

Heath Brothers' Quintet arrives

by Marc Garvey

Since 1974, The Heath Brothers have been in existence creating jazz music that is diverse in style ranging from the small-group sounds of the Bebop classics to the contemporary. In addition to Percy (bass) and Jimmy (tenor and soprano sax, flute) The Heath Brothers ensemble includes pianist Stanley Cowell, Tony Purone on guitar and Akira Tana on drums. In the relatively short time they have been together, The Heath Brothers have been knocking audiences out all over the U.S. and Europe with their singularly swinging brand of musical brotherhood.

Percy Heath is probably best known by virtue of having been a founding member and outstanding bassist for twenty-two fruitful years with the Modern Jazz Quartet (Milt Jackson, vibes; John Lewis, piano and Connie Kay, drums). When the MJQ broke up in 1974, Percy joined forces with his brother, Jimmy, who by that time had built a richly varied career as a multi-reedman, composer, arranger and teacher. Both Percy and Jimmy were key figures in the Bebop revolution of the late forties and early fifties, which still contributes greatly to the course of jazz today.

Born in North Carolina on April 30, 1923 and raised in Philadelphia, Percy started out playing violin during his school years. He took up the bass in 1946 after 2½ years as a fighter pilot in the Air Force. "I bought a bass with my severance pay," he recalls, "learned some chords and scales and joined the union." By that time, Jimmy, born in Philadelphia on October 25, 1926, had begun his professional career as well. Originally an alto saxophonist, he was nicknamed "Little Bird" (as in Charlie 'Bird' Parker) early in his career. He later switched to tenor; today he is equally at home on soprano sax and flute.

"Jimmy and I learned together," Percy says. In 1948, they both went on the road with Bebop trumpeter Howard McGhee. Two years later, they found themselves side by side in Dizzy

Gillespie's big band. In Philadelphia, they both built solid local reputations — Jimmy as a player, teacher and sometime bandleader (John Coltrane was once a sideman of his) and Percy as the house bassist at the Downbeat, Philly's top jazz club. By the early fifties they performed with virtually every major name of that era's jazz: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Nat Towles, Sonny Rollins, Bud Powell, Art Blakey, Kenny Dorham, Fats Navarro, Horace Silver and so on.

In late 1951, Percy joined his Gillespie rhythm section mates in forming the Modern Jazz Quartet. The group specialized in collective improvisation, fragmenting the melodies and reworking them in flexible interplay between the instruments. The MJQ soon became renowned around the world for its sophisticated contrapuntal jazz and the dignified way they insisted on presenting it (the group sported formal tuxedos). From 1958 - 1962 Percy founded and served as a faculty member of the School of Jazz at Music Inn in Lenox, Massachusetts.

Since leaving Dizzy, Jimmy continued to work with many of the great jazz pacesetters, traveling to Europe with his own groups, writing and performing with European radio big bands, and instructing through New York City's Jazzmobile and the City Colleges.

There are eighty Jimmy Heath compositions at last count with *CTA*, *Gemini*, *Gingerbread Boy* and *The Quota* among the most recorded. A work of large scope, *The Afro-American Suite of Evolution* (for forty pieces) has been performed in New York City at Town Hall and the Monterey Jazz Festival. ("It covers the whole evolution of Afro-American music from field hollers up to avant-garde, past rhythm and blues and bebop. It's got ragtime, a choir, strings, everything".) A monumental work, it took two years to complete with the help of a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts CAPS program.

Versatile and sensitive pianist/composer Stanley Cowell has been touring with The Heath Brothers since the group's inception. Cowell's playing evidences Art Tatum's control, Bill Evans' subtle lyricism and Oscar Peterson's blues virtuosity. Stanley is a richly imaginative soloist and a canny accompanist.

Stanley was also the founder and organizer of the Piano Choir, and was incorporator and founding member of Collective Black Artists, Inc. He served as conductor of the CBA Ensemble in 1973-74, and in 1974 as Music Director of the New York Jazz Repertory Company at Carnegie Hall, along with Gil Evans, Billy Taylor and Sy Oliver. Besides his brilliant work in The Heath Brothers ensemble since 1974, Cowell has performed and/or recorded with Sonny Rollins, Clifford Jordan, Oliver Nelson, Donald Byrd, Thad Jones/Mel Lewis, Roy Haynes and Jimmy Owens.

The most recent addition to The Heath Brothers is guitarist Tony Purone, a discover of Jimmy's from Connecticut. Tony gives The Heath Brothers ensemble yet another outstanding harmonic, rhythmic and melodic voice which blends well with the ideas they express in their music.

Drummer Akira Tana born March 14, 1952 in San Jose, California and raised in Palo Alto, has at his young age led an impressive and diverse musical career.

He has performed with Helen Humes, Milt Jackson, Sonny Stitt, Art Farmer, Jaki Byard, George Russell, Sonny Rollins, John Hartman, Hubert Laws and the Paul Winter Consort.

The Heath Brothers record on Columbia Records. *Passing Thru*, their first Columbia release received wide critical acclaim with top star ratings from its *Downbeat* Record review. Their second release entitled *In Motion* was hailed par excellence and remained for almost an entire year on the *Billboard* Jazz Charts. The Heath Brothers' current Columbia release is entitled *Live at the Public Theater* recorded in December 1979.

Clearly, Jimmy and Percy Heath between them have a wealth of experience and an abundance of talent. Add to that the equally impressive gifts of Stanley Cowell, the youthful vitality and creativity of Tony Purone and Akira Tana, combining all that with Jimmy's beautiful arrangements and the spirit and energy present in their live performances — and you have one of the most rewarding jazz units today. Listen, and be amazed.

The Heath Brothers' Quintet will appear Wednesday, November 26 at 8:00 pm in the Provincial Museum Theatre. Tickets are on sale at Mike's and some will be available at the door.

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