

Ray Brown

The first bass Ray Brown played, he stole from his high school music department. Well, he had really just borrowed it for his first club appearance at the age of 17. Since that first engagement, Ray Brown has become known as "the world's greatest bass player" by every knowledgeable musician and critic in the business. In the forty-old years that Ray Brown has been making music with his oversized violin, he has played for every major night club and recording star in the world, including Frank Sinatra, Billy Eckstine, Tony Bennett, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Peggy Lee, ad infinitum.

Born in Pittsburgh in 1926, his first formal training was on piano when he was about eight years old. By the time Ray Brown arrived in high school, he was an accomplished pianist, but hated to practice. His introduction to the bass came about when he noticed there were three basses in the high school orchestra and only two guys to play them. He picked up the third bass because he thought it would be easier to play than piano. That was his first mistake... His second mistake was getting his picture in the paper announcing his first night club engagement. He learned to play the bass by ear and started fooling around with other musicians playing around town. He was so devoted to his new instrument, that he took it home with him after school and even practiced! His music teacher thought Ray was the most studious player in the band.

When the young, dedicated musicians appeared at a local club, the paper published the infamous photo of the trio. That's when Ray's music teacher discovered that his protégé was not only studious, but was making a living using the school bass! - Ray Brown's father was forced to buy him a bass of his own. Armed with his new bass and his high school diploma, Ray Brown joined the Jimmy Hinsley sextet and travelled with the group on the road for six months. He then joined the Snookum Russel band the following year and played in bigger jazz clubs across the country.

Ray Brown's expertise with the bass, even during his early musical career, garnered him the attention of jazz critics and his fellow musicians. He departed Russel's band at age 20 to make his way as a freelance soloist and to try to break into the ranks of "the big time" in New York.

After travelling almost 24 hours by bus from Miami to New York, Ray Brown dropped his belongings off at an Aunt's, grabbed a quick bite and boarded the subway with his cousin for 52nd Street and Time Square. Greeting his eager eyes and ears were the biggest and the best talents in the world - all appearing at various clubs on 52nd Street - Art Tatum, Billie Holiday, Bill Daniels, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker - he had not been in New York more than four hours when he was introduced to Dizzy Gillespie during an intermission.

Ray's reputation as an accomplished musician has already preceded him to New York and Dizzy asked the young bass player to drop by for the following day's rehearsal. Though awed by the attention paid him, Ray Brown, with bass in arm, played his fingers off for Dizzy that afternoon. He remained with Dizzy's band for the next two years. Ray Brown had indeed been introduced to "the big time" Charlie Parker on sax, Bud Powell on piano, Max Roach on drums, Dizzy on trumpet and Ray with his new bass. His experience with Dizzy Gillespie led Ray Brown around the world, playing, learning, and composing his own music. He departed Dizzy's band in 1948 to form his own trio with Hank Jones and Charlie Smith. Among the great talents Ray Brown encountered during his years with Dizzy and his own trio was Ella Fitzgerald, whom he later married. He travelled with his own trio, Ella, and occasionally played with the band on tour.

During those early "big band" years, Ray Brown has stopped by Carnegie Hall to hear "Jazz At The Philharmonic". He was standing in the wings, quietly watching the orchestra set up. When it was discovered that the bassist had not yet shown up for the first set, several musician friends of Ray noticed him standing in the wings. He was cornered by Norman Granz to sit in for the missing bassist. His impromptu appearance on stage began an 18-year association with Norman Granz's "Jazz At The Philharmonic".

He toured with JATP for 18 years in a row, playing Europe, the Far East and the United States, appearing in every major club and concert hall in the world. He met many musicians during those days, but one in particular had a lasting effect on Ray Brown, piano virtuoso Oscar Peterson. Their musical and personal rapport has spanned a 15 year association. He was a member of Oscar's trio until it broke up in 1966.

In describing his experiences with the Oscar Peterson Trio and on the road with "Jazz At The Philharmonic", Ray says: "...the Europeans are a little more serious about jazz. They consider our music an important cultural contribution to society and treat it with dignity and respect. Travelling with Jazz At The Philharmonic and on tour with Oscar Peterson were some of the most rewarding experiences of my career. I was playing with some of the greatest musicians in the business and saw every major capitol of the world and I did it for almost 20 years!"

By the early 50's, though his marriage to Ella Fitzgerald had ended, Ray Brown was becoming increasingly more popular and beginning to enjoy the success of his reputation.

Also in the early 50's, 1952 to be exact, Ray Brown came across a young, ambitious trumpet player named Quincy "Delight" Jones who was appearing with Lionel Hampton. Though they didn't play together until almost ten years later - Ray was already in the big leagues by the time Quincy Jones was making his own steady climb to success - their friendship and partnership has been a strong union spanning almost twenty years.

And Ray Brown has remained in the big leagues - adding his melodic sounds to television, motion picture scores and recordings.

In the late 60's, Ray left Oscar Peterson to settle in Los Angeles. "...you had to be either in New York or Los Angeles to compose and play for motion pictures and television. So I decided, why not L.A. Where else can you play golf all year and still make a living making music?"

While making his music as a solo, Ray composed his familiar "Gravy Waltz". Herb Ellis, a former member of the old Steve Allen Show band, was instrumental in introducing the melody to Steve Allen. When he heard the composition, Steve called Ray to ask if he could compose lyrics to Ray's melody. The tune became Steve Allen's theme song and garnered a best selling record and a Grammy for Ray. The Grammy Award was one of the first of a long list that followed.

Ray Brown's music has also made hits out of the shows on which he has appeared: The Joey Bishop Show, Red Skelton Show, Smothers Brothers, and The Merv Griffin Show where he can still be seen and heard, standing next to his beloved bass in the band.

In describing his love affair with his bass, Ray Brown makes no secret that he idolized Jimmy Blanton and his work with Duke Ellington. He has patterned himself after Blanton and got a chance to recreate the old Blanton solos in 1973 when he made his first album with the Duke on the Pablo label. Ironically, the record company is owned by Norman Granz, the same gentleman who so successfully directed the Jazz At The Philharmonic for almost two decades.

He fulfilled another life long dream when Ray and Quincy Jones combined their creative and business

genius to coproduce a tribute to Duke Ellington which was presented on the CBS television network, "Duke Ellington, We love You Madly!"

"We wanted to tell the Duke just how much we loved him and how much he meant to every musician who ever picked up his first instruments or played his first note. I'm glad we had the opportunity to share our gratitude with the Duke while he was still around to enjoy it..."

He has been the bassist for all of Frank Sinatra's specials, and has been a part of some of the most outstanding television music events in the business.

He has guided the Hollywood Bowl Association in producing jazz concerts and was director of the Monterey Jazz Festival for two years.

He's been honored with innumerable awards, including winning the All-Stars Poll in Playboy every year since its inception in 1958. The unparalleled bassist has been honored with Grammy Awards, Downbeat Reader's Poll Awards, Jazz Critic's Poll Awards, and the list goes on and on.

Early in 1974, he joined Shelly Manne, Bud Shank and Laurindo Almeida to form The LA Four. The quartet has been appearing in-concert around the country and has recorded a number of albums together.

For Ray Brown, musician par excellence, it's been a long way from that first little trio in Pittsburgh, using a borrowed bass... in the thirty plus years that have passed, Ray Brown is not only a little older and wiser, but he has attained a stature in the musicians that was once perhaps only attained by the late Jimmy Blanton...

And Ray Brown's beat goes on...and on...and on...