

JAZZ EDUCATORS JOURNAL



Remembering Clifford Brown
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We Should All Remember Clifford Brown

If you have not yet experienced the music of Clifford Brown, you are but one listening away from an unexplainable beauty and a rich melodic story told from the bell of this dedicated man's trumpet. His sound, his attack, his phrasing, his rhythmic propensity all transcend the ordinary. His music catapults us into the very private world of his mind: his hope, his humor, his love—the things that are at the very essence of all human beings. The great ones, these emissaries such as Clifford, all do this in some unique way.

Clifford Brown shaped the lives of others around him in such a positive way; he will undoubtedly capture your heart as well. There are stories behind this man that illuminate and complement the "voice" emanating from his trumpet. I'd like to share some with you as you listen to the music of "Brownie," one of the world's greatest trumpeters and a special human being.

A Short History

Surrounded By Music

Clifford Benjamin Brown was born on October 30, 1930 and raised in a musical community that was part of Wilmington, Delaware's east side. He was the youngest in a family of eight children, all of whom played piano and grew up with music as a part of their lives. The father, an amateur musician, tinkered with several instruments around the house. The trumpet fascinated young Clifford; along with one of his older brothers, he taught himself the rudiments of the instrument.

Though his brother eventually put the horn aside, Clifford stuck with it and showed promise rather quickly. His father recognized his son's adeptness and deep caring for music and brought this 12-year old boy to a local jazz musician and

by
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teacher, Robert "Boysie" Lowery. Boysie helped Clifford unfold the mysteries of jazz improvisation and develop his ability to hear the direction of chord movement. Clifford was dedicated to his music and practiced trumpet, piano, vibes, and bass, all while absorbing the



Clifford Brown in a Howard High School Band uniform. Wilmington, Delaware.

techniques of composing and arranging. His practice regimen has become legendary, his skill on the trumpet matched also by his genius in mathematics and his ability to help others. By the time he graduated from Howard High School, he had become a popular musical figure around the Wilmington and Philadelphia areas.

Though Delaware State College had no music department, Clifford entered on a music scholarship, majoring in math. He did gain valuable playing experience as a member of a house band in Philadelphia that hosted such talents as Max Roach, J.J. Johnson, Charlie Parker, and Brown's own idol, trumpeter "Fats" Navarro. He played a set with Dizzy Gillespie's big band in the summer of 1949, and Dizzy strongly encouraged

him to pursue music as a career. In the ensuing fall Clifford transferred to the University of Maryland, Eastern Shore on another music scholarship—this time as a music major, playing and writing for the college's fine jazz ensemble.

In June of 1950, while returning to school from one of the group's engagements, a serious auto accident immobilized his legs for almost a year. During the painstaking recovery period Clifford practiced ferociously on trumpet and piano. Yet he could not play jobs until he was able to walk again, and even then only with the use of crutches. In May 1951, fully recovered but left with a pronounced limp, he resumed his career, most notably working for a week with Charlie Parker. He was playing better than ever but was unable to find steady work until he sat in and accepted a job playing with Chris Powell and his Blue Flames. A rhythm-and-blues unit with a

jazz tinge, the band toured occasionally out of Philadelphia. Brownie made his recording debut with the Blue Flames in 1952, playing trumpet and piano, taking short solos on two of the four tunes.

A Full-Time Professional

There were some internal problems within the band, and Brown finally left in the summer of 1953 to join pianist Tadd Dameron's group in an Atlantic City night club. In a short span of time, he recorded with Dameron's nonet, plus a co-leader date with saxophonist Lou Donaldson, a session with J.J. Johnson, and a recording under his own leadership. When the Dameron unit had no more work, Lionel Hampton added Clifford to his band of young All-Stars (including Quincy Jones, Art Farmer, Gigi Gryce, Jimmy Cleveland, and George Wallington). Hamp imposed a ban on outside recording for the three-



(L-R): Clifford Brown, LaRue Brown and Max Roach. Los Angeles, California, 1954.

month European tour that followed, creating a somewhat stormy atmosphere. The sidemen promptly ignored the edict and recorded several albums in France and Sweden, many of which feature the rising talent of Clifford Brown. Hampton ended the clandestine recording with threats of denying return passage to America, and the band broke up upon its arrival in the States.

Drummer Art Blakey picked up Clifford for an engagement at Birdland in New York shortly thereafter, in February of 1954. They made a recording on one of those nights that set the precedent for the "hard bop" school of jazz style Clifford played: "A Night at Birdland."

