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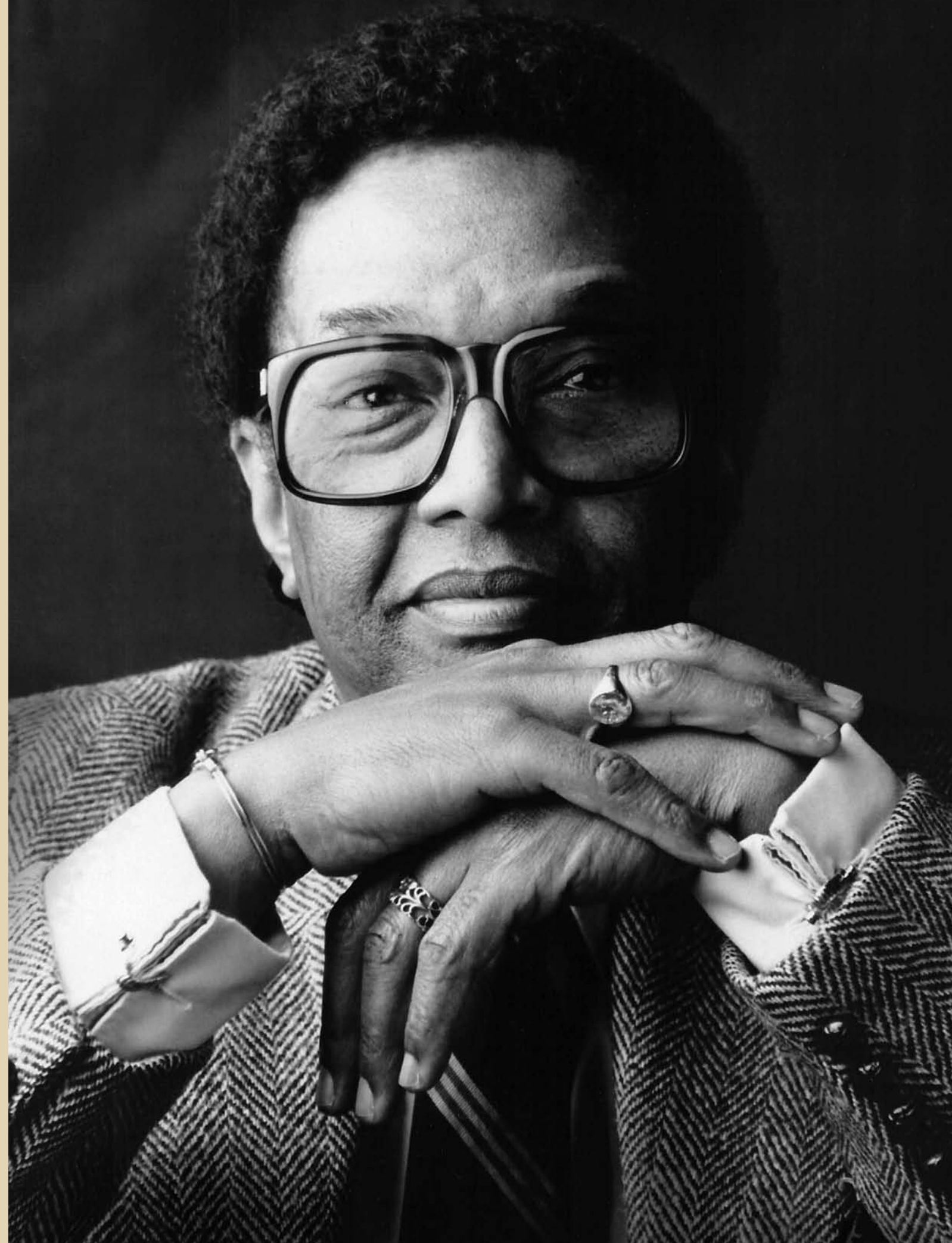
by John McDonough

of it

**PERFORMER. COMPOSER.
BROADCASTER.
EDUCATOR.**



Billy Taylor's uniquely long and broad career has spanned several movements in jazz history, not to mention major episodes of social change. And the pianist with a doctorate has seen it all, done it all—and enjoyed it all.



