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Jazzletter

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Letters

I'm sorry about the delay in renewing for 1991. I have just gone through the roughest two years I can remember, but finally closed one of my deals last week, so things will be all right for a while.

Please use the extra $50 to keep the *Jazzletter* going to one of the friends who is temporarily short.

-- Name Withheld

The check was for $100. A number of readers have written similar letters. The rate of renewal gives evidence of the condition of the economy, and the letters indicate that these problems obtain not only in the United States but in Canada, New Zealand, and other countries. Optimistic forecasts of government do not convince me that it is going to change radically for the better any time soon. The passion for short-term profits has finally brought its inevitable result.

When Frederick the Great came to power, one of his elders -- an uncle, I think -- told him he would be surprised to discover with how little wisdom the world is governed.

It hasn't changed.

Meanwhile, to Name Withheld, thanks. It all helps. And I don't plan to drop anyone from the roster, paid or not.

The Composer

by Jimmy Raney

There was once in the West Fifties in New York City a jazz-piano room called the Composer. The owner was Sy Barron, who had owned and managed jazz clubs at other spots around town. Sy liked jazz and jazz musicians, and treated his players with respect -- by no means the norm with club owners. Although he featured mostly piano, he sometimes used guitar or vibraphone, and once in a while a horn, as long as the music didn't get too loud.

I first went there in the middle 1950s to hear guitarist Tal Farlow. Sy managed to cajole him out of retirement once or twice a year, and it was always a big event for us Tal Farlow addicts.

It was on one of these occasions that I first heard Bill Evans. Bill was the intermission pianist, and relatively unknown. He didn't remain unknown for long. The club changed the main attraction every week or two but sometimes kept the same intermission pianist for longer periods. It wasn't long before the room was jammed with people who had come to hear Bill, but would leave and go to a little bar around the corner while the main group was playing. Needless to say, this didn't go unnoticed by Sy Barron, who began to book Bill's trio as the attraction. As the cliche goes, the rest is history.

I went there another time to hear Tal. This time the intermission pianist was John Mehegan. John was a Juilliard graduate and a well-trained musician. A pedagogue, he had published a scholarly three-volume set for jazz instruction. As a performer, however, he had some problems. The most serious was his time. He rushed. A lot.

He was using a bass player named Vinnie Burke. Vinnie had a problem too. He had a hot temper and a short fuse. He was famous for blowing his top, telling off the bandleader, and getting fired as a result. I wanted to talk to Tal about it, as he knew both of them and their quirks. I found Tal, jerked my thumb toward the bandstand, and said, "How long can this last?"

"Not long," he said.

I stopped in a few days later. Sure enough, Vinnie was gone. I spoke to Tal and asked what had happened. He told me this story:

Vinnie lasted a day or two before his short supply of patience ran out. Instead of losing his temper as he usually did, he had come upon a novel solution. He decided to out-Mehegan Mehegan. When John would get too far ahead, Vinnie, instead of trying to hold him back -- a hard job without drums -- simply moved ahead of him. John would catch up, move ahead, and Vinnie would pass him again. It didn't take long before this little game of leap-frog had nearly doubled the tempo, so that even John was aware of it. He looked at Vinnie and said, "You're rushing, Vinnie."

Vinnie bent down and looked him in the eye and said, "I know, how do *you* like it?"

Mehegan's face turned red and he announced, "I'll take you to the union!"

Vinnie smiled and said, "What for? Rushing?"

I played at the club only one time, and this was with Bob Brookmeyer. As it was a piano room, Bob played mostly piano instead of his usual valve trombone. I remember one incident in particular from our stay.

Sy had a custom. Whenever there was a girl pianist, he placed a small vase containing two flowers on the piano. The intermission pianist at the time was a Japanese girl.

On our opening night, Brookmeyer sat down and played a few notes to try out the piano. Suddenly he stopped, his eyes fixed on the flower vase. His face took on an expression of distaste. He picked up the vase, as if he were holding a dead rat by the tail, and set it on a nearby empty table, and we started the first tune.

The next night he did the same thing. On the third night, just as we were about to mount the bandstand, the manager said to Bob, "Mr. Barron has left strict orders that the flowers are *not* to be removed from the piano."

Bob said nothing, and we played the first set, flowers and all. At the end of the set, Bobby altered his standard announcement. He said, "Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of Jimmy Raney on guitar, Teddy Kotick on bass, and yours truly Bob Brookmeyer on the piano, we would like to thank you for your attention and applause -- piano by Steinway, flowers by Sy Barron."

He made the same announcement after every set that evening and the next. On the fifth night the flowers were gone, never to reappear.

-- JR

Bird

by Bill Crow

Charlie Parker's death in 1955 stunned every musician I knew. He was twenty-five when he first overwhelmed the jazz world with his brilliant playing, and only fourteen years later, that Niagara of music had ceased to flow. During my first months in New York I spent every possible hour listening to him, but as I began to live my own musical life I went to hear him only now and then when he played in New York. I felt no urgency. I thought he would always be there.

I had only a few personal encounters with Charlie during the five years of his life that remained after I came to New York. I hung around him at Birdland when I first arrived, but I didn't really get to talk to him at length until he began visiting Jimmy Knepper and Joe Maini's basement on 136th Street.

Before Jimmy and Joe lived there, I was introduced to that basement apartment by Buddy Jones, a bass player from Hope, Arkansas, who knew Charlie Parker from Kansas City. I was standing in front of Birdland chatting with Frank Isola and a couple of other musicians when Buddy came by and told us that he had found a great place to play. A sax player named Gerson Yowell had rented a large basement room that extended beneath the sidewalk and part of the street, where you could make as much noise as you wanted day or night without bothering anyone.

I hurried over to my room on Eighth Avenue to get my valve trombone and Frank went to get his drums. Buddy waited for us at the 50th Street IRT entrance with his bass and three or four other musicians. Uptown, we trooped after Buddy into the lobby of an apartment building at Broadway and 136th Street. We took the elevator to the furnace room in the basement and found Gerse's door, but knocking brought no answer. The door seemed to be hooked from the inside. Buddy was puzzled. He had called and told Gerse we were coming up.

"Maybe his girlfriend came by, and they don't want to be disturbed," said Frank.

Since no one answered our repeated knocking, there didn't seem to be anything to do but go back downtown. As Buddy ran for the elevator, I gave the door one final, heavy thump and it slowly and eerily swung open. The last knock had shaken the hook loose. In the large gloomy room an old upright piano stood in the middle of the floor. Gerse was sitting on the piano stool with his head on the keyboard and his arms dangling limply toward the floor. He was sound asleep. Beside him on the floor was an empty gallon wine jug. We shook him awake and teased him about drinking all the wine before we got there, and then we set up and played until late the next morning.

Some time after that, while I was camping out in a spare room at John Benson Brooks's apartment on Riverside Drive near 136th Street, I dropped in at Gerse's basement to see what was going on, but Gerse no longer lived there. The new tenants were Knepper and Maini, and they were hosting jam sessions nearly every night. Bird was among the guests the night I dropped in. He went there often to play or to watch Jimmy's little television set. Jimmy also had a tape machine on which he recorded the music that was played in the sessions, later writing out Bird's solos on score paper to use for trombone practice material.

I was learning to play the bass by then, but I would never have dreamed of trying to play while Charlie Parker was around. I don't think Bird even knew what instrument I played. I was just one of several guys who sat around and listened to what he had to say and play. Sometimes I went back during the day to hear the tapes Jimmy made.

