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**PERCY HEATH**  
**NEA Jazz Master (2002)**

**Interviewee:** Percy Heath (April 30, 1923 - April 28, 2005)

**Interviewer:** Eugene Holley with recording engineer Sven Aboe

**Dates:** July 23, 2001

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Holley: Okay, my name is Eugene Holley. I am here with engineer Sven Aboe for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Project at the home of Mr. Percy Leroy Heath Jr. in Montauk, Long Island on Monday, July the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Thank you Mr. Heath.

Heath: Two thousand and one, and you can believe that.

Holley: Two thousand and one, two thousand and one, and it's not a space odyssey.

Heath: [laughs]

Holley: Mr. Heath, I think I can speak on behalf of everyone here, it is such a great honor and a privilege to be talking with you, and thank you. Let me just say that right off the bat, if I can say that.

Heath: You can say that right off the bat and you can say Percy.

Holley: Percy, okay.

Heath: That would be fine.

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Holley: Just wanna get some basic date information. Your full name is Percy Leroy Heath Jr.?

Heath: That's right. My father's name was Percy Leroy Heath.

Holley: And your birthdate April 30, 1923 in Wilmington, North Carolina?

Heath: That's right, North Carolina.

Holley: Your parents' names sir.

Heath: Percy Sr. and Arlethia, which is the only one I've ever heard. My mother's name is Arlethea. Her maiden name was Wall.

Holley: You have a sister and brothers. Can you give their names?

Heath: Well, we had a sister, Elizabeth. She wanted to be called Betty, but we called her Lizzy all her life. And my grandfather on my mother's side gave us all nicknames. And she was Lizzy, Tin Lizzy, like the old automobile. I was Percolator. And Jimmy, I think he called Jimmy, Shorty, which I don't think James would appreciate that so much [chuckles]. He got that nickname, and Tootie was named Tootie when my grandfather Sandy Wall first saw Tootie, he looked down at her and said "Toot, toot" and that stuck. Albert "Tootie" Heath is our youngest brother. James Edward is the middle brother, and I'm the oldest brother, Percy Leroy Jr., and Elizabeth, Ella Elizabeth, was our sister's name. She was a year and a half older than I was. She passed about four or five years ago.

Holley: Now your wife's name is June, what was her maiden name and how long have you been married?

Heath: June Ellen Jones was her maiden name, and we met in 1947.

Holley: In Philadelphia?

Heath: In "Filthy-delphia." And I hope you don't mind me referring to it as "Filthy-delphia"

Holley: [chuckles]

Heath: Where I was raised down in South Philly, it was pretty filthy. But June and I met in 1947. She was a manager of a record store, which featured mostly classical music and she would get the latest, order the latest Charlie Parker's and the latest bebop records and bring them down to the house. I was like the first to have Charlie Parker's records in Philly at that time, "Now's The Time" and a few other releases at that time.

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Heath: But she knew about the band, Dizzy's band, and all before I'd even, when I got out of the service in '46. I was Lt. Heath. I used to go up to the Downbeat in my uniform while I was being on reserve, probably wore my Tuskegee outfit and my wings and bars and decided to buy a bass in 1946, and June, at that time, had already know about bebop and music that I hadn't heard in the South where I was stationed. And we met at the Downbeat, let's see, a year after I had bought the bass and went through a lot of early jobs that I think you referred to as being "Red Garland." But I was over in where we used to call "a bucket of blood," over on the other side of Broad Street in a very rough neighborhood with sawdust on the floor, that kind of joint, and I had just bought the bass and Red said, "Come on sugar, come on sugar. You can play with me and Jake." It was a trumpet player who was an artist who used to, we were all learning, but Red Garland, he was already professional. He had quit boxing, I don't know if you knew that, Red was a pugilist.

Heath: And anyhow, that was [an] early learning process in Philadelphia when Jimmy came home from his Nat Towles' band. He was playing with a Midwestern band, dance band, Nat Towles's Orchestra, and incidentally he had come down to Walterboro, South Carolina when I was still in the air force with that band. And he slept in a classmate of mine's bed for bed check one night while he was on the base. So he quit that band when I got out of the service and came home and decided to play bass, having heard that record that you referred to as "John Simmons."

Holley: You wanted to play the bass after you...?

Heath: I did, yes.

Holley: Right.

Heath: And Jimmy quit Nat Towles' band and came home, and we got an upright piano somebody gave us. I think we got a horse and wagon and backed it up to the house on Federal Street and put that piano in there. So while Jimmy was learning these chords, I was learning the bass. It was a gap in there, about a year and a little bit longer that I was playing at the Downbeat.

Holley: Do you know where that was in Philly? Roughly what part?

Heath: Yeah, on 11<sup>th</sup> Street, a couple of blocks down from Market Street. It was right in Midtown, Philadelphia. Anyhow, that's where I met June. She brought her mother up there for a birthday celebration. Her mother, I don't know if she appreciated anything about the music or the guys and she was [a] pretty opinionated woman. But that long answer was for your question of when me and June met. And then we couldn't get married in Philadelphia in Pennsylvania at that time when we decided to get married a couple of years later.

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Holley: You couldn't get married because...?

Heath: In Pennsylvania, there were no interracial marriages, no licenses issued in Pennsylvania. And that's why we said we better get out of here and go to New York, which we did, and we got married in 1950 when I went with Dizzy Gillespie's Sextet. And contrary to some of the other information that's out, I never played with Dizzy's Big Band. Nelson Boyd went from Jimmy's Big Band, which Jimmy had around Philly. I wasn't even playing then; I was just learning the bass and got with Bill Hollis and Harry Craft in sort of a Nat Cole type piano, bass, guitar, vocals. And that was my first group actually. Those little jam sessions with Red Garland, that didn't count much. I was still learning the C scale. I learned the C scale on the bass and how to read a stock part, "boom boom boom boom boom boom" [chuckles], and went to the union and got a union card because those things with Red Garland were pre-union. And that graduation to become the house bass player at this jazz mecca, the bebop mecca, in Philadelphia in a year and a half or so was really...

Holley: You're talking about the Downbeat?

Heath: Yeah, a phenomenal leap. And I don't know how I did that, but we used to play all day until my mother, who was very considerate, would just say, "Well, it's getting a little late and the neighbors next door will hear everything," from house to house in Philly, you know those row houses. So we had to stop at which time we'd go down in the dungeon, down in the basement, where we had it set up for listening to Symphony Sid and other jazz broadcasts from New York which came on at midnight at that time.

Heath: Anyhow, that's how early experiences, and learning in Philadelphia... And at that time at the Downbeat, a lot of headliners came through there to play with this rhythm section, which I noticed in your notes you mentioned Jimmy Golden. Jimmy Golden was a pianist up there, and Little Jimmy Oliver was a saxophonist who emulated Lester Young. He put his horn up on the side like Lester used to do. And he was strictly a by-ear player, but he could play anything that he heard. And there was another saxophonist Al Steele, who was like a repeater, he could play anything, and very fast, too.

Holley: Kind of like Johnny Griffin?

Heath: Well, JG didn't come about until way later, or at least not way later, but a year or so later after I was playing with Joe Morris, a trumpet player, a rhythm and blues trumpet player. And it's amazing, but the rest of the band up there in the Downbeat was Charlie Rice, who was still around, and Jimmy Oliver was still around too. And by me being there, some of these headliners, like Eddie Davis and Howard McGhee ...

Holley: Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis?

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Heath: Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis, oh he was from Philadelphia too, incidentally. These people came through and played with this house rhythm section, and that’s when Howard McGhee had said, well he had known of Jimmy’s Big Band around town because Jimmy had a lot of people in his Big Band that were, they fed into Dizzy’s Big Band later. Jimmy himself, and Coltrane, John Coltrane, Benny Golson. Nelson Boyd went from Jimmy’s band to play the bass in Dizzy’s band and Hen Gates, Jimmy’s piano player, went with Dizzy. So, Jimmy’s band was like a stepping-stone into Dizzy’s Big Band at that time while I was going through this small, trio type learning process. And they weren’t learning enough bebop, it was still too Nat Cole-ish, so I graduated from that group, but I went to your hometown. Is it Wilmington?

Holley: Wilmington, Delaware?

Heath: Yeah, we used to play in a Ritz bar down there.

Holley: Do you remember a place where musicians stayed called the Lawson Hotel? Near the train station?

Heath: Uh, I don’t know if that was there then. We used to commute from Philly, but I’m not sure if we used to stay down there. It was a little segregated down there at that time even.

Holley: Right, yes. Reason I asked, my grandmother had a place called the Lawson Restaurant and Hotel on Front Street right under the train station where a lot of musicians from Philadelphia could stay there. And she worked also with the Baby, you know the Famous Baby Grand in Wilmington, Delaware.

Heath: Oh yeah.

Holley: Yes.

Heath: Well anyhow, at that time that’s when I met Clifford Brown when I was with the Hollis Hoppers down there at a matinee at the Ritz Bar. And Clifford and Bobby Burton, a little bass player from there, they used to stop by and stand outside with their books, and Brownie, he had his horn with him, they had a little band practice and what not, and he’s a very shy kid, you know, Clifford. And he said [softly], “I’m gonna play jazz, too.”

Holley: He was a teenager at this point, right?

Heath: He was in school, coming home from school. [Chuckles]

Holley: Yes.

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Heath: And sure enough, man, three years later, Clifford Brown was the phenomenon of Philadelphia. But, that was just a sidetrack into your hometown. Anyhow, we used to go a few places, and you asked earlier about bass lessons, which I took in Philadelphia. Actually, I didn't go to school up there, I just went there for lessons on the bass.

Holley: To Granoff.

Heath: Granoff, yes, Granoff School of Music, I think it was. But this teacher, Mr. [Quintelli], he showed me the basic principle of fingering and gave me exercises to study. But during the time I was really beginning to learn, that's when Lt. Heath decided to be a jazz bass player, and I started growing a beard and bought this bass with the pay I had mustered out with. Jimmy had this band around town where we'd go up and listen to Dizzy's band and invite the guys down to the house, Mama would cook a meal, a home-cooked meal for them 'cause she enjoyed that too, because she knew we were gonna be on the road and we would appreciate going into a home instead of a restaurant to have a family meal. So that's the time I met Milt Jackson, John Lewis, and I think it was either Kenny Clarke or Joe Harris at that time.

Holley: With Dizzy Gillespie?

Heath: With Dizzy's band. They were in town, and Jimmy and I went to hear the band and invited some members down to the house for this home-cooked meal.

Holley: This is around 1947?

Heath: '46.

Holley: '46?

Heath: I had just started, and that's where your question later on about... I was reading your synopsis here and there was a question about Ray Brown showing me something, a technique or something. But at that time, Ray Brown was really phenomenal with Dizzy's band. He had done the "One Bass Hit" and the "Two Bass Hit" on record and what not on the next year at least. But he had left Pennsylvania, he was from Pittsburgh, and he and Milt and John and Klook were the rhythm section of Dizzy's Big Band. But anyhow, they came down to the house and that's my first meeting of them personally.

Holley: I wanna go back and touch on a couple things 'cause you zipped right through some points that I want to bring up. But I want to talk about your father's musical ability. Your father was very musical, right?

Heath: My father was a clarinet player, a weekend clarinet player with the Elks . . . with the independent, Benevolent Protective Order of Elks, which is a segregated Elks. It's a black organization.

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Holley: A black fraternal organization.

Heath: It's the fraternal organization connected to the Elks period. These were the independent high B.P.O. And Pop used to... he was a tremendous mechanic, he was a great mechanic, and to give you a history of my father, when we were very young, it was just my sister, myself and Jimmy was just born when we were living in West Philadelphia, we had first moved from the South, Jimmy was born in Philadelphia. But Lizzy and I were brought up from Wilmington. And at that time, my father had a business as a mechanic. He had his own shop working on trucks and cars of that time. And he rented a space in the Bechtel garage, and it was his tools and his shop, and he made a lot of money and we didn't want for anything in the late '20s. Anything we wanted, we had, little cars, little peddle-pushing cars and everything.

Heath: We were really well off until the NRA, the National Recovery Act, during the Depression came, and it drove my father out of business. The little guy got squeezed out somehow under that recovery act. And it was a couple of years when my father had to be on WPA with Works Project [Progress] Administration, and he'd go stand around with a shovel to get a handout, more or less, and we were like welfare recipients. I had to go through the prejudiced, Irish neighborhood, with this little wagon to get this rhubarb and a bunch of horsemeat and canned meat and stuff. My father was really devastated.

Heath: And a couple years of that, and finally he went back to work at the garage on a salary using his tools and working on the same people that he had built up this trade. Anyhow, he got back up there on his working for somebody else, and he stayed at that garage through, well Bechtel sold the garage to a family of Wolfson's. There were three generations of Wolfson's that took over that business while my father worked up there. He was a loyal guy, he wouldn't leave during the war to get a wartime job. Anyhow, that was Percy Sr., he was a loyal guy. We only saw him in the evening about an hour before we went to bed, or half hour before it was bedtime, for years and years while we were growing up.

Heath: And he used to put his clarinet in the pawnshop down the street from us, Pete's Pawnshop. Papa could wrap up a brick and take in there, and say, "Hey Pete, give me two dollars," and Pete would say, "Alright," and give him the [money] 'cause he knew Papa would come back and claim that brick Saturday when he got paid. So that was, he would get that horn out of the pawnshop on Saturday evening, make his rehearsal with the Elks band. He was very proud of the fact that sometimes Louis Jordan would come by and rehearse with the band. Johnny Cole's would come by and rehearse with the band, some other jazz musicians and pop musicians, like Louis Jordan was very popular at that time. He played his military marches, in fact there's a picture in my studio of my father and my mother in their uniform from the Elks. Pop was in the band and Mama was in the marching club, and they won this award in 1937 in Atlantic City when all these Sepia (?) organizations had their parade. But anyhow, that was background on my father musically. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or [archivescenter@si.edu](mailto:archivescenter@si.edu)



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Holley: What about your mother?

Heath: Mama was a choir singer in the 19<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church and her mother, my grandmother, who we used to call “Fat Mama,” it was Mama and Fat Mama, and it finally ended up being “Fatsie,” what a beautiful woman she was. She was part Choctaw.

Holley: Choctaw, Native American Indian?

Heath: Choctaw Indian, yeah. Very high cheekbones, beautiful complexion, copper. Boy, she was very religious. When I was about eleven or twelve, I guess, we were singing in a gospel quartet called “The Family Four,” my mother, grandmother and a female cousin, and myself. And we used to make these jubilees singing these gospel tunes. And I grew up with that background, plus Pop bought a violin for me when I was seven years old, and I used to play at these little church jubilees teas, (sings) “I come to the garden alone,” with a guitar player. Boy, we had little fundraisers for the church.

Heath: But my father, on the other hand, wouldn’t go near a church. Mama, we went every Sunday, we went Sunday school, morning service, BYPU, Baptist Youth Union, and we’d be in church all day Sunday. Pop wouldn’t go near a church even when we were doing our little Easter pieces and stuff, Pop wouldn’t go near. He’d say, “Boy, them preachers, they come over and eat, they sit around and eat” and he’s say they full of hokum. Anyhow, my father was not very religious, but he was beautiful.

Holley: Before we get to you going to New York with Howard McGhee, I wanna just briefly, you touched on your experience in this Air Force. Briefly synopsise for us what your period as Lt. Heath was like. Where did you go to train? And there’s a story about you being trained as a fighter pilot with nobody to fight at that point, so can you just talk about that and what you endured during that time?

Heath: Well, one of the questions I read in your synopsis was about... Before I was drafted, I didn’t volunteer for the Air Force. A year and a half before I was drafted, I was a very naïve person, and I had worked as a mechanic with my father, and I was disillusioned by having to be a car washer and greaser and running for parts instead of being the apprentice mechanic that I was supposed to be working with my father for the Woflson’s. I left there ‘cause of the treatment we got... about a half hour before the time to leave, they’d find a job for you to do which you had to stay overtime, and the next morning they’d expect you to be there right on the minute. And Pop would do this religiously and he didn’t jeeb, “Oh I gotta get up there, I gotta pay these bills,” ‘cause Monday morning, he would take his horn and put it back in the pawnshop so he could pay these little insurances, 15 cents for this, 20 cents for this guy. I wouldn’t go for it, so I quit and I went to work for the railroad, Pennsylvania Railroad down the Round House, down South Philadelphia. I was called a laborer for 55 cents an hour, but I was doing machinist’s work, which was 75 cents an hour. I was paying, getting that 75 cents an hour. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or [archivescenter@si.edu](mailto:archivescenter@si.edu)



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pay and driving a rec truck for overtime, I was making pretty good money considering at that time. But you couldn't be designated, black couldn't be designated as a machinist helper, you had to be a laborer, Pennsylvania rail.

Heath: Well, this is "Filthy-delphia," this is my... growing up in a city where you could live next door to an Italian family but from grade school, from kindergarten you go to a segregated schools, it was like institutional segregation in Philadelphia. And we used to play on the street with little Italian kids, we grew up learning the first foul words in Italian with the kids we played on the street. And we teased them, say, "Ah ha, you got to go through all this snow, three blocks away go to school, ah-nah, and we go across the street." We were living across the street from a black grade school [clears throat].

Heath: Anyhow, this background, I'm a little naïve, 18 year old, and the war started in '41, and I said, "Oh let me go down here and volunteer to be an aircraft mechanic with my mechanical knowledge." I went to the courthouse there in Philadelphia, went through the whole process, signing up, taking the physical and examinations and what not, at the end of this where I stated my preference, aircraft mechanic. I got to the end of this process and a guy stamped my 4F, boom, that means you don't have to go, not accepted, 4F. And I said, "Why? What's the —," and he said, "Oh you don't weigh enough." So I was a little skinny guy playing the violin in junior high school named Percy, I had to really be tough coming home from school, everybody wanted to jump on us. So I went back home and told Mom, and I said, "Gee Mom, I don't have to worry about going to the army, I'm 4F." I stayed here, and that's when I got this job at the railroad. I got me a wartime job and I don't have to go nowhere. About a year and a half later, I registered for the draft being in that age bracket, went down and went through the same process, "Oh don't worry Mama, I'll be right back. I don't weigh no more than I did before," because I had gone home for a couple of weeks and ate bananas and tried to get a few pounds on. And went back and the guy said, "Ah no, you [are] still 4F."

Heath: So when the draft came, I was just sure I wasn't going anywhere, I'm 4F. And I went though all this physical and what not, and at the end of the line the dude stamped "1A." I said, "Wait a minute, man! I don't weigh no more than I did two years ago!" And he said, "That's alright. We'll fatten you up." And at the interrogation, in the meantime, this school had been opened at Tuskegee for blacks to become pilots or navigators or bombardiers. And at the end this guy questioned me, I had made enough on this intelligence test to be qualified to be an aviation cadet. So at the end of this process, he said, "How would you like to be a pilot, bombardier, navigator — ." I said, "Oh wow, that'll beat being a mechanic, yeah, let me do that."

Holley: This is around 1943?

Heath: '43, yes. That's when I got drafted and accepted. And that's how I became an aviation cadet. But at that time, they had opened up... see, I was just a high school

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graduate. Most of the cadets were college graduates or people who had been flying before, some kind of aviation background. And they let us in there, but they let so many in and they didn't have anywhere for us to go...

Holley: This is when they sent you to Biloxi, Mississippi?