Jazz and classical music have always seemed a bit uneasy in each other's presence, not unlike the first awkward encounter of the prospective in-laws in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Different backgrounds, different attitudes, different outlooks. It was true when Benny Goodman took the stage at Carnegie Hall in 1938; and traces of the old anxieties still linger, even in the more collegial environment that prevails today, when Larry Combs, principal clarinetist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, can play a concert of the works of Artie Shaw with the Chicago Jazz Orchestra.

Jazz pianist, composer, and educator Billy Taylor, 84, who will receive the Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award this month from Chamber Music America, knows the feeling.

"One of the great experiences I ever had as a musician," he recalled recently, "was when I was commissioned [in 1990] to write a work for the Juilliard String Quartet. Let me tell you, these guys have so much *fun* when they play, it's ridiculous.

"But"—and this is the crux of his point—"people don't look at the *fun* of it. They feel that proper respect for its work requires a seriousness of attitude, as if enjoying the sheer fun of it would be disrespectful. I was fully conscious of all this then, of course. Yet when I was about to write a work for them, I decided to write something very serious and contemporary.

"Then I went to hear them play at Juilliard for their students. They had so much fun, I tore up the music and wrote a jazz piece for them."

If Taylor's initial impulse was to surrender to a sense of inferred snobbery and put aside his own instincts in order to measure up to the supposed rigor of playing in *their* ballpark, he realized when he heard the musicians that that was neither necessary nor desirable. He ended up preparing a three-part work called *Homage*, a remembrance of violinists Eddie South and Stuff Smith, bassists Slam Stewart and Oscar Pettiford, and drummers Jo Jones and Sid Catlett.

"Each of these jazz masters liked to organize his music in ways that used improvisation as a compositional tool," he explained in the notes for his subsequent GRP recording of the piece with the Turtle Island String Quartet. "The first move-

ment was inspired by memories of the way Eddie South and Slam Stewart used their European classical training to develop and express ideas which were a unique fusion of their experiences as African American musicians who had studied in the European classical tradition but chose to express themselves through jazz."

It was social, not necessarily musical, segregation that set jazz and classical music on their separate but parallel paths, Taylor says. Players like South and Stewart, who "were denied an opportunity to fully explore European classical music on the concert stage...turned to American classical music, jazz."

Taylor's own beginnings as a pianist in Washington, D.C., in the 1930s owe much to that fact of American life. "I studied with one of the few people whom Duke Ellington had studied with," Taylor



THE TRIO: TAYLOR WITH WINARD HARPER (DRUMS) AND CHIP JACKSON (BASS).

says. "Henry Grant was one of the really excellent teachers, who, because of prejudice, spent all of his career at the high school level. But he was extremely knowledgeable in European music and taught me to love it. And he related it to the fact that I wanted to play jazz. He would tell me how many of the musicians from Washington, D.C., who influenced Duke were trained in classical music."

A dozen years before Branch Rickey recruited Jackie Robinson into the Brooklyn Dodgers, Benny Goodman quietly brought Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton into his small chamber combos. In 1935–36, the country hardly seemed to notice—but Taylor was one of those who did. "It was a big deal to me," he says, "both socially and musically. Washington

was a very socially conscious town at that time. And when Teddy went with Goodman, that was not taken lightly. Two great [black] musicians playing with probably the best-known white band in the world. You can't imagine today. It was as big as when Marian Anderson sang at the Lincoln Memorial."

Taylor partially bridged that gap himself in the 1950s and beyond, when Herbert Barrett served as his manager. "I was the only jazz act he had," Taylor says. "He specialized in classical players and certainly expanded my range of bookings outside clubs. I played with symphonies and in concert halls around the world." Maurice Abravanel, conductor of the Utah Symphony, commissioned Taylor's first non-jazz piece, *Suite for Jazz Piano and Orchestra*. (For the list of Taylor's considerable number of compositions,

records, degrees and honors, see www.billytaylorjazz.com.)

So for all the enforced segregation, the two kingdoms had more in common than their contrasting origins might suggest. This notion was first pressed in the late 1930s when the first generation of white, college-educated jazz "critics" (John Hammond, Leonard Feather, George Frazier, Otis Ferguson) began to take up the music as a cause. Their purpose was to lift it from the status of a folk idiom to a higher place. Their strategy: to argue that, on its merits, jazz was entitled a place of conservatory recognition among the older, "legitimate" European forms. That specific merit was based primarily on the idea of virtuosity; that if classical music was defined in terms of the great technical skills required

to play it, then jazz had every right to the same recognition.

