

The Immortal Joker Part Three

It is impossible in our time to perceive how Beethoven's music was perceived in his. This is true of artists generally. We can deduce it from the outrage visited on them by critics — Nicolas Slonimsky's *Lexicon of Musical Invective* is a fascinating compendium of such writings — but we can never actually feel the original impact.

Even knowing how original Louis Armstrong was, we can never perceive him the way the thunderstruck young musicians of his early days did. By the time many of us became aware of him, Joe Glaser, his manager, had manipulated him into position as an international star, grinning and mugging in movies and singing second-rate songs. It was easy to see him as a clown, not too distant from Stepin Fetchit and Mantan Moreland. Further, by the time a new generation of jazz fans heard him, they had already been steeped in the work of those he had inspired, such as Roy Eldridge, which further veiled the fact of his originality.

Less than a generation later, a problem of humor beset Dizzy Gillespie, although there was a sardonic edge to Gillespie's antics that set him apart from Armstrong. One always had a sense that Dizzy was toying with the audience as much as he was catering to it. A dry amusement infused what he did.

The jazz press made much of a schism between bebop and earlier jazz, attributing to Armstrong contemptuous evaluations of the new music and to Dizzy some rejoinders which, when I came to know him, seemed out of character. The gentleness that was in him, whatever the managed angers, was at odds with such remarks.

When I was studying piano and harmony with Tony Aless who, with Sanford Gold, ran a two-man school in New York, Bill Evans got interested in the materials they had assembled, including voicing exercises and chord substitutions. "This is interesting," he said. "We had to work all this out for ourselves."

Bill put a high value on personal discovery, as opposed to imposed methodology. What you learn for yourself is idiosyncratically yours, and since there were no schools of jazz in its first decades, musicians had to find their own approaches to their instruments and the music itself, leading to the "wrong" fingering of Bix Beiderbecke and the "wrong" embouchure and special fingerings of John Birks Gillespie. All this private exploration led to the personal and identifiable sounds and styles of earlier jazz musicians. The teaching methods of the jazz education movement have led to codified procedures and because of them a levelling.

There is a widespread competence in young players, but they are often as interchangeable as the parts on a GM pickup. They may be accomplished at the technical level, but too many are no more individual than Rich Little doing impressions.

The flatted fifth chord and the minor-seventh-flat-five chord were not new in western music, but as composer Hale Smith points out, they were probably, for Monk and other jazz musicians, discoveries, and thus became personal vocabulary.

As composers explored what we call western music over these last centuries, they expanded the vocabulary but they did not invent, or re-invent it. However, this expansion, particularly in the Romantic music of the nineteenth century, appeared to be invention. Thus too with jazz, when Parker and Gillespie entered with such *éclat* on the scene. The nineteenth century led to the illusion that to be original, one must invent a new language rather than use the existing lexicon with personal powers of invention. It can be argued that those who use known vocabulary to say new things are more creative than those who affect the invention of a language. For the personal use of existing materials, we need look only to Earl Hines, Art Tatum, Erroll Garner, John Guarnieri, Dave Brubeck, Teddy Wilson, Mel Powell, Bud Powell, Fats Waller, Phineas Newborn, Oscar Peterson, Tommy Flanagan, John Lewis, Roger Kellaway, Horace Silver, Thelonious Monk, McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Rowles, Milt Buckner, Nat Cole, Bill Evans, and many others, all of them inventing within the same broad vocabulary of Western music, all of them strongly personal, even instantly recognizable, and all of them producing their own tone qualities on an instrument on which, it has been argued from a scientific standpoint, individual tone is not even possible. *That* is originality.

There is nothing original in jazz *as such*. Improvisation is not original; it has been with us for millennia. Collective improvisation is not original: it is found in flamenco, mariachi, Irish instrumental folk tradition, and other musics, including even the simple but stirring music of Paraguayan harp bands whose players have minimal conscious knowledge of what they're doing. Specific "swinging" rhythm is not original; again, we can look to flamenco, and all the regional musical styles of Brazil and Cuba. This is why a universally acceptable definition of jazz has never been elucidated. Jazz is a combination of many things used in a fresh way, and something may be jazz (such as some of the fixed solos of Armstrong and Tatum) even when it is not improvised.

The theme-and-variations form is old and elemental. But it makes possible most of what we call jazz, for there is no other way to set up a comprehensible framework within which the musician can make his statement. It is, however, the implicit

limitation of jazz, and many a musician has writhed in its confines. Yet throw it out, embrace "free jazz", and you abandon the lingua franca audiences can comprehend and thus lose financial support the artist must have to continue developing. Abandon that and get in line for the doles of fellowships and grants and other supports for hot-house art unable to withstand the touch of even the most benign natural breeze. Art that does not communicate isn't art at all, for the act is completed only in the reception and response of an "audience". All else is mirror-gazing.

It is rational to say, as Phil Woods and George Russell effectually do, that this is what I do and I hope enough people like it to permit me to live from it. But it is what I do. It is another matter to say, "Society owes me and must give me grants to permit my endless explorations." This has led to a proliferation of the indecipherable on the "artistic" end of the spectrum in a pathological symbiosis with the explosion of meretricious trash at the commercial end of it.

However, fresh art, truly fresh art, is always startling, even when expressed with conventional materials, and Parker and Gillespie were nothing if not surprising.

