

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



DIZZY GILLESPIE

[This is the thirteenth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

Why did Dizzy have those puffy cheeks when he played? Why was his trumpet bell bent upwards? Exactly what is “bebop?” Answers are provided by digging into this musician’s fascinating life. Read on!

John Birks Gillespie was born in Cheraw, SC, the youngest of nine children of James and Lottie Gillespie. James was a bricklayer and musician, so young Edward had access to several instruments. He began to play piano at age 4. After his father died, he was self-taught on trombone at 10 and trumpet at 12. His hero was trumpeter Roy Eldridge, and became so proficient studying Eldridge that Edward received a music scholarship at the Laurinburg Institute in NC.

Gillespie’s first professional job was with the Frank Fairfax Orchestra at age 18, after which for the next nine years he played in a succession of bands led by Teddy Hill, Cab Calloway, Lionel Hampton, Earl “Fatha” Hines, and the great Duke Ellington. During that time, his usually-jovial personality and mischievous behavior (such as carrying his new trumpet in a brown paper bag) earned him the nickname, “Dizzy.” It was during this period that other musicians noticed his refreshingly different solo trumpet playing, using the upper register notes above high C, his blazingly-fast tempo, his new rhythms and chord changes.

This radically-different approach led to his original compositions and arrangements, such as *A Night In Tunisia*, *Con Alma*, *Groovin’ High* and *Salt Peanuts*. After Ellington, he formed his own quintet and played on 52nd Street in NYC. Later his band included Charlie Parker on Alto and Bud Powell on Piano. His West Coast debut followed, with Parker, vibraphonist Milt Jackson, bassist Ray Brown, among others. In his memoirs, *To Be Or Not To Bebop*, he remembered that his audience would ask for one of his numbers without knowing the tune’s name, and would ask for “that bebop stuff.” The local press picked up on it and Bebop was now a legitimate jazz style, with Gillespie as the Grandmaster.

Throughout the 1950s, he led small combos that served as test tubes for young talent like John Coltrane. His influence in the music world defined Modern Jazz, and continued to build on this theme for the next 30 years.. His many accomplishments and accolades include: Appeared at the first Newport Jazz Festival – 1954; led a U.S. State Department world tour as the unofficial jazz

ambassador; first bandleader to use a conga drum player, employing Latin rhythms and an Afro-Cuban style of polyrhythmic music.

At age 72, in 1989, nothing was going to slow Gillespie down. That year he:

- Received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Grammys ceremonies
- Received the National Medal of Arts from President George H. W. Bush
- Gave 300 performances in 27 countries
- Appeared in 100 U.S. cities in 31 states and DC
- Headlined three TV specials
- Performed with two symphonies
- Received the Commandre d'Ordre des Artes et Lettres – France's most prestigious cultural award
- ... and recorded four albums in his spare time!

Succumbing to incurable pancreatic cancer, Gillespie died in 1993, married 53 years to Lorraine Willis.



Oh, right! The puffy cheeks and bent trumpet. Some pundits claim he blew his trumpet so hard, his cheeks gave out (see accompanying photo). Others, medically inclined, opined that his neck glands were permanently swollen. My own thought is that Dizzy perfected an “air-bridge,” a technique which allows a small amount of air to remain trapped in the mouth (in my case, playing saxophone, between the upper teeth and upper lip). The effect gives a certain softness or sweetness to the resulting tone.

As to the bent trumpet, the story goes that a pair of featured dancers fell onto Dizzy's bandstand in 1953 at Lorraine's birthday bash, bending the trumpet, and that it altered the tone, which Dizzy really liked. Maybe! But I prefer to believe that the great innovator, Gillespie, was just Dizzy being Dizzy!

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as “Just Me 2”, a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com. See them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic