

“I Just Came to Hang with You Guys”: Instructional Storytelling with the Storied Jimmy Heath

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I remember being a kid, and going to some concert and seeing some musician talk about their lives and being so enamored with it and so fascinated and driven to work really, really hard. – Stefon Harris¹

The passing of legendary saxophonist, arranger, and composer James Edward Heath (1926–2020) signaled an unsung end to a bygone era.² Born the same year as icons—and some-time bandmates—Miles Davis and John Coltrane, Heath became one of the few remaining stewards of his specific historical jazz corner. As his aptly titled autobiography, *I Walked with Giants*, indicates, Heath regularly collaborated with innovators at the center of this tradition.³ A cursory review of these associations tags such notables as Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Clifford Brown, and Sonny Rollins among other luminaries.

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¹ Stefon Harris quoted in “PBS Wisconsin Music & Arts: Jazz Fest in Eau Claire – Special.” <https://www.pbs.org/video/wpt-presents-jazz-fest-eau-claire/>. Accessed July 8, 2021.

² Heath grew up in a family so immersed in music that three of its children would make it their lifelong profession: Jimmy, bassist Percy Heath (1923–2005), and drummer Albert “Tootie” Heath (1935–2024). “My family had jazz in my home,” recalled Heath. “That’s where it came from—the family—you know, encouraging each child.” Jimmy Heath, masterclass, Scofield Auditorium, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, April 23, 2016. According to Ted Panken, “Heath and his older brother Percy were growing up to a household soundtrack featuring Duke Ellington, Benny Carter, Count Basie, Jimmy Lunceford, Erskine Hawkins and Louis Jordan. Sometimes they heard their heroes at the Earle Theater, Philly’s TOBA [Theatre Owners Booking Association] outlet. Heath fell under the spell of Carter and Johnny Hodges, and at 14 received an alto saxophone, which his father (an auto mechanic who played clarinet in an Elks band) purchased for \$90 on an installment plan.” Panken, “Rarefied Air: Jimmy Heath Lives as a Musical Giant with his True Tenor Saxophone,” *DownBeat* 69, no. 5 (May 2002): 38.

³ For a complete list of Heath’s career collaborations, see his monograph with coauthor Joseph McLaren, *I Walked with Giants: The Autobiography of Jimmy Heath* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010). Entitled “Unique Names,” its exhaustive first appendix is particularly revealing in this regard.

Heath's departure also marked the loss of a certain type of advocacy for this music's heritage that was common amongst artists of his generation. Celebrated members of his milieu forged connections to audiences through a stage presence that tempered undeniable authority with humility and affability. Seldom matched, they cultivated nostalgic, romanticized notions of the mid-century jazz scene. A hallmark of his later career, Heath shared such perspectives drawn from his extensive personal history in jazz at concert and festival appearances steadily into his nineties.

In April 2016, a then 89-year-old Heath accepted an invitation to headline the 50th annual Eau Claire Jazz Festival in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. This article attempts to capture the essence of Heath's instructional style and contributions to festival culture at large by spotlighting his involvement in this particular event. Framed by the dichotomy of his mentorship onstage and off, it presents a case study of unique engagement with younger players, providing a rare opportunity to pore over and contextualize these interactions across a concentrated two-day period. Drawing heavily on his own words, this study showcases the impact of Heath's dual approach—as a jazz legend directing performance on the one hand contrasted with a more informal, though heightened function as storyteller behind-the-scenes on the other. It also reveals Heath's views on his own role within the important but often inaccessible learning processes of interaction, practice, and growth in jazz.

As this discussion will detail, considerably more was at work when Heath told his stories than a simple recounting of history or even autobiography. He was in fact teaching, and quite intentionally at that. While outsiders may underestimate their true significance, telling these stories lay at the crux of a bona fide instructional method—a pattern of approach that becomes evident upon closer scrutiny of Heath's rhetoric. In actuality, most of his tales operated within a carefully attuned pedagogical schema in which Heath adapted recollections for the shifting benefits of his divergent audiences.

Spanning a spectrum of formal and informal interface, three social environments typically comprise the jazz festival: concert, masterclass, and rehearsal. Distinct storytelling modes may be grafted on to each of these backdrops: stories one shares with a general audience, with specialists in a technical discussion, and with younger musicians gathered to practice. In response to these settings, Heath developed more than one way of telling a story—occasionally the same story—to realize comparable instructional moments in different situations. This study makes these comparisons, as well as their implications, explicit. While formal festival presentations featured his arrangements and playing before live crowds, out of view Heath tended toward more casual, analogous exchanges “backstage,” most notably while holding a pre-

concert chat with the same university students who formed the big band he led on stage. With characteristic charm, Heath held court equally well in both settings by wielding a balance of self-deprecating humor and infectious enthusiasm. The nature of Heath's disclosures—that is, *how* he relates to his various audiences—lies at the core of this examination. What does he share with, or withhold from, a concert audience as compared with students in a rehearsal or masterclass? How do these choices differ and to what ends?

TELLING YOUR STORY

The notion of telling one's story has long been closely affiliated with jazz. "Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom," observed Charlie Parker. "If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn."⁴ Speaking to the tradition's improvisatory demands, the practical application of this aphorism still passes for advice to newcomers. Paraphrasing his idol, Heath affirmed: "Improvisation is the important ingredient in jazz. You can read the music that's on the paper, okay? That's good as a training mechanism. But when you stand up and perform a song, and you improvise on that song and develop it, that's when you're telling *your* story."⁵

But the historical record also abounds with stories of a different sort: anecdotal metaphor. These stories operate as historiography.⁶ "This is the story of jazz, as told by the musicians whose lives *are* that story," opens the introduction to the iconic collection *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*. "This is the story—

⁴ Charlie Parker quoted in Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff eds., *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya: The Story of Jazz as Told by the Men Who Made It* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., [1955] 1966), 405.

⁵ Heath, quoted in "PBS Wisconsin Music & Arts: Jazz Fest in Eau Claire – Special." Aired December 19, 2016. <https://www.pbs.org/video/wpt-presents-jazz-fest-eau-claire/>. Accessed July, 8 2021. For a detailed study of this first type of storytelling in solo improvisation, see Brian Harker, "Telling a Story: Louis Armstrong and Coherence in Early Jazz," *Current Musicology* 63, 1997: 46-83.