Dizzy Gillespie did not come out of a tradition of art; he grew up in the world of entertainment. All high art is ultimately rooted in folklore, but Dizzy was never far from it. His was the tradition of Armstrong and Eldridge and Ray Nance and Woody Herman, with roots in or recent descent from vaudeville and minstrelsy; it was the critics, partly in celebration of their own perceptions, who saw it (rightly so, to be sure) as art. I suspect that Dizzy loved the attention, the giddy journalism, that attended bebop. He startled me, as young and susceptible to the new as I was, and I cannot, like so many others, say, "I dug Bird the first time I heard him." *Salt Peanuts* took me a while. I had to get used to the sudden starts and stops, the rhythmic eccentricity (in the true as well as figurative sense) and flung-out phrases. Once I did, Dizzy had few more ardent admirers.

In August and December 1947, Dizzy and a big band recorded a group of "sides" for RCA, rushing to get them done before the onset in January of the second AFM recording ban. (Results of these sessions are to be found in *The Bebop Revolution*, Bluebird CD 2177-2-RB.) Then Dizzy took the band to Europe on a tour that was a commercial fiasco due to mismanagement, not to mention theft, by some of the business people involved, but a public, critical, and aesthetic triumph. Once, in Paris, the audience was so stunned by the music that at the end of the first number, it forgot to applaud. That tour affected jazz in Europe ever afterwards, and Kenny Clarke remained behind in Paris when the band went home, to become a fixture of the European musical world, and eventually co-leader with Francy Boland of the Clarke-Boland Big Band, one of the best big bands in the history of the music.

Dizzy broke up his band on returning to New York, then reorganized it and kept it together through 1948 and '49. That band is heard to advantage in a Crescendo CD GNPD 23 recorded by broadcaster and impresario Gene Norman when he presented it in concert on July 19, 1948, at the Pasadena Civic Auditorium in

California. The band's goofy, almost dada-esque, high spirits are evident throughout. Chano Pozo was with the band at that time.

But the big-band era was over, and it was impossible to maintain a touring band of such size. In early 1950, Dizzy surrendered to the ultimatum of his wife and broke it up. He went back to a small group and toured with Jazz at the Philharmonic.

"The period 1950 until 1953 was to be an artistic low point in Dizzy's career," Alyn Shipton writes, "redeemed by a few examples of his technically brilliant playing on record or in concert and with a few glimpses of the future direction he was to take."

By then Miles Davis had made the nonet recordings with Gerry Mulligan, Gil Evans, John Lewis, et al, the so-called Birth of the Cool recordings. The relationship between Miles and Dizzy, Shipton says, "has always been hard to pin down." He writes that a master-and-pupil relationship, begun in the Eckstine band, continued into the 1950s. But Miles was critical of Dizzy's behavior before an audience, saying, "As much as I love Dizzy and loved Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong, I always hated the way they used to laugh and grin for the audiences. I knew *why* they did it—to make money and because they were entertainers as well as trumpet players."

That Miles' seeming sullen stance was fully as theatrical as Dizzy's clowning, and just as effective in commanding an audience, should be obvious. But I must admit that a slight uneasiness over Dizzy's antics for a long time precluded my own perception of his art. I came to understand his use of so-called "showmanship" and eventually to know just how purposive his clowning could be.

On May 15, 1953, Dizzy took part in a performance at Toronto's Massey Hall with Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Charles Mingus, and Max Roach. That program is available on Debut, originally Mingus's own company and now one of the Fantasy group of labels, under the title *The Quintet* (OJC-044). Among that concert's other virtues, Parker plays superbly, and Bud Powell, whose unstable mental condition had vitiated many of his performances, was brilliant. When he was off his game, his time could be flakey. It isn't here. And I don't know how anybody could listen to this recording and call Dizzy's tone "thin". Shipton writes: "No better example survives of the intrinsic difference between Bird's spontaneous ability to conjure endless variations in a jam-session environment and Dizzy's to construct architecturally thought-through choruses in which his stock phrases are carefully integrated."

He concludes: "The Massey Hall concert has become one of the most celebrated events in jazz history and is especially valuable because of the relative scarcity of collaborations between Dizzy and Bird after 1946."

The middle 1950s saw Dizzy traveling with the Norman Granz Jazz at the Philharmonic package, and recording such albums with small group as *Have Trumpet, Will Excite* and *The Ebullient Mr. Gillespie* for Granz's Verve label. But Dizzy, like others who had grown up on and through the big bands (Gerry Mulligan among them) retained the yearning to have one, and he was at it again

whenever he could keep one floating.

The opportunity came when he was asked to go on one of the State Department's cultural exchange tours of the middle east. The tour took place in early 1956, with Dizzy fronting the first big band he'd had since 1950. It was such a success that the State Department asked him to tour South America. Dizzy asked his friend Dave Usher from Detroit (who had run Dizzy's short-lived Dee Gee record label) to come along. Dizzy had purchased an Ampex 600 tape recorder, and Usher recorded the band. *Dizzy in South America, Volume One* is available on CD by mail-order from CAP, the co-operative organized by Mike Longo, one of Dizzy's favorite pianists.

Usher told Ira Gitler, who quotes him in the album's liner notes, "In every hotel, people were always waiting in the lobby, day and night, to meet Dizzy, or even just get a glimpse of him. Somehow a few of them would always get upstairs. They would be waiting in the hall outside Dizzy's room."

Dizzy's comedic sense served him well. His peculiar ability simply to stand there, and, like Jack Benny, inspire a smile or laughter, his little dance steps, his uncanny capacity to communicate, sailed through whatever barriers of language there might be.

