

Foreword



In the Basement

We have to start with family, with the grandparents and the parents, all of the people who offered support. Jimmy's father, Pop, played clarinet in the Elks Quaker City Marching Band in Philadelphia, and Mom sang in the choir after leaving Wilmington, North Carolina. Mom and Pop didn't do this for a living, and it wasn't a hobby.

European people came to the United States with their traditions of classical music. When people say, "Well, do you listen to classical music?" we assume that it's Wagner or Beethoven, but each culture has its own classical music: People from China have their own, people from India have their own, people from Bosnia have their own, and people from Africa have their own.

In all of their neighborhoods, people who migrated to this country worked at various jobs—a watch repairman, a dockworker hauling vegetables off trucks, a fruit-stand vendor, or an auto mechanic. When workers came home at the end of the day, they turned on the radio or Victrola, and after dinner, and maybe a cigar and a half a glass of wine, they shook off the dust from a violin. They weren't planning to go to Carnegie Hall, hadn't studied for that. They played the music that they loved.

In the house in Philadelphia Pop pulls out his clarinet, and Mom sings in the church. There's music in the house, which they bought, and in the house there's a basement. In Philadelphia, in Baltimore, and in Wilmington, Delaware, houses like this were famous for what went on in the cellar,

where there was also the coal furnace and the coal bin. The coal vendor would say, “How much you want?” and the answer might be, “Give me fifty cents’ worth of that cut.” Then the vendor would slide that long shovel down through the hole, past the screen and the window. He would mark off fifty cents’ worth of coal. You could hear the coal slide down into the coal bin like a long drum roll, a press roll, a Max Roach roll, and the coal dust rose up in the air. Then the coal man would pull that long slide out and close up the window, and the coal was ready for the furnace, ready to heat the house.

Blocked off in the basement was a section for getting together, and Jimmy would say to his friends, “Come on. We’re going to play some music.” They would go down into the cellar to practice, to talk about their classical music—African American music, Negro music, the devil’s music, the music of Duke Ellington, Don Redman, Louis Armstrong, Jimmie Lunceford, Erskine Hawkins, Benny Carter, Dizzy Gillespie, and Charlie Parker.

There was young James, and nobody told him what he should be playing. He made his own choices. He played with his friends, but Pop was always there in spirit or in person with the clarinet, their strength and their stronghold.

On Thanksgiving Day in Philadelphia, down Broad Street marched the Elks Marching Band. I saw them, and I probably saw Pop, but I didn’t know who he was. I stood there at Broad and Parrish when the Elks Marching Band went by. I was waiting for Santa Claus, but I was also very proud when the all-Negro marching band passed by, because everything was segregated back then. There wasn’t any integration in those bands, and very few black school bands marched by to fill us with pride. Then came the Elks Lodge all-black marching band. They were resting before they struck up again. The cadence that the drummer struck on the snare and the bass drum, the way they walked, their rhythm, made me feel connected and proud. They hit it, bam, but the drumming was different from those other bands—the kick, the emphasis, the crescendo from the cymbal player. They still played 1, 2, 3, 4, just like everybody else, and they marched straight and stood tall, but I’ll be damned if there wasn’t a little attitude that came through. They just couldn’t help it. There was something mythical, something real, something mysterious. The Elks band continued on down the street, and I could still hear those black men, who were marchin’ on and taking their

attitude, taking their happiness, taking their education, taking their “I work for a living to support my family” attitude along with them. It ain’t a hobby. It’s a love.

Somewhere back there in South Philly there was house with a cellar called a basement, and there were chairs waiting for musicians whom Jimmy had chosen for his band. One of them would say, “Let’s go over this or go over that. Let’s practice this scale or this chord.” They were saying, “Let’s study; let’s learn, yeah.” It’s in the cellar; it’s in the basement. It’s in the mother, it’s in the father, and it’s in the children. When these young men became professional musicians and were playing in a nightclub, it was weird when a patron would say, “Play something where you go crazy,” because nobody was crazy. That’s what people were taught to think, that this music was being played by musicians who were just going crazy. I don’t think so, because it’s in the basement, it’s in the cellar, it’s in the mother and father, passed on to the children to learn and to study.

Bill Cosby
September 2007

Introduction



I guess the old bard summed it up years ago: “To be or not to be.” And then Dizzy went on to qualify it: “To BE, or not . . . to BOP.” What we choose determines what we will be. Choosing is serious business. The most provocative memoirs inspire us to make informed choices in our own lives. That’s why we love to check out other people’s lives. From the pen of a master storyteller, Jimmy Heath’s memoirs instruct and entertain.

Jimmy’s has been a life rich in experience, full of the bittersweet ironies and extremities that make you want to laugh, to cry, and to sing the blues. He tells stories with the homespun humor of a true American original. Through him, we get an accurate take on those fabulous musicians who swung across the globe throughout the twentieth century. Possessed of originality, resilience, pride, and a deep understanding of our common humanity, their lives burned brightly and quickly against a backdrop of segregation and injustice. Still, their music projected the joys and sorrows of real life with unsentimental optimism. It was romantic and wise, virtuosic and earthy—the perfect antidote to the difficulties of modern life.

These musicians believed that times would always be improving and that the syncopated rhythms and on-the-fly improvisations of their brand of jazz would help. They played with a swagger forged in the Great Depression, tested by the war, and proven in the cultural neglect of postwar prosperity.

In the early twenty-first century, Jimmy Heath is one of the last of these jazzmen. Past the civil rights movement, the rock ‘n’ roll revolution, and

the computer age; through generations X, Y, and Z; and up to the hip-hop nation, his presence speaks to the ageless vitality of this music. He stays very much on the scene, composing, arranging, teaching, and playing with wit and vigor. Jimmy brings the generosity of spirit and downright soul that makes jazz worth the dues paid to play it.

At a rehearsal of James Moody's music with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, Jimmy Heath walks in and lights up the room. Men, some of whom are close to sixty years younger than he is, stop playing to salute him. All are happier than they were the moment before. He hugs Moody and calls him "Section." Man, they played at different times in Dizzy Gillespie's saxophone sections in the 1940s, and here they are talking 'bout "Section" as if it were yesterday. One thing is clear—they love each other and this music. The passage of time has only strengthened those bonds.

While there may be some confusion about the identity of jazz in present-day critical circles, in educational institutions, and even among musicians misinformed by both, Jimmy Heath is unquestionably the embodiment of the spirit and practice of this music. He is always showing us how to live in jazz, how to be . . . jazz. Coming into the twenty-first century, there could be no more perfect figure to call us home. He walks that walk, and what he talks is exactly what we need to be reminded of in this moment. Enjoy the words of a master.

Wynton Marsalis
October 2007