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The Philadelphia Connection

Part Two

"My mother," Benny Golson said, "heard John play and said, 'He sounds great!'

"John Coltrane and I became fast friends. John was like a country bumpkin at that time. Very quiet. He was from North Carolina. Any time I wanted to have a session, John would come, Ray Bryant would come. And my mother would holler downstairs and say, 'Is John there?' And he would say, 'Yes, Mis' Golson.' And he knew he would have to play *On the Sunny Side of the Street*. And then the session could start.

"We were together every day, just the two of us. He would come by. There was a big old stuffed chair by the window. He'd sit there and put the alto together. I would try to play some kind of chords for him on the piano. Terrible. And then he would try to play chords for me, which was even worse. He was eighteen, and I was sixteen.

"We wound up playing in a lot of local bands together. Jimmy Johnson's big band. And we would live for those gigs, just playing out in the public. Even though we were playing stock arrangements. By Spud Murphy and Val Alexander. I remember one day we were looking forward to playing a gig. And the bandleader told us it had been cancelled. We thought this was kind of strange. And the night of the gig, we were sitting down in my living room, looking at each other. My mother said, 'Why are you looking so dejected?' I said, 'We were supposed to play this job, and it's been cancelled.' And she said, in her wisdom, 'It sounds to me like he didn't want you to play tonight. If I were you, I would walk down there and just see what's going on.' John looked at me and I looked at him. And we walked. We walked everywhere because we didn't have money for carfare. So we walked over there. It was only about six blocks. And as we approached, we heard the band playing!

"It was in the basement of this building. In order to see, you'd have to lay down on the ground and when they opened the door you could see down the steps. You have to imagine this. We lay down on the ground and looked, and it was them! He'd cut the band down from a big band to a sextet.

"We were really down in the dumps. After we walked back to my house, we sat down. My mother came down and John said, 'You were right, Mis' Golson.' She said, 'Look, don't worry, sweethearts. One day both of you are going to be so good that that band will not be able to afford you.'

Benny laughed. "We didn't see that in the near future. They were just words at that time.

"Years later, we were up playing the Newport Festival. John had his quartet by then, with Elvin Jones, McCoy Tyner, and Jimmy Garrison. John started laughing, and said, 'Remember when we had that gig and got cancelled out? Remember what your mother said? Do you think they'd be able to afford us now? And do you remember that time you came in the Ridge Point and caught me on the bar, walking the bar?' I remember it well. He was walking on the bar, horn in hand, stepping over drinks. As I came in, he had his foot poised, stepping over a drink, and he saw me and he took his horn out of his mouth and said, 'Oh no!' I just about died laughing.

"We had rhythm-and-blues gigs like that. He was with Daisy May and the Hep Cats, where they were singing. I had gigs doing the same thing, playing with Trudy Briscoe. She was playing the cocktail drums and singing *Rag Mop* and I was singing. But hey! Until we got a chance to do something else. He'd gotten into the tenor by then."

Coltrane, one of those who studied at Granoff, gained experience in bands led by Joe Webb, King Kolax, Earl Bostic, and Johnny Hodges, along with some obscure groups. Benny went off to university.

"I went to Howard University," Benny said. "Washington DC. I was not an A student in high school, but I had good enough marks. A friend of mine who played alto was going there. He was telling me, 'Oh it's great!' Even though he was in liberal arts, he was telling me what he saw in the music school. I didn't want to be a music teacher, but that's what was set up for me. Music education. It's a cover-all.

"I went to take my entrance exam. I prepared this thing. I worked on it diligently on the saxophone. Something by Rudy Wiedoft. He was a very legit, very technical saxophonist. Rudy Wiedoft, Marcel Mule, Dick Stabile, Al Galladoro, these guys were technicians. Al Galladoro was probably the best I ever heard in my life, my entire life. He's still alive. I must get up to see him. He used to play for Paul Whiteman. This guy was unreal. He must have been from Mars. Double tonguing, triple tonguing. He used to play under Ormandy, he used to play jazz. He could improvise. He was on a weekly radio show, he played a *Flight of the Bumble Bee* on the clarinet that was breath-taking. He was amazing. I felt an effervescence inside when I heard this guy. This guy from the past turned me upside down. I've heard him within the last year, and I've talked to him on the phone. He puts Rudy Wiedoft to shame, but at that time I was listening to Rudy Wiedoft.

"Anyway, I went down to Howard with my saxophone. They let me play the piece. And then they told me, very nicely, 'No saxophones here. Only clarinet. Legit.'

"So I had to lay the saxophone aside, and do *allll* the work, *allll* the practicing, all the things I wanted to do on the saxophone, on the clarinet. So at night, I would go down to the laundry room in the dormitory, shut the door, and transfer all the stuff to the saxophone. So it was double work for me, trying to learn how to get over the scales and things.

"I liked it down there because it was big, cement, had a nice echo -- built-in echo. It made you sound better than you were. And that's what I did. They had practice rooms for the piano -- no jazz.

