

RAY BROWN*

Catherine Schmidt-Jones

This work is produced by The Connexions Project and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License †

Abstract

An introduction to the influential bebop bassist.

1 Background and Influence

It is in the basic nature of some musical instruments to catch the ear. The timbre, range, and facility of the trumpet, for example, make it ideal for solo work. It is equally inherent in other instruments to play a more supportive, background role. This does not make such instruments any less important to the success of a group, however. The string bass, for example, as the bass voice in the rhythm section, has a crucial function in laying the groundwork for both the rhythm and the harmony of a jazz ensemble.

Ray Brown is considered one of the top bassists in jazz during the bebop era precisely because of his abilities in this area. This was certainly not his only contribution to jazz. Brown's solo work was considered to be inventive and ambitious, while remaining singable and strongly swinging. He composed, and he led recording sessions featuring outstanding jazz musicians. He was important as a teacher and promoter in many jazz musician's careers. His hybrid cello/bass – basically a cello with tuning and fingerings that are more familiar to bassists – was a forerunner of the piccolo bass.

However, those who worked with him agreed that his genius lay in his ability to function as an ideal bass player within an ensemble. His tone quality and accuracy of pitch are legendary among bass players, many of whom claim to be able to recognize his sound from only a few notes on any recording. Bassist Hal Gaynor, for example, said, "He had this clarity of sound, and his intonation! At that time most bass players were playing kind of thumpy. You didn't have to recognize all the notes so long as you felt the pulse." (1) (Section 4: Notes) Jay Leonhart agrees, "such a huge sound and such accuracy...nobody's ever played like that since. And many of us have tried." (2) (Section 4: Notes) The "huge" sound Leonhart mentions required unusual physical strength in the hands, to get a sound that was both quite loud and that lasted an unusually long time for a plucked string bass note. As Bill Crow explained, "He developed a lot of the skills that became the standards of the next generation of virtuoso bassists. Like Blanton, Mingus, and Pettiford, Ray developed his technique before the invention of amplifiers and metal strings....He knew how to project his tone, and he pulled the strings percussively, making the bass line powerfully propel the rhythm section and the band." (3) (Section 4: Notes)

Brown attributed his sound to his instrument, which was unusually thick and had a very woody tone, but many musicians have attested to the fact that he could pick up any instrument and make it "sound like Ray." Oscar Peterson said simply, "He is a walking sound. Ray has a sound that he walks around with that he can't even describe, within himself. I don't care what he says..."(4) (Section 4: Notes)

*Version 1.1: Mar 28, 2006 2:38 pm US/Central

†<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

Tone quality and accuracy are not the only qualities a good bassist can offer an ensemble, however. The lowest pitch – the bass note – has a very important function in harmony, so a bassist who can improvise solid, interesting bass lines, made up of the notes that are the best choices from the harmonic point of view, is a huge asset to a jazz ensemble. To continue quoting from Hal Gaynor, “And there was Ray’s choice of notes. No other bass player I’ve ever heard played quite the lines Ray played, particularly with Oscar [Peterson], because he was very meticulous about harmonic movement and sound. Ray played fantastic lines and phrases, and he plays every note. He doesn’t slide around. Nobody walked the way he did [this refers to a common type of bass line called a “walking bass”] ... and he always listened to who he was playing with and gave him exactly the notes he needed.” (5) (Section 4: Notes) Don Thompson agreed, “He played the most perfect notes, as if he’d sat up all night figuring out the best possible line to play....He’s the Bach of bass players.” (6) (Section 4: Notes)

The result was a quiet authority of supportive playing that affected the entire ensemble. Roger Kellaway put it this way: “Ray was not a sideman! Ray was a member of the band. Unless you sat back too much, in which case he became the leader of the band.” (7) (Section 4: Notes) Oscar Peterson said, “Ask any players who’ve played with him...this is totally unknowing on his part. Totally unconscious...he comes in and just plays the way Ray plays, everything sort of adjusts to it.” (8) (Section 4: Notes) Don Thompson agreed, “What he always did was to make the band sound better than it would be without him. Every time, he made everyone sound better than they ever sounded before. In fact, he made everyone better just by showing up.” (9) (Section 4: Notes) Few musicians would ask more of a colleague, and Ray Brown’s life story clearly reflects the fact that many major jazz players felt this way about him.

