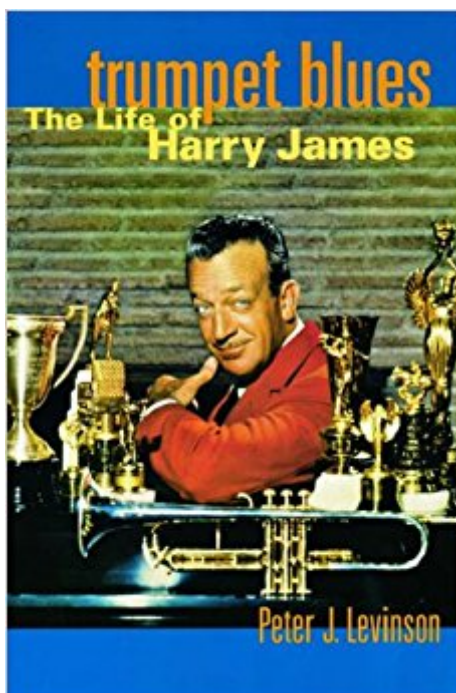


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# Trumpet Blues: The Life Of Harry James



## Synopsis

Swing is back in style, and with it a renewed interest in the Big Band Era. And few players dominated that era more than Harry James, whose soaring trumpet solos and romantic hit tunes influenced popular music for a generation. Now, Peter J. Levinson, who knew Harry James personally, has written a revealing biography of this jazz icon, based on nearly 200 interviews with musicians and friends. Harry James led a truly colorful life, and in *Trumpet Blues* Levinson captures it all. Beginning with James's childhood in a traveling circus, we follow the young trumpeter's meteoric rise in the 1930s and witness his electrifying performances with the Benny Goodman Orchestra. We see how James formed his own band in 1939, an incubator for many pop music stars of the 1940s and '50s, including Frank Sinatra, Connie Haines, Dick Haymes, Helen Forrest, and Kitty Kallen. Combined with James's superb musicianship, peerless trumpet technique and talented sidemen, this stellar group dominated the war years and the immediate post-war period. And James himself, especially after his marriage to film goddess Betty Grable, became one of America's most famous personalities and lived like true Hollywood royalty. Levinson describes their twenty-two-year marriage with insight and sympathy. But he shows how James's marriage--and his triumphant late-1950s comeback in Nevada's casinos--were slowly undermined by his penchant for compulsive gambling, womanizing, and alcoholism. He gives us the inside story of James's sybaritic life style, and probes the profound psychological reasons for James's destructive behavior. The first biography ever written on Harry James, *Trumpet Blues* is a scintillating portrait of Swing's brightest star--his life, his loves, and the music that defined an era.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

An engrossing, swinging biography of a jazz icon, this book traces the life of Harry James, a trumpeter and bandleader who played in Benny Goodman's Orchestra in the '30s, and who led the country's most popular big band during World War II. Levinson, a jazz publicist who knew James from 1959 until the latter's death in 1983, presents the life of the flashy trumpeter as one of fame, fortune and eventual self-destruction. Born in Georgia in 1916 and raised in Texas, James had an insecure, peripatetic childhood. His mother was a trapeze artist and his father a circus bandleader, and James played in the circus band. Taking Louis Armstrong as his musical role model, James, who was white, was recruited to play in Benny Goodman's band, then left to form his own hugely acclaimed band, marrying film star Betty Grable and acting in movies himself. Over the next two decades, his star waned, but he staged a comeback of sorts in the late '50s, playing in Nevada casinos and continuing fitfully to reinvent his band throughout the next two decades. James's three marriages were ruined by addiction to alcohol, sex and gambling. Grable divorced him in 1965 following a 22-year marriage marked by his constant infidelities, neglect of their two daughters and, according to Levinson, by violent abuse. While many jazz critics dismiss James's romantic bluesy style and wide vibrato as schmaltzy and sentimental, Levinson disagrees. This robust biography offers a heady plunge into the swing era and a vivid portrait of a daring and inventive artist. Photos. (Oct.) FYI: A companion CD from Capitol Jazz, annotated by Levinson, features 16 of James's hit songs. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Leading jazz publicist Levinson makes his literary debut with this biography of the late bandleader, who in the '30s and '40s established himself as a rival to Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey, among others. James's early years were particularly formative, as he was born to parents who devoted much of their lives to performing for the circus. "Young Harry first met his public at the age of 11 days, when his parents introduced him to the circus audience," Levinson writes. With his look at the life of circus entertainers in the early part of the century, Levinson hooks the reader immediately. He makes James's progression from childhood circus performer to budding musician at age 12 when he was "the youngest circus bandleader in the world" a seamless evolution. By the early 1930s, when James was struggling to succeed as a trumpet player, the reader has a strong sense of his musical growth. It wasn't until December 1936, when Goodman who would stay friends with James throughout their lifetimes, despite their competition for bookings invited him to join his

band, that the trumpeter became a star. Levinson captures the era well, citing the impact of WWII on popular music, telling stories of the biggest stars of the time (including Goodman, Dorsey, James hero Louis Armstrong, Lionel Hampton, and Frank Sinatra, whom James helped discover by giving the "kid" his first recording gig) and the bigotry integrated big bands faced on the road. To his credit, Levinson, while hardly ignoring James's legendary womanizing, gambling, and drinking, as well as his lengthy marriage to pinup queen Betty Grable ultimately victimized by all of James's vices turning the bandleaders life into a melodramatic soap opera. Instead, he concentrates on the music. Impressive, and a fascinating read not only for fans of jazz, but for students of 20th-century history, Hollywood, and the music business. -- Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

It was a good read, but it got really bogged down quite a bit - it seemed that every time the author mentioned a band he had to name every single member, past and present, and with every song came the name of the writers, arrangers, collaborators and every member of the band past and present. It started to give me a headache and made the first few chapters hard to follow with all the names flying around. Fortunately, the last few chapters focused more on the topic of the book, Harry James. It really didn't tell much about his personal life (you'll have to read *The Girl With The Million Dollar Legs* to find out how he treated Betty Grable) but it DID give some insight as to what might have made him tick. If you're a big band fan, it's worth the read.

Fascinating read. I thoroughly enjoy reading about big band professionals from that era. But Harry was an apex survivor. Into the 60's out of all those wonderful big bands, some sweet, some hard edged who came out at the other end of the pipe? Harry James, Guy Lombardo, Lawrence Welk. Sweet bands. Sweet bands? Yep. Harry James was the consummate performer he knew what the public wanted and they wanted schmaltzy tunes, sappy songs, etc... He had an ironclad embouchure from his long tenure on the horn and kept delivering night after night. He took to Vegas and stayed there, for more reasons than either the money or the fame. And you will have to read it. Rather sordid in places but Harry knew what he was doing, what he liked doing, and he kept on doing what knew and liked.

I enjoyed this book, as it really is a history of the big band period in American music, and Harry James role as one of top musicians of this period. I am a little surprised that some reviewers found the book too negative. Actually the author is very emphatic about Harry's incredible talent, and

points out the almost overwhelming consensus among musicians of that period of Harry's trumpet playing skills. James' life from his childhood in the circus through his breakthrough with the Goodman band, and later success as a bandleader, are all detailed, with litanies of concert events and recording dates. Despite the decline of the big bands in the late 1940s and 1950s, James continued working almost non-stop (until his death in 1983), and had a financially very successful period in Las Vegas in the early 1960s. There are extensive quotes throughout the book from bandmembers, and countless other contemporaries from all stages of Harry's career that corroborate the main themes of the book. The author is also quite blunt about Harry's problems with alcohol, gambling, and womanizing. I had read of James womanizing in other books, but in this book several contemporaries were quoted in detailing the extent of the "skirt-chasing" and it really bordered on obsessive behavior, probably as bad as his gambling. We tend to think of these tales of addiction as modern problems, and forget that personality flaws of this sort have been around forever. Certainly, this side of James is not attractive, but it does not detract from the theme of Harry's stature as one of the leading men of music in this era. Of course, no book about James could be written without talking about his first wife, Luise Tobin and even more prominently his second wife, Betty Grable. There are innumerable references to both, but particularly to Miss Grable. Miss Tobin was interviewed by the author for this book, and Miss Grable died in 1973, but a few of her surviving close friends were interviewed. Apparently, the author was able to even talk to Betty and Harry's two daughters who have generally declined interviews in regards to their famous parents. While both marriages ended badly, and Mr James acted like a real louse in both cases, I find the Grable union the most "tragic" part of Harry's personal life. What is most surprising is that after 22 years of a pretty chaotic marriage, Miss Grable continued to be a friend and a supporter after the divorce. It is not pleasant to read some of these details, but it certainly gives us a full picture of James' personal life, and insight into the lifestyle of the entertainment figures of that time. I found some of the endless accounts of concert dates and recording details a little tedious, but otherwise the book is a well-researched and well-written biography. It gives a great look into the big band era, the musicians, their lifestyles and the entertainment business of that period in general. I highly recommend at 4 1/2 stars.

I can't write this as a Literature Critic, because I'm not qualified. In my OPINION, this is not great literature, but it IS written with good intent and certainly written well enough to tell the story of this legendary trumpet player. Yes, I know most of you have no idea who Harry James was, but he was exceptional at playing jazz, blues, swing, and even classical music. If you're curious, you can listen

to little snippets of his music by searching him out on YOUTUBE.COM. I am a trumpet player in my seventh decade of life and I fondly remember Harry, his music, and his orchestra. I find it interesting to read about this legend and his surprising background and a child musician with a circus. Child labor laws? Not in the 1920's and 30's. The book reveals everything...good, bad, shameful, and heroic. It makes a legend HUMAN. If you're interested in Harry's life, what kind of trumpet he played, who he married, then you'd like this book.

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