11. Meet Benny Bailey

Let me introduce you.
I've heard that boredom's entered your life,
And you're feelin' real low.
Have you met Benny Bailey?
Well, he's a fella that you should know . . .

These lyrics by Jon Hendricks, who grew up in Toledo, were written about jazz trumpeter Benny Bailey, who grew up on East 36th Street between Cedar and Central Avenues in Cleveland.

. . . You must meet Benny Bailey,
At least he's somebody who's hip . . .

There are many who have ranked Benny Bailey among the best jazz trumpet players in the world. But because he moved to Europe in the early 1960s and spent most of his professional life there, most Americans, even many ardent jazz fans, did not know him.

Early musical influences

Bailey was born in Cleveland in 1925. His father played saxophone as a hobby. His mother played piano. Benny started playing the flute, but while he was growing up, he listened to records of such jazz trumpeters as Louis Armstrong and Roy Eldridge, and pianist Fats Waller.

Evelyn Freeman, who was leading a teenaged jazz band in Cleveland at the time, remembered, “Benny came to me one day. He was a little fellow, raggedy as he could be, and he could play only one song, ‘Sleepy Lagoon.’” She told me, “He played it for me and I recognized that he had talent. I took him into my band and taught him how to read music.”

During an interview at the 1992 Tri-C JazzFest, Bailey told me, “When I was a kid, I used to try to copy some of Roy Eldridge’s solos like ‘Rockin’ Chair’ and ‘After You’ve Gone.’ That one really knocked me out! ‘Little Jazz’ was all fire, fast, like magic!” Bailey also listened to older Cleveland trumpet players Tommy Enoch and Freddie Webster. Webster was eight years older than Bailey and had already made a name for himself playing with the bands of Earl Hines and Jimmie Lunceford. Bailey said, “Webster was an influence on all the younger trumpet players in Cleveland. I was fascinated by his type of playing. He had something of a Eldridge flavor – not a growl – but sort of a buzz on certain sounds.” Enoch, who had come to Cleveland from Pittsburgh, later played with Earl Hines’ legendary 1942 orchestra.

Bailey said he was also influenced by a Cleveland trumpeter named Hubert Kidd who played with a family group called the Kidd Brothers. Bailey called Kidd “a real virtuoso on the trumpet.” Bailey told me, “Kidd was one of the most fantastic trumpet players I ever heard.”

Bailey’s first band

Bailey was still a student at Cleveland’s East Tech High School when he formed a band called the Counts of Rhythm. “I remember the first gig we had,” said Bailey, “we got paid in hot dogs. We didn’t want any money. We lived at home and didn’t need any money. We had fun. We would copy Louis Jordan, the arrangements, everything. He was very popular in those days and it was fairly simple to copy. We just copied the records and played dances.” Other members of the Counts of Rhythm included bassist Vic MacMillan and saxophonist Willie Smith. They played at such spots as Cedar Gardens and Club Rendezvous on Cedar Avenue. Among the younger musicians who followed Bailey and his band was Bobby Few who also later moved to Europe and spent years in Paris playing piano with soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy.

While leading the Counts of Rhythm, Bailey remembered one time when Dizzy Gillespie was in town. Dizzy was jamming in a room at the Majestic Hotel at East 55th and Central. Tadd Dameron came in and Bailey’s local idol, Hubert Kidd, arrived. “He brought his horn and sort of traded choruses with Dizzy. At that time, Dizzy was something else, untouchable, playing impossible things, and Hubert Kidd actually sounded good. They had different styles, but Kidd held his own.”

Besides hearing Kidd with Gillespie, that hotel jam session had a strong effect on young Bailey. He remembered Bud Powell and Eddie “Clean Head” Vincent were also there. When Dizzy began playing in his new style of bebop, Bailey remembered thinking, “What’s happening here?” It was so different from anything I had ever heard, totally different! At first, I thought he was missing notes. I thought to myself, ‘What the hell?!’ What’s happening?” But the more I listened, the more fascinated I became with it. It was something I
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couldn’t put my finger on, but it was totally different from anything I had heard.”

With Scatman Crothers

Willie Smith, who grew up with Bailey, remembered, “We were working at a club in Akron. Scatman Crothers came into town and he was looking for some musicians. So he hired me and Benny. We played there over a year (1944) with him, playing shows and playing the club.”

Crothers, a drummer who later became better known as a dancer, got an opportunity to go to Hollywood. He took Bailey and Smith with him. Smith said they stayed on the West Coast for several years.

In Los Angeles, Bailey remembered, “I got a chance to hear Miles (Davis) and Bird (Charlie Parker), the real source of everything. There were sessions every night at a place called the Casablanca. Actually what the cats would do was try to find out where Bird was gonna be on any particular night and everybody would try to be there. They had sessions at Billy Berg’s every Sunday. You could just listen to music all the time all over the place.”

Vic MacMillan, who had played with Bailey and Smith in Cleveland, got a chance to play bass on one record with Parker. Bailey remembered, “Parker happened to hear Vic and said, ‘Come on, make a record with me tomorrow.’” The record was Parker’s “Ornithology,” an all-time jazz masterpiece. Bailey said, “It was the only record MacMillan ever made and it’s great.”

While many young musicians at the time were listening to and trying to copy Duke Ellington, Bailey said, “I just never listened to Ellington or a lot of the older musicians at that time. I had my hands full keeping up with bebop which was pretty fast action.”

Smith said, “Music was all that Benny thought about. He used to wake up in the morning, grab his trumpet from the table next to the bed and practice for an hour before getting up.” Smith, who wanted to sleep, said, “It used to bug me.” Years later, Bailey admitted, “I still do that before I eat breakfast. It gets me set for the day.”

All the early playing and practicing paid off. Bailey was hired by the Jay McShann band in 1947.

Joined Gillespie’s band

Later that year, Bailey joined Dizzy Gillespie’s big band for a tour of Europe. Bailey told me it was fellow Cleveland William “Shep” Shepherd, who was already playing with Gillespie, who got him into Dizzy’s band. Joe Wilder had left the band and Bailey heard they needed a new trumpet player for the European tour. “I wanted to go to Europe,” said Bailey. “Dizzy didn’t know me from Adam, but Shep told him, ‘I know this guy from Cleveland who can play.’ They had a rehearsal in the basement of a theatre. So I just went in and started playing bebop licks. Dizzy said, ‘Who’s this guy?’ Shep said, ‘Oh, he’s from Cleveland.’ Dizzy said, ‘Okay, want a job?’ So I had the gig.”

“Benny always had a distinctive style,” said Smith. “He can play so high with so much strength and has such dynamic chops!” He developed an instantly recognizable mannerism of dropping two octaves in the space of one note. Bailey said years later he often caught himself subconsciously playing some of the “glitches” and “twists” he had heard Freddie Webster playing in Cleveland in the 1940s.

Back to Europe with Lionel Hampton

Bailey and Smith joined the Lionel Hampton Orchestra in 1949. Bailey led the brass section and Smith did a lot of the writing. Bailey stayed with the Hampton Orchestra for four years despite frequent arguments with Hampton’s wife Gladys who, according to Smith, “really ran the band.” After going to Europe with Hampton, Bailey decided to stay there. When Bailey left the Hampton band, he was replaced by Fats Navarro.

In 1953, Bailey began playing with Harry Arnold’s band on Swedish radio. He soloed on a recording of “Royal Garden Blues” with Arnold’s band in November of 1956.

While playing with Arnold in Stockholm, Bailey also played and recorded with a small group led by Carl-Henrick Norin, an excellent tenor saxophonist with the Arnold Orchestra. Norin’s son, Bo Norin, told me Bailey played with his father’s group from 1956 to 1962. Bailey also made a film in Germany with Oscar Pettiford before returning to the United States in 1959.
With Quincy Jones

In 1959, Bailey joined the band of Quincy Jones who, after leaving Gillespie and Hampton, had been arranging for various bands including Count Basie and Cleveland Ray Anthony. With Jones’ orchestra, Bailey went on a world-wide tour, including six months in the United States and - as luck would have it - back to Europe. In Paris, Bailey made several records with the Jones Orchestra including “A Parisian Thoroughfare” which featured Bailey’s muted trumpet.

It was Jones who composed the instrumental salute to the Clevelanders. He called it “Meet Benny Bailey.” Hendricks later wrote the vocalese lyrics to match Bailey’s improvised trumpet solo. “Meet Benny Bailey” became a favorite of the band and, in time, became a big band standard and a jazz classic.

...He’s the kind o’ cat people hear about, But in a second-handed way, That there’s nothing really clear about...

Jones said of Benny, “His sound is very personal and he completely avoids clichés. Above all, he is thrillingly himself. He is totally uninhibited and will get all kinds of sounds out of his horn to get his message across. He combines fantastic breath control, remarkable range and a flawless technique, and really composes as he plays - like Milt Jackson – so that his solos are not just anthologies of licks.”

Trumpeter Freddie Hubbard told me, “Benny Bailey once picked up my trumpet and I had one of those mouthpieces with a hole in it for the electric attachment to a speaker amp. I lost the button (that covers the hole). Benny held his finger over the hole and blew like it was never missing. I looked at him and said, ‘Man, he’s playing!’ You gotta have a lot of wind to do that even with your finger on the hole.”

Bailey was 35 years old when he made his first record as a leader. Recorded in 1960 for Candid Records, Big Brass featured Benny’s trumpet on arrangements by Quincy Jones with a hard-swinging rhythm section consisting of pianist Tommy Flanagan, bassist Buddy Catlett and drummer Arthur Taylor.

Moved to Europe

Bailey decided to move to Europe permanently in 1961. Why? Bailey hinted several times that one of the reasons was the growing popularity of drugs by jazz musicians in the United States. Gillespie, in his memoirs, recalled, “Dope, heroin abuse, really got to be a major problem during the bebop era, especially in the late ‘40s and a lotta guys died from it.” Smith said, “We talked about it a lot and Benny told me, ‘I wanted to get away from all the drugs and stuff being used (in America). All my friends were getting high. If I had stayed here, I’d have to have become a hermit to stop because as soon as I saw somebody I knew, I’d be drawn into the circle again. So I just tried to separate myself from it completely.’”

Smith also said, “He wanted me to come with him. He said Americans don’t appreciate jazz musicians as much as Europeans do.”

In 1961, shortly after moving to Europe, Bailey married a Swedish girl. They raised a son and a daughter.

Playing in Europe

He quickly became one of the most respected jazz musicians in Europe, doing all sorts of studio work in Sweden, Germany and Switzerland. From 1961 to 1963, he was a member of the Berlin Radio Orchestra. From 1963, when he moved to Munich, to 1968, he played with the Max Gregor Orchestra. In 1969 he moved to Switzerland and became the lead trumpeter in the Radio Swiss Romande Orchestra based in Geneva.

At times in Europe, Bailey performed with other Cleveland expatriates including trombonist Jiggs Whigham, Rick Kiefer and Bob Lanese.

In November of 1969, Bailey played with the Duke Ellington Orchestra during Ellington’s 70th birthday tour of Europe. The band played 32 cities in 35 days. Bailey performed with the Ellington band in seven of the European cities – Rotterdam, Holland; Berlin, Germany; Malmo, Sweden; Cologne, Germany; Pescara, Italy; Bologna, Italy; and Lausanne, Switzerland.

In the early 1970s, Bailey recorded with the revolutionary Kenny Clarke-Francy Boland Band in Cologne, West Germany.

Bailey also made countless records for European record companies. According to Smith, Bailey’s trumpet work is on more than 200 records, “but they’re almost impossible to find in the United States. I gave him two songs as a present,” recalled Smith, “and to my surprise, he recorded them both!”

In 1987, after returning to Stockholm, Bailey married Janet Norin, the daughter of his former band mate, Carl-Henrik Norin. That marriage continued until 1996 when Bailey was 71 years old.

Bailey went to London in 1988 and recorded an album for Hot House Records. It included a salute to his early trumpet idol, Roy Eldridge. The album was entitled Little Jazz.

Visits to Cleveland

From time to time, Bailey quietly returned to Cleveland to visit his sister Doris at her home on Melzer Avenue and to see his old childhood buddy, Willie Smith.

In April of 1992 Bailey played a reunion concert with
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Nancy Ann Lee

Benny Bailey playing at the 1992 Tri-C JazzFest.
In the background are bassist Gary Aprile, drummer Mark Gonder and trumpeter Jack Schantz

Smith at the Tri-C JazzFest. Smith assembled an all-star 18-piece big band to perform with Bailey. During that concert, Bailey played “T and M” with a huge trumpet coda, “Solar,” “I Remember Clifford” in honor of Clifford Brown, “But So Far” and Dizzy Gillespie’s “Groovin’ High.” Bailey also sang Bunny Berigan’s classic “I Can’t Get Started” and Billy Strayhorn’s “Take the A Train.” Also performing with Bailey in a small group after the intermission were saxophonist Bobby Watson, pianist Ace Carter, drummer Victor Lewis and bassist Richard Davis.

Plain Dealer reviewer Nick Charles wrote, “All who attended can now attest to this local legend’s unlimited worth. Welcome home Benny Bailey!”

Bailey admitted he had been away for a long time. He said, “When you leave, you have images in your mind and when you come back and everything is different. It’s shocking. We drove by the old corner drug store and it’s not there any more!”

If Bailey had remained in the United States, many believe the trumpeter from Cleveland might have become one of the biggest names in jazz. There is little doubt he was one of Cleveland’s most important contributions to jazz.

... We’re happy you got to meet Benny Bailey,
I’m happy fin’ly meeting with you.

Benny Bailey Selected Discography

1946-49
Giants of Jazz (ITA)

1947 - Bebop Enters Sweden
1948 - Dizzy Gillespie and Max Roach in Paris
1949 - Lionel Hampton & Gene Krupa (Fortane)
1951 - The Blues Ain’t News to Me
1952 - In Paris (Vogue)
1952 - The Artistry of Stan Getz (Polygram)
1953 - Oh, Rock! Live (Natasha)
1955 - Lionel Hampton and His New French Sound
1957 - Big Band Concert (Dragon)
1958 - Quincy Jones: Jazz Round Midnight (Polygram)
1958 - Stockholm Jam Session, Vols. 1 & 2

(Natasha)

1959 - Benny Bailey Plays
1960 - O Live in Paris Circa 1960 (Warner Bros.)
1960 - Newport Rebels (Candid)
1960 - Big Brass (Candid)
1960 - Our Kinda Strauss
1960 - Swiss Radio Days Jazz Series, Vol. 1 (TCB)
1960 - Rights of Swing (Candid)
1960 - I Dig Dancers
1961 - Great Wide World of Quincy Jones: Live!
1961 - The Eddie Harris Anthology (Rhino)
1962 - Live in Sweden
1965 - Great Moments in Jazz (Atlantic)
1966 - Soul Eyes: Jazz Live at the Domicile Munich
1969 - Three Latin Adventures
1969 - Swiss Movement (Rhino)
1976 - Islands (ENJA)
1976 - Serenade to a Planet
1977 - Sophisticated Giant (Sony)
1978 - Grand Slam (Storyville Records)
1978 - Home Run (Storyville)
1978 - East of Isar
1980 - De Lawd’s Blues
1981 - Trumpets in Modern Jazz (ENJA)
1981 - Upper Manhattan Jazz Society (ENJA)
1981 - Compact Jazz: Quincy Jones (Polygram)
1984 - The Mystery of Man
1984 - Lightnin’
1986 - Heavy Nights
1989 - Berlin Contemporary Jazz Orch. (EMC)
1990 - While My Lady Sleeps
1991 - Miles & Quincy Live at Montreux (Warner Bros.)
1993 - Mambo 2000 (ENJA)
1994 - No Refill (TCB Music)
1995 - Angel Eyes
1995 - Mainstream Masters (Jazz Hour)
1996 - I Thought About You
1996 - Peruvian Nights (TCB Music)
1996 - Hamp: The Legendary Decca Recordings

1998 - Ool-Ya-Koo (DNA)
1998 - Uno Dos Tres: Latin Jazz Grooves (Polygram)
1998 - Rights of Swing (ITA)
1998 - Bravissimo, Vol. 2: 50 Years of NOR Big Band

1998 - The Bag Is Packed (Timeless)
1998 - Atlantic Jazz: Classics (Rhino)
1999 - Jazz Is Universal/After This Message

1999 - Atlantic Jazz: Classics (Rhino)
1999 - Jazz Is Universal/After This Message

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(Polygram)
(Fine Tune)
(Fine Tune)