Work And Family Joys

Unfortunately, the Blakey unit could get no work either; so Clifford was free when drummer Max Roach called to form a quintet on the west coast. Clifford flew to Los Angeles in March to co-lead one of the greatest quintets in jazz history. There were some personnel changes and many recording dates. Clifford then met and married Miss LaRue Anderson, a young music student who befriended Max Roach while completing her thesis, "Jazz vs. the Classics."

In the fall of 1954, the band moved its base to the east coast, with Clifford and his wife moving their home to Philadelphia. The quintet toured extensively on the coasts and through the Midwest, LaRue usually with the group on the road. This was a prosperous time for Clifford. The quintet recorded several popular albums, many including his original compositions. He won *Down Beat* magazine's New Star Award for 1954, appeared on prominent television talk shows; and at the close of 1955, he and LaRue had a son, Clifford B. Brown, Jr.

To show LaRue his appreciation for agreeing to have a child so early in their marriage, Clifford recorded one of his most popular albums, "Clifford Brown with Strings," as a gift for her, displaying his ballad mastery. It was a beautiful time for Clifford and his new family.



Clifford Brown—Trumpet, Teddy Edwards—Sax, George Bledsoe—Bass and Max Roach—Drums, at the California Club, Los Angeles, California, 1954.

Sudden Tragedy

Having his child so early was fortunate for Clifford, for six months later he left this world in another automobile accident while en route to Chicago on a rain-slicked Pennsylvania turnpike. In the early morning hours of June 27, 1956, the crash ended the lives of Clifford, Richie Powell (the quintet's pianist and younger brother of bop piano legend Bud Powell), and Richie's young bride Nancy, who was apparently driving the car. With the music-making of this extraordinary person silenced, only the records he left us from his short four years in the musical limelight allow us to remember him.

Memories of Clifford

What do we know of this man who was a revelation and somewhat of a nov-

elty in the jazz scene of the '40's and '50's? I listened to the voices and looked into the faces of many that knew him; and at the mention of his name a special, fond remembrance filled the tone of each person. It was obvious from their willingness and excitement that Clifford had touched them deeply and that, in some small way, each was a better person for having known Brownie.

Family

I started with a woman who knew Cliff, as she calls him, very intimately and who loves to speak on the topic: Mrs. LaRue Brown Watson, widow of the trumpeter. "Clifford is one of the few people that I have ever heard of—not just known, but heard of—that you mention his name, you don't hear negativity. You don't hear a negative phrase about

this man, which to me is most amazing. And I think the reason is because of his personality. He was a lover of people, a lover of the music, and that was all. He didn't have any time for anything else," said LaRue. "He was warm, kind, loving, and sensitive and he always saw the good in everybody."

Although LaRue did not always agree with the music of the jazz musician in the 1950's, she nonetheless understood the beauty coming from her husband's horn. "He would absorb the sound of the ocean, he would absorb the feeling that he had for a sunset and things like that; and it would come *out* in his music!" Clifford was a family man who didn't let his traveling profession stand in the way. He insisted that the family travel together on the road and do things together in each town. "He was absolutely wonderful with his son," stated LaRue. "He would take the baby, put him on his lap, talk to him, have a whole conversation with him about philosophy, art, music, current events, anything; just talk, talk,

"I remember one time, on a Sunday morning. I found him practicing his trumpet in the closet so as not to disturb anybody! He felt that improvement could always be made. The whole family was like that."

Leon Brown

talk. And when he would practice, he would lay him across his lap and practice. He'd play something and say, 'Now that was so and so!'"

Even though he was shy, he loved to talk to anyone who approached him; and he liked helping kids. "Clifford always took time to talk with young people. He stressed the need for youngsters, especially aspiring musicians, to get a good education and to be 'clean' spiritually and morally. Clifford enjoyed going to Heritage House when we were home in Philadelphia. He would help kids, like Lee Morgan, with their music and jam with them."



Zoot Sims and Clifford Brown at a recording studio in Hollywood, California, 1954.

Many that were close to Brownie felt that he had some kind of premonition of his early demise. LaRue recalls, "For instance, starting trust funds, making sure that properties were insured in case of his death, getting certain accounts established so that we would be taken care of later...things like that...making sure that all of his music was in the right place so that it would revert to me. And everything was in place." But Clifford didn't let this affect his outlook on life. "Believe it or not, Clifford was a very funny guy," emphasized LaRue. "If he knew you he might play a practical joke on you. He liked to clown around, singing and imitating famous personalities. You should have seen some of the plays we put on. Too bad video wasn't around!" Basically, he was very at peace with himself and the kind of person that he was. The message of Clifford Brown is 'keep clean, keep your body in shape, and your mind healthy.' That's what he's all about!"

