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The Illustrious Jazz Past of Political Blogger Charles Johnson

From fusion to filibusters

UPDATED APRIL 26, 2019 – DAVID R. ADLER

Charles Johnson (holding guitar) with Steve Bach, Simon Phillips and Stanley Clarke, 1980. Photo courtesy of Stanley Clarke

Every day on Twitter at @Green_Footballs, Charles Johnson takes caustic and intelligent aim at the Republican right as well as the global Wikileaks/Edward Snowden/Glenn Greenwald fan club. The self-described “ex-wingnut” blogger of Little Green Footballs, seen as right wing in the years following 9/11, is now reliably center-left. Toggle to his bio, however, and it starts thus: “Scientist of Love. Guitarist w/ George Duke, Stanley Clarke, Al Jarreau, others.”

Yes, it's the same Charles “Icarus” Johnson heard shredding like a fiend on “Life Is Just a Game,” from Clarke’s famous 1976 album *School Days*. Now 60 and based near Los Angeles, this political pundit and “code monkey” was far more than a six-string dabbler in an earlier life. He took the stage name Icarus at the urging of a girlfriend. There's YouTube footage of him playing with drummers Simon Phillips, Sheila E. and Steve Gadd (in bands led by Clarke, Duke and Jarreau, respectively).

Born in New York, Johnson moved to Hawaii at age 10, having taken up guitar at 9. He writes via e-mail: “In Hawaii I played with a lot of popular bands, both nightclub stuff and experimental music with an acoustic trio composed of myself and Larry Herzberg on guitar, and Bob Kindler on cello.” By the '70s it was on to New York, where Johnson was introduced to John McLaughlin through some friends. “John heard a demo tape I had made, and when Stanley asked him to play on *School Days*, he recommended me for ‘Life Is Just a Game’ because he was going through an acoustic purist phase and didn't want to play electric. That's how I ended up in the studio for my first major recording, with Stanley, George Duke and Billy Cobham, all of them major idols of mine.”

When steady work in New York proved scarce, Johnson relocated to L.A.-right at the time George Duke was putting together a new band. “I got in touch with him,” Johnson recalls, “and ended up auditioning versus about 150 other guitar players and got the gig.” The band toured throughout the '70s and made three albums, *Reach for It*, *Don't Let Go* and *Follow the Rainbow*. Johnson also wound up touring again with Clarke and playing on *Rocks*, *Pebbles and Sand* (1980). He recorded two albums with the band Pages (the future Mr. Mister) and did extensive session work in L.A. before joining Al Jarreau's band. “I spent a total of almost eight years with Al, with some of the greatest musicians in the world,” Johnson says.