"And then we got into the harmony. In the third year they were supposed to be doing some advanced stuff. And I'm really feeling like a rebel. So I go to the practice building early in the morning, around seven o'clock, before anybody was there. And the instructor for the violin had the office right

across. And I kept playing this tune that I was trying to put together. I couldn't get the ending. And so I would start over again and get to the ending and stop. It didn't bother me. And all of a sudden I heard the door open across the hall and I said, 'Oh my God, he's here.' His name was Louis Vaughn, a classical violinist in charge of the violin department. And I was in trouble, because I wasn't supposed to be playing jazz there. He walked over to the piano and said, '*Resolve* it! Resolve it!' And he went out and slammed the door. And I knew I was all right with him."

"From what you've told me in the past, and what I've heard from others," I said, "it seems that there was in the black academic community a deeper hostility to jazz than in the white community, reflecting a sort of aspiration to white middle-class respectability."

"Yes. Tell me about it!" Benny said. "That's what was going on. The director of the music school, Dean Lawson, his pride and joy was the choir. It was Mozart, and whatever. All classical stuff. No jazz. And I had a job out in the city, off campus, playing jazz. They used to lock the dormitory door at night. The wall that prevented me from coming in was about eight feet high. And I had this gig. I went to play, and I had extra money. Instead of my mother sending me money, I was sending money home.

"There was a monitor at the door. I became very chummy with him. We worked it out so that he would let me in. And nobody would know about it, you see.

"One night, when I was up there playing, here comes Sterling Thomas, the one of the guys who taught theory. And he sat at the front table, right in front of the bandstand. It was terrible. I kept playing. But after the set was over, he said, 'That was really nice.'"

"So, then, the whole faculty wasn't opposed to jazz. It was just official policy. Somebody on top."

"Right," Benny said. "That's right. Fools in high places. Some of the teachers went along with it, but some didn't.

"At the end of my third year, I took cantus firmus." (The Latin term means "fixed melody." It refers to the practice of using an existing melody as the foundation of a polyphonic composition.) "I knew all the rules. I went home and my heart said, 'Why don't you do it like you feel it, like you hear it?' And I did. I broke the rules. It was then that I concluded that school teaches you the rules but experience tells you when to abandon them.

"I took the class the next day. There were only ten or twelve in the class. The teacher reviewed the work of each of us on the piano. She'd play and say, 'Oh, very nice, Mr. So-and-So.' And she started playing mine, and the red pencil went like the sword of Zoro! Swish. Swish. And she did it again. And again. Then she just *stopped*, and turned around, and said, 'Mr. Golson! What have you *done*?

"And in my belligerent way, I stood up and said, 'That's the way I heard it.' And next day I packed up my car, and I was gone. I just left."

The incident reminded me of Debussy's encounter with Cesar Franck when the latter was his teacher at the Paris Conservatory. Franck was an extension of the German Romantic tradition, whose dominating influence on French music Debussy resented. Debussy objected to the methods of modulation by which the increasingly complex chromaticism was accomodated to common practice, and one day in class he rose to his feet, said indignantly, "Monsieur Franck, you are a modulating machine," and left.

Benny said: "I left Howard and Washington and went back to Philadelphia.

"I started working for a local band there. We were playing rhythm and blues type stuff. The leader would sing songs and we'd get up on the bar sometimes and walk the bar and put on funny hats.

"And then a guy named Bull Moose Jackson came through town. Somebody told him about me and he called and asked if I would be interested in joining the band. I said, 'Yeah.' This was an opportunity to get out of town.

"While I was with Bull Moose Jackson, I met Tadd Dameron. He was in the group. When I left Bull Moose Jackson, Tadd Dameron was putting together a band to play a show down in Atlantic City. He hired Philly Joe, Jymie Merritt, Johnny Coles, Clifford Brown, me, Gigi Gryce, Cecil Payne, and a couple of other people. When I left that situation, I joined Lionel Hampton. This was in 1953. With Lionel Hampton, I met Art Farmer, Quincy Jones, Monk Montgomery, Jimmy Cleveland. And of course Brownie and Gigi Gryce had been in the band in Atlantic City with us. We all left at the same time. Tadd had given the band up. I'm not going to tell you why. But the police were looking for him and he had to get out of town . . . " The silent ellipse, as it so often does in conversations with musicians who lived through that era, told the story. Tadd Dameron's problem was, alas and yet again, heroin. Dameron died in 1965 of cancer.

"I told the club owner, 'Okay, let him go, I'll stay here and make sure that the new guys have got the show down right.' When everybody had it down, then I split and went with Hamp.

"And the money was so *bad*! That I think I stayed with him for all of two weeks. Later I wrote some music for Benny Goodman, and the way he negotiated the price, you'd have thought the man was poor." (Hampton and Goodman are often mentioned in the same paragraph by musicians who worked for both. Indeed, Hampton is sometimes referred to in black musical circles as "the black Benny Goodman.")

"I remember how Hamp used to jump on the tom-toms. I used to watch his heels digging into the heads. And one night we went daht-daht-daht daht-daht-daht-daaaah . . . " He sang the famous lick from *Flying Home*. "And boom! he went right through the big tom-tom. And it fell over and rolled, and he rolled. Right off-stage. In front of the people." He laughed.

