

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Jimmy Heath

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Heath, Jimmy
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jimmy Heath,
Dates:	January 17, 2017
Bulk Dates:	2017
Physical Description:	5 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:28:45).
Abstract:	Musician and jazz composer Jimmy Heath (1926-2020) was known for his jazz and bebop contributions, notably his pieces “C.T.A.” and “Gingerbread Boy,” and as a member of the Heath Brothers. He was the first jazz musician to receive an honorary doctorate in music from the Juilliard School in New York. Heath was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 17, 2017, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2017_002
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Musician and jazz composer Jimmy Heath was born on October 25, 1926 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Arlethia and Percy Heath Sr. He attended Walter George Smith School in South Philadelphia and graduated from Williston Industrial School in Wilmington North Carolina in 1943.

As a teenager, Heath took music lessons and played the alto saxophone in the high school marching band. He also played in a jazz band called the Melody Barons and toured with the Calvin Todd Band in 1945, before joining a dance band in Omaha, Nebraska led by Nat Towles. Heath later formed his own big band, including John Coltrane, Specs Wright and Nelson Boyd. He also recorded with trumpeter Howard McGhee, who called him “Little Bird” because of his affinity to Charlie Parker. In 1948, McGhee took Heath and his older brother Percy to Paris, France for the First International Jazz Festival headlined by Coleman Hawkins and including Erroll Garner.

In 1949, he recorded his first big band arrangement on Gil Fuller Orchestra’s Bebop Boys. Dizzy Gillespie then hired Heath to play in his band with Coltrane and Specs Wright. In 1952, Heath switched to Tenor sax and played with the Symphony Sid All Stars, featuring Miles Davis, J.J. Johnson, Milt Jackson, Kenny Clarke and his brother Percy. In 1953, Heath recorded his composition *C.T.A* with Miles Davis and another with J.J. Johnson which included Clifford Brown.

In 1959, Heath rejoined Miles Davis and made his debut album for Riverside Records called *The Thumper* followed by *Really Big* in 1960, *The Quota* in 1962, and *Triple Threat* in 1963. Heath recorded eight more albums as a leader. In 1975, he formed the Heath Brothers, with his two brothers, Percy and Albert “Tootie” Heath and Stanley Cowell, and recorded albums *Live At The Public Theater* on CBS for which they received a Grammy nomination, *As We Were Saying* and *Endurance* released in 2010.

In 1987, Heath became a professor of music at the Aaron Copland School Of Music at Queens College. There, he

premiered his first symphonic work, *Three Ears* with Maurice Peress. In 2010, Heath's autobiography was published by Temple University Press, *I Walked With Giants*, and it was voted "Best Book of The Year" by the Jazz Journalist Association. Heath recorded three big band records, *Little Man Big Band* produced by Bill Cosby, *Turn Up The Heath* and *Togetherness* live at the Blue Note. Vocalist Roberta Gambarini recorded twelve Heath songs for the album, *Connecting Spirits*.

Heath received a Life Achievement Award from the Jazz Foundation of America and the 2003 American Jazz Master Award from the National Endowment for the Arts. He was nominated for three Grammy Awards and has received three honorary doctorate degrees. He was also the first jazz musician to receive an honorary doctorate in music from the Juilliard School in New York.

Heath has one son, James Mtume, from a previous relationship and two children with his wife, Mona Heath; their daughter, Roslyn Heath and their son, Jeffrey Heath.

Heath passed away on January 19, 2020.

Jimmy Heath was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 9, 2016 and January 17, 2017.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Jimmy Heath was conducted by Larry Crowe on January 17, 2017, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 5 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Musician and jazz composer Jimmy Heath (1926-2020) was known for his jazz and bebop contributions, notably his pieces "C.T.A." and "Gingerbread Boy," and as a member of the Heath Brothers. He was the first jazz musician to receive an honorary doctorate in music from the Juilliard School in New York.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Heath, Jimmy

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Heath, Jimmy--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Jazz Musician

Composer

HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jimmy Heath, January 17, 2017. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Jimmy Heath, Section A2017_002_001_001, TRT: 1:31:50 ?