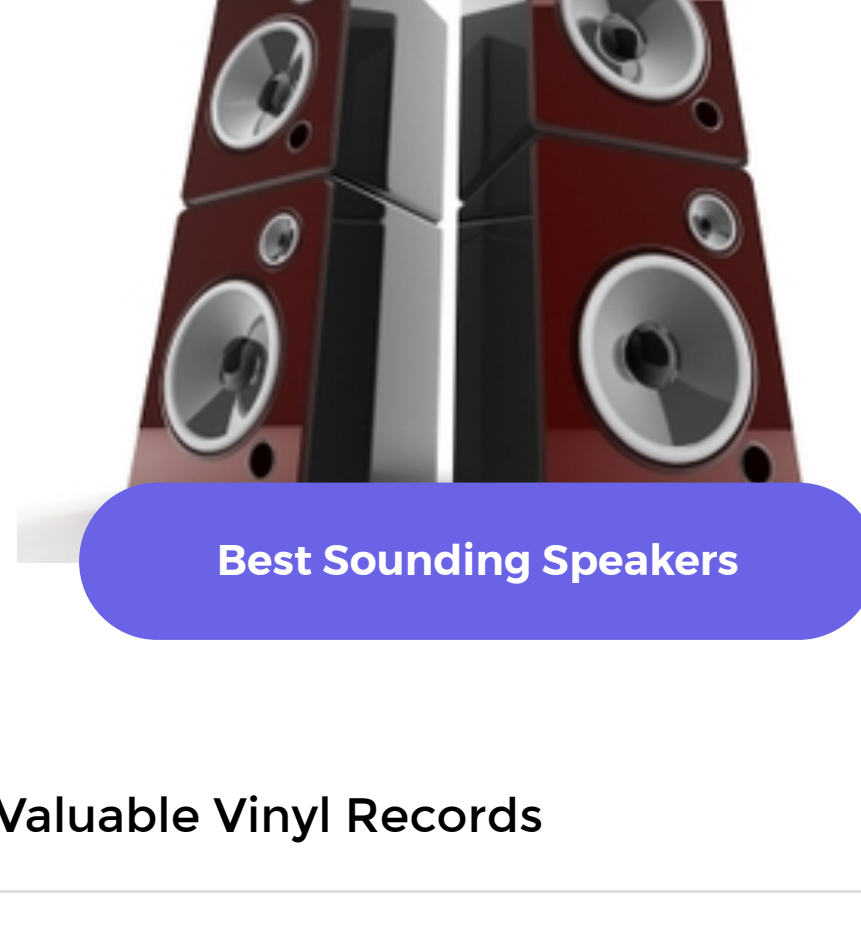
Meanwhile, Johnson pursued a second career in tech. With partner John Eidsvoog he started a popular software company for Atari ST computers. He also ran a shareware company on the side called Little Green Footballs-the name of his music publishing company. “I started the LGF website to explore the technology of blogging and learn about new tools and programming languages,” Johnson writes. “After 9/11 I started writing a lot about the issues around the attacks, including radical Islam, and somehow ended up with a very large following. I was also one of the main bloggers involved in exposing the faked George Bush National Guard memos that were aired on *60 Minutes* by Dan Rather, and after that our traffic took off.”

Johnson had long been drawn to politics and history-he always made a point of reading up on the places where he toured-but he never saw it as part of his career. He insists that he didn't launch Little Green Footballs as a right-wing blog. “Over the years I made some efforts to resist that label,” he says. Nonetheless, his stance against radical Islam attracted allies who were more interested in bashing Muslims per se. “When Pamela Geller, Robert Spencer and others of the so-called ‘anti-jihad’ bloggers began to make alliances with European far-right and fascist groups, that was the breaking point,” Johnson recounts, “but I'd been getting uneasy with their rhetoric and obsessions for a long time before that. The election of Barack Obama was another eye-opener, as I saw a lot of right-wing media go into a crazed paranoia, often mixed with overt racism, sexism and homophobia, and I wanted no part of it. I made a public break in 2009 in a post titled ‘Why I Parted Ways With the Right.’”

