

Mostly about People

By Wally Trabing



Dizzy Gillespie

Monterey Jazz Festival—Dizzy Gillespie, who says he was once a bricklayer by trade (and his horn looks as if it was hit by a brick) opened the near sellout jazz festival here Friday with bitter-sweet intellectual sounds called jazz.

Cheeks and neck puffed like an adder, horn askew, handkerchief at the ready, a la Armstrong, John Birk Gillespie summed up his defiant music, hot enough to scorch Ben-Gay; occasionally jumpity, growly and nerve racking.

Gillespie is one of the fathers of bebop which broke away from swing publically around 1944.

His trumpet has always been an instrument of experimentation, stabbing ears with strange aggressive sounds, slowly collecting fans over the years and finding other experiments—Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk, Earl Fatha Hines, Roy Eldridge, Billy Eckstine.

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I sat on a wooden fence with Gillespie (not a very jazzy sitting) during afternoon rehearsals and he talked of his work between loud outbursts of greetings with friends.

He's an alternate guy, serious and suddenly flamboyant — 48, 5-10 with an underlip goatee.

He was born in Cheraw,

South Carolina, in 1917, and played trombone in the high school marching band ("I was so short I couldn't reach seventh position.")

At 14 he was also playing trumpet, painfully, and when he showed up as jazz sessions "they used to yell: 'Here comes ol' wrong note!'"

He started playing for \$12 a week; worked up to \$45 with Teddy Hill at the old New York World's fair and in 1939 joined Cab Calloway at \$100 where he continued to experiment much to Calloway's disdain.

In 1945 he established his own combo, The Three Deuces, and bebop was under way as far as he was concerned. He now has a quintet.

I'm not going to attempt to define bebop because I couldn't and it takes books for experts to discuss it.

But Gillespie said today's jazz has not changed much from the bebop area.

"They still play the same type of music; it's just that the name has been dropped and they call it jazz again."

How does a jazz leader pierce the pack and become distinctive?

"Your top jazz musicians today assemble music knowledge and experience up to a point, then they start to eliminate."

"It's like a good tennis player. He develops himself up to where he wins a championship, then he works his game down to finer points," said Dizzy.

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The jazz played here is probably among the purest, and in some instances it is difficult to tell whether a band is warming up or playing.

I asked Gillespie if King Oliver jazz was played any place in the United States and he said it was played around by some of the old guys.

That old New Orleans jazz is known as "roots."

"Today's jazz is piled on top those roots. When I improvise I don't discard those roots. Subconsciously they are there in me."

"When musicians do not have a background and try to play jazz today you can tell."

"It's like a white guy coming up to me and tries to talk colored. I know right away (whether he has a background of being associated with Negroes).

"But, really King Oliver is being played today by Louis Armstrong. There is a remnant of Oliver in Armstrong just like



Dizzy Gillespie and his spaceward horn

there is a remnant of Roy Eldridge in me. It's nostalgia," he said.

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Dizzy got his name because he was a prankster. He also thinks it dates back to the early days when his brother bought him a trumpet and he carried it around in a paper sack.

And how did his horn develop that angle of space?

In 1954, while playing at Snookie's Barn on 44th street, New York, he placed his trumpet on a music stand. A dancer fell on it and bent the bell skyward. He had to play on, but noticed that with the bell bent upward, he could hear his own playing better.

So all his horns have been especially made in this shape.

Gillespie gets from \$1500 to \$3000 for a one-night stand now. He has a home in New Jersey and a wife he has been married to for the past 25 years.

"And I want to state that any bad habits or vices I own I have picked up on my own," he said.

Being a celebrity lessens the race problem in someways, but in other ways he said it is more

profound. In some ways he says he is more conscious of others' problems.

There must be a new beginning for the little ones.

His mother, he admits, had the wrong idea.

"There was a coffee jar on the shelf at home and one day I asked my mother if I could have some coffee."

She said, "No, coffee will make you blacker."

"This is so wrong," he said.

But music has its charm, not only in the ear but through the skin.

And this is good.



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