

Respectability and The Modern Jazz Quartet:  
Some Cultural Aspects of Its Image and Legacy  
As Seen Through the Press

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Carla Marie Rupp, Nov. 15, 2010, New York City

## 1.

**Introduction**

The Modern Jazz Quartet (MJQ) was a noted jazz ensemble whose original members—John Lewis (piano and director), Milt “Bags” Jackson (vibraphone), Ray Brown (bass) and Kenny “Klook” Clarke (drums)—first performed together in Dizzy Gillespie’s big band in 1946.<sup>1</sup> Lewis (1920-2005), Jackson (1923-1999), Brown (1926-2002), and Clarke (1914-1985) first recorded as a group, calling themselves the Milt Jackson Quartet, in 1951-2. By the time the first recordings of the group under the name Modern Jazz Quartet were released in 1952, Percy Heath (1923-2005) had already replaced Brown as bassist. By 1954, the group had begun performing regularly in nightclubs and concert halls. Drummer/percussionist Connie Kay (1927-1995) replaced Clarke in 1955. The personnel of Lewis, Jackson, Heath and Kay established the MJQ as one of the longest surviving jazz groups in history—more than 40 years.<sup>2</sup> The MJQ could boast of having “the most permanent personnel in jazz history.”<sup>3</sup> After the death of Kay, several drummers—such as either Mickey Roker (b.1932) or Albert “Tootie” Heath (b.1935), a brother of Percy Heath—briefly filled the vacancy at clubs and concerts between 1995 and 1996.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the obituary by Peter Watrous, “Dizzy Gillespie, Who Sounded Some of Modern Jazz’s Earliest Notes, Dies at 75,” in *The New York Times* (Jan. 7, 1993), D20. According to Watrous, the Gillespie band’s “highest moments” were when “Mr. Gillespie—in a move that characterized his career—hired some of the young be-boppers on the scene. Among them were the pianist John Lewis, vibraphonist Milt Jackson, bassist Ray Brown and drummer Kenny Clarke, who went on to form the Modern Jazz Quartet. ‘It was an incredible experience because so much was going on,’ Mr. Lewis recalled. ‘Not only was he using these great bebop arrangements, but also he was so encouraging. It was my first job, a formative experience.’”

<sup>2</sup> This personnel history was taken from Thomas Owens, “Modern Jazz Quartet (MJQ),” *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 4 vols., ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie (New York: Macmillan, 1986), III, 252.

<sup>3</sup> Gunther Schuller, *Musings: The Musical Worlds of Gunther Schuller* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 15. As an unofficial adviser to the Quartet, Schuller also praised MJQ’s “classical refinement.”

<sup>4</sup> Personal interview with Percy Heath, October 9, 1999. In an aside to the MJQ “Group History,” Miles Davis recorded his first film score, “Escalator to the Scaffold” for director Louis Malle in 1957, the same year Lewis’s “No Sun in Venice,” a thriller/melodrama motion picture, was recorded (April 4).

The most complete history of the MJQ is found in the archives of the Institute of Jazz at Rutgers University, Newark. The group's history that follows--which includes a number of firsts for a jazz group--is taken from these archives, primarily from MJQ's own promotional listings on file at the Institute. I have selected some of their accomplishments and summarize them here, decade by decade, as a background for this essay.

### **Group History**

It was in 1956 that Lewis, Jackson, Heath and Kay began recording for Atlantic Records, for which they recorded 27 of their 45-album discography. It was also in 1956 that the Modern Jazz Quartet, as artists-in-residence, inaugurated their first outdoor jazz concerts at the Berkshire Music Barn of the Music Inn, in Lenox, Mass., near Tanglewood. The group organized the School of Jazz in 1957 at the Berkshire Barn, where young musicians could study jazz with Lewis, as music director, Jackson, Heath, Kay, Gillespie, Max Roach, and Oscar Peterson. That same year, the MJQ became the first small jazz group to play a solo concert tour of Europe. They played 88 cities in four months, bringing jazz to many classical concert halls for the first time. In 1958, the quartet performed a film score by John Lewis for the soundtrack of the Roger Vadim film, "No Sun in Venice," the first major commercial film to use jazz improvisation for dramatic purposes. In Paris that year, the world premiere of "The Comedy," a commedia-dell-arte-inspired jazz entertainment by John Lewis was featured, with four dancers and the MJQ on stage. The next year, the group performed on the soundtrack of the Harry Belafonte film, "Odds Against Tomorrow," directed by Robert Wise, with a score by John Lewis.

In 1960, the Modern Jazz Quartet led the way in performing a new kind of music called "third stream" for jazz quartet and symphony orchestras, as well as for smaller

symphonic ensembles, composed by John Lewis and others commissioned by the group. An important engagement was the performance of the MJQ, in 1961, with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Max Rudolf, first of a continuing line of conductors to combine their orchestras with jazz artists. In 1964, the group's performance at UCLA in Los Angeles helped inaugurate Royce Hall's first jazz concert series. Another first was the performance of the quartet with Balanchine's New York City Ballet in 1965. The following year, they recorded works by Bach and Purcell in Paris with the Swingle Singers. The Beatles signed the MJQ in 1968 to their Apple label (now Capitol) to two albums. They went to London to record at the Beatles' studios. In 1969, the quartet performed a concert at the White House, one of many White House appearances.

They were honored in 1971 among the Founding Artists of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Their names were inscribed in marble in the building. In 1972, the MJQ celebrated their twentieth anniversary, appearing at Carnegie Hall. The next year, they performed at Carnegie Hall with the Julliard String Quartet. The two groups were guests on CBS-TV's "Camera Three" for an historic combined performance. Beginning in 1974, the Modern Jazz Quartet took a hiatus and gave farewell performances in Australia, San Francisco and New York. Their famous "Last Concert" was at Avery Fisher Hall in New York. However, the group reunited once in each of 1976 and 1977 for U.S. concert tours.

