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We Are Like Atlas

Part Three

"Why do you think," Milt said, "that Antonin Dvorak wrote the *New World Symphony*?

"When he came here from Czechoslovakia to teach, he had a black singer in his class named Harry T. Burleigh. Nobody's heard of him either. Dvorak asked him to sing some of the spirituals. And that's when Dvorak wrote the *New World Symphony*, based on *Going Home*. Harry T. Burleigh became a great singer and sang in the big white churches in New York City. He was a big name. Now nobody mentions him."

I'd heard Burleigh's name but knew little about him. I asked my friend Dr. Dominique de Lerma at Lawrence University — one of the great scholars of black music, including all that which preceded jazz — about Burleigh, telling him what Milt had said. Dominique wrote me a letter:

"Harry T. Burleigh (1866-1949) was a voice student at the National Conservatory of Music, there on a scholarship encouraged by the mother of Edward MacDowell (who had been registrar). She had met him at a winter evening musicale being given at a fancy-ass home in Erie where Rafael Joseffy was performing. Burleigh was outside in the snow, trying to listen through the window. The hostess saw him, called him inside, and supposedly gave him some servant's clothes as a disguise.

"My sources say that Burleigh studied with Dvorak. He did not. He was a voice major. But Dvorak got him often to his residence — way up on something like 15th Street in New York! — to sing all the spirituals Burleigh knew. When in that year, 1893, Dvorak wrote his final symphony to show Americans what (he thought) American music was like, he gave the Second Movement's initial theme to the English horn because, he is said to have remarked, it was most like the sound of Burleigh's voice. Today he might have given the solo to the tenor sax.

"Dvorak encouraged his students to write American music, not pseudo-German music, and as you well know, Will Marion Cook was one of his students. So was William Arms Fischer (1861-1948). Fischer later became associated with Oliver Ditson (1897-1937) in Boston. It was there Fischer set Dvorak's melody to a so-called spiritual text, *Goin' Home*. That was in 1924. The tune is in ballad form, AABA, like *Over the Rainbow*, *Take the 'A' Train*, and *Swanee River*. I know no spiritual in that form.

"*Goin' Home* was often thought to be a real spiritual from the start, but it isn't. Dvorak quoted no spiritual in any work of his.

"Burleigh, a real dicty dude, taught at the school for a bit, even tried his hand at a minstrel show — which I'm sure disgusted him. He became baritone soloist at New York's all-white St. George's Church, high Episcopal, because J.P. Morgan said so. He remained there for a half century, even after Morgan's death, as requested in Morgan's will.

"Since he was free on Saturdays, he was also soloist at Temple Emanu-El from 1900 to 1930, doing such things as singing *Deep River* in Hebrew. I'm on the trail of a recording of Burleigh. Those I've known who actually heard him raved about his voice.

"By 1913, he was editor for Ricordi, in which capacity he published also his own settings of the spirituals, giving the Harlem Renaissance some important literature."

Little wonder, then, that Milt Hinton doesn't want Burleigh forgotten.

Milt said, "I got married in 1939. Mona was in my mother's choir.

" I was in the Cotton Club. The World's Fair was going on. The Trilon and Perisphere. I got a call that my grandmother had died, 103 years old. I left my bass right on the bandstand and I got to Chicago, and all these Mississippi folks had a wake. There was chicken and whisky and talkin' and consoling the family. The house was loaded. And I'm a star. I come in sharp. There were a lot of young girls there, pretty chicks. And my mother gave me hell. She said, 'You come to Mama's funeral and you're looking these girls over. Leave these girls alone!'

"And I saw Mona over there and I hit on Mona. I said, 'Look, I'll be back later. Let's keep in contact.'

"A few weeks later, we were coming back to Indianapolis, Indiana. I called up Mona on the phone. I said, 'Look, I'm going to be in Indianapolis for a week, at the Circle Theater. Why don't you come down on the weekend, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and hang out with me, and then go on back to Chicago.' She said, 'Okay.' I told her to come backstage

at the theater and when you see my bass trunk, tell them you're waiting for me. So she did.

"Now my mother had some friends in Indianapolis. She decided since I'm playing there, she'd come down and see her friends. She walked backstage, and there was Mona sitting on my bass trunk. She raised hell. She said, '*What* are you doing here? Get back on the train, and go back to Chicago.'

"And when I come off stage, she says, 'She's gone back to Chicago.' As if that would stop it. We've been married ever since."

1939 was a major year in Milt's life. Another major figure came into it. Dizzy Gillespie joined the Cab Calloway band.

"Dizzy came into the band while we were at the Cotton Club. Doc Cheatham got sick, and Dizzy took his place. Dizzy had just got back from Europe with Teddy Hill. Dizzy and I got to be very tight. I was young, and he was younger than I."

He was in fact seven years younger than Milt.

"He had a mouthpiece that was so damn brass it was eating through his lip. I gave him five dollars to go and get it plated.

"Dizzy was harmonically miles ahead of me, and everybody else at that time. He'd show me things. At intermission, instead of hanging around and getting drunk, we'd go up on the roof of the Cotton Club and jam. Every night, Dizzy and I would be on the roof, just he and I. There was an old fire escape, winding stairs. He'd help me get my bass up there, and we'd rehearse on the roof. Dizzy would show me some new changes. The flatted fifth, which nobody was using in 1938, altered tenths and thirteenths. We'd rehearse until it was time for the show to go on, and we'd come back down.

"We would go to Minton's and jam every night. A lot of kids would come in, because they know the name guys are gonna be there. These kids got their horns out, they want to get up on the bandstand and jam. There was no room for us to get up there and do *our* thing. So Dizzy said, 'Okay, we're gonna change these changes all around.' The kids are all standing around, and they say, 'Whatchall gonna play?' We say, *I Got Rhythm*,' and we'd play these other changes, then they'd have to get off the bandstand. Black kids and white kids both. They just didn't want no beginners up there.

"When Benny Goodman started the quartet with Gene Krupa and Teddy Wilson, Cab tried to follow suit. He named his quartet the Cab Jivers. He got the four biggest names in his band, Chu Berry, Cozy Cole, Danny Barker, and myself.

"The drummer in the band had been Leroy Maxey. He'd been with the band since it was the Missourians. When Gene Krupa started playing all them drum solos, Cab wanted drum solos. Maxey was a great show drummer, but he didn't know how to take drum solos. Cab got him to take a solo one night, and he got so hung up in it, he stood up and sang the rest of it. Cab fired him, and got Cozy Cole, who was with Stuff Smith and was a hot drummer around New York.

"So now we're doing this thing as the Cab Jivers. Slam Stewart was very big now. Slim and Slim had *Flat Foot Floogie* going.

"We had a piece to play, *Girl of My Dreams*. Dizzy said, 'Let me show you a solo on that. Play it like Slam, use the bow.' Dizzy sang it to me, and played it on his horn, and I used my bow. It goes to a flatted fifth. And I couldn't hear that damn thing. Every night I would play it on the air, and I would look back at Dizzy. If I would get it right, he'd nod, and if I missed it, he'd say, 'Jesus Christ, you stink.'

"This went on and on.

"Dizzy's chops weren't right yet, not like they got to be later. He would start things he couldn't finish. In the band, we didn't mind that he was even *attempting* it." Milt sang a typical Gillespie line and screwed it up. "We'd say, 'That was a great try.' Cab would turn around and say, 'What the hell you got to play that damn Chinese music for?' He was always on Dizzy. And Dizzy would do all kinds of crazy things.

"Cab would be singing a ballad." Milt sang: *I've got you under my skin* . . . . "Dizzy would look out at the audience like he saw someone he knew, and wave. And the people would start laughing. Cab would turn around to see what's happening, and Dizzy sat there like he was in church.

