

## Race, Revolution, and Religion

The subject of today's service was originally to be about heroes and heroism. It still is. But the hero I'm going to discuss doesn't fit the usual definition of one who displays great valor in combat while facing imminent death. Rather he is someone who demonstrated courage, generosity, and integrity throughout a lifetime, involving the three areas in the title of the service. In Joseph Campbell's terms, he made many journeys, all of which involved daring to risk fiasco in search of bliss.

He was born in Cheraw, South Carolina in October, 1917, and was named John Birks Gillespie. Most people know him by his nickname: "Dizzy." Race enters in because of his being an African-American born in Jim Crow country, where he lived as a child. When he first became aware of race is uncertain, but it must have been a factor in his life from the time he was seven or eight. According to his autobiography, he (quote) "first realized a social difference (in the races) because of a little white boy...we were inseparable...My mama called me in the house one day and said 'Look, you gotta stop playing with that little white boy.' I said 'Huh?' " It was his first inkling of the racial divide that separated black and white America.

He got his musical education from Alice Wilson, his music teacher at Cheraw's segregated grammar school, starting at age twelve; he later attended the Laurinburg Institute, a boarding school for African American children founded in 1904 by Emmanuel and Tinny McDuffie, disciples of Booker T. Washington. The McDuffies encouraged young John's interest in music, so much so that he set off on his career as a musician before graduating.

His early exposure to religion came via the United Methodist and Sanctified church services he attended near his home. When he was around 50, he discovered the religion he'd follow for the rest of his life: he became a Baha'i.

The revolutionary aspect came in the 1940's, when he and a small coterie of fellow musical rebels created bebop, a radical break from the jazz of the 20's and 30's, respectively referred to as Dixieland and swing. A fierce reaction to bebop came swiftly and vehemently. There was a fierce guerilla war conducted, pitting the established jazzmen against the younger ones. Those of the old school, called "moldy figs" by the modernists, rejected the new jazz as slop, with no melody, no rhythmic quality, and no meaning. To some, it sounded (in the words of Eddie Condon) "like an explosion in a hardware store."

According to Dizzy "...the bebop era...was a major concrete effort of progressive thinking black and white [people] to tear down and abolish the ignorance and racial barriers that were stifling the growth of any true culture in modern America."

For a generation of Americans and young people around the world, who reached maturity during the 1940's, bebop symbolized a rebellion against the rigidities of the old order, an outcry for change in almost every field, especially in music. The bopper wanted to impress the world with a new stamp, the uniquely modern design of a new generation coming of age." *To Be or Not to Bop*, p282, p 302

To be a modernist in the 40's required strong belief in what you were doing and the courage to stay on course despite the hurtful comments of your elders. But the momentum for the new jazz was unstoppable, especially when championed by Gillespie, whose goatee, horn-rimmed glasses and beret became icons of his music.

There were also the vagaries of a lifestyle that meant late hours in venues peopled by those of less than the purest of motives. For every devotee of the music, there was someone looking to profit by preying on the human weaknesses of its practitioners, especially when it came to drugs. As alcohol was to the earlier generation of jazz musicians, heroin became to the boppers. One of the older guys once lamented that fans were always willing to buy you a drink, but never a sandwich. Hard drugs were the scourge of bebop, taking the life of several of the major stars, most notably Charlie Parker, dead at 34. Luckily, heroin held no allure for Dizzy, although the same could not be said for alcohol and other forms of self-induced bliss.

His nickname came much earlier, when he was still a fledgling jazzman, playing in swing bands that were still in vogue in the late 30's. His irrepressible antics onstage, including mimicking the band leader and tossing spitballs at other musicians during performances earned him the moniker "Dizzy." It was his reputation for pranks that got him fired from Cab Calloway's band, even though on that occasion he was not the perpetrator. The spitball that hit the bandleader had been thrown by Jonah Jones, another member of the trumpet section, not Dizzy. He was the prime suspect, and was immediately accused by Calloway. In the ensuing scuffle, Calloway suffered a gash in his posterior, which legend has it was caused by the knife that Gillespie carried for self-defense; others say it was the result of Calloway backing into a sharp object. Whatever caused it, when Cab

saw the blood on his new white trousers, Gillespie's tenure with the band came to an end.

