Groovin' High: The Life of Dizzy Gillespie

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The Life of Dizzy Gillespie

Alyn Shipton

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001

As the 1960's drew to a close, Moody left Dizzy's band to be replaced by a guitarist. At that time, in 1969, Dizzy himself may still have been adrift musically, but he was making significant strides in terms of his own life. He had reached his lowest point at the time of Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968, which happened on a day when, as luck would have it, Dizzy was back in South Carolina, revisiting Cheraw and Laurinburg, with all their associative memories of segregation and the old South. His reaction to the news was to get spectacularly inebriated, and Mike Longo, his pianist, tells the part-tragic, part-comic story of trying to extricate Dizzy from the area, with Dizzy drunk and bleeding from where a woman had bitten him in a fight. Longo was petrified about what the state police might think if they were to stop the car on a night when racial unrest was expected to find a severely beaten up Dizzy semiconscious on the back seat of their borrowed car.

Within a year or so of this saga, Dizzy forsook drink for good. It was just one of his undertakings when he decided to become a Bahá'í. Clues as to why he took this step are apparent in his earlier comments about drinking when things got him down, or just from sheer boredom. As his life involved yet more and more traveling from place to place or weeks at indifferent clubs in anonymous American cities, the boredom quotient grew higher and higher. For a figure of such seminal importance in jazz, Dizzy had somehow failed to capitalize on his position. While Miles Davis aspired to and acquired expensive Italian sports cars and a flamboyant lifestyle, promoting himself as a pop icon, and soul stars like James Brown sold their records in the millions, Dizzy was consigned, between festivals and the occasional overseas tour, to the old rounds of clubs. The Plugged Nickel and the Village Gate might have replaced Birdland or Snookie's in his itinerary, but the life was the same. Some musicians were angered by this, including trumpeter Donald Byrd, who followed Miles into the fringes of 1960s rock music. He told Leonard

Feather: "Do you think it doesn't break my heart to see Dizzy working in some small club? We're taking about respect and dignity." Although Byrd himself was by this time surrounding himself with backing vocalists and a funk beat, he knew exactly how important Dizzy's contribution to the development of jazz had been.

Ironically, it was on his endless rounds of the club circuit that Dizzy encountered the woman who helped him change his life: Beth McKintey, who contacted him in Milwaukee--initially to talk about Charlie Parker. Their conversations turned from music to religion and it turned out that while Dizzy toured the nation playing in clubs, she traveled from place to place promoting the word of the Bahá'í Faith.

Contrary to some perceptions, Bahá'í is not in itself an ancient religion, but is based on the nineteenth-century fulfillment of an Islamic prophecy that in "the year sixty" a Messiah or Qa'im would arise to establish the final victory of Islam on Earth. A mystical prophet known as the Bab ("the Gate") made a proclamation at Shiraz in what was then Persia in May 1844 that led him to be seen by many in the Islamic world as this expected Messiah, who would establish and purify Islam. As the Bab's earthly mission continued, it soon became apparent that he was proposing to replace rather than reform some of the laws of Islam, and, after a turbulent few years defying the Islamic orthodoxy, he was shot by a firing squad in 1850.

Persia put down the Babis--the followers of the Bab--with vicious force, and over 20,000 people are reputed to have been killed in the aftermath. However, as is so often the case, a new leader emerged in 1863, known as Bahá'u'lláh, who was accepted by the surviving Babis as a new prophet whose coming had been foreseen by the Bab, a kind of Jesus Christ to the Bab's John the Baptist. Bahá'u'lláh was forty-six in 1863, and from that time on spent much of the remainder of his life in prison: in Tehran, Baghdad, and eventually 'Akka, in what was then Palestine, where he died in 1892.

Despite his exile and imprisonment, Bahá'u'lláh managed to exert considerable influence and his teachings gained wide support in the Middle East and beyond. His son Abdu'l-Bahá was able to travel freely about the world before the 1914-18 war, and established groups of followers of Bahá'í (as Bahá'u'lláh's teachings were known) in Egypt, Europe, and, principally, the United States. Beth McKintey worked for the U.S. branch of the faith, which he had established in 1912. Briefly, the teachings of Bahá'í involved a continual process of divine revelation, of one being revealing one evolving truth, and of the unification of humanity into one faith and one order. Under such tenets, religion becomes the very bedrock of society, the supreme law for civilization.

It might be trite to suggest that Bahá'í filled the vacuum created in Dizzy's life by endless touring, but there is more than a little truth in it. There was a limit to the number of photographs Dizzy could take in a new place with his latest camera or the number of games of chess he could play, despite always carrying a portable board. People were not always available or willing to join him in other social pursuits. After meeting Beth McKintey and her husband, he filled the empty hours of his touring life by reading endlessly on the subject of Bahá'í. This squares with the time in the late 1940s when John Coltrane was in Dizzy's big band searching for some kind of religious enlightenment. Then, although interested, Dizzy had left the long discussions into the night to Yusef Lateef and Coltrane, perhaps preferring to follow Jesse Powell's example and go for a drink. Now, in sharp contrast to his recent behavior, he eschewed alcohol and devoured books and pamphlets, in particular a work called Thief in the Night by Bill Sears.

By 1970, Dizzy had become a member of the Bahá'í Faith and managed to use its principles to rationalize some of what he must have felt about his musical career, about why it was that he still worked in those dingy clubs Donald Byrd got so irate about, while others who had based their work on his had gone on to greater things. "Every age in music is important," he said. "Equally as important as the previous one, and is as important as the one that's coming after that. The same thing with religion you know, like when religion reveals itself. God has got it set up now. His education of mankind is through these prophets, and each one's supposed to come for a specific age, so they just keep coming, and after his is over another one takes their place. That's what the Bahá'ís teach you. They got a really intelligent way, looking at God's work on the planet. So I believe that music is the same, too. Messengers come to the music and after their influence starts waning, another one comes with a new idea, and he has a lot of followers."

In numerous interviews as well as in his autobiography, Dizzy expanded on this theme, the upshot of which was that he had defined his place in the succession of trumpeters and musical innovators within jazz. He could now look back at the lineage that led from King Oliver to Armstrong, to Roy Eldridge, to himself and onward to Miles Davis in terms of principles of the faith he espoused. Other musicians who were devout Bahá'ís sometimes questioned the strictness of Dizzy's devotion to its rules, including Quentin Jackson, who spoke contemptuously to John Chilton of Dizzy's "carrying on" about the religion. But this was to miss the point of its importance to Dizzy. Belief in the succession of "messengers" and application of the idea to music allowed him to regain belief in himself and reinvent himself as a teacher and prophet for the generation of younger musicians he encouraged over the years to come.

METADATA

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