Buddy Jones had a lot of Bird tapes. He played one for me of Parker playing at a session somewhere with five or six other horn players and a rhythm section. During Bird's solo, the other horns began playing heavy sustained chords behind him, filling in all the space. Suddenly Charlie played a very strong melodic figure a beat earlier than one would have expected. The other horn players, thinking they had dropped a beat, stopped playing, leaving Bird in the clear for a few measures. Every time the horns would find him and come in again, Bird would play another figure that made them think they were in the wrong place. He did this for the rest of his solo, always coming back into consonance with the rhythm section before he lost them, too.

Bird would play musical tricks like that, but I never heard him put anybody down. He usually encouraged everyone to play. He wouldn't insult or refuse to play with awkward beginners. He'd been through those scenes himself when he was just learning. He did come close to sarcasm one night when a nice young man named Tony, who had fantasies of being a tenor saxophone star but very little understanding of jazz, played with Bird at a session and then asked him what he thought. Bird looked at him and smiled.

"Tony," he said, "you're incredible."

One night at Birdland, Bird showed up on the bandstand playing an alto made of cream-colored plastic. Everyone speculated about the new instrument, some claiming it was an improvement on a metal horn, some deprecating it as a toy. Bird liked it because the instrument maker had given it to him. As he had hoped, most people accepted the plastic alto because Bird was playing it. Though I liked the sound of his Selmer better, I thought Bird sounded fine on the plastic horn. He could get his own sound on any saxophone he put in his mouth, whatever the make, mouthpiece, reed, etc. A good horn made it easier for him, but there was no such thing as a bad horn in Charlie's hands.

I ran into Bird one summer afternoon in Washington Square Park. He was living several blocks east of the park, and my place was a block west of it on Cornelia Street. We sat on a park bench and chatted for a while. A little girl next to us was having trouble with a mismatched wheel on her tricycle, and Charlie got into a serious discussion with her about possible remedies. After she pedaled squeakily away, I mentioned that I usually joined a group of friends every Sunday morning at the nearby city pool on Seventh Avenue between Carmine and Leroy Streets. Weekday mornings were

reserved for children's swimming classes, but on Sundays the Leroy Street pool was our morning country club. Bird sounded interested and said he'd join us some time. After chatting a while longer he headed on home.

I hadn't expected Bird to show up at the pool, but the next Sunday morning he was waiting at the entrance with a little canvas gym bag in his hand. We went into the locker room, got into our bathing trunks, and joined the Sunday regulars stretched out on towels on the sunny side of the pool. When we got too warm, he'd jump in and get wet and then return to the towels for more sunning and conversation.

Bird wore a thin rubber bathing cap, but he didn't really swim that day. He just floated a little and had some splashing contests with a couple of kids. Once he sank to the bottom of the pool and stayed there so long that we became concerned. I leaned over the edge and looked down at him. He was lying on the bottom, curled up in a fetal position, grinning. I could see the sun twinkling on his gold tooth. When he finally surfaced, he was pleased to discover that he had worried us.

"I can hold my breath a *long* time," he said.

Even though Charlie seemed to enjoy himself at the pool that morning, he never came back. I ran across him now and then in the park, or at the Open Door on West 4th Street, or the Spotlite on West 3rd. He was always friendly, at ease, a charming conversationalist with a broad range of interests and an optimistic point of view. He made me feel that the possibilities for satisfaction in music and art were unlimited.

I was especially saddened to hear that during his last days Bird was feeling defeated and unappreciated. I like to remember him at the peak of his skill, sure of himself, able to do anything, expansive, kind, generous, flowing with the wonder and delight of his own imagination, secure in the dignity of the master artist deep in his work. It is a tragedy that he lost all that at the end and that his life was so soon over.

Though I hoped to find a memory of him in Clint Eastwood's movie *Bird*, I was sorry to find that Charlie wasn't there, except in the sound track. The movie missed Bird's nature, his confidence, his intelligence, and especially his wit. Everyone who knew him has their own memories of him, and many have already been published. I wasn't surprised to find Dizzy Gillespie's recollections more appreciative of Bird's fine qualities than those of Miles Davis, who acknowledges Bird's genius but writes him off as "one of the slimiest and greediest motherfuckers who ever lived in this world . . . (who) never did know when to stop, and that's what killed him." Hard words for the man who Miles also says "treated me like a son, and he and Dizzy were father figures to me."