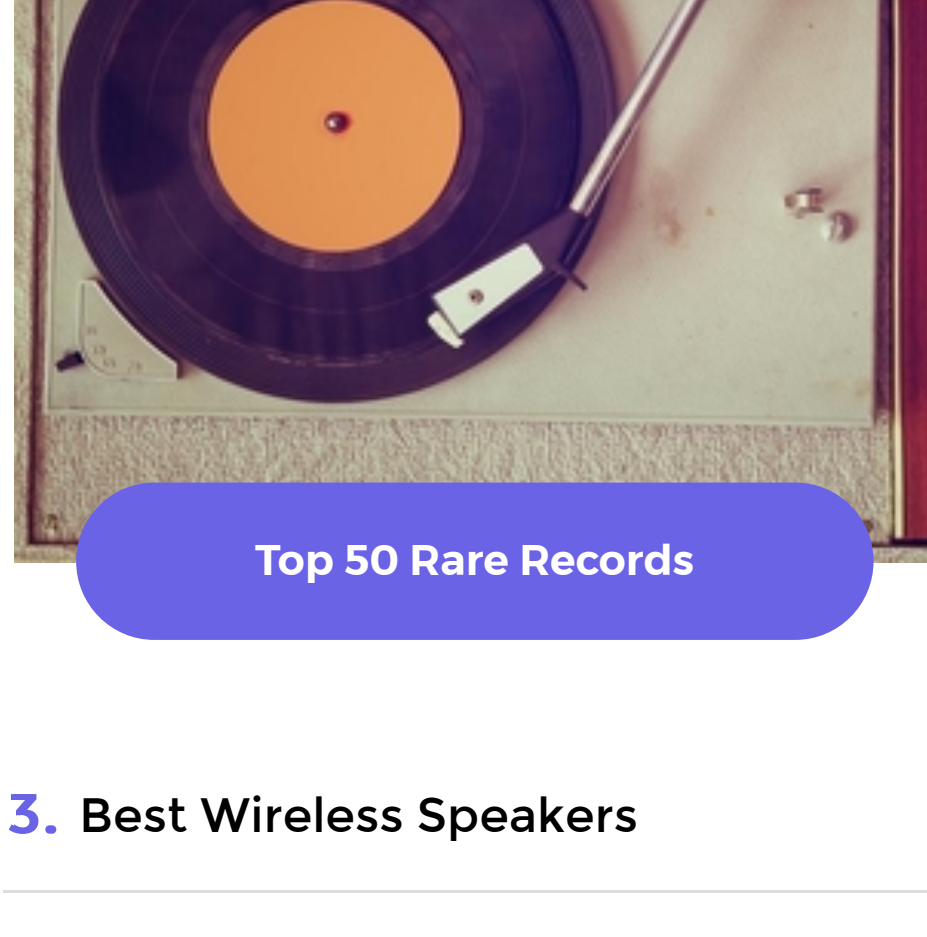
There seems to be something about jazz and the national security commentariat, across the political spectrum. *Slate*'s Fred Kaplan is a noted jazz writer. Eli Lake, Matt Duss and others have tweeted their interest in jazz now and then. But Johnson's tastes are broad. His frequent “now playing” posts can range from Michael Brecker to Todd Rundgren, from Keith Jarrett to Greg Howe. There's one fellow guitar player who comes in for serious slagging, however: Ted Nugent.