Jimmy Heath was born on October 25, 1926 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Arlethia Wall Heath and Percy Heath, Sr. Heath's father was born in Wilmington, North Carolina. His mother, Mattie Anderson, married several times, and he took the name of his stepfather, Stuart Heath, who drove a dray. Heath's paternal grandmother later married grocery store owner Oliver Fisher. Heath's mother was born in Sumter, South Carolina, and raised by her mother, Ella Wall, and stepfather, Sandy Wall. Her family relocated to Wilmington, where Heath's parents met and married at a young age. They settled in Philadelphia, and Heath's father worked as an auto mechanic while his mother opened a beauty parlor. Heath's mother, maternal grandmother and uncle were members of a Baptist congregation there. On the weekends, his father played the clarinet in a marching band and an Elks band, and encouraged Heath and his siblings, Elizabeth Heath Reid, Percy Heath, Jr., and Albert "Tootie" Heath, to learn an instrument as well.

Video Oral History Interview with Jimmy Heath, Section A2017_002_001_002, TRT: 2:27:45 ?

Jimmy Heath grew up in a musical household. His father played the clarinet, while his younger brother, drummer Albert "Tootie" Heath, went on to work with artists like Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis. Heath's older brother, Percy Heath, Jr., played the violin, and then studied the bass at the Granoff School of Music in Philadelphia, after serving as a Tuskegee Airmen during World War II. Inspired by jazz musicians Johnny Hodges, Benny Carter and the Glenn Miller Orchestra, Heath decided to study the saxophone, which was gifted to him by his father at fourteen years old. During the school year, he lived with his paternal grandparents in Wilmington, North Carolina, where he attended Williston School, and spent the summers with his parents in Philadelphia. After graduating from the eleventh grade in 1943, Heath began playing in bands around Philadelphia, and touring with Calvin Todd and Mel Melvin. In 1945, Heath joined Nat Towles' band in Omaha, Nebraska, but returned to Philadelphia within a year.

Video Oral History Interview with Jimmy Heath, Section A2017_002_001_003, TRT: 3:31:53 ?

Jimmy Heath began his musical career as bebop was emerging as a style. He first heard Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie on records while touring with Nat Towles, and returned to Philadelphia, Philadelphia to join the music community there. Heath met Bertha Preston Forman in 1946, and they became engaged. Shortly after the birth of their son, James Mtume, in 1947, Forman left Heath for pianist James "Hen Gates" Forman. That same year, Heath formed his own band, which included John Coltrane and Benny Golson as regular members and Charlie Parker as a guest soloist. During this time, Parker began playing regularly with Miles Davis and Max Roach at Philadelphia's Downbeat club.

Heath and his brother, Percy Heath, Jr., moved to New York City to perform with Howard McGhee. In 1949, Heath and Coltrane joined Dizzy Gillespie's band, and Heath became known as Little Bird, in reference to his mentor, Charlie Parker, who was called Bird. Under Gillespie's guidance, Heath began learning the piano to compose and arrange.

Video Oral History Interview with Jimmy Heath, Section A2017_002_001_004, TRT: 4:27:10 ?

Jimmy Heath started playing in Dizzy Gillespie's band in 1949, and worked with John Coltrane, drummer Specs Wright and bass player Nelson Boyd. Heath began using heroin at drummer Teddy Stewart's suggestion, after his fiancée, Bertha Preston Forman, left with their son, James Mtume. In 1955, Heath was arrested after selling heroin to a police informant in Dayton, Ohio. He was incarcerated in the United States Penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania and the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital in Lexington, Kentucky for four and a half years, during which time he recovered from his addiction. At this point in the interview, Heath reflects upon heroin's impact on the jazz musicians of his generation. He describes the spirituality of jazz, and talks about the lack of government and institutional support for jazz in the United States in comparison to Western Europe and Japan. He also talks about the discrepancies in funding between jazz and classical music.

Video Oral History Interview with Jimmy Heath, Section A2017_002_001_005, TRT: 5:30:07 ?

Jimmy Heath was incarcerated in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, when he first met record executive Bruce Lundvall. They went on to produce a series of albums with Columbia Records in the 1970s. Heath was paroled in 1959; and in the following year, he married artist and jazz enthusiast Mona Brown, to whom he was introduced by his brother, Percy Heath, Jr. Heath was approached by record producer Orrin Keepnews to sign with Riverside Records in 1959. His first solo album, 'Thumper,' featured Nat Adderly, Curtis Fuller, Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers and his brother, drummer Albert "Tootie" Heath. He also worked with Cannonball Adderly, Clark Terry and Laurdine "Pat" Patrick for his next album 'Really Big!' Heath's career during these years was limited by the constraints of parole, as his probation officer prevented him from traveling to California to fill John Coltrane's role in Miles Davis' group. This frustration inspired Heath to compose the song "24-Hour Leave," which was recorded by trombonist Julian Priester.