Fillmore District: Billie Holiday sang at the Champagne Supper Club; Chet Baker and Dexter Gordon jammed with the house band at Bop City; and T-Bone Walker rubbed shoulders with the locals at the bar of Texas Playhouse. The Fillmore was one of the few neighborhoods in the Bay Area where people of color could go for entertainment, and so many legendary African American musicians performed there for friends and family that the neighborhood was known as the Harlem of the West. Over a dozen clubs dotted the twenty-block-radius. Filling out the streets were restaurants, pool halls, theaters, and stores, many of them owned and run by African Americans, Japanese Americans, and Filipino Americans. The entire neighborhood was a giant multicultural party pulsing with excitement and music. In 220 lovingly restored images and oral accounts from residents and musicians, *Harlem of the West* captures a joyful, exciting time in San Francisco, taking readers through an all-but-forgotten multicultural neighborhood and revealing a momentous part of the country’s African American musical heritage.

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