Jymie Merritt

Taken & Transcribed by Ludwig Van Trikt

Jymie Merritt by Martie Zelt

CADENCE: Where and when were you born?

JYMIE MERRITT: I was born in Philadelphia, PA 1926 at the Women's Hospital (which was in the North Philly area.)

CAD: You were part of a generation of musicians who came of age during a golden era in Philly's Jazz history. What cats did you grow up with?

J.M.: Well, there was Trane. He used to come over to my house and jam. John Coltrane and Jimmy Heath......Sometimes a whole band. Anybody I could get my hands on would come by my house on Sundays. We would just "jam"—no rules, no music—just play. We did that for quite a few years.

CAD: Let's trace the history of your own studies. When did you first start getting into music?

J.M.: I came out of the Army in 1946 after three years in combat. I had some injuries from sleeping on the ground in foxholes during World War II. Before the war I had studied tenor saxophone. One of my injuries was a sinus condition that I thought would be permanent. I was in a state of despair since I couldn't play the saxophone. When I was in the service I had a little clarinet with me. My mind was made up that when I got out of the service I would play music professionally. In fact, I had written one of the major Jazz critics and asked him his advice. I did this when I was on the front line. He wrote me a very nice letter back!

CAD: Who was this critic?

J.M.: Martin Downs? He came on the radio hosting the Chicago Philharmonic and events like that. He was not a Jazz critic. I was looking for advice from somebody who knew a lot about music in general. At that time I was approaching 20 years of age and my thought was that it might be too late for a music career.

CAD: You started studying the bass when you were relatively old.

J.M.: Yes, I was at least 21 years old. I had just come out of the service. Like I said, I didn't know if I was going to get back to the saxophone. On my 21st birthday my mother (who was a public school teacher) came home saying "I want you to help me in the

house with something from the car." I saw this great big thing sticking out the car–it was a bass!

CAD: Your mother came up with the idea of you playing the bass?

J.M.: My mother thought since I couldn't play the horn, why stop now?!

I picked up the bass and started playing right away. During that time I was helping my father with constructing homes in Chester, PA. My father came to me the next day (after I got the bass) and asked if I was ready for work? I said, "I am sorry but I won't be doing that anymore." My mind was made up to play the bass violin.

CAD: Were you at first largely self-taught?

J.M.: Yes. Although on various occasions I had an opportunity to get educational reinforcement from some notable professional musicians.

After I had been playing for about a year I went to the Philadelphia Conservatory. I don't remember the gentleman's name from that school, but he agreed to audition me.

I was so concerned that I had the proper aptitude for a professional career. The gentleman made an assessment of my playing and also he was very encouraging with the idea that I go on. I enrolled in the Ornstein School of Music and I got to know Leo Ornstein. He was a great classical pianist who, along with his wife, ran the school. The test results in academic areas showed I did very well with theory and general studies.

They did, however, appreciate me going into the closet and practicing Jazz. Around that time a number of schools were opening up that embraced and taught Jazz. Red Garland, Philly Joe Jones, and a bunch of the guys were going to the more progressive schools. I got to know a lot of the guys because we were coming home from school at the same time. They were even invited over to my house to jam.

CAD: Was Philly Joe Jones (7/15/23) younger or older than you?

J.M.: I think he might have been a few years older.

CAD: Did Philly Joe start late at a musical career too?

J.M.: Yes, he would carry his drums with him (laughter). Philly always had a snare in his hand.

CAD: Were you also jamming at some of the clubs while you studied formally?

J.M.: I actually started playing before that. See, my mother was a musician. She had been playing since she was six years old. On any social occasion, like a tea or something, I got pushed out the door to perform. Almost immediately I got used to playing in public. I was studying with a wonderful teacher named Wyatt Graves–a gentleman who lives in West Philadelphia. We used to stand on the corner after my lessons finished. I was concerned about where my career was going. I had this schedule wherein I would practice for eight years then be ready to perform professionally. Mr. Graves said, "Do it now. Go down to the Union and join!" I went down there even though I was terrified; the Union was #274 on Fitzwater Street.

CAD: Was that the old Black musicians' locale?

J.M.: Yes. This was before they moved to Broad Street. I was properly harassed musically when I got there. They threw these big complex pieces at me to read. Somehow I got through it. The next thing I knew I got a few recording jobs and related gigs. I never knew how the musicians from the union did it, but they would stand in the vestibule and hear you playing. Then they would test your skill level. Later I realized that it was a very good environment.

CAD: What kinds of gigs was the Black musicians' Union getting for you at that time?

J.M.: I call them generic because no one said this is "Jazz." When you got to the performance there were all these people and you had to perform something. The question was, what do you do? So someone would just say, "Let's play." We would do just that and play.

CAD: Did you do standards?

J.M.: Once I got used to the process, I would say the opener was usually a Blues.

That made it easy to access and get into. Then you looked around and decided what tune might work here. It might be some tune from the radio.

CAD: Your career has been marked by going from Jazz to the Blues. You had quite an extensive blues background.

J.M.: I always considered it to be two faces of the same thing. In the Blues you have some Jazz changes and vice versa. After you play the heads of these charts you have got to play something. Especially with all the dances that I played. I would play with Hasaan Ibn Ali ("The Legendary Hasaan") at many of these

gigs. These were private clubs in North Philadelphia we would hit and the next thing I would know he was singing the Blues. Hasaan, a great Blues singer, was known as "Count Langford."

CAD: That's surprising because he was mainly known for his unique approach to the piano.

J.M.: Well even back then this style of his was coming out. When his concept got stronger it was tough for him to contain. I watched the whole process of him being alienated because the audience didn't understand what he was doing.

CAD: What kind of electric bass were you using in the late 1950s?

J.M.: By that time I was using what is still called a Fender bass. I had been attracted to it because of Benny Golson. Golson and I were on the road (1951) with "Bull Moose" Jackson's band. Benny was the musical director. The other members of the band were Philly Joe Jones and Johnny Coles. Golson had free rein in that group doing everything but the vocal arrangements. He had changed the direction of the group so that it was more of a Jazz band, except when Bull Moose was singing.

CAD: Was that because Bull Moose was using charts by Tadd Dameron?

J.M.: Yes, that's right.

CAD: Did that group ever record?

J.M.: Yes, we recorded one tune called "Lulberry Love" (discography lists 3 tunes) which surprisingly made the critics choice. This was on a label (King) based in Cincinnati.

CAD: How did Benny Golson lead you to the electric bass?

J.M.: We were touring—getting as far as Texas. Golson called me one night while we were on tour and said, "I want you to see this new instrument." We went to see a Country and Western band at a club. Some White cats with their bassist were using a Fender bass. Benny told me he saw one of the bass instruments in a Texas music store. I went down there and played it thinking it would come in good for dances, so I got the bass then. The guys in the band gave their permission for me to use it. They all agreed to suffer (laughter) with me.

CAD: Later you played a hybrid bass called the "Ampeg bass."

J.M.: I had already begun to use electronics when I used the Ampeg bass. This bass was acoustic but mounted a microphone inside it. That bass had certain problems; it wasn't perfect. Yet, still it was the first amplified acoustic bass. So I found out where the inventor of the Ampeg was living—in New York City. Everett Hall (the inventor) and I formed an acquaintance. At some point when he perfected it he sent me one, which I still have in my home.

CAD: Let's go back to your gigging situation. What did you do between Bull Moose Jackson and Art Blakey?

J.M.: I was working a lot in Philly, in particular with an alto saxophonist named Jimmy Campbell. There was also a drummer named Jimmy Bivens and trumpeter James Brown (who was Ruth Brown's husband).

CAD: Were you able to sustain yourself solely by playing music or did you do some non-musical things?