2 Biography

Raymond Matthews Brown was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on October 13, 1926. His first instrument was piano. His father wanted him to learn to play like Fats Waller, and by age eight he was memorizing Waller recordings. “Later he wanted Ray to play like Art Tatum. ‘That was asking a little too much,’ Ray grins. ‘But that’s not the reason I gave up piano. I couldn’t find my way on it. It just didn’t give me what I wanted. Besides, I was in a high school orchestra and there must have been fourteen piano players in it. And twelve were chicks who could read anything in sight.’” (10) (Section 4: Notes)

He tried the trombone, but (accounts vary) either his family could not afford one, or that instrument also didn’t give him what he was looking for. The school owned a bass that he could use, so he began playing bass. He was allowed to bring it home on weekends; apparently the school’s orchestra director thought he was being diligent about practicing. However, after Brown’s picture was published in the local newspaper in reference to a gig that he was playing – with the school bass – he was no longer allowed to take it home, and his father finally bought him one.

Brown was already getting offers to join professional jazz bands on road trips, but his mother felt very strongly that he should finish high school. He left town immediately after graduation in 1944, to spend eight months with Jimmy Hinsley’s band, then another eight months with Luis (Snookum) Russell’s band. Brown considered Jimmy Blanton his primary early influence on the instrument, but he was also studying the solos of Oscar Pettiford and Slam Stewart.

In 1945, while Russell’s band was in Miami, Brown felt ready to try his luck in New York. According to Brown, several members of the band decided to go together, but the rest “chickened out, leaving me with my bags all packed. So I said ‘The hell with it,’ and went.” (11) (Section 4: Notes) The night he arrived in New York, Brown took his bags to his aunt’s place and immediately asked his nephew to show him where Fifty-second Street was. According to Brown’s own recollection:

“That night, I saw Erroll Garner, Art Tatum, Billie Holiday, Billie Daniels, Coleman Hawkins, and Hank Jones. I’d known Hank before. While we were talking, he said ‘Dizzy Gillespie just came in.’ I said, ‘Where? Introduce me! I want to meet him.’

“So Hank introduced us. Hank said to Dizzy, ‘This is Ray Brown, a friend of mine, and a very good bass player.’

“Dizzy said, ‘You want a gig?’ I almost had a heart attack! Dizzy said, ‘Be at my house for rehearsal at 7 o’clock tomorrow.’

“I went up there the next night and got the fright of my life. The band consisted of Dizzy, Bud Powell, Max Roach, Charlie Parker - and me!” (12) (Section 4: Notes)

Brown was only eighteen years old.

A few weeks later, Milt Jackson was added to the band, and he and Brown became very close friends, rooming together, and so inseparable that they were called “the twins.”

With Al Haig and Stan Levy in place of Powell and Roach, Gillespie took the group to California in the fall of 1945. In 1946, Gillespie included Brown when he formed his second big band, which played at the Spotlight on Fifty-second Street and recorded for Musicraft. Brown stayed with the Gillespie band until 1948. He “credited Dizzy with starting him in the right direction harmonically” (13) (Section 4: Notes), and Gillespie, for his part, described Brown as being very inquisitive, wanting to know “why” as well as “what.” If Gillespie felt that Brown’s understanding of a harmony was not accurate, for example, Brown wanted to be shown, at the piano, exactly what Gillespie had in mind.

Brown left Gillespie’s band to marry Ella Fitzgerald, whom he had met in 1947, and to form his own trio, which accompanied Fitzgerald in most of her engagements. They divorced after only four years (in 1952), but remained good friends and continued to work together.

Meanwhile, in 1949, Brown met pianist Oscar Peterson at Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP). Norman Granz had begun producing JATP in 1944, and it was so popular that it eventually became annual tours presenting “all-star jam session(s) filled with swing and bop giants” (14) (Section 4: Notes) all over the country. Dan Morgenstern relates that it was Fitzgerald’s relationship with Brown that first brought her to JATP:

“One permanent effect of their relationship was that Norman Granz discovered Ella’s magic. She had come to see Brown at a Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP) concert in 1948; members of the audience caught a glimpse of her and called out for her to sit in. Granz was reluctant but gave in, and was converted on the spot. By 1950 she was touring regularly with JATP and Granz had become her unofficial manager.... Thus her Song Book era and long affiliation with his Verve label began.” (15) (Section 4: Notes)

At the height of its popularity in the early 1950’s, the JATP roster would regularly include Ray Brown, Ella Fitzgerald, and the Oscar Peterson Trio. That trio began as a duet when Ray Brown and Oscar Peterson teamed up, beginning in 1950.