It was a sound argument as far as it went. Indeed, jazz experienced a major surge of high-powered technique by the late '30s, with the rise of such polished virtuosos as Art Tatum, Roy Eldridge, Benny Goodman (who recorded the Mozart clarinet quintet with the Budapest Quartet in 1938), and others. "But I would also suggest," Taylor adds, "that that entitlement to recognition alongside the classical virtuosos was not simply a matter of virtuosity, although in the '30 that was the most obvious and measurable aspect of the music to the casual observer. That entitlement was and still is rooted in something far deeper than a brilliant and finished technique. It's the character of the music itself."

That fell to those early jazz critics to further articulate. Among their more endur-



ing contributions was to fashion a hierarchy that distinguished commercial jazz from "real" jazz, the implication being that only real jazz had true merit. The corollary was that real jazz could be fully appreciated only by an anointed group—self-styled cognoscenti who held themselves apart from popular taste. So, having played the virtuosity card in pursuit of legitimacy, jazz now joined classical music in adopting a strategy of removal from mass culture through implied snob appeal. As in classical music, the jazz critic became a kind of interlocutor between the music's inner world and its public.

But by the late '40s, that public was shrinking. The hippest of the hip now looked down on all popular big bands. The very word "popular" was spoken in

quotes, as if being held at arms length on a set of tongs. And so jazz, which had infused so much of popular music before the war, drifted to the edge in the 1950s, as brilliant and edgy young artists such as Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Sonny Rollins, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane took over and built their reputations playing to smaller, more dedicated audiences.

This was the period in which Billy Taylor came to prominence. Having grown up in the 1930s and begun his professional career in the waning years of the Swing Era on 52nd Street, he emerged in the early 1950s as a leading bebop pianist with a broad musical perspective. His first model as a youth had been Fats Waller, who gave him his roots in classic stride piano. But by the 1940s he had set his sights on playing at the highest level and become a protégé of Art Tatum, the most advanced pianist of his generation. That training served Taylor well after the war, as

genius X was being ignored might suddenly dismiss him as "commercial" when he was signed by Columbia Records and covered by *Time* magazine. Even the *appearance* of popularity in the form of active marketing was distrusted and a curse.

If that had been the end of it, jazz might have spared itself harder times to come. But its public shrank acutely and even grew hostile. When some critics in the '60s praised the early free jazz experiments of Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and later Coltrane—jazz's avant garde complement to serialism—many fans came to the music only to feel deceived once they heard it. Older listeners clung to their aging favorites, while the young defected increasingly to rock as jazz grew increasingly insular. What *New York Times* critic Harold Schonberg has said of serialism was no less true of jazz: "Certain it is that [it] did nothing but alienate the public, creating a chasm between composer and audience."

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jazz turned from swing to bebop, and he directed his Tatumesque polish to mastering the new music's dense phrasing and enriched harmonics. He became a player for all contexts. In 1950 his trio became the core of a small group led by Artie Shaw ("one of the best musicians I ever met in my life"). He even played the role of pioneering pianist Jelly Roll Morton in a 1954 episode of the TV series *You Are There*, with host Walter Cronkite "reporting" the shutdown of New Orleans's notorious Storyville district in 1917 ("very well done and worth a look today," says Billy). During the same period, however, Taylor was house pianist at jazz's citadel of modernism, Birdland, and recorded extensively for contemporary labels like Prestige and Atlantic.

By that point however, however, both the perceptions and practice of jazz were subtly shifting. The notion that art is not supposed to be popular led to paradoxes. Jazz critics who complained that obscure

It was in this atmosphere that Taylor began to create a secondary role for himself in the jazz world that was almost unique among his fellow musicians—that of working jazz musician turned communicator and media advocate.