J.M.: I was doing different types of music including working with Ernie Hopkins, who was in a Lester Young mode. He is still active somewhere. We hit mainly in North Philly. At that time it was a productive time for gigs in Philadelphia. You had a lot of blue-collar jobs for Blacks. There was Quarter Masters Factory and the Navy shipyard, just to name a few. All these people wanted to go out somewhere. The Black middle class here was almost on par with Detroit. Later I went to Detroit with Bull Moose and saw the impact that these industries had. There was also a Black columnist named Matt Middleton who wrote for *The Philadelphia Tribune*. He was a critic at large who was very serious and helpful to the local musicians. Prior to my working with Art Blakey I performed with Chris Powell (drums/vocals) who was some sort of genius—he played drums. This was a cat that weighed more than 500 pounds. He was a super entertainer who knew what to do and who to do it. He was from Buffalo, New York, and grew up with Sammy Davis, Jr. Powell had insights into the music world. All the people that subsequently came onto the Black music scene would come out to see him. When we worked in Pennsylvania, Bill Haley was there every night! They played opposite us. At first they played Country & Western. After seeing Chris Powell, he [Bill Haley] played the type of music that we performed. Wherever we performed it wasn't the same effect. Chris Powell was only popular in this area, though. His performances included the Showboat in Philly and different Atlantic

City clubs. Chris would go into these clubs and talk people into hiring him. Crowds would be around the corner. He would show a club owner how much money they would earn–which they did. He had a unique insight into the music business. Plus he played well and included dancers. One time Clifford Brown worked with us.

I did this gig for five years then performed with B.B. King for three years. B.B. King heard me with Chris Powell then invited me to join his group.

CAD: Were you still formally studying at that time?

J.M.: Yes–I gravitated to the Hamilton School of Music because they taught the Schlinger system. I had become interested in this system by Joe Schlinger, which gave me a whole new philosophy about music. I wish I were still studying it. Schlinger has a very profound mathematical approach.

CAD: Does this lean toward composition or playing?

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J.M.: "The method goes toward anything you want to apply it to. I have for years now written my own exercises based on this theory. I unfortunately threw away all my old books. The books helped but they influenced me at the same time. The Jazz musician has to write his own studies based on what it is that he is doing.

CAD: At the same time you were pursuing studies you also were playing the Blues? Isn't that an easy form to master?

J.M.: Yes, except when you perform with a master like B.B. King. Then you are playing in all keys and all forms of the blues. It gets a little involved musically plus he had guest writers coming in. A lot of the guest writers were Schlinger trained and wrote some complex charts. B.B. King also was a student of Django Reinhart. I don't know if they actually played together but B.B. King carried everything that Django wrote with him on tour. He would study these tunes while we were on tour; this went on for years.

CAD: So B.B. King has some Jazz chops?

J.M.: Oh yeah, yeah!

CAD: Were you making a good livelihood at that time?

J.M.: "At that particular time the money was okay because every night of the month you could work. After a while the tedium of working all the time got to me. One night we pulled into New York City and I said that I was staying. I was in New York City long enough to get my cabaret card. I left the B.B. King band and also got my local musician's card.

CAD: Did you start playing gigs in New York City?

J.M.: No, not exactly. I just started sitting in. One day I ran into Red Prysock and he invited me into his group. I worked with him but I was also going out to gigs on the Blues circuit. From time to time I came back to Philly to work with my father and to practice my Jazz chops. One night in New York City I checked out Art Blakey performing. During the break at Small's Palace he walks up to me and asked, "Do you want to join the band?" Just like that (laughter)!! I said I didn't even have a bass because by that time I was into the Fender bass, playing R&B gigs. Art said "Can you get a bass?" I told him sure! He had Spanky DeBrest playing at that gig and a collection of fill-in players. Benny Golson came into the band. He was the music director pulling the whole thing

together by getting pianist Bobby Timmons, trumpeter Lee Morgan, and myself.

CAD: This was the Philly band?

J.M.: Yes. Benny did stay long after performing that feat (i.e. forming the band). Golson then wanted to form another group, the Jazztet, with Art Farmer. Golson had a better personal relationship with Art Farmer. I decided to stay with Art Blakey. I was with the band up until the time I started having health problems, which later turned out to be the big "C" (i.e. cancer). I didn't actually know it then; they had not developed the diagnostic equipment back then. The illness put me in a place wherein people thought that I might be using drugs. When it came time to do a gig I just couldn't get it together. I left Art's group, which was the best thing for me to do.

CAD: You worked with Art Blakey from the late 1950's to 1962?

J.M.: Yes. When I came back to Philadelphia I figured if I slowed down I would be able to figure out just what my illness was. I stayed home for a number of years–which is what probably sustained me.

CAD: What did you do to survive after you left Blakey?

J.M.: My financial situation was touch and go, often quite hairy. I just thought I couldn't play anymore. Playing would really kill me. My father had a business and if it wasn't for him being helpful... One of the essential problems was I never had any good management situations.

CAD: I imagine things were shaky money wise even with Art Blakey. Art had a reputation for bad business management.

J.M.: Well, later on in his career he wanted me to have Power of Attorney over his affairs. I did some business for him but realized that it was too much. I didn't want to be a business person; I just wanted to be an artist.

Just as well because even when you have your own management it can be a problem. This I discovered when I worked for Dizzy Gillespie who was used by the people he hired to manage him.

CAD: Certainly working in that edition of the Jazz Messengers must have been great?

J.M.: Oh, yeah!! I had been with some great drummers before, such as Philly Joe Jones. In particular a drummer from Philadelphia–Charlie Rice. Rice was an ex-dancer. He had a natural feeling about rhythm. I even try to keep that "feel" now in my playing. In my past I also worked with an excellent pianist named Sammy Johnson. Mary Lou Williams tried to get him to come to New York City. When he performed at music school years later the entire faculty would come out to see him perform. He was an astounding musician but he never recorded.

Getting back to Art Blakey, that playing situation was phenomenal! When he asked me to join I still was gigging with R&B groups. I told him it would take 30 days before I could join him. Benny Golson sent me all the music after forming the group. We opened without a rehearsal in Rochester, New York. From then on everything happened on the bandstand. One time Bobby Timmons was humming a melody from his father's church roots. The tune had a spiritual anthem. Benny Golson kept on Bobby Timmons to write that down. We were playing "Moanin'" before it was an official tune. Then Timmons went on to write another similar composition, "That There."

CAD: Those cats were doing some hard living: a young Lee Morgan, Bobby Timmons, all of whom wrestled with their own demons.

J.M.: Yes. Well after Benny Golson left, Hank Mobley came into the band. That was like a

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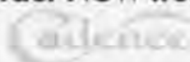

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further in-road to what you are talking about. Mobley was dedicated to the task of keeping himself in a certain state. We would have to huddle like a team and talk about whether Hank could make it or not? Eventually one day Hank didn't show up when we were in Montreal, Canada. We was doing our first gig for the great George Wein. I got to know Wein and was very impressed. The first time I saw him he was limping from carrying all the bags. I thought this guy is really hustling. Why is the impresario doing all this. But he wanted to make sure everything was all right. This was the hallmark of his legacy. We looked around for Hank Mobley and he wasn't there. No Hank! He was still in New York City. I don't think he could get out of the city because it was too far from where he needed to be for his addictions.

CAD: You made some significant recordings with Max Roach and Lee Morgan.