Usher recalls an incident that is revealing of Dizzy's character. In Sao Paulo, Brazil, Dizzy and Usher went to a school, Casa Roosevelt, sponsored by the U.S. to teach English. Usher said:

"It was an open-air, backyard kind of thing. There were a great many kids, junior high and high school students, who were asking Dizzy questions. They wanted to come to the evening performance, but they didn't have the money. We found out that our secondary sponsor, the American National Theater Academy, was charging admission. We told the kids to present their IDs and they'd get in. Dizzy refused to play until the kids were allowed in. He said, 'We're doing this for the people.'"

The album derived from the Usher tapes sells for \$12.95 plus shipping and handling. You can order it directly through Mike Longo at 800 425-6557. Despite some shortcomings in sound, it is fantastic. If ever anyone should ask what jazz is all about, you could play the *Cool Breeze* track. Dizzy plays an extended ballistic solo that is truly awesome. One of the great solos in jazz history.

Trombonist Al Grey, who played in the bands of Benny Carter, Lucky Millinder, Jimmie Lunceford, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Lionel Hampton, remembers that period with Gillespie as a pinnacle of his life. "What a band!" Al said several years ago. "Come on! We'd come to work twenty minutes before time, warming up getting ready to hit. The trumpet section had Lee Morgan, Bama Warwick, Lamar Wright. The trombone section was Melba Liston, Chuck Connors, Rod Levitt, and me. The rhythm section was Wynton Kelly, Paul Wess, and Charlie Persip. The reed section was Benny Golson, Billy Mitchell, Ernie Henry, Rudy Powell, and Billy Root on baritone, who came from Stan Kenton's band. For a while we had Phil Woods. This is what I admired about Diz. And Lucky Millinder. They didn't care what color anybody was.

"But Dizzy was losing so much money. To play in that band we all had to take a *drop* in fees. We all got \$135 a week, and you

had to pay your hotel and all your expenses out of that."

Norman Granz recorded Dizzy with the big band (there had been personnel changes after South America) on July 6, 1957, *Dizzy Gillespie at Newport*, Verve CD 314 513 754-2. Thus Dizzy's big-band work in the mid-1950s is well-documented on recordings.

A good three-CD package called *Dizzy's Diamonds* (Verve 314 513 875-2) documents Gillespie's work with Granz. The material was selected and sequenced by Kenny Washington. Now forty-one, Kenny is not only a great drummer; he has emerged as one of the most conscientious and informed scholars of jazz, and for liner notes he interviewed Jon Faddis, whose work on trumpet probably comes closer to Dizzy's than anyone's. Faddis told Washington:

"When he has a big band behind him, it pushes him in different directions and that's when I think Dizzy is actually at his best."

Writing biography is a more complex task than the mere recording of information. If five persons witness a given event, you will get five different views of it, filtered through the commentator's self-interests, rationalizations, and solipsism.

When the subject of the biography is recently dead, the survivors cannot sue for libel even if they are hurt by its disclosures. Do the revelations justify the pain they may cause? Future writers may need information you might wish to pass over in consideration for the feelings of others, or for that matter your own discomfiture. It's a delicate dilemma.

And how do you strike a balance between what the press knew of John F. Kennedy's peccadilloes and kept still about and the maniacal pursuits of Kenneth Starr? Did Starr, fully as much as a distracted Bill Clinton, contribute to the horrors of Kosovo? Has Monica Lewinsky considered the deaths she may have caused in collecting her groupie's trophy?

In books about the long gone, the problem doesn't arise; you can't hurt Salieri's feelings if you say he was jealous of Mozart. On the other hand, the best witnesses to that age are also gone.

As for anyone who holds that the artist's private life has nothing to do with his art, consider Wagner's dreadful character and virulent anti-Semitism. It infects his music, in his myth of the glorious Aryan, and it affected the growth of anti-Semitism in Germany, to a price we have all paid one way or the other. Toscanini's prejudices and background bear on his work. As a less-than-enthralled Robert Shaw, who prepared the chorus for the last movement of the Ninth Symphony, told me once: "He makes Beethoven sound like Verdi." Even when the work seems at variance with the character of the artist, as (spectacularly) in the case of Stan Getz, the discrepancy is a legitimate subject for examination.

Alyn Shipton, in *Groovin' High*, faced a decision: To discuss or not to discuss Jeanie Bryson. To do so could only hurt Lorraine, Dizzy's wife. I would not have found the decision an easy one. Though I don't know her well, I like Lorraine a lot. On balance, I think Shipton had no choice. The information was out, Lorraine had undoubtedly heard about it, and perhaps she knew what his friends knew, that away from home Dizzy had a taste for the

ladies. This, of course, hardly made him a novelty among men.

Shipton, further, enters into the subject of Dizzy's taste for, even fascination with, white women.

I once discussed this with an especially dear friend of mine, a trumpet player at the highest level of jazz. I asked him if there was any particular attraction for him in white women. They weren't any better at "it" than black women. He agreed. Then what did they have to offer?

He said, and this is verbatim, "I think of all the white men who'd like to whup my ass for it."

The forbidden has always been attractive, and adding risk to the act for some people enhances the thrill.