"Oh boy, the things we used to do with that band. During the summertime, one of the guys used to wear these straw shoes, almost like women's shoes. And they used to kid him about the smell. And Lionel one night grabbed one of his shoes off and came by the reed section and waved it in front of our faces and said, 'Faint, Gates, faint!'

"This guy would go out and play a solo. He had like an act he got together. He would kick his foot up in the air and the shoe would fly off. Oh man. Sometimes we would go out off the stand and go marching around."

"Al Grey said they had a guy who specialized on walking on the backs of theater seats while playing."

"Oh yes," Benny said, laughing helplessly. "One night, one of the trumpet players, Emory Thompson, weighing 335 pounds . . . They had a riser for the trumpet section, and he lost his balance, and when he tried to catch his balance, the whole trumpet section disappeared. Boom! They all went over backwards. Nobody but the trombones sitting back there.

"I came on back to New York and I said, 'Hey, I'm gonna settle down here and I'm not gonna travel.' Because I really wanted to get established in New York

"Regardless of the money, I'm glad I was with that band. It was really an experience. I wasn't on the Swedish trip."

The "Swedish trip" has assumed almost legendary proportions, largely because of a recording session that occurred in Stockholm. Art Farmer and Clifford Brown crept surreptitiously from their hotel and made an LP with Swedish musicians and the writing of Quincy Jones. The album enhanced the reputations of all those involved in it. Hampton was angry, not apparently because it had been made but because he had not been invited to be a part of it. But Farmer, Brown, and the others were all young, the new crowd, and Hampton was of an older school. For this exclusion, according to these witnesses, Hampton came close to firing the participants in Paris.

"I quit the band just before that trip. Me and my principles! I quit the band when it got to New York." (Had he not done so, it is likely that some of his writing would have gone into the Stockholm album.) "I said to myself, 'Why are they going to Europe for that little bit of money?' Quincy sent me a letter from Stockholm: 'We just did two record dates today, outside the band.' Then I got another card: 'We made an album last week. Sure wish you'd made it.' They made more money on the side than they did with the band.

"Philly Joe Jones had already left Philadelphia, but John Coltrane had not gone yet. Philly was older than us, and played better than we did. He was quite a pro by then. Hank Mobley was leaving Miles. Miles enjoyed Philly so much, he said, 'Do you know anybody?' Joe said, 'Yeah. His name is John Coltrane.' Miles said, 'Can he play?' Joe said -- understatement of the world -- 'Yeah. He can play.' Later Miles came to love him.

"When John left, we all left vicariously with him. About two weeks after he joined Miles, I ran into John on Columbia Avenue, one of the main streets of North Philadelphia. I said, 'How's it going?' He said, 'Great. You know, Miles needs some tunes. Do you have any tunes?' Did I have any tunes! That's all I was doing, writing tunes. I gave him a tune that I had written for Herb Pomeroy who was playing at the Stables up in Boston.

"After I'd been out on the road with Bull Moose Jackson, I went with Tiny Grimes, with Screamin' Jay Hawkins. Then I got into the Earl Bostic group. Blue Mitchell was in the band. Stan Turrentine had just left. John Coltrane had been in that band. Earl was a monster on that saxophone. John told me about it before I joined the band.

"While I was in Boston with Earl Bostic, I met Herb Pomeroy, who asked me to send him some tunes. I'd been writing a thing in bits and pieces. We would play an hour and a half and then take a half hour intermission at these dances, one-nighters. I would stay on the bandstand and use that half hour. I finished this thing in Wilmington, Delaware, and sent it to Herb. Since he was playing at the Stables, I called the tune *Stablemates*.

"I gave this thing to John. Didn't think anything about it. And I ran into him about a month later. And he said, 'Remember that tune you gave me? Miles dug it. We recorded it.' I said, 'What?' I couldn't believe it. James Moody did my first recording, thing called *Blue Walk*, but it didn't get any kind of acclaim. But wow! It was through John Coltrane and through Miles that I got put on the map as a composer. Because I'd been passing out music all across the country. Nothing ever happened. Now people went back and got those tunes, and they started recording my stuff like there was no tomorrow. And never stopped. And I kept writing. Of course, I have to tell you, I had a lot of dogs, too, that will never see the light of day. A lot of dogs in my piano bench.

"Eventually I moved to New York. I figured this was where all the action was. And it was. It was good for me. I did *Stablemates* in '55. And I moved to New York after I joined Dizzy. So that would make it '56 when I moved to New York. I'd been married, and now I was divorced. I started to gig, and worked with Dizzy in the big band. Quincy Jones, Lee Morgan, Wynton Kelly, Nelson Boyd, Billy Mitchell were in the band. Phil Woods. That's where I met Phil. I took Ernie Wilkins' place. Ernie had recommended me.

"While I was living in New York at that time, I got a call from one of my idols, Art Blakey. He said, 'Look, I need a sub just for the night. Can you make it?' And he told me how much he'd pay. He didn't know it, but I'd have played for free. So we went down to the Cafe Bohemia and played. Bill Hardman was there and Spanky De Brest. And I really enjoyed it. And I thought that was it. Art said to me at the end of the night, 'Do you think you could make it tomorrow night?' I said, 'Oh yeah, I think I can make it.'