Heath: Straight to Keesler Field where the closest we got to an airplane was standing in line in formation on Saturday before you get weekend leave. And standing at attention, a B24 would fly by. We'd say, "There goes a B24," under your breath at attention. We slept in between barracks in tents on cots and the rain would run right through there. You had to tie your duffel bag up on the cot if it rained or your stuff would get wet. And that's the way we were treated while we were taking all these examinations and dental appointments and psychomotive tests and this and that, written tests. It was very grueling to even get into being a cadet. And they were kind of disrespectful down there in Biloxi of, "Who were these black guys? They gonna fly? Are you kidding? They can't handle..." You know, that attitude. Anyhow, there were about 700 of us in squadron 707 and I was like a... I was always outspoken and I had been a president of the High Y organization in Wilmington where I finished high school.

Holley: The High Y Organization?

Heath: It's a youth health organization and I was a state president because I was a public speaker of a sort. And I had gone down to Wilmington...

Holley: For school?

Heath: Where we used to go to visit my grandmother in the summertime, and my father's mother bribed me with a bicycle to stay down there. And Jimmy stayed down there with me in the last two years of high school. That's when he started playing saxophone in a school band.

Holley: What was the name of the high school that you...

Heath: Williston Industrial High School. And I use this mechanical knowledge to get the right marks on this test to even be considered. Anyhow, down there I was calling the cadence for the marching and formations to these different tests and what not. Myself and a guy named Marcus S.W. McBroom I don't know whatever happened to McBroom. He washed out a little later. Anyhow, it was six months of that down at Keesler Field and we were so happy to leave there. We were given a weekend pass to go into Biloxi, and this one bar where all the soldiers went, and one hooker who was in and out of there every five minutes [laughs]. And we stand around drinking that two-point-whatever beer by the case almost. I went to town once and Dorothea was the only female in there with a whole bar full of guys.

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Holley: So we're talking about your experiences...

Heath: Early!

Holley: Early experiences. Now you get into the Air Force in 1943. In 1945, you graduate, you're ready to fly planes, but what happened at that point?

Heath: Well there is one thing I must tell you before that. When we did go to Tuskegee, the institute, I was sent to what they called "college training detachment," for about four or five months to learn some geometry, little advanced about wind vectors and things like that, that I didn't know about. In order to fly a single engine, you had to know how to plot your course and what not. That was on the campus at Tuskegee. Beautiful, all the young ladies and students. We also had primary training and early pre-flight training where we fly Aeroncas, little cubs and small models, very light single engine with dual controls for instructors. We flew around, you'll see if you're gonna get air sick or if you're gonna be able to fly at all, if you had the coordination, all this pre-flight business. Then we also had primary training where we flew a bi-wing plane called a Stearman, open cockpit. It's quite an experience when you first roll over and hang upside-down by the seatbelt and the shoulder harness. Of course, you're sitting on your parachute. But all that early training was really experience while I was nineteen, twenty years old.

Heath: Went through those two stages and then you go to the Air Force base, Tuskegee Army Air Force, TAAF, which unlike the other trainees, [where] you'd be in different air fields for different phases of training, but the blacks were all in one, all at one base. And that's where B.O. Davis was...

Holley: General B.O. Davis?

Heath: B.O., Jr. was a commanding officer through that air base and they had gone overseas by the time I got there. That movie about the airmen...

Holley: "The Tuskegee Airmen."

Heath: Yeah, that was pretty accurate, except I didn't know anybody who took a plane and committed suicide. That was a little poetic liberty...

Holley: Poetic license.

Heath: Yeah, license or whatever they call that. But it was a rigorous training. And the fact that upperclassmen could brace you, they used to call it, all this jumping up and down and reciting stupid verses and doing push-ups any time of night, making up the other over-classes' beds and things in the morning. Later on you realize they didn't really have time to do that. So all the underclassmen were subjected to basic, lower basic, upper basic, advanced, lower advanced and upper advanced. And upper advanced were the guys

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who had gone through this whole thing and moved upwards [to] different aircrafts, more powerful. But that experience at Tuskegee was... I was just determined despite what those Southern senators had said about the Negro being inferior and unable to operate those high powered machines and [mockingly], "Booga, booga, they can't do it." Me being a stubborn Taurus, I said, "I bet I could do it," which I was the right size and had the proper coordination to really excel. By the time I got to advanced, I made the mistake of soloing the AT6 was a Texan, which was the "advanced trainer," I made the mistake of soloing that in about two hours and a half of instruction. The major wanted to know who was this mister that just soloed, and he jumped on my instructor, and my instructor said, "He's been flying it for an hour already. He's been landing it." And so, by me being tested like that, whenever they wanted to show off the squadron I had to... "Ah Mr. Heath get your chute, you're gonna ride Coronel So-And-So ..." "Aww God!" On my low altitude course country where I had my chance to get down in the trees, here's this guy sitting there making sure I didn't get below 500 feet.

Heath: Anyhow, like you said, in January of '45, I got my commission and my wings. And Mama was really, they were proud of me because I was one of like three or four Philadelphia flyers that had gone through successfully. And we ended up with sixteen single engine men out of those 700 guys that started two years before.

Holley: But you didn't get a chance to fly, though? The war was coming to an end; you didn't get a chance to fly. You didn't get a chance to...

Heath: Combat.

Holley: Yes!

Heath: No, I didn't have to go kill anybody. I was pretty fortunate. But in May of '45, we had gone through the transition into P40, which is War Hawk, like the Flying Tigers are famed for. And we used to say that we got some of the planes backward, the teeth painted out on them. They gave us inferior equipment. We used to joke about who was going to get off in the morning and whose engine would quit on takeoff. Anyhow, they canceled my unit going to Europe. The European war had just about ended and there were strafing trains and those guys were gonna come back pretty soon. They switched us over to P47, which was air-cooled, to go to the Pacific. And at Walterboro where we were stationed at that time, there was a group of B25 pilots who never saw any combat at all because they didn't know where to send them, medium bombers, little light bombers.

Holley: You were stationed where?

Heath: Walterboro, South Carolina. That's where we left Tuskegee to go to Walterboro. And we had gotten 100 hours or so in of P40, and we were ready to go overseas in May, and they canceled it and took all P40's and brought in these P47's. Big ol' sloppy thing. We didn't like it at first 'cause we had mastered the P40. We used to get jumped on by

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these Marine pilots from Paris Island. We'd have to go past their field practically to get to the ocean to practice gunnery. And they'd jump on us everyday man, out of the sun, here come these F6's and these other Corsairs. And they'd come diving on us. We'd have these mock dog fights and the P40 was such a marvelous aircraft, you could slow it down much slower than they could slow those F6's and F4's, those Navy and Marine planes. They had a higher stall velocity. So we could slow the P40 down and turn inside them and get on them, which is another combat maneuver because the P40 could slow it down to 90 miles an hour and stand on the top rudder, stand really on the wing and drop a few degrees of flaps and you could turn inside these... They'd be out there stalling, trying to get in. 'Cause the purpose of a dogfight is to get on somebody's tail. Anyhow, we used to beat them daily. We didn't like the P47, it was a big, sloppy thing, but if you ever got past 10,000 feet, it had a super-charger so you were superior to other airplanes we were gonna face in the Eastern theater. I could fly that one, too. I had about 200 hours in training and 200 in fighters, single engine.

Holley: From that period, you talked about coming home and making the transition from being Lt. Heath to Percy Heath the bass player. And we talked about you playing with the great Howard McGhee, who really, in my opinion, is a very underrated musician. Was he responsible for bringing you to New York as a musician and can you contrast what it was like, what New York was to jazz and how your experiences there as a bass player were different than you being in Philly? Compare the jazz scene in New York and Philly.

Heath: Well, Philadelphia was like a proving ground. Many later to become famous musicians got their act together in Philadelphia.

Holley: And I wanted to say, did you also, you mentioned John Coltrane, did you play with John Coltrane when he was young, or did you see him develop when he was young?

Heath: He was an alto player in Jimmy's band. Jimmy was playing alto. There's somewhere a record of me with Coltrane when he first played soprano, I don't know what date that was. Sure, I knew John. I used to call him "Country John." We were together with Dizzy's small group in the '50's, in '51. Sure, I played with John, and he had switched to tenor then. But early John Coltrane on that alto had a concept of... He was a different player all along. He and Jimmy used to get together and they were learning this so called bebop, new harmonies, at the same time. Maggie [Howard McGhee], he was recognized at that time of being one of the so-called bebop trumpet players. True to his word, he got me and Jimmy to go to Chicago with him, [our] first big time on the road. We played a club in Chicago, we played five weeks, I think we got paid for two [laughs]. My experience on the road, Chicago, we got stranded out there. The club owner was the gangster type and he gave Maggie bouncing checks and threatened him with his pistol on the desk when Maggie said, "Mister So-And-So, the check didn't clear." "Put it back in, it's good!" And he had his '45 on the desk, you didn't argue with him. So finally, the union had to send us back from Chicago, but I was big time. We had on the "Chittlin'

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Circuit”, you know what the “Chittlin’ Circuit” is? All those black theatres, there must have been about fifteen black bands that made the rounds of those circuits.

Holley: They also call them TOBA [laughs].

Heath: Well, yeah, right. Well anyhow, we were in a show with Maggie’s Big Band, we played the Apollo, we played Chicago, the Regal and we played the other one in Detroit.

Holley: The Bluebird?

Heath: Paradise.

Holley: Was the Bluebird Club opening? ...

Heath: No, this was theaters.

Holley: Theaters, I see.

Heath: That show had Sarah Vaughan with strings. She was married to George Treadwell at that time. The Howard McGhee Big Band, who had several big players and good players in there too, some of Dizzy’s players, or later to become Dizzy’s players. Illinois Jacquet, he had Shadow Wilson, Al Lucas, John Lewis on piano. And that show had people wrapped around the block from ten o’clock in the morning all day. What a bill it was! And we were with Maggie’s Big Band, we played the show stuff that big bands play. In those theatres, they had curtains that you could see through from behind, but the audience couldn’t see you because of the spotlight.

Holley: So it was a silhouette kind of effect?

Heath: Right, and we could see the band from behind that silhouette curtain. And we were back there man, trying to get John Lewis to play one more chorus. At that time, Jacquet’s, they had Russell with him, his brother, on trumpet... and man, by the time John Lewis set up “Robbin’s Nest,” which was his hit at that time, that thing was so tight, we’d go, “One more, John!”

Holley: Did John sound like John Lewis on piano?

Heath: John Lewis always sounded like John.

Holley: Meaning what?

Heath: From Dizzy Gillespie’s band, he was economical and still he fed the soloist.

Holley: So he was a great accompanist?

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Heath: He was a great accompanist from the moment we heard him. He did something on “Two Bass Hit” behind Ray Brown that everybody was saying, “Listen to John Lewis behind that!” [sings] Some kind of rhythmic thing he set up when the band came in after Brown’s solo. John Lewis has always been a phenomenal pianist! He went with Ella, too. At the early stages of the quartet, we weren’t doing anything. No jobs. We were Milt Jackson’s quartet actually at that time. But I’m jumping ahead a little bit because...

Holley: You were talking about Howard McGhee...

Heath: That show, Maggie... we were in Three Deuces on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street...

Holley: In New York?

Heath: In New York. In January of '48 after we came back from Chicago. Erroneously, I hadn't moved. It's been reported that I moved to New York. I didn't move to New York. I came over here to do a gig. We were living in Maggie's apartment, a five story walk-up over on 115<sup>th</sup> Street.

Holley: Up in Harlem?

Heath: Up in Harlem, 115<sup>th</sup> in East Harlem. We were sleeping around up there, me and Jimmy. Jimmy was in that sextet, too. But the big band made those few appearances in the theatre with that show, it was fantastic.

Holley: So you played in the sextet and in the big band? Howard McGhee's Big Band?

Heath: Right, yeah.

Holley: How did you playing in New York affect your style as a bassist? And you talked about John Simmons being influential on you playing bass, but there are people like Oscar Pettiford back in the day. Of course you talked about Ray Brown. Were there other bass players that you were digesting in this period?

Heath: Anybody that pulled a string. It was just first hearing John Simmons do his identifiable [sings] “DOOM doom doom,” he dropped a beat, skipped a beat like. And I said, “Oh wow!” and it drew my attention to the bass with this Coleman Hawkins recording with John Simmons when he did that set. And it brought back a thought that I had when I was in junior high school playing in the school orchestra with the little violin, which I gave up after that completely. Little squeaky sucker, I couldn't play it anyhow. I was always drawn to this big instrument, the bass. But at that time I wasn't big enough to be playing it, anyhow. In the military, I had grown a couple of inches. At least I got bigger in the service. So I had grown up to play the bass, and when I heard this recording, that was influential. It influenced me to say, “Ah, that's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna

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play the bass.” And Jimmy heard about that, and he had heard Charlie Parker, so that’s how we got together. I don’t know how, in year and a half, I was playing with Howard McGhee in the first international jazz festival in Paris. And at that time, John Lewis was living in Paris then, and Kenny Clarke. And I had a matinee with John Lewis, it was a beautiful club there called the Ambassadors, they were all down the foot of the Champs-Élysées near the Théâtre Marigny where this first festival was. We played on the festival, but we had other engagements at that time. Like a matinee with Coleman Hawkins, John Lewis, Kenny Clarke and John Collins...

Holley: Guitarist, played with Nat King Cole.

Heath: He had been with Nat Cole. He was on the festival over there. But while I was at the Downbeat, Kenny Clarke came through there with Jazz At The Philharmonic and came up there and sat in, and I was scared to death. I didn’t know where to put my finger or where the beat was playing with Kenny Clarke. But in that period of time between then and when we played in Paris that afternoon, somebody told me, they said, “Just listen to the cymbal,” [sings] “ting, tink, ting, tink, ting,” that was what you listen to, not the accents. Ignore those bombs.

Holley: Because at that time... Right. Cause he was using the bass drum, that’s when he started dropping...

Heath: He was doing a lot of accents and what not, but that cymbal...

Holley: That’s where the time was.

Heath: That’s where the time was. And so we started out with the thrill of my life at that time. We started out playing “Stuffy,” Coleman Hawkins [sings the theme], and we got through with the figure, the theme and we went into the chorus. And Klook and I got together and Bean turned around and said, “Yeah!” And boy, (that’s when) my experience of playing with Kenny Clarke went. This was in ’48.

Holley: I just wanna ask you, now when you talked about John Lewis in Illinois Jacquet’s band, do you remember the exact first time that you actually met John Lewis?

Heath: At my house, at my mother’s house.

Holley: In Philadelphia?

Heath: He was one of those who came to the house in ’46 when I had just bought the bass. Ray Brown, John Lewis, Milt Jackson and I’m not sure if it was Kenny, [but] I think it was Kenny too at that time.

Holley: So you met the future members of MJQ in your house in Philly?

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Heath: 1946.

Holley: Wow! And they were playing with?

Heath: With Dizzy Gillespie's Big Band.

Holley: Mm-hmm. Is it true that John Lewis wouldn't eat chicken?

Heath: Oh yeah, it's true. My mama had chicken that night on the menu, fried chicken, collard greens, candied yams, all that good Southern home cooking. And John sat there, he had a fur coat on at that time, and he sat there. He didn't know how to say, "I don't eat chicken." He didn't wanna insult my mother. So he sat there for about a half hour or so, and my sister Lizzy is crazy, boy she's wild. You think the Heath brothers are crazy when they get together, but Lizzy was pretty outgoing. And she later called John Lewis "Fur Coat" forever, "Hahaha, Fur Coat," because he didn't take off his coat. And then finally he made some excuse to leave, but he was embarrassed to say, which I learned some years later, that he didn't eat chicken. Anyhow, that was my meeting with them, and I had no idea, I had just bought a bass, I had no idea that we'd spend the next fifty years together at that time.

Holley: Now you talked about your time in Paris playing with Kenny Clarke. You also played with James Moody at that time, right?

Heath: I don't remember that.

Holley: Yeah, okay.

Heath: I don't remember Moody being there.

Holley: Mm hmm. You also recorded, this was around 1948, '47, with Johnny Griffin's album "Fly Mister, Fly." Do you remember that?

Heath: No, I don't remember that specific album, but in 1948, after we came back and didn't have much to work with Maggie, I was with Joe Morris's band, who was a rhythm and blues trumpet player. And you wanna know who was in that band? Philly Joe Jones was the drummer, Johnny Griffin was on tenor, and another fast playing tenor player, his name was Wally Something, I can't think of his last name.

Holley: And this was a rhythm and blues band?

Heath: This was a rhythm and blues band with Elmo Hope, Matthew Gee on trombone, Elmo on piano, Silly Joe I called him, Philly Joe on drums, myself on bass and Mack LeMar was baritone. That was Joe Morris' brother-in-law, or something. And Eddie Hart, For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or [archivescenter@si.edu](mailto:archivescenter@si.edu)



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“Fast Talking” Eddie Hart, was the road manager. And we played, I must have played about six months or so with Joe Morris with that band. We were on the road, we went to your adopted hometown, Wilmington, Delaware. We played on Pennsylvania Avenue at a dance hall. And we had just gotten into town, setting up, [and] between the set up, we said, “Oh, there’s a fast food restaurant across the street on the other side of Pennsylvania Boulevard.” And we went over there to get sandwiches or something and we ordered this milk shake and something else, and the woman put it in a bag, and we said, “Oh no, we were...” and she said, “Oh, you can’t eat it here.” It’s 1948 man, after I had got out of the Air Force. My roommate got killed messing with those airplanes, the guy that went through the whole thing with me, E from Earl Totley (?) from Philly. I had [to] confront his mother and his sister and all when he got killed. And here they going to tell me we can’t have a hamburger at this counter in Wilmington, and I said, “What’s up with this country? Why was I into that [the Air Force] and what for?” But that’s the way it was in Wilmington, Delaware at that time, ’48. It might have changed now but boy, it was really rough. I was shocked to find out that, that close to Philadelphia there was a place you couldn’t sit down and have a sandwich.

Holley: Now the experience, it was the first annual Paris Jazz Festival, I believe you were there when Miles Davis was over there.

Heath: Miles was there; they went over in ’49.

Holley: Oh, okay.

Heath: Charlie Parker went in ’49.

Holley: Now you being in Paris being a black musician from America, was it true that the reception there was much different than it was in the states? They really liked jazz over in Paris?

Heath: If you’re trying to trace the history of the music, Europeans were receptive, they were more or less color-blind, where in America, it was some kind of race music, degenerate, degradation of the population, degrading of the morals... They put that tag on it, “jazz,” which was only allowed in savory places, unsavory places, like in brothels and smoky nightclubs, “don’t give me all that jazz,” which meant it was insincere. That label, “we don’t play that kind of music here,” and all that [was] America’s reluctance to accept the art form that was developing in America. Whereas, when Jim Europe...

Holley: James Reese Europe.

Heath: James Europe. He went to Europe, went to Paris with this military band, like a concert band, and they’d sit down and played good swinging [music]. They gave it that Afro feeling, which it later was identified with. And the Parisians and everybody else

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said, “Oh wow! That’s different,” and they took to it. Therefore, the Hot Club of France, and in England, there were people emulating that music and embracing it, not...

Holley: Denigrating it.

Heath: Yes, and not looking at its origin as being, “Oh that’s from slaves.” They heard the music and they heard the Afro influence in the music. That music developed, there was a professor, Willis James, when we had the School of Jazz up at Lenox, the Modern Jazz Quartet had a school for a few years...

Holley: In Lenox, Massachusetts.

