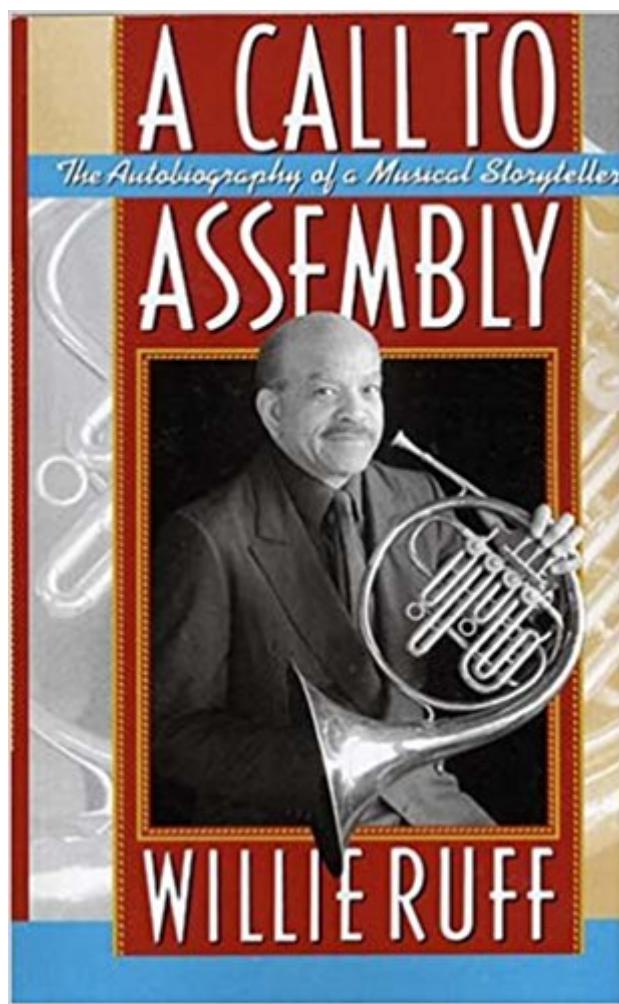


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A Call To Assembly: The Autobiography Of A Musical Storyteller



Synopsis

Music came to Willie ruff early in his Alabama boyhood. It came from Mrs. Nance, the solo bass drummer of the Sanctified church, whose beat "gave her right arm the churning motion of a set of steam locomotive wheels." It came from singing at the grocery store for candy, and from the "chitlin struts: at his home, with young Willie sprinkling cornmeal on the floor to make "gliding" easy for dancing. It came from eavesdropping on the porch ladies, listening to the rhythm of their revelations. It came from the Sheffield School for Colored the day the second grader met a storied Alabama neighbor, W.C. Handy, who played his St. Louis Blues on the trumpet and spoke to the children about "the music of the Negro race." Music and learning ("Can't nobody take nothin from outta your head," said his first mentor, Daddy Long) set the course of Willie Ruff's life. He sopped up music and learning when he joined the army at age fourteen, coming under the influence of various fatherly music masters. While he was an undergraduate at Yale, it was Paul Hindemith's magnetic presence that expanded Willie's musical horizons. Later, playing the French horn with the Lionel Hampton band and forming the "Duo" with his old piano-playing army sidekick, Dwike Mitchell, Willie learned firsthand from powerful influence like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Max Roach, Dizzy Gillespie. And through his years at Yale as a professor of music, the quest for learning never stopped. But music wasn't all. A powerfully recurring theme of *A Call to Assembly* comes from Willie's curiosity about the black soldier in American history. It began when he was in grade school and witnessed an air show by an all-black squadron of fighter pilots from Tuskegee. Later, in the army, Willie met some of those pilots who had fought over Germany and Italy and risked courts-martial to gain the same rights white officers enjoyed. Years later, through a set of extraordinary circumstances, he came across a statement written in 1902 by another Alabama neighbor, an ex-Confederate general who commended the valor of Negro soldiers fighting in the Spanish-American War. It was, Willie writes, as if this general "laid a hand on me from the grave and gave me pride and understanding." Willie Ruff's is an exhilarating story, told in a distinctive voice that rings clear and true, smart and funny, and is always moving.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I just finished listening to Mr. Ruff talk with the late great Marian McPartland for an hour on her classic Piano Jazz show, and it left me hungry to hear more of his erudite, articulate, eloquent voice. So I bought this, and I know I will enjoy it a LOT: Mr. Ruff has made great use of his remarkable life, and I look forward to learning more about it.

Willie was a personal friend of ours in the Sheffield area. I didn't know he had written a book until my daughter told me. It was such fun to read this personal story from a long lost friend. He captured the feeling and reality of the area as it was when he was a youngboy. He is a truly renaissance man and I would love to be able to touch base with him again.

Professor Ruff's amazing life story in this book goes full cycle, from the Tennessee Valley of the 1930s, to Moscow and Shanghai and Africa and Los Angeles and New Haven, then back to the land of Gen. Joe Wheeler and W. C. Handy and Helen Keller. Someday North Alabama will be known for all four, Wheeler, Handy, Keller, and Ruff. His story is that good and that well told, and his success in his chosen fields of music, pedagogy, and writing is remarkable. He is among the most successful people to come out of the Shoals area of Alabama by a dam site. I regret that it took me so long to discover this book. It might have taken me even longer than 20 years if it weren't for Neal Starkey, a bass-playing friend at the annual W. C. Handy Festival in the Shoals. The book's non-informative title is its only negative, in my opinion. I think of it instead as "From Pickaninny To Impresario."

I think this should be required reading in every high school. A clear story on how to conquer adversity with persistence and determination. Interesting, well written, and inspirational.

One of the most well written and informative books I have ever read.

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