It is, of course, the ultimate social folly to think you can collide men and women of different races and at the same time suspend the workings of hormones. If man had not wanted "race mixing" he should never have mastered sea travel, and certainly should not have invented the airplane. I am always troubled by scenes in movies and television in which couples are paired off by race, the white man with the white wife, the black man with the black wife, all of this implying segregation. I argued as far back as the 1960s (with Lenny Bruce, among others) that the real issue was not desegregation of the school-room but of the bedroom, and indeed of the entire social fabric. The movies have always perpetuated segregation. According to Hollywood, cowboys and trappers and miners never married Indians. How is it then that there are countless "whites" in the American west with Cherokee or Apache or Comanche or Chumash or some other native ancestry? The number of "blacks" with Indian ancestry is, proportionately, as high or higher: John Lewis, Benny Golson, Art Farmer, Ed Thigpen, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Horace Silver, Doc Cheatham, Oscar Pettiford, keep going.

In the broader picture, the fact that Dizzy's long and hidden relationship was with a white woman is irrelevant; it was not, irrelevant, however, to the persons involved, entailing pain the blame for which goes less to them than to the society as a whole.

Connie Bryson was a high-school sophomore, the daughter of a microbiologist at Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, when she met Dizzy at Birdland in 1953. She found him, not surprisingly, charming, funny, and kind, and, as she said, "in a lot of ways a real contrast to his canned humor on stage, because that wasn't nearly as vital and spontaneous as he was in the flesh." She said he "didn't lay a finger on me until I was over eighteen" She was, she said, insanely in love with him.

She believed he was incapable of fathering a child, and was shocked to learn she was pregnant. Her daughter, Jeanie Bryson, was born on March 10, 1958, and thus, as you can figure out quickly, is now forty-one years old.

Connie Bryson apparently asked nothing of Dizzy, attempting to raise the child on her own, but at last moving in with her parents. Her father was by now with the Institute of Microbiology at Rutgers University. His grand-daughter presented problems, and his job was threatened. He told the powers-that-be what they could do with the job, and the problem dissipated.

There was apparently never much question of the paternity, though a blood test was taken. Dizzy had a check sent each month

by his booking agency — Associated Booking, the late Joe Glaser's company — in support of the little girl. Jeanie Bryson saw a lot of her father in childhood and again when she was in her late teens, when she met many of his friends, including Mickey Roker and Jon Faddis.

It was not known publicly until 1990 that Jeanie Bryson was Dizzy's daughter, and this when she began to emerge as a singer. Immediately some of his partisans attacked her, saying she was using his name only for publicity, but Telarc records, her label, said they had signed her on her merits without consideration of her paternity. Al Fraser, co-writer with Dizzy of the autobiography *To Be or Not to Bop*, told Dizzy that if he wanted to deny her, he would have to get a nose job. Alyn Shipton notes the similarity of her movements, a phenomenon one often encounters in family relationships. It is interesting, in those old films that featured the Glenn Miller band, to study the face of singer Marion Hutton. The crinkle around her eyes when she laughs, the very mobility of the face, an exuberance masking a terrible sadness, are exactly, but exactly, like those of her sister, Betty Hutton. It isn't a matter of imitation but of facial structure. I have seen Jeanie Bryson — a very good singer — only once, in a 1997 television interview, but it was enough to establish the paternity. The facial structure, the movements of the head, and other details or so like Dizzy's.

In any event, Dizzy signed a court agreement on May 26, 1965, acknowledging "paternity of the said child and his legal liability for the support thereof." When she reached eighteen, Dizzy extended his support agreement till she was twenty-one. She was graduated in anthropology and ethnomusicology from Rutgers. Pianist Kenny Barron, her tutor there, said, "I met her when she was four. I was working with Dizzy when her mother brought her by. He didn't really talk about her publicly, but I'm sure he was proud."

Dizzy was known for the casual way he would hire sidemen, such as Ray Brown, simply on someone's recommendation. Composer Hale Smith got a call when he was a student at the Cleveland Institute of Music. The voice on the phone said, "This is Dizzy Gillespie." Hale thought, Oh yeah, sure it is. But in a moment he realized it was indeed Dizzy Gillespie. Dizzy had heard from Sahib Shihab, who was playing saxophone in his group, that Hale was a pretty good pianist. He said, "Do you want a gig?" So Hale went to a job that night. He asked for the charts. There weren't any.

"Fortunately, I knew most of the tunes from the records," Hale said. And he eared his way through the rest. At the end of the night, Dizzy asked if he wanted to work with him another night. And then for a time he became Dizzy's pianist, when he could get away from his studies. They remained lifelong friends. Years later, Dizzy told him the directors of the Hartford Symphony had asked him to perform the Haydn *Trumpet Concerto*. Dizzy asked Hale if he would run through the piece with him. Hale played it from a piano reduction score; Dizzy sight-read it flawlessly, and then said at the end of it that he thought he wouldn't play it. He said it wasn't really his cup of tea.

Dizzy met Lalo Schiffrin in Buenos Aires during the South

American tour. Dizzy played with him briefly and urged him to come to New York. Lalo detoured through the Paris Conservatory and composition studies with, among other teachers, Olivier Messiaen. When at last he came to New York, playing with Latin bands to eke out a living, he finally, hesitantly, called Dizzy. Dizzy told him to write something for him. Lalo sketched the *Gillespiana Suite*. He showed it to Dizzy, who said he would perform it. At the moment, he had no pianist for his small group. Who was he planning to get? "I sort of had you in mind," Dizzy said. And so Lalo joined him on piano and as resident composer. It changed the course of his life.

Lalo told me many stories of Dizzy from that period, some of which I have recounted elsewhere. But they are pertinent now. Once he and Dizzy were in a hotel room with a friend who was putting golf balls into a glass. Dizzy asked if he could try it. And, repeatedly, he put the ball into the glass. The man asked if he had played a lot of golf. He'd never touched a golf club before. Then how was he doing this?

