
Hannah Shoemaker
Undergraduate Student, Fourth Year (Music Major with Jazz Studies Concentration) Christopher Newport University, Virginia, USA

As author John Wriggle discusses in his book, Blue Rhythm Fantasy: Big Band Arranging in the Swing Era, American popular music has assumed several identities over the last one hundred years. From 1920 to 1945, swing bands were the main form of musical entertainment. The period between the 1930s and mid 1940s is particularly interesting, because of the juxtaposition of a thriving economy and the introduction of new recording technologies. This uniquely new atmosphere allowed for large groups of musicians to be profitable and ultimately facilitated the success of big bands. During this era, American popular culture was characterized by swing bands, night clubs, and a heated political culture (264). The period of time when jazz was the premiere American art form was aptly deemed the “Swing Era.”

Band leaders and talented musicians were treated in a manner consistent with today’s popstars and often had crowds of adoring fans following their every move. However, beyond the suave band leaders and dedicated musicians, the unsung heroes of this music were the arrangers. Often working behind the scenes of popular acts such as Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington, the arrangers assumed an Oz-like existence. John Wriggle’s Blue Rhythm Fantasy: Big Band Arranging in the Swing Era explores the

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presence of arrangers within the popular music scene, particularly through the lens of freelance arranger Chappie Willet. Unlike many other sources focused on the Swing Era, Wriggle explicitly expresses that this work is not a comprehensive history or instructional manual on arranging, but rather that he wishes to explore the “motivations and ideologies” of arrangers during the Swing Era (78). Willet’s career, though it only spans the latter half of the era, serves as a focal point via which to explore the many dimensions traversed by arrangers. This is an important viewpoint, as often the swing era is studied through the work of performers and composers.

The book itself contains nine chapters followed by supporting materials that include an appendix and bibliography. Chapters are then divided into groups of three; each trio devoted to a specific facet within the world of arranging. The first three chapters provide a broader understanding of the “economic, political, and professional landscape” (159). Aspects of Willet’s own music clinic and staff are discussed thoroughly, spanning the majority of these first three chapters. Financing, business interactions, and basic arranging theory and practices are explored throughout the next three chapters. Oral histories are heavily integrated into this section of the book and contribute an almost biographical dimension. The author uses interviews when exploring arrangers’ sources of inspiration. Other scholars, including Rayburn Wright, use this same methodology to great success. These interviews are an important resource, because they provide first-hand evidence of the subjects at hand.

Finally, the last three chapters cover performer identity, arranging style, and popular entertainment (163). These last three chapters stand out as unique within the scholarly literature. Wriggle took ample time to delve into the different subgenres of popular jazz using specific groups as his case studies. As though to come full circle, the final section analyses Willet’s own arrangements, the pinnacle being “Blue Rhythm Fantasy.” Several versions of this piece are presented, including non-commercial and commercialized versions, which allow for an interesting analysis of Willet’s influences and compositional identity (241). Successfully delivered in the given sequence, the author does not assume niche knowledge on the part of the reader and provides background information accordingly.

Wriggle’s research is very thorough and his presentation of this information uses a variety of methods. A number of primary sources were helpful in constructing this book. The author used several oral and written histories, including interviews with black Swing Era performers and arrangers. In addition, the author employs autobiographies and memoirs of famous composers and musicians. These sources create an atmosphere for the reader and an understanding of what life and culture were like during these times. The narratives provided by the musicians and composers themselves are a priceless resource. Wriggle’s use of firsthand sources, specifically in relation to Willet, were extremely valuable, as there are few other texts which focus solely on this arranger.

To assist with the development of historical contextualization and to frame the narrative, the author provides several posters, news articles, and commerce reports. Commerce reports, which detailed the financial dealings of arrangers, were often paired with the 2015 equivalence scale, a tool I found useful (440). For instance, Wriggle

3 Rayburn Wright, Inside the Score (Delevan, NY: Kendor Music Inc., 1982).
explains the economics of arranging as “specified time wages of two dollars per hour (approximately thirty-four dollars in 2015), or work by the page ranging from twenty-five to fifty cents per page, depending on instrument and transposition.” Willet clearly equated the conditions of the past to current economic conditions. Other books such as *The Duke Ellington Reader* simply state that “the top salary in this group is $125 per week—approximately equal to the best symphonic wages.” Without a true grasp of the power of a dollar during the given time period, the reader cannot understand the values presented by this data. Wriggle does a wonderful job of connecting his era’s statistics and situations to today’s society and putting monetary values into perspective. Furthermore, pictures and quotes humanise the research and allow the reader to establish a visual connection with the story being told. One additional element that Willet employs that is often overlooked in other research is the use of articles from primarily black newspapers, such as *The Chicago Defender* and *Baltimore Afro-American* (179). These sources provide an underrepresented perspective during the era in question. Most other scholarly sources cite white newspapers which were often riddled with racism and had biased views on current events.