Also in 1950, the Gillespie Orchestra broke up. The Gillespie Orchestra had specialized in fast, high playing that required the wind players to take a break occasionally to recover, and the rhythm section would often play together during these breaks. In particular, the 1947 version of the rhythm section, which included Ray Brown, Milt Jackson on vibraphone, John Lewis on piano, and Kenny Clarke on drums, enjoyed playing together as a smaller group, and in 1950 decided to record together as the Milt Jackson Quartet – the MJQ. They wanted to form a permanent performing group, but Brown had too many other commitments, so he was replaced by Percy Heath, and the MJQ continued on as the Modern Jazz Quartet, a group that was important in the history of ‘cool’ jazz.

Brown was too busy for the MJQ partly due to his performing and recording commitments with Ella Fitzgerald, but also because of his increasing involvement with Oscar Peterson. Major Holly was in Brown’s place with Peterson for an extensive session in 1950, but Peterson had already indicated a strong preference for Brown. In 1951, guitarist Barney Kessel joined Brown and Peterson to make the group a trio for one session. In 1952 guitarist Irving Ashby took a turn with Peterson and Brown, but then Kessel rejoined them. They travelled and recorded as an increasingly popular trio, but in mid-1953 guitarist Herb Ellis replaced Kessel, and it was the Peterson-Ellis-Brown trio that was considered “one of the great groups, particularly after they were together for a time and worked out complex arrangements, trying constantly to challenge and outdo each other.” (16) (Section 4: Notes) The result of the competition between the piano and the guitar was music that was “light, fast, intricate, and swung masterfully. There was a high degree of rhythmic interplay between the instruments.” (17) (Section 4: Notes) Meanwhile, “Brown’s ability to execute intricate counterlines was essential to the success of the group’s complex and dense style. He also propelled the trio with his sturdy walking patterns, which hugged the front edge of the beat. Although he crafts technically

ambitious solos, they are lyrical and framed effectively with silence.” (18) (Section 4: Notes)

The Peterson trio was particularly good for Brown’s reputation as a top bassist, and in the fifties and sixties he often topped polls as the favorite bassist of critics and fellow musicians as well as fans. In the fall of 1958, Ellis left the group. Drummer Gene Gammage filled in, but was soon replaced by drummer Ed Thigpen, who stayed with the trio for seven years. Without the guitarist, the trio had a less complex sound, and this later version of the group is usually not considered as inspired or exciting as the version with Ellis. The group was still very popular, however, recording and going on world tours regularly.

In 1966, after fifteen years with Peterson, Brown left the trio, and Peterson began working with bassist Niels-Henning Orsted-Pederson. Brown said of Peterson, “Frankly, I credit Oscar with a lot of my development. He always gives you a little more than you think you can do. He’ll say ‘Is this possible on the instrument?’ It’s been a spur and a challenge to me.” (19) (Section 4: Notes) Peterson, no less complementary, said of Brown, “Ray has an insatiable desire – insatiable, absolutely insatiable – to find the right note at the right time...(He is) the epitome of forethought. Sympathetic forethought.” (20) (Section 4: Notes)

Brown was tired of life on the road, however, and decided to settle in Los Angeles, California. This apparently caused a temporary panic among the bassists who were already there, who worried that he might take up all the studio work. He certainly became a very busy studio musician, but he also became involved in publishing, managing, and record production. Many musicians – including some of the previously panicked bassists – later considered Brown’s help as a teacher, talent scout, and manager crucial to launching their careers. It is a sign of fondness and gratitude, as well as respect, that more than 400 people, mostly musicians, including dozens of bassists, attended a tribute celebrating his seventy-fifth birthday in 2001.

Brown was also active playing in the local music scene during his time in L.A. In 1974, he was one of the founding members of The L.A. Four, with drummer Shelly Mann, acoustic guitarist Laurindo Almeida, and Bud Shank on flute and alto saxophone. The quartet’s repertoire was a mixture of Brazilian, classical, and jazz styles.

Although he had settled in L.A. because he was tired of travelling, Brown also eventually tired of studio work, and began playing on the road again seven months a year, with a trio that he headed. On July 2, 2002, while he was on the road in Indianapolis for a gig at the Jazz Kitchen, Brown died while napping after a round of golf. A few days later, there was yet another large gathering, with a huge crowd from all over the country. This one was also a tribute to and celebration of the musician’s life and influence. Brown had left instructions that he wanted a party, not mourning, at his funeral. The jam session at the reception lasted all evening.

