



# Jimmy Heath, Legendary Saxophonist, Composer and Jazz Educator, Dies at 93

By DAVID R. ADLER • JAN 19, 2020

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Jimmy Heath performs during the Apollo Walk of Fame Induction Ceremony for Charlie "Yardbird" Parker at The Apollo Theater on March 30, 2016 in New York City.

JOHN LAMPARSKI / WIREIMAGE/GETTY

Jimmy Heath, a saxophonist, composer, arranger, educator and 2003 NEA Jazz Master who came of age in the bebop era, and did much to sway the course of jazz history in the ensuing decades, died on Sunday. He was 93.

His death was confirmed by his wife, Mona.

Miles Davis described Heath as "one of the thoroughbreds." He was not only a doggedly individual talent, but also the middle brother in one of jazz's most storied families, the Heath Brothers. Percy Heath, the famed bassist, died in 2005. Drummer Albert "Tootie" Heath is in the midst of a late-career bloom. The love, irreverent humor and profound musicianship embodied in the Heath Brothers legacy makes Jimmy's death all the more deeply felt.



Heath's especially close friendship with John Coltrane and life-changing early tenures with Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis inspired the title of his 2010 memoir *I Walked with Giants: The Autobiography of Jimmy Heath* (Temple University Press), co-authored with Joseph McLaren.

The book is a portrait of someone prized for his seasoned tenor voice, lyrical and varied compositions and deft, swing-drenched writing for multi-horn ensembles — sextets up through big bands and even orchestral settings. But to "walk with giants" implies being in their shadow, and Heath was indeed underappreciated — a phenomenon he laments in his book as "little guy passed by" (he stood five-foot-three).

James Edward Heath was born on Oct. 25, 1926 in Philadelphia. (The family had moved up from North Carolina in 1923.) His father, Percy Heath, Sr., played clarinet in a respected marching band. His mother, Arlethia, sang in the choir of her Baptist church.



Jimmy Heath at WBGO's 2011 gala, with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar over his shoulder.

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Like all the early beboppers, Heath was reared on the sound of the Swing Era. (At six he saw Duke Ellington perform.) He left Philadelphia to attend high school back in North Carolina, in his father's segregated hometown of Wilmington. By the time he received his first saxophone, an alto, from his father as a Christmas gift in 1941, he had gravitated toward the sounds of Johnny Hodges and Benny Carter. Two years later he landed a gig with bandleader Arthur Woodson. He then joined Calvin Todd's more rigorous 10-piece band, moving from third alto to first as his abilities grew.

From 1945 to '46 Heath played in the Nat Towles Orchestra, a territory band out of Omaha, and toured the Midwest and South extensively. "He was playing bebop way before a whole bunch of guys were doing it," recalls Felix Leach in Heath's memoir.

Heath formed the Jimmy Heath Orchestra in '46, featuring John Coltrane on second alto. He got to know Charlie Parker, who would at times use Heath's horn on gigs, and who even sat in with Heath's band (occasioning the famous anecdote of Coltrane being so awestruck that he burned his hand with a dwindling cigarette).

In 1947 Heath began working with bebop trumpet great Howard McGhee, taking his first trip to Europe (his first time on a plane) and gaining entrée to the musical revolution underway on 52nd Street.

Six members of the Jimmy Heath Orchestra, including Heath, Coltrane and Benny Golson, would make the transition to Dizzy Gillespie's historic big band. Heath himself joined in September 1949. Paul Gonsalves, who joined Gillespie as well, played a big role in Heath's decision to switch to tenor. (Heath also played baritone, flute and remarkably acute soprano.)

Heath studied orchestration informally with Gillespie colleague Gil Fuller, who featured Heath on his uptempo showpiece "The Scene Changes" (a riposte to Gillespie's "Things to Come"). Fuller's band also performed Heath's forward-looking arrangement of the standard "Mean to Me," its rousing trumpet shout chorus spilling with bop phraseology and spirit. This was Heath's only documented big-band arrangement until 1995, when he released *Little Man Big Band*. (Another big band outing, *Turn Up the Heath*, came in 2006.)

