

WEATHERBIRD

BY GARY GIDDINS

Master Class

Jimmy Heath Gets His Due

The October 19 and 20 Jazz at Lincoln Center tribute to Jimmy Heath, commemorating his 75th birthday, was called "He Walked With Giants"—a title typical of that series, and also of its unduly modest guest, whose superlative Riverside LPs were once anthologized as *Fast Company* and who himself titled a later album *Peer Pleasure*. Still, the implication that Heath is great by association riles me. I don't want to overstate his claims—merely allow them to stand on their own. Miles Davis and John Coltrane, born the same year as Heath, are giants in a way that he is not, though they both benefited from his skills as bandleader, composer, and player. Heath's achievement is of a different kind. He is primarily a craftsman, one of the most distinctive of his generation. If he remains undervalued even in his autumnal years, when he is routinely accorded living-legend status, it is because craftsmanship has limited charisma, especially when married to understatement, his stock in trade.

In Heath's case, craft is inseparable from melody, which, like comedy, is a favor of the angels—harder to play than drama or rhythm. If you've got the gift, you'd be a fool to sacrifice it. Yet Hollywood is littered with the corpses of comedians who coveted the tragedian's prestige, and jazz saw a generation of lyrical players bite the bullet of rhythms on top of rhythms combined with expressionist howls. Davis and Coltrane, once supreme melodists, could make the journey outward, fired by the force of genius and innovation. When Heath acknowledged the antimelodic fashions of the '70s—overblowing, extra percussion, Afrocentrism, vocalisms—he applied them as painterly touch-ups to an already centered approach steeped in his unique bebop melodicism.

Why unique? It became clear during the big band half of the Lincoln Center concert that Heath, a product of bop, was a child of the swing era whose love of big band bravura gives his tunes a peculiarly robust shine. Except for Heath Brothers albums, where he has usually worked with brothers Percy and Albert on bass and drums and a guitarist or pianist, he rarely records in the typical saxophone-plus-rhythm format, preferring to add at least a couple of brass instruments—French horn and tuba as well as trumpet and trombone. That instrumentation suggests an ear for subtle hues and dynamics, but disguises the unfeigned generosity of his melodies, which give off an orchestral charge no matter how small the ensemble. The tunes themselves make small groups, his and others that have covered them, sound larger. Despite his affection for minor chords, Heath's writing has an extroverted openness and rhythmic finesse that recalls orchestrations from the swing era, when the best and smartest music in the land courted inclusiveness.

I'm not certain precisely what makes some pieces, say Charlie Parker's "Ornithology," which was developed from a lick Bird played on a big band record, sound like combo music, and others, say Bud Powell's "Bouncing With Bud," which was written for a quintet, convey the valorous attack of an orchestra. Part of it has to do with the fact that some heads sound like extensions of what a musician might improvise in a solo, while others bespeak the interactive detail of composition. Of the great jazz



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tunesmiths whose work was often performed in the 1950s—Monk, Silver, Lewis, Mulligan, Weston, Mingus, and Heath among them—none has a more consistent feeling for orchestral attack than Heath, which is especially remarkable if you consider that most of his best known pieces are blues. Though elemental in structure, they are enlivened by substitute chords, rhythmic vamps, rests, and imaginative voicings, not to mention Heath's alert and knowing melodic command.

A good example is "Big P," introduced on *Really Big*, his second of six Riverside discs (one a year between 1959 and 1964, all presently in print), featuring seven winds plus rhythm. The piece is basically a 12-bar blues, but the head is 24 bars, the second 12 a variation on the first with slightly altered chords and a different voicing. The tune, which begins with minor chords and erupts into major ones, is a stately band riff with almost as many rests as notes, at first divided between reeds and brasses, which unite for the climax of each chorus like Ellington in full flower. Cannonball Adderley adapted "Big P," which suited his own inclination for ensemble might, but the Heath piece that ignited his sextet was the blues waltz "Gemini," with its six-note mock-classical call to arms and a written tonical passage that excitingly spells the soloists. Adderley uses bass for the call and flute for the head, while Heath's sextet versions assign both parts to French horn (*Triple Threat*, 1962) or cello (*Love and Understanding*, 1973), underscoring a broader and warmer palette. In all cases, the ensemble mines the give-and-take tradition of orchestral section work.

