

The Saga of Society Red

He did everything wrong and it all turned out right.

—Dizzy Gillespie¹

These days people will say to me, “Oh, gee, you’re out here alone now. All these people are gone.” Well, I don’t really know what they’re talking about. They’re all still here.

—Sonny Rollins²

When Dexter played, everybody listened. He could really power you off the stage if you were up there with him. Long Tall Dexter. He will never be forgotten.

—Jimmy Heath³

Dexter Gordon was known as “Society Red.” He got this name when he was with the Lionel Hampton band as a seventeen-year-old in 1940—just about the same time Malcolm X (then Malcolm Little) was being called Detroit Red. Dexter wrote a tune with that title and decades later, when he began working on his autobiography, he decided to name it *The Saga of Society Red*. The irony of that nickname has many levels and it became an “inside” jazz nod to an earlier time when young Black men konked their hair and wore zoot suits. Dexter began writing his life story in 1987 after the big fuss was made about his Academy Award nomination for the leading role in the film *Round Midnight*. When the noise had died down and we were living in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where he would play his saxophone in the garden, float his stretched-out body in the pool, and saunter to the *zócalo* (main square), Dexter would jot down his memories and thoughts on yellow legal-size pads.

He had originally hoped that James Baldwin would write the book with him, but sadly, Baldwin was ill and he died in December 1987.

James Baldwin was one among many of our shared passions. Dexter and I owned the same Baldwin books, loved talking about *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and would laugh about the fact that we traveled with our individual copies. Dexter knew Baldwin well enough to call him Jimmy. I only got to meet him once, at a party in Harlem, and I was stunned and wordless. Being speechless is a very rare condition for me. Dexter joked that if I pulled myself together he would introduce me to the great author. As he said that, Baldwin yelled across the room, “Hey Dex, I read in the paper that we were expatriates. I thought we were just living in Europe.” Dexter roared, then strolled over and bent down and hugged Baldwin, who seemed to disappear in his embrace. *I thought we were just living in Europe*—that remark has resonated with me for years.

The years Dexter lived in Europe—1962 to 1976—are treated as “lost” years by many fans, friends, and critics. Those Europe years were when he went missing from the scene in the United States, which many believed to be not only the center of jazz at that time but also the center of the world and anything interesting that was happening in it. But Dexter was aware of everything that was happening in the States and stayed connected to his home country in many ways. Like Baldwin, he found humor in the designations that suggested he was something of an outsider.

I tried to be cool when I was introduced to Baldwin. I tried not to look nonplussed. I was New York cool—nothing, and nobody, could impress me. Baldwin was just another partygoer. But Dexter said I had tears in my eyes and looked like I was going to faint. And his ability to see past my pretensions, and make me laugh about them, was something I especially treasured. Dexter did that—he made you see yourself a little clearer and always did so with wit (sometimes a biting wit; every now and then the humor was a knife turning).

Dexter knew he had an important story, and a very interesting one, to tell. It was his story but also the story of Black “expatriates,” a story about the history and culture of remarkably creative jazz musicians, a story about people’s love for Baldwin and other brilliant writers, a story about America and the way it embraces and also pushes away brilliant and creative Black people. He knew he had a story to tell about himself and this country. He recruited the very talented Wesley Brown, who wrote the novel *Tragic Magic*, to work with him on it. When Dexter learned that Wesley had spent a year in jail for refusing to serve in the

military during the Vietnam War, he felt that he had found the right collaborator. Wesley came to our New York apartment several times and then came to visit in Cuernavaca, talking with and interviewing Dexter. He wrote about Dexter's first trip to New York City with the Hampton band and Dexter liked it, but soon afterward Dexter decided that he wanted to write his own book, in his own voice.

He thought about writing it in the third person about a character known as "Society Red" who moved in and out of trouble while loving his life as a jazz musician and most of the people who played the music. Dexter began by writing notes to himself and vignettes on those yellow legal-size pads. His idea for the book was greatly influenced by one of his favorite novels, *The Ginger Man*, by J.P. Donleavy. He always had a paperback copy of *The Ginger Man* with him on the road and on the nightstand at home and could quote from it at length. He liked it because of the improvisatory feel of its narrative voice with an unexpectedness to it. Some chapters ended in poetry, some sentences had no verbs, and the thoughts would sometimes rush at you—Dexter wanted his book to be the same. Most of all, he loved the comic element of the novel and wanted his book to carry a sense of humor, the aspect Dexter thought most important in our complicated, harried lives.

Dexter would fill a few pages with his writing; I would type up the notes on a small portable Olivetti typewriter; then he would read them over, make changes, and talk about how he wanted to tell the story. One time when we were sitting on the patio in Cuernavaca, I remarked that I thought he needed to make an outline to better organize the book. He thought that was a bad idea and said he did not want a book written along a linear timeline. He wanted to improvise and have the book play out like a long jazz set, letting the story unfold as he reflected on the life of "Society Red." I insisted that an outline was necessary and recall that I won that argument—which was a very rare occurrence. (He later said that he agreed to make the outline just to quiet me down. But, as so often happened with us, Dexter saw the "long game": he knew that over time I'd come to see the wisdom of his approach. This book is, in part, another posthumous win for Dexter in one of our many spirited debates.) The way Dexter wrote the book is the way he wrote his life—on his own terms, in his own voice, in his own inimitable way. As I watched him work, and helped and argued with him about it, I saw why his story was important, even essential: to know the story of Dexter Gordon is to know the story of his community, the story of how some of the most creative people in the twentieth century projected their unique voices.



FIGURE 1. Dexter at the Royal Roost in New York City in 1948. This photo has become the iconic jazz image and is considered the epitome of “cool.” © Herman Leonard Photography LLC. www.hermanleonard.com

As he worked through the outline, he got to 1948, when he was twenty-five years old and working at the Royal Roost in New York, where Herman Leonard made the photograph of him as he was rehearsing with Kenny Clarke and Fats Navarro. Years later, Herman thought he would try to remove from the famous photo the cigarette smoke that swirled above Dexter’s head. He was concerned that the smoke might encourage young people to equate being “cool” with smoking. But after retouching the image on his computer, Herman killed the idea, saying, “The photo is nothing without the smoke.” The image still stands as the epitome of what was considered hip and cool at the time, and it is to this day widely accepted as *the* iconic jazz photo.

This Dexter Gordon—the icon—is the Dexter who is now known and beloved and celebrated, on albums and on film and in jazz lore, even in a street named for him in Copenhagen. But this image of the cool jazzman fails to come to terms with a three-dimensional figure full of humor and wisdom, a man who struggled to reconcile being both a creative outsider who broke the rules and a comforting insider who was a son, father, husband, and world citizen. This book is an attempt to fill in the gaps, the gaps created by our misperceptions, but also the gaps left by Dexter himself.

After finishing up the details of 1948 in his outline, Dexter skipped directly to 1960. I said, “You left out a decade. You can’t leave out an entire decade.”

“It’s my life and I can leave it out if I want to,” he replied. “I don’t want to write about it and I definitely don’t want to think about those years.”

I argued—to no avail. Dexter had that look in his eyes that let me know that no matter how hard I pushed or how many logical arguments I might make, he had made up his mind. That was that. There were many times when there was no point in discussing something that he had already decided about, and the 1950s was something not open for discussion. Then he said, “If you want it in the book, you will have to write it yourself.” This book is my unexpected acceptance of that challenge.

In 1988, for his sixty-fifth birthday, we threw a big party in Cuernavaca. It was one of the great parties, featuring two bands, copious quantities of food and drink, local women making blue tortillas on the patio, and an interlude during which Dexter played “Bésame Mucho” on the soprano saxophone for Gil Evans, who had come to Cuernavaca for health treatments. As the party wound down, Dexter thanked the guests for coming and said, “If you had told me that I would be at my own sixty-fifth birthday party, I would not have believed it. This is a jazz miracle. So many great friends and musicians died young. I salute them and pledge that they will not be forgotten.”

Two years later, when Dexter began to have serious health problems, we had some conversations about how he wanted things to be handled should he die before me. His mother had lived into her nineties and I kept thinking he would live into old age as well. He said that living past thirty-five was old age for a jazz musician. Dexter wrote out a set of instructions to be followed upon his death, directing that his ashes be cast into the Harlem River and that there be no funeral nor church service. He insisted that if musicians played, it should not be in a commercial

venue. We did our best to follow his wishes. He also insisted that I promise to finish college. He said that he thought I had regretted leaving college at nineteen, but the fact was that *he* was the one who regretted not going to college. Dexter was a passionate reader and admired people who valued academic skills and intellectual pursuits. I agreed to finish college. Then he asked me to make another promise. “If I don’t finish the book,” he said, “promise me you will finish it. I have talked to you more than anyone else about my life and you are here in this time when I am reflecting on the past. I never had time for that before. I was too busy running up and down the road.” I promised to finish the book if he didn’t, but I did not want to think about what that promise meant. But in April 1990 Dexter died, and I was forced to consider all the things I had been pushing out of my mind the previous few months.