⁶ A sizable corner of jazz scholarship consists of tomes devoted exclusively to documenting anecdotal history from primary sources, most often presenting transcribed conversations edited in the vein of Shapiro and Hentoff. Among a host of others, see Stanley Dance, *The World of Swing: An Oral History of Big Band Jazz* (Boston: Da Capo Press, [1974] 2001); Fred Hall, *More Dialogues in Swing: Intimate Conversations with the Stars of the Big Band Era* (Ventura, CA: Pathfinder Publishing of California, 1991); W. Royal Stokes, *Living the Jazz Life: Conversations with Forty Musicians about their Careers in Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); and a more recent survey of those somewhat lesser-known, up-and coming figures in the present-day jazz scene—Jeremy Pelt, *Griot: Examining the Lives of Jazz's Great Storytellers, Volume I* (Peltjazz LLC, 2021).

and the stories,” the editors offer, “that musicians tell.”⁷ Naturally, relaying episodes from the past that contain jazz essentials has remained seminal to the music’s perpetuation. But in many ways the act of recounting—or *retelling*—such tales has itself become more vital to this longstanding didacticism than the original stories themselves. Put simply, most jazz musicians are, after a fashion, gregarious. This tendency often reflects a broader impulse to share knowledge and skill sets with one another, and those embellishments that creep into this recycling further echo a shared fondness for improvised variation among the participants.

Consider a demonstrative example. In the film *A Great Day in Harlem* (1995), saxophonist-composer Benny Golson relates an anecdote in which he realized that a melody he bothered to transcribe from a dream one night turned out, in the light of day, merely to be “Stardust.”⁸ During a seminar screening of this documentary years ago, I recall a student announcing with newfound insight—and some measure of disappointment—that Golson had “revealed” the exact same confession as part of his recent appearance at our university jazz festival in 2008. This metastory illustrates two important details. First, it documents that Golson had been telling and retelling this particular story for at least fifteen years (and likely a good deal longer before the film immortalized it). Second, its longevity testifies to Golson’s enduring investment in telling such stories and their import. Though his misunderstanding here is itself unremarkable, Golson’s clear commitment to repeat it all the same is not so easily dismissed. For while trading anecdotes may be commonplace to the jazz experience, divining their purpose can often be elusive. Storytelling tropes permeate the practice of everyday jazz—from the idiosyncratic group dynamics of band member relationships, bonding rituals, and shoring up morale to working through challenges and celebrating shared triumphs. These associations signal the nontraditional means by which aesthetics are passed from musician to musician across generations of players.

In this sense the storyteller mode—so often taken for granted—proves to be far more important to jazz education than is commonly acknowledged. It transcends the strictly technical pedagogical realm of basic musicianship to offer supplemental learning that rounds out the budding jazz artist’s awareness and

⁷ Shapiro and Hentoff., *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, x. Though partly written as a counterpoint to widely circulated unflattering clichés about jazz artists, this important volume invited listeners into the professional musician’s inner sanctum. As such it was among the first treatments to acknowledge this dimension at the core of the jazz experience with sincerity and, in so doing, initiated and validated an important new mode of scholarly inquiry.

⁸ *A Great Day in Harlem* (documentary film), Jean Bach, director, Castle Hill Productions, Inc., 1995.

sensibility. Heath actively embodied, if not exuded this process. His student interactions attest to the power of these exchanges and his enduring sway over inspiration by example.

THE JAZZ FESTIVAL FORUM: HEATH'S *MISE EN SCÈNE*

Heath made the solemnity with which he regarded his part in reaching younger players patently manifest. "You know," he recollected, "they said jazz was dead when I was a kid":

And here I am, getting ready to be ninety, and I see all of the colleges around the world with jazz programs. And all these kids are very enthusiastic about learning from the masters of the past. So if I can offer anything to them—an experience and tell them anything—that keeps the music going. I think I'm serving my purpose being here on the earth.⁹

To decades of attendees, Heath's jazz festival appearances were an opportunity to see the artist in his element. They served as the ideal format to witness Heath deliver his ideological intoxicant to the masses.¹⁰ The remainder of this article addresses Heath's festival settings in turn. Figure 1 diagrams the spectrum of Heath's formal and informal storytelling modes as they played out at the Eau Claire Jazz Festival.

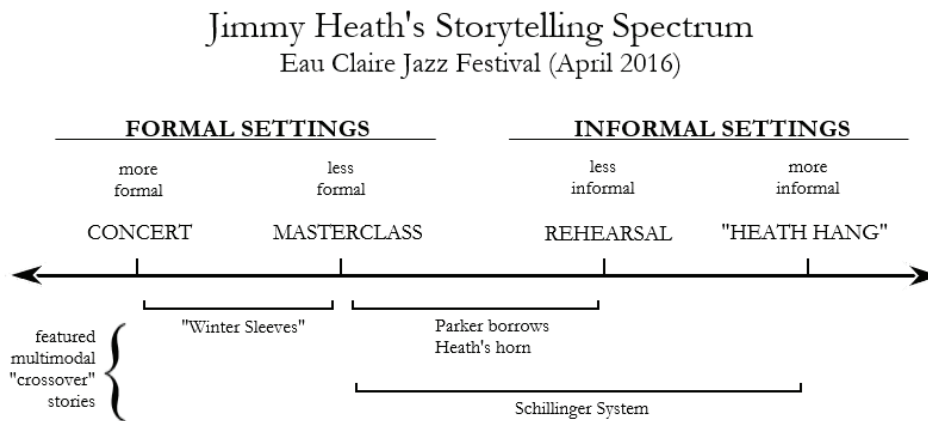


Figure 1. Heath's Storytelling Modes (50th Annual Eau Claire Jazz Festival, April 2016)

⁹ Heath quoted in "PBS Wisconsin Music & Arts: Jazz Fest in Eau Claire – Special."

¹⁰ From 1987 to 1998, Heath also taught as Professor of Music at the Aaron Copland School of Music at Queens College, City University of New York where he spearheaded a prominent jazz studies program.

Heath's festival remarks included three twice-told tales of note that crossed over between two discrete modes of communication. Where one describes the whimsical origins of his composition "Winter Sleeves" to formal concert and masterclass audiences, another shares with members of the masterclass and rehearsal a formative episode in which Charlie Parker borrowed his saxophone. Still another passing masterclass reference to his training in the Schillinger compositional system is later expanded upon during an extemporaneous pre-concert student gathering. These examples where public and private modes of instruction align offer insightful glimpses not only of Heath the performer (his career, technique, or musical standards) but also how jazz internalizes and disseminates its special brand of imparting meaning and conferring value through storytelling.

