

A FIRESIDE CHAT WITH HANK JONES

An icon of the music, but one so humble, his accolades and achievements are never heard above a whisper. His impact, however, is elephantine and certain to linger long after I am six feet under. Take Master Class (a reissue of Bebop Redux and Groovin' High), a testament to the pianist's sensitive lyricism and gentle swing, Jones is a personal fav. I am pleased to present the Brother to Thad and Elvin, mentor to numerous, and favorite of mine, Mr. Hank Jones, unedited and in his own words.

FRED JUNG: Let's start from the beginning.

HANK JONES: I think the biggest influence on me was the fact that both my parents were musical, my father and my mother. My father played guitar and my mother played piano. There was always music in the house. We had a piano and we had a record player. There was always in the house and I think that inspired me. The records that I heard at the time with Duke Ellington and a lot of blues records as a matter of fact. I think some Earl Hines records were around at the time, so there was always music there. I took lessons. I was ten or eleven years old when I first started to take lessons. However, my two older sisters had taken lessons prior to the time I took them. The same teacher, as a matter of fact, taught all of us. I took lessons as long as the funds held out. We were a poor family. My father managed to work during the Depression, which is the period in which I grew up, or part of the period. But his income was not that large and the amount that was set aside for lessons was relatively small because we did have to eat and we had a fairly large family at that time. At the time, it was six and it later grew to ten. There was always a lot of places for money to go, too many places and not enough money. They did provide lessons for me for a considerable period. When I grew older, when I moved to New York, I began to take lessons on my own.

FJ: Brothers Thad and Elvin are recognized figures in the music. You mentioned your two older sisters played the piano. How many others members of the Jones family were musically inclined?

HANK JONES: Well, there were six boys and four girls. My oldest sister was a very talented person and was considered a child prodigy at the time. Unfortunately, she died in a ice skating accident on the lake. That was at an early age. She was only twelve at the time. My next oldest sister took lessons, but she was not as interested in the piano. Then I was next and I was very much interested in piano and music. I couldn't hear enough records. I listened constantly to everything that I could get my hands on. I had a very good teacher, who encouraged my playing and my getting into jazz. Of course, most piano students start off not studying jazz, but studying Bach and Beethoven and so forth and exercises. These things all helped.

FJ: Tell me about your move to New York.

HANK JONES: Well, I did in a series of steps, incremental steps. First, I worked local places in Flint, Michigan and Lansing, Michigan, but then I began to move west, you might say. I went to Cleveland for about a year and a half with a small band, working a nightclub there. One of the better known players in New York, Tadd Dameron, his brother was a member of that band. From Cleveland, I moved to Buffalo and worked in a small club with a bass, tenor, and piano trio, a rather unusual trio. I stayed there for about a year and a half and then moved onto New York, where I had a job waiting for me with Hot Lips Page. Lucky Thompson, who used to work in the small groups I worked in in Lansing and Flint, and Lucky Thompson had gone to New York a year or so before I did and he joined the Hot Lips Page Orchestra. Shortly after that, I guess Hot Lips Page needed somebody to play piano and so Lucky mentioned my name and I got a letter from

Hot Lips Page saying that if I came to New York, I would have a job waiting for me and so my first job in New York was with Hot Lips Page. I was lucky in that respect.

FJ: Have you heard any news of Lucky Thompson?

HANK JONES: He was a great player. Lucky was one of the unique players. His idol was Don Byas and of course, Coleman Hawkins. He had a phenomenal style.

FJ: Did he ever indicate to you as to the reasons behind his departure from the music?

HANK JONES: We never really got into that, but I think, in my opinion, it had something to do with his two sons, whom he was raising because his wife was not around at the time. I think she had passed. He had to raise these boys and I think he had a very difficult time raising these two boys. Of course, he tried to do the very best job that he could, but it is very difficult for a man to make a living playing music and also take care of the family end of it, raising the boys and providing a good home for them and making an income. I think that is one of the reasons why he dropped out. There may have been other reasons, but I am not aware of them.

FJ: How did you get the gig with Ella Fitzgerald?