On one of my trips to Wilmington, I had a chance to visit the home of Clifford's brother Leon, 12 years his senior, and his wife Margaret, also a close friend of Clifford's. We talked of Clifford's beginnings as a player. "I remember one time, on a Sunday morning," Leon stated as his distinctive voice rose in anticipation, "I found him practicing his trumpet in the *closet* so as not to disturb anybody! He felt that improvement could always be made."

Hometown Friends

The people of Wilmington have a special love for the hometown hero who put their city on the musical map. I visited the home of Robert "Boysie" Lowery, where the young Clifford received inspirational instruction from this dedicated teacher. Boysie sat before me in his flannel shirt and suspenders and remembered his famous pupil: "He *wanted* to learn!" he recalled, "and I was just the right person for him at the right time." Clifford spent several years with Lowery, returning for advice even after he became a renowned jazz musician. Boysie's eyes

lightened in admiration of Clifford: "Brownie was the kind of guy...anybody he could help, he would help, you know?"

Clifford, along with some of his other students, visited his mentor's home just prior to his death. "We had a good time that day," reminisced Boysie. "Clifford wanted me to get on him about some technique that he hadn't been doing and he said, 'Next time I'm in town, I want you to make sure I'm doing such and such!' Of course, he never returned." The basement in which Boysie teaches today is decorated with awards, citations, and photos of the wonderful students that he has taught, a special area of which is devoted to the memory of this student that he loved very much.

Five doors down from the vacant lot where the Brown family home once stood is the Poplar street residence of Ralph Morris, a Brown family friend and a trumpeter who was several years Clifford's senior. "I never heard him criticize another musician. He could hear something in musicians that I couldn't hear. He could always pick out something that he enjoyed."

Dean Jenkins, another of Boysie's students, is a pianist who played in the local jam sessions with Clifford and remained a close friend throughout Brownie's life. "He was a very humble, studious guy—a whiz at mathematics. But he spent most of his time after school practicing...maybe three, four hours. I don't mean to say that he was a recluse, now! Yeah, he would go out; but he always had time for his horn every day. That came first."

Musical Partners

Jodie Christian is a respected Chicago pianist who recently recorded his first solo album. He first met Clifford in Wilmington while stationed there in the army but later relocated back to Chicago. Clifford's acts of friendship to him as a stranger still overwhelm him. "I introduced him to my wife, and he was not at all like she pictured a jazz musician to be: clean—nothing scandalous. He invit-

ed us to the Blue Note in Philly, brought us, paid the tab, and took us back. He did this for anybody, especially if they liked the music."

As Clifford developed and his stature pulled him away from the Wilmington area, he met the musicians, his peers, that so respected and admired him on a regular basis. Jazz saxophonist Benny



Clifford Brown and Clifford Brown, Jr., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, January, 1956.

Golson played with Clifford during Brown's teen years and developed a lasting friendship with him. "I never remember Clifford being angry. I mean he was just kind of even-tempered all the time. An unusual person. Sometimes you can meet a person who's so talented, and when you meet them in person they're a real crud; and you just crumble inside. But how much more rewarding it is to hear somebody that's exemplary, who's sterling in what they do; and you meet them and their personality is the same way. It's a reward. It's like another boost, and you go away feeling better about the situation. And that's the way Clifford was."

About his dedication and artistry, Benny offered, "He never 'walked' through anything. He played as if his life depended on it, as if all the most important critics were there. When he set out

to perform, he painted really a very graphic picture of what he was feeling inside. Sometimes it's hard to do, but he was very adept at doing that. At the moment, he could spell out what he was feeling, he could paint a picture for it. And he involved you in that picture as one of the spectators, as one of the listeners. And so you became enthralled with it. You became a fan of his; you became a booster...an espouser of Clifford."

About his own composition, "I Remember Clifford," Golson said, "I started playing tunes at the piano one day, and I was thinking about Clifford. I said, 'Wouldn't it be nice if someone could write a song that sort of exemplified what he was: the way he played and his phrasing and his feeling?' And I started to tinker around with it, and I said: 'Well maybe I can come up with something.'" His poignant jazz standard, including added lyrics by Jon Hendricks, serves as a beautiful tribute and deserves a place in everyone's music collection.

Two of bebop's original legends also had admiration for Clifford: Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. "He was a real sweet guy," said Dizzy. "He was just a very warm human being. He didn't have any bad habits that I could see. And he was different from the rest. He wasn't wild. He was a family man. Oh, man, he was just beautiful!" Clifford played with Charlie Parker on several occasions throughout his career; and Parker took Brownie in a corner once and exclaimed, "I don't believe it. I hear what you're saying, but I don't believe it!"

