Tadd Dameron was an important, but under-recognized, contributor to the bebop revolution of the 1940s. The Cleveland native was not a national celebrity but is still highly respected by jazz musicians as a composer and arranger who spanned the eras of swing and bop. Perhaps more than anyone else, he added form to the emerging new style of jazz that was being pioneered by Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker.

Dameron biographer Ian MacDonald wrote that Dameron was “the main man when it came to translating the language of bop from small combo to a bigger band setting.”

Dameron arranged for most of the important big bands of his era, was instrumental in the introduction of such all-time jazz greats as Clifford Brown and John Coltrane, and composed such jazz standards as “If You Could See Me Now,” “Good Bait” and “Hot House.”

But the Cleveland native’s career was cut short by drugs and health problems and he never achieved great fame outside of the jazz world.

Dameron’s family

Dameron was born in Cleveland in 1917, but, like many aspects of his life, there was a great deal of confusion surrounding details of his birth and family.

MacDonald was completing his biography of Dameron when he suddenly heard a rumor from a normally reliable source that Tadd and his brother, Caesar, were not really brothers. The source told MacDonald that Tadd had been adopted. This was a fairly important bit of information for a writer who was about to publish a biography. MacDonald asked me for help in checking out the rumor about Dameron being adopted.

I called Cleveland City Hall’s Bureau of Vital Statistics and tracked down the birth certificates of both Caesar and Tadd Dameron. When I went to City Hall and got copies of the documents, I discovered some surprises—some information that had never been reported before.

According to the birth certificates, Caesar was born at 9:45 p.m., March 4, 1914, at 2177 East 30th Street in Cleveland. The official birth certificate says Caesar was the son of 21-year-old Isaiah Peake, a porter, who had come to Cleveland from Tennessee, and his 20-year-old wife, Ruth Harris Peake, who was born in Mississippi.

Tadd’s birth certificate said he was born at 11:15 a.m., February 21, 1917, at City Hospital (later Metro). According to Tadd’s birth certificate, his parents were also Isaiah and Ruth Peake. By 1917, the couple had moved to 4500 Central Avenue.

The discovery of the birth certificates in Cleveland’s Bureau of Vital Statistics proved that Tadd and Caesar were brothers, both the sons of Isaiah and Ruth Peake.

While Tadd never talked about it during his lifetime, his widow and biographer MacDonald believed that Ruth and Isaiah Peake split up sometime after Tadd was born and she married a man named Adolphus Dameron. He was a chef and had a restaurant in Cleveland called Dameron’s Hut. With or without a formal adoption, Ruth’s sons, Caesar and Tadd, apparently took her new husband’s surname.

Tadd’s widow gave MacDonald a copy of a letter Ruth had written to President Franklin Roosevelt during War II in an attempt to get “Caesar Dameron” excused from military service. That letter was signed, “Ruth Harris Dameron.”

While all this may seem to be little more than an academic exercise, it does assume some historical importance when you attempt to pinpoint the earliest musical influences of one of the most important jazz
musicians in Cleveland history.

In a 1952 interview, Tadd said he was born into a musical family. He told interviewer Harry Frost, "Everybody in my family played music. My mother played piano. My father played piano and sang. My brother plays alto. My cousins and my aunts, they all play." He added, "My mother taught me piano, but she did not read."

While it is clear that Dameron considered his mother his first musical influence, we do not know who he was talking about when he said, "My father played piano and sang." Was it Isaiah Peake or Adolphus Dameron?

There was another mystery uncovered in the discovery of the birth certificates. On Tadd's certificate, there is a notation that he was the third living child of Isaiah and Ruth Peake. Tadd's widow said she never heard about another sibling. She said that during many detailed conversations with Tadd's mother, she never mentioned any children other than Tadd and Caesar.

Dameron's early life

Caesar Dameron, three years older than Tadd, was apparently the person who got Tadd interested in jazz. Tadd later said he spent a great deal of time listening to his older brother's records. In the 1952 interview, Tadd said, "I was listening to Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington and the Casa Loma band that was playing unique arrangements at the time."

Tadd attended old Central High School on East 55th Street, a school with a rich musical tradition and where many future outstanding jazz musicians learned the mechanics of the art.

Veteran Cleveland jazz musician Andy Anderson told me he first heard Tadd play piano in the 1930s when Caesar brought his kid brother to the Columbus Nightclub at East 46th and Carnegie and asked if the teenager could sit in with the Snake White Band. Anderson said he was amazed when Tadd started playing. "He's got ten fingers and all of them went down just like this (on the piano keys) and all of them were on different notes," said Anderson. "He had been studying all the time and I said to myself, 'Gee whiz, with kids like that, who stay in and study! You don't expect to hear anything that good!'"

At Central High School, Dameron ironically failed his music exams. But he became friendly with a young trumpeter named Freddie Webster. Tadd later said he and Webster, who was the same age, "were raised together." They both were fascinated with the music being played in the 1930s by the big bands, particularly the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra. They often went to the Palace Theatre downtown to hear the bands including Duke Ellington.

While still at Central, Webster began making a name for himself playing gigs around Cleveland. After high school, he formed his own 14-piece band which toured Northern Ohio in 1938 and 1939. Webster persuaded Tadd to play piano in his band and Dameron later said Webster was the person responsible for starting him on a career in jazz. Dameron also later claimed he had taught Webster how to breathe when he was playing the trumpet.