Their next reunion was in 1981 at Budokan Hall in Tokyo as part of the Monterey Jazz Festival tour. Between 1982 and 1985, the MJQ members played together each year on a limited basis. In 1986, the group returned to a regular performance schedule. They appeared that year as guests on Garrison Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion" radio show. Another important engagement featured the MJQ and violinist Itzhak Perlman playing George Gershwin's standard "Summertime" for a PBS Television special. The

year 1987 marked 35 years for the quartet. Their itinerary that year included a worldwide tour to festivals in South America, Freiburg, Bath, Montreaux, Nice, Verona, Istanbul, Vienna, the North Sea, as well as appearances at the Hollywood Bowl, Monterey, and various places in New England and the western states. The MJQ and the New York Chamber Symphony premiered “Three Windows,” by John Lewis, at Carnegie Hall, with the performance recorded by Atlantic Records. The cities of Los Angeles, Detroit and New York officially honored the quartet with anniversary celebrations and declarations. In 1988, the MJQ, with the New York Philharmonic and the Oregon Symphony Orchestra, both conducted by James de Priest, performed a program of compositions by John Lewis. That same year, the MJQ released “For Ellington,” on the East-West label (distributed by Atlantic Records), produced by Nesuhi Ertegun. In 1989, Jackson, Lewis, Heath and Kay received Honorary Doctorates from the Berklee College of Music for their individual and combined contributions to music. That year the Italian city of Trieste honored the MJQ on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the group’s first concert in the city. It was also the year that the MJQ and the Manhattan Transfer group performed John Lewis’s composition “The Golden Striker,” in memory of the late Nesuhi Ertegun. The performance was repeated at Alice Tully Hall in New York at Ertegun’s memorial tribute.

An achievement in the 1990’s was the joining of the MJQ and the Kronos Quartet to perform four works composed for the occasion by John Lewis, first at concerts on the West Coast, then at the Wolf Trap Festival. Another highlight was the MJQ’s month-long engagement at the Café Carlye in New York. The group also notably performed with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and toured Canada. Early in the decade, they won first place in the *Jazztimes* magazine’s Readers Poll as Best Acoustic Group. Jackson



won first place in the magazine's poll as the top vibraharpist. Jackson also frequently won the *Downbeat* poll.

To commemorate the group's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Atlantic Records released a four-CD boxed set surveying the recording career of the MJQ between 1952 and 1990. Didier C. Deutsch, then of the Jazz Division of the Atlantic Recording Corporation, underscored the importance of this release for Atlantic Records. "Formed 40 years ago from the Dizzy Gillespie orchestra, the MJQ is the only group in the annals of music to have performed together over such a long period of time."<sup>5</sup>

### **Group Style**

The style in which the members of the Modern Jazz Quartet operated contributed to its success and longevity. While John Lewis composed much of the MJQ's music and acted as a visionary during its long duration, the group operated, as much as possible, as a cooperative in which each member split the profits and shared the responsibilities.<sup>6</sup> Each member of the Quartet already had a reputation in jazz; no one could afford to pay the other three, Lewis told writer Gary Giddens in an interview. "So we had to make the band a cooperative," said Lewis. In Jackson's words, "The Quartet became a unit because John was not going to be a sideman for me, and I was not going to be a sideman for him. Public relations went to Jackson, financial responsibility to Heath, music to Lewis, and Kay (after 1955) handled accommodations and transportation."<sup>7</sup>

"The group created a cool kind of 'bop' [style of playing] and became one of the best known bands in modern jazz," said historian Mark C. Gridley.<sup>8</sup> The main soloists in the MJQ were Jackson and Lewis. Jackson became recognized in the

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<sup>5</sup> From an Atlantic Records press release dated January 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Feather, "John Lewis," *Current Biography* 23, no. 1 (January 1962), 20.

<sup>7</sup> Gary Giddens, "Modern Jazz Quartet (The First Forty Years)," in *Visions of Jazz: The First Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 386.

1950s “as the leading vibraharpist in modern jazz” largely due to his presence in the MJQ, according to Gridley. “Cool” is a term defined as “an American jazz style of the 1950’s, characterized by a less frenetic atmosphere than earlier styles, use of ‘nonjazz’ instruments (such as flute, French horn or vibraphone), and adoption of ‘classical’ techniques (fugue).”<sup>9</sup>

## **Individual Histories**

### **Milt Jackson**

Born in Detroit in 1923, Milt Jackson began studying the guitar at age seven, the piano at eleven, and the drums, timpani, violin, and vibraharp as a teenager. In 1945, Dizzy Gillespie heard Jackson playing the vibraharp in a local nightclub and brought him to New York. His influences were vibists Lionel Hampton and Red Norvo. But Jackson’s unique sound gave his instrument an entirely new direction and style. In spite of the mechanical and percussive nature of the vibraharp, Jackson managed “to extract a warm sound and project a remarkable presence by bluesy melodic figures and a careful regulation of the vibraharp’s tremolo speed (he uses especially low rates of tremolo [in comparison to Hampton]). According to jazz historian Scott Reeves, “Jackson was the first vibraharpist to incorporate Charlie Parker’s innovations on that instrument.” Jackson often adjusts the tremolo rate while playing, just as a saxophonist alters his vibrato and blowing pressure for expressive purposes. Jackson’s lines are richly ornamented in a graceful, relaxed way. He ties up each phrase neatly.”<sup>10</sup>

Thomas Owens wrote that Jackson’s “exuberant and rhythmically complex solos” contrasted “effectively with [John] Lewis’s restrained and deceptively

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<sup>8</sup> Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1991), 153. Scott Reeves, personal comments, Dec. 1, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Baker, ed., *Schirmer Pronouncing Pocket Manual of Musical Terms*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn., rev. Nicolas Slonimsky (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 59.