HANK JONES: That was some time later. The year actually was 1947 because that was the first year that I started touring with JATP (Jazz at the Philharmonic). It was interesting because the singer with JATP at that time was Helen Humes. She was quite a singer and quite a star. Ella came on after her and of course, Ray Brown, at the time was in the process of being married to Ella and so Ray was, of course, the bass player in the group. We had a little trio. That was a pretty good trio, Charlie Smith on drums, Ray Brown on bass, and I was holding up the piano end and so that was interesting. That was during the periods when she wasn't touring with JATP. When we were with JATP, that was a special group with Buddy Rich on drums and Ray Brown on bass and myself and maybe Coleman Hawkins or Lester Young or Charlie Shavers or Roy Eldridge. That was a very interesting musical group. I learned a lot. I kept my ears wide open and learned quite a bit on that tour. We did two tours a year, one in the spring and one in the fall.

FJ: Accompanying a vocalist is audibly refined when compared to improvising within a tenor or trumpet group.

HANK JONES: It is. It is quite different than any other mode of playing, whether it is a big band or small band. Accompanying is a special art. You have to learn it. The usual instincts that you have for playing piano don't apply when you are accompanying because you have to support the soloist. You have to support the soloist and you can't really be yourself so to speak because you have to always provide background and foundation for the singer. I learned a lot about accompanying from Ella. It was really a learning experience the whole time I was there. She liked to have blocked chord fills in the background, sort of like an orchestral like sound, rather than the single line fills that some people use. Ella didn't like that so much.

FJ: How long was your tenure at CBS?

HANK JONES: I was the staff pianist and also acted as rehearsal pianist at times and audition pianist at times. There were four of us on at the time. I got a lot of work because the others were assigned to do other things and we also played for people like Jackie Gleason and Ed Sullivan and a couple of other shows that didn't make it. It was quite a busy period. During the rehearsals, playing for auditions, and playing with the big shows, I was pretty well occupied. Also, we did a

radio show for part of that time. We did two radio shows. One was a Dixieland show and the other was the modern jazz show. It was a very interesting period. I learned a lot there too.

FJ: Being the house pianist for CBS, one has to adapt to any situation that may arise.

HANK JONES: That's true. Usually, but not always, there was a rehearsal. As you said, you have to be able to adjust to the different styles, which, of course, is another learning experience. I think all of this goes into making you more versatile pianist, in that you learn how to do a variety of things in a variety of situations. I think that all helps you and I am sure that it helped me.

FJ: Do you have a preferred setting?

HANK JONES: Actually, I prefer the trio setting because not only do you have a lot more chances to play, but you also have the support of the bass and the drums. The group that I have now, which is an excellent group, you couldn't find better musicians in the world than Dennis Mackrel on drums and George Mraz on bass. I am very fortunate in that respect. I enjoy the trio format more. There is greater opportunity for versatility. You can play a greater variety of things than you can do in other formats just because you have a chance to play a lot more.

FJ: On *A Handful of Keys*, you play the music of Fats Waller.

HANK JONES: I played solo. I had done the Broadway show "Ain't Misbehavin'" prior to that time and Jean-Philippe Allard, who was the A&R man for that section of the company, suggested that I do a Fats Waller album. I tried to play as many of his compositions as I could. It had a certain swing that was typical of Fats Waller. That was an interesting thing. I am not sure I did it so well, but I did the best I could.

FJ: Then came *Upon Reflection*, an album of your late brother Thad's music. Give me your thoughts on the music of Thad Jones.

HANK JONES: Many people don't know this, Fred, but when he had the big band, he didn't play so much. He let the other trumpet players play the solos. He had some great soloists, Pepper Adams and people like that. But he was a great soloist. Prior to the time he left Detroit, he played almost continuously as a soloist. He played a lot more than what he did when he got to New York. When he arrived in New York, he reverted to his other great talent, which was arranging. By the way, Fred, he was one of these people who could sit down and write a score and write out the instruments one by one without using the score. In other words, he would take a piece of paper and write out a first saxophone part in its entirety from start to finish without the score. He would do the same thing with the trumpets, the trombones, the piano, the bass, without a score. He did that when he first started arranging and so he had a great, natural talent for arranging. At that time, perhaps his talent for arranging was equal to his playing ability. I think they were both rather equal. It was just that he relegated the solo work to the other guys in the band, which was pretty generous of him because he himself was such a great soloist. Later on, when he began to play with the Mel Lewis-Thad Jones band, he wrote a lot more. His arrangements are outstanding and unique. Almost every college band in the country has a full supply of Thad Jones arrangements and high school bands as well. They are pretty difficult to play so many high school bands can't play them, but college bands love these things. Every place I go, they have some Thad Jones arrangements in the book. His arrangements are quite popular in Europe as well. So his talents were just phenomenal. He was also a very unique conductor. His conducting style was very visual. When you watched him conduct, you expected something great to happen and certainly, it did. Thad passed much, much before his time, but he certainly left a great legacy with his music and his playing.