Clifford played in a trumpet section that at the time included two of music's future greats. Art Farmer and Quincy Jones were among the rising jazz stars in the 1953 Lionel Hampton Band. Farmer said of his cohort, "If I were to put it into one word, I would say *nice*. He was a quiet guy; he wasn't boisterous, but he said what he wanted to say. He never had to say how good he was, or how bad someone else is. Some people have a need to do that. I never heard him say a negative word about anybody."

Clifford's personal drive was very

evident to Art: "Yeah, he really wanted to get as much out of it as he could. He also had a sense of humor, which you could hear in his playing." Farmer recalls a time in Chicago, at the Beehive, when he had flown in from New York City and discovered on the bandstand he had no valve oil. He knew Clifford was in town and phoned him. "I'm over here, and I don't have any valve oil," Art told him. Clifford said, "OK, I'll be right over!" Art recalled, "That's the kind of guy he was."

Quincy Jones stated that both Art and Clifford inspired and encouraged him to pursue composing and arranging while in that band. He writes these beautiful words as his introduction to his memorial article, "A Tribute to Brownie," in a 1956 *Down Beat* magazine: "TO ME, the name of Clifford Brown will always remain synonymous with the very essence of musical and moral maturity. This name will stand as a symbol of the ideals every young jazz musician should strive to attain."¹¹

The following deed, performed for a fellow musician in need, exemplifies just the kind of person he was. Quoting from Dan Morgenstern's notes to "The Complete EmArcy Recordings of Clifford Brown": "When a famous tenor saxophonist got into trouble with the law, Brownie heard that he had a pregnant wife. He didn't know the man well and had never met the wife, nor did he have much empathy for the indulgence that was the cause of the problem. Yet he organized a benefit (not a big one; he was no promoter) and without fanfare turned over the proceeds to the wife not as charity, but as a gesture of professional esteem. (By the way, the tenor-man and his wife were white. Maybe that's beside the point, maybe not.)"¹²

Philadelphia bop trumpeter Red Rodney offered me these words: "I consider him the finest of people and the greatest of players. It's really some legacy to have left. He was one of the most special people the jazz profession ever had. This was a young man who came along and captured the entire world with

his great ability." On Brownie's playing, Red stated: "He was just like he played: considerate, thoughtful, and kind. [His sound] was love; and then when you talked to him, you fell more in love. That's how sweet a man he was. Brownie could do no wrong musically; and then when you spoke to him, he was just as beautiful as he played."

There are a few men who knew Clifford on a daily basis. Harold Land was the quintet's tenor saxophonist until succeeded by Sonny Rollins. "In my opinion Brownie had...a kind of wisdom or knowledge of himself and those around him, and of life in general, that one associates with someone quite a bit older than he was at the time. And to me these same qualities were evident when he expressed himself through his instrument. I have had more than one talented musician say to me, referring to Brownie, that he played his instrument like a young old man! And in each instance I'm sure they meant this statement to be an extremely beautiful compliment, that a man so young in years could acquire such command, depth, and broad musical scope in what seemed such a relatively short span of time. Playing with the fire and creativeness of a young man and the depth, tenderness, and insight into past, present and future of an older man."¹³

Max Roach is the one who knew Clifford the best. The phenomenal drummer is often outspoken when the topic of the quintet arises. Max is frequently overlooked as the originator of the quintet, the one who made the gesture for Clifford to be the co-leader of the group. But any irateness is soon overshadowed by his love for Clifford, and we see his special bond with his good friend. "When I think of Brownie," Max said, "it is with love and appreciation for all the happiness he brought me, both musically and personally. He was a sweet, beautiful individual."¹⁴ When asked how Clifford got his warm, rich, personal sound, Max replied: "He practiced all the time. As simple as that. He practiced, and just as important, he listened. A lot

of kids now don't listen. The great ones are also great listeners."¹⁵

Max places Clifford in the company of greats like Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and Bud Powell, saying that these people were humble enough for people to give them something—and humble enough to accept what was given to them. They knew how to listen, not only to other people but to themselves. They also had a great pride, a pride of accomplishment. Max had a strong bond with Clifford, both musically and spiritually. He thought of him as a brother and the two took care of each other. Clifford's maturity and responsibility surprised Roach: "Clifford got married during this period; and when he was killed, his son was only about 6 months old. And he had bought a house in Philadelphia; and we later found out that he had the insurance so well covered that when he passed, the house was completely paid for and his wife was left with no bills at all. For a person who was 24 going on 25 at that time, this was phenomenal for us, especially in this kind of business. That kind of responsibility and dedication to what we are all about here, and he was smack dab in the continuum of this particular music!"¹⁶ Max was deeply hurt by the death of Clifford and is only now finding the strength to talk of him and play his music again.

