

# Portraits of an Artist

*Falter lovingly recorded history of jazz with images*

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John Falter grew up loving jazz music and dreamed of one day being a great musical artist. An artist he became; a musician he didn't.

Instead, Falter used his extraordinary talent for drawing to express his true passion: jazz music.

Falter's musical portraits are now on display at the Nebraska History Museum, 15<sup>th</sup> and P streets.

Much of the display takes you back to the 1971 Colorado Jazz Party, a gathering of the best jazz artists of that time.

You walk in and are surrounded by images of George "Pee Wee" Erwin, John Mince, Ralph Sutton, Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong and "The World's Greatest Jazz Band."

One of Falter's paintings shows a gleaming-eyed Armstrong wearing a huge white grin and holding his trumpet in his right hand. Above his head is a halo surrounded by stars in the night sky.

Accompanying the picture of Armstrong is a quote by Falter expressing his feelings about Armstrong and jazz itself. It reads:

"Recently when the late Louis Armstrong marched over to the other side to be one of the saints, we were once again reminded that there are but a few of them left. The innovators who grew up with the jazz, the men who stuck to the roots of this American Expression of Music."

Another picture in the gallery is of Ralph Sutton, pianist for the "World's Greatest Jazz Band."

The picture shows Sutton bent over a piano with an intent look of concentration on his face.

His forearms are brushed lines, and flames rise from his fingers representing his rapid play on the keys. His left foot is a blur operating the pedal.

A third picture shows saxophone and clarinet player John Mince, half squatted and slightly leaning backward while playing his horn.

His closed eyes, scrunched face and stiff body give the impression that he is digging deep into his lungs for one last breath of air to play his instrument.

Most of the drawings shown at the museum were taken from Falter's portfolio of prints, "Jazz from Life."

The basis of that portfolio came from sketches Falter did of the musicians at the Colorado Jazz Party.

Falter was invited to draw at the Colorado festival and many other festivals because he ran with that circle of jazz musicians, said Brent Carmack, historic sites coordinator at the Nebraska History Museum.

While the musicians played, Falter drew.

"I started working on a manageable sketch board that would enable me to do lightning sketches and paintings right on the spot of jazz in action, portraying the musicians at work, drawing and painting 'on the beat' if you will," Falter said in a press release.

For each subject on display, the museum has Falter's original drawing and a lithograph print.

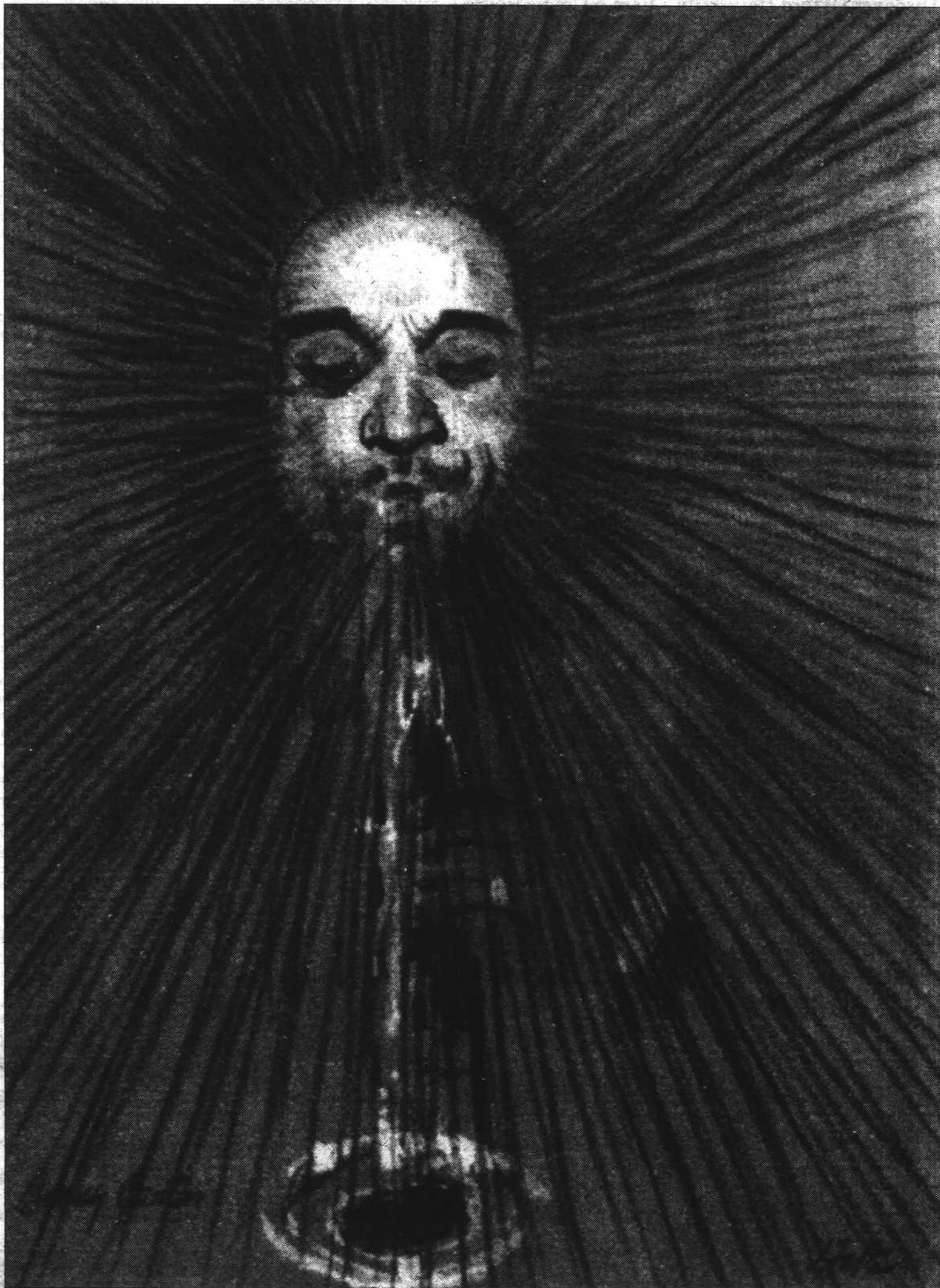
The lithograph prints contain slight differences from Falter's original drawing but still have the look of the originals.

Before his jazz sketching, Falter, who was born in Plattsmouth in 1910 and grew up in Falls City, was best known for the covers he drew for the *Saturday Evening Post*.

"Falter and Norman Rockwell may have been the most well-known artists of their time," Carmack said.

The exhibit offers more than just a look at Falter's work.

"The art exhibit is also a history of jazz during that time," Carmack said.



In this 1991 drawing, John Falter captures the spontaneity and vibrancy of jazz musician Benny Carter, who is affectionately known to fellow musicians as "King." LIZ MEACHAM/DN

Included with each picture is a description of who is in the drawing and where it was drawn.

Also on the walls are quotes from Falter's press release for his portfolio of prints in 1971.

Accompanying some of the pictures are possessions and collectibles of the subject in the picture.

Underneath the drawing of Falter's childhood friend George "Pee Wee" Erwin are his trumpet and pieces of his sheet music.

The museum also has photographs of many of the musicians and a listening station where

you can hear music by the people on display.

Carmack said this is the first time the museum has had an audio component for one of its displays.

People at the museum didn't think the exhibit could be done without the musical aspect, Carmack said.

Funded by the Berman Music Foundation, the exhibit will be on display through April.

Carmack described Falter as a frustrated musician who played all of his life but realized he would never play at the level of musicians he

saw around him.

Falter, who died in 1982, summed up his work best in a quote located above his friend Erwin's display.

The quote from his 1971 press release read, "During the mid-twenties I played, or attempted to play, jazz clarinet with my schoolmates in Falls City, Al Maust and Pee Wee Erwin. I plan to go and record ... these men who have kept pure jazz alive."

"You see, I am attempting to visually record the jazz I was never able to properly play."