All the collected memories of him still don't add up to the complex, fascinating man that Bird was. But even if we don't tell it right on the written page, and even if the movie about him is a caricature, when the last personal memory of him has faded, Charlie Parker's music, his wonderful, beautiful music, will still be there to tell the listeners of the future that a great artist passed this way. Bird lives. Indeed.

-- BC

The Philadelphia Connection

Part One

The role of cities in the development of jazz seems not to have been examined in the history books. In the early days, New Orleans was the primary incubator of jazz musicians, but in the 1920s Chicago, after a kind of mass migration of jazz players to that turbulent Mecca in the north, took over that role. It has consistently turned out major jazz players, and a glance through any of the standard biographical dictionaries suggests that only New York produces more of them. Part of this is a function of demographics. New York has the largest population of any American city, and Chicago long was in this regard its second, although that increasingly dubious honor has devolved on Los Angles, which lies there in a basin of subtropical smog slowly strangling in its own effluents.

Often you can trace the genesis of a body of jazz musicians to a particular school, such as Cass Tech in Detroit, which has turned out fine players, from Donald Byrd and Frank Rosolino to Geri Allen, for decades. And there are subtle regional styles of playing. Chicago, many of whose jazz musicians have owed their careers to the inspiration of a single teacher, Captain Walter Dyett at Wendell Phillips High School, has since the early days produced jazz players of a particular feeling: strong, tough, and individual, like the city itself, players of a nature that reminds one of what Carl Sandberg called it, the city of the big shoulders.

Some cities have produced very few jazz musicians. Davenport, which is on the eastern border of Iowa, abutting Illinois and due west of Chicago, produced only one important jazzman, although that one was of a stature to give the city forever a place of honor in jazz history, namely Bix Beiderbecke. Council Bluffs is at the far side of Iowa, due west again, right on the Nebraska border, and it produced two jazz musicians: the twins Art and Addison Farmer. They did not develop there, however: they spent childhood in Phoenix, Arizona, and then moved to Los Angeles where they attended another of those incubator schools, Jefferson High, where they (and Edmund Thigpen, among others) came under the influence of Samuel Browne.

Pittsburgh, in the extreme west of Pennsylvania, the birthplace of Art Blakey, Bill Eckstine, and Billy May, and home in a formative period of Billy Strayhorn (who went to high school and got much of his training there), produced a lot of jazz musicians. American states are bigger than most European countries, and Philadelphia, a long drive to the east of Pennsylvania on the New Jersey border, has little in common with Pittsburgh, except that it too contributed a large number of players to the roster of jazz musicians.

In our last two issues, we considered the career of one of them, Red Rodney. But besides Red, the following were born in Philadelphia:

Donald Bailey, Kenny Barron, Joe Beck, Mike and Randy Brecker, Ray Bryant, Stanley Clarke, Warren Covington, Ted Curson, Spanky De Brest, Bill Doggett, Ziggy Elman, Stan

Getz, Bill Harris, Tootie and Jimmy Heath, Gregory Herbert, Billy Kyle, Eddie Lang, John LaPorta, Jimmy McGriff, Lee Morgan, Paul Motian, Tommy Potter, Luckey Roberts, Jimmy Rowser, Rex Stewart, Lew Tabackin, McCoy Tyner, Charlie Ventura, Jimmy Woode, Reggie Workman.

And Benny Golson.

In addition, city was the home during formative years of a number of important players, including Joe Venuti, Johnny Coles, Gerry Mulligan, and Joe Wilder. In part this fecundity can be traced to the work of a particular institution, the Granoff school of music, where a number of Philadelphians got the solid classical training so widely assumed not to be part of the making of jazz musicians.

Jazzmen often reveal a preference for the professional company of natives of their home towns. This is not to be ascribed to regional chauvinism or racism. It probably has to do with compatibility or even mere familiarity. Everyone knows you cannot just throw three people together and get a rhythm section: there must be a consensus about time and dynamics and other things, and sometimes one more readily achieves it with those who grew up in your own cultural ambiance. Witness the devoted association of the late Pepper Adams with Donald Byrd, still angry that Pepper didn't get the recognition Donald thinks he deserves.

Whether he is consciously aware of it, Benny Golson has often revealed in his professional associations a taste for the company of hometown boys, although his most celebrated association over the years has been with the aforementioned Arthur Farmer. It was Art with whom Benny founded and co-led the Jazztet some thirty years ago, and then revived it in the 1980s. It was a group that featured some outstanding writing by Golson, and some striking soloists, including Curtis Fuller and Benny's fellow Philadelphian McCoy Tyner. Memory is treacherous and I had long thought it was John Coltrane who first introduced me to McCoy Tyner, but McCoy reminded me recently that we met some months before he joined Coltrane, when he was part of the Jazztet rhythm section with Addison Farmer and yet another native Philadelphian, Tootie Heath. Since Art and Addison were the products of Council Bluffs, Phoenix, and Los Angeles, that left poor Curtis Fuller out there all alone. But then he is a Detroiter, and had worked with Kenny Burrell and Yusef Lateef before any of them left the Motor City, and had no cause for musical loneliness. Curtis Fuller got and still gets just about the biggest sound I ever heard from a trombone, and he was integral to the original Jazztet. When he left the group, he proved irreplaceable.

Golson was a highly lyrical tenor player whose sound, since his return to the jazz world after a long absence, has become rougher, deeper, and bigger. He is an outstanding soloist. Yet from the beginning his playing was overshadowed by his writing, and he has contributed a substantial body of compositions to the jazz catalogue. His tunes include *Stablemates*, which Miles Davis established in the repertoire, the lovely *Whisper Not*, *Along Came Betty*, *Blues March*, and *Are You Real?*. His tunes are characterized by a simplicity that will fool you. They are hipper than you think. It is their harmonic elegance that makes them popular with jazz players.

One of Benny's tunes has attained the ultimate accolade for hipness: it has passed into the folklore of jazz humor. The joke, which almost everybody by now has surely heard, tells of the leader of a jazz group whose pianist fails to arrive on the day of an important opening. The leader expresses his desperation to the club owner, saying he has to find a sub. The club owner says he's heard about a pianist down the street who's supposed to be pretty good. They send for him. The pianist says he would be, gee whiz, honored to work with the group. "But unfortunately," he says, "I only know three tunes."

In desperation the bandleader says, "What are they?"

"*I Dream of Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair, Battle Hymn of the Republic,* and *I Remember Clifford*."

When the joke first went around, the incongruity fractured musicians. *I Remember Clifford*, an *homage* to Benny's friend Clifford Brown, is one of the loveliest of all jazz ballads, and it has been widely recorded.

Benny's writing remains a forte, and doubtless is the primary source of his income. He gets not only the royalties of his jazz standards but from the performances of all the television shows for which he wrote scores during his many years in the Hollywood film industry.

Benny went to the west coast during that period when jazz had become fashionable in film scoring. He was far from being the first black musician to penetrate that metier. Benny Carter wasn't even the first; that distinction belongs to Will Vodery, who had got into film scoring by the 1930s. But when Benny Carter did, such was the nature of the bias in the industry that he was assigned largely to writing arrangements for black singers when they appeared in film. Henry Mancini recalls -- still with anger, all these years later -- receiving a call from a studio head to ask if a black musician, namely Quincy Jones, could score a picture. Hank kept his temper and said yes.