"Tyree Glenn came into the band. And Cab would be singing a beautiful ballad, and Dizzy would act like he was throwing a football. And Tyree would act like he caught it. Just as he'd catch it, Cozy Cole would hit the bass drum, *doom!* And the people in the audience were falling *out*. It drove Cab *crazy*. And he keeps trying to find out who in the hell is doing it.

"We get to Hartford, Connecticut. Sunday afternoon. The band is all set to play. And then comes the spot for the Cab Jivers. We go out front. They drop the lights down on the band. Cab introduces us and goes off in his white suit. He's got two pretty ladies in the wings, waiting for him back there. It's my turn to play the solo on *Girl of My Dreams* and I missed it a mile. I look back at Diz and Diz says, 'You stink!' And Cab is in the wings and sees this. Just then somebody threw a wad of paper up in the air and it landed on the stage in the spotlight, right beside me.

"When the curtain closed, the show was over, the band walked off, I got to put my bass back up on the stand. Cab walks away from these two chicks, and walks over to Diz and says, 'You stupid son of a bitch, these men are out there entertaining the people, and you're playing like you're a kid in school throwing spitballs!'

"For the first time in life, Dizzy hadn't done anything. The guys called Cab Fess. Dizzy said, 'Fess, I didn't do that.' Cab says, 'You're a damn liar. I'm looking right at you.'

Now Dizzy gets kind of mad about this, because he's right this time. He says, 'You're another liar, I didn't do it'

"Now Cab can't have the youngest cat in the band talking to him like that when he's got these fine chicks standing over there on the side. He's the leader. Cab said, 'Get away from me, or I'll slap the hell out of you.' And Dizzy said, 'I didn't do nothin'.

"Cab turned around and slapped his hand upside his face.

"I'm ambidextrous. We used to play with knives when we were kids , like cap guns. Not switchblades, case knives that you throw. I taught Dizzy to do this either hand. If you know how to do it, the blade opens right up. And Dizzy came up with this knife and went right for Cab's stomach. If I hadn't been standing there, Cab would have been dead twice.

"Dizzy was always bigger'n me, and strong. I just hit his hand and deflected the knife. Cab grabbed Dizzy. Cab was a strong guy, and a street fighter, a tough dude. He was one of those Baltimore alley cats. He grabbed Dizzy's wrist, and they had this big scuffle. The musicians were in the band room, and they hear the scuffling, and they rush back out. Chu Berry and Benny Payne, two big guys, pull them apart and push Cab into his dressing room. Dizzy went to the band room. By the time Cab gets into the dressing room, his white suit is red, all the way down his leg. The knife went into his leg when I deflected it.

"Dizzy was scratched on the wrist from the scuffle. Cab walked into the dressing room. Mona was there and Dizzy's wife, Lorraine, was there. Cab said, 'I guess you cats know, this cat cut me.' And he said to Dizzy, 'Get your horn and get out of here.' Dizzy packed up his horn. Lorraine was standing in the door. And they left. And it was quiet.

"The guy who did the spitball did not mention it. That was the sad part about it. It was Jonah Jones.

"We finished the engagement that night and went back to New York. The bus always went to the Theresa Hotel at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue. That was home base in New York. Cab always had the first seat on the bus.

"When we get to the curb, Cab stepped off the bus. Dizzy was waiting. He said, 'Fess, I didn't do that.' Cab just hit him on the hand and walked away. The newspapers and *Down Beat* made it up like it was a big fight.

"It made 'em both famous."

"Did they ever get over it?" I asked.

"Absolutely. When there was a big reunion of the Cab Calloway band, everybody was there. Tyree Glenn, Budd Johnson, Illinois Jacquet. Dizzy was there. Dizzy started some of his antics, and one of the guys said, 'Don't start!' Dizzy went out and played his solo and turned around to the band and said, "Who threw the spitball?" And the whole band yelled, '*Not me!*' And Cab grabbed Dizzy and hugged him and said, 'I know you didn't do it'.

"Later, we were all in Nice, France, and Cab pulled his pants down and pulled Dizzy over and said, 'Feel here,' and put Dizzy's hand on his leg. The scar was still there."

"Dizzy always sent Cab a Christmas card. He loved Cab. Cab was one of our greatest leaders. He was kind to us, he paid us more money. He even paid more money than Duke paid. He was born on Christmas Day. We stopped work December 23. Wherever we stopped work, he gave us our salary and a hundred dollars for Christmas, a ticket home to wherever you lived, and a ticket back to Chicago. We had a contract for years to play New Year's Eve at the College Inn.

"He paid for the pre-natal care for my daughter. He said, 'Have this one me.' It's never been told what kind of man this was, except by people like Dizzy and me. We kept that band together after it broke up, like family. Anybody got broke, got sick, was out of money, we always chipped in. When Benny Payne died in California, we got some money together. It's *still* that way, those of us who are left."

A year after Mona and Milt were married, another figure came into his life: his father.

"He came back to the United States. He was an educated man. His field was agriculture, like Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee. After slavery, we weren't trying to get brain surgeons. We were trying to get people who knew how to be servants, porters, cooks. That's why Tuskegee was built. This was right after slavery. People knew *nothin'*.

"My father was well-versed in cotton. When he went back to Africa, Firestone found you could grow rubber trees there in the same conditions you did in South America, and they built the great rubber plantations in Monrovia, and he worked there. But he didn't get on too well with them. From what I hear, he wasn't a very easy man to get along with, and he didn't take anything from anybody. And he got in trouble there, and he came back to the United States — to Memphis, Tennessee. He got to be a cotton sampler, and that was the best job a black man could have in the South. Every cotton buyer would have a cotton sampler, a black man who knew cotton, Grade A, Grade B. And he would buy according to that man's opinion.

"We were playing Memphis. Benny Payne, the piano player, says, 'I hear your father's in town. Have you seen him yet?' I said, 'No.' I'd just played a bass solo. Benny said, 'He's standing over there.' And he was. He was standing backstage. I looked just like the guy. I didn't know what to say to this man. But he said the right words. He looked at me, and he said, 'Your mother's done a wonderful job.' And when he said that, I hugged him. And I said, 'Let's go have a drink.' And Cozy Cole, Cab Calloway, Chu Berry, and my father and I went to the nearest bar and got stoned.

"I went to the telephone and called my mother in Chicago, and I handed him the phone. His voice was the same as mine, with the half hoarseness, half harshness, and she said, 'Baby,

have you got a cold?' And he said, 'No,' and she knew, and she said, 'Put my son on the phone!' She never saw him.

"He stayed in Tennessee. When they started building the atomic bomb in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, they grabbed everybody who knew about cotton, because cotton acetate is the basis for explosives.

"I don't know what he did there, but they gave everybody who worked at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, a citation, because if the thing had gone up, everybody would have been gone. He died when he was 66 years old. The only thing I have of my father's is that citation from Oak Ridge and his razor."

Many musicians have taken up photography as a hobby, and some have become highly proficient. Stan Levey even turned professional, giving up music as a career. Les McCann is a superb photographer, and a fine painter as well. Milt is one of the best of them. In 1988, Temple University Press published a coffee-table book of his pictures supported by a text in which he recounts his life and times. It's titled *Bass Line*.

"How did the photography start, Milt?"

"Somebody bought me a camera for my birthday in the late '30s. Traveling with Cab, I just wanted to take pictures of the musicians. I wanted to record what I did, and the places that I'd been and the people in my surroundings. And I found that I can do what photographers can't do because I'm a musician. Because I'm going to take a picture, the guy doesn't tie his tie or get his horn. If he does that, I don't take the picture, because that's not what I'm into. I took a picture of Dizzy sleeping in a bus. I just want to catch a guy in a restaurant, eating a sandwich. I got Chu Berry down in Texas, where it was hot as hell, with a big piece of watermelon and he's enjoying it, and he's soaking wet. Places we've been. I've tried to show the stupidity of prejudice. Like a picture in Atlanta, Georgia, of a railway station, 1939. It says *Colored Entrance*. Cab Calloway's whole band. I said, 'Before you go through, guys, let me get this picture.' Fifty years later, you had a black man running for governor there. It shows you the progress that has been made. There's not nearly enough, but we've come a long ways. I took a picture of a sign in Florida that said *No Jews and Dogs Allowed*. Forget me!

"Ray Brown — he was married to Ella Fitzgerald at the time — and I used to stand out on the corner. He was working in one club and Cab Calloway was playing another club. During the day, we walked down Second Avenue, that's the black neighborhood. The club where he worked at night, there was no one there in the afternoon. There was a bass in the back. We'd get a half pint of whisky and take a little sip and he'd play something and show me, and I'd play something and show him.

"One day, I remember, the bar was open in the front, but in the back it's dark. And we heard some cats rehearsing back there. We couldn't see who it was. We listened to the bass player. You couldn't hear much tone out of it. But Ray Brown said, 'That cat sure is keeping good time, man. We're gonna hear more about him.' And the guitar player was playing! And the trumpet player was out of sight. Years later that bass player took Ray's place with Oscar Peterson. It was Sam Jones. The trumpet player was Blue Mitchell. The guitar player killed a woman and went to jail. The saxophone player, the chicks just ruined him and he never made it."

"This brings us to another point," I said. "Milt," I said, "how do you see the line of development of the bass from about the 1920s on?"

"Oh!" he said in a long sigh. "Bass has made more progress than any other instrument in the last fifty years. Listen to Lynn Seaton, or Ron Carter, or Richard Davis. And John Clayton. Fantastic. The epitome of players! The instrument hasn't changed bodily, but the balance of strings has changed, the teaching has changed.

"I heard Jimmy Blanton with Jeter-Pillars down in St. Louis. Bass horn was still the style down in St. Louis. Anybody that played bass fiddle had to emulate bass horn. We played two beats, boom boom, boom boom, budoom-budoom boom boom. That's the way we were taught play. That's what the musicians wanted to hear. And nobody wanted to hear a bass player taking a solo. Pops Foster got a chance now and then to do a little something.

"The word *bass* means bottom. It means support. That's the prime requisite of a bass player, support. Architecturally, it has to be the lowest part of the building, and it has to be strong, or the building will not stand. Musically, it is the lowest human voice. It is the lowest musical voice in the orchestra. It's identifying. If it's a B-flat major chord, I have to play B-flat, or you won't know it's a B-flat major chord. We are like Atlas, standing in support. Now what we're doing today in most instances is not really supporting. We're bypassing that, doing other things as well as supporting. Which is possible to do. Bridges don't need to have columns, we have suspension bridges with cables coming from them. And we're doing the same thing musically with the bass."

I said, "You made the adjustment, through all those styles of the '30s and '40s."

"Right," he said. "Very few guys did."

"And you play in contemporary styles."

"I try. But I'm still using some of the old things that I heard. Like the slap bass, which I got from those guys. Steve Brown was one of my idols. He was fabulous. I listened to his records. He was a better slap bass-player than even Pops Foster, and more exposed because he was with Jean Goldkette and Paul Whiteman. He was a big man. I never met him, but I always loved him. He was on *Rhapsody and Blue* and all those things with Whiteman, and you had to be a

proficient bass player for that music. He was the best slap-bass player I ever heard in my life, amazing. The best in the world. I try to double that, like these young people who double what Blanton did, and all that sort of stuff. Now they're coming to me to find out about this slap bass thing.

"But I'm amazed at *them*, and I'm still trying to find out and continue. Education will make you do that, that you don't shut your mind to any one thing. Not to be facetious about it, all the bass players in all of the big bands down through the years, you don't remember who they were. All they did was that one thing and they didn't keep abreast of the other things. Nobody remembers who was Jimmie Lunceford's bass player. All he had to do was play that two beats, and he never got past that. His name was Mose Allen.

"And that goes for all the other bands. So when the complexion of the dance orchestra changed, Blanton was one of the innovators. He was *also* a violin player. Blanton's innovation was the violin, improvising. The academic knowledge, having the dexterity, the knowledge of the instrument harmonically. I have some records of him before Ellington, the Jeter-Pillars band out of St. Louis, and the guys in the band didn't *like* him, because he was playing all that stuff, and that was not what they wanted out of a bass player. But he was modern, and he wasn't very successful. He was improvising and doing little things in between. They weren't accustomed to that. It was because of Ivie Anderson, who was a very modern lady singer with Duke Ellington, they went down to St. Louis and heard him, and thought it was marvelous. *She* introduced him to Duke Ellington. And Duke Ellington was always looking for the new.

"And they started with those duos. *Pitter Panther Patter.* I've got the write-ups from when that came out. They panned Duke like hell for that. They said, 'What does Duke mean doing this kind of thing, duets?' I call them bass booets. And then the musicians heard it, and could see a vision of what he was about, and they fell in love with it. And other bass players began to emulate it, and as they got more advanced began to do it.

"I was in Cab Calloway's band, and when I heard him, I thought I'd hang up my bass and leave. There was nothing else for us to do. Billy Taylor was with Duke. Duke never fired anybody — he just added Jimmy Blanton. And Billy Taylor couldn't take that, standing there every night and hearing all that wonderful playing. He just quit.

"You have to keep on top of things, keep abreast, keep listening and find out what you can do, and how it works, and appreciating it. And these kids appreciate *me*, they're coming to me and saying, 'Milt, how do you do that slap-bass thing?' And I'm only too happy to try to show them. But it's gonna take practice to do it."

Yet another bassist who began as a violinist was Milt's friend George Duvivier. He studied at the Conservatory of Music and Art and became concert master of the Central Manhattan Symphony when he was sixteen. When Duvivier died in 1985, Ray Brown wrote a piece in his memory to be played by seven bassists, himself, Bob Haggart, John Clayton, Major Holly, Carson Smith, Milt, and John Heard.

John Heard said, "We all played our solos. And then came Milt's turn. He did his animal number. He played slapped bass, he did everything, and he wiped everybody out! It was great."

It would seem, then, that all Milt's life, after the flight from Vicksburg, has been sunny. Not so. He and Mona had one daughter and adopted another, whose son Milt considered his own grandson.

"He was nineteen years old. He was going to be a lawyer. He was to graduate from the New York Police Academy. My grandson was a big guy. Just wonderful. He didn't like to argue with anybody. If he had an argument, he'd walk away. He could move a building over if he wanted to. This kid he knew, who was eighteen, started an argument. He walked away. The kid picked up a cinder block and hit him on the head and killed him and put his body in the trunk of his car.

"I had two condominiums for my daughters where the Jamaica race track used to be. St. Albans. They had keys to our house and we had keys to their places. My adopted daughter was working for the Board of Education. She went to work in the car pool every morning.

After this kid put my grandson in the trunk, a meter maid came along. She started to write a parking ticket and she saw blood. She called the police, and then she left. The police were a long time getting there, and the kid came back and got the car. And he had the keys to our daughter's house. He knew that she went to work, and he decided to go and rob their condominium.

"But my daughter hadn't gone to work yet. When the kid put the key in the door, she thought it was her son. He opened the door and this kid jumped in. She screamed. They had a big fight, and he killed her. He took his clothes off and put on my grandson's clothes and sat down in the house.

"When my daughter didn't show up at work, the people at the Board of Education called. He answered the phone. They think it's my grandson. He says, 'No, I'm waiting for Tommy.' They said, 'Elizabeth didn't get to work.'

"He said, 'Well, she thought of coming later.' And she's in the kitchen dead.

"The police had traced the car to the parking lot. They're watching it. They find out where she lives. They go over to the other condominium, and my real daughter says, 'I've got keys to her place.' Meantime, this kid is going back to the car, and they catch him. My daughter and the police go to my adopted daughter's place and open the door. When she saw what had happened, she went berserk. We almost lost her

too. She was put in the hospital, and we thought she was going to die.

"It was a dark day in our life.

"They sent the guy to jail."

Somehow Milt and Mona survived even that. I suspect that his passion for teaching is one of the things that sustains him.

"Clark Terry and I have gone to black universities, like Morgan State, and the faculty teaching don't know about people like Harry T. Burleigh, and we tell them these things, the black kids particularly, to give them some impetus about their heritage, some inspiration. Kids have to have role models. There's a book by a man named James M. Trotter called *Musical People of Color.* It goes back to 1845 and tells about the time of slavery, when free blacks became great singers and great writers and opera singers. Joseph White, a great violin player, went to Cuba and France and won medals and was a friend of Rossini's. And our black kids don't *know* about these things. James Holland, whose music for guitar is on the market to this very day. And Blind Tom. This book has got the reviews he got from all over the world. This is a wonderful book. We need this to give the kids something to aspire to.

"In the Jewish religion, the kids learn about the Maccabees and Eliazar, the great priests who held up the faith, and defied kings. Jewish children can read about these things. And we don't have that kind of thing in our race, and it's important.

"I love doing clinics. Sharing my expertise. And not teaching but advising, encouraging, setting a role model. Telling the kids from where we've come, where it is now, and where *you've* got to go, because these young ones have got to do *better.* If you don't do better than what's happening now, you haven't made any progress. I try to tell them how you should carry yourself, and what's required of a professional musician.

"This music came up on the North American continent. That includes Canada, because it is part of this continent. Everybody's contributed to this music, whether Indian, Canadian, black, white. We have to use the academics that people get and put it together with the creativity of other people, and we form something that is truly American.

"It's like plastics. I took a course in plastics. Plastics can be made from waste material, and under heat and pressure it becomes another substance with none of the properties of what it came from. If you wanted to make plastics in Iowa, you would use corn cobs, the parts you throw away, and under heat and pressure you make a plastic sheet material that has none of the properties of corn.

"This is what was done in music in America. All of this has been under the heat and pressure of the North American continent, and we concocted music that has European and African and Asiatic background, and it becomes American classical music. And it is constantly changing, according to what waste materials we use.

"I'm a descendant of slave Africans and black Africans, but it's African. Other people come from the intermarriage of American Indians and black people. Because they were on the low part of the totem pole, they kind of hooked up together there.

"But what we really want to do is be Americans. We're all on this American continent together, man."

Milt continued to perform well into his eighties, producing that big, gorgeous tone and powerful beat, but time slowed him at last, and he eventually gave it up. For years he was a regular on the jazz cruises of the S.S. Norway, and it was on one of these that I was able to interview him over a period of several days.

The night of his 90th birthday tribute at the Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College arrived, June 13, 2000. Forty musicians played. According to the *New York Times* no concert ever went more smoothly. Produced by David Berger, it was directed by John Clayton. Milt and Mona — who is as much loved in the business as Milt — were in the audience with his friend Jack Lesberg, now 80 years old.

The players included Russell Malone, Benny Green, Howard Alden, Art Baron, Jimmy Heath, Frank Wess, Joe Bushkin, James Williams, Renee Rosnes, George Wein, Dick Hyman, Randy Sandke, Jon Faddis, Kenny Davern, Dennis Mackrell, Jackie Williams, Warren Vaché, and more paid their loving tribute. At one point there were 18 bassists on stage, including Bill Crow, Ron Carter, Christian McBride, Jay Leonhart, Brian Torff, Kyle Eastwood, and Richard Davis. All the musicians were chosen by Milt.

"We all had a wonderful time," Bill Crow said. "Everybody had a chance to play something for Milt and Mona. And the packed house seemed enchanted."

The *Times* story, by Ben Ratlif, noted that Milt made his first recoding in 1930 with Tiny Parham.

"Mrs. Hinton," Ratliff reported, "stood up and asked the crowd not to leave without stopping by to say hello. The concert's proceeds benefitted Mr. Hinton's scholarship fund. Concertgoers were given bags of M&M's as they left — for Milt and Mona. It was a charmed night."

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