"And then the next night, he said, 'Look, do you think you can finish the week out?' I said, 'Yeah!'

"Now I was really into it. We finished the engagement. He said to me, 'Do you think you could make one week with us in Pittsburgh?'

"I thought, 'Well, one week is not so bad.' So I went to Pittsburgh with him. And just about the day before we closed, he said, 'We just got a call to go to Washington. Do you think you could make it one more week?' He suckered me little by little.

"So I went to Washington, and I'm glad I did, because I met my present wife, Bobbie. She was a ballet dancer. She was good too. I went to see her a couple of times in Boston, and

here, and Washington. But ballet wasn't good for black people at that time. That was 1958. It's stioll not that good.

"We came back to New York to do something. We went to the bar next door where the drinks were cheap. I didn't drink, but we used to congregate there." Lowering his voice, Benny said, "Art was late all the time. He wasn't making any money. There were no uniforms. The guys, the habits were . . . " Again, the ellipse. "I said, 'Art, you should be a millionaire, with your kind of talent.' He looked at me with those sad, cow eyes, and he said . . . " Benny's voice dropped to a pathetic hopelessness: "He said, 'Can you help me?'

"I can't believe what I said to him!" Benny laughed at the memory of his own seeming audacity. "I said, 'Yes. If you do exactly what I tell you.'

"He said, 'What shall I do?'

"I said, 'Get a new band.'

"Who was then in the band?' I said.

"I'd rather not say," Benny replied.

One of them was Spanky De Brest, who was like Benny, a native of Philadelphia, and died there at the age of thirty-six.

"Art said, 'Well you tell 'em.'

"I said, 'No! *You* tell 'em.'

"He said, 'Who we gonna get?'

"I said, 'There's a young trumpet player from Philadelphia playing with Dizzy, named Lee Morgan. He's only eighteen years old.'

"He said, 'Can he play?'

"I said, 'Oh yeah, he can play.'

"He said, 'Who you got in mind for bass?'

"I said, 'There's another guy from Philadelphia, named Jymie Merritt." Merritt had played in Philadelphia with Golson, Coltrane, and Philly Joe, and had been with Bull Moose Jackson. At the time Golson recommended him to Blakey, he was out of jazz and working in the rhythm-and-blues field.

"He said, 'What about piano?'

"I said, 'There's another guy from Philadelphia . . . '

"He said, 'What is this Philly stuff? Who is it?'

"'A guy named Bobby Timmons.'

"Then I said, 'Art, Small's Paradise doesn't want you back. You've got to set yourself separate and aside from the other groups that are playing. 'What's going to make you different from the guy down the street or next door?'

"He said, 'What can I do?'

"I said, 'You've got to get some new material.'

"He said, 'All right.'

"So I said, 'Let me write some things.' So I wrote *Along Came Betty, Are You Real?*. I told him he needed a featured number, a number that was his own. 'But you've already played everything there is to play. Except a march!' He started laughing. I said, 'Wait a minute! A march!'

"He looked at me and said, 'Ah, come on.'

"I said, 'No, wait. I've got an idea. Let's have a rehearsal tomorrow.'

"That night I said to myself, 'How can I write a march that sounds military yet doesn't sound like the army? A little something different. Maybe a blues, but not just an ordinary blues. A blues with a different tinge.' I came up with this thing, *Blues March*, just a novelty tune that would be played for a while and that would be the end of it. The next day I brought it in. Nobody has ever played that tune the way he played it. All the world's best drummers have played that song, but to this day nobody ever played it the way he played it. That thing caught on, I couldn't believe it. Until the time he died, that was still part of the repertoire. That and *Along Came Betty* stayed in there.

"Bobby Timmons had a thing he used to play. We were out in Detroit. He used to play this funky lick between tunes, just eight bars. We got to Columbus, Ohio. I called a rehearsal. I'd got in new uniforms. I said, 'Bobby, play that lick that you play. Today you're gonna put a bridge to it.' He said, 'Ah, that's just a lick.' We were at the club. I said, 'We're just gonna sit over here and lollygag, while you're onstage at the piano and putting a bridge to it.' He said, 'How's this?' I said, 'No, that's not the same funky flavor as the outside.' He said, 'Well, you do it!' I said, 'No, this is your tune. You do it, but try to get the same funky feeling that you got on the first eight bars.'

"We sat there, and he did it, and I said, 'That's it.' We rehearsed it and played it that night and laid 'em out in the aisles. *Moanin'*. The rest is history. That's how that came about.

"While I was with Art I wrote a thing -- I wrote a lot of things. I laugh about this tune. I was only playing the chords to this tune, and I had three different melodies in my mind, and I couldn't decide which one I was going to use for it. So all day long I'm playing these two chords over and over. That's all my wife could hear, because only I could hear the melody. I finally decided which melody I was gonna use. And then I played it for my wife. It was like she was waiting all day for me to ask her what she thought about it. And before I could get the words out of my mouth, she said, 'It'll never work. It's too monotonous.' That was *Killer Joe*. I've had so many records on that darn thing. And we played that and people ate it up.

"When I first got the new Blakey band together, I called Jack Whittemore."

Whittemore was Blakey's agent, and the agent of just about everybody else of substance in jazz. He was at that time head of the Shaw agency, but later he went on his own, taking the cream of the clients with him. Jack, a short, round, feisty, funny, tough Irishman, an inveterate hanger-outer with impeccable musical taste and an unshakable integrity, was loved, and his death of a heart attack a few years was considered a major loss to the jazz community. He has not been replaced.

Benny continued, "I said, 'Jack, get us a concert in Town Hall.'

"He said, 'Why?'

"I said, 'Because we're trying to prove something. Small's Paradise doesn't want the band back ever again in life. One of our first goals is to make Small's Paradise *ask* for us back.'

"He said, 'It'll never happen.'

"I said, 'Trust me.'

"I told the band, 'Fellows, we're going to do this concert black tie. We're trying to make an impression here, and people see you before they hear you.' So we did it and it was a success. Then we started to do some other things. Jack Whittemore called me and said, 'Small's Paradise now wants to have you back.'

"I said, 'Okay, now we're now going in the right direction. See if you can get something in Europe.' Art had never been to Europe. 'And,' I said, 'Get in touch with Alfred Lion and let's get an album going.' The album was called *Moanin'* and it had *Moanin'* and a thing I did called *Drum Thunder Suite, Are You Real, Along Came Betty, Come Rain or Come Shine.* We went to Europe, and we did a moving picture. I was handling the money. I would get the money, pay Art, pay myself, pay everybody, and send the rest over to Jack. So anybody who wanted money, I said, 'I don't want you drawing money daily at the club. It makes us look cheap.' I would draw a substantial sum, and let them come to me for the draw, rather than going to the club owner. It makes you look like stumble bums.

"I joined Art in 1957. In 1958, the band came way up. I said, 'Art, you're doing good now. And I'm going to leave you. Because I still want to establish myself here in New York.'

"I left. Wayne Shorter replaced me. Art tried to keep it on a certain level. And he did. Lee Morgan left and Art replaced him with Freddie Hubbard. Many, many people went through the band.

"In November of '89, he made a 70th birthday tour. Jackie McLean, Curtis Fuller, and I went as a sort of adjunct to his regular band. During the time he was making the announcement, he said, 'This is Benny Golson. He started it all.' And all the guys said, 'What does he mean?'

"Because I hadn't there all the time. There was Horace Silver, and Kenny Dorham. That was the beginning of the Jazz Messengers, and they knew that I wasn't there. They said, 'What does he mean, you started it all?' But he was talking about when things started to change for him, and I told them. Art was always appreciative of that. And because of that he always trusted me. He used to call me and say, 'What do you think about this, what do you think about that?' For years."

"I heard he couldn't read," I said, incredulously. "Is that true?"

"Are you kidding?" Benny laughed. "He couldn't read a note. But the man was didactic. He taught everybody, including me, in the band. I came in there playing soft and sweet. He used to try to give me a hint, with the loud drum rolls going into the next chorus, and I would disappear. And I didn't get it. And so he did it one night and I disappeared as usual. And to sort of underscore it, he came down with a bang! And then another bang! And he hollered over to me, 'Get up out of that hole!' And I thought, 'Gee, maybe I am in a hole, and I have to start playing differently, a little harder.' And I did, because of him. Yeah, he was a teacher. He taught from the drums.

"And when he died, I said, 'School's out.'

"I asked Freddie Hubbard about it. Same thing. I said, 'When I left Art Blakey, I could not play with another drummer. I was frustrated. I felt like the drummer was tickling the drums. And Freddie said, 'You too? I had the same problem when I left. And I just took it for granted while I was there.'

"Art Blakey didn't know what it was *not* to swing. Even when he didn't feel good.

"I really miss him. There was something about him.

"I loved him, Gene. He was the world's biggest liar, and I didn't care."

"During that period," Benny continued, "Art Farmer and I used to do lots of dates together in town here. He'd left Hamp after I did, came back to New York, and we wound up on the same dates. Jingles and one thing and another. And I loved the way he played. And as it turned out he liked the way I played too.

"I said, 'I think I'm going to put together a sextet. Who do I want on trumpet? I'll call Art Farmer.' And I called Art. He chuckled and said, 'You know, I was thinking of putting together a sextet too, and I had you in mind for the tenor player.' So I said, 'Come on by the apartment, and let's talk about it.'

"He came by and I said, 'Maybe we can get together and have a co-leadership thing. What about trombone?'

"He said, 'Well who've you got in mind?'

"I said, 'Curtis Fuller.'

"He said, 'That's good. I'd like to have my brother Addison on bass. And Dave Bailey, who played with me with Gerry Mulligan. But now what about piano?'

"I said, 'There's a guy I met in Philly when I went over to do a single gig one Sunday afternoon, a jazz concert. This guy can really play and I'd call something in a strange key, and he ate it up.'

"He said, 'Who is he?'

"And I said, 'Name's McCoy Tyner.'

"So I called him and asked him if he'd like to join. He was ecstatic. I said, 'Now, McCoy, we're going to have lots of rehearsals, so you're going to have to be coming back and forth from Philly.'

"He said, 'Well, you know, I'd really like to move to New York.'