3 Discography

- “One Bass Hit”(1946, Musicraft) and “Two Bass Hit” (1947, Victor) show off Brown as featured soloist with Dizzy Gillespie’s band.
- *Groovin’ High* (1946) includes “Ray’s Idea”and “That’s Earl, Brother”, probably Brown’s best offerings as composer with Dizzy Gillespie’s band.
- *At the Stratford Shakespearean Festival* (1956, Verve) and *At the Concertgebouw* (1958, Verve) are important live recordings from the Oscar Peterson Trio. The 1956 date includes “How High the Moon”, with Peterson’s favorite recorded example of Brown’s solo work. (21) (Section 4: Notes)
- *This One’s for Blanton* (1972, Pablo) The biography above only includes the collaborations that were most important to Brown’s life story, since a list of all the major musicians that he worked with would be very long indeed. One fine example is this session of duets with Duke Ellington, which pays homage to an earlier Ellington session with Jimmy Blanton and displays Brown’s talents both as a selfless accompanist and as an inventive soloist.
- *The L.A. Four Scores* (Concord Jazz, 1990) shows off the group’s mix of cool jazz and Brazilian music.

4 Notes

1. Lees, Gene, *Friends Along the Way: A Journey through Jazz* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 74
2. *ibid*, p. 80
3. *ibid*, p.72
4. *ibid*, p.77
5. *ibid*, p. 73
6. *ibid*, p. 86
7. *ibid*, p. 76
8. *ibid*, p.78
9. *ibid*, p.86
10. Gitler, Ira, *The Masters of Bebop: A Listener's Guide* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), pp. 168-170
11. Lees, *op.cit.*, p. 71
12. *ibid*, p. 71
13. *ibid*, p. 72
14. Yanow, Scott, *Jazz on Record: The First Sixty Years* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2003), p.315
15. Morgenstern, Dan, *Living with Jazz: A Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), p.346
16. Yanow, *op.cit.*, p.364
17. Lyons, Len and Don Perlo, *Jazz Portraits: The Lives and Music of the Jazz Masters* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1989), p.416-417
18. *ibid*, p. 92
19. Lees, *op.cit.*, p. 78
20. *ibid*, p. 76
21. Gitler, *op.cit.*, p. 171

5 Bibliography

Feather, Leonard. *Encyclopedia of Jazz in the Sixties*. Horizon Press. New York, 1966. This book includes many short, encyclopedia-style biographies.

Gitler, Ira. *The Masters of Bebop: A Listener's Guide*. Da Capo Press. New York, 2001. This book offers extensive biographical information about the subjects, relating it clearly to their important recordings.

Kernfeld, Barry, ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz, Volume One, A-K*. Macmillan Press Limited. New York, 1988. Biographical entries in this dictionary include extensive discographies as well as basic information on the life and the influence of the musician.

Kinkle, Roger D. *The Complete Encyclopedia of Popular Music and Jazz 1900-1950, Volume 2 Biographies A-K*. Arlington House Publishers. New Rochelle, NY, 1974. This large volume has short but informative biographies of a large number of musicians.

Lees, Gene. *Friends Along the Way: A Journey Through Jazz*. Yale University Press. New Haven & London, 2003. This book is a collection of minibiographies (including one of Brown), first published in the Gene Lees Jazzletter, of people Lees knew personally. A jazz writer and lyricist, Lees offers an insider's insight into the lives and work of these jazz figures, not only from conversations with the subjects themselves, but also from conversations with many others whose lives and work they influenced.

Lyons, Len, and Don Perlo. *Jazz Portraits: The Lives and Music of the Jazz Masters*. William Morrow and Company, Inc. New York, 1989. This is another set of short biographies of important jazz figures.

Morgenstern, Dan. *Living With Jazz: A Reader* edited by Sheldon Meyer. Pantheon Books. New York, 2004. This collection of Morgenstern's best writings on jazz is taken from a great variety of sources.

Ward, Geoffrey C., and Ken Burns. *Jazz: A History of America's Music*. Alfred A. Knopf. New York, 2000. This book is an easy-to-read anecdote-filled popular history of jazz. Rather than a discography, an extensive set of recordings and video complements the book.

Yanow, Scott. *Jazz on Record: The First Sixty Years*. Backbeat Books. San Francisco, 2003. This comprehensive book is an overview of jazz history that includes a detailed discography for each period of jazz history, with discussions of the important recordings alongside the relevant history.