

Ray Brown, jazz bass virtuoso, dies

By John Andrews
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After an extraordinary 55-year career, bassist Ray Brown died suddenly while napping before a performance scheduled in Indianapolis for the evening of July 2. Brown was 75.

Brown was perhaps the foremost bassist of postwar jazz. He consistently displayed excellent taste coupled with virtuoso technique and the utmost professionalism while backing musicians ranging from Charlie Parker to Frank Sinatra.

Born in 1926 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Brown picked up the bass in high school, where he sought to emulate Jimmy Blanton of the Duke Ellington Orchestra. At the time of his death from tuberculosis in 1942, Blanton was in the process of revolutionizing the jazz bass by freeing it from straight quarter-note rhythms in favor of intricate melodic solos similar to those performed by horn players.

Oscar Pettiford, 1922-1960, was the first bassist to absorb Blanton's innovations and apply them to the nascent modern jazz movement of the World War II years, which became known as "bebop." But Pettiford proved to be a difficult and unreliable sideman, in large part because of alcoholism. Pettiford was the bassist in Dizzy Gillespie's original bebop combo in 1943 and 1944, but by 1945 Gillespie needed a replacement.

Hank Jones, the elegant and still active pianist, introduced the 19-year-old Brown to Gillespie shortly after the bassist moved to New York to be close to the exciting developments in jazz occurring there. Without even an audition, Brown was plugged into a quintet featuring Gillespie on trumpet, Charlie Parker on alto saxophone, Bud Powell on piano, and Max Roach on drums—the cream of the new jazz musicians at the peak of their powers. Brown was later quoted as saying, with characteristic modesty, "If I had known these guys any better, I would have probably never gone to the rehearsal."

After playing with Gillespie's unsuccessful 1945 big

band, Brown joined Gillespie and Parker for a legendary two-month engagement as a sextet in Los Angeles. Recordings from this period reveal as fully developed the qualities that would define Brown's playing throughout his career: the beautiful, strong tone and interesting choice of notes, coupled with a drive that seemed to lift and propel the entire ensemble.

While Parker remained in California, where he eventually collapsed from heroin addiction and alcoholism, Brown and Gillespie returned to New York in 1946. Gillespie formed his second big band, which was both commercially and artistically successful. Brown was prominently featured on "One Bass Hit" and "Two Bass Hit." He can be seen with the band in the concert-style film "Jivin' in Bebop."

Brown performed during breaks with vibraphonist Milt Jackson, pianist John Lewis and drummer Kenny Clarke as a "band within a band." With Percy Heath replacing Brown and Connie Kay replacing Kenny Clarke, this combination evolved into the Modern Jazz Quartet.

From 1947 to 1952, Brown was married to Ella Fitzgerald, one of the greatest jazz singers of all time. He became her musical director, formed a trio, and guided her away from novelty tunes like "A Tisket a Tasket" to jazz and quality popular songs. The two performed regularly with the large touring shows assembled by impresario Norman Granz under the title "Jazz at the Philharmonic."

Through his association with Granz and JATP, Brown became the regular bass player for piano virtuoso Oscar Peterson, with whom he remained for 15 years. Although musically conservative compared to the cutting-edge bebop players, the very popular Peterson played with awesome technique and great swing. They were a perfect pair and appeared on dozens of excellent albums together, usually joined by either Jim Hall on guitar or Ed Thigpen on drums.

From the mid-1960s on, Brown settled in Los Angeles, mixing studio work with recording sessions, touring and jazz education. Brown was also involved in the business end of music. He managed several musicians, a nightclub, and even directed the Monterey Jazz Festival for two years.

There are thousands of recordings featuring Brown. My personal favorite is a trio session he recorded in 1949 with pianist Bud Powell and drummer Max Roach that produced several masterpieces. The tempos are extremely fast on “Tempus Fugit,” “All God’s Children Got Rhythm,” and “Cherokee,” but the time is absolutely steady and the swing irresistible.

Brown remained active in music right to the end. When he died, he was touring after releasing “Some of My Best Friends are ... Guitarists” on June 25. This album was the latest in a series, each featuring various musicians on a certain instrument. Others include pianists, singers, saxophonists and trumpeters. He had played golf in the afternoon, and was found dead in his hotel room by a band member after he did not show up for the evening sound check.

Brown was one of the giants of twentieth century American music and will be sorely missed.

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