"ROYALTIES FOR MY MELODIES, PLEASE!": FORMAL MODE—MASTERCLASS & HEADLINER CONCERTS

Masterclass & Crossover Lessons

Following an impromptu combo performance of the Jerome Kern classic, "All the Things You Are," Heath opened his masterclass with a practical appeal to storytelling:

As far as improvisation is concerned, it is what jazz is all about. It's telling your *own* story and it is very democratic. It's democracy at its best. I don't care about all that presidential stuff, and all that arguing one against the other. I know one thing: we never played together. But when I played the melody and I improvised, then I let the *piano* player tell his musical story, then I let the *bass* player play *his* story and tell what he wanted to play on *his* instrument, then the drummer plays, and they *all* play together and we play something that we've never played together and it *works*. But everybody gets a chance to speak their musical knowledge in their field—tell *their* story.¹¹

Heath's expansion on this well-worn allegory sets up an important music-theoretical framework—one that introduces the central idea behind his seasoned improvisational approach:

Well, this is the first time we've played together, and we just decided to play a standard Broadway composition. It's quite a complicated composition in that we, as improvising musicians, always seem to try to

¹¹ Heath, masterclass, Scofield Auditorium, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, April 23, 2016.

really figure out how it was written. And, in this particular case, analyzing is like improvising. You analyze what the composer has done, and you try to elaborate on that when you're improvising.¹²

It is worth noting just how sophisticated a concept Heath tries to communicate here, especially as he is speaking to an audience of primarily inexperienced—however aspirational—younger players. Shaped by a lifetime of composing, his notion that the key to informed improvisation lay in tackling a work's analytic dimensions may seem a foregone conclusion. But the essence of his claim—that improvising is a form of analysis—is not as immediately apparent. Heath then expounds upon this thesis with technical details demonstrating his point:

Now, I found out—[in] every one of [its] chords—the melody note ends up on the third—either a minor third or a regular third of the chord. It starts out with an F minor. And then it goes to a Bb minor, and the melody note is still on the minor third of Bb minor. Then you got to an Eb7 and the melody's on the third of *that* chord. So now, [the composer] didn't do this without knowledge of science. You know, music is science and soul together. And when you have that, you have music—when you can do that. It's a very intricate melody to improvise on. It's very difficult. So, in analyzing it, if every note's on the third, you see what you can do.¹³

"I'm as much a composer as I am an improvising musician," Heath avowed, returning to the running theme of composition at the heart of his outlook. "I think composition is very important, and you all should be writing melodies."¹⁴ Selling his analytic guidance more as an active, even exciting discovery process, Heath foregrounds voice leading and passes over the usual cliché simply touting music's scientific and artistic duality to detail how this fusion operates:

You know, it's a *numbers* game! I studied with a guy named Rudolf Schramm who taught a system called the Schillinger System, which was *all* mathematics. And you will find, if you learn those things, mathematics and music are close. And people who are into one or the other discipline are

¹² Heath, masterclass, Scofield Auditorium, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, April 23, 2016.

¹³ Heath, masterclass, Scofield Auditorium, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, April 23, 2016.

¹⁴ Heath, masterclass, Scofield Auditorium, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, April 23, 2016.

usually good in both. If you're good in math, you could be in music if you wanted to be. But I think composing is very important.¹⁵

During the early 1970s, Heath forwent album releases to seek out formal instruction with Schramm at Carnegie Artist Studios.¹⁶ Named for composer, music theorist, and educator Joseph Schillinger (1895–1943), the eponymous “Schillinger System of Musical Composition” peaked by mid-century and stressed non-serialist mathematical processes to free elements of melody, rhythm, counterpoint, and even extended forms from traditional stylistic strictures.¹⁷

Later into the festival weekend during a dinner conversation with students, Heath expanded on his training after one member of the college ensemble asked if he had ever studied with any of his distinguished associates:

Not with those. Those guys are my peers. I didn't study with them. I studied with Gil Fuller, you know. I studied with a guy named Rudolf Schramm. The Schillinger System. You know the Berklee School of Music? Before it was Berklee, it was the house of Schillinger. Quincy Jones and a lot of people studied the Schillinger System. I think Gershwin probably studied Schillinger. It's a number system, you know? And it helps you to write suites and extended works. You know? So that's what I did. Studied with him for two years, and I was able to write about sixteen or twenty extended pieces.¹⁸

¹⁵ Heath, masterclass, Scofield Auditorium, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, April 23, 2016.

¹⁶ Housed directly above Carnegie Hall itself, the Carnegie Artists Studios were built in the 1890s to welcome artists from a variety of fields (acting, sculpting, architecture, music, painting, and photography among others) as part of Andrew Carnegie's wish to foster a wide-ranging creative community in New York.

¹⁷ Widely rejected by the academic community owing to perceptions surrounding its overly prescriptive, commercially minded approach, Schillinger's system was already disfavored by the time Heath started his schooling—most notably stricken from the curriculum at Berklee College of Music (formerly the Schillinger House of Music as founded by Schillinger devotee Lawrence Berk) after decades of promotion. For an overview of Schillinger and his legacy, see Warren Brodsky, “Joseph Schillinger (1895–1943): Music Science Promethean,” *American Music* 21, no.1 (spring 2003): 45–73.

¹⁸ Heath, Jazz Ensemble I dinner chat, Memorial High School, Little Theater (Room 1310), Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016. Heath credited his first extended piece, *Afro-American Suite of Evolution* (1973), directly to his time with Schramm. “It was all about a numerical system that helped me to find all kinds of different chord sequences you might not think of intuitively on your own. I met with him at Carnegie Artist Studios and studied with him for two years, and as a result I wrote my first extended piece, *Afro-American Suite of Evolution*”...with African

In broadening his remarks for student performers behind-the-scenes with references from Gershwin to Berklee, Heath acknowledged the sophistication and usefulness of his compositional approach as well as its relevance to up-and-coming musicians. As a case in point, Heath demonstrates the professional advantages of applying his analytic acumen to composition in the time-honored bebop contrafact tradition:

Do you know “Autumn Leaves?” Thirds again, right? Yeah. So, I wrote a song called “Winter Sleeves” based on “Autumn Leaves” so I could collect the royalties for my melodies *please!* Okay, see now what that allowed me to do is to use somebody else’s chord pattern and write my own melody. Consequently, I can collect the royalties for my melody because you can’t copyright a chord pattern. If you could, think about George Gershwin writing “I Got Rhythm.” There’s a million songs written on “I Got Rhythm” changes. So you could put your own melody on “I Got Rhythm” changes or blues changes—which is the most understood sequence in the world. You can play a twelve-bar blues anywhere you go. I’ve been all over the world and people understand the twelve-bar blues. So think about writing your own melodies, it’s very important to be able to improvise and come up with your own melody. A lot of melodies are taken from other people’s compositions, so, you know, you can do that.¹⁹

Through each of these discussions, Heath carefully gradates his learners’ perception of the benefits an awareness of composing can bring to performance. He models well not only how to analyze, but also how to approach and think about it effectively with intentional, functional purpose. Next, Heath doubles down on the compositional mandate:

How many out there have been composing? Anybody out there been trying? How do you go about a melody? You go intuitively to write a melody? Okay, that’s a good way. Do you write from a given chord structure sometimes? You know if you write a melody *without* the chords, you have more possibilities of harmonizing. Don’t know if we have enough time for that. I did something this morning where I had a little lyric and I had a little melody that only has three different notes in it. The reason being that if your melody only has two or three notes, there are more possibilities of harmonizing that melody in different ways. You understand that? Because if you got ten different notes in your melody, it’s going to dictate one particular order. You won’t have two chords that fit that

percussion, a big band, strings and a choir. He took me to the next step.” Heath quoted in Dan Ouellette, “Jimmy Heath: Diz to Today,” 32.

¹⁹ Heath, masterclass, Scofield Auditorium, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, April 23, 2016.

melody. So the bebop time [in which] I came up was kind of complicated. They weren't doing that—just taking simple melodies.²⁰

As before, Heath immediately demonstrated his broad idea with a few specific examples (aided this time by the onstage pianist):

So, now, if you play three notes, say A, G, and C. [Pianist responds.] Okay. Now what chord could that be? It could be C chord. Right? It could be an A minor chord. Play an A minor chord. [Pianist responds.] Okay. Now play an F major chord. [Pianist responds.] Seven, major seven. E-natural. [Pianist responds.] Now play a D minor eleven chord. Now there's still those same three notes that will work. So you already played three or four different harmonic patterns. So now, suppose you play an Eb13, a nine and a thirteen. [Pianist responds.] See? As modern as you want the harmony to sound because you've got only three notes in the melody. So you may have more harmonic possibilities. But I just wanted to interest you in the composition more than just improvising.²¹

Note how persuasively—and clearly—Heath introduces the complex idea of melodic concision. The value of writing from melody first so as not to limit potential harmonic contexts advances his case about generating thoughtful composition. At the same time, Heath's skillful execution demonstrates an example illuminating the more practical side of storytelling and brings the introductory notion of his masterclass full circle.

Revisiting “Winter Sleeves” later that night in concert, Heath pared back his detailed masterclass coverage of the tune's origins to its rhyme-schemed talking points:

We're going to play a composition based on a standard entitled “Autumn Leaves.” My song I call “Winter Sleeves” so I can collect the royalties for my melodies, please! I found out from Dizzy that you can't copyright a chordal pattern, so a lot of people have written songs on Gershwin's “I Got Rhythm” and they all go to the bank too! So I said, “Ok, I'm going to get some of that too!” It's not plagiarism. You can't get sued for that. Only for the melody.²²

²⁰ Heath, masterclass, Scofield Auditorium, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, April 23, 2016.

²¹ Heath, masterclass, Scofield Auditorium, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, April 23, 2016.

²² Heath, Eau Claire Jazz Festival headliner concert, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 22, 2016.

“Thank you very much for Sleeves like these. Not sleaze,” he clarified in jest.²³

These examples demonstrate Heath’s special brand of instruction through storytelling and—more to the point—*retelling* in varied contexts. As his purpose changes with his audience, so do the dimensions of his story’s point. As concertgoers have neither the time nor the expertise to appreciate the expanded technical demands of his masterclass lesson, Heath’s adjustments here evince clear intent. He was not simply telling stories for their own sake, but shaping them for the situation. Stories became his pedagogical tools.

HEADLINER CONCERTS

Speaking from the concert stage in between numbers (see Figure 2), Heath’s comments to the audience, while necessarily curtailed, aligned with his earlier public remarks. Some even reproduced points made during his masterclass verbatim. Working his usual charm in short doses, he quickly endeared himself to a packed house of admirers: “Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen. The first composition was entitled ‘A Sound for Sore Ears.’ I took that from the idea when people say, ‘You’re a sight for sore eyes,’” Heath explained, “when they haven’t seen you in a while.”²⁴

<u>Composition</u>	<u>Arrangement</u>
“A Sound for Sore Ears”	big band*
“Gemini”	big band*
“Winter Sleeves”	jazz combo**
“Gingerbread Boy”	big band*

**UW-Eau Claire Jazz I Ensemble*

***Heath with Bob Bowman, bass; John Kizilarmut, drums; Peter Schlamb, vibes; Michael Shults, alto saxophone*

Figure 2. Heath Headliner Concert Program (50th Annual Eau Claire Jazz Festival, April 2016)²⁵

²³ Heath, Eau Claire Jazz Festival headliner concert, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 22, 2016.

²⁴ Heath, Eau Claire Jazz Festival headliner concert, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016.

²⁵ Duplicate program presented at Memorial High School (Eau Claire, Wisconsin), April 22 and 23, 2016. The Saturday April 23rd included an encore performance of “On Green Dolphin Street” with the same combo personnel replacing Shults with Stefan Harris on vibes and featuring Schlamb on piano.

Introducing the next tune with a personal touch, Heath disclosed:

The next one we're going to play is a jazz waltz that I wrote for my daughter [Roslyn] many years ago. She happens to be a Gemini. Gemini's astrological sign is kind of strange. I have a brother [Albert "Tootie" Heath] like that too. He's a Gemini.²⁶

Stoking the crowd, Heath added that "Miles Davis was a Gemini," and—mustering a gravelly voice—channeled his esteemed leader: "If I play what I used to play, I'll have a heart attack!" Following a carefully timed pause before his punchline ("He still played the same song!"), the audience howled in delight.²⁷

Heath's truncated comments ahead of the last number broadened his familial context. While on stage he indicated merely that "This title is 'Gingerbread Boy' and it's dedicated to another one of my children," during rehearsal he explained the title's racist origins.²⁸ He recalled being chided during the pregnancy, "You're going to have a little gingerbread boy!"—a reference to his son's biracial parentage.²⁹ In sharing this passing reminder of the casual racism inherent to the era in which his tune originated, Heath delicately stressed a pointed historical lesson reserved only for his captive, and perhaps more receptive audience of student learners.

At the conclusion of the first night's headliner concert, Heath remained on stage, making his way around to shake the hands of the rhythm section and speak with audience members. Before departing he made a telling request of the festival organizers in anticipation of the second concert the following night. "I don't know the names of the soloists," he observed. "You know? I think that would be nice." When it was suggested that specific names need not matter, he retorted, "It does if it matters to *them!*" Years later, as testament to both his advocacy and the success of his outreach, one student saxophonist who performed under Heath as part of the university big band noted, "I had a solo on a tune, and I had transcribed one particular lick from his solo from the recording, and when I played it in the performance he immediately recognized

²⁶ Heath, Eau Claire Jazz Festival headliner concert, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016.

²⁷ Heath, Eau Claire Jazz Festival headliner concert, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016.

²⁸ Heath, Eau Claire Jazz Festival headliner concert, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016.

²⁹ Heath, UW-Eau Claire Jazz I rehearsal, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 21, 2016. After Roslyn (b. 1960), Jeffrey Heath (1963–2010) was Jimmy's second child with his wife Mona Heath (née Brown), who was white.

it and gave me a big smile.”³⁰ Such indelible impressions were the bedrock of Heath’s enduring impact.

“I JUST CAME TO HANG WITH YOU GUYS”: INFORMAL MODE—REHEARSAL & PIZZA

Rehearsal & More Crossover Tales

Heath’s first encounter with the university jazz ensemble took place at a late-night rehearsal session in which he led the group through a few of his charts, making suggestions and sharing anecdotes along the way. After correcting a piano melody on “Gemini” led Heath to point out that Wayne Shorter had stolen the lick for “Footprints,” he dismissed the accusation a moment later, acknowledging that all jazz musicians rob from one another. In another response to a student’s question about favored trumpeters, Heath proffered: “I like Freddie Hubbard, Miles, Dizzy, Clifford Brown. Fats Navarro used to kick Miles’s butt. That’s it. Lot of people.”³¹

As for many budding jazz players of his day, Charlie Parker proved Heath’s greatest formative influence. But the young Heath had the unique advantage of knowing the bebop founder and his circle personally, likely by way of his brother Percy’s ever-expanding professional network. “At that time they were calling me ‘Little Bird.’ I was trying to play everything that Bird played. I couldn’t do it,” he confessed. “Nobody can.”³² During an extended question and answer session with the jazz ensemble, Heath shared an endearing story about playing his horn after lending it to Parker in 1948:

[Parker] came to Philadelphia [and asked] “Can you help me? Can I borrow your horn?” So I knew what he was doing wasn’t so legit. So I would take the horn to the Downbeat Club in Philly. He had Max and Miles and Tommy Potter and Duke Jordan. And I’d take the horn up there every night and Bird would play my horn. I would make sure at the end of the gig that I’d got my horn back and take it home to my mother’s house in the basement cellar. He’d leave the white real hard [Brilhart] mouthpiece on it because he was commuting back and forth to New York because he had to get medication. So I’d bring it back the next night and he would use it. I was playing the same old corny stuff. I just found out right there that it goes right through the horn. It doesn’t stay in there. I thought Bird put in

³⁰ Angie Coyle, correspondence with author, November 16, 2020.

³¹ Heath, UW-Eau Claire Jazz I rehearsal, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 21, 2016.

³² Heath, Eau Claire Jazz Festival headliner concert, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016.

my horn all that good stuff that would stay in my horn forever! He was a very nice guy in spite of his shortcomings. One of the greatest pictures of all time for me [to] have [is] Bird play[ing] my horn and Trane looking at him [dumbfounded]. See, because a lot of people think Trane started the music, but it's a continuum—generation after generation.³³

Compare the abridged version of this same story he told at his masterclass during the next day of the festival:

Charlie Parker borrowed my horn because his was in the pawn shop and he played it for a week. He would leave his real hard white mouthpiece on there and give it to me, and I'd take it back to my mom's house where I was living in the basement and I would try and say, "Oh my gosh, Charlie Parker played my horn last night and all that stuff is *still* in there!" That was the dumbest idea I ever had! All he played went right through! And when I played, it was still the same dumb stuff I was playing before he showed. I have this picture of that that I always give to my students at Queens College because Coltrane [was] in the reed section in my band looking at Bird [playing my horn] with a cigarette in his hand, [mouth wide open]. Because people think the saxophone started with Coltrane, but it didn't. It starts with all your predecessors. And you have to listen to them to learn where *you* want to go. You have to have one foot in the past and one foot in the future, and that's when you can progress musically. All right?³⁴

In each of these recastings, Heath extracts a slightly different message from his stories as appropriate for the listeners on hand. For his earlier audience of rehearsing students, he elaborates—however discreetly—on Parker's addictive lifestyle. But the informative outlook here ultimately lies with what unifies each retelling. Less a series of loosely related permutations, these differences are bound by their function within a pedagogical finessing Heath implements across the festival's various modes of learning. In each scenario, Heath uses this story instructively, bringing the narrative around to his larger perspective on generational legacy—a notion upon which he intentionally expands in front of the masterclass audience. In both forums, the young Heath's incredulity over the realities of practical playing experience neatly affirm Parker's own testimony: "If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn."³⁵ Unsurprisingly this

³³ Heath, Eau Claire Jazz Festival headliner concert, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016.

³⁴ Heath, masterclass, Scofield Auditorium, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, April 23, 2016.

³⁵ Charlie Parker quoted in Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff eds., *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*, 405.

compelling story was one among a number that Heath regularly recycled in public and private, formal and informal settings during his many festival appearances over the years.³⁶

Further linking Parker's lessons to his own, Heath also recognized the challenges he faced in his professional life owing to his own addiction and subsequent imprisonment.³⁷ "I didn't make a solo record until '59," he conceded to his festival band members.³⁸ "I felt good about having signed a recording contract," Heath wrote, "but not so good about the restrictions that were put on me by my probation. I had to wait nine months before I was released from those, around early 1960."³⁹ Though detailing these impositions, his autobiography does not mention perhaps the greatest professional cost for this hiatus. While Heath awaited release from prison on May 21, 1959, earlier that same spring—on March 2nd and April 22nd at Columbia Records' 30th Street studio in New York City—his former leader Miles Davis recorded the seminal album *Kind of Blue* with Heath's close friend, John Coltrane, on tenor saxophone. "I mean, I was with Miles before Coltrane," he noted.⁴⁰ "I introduced Miles to Coltrane."⁴¹

³⁶ Another popular crossover story Heath shared at both rehearsal and masterclass—one, if a quick search of Youtube is any indication, he retold time and again in various settings—involved a formative inducement toward the saxophone as his instrument of choice: "I got to tell you a story. [Percy] was playing the violin and he had a teacher, Professor Pugsley. And a pug is a fighter. You know? And this man had the longest pencil I've ever seen. When my brother Percy [bowed], *Bop!* He hit him on his hand every time he missed a note or something. And my father said, 'Jimmy, what you want to play?' I said, 'Not the violin!' Professor Pugsley turned me off to the violin. I like the strings, you know. I mentioned the Kronos [Quartet]—writing for them—and one symphonic piece I wrote when I was teaching at Queen's College. You know, strings are beautiful. But I didn't want to play it with Professor Pugsley." Heath, masterclass, Scofield Auditorium, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, April 23, 2016. Heath also references this episode in his autobiography. See *I Walked with Giants*, 4-5.

³⁷ For detailed coverage of Heath's heroin addiction, arrest record, and prison sentence (including his extensive compositional and performance activities while incarcerated), see his autobiography, *I Walked with Giants*, 62-89.

³⁸ Heath, Jazz Ensemble I dinner chat, Memorial High School, Little Theater (Room 1310), Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016.

³⁹ Heath, *I Walked with Giants*, 102.

⁴⁰ Heath quoted in Panken, 41.

⁴¹ Heath, UW-Eau Claire Jazz I rehearsal, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 21, 2016. Expanded comments in 2002 contextualize the lasting impact of this period with broader perspective: "I was scheduled to go with Max Roach when he started his group.... I was scheduled to go with Tadd Dameron when Benny Golson got the gig. But due to illness, I couldn't make either one of those. I was on the rebound from a love affair, and it tempted me as something to get out of the doldrums. Then it took on a life of its own. It deterred my recognition as a jazz soloist; it was the time when small group jazz took hold, and I was not on the scene.... Being away stifled my career, but it saved my life. Most of those I

Understandably, a half-century later Heath's discussions around this episode—arguably the most significant missed opportunity in jazz history—waiver between contradiction and deflection.⁴² Though candid in publication about his early struggles with substance abuse and the nearly half-decade incarceration he served in the late 1950s, he was considerably less forthcoming about this part of his story in person. When asked directly to respond to the rumor that he had been invited to appear on *Kind of Blue*, Heath clarified:

No. I wasn't on the scene when he made that record. I was on the scene when Trane left. I had been with Miles before. Then I went away to college. We don't need to get into *that!* I went away to college for four and half years. I was playing with Miles in 1953. When I came back home, Trane split and I went in the band for a little bit after that. *Back* with Miles, because I had been with him earlier with the Symphony Sid All-Stars.⁴³

Heath's approach to reframing this particular tale is revealing. Among the earliest personal episodes he broached with the university big band at the festival,

was out there with are gone." Heath quoted in Panken, 41. About his work through the mid-1950s, Heath acknowledged, "I was recording with the good guys, but I wasn't a leader. This is what using drugs did to my career." Heath, *I Walked with Giants*, 78. Panken summed up Heath's career leading to his imprisonment as follows: "Heath moved to New York in 1952.... He immediately cemented his credentials as an improviser-composer-arranger with the Symphony Sid All-Stars, a group with Miles Davis, J.J. Johnson, Milt Jackson, Percy Heath and Kenny Clarke. Their repertoire is documented on a Davis-led 1953 Blue Note sextet on which he played brilliantly and contributed 'C.T.A.' During that year Heath also recorded with Kenny Dorham for Debut and with Johnson for Blue Note, the latter date marking Clifford Brown's first recording. He seemed poised to claim his place as the next major voice from his generation on his instrument. Then he was arrested on a heroin charge, and went to prison for four-and-a-half years." Panken, 40-41.

⁴² Heath's only mention of *Kind of Blue* in his autobiography surrounds an ironic invitation to attend an event celebrating the album's impact: "Jimmy Cobb, who was with Miles in 1959, and I were asked to attend the book signing for *Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece* [2000], by Ashley Kahn. Cobb was the only surviving member of Miles's group who had recorded on the album. When Kahn called me earlier asking me for a statement about being in the Miles's band just after the recording, I was surprised. I asked him why he was writing a book about one recording. He said, 'You don't know?' I said, 'No.' He told me that *Kind of Blue* (1959) was the biggest-selling jazz recording of all time. I was shocked." Heath, *I Walked with Giants*, 253.

⁴³ "That was Symphony Sid [Sid Torin] and J.J. Johnson, Milt Jackson on the vibes, Miles Davis on trumpet, my brother Percy on bass, Kenny Clarke on drums, and myself on tenor. And that was called the Symphony Sid All-Stars. And Symphony Sid didn't play nothing! A fan asked me, 'What's Symphony Sid play?' I say, 'He played microphone: Ladies and gentlemen, here's Miles Davis!' But he had the group, you know." Heath, UW-Eau Claire Jazz I rehearsal, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 21, 2016.

he replaces well documented instances of substance withdrawal and prison sentences with vague euphemisms referencing illness and “college.” Meant to suggest he went away to serve time, Heath’s jocular misdirection concealed his discomfiture discussing a subject he once described as taking care of “our stupid business” in front of a band of young students.⁴⁴ Ultimately it proved the one story he would not retell.

Another related series of rehearsal exchanges humanized the mythological Coltrane by renewing a few oft-told tales about his character and practice regimen:

[Coltrane] was the most humble, nicest guy. Even more than me! I don’t think I ever heard Coltrane curse. He was very spiritual and very sincere and dedicated. At that time people weren’t concerned with, “Hey, we’re going to make a lot of money.” All we wanted to do was play as good as we could and hope that people would like it. It ain’t like that [now]. Coltrane was a very humble person and he practiced all the time. He said he practiced “Giant Steps” two years before he recorded it.⁴⁵

Turning to more technical matters, Heath couched his own struggles overcoming Davis’s modality within Coltrane’s challenges:

Well, *Kind of Blue*—I played that with Miles. I hadn’t been used to playing in the modal; no final cadence at the end of the chorus. You just stay in that mode. It was difficult to learn to play like that. I like changes that move around like “All the Things You Are” and songs that have repetitious cadences that go around the keys. I can do that. But when I got to playing with Miles, I said, “Miles, how you play on *Kind of Blue*?” He said—this is very simple, but it’s true—“Oh, you play all the white keys and then [on] the bridge, you play all the black keys.” I said, “Oh!” That helped, you know? He said that at the Apollo Theater Coltrane wouldn’t stop. He’d play so long they’d be blinking the lights because they had a show, they had a movie in the theater too. They’d be blinking the lights, and Trane would say, “Miles, I couldn’t find nothing good to stop on.” [Davis] said, “Take the horn out of your mouth! You can’t play without *it*.”⁴⁶

Beyond new insights Heath’s storytelling offers about the fabled conscientiousness of his friend, these stories—as does so much of the experience in making jazz—concern people. Whether featuring Coltrane, Davis, or Parker,

⁴⁴ Heath, *I Walked with Giants*, 69.

⁴⁵ Heath, UW-Eau Claire Jazz I rehearsal, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 21, 2016.

⁴⁶ Heath, UW-Eau Claire Jazz I rehearsal, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 21, 2016.

each of these tales underscores the interpersonal relationships that drive these figures through a collective history: their collaborations, teaching, achievements, influences, and, by extension, their values. Learning that Coltrane struggled in earnest to round off his modal phrasing is itself rendered comparatively immaterial. It is Heath's humorous cadences that stick this narrative landing in the minds of his listeners.