simple manner of playing. By frequently accompanying Jackson with subsidiary counter-melodies rather than the usual chordal punctuations of bop,” said Owens, Lewis created “a distinctive contrapuntal texture seldom heard in other bop performances.”<sup>11</sup>

The MJQ “bio” files available at the Institute of Jazz, Rutgers University, Newark, say that Jackson played with pianist Al Haig, bassist Ray Brown and drummer Stan Levy in the celebrated sextet led by Gillespie and Charlie Parker. Jackson worked with groups organized by Coleman Hawkins, Howard McGhee, Tadd Dameron, and Thelonious Monk. In 1949 Jackson replaced Terry Gibb in the Woody Herman Second Herd. The following year he rejoined the Gillespie big band, doubling as pianist and occasional vocalist. It was during that time that he, Lewis, Heath and Clarke began to play together, eventually forming the MJQ. Among the many compositions Jackson contributed to the group, “Bags’ Groove” became a classic in the jazz repertoire. (“Bags” was Jackson’s affectionate nickname, due to the bags under his eyes, when he served in the Air Force.) When the MJQ temporarily disbanded in 1974, it was because Jackson wanted to do more work on his own without the MJQ.

### **John Lewis**

The musical style of John Lewis is described in a 1997 feature article as “unique and concise.”<sup>12</sup> The article contains a transcription by author Riccardo Scivales of the standard song “Willow Weep for Me,” with words and music by Ann Ronell, as improvised by Lewis. According to Scivales, this improvised solo, in the context of the MJQ, is representative of Lewis’s piano style, and is

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<sup>10</sup> Gridley, 158-59.

<sup>11</sup> Owens, 253.

<sup>12</sup> Riccardo Scivales, “The Lyrical John Lewis,” *Piano Today* (Spring 1997), 33-37.

marked by a “miraculous conciseness, a magical touch, and a deep blues feeling.” The pianist also has the unique gift of constructing “gem-like phrases” in his improvisations. Lewis’s touch on the keyboard is described as “renowned” and “rich in nuances.” Most of the solos are almost exclusively in the right hand, with only a few spare chords in the left. They tend to rely on the string bass part played by Percy Heath.<sup>13</sup>

Thomas Owens called Lewis among the most conservative of bop pianists, noting that his improvised melodies, played with a delicate touch, are usually simple and quiet. The accompaniments are correspondingly light, with Lewis’s left hand often “just grazing the keys to produce a barely audible sound.” His method of accompanying soloists is similarly “understanding: rather than comping—punctuating the melody with irregularly placed chords—he often plays simple counter-melodies in octaves which combine with the solo and bass chords to form a polyphonic texture.”<sup>14</sup>

Born in 1920 in La Grange, Ill., Lewis grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he began studying the piano at the age of seven. He continued his musical studies at the University of New Mexico. While he was in the U.S. Army during World War II, he met the drummer Kenny Clarke, a pioneer of the bop style of jazz. Clarke introduced Lewis to Dizzy Gillespie. In Gillespie’s band, Lewis developed his skills as a composer and arranger, both by writing for Gillespie’s band and by studying at the Manhattan School of Music, where he received a master’s degree in 1953. During that time he was a founding member of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Scivales suggests pianists try playing “Willow Weep for Me” in the style of Lewis. “Try to get that controlled and limpid tone which makes Lewis’s solo so fascinating.” He adds, “Despite being criticized by some ‘critics’ who considered the Modern Jazz Quartet a betrayal of ‘true’ jazz, John Lewis has indeed left us a most personal and memorable contribution to this music.”

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Owens, “Lewis, John,” *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 4 vols., ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie (New York: Macmillan, 1986), III, 40.

MJQ. His Manhattan School studies were interrupted when he went with the Gillespie band on a concert tour of Europe. After the tour, Lewis also worked for such musicians as Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Miles Davis, Illinois Jacquet and Ella Fitzgerald. Lewis's work with the quintet of Parker and Davis was particularly historic. Together with Davis and Gerry Mulligan, Lewis helped to develop the ensemble sound of "cool jazz" manifested for the first time in the Miles Davis Capitol Band. Along with composer Gunther Schuller, he founded the Modern Jazz and New Classical Music Society, which promoted contemporary concert music and jazz. Nearly all of the compositions played by the MJQ were created or arranged by Lewis. Several of his compositions include "Toccato for Trumpet and Orchestra," "Three Little Feelings," and the suite "Fontessa." In addition to his work with the MJQ, Lewis also was the musical director of the Monterey Jazz Festival in California for 27 years until 1982. During the mid-1970s, Lewis held teaching positions on the music faculties of the City College of New York and Harvard University. He died on March 29, 2001.

### **Percy Heath**

According to Percy Heath's Atlantic Records biographical material, he was born in 1923 in Wilmington, N.C., and grew up in Philadelphia. As a youngster, he played the violin in the school orchestra. After serving in the Air Force, Heath returned to Philadelphia to study at the Granoff School of Music and play bass in the local nightclubs. In 1947, trumpeter Howard McGhee took Heath on tour with a sextet. This affiliation brought Heath to New York City and to the First International Jazz Festival in Paris. He played steadily at Birdland, working with "Fats" Navarro, Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, J.J. Johnson, Thelonious Monk, Sonny Rollins and Milt Jackson. When Heath joined the Dizzy Gillespie band, he

met the other members of the soon-to-be Modern Jazz Quartet. During his association with Gillespie and in the early days of the MJQ, Heath became the house bass player for both Prestige and Blue Note Records, recording almost 200 jazz albums. In the mid-1970s, Heath organized the Heath Brothers Band with his brothers--saxophonist Jimmy Heath and drummer Albert Heath--taking a leading role in that group. He died on April 28, 2005, several days before his 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday.

### **Kenny Clarke**

The first drummer in the MJQ, Kenny Clarke brought his unique style of performing and expertise to the group in its first few years. Ed Thigpen, in his profile of Clarke in *Modern Drummer* magazine, discusses the drummer's major contributions to jazz.<sup>15</sup> Clarke "is perhaps more responsible for the evolution of modern jazz drumming than any other single individual. The man is, in fact, the ultimate pioneer."<sup>16</sup> According to Thigpen, Clarke's drumming led to the use of the bass drum for accentuation as well as timekeeping; he established a jazz-time rhythm for the ride cymbal; and he freed the drums from a strictly metronomic role, forcing the bass to share in the responsibility of timekeeping. Clarke also freed the left hand so it could interact with the soloist. More importantly, Clarke "is primarily responsible for giving jazz drummers an opportunity to fully express themselves on the instrument."<sup>17</sup>

Born in Pittsburgh in 1914, Kenneth Spearman "Klook" Clarke was taught to read music by his mother. In high school, Clarke studied piano, trombone, vibes, theory and, finally, drums. Clarke became a swing band drummer. He performed

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<sup>15</sup> Ed Thigpen, "Kenny Clarke: Jazz Pioneer," *Modern Drummer* (Feb. 1984), 16-20.

<sup>16</sup> This and the following are from Thigpen.

<sup>17</sup> Thigpen, 17.

with Roy Eldridge, Claude Hopkins, Teddy Hill, and Edgar Hayes. Later, at Minton's, the 118<sup>th</sup> Street club in New York City, Clarke used his new style of drumming in the formation of the new music of "bebop" with Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Christian, Thelonius Monk and Charlie "Yardbird" Parker.<sup>18</sup> After the Minton years, Clarke worked with Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Benny Carter, and Henry "Red" Allen. Clarke went into the Army in 1943, and was in Europe during the war. After the war, in 1946, he worked with Dizzy Gillespie, Tad Dameron and Billy Eckstine.

Asked about his involvement with the original Modern Jazz Quartet, Clarke told Thigpen: "We did that in 1952. That was with John Lewis and Milt Jackson. That was some quartet; made a hell of a racket. It was so beautiful, you know. And Bags, he could hear around the corner. He had the power to do anything he wanted to do." After Clarke left the MJQ in 1955, he made a number of recordings in New York, and then decided to move to Paris, shifting his career to Europe.<sup>19</sup>

### **Connie Kay**

Connie Kay, who played drums in the MJQ from 1955 until his death 40 years later, also has an impressive biography. According to the Atlantic Records press release on Kay, the drummer had just spent three years with the legendary saxophonist Lester Young before he joined the MJQ. Kay became known for using triangles, bells, and other percussive instruments to enhance the subtlety and precision, which are integral aspects of the MJQ's sound. The release claims

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Clarke's drumming style, Thigpen added, would have an immediate impact on musicians such as Max Roach, Art Blakey, Tiny Kahn, Stan Levy and Shelly Manne, a group of young drummers who "would ultimately take the style to even greater heights."

<sup>18</sup> Thigpen, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 20.

Kay as one of the most important representatives of the new conception of playing his instrument, the most remarkable characteristics of which were a dominating, pulsating beat in spite of the greatest restraint and integration of the drums into the structure of the ensemble.

Born in 1927 in Tuckahoe, N.Y., Kay grew up in Manhattan. His parents were West Indians who came from the island of Montserrat. He was born with the original name of Conrad Henry Kirnon, but later took the name of Connie Kay. He taught himself the rudiments of drumming, with Big Sid Catlett as a mentor. Kay worked early in his career with trumpeter Rex Stewart. In 1944, he became the house drummer at Minton's, one of the birthplaces of bebop, where he played with Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, and Miles Davis. In 1945, Kay played in Cat Anderson's band and with Coleman Hawkins, Stan Getz, and Parker. Kay played in the early rock 'n' roll efforts of Ray Charles, Ruth Brown and Joe Turner (including Turner's original recording of "Shake, Rattle and Roll"). When the MJQ began their hiatus in 1974, he worked as a house drummer at Eddie Condon's and toured with Soprano Summit. In fact, during the years of 1975-1981, Kay was an in-demand drummer. Not only did he work at Eddie Condon's, tour for Soprano Summit and play with Tommy Flanagan, but he also enjoyed working with the noted Benny Goodman

### **The Phenomenon of the MJQ**

Throughout its history the MJQ received a tremendous amount of respect and gained a large following. This section will discuss certain aspects of the phenomenon of the MJQ. Joe Goldberg, for one, attributes part of the success of the MJQ to its packaging; in his view it was an example of "an astute use of public relations unparalleled in jazz."<sup>20</sup> Jazz

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<sup>20</sup> Joe Goldberg, *Jazz Masters of the 50s* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1965), 113.



musicians and commentators, he said, “have always fought for respectability, determined to prove that the music itself has validity apart from the social situations and myths that have surrounded it.”<sup>21</sup> From 1952 to its final performance in 1996, the MJQ was the ultimate respectable jazz group and achieved results because of the way it presented itself. Due to the respect the group received, it was instrumental in expanding the popularity of jazz.<sup>22</sup> The quartet received considerable press coverage of its concerts and appearances all over America and the world. Scott Reeves credits the group’s personal approach to group interplay, counterpoint, and structure, combined with a restrained, blues-based approach to improvisation, for enabling them to capture such a large general audience.<sup>23</sup>

Audiences found the Modern Jazz Quartet easier to listen to than many other jazz groups. There were reasons why audiences were receptive to the MJQ: it produced improvisations that were simpler and easier to follow for listeners than those ordinarily found in other bop combos; their solos were not as long as in other combos; it interspersed tightly arranged and well rehearsed ensemble statements among the improvisations;<sup>24</sup> it used compositional techniques, such as fugue, that were familiar to audiences who listened to classical music.<sup>25</sup> According to John Lewis, the group had

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> “In a world wracked by violent change, obsessed with planned obsolescence, what price can be set on constancy? How valuable is loyalty to an artistic credo?” asked Leonard Feather, of the Washington Post-LA Times News Service, in “MJQ Has an Era All its Own,” reprinted in the *New Brunswick* (N.J.) *Home News* (November 21, 1971). “The questions might well be asked with regard to a respected and world-renowned musical group, the Modern Jazz Quartet, masterminded by the composer and pianist John Lewis.” According to Feather, “While a dozen rock and jazz trends (and a thousand small combos) have come and gone, Lewis and Co. have remained almost untouched by the world around them, still making the same delicate, pointillistic music.”