But by the time Benny Golson got into film, Oliver Nelson had already done so, along with a number of white jazz composers such as Johnny Mandel. Then J.J. Johnson began scoring films and TV. Jazz had arrived in Hollywood.

Its day appears to be over. The synthesizer has ruined film scoring, not to mention what it has done to employment in the west-coast music industry. A great many jazz musicians, composers and players alike, have gone back to playing jazz, J.J. Johnson, Roger Kellaway, Herb Ellis, and Bud Shank among them. Along with Benny Golson, who now lives most

of the time back in New York, although he still maintains his home in the Hancock Park district of Los Angeles. His four children are grown; indeed they are now in their thirties and forties.

I first met Benny, another of the alumni of the late Art Blakey, when I met Arthur Farmer, that is to say when they formed the Jazztet in 1960. Their manager, Kay Norton, contacted me when I was editor of *Down Beat* to solicit some publicity for the new group. The mating of two such talents with that of Curtis Fuller seemed eminently noteworthy to me, even if the name McCoy Tyner didn't yet mean much. Norton, a tall and handsome blonde who lived on New York's fashionable upper east side, was well-liked in the business, worked hard for the Jazztet, and died some years ago after a protracted cancer. I told her I'd give them the cover of the magazine. I arranged a photo by the imaginative photographer Ted Williams -- he shot them in elegant suits, holding their instruments, in the rubble of a South Side Chicago apartment building that was being razed -- and I put it on the cover. Arthur and I became fast friends, and have remained so. Relations with Benny were very cordial, but more distant. Art and I were more alike in temperament, I think.

It is amazing to me that I have known the two of them (and Curtis and McCoy) more than thirty years now. It is hard for me not to think of them, and myself, as young Turks. Our seniority baffles me.

But I never sat down to a long conversation with Benny until February of this year, when I spent a thoroughly pleasant afternoon with him at his apartment in the West 90s of New York City. It is simply and tastefully appointed with mostly modern furniture. Its windows command views of the towers of Manhattan, receding in planes of aerial perspective to the south, and the glinting Hudson River and New Jersey on the west. I asked Benny questions I had never had occasion to raise, and he answered joyously, warmly, and with a great deal of amusement. The dynamic range of his speech is broad, ranging from conspiratorial secretive whispers to bursts of loud laughter. His face is round and animated, and he is fairly shiny on top.

"I was born January 25, 1929," Benny said. "In Philadelphia. "My parents were non-musical. And non-academic. Intuitive. My mother and father separated early on. I never remember living with him. Years later we got together. My mother's gone now and I sort of watch out for him.

"My mother was my champion. If I'd said I wanted to go to the moon, she'd have tried to figure out a way to get me there. She was very supportive. We didn't have much money. Piano lessons were seventy-five cents. That was quite an outlay at that time. She was getting six dollars a week in tips as a waitress. We'd just come off of welfare, and seventy-five cents a week was something. One week the piano teacher came and my mother asked her to come out to the kitchen. She didn't want me to hear. I found out about this years later. She told her she didn't have the seventy-five cents. She said, 'Mrs. Golson, don't worry about the seventy-five cents. I think Benny really has talent. Don't ever do anything to stop him. Let him go ahead to reach his full potential.'

"And he gave me my lesson. After that he would let me come out to his house. I'd go spend the weekend there. He'd have this music together. His godson came. We went to elementary school together. His godson would be out playing stick ball, and I'd be inside having an adventure going through all this music he had on the piano. Going through it and trying to play it, all day long. He had all kinds of stuff. You name it.

"That was my pleasure. It was an adventure to me. He told my mother.

"I got to be a good reader. I can still read pretty well on the piano.