While with Calloway, however, Dizzy spent hours experimenting with chords, working out the harmonic structure that would become bebop. The epiphany probably came when he met Charlie Parker on the Earl Hines band. Parker had also been seeking a new direction, and was already playing things that Gillespie had been doing as well (earning him Cab Calloway's admonition to "stop playing that Chinese music" when he used some of the new motifs in his solos). The two of them bounced musical ideas off each other and became co-founders of modern jazz.

Today much of what was once so radical can now be heard over the Muzak speakers of Macy's, Lord & Taylor, and other locations in shopping malls all over America. It's difficult to imagine it could have caused such an uproar back in the 40's and 50's.

As a boy, I had the usual heroes, mostly professional baseball players (and almost exclusively Boston Red Sox): Ted Williams, of course, and Bobby Doerr led the list. As I grew a little older, I decided I wanted to be a musician, specifically a jazz musician. There was a shift in the focus of those I admired, with names like Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, Benny Goodman and Bunny Berigan at or near the top. At the age of fourteen, I would have been counted among the moldiest of figs. Then I heard a song called *52<sup>nd</sup> Street Theme*, written by someone with the weird name of Thelonious Monk, and performed by an amazing trumpeter named Gillespie, who played a million notes a minute way up in the stratosphere. Just my luck: I'd decided I'd be a trumpeter, and was almost immediately smitten by this miraculous musician and decided I wanted to play like him. I often wish I'd taken Miles Davis as a role model, but that's another story.

Sadly, my dream of being a great bebopper came to naught, though I still occasionally pick up the horn to blow out the cobwebs. But that didn't alter my estimation of my musical hero. Unlike others we hold in high esteem while we're young, his admirable qualities did not diminish with age or proximity. The more I learned about him, the more I admired him. I became a virtual Dizzy groupie, showing up for his performances any time he was in the area whenever possible. It was on one such occasion that the full realization of the futility of my quest became starkly obvious. I'd finished my 4-year hitch in the Air Force, and made up my mind to get serious about the trumpet. I signed up for weekly lessons with a

teacher in my home town of Natick, spent the princely sum of \$5 on a brand-new copy of Arbans, the trumpet player's bible, and was diligent about practicing. At the time I was working on lip slurs, where you start on a note, then, without using valves, attempt to go immediately to the same note an octave higher, without touching any of the natural harmonics in between. I had achieved some modest success in this, and was quite proud of my accomplishment. Then I went to a jazz club in Boston to see Dizzy. I got there early enough to encounter him in the lobby, where he was warming up. Imagine my shock and dismay when I heard him performing flawless lip slurs that went up not just an octave, but several notes beyond: it was a moment when I felt like melting down my trumpet and making a doorstop out of it.

Besides his unequalled status as a great musician, Dizzy was a fine, if not flawless, human being. As sportswriter Jimmy Cannon once said of Joe Louis, "He's a credit to his race. The human race." While not militant, he did not shy away from the issue of race, often making his points with humor, a hallmark of his career (indeed some critics have faulted him for excessive clowning, likening it to what they consider Louis Armstrong's obsequiousness to white audiences – I refuse to use the term "Uncle Tom"). It took the Little Rock school crisis involving Governor Orval Faubus's defiance of President Eisenhower in 1957 to prod Armstrong to speak out, and when he did, most of the country was shocked. He said he had given up plans for a Government-sponsored trip to the Soviet Union because "the way they are treating my people in the South, the Government can go to hell." Mr. Armstrong also said President Eisenhower had "no guts" and that the President was "two-faced" and had allowed Governor Faubus to run the Federal Government. That Armstrong could express such strong views was in sharp contrast to his usual easy-going demeanor.

Dizzy's approach was a little more oblique, but never left doubt about his views. Nor was he above a bit of self-mockery. In 1963, when black pride was reaching full boil, I was at a performance of his quintet at Lenny's On The Turnpike, and heard him announce that the featured soloist on the next song would be his bass player, Chris White. In the introduction to the song, Dizzy said that the solo would be by "Whitey." With feigned outrage, Mr. White let it be known that he had too much racial pride to allow himself to be known as Whitey. Dizzy, bowing to his distress, changed the announcement: "The soloist on the next tune will be our bassist, Coloredy."