He had already laid the groundwork. "As far back as the mid '50s," Taylor says, "I had a radio show on WLIB in New York. I was on four hours on FM, and because it was a daylight station, I took what time I had left on AM. I think today more people in New York know me as a DJ for just that brief time. People still come up to me and tell me they used to come home after school and listen to the jazz I played. I'm proud of that because I made Columbia Records give me records that would be good for the black community. They didn't service black stations they way they did some of the others. Anyway, I played a John Handy record that was 26 minutes long and said this was the only place on radio where you were going to

hear this. And that had an impact on the album's sales.

"I learned to talk about music in ways that people can understand, without talking down to them. I still have many people tell me that they didn't understand something until they heard me explain it and have it make sense. I'm always pleased to hear that. That was what I was shooting for. I didn't want to play the oracle. I wanted to play what I liked in a way that communicated the delight I had in playing it."

Among the factors that drew Taylor to sink his roots into broadcasting was fatherhood. Wanting to be with his two children, Duane and Kim, he was able to confine much of his performance itinerary to venues in the New York area. From WLIB, where he became program director in the '60s, Taylor joined with jazz scholar and critic Marshall Stearns and served in 1958

1980." Kuralt might have taken the more expected course and chosen a veteran critic/commentator such as Leonard Feather, Nat Hentoff, or Dan Morgenstern. But if someone was to discuss music, he preferred that it be an active performer rather than a passive observer. Only pianist Marian McPartland, whose *Piano Jazz* dialogues had been launched on NPR in 1978 (and continue today), could be said to have been cast from a similar mold. Each was a full-time performer who brought a combination of easy-going charm and deep credibility to the job, much as Deems Taylor and Leonard Bernstein had done on the classical side in the '40s and '50s.

Over the next 21 years, Taylor became a familiar and welcoming voice, bringing news of jazz and jazz musicians to a general audience that otherwise would have

But the curious historical cycles that affect the music world have made Taylor the jazz educator very much a man of the moment today. It's been nearly fifteen years since the death of Miles Davis, and more than forty years since John Coltrane came to personify the last new approach to improvisation. Sonny Rollins, Oscar Peterson, and Dave Brubeck are the venerated eminences today, but clearly the era of the charismatic jazzman as cultural icon is over. Today's musicians live with one foot on the bandstand and the other in the conservatory masterclass.

If you compare Miles Davis with contemporary players Wynton Marsalis or John Faddis, Taylor says, "Wynton and John are teachers as well as bandleaders. Miles was not. He knew how to get what he needed from the players he hired, but that's a different skill."



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as musical director for one of the earliest jazz television series, *The Subject Is Jazz*. He also published essays and articles in *Down Beat*, *The Saturday Review*, and *Esquire* and conducted the house band for *The David Frost Show* into the early '70s. In June 1978, when NPR aired a 25th-anniversary celebration of the Newport Jazz Festival from the White House (in which President Carter joined Dizzy Gillespie and Max Roach on stage for a spontaneous jam on "Salt-Peanuts"), it was Taylor who hosted the show. By the time CBS-TV's *Sunday Morning* came calling, Taylor was a seasoned broadcaster.

"It was Charles Kuralt's idea to bring me to *CBS Sunday Morning*," Taylor says. "The show had been on the air for about a year before they interviewed me for it in

paid little attention to the music. He gave background and asked questions, but strictly avoided taking on the role of critic, always a touchy task for a working performer.

"Many people have been influential on me," Taylor reflects, "and Charles Kuralt was one. Every time I was on camera with Charles, without fail he added something to the piece I was doing. He always came up with something that I hadn't said, always some unexpected insight."

Today, Taylor's fame and reputation as journalist and educator may well overshadow his long and brilliant performing career. "If the only place you see a guy is on television, then that's what he does," Taylor observes. "The irony is that my credibility as a journalist and educator rests to a large degree on my career as a musician."

Taylor regards Marsalis and Faddis as great teachers and has great admiration for them, Faddis especially. "He took so much from Dizzy and used it all," he says. "He and Clark Terry are poles apart when you hear them, but they can do so much with kids. If we could get other music teachers to follow their example instead of acting like lemmings like so many do, it would be great."

So the real magic today is in the hands of those who can pass on the wealth of jazz history on to the young. It's a mission Billy Taylor has pioneered for decades as both performer and advocate.

John McDonough is contributing editor at Down Beat and a frequent contributor on music to The Wall Street Journal.