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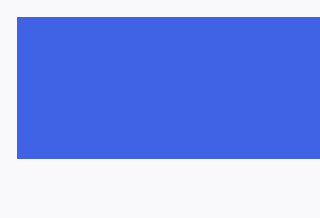
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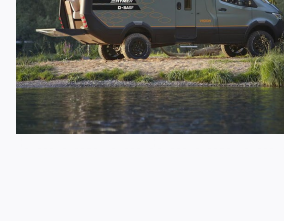
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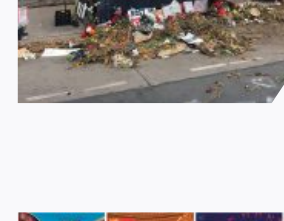
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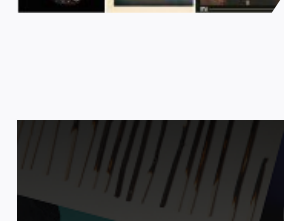
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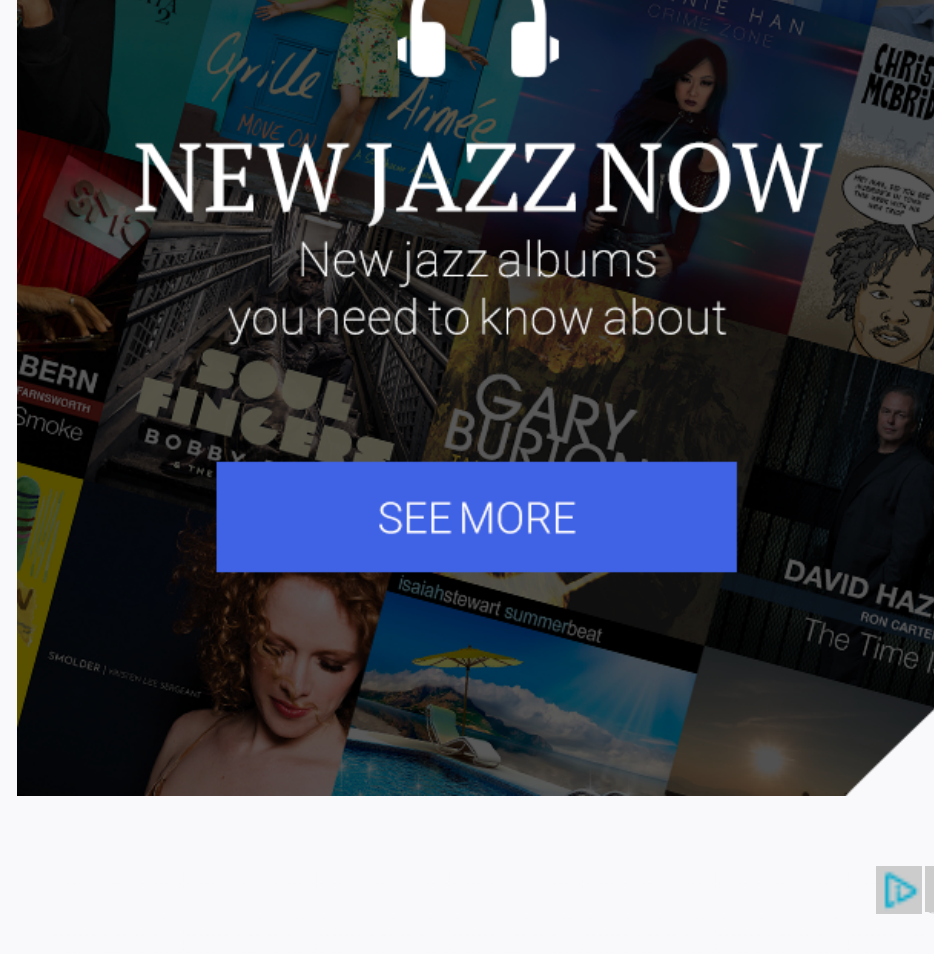
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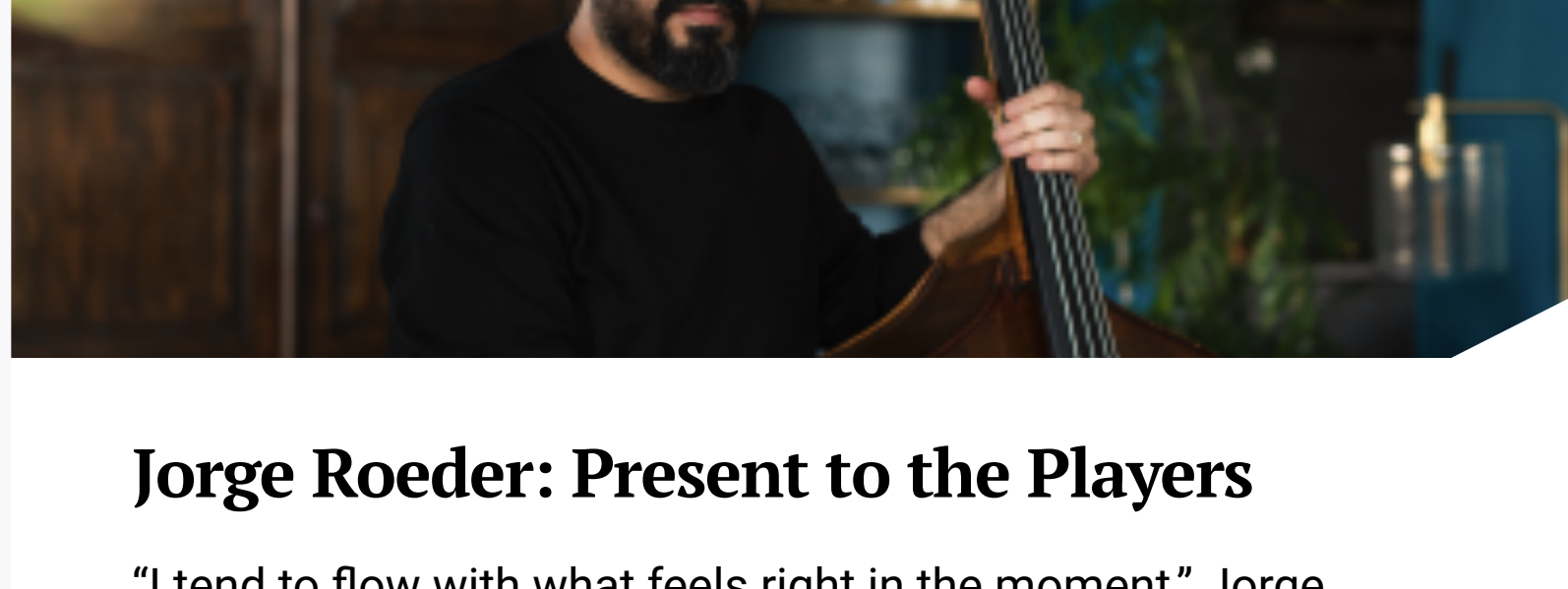
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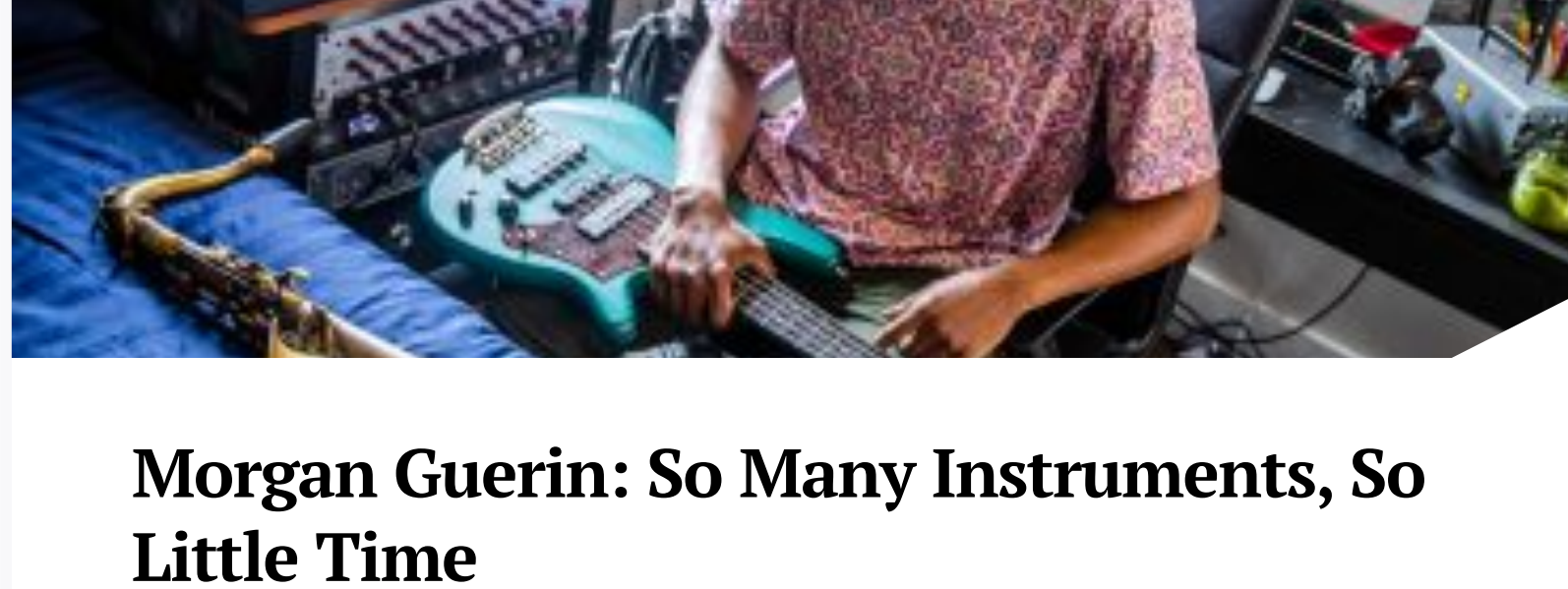