The Legacy

In Wilmington, Delaware, although the house where he once lived and the clubs that he played in have long been removed, his old high school still stands, a park has been named in his honor, and his final resting place in Mt. Zion's cemetery is marked with a fitting stone that depicts a neatly carved trumpet and musical notes.

There has been a strong resurgence of interest in the life and music of Clifford Brown, with regular tributes paid to the trumpet artist. Harmon Carey and his sister Kay Lacy, who both knew Clifford, organized an exhibit in Howard High School of some of Brown's personal items as well as artwork and press cover-

age on the musician. Along with the Afro-American Historical Society of Delaware, they have been instrumental in keeping the memory of Clifford Brown alive, renaming the city's jazz festival—and his boyhood Poplar Street—in his honor.

Scholarly interest in Clifford is abounding as well. Besides the numerous magazine articles since his death, I know of three people writing biographies on

Clifford, plus one already written by his wife, LaRue. Don Manning, a Portland, Oregon disc jockey, possesses two unpublished, taped conversations with his trumpet idol, recorded shortly before Brownie died.

In the sometimes dark world we live in, Brownie stands as a bright beacon for us. His lifestyle, his dedication, and his caring for others serve as a model for all of us to follow. He recognized his oppor-

tunity and used his talents to the fullest before he left. Yet he never really left—because the music is him. Each listening to one of his solos or compositions contains all he represents. I hope that you choose to set aside some time and invite Clifford Brown into your home. Along with Benny Golson, we can all remember Clifford!

FOOTNOTES

¹ Schaap, Phil: "Interview with LaRue Brown Watson." WKCR-FM, Columbia University, New York, New York. Broadcast on June 26, 1991.

² Watson, LaRue Brown: Untitled personal reminiscence from notes to *The Complete Blue Note and Pacific Jazz Recordings of Clifford Brown*. Mosaic Records, 1984, p.1.

³ Shaap, Phil: "Interview with LaRue Brown Watson."

⁴ Watson, LaRue Brown: Notes to Mosaic collection, 1984.

⁵ Holman, Leslie: "In the Groove." KKUP-FM, Cupertino, CA. Special guest, Clifford Brown, Jr. with taped comments by LaRue Brown Watson. Broadcast on October 27, 1987.

⁶ "I Remember Clifford," 5-hour tribute to Clifford on KCSN-FM, Los Angeles, CA, with guest LaRue Brown Watson, including an "Interview with Benny Golson." Broadcast on October 30, 1978.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ National Public Radio: "Shades of Brown." 1982.

¹⁰ Hentoff, Nat: "Clifford Brown: The New Dizzy." *Down Beat*. April 7, 1954, pp. 15-16.

¹¹ Jones, Quincy: "A Tribute to

Brownie." *Down Beat*. August 22, 1956, p. 10+.

¹² Morgenstern, Dan: "Clifford Brown." Notes to *Brownie: The Complete EmArcy Recordings of Clifford Brown*. EmArcy/Polygram Records 838 306-2, 1989.

¹³ Land, Harold: "Clifford Brown." Notes to *Clifford Brown in Paris*. Prestige Records P24020, 1972.

¹⁴ Gardner, Mark: Notes to *The Clifford Brown Quartet in Paris*. Prestige Records PR 7761, 1970.

¹⁵ Hamill, Pete: Notes to *Live at the Beehive*. Columbia Records, 1979.

¹⁶ Roach, Max: Taped monologue from "We Remember Clifford" concert tribute, Loeb Center, NY University, 1977.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Brownie: The Complete EmArcy Recordings of Clifford Brown—EmArcy 838 306-16 (a 10-CD collection including "Clifford Brown with Strings")

The Clifford Brown Quartet in Paris—Prestige OJC CD 357-2

A Night at Birdland, Volumes One and Two—Blue Note CDP7 46519-2 and 46520-2 (Art Blakey Quintet)

The Best of Max Roach and Clifford Brown in Concert—GNP Crescendo GNPD 18

The Beginning and the End—CBS/Sony 32DP 663 (Clifford Brown's first and last recorded performances)



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both the jazz and classical idioms and continues to research the life of Clifford Brown. Al has performed in the company of such artists as Conte Candoli and Jon Faddis and can be heard on the latest CD of Rob Parton's JazzTech Big Band, "The Count is In!" (Sea Breeze CDSB-2047).

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