"And then I heard Lionel Hampton. He featured a guy named Arnett Cobb. I took a day off from school when I wasn't supposed to. I went down to the Earl Theater in Philadelphia. And when that curtain opened up, my life changed -- dramatically. The bandstand rolled forward. The lights made the horns sparkle, playing a flag-waver. I was in awe. And when Arnett Cobb stepped out there to play that solo on *Flying Home*, all the kids were screaming. I was screaming emotionally, inside. That did it. Earl Bostic was in the band, too, playing snakes. The snakes didn't get me, but Arnett Cobb did!

"I told him about eight years ago that he was the one responsible for me playing saxophone. And tears came into his eyes and he said, 'I never knew that.'

"Time and again you'll hear something like that from musicians," I said. "Horace Silver said it was hearing the Jimmie Lunceford band at an amusement park in Connecticut. Lou Levy said it was hearing the Glenn Miller band at a dance in Chicago."

"Speaking of Glenn Miller," Benny said, "I was the only person in the whole black neighborhood listening to that band. And that was my favorite band. Nobody could understand."

"Billy Mitchell told me the same thing," I said.

"Tex Benecke was my hero!" Benny said. "I wrote a letter to him about two months ago."

"Henry Mancini told me Tex Benecke was one of the finest tenor players technically he ever worked with."

"I knew it well," Benny said.

I said, "I preferred the Tommy Dorsey band, with those Sy Oliver charts, to Miller. I didn't realize until later how much of that era was the product of the arrangers."

"The arrangements!" Benny said. "Some of them were pearls. Really. *Chattanooga Choo Choo, In the Mood*! I liked Count Basie. Duke Ellington at that time I didn't understand. A little arty for me, a little artistic. Basie was more straight-ahead. Jimmie Lunceford. Trummy Young was with him. *Cheatin' on Me, Blues in the Night Parts 1 and 2.* Then I started to really get into it and broaden out.

"My mother didn't have the money to buy me a tenor saxophone."

"What's a good tenor cost today?" I asked.

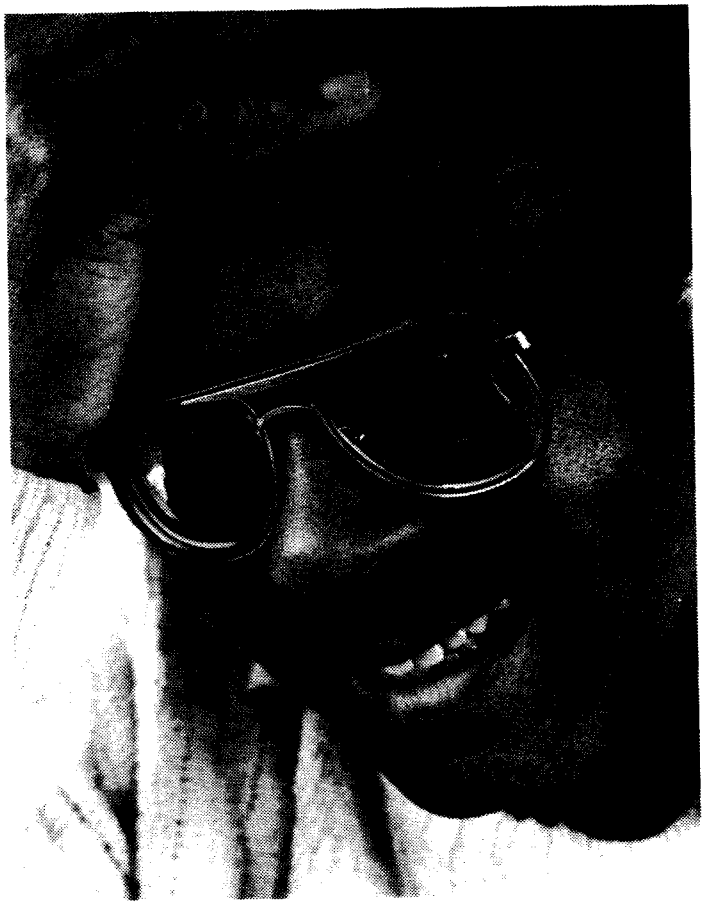
"Don't even mention it! Three thousand dollars, maybe more. We were talking even then five or six hundred bucks.