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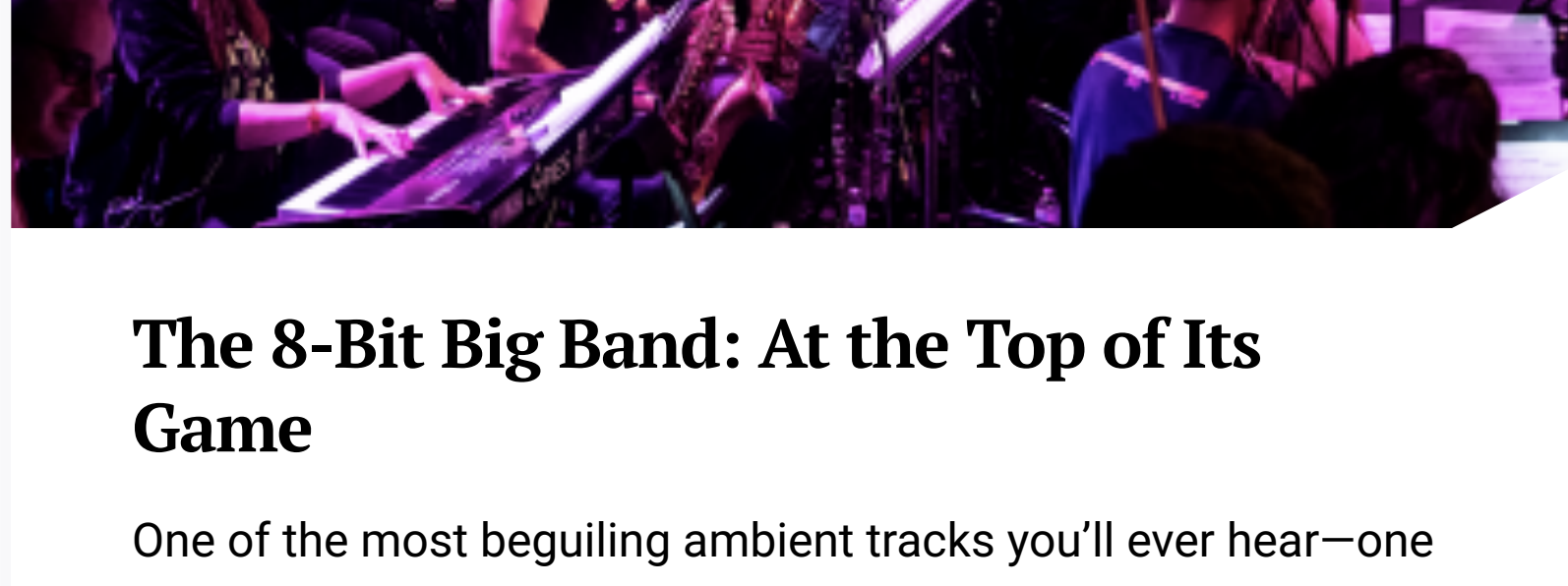
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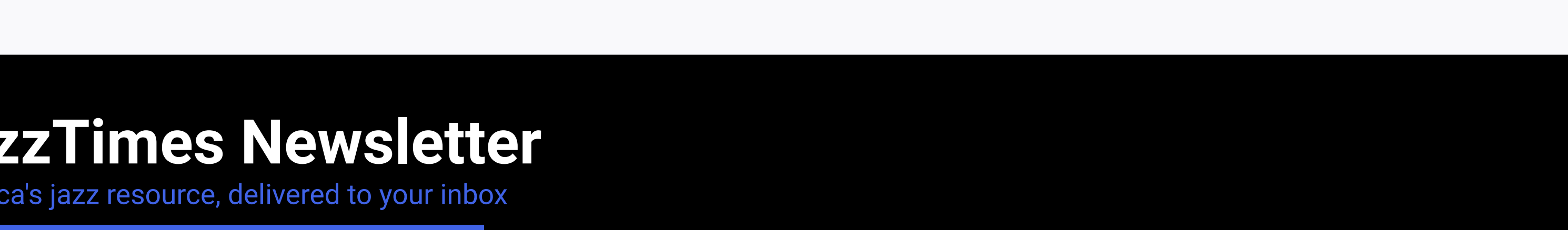
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