"I said, 'Okay, let me see what we can do.'

"And Art and I found him an apartment. The day he was going to move, I got a call from him. The guy who was bringing him and his wife over had broken down on the New Jersey Turnpike. He said, 'Can you come out and get me?'

"I said, 'McCoy, I don't have a car. But tell me where you are, give me a phone number or something.' I called up John Coltrane. He had a car. He came by to pick me up and we went out to get McCoy and his wife. I don't know what happened to the guy. We left him standing out there with his broken-down car. And we came in to New York and McCoy

started playing with us. A little while later he went with John. And I saw John and said, 'What a friend you turned out to be! You stole our piano player!' But actually it was the best thing for McCoy. He had something else in mind, which was closer to what John was doing at that time."

"It was very hard to keep a group together then -- as now, for that matter," I said. "I remember talking to J.J. Johnson about it at about the time you and Art started the Jazztet. He was playing the Blue Note in Chicago. He said the Blue Note wasn't making enough money to survive, and the group wasn't making enough to sustain them on the road. Eventually Frank Holzfiend closed the Blue Note, of course."

"The only reason we survived as long as we did," Benny said, "is that the manager we had, Kay Norton, so believed in us and never took a commission. She did a lot for us.

"The Jazztet was together about a year and a half. Then I started working as a single with local rhythm sections. Sometimes I took Blue Mitchell.

"I was writing and doing arrangements for various people, in commercials and stuff like that. And then I began to study again. But not like Howard University. This was on a much higher and deeper level, with a fellow named Henry Brant. He was teaching up in Vermont at Bennington College. He came home every weekend. I would go over to his house in Brooklyn and he would teach me for an hour. Composition, on an advanced level. He taught me so much. It was like I could hardly get it all in, he was teaching me so much.

"Right after that I got a call from Quincy to do a picture, one he couldn't take. I went over to Europe to do it. It was a forgettable picture named *Ski Fascination*. It was all about skiing. I used everything Henry Brant had taught me. I came back and continued to study with him. Now I had all these devices and technical skills at my fingertips, and nowhere to use it in New York. Not the kinds of thing he was teaching me!

"Quincy had already gone to California. Oliver Nelson had gone. Each time one of them went, they would call me back and say, 'Why don't you come out?' Leonard Feather moved to California. *He* called me and said, 'Why don't you come on out?'

"I wisely went out there without moving. Just went out there to survey things. And I got a feeling. I came back, sold what I didn't want, packed up the other stuff, and moved out there. I went to work right away. Quincy got me with his agent, Peter Faith, who was Percy Faith's son. Nice fellow. [Faith died young of a heart attack.] A few months later, I moved my family out.

"I went to work on a William Holden film out at MGM. Alex North was the composer. I did some period music for it. And 'period music' means exactly what it says -- a gavotte from the sixteenth century, a George Shearing style piece, a Dixieland. Period pieces.

"And then through Quincy, I got a call to come out to Universal. Dave Grusin had just done the theme on a Robert Wagner series called *It Takes a Thief*. Very next episode I went to work on it. Stanley Wilson was the musical director. He asked me if I wanted to do another one.

"Then I started to do a variety of things. Ben Gazzara had a series called *Run for Your Life*. I got a call to come over to 20th Century Fox. And I went to work on a thing called *Room 222*. Then I got a call to do *M.A.S.H.* I stayed with *M.A.S.H.* for three years. And a couple of things that came through. At the same time I got a call from Screen Gems Columbia, and I went over there and start doing *The Partridge Family, I Dream of Jeannie*, that kind of stuff, and I also got calls to come out to Paramount. *Mannix, Mission Impossible*, and some series that really didn't make it. I did quite a few pilots too. I kept pretty busy writing.

"During that time, I didn't play. I put the horn aside in 1964. I had two of every instrument -- two clarinets, two flutes, two saxophones. I figured I would never play again. That was it. Then I got the itch again, would you believe it? I came back to do a concert for a jazz society here. And it started to feel kind of good. But I still wasn't going at it full time. I'd pull the horn out when festival time rolled around each summer. But it took me so long to bone up, get my chops back together, y'know, it wasn't worth my while to do it for just one gig.

"So I did that. With more frequency I started to do these things. I eased back into it. But I didn't play the horn from 1964 to about '72, when I really started to get back into it. If I'd known it was going to be so hard, I might not have tried to play again. It was like getting over a stroke. I picked this thing up and put it together and put it in my hands, and it didn't feel like a saxophone. It felt like plumbing. My chops felt like ripe tomatoes. The mind was going every which direction. My fingers didn't want to co-operate. I didn't like the way I was playing, I didn't like the way I was sounding. I put it down. I felt as if I were recovering from a stroke.

"But when I picked it back up, I didn't sound the way I'd sounded when I put it down. So evidently some processes were going on mentally that I wasn't aware of. But still it wasn't what I wanted to do.

"And I went through, like Picasso, this period and that period. I didn't start to feel comfortable and secure again on the horn until about ten years ago. It took that long. Even then I wasn't playing on a regular basis. It was intermittent until about the last three years.

"And then the Jazztet got together again.