Lastly, while expanding yet again on the primacy of melody, Heath returned to his emphasis on improvisation as a function of studying harmonic scaffolding:

Well, I'm a Scorpio and I really like melody. You know, sometimes now, there's *no* melody. Today's music. There is no melody. It's just the beat and a lot of cursing on top. You know, music's got three ingredients: rhythm, harmony, and melody. Those three ingredients—you got to have all of that for me. Debussy and Ravel. They had some great melodies. As far as jazz is concerned, beboppers were the most. You want to touch me as a composer? Kenny Dorham. Kingly Dorham from Texas. He wrote more beautiful love songs. Tadd Dameron wrote beautiful ballads. Kenny Dorham wrote beautiful ballads, you know. Broadway people—there's some great songs, man. There's some *great* songs. Harold Arlen? People like that. I've got their books. I studied them. You know, to improvise you've got to be able to analyze. Hear what somebody else did, and you can figure out—say, “Ok, what can I do different?” That's part of it. Improvisation is the root of jazz. You know everybody can sit around and read parts, but when you stand up and you tell *your* story musically—that's what you got to work on. There was a lot of people I heard when I was a young man. When I heard Glen Miller's band live, I was only fourteen years old. They played “Serenade in Blue” and put a blue light on the saxophones. “Oh man, one of these days I'm going to be up there like them guys!” It was so beautiful.⁴⁷

Here Heath pivots elegantly from issues of melody and analysis to interrelate and reinforce many of the themes he would touch on throughout his appearances at the festival. These include the importance of recognizing inspiration across generations to sketching *his* path— notions resonant with his later masterclass advice: “You have to listen to them to learn where *you* want to go.”⁴⁸ Heath frames all of it within telling one's story: his.

⁴⁷ Heath, UW-Eau Claire Jazz I rehearsal, Memorial High School, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 21, 2016.

⁴⁸ Heath, masterclass, Scofield Auditorium, University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, April 23, 2016.

“Heath Hang”

“Pizza!” exclaimed Heath upon entering a pre-concert gathering of university student band members just hours before their final headliner concert together. “Never had a piece of pizza in my life! I’m a ‘blandatarian’ so I don’t like spicy food. Onions? And garlic? My mother spoiled me.”⁴⁹ He then initiated his impromptu arrival with dramatic references to a thirty-year-long heart condition:

That’s when I had to stay home with my limited diet. Well, I have to eat low cholesterol food anyway. I have a problem with [silently points a forefinger against his chest]. So I eat chicken breast and fish. That’s it since the ‘80s when I got sick over in the North Sea Jazz Festival. So I’m just stopping by to watch you guys have your pizza. Only pie I like is apple pie, piece of peach pie, piece of blueberry pie, piece of sweet potato pie. But no *pizza* pie. All them other pies I can handle. So enjoy. “Salmon Davis, Jr.” they call me! Salmon—ooh, I could eat salmon every day. And it’s good for me with the heart problem. Salmon is good, or chicken breast. I can’t eat no more steak, no more ribs, or no more bacon, no more ice cream since ‘86. I just came to hang with you guys for a minute because I’m going to the hotel and eat my favorite—salmon. You all can have pizza.⁵⁰

This informal, private visit over dinner—what he coined a “Heath hang”—was by far his most personal, relaxed appearance at the festival. By openly sharing health issues concerning his 1986 angioplasty, Heath called attention not only to his impressive longevity, but also stressed those lifestyle decisions that have allowed him to continue to write, play, and contribute to student understanding in person through 2016. More importantly, he established a visceral, extra-musical connection of a very different sort. Rather than shrinking from this moment, Heath instead embraced the opportunity to bond with his backing band over his own frailties and discipline.

In making a point to stop by this student get-together, Heath clarified his *modus operandi* perhaps better than any other appearance at the festival and signified the value he places on creating these types of interactions. Countering his repeated declaration (“I just came to hang with you guys for a minute”) Heath instead lingered for a time to offer a running commentary on many of the figures with whom he had worked—and nicknamed—over his long career. With a copy

⁴⁹ Heath, Jazz Ensemble I dinner chat, Memorial High School, Little Theater (Room 1310), Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016.

⁵⁰ Heath, Jazz Ensemble I dinner chat, Memorial High School, Little Theater (Room 1310), Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016. On Heath’s health incident abroad, see his autobiography, *I Walked with Giants*, 200–201.

of his own autobiography in hand, Heath started musing over the list of arrangers and composers commencing Appendix A, “Unique Names”:

Oh yeah, I got a whole batch. Whoa. Benny Carter? Carter’s Crossings. Billy Childs: Childs’ Styles. John Clayton: Clayton’s Crayon. Remember the bass player, John Clayton? He writes such beautiful music. I say, “Man, you can’t write music like that with a pencil. You have to write with a *crayon*. It’s so *thick*—voices and everything. So I call him “Clayton’s Crayon.”⁵¹

Urged on by pages of prompts, Heath treated students to a stream-of-conscious, rapid-fire history lesson. In the sweeping survey that emerged, swift remembrances routinely merged larger-than-life figures with mundane details, revealing more about Heath than his acquaintances. Even the decision to assemble such an extensive listing in the first place—one unlike any found in jazz biography—speaks volumes about Heath’s perspectives and creativity. The procession of arrangers continued unabated:

Tadd’s Tenderness: Tadd Dameron. Endless Ellington. Instead of “Duke,” “Endless.” Glorious Gil. For Gil Evans. His music is glorious to me. Foster’s Frostings: Frank Foster, arranger. Gil Fuller: Fuller’s Fire. Do you know what arrangement he wrote for Dizzy? “Things to Come.” That’s *fiery*, isn’t it? Fuller’s Fire. You know this guy gave me and my friend [trumpeter] Bill Massey—he told us he would give us an arranging lesson if we [would] come to his house. First thing he did was hand us a paintbrush. “All right, paint!” He had us paint. I said, “Oh my god. He put us to work, man!” Then he showed us a few little things afterward. “All right. Here’s the paintbrush. Paint that wall over there!” I said, “Oh man.” Golden Golson: Benny Golson. Slide’s Slickness: Slide Hampton, his arrangements. And Quincy’s Quickness. Thad’s Thickness: Thad Jones. His arrangements were real counterpoint, really deep.⁵²

⁵¹ Heath, Jazz Ensemble I dinner chat, Memorial High School, Little Theater (Room 1310), Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016. In one form or another, puns (many of them alliterative) have regularly punctuated Heath’s professional and personal demeanor from composition and album titles—among others, “Picture of Heath” from *Really Big!* (1960), “Chordnation” from Nat Adderley’s *That’s Right!* (1960), “A Sound for Sore Ears” from *The Gap Sealer* (1972), “One for Juan” from *Love and Understanding* (1973), *Peer Pleasure* (1987), “Trane Connections” and “Ellington’s Stray Horn” from *Little Man Big Band* (1992), *Turn Up the Heath* (2006)—to nicknames for fellow artists and even inanimate objects. One festival student noted Heath’s constant reference to his saxophone stand as “Stand Getz.” Angie Coyle, correspondence with author, November 16, 2020.

⁵² Heath, Jazz Ensemble I dinner chat, Memorial High School, Little Theater (Room 1310), Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016.

Confronted with these windows into his past, students were held spellbound as Heath reminisced over a fraction of the associations from his colossal appendix, including his own tireless teacher, Dizzy Gillespie. “This is what I’ll tell you about Dizzy,” he offered quickly. “Dizzy was a teacher, and he was showing us voicings and stuff. He was always doing that.”⁵³

Turning specifically to individual bassists, Heath interlaced his running commentary with mounting humor, starting with an anecdote about the realities of playing with Ron Carter followed by reactions to George Benson’s vanity, and concluding with the eccentricities of Benny Green and Thelonious Monk:

The bass players. Blanton. Jimmy Blanton: Blanton’s Breakthrough. He was the one that started the walking bass. Jimmy Blanton. Now, Ron Carter? I say “Carter’s Clock” or “Ron Cartier.” So fashionable. When I was playing with Ron Carter and he says, “Hey, man! Time to get off, man!” I say, “Well, let’s finish the song at least, man!” He’s always watching his clock. If we [were] supposed to play forty-five minutes, when it hit forty-five, Ron Carter’s ready to get off. So I call him “Carter’s Clock.” He’s always watching the clock, man. I said, “What? We in the middle of the song, man!” “Well, take it out!” [Carter directed.] I said, “Okay, Mr. Carter.” It’s one of his little “idiot-syncretasies.” You know what I mean? You like that one? “Idiot-syncretasy?” Yeah. “Idiot-syncretasies....” Gorgeous George: George Benson. I think he had a little touch up. You know what I mean? I think he had a little plastic surgery. He had a little facelift. Fluid Flanagan. That’s Tommy Flanagan, boy. He could play. Erroll Garner: Garner’s Groove. Benny Green, piano player? I call him “Benny Mean.” Benny Green. I just heard something on this morning I was playing that Benny made on a record with me. Me and Joe Henderson and Arnett Cobb. You heard of Arnett Cobb—old man who played the tenor saxophone? Played with Lionel Hampton. He’s like a preacher on the tenor. He could get the house, man. The house would be [shouting enthusiastically] because he could honk and scream and yell. So we went through three generations of tenor. I think it was in Germany, and we made this record. And Benny Green was playing with Art Blakey at the time. He was on the record with Benny. And he’s a little eccentric, Benny Green. We were playing in Taichung, China, and Benny—I don’t know what possessed him to go lay on the floor, on the stage. While somebody—

⁵³ Heath, Jazz Ensemble I dinner chat, Memorial High School, Little Theater (Room 1310), Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016. “Dizzy Gillespie is my Duke Ellington,” Heath says. “He was my mentor. From the beginning, I asked questions, and he’d give me something I could use musically. He’d tap out rhythms and sing ideas. He showed me how to write in 3, 5 or 7, and syncopate in a way that’s jazz as opposed to straight classical writing. With his whole being he was music, and I wanted to be like him.” Heath quoted in Panken, 38.

Tootie or the bass player—was playing a solo, he got off the piano and laid on the floor. And I said, “Wait a minute, Benny. What’s happening?” But he’s a great piano player, too, Benny Green. You know. Got a little abstract.⁵⁴

When a student asked if he had played with Thelonious Monk, Heath quickly responded: “No! I was *scared* of him! Oh, man. Monk was crazy. You know, he was different, man. I was on the same show with him at the Apollo when [Charlie] Rouse was playing with him. I was playing with Gil Evans’s band and we were on that same show: Dinah Washington, Thelonious Monk, and Gil Evans big band.”⁵⁵

The impression made upon students by Heath sharing personal recollections in this intimate setting cannot be overstated. The candid delivery of his revelations—their honesty, humor, and grace—demystifies his legendary colleagues, serving to decouple them from history if only for the duration of his chat. Priming novices directly with his experiences, this humanizing glimpse in many ways remained the most consequential and lasting perspective Heath’s storytelling passed along. Taking leave of his students, he returned focus to the upcoming final headliner concert performance. “I’m going to get my dinner. I just came to hang for a few minutes,” he restated. “We got to work tonight, right?” When students responded in kind, Heath affirmed, “I’m looking forward to it.”⁵⁶

A LEGACY OF LEARNING

When Jimmy Heath told stories, he was teaching. The snapshots supplied by his appearances at this jazz festival outline a figure intensely dedicated not only to his craft but to sharing it. The portrait formed in relief suggests a man less concerned with his own legacy and more invested in securing the future of the music he helped define for nearly three-quarters of a century. For Heath, that security lay firmly in selling the benefits of embracing a decidedly educational outlook.

⁵⁴ Heath, Jazz Ensemble I dinner chat, Memorial High School, Little Theater (Room 1310), Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016.

⁵⁵ Heath, Jazz Ensemble I dinner chat, Memorial High School, Little Theater (Room 1310), Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016. Another question about presidential musicians prompted the following response: “What-you-call-him tried to play the piano—Reagan! He was sadder than a baby’s funeral playing the piano. How sad can you get? Sad as a baby’s funeral.”

⁵⁶ Heath, Jazz Ensemble I dinner chat, Memorial High School, Little Theater (Room 1310), Eau Claire, Wisconsin, April 23, 2016.

In such an endeavor, storytelling looms large. The space in which this element takes hold—in between the music making itself—fosters a learning curve with the unique capacity to inspire and inform musicians in ways more conventional academic methods do not. In the hands of a skilled, practiced spokesman such as Heath, this potential pledges tantalizing access to knowledge from one of his tradition’s most prolific progenitors. As testament to the centrality of storytelling in jazz ethos, one need only look to the energetic festival atmosphere that surrounds the arrival of an NEA Jazz Master of Heath’s caliber and reputation to lay bare *his* stories for inspection and stimulus—the same “master storyteller” whose memoirs, asserts Wynton Marsalis, “instruct and entertain.”⁵⁷ Plumbing the idiosyncrasies of his technique—to say nothing of the vast historical record his stories encompass—yields essential, otherwise undisclosed truths about the people and practice of jazz not enshrined in textbooks. Over time the appeal of this mastery formed the cornerstone of Heath’s truest jazz legacy.

And though many among his audience may not fully grasp the breadth and meaning of his approach, all of Heath’s listeners come to sense some part of his message’s gravity. In the end, this shared, imperfect awareness of the living history personified before them accounts for why they listened and how they learned. As Heath articulated:

You know, music is a thing that you have to stay with your whole life. It’s gonna be with you until you pass. Music is one of those kind of subjects and loves that you have in life, that you’re gonna always want to learn something new. And there’s always something new. When you stop learning, it’s over.⁵⁸

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⁵⁷ Wynton Marsalis quoted in Heath, *I Walked with Giants*, xvi.

⁵⁸ Heath quoted in “PBS Wisconsin Music & Arts: Jazz Fest in Eau Claire – Special.”

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