Like Armstrong, Gillespie was a goodwill ambassador for the U.S. government, touring many foreign countries where he and American jazz were held in high esteem (sadly, higher than here in the States). At least the tax dollars were being put to good use, since the government sponsorship allowed him to put together a stellar big band in the mid-50's, when most large ensembles had become economically unfeasible. One such tour became a punchline: after suffering the corrosive effects of Jim Crow while traveling in the States with a racially-mixed quintet, he announced "We've just finished a tour of South America: Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi..." Events that took place during that tour also provided lyrics for the opening bars of his Afro-Cuban composition *Manteca*: "We'll never go back to Georgia, we'll never go back to Georgia."

One of the traits I found most admirable was Dizzy's generosity, his willingness to share what he knew with other musicians, something not always found in a profession where knowledge is power. One infamous example of secretiveness was an early jazz trumpeter named Freddie Keppard, who put a handkerchief over his valves so other trumpeters couldn't see what fingers he used to produce his notes. There was also Dizzy's brief tenure on the Duke Ellington band, where veteran members of Duke's trumpet section were loath to clue in the rookies on how the arrangements were to be played ("Repeat section D, then jump back to A for 8 measures...."). Where others feared competition, and avoided situations where they might be outshone by others, Dizzy took pride in featuring young, brilliant musicians, especially trumpeters. When the State Department sponsored the international tour in 1956, he made it a point to include then 18-year old Lee Morgan in the trumpet section, and gave him plenty of opportunity to shine. Dizzy also included a young woman named Melba Liston on that band as one of the trombonists, and afforded her the chance to stand out and to contribute compositions and arrangements to the repertoire. The most famous example was his assistance in liberating the phenomenal trumpeter Arturo Sandoval from Castro's Cuba, bringing him to the United States, where he's made an outstanding career in both the jazz and classical worlds. I had the opportunity to be at one of Dizzy's Boston appearances, when Arturo was playing in an adjacent part of the hotel. He made a guest appearance with Dizzy, who introduced him by saying "And now I'd like you to hear a *real* trumpet player." This goes beyond mere generosity.

I alluded earlier to his conversion to the Bahá'í faith, which took place around 1970. It helped him understand where he fit into the succession of jazz

trumpeters, and helped turn him from rambunctious roughneck to global citizen, and from alcohol to what jazz writer Nat Hentoff (who knew Gillespie for forty years) called *soul force*. He is often called the *Bahá'í Jazz Ambassador*. He is honored with weekly jazz sessions at the New York Bahá'í Center. The teachings of the Baha'is, which follow the precepts of racial unity and peace taught by nineteenth-century Persian prophets, inspired him to pursue a more spiritually guided approach to his music and his life. (From jazz.com)

Bahá'í teachings emphasize the spiritual oneness of humanity and the underlying unity of the major world religions. Religious history is seen to have unfolded through the influence of a series of divinely-sent messengers, each of whom established a religion suited to the time. These messengers have included Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Krishna, Jesus, Muhammad and, most recently, Bahá'u'lláh. In Bahá'í belief, each messenger taught that other messengers would follow, and Bahá'u'lláh's claims and teachings fulfill the promises of previous scriptures. Humanity is understood to be involved in a process of collective evolution, and the need of the present time is for the gradual establishment of peace, justice and unity on a global scale. To the Bahá'í all religions are essentially the same. You can imagine how popular that makes them among the organized religions of the world, especially those who claim exclusive rights to the Truth.

In closing, I'd like to show you a short clip I taped many years ago. It features Dizzy on the Muppets Show. In it, he parodies a traditional spiritual, which I'm sure you'll recognize. Underneath the humor, there is a thread of social commentary. He uses the song to poke fun at one of the stereotypes often held about the black community, as well as recognizing the nugget of truth within. Then he caps it off by referring to one of the bitter truths on life as experienced by so many of those on the lower end of the socio-economic scale.

I thank you for your attention, and now turn it over to Kermit to introduce our closing segment.