Thanks to the urging of my good friend Shirley Scott, the legendary jazz organist who had gone back to school and was teaching at Cheyney University, I enrolled in college. When I began writing “the book,” I realized that there was no way to write about Dexter without writing about so much more—the early history of African Americans in Los Angeles, the criminalization of drug users in the 1950s, the political economy of jazz, and more. The story of Dexter’s life is nothing less than a cultural history of creative Black Americans in the interwar and postwar years. Dexter being Dexter, though, it would have to take the playful, circuitous, improvisatory route that he so adored in life and left as a legacy for us in death.

Now you have in your hands *Sophisticated Giant*, the story that began as one more creative and musical spark in Dexter Gordon’s mind as *The Saga of Society Red*. It is my voice, yes, and also my story—my attempt to close and fill in gaps, even in some cases against Dexter’s will—as well as, for many of his years, our story. But it’s also an ensemble affair. This book is my nod in agreement with Sonny Rollins that all those jazz greats of days past, “They’re all still here.” Throughout *Sophisticated Giant* you will find original vignettes, notes, and thoughts, exactly as Dexter laid them down on those yellow legal-size pads as he relaxed and reflected in Cuernavaca, “City of Eternal Spring.” When you arrive at those passages, always rendered in italics, think of Dexter (or “Society Red”) stepping out to take a solo—sometimes eight or sixteen bars; sometimes a full chorus, or three. Those passages appear exactly as Dexter wrote them on his yellow pads. Other italic passages, including original letters and quotes from Dexter with noted attribution to previously published sources, indicate similar “solo” turns.

The 1950s was the decade that Dexter wanted to leave out of his book. He had his reasons—relationships he did not want to talk or think about, in which he preferred not to face his weaknesses or, perhaps more likely, his neglect. He said to me that he chose to go on the road to play the music he loved, and his family was lost in the course of his travels. “I messed up my family life,” he said, not wanting to elaborate because to break the silence was to face heartbreaking facts. Of course, it wasn’t only the 1950s that was problematic for Dexter. Decade after decade, I recognized, he wanted to leave out many pertinent details. Anything he found to be unhappy or negative was out of bounds. It was the personal that was the problem. But, of course, there were happy moments in the 1950s. He married his first wife, Josephin A. Notti, known as Jodi, and they had two daughters, Robin and Deidre, during that decade. They all lived with Dexter’s mother in the family home on Los Angeles’ Eastside. (Dexter and Josephin divorced in the mid-1960s.) His daughters surely have their own stories about their childhoods and we hope they will one day write them. This, we know, must have been a very difficult time for the family, three people who heard too little of the voice that this book celebrates.

When digging to uncover a hidden past, one comes upon a life in the form of fragments. This book is a jazz composition that gratefully gives the bandstand over to different voices to play their tunes, and lovingly pushes against Dexter’s inclination to turn away from the uncomfortable. But it does not lose sight of what is most crucial in this story—an individual voice and its determination to assert itself in a world too often arrayed against it. Arriving on the scene just as the new phenomenon of recorded sound was mixing with the cultural explosions that were jazz and then bebop, and the growing vibrancy and confidence of an emerging and demanding group of young Black radicals, Dexter and so many of his contemporaries made themselves heard like none that had been heard before, bringing joy, hope, and fulfillment through their voices—musical, political, racial, cultural. This is a book about voice—playful, poignant, funny, firm, querulous, confident.

My voice didn’t enter the story until 1975, when I met Dexter in France, the year before he returned to the States. Mine is quite a loud voice (as I have often been told) that was formed by jazz from the late 1950s when we teenage jazz fans had a little listening club (mainly boys) that would get together at Joel O’Brien’s house and listen to the latest LPs. Joel’s father was a well-known morning radio host who received DJ copies of all the latest albums. We went to matinees in New York City’s Village Vanguard and sat in the listening section at Birdland. I always

wondered how I might find a way to spend as much time as I could around this great music and these fascinating people. I often say that hearing Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers at the Village Vanguard with Lee Morgan, Wayne Shorter, Bobby Timmons, and Jymie Merritt was my moment when I entered the jazz life, or at least wished I could claim to be part of that world. This became a life that chose me as much as I chose it. I was a road manager for Gil Evans, worked with Shirley Scott and Harold Vick, and learned from them what it meant to keep things together while traveling, to handle the payroll and find places to eat after the gigs and go to meetings at record companies acting as if I knew what I was doing before I actually knew what I was doing.