Heath: Lenox, Massachusetts had the music barn. And Professor Willis James came up there from Spelman, and he gave a lecture on the origin of that music, which was so enlightening to me. I had never thought of it as being a development from salve hollers in the field. And he demonstrated how expressive so-and-so would be when his day was done, and this field holler that he would emit meant that he was through with that long day in the fields and was going home. And he was identified through his holler that he gave at the end. And in the neighboring fields, someone would say, “Oh there goes John. He’s going on off...” This translated into an expressive thing. At that time, slavery, drums were outlawed because they assumed that these people were getting together with these messages, there was gonna be some uprising. So you couldn’t play drums. But any music that they heard and instruments they were allowed to try to play had this different feeling, this six-eight feeling of the [sings] “dit dit dit dit dit dit, dit dit dit dit,” this Afro thing. And that’s what they transferred to the minuets or anything else they played was the feeling. And through that initial feeling and into the gospel through the church with that handclap, that second beat [sings and claps out rhythm], all that was transferred into the music in its early developmental stages. Of course later on, they learned more harmony and European classical music was absorbed into it and given that feeling.

Holley: And the Latin thing too, right? From Cuba?

Heath: Well, you see, the Latin thing, they had their own thing as far as I’m concerned. The rhythm was there, but to me, contrary to what Dizzy said, he said all the music of the world is going to be the same. I disagree with that, ‘cause jazz will always be jazz as far as I’m concerned. If you put Latino rhythms or whatever, it’s hyphenated. Free jazz, funk jazz, if you gotta hyphenate it, it’s sort of diluted, for me, ‘cause I believe that [sings jazz drum beat], that rhythm must always be a part of jazz, to me, not that Latin thing, which is great to dance by. It’s great. And African music itself, it’s not jazz either. But that’s my own narrow-minded concept of what the music should be.

Holley: We’ll say that in quotation marks.

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Heath: No, I'm opinionated, I really believe... You know like when you asked me what I grew up listening to, I remember cranking a Victrola when I was barely able to turn it four or five turns and somebody else had to finish cranking the Victrola in order to finish a record at the time, "Haunted House Blues" or something else that we had in the house back there when we had [a] Victrola. This was before we had electronic things. And this category that America put anything black in a category of race music, when phonograph records came out in the 30's and the vinyl in '78, you go to a record shop, they'd have classical music [phone rings, interrupts statement]...

Heath: About categories and recorded music, everything by a black person was under "race music," and in that designation, there was gospel, pop, jazz and another one. I'm gonna think of it. It was uh, oh yeah, blues. Gospel, blues, pop and jazz, four different categories. There was no crossover, this and that. If you wanted to hear blues records, you asked for blues. If you wanted to hear jazz, you got a category of jazz. And they were recorded under those separate...

Holley: Headings.

Heath: Headings. Under the general heading of race music. So this business about making this jazz to please this audience, I never did, because Duke Ellington was our role model in the early 30's, Duke Ellington and those bands that were on that Chittlin' Circuit. When they came through, they were immaculately dressed, uniforms, it was a presentation on stage that was impressive, like an organization or a unit. And of course, the quartet was credited with doing certain things, which were not really original with the quartet. It was some holdover from really previous developments of the music and presentation. When the bebop era, which was sort of revolutionary, sometimes all the all stars came in dressed differently, not in uniform, but they were clean, they were sharp and everybody had his own taste. When the quartet was formed and John Lewis said, "This is not a bandleader and so-and-so's band. This is a nondescript name, non-personal name for the group," and therefore we were equal in dress. There was no bandleader in a different outfit. Like in Dizzy's band, the guys in the band had on Fox Brothers from Chicago uniform type, but Dizzy had his own thing, and any other bandleader. Cab Calloway used to change tails two or three times. Lucky Millinder would change two or three times during the show. But this presentation and the music itself was not bebop even though Milt Jackson was the baddest soloist other than Charlie Parker. Milt Jackson was the improviser on his instrument of all time, not disrespecting Lionel Hampton and his pioneering contributions to the instrument. Milt Jackson was special. With that instrument, there was no equal.

[End of disc one]

Holley: We're gonna come to the quartet in just a second, but I wanna clarify something. When did you permanently move to New York and when you get to New York, you get into the thick of things by playing on many dates from Prestige and Blue Note, and talk For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or [archivescenter@si.edu](mailto:archivescenter@si.edu)



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about the many people you worked [with]. So, I want to know when did you permanently move to New York and how you got to work with all these great people?

Heath: I had met them when they came to New York, and we had jam sessions. Miles would come to the jam sessions and Clifford Brown was there.

Holley: When did you move to New York permanently?

Heath: This was all before we moved to New York.

Holley: Ah, I see.

Heath: This was in Philadelphia, when I was still working around Philly. These people would come to Philly. They'd come to the jam sessions, and Bill Barron, Kenny's brother, was in Jimmy's band. All these people would go to these jam sessions. When these headliners would be in town, they'd have matinees and jam sessions. I met all of these people that way, Miles especially, who was influential in me even being recognized in New York. June and I decided, after a policeman leaned out of the car, June and I were coming home from a local movie down in my neighborhood in South Philly, a nice summer night, we're coming home talking about the movie we had just seen, and this guy in a squad car leans out and says, "Are you alright, Miss?" She was shocked, and so was I because the precinct was right around the corner, and they had seen me in my uniform and everything else, and they had the nerve to... So at that moment, we said I think we better get out of Philadelphia before I get killed with one of these police officers asking me something. I am an officer and a gentleman, and I did my part in the service, and they're gonna question who I'm with. And that's when we moved to New York.

Holley: In nineteen? ...

Heath: Forty-nine.

Holley: 1949.

Heath: And in '49, it was late '49, I was working with Joe Jones, Philly Joe, at a bar up in North Philadelphia. We used to go to an all night movie, air conditioned movie, after we get off, sweatin' and what not, and I got pneumonia. First time I've been to the hospital in all my life. And June had already moved to New York to find employment in a record shop in New York, what she'd been doing in Philadelphia, she had managed this record [shop]. Impossible! Have to be bonded, [an] un-bonded female couldn't get a job like that. So she went to work in the hospital as a nurse's aid to pave the way for me to come over and transfer my union. When you move from one jurisdiction to another, you have to put in a transfer card.

Holley: It takes about six months?

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Heath: Yeah, and you can't travel and you can't do this. You can only take occasional jobs. It's a mess of restrictions going from one local to another. So June had to take care of us. We were paying fifteen dollars a week in a room in somebody's apartment up on Sugar Hill, up on 148<sup>th</sup> and St. Nicholas.

Holley: Okay, I live on Convent Avenue and Sugar Hill.

Heath: Yeah? Well this was 148<sup>th</sup> right near the subway stop. There used to be a luncheonette there named Al's. I don't know if it's there now, but this was 1949. That's when we decided, right after I got out of the hospital with this pneumonia, I was getting ready to go to a matinee, got up and coughed and there was blood in my... And I went back to bed to try and sleep it off to get up to go to this matinee, and my fever jumped up and this doctor said, "You're not going to a matinee. You're going to the hospital." Then June came over and I didn't even know she was there, I was out of it that night. Soon as I recovered from that, I moved over to New York, and Miles Davis, let's see, that was in September, I could take little jobs, one nighters. That's where I would play dances, those ten dollar gigs, with Sonny Rollins and Kenny Drew. He lived up on the Hill there and Jackie Mack, Jackie McLean, would come over in the daytime and a young tenor player, Andy Kirk Jr., a tremendous tenor player. He used to carry his tenor in a pillowcase.

Holley: The son of Mary Lou Williams and Andy Kirk . . .

Heath: Andy Kirk's son, A.K. Junior.

Holley: Yes, wow. What about Art Taylor? Was he around?

Heath: A.T. was there. And when his mother would go to work, we'd go to his house and practice for these gigs. We had these twelve dollar, ten dollar dance gigs around up in Harlem and a place down in Midtown, the name will come to me. Where they used to have, City Center, they used to have some dances in there. Those were the gigs I could take, and Miles gave me a gig and Birdland, I think it was January 1950, with Miles, Fats, Navarro, Bud Powell, Buhaina, Art Blakey and myself, sometimes we were in there a few weeks with that band. And one time, a few days was with Mad Lad, Leo Parker on baritone, and another couple of days we were with Sonny Rollins and J.J. [Johnson]. And from that group, Symphony Sid used to broadcast from there, and we became the Symphony Sid All-Stars after that. But that gave us Fats' last gig. Fats had lost so much weight, he was really/rarely going out, and he couldn't play very long, and he was spitting up blood. But he played some of the most beautiful lyrical phrases that you'd ever wanna hear. And Fats was getting so weak he could only play a chorus or so, but what beautiful music. And I understand that was recorded too. I saw some people, a guy in London last year or the year before who said that they had put out everything that Fats Navarro had recorded including the broadcasts from Birdland, which I never heard. And they were supposed to send it to me, I haven't heard from them yet. But anyhow, that gig, For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or [archivescenter@si.edu](mailto:archivescenter@si.edu)



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I was like I was in heaven, every night I was there way ahead of time practicing, and these guys were big time stars, they'd come lolly-gagging, they'd come in, relax about two minutes before time they'd hit and I'd say, "Where are they, what's wrong with...?" Boy, I was in heaven. Anyhow, that was some of the early gigs, and then I made some gigs with Mary Lou Williams, who you just mentioned. Used to rehearse with her with Julius Watkins.

Holley: The French horn player?

Heath: The French horn player. "The Jug," we used to call him. I had forgotten I'd made a record with Mary Lou until one day a few years ago, I was out in California and it was her birthday, and they were playing a bunch of Mary Lou's stuff.

Holley: You remember the name of the record?

Heath: No. When he got through with the trio record, he said, "Percy Heath on bass," and I said, "Aww man! I forgot that one." With Mary Lou and Tim... I think Tim Owens was his name, the drummer. And Donald, can't think of his last name, was the trombone player. We used to rehearse and do a few little gigs around. This is in the early 50's.

Holley: You also worked with Charlie Parker at this time.

Heath: Yeah, but not at that time. This was much later after I was with Dizzy. I was with Dizzy in 1950, that's when June and I officially got married, when I got the gig with Dizzy and I told her to quit that hospital job 'cause it was tearing her up.

[Garbage truck interrupts conversation. Tape paused.]

Holley: Let's back up for a minute. You were talking about, you went on a review at this time of the Smart Affairs. Now, talk about that.

Heath: Larry Stills . . . Smart Affairs, there were some chorus girls, shake dancer and a jazz band, and that's how I got involved with Milt Buckner.

Holley: The organist?

Heath: Milt Buckner, the pianist. And a vibist. He had a contract with Lionel Hampton not to play the vibes. You didn't know that. Milt Buckner couldn't play the vibes in Hampton's band, that's why he had to sit down and play two fingers on the piano. Milt's Boogie-Woogie and those things, he was as proficient on the vibraharp as Gates. So, he couldn't play the vibes with [Hampton]. Anyhow, Milt Buckner had this group on him, and that's how I met this guy Tim Owens and got involved with Mary Lou after that. And Poopsie was in the band.

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Holley: Poopsie is...?

Heath: The baritone player with Basie. [Struggles to remember Poopsie's full name]

Holley: I can find... yeah.

Heath: Poopsie was... Charlie Fowlkes! [laughs]

Holley: Charlie Fowlkes, yes.

Heath: He was in the band too. I forget who else was in it. Maybe J.G., Johnny Griffin. We went on the road a couple of weeks with that band. I snuck out and made a few bucks when I wasn't supposed to leave New York under this stupid regulation.

Holley: Before we get into the MJQ stuff and the Dizzy stuff, I wanna talk about... there are so many records you made on the Prestige and Blue Note labels with people like Art Farmer, Miles Davis. Talk about recording, because you were kind of like the house bass player for those early sessions. Talk about what it was like playing, and also I want to ask you specifically about this one session, Miles Davis Jazz Giants were supposedly Monk and Miles were fighting and you were on that gig. I wanna set the record straight on that.

Heath: Okay, before we can get to that though, I went on the road with Dizzy, with John Coltrane, Jimmy Heath, Milt Jackson. See, I had been playing with Milt Jackson almost my whole professional career 'cause he was in that band with Maggie also. And the price wasn't right for him to go to Paris, but we were all together in that band because Maggie used to, in fact Maggie and Dizzy used to not hire piano players at certain periods and Jackson would play piano behind so-and-so, and Jimmy would play, and Dizzy would play behind different horns. There was no piano player actually in the band at some points. But that sextet with Coltrane, you asked me if I had played with, yeah I played with Coltrane with Dizzy.

Holley: This was around nineteen-fifty...?

Heath: 1950 and '51 when Trane left. Now Trane was trying to recover from his addiction at the time.

Holley: It was that early?

Heath: Yeah, and he was just trying to drink and come off his addiction. And Dizzy didn't want anyone in the band to have anything to do with drugs like that, with heroin, 'cause his experience with Charlie Parker and what not, he just didn't want it around him. So that's when Bill Graham came, Bill Graham was a baritone player that came with Dizzy. It was a quintet at that time with Al Jones...

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Holley: Drummer, Al Jones?

Heath: Yeah, and Specs Wright from Philly. He went through all these drummers, man it was unbelievable. Every two weeks it was a different drummer. And J.C. Heard's brother, David, Kansas Fields. I'm talking about five different drummers while I was there a year and a half. But Jackson was there, Milt was there with me. And then when Percy was born, and June brought Percy to Chicago 'cause I came home from Chicago, we used to come home, it was like \$25 airfare at that time round trip, and I had two days off in Chicago, and Percy was supposed to be born, and we were living up in Benny Harris's mother's house in the Bronx at that time, and Bud was living there too. June was scared to death with Bud in the house.

Holley: Why?

Heath: Well, I don't know. Bud, he would look at you, and he would give you that grimace. You wouldn't know if he was smiling or what. Bud was very strange at that time. Anyhow, he lived there, and at the time I was working in Birdland with him, Oscar Goodstein said, "Percy, see that Bud gets home," 'cause we're living in the same house. We get in a cab to go from Birdland to the Bronx, and Bud would tell the cab driver, "Hey man, go through 115<sup>th</sup> Street. Percy, I'll be right back." He'd get out [of] the cab, I don't know what building he went in, I'd sit there for a while, and I'd just tell the cab driver to take me home. And I told Oscar Goodstein, I cannot keep up with Bud Powell for you, so don't assign me to be his keeper. It's impossible. We lived in the same place, but you can't get Bud Powell to go home when he wants to go out and do whatever he's looking for.

Heath: Anyhow, that was one experience we had up there with Benny Harris. We were in a room up in his family's house in the Bronx at that time. And Percy was supposed to be born a certain week, and being the first child, naturally he was late. So I flew from Chicago, waited, I had to leave back and go back and play with Dizzy, and on Wednesday, Percy didn't show [until] the next Monday. If I had just waited one week, he showed. So June had Percy there without me, and it was really... yeah, I couldn't be there, I was in Chicago. So, five weeks later, I think, we were still in Chicago, and she brought Percy out. Maybe that was the next year, no he was still in a high chair. And Dizzy, he was cutting teeth, and we had those mixing spoons, those plastic mixing spoons, and he was cutting teeth on them, and Dizzy called him "Spoons," and Dizzy called Percy "Spoons" for the rest of his life. Every time he'd see him, he'd say, "Hey Spoons!" Percy was forty years old [chuckles], thirty-five years old, and Dizzy still called him "Spoons". And that's when we stayed at Johnny Griffin's grandmother's house with Percy on a pillow in a drawer on two chairs because the hotel, when June arrived with Percy, they wouldn't let her [in], they wouldn't let integrated couples stay there. Even married with [a] child. The guy at the hotel, South Central Hotel, said, "Aww man, they'll come and close our hotel," so we couldn't stay there. And Johnny Griffin, who I had met and had played with in Joe Morris's band, said, "Oh man, call up my

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grandmother,” and we stayed at Johnny Griffin’s grandmother’s house with Percy in a drawer from the dresser.

Holley: This is in the Bronx?

Heath: In Chicago. She brought him back out there when he was able to travel and whatnot. But I was still there. We were engaged in Chicago for quite a few weeks.

Holley: Now I just wanna get to Prestige and Blue Note...

Heath: I know you’re trying to get there and I’m still in 1950...

Holley: Which is cool...

Heath: [laughs] I’m still in ’51.

Holley: Because you’re on so many great dates.

Heath: Well, that was after though, you gotta remember. I made a terrible record in Paris with Maggie in ’48. I didn’t know doo-doo man, I didn’t really know anything. I had only been playing a year and a half, close to two years, so I should never have been recording. We made a record in Philly, Al Steele’s Allstars, on some obscure label, and then this one in Paris. And at that time, I played a trio record with Sardaby?

Holley: Michel Sardaby, yeah. A great French pianist.

Heath: Right, and I made an album with him and Kenny, and we tried to make an album with Bud Powell, who was over there by that time. And Norman Granz said, “Aww you’ll never heard this!” ‘cause Bud would skip places and it was [a] really mumbo-jumbo record. So those are my early, recorded experiences, which should have never been. And I made an early record with Dizzy on his DG label with Joe Carroll and Dizzy. Joe was in the band, singing most of these bebop and scat singing...

Holley: Like “School Days?”

Heath: Yeah. I made that record with him, and incidentally, what’s his name, was his first record date too, guitar player... [Struggles to remember name]

Holley: Collins?

Heath: No, no.

Holley: Wes?

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Heath: No, this was before that. This was in fifty... [Exasperated] Urg, can't think of the name, light skinned boy lived in Japan for a while...

Holley: Kenny Burrell?

Heath: Kenny Burrell! It was his first record date too on DG. We played "Swing Low, Sweet Cadillac," some silly thing...

Holley: "The Champ."

Heath: Yeah, right! That's the date with Dizzy. I was so disillusioned playing with Dizzy, and he would spend ten to fifteen minutes fooling around with that, we used to call it "the barrel," that conga drum he used to play that Chano had given him. And comedy and what not, and all this scat singing, and we wanted to hear Dizzy play his trumpet, and [we'd] say, "Aww, why he's fooling around the whole set, he played two songs on the trumpet!" Anyhow, when Percy was born, I was driving one car, me and Dizzy and some of the equipment, Jackson was driving the other car with the rest of the guys in the band, he wasn't paying anything for driving from New York to Chicago, 19 hours to get there, it was all part of the gig, and I was making \$115 a week on the road, \$8 a day, hotel expenses and what not, and I'm paying the rent back there for June, and I said, "Birks man, I need a little more bread. I got a family now, man." And that's when Dizzy said, "You ain't worth what you gettin'!" [I] said, "Oh?" That's when I left. And Milt had gone, Milt was gone and he was playing with Woody Herman at the time 'cause Dizzy wasn't paying any money, so we had to get out of there. So that's how I left Dizzy and came back to New York in '51, and that's when I was living on Monday nights in Birdland 'cause Monte Kay was booking Monday nights and I was \$25 a night in Birdland. At one time, I got so far ahead, I had borrowed \$100 so I owed Monte four nights in Birdland to keep up 'cause I had to pay my rent and some other expenses at the time.

Holley: So, you first met Monte Kay in 1951?

Heath: In '52.

Holley: That early?

Heath: Oh yeah!

Holley: And he was the principal owner of Birdland?

Heath: He was involved with Birdland and he pulled out from Birdland, Morris Levy and his brother, Irving, and some other, hooked up, connected Jewish owners. All those clubs in New York at that time were run by the so-called mob, and Morris Levy was connected, otherwise they wouldn't be in business. But anyhow, all that politics aside, those people  
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were running the clubs, yet Monk couldn't get a cabaret card 'cause he had been busted for... It was sort of a double standard there. Musicians were restricted from appearing in nightclubs, and the owners were all gangster-involved type people. But anyhow, Monte was booking Birdland, and he pulled out from there and opened up a club around 54<sup>th</sup> Street called the Downbeat, which he started on his own. He broke away from there, and I think Irving left there too because it got too sticky for them. And Irving Levy was a family man, real nice guy. He gave me a crib for Percy [that] one of his kids had outgrown. And Monte lent me \$100 to pay my rent and stuff.

[Phone rings; tape paused]

Holley: We were talking about Monte Kay who was the future manager of the Modern Jazz Quartet. We were in 1952, and Monte Kay is opening the Downbeat, a new club that he opened after his association with Birdland.

Heath: Right, he and Irving Levy opened the club on 54<sup>th</sup> Street near 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, between 8<sup>th</sup> and Broadway. And that's where Billy Taylor's Trio was playing at, and it's the first time I saw Earl May standing on the wrong side of the bass playing [chuckles]. He and Charlie Smith were left-handed players, and Charlie Smith had the cymbals on the wrong side, and it was kind of weird. When I first walked in, I had walked around the block with Buhaina, we were working in Birdland, I walked around there and went in and saw these people, and I immediately backed out of there 'cause I thought we had smoked the wrong thing [chuckles], see these guys playing. Anyhow, that was the Downbeat around the corner, couple of blocks from Birdland. But Monte was there, and at that time, we had formed the Symphony Sid All-Stars, too. It originally was with Zoot, and Miles, and who was the drummer? ... Kenny, and myself...

Holley: Kenny Clarke?

Heath: Kenny Clarke. And who was playing piano? I don't remember who was playing piano at that time. Jimmy made some of the gigs up in Boston with the Symphony Sid All-Stars. It might have been Kenny Drew, not sure about the piano player. But that's some more association with Miles that I had, and Kenny, Kenny Clarke. Maybe it was Gilly Coggins...

Holley: Gil Coggins on piano?

Heath: Yeah, maybe it was Gilly. But the Symphony Sid All-Stars, and oh yeah, JJ Johnson was in that too. We played around there in the Downbeat with that group. The two clubs were interrelated anyhow. Being in New York then working sometimes with Miles, made these record dates with Miles and everybody else who recorded for Prestige at that time, Thad Jones, you mentioned Art Farmer, who had left the Jazztet, he and Benny had when Tootie was playing with them incidentally. You remember the Jazztet?

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Holley: Wasn't the Jazztet later? I thought the Jazztet was formed like in 1959. But there was a Jazztet...

Heath: But then it was before Art Farmer...

Holley: He was with Lionel Hampton with...

Heath: He left Hampton and made a record for Prestige on a sextet or something...

Holley: Quincy Jones was on those records?

Heath: Yeah, I made those records. But anyhow, I made records with almost everybody back there who was recording for Prestige, and that's how I made my rent actually. 'Cause by then we had moved up in Harlem River Drive in those new apartments up above the Polo Grounds. It was a middle-income deal up there, and that was the bracket I was in at that time. And during that time, I worked with Ben Webster up at a place called Bowman's, up 155<sup>th</sup> Street, right near Coogan's Bluff, between 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Coogan's Bluff right on the hill there. Ben Webster, Duke Jordan and a drummer, Arthur Edgehill, we were playing up there behind Phil Black, who was a female impersonator and a shake dancer, it was a real wild gig, but that's when Ben Webster, we fell in love with each other, up at Bowman's. He incidentally had once gave me a gig with the Duke Ellington cats...

Holley: Harry Carney and those people?

Heath: No, it was with Johnny Hodges and Sonny Greer. Boy, we had a good time on that gig. That was the only time I played with the Duke Ellington guys. But during that period, like becoming a house bass player, so to speak, for Blue Note and Prestige, the jazz labels, I recorded with an awful lot of people, including Monk and Miles and this discography, I can't even recall who I recorded with. It was Horace Silver's first date...

Holley: Kenny Dorham too?

Heath: And some of Milt Jackson's dates, and that was how I paid my rent making record dates. I think it was about \$55 a sessions, or something like that, for a three-hour session.

Holley: There's a famous session that you were a part of, Miles Davis and the Modern Jazz Giants, and in jazz lore, there's been some kind of controversy that Monk and Miles almost got into a fistfight because Miles didn't want Monk to comp for him. Now you were on that date, can you set the record straight? Was there any kind of beef between Monk and Miles?

Heath: A beef, fistfights, no. Listen, I've been asked about that on many occasions. At the time, Miles, who was [a] really, very innovative person, he used to say, "Stroll," to a  
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piano player, which meant the piano player would lay out for a certain number of choruses and then come back in, which was really quite effective. The absence of the piano for a period and then to bring the piano player back in to accompany, it was really a very dynamic difference. When Miles told Monk to “stroll,” Monk said, “Well, you don’t like the way I play, anyhow.” That was it. That was the big fight. You know Monk, “You don’t want me to play ‘cause you don’t like the way I play.” And he laid out and was sitting there listening, and he failed to come in when Miles turned around for him to come in, and Miles turned to him and played the melody to the bridge [singing melody]. And he came back in. End of story. That was the great fight between Miles and Monk. It was ridiculous how they grab hold of something and print it, and it becomes lore, doctrine. But that was the extent of the rumble between Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk.

Holley: 1951 is a pivotal year because you’re playing in the Milt Jackson Quartet and I wanna kind of get from how does the Milt Jackson become the Modern Jazz Quartet because again, there’s so much that’s been written about when you guys were actually formed, but talk about the Milt Jackson Quartet. You were in it. How did it become the Milt Jackson Quartet?

Heath: Well, we had been playing with Milt, John, Kenny, myself. It must have been in late ’51, Ray Brown came to town and they had this record date on Dizzy’s label, I guess it was DG, and it was old reunion time for them having been that rhythm section with Dizzy’s Big Band, which spelled the trumpet players while they got their chops rested...

Holley: Meaning they played while the horn players were resting?

Heath: Yeah, right. The trumpet players were playing some really difficult music and needed a rest of their chops, their lips. And at that time, Dizzy would allow the rhythm section, which was Brown, John Lewis and Kenny and later Joe Harris ‘cause Kenny left. Anyhow, that was the rhythm section that played during this lull between these brass compositions, brassy compositions. And Brown came into town, I think he was with Ella at the time, Ella Fitzgerald. He had married Ella and he was playing behind her. They made this record, “Milt Meets Sid,” and something else, “D and E.”

Holley: “True Blues?”

Heath: Yeah, well “True Blues” was just a name of a lick that Jackson played. They made that record. It was the record of the year, jazz record of the year or something in Downbeat or one of those magazines. But that was just passing ‘cause as the Milt Jackson Quartet, we had been playing in Philly and other places in small clubs all around and a few gigs, and John Lewis was studying, getting his masters degree...

Holley: At Manhattan School of Music.

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Heath: Manhattan School, all this was going on at that time. John had this idea of forming a group with the same formation, and he wasn't interested in writing music, this concept that he had, which was different from a rhythm section behind Milt Jackson. He wasn't interested in doing that, which he expressed. He said, "I wanna write some different music, and Percy, you don't know enough to do what I wanna do. You better get some lessons." So that's when I went to Charles Mingus, and I told Ming, I said, "Hey Charles, I gotta get some lessons from you." And he said, "Percy Heath, you're putting me on. If I could play the blues like you, I wouldn't want no lessons!" or something like that. I said, "No man, I'm serious. 'Cause John said I needed to improve my technique," 'cause I'm self-taught 'cause I had quit those lessons with Quintelli years before I had become professional, and one the road, I missed those lessons. So, anyhow, during that period, John decided that he wasn't gonna write music for Milt Jackson's Quartet, but he was gonna write this music in which I had to progress to learn to play because I was with the quartet, and that's when he brought in a list of names that didn't say anything about a bandleader, so-and-so in this quartet. And one of the names submitted was the Modern Jazz Quartet, and we said oh yeah, that's cool, that's what we can be, the Modern Jazz Quartet. That's where the name came from, and in 1952 when we decided that to become a partnership, instead of a bandleader and his quartet, we incorporated.

Holley: One thing I want to clarify, I read that you're officially incorporated on January 14, 1952, and then I read it was January 15<sup>th</sup>.

Heath: I have no idea. I had the seal around somewhere. That's really insignificant whether it's the 14<sup>th</sup> or the 15<sup>th</sup> but the corporation, you could check with the state records, I guess. I had the seal for a long time. I could probably try to check on banking records because it became the Modern Jazz Society, Inc. That was the name of the corporation.

Holley: Not Modern Jazz Quartet?

Heath: No, the quartet was just one entity 'cause the society was formed to present concerts and other records, and produce records and a lot of other things other than performing as a quartet.

Holley: Which the society did a couple years later because, matter of fact, you have one record with Gunther Schuller. That's interesting.

Heath: Yeah, right. So those other prospective entities were part of the Modern Jazz Society, Inc. The Modern Jazz Quartet was just one facet of the proposal under the corporate papers, which Harold Lovett set up. At that time, Harold Lovett was Miles Davis's lawyer. That set up was in '52, I don't know if it was the 15<sup>th</sup> or the 14<sup>th</sup>. That's when we became a partnership, more or less, a corporation. And on the first album, you will notice, the first Prestige album, said "Milt Jackson and the Modern Jazz Quartet." The first performance in Birdland they insisted on "Milt Jackson and the Modern Jazz Quartet." For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or [archivescenter@si.edu](mailto:archivescenter@si.edu)



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Quartet” because it had been Milt Jackson’s quartet in the beginning, and he was the name. So when Kenny decided to stay in America for a while, and we formed this group, he hadn’t realized that it was gonna be the drum parts written by John Lewis, and you hit this here and that there, and Kenny, being the innovator who had taken John Lewis by the hand and introduced him to Dizzy Gillespie when they got out of the service together, he didn’t want nobody to write no drum parts for him. That was the concept that John had, it was four different lines going along together in counterpoint, which made the sound of the Modern Jazz Quartet.

Holley: Which was different from the way you played under Milt Jackson with kind of a freer blowing...

Heath: It was not freer flowing. It was just, in the fashion of a rhythm section and soloists, which was the concept that John wanted to get away from, because he didn’t want to present this music in nightclubs. This is a master plan of John Lewis, the whole thing, the whole concept of the Modern Jazz Quartet including four people in Brook Brother’s suits, on concert stage tuxedos. This was to elevate the presentation of the music not only visually, but the sound, to get out of those Birdland’s and wherever, those smokey glasses, drinking and tinkling and conversation. This was music designed to listen as a chamber group, we were dubbed. But I hate all these labels and what not ‘cause even though “Vendome” was completely written out for me, “Concorde” except for a few... some of those early compositions, I had to learn how to play that stuff. I listened to *The Comedy* there the other day, I don’t believe I played some of the music. It’s ridiculous!

Holley: It’s hard.

Heath: How complex that music was and how simple it sounded ensemble.

Holley: And swing in the jazz context...

Heath: Oh, that had to be there. It had to be there. Even a transcription of...

Holley: Bach.

Heath: Any Bach fugue, Milt Jackson couldn’t un-swing it if you hung him up by his neck. So, encompassing those classical forms and using that as a springboard for improvisation ‘cause every piece had some improvisation in it, even though it would... like we played *Bachianas Brasileiras*, Milt Jackson would dress up that melody, it’s a lot of grace notes and things that Villa-Lobos didn’t write. And in *Concierto de Aranjuez*, there was always jazz swinging it. That was one of the ingredients that was demanded so that we could be called jazz. It had to swing. And that’s one of the elements, along with the most important element in jazz for us, was improvisation. There had to be space in there, even in those written parts for me, there was a section in there where there were

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chords for me to improvise a line. And that was the concept of four lines going along there together making the one, the sound of the Modern Jazz [Quartet], which was identifiable right from the start of the first four bars of anything. But John Lewis, when Jackson played the blues... when you listen to any Modern Jazz Quartet record, if you listen to one instrument per listening, listen through the drums, listen through the bass or through the vibes or the piano, you're gonna hear different music every time.

Holley: Like counter-solos.

Heath: Let me tell you, John Lewis set up... he knew, if he did a certain thing, what Jackson would do. They were unbelievable. I played with those people for forty years and I never heard them play the same thing twice. They may have the same vocabulary, but never the same thing in the same place in thousands of concerts. Thousands. They never repeated. Like the solo of "Flying Home," if you didn't play that solo of Illinois Jacquet, you didn't play the tune. I don't care what tenor player it was. If you didn't play that Illinois Jacquet solo, you didn't play "Flying Home." But there was never a repeat after the theme, which even that changed occasionally, they would embellish that somehow, but they never played the same. Improvise was improvise for the Modern Jazz Quartet, not [a] rehearsed solo, like Lester Young's "D.V. Blues" and all that, and Count Basie, some of those solos, they played the same, like Ben Webster's "Cotton Tail," he played that, which became "Cotton Tail," the song.

Holley: Where the solo becomes like an arrangement.

Heath: Where the solo became the song actually. But that never happened with the Modern Jazz Quartet. After the theme, it was never the same.

Holley: You mentioned that you took lessons with Charles Mingus. What exactly did he teach you? And also what did Ray Brown teach you during this period?

Heath: Ray Brown showed me how, when I just bought the bass, there was a certain way of grabbing the neck, it can't be spoken how, but grabbing the neck like... Oscar Pettiford never stood up on the thumb and played like that, Oscar Pettiford had perfect pitch. And you asked me about my idols, that was my man, O.P., after the influence of early Dizzy Gillespie bebop and Ray Brown. I still call him "Ding," "Ding Dong," he's the "Ding Dong Daddy" of us all 'cause that [sings] "ding ding ding," that walk. "Ding Dong" is Ray Brown. But O.P. had a way of grabbing the neck with his whole hand around it as opposed to fingers, and Ray Brown says to me, I had just bought the bass, and I'm showing him [that] I'm going to play the bass, he said, "Oh yeah P., you gotta get your spider together," which that's what they refer to as putting your thumb on the back of the neck and fingering as a spider, as opposed to grabbing the neck within the whole hand. And that's what Ray Brown showed me. I never tried to play like Ray Brown 'cause Ray Brown was so far advanced from what I was doing that I heard him

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and I heard what he did on “One Bass Hit.” Incidentally, that “One Bass Hit” was Oscar Pettiford’s composition.

Holley: Ah, I see.

Heath: He called it something else.

Holley: Was it credited to him ‘cause...?

Heath: No, it was credited to Dizzy. That’s O.P.’s composition.

Holley: Okay, now Charles Mingus... He’s gonna change the tape.

Heath: Alright.

[End of disc two]

Holley: This is tape two of a Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Project interview with the great Percy Heath. My name is Eugene Holley. The engineer is Sven Abow, and we are here at the home of Percy Heath, July 23, 2001.

Heath: [laughs] Yeah, you gotta get that year in there, Eugene.

Holley: Yes. So I was asking you, sir, about, you mentioned what Ray Brown showed you, the spidering technique of fingering certain things on the bass. Charles Mingus showed you what kind of things?

Heath: Well, at that time, being self-taught, more or less, having discontinued my lessons, original bass lessons with Mr. Quintelli, I wish I could think of his first name. But he put his hand on the bass, and it was so gentle, the movement was so effortless. It was really impressive when I first started playing my \$300 Epiphone plywood bass, which I had originally. When I went to Charles for these lessons, he gave me fingering exercises, which I think his teacher out in California, Zimmerman, I don’t remember his first name either. I think Mr. Zimmerman had given Charles certain fingering exercises to improve intonation and the spacing between fingers on this instrument with no frets to guide. It’s all positions, the semantle (?) system of certain fingers in certain positions across the four strings. And these exercises, I gave them when I was so-called instructor up at the School of Jazz at Lenox that we mentioned. Ray was up there too, but I had some students that I gave these very same exercises to, and every time I’m asked to instruct somebody, “Hey Mr. Heath, do you give bass lessons?” “No, I don’t give lessons, but here, take this with you.” They’re the same exercises that Charles taught me because later on in my career, I was noted for intonation, so I credit Charles Mingus’s exercises with that part of my playing, which people hired me for on those records dates. Intonation was one thing, but then the pulse. I knew where one was. That’s what Miles used to say, “Where’s one? I

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couldn't find one." 'Cause you have to find one to know where two, three, four is [are]. So, old Perce had a good beat from that Baptist [claps] that I grew up with, I knew where one was. And then later on earlier, I didn't know much harmony when I was making those records with Monk. I told him, I said, "Monk, I've only been playing a little while. I don't know nothing but the basic." He said, "That's what I want you to do. Just what you do." And the same thing Ornette Coleman told me later, "What you do is what I want you to do on these records, don't try anything else, I'll do that. You just play the basic line." 'Cause earlier in the Downbeat magazine, somebody wrote out a bass line that I played on a blues, and I had played two choruses of a walking line, which to me, I was just embellishing the line from Count Basie's bass player, I've got to recall his name...

Holley: Walter Page?

Heath: Walter Page had played a bass line, and I took that bass line, which is basic blues bass line, and I put some notes in between notes, which is a concept that I have. If I was a bass teacher to teach young people to play the bass--jazz, there's certain beats in jazz that are strong and the weaker beat should have the stronger note.

Holley: Like the one and three.

Heath: Yeah. The weaker beat could have the stronger note, but two and four [are] accented in jazz. So you could put a weaker note on the two and four because the accent is on the after-beat [sings] "dun dah, dun dah." So, the initial one has got to be a strong note, which is one of the three basic notes of the triad. This is in my concept of constructing a line so that harmonically, I'm establishing the chord change and at the same time, I'm putting notes in between to lead into those other notes. You can use leading tones into stronger beats, which are not necessarily the basic notes in the chord. Anyhow, I don't know if I explained that, but that's my whole concept of constructing a line so that I'm implying harmonic changes of the composition. At the same time, I'm at liberty to create a melody of my own.

Holley: So you can create a counter-melody by staying true to the harmonic progression of the tune?

Heath: But I'm still the bass. I'm not playing the harmony that the horns are gonna play 'cause there's no foundation. To me, the bass is the base, the bottom. The b-a-s-e is the b-a-s-s is the b-a-s-e. The ground bass (base) of the harmonic progression. This concept came from the way John Lewis wrote for me to learn where and when in his writing to be a line going along polyphonically, but yet independent. And that's what I was trying to say about Mingus' teaching me those exercises, improve[d] my intonation. So that accompanied with my teacher, John Lewis, who wrote ahead of me for forty years and made me learn to do more than what I was doing the whole time. He was my teacher and my mentor, I love him and I'm really sorry he got away, and me being the last member of that really revolutionary organization, I'm fortunate to be still here. But those years of

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productivity and to realize his vision of what we could be as a small group and with other people, too. He wrote for quartet and others. But the quartet, it's like the early times we went to play with a symphony orchestra, and some wise guy back in the section there, when we came out, he said, "Yeah man, now we gonna play some jazz!" And Mr. Lewis calmly said, "Oh no," very politely said, "You're gonna play what's written. We're gonna play the jazz." And that just stopped that attitude right there [laughs]. But you had to encounter a lot of things in the beginning because it was different, and in the nightclubs, rather than try to out-volume the conversation that was going on, people dating and, "Hey, yay, blow, yeah man, go!" That attitude, what we did was we played so soft they realized music was going on up there and their conversation was above the music, and they would settle down and listen.

Holley: Reverse psychology.

Heath: Reverse psychology. John Lewis was a smart man. I keep talking about John, but the fact that Milt Jackson's ability was such a major part of the whole... his improvisations and his concept, his blues and gospel feeling. But don't underestimate John Lewis. He could play some of the funkier blues as you wanna hear, too. Like that one you keep mentioning, "True Blues," most of the compositions that were Modern Jazz Quartet recordings were credited to Milt Jackson as Milt's composition. Jackson would bring in a line, and John Lewis would make it a song. Milt Jackson's composing was just a melody on his instrument, and my brother Jimmy did that for him too on many of the record dates that Jimmy was involved [with].

Holley: Now Milt also had perfect pitch and a photographic memory, right?

Heath: Yes sir. We discontinued playing some of those really complicated fugues for a year or so, and John would say, "Milt, why don't we play so-and-so again?" and Jackson would start into it and he'd stumble into one spot, and he'd say, "What did I do here?" And John would play it on the piano, and he'd say, "Oh yeah!" and he'd get the whole composition like we played it yesterday. That's what Jackson could do.

Holley: You mentioned the early days. You mention this one particular performance at Club Chantilly. What was that like? And that club doesn't exist [anymore]; it's where the Blue Note is now.

Heath: No, it's around the back and the street behind where the Blue Note is.

Holley: Right, in Greenwich Village. Can you recreate for us what this club was like? And you count that as the first official gig of the Modern Jazz Quartet.

Heath: I got that gig in New York. I got that gig for the Quartet. I forget the brother's name who was booking at that time. We played two or three nights, a weekend or something, and I think we drew our families, our wives; they weren't even married at that time. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or [archivescenter@si.edu](mailto:archivescenter@si.edu)



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time. We didn't have over ten people in there because we weren't known, we didn't have a record out, and we were just getting it together, so to speak. That actually was the first MJQ engagement. That preceded Birdland, which came after the first Prestige record. And then the second record with "Django" on it, Kenny was on that, and that was up 'til '54. And in '55, we were going to Washington, DC to play opposite Dave Brubeck, and this is the first time we had a chance to bump heads with the then popular Dave Brubeck Quartet and that style of playing...

Holley: Who was just on the cover of Time magazine at that time.

Heath: Yeah, we were going there, and Kenny quit.

Holley: Okay, stop that for a minute because that is a very significant point. What was the reason why he quit? Again, there are so many different versions of why he left. He was either kicked out or he wanted to leave...

Heath: No, he wasn't kicked out. He just didn't wanna do all that rehearsing and playing drum parts. Kenny did not want to play that kind of music. He was an innovator on his own as far as his instrument was concerned. He started [a] certain concept of punctuating. If you hear that thing that we did before the Modern Jazz Quartet, we were on a thing at Carnegie Hall with Charlie Parker, there's a record out of that with Kenny and myself and John Lewis, and you can hear Kenny in the back, "Go Bird! That kind of bebop." Kenny Clarke, he was it. Max was [had] a certain recognition being with Charlie Parker for his technique and what not, but Kenny Clarke swung. Miles used to say, "Max couldn't swing if you hung him by his neck," but he was correct. And technically, impossible to do what he was doing. Arthur Taylor used to sit around all day with Max Roach records trying to play what Max Roach was playing. But as far as swing, Jo Jones, "Philly Joe," and "Papa Jo," they call him, they had that swing. Shadow Wilson, he could swing. Denzel Best was a quiet but swing. You can play, a lot of people can play, but that feeling, that's the difference between jazz and other music all over the planet. "It don't mean a thing," like the Maestro said, "if it ain't got that swing." Well, that swing is the difference like Buhaina. Art Blakey will swing you into bad health, but you had to hold him back 'cause the tempos would go up. And the marriage between bass players and drummers in order to keep that swing, like Kenny Clarke, you got to play behind him a little bit, behind the beat. Art Blakey gotta lay back a little bit. Connie Kay was so right on it that you feel like you gotta pull him a little bit. That difference of where on the pulse that the bass player and the drums marry, that's the difference in a formation swinging and not giving you that feeling. You say, "Oh you gotta pat your foot to that." So, different drummers have different points of where the beat is in his head, and that's what happened with the Quartet. Everybody felt where one was. You had to know where one is, and Lester Young played so fluent, but when Prez said, "BOOP!" it was right on it! But he'd be laying back a little relaxed and what not, but when Lester said, [sings melody], that beat said, "Here it is!" There's no doubt that was one. This concept of jazz, I really wanna emphasize that even though the Quartet had this polyphonic concept of

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four things going along at the same time, we could not un-swing it, we couldn't do it. Even the transcriptions, like I said before, the exact notations, the feeling had to be there, which it was. I imagine that was why we were successful for so long a period of time.

Holley: Before we get from the transition from Kenny Clarke to Connie Kay, I wanna talk a couple things in those early recordings. On "One Bass Hit" and on the "La Ronde Suite," we have the first recorded solos of Percy Heath in the Modern Jazz Quartet. Now talk about that for a second.

Heath: Well, the "One Bass Hit" was carryover from Dizzy's band, which I was really embarrassed to think about trying to play that particular thing because I had heard Oscar Pettiford's too. I have a tape of it somewhere here, of Pettiford's and Ray Brown's with the band. And the arrangement was carried over to the Quartet. It was amazing how, even in the *Bachianas Brasileiras*, that was originally recorded with about nine or ten cellos, and Bidú Sayão was singing the a cappella part, the melody. Well, John Lewis gave me the cello parts so I'm playing all those cellos on that line that I had to learn. That was a piece that June and I had...

Holley: Bidú Sayão was the Brazilian opera singer?

Heath: Yeah, and they had this record of the Villa-Lobos "Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5" And June and I used to listen to that, her being in charge of this record store with classical music, and that was one thing we used to lay around and listen to when we were courting. And I mentioned that to John, and John came in with it. I didn't realize he was gonna give me all those different parts. The condensation of larger works, which were played by the four people, that was a masterstroke of John Lewis condensing those things to sound like those pieces with just the four people. So that arrangement of "One Bass Hit" was a la Dizzy Gillespie's band. I'm not sure if John did it for the band or if Dizzy did it, but that takes care of the "One Bass Hit," which that record wasn't my greatest. I could've done it better later. It was quite early. But then, when it came down to the "Two Bass Hit," the "La Ronde," that's my line. John told each of us to compose a line on that arrangement of "Two Bass Hit," which he had done with Dizzy's band, which we call "La Ronde". So each of us had to create a melody, so when you hear [sings melody], that's Percy Heath, but never credited for that. But that's John Lewis's form.

Holley: I just wanna let you know that, I don't know if you know this or not, but that was sampled by Branford Marsalis in a hip-hop album called *Buckshot LeFonque*, so that little piece that you're talking about is in hip-hop.

Heath: They should've given me some royalties 'cause they did that with one of Jimmy's things named "Smilin' Billy," part of the improvised "Smilin' Billy Suite." We just resurrected it, too out in California when Billy passed, and this festival up in the Sonoma wine country, it was dedicated to him. We resurrected that "Smiling Billy Suite," which

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is on the other half of the first Heath Brothers album that we did for Stanley Cowell's company at the time.

Holley: Strata-East, we'll get to that.

Heath: Anyhow, they take little pieces of some things that were written in the bebop era, post-bebop era, and they make little licks out of it and they use it. That's good that some people, they listen to hip-hop. So, hip-hop is like bebop was back then, revolutionary movement. This business of rapping, I used to do that in the schoolyard when I was twelve years old. I was the "Whoobie-Doobie Man" or something, "Hey, come here, step in closer," and I used to have people around laughing all the time, the same as those things in the military about the monkey and the lion and all those traditional...

Holley: Signifyin' monkey.

Heath: Yeah, man, all that. We did that as kids. I was imitating a circus barker, who at the sideshows which my father used to take us to, 'cause he'd go and listen and meet all the guys in the sideshow band, not the main tent guys that played behind the trapeze. These guys were in a sideshow, which were tents outside of the main tent. Pop used to take us to see them set up the tents. Boy, that was something to see, with these crews pulling on the ropes, and the foreman with his rhythm, and five guys would get around a stake and it would be just, "bop bop bop bop bop," and they'd drive the stake. My father took us to all of that, and the sideshows and these bands, we'd meet these guys who were traveling musicians. So all that influence, I grew up with, so I can't get away from that basic jazz feeling that I grew up with. A lot of families were alienated, black families didn't want their children to go into playing jazz. It didn't pay, it was downplayed, and some people in the church, it got too jazzy, the music that was founded on that beat got too jazzy for some people in the church, so there was an alienation of the music. There was a struggle to perpetuate the growth of jazz because it was no promise. MJQ was an exception. We were making \$600 a week all year, whether we worked or not, after the first fifteen, eighteen years.

Holley: Because you were incorporated?

Heath: And not only that, we got popular, and we put all the money in and stuck to a salary so that when I put my foot down and said, "Look, I got a family. You guys don't have a family. I got three boys and June's home with those boys alone most of the year. And when school is out, I'm not gonna go anywhere, I'm not playing." I told Monte Kay, "Get another bass player 'cause Percy's not leaving." I'm coming to Montauk and [to] spend three months with my family 'cause June was here the rest of the year without [me], except for a month around Christmas. I was gone, three, four months at a time in Europe. She was here with the three boys with all the problems of raising three sons without me. That's how come we got to Montauk.

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Holley: When did you first come here?

Heath: 1963. We spent five weeks in a motel out here and every year after that, we came to Montauk, and that house down there right where you came around the curve, we were 26 years in that. It got from three months, and when the boys finished school, we're out here five or six months. Then for the last twelve years almost, we've been out here permanently because we sold the house in Queens. But I got off the subject to tell you how fortunate the Quartet was as opposed to other struggling musicians who were great players and who never got to be financially secure, and therefore the discouragement by the families who said, "Why you wanna go into that?" But at that time, you really had to love it and be devoted to presenting it, like the Quartet was devoted to presenting that music in a different venue other than nightclubs. And we were fortunate enough to get into some halls where they didn't allow jazz at all.

Holley: Before we get to that, because we left off with Kenny Clarke leaving and the great Connie Kay coming in, how did Connie come into the band, and talk about his contributions?

Heath: I used to know Connie when he was with Lester Young, and Connie had left Lester Young and he used to sit around and listen to the Quartet as a fan. So when Kenny abruptly left, we had to get somebody. Art Blakey played with the Modern Jazz Quartet one night and played sensationally! I mean, quiet and what we were doing he got right into it. But Connie Kay, when John says, "We gotta get a drummer to go to Washington," he says, "We'll get Connie," and they talked over the arrangements on the train going down there to Washington and what to play where and what. We did that hour opposite Brubeck...

Holley: Do you know where in Washington you played?

Heath: I forget, it was a hall.

Holley: Howard Theatre?

Heath: No, no, it was a hall somewhere where they had jazz.

Holley: Lincoln Theatre maybe?

Heath: That's Philadelphia.

Holley: There's a Lincoln Theatre in DC, too.

Heath: Is it? I don't know where that concert was. The Armory somewhere?

June Heath: It could've been the Armory.

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Heath: Yeah.

Holley: So, John and Connie Kay are coming down to Washington on the train.

Heath: On the train. We're going over the arrangements and what to play, and we played a lot of the bebop things that time. I don't remember what we played as far as some of the more elaborate arrangements, but most of those, like "Vendome," it was just a few changes from brushes to cymbals, but the drum part was mostly straight ahead.

Holley: John wrote the drum part?

Heath: Yeah, he wrote all his drum parts, and that is what Kenny didn't wanna do. Kenny went back to Paris. He wanted to go back to Paris anyhow. He didn't stay over here very long. At that time, he was married to Annie Ross, and they had a son that they brought back over here.

Holley: Annie Ross of Lambert, Hendricks and Ross?

Heath: Yeah, they came over together with a son, Liaquat. They broke up sort of, and Kenny wanted to go back to Paris and left Annie here with the son, and she took him to Kenny's sister in Pittsburgh. And Carmen McRae was Kenny Clarke's ex-wife, too. And Carmen helped raise the son along with the sisters. It was kind of complicated as far as his personal life at that time.

Holley: Connie, the reason I talk about him, he was kind of the final link to the MJQ that we know that has lasted so long...

Heath: Forty years.

Holley: A long time ago, I was talking to you on the phone, I did something for Atlantic, and you told me about Connie Kay and John Lewis going up to the Zildjian factory. Can you talk about that and talk about the construction of Connie Kay's drumset, which was so different from other drummers in jazz?

Heath: Kenny Clarke had the connection with Sonor, and when Kenny left, he put Connie in touch with the Sonor people 'cause the music that we were anticipating playing would necessarily also be a certain drumset, the sound, 'cause Kenny was playing Sonors at that time. So to continue that sounds, Kenny introduced Connie and John to the Sonor people, and Connie had the exclusive Sonor contract. Anywhere we went we could get Sonor drums for that sound. We used to carry those around, but certain cymbal sounds for certain pieces, John used to go and say, "Hey, we're in Boston. Let's go up to Zildjian." And the Zildjian brothers spilt after that, but still, I forget which one we still used to go to, the factory and try out all the cymbals in the factory and see which one gave the sound. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or [archivescenter@si.edu](mailto:archivescenter@si.edu)



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that Connie liked, and John says, “How about this one?” There’s cymbals for different, like big band crash cymbals, that weren’t appropriate for the Quartet, and the sizzle cymbal had to have a certain sound to it to accompany the music. Then at one time, we used to carry a gong around that weighed about forty pounds. We used to carry so much overweight, it’s a wonder we could make any money at all ‘cause the vibraharp was in four cases and we used to carry like 400 pounds overweight on the airlines. I was buying a separate ticket for the bass and taking it up the steps in a soft case and putting it in a seat beside me. All this stuff we innovated, and they used to give me a hard time about bringing it on the plane, so I had letters from three major airlines from the public relations guy from all TWA, all the airlines, United, I had letters. Monte Kay, you mentioned his contribution to the success of the Quartet, when he and Pete Cameron were partners on this booking management agency, we had to get them to get these letters from these guys that don’t mess with Mr. Heath with his 250 year old bass, which goes in the cabin and has a seat, booga, booga, “Please allow him every courtesy,” we had letters like that. When the little stewardesses, no disrespect, would say, “Oh you can’t bring that on the plane,” I’d say, “Please, just stand aside,” and I’d show them the letter and they’d say, “Oh yes, Mr. Heath. Come right in and we’ll strap it in for you.” And we did that until the airlines changed, the economy section, the wall kept getting closer and closer, it squeezed the seat and I couldn’t get the bass in there properly. I had to reverse it, and one of us had to sit behind it on the neck, and I hated it. So, that’s when I finally said I would trust the Kolstein case bass carrier, which Sam Kolstein and his son, Barry, had been taking care of my bass ever since I acquired it in 1956, this 300 year old instrument I have. But I wouldn’t trust it [to] any of those bass carriers until I saw this gigantic thing that I carry around now to ship it with the rest of the instruments. We used to have this 400 pounds of overweight with this heavy gong, which hit one note in the beginning of “Fontessa” and one note on the end. And we’re carrying all this stuff around and those silver horn drums that Connie had, the most impressive drumset, you could see it on some of these older pictures, which was all part of the presentation. Duke Ellington had chimes and stuff with Sonny Greer behind him, he would get up and hit three notes. The Quartet had all this equipment; we had miniature kettle drums, and all that to carry, which was all part of the presentation, and boom! When the lights go on and this 300 year old bass is laying out there and these drums with all this stuff going on, wow!

Holley: It sets the tone.

Heath: Look at those guys! And I don’t wanna jump ahead, but in 1957, I got an album here, which says, Joachim Berendt wrote some liner notes about that appearance that the Quartet made in Donaueschingen at the mouth of the Danube in the Black Forest in Schwarzwälder in Deutschland, in Germany, and they had jazz of a sort there, according to these notes, in a few years up until that time. But the Modern Jazz Quartet was in 1957, we were the first jazz really that they had along with Henry Hodeir, with the French jazz thing, and...

Holley: Eddie Sauter?

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Heath: Eddie Sauter, and there was [were] some Stravinsky works there, and Milhaud and all other music. And the Modern Jazz Quartet, John Lewis somehow said, “We’re gonna have morning/mourning clothes.” You know the morning/mourning clothes with the hickory striped pants and the white vests and the ties and the black jacket almost swallowtail, but morning/mourning, I mean real formal, ambassador’s outfit. Prince Max von Fürstenberg, who had something to do with the presentation of this festival of light music, their family for centuries, the Fürstenbergs, and Prince Max was in his 80s, and he had us to dinner at the Schwarzwälder restaurant in the Bayerischer Hof hotel. We stayed in Munich, in München, this is in the heart of Bavaria. All the princes and princesses were at this dinner the night before, and this old guy says, “You better play very well tomorrow, or I will roar like a lion. And you know I can roar,” and all the little princes and princesses said, “Yes, Grand Papa.” This old German prince here, and that Sunday morning, we came out and stood for over five minutes to a standing ovation just because we came out with the pipe organ behind in this little chapel and we stood there. We were embarrassed from coming out in the hickory stripes, formal, and boy when we hit, unbelievable! At that time, we were playing the music from the soundtrack of “No Sun in Venice”...

Holley: Roger Vadim?

Heath: Roger Vadim and a bunch of French people, biggies, who decided to have a soundtrack with just the Quartet. Unheard of for a major moving picture. But from that score, we played the funeral scene. There was a scene in that movie where the gondola... remember I talked about that at the Lincoln Center film thing?

Holley: Jazz Lincoln Center, yes.

Heath: Well, that scene was accompanied by a piece [by] John Lewis that the bass started, a real cortege it was to accompany that scene of this black, ebony gondola going down the Grand Canal in Venice. The scenes are fantastic in the movie, and it was filmed in Venice. This old German prince told his sister... and after the performance, I have a tie pin with the family crest of Fürstenberg. Of course, after the war, they were just name beer distributors, Fürstenberg beer. But to have this old German prince to come up among the various little groups of autograph-seekers because they had some fantastic programs there, photography was really innovative. Each one of us had this little group around getting autographs, and this old man, you could see him in the crowd with this little white box. He went to all of us and handed us this family crest, on a tie pin, of Fürstenberg. And he told his sister, Princess so-and-so, I forgot her last name, he wanted us to play that over his beer at his funeral. This was '57, that ain't too far after the war. We saw her a few years later in mourning, she had on a black veil. She was in the Excelsior Hotel in Rome, and we walked in and said, “Oh there’s the prince’s sister. He must have passed.” She said she had tried to honor his wish to have us play that over him, and we were in Australia or something at the time, so it couldn’t be. But things like that happened to the

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Quartet. I don't know nobody in jazz, that things like that never happened before. So we were not only pioneers with the music, but with (the) attire and never being late. We were ahead of time every gig we ever played. I think once something happened, transportation broke down, planes couldn't leave on account of the weather and we were a little later getting to a job, but maybe twice in forty-something years.

Heath: But Monte Kay, you asked about his effect on the Quartet. When he left Lewis Nightclubs and opened up this agency... Monte Kay was married to Diahann Carroll, too...

Holley: Who sang on *The Comedy*.

Heath: That's right, that was the only vocal. You could have one of them sixty-four thousand dollar question about who was the one vocalist on a Modern Jazz Quartet album. Monte had also the same vision of booking us in those places that were heretofore not jazz venues, so he hooked us up with a woman in Italy, Señora Fenzi, had a classical agency. She presented string quartets and opera singers in Italy. They put us on tours throughout Italy. We played in some little halls with 500 people, acoustic halls with just the head music people in the town. The music society in those towns were with the so-called mafia. They were the cultural people in the town, the biggies. We played for them and were entertaining (in) their homes in Italy and Germany. Our concerts were booked as cultural events with no state tax, and we went all over Germany, I mean five, six weeks at a time [in] every little town you could think of. When you ask me about where we were most respected, you inferred that there was a difference between European acceptance and American, and we spoke about James Europe and how that influence was spread to Europe. But the Quartet, when John wrote pieces with names like "Vendome." He also lived in France, and he was impressed with these Concorde and those places in Paris, which is really a beautiful place. If you've never been there, you wouldn't realize. All that influence and the coming together of Pete Cameron and Monte Kay... I'm on a record with the Weavers, a Christmas concert...

Holley: The folk people?

Heath: The folk singers, the Weavers, because Pete Cameron was involved with them, and "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine" and all those things, Pete Cameron owned some of those songs, owned the publishing. They got me to play on this famous Christmas concert, I forget what year it was, but I'm on it. I'm not mentioned, but the bass player on there is Percy through Monte Kay, Carnegie Hall concert. They were booking the Weavers at that time. Once time when we played in Chicago opposite Miles, Miles was there in a theater and Dick Gregory was the MC. He told some jokes, funny guy, and he said, "I'm looking for an agent," and I said him, "Call Monte Kay, our manager." I talked to Monte, I said, "Did you talk to that guy, Dick Gregory?" and he said, "Yeah, he broke me up on the phone for about an hour." I said, "Did you sign him?" he said, "No." And a year later, Dick Gregory could've bought Monte Kay's agency, I said, "Man, you missed

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it!” But then he got Flip Wilson to have the first black variety show on television weekly on a major network. Monte Kay did all of that, man. When you asked me what he did, what his connection was with the Quartet, and how his management fostered the career of the Quartet, it was like everything fell into place. They all had the same vision, Nesuhi Ertegun of Atlantic. John Lewis could say, “I’m gonna write, we’re gonna record ‘Come to Jesus’ in the whole tones,” “Okay John, if that’s what you want to do.” Nesuhi was hands off, and they loved John’s music and believed in the Quartet so much that whatever you brought in and what we did, contrary to what other people did, like Miles and recording all those people you asked me about, he wrote our little chords and stuff at the record date and played so-and-so. But the Modern Jazz Quartet played those compositions a month, two months before recording, and we would refine it, “Take out this. Okay don’t play this here, play this here instead.” Those pieces were refined and performed, so that when we went in the studio to make a record, it was just like we were on a gig, and a lot of those things were first take down were the best take, or a repeat if somebody made a clinker. Usually, it was my mistakes, “Oh no Percy, that’s alright.” With Milt and John, theirs were perfect. That’s how we recorded.

Holley: You talked about going over to Europe, and I wanna talk about two major tours. You touched on the ’57 tour, I wanna get to that, but there was a ’56 tour with the Birdland All-Stars. Talk about the concert you had in Paris with Miles Davis and Lester Young.

Heath: We toured all over Germany and France with that, the Birdland All-Stars with Bud Powell doing the solo, René Urtreger had the trio with...

Holley: Pierre Michelot?

Heath: Michelot and...

Holley: Daniel Humair?

Heath: No, Christian Garros was the drummer. They were the trio. Miles played with that trio, and Lester played with that trio, rhythm section. The Quartet played its stuff. That was the Birdland All-Stars and we toured by bus. But when we got to Berlin in ’56, we were in a pension at that time, no hotels, just in a pension. I had just gotten in, we had hung out the night before somewhere, and I told Michelot that I was looking for another bass. He went to this drum shop with Christian Garros to get some sticks and asked if he knew where there was an old bass for sale. They sent him to Frederick Bohm (?), who was the repairman for the instruments from the Berlin Philharmonic. And this bass that I have now, which is not a Ruggeri, it’s a Rogeri family. Ruggeri, the other, you can’t find one, that’s million dollar instruments. But mine is from the same Cremona in Italy where all those Renaissance period string makers like Stradivari, Guaneri, Rogeri and Rugeri and several families all were students of Amati, who taught them all how to make those priceless instruments back then in 16-something. So, Giovanni Batista Rogeri was the

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maker of mine. I had some papers from Frederick Bohm that said at the time in '56 that my bass was over 250 years old in a Rogeri style from Cremona. I don't know what I did with the papers. I left them in a cab somewhere in Italy 'cause I was never gonna sell that bass. I didn't need no papers anyhow. That tour produced that bass for me, and Michelot called me and said [in a French accent], "Percy, get up man. I find you bass!" I said, "Oh Pierre, I just got to sleep." "Percy, get up, man. I find you bass!" I said, "Okay, where is it?" and I went over there, and I saw this thing in the corner. It had some ropes on it for strings that had been there for several years. The player was in his seventies, and he needed medical expense, and he put his bass up for sale. At that time, he wanted \$1,200 for it. I think the mark was like four to a dollar. The Quartet had a few bucks accumulated at that time from the two years of success from '55 up until that point, and I borrowed \$1,000 from the Quartet. I said, "Man I got a chance to get a good bass." I told the guy, "I only got [have] 4,000 marks and I really want..." I had to promise him not to be one of these ugly Americans who went to Europe and bought all the good stuff and brought them back here to sell. I made him that promise, and he sold me that bass. I had two basses. When we left Berlin that time and we were heading back to Paris on the place, Connie Kay took one and I took one in the front seats. I left it in Paris to be restored 'cause it had quite a lot of work to be done on it. The consequence of that tour in '56 is that I have the one and only bass that I own, the Rogeri bass. Recently, it was restored by the son of Sam Kolstein, who makes tremendous bows. Sam passed recently, but Barry is a great bass maker. He copies antique basses and makes replicas, and he restored mine completely.

Holley: You mentioned about playing at the [Donaueschingen]; I'm probably messing up my German, but that's the '57 tour. That was a four month tour where you toured 88 cities, and that's where the Quartet really got on the world mark. You also played the Mozarteum where you were so great that they asked you not to come back.

Heath: That was in Donaueschingen. They didn't ask us to come back, but as stated on that record jacket which I'll show you, Joachim Berendt said for the next ten years, there was no jazz allowed at that prestigious festival of light music in Donaueschingen, the one where the prince, Max von Fürstenberg, was so impressed. We had such an impact that we overshadowed Milhaud and everybody else that was presented at that festival. The headline said something about "King Jazz" [referring to the record jacket]. You can read that and quote it if you like. The next jazz that they had at that festival was when free jazz came about, and of course, the Germans jumped on that and thought that was exciting, as they thought we were revolutionary, then they jumped on free jazz. Even Albert Mangelsdorff, a great J.J. Johnson disciple,--all trombonists tried to be J.J. Johnson back then in the bebop days,--even he "went outside," as we said [sings]. Free expressionism, whatever that period that Ornette opened up that can of worms, so that people said, Oh anything goes! But anything goes if you know what rules you're breaking. You just can't break the rules. Some of those later recordings that alienated a lot of people to jazz, say, what is that? It sounded like what they call "ready room" on the side when the big band, everybody is warming up their horns, and everybody's playing little different things.

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Occasionally, you hear something that comes together, but generally, it's sort of chaotic, which also expressed the times that that music came out of. Jazz always expresses some of the politics of the period which it's going through. By being a personally creative art form, one cannot disdain any period it goes through. Like Miles in later years, I always tell a story about being in Scandinavia, we were on the same festival with Miles. Me and Buhaina always called him "Dave," we never called him Miles. This place where he played was just packed; he drew big crowds. I was in the back against the wall about twenty feet behind the speakers, and the volume was so great in the place with all these electronic instruments. I slid out the back door at intermission, and Dave came by and said, "Percy, how you like the band?" and I cupped my ear and said, "Huh?" [laughs] He said, "I'll be right back." He knew what I meant, that this volume was just overwhelming for me, having played with Miles in one of the most creative periods of his development. I considered some of those records we made, notwithstanding *Kind of Blue* that's supposed to be the biggest selling jazz record of all time...

Holley: 5,000 per week.

Heath: Whatever. I think the one we made, "Walking," the original one with Lucky Thompson and Klook and Horace I think that is the Miles Davis that I like most. He never criticized playing, as long as you played your part, you could do almost anything you wanted with Miles and he never would say anything. Except for that time me and Buhaina got a little too ripped and told him we were gonna get him out of the hole on his next set [laughs]. We came back in there and scrambled eggs. That's when he said he couldn't find one.

Holley: We're really going through a lot of stuff. You're covering so much ground. I wanna talk about two recordings. We're still in the mid to late '50s. I'm not gonna make you go through every single album you ever did, but there are certain albums I want to point out. You touched on the first soundtrack, *No Sun in Venice*, because MJQ, in my opinion, had some of the best soundtracks in jazz. *No Sun in Venice*, if my research is correct, John Lewis wrote some of that prior to seeing the movie, was that correct?

Heath: He had to look at the movie and the script, and he wrote this one piece called "Three Windows," this fugue, which contained the themes of all the songs that were used in that movie. He wrote this ballad-type, "One Never Knows," which was supposed to be the theme for the female character, [Sophie]. That was the theme of the "Three Windows" that he used for that character. Then there was the cortege part, which was used for the funeral scene, and then this other, "Rose Truc" was like a casual, romantic meeting of the two main characters, Christian Marquand... Anyhow, the themes of "Three Windows" was the basis for the whole score. So we used to play that, it was quite complicated, we used to play it as one, the whole score, as we did with other suites, like *The Comedy*. We used to play that as one set uninterrupted, from one theme into the next.

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Holley: *The Comedy* was based on the Italian “Comedia...”

Heath: “Comedia del la Arte,” which was originally a condensation of the original Fontessa, which also had those characters from the “Comedia del la Arte.” When we first went to Italy, we played on a TV show there, Caterina Valente was a very big Italian star, and we played there on the Maggio Musicale, where we played these great prestige festivals...

Holley: That was televised in '57?

Heath: Yeah, somewhere back in Italy. This was that same tour you're talking about where we did the 88...

Holley: 88 cities in four months.

Heath: Yeah, and June was home with the three boys. They kept adding on a week, and I'd call her and say, I'm coming home such-in-such a day, and then that day would approach and Monte would say, “We got a chance to do this...” and I would say, “Baby, I'm not coming home for another ten days.” I finally said, “If you add another day, you're gonna get another bass player 'cause I told June three times I was on the way home.” They weren't married at that time in the 50s and I was. We had this family with her alone. Of course, we had moved out of this Harlem River Drive Apartments 'cause the Quartet had started making too much money. My salary was too much to be in a middle-income project like that. I told them for years, “Look, half of my expenses on the road... this is not really my income. This is my net.” And finally they said, “Mr. Heath, you make too much money,” so that's when I bought the house out in Queens.

Holley: Springfield?

Heath: In Springfield Gardens, close to the airport. I could drive in the back door of Kennedy airport in fifteen minutes...

[End of disc 3]

Heath: Jason was born in... He's 45 so he was born in '56, I guess. She had the three boys in '57 without me. That extensive tour was really... she believed in this music so much that she just gave me to the world. That lady you just met, June, when I see the in 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary compilation, that box set, and June Heath is not mentioned, it galls me because before Mrs. Lewis and Mrs. Jackson were even on the scene, Mrs. Heath was behind all of that.

Holley: She was holding it down.

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Heath: She . . . had me to come home to her and the family before any influence that those other ladies had later and they're given credit for in the notes on that thing. And I said, "How could they leave June out?"

Holley: I've been asking you about this, so I wanna take a brief time. What do you know about Connie Kay's family? I don't know anything about them. Who did he marry? What were his sons' names?

Heath: You asked me about that. Rodney was born around the time... His wife is Addie Kirnon. His real name was Kirnon.

Holley: Is that A-D-D-I-E?

Heath: Mhmm, Addie Kirnon.

Holley: And his son's name?

Heath: And they lived up in his mother's house in the Bronx. Now Mr. Kay was sort of a mac daddy type and he had some other ladies later, but he left Addie and the two boys in the Bronx.

Holley: And his one son is named? ...

Heath: Rodney and Noel. Noel is the one who was living with him down there in Lincoln Center where he had the apartment on 66<sup>th</sup> street. He was the one that finally... he died there. That's his family, but then he had a wife, Frances, I think he married Frances too, later after he left Addie. Francis Kay, which he used that name, but his name was really Conrad Kirnon.

Holley: We talked about *No Sun in Venice*, and I think also the "Great Golden Striker" came from...

Heath: Right.

Holley: Right. How would you contrast *No Sun in Venice* from *Odds Against Tomorrow*?

Heath: It was a different movie and a different theme and different music all together. Now *Odds Against Tomorrow* was Harry Belafonte. *No Sun in Venice* was like one of those gangster type melodramas, but *Odds Against Tomorrow* was a film with a purpose, as Belafonte always is in the forefront of equal rights and with Dr. King and all those things that he was involved with, demonstrations and what not. This movie was a breakthrough in the theme that the whole lesson to be learned from that film was that this great robbery was planned and it failed because Robert Ryan, being a Southern prejudiced individual, didn't wanna trust the black participant, Harry Belafonte, who was

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a waiter, with the key to the getaway car. And the whole theme of the movie was finally when they were both blown up on the top of this gas tank at the end of the movie, the last line was when the coroner and these police were standing there trying to decide who was who and they were both charred, and he said something about, "Take your pick." In other words...

Holley: You couldn't tell.

Heath: You couldn't tell who was who and it didn't really matter that both of them had died in the failure of this robbery, which was planned with this black guy being the waiter that knocked on the door to get them to open the door in the bank in the first place. Ed Begley had figured this out, and there were different characters, but that theme was a theme movie about racial differences and prejudices.

Holley: John Killens, a great African American writer, wrote the screenplay for *Odds Against Tomorrow*, which I believe now is on DVD...

Heath: Oh, is that right?

Holley: Yeah.

Heath: Good, 'cause I got a copy which is not so good, and I asked Harry last time I saw him at a thing for Max Roach to send me a copy, but the only copy I got is off of the television.

Holley: Now, you made two albums because the actual soundtrack was not MJQ, but it was a larger ensemble and I think it was the first time that John Lewis and all of you guys worked with Bill Evans, the piano player, in that particular setting.

Heath: Bill Evans played the calliope on the waltz thing...

Holley: "Skating in Central Park"?

Heath: "Skating in Central Park" [sings melody]. That was Bill Evans. John wrote that score for horns but that original French score was... I think there was one piece in there, I'm not sure who played it, a blues piece in there, in the film, *No Sun in Venice*. There's one thing in there that we didn't play, I don't know, but the score for the action and to accompany the scenes, it was all just the four people [of the Modern Jazz Quartet]. And Miles did something like that too for a French movie, and Duke Ellington did something like that, but I think it was all later, and maybe it was incidental music, not the whole score.

Holley: Before we leave the 1950s...

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Heath: Was it “Paris Blues” or something like that?

Holley: That was the Duke Ellington with Sidney Poitier and Diahann Carroll in '61.

Heath: Yeah, and that's when the little hanky-panky was going? [laughs]

Holley: Yeah. Before we leave the '50s, there's another great part of MJQ history, that's the history you have with Lenox School of Jazz. I believe you started playing there in '55 and by 1956 you started teaching. Can you tell us about that?

Heath: We became the artists-in-residence or something like that at the Music Barn, and they had erected a nice tent there to accommodate these concerts, but we were there all summer. By being artists-in-residence we did two or three concerts during the summer. The idea came to John to have a school up there since we were gonna be up there as artists-in-residence, and at that time, Oscar Peterson's Trio took part, the Modern Jazz Quartet, and later Ornette Coleman had some classes up there too, but then there was George Russell with his Lydian Theory of Tonal whatever he called it, this concept that George Russell had. Jimmy Guiffre was there with Ralph Pena and Jim Hall. They set up tents for instruction, and each of us had students, which included the trombone player from Indianapolis...

Holley: Dave Baker.

Heath: Dave Baker and Larry Ridley...

Holley: Bass player from Indianapolis.

Heath: Yeah, he was one of my students. Of course he's now professor emeritus or something from somewhere else, but what I taught him was the same thing that Mingus showed me. Ray Brown had some students. Jackson had some vibe students, and at the end of the four or five weeks, there was a concert by all the students together and individual teachers, too. Dizzy was one of them in early years. But you couldn't pay these guys a salary that they would deserve by taking off time. Bill Evans was up there, and all these great players would take time out for those few weeks up there in Lenox, and their bands would be off at that time. The fundraising became too much for Stephanie Barber, and Phil Barber had died, and they were really the sponsors of the whole thing. We played Tanglewood at that time too up there, which was a couple of miles from the Lenox Music Barn, which originally had folk people up there. And then they opened a nightclub up there called The Potting Shed, which Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee, Leadbelly and all those people played there. The folk people played there at night, but the jazz thing became the focus for that time for about three years, I guess it was you mentioned. But then the fundraising got to be too much and it was discontinued. That was another unique concept.

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Holley: Just one more tour that I wanted to mention. The MJQ briefly hooked up with Norman Granz and the Jazz at the Philharmonic. I believe about fifteen minutes from that tour were released on an album that you guys made with Oscar Peterson, *MJQ on Tour* or something like that. What was it like working with Norman Granz during the '57 period?

Heath: Norman, as you know, was instrumental in employing a lot of jazz stars and presenting them in different places where... that Jazz at the Philharmonic became quite popular in the '60s, early '50s and '60s. He had a bunch of all-stars on there on that tour every year, and he wanted the Quartet on there. Norman wasn't really too sure of John Lewis's concept, but the popularity of the Quartet had grown so that we were included there, but he was more or less jam session-oriented with everybody blowing, taking their Boston, "take your Boston, friends," that's what the old timers used to say. You outdo this one in the battle of the trumpets, the battle of the saxophones, and the Quartet just did its thing. So he was always on the side with Milt talking about, "When are you gonna play something?" this, that and the other. He would pull Milt on the side. Jackson had this idea that somehow the hard driving Oscar Peterson was the setting that he really wanted to be in. He never did realize the value of the Quartet.

Holley: This is important because this is the one theme that runs through the history of the Modern Jazz Quartet, "John Lewis held Milt Jackson back," the theme, "let Milt blow." So, you're saying there was a different conception, Milt kind of favored...

Heath: He wanted to play bebop all straight through all the time because he was a great innovator and he liked that rhythm section pumping up behind him, and he'd do his solo and look up for his applause as if it was still the jam session type. And he did a lot of that on his own. He was free to do recordings that he wanted with his blues and ballads that he preferred. He was even quoted on an interview saying, "I didn't wanna play that Bach all my life, that Bach stuff," and somebody misquoted him, "Did you say Bop?" "No, I said Bach". He didn't realize ever that the Quartet playing Bach and other fugal concepts, that was the difference between Jim Splivic (?) and his trio.

Holley: In other words, the framework of the Modern Jazz Quartet made Milt Jackson stand out more had Milt Jackson had a regular, straight ahead group?

Heath: Actually, the integration of his playing with John's and John's linear approach instead of the accompanying chords, that made the difference in the Quartet and that's why we lasted forty years. And that's why when we broke up, we broke up after twenty years and Jackson found out just being a bandleader...

Holley: Wasn't all it's cracked up to be.

Heath: Yeah, with that responsibility and paying the guys and the transportation, and he wasn't making what the Quartet was making. He also claimed that he was threatened.

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Holley: What do you mean?

Heath: People called him up, you broke up the Quartet, we're gonna do this to you. He said that his family was threatened...

Holley: Because the Quartet broke up?

Heath: Because he was responsible for breaking up the Modern Jazz Quartet. He said he was getting threatening calls.

Holley: This is confusing because I've always read, I know we're jumping ahead twenty years, but he is quoted as saying he was the reason. What led to it? ...

Heath: He was the reason. In 1974, we had an engagement booked with the National Symphony in Washington, and Milt Jackson said after Australia, at the end of the tour in Australia, he was through with it 'cause he was gonna do his own thing. And he did leave us in '74 at that time. We had to cancel that engagement and other engagements that were booked beyond these dates in Sydney. He always thought that we should be making more money. After all, we were the best in the world in all the polls and everything else, we had that prestige, but no Beatle money.

Holley: Was that really realistic?

Heath: And I used to say, "The rock guys are playing in football fields. We're not playing there. We're playing in little halls, and we're making \$600 a week, every week of the year." Now, in '74, we had worked up to that. It was enough for me to come to Montauk and spend the summer with my family, have a beach buggy and fishing and taking care of that, and then go back to work, which wasn't enough for Milt. He always felt that as the star, which he considered himself because he won all the polls, even if the Quartet didn't, on his instrument [because] there were only about six guys playing it but nobody could touch Milt Jackson on the vibraharp. So, with that recognition, he thought he could get some more money...

Holley: And it didn't work out that way.

Heath: No, no jazz players made that kind of money that he was envisioning that the young rock players were making. That was one of the things that he used to complain about, other than the fact that he really didn't wanna play those things that made us different from other people. It was very difficult for him to learn those things. We had hours and hours of rehearsal for him to learn those things, but once he learned them, baby, he was like an elephant. He never forgot. Even after we didn't play them for a year, he'd come back and play those things, I'd say, "Total recall, Bubba!" I used to call him Bubba, we used to call each other Bubba. I'll tell you a joke about it, well, it wasn't a joke. We were on a train one time,--we traveled by train,--and we were going up to Utica. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or [archivescenter@si.edu](mailto:archivescenter@si.edu)



or somewhere with Howard McGhee, and this very tall, elegant, light-brown skinned guy was coming through the cars selling these condiments, and he'd say [in British accent], "I have boiled ham sandwiches and American cheese. I have boiled ham sandwiches and American cheese." We were up in the front of the car and when he got to us, he leaned over and said, "What for you, Bubba?" to Jackson, and boy, we almost died [laughs]. This brother reverted for us and so from then on, we called each other Bubba. So anyhow, I'd say, "Bubba, we're making enough for me to take care of my family and all." "Well man, we ought to be making more money. And look at so-and-so, they're making this and that." It was a soft point with him about finances 'cause he never thought he was getting enough financial reward for our status in the jazz world, but we were making more than any other. Then with the Norman Granz thing, you'll notice that in the discography we had to do a record on Norman Granz's label, Verve or whatever it is, because he had Milt Jackson tied up contractually between the time we broke up in '74 and the time I got with my brothers and the Heath Brothers started. By the time the Heath Brothers got started good and well in '76, somebody said...

Holley: You're taking about Pablo?

Heath: The Pablo label, not Verve. He had sold Verve, it was on Pablo. But anyhow, we had to put an album on Pablo in order for Norman to release Milt after we got back together.

Holley: Now I know I'm really jumping ahead, but you got back together in '81 or '82?

Heath: Yeah, but we played...

Holley: But you never were really apart, were you?

Heath: No, we played a series of concerts after the so-called last concert, which we had been giving Christmas concerts every year in Lincoln Center or Carnegie Hall. Somewhere we had these Christmas concerts. This so-called last concert, the producer, I forget who it was, said, "Why don't we just have one more?" which was in '76. But in between, we had done some college things for a classical agent and for the sisters that handled Janos Starker, we had done some things for her in '77 or '78. We weren't really completely apart. But in the meantime, the Heath Brothers had done four albums for Columbia and we were getting ready to be somebody when John and I went to Japan on a Monterey Jazz in Japan, Tokyo. And we went on this thing with Katea's father, Sonny [Stitt] was on it, and Dizzy, and John and I, and Mel Lewis and Hank Jones, it was a big all-star thing from the Monterey Jazz Festival, which John had been the musical director for about ten years. We were on the first one and the thirtieth anniversary and the fortieth anniversary. Anyhow, we got together for that. Over there, one of these Japanese interrogators had asked me something about when is the Quartet gonna get back together, and I said, "Maybe the Japanese people will demand that the Quartet..." just casually, off the cuff. And a friend of mine, Chikuchi, who's a newscaster over there, said that from For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or [archivescenter@si.edu](mailto:archivescenter@si.edu)



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that remark, the Tokyo Broadcasting Company decided to bring the Quartet back to Budokan for a concert by a remark that the Japanese people would bring the Quartet back together, and it did. So, in '81, we started out again and it was another 10-12 years until Connie passed. Well, Mickey played with us almost a year...

Holley: Mickey Roker.

Heath: Mickey, because when Connie died, Milt, who had been playing with Mickey on his jobs, said, "I asked Mickey, and Mickey said he'd be honored to play with us," so when he did that without any vote from John...

Holley: Wasn't Connie Kay sick? Connie had a stroke first and then didn't Mickey come in?

Heath: That was during the year that Mickey replaced Connie. He made most of the record date there with *MJQ and Friends*, and Connie was recovering, and he was up there. Connie had a stroke on the day we were supposed to go to Boston and play with these old instruments of this Bach Brandenburg Concerto and we had learned all this stuff in the odd keys because they played these ancient instruments which were in different keys from what were used to, Hogwood.

Holley: Christopher Hogwood.

Heath: Christopher Hogwood and whatever that ensemble of his was playing these old Bach things on these other instruments. And Connie fell out in the store. He was buying some white ties. He was in Brooks Brothers or something trying to buy a white tie and fell out in the store with a stroke. And we were waiting for Connie, who was usually a little tardy getting in, and we said, "Aw, he'll be up here on the next shuttle," and he missed that one. He didn't arrive, and then somebody called up and said Connie had a stroke, so Hogwood said why don't we do it without the drums, and we did.

Holley: Was this recorded?

Heath: No, it was in the Symphony Hall up in Boston. It wasn't recorded. But it was okay without the drums 'cause he was just playing "tinkty boom" anyhow. Didn't have much to do with the Bach Brandenburg. That's when he fell ill, and that's when Jackson said "Mickey said he be honored," so we got Mickey and we didn't contest it. But Mickey was a different type [of] drummer completely from Connie Kay, and he was Milt Jackson's buddy,--John wasn't pleased,--but we did a whole year almost with(out him?) and he made quite a salary for that year. Then, John said we'll get Tootie 'cause Tootie familiar with the MJQ and everything we did since before he even started playing with J.J. and other people and the Jazztet and whatnot. He was completely sympathetic and flexible enough to do exactly what fit with the Quartet, so he played with us about a year until Milt passed.

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Holley: The last concert was San Francisco, the San Francisco Jazz Festival where Tootie was...

Heath: Yeah, we were honored out there and given some kind of award, but that gap wasn't quite the gap that's publicized. That's what I was trying to emphasize. We had been together a few times in between. As soon as the Brothers got going good, John called me and said something about, "You owe it to us after all the time we put in together," so we tried to coordinate the Heath Brothers's schedule with the MJQ schedule, which was absolutely impossible, so I had to tell James go ahead and go for himself. In the meantime, Jimmy became professor and did ten years there, and those four albums that we did for Columbia Broadcast is on the shelf. They're waiting for us to quit it and then they'll put them out. We did two for Antille's, the reggae label, and we did...

Holley: Concord.

Heath: And we did two Concord and ain't never said anything... The last Columbia one we made, we sold 40,000, which was nothing...

Holley: *Passin' Thru*.

Heath: Yeah, whichever one it was, *In Motion*; *Passin' Thru* was the first one. *In Motion* or *For the Public* or something like that.

Holley: *Live at the Public Theatre*.

Heath: Yeah, on which Mtume produced one of the songs that was supposed to cross over, and I told Jimmy it wouldn't work.

Holley: Mtume is your nephew?

Heath: That's Jimmy's son, yeah, Mtume. I told Jimmy at the time, that's why I'm anti-crossover because I feel if you have to... I was at a meeting once and Grover, rest his soul...

Holley: Grover Washington Jr.

Heath: Grover was there and this guy that he made all those hits with was up there on the panel, and he says, "We put the beat back in jazz so that people could dance." I was there in the back of the room and I said, "Don't make a statement like that in my presence." And boy, George Shearing gave me a hand and all the people [laughs]. What I meant was, they were dancing to jazz from the beginning. In fact, they invented dances to go with jazz. At the Savoy, there was no compromise of the music for dancers. Dancers

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danced to that music. So, when you go to the [sings pop drum beat] to make everybody who could shake his booty a great dancer, Travolta and all of them people all of a sudden got more rhythm than black people, you're compromising the music for people who couldn't dance if you took away that "bump tiddy bump tiddy bump," they couldn't march around and become great so-called dancers. Grover's wife said, "Why would you insult..." I said, "I didn't say that to insult Grover. I said that to this man who claims to have reinvented jazz so that people could dance to it and I didn't want him to make a statement like that 'cause it wasn't true." So when George Butler wanted Jimmy to write something to appeal to another audience, that's the way they put it...

Holley: You're talking about George Butler?

Heath: George Butler. Dr. Butler was in charge of this black section of Columbia Records, "Black Music." I hated that category anyhow. The inclusion of this one piece by Mtume and his concept of funk didn't sell any more records than we had been selling all along. I said, "Nobody's gonna buy that whole album of straight ahead jazz for that one funk piece. Either you're gonna have to do a whole album of that to appeal to those people who don't know or appreciate the art form alone." I told Jimmy it wouldn't work, and it didn't work. You can't give somebody apples and expect them to like oranges. The MJQ never had to compromise. We played our thing. If you didn't like it, you didn't have to come, and our audience was big enough over three generations of listeners to support us. In that '95 tour when it was supposed to be our last tour, we had broken up again, and everybody in the world wanted us. Man, in the middle of December when we finished that tour, I had realized I had over-made my estimate tax to retire, I paid the government \$60,000 that year! I said, "Aw man, I'm never going on the road that much again to put me in another bracket." That was the last great year of touring.

Holley: We can disregard the chronological sequence because you're answering a lot of questions in that sequence already, but you mentioned about crossover and genres of music, and one genre of music that you're associated with is the so-called "Third Stream." Talk about that and talk about the role that Gunther Schuller played in the world of the Modern Jazz Quartet.

Heath: Gunther was a good friend of John's, and we used some members of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, which Gunther was a French horn player in. We used Proletus and some of the other people on some of the records that we made that included Joe Tekula and Jimmy Proletus (?), that score of *Odds Against Tomorrow*, I think they're included in that. Then this crossover business came about when the concept of using European forms as a vehicle for jazz music, this publicized crossover was always there. Jazz used every kind of music from all over the world and incorporated it in jazz. Now, Gunther's involvement with that Balanchine choreographed performance with four of the principle dancers with the New York City Ballet. Man, let me tell you. Gunther wrote an atonal piece at 12-tone, you know that system where you don't repeat the same note and you don't do this and that, all those Schillinger rules, which I hate. It's so restrictive. I For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or [archivescenter@si.edu](mailto:archivescenter@si.edu)



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was fascinated with Jillana (?), who was one of the principle dancers, and Jillana, who was a friend of ours for years later, she was the only ballet dancer that I've seen that had a breast [laughs]. And I couldn't look at Jillana, I had to look at that music because every note there was a note that I would not go from this note to that note, every note of the whole piece that I accompanied her. Each instrument accompanied the dancer with this atonal music that Gunther had written, and it was so off the wall as far as the sequential Bach bass line that the Quartet had been involved in. This collaboration, so-called "Third Stream," I listen to the album sometimes. There are some nice songs in there that John wrote, but this atonal business or poem or whatever that was, that was so far . . . you couldn't swing it. I couldn't swing those notes because I don't wanna go from that note to that note ever, in no harmonic progression that I ever played. So, that business about "Third Stream" was kind of over publicized and labeled, which they always try to identify things by words. But I was part of it, I played what was written for me, but it wasn't my favorite.

Holley: That was more of a John Lewis-Gunther Schuller thing?

Heath: Yeah, and it was okay, but I listen to that album and there's only one thing on there that Gunther wrote, that suite of things, that was kind of abstract, but John Lewis wrote some great pieces on that *Third Stream* album.

Holley: *Third Stream* with the Beaux Arts String Quartet?

Heath: Beaux Arts was on there, yeah.

Holley: Ironically, you were nominated for a Grammy on that one.

Heath: I don't know what they nominate... It was different.

Holley: The other album you made in that vein, which is not in print now, *Modern Jazz Quartet & Orchestra*. Now I always wanted to know, they never identified the orchestra. Do you know who the orchestra [was]?

Heath: It was Swedish. That was in that same period. The first *Modern Jazz Quartet & Orchestra*?

Holley: Yes.

Heath: I think that was in Sweden.

Holley: Okay, because they never identify where it was recorded. They never identified who the players were.

Heath: On the album it didn't?

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Holley: No.

Heath: 'Cause I have the album.

Holley: Right. One more thing, this is another part of the history that's very murky, your early television appearances. I did some research and I came across a thing in 1955 that the Modern Jazz Quartet appeared on program called "Look Up and Live" on CBS television in 1955.

Heath: Was that with the priest [with his collar back]?

Holley: Yes! That did happen?

Heath: Oh yeah, I got a tape of it!

Holley: You do?

Heath: Yeah.

Holley: We have to talk [laughs].

Heath: That was a part of the film presentation, I think.

Holley: No, it was not.

Heath: No, it was not?

Holley: Trust me.

Heath: It's on there. It's on a tape that I got with, I forget the priest's name...

Holley: Kershaw?

Heath: Yeah, he had his collar backwards.

Holley: No, that's never been seen. That tape you have doesn't hardly exist anymore. You should talk to somebody about that. Now, the other thing I want to talk about...

Heath: But we were also on that program with Dorothy Kilgallen, "What's My Line?"

Holley: You were?

Heath: Yeah.

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Holley: What year roughly?

Heath: I don't know. I got it somewhere on tape. "What's My Line," and we were on a program with Soupy Sales before Merv Griffin left Philadelphia.

Holley: Wow! You were on with Merv Griffin?

Heath: It was his show.

Holley: I see.

Heath: And Soupy Sales was on there too, the comedy and what not. That was in Philadelphia, that was before Merv left Philly.

Holley: There was a show called "PM East and PM West?"

Heath: Maybe. I don't remember that one, but I remember... Did you get those listed in the bio?

Holley: Yeah, from Lincoln Center.

Heath: Oh, no.

Holley: In your biography, a lot of your TV stuff is not listed.

Heath: The Modern Jazz Quartet, the Biography? You got that? From Evelyn Levin?

Holley: Oh, yes, yes. No, a lot of that stuff is not listed.

Heath: No kidding.

Holley: No, it isn't. I would've remembered that. That's why I was asking you.

Heath: But then there was a question about that theme song of "Home," that you referred to as a crossover or something.

Holley: It was kind of like a Lee Morgan "Sidewinder."

Heath: Well, Lee Morgan "Sidewinder," all those things came from earlier jazz.

Holley: Of course.

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Heath: So, it was utilized there in a composition that John wrote with that bass line in it. That's an old blues bass line. It was nothing new. It wasn't a John Lewis innovation. It was utilizing something that had gone on before. So, a lot of things like that, that may sound different and were used, that rhythm came before Lee Morgan was born [laughs].

Holley: Just for evocation, this composition, "Home," was adopted by the "Today Show" in 1966. It was used as a theme.

Heath: It was their theme. MJQ Publishing, which was a part of that...

Holley: Modern Jazz Society.

Heath: Society, the publishing company, boy we made some money that year just from those two minutes or whatever it was, forty seconds of that piece being played all over the country every morning. MJQ gave out some good checks for the two years or so. You'd be surprised what the royalties are...

Holley: Residuals.

Heath: Yeah, a nation-wide program like that. It's fantastic, the amount of money. So, MJQ Publishing, we gained a lot from that little [sings melody].

Holley: [laughs] You know the other program that's probably more well-known is the Ralph Gleason Jazz Causal series, at least this writer hopes that you guys reconsider because they can do wonders with restored material.

Heath: Yeah, but some of the sounds...

Holley: I'm telling you, the sound can be restored. They've done it already with Art Farmer's because they can re-digitalize all that stuff. They've got like fifteen of Ralph Gleason's tapes during that period out. They don't look anything like what you have.

Heath: But what they sent us wasn't acceptable. John didn't appreciate... But that little segment of "The Golden Striker," that was cool. Ralph was really one of our biggest fans. He was instrumental in getting us the cover picture by Bill Claxton on the Sunday supplement of the San Francisco Chronicle the first time we went out there.

Holley: Claxton shot that?

Heath: That was a Bill Claxton photo.

Holley: So, this was early 60s roughly, around that time?

Heath: Maybe that late, 50 something.

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Holley: We talked about “Home” and that was, what I called, a Lee Morgan “Sidewinder” kind of thing. The MJQ was a really unique band in the fact that it weathered a lot of the onslaught of the rock and roll and the R&B era. That leads me to what I consider to be a strange association with the Beatles. How did that come about? You recorded two recordings on their label [*Apple*]. I’m talking about the late 60s at this point.

Heath: The Beatles, before they were “The Beatles,” we used to go through Europe and we’d see this big sign, “The Beatles Are Coming.” We used to say, “What the hell is ‘The Beatle’?” This was that great publicity stunt or great public relations promotion that was thought of by their manager [*Brian Epstein*]. But when we played the Festival Hall in England, at that time Annie Ross was living over there, she was back home and she’d married Sean Lynch, and they had a club together over there. We played Royal Festival Hall and there were black market tickets. Somebody had sold black market tickets and the thing was oversold. These young men from Liverpool weren’t able to get in. After the concert, I went to a place that was crowded, an after hours, after the concert type place, and Annie Ross said you know there’s some young men from Liverpool, they call themselves The Beatles and they tried to get into your concert, and they couldn’t because there were black market tickets and it was oversold. I said, “Oh gee, if they had told me, there were certain seats put aside for the artists to have people admitted, a certain number of tickets for the concert.” At that time, I realized that they were fans of ours. Then a few years later, they were the Beatles! And a friend of Monte Kay’s, I’m not gonna be able to call his name now, but he had something to do with that record company. Boy, I wish I could think of that guy’s name ‘cause he lived in the Garden Spot of the world, and he died though. I can’t recall his name. He was connected with that, and he got us on that label to do two albums.

Holley: The Apple label.

Heath: The Apple label. Ron somebody was his name. Jesus, it’s gonna come in my head in a minute. He had an apartment in Lugano. The Garden Spot of the World in Switzerland? The Italian Alps?

Holley: The first album was *Under the Jasmine Tree*, which had some different music on it compared to what you guys used to play.

Heath: John wrote different stuff all the time. He was writing music. In the beginning, he used to carry his keyboard with him and we’d go out jamming, the three of us, somewhere after the concert. John Lewis would get a sandwich and go to his room and compose...

Holley: What kind of keyboard?

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Heath: Just a silent practice keyboard. He would compose and he would come up with a new piece in the middle of a tour, two new pieces, and call a rehearsal and give out the parts. "Jasmine Tree" was recorded on that album, but that was written years before for this US information film about the so-called blue people in the desert who dyed their clothes with this blue dye and got on their skin, these nomads. That and another piece was on this film. I think we recorded that later too. Might have been in the same album, but this music was written for...

Holley: "Under the Jasmine Tree" was part of the documentary?

Heath: Right, and so was this other theme. There was another theme on there that I can't recall the name of it. That music was written for that, and you know the story about the Shah of Iran.

Holley: No, I don't.

Heath: Oh, we were invited to play at the State Department dinner when Richard Nixon was president. We weren't there just to entertain, we were invited to be guests at the dinner and then perform. So, we had this introduction, when the person introduces you to the president, "This is Mr. Percy Heath," and Nicky, Mr. Nixon says, "Oh yes, Mr. Heath," and he tells Agnew, "This is Mr. Percy Heath," and you're passed down this receiving line of protocol. We were in this little blue room and we stepped off this little stage at the end of the performance, we had ended it with the "Jasmine Tree," and the Shah was sitting there (in) the front row with all the dignitaries in line. We did our usual together bow in front of the stage, and the Shah went to John Lewis to ask him if that piece was written just for that occasion. John said, no that was written for so-and-so, so the Shah went from John to me to Jackson to Connie down the line congratulating us, so Nixon had to go behind him, and Agnew, so the whole protocol was reversed. Connie was bowing over and said, "You dig?" and I said, "Yeah, I dig." We became the receiving line. It was really a pretty funny occasion. Nixon had been briefed about us being known simply by our initials, so his introduction really broke us up because he says, "Tonight we our favored with the world famous Modern Jazz Quartet. To those of us in the know, they are simply known as the MJQs," with an "s" on the Q and boy, we just died [laughs]. But we were invited there so that was quite an honor, but June wouldn't go. She didn't like Mr. Nixon so she didn't go.

Holley: She had good foresight [laughs].

Heath: No, she just said, no I don't like him, I'm not going. We had been to the opening of the Kennedy Center because we were founding artists there, and I've been looking for the last thirty years trying to find out where our names are inscribed. It's supposed to be somewhere in the Kennedy Center as founding artists, but I haven't been able to find it. She went for that occasion to Teddy Kennedy's house for that dedication and the reception. She went to Bill Clinton, President Clinton, invited us to play at the...

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Holley: You played for the king of Morocco?

Heath: Yes.

Holley: King Hassan, the II.

Heath: Hassan was there, and boy, his daughter was there with some jewels that you wouldn't believe. And his son, they are handsome kids...

Holley: This was in 1992, if I'm not mistaken.

Heath: Yes, just a year before he passed. He was supposed to get the Brothers to come to Morocco but he passed before...

Holley: Just to let you know, the tunes on with "The Blue Necklace," "Three Little Feelings"...

Heath: "The Blue Necklace" is the other one that was part of that score. "Three Little Feelings" was John Lewis's composition from way back, and I loved it. It was performed, too on his last appearance at the Lincoln Center by the Orchestra. It was touching, I'm telling you.

Holley: Yes, I was there. The other album *Space*, which I thought was interesting because this came out around the time of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I always wondered, was there a connection?

Heath: No, "Space" I think was a part of that score...

Holley: Part of "Kemek"?

Heath: I think so.

Holley: Oh! Okay.

Heath: I think it was part of that score.

Holley: Now, for those of us who don't know, what was "Kemek"? And it's spelled K-E-M-E-K.

Heath: E-K, was it?

Holley: Right.

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Heath: It was a movie that we were doing the soundtrack for. The day that the film was finished, the director died or something, and it was never released. So, somebody died after we worked very hard on that melodrama. It was another one of those “who done its.”

Holley: It was a psychological thing. Did it have kind of a, not an LSD angle, but something to do with psychotropic drugs?

Heath: I don’t know. It was the first use of this so-called fishbowl eye [*lens*] that took the photograph from above, and it gave a certain illusion, dimension, like an overhead shot of this person going out of it. We never even did get to see the whole movie. It was completed, and the one piece that you referred to is “Plastic Dreams.”

Holley: Actually no, I’m talking about “Space” with “Visitor from Venus,” “Visitor from Mars”...

Heath: Oh, that wasn’t part of that.

Holley: That was another part of the Apple.

Heath: That was just a part of, John Lewis wrote some pieces that were far out.

Holley: What I notice about this is two things, I think that was one of the first MJQ recordings where electric piano was used, and number two, the liner notes...

Heath: Was it electric piano or harpsichord?

Holley: It may have been the harpsichord. I’m sorry. On the liner notes, they seem to be the most political liner notes you guys have because there were anti-war feelings in the liner notes.

Heath: I don’t know who did the notes, but when you engage somebody to do liner notes and their descriptions of the music are not necessarily the intent of the composer, it’s another incident of trying to verbalize an intangible. You know what I mean? What label they put on it... I don’t know. I do have the album here somewhere. You read all these notes, I probably never read the liner notes.

Holley: [laughs] What you were referring to is the soundtrack from *Kemek* turned out was *Plastic Dreams*, now you gotta tell me, what was the deal with the album cover? Who thought of that?

Heath: Who did it? Yeah, I don’t know, some artist brought it in and it was approved.

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Holley: And for those of us who can't see it, the liner notes or collage of a nude woman with...

Heath: Well, not exactly nude. It's an artistic interpretation. It had some phony breasts there, which was "Plastic Dreams." It just went with the (title?).

Holley: Not something you would expect from the composed Modern Jazz Quartet [laughs].

Heath: Well, the album cover, I forget who did it, but it was an artist's concept of "Plastic Dreams," which was accepted. It was a little risqué, but we are human beings and we're not above...life. What is that on the other album cover, *Jasmine Tree*? That's a serpent of some kind. I don't know if it had anything to do with the music. There's another album cover there with a slice of bread. So, album covers are artistic...

Holley: Open to interpretation.

Heath: [Laughs] Yeah, artistic, whatever the artist deems appropriate.

[End of disc 4]

Holley: This is tape number three of the Percy Heath interview for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History project. My name is Eugene Holley. The engineer is Sven Abow. We're here at the great home of Mr. Percy Heath in Montauk, New York, July 23, 2001.

Heath: The modest home. The modest home in paradise.

Holley: Right, coming down to the home stretch. Mr. Heath, the MJQ, in addition to being four great musicians, you guys actually had distinct non-musical duties in the group. Describe what they were, and describe what yours was.

Heath: In the formation of the Modern Jazz Society Inc. and then the formation of the Quartet as an entity of that along with the publishing company and proposed presenting of concerts and other artists, within the Quartet it was asked why was John Lewis the musical director. It was John Lewis's concept of the music, which was the Modern Jazz Quartet and as such, he was the musical director. However, some contributions of some of the compositions in the repertoire were compositions of Milt Jackson, and he also rearranged "The Watergate Blues," which was my composition. In general, in fact, all of the music was arranged at least, even Milt Jackson's so-called composition, his musical lines that he wrote on the vibraharp, which were single note lines, generally. The harmonic part sometimes was supplied by John Lewis and in other cases on Milt Jackson's albums, it was supplied by Jimmy Heath, who arranged compositions on several of Milt Jackson's albums. So, that was John's job, musical director, composer and author. He also did most of the announcements. They were split up at concerts between

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he and Milt. Connie Kay was dubbed the “Minister of Transport” by W. Talbot in England because Connie used to arrange the tickets and hotel reservations, which is another part of the story of pioneering that I’ll add on to after I explain these different positions. My position at that time, and for the first twenty-two years without interruption, was to collect the money in every country and pay the salaries and do the banking. I was the “Minister of Finance” in that respect, to quote W. Talbot’s description of Connie’s job. Milt Jackson was supposed to be sort of public relations. He would do interviews, and we found that Jackson most of the time was talking about Jackson on these interviews, so we had to throw in a few words about the Quartet most of the time. Milt was like that. By us growing out of the Milt Jackson Quartet, he never really realized that it was not still the Milt Jackson Quartet, but that was forgivable because of the great artist he was and most of the improvisation, even though it was underlined by John Lewis’s accompaniment, single note line or whatever, the one fed off of the other. That was the integral part of the Quartet. That’s the four members’ responsibilities as a partnership. Of course, later on, I was relieved of the duties of taking care of the money ‘cause I turned that over to Milt’s wife, Sandra, and she took care of all that bookkeeping and stuff that I had to do for all those years, which was quite a relief. I could just be the bass player again. The construction of the Quartet with those jobs, it sort of justified the equal pay and the partnership that evolved, which was quite unique at the time. I think the Glen Gray Casa Loma Orchestra was also like a partnership, and Glen Gray’s name was just out there, but it acted as a corporate entity too.

Holley: I think the only thing that’s more astounding than your tenure with the Modern Jazz Quartet is the fact that you only record, if I’m not mistaken, there’s only one of your own compositions that you recorded with the Modern Jazz Quartet, “The Watergate Blues.” When did you write that?

Heath: I was really annoyed about all this business about scandal and whatnot in the presidency at that time and the denial of being implicated, which all led to the downfall of President Nixon. It was really something that they did in Washington anyhow, spying on each other. Politics is a dirty game. At that time, it was so much emphasis put on this little case of spying and the cost of the presidency and a lot of other scandal that came out at that time. My exasperation when Mr. Ford pardoned Mr. Nixon, it was really upsetting to me that all this so-called crime could be made, in one stroke of a pen, forgotten. Some of the lyrics to it are quite profound. There’s not just the melody, which was a little different and became popular for the Heath Brothers repertoire. The Quartet had a TV show in Boston on which Mr. Ehrlichman had just gotten out of jail for his participation...

Holley: The Quartet was on a TV show?

Heath: On a TV show that he was on in Boston, and I had the audacity to give Mr. Ehrlichman a copy. Was it Ehrlichman or the other guy?

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Holley: Halderman?

Heath: No, it was Ehrlichman. He got out of jail and we were on the same TV show in Boston, and I said, "Here John, if you record this we'll both get rich," and I handed him a copy of it [laughs]. I don't think he liked it very much, but there's some words in there, "On the next election day/It's Mr. Ford who will have to pay/because of something with the Watergate Blues," so he was not reelected. A lot of people didn't think he should've pardoned Mr. Nixon after all that expose. But there are some very clever words there that match the rhythm of the melody. Like my father used to say, "They're a bunch of educated fools," and one of the verses says, "They read an awful lot of books and spent a lot of time in school..." something about crooks, and then the other line says, "They're a bunch of educated fools" with the melody. These words just came to me, I haven't seen it in a long time, but it's not bad. There are about six different verses of that.

Holley: The other group that you were involved with was, of course, the Heath Brothers, and just give me kind of an origin. You've always played with your brothers. Tell me how the group came together and what were your high points of the group?

Heath: Well, we got together when the Quartet broke up and I had an opportunity to join my brothers in a group. 'Cause, Jesus, 22 years I had devoted to this music and all of a sudden, the group is no more. I said, "I have to make the best of it," and now I have a chance to get together with my brothers, who were successful in their own right doing other things. We had been associated on several records, one of Tootie's and three or four of Jimmy's albums, the brothers had come together and played on. You know the one of Tootie's that's called *Kwanzaa*?

Holley: Mid-70s, I believe.

Heath: Yeah, so anyhow, we had been associated together on recordings, but now we had the chance to play together in a group. I don't know, I might have been instrumental in securing this contract with Columbia, and we did four albums for them, which were really good albums. I hope they come out again sometime.

Holley: I don't mean to cut you off, but I wanna get to the point about Strata East. I don't really remember the Strata East one. The early members of the band were Stanley Cowell, Tony Purrone...

Heath: Yeah, it was a quartet at first. In fact, the first time the Heath Brothers played, we played in Pescara, just the three of us. No piano. That was on a festival in (Pescara). We were booked as the Heath Brothers, and we played just the three of us. Then we had the opportunity to record on Strata East label, which was like a musician-owned label. I have a copy of it, I'll show you there. It's a picture of our mother and father that's in my studio that's on the album cover, and it's called *Marchin' On*, with them in their Elks uniforms. They both had passed by the time we got to play together, but they were very proud of us. For additional information contact the Archives Center at 202.633.3270 or [archivescenter@si.edu](mailto:archivescenter@si.edu)



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individually. When Tootie was with Lester Young in Philly, Pop would go up and brag about, “that’s my boy!” My father was really proud of us, especially when Lt. Heath came home, and soldiers would pop into attention and salute me from across the street. He had great pride in that achievement, so throughout our whole life, they were really beautiful people, my parents. Exceptional. Like I said earlier, we had the support of them in our musical careers that other families didn’t give to their siblings that wanted to pursue a jazz career. That opportunity came for us to be together, and we put out that one record. I think we only printed 2,000, but I got a copy of a CD that somebody else put out recently. It’s been put out on CD now, and in Japan somebody picked it up. But that initial album, on one complete side was the suite that Jimmy wrote for Billy Higgins called “Smilin’ Billy.” It had several movements, and with the joining of Stanley Cowell, who was the president and part owner of that label, Strata East, he played the kalimba. He had a couple of octaves of keys on it. Have you heard that album? Stanley played the kalimba very melodically, and he had his own tuning. Stanley Cowell is a remarkable pianist, too and a professor also for all these years at Lehman College up there. The Brothers are gonna go down there to Baltimore or somewhere he presents...

Holley: Prince George’s Community College?

Heath: He presents concerts down there. The Brothers are going down there, and we’re gonna be joined by Stanley on piano for that occasion. The Heath Brothers Quartet, I’ve given you some posters to show where we appeared in several places. And like I said before, as soon as we got to going good with the Heath Brothers and those four albums out on Columbia and the two on Island, we were just going good, it takes time to build and organization, then...

Holley: Then MJQ reforms.

Heath: Here comes Jackson back and we did another ten years. Now we’re together. On many occasions now that’s the only jobs I’m taking outside of two individual jobs that I had, the one with John Lewis at Lincoln Center and a couple with Cedar Walton and Curtis Fuller and the all-star group with Lou Hayes on drums, I made a few gigs with them. Otherwise, I’m doing something out here in Montauk with Hal McKusick a couple of times a year and more local. With this organization that I’m the president of, the Montauk Artists’ Association, we acquired the train station out here in Montauk as a depot gallery, and we’re in the midst of a fundraiser the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of August at the clubhouse of the golf course out here, the Downs in Montauk.

Holley: You’re being very modest, but this is the first Montauk Jazz Festival and there’s a tribute to you.

Heath: That’s okay, but the purpose is to rehabilitate the upstairs of the train station. It’s called a “community arts center.”

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Holley: And it's happening on August 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>.

Heath: Yeah, of this year, but so far we haven't raised that much of the \$200,000 necessary to rehabilitate because we're gonna have to put a new staircase. I'm sorry you don't have time to go by the station. It's a beautiful gallery downstairs, which used to be the waiting room of the Long Island Railroad Station, and they've given us a five year lease with an honorary dollar a year leases courtesy of a good friend of mine who was the head of the MTA, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, E. Virgil Conway. We got the station, so that's what this festival is all about. That's another hat I'm wearing out here in Montauk as president of that organization, and I'm retired, you know, so I'm only on tour with the Brothers [laughs].

Holley: Just a couple more questions and that's it. And again, thank you for this great history.

Heath: Listen, I rap on and on and on, and I crossed over some of your questions. I apologize for that.

Holley: No, that's okay. I could go on and on about my favorite MJQ recordings, the European concert collaboration and so forth, what is your favorite MJQ recording and why?

Heath: Yeah right [chuckles]. What do we got, fifty albums? I should have a favorite out of that? I don't have the slightest idea of what would be my favorite. My favorite is the one I made the least mistakes on [laughs]. No, I'm just teasing, but there are some things that I'd rather not hear again, certain parts. Like they said at the time of the release, [there] were insignificant errors on my part, which didn't completely destroy the whole composition. When you're trying to improvise and do something different on the same compositions that you play every night, like "Django" and "Bags' Groove," we played every concert as encores, if not part of the program, for I couldn't begin to say how many thousands of concerts we played. Those two compositions were mandatory, like "A-Train" for Duke Ellington, if he didn't play "A-Train" or later "Satin Doll," you could've stayed home 'cause those were the things people wanted to hear. In order to play something different on those every time, one must take a chance. On some of the recordings, the professionalism is to be able to make a mistake and turn it into something, which comes with experience. Some of the young people may hesitate to be adventurous. Not so much on recordings, but on live performances, they should not hesitate to try something else that they hear in their head that might not come out that way with their fingers. This is the trick or what to try to seek with improvising, to be able to make a mistake and, like we used to say, "Like an artist, smear it over." Jackson could do that. Jackson could hit one of those cracks, two notes accidentally, and turn it into something [snaps fingers] instantaneously, which come with years of trying. If you restrict yourself to play only what you know and what you've practiced or what you ran over, the instantaneous revelation of a musical idea, which comes while you're playing, it's a

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beautiful thing to make it say what you heard. You hear all this music before you play it actually. It's in your head before it comes to your fingers or in your chops. That's what made people like Charlie Parker and Milt Jackson, the other great improvisers, the command of being able to hear it and do it. For the Quartet, every night, if we played the same compositions on a program, the tempo that it's in that night dictates the ideas and the feeling of a piece at that time, just a slight change of tempo. Something John Lewis would do would throw Milt Jackson into doing something else, it's really a beautiful thing to be part of and I was really fortunate to be in that, just as I feel now with my brothers. Tootie is [a] really phenomenal drummer, and I played all the drummers in jazz. I'm very comfortable with Tootie. He has that feeling and the ability to do whatever he thinks at the moment, too. And Jimmy too, but Jimmy is not as adventurous as he could be 'cause we tried to get Jimmy to play just the three of us and he's used to having either the guitar or the piano. He feels more comfortable with that. Like how you asked about Tony Purrone, who was involved in the Quintet for a long time. And we had uniforms like the MJQ, we had our little Cardin look-alikes and presented it that way, but now with this looser organization as far as no-uniforms, we come sharp but different. But I'm having a lot of fun with them, and we're gonna have a lot of fun on this tribute to me. It'll be the first time the Brothers played out here in a long time. I'm sorry you won't be around for that. Bob Berg has consented to do it, and Chico Hamilton and his Euphoria, his latest group, and Eddie Locke and his group, and Jerry Sokolov and his group, and the Trio, it's gonna be quite a long day of events. I hope it raises some money to rehabilitate that train [station], so we can have the workshops upstairs and the photo lab for kids. It's a project in progress. That's about what I'm doing now.

Holley: Final question, will there ever be a Percy Heath album? You've never recorded as a leader, and at this stage of the game, I think that's a fair question.

Heath: I don't know about a Percy Heath album. Those Heath Brothers' albums are a collaboration. I have about ten compositions of mine. Maybe, one day. After the duets at the Lincoln Center with Jeb Patton, did you go to those?

Holley: I was out of town. I heard they were good though.

Heath: I was a little reluctant to do it in the first place, just me and a piano player? What the heck am I gonna do for two hours? But it turned out to be alright, so it's possible that if some recording company wants to...

Holley: I think we can get some people interested [laughs].

Heath: Yeah, well we'll see. It would take me quite a while to get enough together. I'd hate to have an album of repetitive licks. We'll see if we can get it together. There's a suite that I wrote on the passing of my father that has three movements to it. We did a couple of them separately on some of the Heath Brothers' albums, but never as a suite. So now that I'm the survivor of the Modern Jazz Quartet, so many thoughts when I listen to

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some of those recordings and bringing back those memories of those times when that happened and where we were and things we were doing for half a century, it's... I don't want to be too morbid about it, but there's a part in the suite that expresses sadness, call it, "Lament," and the other part, "Rejoice," which should be the celebration of that passing. We're working on it, Eugene, we'll see what happens with that, if I'm around long enough to do that. Only time will tell. Thank you for including me in this study. Jimmy did it quite a few years ago, I understand. I was supposed to do it a couple of years ago, but they ran out of funds, which that wasn't the reason why I consented to do it, but it's just an honor to be included in this study of people who contributed to the art form that we have all dedicated our lives to. Thank you very much.

Holley: Thank you. Thank you very much.

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