

If It Swings, It's Music: The Autobiography of Hawai'i's Gabe Baltazar Jr.

Gabe Baltazar, Garneau Theo

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Hawai'i's legendary jazz musician Gabe Baltazar Jr. has thrilled audiences since the late 1940s with his powerful and passionate playing. In this, the first book on his life and career, Gabe takes readers through the highs, lows, and in-betweens on the long road to becoming one of the very few Asian Americans who has achieved national and international acclaim as a jazz artist.

Born in 1929 to a Japanese mother and Filipino father, Gabe was largely raised by his maternal grandparents, but at a young age his father, an accomplished musician, encouraged his son to take up the clarinet and saxophone. As a teenager during World War II, Gabe performed with the Royal Hawaiian Band and played weekend dances with Filipino swing bands. By the mid-1950s, he had established himself in the West Coast jazz scene, and in 1960 he became the lead alto saxophonist of the influential Stan Kenton Orchestra. Following a four-year stint with Kenton, Gabe worked as a valued studio musician in Los Angeles, where he recorded with Dizzy Gillespie, Oliver Nelson, James Moody, and countless others. In 1969 he returned to Honolulu as assistant director for the Royal Hawaiian Band while taking center stage as Hawai?i's premier jazz artist, a role he admirably fulfilled for over forty years. At 83, Gabe remains active in jazz education and continued to perform at home and abroad until 2010.

Gabe is one of a legion of Hawai'i musicians who migrated to the Mainland after the war, yet his is the only detailed, firsthand account of that experience. As the quintessential musician's musician, his reminiscences of working as a valued sideman and studio musician in the years when big bands were disappearing and studio orchestras were being replaced by synthesizers comprise a singular account of jazz in the last half of the twentieth century. His memorable encounters with some of the greatest names in jazz and popular entertainment will delight music fans, while readers of Hawai'i and Asian-American life-writing will find in this work a fond record of days past told with humor and heart.

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