<sup>23</sup> Scott Reeves, *Creative Jazz Improvisation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 74. Reeves provides a transcription of John Lewis’s well-known composition, “Django,” as played by vibraphonist Milt Jackson.

<sup>24</sup> Gridley, 172. Scott Reeves personally explains, “Its lack of wind instruments, restrained rhythmic and dynamic emphasis, and elegantly crafted compositions and solos also appealed to a classical audience,” Dec. 1, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> See Thomas Owens’s excellent analysis, “The Fugal Pieces of the MJQ,” *Journal of Jazz Studies* (Fall 1976), IV/1.

over 300 numbers in its musical repertoire.<sup>26</sup> The MJQ rehearsed regularly, as opposed to many other jazz groups known for their jam-session approach to performance. Lewis said it generally took the group about three hours to learn a number after he brought in the music and the arrangements.

And it [the repertoire] grows and changes all the time. Sometimes I change certain passages in numbers, and the tempo automatically tends to get faster through the years. And the group grows steadily and understands the music better, and that contributes to change. Gradually each piece comes to sound as if it is improvised all the way through. Some actually are and some are almost all written out. The length of a piece is pretty much dictated by where it is in the concert program, and the program is figured out, balanced out, from the first number to the last, so that it has a design and a structure. We abhor long solos. If good things don't happen in the first chorus of any solo, it's generally not going to happen at all.<sup>27</sup>

The MJQ phenomenon represented more to audiences, writers, and observers than its music. Its legacy extends beyond the music. The MJQ had a certain image, “which may ultimately be as important as its music.”<sup>28</sup> The Modern Jazz Quartet worked for respectability in ways other than through its musical style. The group was a pioneer in certain cultural aspects—the way it looked, and the way it practiced its style and presentation. The MJQ had a certain image. According to Stuart Troup, “Their consummate elegance extends to how they look, how they dress and how they approach their instruments.”<sup>29</sup> Even the places where the MJQ played were considered more respectable than the usual dive bar. In describing the appeal of the Quartet’s musicians, Joe Goldberg confirmed that the group not only played in the best places the most “respectable music ever to be called jazz,” but that the performers were “impeccably attired, with the bearing, manner, and appearance of gentlemen.” He also remarked that

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<sup>26</sup> Whitney Balliett, “Profiles to Live In,” *The New Yorker* (Nov. 20, 1971), 98.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted by Balliett, 96-98.

<sup>28</sup> Goldberg, 129.

<sup>29</sup> Stuart Troup, “On Music: No Rest for Revived MJQ,” *New York Newsday* (March 2, 1984), Part II/29.

their records were in the homes of suburbanites who might own “nothing else more daring than the songbooks of Ella Fitzgerald.”<sup>30</sup>

Other jazz historians and critics agree with this assessment. Witness Dan Morgenstern, director of the Institute of Jazz, Rutgers University, Newark, N.J., who notes that the MJQ played mainly in concert and sometimes in select clubs in the United States, Europe and Japan, taking an important role in the so called third-stream movement (the attempted joining of jazz and classical forms) and winning new respect and acceptance for jazz in circles previously hostile to the music.”<sup>31</sup>

Going to see the MJQ was “an event,” explained Morgenstern. The MJQ’s style of jazz was different. “They had mastered the art of how they wanted to present themselves. They attracted a different audience from other jazz groups. Some people would say, ‘I don’t really like jazz, but I like the MJQ.’ It was a kind of chamber jazz. The quieter sound of the MJQ appealed to those persons who didn’t like the more raucous type of jazz.”<sup>32</sup>

The general press treated the MJQ as something of an anomaly.<sup>33</sup> “Here were these tuxedo-clad people playing this ‘cool’ kind of jazz. It was a kind of an ‘image-thing,’ the way the press wrote about the Modern Jazz Quartet,” said Morgenstern. Most of the writers in the press needed an angle, and so writers often reported on aspects such as how the group walked, how they looked, and that they appeared in the most prestigious halls and locations. “Monte Kay [the MJQ manager and no relation to Connie Kay] was clever

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<sup>30</sup> Goldberg, 113.

<sup>31</sup> Dan Morgenstern, in “Notes on the Program” at Jazzmobile’s 35<sup>th</sup>-Anniversary Gala Featuring A Tribute to Milt Jackson, October 29, 1999, Avery Fisher Hall, in *Stagebill* (November 1999), 30.

<sup>32</sup> From a personal interview I conducted with Dan Morgenstern at the Institute of Jazz, Rutgers University, Newark, N.J., on October 29, 1999. A similar explanation is provided by Scott Deveaux: “The discreet gently swinging tonal structures of the Modern Jazz Quartet, performed by black men in tuxedos in concert halls for respectful audiences, provided a comforting image.” See his “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 499-500.

<sup>33</sup> “The Timeless, Enduring, Classic, Swinging, Dynamic, Quintessential, Creative, Expressive, Exciting, and Forever Hip MJQ”—read a telling headline for an article in *Jazztimes* (Feb. 1989), 18.

enough to capitalize on all of that. He didn't mind the superficial approach because it got them publicity. I don't think John [Lewis] was enamoured with the publicity of their looks, but he did want dignity for jazz. And we all know that if you want to market something the image is important." The effects were far-reaching. Morgenstern said he thinks "the effect of the MJQ extends to the present day, where we have jazz regularly at Lincoln Center, and it is not unusual anymore for jazz to be presented in concert halls. The MJQ was an interesting phenomenon."<sup>34</sup>

### **Research Methods and Aims**

Morgenstern pointed out the bulging folders at the Rutgers University Institute of Jazz pertaining to the material written about the Modern Jazz Quartet. Four decades of clippings from newspapers and magazines filled the various folders. I made copies of them, including pictures, programs, and press releases, to study. I had already made copies of the abundance of newspaper and magazine clippings on the MJQ at the Music Research Division of the New York City Public Library. All of this archival material provides the basis for my analysis of how a representative sampling of the press presented several distinctive features of the MJQ: their looks, self-presentation, use of the concert stage, and their professionalism.

My thesis will synthesize this press information in terms of how the newspaper and magazine reporters and writers perceived the MJQ's image. I will explore what reporters, critics and commentators wrote about such matters as dress, style and presentation, and about the use of certain performance sites. There is no other place where this synthesis can be found. Comments from jazz historians and material from my interviews with various sources will be inserted to provide context. I will first look at a sampling of what the newspaper and magazine press reported on how the MJQ dressed

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<sup>34</sup> Personal interview, Oct. 4, 1999.

for performance appearances (Chapter 2). Using various clippings as references, I will then summarize material reported about the MJQ's presentation as a group. In Chapter 4, I will discuss how the MJQ made the concert hall an important venue for jazz music, instead of just using the jazz nightclub. Chapter 5 will deal with the professionalism of the group. I will conclude with some personal remarks.

## 2.

**Respectability through Dress**

Throughout its over 40-year history, the Modern Jazz Quartet maintained its dignified reputation for appearance and style of dress. Over the years, the members paid attention to the way they dressed, and the music press duly noted this fact. At times, writers were quite descriptive of the MJQ's appearance. Amusingly, *Esquire* magazine reported in 1957, "In concert, the four hirsute gentlemen (three of them wear Vandykes, all of them mustaches) resemble a splinter group from a Baptist Ministers' convention." It added that the musicians looked "very, very dedicated and serious, and you can see it when they play."<sup>35</sup> "Four immaculately dressed gents, with music to match," wrote *Variety*, the music-trade newspaper, beginning a story on an overseas MJQ performance. The group was the main "act" at a matinee concert at the 3,000-seat Royal Festival Hall in London. "Attired in black jackets and striped pants, the Quartet immediately gave the impression that theirs was a serious business, and there wasn't going to be any handclapping or similar forms of audience expression. In fact, the mood set was more in keeping with a classical recital."<sup>36</sup>

Whitney Balliett was the first writer to make a funeral reference in his description of the group's serious dress in the *New Yorker* magazine. Then he went on in his writing to make the musicians seem more "alive" and "human." He described the appearance of the musicians, in 1971, like this:

Onstage, the MJQ often resembles, with its solemn, dark-suited mien, the rostrum at a morticians' convention. But this is only a mask; close-ups reveal life and variety. [Percy] Heath [the bassist], is tall and thin and patrician. He has a high, receding forehead and a pharaoh's nose. [Connie] Kay [the drummer] is even taller, with a full, monolithic face that conceals sharp, lively eyes. [Milt] Jackson

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<sup>35</sup> R.G. [writer's name just initials], "The Slipped Disc" [column], *Esquire* (December 1957), 12.

<sup>36</sup> Bary [the signer], "Modern Jazz Quartet a Big Click But Beat Befuddles Britishers," *Variety* (December 11, 1957), 15.

[on vibraharp] is a gnome. He is short and bird-boned, and is dominated by a slightly askew owl face. [John] Lewis [pianist] looks like a Teddy bear, and when he moves, he runs, even from room to room. But he has the handsome, untroubled, intelligent eyes that professors of philosophy should have.<sup>37</sup>

In his report of the group's Tanglewood concert in the *Village Voice*, June 12, 1957, Bob Reisner also noted the looks of the MJQ. First he reminisced about a concert several years earlier in which he, as manager of the Berkshire Music Barn in Lenox, Massachusetts, had hired the Modern Jazz Quartet. "It was an experience I shall not easily forget." He recalled being impressed with the way John Lewis, as master of ceremonies, introduced each number. Now, at Tanglewood, he was seated in the audience with "people nurtured on Purcell and Mozart. First impression the folks got was visually favorable: four impeccably dressed individuals in conservatively Edwardian-cut suits, the majority dignifiedly bearded."<sup>38</sup>

Later in his column, Reisner indicated a reason for the "mortician" label they sometimes got from critics. Reisner's opinion: "The Quartet has come in for its share of criticism. The school of hard swingers has nicknamed them 'The Undertakers' because of the conservative clothes and [style of] jazz. But MJQ has done some fine things for jazz."<sup>39</sup>

Sometimes the music writer could be quite facetious about the dress of the MJQ, such as in this review that appeared in *Time* magazine in the early 1960's referring to the "tails," or tuxedos worn by the group. "Ever since Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, the Lewis and Clark of modern jazz, returned from their first explorations on Manhattan's 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, other musicians have been following the masters' trails. Their search is more for small refinement than grand departures, and cults of aficionados travel in their wake,"

<sup>37</sup> Whitney Balliett, "Profiles: Room to Live In," *The New Yorker* (Nov. 20, 1971), 62.

<sup>38</sup> Bob Reisner, "Jazz: The MJQ," the *Village Voice* (June 12, 1957), 10.

<sup>39</sup> Reisner, 10.

begins the report, which describes retrospectively the “cults” of Theolonious Monk and Miles Davis. Then the reporter concludes: “But the cultists that follow John Lewis and his MJQ see themselves as the true believers. They were there in full force at a concert with ‘tails’ at the Manhattan Philharmonic Hall.”<sup>40</sup>

In 1965, in the *New York Journal American*, Lewis addressed the issue of the interest in the group’s clothing and of the constant reporting on their attire.

It’s funny...with all we’ve done, with all the places we’ve been, there’s one question that seems to crop up more than any other: ‘How come you all dress like that?’ There is a reason for our soberly dressed appearance on stage. The unity of our quartet disqualifies any kind of individual showiness or superficial characterization. We feel that by dressing and behaving as ‘mutedly’ as possible on stage, we’ll draw attention to our music, rather than to ourselves.<sup>41</sup>

Twenty years later, reporter Bob Protzman had this to say about the formal dress of the MJQ in the *Chicago Tribune*: “There also was, and probably remains, a kind of formal aura about the MJQ that resulted from more than the classicism in the music. The members dressed alike—in the stylish suits and narrow ties of the 50s—and they all had beards, giving them a dignified appearance not common to jazz musicians or groups.” Lewis is quoted in Protzman’s story on the subject of dress: “I thought the way we dressed was the normal way to dress.” Protzman wrote that Lewis was “perhaps a bit irritated that so much was made of their clothes.” Lewis said, “We were all about the same age and dressed that way. We never thought of it as something special or different.”<sup>42</sup>

To this researcher in 2000, the constant reporting of the group's apparel appears elitist and somewhat racist, as critics during that era would not have considered it noteworthy to comment on the formal attire of classical musicians (say, Heifetz, or Horowitz). In fact,

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<sup>40</sup> Unnamed writer, “Jazz: Pretension’s Perils,” *Time* magazine (Jan. 11, 1963), 49.

<sup>41</sup> John Lewis, guest columnist, “Jazz: The Easy Life,” *New York Herald-American* (Aug. 21, 1965), Journal for Living section, 5.



jazz groups, such as those led by Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, Jimmy Lunceford and others, had dressed formally many years prior to the Modern Jazz Quartet, as the many available jazz videos from that era (1930's and 1940's) show.<sup>43</sup>

Percy Heath, the bassist for the group, gives this explanation for their style of dress:

John's vision for the group was to change the music from just a jam session, or a rhythm section and soloist idea to something more. We were all equal members, and the dress, the wearing of tuxedos, and trying to perform in concert, rather than always in nightclubs, was part of what he envisioned, to change the whole attitude about the music.<sup>44</sup>

Milt Jackson elaborates:

Everything was methodical, a system. We practiced walking on stage, the appropriate attire. We set a precedent in doing that. We wanted to bring back a level of dignity that we all remembered from watching all those great big bands in the swing era. That was a very important part of jazz that I think we lost somewhere along the way.<sup>45</sup>

New Jersey reporter George Kanzler, who wrote that the MJQ “has been largely responsible for achieving increasing respect for jazz,” once asked Jackson to talk about “the fuss” people have made over the clothing. He replied: “You don’t come to see what I’m dressed like, what kind of a suit I’ve got on. To hell with that. You come to hear me play that instrument. That’s what you paid your money for!”<sup>46</sup>

Interestingly, the suits are mentioned prominently by Ben Ratliff in the *New York Times* obituary of Jackson, who died on October 9, 1999, at the age of 76.

The [Modern Jazz Quartet] group wore tailored suits and practiced every aspect of their public presentation, from walking on stage to making introductions to the powerfully subdued arrangements in their playing. They wanted to bring back to jazz the sense of high bearing it had been losing as the popularity of the big bands was slipping and jazz became more

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<sup>42</sup> Bob Protzman, “Modern Jazz Quartet Takes Five, Then Bops Back Together,” *Chicago Tribune* (June 2, 1985), 20, Section 13.

<sup>43</sup> “That’s the Ellington-Lunceford tradition,” Lewis says of the tailored suits, as quoted by Gary Giddens, *Visions of Jazz: The First Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 382.

<sup>44</sup> Giddens, 382.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> George Kanzler, “Artist Seeks More Reference for His Genre,” *The Sunday Newark Star-Ledger* (July 25, 1993), Sect. 4/1.

of a music predicated on the casual jam-session.<sup>47</sup>

Saxophonist-vocalist Bob Mover, who played with the bands of Charles Mingus and Chet Baker and who has worked on occasion with Percy Heath, comments: “Dress was certainly a very important consideration to the older black musicians, something I kind of found out the hard way.” He told me this story, which is revealing, I think, in what it says about the way some older jazz musicians thought about dress:

A few years ago I ran into Jim Hall [guitarist], and Jim has this fantastic memory and mentioned that he remembered me at the age of 16 at Ben Webster’s birthday party wearing a tuxedo. I was amazed that he would remember that, but it was actually Roy Eldridge’s birthday party at the Half Note. And the story is that Roy would quite often ask me to sit in as I would be at the Half Note at least four nights a week listening to him. So when it wasn’t too crowded, he’d invite me up to play a few tunes. Well, he hadn’t asked me for awhile, so one night I asked him, and he said: ‘No!’ That confused me, as before he’d been quite encouraging to me about playing. So I asked him why he said no. ‘Was it my playing?’ He said no; it was because of the way that I was dressed. Well, it was the summer of 1968, and there I was with long hair and jeans and sneakers and a T-shirt or something. And Roy turned to me and said that he ‘came from an era when the only place a black man’s mamma could see him in a suit was on the bandstand or in a coffin!’ So, I wore the ‘tux’ to show Roy that I respected what he taught me.<sup>48</sup>

Whether donning a tuxedo in fact brings respectability and dignity to the jazz musician has been debated. Referring to the Modern Jazz Quartet’s formal dress for concert appearances, Miles Davis observed: “I don’t go with this bringing ‘dignity’ to jazz. The way they bring ‘dignity’ to jazz in their formal clothes and the way they bow is like Ray Robinson bringing dignity to boxing by fighting in a tuxedo.”<sup>49</sup> In 1957, a British writer, Tony Brown, addressed this topic. He wrote that he regarded John Lewis’s approach to the MJQ’s image as “a misguided attempt to bring dignity to jazz.”

<sup>47</sup> Ben Ratliff, “Milt Jackson, 76, Jazz Vibraphonist, Dies,” *New York Times* (October 11, 1999), A17.