Oberlin College?

At one point in his youth, Dameron later told friends that he had originally hoped to become a doctor. There were published accounts that he went to Oberlin College as a pre-med student but dropped out after seeing a man with his arm severed. According to the story, Dameron said, "There is enough ugliness in the world; I'm interested in beauty."

While Dameron was, no doubt, more interested in beauty than ugliness, biographer MacDonald wrote, "The famous and much perpetuated 'severed arm' story appears to be pure fantasy." After his death, Dameron's widow all but admitted the story was apocryphal. MacDonald and Caesar Dameron's wife, Dorothy, made "extensive inquiries" at Oberlin, but could find no record of Tadd ever attending any classes there.

The stories about enrolling at Oberlin and seeing a man with a severed arm may have been Dameron's way of trying to justify his decision to give up his hopes of becoming a doctor and turning to jazz.
Dameron's first arrangements

While Dameron was probably at least partially responsible for some arrangements for the early Freddie Webster band, he later said, “My first big band arrangement was for the Jeter-Pillars Orchestra,” a band that had been formed in Cleveland in 1934 and was touring the Midwest. In 1938, at the age of 21, Dameron arranged “I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart” for the Jeter-Pillars band. He later said, “Everything was wrong with it, but there were some good ideas.”

Also in 1938, Dameron replaced the ill Clyde Hart as the pianist on the Blanche Calloway band and toured with the band for a brief period. He returned to Cleveland and began arranging for Webster who was leading his own 14-piece local band in Cleveland. Dameron also played with the Zack Whyte band.

Late in 1939, Dameron formed his own band in Cleveland and first began working on several compositions including “Good Bait,” “Stay On It” and “Lady Bird.”

Veteran Cleveland trumpeter Earl Douthitt, Sr. told me, “Tadd didn’t talk too much. He was very quiet. All he knew was music.”

At the age of 23 (in 1940), Dameron left Cleveland and went to New York, writing for Vido Musso’s band. “Musso fired me,” remembered Tadd, “because my voicing wasn’t good enough.”

He went to Kansas City where he joined Harlan Leonard’s Rockets for two years.

With Harlan Leonard

Dameron’s composition and arrangement of “Rock And Ride” for the Leonard band (recorded July 15, 1940) was almost pure swing with little if any indication of bebop, the form of jazz he would later help pioneer. Leonard had played saxophone with Bennie Moten’s band in Kansas City in the 1920s and by 1937 had one of the city’s top-rated bands. While he was with Leonard, Dameron first met Charlie Parker who had left the Rockets shortly before Dameron arrived.

Another Dameron composition and arrangement for Leonard was “400 Swing” (recorded by Bluebird Records in Chicago in 1940). In November of that year, the band recorded another of Tadd’s originals, “Dameron Stomp.” Like the other songs he arranged for Leonard, it was almost pure swing.

Native Clevelander Andrew Homzy, a Concordia University professor who later discovered the manuscript of Charles Mingus’ monumental work *Epitaph*, tried to find Dameron’s early scores for the Leonard band. Homzy called Leonard in Los Angeles in the early 1970s and asked, “Are you the Harlan Leonard who had a band in the 1940s?” The music professor was shocked and surprised when Leonard said, “Who are you to call me up and ask me that question? I’ve been trying to forget about it for the past 30 years. It was such a difficult period of my life. I don’t want to speak to you about this music.”

Those early Dameron arrangements are still missing.

While he was writing for Leonard, Dameron also sold arrangements to the Jay McShann band. McShann remembered, “He liked my band and would sell me arrangements for about half what it should have cost.”

Arranging for Lunceford

By the end of 1941, after playing with his brother’s band in Cleveland, Tadd sent some arrangements to his boyhood hero, Jimmie Lunceford, and soon became a full-time arranger for Lunceford. The band recorded three of Tadd’s charts in 1941 and 1942.

Dameron later said he began experimenting with some “new ideas” when he wrote arrangements for the Lunceford Orchestra. They included “I Dream a Lot About You,” “It Had to Be You” and “Yard Dog Mazurka.”

A member of that band, Gerald Wilson, who had joined Lunceford in Cleveland in 1939, recalled in his 1996 *Suite Memories* CD that Dameron “was a wonderful arranger. He was a romantic who liked to write about people, places and things.”

Meets Dizzy Gillespie

In 1942, Trummy Young, a trombonist Dameron had known on the Lunceford band, introduced Tadd to Dizzy Gillespie. Young told Gillespie, “There’s a guy here who writes some beautiful things!” Dameron recalled he first met Gillespie during a jam session at Minton’s in Harlem. “I started to play some unusual chords,” he said, “and Dizzy said, ‘Well, that’s it, man!’” Dameron was soon playing piano with Gillespie’s group at the Onyx and other New York clubs. Dameron later said of Dizzy, “We got to be very good friends.”

One night during a jam session with Parker, Bird was so delighted by Dameron’s harmonic ideas on the piano that, according to Dameron, “He kissed me on the cheek!”
With Billy Eckstine

In 1944, after selling arrangements to Georgie Auld and Earl Hines, including “Sweet Georgia Brown,” Dameron became an arranger for what is considered the first bebop big band, a band led by singer and valve trombonist Billy Eckstine. The Eckstine Orchestra featured both Gillespie and Parker. The band played Gillespie’s “Night in Tunisia” and Jerry Valentine’s “Second Balcony Jump.” Dameron contributed new arrangements of his compositions, “Cool Breeze” and “Lady Bird,” as well as some lush backgrounds for Eckstine’s vocals.

By September of 1944, the Eckstine Orchestra included Gillespie, saxophonists Gene Ammons and Dexter Gordon, drummer Art Blakey, and a young singer named Sarah Vaughan.

One time when the band was playing in St. Louis, trumpeter Buddy Anderson got sick and the musicians' union sent a 16-year-old to take his place. Young Miles Davis subbed with the Eckstine band for two weeks.

By the end of 1944, Dameron, Gillespie and Parker had all left the Eckstine Orchestra, but Dameron and Gillespie remained in contact with each other. Tadd showed Dizzy his small group arrangement of “Good Bait.” Dizzy liked it and recorded it in January of 1945 with a sextet that included trombonist Trummy Young, tenor saxophonist Don Byas, pianist Clyde Hart, bassist Oscar Pettiford and drummer Shelly Manne.

Arranging for Gillespie

In 1945, Gillespie and Parker recorded Dameron’s “Hot House” (based on chord changes from Cole Porter’s “What Is This Thing Called Love?”) and “Our Delight.”

From 1945 to 1947, Dameron composed and arranged a number of pieces for Gillespie’s big band including “Good Bait,” “Stay On It” and “Cool Breeze.” Tadd took the long phrases, powerful upbeat rhythms, and unusual chord changes of the bebop that Diz and Parker were pioneering in small groups, and used them for the first time in his big band arrangements. Jimmy Heath, a member of the band, said, “I found that Tadd had that sort of concept similar to Billy Strayhorn for beautiful, melancholy type of ballads. I was fascinated by his chords. Tadd’s writing was more melodic than exciting, sort of mellow swing.”

But not everybody believed Dameron’s bebop writing for Gillespie was solely his own. Saxophonist Budd Johnson, in Ira Gitler’s book Swing to Bop, claimed Gillespie taught Dameron everything he knew about modern arranging. “He would have Tadd write and Tadd would say, ‘Hey, Dizzy, is this the way it goes?” Dizzy would say, ‘No, no! Move over there (at the piano). That’s the way I want the changes to go, like that!’” According to Johnson, “Tadd put it down on paper, but Diz was really writing it.”

Dameron said in a 1952 interview, “I got on Count Basie’s band and that’s when I started writing my own style.” He was adapting some of Gillespie’s and Parker’s ideas in his arrangements. Among Dameron’s early charts for Basie were “Good Bait,” the song he had written in the 1930s, and “Poor Little Plaything.”

Tadd also did arrangements for Boyd Raeburn and Woody Herman. His originals for Raeburn included “Boydstown” and “In-Choirs.” Dameron also arranged for a Herman radio program sponsored by Wildroot Cream Oil. One of Tadd’s least-known compositions was a commercial jingle, “You Better Get Wildroot Cream Oil, Charlie.” Nat Cole later sang the jingle when he did a radio program for the same sponsor.

Pianist Mary Lou Williams recalled that Dameron, “though very young, had ideas even then that were ‘way ahead of his time.”

Dameron, in a self-deprecating statement, once said, “I became an arranger only because there was no other way to get my music played.”

Played with Bill de Arango

In May of 1945, Tadd formed an octet in New York to back singer Sarah Vaughan on his arrangement of “I’d Rather Have a Memory Than a Dream.” The group included Gillespie, Parker, Flip Phillips, Curly Russell,
Max Roach, Dameron and a young guitarist from Cleveland, Bill de Arango.

De Arango had known Caesar Dameron in Cleveland but had never met Tadd. The Cleveland guitarist told biographer MacDonald, “When Dizzy made the introductions, he just said, ‘This is Tadd.’ I had no idea he was Caesar’s brother.”

“It’s a Beautiful Day”

When Gillespie took the old tune “Whispering” and changed the chords to create “Groovin’ High,” Dameron took Gillespie’s improvised cadenza on “Groovin’ High” and created a ballad called “If You Could See Me Now.” Dameron first recorded the song in May of 1946 with Sarah Vaughan and his old boyhood friend from Cleveland, Freddie Webster. “If You Could See Me Now” became the first ballad to emerge from bop and a classic vehicle for Vaughan. It was Dameron’s best known composition.

Tadd became a close friend of pianist Mary Lou Williams who had spent a great deal of time in Cleveland. She recalled that whenever Tadd was out of ideas and inspiration, he visited her apartment in New York City. Others also gathered there, including Gillespie, Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk. Williams became virtually the musical den mother for the young bopsters. She later recalled, “Most of the musicians were my friends and they often visited my apartment to write or play their ideas. I loved them. I had so much love for them.”

In the mid-1940s, Dameron also arranged for Buddy Rich and Boyd Raeburn. Frankie Socolow, who played with the Raeburn Orchestra at the time, said many of Dameron’s arrangements for Raeburn “were great.” In 1947, Dameron was honored by Esquire magazine as “The Best New Jazz Arranger.”

Jimmy Heath remembered, “Tadd was always soft-spoken except when he was showing his new arrangements off. Then he would always sing them in this very high pitched, falsetto voice.”

But he was beginning to have some doubts about some aspects of bop. With its major practitioners becoming almost cultural freaks – wearing goatees, berets and dark glasses – and being ridiculed by many, Dameron was afraid the new form of music was not reaching the general public and was being regarded by many as little more than a passing fad of the post-war period. Hoping to reach a wider audience and separate himself somewhat from the exclusionary aspects of bop, he joined a group called Three Bips and a Bop which performed vocal and commercial versions of bop tunes. Babs Gonzales said, “I formed the Bips because I felt bebop needed a vocal bridge to the people. The fire was there, but it wasn’t reaching the people.”

With Fats Navarro at the Royal Roost

As bop was slowly being more accepted by the general public, Dameron organized a sextet with Charlie Rouse, Wardell Gray, Allen Eager, Kenny Clarke and an amazing young trumpet player named Fats Navarro. Many at the time (1947) considered Navarro a much better trumpeter than either Gillespie or Miles Davis.

A native of Key West, Florida, Navarro was 24 years old when he began playing with Dameron. At the age of 20, he had toured with Andy Kirk’s band and then replaced Gillespie in the historic Billy Eckstine Orchestra. Davis, in his autobiography, said that during the early days at Minton’s, “‘Fat Girl’ would be blowing away everybody that came through the door.” Miles called Fats “Fat Girl” and Fats called Miles “Millie.”

With Navarro in his group, Dameron recorded for Blue Note Records and played regularly at the Royal Roost, a new jazz club at Broadway and 48th Street in New York City. Jazz fans and fellow musicians began to recognize Dameron and his music. Navarro worked regularly with Dameron for three years and quickly became one of Gillespie’s few rivals on trumpet. He didn’t play as many high notes as Gillespie, but he did produce some stunning solos with surprising harmonic twists and colorful melodic elaborations.

Unfortunately, by late 1948, Navarro “was a total junkie,” according to Davis. “In January of 1949, ‘Fat Girl’ was too sick to play,” wrote Davis in his autobiography, “so I took over for him.” Dameron said...
Tadd Dameron and Fats Navarro

in an interview, “I fired him. That was like firing your right hand. I hired Miles Davis, but I got Fats back.”

Miles later said, “Tadd was a great arranger and composer and he was a very fine piano player also.”

Navarro made his last record, Birdland All-Stars, in May of 1950 with Davis, J.J. Johnson, Dameron, and Art Blakey. Miles recalled, “It was sad to listen to him that last time, trying to hit notes he used to hit like they was nothing.”

Navarro died of tuberculosis complicated by drug abuse two months later – July 7, 1950. He was only 26 years old.

He was replaced in Dameron’s group by Allen Eager who, as a teenager in 1945, had played with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra. Like many others, Eager made the switch from swing to bop while playing at various clubs on New York’s 52nd Street. A disciple of Lester Young, Eager was making distinctive contributions to the new music and became an important part of Dameron’s group, but, in the mid-1950s, Eager moved to Paris. He later played on Frank Zappa’s first album. While not playing, Eager spent a lot of time skiing, riding horses and driving race cars.

Dameron, meanwhile, composed his major orchestral piece, “Soulphony” which was performed by the Gillespie big band at New York’s Carnegie Hall in 1948.

Goes to Europe

In 1949, Dameron spent some time in Europe. He co-led a quintet with Miles Davis at the Paris Jazz Fair. After the fair, Dameron stayed in Europe for awhile and remembered, “We had to go to Lyon (France). While we were on the train, the way it was moving gave me a little pattern and I made a tune, ‘Lyonia.’” He arranged the song and others for Ted Heath’s big band in England.

Wide-ranging musical taste

Dameron did not consider himself strictly a bopster or even a jazz musician.

In 1950, he was interviewed in one of Metronome magazine’s Blindfold Tests. After hearing the Tex Beneke recording of “Star Dust,” Tadd said, “I can’t say I care too much for the style, but it’s really good sounding music.” Commenting on Jimmy Dorsey’s “Johnson Rag,” he said, “I can see why people like dixieland; it has a beat and is easy for anyone to understand.”

He also admitted, “When I’m at home just listening to music, you know what I play? Ravel, Delius, Stravinsky, Villa-Lobos, just to mention a few.”

In 1951, Dameron was trying to decide his future direction in music when he took a job playing piano with a rhythm-and-blues group led by another former student at Cleveland’s Central High School, “Bull Moose” Jackson. He toured with Jackson, playing r-and-b songs and novelty numbers.

Another member of Jackson’s group was a young saxophonist who had dropped out of Howard University in Washington. Benny Golson quickly became friendly with Tadd. Golson said in the foreword to Ian MacDonald’s Dameron biography, “After hearing me play on our first one-nighter together, he approached me at the intermission and said, ‘I love the way you play. I’d like you to do some things with me sometimes, perhaps even go to Europe with me.’” Golson said he considered Dameron’s offer a stamp of approval. Golson soon became Dameron’s composing and arranging student.

After leaving Jackson’s band, Tadd formed a big band that worked intermittently. It included at various times Stanley Turrentine, Blue Mitchell and Cleveland saxophonist Tony Lovano. Dameron also led several small groups which toured around Ohio and the eastern states for a year or so. One of his groups included a young Cleveland trumpeter, Bill Hardman, who had just graduated from Central High School.

In another interview, Dameron discussed his arranging style. He said he was primarily concerned with sound. He said he tried to emulate some of the forms of classical masters Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. “I try to make it slow and coherent. I try to make everything go like you’re reading a book. You just can’t have one idea and jump to another one.”
Introduction of Clifford Brown

In 1953, Dameron formed a new nine-piece group which included Joe Jones (not yet called "Philly Joe"), Golson, Percy Heath, and an unknown 23-year-old trumpet player. Dameron said, “I want to use a fellow named ‘Brownie’ from Wilmington, Delaware. He’s another Fats Navarro. He’s a little smoother than Fats was, I think, and has a lot of drive.” Dameron had been toying with the idea of recording with another trumpeter, a man who had been playing with him on club dates. He said, “I have a trumpet player, Johnny Coles. But for recording, I think I need a little more power.” He got it!

With Clifford Brown, Dameron and his group went into a recording studio in New York City June 11, 1953. When recording supervisor, Ira Gitler, first heard Brown, he said, “I nearly fell off my seat in the control room! The power, range and brilliance, together with the warmth and invention, was something I hadn’t heard since Fats Navarro.”

Trumpeter Idrees Sulieman told Dameron biographer MacDonald that Brown, after each solo, “kept saying ‘I’m failing.’” But, two weeks later, Brownie called Sulieman and said, “I’ve heard the album. I like it.”

Brown did not begin playing until he was 15 years old. His father, an amateur musician, had given him a trumpet. While attending Wilmington’s Howard High School, the teenager learned quickly. Later, when he attended Delaware State College, he frequently drove to Philadelphia to listen to such boppers as Max Roach, J.J. Johnson, Gillespie and Navarro. Occasionally they let him sit in. Miles Davis later recalled that the jazz musicians in Philadelphia were talking about the kid called “Brownie.” One night, he sat in with Parker and Bird told him, “I hear what you’re saying, but I don’t believe it!”

During that first recording session with Dameron, Brown played several Dameron compositions which later became classics — “Theme of No Repeat,” “Fountainebleau” and “Dial B For Beauty.”

Dameron’s group with Brown played during the summer of 1953 in Atlantic City. The group’s records and live performances prompted some big bands to try to make the transition from swing to bop. Among them were Artie Shaw, Woody Herman, Charlie Barnet and even Benny Goodman. Goodman’s “Undercurrent Blues” is virtually forgotten today, but it bore an unmistakable debt to Dameron’s work with Brown.

In September of 1953, Brown went to Europe with the Lionel Hampton Orchestra which also included pianist Quincy Jones and trumpeter Art Farmer. In Stockholm Brown teamed up with Jones, Farmer and a group of Swedish jazz stars to record an album (September 15, 1953) which included “Stockholm Sweetnin,” “Scuse These Blues,” “Falling in Love With Love” and “Lover Come Back to Me.” In the weeks that followed, Brown, Farmer, Jones and Jimmy Cleveland recorded enough material in Paris for three other albums for Prestige Records, The Clifford Brown Quartet in Paris, The Clifford Brown Sextet in Paris and The Clifford Brown Big Band in Paris. When Hampton learned that members of his band were recording on their own, violating his rules, he fired the ambitious young musicians.

Brown returned to the United States and joined Art Blakey’s new group. Later in 1954, he formed a group with drummer Max Roach. Dameron wrote for the Max Roach-Clifford Brown Quintet.

Brown crossed over into the popular field in 1955 when he made a record with former Count Basie arranger Neal Hefti. Clifford Brown With Strings became one of the few successful jazz albums with lush string backgrounds.

By 1956, almost three years after Dameron had introduced him on record, Brown had become one of the most respected trumpeters in jazz. He played at the Loop Lounge on Prospect Avenue in downtown Cleveland. It was his last formal gig. The following night, Monday, June 25, 1956, Brown played an informal gig at a Philadelphia record store called Music City. After that performance, Brown, pianist Richie Powell (the brother of Bud Powell) and Richie’s wife Nancy began driving from Philadelphia to Chicago for a weekend gig at the Blue Note. Nancy, an inexperienced driver, was at the wheel in the early hours of the morning. They raced along the Pennsylvania Turnpike, heading for Cleveland. She lost control of the car. It skidded off a wet stretch of the road and careened down an 18-foot embankment. Nancy and Richie Powell and Clifford Brown were all killed. It was four months before Brown’s 26th birthday.

Freddie Hubbard, a young trumpeter at the time, later told me, “I couldn’t believe it. I cried when he died. I was back in Indianapolis and I had all his books, all his records. I was transcribing solos and practicing those things all day and all night. I used to carry all his albums on my dates. If a chick wanted to be with me and didn’t want to listen, I couldn’t be with her.”

Dameron, meanwhile, was fighting drug addiction. He returned to Cleveland and played piano with a group led by drummer Lawrence “Jacktown” Jackson who told me, “I had a band at the Congo Lounge on Woodland and...
Tadd was playing with me, Tadd and Tony Lovano, Joey Lovano’s dad. The band was called ‘Jack’s Town Criers.’ We played at the Red Carpet as well as the Congo Lounge.” At times when Dameron was not available, Ace Carter played piano with Jacktown’s group. Carter later played piano with the Count Basie Orchestra.

In 1956, Dameron wrote for the Max Roach-Clifford Brown Quintet, arranged for Carmen McRae and recorded two albums with young saxophonist John Coltrane. One, entitled Mating Call, was recorded November 30, 1956 and included six Dameron compositions – “Mating Call,” “Gnid,” “Soultrane,” “On a Misty Night,” “Romus” and “Super Jet.” It was one of Coltrane’s early recordings and the liner notes by Andrew White said the album was a good example of Coltrane’s “post-bebop lyricism.”

It was also Dameron’s last recording until 1961.

**Dameron’s drug problems**

When Dameron recorded with Coltrane, both were apparently heavy users of cocaine. According to the Harvard Medical School Family Health Guide, cocaine is a stimulant that accelerates physical and mental states but has such possible long-term use effects as causing lung damage, heart attacks and strokes.

Dameron’s use of drugs apparently went back to his early days on the road. Gary Giddens, in his book, Bird, wrote that when Dameron first met Charlie Parker in the late 1930s, when they were with the Harlan Leonard band, “One of the reasons for the two musicians’ instant friendship was that Tadd could do all sorts of tricks with pharmaceuticals and had a big appetite for getting high.”

Dameron biographer MacDonald wrote that Tadd was into hard drugs in the 1940s and several musicians including John Collins and Joe Wilder kept their distance because of his use of drugs. MacDonald quoted Wilder as saying, “I kept away so it wouldn’t happen to me.”

Record producer Orrin Keepnews was quoted saying Tadd was what he called “one of a small group of charming, well-dressed junkies.”

According to MacDonald, both Tadd and Miles Davis “were leading members of the Harlem drug scene.” The biographer wrote that Davis took a self-cure and recovered, but “Tadd continued to use heroin until his imprisonment in 1958.”

In 1947, Freddie Webster, Dameron’s boyhood friend from Cleveland who had played on Tadd’s recording of “If You Could See Me Now” less than a year earlier, died of a drug overdose at the age of 30.

Despite Webster’s death, Davis, in his autobiography, recalled that in 1949 there was a lot of dope around the music scene and a lot of musicians were deep into drugs, especially heroin. He said he and Tadd plus Dexter Gordon, Art Blakey, J.J. Johnson, Sonny Rollins and Jackie McLean all started to get heavily into heroin around the same time. Ken Burns, in his TV series Jazz, listed other jazz musicians who were hooked on narcotics: Chet Baker, Gerry Mulligan, Art Pepper, Max Roach, Sonny Stitt, Stan Getz and eight of the 16 members of Woody Herman’s band. Trumpeter Fats Navarro, who played with Dameron’s group in the late 1940s, died mainly of drug abuse in 1950.

Dameron apparently recognized his problem and made several attempts to kick the habit – usually by coming home to Cleveland. After Navarro’s death, Dameron came home where, according to MacDonald, “he hoped the ‘temptations’ would be less than in New York.” While in Cleveland, Tadd played at his brother’s Twelve Counts club on Cedar Avenue.

After Miles was arrested in September of 1950 for possession of heroin, Tadd again left New York and took a job touring with fellow Central High School alumnus Bull Moose Jackson and his rhythm-and-blues band.

But Dameron apparently did not kick the habit.

In 1953, when Tadd took his jazz group to Atlantic City for the summer, MacDonald wrote that Dameron’s “addiction was severe.” Tadd later admitted he had to be on his toes in order to keep one step ahead of the police. He sometimes told other addicted band members to take the night off if he felt there was a chance of a bust. He even “fired” Clifford Brown several times because he didn’t want the ultra-clean Brownie to be “caught up in any unpleasantness.” After several months of this, Dameron disbanded his group and again returned to Cleveland for two years.

In the mid-1950s, drummer Philly Joe Jones later said Dameron “was very stand-offish and many players couldn’t get close to him because he was using heroin.”

In April of 1956, Dameron was arrested in New York City on several narcotics charges including intent to sell illegal drugs. In court he was sentenced to three-to-five years in prison, but the sentence was suspended and he was placed on probation.

Less than two years later, in January of 1958, Dameron was arrested again and charged with, among other things, dealing drugs. A month later, he was sentenced to prison.
Serving time in prison

Dameron spent three years at the Federal Narcotics Hospital, a combination hospital and prison, in Lexington, Kentucky. It was the largest institution of its kind in the world. At Lexington, where Chet Baker and other jazz musicians were also being held, Dameron led a 24-piece orchestra and did a lot of writing.

When he was released in 1961, Dameron returned to New York where he wrote and arranged for albums by Sonny Stitt, Blue Mitchell, Milt Jackson and others. The following year, he wrote some arrangements for Benny Goodman’s tour of Russia.

Dameron recorded four sides in December of 1961 with Donald Byrd, Curtis Fuller, Julius Watkins, Sam Rivers, Cecil Payne, Paul Chambers and Philly Joe Jones. The recordings, considered sub-standard, were not released by Blue Note Records until 1999.

Final recording

In a 1962 interview with DownBeat magazine, Dameron, who aspired to a musical level beyond bebop, said, “I’d like to do an album of just lovely music.” He called the planned album his “comeback.” Dameron said he was dissatisfied with his earlier works – “Turkeys, all of them,” he said. “I’ve never been well represented on records.” The album, The Magic Touch, turned out to be not only his comeback, but his musical farewell address.

He assembled an orchestra that included such all-stars as trumpeters Joe Wilder, Clark Terry, Charlie Shavers and Ernie Royal; trombonists Jimmy Cleveland and Britt Woodman; saxophonists Johnny Griffin, Tate Houston and Jerome Richardson; pianist Bill Evans; bassist George Duvivier; and drummer Philly Joe Jones.

Griffin soloed on “On a Misty Night,” the song Dameron had recorded with Coltrane in 1956. Shavers, Cleveland, Griffin, and Evans soloed on an extended version of Dameron’s “Fontainebleau.” Former Duke Ellington singer Barbara Winfield sang an updated version of “If You Could See Me Now.” Evans’ piano solo on “Our Delight” demonstrated how Dameron’s musical thinking had expanded since his early days with Gillespie. The Fantasy album also included five songs Dameron had written while in prison.

But, after the album was released, Dameron’s health began to fade. He was dead three years later.

He suffered several heart attacks and died of bone cancer in New York City March 8, 1965. He was 48 years old.

Dameron’s funeral

Four days after his death, there was an unusual jazz memorial service for Dameron at the Advent Lutheran Church at 93rd and Broadway in New York City. A quintet consisting of saxophonist Benny Golson, trumpeter John Collins, pianist Cedar Walton, bassist Reggie Workman, and drummer Mel Lewis performed. They played “The Squirrel,” a favorite Dameron composition. Several of his friends who attended the funeral service said Tadd would have loved hearing the group playing his songs.

The coffin stood in front of the church altar, beneath and barely lighted by the glow from a reproduction of Leonardo Da Vinci’s “The Last Supper.” The jazz quintet was to the left of the mourners, in front of the pulpit.

The funeral service was conducted by Rev. John Gensel, a graduate of Ohio’s Ashland College and a onetime minister in Mansfield, Ohio. Pastor Gensel had just been named by the Lutheran Church in America as the special pastor to New York City’s jazz community.

Rev. Gensel later told me he had frequently visited Dameron when he was at Roosevelt Hospital in New York City. “He lived not far away from where I lived on the West Side of Manhattan,” said Gensel, “and I would visit him at his home and we’d talk. What an incredible musician, arranger, and a great composer!”

Pastor Gensel said very little at the service. He later said he believed Dameron’s music spoke for itself.

The Golson group also played “If You Could See Me Now,” and “Our Delight.” There were only a few words of eulogy. The speakers were pianist Billy Taylor, disc jockey Mort Fega, and Dameron’s Cleveland lawyer, Earl Rowe.
In addition to his widow Mia, other members of Tadd’s family from Cleveland went to New York for the funeral service. They included his mother Ruth and his brother Caesar. There were among about 150 people in the church. Among the others were Babs Gonzales, Yusef Lateef, Danny Quebec, Randy Weston, fellow Clevelanders Bill Hardman, Roy Haynes, Rudi Blesh, Larry Ridley, Walter Bishop, Ray Bryant, Sonny Nevin, Dan Morgenstern, Luis McKay, Barry Harris and Marcel Daniels.

Dameron’s mother, Ruth, died five years later (in 1970) at the age of 76.

Assessments of Dameron

How important was Tadd Dameron to jazz?

Dizzy Gillespie, in his memoirs, wrote, “Dameron became the leading bebop arranger.”

Pianist and composer Horace Silver, who grew up during the bebop era, said that Duke Ellington “was and still is the main man. Then come Thelonious Monk and Tadd Dameron.”

Native Cleveland musicologist Andrew Homzy said, “If one were to accept that Ellington was to jazz what Bach was to classical music, then Mingus might be jazz’ Beethoven, Monk its Chopin, and Dameron its Schubert. As for Schubert, singable melodies and concern for beauty were among the most notable traits of Tadd Dameron.”

Philly Joe Jones said, “Tadd was a genius. Many people don’t realize that Dameron had an enormous impact on musicians. All the cats who make their living writing for TV and Hollywood owe a great deal to him. They all came from Dameron.”

Benny Golson said, “None of his music ever sounded artificial, arbitrary, or manufactured. It always had depth and personality – his personality. It touched not only our minds, but our hearts as well. This is what’s really important.”

Tributes

In the 1970s, pianist Barry Harris, who was first exposed to Dameron’s music as a high school student, recorded an entire album of Dameron songs. Harris said, “I like Tadd’s harmony, the easy way he has with melodies. It’s an easy blend of rhythm and harmony.”

Almost 20 years after Dameron’s death, Philly Joe Jones led a repertory group called Dameronia which recorded many of the Clevelanders’ compositions and arrangements. Another band, Continuum, led in the 1980s by Jimmy Heath and Slide Hampton, recorded an album called Mad About Tadd for the Palo Alto label.

In 1999, native Cleveland saxophonist Joe Lovano, whose father had played with Dameron in Cleveland, recorded a compact disc, 52nd Street Themes, which included five of Dameron’s songs, arranged by fellow Cleveland Willie Smith. Lovano, a three-time Jazz Artist of the Year, said he learned how to play his horn by listening to Dameron’s music.

Most people are amazed to learn that during his career Dameron composed almost 200 songs. Several became jazz standards. Others have been forgotten.

### Tadd Dameron Discography

(Recordings on which Dameron was a performer or the arranger)

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Date</th>
<th>Recordings</th>
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<td>Swing, My Dream, A Bridges</td>
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<td>11/13/40</td>
<td>Harlan Leonard’s Rockets: Dameron Stomp, Society Steps Out, Keep Rockin’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>’Take ‘Em, Dig It</td>
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<tr>
<td>12/23/41</td>
<td>Jimmie Lunceford Orch: I’m Losing My Mind, Because of You</td>
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<td>4/14/42</td>
<td>Lunceford Orch: It Had to Be You</td>
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<tr>
<td>7/14/42</td>
<td>Lunceford Orch: I Dream A Lot About You</td>
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<tr>
<td>3/29/44</td>
<td>Sabby Lewis Orch: Embraceable You</td>
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<td>4/18/44</td>
<td>Earle Warren Orch: Poor Little Plaything</td>
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<tr>
<td>9/5/44</td>
<td>Billy Eckstine Orch: I Want to Talk About You, I’ll Wait and Pray</td>
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<td>1/9/45</td>
<td>Dizzy Gillespie Sextet: Good Bait</td>
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<tr>
<td>2/7/45</td>
<td>Billy Eckstine Orch: Airmail Special, I Want to Talk About You, Mean to Me</td>
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<tr>
<td>5/11/45</td>
<td>Dizzy Gillespie Quintet: Hot House</td>
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<td>5/24/45</td>
<td>George Auld Orch: Honey, Stompin’ at the Savoy</td>
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<td>5/25/45</td>
<td>Sarah Vaughan Octet with Bill de Arango: I’d Rather Have a Memory Than a Dream</td>
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<td>10/16/45</td>
<td>George Auld Orch: Airmail Special</td>
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<td>10/23/45</td>
<td>George Auld Orch: Just You, Just Me</td>
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<td>3/21/46</td>
<td>Dickie Wells’ Big Seven: We’re Through</td>
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<td>Buddy Rich Orch: Just You, Just Me, Cool Breeze</td>
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<td>George Auld Orch: One Hundred Years From Today, Just You, Just Me</td>
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<td>5/7/46</td>
<td>Tadd Dameron Orch. with Sarah Vaughan: If You Could See Me Now, I Could Make You Love Me, My Kinda Love, You’re Not The Kind</td>
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<td>6/7/46</td>
<td>Billy Eckstine Orch: I Want To Talk About You, Our Delight</td>
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<td>1/17/47</td>
<td>Illinois Jacquet Orch: For Europeans Only, You Left Me All Alone</td>
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<td>1/9/47</td>
<td>Fats Navarro group: Fat Girl, Ice Freezes Red, Eb Pob, Goin’ to Minton’s</td>
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<td>1/22/47</td>
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<td>Babs Gonzalez group: Lop Pow, Oop-Pop-a-Da, Stompin’ at the Savoy, Pay Dem Dues</td>
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<tr>
<td>4/11/47</td>
<td>Buddy Rich Orch: Just You, Just Me</td>
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# Tadd Dameron Discography (continued)

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<th>Artist/Group</th>
<th>Song(s)</th>
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<td>New, Heaven's Doors Are Open Wide: Tadd Dameron and Miles Davis Quintet</td>
<td>Riffthide, Good Bait, Lady Bird, Don't Blame Me, The Squirrel, All The Things You Are, Allen's Alley, Wahoo, Embraceable You, Ornithology, Crazy Rhythm</td>
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<td>Woody Herman and His Orchestra</td>
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<td>12/7/49</td>
<td>Artie Shaw and His Orchestra</td>
<td>So Easy</td>
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<tr>
<td>1/7/50</td>
<td>Artie Shaw and His Orchestra</td>
<td>Nothing For Nothing, There Must Be Something Better Than Love</td>
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<td>2/8/50</td>
<td>Miles Davis Sextet: Conception, Ray's Idea, That Old Black Magic, Max is Making Wax, Woody's You</td>
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<td>6/30/50</td>
<td>Birdland All-Star Sextet with Miles Davis (Damon in prison from February to June 1961)</td>
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<td>10/17/51</td>
<td>Bull Moose Jackson: I'll Be Home For Christmas, I Never Loved Anyone But You</td>
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<td>11/8/53</td>
<td>Tadd Dameron Orchestra with Clifford Brown: Philly Joe Jones, Choose Now, Diz B For Beauty, Theme Of No Repeat</td>
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<td>9/7/53</td>
<td>Louie Bellson Orchestra: For Europeans Only</td>
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<td>2/19/56</td>
<td>Clifford Brown-Max Roach Quintet: Flossie Lou</td>
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<td>3/9/56</td>
<td>Tadd Dameron Orchestra: Fontanelleau, Delirium, Clean The Scene, Flossie Lou, Bula Beige</td>
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<td>3/29/56</td>
<td>Tadd Dameron Orchestra and Carmen McRae: Blue Moon, I Was Doing All Right, I'm Putting All My Eggs In One Basket, Nowhere</td>
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<td>Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra: Bula Beige</td>
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<td>Woody Herman Orchestra: Slight Groove</td>
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