FJ: Did you have any indication when Elvin was younger that he would become an icon of the music?

HANK JONES: I had a thought that he might. Of course, you never know these things. You are not psychic, but I think the interest that he showed in the music and drums early on was an indicator that he might make it a career and he certainly has. He has gone a lot further than, I am sure, he even expected to go. He's become an icon. He is regarded as one of the trendsetters in the drum category and he is an excellent player. We did a date not too long ago, maybe six months ago with Richard Davis playing bass, Elvin on drums, and myself on piano.

FJ: Did Elvin have trouble keeping up with you?

HANK JONES: I had a hard time keeping up with him (laughing).

FJ: I find that hard to believe.

HANK JONES: (Laughing) He has energy to burn. If you've watched him play, he has endless store of energy. It comes out in bursts, sustained bursts. There is fire in the belly with him. He has got it going.

FJ: Has anyone you have collaborated with made more of an impression on you than the others?

HANK JONES: There are several people. Of course, there are some people that I didn't play with like Art Tatum, whose influence still is part of me. I think he is the greatest pianist who ever lived as far as jazz is concerned and maybe the greatest pianist period because he was improvising. He was creating at the same time that he was performing. Anyway, the person who made the greatest, lasting impression on me was Charlie Parker. I had this brief experience with him on JATP. I never worked a club date with him, but the experiences on JATP was overwhelming. Everything he played was a masterpiece. I think that applies to most of his recordings. I did one recording with him. His creative ability and he had technique to use all his ideas and he had endless stream of ideas. He was like Tatum in that respect. And his tone, which a lot of people forget, his tone was extraordinary. He had a perfect alto saxophone tone. A lot of the players today don't have that tone. He had a certain smoothness and a certain ease of playing that made it seem ridiculously easy, but we both know that it is not easy, but he made it sound easy. I think that is one of his chief assets. This is the way Tatum played by the way, without effort, just phenomenal. Words don't exist to describe his playing. When I first met Art Tatum, of course, I had heard Art Tatum long before I came to New York. When I first heard Art Tatum, they were playing some of his recordings on a radio station in Detroit. I had thought that this was a gag and that they were trying to make us believe that only one man was playing this and I knew that there were at least three or four people playing this. I didn't see how one man could do that. This was my first impression of Art. Later on, when I was in Buffalo, Art Tatum used to work at a place in Buffalo on the other side of town from where I worked. We played our last set before Art played his last set, so when we finished, we would go over there and listen to Art play. What a thrill that was to listen to maybe thirty minutes. He wasn't playing the best piano in the world, but he made it sound like a concert grand. After that, after playing his last set there, he would go into downtown Buffalo and play until eleven that day, solo, just playing and drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. You would sit there and be transfixed. You could watch his fingers and you still couldn't figure out how he was doing it. He was a true genius. If you ever heard him in person, you would have even more appreciation for him because he did it so effortlessly. His effort was nothing, any key, both hands, equally adept. His left hand was good as his right hand. I never got tired of listening to him play. Even today, when I throw on his records, I still can't

believe he is doing what he is doing.

FJ: When the journey comes to a close, what would your legacy to be?

HANK JONES: I would like people to think I was distinguishable as opposed to indistinguishable from other pianists. I would like to believe I had developed some kind of style or signature to be identified with myself and not just a hundred other people. That is one of the greatest things you can accomplish, if you ever accomplish that. There are very few people that you listen to that have that distinctive style like an Erroll Garner or Art Tatum or Fats Waller. I would like to be remembered as someone who developed a style. That is a matter that can only be decided by time, Fred.

FJ: I am confident that you can rest at ease.

HANK JONES: I thank you. That is very kind of you, Fred. I hope so.