"I just think I'm the ball and I want to be in the cup," Dizzy said. That is a form of zen, and I think Dizzy approached playing the horn in the same way. How else account for the liquid direct contact with the instrument and the music it was emitting?

Lalo told me funny stories, too, stories of Dizzy's humor. In Scotland, Dizzy would approach someone on the street and say, in his most formal enunciation, "Pardon me, my name is Gillespie, and I'm looking for my relatives." He did of course have white relatives, and in his later years, he told me, when he went home to Cheraw, some of them recognized and welcomed him.

Lalo also played Berlin with him. When the bellboy showed them to their rooms, Dizzy said to him, "Would you mind trying out the shower?"

"Wass?" the man said.

"You Germans have some funny ideas about showers," Dizzy said.

That was about as close to malicious as I think he could get, though he did carry that knife. But even that could be a tool of humor. Mike Longo recalled an occasion when he and Dizzy and other members of the group were playing cards backstage. Dizzy pulled out his blade and with a grand gesture and ominous glower stabbed it into the table top. "What's that for?" Mike said.

"That's in case any of you motherfuckers mess with me."

Mike took out a dime and dropped it on the table. "What's that?" Dizzy said.

Mike said, "That's a dime to call the Mafia in case any of you motherfuckers mess with me."

Dizzy hired Junior Mance as casually as he had these others. Junior had been working with Cannonball Adderley. But the group broke up. Dizzy encountered him on the street in New York and asked what he was doing. "Nothing," Junior said.

Dizzy said, "The rehearsal is at my house," and handed him a card bearing the address.

"That's how it started," Junior said. (Jazzletter, March 1997.) "In the three years I played with Dizzy, I think I learned more musically than in all the years I studied with teachers and in music

schools. Besides his being a hell of a nice guy.

"We lived near each other in Long Island. He lived in Corona and I lived in East Elmhurst. Two villages, you might say, right next to each other. I was, like, a five-minute walk away from his house.

"You never knew what he was going to do. I used to try to play at tennis. And so did he. He'd say, 'Let's go play tennis.' I figured we're going to a court or something. We'd go out and find an open field in Queens and just hit the ball back and forth.

"It was always exciting. I remember when the band was in Pittsburgh once. One day he took a walk. He saw a firehouse. Some of the firemen were playing chess. He sat down and wiped them all out. They told him to come back the next day. And he did. He was always relaxed and nonchalant about everything. He was a man who could converse with anybody on any subject. It really amazed me. He could meet people in other walks of life, far removed from music, and hold the most brilliant conversation. He had a picture in his house of him and former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Earl Warren, playing chess on a plane. They had the board on a support between the seats.

"I used to spend time with him in his basement, where he had his own private little studio. He would show me things on the piano. But he never forced you to play any way you weren't comfortable. I got the impression that he knew how you played before he hired you. And by listening to him, I would think you would have to get better. It's like Miles Davis said, any trumpet player who played in Dizzy's big band and didn't improve didn't have it to begin with.

"Everybody who played with him improved. Especially drummers. He made so many guys who were just average drummers into fantastic drummers. I didn't hear Charlie Persip before he played with Dizzy, but somebody told me he was just another drummer. After a while with Dizzy's big band, he was one of the most fantastic big-band drummers, and small-group drummers, around.

"Dizzy had such a great sense of rhythm. He could teach you any kind of rhythm. It was almost as though he'd invented the rhythms. Rhythms you might think you'd been playing right for years, and one little thing he injected would change the whole thing."

About Dizzy's onstage clowning, Junior said, "You see, Dizzy was a master of programming. He'd fit the situation, it was like tailor made for each room. He'd use the same tunes, but maybe in a different way each time. That's one of the things I learned from him, how to program things. So many of the young cats now, they'll get up there, they'll play one tune after another the same tempo, they'll play all they know each tune. They're good musicians, but you can't get an audience that way. Dizzy would mix it up, he knew how to do it. I do it myself. I'll do it in a different way. I'll start with one rhythm or one tempo, and a ballad, then maybe throw a blues in there. But it's all stuff that I like. And this is what I noticed about Dizzy. He wasn't tommying, or bending over backwards to get anybody's attention — even when we played *School Days*. After a while, we began to like

School Days, too, because that shuffle rhythm will get you every time. I like shuffle rhythm. And Dizzy, being Dizzy, when he put that horn up, it worked, and I said, 'Wow, yeah!'"

Junior left to form his own group with Dizzy's firm support and permanent friendship. Like Longo and others, Junior became part of Dizzy's reserve army of musicians who would go anywhere, do anything, for him. Junior played with him for a week at the Blue Note on the last gig of Dizzy's life.

Dizzy experimented with large-orchestra formats. He became deeply impressed by the orchestral writing of the young Clare Fischer, and commissioned him to write an album for him. They decided to do Ellington material. Shipton writes, "It is one of the least successful of Dizzy's big band ventures, lacking the authentic stamp of Ellington's own personality"

I don't think it was meant to reflect Ellington as much as the broader instrumental palette that Gil Evans had explored. If, as Shipton suggests, Dizzy wanted a setting comparable to that Miles Davis had found with Gil Evans in *Porgy and Bess* and *Miles Ahead*, he had found the right arranger. I gather Shipton doesn't know why that album turned out poorly. Fischer arrived in New York from California, charts completed, to find that Dizzy, with the out-to-lunch carelessness of which he was capable, hadn't bothered to book an orchestra. Fischer had to do it at the last minute. Most of the best jazz players in New York were already engaged, and Fischer had to fill in the instrumentation with symphony players. They didn't grasp the idiom, and the album is stiff. In a word, it just doesn't swing. But the writing in that album is gorgeous; its failure is Dizzy's fault.

Lalo Schiffrin presented Dizzy with the *Gillespiana Suite*, recorded in New York November 14 and 15, 1960. It is an interesting album. It uses French horns and tuba instead of a saxophone section. One of the things it has over the Clare Fischer album is a beautifully-booked band of some of the best players available in New York at that time, including John Frosk, Ernie Royal, Clark Terry, and Joe Wilder on trumpets, Urbie Green, Frank Rehak, Britt Woodman, and Paul Faulise on trombones.

An album in this genre that I like is *Gil Fuller & The Monterey Jazz Orchestra*, recorded in Los Angeles in 1967 after Dizzy's early-autumn appearance at Monterey and available on a Blue Note CD, alas now out of print. As in *Gillespiana*, four French horns are used, but no tuba, and there is a sax section. Fuller gets top billing, and his writing is delicious, both in his own compositions and arrangements of two of Dizzy's pieces, *Groovin' High* and *Things Are Here*.

Something had occurred at the Monterey Jazz Festival the year of its opening, indeed in the first moments of its existence, in 1958. No one wanted to "open", the protocol of show business holding that the opening is a demeaning slot. Grover Sales, who was the festival's publicist in its early years, witnessed the incident. Dizzy said, "Shoot, I'll open," went onstage and played *The Star Spangled Banner*. Then Louis Armstrong came onstage. Dizzy got down on one knee and kissed his hand. "A lot of people said Dizzy was clowning," Grover recalls. "He wasn't clowning. There is a photo of that. Louis looks pleased and surprised.

"Some time after that, I played an Armstrong record for Dizzy. He said, very quietly, 'Louis Armstrong was a miracle. Imagine anyone playing that in 1930.'"

Whatever Armstrong had said about Dizzy in the press-fed fervor of bebop's early denunciation, Dizzy never carried a grudge. In the later years, when he and Clark Terry and Armstrong all lived in the same neighborhood in Corona, Long Island, Clark and Dizzy would go over to Armstrong's house, ring his bell, and be admitted. Louis would give them the benefit of his wisdom. "It made him feel good," Clark said.

Presumably Armstrong had grown comfortable with what once had seemed revolutionary. And Dizzy said of Armstrong, "No him, no me."

Alyn Shipton notes, and so did Dizzy's friends, that as the 1960s progressed, he moved deeper and deeper into an inner spiritualism, of which the incident of the golf balls is perhaps an expression. He embraced the B'hai faith. He never talked about it, he never proselytized, but it was there. Shipton quotes Nat Hentoff:

"I knew Dizzy for some forty years, and he did evolve into a spiritual person. That's a phrase I almost never use, because many of the people who call themselves spiritual would kill for their faith. But Dizzy reached an inner strength and discipline that total pacifists call 'soul force'. He always had a vivid presence. Like they used to say of Fats Waller, whenever Dizzy came into a room he filled it. He made people feel good, and he was the sound of surprise, even when his horn was in its case."

I had always found Dizzy an accessible man, and as the years went on, he became only more so, even as he withdrew into an inner peace. I suppose it was comforting to him to know that he was revered by musicians everywhere.

I remember going to hear him at a matinee in the Regal Theater in Chicago, taking my son, who was then probably three, with me. Backstage, Dizzy got down on his knees with him, put his trumpet mouthpiece to the tip of his nose, and buzzed his lips in a tune. My son giggled delightedly; how he got the joke, I don't know. But Dizzy could reach any audience, of any age and apparently any nationality, and those who derogated his showmanship just didn't get it. It was always at the service of his art.

I saw this one night in Ottawa, probably in 1969.

Peter Shaw, a producer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's radio division, stationed in Ottawa, asked me to come up from New York and sing a group of my songs for broadcast. In those days the CBC still generated a lot of original music. He said I could use a fair-sized orchestra. When he asked who I wanted for an arranger, I said, "Chico O'Farrill." Chico was my friend, my neighbor, and Saturday-night drinking companion. We had met in Mexico City, when he was writing albums for, among others, Andy Russell, who by then was living there. When his American career faltered, Andy, who was Mexican by ancestry and spoke Spanish, simply moved to Mexico and became the biggest star in Spanish-language television. From those writings for Andy, I knew how well Chico wrote for singers. Not all "jazz" arrangers can do it. Chico and I went to Ottawa, and recorded that hour of radio.

Later, Peter asked us to come up again and do a concert at a

place called Camp Fortune, an outdoor amphitheater across the Ottawa River in the beautiful Gatineau Hills of Quebec. We agreed, of course. Then Peter called and asked if Chico would consider performing the *Aztec Suite*, which he had composed for Art Farmer. They had recorded it in an album for United Artists.

Chico still had the music. After that we tried to reach Art. But he had moved to Vienna, and was working mostly in Europe. Chico looked at me and said, "How about Dizzy?"

Why not? Chico called Dizzy, who said he'd love to do it.

Back to Ottawa Chico and I went. When the day of the first rehearsal arrived, no Dizzy. His flight had been grounded by extreme storms in the St. Louis area. Chico rehearsed the orchestra. Dizzy phoned to tell us the weather was clearing and he would be there next day for the dress rehearsal and the performance.

