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SHOW TIME

Baltimore Afro-American
Music, art, theatre

REUNION

Master musicians who made Baltimore a musical mecca in the 50's on scene again.

By Ralph Matthews Jr.

NOTE: Last week Ralph Matthews Jr., editor, Baltimore AFRO, traced the development of modern black music in Baltimore. He cited musicians Walt Dickerson, Hank Baker, Bill Hardman, Jimmy Heath and the late Bill Swindell as being prime movers locally as the Fifties began. This is the second and concluding installment.

On a Sunday night two decades ago Jimmy Heath, the saxophonist and composer, stood with me on the corner of North and Madison Aves. and spoke of his dreams.

"One day there will be a Heath family band. My brother Percy, little brother Albert, all of us, everyone in my family can play."

Last summer (1976) vacationing in New York, I descended the stairs of the Village Vanguard night club, my four-year-old sleepy in my arms, (begin them listening early) and squirmed through the crowded bistro.

About to mount the bandstand were the Heath Brothers, Jimmy, Percy, Albert. Most black dreams as Langston Hughes noted are deferred but sometimes street corner dreams come true.

But back to the beginning. Milton "Buddy" Lonesome and I, young AFRO reporters in the Fifties, sharing a love for our music, found that there just wasn't enough of what we wanted to hear being played in Baltimore.

So without any resources except energy, burglars' nerve, and a lot of friends we decided to give concerts.

We struck a bargain with Lloyal Randolph who then owned the York Hotel at Madison and Dolphin to have jazz sessions in his Blue Room cocktail lounge. Being the astute businessman he was, Mr. Randolph figured if we filled the room and he dispensed liquor then it was a good deal for him.

Filling the room? Buddy and I collared everyone we knew and promised them the best musical time they had ever known.

Having met our ticket quota a week or so before the concert, it suddenly occurred to us that it would be nice if we actually had some musicians.

"My God who're we going to get?"

Walt Dickerson was still a Morgan student, a music major, and my friend. I had to track him down on a football Saturday because he was duty-bound to march with the MS band at ballgames. Only Dickerson, already working as a professional musician playing very advanced music, could keep a straightface while he rat-a-tatted on a snare drum in a college marching band.

We negotiated on the sideline while he marched. He would bring his group.

Who else? We wanted to knock our audience on its butt. Dickerson suggested a young Philadelphia tenor saxist, Wilbur Campbell.

"If you can't get him, get Jimmy Heath."

We ended up hiring both.

Doris Robinson agreed to be our vocalist. She was the only young singer around who was into the new music. A little Sarah.

Gordon Watkins, later to be an always busy Broadway singer, dancer and actor, was brought in as male vocalist. Though not so jazz-tinged as our other performers, Buddy and I liked Gordon. Even so we kept asking ourselves "why have we hired him?"

We had a turn-away crowd, the late AFRO entertainment editor E.B. Rea having given our project his blessing on his music page though doubtful we could pull it off. "You guys really think it will draw?" We assured him.

Dickerson's group led off and from the first note and the audience reaction we knew Baltimoreans were ready for black music far more advanced than what they had been hearing in the Avenue bars that featured music.

"Strike Up The Band" was Dick's opener played at jet plane tempo, tolling the death knell for a lot of dudes who had just been diddling with music, just plucking and shucking, and not advancing their art as the music was being transformed.

Buddy and I had been appised by Hank Baker who was all knowing in these matters that both Wilbur Campbell and Jimmy Heath could play.

Even so once these two young Philadelphians sounded their horns, we stopped counting ticket receipts and our other entrepenurial duties, and just sat down, mouths open, and listened with everyone else. No longer promoters, just fans. The hell with the money problems.

We had listened to Charlie Parker, to Sonny Stitt and the other top reed players, but to hear these much younger musicians move through the music with such detexerity amazed us.

Campbell had been touted as the premier player but Heath, already nick-named "Little Bird" after Parker, had the gift of direct and total communication with listeners.

Jimmy later told me that his first professional jobs were in honky-tonks where you either moved your audience and risked getting cut, short or at least thrown off the bandstand. Play or die.

Heath quickly learned that powerful and direct contact was not only the essence of black music but kept on-the-job injuries to a minimum.

We were off and running.

Lonesome and I determined to keep the sessions going. Heath we would bring back again certainly, but who else or was Heath enough?

Our bankroll, zero, said keep it small.

"I'm in a little trouble," Jimmy told me long-distance.

"What kind?"

"Read The Pittsburgh Courier this week."

DREAM REALIZED — Twenty year ago saxaphonist Jimmy Heath planned a family band. It finally happened last year. The Heath Brothers is now one of the best drawing groups on the music scene. At left pianist Stanley Cowell, at right the Heaths, Jimmy, Percy, and Albert.

Trane

A little trouble? Jimmy, like so many young men of that time, had been in a drug bust. Our star performer's photo was on the front page but not as the gifted musician he was, but as defendant.