"Around 1981, somebody called me from Europe about putting something together with J.J. Johnson. J.J. was also out in Hollywood then. And he didn't want to leave, because when you move you lose. You're forgotten very quickly. They said, 'What about putting the Jazztet together again?'

"It had been over twenty years. I said, 'Let me look into it.' I called Art, I called Curtis. They said, 'Yeah, maybe do a few gigs.' We were planning to go to Europe but the Japanese, these inscrutable people, somehow found out about it, got on the case even quicker, and we went to Japan before we went to Europe.

"We put the band together with Buster Williams on bass, Cedar Walton on piano, Tootie Heath on drums, Curtis, Art,

and me. There were some personnel changes. We worked together, I guess, about three years. It wasn't so stiff, and regimented, formulaized, like the first Jazztet. A little looser.

"And we worked and recorded until about three years ago."

"I had the impression that the years of composition had changed your playing," I said.

"It wasn't the composition," Benny said. "I was consciously trying to change it because I was so unhappy before."

"Whatever it was," I said, "it was a far bigger structure than in the old days. There was something very different about it."

"Yeah," Benny said, "that's a matter of opinion. Some people put me down because they want to hear the old Benny Golson. But I can't do that. I've got to do what I feel. I can't please people. I mean, I want them to be happy with what I'm doing, but I'm an artist, not an entertainer.

"I got back to New York in 1987. It's strange how that happened. The Jazztet was together then. We had two appearances at Sweet Basil's every year. We were coming here for one of those two-week appearances. Then I was going back home to California.

"During the two weeks, I was meeting people and renewing acquaintances from the past. It's inevitable in New York. I said after we finished, 'I think I'll stick around for a week, see what's happening.'

"It was starting to slow down a bit in California.

"I stayed a week. I was seeing a lot of people, I was getting a lot of calls. I thought, 'Let's stay one more week.' Our daughter accused us of leaving and never coming back. We stayed here one year.

"We were staying with a friend. I felt like the man who came to dinner -- with his wife and all his belongings! I said, 'Well this is ridiculous. We're either going to have to go back to L.A. or get an apartment.' I walked by this place every day, but I thought it was much too expensive -- until I started inquiring about other places in the Village and here and there. But we finally got this place.

"And I've got to tell you, I'm busier now -- not the first two years, but after that -- than I've ever been in my whole life. It's just like I've been rediscovered -- or discovered. I don't know what it is, whether it's just availability. I've gotten some grants, and commissions. I'm doing lectures and clinics. I'm playing again quite regularly now. I'm doing lots of commercials, I'm doing colleges, and I'm lecturing. I like that. I like to talk to students. I find they're bereft of many things that they should have. And it takes them a long period to arrive at these things by trial and error, as I did. And why not give them the benefit of what we know, so they can get to the heart of what they're doing and get back to making a living? Instead of floundering around out there.

"I will bend over for students. If they call and say they want a tune but they only have so much money, I'll say, 'For students, okay.' But not for anybody else."

Inevitably, perhaps, Benny and I got talking about all the friends and acquintances we had back in the first years I knew him and Art, all of them gone now -- scores of them, John Coltrane high on the list.

"My wife Bobbie," Benny said, "has an expression that lays it right out there. She says, 'Who ever said it was fair?'"

Ding

by Bill Crow

When I was a high-school student and jazz record collection living in the then remote Pacific Northwest, I developed a skewed sense of the age of the musicians who played on the records I listened to. An amateur musician myself, I assumed that anyone who had progressed to the level of professional skill required to be heard on a phonograph record must be an adult, years older than I was. Of course, my perspective in general was different then. The country was at war, and the commentators on radio and in the newsreels and newspapers kept talking about our "fighting men." Most of these "men" were still in their teens, but to a boy in school they seemed very grown up. Men too old for military service were *really* old.

Since Vic Dickenson was the trombonist on several of the more traditional jazz records in my collection, I had him classified with the patriarchs, and so it was a bit of a surprise, when I first saw him in person, to discover that he was still a youthful-looking vigorous player in the mainstream of jazz. Born in 1906, he was forty-nine when I met him in Boston at the end of 1955, where he was playing at Mahogany Hall. I was with Gerry Mulligan's sextet upstairs at Storyville.

My first change to play a job with Vic was with Jimmy McPartland in New York, at a Christmas party upstairs at Toots Shor's. Vic sat right next to me. I was thrilled to be there, hearing his unmistakable sound and feeling his good-natured swing. We fell into an easy musical relationship right away, happily matching bass lines with trombone counterlines on the ensemble passages. When he gave me an approving look, the world was my oyster.

I had developed neither the talent nor the desire for drinking alcohol, but when I noticed that Vic was drinking straight gin, I'd order gin too, whenever someone would buy a round for the band, and I'd push my glass over beside Vic's. Vic would look at me with love in his eye and say, "Ding ding!" as he downed both drinks.

From then on we were buddies. Whenever he saw me he would smile and raise his eyebrows. "Ding ding!" was always his greeting. Many of his friends called him Ding. He told me he got the expression from Lester Young, who used it to mean many things. It could mean, "You've rung the bell, I agree with what you just said," or "You just played a prize-winning chorus." Said without a smile, it could mean, "Your playing would get you the gong on the Amateur Hour." For Vic it simply meant "Hi, pal," or "Here goes another drink, and I hope it rings my bell."