J.M.: When I met Max Roach I was still living in Philly. Max asked me to come play with his band but my physical state was still tentative, since I was plagued by this ailment. I didn't know that it was cancer yet. Max would pick me up in his car, since I couldn't drive at that time. He saw my condition and he would give me hot tea with milk. "This will help you sleep better," he said. Max has been so important in this music! He extended himself to Hasaan who was two steps ahead of Hank Mobley in terms of addiction. Max has dealt with cats having these sorts of problems. One time we were on tour in Barcelona, Spain when Sonny Rollins wandered off the stage. The people started rioting but some of Rollins' hardened fans shouted "Leave Sonny alone! He knows what he is doing!" Then other fans confronted those supportive fans. Afterwards, when we hit Berlin, Max approached Sonny and said "Sonny the next time you walk off stage, let us know when you are going to do it. This way we can do it too!"(laughter). The funny thing is that, at the next gig, Sonny stopped wandering off the stage.

CAD: You also had a prior conception for your own music before going with Max Roach called the Forerunners concept?

J.M.: When I was in Philadelphia, after I left Art Blakey, I took certain concepts that were indigenous to Jazz. This is predicated on the fact that there are all these guys who are "fore -runners," people who started this music. They paid their dues and dealt with the American evolution coming out of apartheid (segregation). All of which made it very difficult for them. It is hard just being an artist in this society and surviving. It is these kinds of things that we eulogize without getting smothered by what had happened before us.

CAD: This concept is a broad cultural idea then?

J.M.: I had envisioned taking the group out on the road with this essential idea but my health prevented it. I did however get better to the extent that I worked and recorded with Max Roach. The record *Members Don't Get Weary* (1968) came out during that time. The touring I did with Dizzy Gillespie was also helpful spiritually. That particular band included the pianist Mike Longo and James Moody. Longo became an educator who wrote many books since then.

But my health was deteriorating with me going to various hospitals with no result. It wasn't for another 10 years that I found where the cancer was. It was on the verge of being terminal but I began radiation treatments. A friend of my wife was instrumental in my recovery.

CAD: Many of us wondered why you never recorded leading a band.

J.M.: There were too many interruptions because of my health.

CAD: Though you still worked out a poly-meter system?

J.M.: Yes.

CAD: How did you arrive at that concept which the group M-BASE has borrowed from (i.e. Polymeter System)?

J.M.: Jazz has always been generational, going from one generation to the next. When you study Jazz, it goes from two beats to four beats then eight beats. Further, the use of the 6/8 then 12/8 reflects the overlapping of the African American influences which put it all into a different framework. This resulted in African American Classical Music or Jazz. Jazz is a part of this larger tradition; it is also generic because you find Jazz in everything. You find Jazz (or improvisation) in Blues, Gospel, and Soul music. Although Jazz is primarily characterized by improvisation, which is the chief component of that particular style.

CAD: Is the Forerunner concept then concerned with rhythm changes?

J.M.: It is an investigation into different forms of rhythm changes. They change from, say, African music with its predominance of 6/8.

You don't find that in Jazz.

Art Blakey said Jazz is a totally American invention. You wonder where this change in meter takes place, then you realize it's done in the mind, intuitively.

CAD: Is this a theory that you wrote down?

J.M.: I never took the time to write this theory down. Now I am actively involved in composing, particularly writing for a new bass that I received. It is called a VB6, an electric upright bass with 6 strings made in what used to be called the Czech Republic.I kept on trying to get information and finally found out where it was being made. So I called the manufacturer and they told me who was making it in the USA. I got the gentleman's name and he was very appreciative. He said he heard me on Lee Morgan's *Live At The Lighthouse.* (1970) This guy was a bassist who also managed a factory.

CAD: Of all the recordings that you have done, which one is the most representative?

J.M.: Although I am astonished at the amount of time that has lapsed, *Live at The Lighthouse* still today represents a lot of the musical avenues we were trying to explore.

These avenues still have not been explored fully.

CAD: During that time, Lee Morgan had seemingly put his addiction behind him.

J.M.: Yes, he had because I used to go by his place and he then had a fridge full of methadone. Lee said that was what was going to do it for him.

CAD: What made him stop doing drugs?