The author values the arrangers of the swing era, and labels them as a vital source for success (73). It is clear in his writing that the author has a great appreciation for Chappie Willet. Willet’s existence as an unremarkable but well-documented arranger is part of what makes this research so crucial. As the author asserts, Willet did not assist in the development of the jazz canon, but he does generally meet “contemporary expectations of the genre and style and demonstrates the cultural powers of arranging within the Swing Era big band idiom” (154). The fact what Willet was genuinely average, allows for the research to be widely applicable to the rest of the industry. Focusing on such a figure is one of this book’s strongest assets, as the vast majority of other research regarding the Swing Era has been framed through canonised figures such as Ellington and Basie.

While Willet is adored by the author, he is virtually a phantom in the world of musicological research. Prior to Wriggle’s publication, the role of the arranger as well as Willet’s existence was a new frontier. The arranging realm had only been notably explored by Gunther Schuller. Schuller’s work on the Swing Era “stands as one of the first works to shed light on a number of Swing Era arrangers.” Though Schuller developed a rather exhaustive and unprecedented history of jazz, which includes arrangers, only a few momentary traces of Chappie Willet can be found (158). In more recent research, such as Gioia’s *The Jazz Standards* (2012), advertised as a comprehensive guide to jazz compositions, Willet is not mentioned at all. This absence of Willet in popular publications allowed Wriggle a unique opportunity to delve into a virtually untapped pool of information.

Overall, Wriggle’s research was of the highest quality and exhaustive with regards to Chappie Willet’s career. Wriggle’s structural choices were important to the flow of the book. The overarching division of the chapters had the potential to facilitate

5 Tucker and Ellington, *Ellington Reader*.
an effortless read, but I do not think the author was entirely effective in accomplishing this. In addition to the structure, the subject matter could have facilitated a thrilling narrative, and at times it was just that. However, there were a few issues created by the author. The first being that Wriggle champions Willet. The author is clearly passionate about Willet but tends to place him on a pedestal, almost idolizing everything Willet did. In addition, the presentation of specific information within this book falls victim to the common research pitfall: pontification. Wriggle’s dedicated and thorough focus on the latter half of the Swing Era is an immense asset. It was clear while reading this book that the author had gathered more than enough information. With that being said, several pages were spent listing names or venues without reprieve, which I found meandering. This droning can also be seen in the first few pages of Duke Ellington’s autobiography, where he lists the names and locations of people within his own adolescent community. Among more established members of the jazz canon, this often functions as a way to show an artist’s far-reaching influence; while for lesser-known artists, it is a way to show importance. Willet belongs to the latter category.

Another weakness of Wriggle’s book is that it does not serve a single, targeted audience. His potential readership ranges from those highly knowledgeable in the field of music to those merely interested in the historical content. During the middle and later sections of this book, Wriggle enthusiastically embraced the task of presenting and explaining written musical scores. This broad range of evidence was difficult to synthesise, as the author risks over-explaining and boring the more musically fluent reader or under-explaining and losing the less musically fluent crowd. Other works such as Rayburn Wright’s *Inside the Score*, target a more specialized audience through the use of full scores and score reductions, accompanied by the assumption that the reader has a certain fluency with the material. Wriggle’s inclusion of basic score reductions to highlight specific examples and concepts are a great addition to this book for a non-musician, and the in-depth explanations are useful to the specialist.

As a reader, Wriggle’s honesty was refreshing. With regards to content, Wriggle wisely managed the audience’s expectations within the first few pages when he asserted that this work was not a comprehensive history. Delivering what he promised, this book utilized firsthand sources and interviews to create a feel more akin to a well-informed biographical narrative. With the exception of the occasional digression on the part of the author, this book was well written. Wriggle’s writing falls victim to a few fallacies. I feel many of his issues could be resolved by narrowing his target audience. By targeting a more specialised musical audience, he could eliminate the need to over-explain the musical examples and speak to an audience capable of synthesising the lists of names and dates. By targeting a more general audience, he could have validated his choice to explain musical concepts thoroughly and generate the need for a more narrative stance. Regardless, Wriggle does a great job of incorporating strong and unique sources that serve as a great addition to the field, allowing him to craft the story of Chappie Willet specifically and the swing era arranger more generally.

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9 Wright, *Inside the Score*. 
For further reading:


