Jazz vibraphonist Milt Jackson dead at 76

John Andrews
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One of the few remaining links to the founding of bebop passed away Saturday when vibraphone virtuoso Milt “Bags” Jackson died in Manhattan of liver cancer at the age of 76.

Jackson is best known as one-fourth of the Modern Jazz Quartet, which performed its unique and impeccable “chamber jazz” from 1952 until its dissolution in 1974, with only one change in personnel—drummer Connie Kay replacing Kenny Clarke in 1955. Jackson's death leaves pianist-musical director John Lewis and bassist Percy Heath as the MJQ's survivors.

Following the exuberant Lionel Hampton and more subtle Red Norvo of the swing era, Jackson was indisputably the third great master of the jazz vibraphone. He was the first to translate the new, complex harmonies and rhythms of modern jazz to the instrument, and played always with perfect time and excellent taste. His descendants are plentiful, and include Bobby Hutcherson and Gary Burton.

Although the MJQ was known for Lewis's embrace of classical music formats and the so-called “third stream” school, which attempted to fuse classical and jazz music, Jackson could always be counted on for his swinging, bluesy and down-to-earth improvisations. The tension between the two forms surfaced in interviews Jackson gave after the dissolution of the MJQ, where he criticized Lewis for too tightly controlling the music, depriving it of feeling, as if he were trying to cleanse bebop of its more earthy elements.

I personally agree with Jackson's criticisms, although one might wonder why he spent more than 20 years in such a situation if he really felt that way. I heard the MJQ twice in the early 1970s, once in a nightclub and once in concert. I can still remember how, on both occasions, the band seemed wound too tightly while working through the Lewis arrangements. Relief would come only when Jackson cut loose with one of his patented bebop solos, setting the audience into subtle foot-tapping, head-bobbing motion.

Jackson was born on New Years Day, 1923, in Detroit. Growing up, he sang and played a variety of instruments, including drums and piano (on which he recorded several times) before settling on a relatively new instrument, the vibraphone, a somewhat unusual choice given that he had perfect pitch.

In 1945, Dizzy Gillespie heard Jackson playing the vibraphone in a Detroit bar and immediately hired him for Gillespie's ill-fated first attempt at a big band. After the band collapsed, Jackson joined Gillespie and Charlie Parker in a sextet for what became a legendary two-month engagement at Billy Berg's in Hollywood. Recordings from this period demonstrate that Jackson had not yet fully developed the modern style, but working night after night in a combo with the two great geniuses of the new music obviously had a profound influence.

While Parker stayed on the West Coast (eventually landing in Camarillo State Hospital for seven months because of his drug addiction), Jackson returned to New York with Gillespie and became a leading member of his new and, this time, highly successful big band. Recordings from this later period show that Jackson fully assimilated the new genre. He had become one of its leading voices, and would remain so right up to his death.

Jackson's mellow and lyrical solos formed the perfect foil for Gillespie's screaming high-note trumpet playing. The job presented another opportunity for Jackson. The Gillespie big band arrangements were so demanding on the embouchures of the reed and brass players that Gillespie would rest them by having Jackson play solo, backed only by the rhythm section of John Lewis, piano; Ray Brown, bass and Kenny Clarke, drums. This band-within-a-band format became

the MJQ, Percy Heath replacing Brown.

Besides his work with the MJQ, which continued with reunion concerts into the mid-1990s, Jackson performed and recorded frequently with the best players of postwar jazz. Notable associations included recording dates with tenor saxophonists John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins, and even an unusual session with soul singer Ray Charles. My personal favorite Jackson recording is his appearance on a 1954 Christmas Eve session issued as “Miles Davis and the Modern Jazz Giants.” With a private war going on in the background between Davis and pianist Thelonious Monk, Jackson rips off chorus after chorus of absolutely perfect bebop improvisation on Gershwin's “The Man I Love,” Monk's “Bemsha Swing,” and his own blues, “Bags' Groove.” There are no better examples of modern jazz at its zenith.

The year 2000 means 55 years have passed since the founding of bebop, so those who did not succumb prematurely because of the ravages of drug addiction and alcoholism are now the age for natural death. Trumpeter and flugelhornist Art Farmer, a somewhat lesser-known musician from the same era, also passed away last week in New York City.

Born in Indiana, Farmer first came to prominence along with his twin brother, bassist Addison, in the burgeoning Los Angeles jazz scene of the late 1940s. Farmer became quite well known as the replacement for Chet Baker in the Gerry Mulligan quartet, and as a member of Benny Golson's group, playing on the original recordings of such Golson classics as “Killer Joe.” Farmer, like Jackson, had superlative skills and taste, and refused to compromise his aesthetic vision to commercial fashion.

Repelled by the racism and artistic indifference he encountered in the United States, Farmer moved to Europe, where he made his home for over 30 years. Perhaps some day, wonderful musicians like Jackson and Farmer, and the wonderful music they made, will be appreciated as they should be in the United States as well as abroad.

See Also:

Book review:
The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History
—What bebop meant to jazz history
[22 May 1998]

Mel Torme, an appreciation
[10 June 1999]