J.M.: I have thought about the use of drugs in the Jazz world, not just Lee's situation in particular. It has a lot to do with the basic nature of creativity. When you have an addiction it becomes so complicated; all that you have time for is that addiction and nothing else. Artie Shaw once said "success is very hard to handle." I could see all the myriad of things come about. In Lee Morgan's case the pressure of creativity affected Lee Morgan's choices. He ran into beautiful people and he was making valued judgments that had nothing to do with his art. Some of Lee's misjudgment were financial he had a great need for creative management. If we don't have business people with integrity then the music will not stand the kind of rigors that it faces. See, you can handle failure but success is the same damn thing that throws you. Lee Morgan was in that situation.

CAD: You have been a mentor to a number of Philly musicians from Bobby Zankel to Odean Pope. Now that your health is back, do you plan on performing more?

J.M.: Yes, I do as much has humanly possible. I had a very good doctor when I was out in Chester, PA. Ron Christopher is a great doctor who helped me go to a specialist, Dr. Kay Hirsch. Between the two of them is how I got my thing together. I am hoping to step out and do some things. This new instrument is only 20 pounds so I can sit down with it more easily. I still do a once a week gig at The Warwick Hotel in Philly with pianist Ted Gerike. Ted is a very unusual pianist who played by himself for 20 years.

CAD: Philadelphia is unique in that you have a number of artists who came up with different theories that remain largely underground.

J.M.: Philadelphia has been a good place to develop up until now. I say up until now because Philly is about to move beyond a "good" place to a world class status. The city is moving up to world class status. Philly is starting to promote its own home-grown talent.

CAD: Philadelphia doesn't have a sustained Jazz audience base.

J.M.: I think the internet is going to change all that because we will be able to reach people all over the globe. There is a massive potential audience out there.

CAD: I wondered if you had a sense of the radical evolution in the Jazz bass that was brought about During the '60's by cats like Scott LaFaro, Richard Davis, Ron Carter, and Cecil McBee.

J.M.: Ever since the inception of the instrument it has evolved steadily in Jazz. I remember first hearing Jimmy Blanton with Duke Ellington and I knew something was up then. Count Basie's band also introduced what we call Swing time with a surging bass sound. John Kirby was also an early innovator along with "Slam"Stewart. They were followed by Oscar Pettiford, Ray Brown, etc. So the music was constantly moving with new players. Now we have European players bringing a tradition of Classical music with that kind of virtuosity.

I want to add again how much I really admire Richard Davis in particular, everything that he is doing.

CAD: Philly has always had a rich bass tradition: Percy Heath, Reggie Workman, Jimmy Garrison.

J.M.: Don't forget a cat from the Philly area

(Camden), Nelson Boyd, who passed away recently. Miles Davis wrote "Half Nelson" for him. When we look at an explanation for the bass tradition in Philadelphia, I think it all has to do with economic growth. These people came from forbearers who made better decisions and had better life opportunities. Job opportunities allowed all this prosperity, so when jobs declined then the music declined also. Look at The Clef Club on South Broad Street. It was an example of this Black working class success; now it is scarcely used. This all depends on public participation–how the people feel. If they are making enough money then they want to go out and have a good time (i.e. see Jazz). So it's all related.

CAD: The cultural landscape has changed now to a more youth market.

J.M.: Yes, but there is still a need for the older generation to go out in safety to these places. Although people now have more things to do in the house with all these high tech devices.

CAD: Jazz in Philadelphia was in the past more of a part of the social fabric. Did you feel part of the community when you were a young musician?

J.M.: Yes! Between Local # 274 and people like the Black writer Nate Middleton from the *Philadelphia Tribune* and the different writers from *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Daily News*. Another example is how we developed my concept of the Forerunners at the former Tuskegee Alumni clubhouse in Philadelphia. When discrimination laws came into being (I mean anti-discrimination), locals like #274 were required to integrate. The Black local in Philly was one of the last Negro locals. Local #274 had so much to lose. Other locals like the one in Chicago also lost a lot by integration.

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