ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

I Walked With Giants: The Autobiography of Jimmy Heath
Jimmy Heath
Temple University Press
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The title of Jimmy Heath's autobiography is a bit misleading. He didn't just walk with giants, he was, and remains, a giant. The influence of Heath's musical arrangements alone would put him on that stroll with the greats, but his compositions and his playing-what a unique tenor sax sound!-places him up there with Charlie (Bird) Parker and John Coltrane. That's some company for a mild-mannered little guy from Philadelphia.

Rife with anecdotes and fascinating facts, one doesn't have to be a jazz aficionado to appreciate what is essentially an oral history of jazz from the 1930s through the present. For instance, Charlie Parker was so influential in bebop (which he virtually invented), that many young musicians shied away from the alto saxophone because Bird seemed to have said it all and said it so well already. It is also one of the reasons a young Jimmy Heath turned to the tenor sax to express himself.

The book is structured around Heath's recollections and then buoyed by a roll call of such eclectic and legendary performers as Dizzy Gillespie, Cedar Walton, Roy Haynes, Dave Brubeck, Dave Bailey, and the incomparable Jamaican pianist who links these generations, Monty Alexander. Alexander's reminiscence of Heath is particularly eloquent:

There's no one like himÂ…His music always has a smile on it, a good feeling. When I saw him performing at the Vanguard in October 2007 for his eighty-first birthday, it was like being in his living room. He brings that family concept and great entertainment, a great uplifting experience. You can't forget it.

This autobiography is a little choppy simply because of the plethora of voices paying homage to Heath. But what emerges is the camaraderie among the jazz players of that older generation. One would be hard pressed to find a band or a big name player that Jimmy Heath didn't play with. And so it is with most of them. Not that there wasn't the usual bickering that goes along with bands traveling together, but ultimately it was what you said with your music that counted the most. It is uncertain whether that mentality has carried on to this day, especially in our world of variant and crossover music.

If music matters one iota, we are all the better for having lived in Jimmy Heath's time. I Walked with Giants underscores that notion from behind the scenes, from jazz greats, and from the man himself. Pretty good stuff from the man they called "Little Bird." (January) Michael Lee