By the time I met Dexter in France I acted as if there was nothing anyone could tell me about jazz. I had been on the road with Clifford Jordan, George Coleman, Cedar Walton, Billy Higgins, and Sam Jones. Sam, in particular, thought I could learn the job and might one day be helpful to the musicians. He is the person who suggested I keep studying the European train schedules printed in that one huge book and know how to exchange the various European currencies (long before the Euro, the internet, cell phones, and online train schedules). When I worked in Europe as a road manager, I learned that there was an enthusiastic and respectful audience for the music and that bands were paid *before* the concert, not after. Dexter would say that he could play the blues even better when he got paid before playing.

When he left for Europe, alone, in 1962, Dexter said that he had hoped his wife, Jodi, and his daughters would join him there. But after he began to create a new life in Europe, the marriage ended. What I learned as a road manager with jazz groups is that the life out there is not easy and the temptations are great—drugs, alcohol, women, financial neglect. One tends to live in the moment, not think about the future. Of course, not all musicians messed up. Many were good with their money and had stable home lives, but many of the musicians I have known over the years did not have a plan for the future. The joy of playing music and being in the company of each other and of loving fans makes for an exciting and fulfilling life on the bandstand, but as Dexter said later in his life, it is those times off the bandstand that can be very tough.

When Dexter moved to Copenhagen in the early 1960s, his letters to Alfred Lion and Frank Wolff, the cofounders of Blue Note Records, carried as a return address “c/o Nielsen.” For my research on his years in Europe I turned to Dexter’s very good friend, the journalist Leonard

“Skip” Malone. When I asked Skip about this person named Lotte Nielsen, he looked at me and said, “Walk away from that. Leave it alone.” He had that same look that Dexter would have when I would ask about the 1950s or about his being in prison. Dexter never mentioned Lotte to me, nor did he mention being arrested in Paris in 1966 until he showed me a letter that he was required to carry in order to be allowed to enter Paris. When I asked him about a photograph of this short, happy girl named Lotte, taken behind the Montmartre Club in Copenhagen, he just looked wistful and did not reply. The story of Lotte has a tragic ending and, against Dexter’s wishes, it is told in this book because I decided that it must be.

While living in Copenhagen and traveling on the road in Europe in the mid-1960s, Dexter had two sons whom he did not raise—one of whom he never met. I’ve come to know both these men, who resemble Dexter physically and have become much like him in certain ways. They walk like him, and sometimes I notice that they think like him in the way that they tend to be optimistic when times are hard. Morten lives in Denmark and Mikael lives in Sweden. Neither ever lived with Dexter. These sons were born from relationships with women Dexter met on the road or when he was working in Copenhagen. Both are proud of their father, know and listen to his music, and understand many things about his life. I only learned about Mikael late in Dexter’s life. He has grown into a remarkable man with a beautiful wife and family, has learned much about Dexter and his music, and is profoundly influenced by him. I met Morten when he came to visit me after Dexter’s death. I know nothing about Dexter’s relationships with their mothers.

When Dexter finally “got himself together” (as he put it) and bought a home in the Valby district of Copenhagen, he met and married Fenja Holberg. According to Dexter, Fenja was descended from Danish royal lineage. Their son, Benjamin Dexter Gordon, called Benjie, was born in 1975 and named after Ben Webster, the great tenor saxophonist. Dexter said that he wanted to try to live a “normal” life and put an end to his years of unrest and struggle. Life was going very well at this point for Dexter, and Benjie was his pride and joy. When Dexter returned to the States in 1976, Fenja and Benjie came with him. But being back in the States meant yet another new life, and Dexter, after signing with Columbia Records and having me as his manager, had his own band and was on the road continuously, renewing old friendships and hanging out until the early morning hours. When he was in New York City, he spent many hours with his old friend Charles Mingus and musicians he hadn’t

seen in years. He was able to get an apartment in the same building as Mingus and his wife, Sue. There were many welcome-back celebrations, often spilling into long stretches in the after-hours clubs of Harlem. Dexter carried a business card with our office number on it so that I could always be reached if there was ever a problem. One thing Dexter and I agreed upon was that if he was not working I didn't need to ask him where he was going or when he would be back. I abided by that rule.

Unfortunately, his marriage with Fenja did not survive his return to the States, and she returned to Copenhagen with Benjie. Dexter planned for Benjie to visit and grow up in New York for part of each year but, sadly, that never happened. The marriage ended with a very acrimonious divorce, and after that Dexter did not permit any mention of Fenja again. Both Jodi and Fenja are now deceased. Dexter has five grandchildren. He knew and loved Raina, Robin's daughter. The other grandchildren were born after Dexter's death—Benjie's son Dexter, Mikael's son Dexter Gordon-Marberger, and Robin's sons Jared and Matthew. Dexter had heard of other children who claimed that he was their father, but these are the facts as we know them and as he wrote them out.