Living in Ottawa at that time was a fine saxophonist from Brooklyn named Russ Thomas. Russ had a Russian wife, an exceptional seamstress who had made him several dashikis, not in the exquisite cottons of Africa but in wool, suitable to the winter weather of Ottawa. (It is colder than Moscow, and the winter lasts longer.) I loved them on sight. Russ wore one to the dress rehearsal and brought another for me. They were in beige-and-dark earth tones. Russ and I were wearing them when Dizzy walked in, and all the musicians stood up in obeisance.

I said, "Now see here, Mr. Gillespie, I hope you realize you're now on our territory."

"Damn!" he said, ignoring this. "Where'd you get that?"

I introduced him to Russ and told him Russ's wife had made it.

"I want to wear that in the concert!" Dizzy said.

I took it off and gave it to him.

Then he rehearsed, reading the *Aztec Suite* flawlessly at sight.

Even before the concert, on the phone from New York, I had told Peter Shaw that there was absolutely no way I was going to follow Dizzy Gillespie onto a stage, even if in theory this was "my" concert. I'm not crazy, I said.

But if I opened, it would create an imbalance. Chico and I came up with a solution. We would write a new piece which Dizzy, Chico, and I could do together to close the concert.

I did the first half of the concert. I said I was pleased to be able, for the first time, to do my songs in the country where I was born. I said, "And now, may I introduce my friend Mr. John Birks Gillespie."

Dizzy came onstage in that glorious dashiki, toting his tilted horn, took the mike in his hand as I walked off, and looked around (as was his wont) as if surprised to find there were people there. And there were indeed, perhaps 5,000 of them, spread up the grassy slope of a natural amphitheater. He had them smiling before he uttered a word, and then, when he said, "Damn! I'm glad I'm a Canadian," they roared. He had them, without playing a note.

And oh did he play. Magnificently, soaringly. When the suite came to its end, the audience stood, screaming. But we had prepared no more material. And at this point I was to walk out and do the song, a ballad, with him and Chico. My God! I could never walk out into that inferno of applause. That audience had forgotten I existed, and with good reason.

Dizzy, acting as if he weren't hearing them, got out the music for his part in the song we were to do. It was through-composed, and his music was in a long accordion-fold strip. Somewhat formally, still ignoring the applause, he pretended to put it on his music stand, but dropped it. It spilled on the stage. The audience laughed, and the applause died down a little.

He gathered it up, his horn under his arm, and then went through gestures of putting it back together, like a man who can't quite figure out how to refold a road map. At last he succeeded, and, with an air of ostentatious triumph, put the music up a second time. And it fell again.

This time he stood his horn on its bell, its body tilted at that odd forty-five degree angle. He got down on his knees, put the music together yet again, and had the audience helpless with laughter. He stood up, and put the music back. This time it stayed in place. He held up a hand for quiet, then said into the microphone, "Ladies and gentleman, Gene Lees."

And he and Chico and I did the song.

He had calculatedly broken the mood of his own success, changed the ambience entirely through laughter, and then handed me the audience as a gift. It was incredibly clever, not to say deeply generous, and ever afterwards I understood the meaning of the comedy in the midst of his great and serious art. Shakespeare knew how to use light moments to set up the serious material to follow. So did Sibelius. So did Stravinsky. Indeed, you cannot write tragedy without a sense of humor, for without it, everything is dirge and darkness and boredom. Whether Dizzy had ever given this a conscious thought, I shall never know; but he certainly understood the principle.

Afterwards there was a small party at Peter Shaw's home, the upper floor of a duplex. I remember Dizzy's graciousness to my mother and my sister. My mother knew nothing of jazz, and never understood my fascination, and my sister's, with it. But Dizzy held her enthralled.

For part of the evening, some of us, including Dizzy, were out on Peter's balcony, overlooking the leafy parkland along the Rideau Canal, the glow of streetlamps casting shadows through the trees. More and more, as the years had gone on, I'd found Dizzy's purported rejoinders to Armstrong at the time of bebop's burgeoning hard to credit. I asked him about this, out on that balcony. He said, in a voice as soft as the evening, "Oh no. I'd never say anything like that about Pops."

Dizzy's work in the later years is often seen as a turning away from the revolutionism (although he and Parker denied that it was a revolution) of bebop, a surrender to conservatism. I don't see it that way. I once asked him what he looked for in a tune.

He said, "Simple changes." Perceiving my surprise — he didn't miss much — he added, "If they're too complicated, it won't swing."

I don't think he became conservative. He abandoned the excesses of bebop. And, in the exuberance of youth, they were there. Some of the music of that time now seems cute and coy. Also, Dizzy embraced lyricism in later years, playing ballads with an ardor that isn't there in the early stuff. In any event, it is a pattern for great minds to define their innovations early — and

great innovations always do come from the young, which is well-known in the sciences — and spend the later years exploring, refining, and teaching the revelations of the early years.

To expect Dizzy to continue revolutionism is unreasonable. And, melodically and harmonically, he and Bird and Bud Powell pushed jazz about as far as it could go without abandoning completely the vocabulary of western music. It seems that a lay audience, and one can hardly expect to survive on a professional audience, can follow art only so far into obscurity. Bill Evans and some others refined what Dizzy and his colleagues had achieved, adding a little more derived from European concert music, and it is questionable whether some of what Bill and others did should be called jazz at all. Brilliant, yes, marvelous and moving, but it escapes the bounds of jazz. Dizzy took jazz about as far as it could go. There is something else he achieved. Sonny Rollins, quoted in Ira Gitler's *Swing to Bop*, said it:

"Jazz has always been a music of integration. In other words, there were definitely lines where blacks would be and where whites would begin to mix a little. I mean, jazz was not just a music; it was a social force in this country, and it was talking about freedom and people enjoying things for what they are and not having to worry about whether they were supposed to be white, black, and all this stuff. Jazz has always been the music that had this kind of spirit. Now I believe for that reason, the people that could push jazz have *not* pushed jazz because that's what jazz means. A lot of times, jazz means no barriers. Long before sports broke down its racial walls, jazz was bringing people together on both sides of the bandstand. Fifty-second Street, for all its shortcomings, was a place in which black and white musicians could interact in a way that led to natural bonds of friendship. The audience, or at least part of it, took a cue from this, leading to an unpretentious flow of social intercourse."

Jeanie Bryson said of her father that "he could make people feel so special. He could be so sweet and charming that a person would go away with a broad smile on their face. It wasn't, as you might think from some of what's been written, a black or white issue. If he liked you, he was the same whether you were a dishwasher or a king. He was always laughing, full of life, and, I think, truly larger than life."

She's right. He took all his pain, all his resentment — he once said to me, "Jazz is too good for the United States," but I saw this as a passing anger, and it was — and by whatever mysterious process inverted it all, making himself into the fabulous creature and creation that he was, not only one of the greatest musicians of his century, but also this, especially this: a great healer. That is an achievement even beyond his music; indeed, the music is an expression of it, along with his laughter. All this makes the present induced polarization of jazz a searing insult to the great heart, great soul, great mind, great art, and great life of John Birks Gillespie.

When Creed Taylor was producing the album *Rhythmstick* at Rudy Van Gelder's studio in New Jersey, he asked me to go to Newark airport to pick up Dizzy, who was flying in from Washington for the date. Dizzy came off the plane carrying that rhythm stick, a broom handle (I suppose) with pop-bottle caps nailed to it.

Shaking it, tapping it against his shoe sole, he could produce the most astonishingly complex rhythms. Phil Woods said that when he traveled with Dizzy (whom he called Sky King, because he was always flying somewhere), that thing would set off metal detectors in every airport they passed through. And you always knew where Dizzy was in the airport; you could hear it.

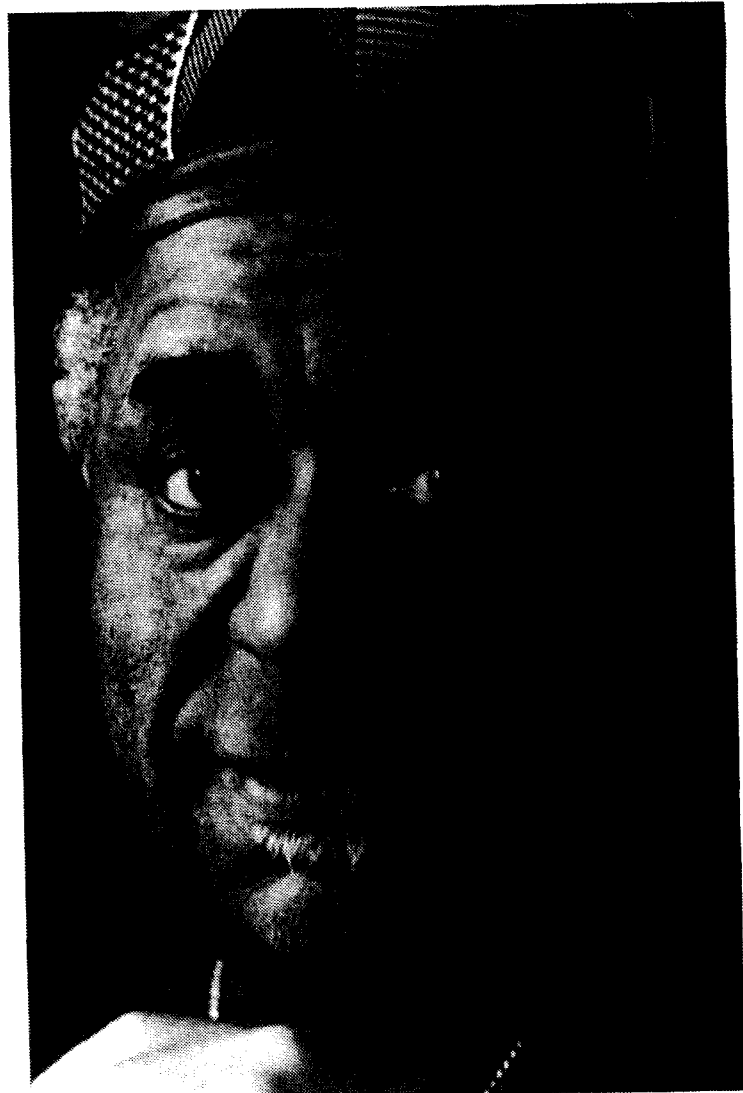
I hadn't seen him for a while, and when we got into the car, I said impetuously, "Gee, Birks, I'm glad to see you."

He tapped his forefinger on his sternum and said, earnestly, warmly, "Me too." I never felt more honored.

My friend Sahib Shihab fell ill with a cancer we all knew was terminal. I called Dizzy (as did Hale Smith), told him, and gave him the hospital number. There was nothing humorous in *that* conversation. He telephoned Sahib almost daily until Sahib died.

Jon Faddis, James Moody, and a few more of his friends were at Dizzy's bedside on January 6, 1993, when he too died of cancer.

It is my privilege that I can say I knew him. And oh yes, this too: once, just once, I sang a song with him.



1990 photo by John Reeves