Miles Davis hired Heath on tenor and recorded his enduring piece "C.T.A." (for Connie Theresa Ang, Heath's girlfriend) on the landmark 1953 Blue Note session *Miles Davis Volume 1*. (Davis later recorded Heath's "Gingerbread Boy" on the album *Miles Smiles*.) Heath also wrote "The Serpent's Tooth," which Davis recorded with Sonny Rollins on the 1953 *Collector's Items* session (featuring "Charlie Chan," the pseudonymous Charlie Parker). In this period Heath also began pivotal associations with trombonist J.J. Johnson and trumpeter Kenny Dorham.

For seven years Heath succumbed to heroin addiction. ("The drug was the pimp and I was a simp," he remarks in his memoir.) Following a 1954 drug arrest he was sentenced to probation, forcing him to decline out-of-town work, including a major gig with Max Roach and Clifford Brown. A second arrest followed, landing Heath in prison for nearly four and a half years. He was released in May of 1959.

With renewed purpose, he signed with Orrin Keepnews' Riverside label and made a string a timeless recordings, beginning with *The Thumper* and ending with *On the Trail*. Heath's forceful, intricate multipart writing on these records led Keepnews to hire him as a house arranger for Riverside.

With both horn and pen, he brought a lucid and compelling sound to sessions led by Milt Jackson, Julian Priester, Cannonball Adderley, Blue Mitchell, Sam Jones and more. His tunes, including "For Minors Only," "Gemini," "Bruh Slim," "24-Hour Leave," "Waverley Street," "Mona's Mood" and "Picture of Heath," remain models of melodic focus and vitality. Years later Heath studied the Schillinger system with Rudolf Schramm, paving the way for symphonic, choral and mixed-ensemble commissions such as *The Afro-American Suite of Evolution*, *Three Ears*, *Sweet Jazzmobile* and *Leadership*.



In 1987 Heath accepted a teaching position at Queens College, in a brand-new M.A. jazz program that he did much to shape and solidify. He remained in the position until 1998. "The reputation of the program worldwide is really attributable to Jimmy's work," declares the late Howard Brofsky, a founder of the program, in Heath's memoir.

A Queens resident since 1964, Heath also served on the board of the Queens College-administered Louis Armstrong House Museum, giving back to the community and student body in myriad ways. His mentorship of countless players, including alto saxophonist and future faculty member Antonio Hart, set an example for others striving to rekindle the spark of jazz's apprenticeship system of old.

Heath is survived by Mona Brown, his wife of 60 years; by their daughter, Roslyn, and son, Jeffrey; by James Mtume, the noted multi-instrumentalist and songwriter, his son from a previous relationship; by his brother Albert "Tootie" Heath; and by his nieces, nephews, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

"The Endless Search," a three-part suite that Heath wrote and recorded in 2007 with the Seattle Repertory Jazz Orchestra, captures something essential about his life's work, down to the title. The formal and thematic ingenuity, the scintillating sectional counterpoint, the uncompromising swing and deep tone of Heath's tenor solo in Part I: it's the sound of a lifetime spent in jazz's deepest waters, perhaps without top glamorous billing but as serious as it gets.

Or consider "Goodbye," the Gordon Jenkins ballad that Heath arranged for his 1962 date *Triple Threat*, featuring his brothers Percy and Albert with Freddie Hubbard on trumpet, Julius Watkins on French horn and Cedar Walton on piano.



"Goodbye" was Benny Goodman's signoff theme on the mid-'30s radio show Let's Dance. Heath likely knew it as a child. In his hands it takes on the earthiness and weight of someone who's absorbed Ellington, Thelonious Monk and so much else. With his patient and elegant tenor, delivering the melody but flying into finely articulated bop passages as he goes, Heath strives toward a goal above all others: what he calls in his book "writing melodies to the beat of life."

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