He was in the trouble that gripped almost every musician I was to know. A young friend, a few days ago, asked who in our music to my direct knowledge had been into drugs during the period I am discussing now. By the time I finished licking off former junkies the list could have been a Who's Who of jazz.

"You mean him, too?" my friend asked incredulously. "I thought he was clean."

"Him," was John Coltrane.

The name Jimmy Heath was saying on the other end of the line.

"John who?" I asked.

"If I can't get down, get Coltrane."

Buddy and I asked Hank Baker, who then had a haberdashery on Pennsylvania Ave. to walk over to Gamby's nightclub. We wanted his musicial opinion of whomever this Trane person was.

Gay Cross and the Rhythmnaires was the band. They played honkytonk.

"Jimmy Heath has lost his mind," hearing the young saxophonist bleating out a Bull Moose Jackson tune. Baker said with finality. "He can play. Don't let that junk they're doing bother you."

"Specs" Wright, the drummer, did the talking. John Coltrane sort of just mumbled.

"We'll do an afternoon session for $25 each plus some skag."

Skag

Skag? Buddy and I recoiled. This man was talking about heroin.

We muttered something non-conclusive and said we'd get back to them. We hied ourselves to another bar to study the situation.

"We don't even know whether these cats can really play plus they want us to be dope pushers in the bargain."

No bet! We marched resolutely back into Gamby's. $35 each, fellows, do your own dope dealing.

Depression set in. Buddy and I sat in his broken-down car.

"We wanted Jimmy Heath and here we are settling for somebody named Coltrane. What the hell kind of name is that anyway?"

A second concert. A second smash. John played hard, a rough and ready version of Dexter Gordon, not so fleet or dextrous as Heath, but good.

"Specs" Wright stole the show, being able, in chase choruses, to play on drums lines Coltrane blew on his horn.

Local trumpeter John Birks complemented them perfectly.

Then paranoia set in.

Musicians who were performing for us were getting busted.

Paranoia

Heath, then word came that Coltrane faced heavy time.

Buddy and I began to wonder if bringing brilliant musicians together was all that great if their addiction, a health problem, was going to make them vulnerable to criminal prosecution.

In the Fifties to be strung out was to be a desperate criminal to the unenlightened.

We gave a few more sessions, booking musicians like pompous old fogeys. Is this guy clean? (Non-addicted) This was a drag.

Heath beat his rap and played a few more times but the thrill of creating the circumstances wherein good music could be heard was wearing thin. We were writers and promoters. We cared about these artists.

We finally said the hell with it but not before a final session starring Clifford Brown.

Dickerson had raved about this fantastic trumpet player in Wilmington who scared everybody, Miles, Dizzy.

Brownie, 19 years old, a Delaware State College student, agreed to perform.

It was a joyous, comical occasion. All the young Baltimore trumpeters came to check Brownie out. On the front row were "Mousie" Johnson, the same Bill Hardman I mentioned last week, Tanglefoot and a couple of others.

I guess trumpet players know each other by smell or something. "Brownie" sensed on his radar that he had to prove himself

He did. After his opening solo, played at a tempo so fast the notes came like machine gun bullets, after the the crowd screamed in amazement, after the overwhelming impact of Clifford Brown, I heard Hank Baker laughing.

"What's so funny," I asked.

Split

"All the trumpet players have split."

Sure enough where our local reigning brass-men had been seated at the bandstand's apron were several empty chairs.

I teased Bill Hardman about this later. He laughed. "After hearing Brownie, I just figured I needed some air."

This is some of how it was. Two young writers trying to build a climate for the new music. Early Heath, early laconic Coltrane, fully-formed Clifford Brown, he and Trane now kings in jazz heaven, happy days, black folk enjoying black music in the basement of a black hotel. Nobody had any money, made any money but everyone, junkies included, moving in a spirit of collective love and respect.

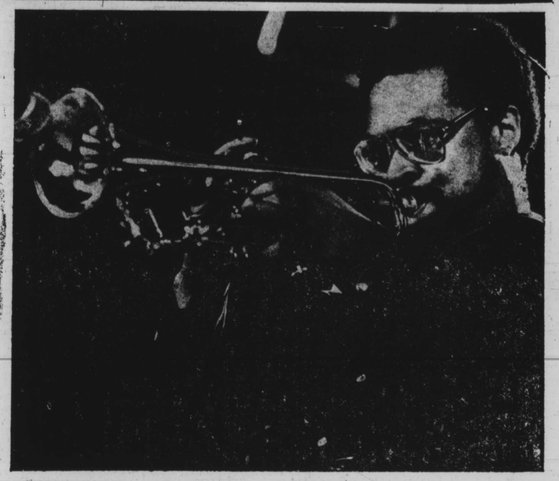
People say "You and Buddy were ahead of your time."

I say we are just in our time. All it was was folks wanting great art and great artists wanting to give it.

It was everybody's time and will it be that way again?

FOOTNOTE: I left Baltimore after this period for New York. A couple of years later I ran into Specs Wright, he was playing with Carmen MacRae, he smiled. "Coltrane's out of jail."