I couldn't get a saxophone. So what I did was, at night, I'd do my homework and turn the radio on and listen to the jockeys play the music, and listen for all the tenor solos. I became a fan of Eddie Miller, Bud Freeman, Chu Berry, Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster with Duke on *Air Check*. *What Am I Here For?*, things like that. *Cotton Tail*.

"One day my mother came home from work. And she had this thing in her hand. And I was looking. And I said, It can't be. And my heart was beating. And she got closer and she said, 'Guess what I got for you, baby. A saxophone.' It was a brand new one that she bought at Wurlitzer. And it happened to be a good one, a Martin saxophone.

"I was beside myself. I was ecstatic instantly. Then I realized when I opened it up that I didn't even know how to put it together."

Benny's experience confirms something I have recurrently noticed. If there is a common condition in the lives of major musicians, it is the support of parents, one or both of them. Sometimes a gifted teacher plays an important role too, but for the most part it will be found the one thing major musicians tend to share is an early start supported and encouraged by a parent.



Benny Golson 1991 photo by John Reeves

"There was another friend of mine who lived near my aunt," Benny continued, "a fellow named Tony Mitchell. He showed me how to put the saxophone together, how to put in the reed and the strap and everything. I said, 'Play something!' I wanted to hear my horn, I wanted to hear my horn speak! He played the Ben Webster solo on *Air Check*. I couldn't believe it. He said, 'Try it.'

"I put it on. It sounded like an insane mule. Nothing.

"My mother arranged for me to take lessons at Wurlitzer. And it turned out that this guy, Raymond Ziegler, used to play with Charlie Barnet. He'd decided to just settle down in Philadelphia. He was a good teacher, and I got a lot out of him. Right away we got into what the saxophone was all about. I spent so much time on what the instrument was all about, reading and transposing and stuff like that, that I couldn't play solos.

"After about four months, I joined a little band. We were playing stocks, of course. Another guy was the soloist. This started to concern me as the months rolled by. They said, 'Black people got rhythm, and they can *play*.'

"I said, 'I can't do a thing!'

"Then there was another band I started to play with. The bandleader said, 'Go see so-and-so, he'll show you.' But I didn't realize: nobody can show you how to play solos. Unless you copy what they're playing. But eventually I learned. By trial and error. Syllogistic reasoning. I arrived at it.

"I became very eclectic, like all beginners."

"But of course," I said. "That's how we assimilate techniques. Imitation is a vitally important phase of training."

"Yeah, absolutely! I was sounding like everybody. First time I heard Bill Evans, he sounded like Milt Buckner. Next time I heard him he sounded like Bill Evans. I said, 'Bill, what happened?' He said, 'Well, it was time for a change.' We used to laugh about that. He was playing with Herbie Fields when I knew him. He was patting his feet. He locked both legs together, and he lifted his heels up. And that's the way he played, he bounced on the seat like Milt Buckner. When I saw him again, he was so smooth, and he had this other thing going.

"You go through it."

It was during his early years of playing that Benny met one of the important figures in his life, one who was to influence his career.

He said, "When I was in high school, a friend of mine, who lived in the Projects, where Bill Cosby is from, said, 'There's a fellow in the Projects who plays alto just like Johnny Hodges.' I said, 'Bring him by.'

"Sure enough, next day he knocked on the door, and he came with this fellow. He was standing there, and I said, 'Play something for me.' Me! As though I'm an authority." Benny mocked himself with laughter. "So he whipped out his horn, put it together. Johnny Hodges was his idol. So you know what he played. *On the Sunny Side of the Street*. My mother heard it. She said, 'Who is that?' I said, 'Oh, it's a new fellow I just met. His name is John Coltrane.'"

(To be continued)