These pieces not only cast every member

of the group in an essential role; they also stimulate improvisation—Freddie Hubbard, Wynton Kelly, and Cedar Walton, among others, recorded some of their best work of the period on Heath's watch. During a four-year sabbatical from playing in the 1950s, he wrote many durable tunes, including four for the 1956 Chet Baker and Art Pepper sextet LP, *Playboys*. The difference between the way that band plays them and an earlier Heath anthem, "C.T.A.," and two cooler numbers by Pepper, which are decidedly of their time, is startling. In 1953, with Heath on tenor, "C.T.A." had given Miles Davis's band a notable thrust, and in 1966, "Gingerbread Boy"—perhaps his signature piece, with a funky vamp that seems to presage Tony Williams and a memorable blues line—sparked union playing by Davis and Wayne Shorter on *Miles Smiles*, famous for its otherwise discursive heads.

Heath's records never sold as well as those that covered his pieces, but they abide. The *Riversides* prevail as boldly gentle reminders of a creative period in jazz when the rules of bop were stretched to breaking, including *Swamp Seed*, with its stirring brass quartet, and the more conventional *On the Trail*, an apparent blowing session (with Kenny Burrell's guitar) that is nonetheless orderly, polished, and varied. Variety was never an issue: *The Quota* opens with two blues that are nothing alike—the title tune, another twice-played (and arranged) theme that leads to four Heath tenor choruses, with trumpet and French horn kicking in at the climax so that you can hardly believe it's just a sextet; and "Lowland Lullaby," which begins with a waltzing 24-bar intro based entirely on a yawning two-note riff that kicks into four for

a melodic theme in which the riff signals rhythmic change-ups in each improvised chorus. No less impressive are the even less well-known albums from the early 1970s, a relatively uncreative period from which *The Gap Sealer*, *Love and Understanding*, *The Time and the Place*, and the rare quartet session *Picture of Heath* stand out as gently independent and fully realized projects. Significantly in this period he wrote his *Afro-American Suite of Evolution*, each movement dedicated to jazz idols of the past, and thus way ahead of the curve for jazz repertory and reverence.

With the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra's performances of "Gemini," "Like a Son," "Gingerbread Boy," "The Voice of the Saxophone," and Parker's "Yardbird Suite" ringing in my ears, I've focused on Heath's writing at the expense of his playing, and yet nothing was more evident than the degree to which Heath, usually limiting himself to two-chorus solos while cheer-leading the younger players as well as a few peers (Slide Hampton, his brothers), outclassed everyone. Initially influenced by Parker (when he played alto he was known as Little Bird), and later by Dexter Gordon and still later by Coltrane, who played in Heath's legendarily unrecorded Philadelphia big band in the late 1940s, he has long since developed a natural, dry, aged-in-the-wood style and timbre of his own. Like his writing, his playing has a candid, sage authority that never calls undue attention to itself. Its meaning stems from feeling, not technique.

Compare his two recorded versions of "The Voice of the Saxophone," playing a borrowed alto (for the first time in 24 years) with a 1974 quintet (*The Time and the Place*), and tenor with the 1992 *Little Man Big Band* (sadly his only big band album, savory despite harsh engineering that favors the rhythm section to no one's advantage). On tenor, he is the soul of authority, brimming with confidence, vigor, and the dark, knowing sound of an old master—appropriate for a homage to Coleman Hawkins. On the alto, though, he recapitulates the poise of untrammelled bop, a yearning back-of-beat sound that Parker invented—it's almost as though the instrument brought him back to another era. He communicates two very discrete moods simply in the way he intones the melody. With Heath's 1972 recording of "Invitation" (*The Gap Sealer*), he proved himself one of the few saxophonists who could play the soprano in tune, focusing on melody notes rather than a shrill wail, more in the line of Zoot Sims than Coltrane. At the concert, the very containment of his solos on tenor and soprano made the more angular assertions of his former student Antonio Hart and members of the orchestra, including Wynton Marsalis, seem overwrought by comparison. They played well enough, but the only soloist who could match Heath's savoir faire was the band's veteran baritone saxophonist, Joe Temperley.

During the first half, Heath actually danced to his solos and others', reveling in a good time he was eager to share, playing Strayhorn's "Day Dream" at a provocatively fast tempo, raising the barometer with a Lesterian one-note ride on his marvelous "Indiana" variation, "Nice People." For the big band half, he chose mostly to conduct, and was just as boastful, because his arrangements never stand still: Every solo at some point gets orchestral commentary, every section of the band fully deployed and on alert. For most of the past three decades, Heath has buttered his bread as an educator, heading the Jazz Masters program at Queens University (he stepped down in 1998). But he teaches every time he unfurls a score or plays a solo. He has quietly, without fanfare, become the soul of jazz, and if you don't pay attention, you will miss something. **U**