Vic was always a joy to play with. His lyrical style fit any combination of musicians who used chord changes as the basis for their improvisation. Though he played mainly with dixie and swing groups, he also fit comfortably into more modern settings. His musical ears were large, and his inventions were

always delightful.

Vic was born in Xenia, Ohio, the seventh of nine children, five brothers and three sisters. His brother Carlos played the alto saxophone -- very well, according to Vic. In 1925 they had a band in Columbus they called the Dickenson Brothers. Carlos stayed in Ohio and finished out his years working for the postal service while Vic took to the road and wound up in New York, but they remained close. Vic always talked about getting Carlos to come to New York and record with him, but he was never able to arrange it. "I never get to pick my own musicians on my records," he said. "It seems like somebody else has always done the picking."

Vic's career took him through the bands of Speed Webb, Zack White, Thamon Haynes, Harlan Leonard, Blanche Calloway, Claude Hopkins, Benny Carter, and, in 1940, Count Basie. Then, looking for more solo space, he began working with smaller groups, such as those led by Sidney Bechet, Frankie Newton, Eddie Heywood, and Edmond Hall. He played around Boston for several years as the house trombonist at the Savoy and at Mahogany Hall, and in the 1950s he returned to New York, where he worked places like the Metropole, Central Plaza, and Nick's. Around 1960 he got together with pianist Red Richards to form the Saints and Sinners, with clarinetist Buster Bailey, trumpeter Herman Autrey, bassist Danny Mastri, and drummer Jackie Williams. That group traveled the festival and concert circuit for several years.

I had an interesting encounter with Vic in New York around 1957. Because of the growing difficulty of finding a parking place for a car in Greenwich Village where I lived then, I was using a Lambretta motor scooter for transportation around the city. I had a steady job with Marian McPartland at the Hickory House, where I usually left my bass under the piano every night after work. But when it became necessary, I would strap the bass to my back, get on the scooter, and drive carefully to my destination. At recording dates I often took the scooter right into the studio with me.

After a date one afternoon at a studio near the Hickory House, I took my bass back to the club, got on my scooter, and started east on 52nd Street, where I saw Vic walking in the same direction carrying his trombone case.

"Ding! Where are you headed?"

"I'm walking over to Lexington Avenue."

"Hop on, I'll drive you over."

"Nooo, thank you. I rode on a motorcycle just once in my life. It belonged to a friend of mine. I nearly had a fight with that man, he *leaned* on me so!"

I explained that motor scooters were much more docile than motorcycles, and I promised not to lean with him, since we would be going straight across town and wouldn't turn any corners. Vic looked doubtful, but let me strap his trombone on the rear luggage rack. He climbed carefully onto the pillion seat behind me, tucking the bottom edge of his topcoat under his legs to keep it from flapping in the breeze. He seized the hand grip with his left hand, clutched the crown of his fedora with his right, and sat very erect as I eased out the clutch and gingerly rolled down 52nd Street, trying to steer as straight a line as I could while avoiding manhole covers and potholes.

When I pulled over to the curb at Lexington Avenue, Vic got carefully off the scooter and adjusted his clothes. As I unstrapped his horn case, I said, "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"No, that was a very nice ride. But I don't believe I'll do that again."

Vic and I were working with Jimmy McPartland at Nick's in the village the week his brother Carlos died. Vic took a night off to fly out to the funeral, but he came straight back to work the next night. We could see that the grief was still heavy on him. His playing that night was filled with emotion and he seemed to find deep solace in it. He played soft backgrounds behind everyone else's choruses, played heartbreakingly beautiful choruses of his own and, when our band was off the stand, moved over to Hank Duncan's solo piano, sat down on the bench beside him, and played along quietly throughout his set. Vic didn't take the mouthpiece away from his lips for more than a minute all night long. It was a remarkable example of the healing power of music. He did all his grieving through his horn that night, and was pretty much back to normal the next night.

Through the years I often found myself on the same bandstand with Vic at jazz concerts and festivals. He loved to share the pleasure of music with his friends; his generous welcoming smile always made me feel like an honored guest at his party.

The last times I played with him were during his stay with Red Balaban's house band at Eddie Condon's on West 54th Street. Red sometimes had me sub for him when he was occupied elsewhere. By the time that club was ready to be torn down, Vic's age was beginning to show. He moved slower and more carefully, and remained seated on a tall stool while he played. I noticed that his sound had become much softer. Its unique burry quality was still there, but you really had to stand in front of his trombone to hear all of it. He wasn't strong enough to push it all the way out of the horn any more. He had finally become the old man I had thought he was forty years before, but his trombone was still singing the same bittersweet songs.

Vic succumbed to cancer in November, 1984, at seventy-eight. He left far too few records behind. I treasure the one I got to make with him, a Ruby Braff date in 1974, on which he played some fine solos. After a lifetime of consistent, craftsmanly musical expression, he went on his way, but he left the light for the rest of us. Ding, ding.

-- BC
