Harlem Renaissance: Dizzy Gillespie

John Birks Gillespie, more widely known as Dizzy Gillespie, played a huge part in the Harlem Renaissance era. One of the seminal figures in the creation of bebop music, Gillespie was a jazz icon. Some of his best known works are Oop Bop Sh'bam, Groovin' High, Salt Peanuts, and A Night in Tunisia. Things like his bent trumpet and his puffed-out cheeks made him instantly recognizable to fans all around the world.

Gillespie was born at Cheraw, South Carolina October 21, 1917. He was the youngest of nine children. His father was the first to introduce him to instruments and music. After his father died in 1927, Dizzy began teaching himself the trumpet and the trombone. For two years, he attended the Laurinburg Institute in North Carolina, where he played in the band and took music classes. When he was 18 years old, Dizzy and his family moved to Philadelphia, where he joined the Frankie Fairfax band, his first professional job.

In the late 1930's and the early 1940's, Dizzy played in many bands, including those led by Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, and Billy Eckstine. Around this time, he also worked with many performers, including Ella Fitzgerald, Earl Hines, Jimmy Dorsey, and Charlie Parker. Alongside Charlie Parker, Bebop was created. Although Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker are considered the co founders of bebop, people like Charlie Christian,Thelonious Monk, Kenny Park, and Max Roach also contributed to this type of jazz.

Gillespie considered bebop "the classical music of the future". Parker and Gillespie's competitive relationship was one of the things that made bebop truly unique. In fact, Parker admitted that he was irritated by Gillespie's stage antics. In the late 1940's, Gillespie started his own band, which was important in developing his winning stage personality and his connection to the audience. But, it wasn't until 1953 that he developed one of his most recognizable trademarks; his trumpet. Someone accidently fell on Gillespie's trumpet while it was in its stand, and it bent at a 45 degree angle. But, instead of getting frustrated, he realized he liked the sound and how it projected above the audience, so he kept it, and he made sure all of his trumpets were the same way.

For decades, Gillespie continued to perform, alongside people like Duke Ellington, Oscar Peterson, Johnny Hodges, Count Basie, and Paul Gonsalves. In 1979, his memoirs, To BE or Not to BOP: Memoirs of of Dizzy Gillespie, was published. More than a decade after that, in 1990, he received the Kennedy Center Honors Award. In 1993, Englewood, New Jersey, Dizzy died of Pancreatic Cancer at age 75.

Bibliography

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