The story of how I met Dexter and how we planned his return together, opened an office, and began a life together in 1983 is told in the chapter called "Homecoming." We were first of all friends, then business partners. We spoke more than once every day. Sometimes I had to catch a flight to a city where there was some problem that had to be solved. "Max, the band needs you here," he would say. Every year on New Year's Eve we agreed verbally to continue working together. We had no paper between us. He would say, "Let's give it another year. Okay, Little Red?" (Yes, it is a curious coincidence that "Society Red" would one day pair up with "Little Red." Woody Shaw had written a beautiful composition for me called "Little Red's Fantasy" because of the color of my hair, and that became my new nickname.) We had an office on West Fifty-Third Street next to Columbia Records, and during those years I worked double shifts—probably sleeping four hours a night at most.

Earlier, when I was road manager for the Louis Hayes–Junior Cook Quintet, traveling to Europe for six weeks at a time, I met the phenomenal trumpeter Woody Shaw and we began a relationship. In 1978, by one of the greatest miracles in my life, our son, Woody Louis Armstrong Shaw III, was born. This baby grew up in the office, on the road, in the kitchen of the Village Vanguard, and on weekends in Newark with his grandparents. Woody Shaw and I lived together for a short time, but things didn't work out between us and we ended our relationship in 1983.

Things had changed for Dexter around his birthday that year when we had a big party at the Village Vanguard. We agreed to end the business relationship, live together, and as he again put it, try to have a “normal life.” Clearly, that was something Dexter craved, but after all, what really is a “normal” life? We closed the office and Dexter became Woody’s stepfather. This normal life, for my part, included cooking three meals a day, walking Woody to and from school and taking him to after-school activities, and finding time to rest and recover from our lives on the road and in the office. Once, when Dexter was adding my name and information to the apartment lease, the building agent said to me, “Oh, you don’t work?” Dexter looked at her and said, “This is the hardest job she has ever had. She is staying at home to be a wife and mother.” He was right about that. Sometimes Dexter would wake up and ask, “What time is the gig?” and it would take some time until he realized that he was actually at home and didn’t have to go anywhere.

We agreed that we both lived jazz lives—a way of seeing the world and knowing that there was always a way out of any problem you might have to confront. Of course, having great friends and the best lawyer, doctor, and accountant helped. Woody has grown up in this environment and I see him viewing life in a very wide angle and finding solutions to monumental problems just as his father and stepfather did. Art Blakey once said to me, “We can always knock down that brick wall they build in front of us. We have power.”

Dexter was determined to put some things right about being a father. Woody traveled with us on the road, went to the International School in Cuernavaca when we lived there, and went with us to Paris for the filming of *Round Midnight*. In Paris he hung out on the movie set when he wasn’t in day camp in the park in Saint-Mandé. Dexter watched from the third floor of our house as Woody walked to the boulangerie in the morning to buy croissants and baguettes. He was very proud of who this seven-year-old child was becoming. He wanted to do what he hadn’t done with his own children—he wanted to be a real father.

The result of my promise to finish his story is this book, which sets out to give a meaningful portrait of one of the world’s most influential and beloved jazz icons, my husband and former partner in the so-called jazz business, tenor saxophonist, composer, and Academy Award-nominated actor Dexter Gordon. The Dexter Gordon story is the story of the phoenix rising. He was a towering figure at six feet five inches, the epitome of cool, the musician who translated the language of bebop to the tenor saxophone, the man who disappeared for a decade into

drugs and jail terms and managed to emerge with a sound to be heard, the musician who left the States for a gig at Ronnie Scott's Club in London in 1962 and returned fourteen years later to standing ovations in New York City, the musician who made a movie with French director Bertrand Tavernier and got nominated for an Oscar for best leading actor. One could tell the story of his life in shortcut by perusing the titles of some of his most significant albums: *Resurgence*, *Go*, *Our Man in Paris*, *Homecoming*. Dexter Gordon believed in life and in music. He loved being a jazz musician, and although his life was complicated with some very dark, very low moments, he was not a man to burden himself with regrets. In fact, Dexter was not even sorry to run out of time before he could finish his book, probably because he knew I would. No, "Society Red" left this world a very contented man. When asked if he had any regrets, he replied, "Only one. I never got to play in the Count Basie band—in Lester Young's chair."