Which leads us to another point in black music time, of course, and I'll share that with you along the way.



WOODY SHAW Concert Ensemble appears at the Left Bank Jazz Society this Sunday (Oct. 2).

THE GOOD LIFE

Social Events

TESTIMONIAL BANQUET to honor the Rev. Dr. Olin P. Moyd, Martin's West, Dogwood Road, Sunday, October 2, 7 p.m. Congressmen Walter Fauntroy and Parren J. Mitchell, speakers. Call 669-9723 or 542-5473 for information.

DINNER DANCE — Sponsored by the Avalons, Martin's West, Dogwood Road, Saturday, October 1, 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. Call 466-8120 for more information.

FIVE-YEAR REUNION — Cardinal Gibbons High School class of 1972, Saturday, October 8, 8 p.m. to midnight. Reservations must be made by October 3, Call 644-1770 for reservation.

Music

WOODY SHAW Concert Ensemble, Left Bank Jazz Society, 1717 N. Charles St., Sunday, October 2, 5 to 9 p.m. For more information, call 945-2266.

CAB CALLOWAY — Appearing with the Baltimore Symphony Pops Orchestra, Lyric Theatre, 120 W. Mt. Royal Ave., Saturday, October, 8, 8:15 p.m. Call 727-7300 for ticket information.

Movies

"ROOTS" — Television series film, Bowie State College, Martin Luther King Auditorium, every Wednesday. Call 464-3237 or 793-0640, ext. 3237 for more information.

"CARTOONS THAT SWING" — Featuring Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie and Duke Ellington, Center Stage, 700 N. Calbert St., Saturday, October 1, 7:30 p.m. For ticket information, call 332-0033.

"THE FIGHT AGAINST SLAVERY" — Six-part film series, Central Enoch Pratt Library, 400 Cathedral St., Wheeler auditorium, October 1 through November 5, 2 p.m.

"MURDER BY DEATH" — Anne Arundel Community College, 101 College Parkway, Arnold, (student center), Friday, October 7, 8 p.m.

Theatre

POETRY AND PLAYS — The Afrikan-American Conservatory Theatre, from the Maryland House of Correction, Calvert Educational Center Auditorium, North Avenue, Saturday, October 1, 8:30 p.m.

ARENA PLAYERS — "The Madwoman of Chaillot," 801 McCulloh St., Saturday, Sunday, October 1, 2, matinee, 2:30 p.m., Call 728-6500 for ticket information.

"SHAKESPEARE'S PEOPLE" — Featuring Sir Michael Redgrave, Goucher College, Towson, Kraushaar Auditorium, Monday, October 3, 8:30 p.m. Call 825-3300, ext. 261 for ticket information.

TRYOUTS for actors, singers and dancers for "My Fair Lady," Dunbar Performing Arts Center auditorium, 1400 Orleans St., Saturday, Sunday, October 1, 2, 3 p.m. Call 276-4646 for more information.

Classes, lectures, workshops

YOUR BODY, How You Deal with It, first of five sex education programs for young adults, Pratt Library's Forest Park Branch, Wendesday, October 5, 5 p.m.

CAREER WORKSHOPS — Towson State University, Newell Hall, Wednesday, October 5, 7 to 10 p.m.

BALTIMORE HISTORY WORKSHOP — University of Baltimore, Charles Street and Mount Royal Avenue, Langsdale Auditorium, Saturday, October 1, 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

GENETICS AND HUMAN POPULATIONS — Loyola College, Jenkins Hall, Monday, October 3, 2 to 4 p.m.

COURSE — "Improving Adults' Reading Ability," Towson State University, Mondays, October 3 through October 24, 7 to 9 p.m.

DANCE CLASSES — Herring Run Recreation Center, beginning Tuesday, October 4. Call 488-6634 for more information.

"RELIGIOUS CULTS" — Old Court Junior High School, 4627 Old Court Road, Pikesville, Tuesday, October 6, 8 p.m. For more information, call 358-3555.

NEARLY NEW SALE — Providence Baptist Church Center, 848 Edmondson Ave., Saturday, October 4, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Community events

MEETING — Advisory Board of Juvenile Services, O'Conor Building, 201 W. Preston St., conference room 5A, Wednesday, October 5, 2 p.m.

NEARLY NEW SALE — For the Miriam Lodge KSB, Pikesville Fire Hall on Sudbrook Road, Sunday, October 2, noon to 6 p.m., Monday, October 3, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

INTERNATIONAL HOLIDAY — Festival featuring food, crafts, entertainment, flea market, sponsored by the Glen Brune Jaycees, Cromwell Field, intersection of Route 648 and Hursey Road, Friday, October 7, 6 to 11 p.m., Saturday, October 8, 10 a.m. to 11 p.m., Sunday, October 9, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Health

SLEEP DISORDERS — Clinical course, Baltimore Hilton Inn, Reisterstown Road, Preakness Ballroom, Wednesday, October 5, 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. For pre-registration forms or more information, call 396-8603.