<sup>48</sup> Related from a personal conversation between this author and Bob Mover on October 7, 1999, New York City, when discussing the importance of dress for the jazz musician on stage.

<sup>49</sup> As quoted by Nat Hentoff, *The Jazz Life*, 173.

Lewis “has obviously set his face too sternly against Uncle Tom antics,” Brown stated. “The pity is that he apes the ridiculous formality of Europe instead of relying on the natural dignity of his music,” Brown concluded.<sup>50</sup>

Nat Hentoff pointed out that John Lewis was “rather touchy” about any criticism of the MJQ’s appearance, and relates this story: “‘It has taken a long time,’ Lewis lectured a London interviewer, ‘to perfect the material that this suit is made from.’ He fingered the cloth. ‘We don’t want to come over here looking like bunch of tramps.’” Hentoff noted that at times there were “farical elements” to the Modern Jazz Quartet’s wardrobe problems. At the end of a rehearsal one afternoon, the group debated for 15 minutes concerning which suits they’d be taking to Philadelphia the next night, and which were the proper shoes and other accessories for those suits. A ‘hanger-on’ supposedly muttered, “Are they going to be in *Vogue* magazine again?”<sup>51</sup>

In his introduction to interviews with each of the MJQ musicians in *Down Beat* magazine on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the group, writer Michael Bourne implies that the four men perhaps belong in *Gentleman’s Quarterly* magazine. Speaking of the elegance and looks of the musicians, Bourne interestingly remarks on their self-presentation:

Even when they’re named on the albums, they’re elegant.  
 ‘The Modern Jazz Quartet is *composed* of John Lewis, piano;  
 Milt Jackson, vibraharp; Percy Heath, bass; Connie Kay, drums.’  
 It’s also a touch of class that Jackson’s instrument is always called  
 a vibraharp, not a *vibraphone* or downright vulgar *vibes*. And they  
 look as good as they play, always dressed with style, as if they’re  
 the *MJQ*. But that’s only the character of the MJQ, an image of  
 refinement.<sup>52</sup>

In that *Down Beat* interview, Jackson commented on the group’s image, saying he “would never want to destroy the image or the unique style of the quartet.” He added,

<sup>50</sup> Tony Brown, “Jazz in a Bowler Hat,” *Melody Maker* (December 7, 1957), 8.

<sup>51</sup> All of the previous material is from Hentoff, 173.

“We represented the epitome of everything, and most people, because of our appearance and the presentation, assumed we were four of the richest black cats who ever graced a stage.” In answer to Bourne’s probe into the creation of their elegant image in dress and presentation, Lewis replied, “My model for that was Duke Ellington. That was the most elegant band I ever saw.”<sup>53</sup>

Whether they wore stylish tailored suits or tuxedos, the members of the MJQ received attention and respect—and numerous press notices. Did they look like Baptist ministers or morticians? Magazine and newspaper writers were quick to conjure an image for them. Their fans devoured the coverage. The group was part of American culture. It was considered hip and cool, and what the musicians wore at their most recent club or concert appearance sometimes was “the talk of the town” among the cultural elite. The Modern Jazz Quartet had a certain air of sophistication and a mystique all its own. It always garnered plenty of attention in the media, particularly in the early decades. Appearances did not go unnoticed. The quartet’s sober clothing--intended to promote a feeling of equality among the members--often gave critics and reporters something tangible to mention or describe in their press coverage in addition to the music. The mention of the attire perhaps added a bit of color to the writing. It is interesting that press reports of classical concerts did not usually include a description of what the performers wore. However, many writers compared the MJQ to a classical group because of their image and mood. But inherently, the quartet’s uniformed, dignified look gave tribute to the bygone swing era, when projecting a band’s elegance and taste--and good looks--was always the thing to do!

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<sup>52</sup> Michael Bourne, “Bop Baroque The Blues: Modern Jazz Quartet,” *Down Beat* (Jan. 1992), 24.

<sup>53</sup> Bourne, 25. Also, Historian Scott Reeves asks: “Isn’t this what Paul Whiteman was purporting to do in the ‘20s and ‘30s by ‘making a lady out of jazz?’” Personal communication, Dec. 1, 2010.

## 3.

**Perfection in Presentation**

In 1958 Don Nelson described an MJQ concert, with what he called its “briskly-paced program,” as “one of the most interesting presentations to hit New York in some time,” saying the production was “handled with taste,” unlike “most jazz concerts, where a sideshow atmosphere is the rule.”<sup>54</sup> The words “polished” or “impeccable” were typical of the adjectives writers used over and over to describe MJQ performances. For one, Patricia O’Haire commented in 1974 about the group’s polished presentation in her report in the *New York Daily News*.

Musically, their standards were the highest. They were all schooled musicians, and while all their concert appearances left room for each to improvise in true jazz style, their performances always had polish and professionalism. They never condescended to an audience, and their audiences appreciated that. It was a mark of their professionalism that even after 22 years they still were rehearsing before going on stage.<sup>55</sup>

“Impeccable” was the word chosen by Whitney Balliett and others to describe the MJQ’s presentation. Balliett wrote this in *The New Yorker* in 1958 about the first full jazz concert presented by a single group, the MJQ, at Town Hall:

‘Monte Kay Presents an Evening with the Modern Jazz Quartet’ marked the first time that a jazz concert has been served up—greaseless and perfectly cooked—under glass. There were none of the Katzenjammer aspects of the usual jazz concert; in fact, the presentation was impeccable.<sup>56</sup>

Revealing the MJQ’s style of presentation in this particular concert, Balliett indicates that there was a concert program, and that John Lewis, the pianist, described all of the musical numbers on stage. Balliett found it “astonishing” that the pieces on the concert actually appeared in the same order as on the program. The group was presented in an arrangement around a perfect semicircle, uncommon for jazz groups of this period.

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<sup>54</sup> Don Nelson, “Modern Jazz 4 Sends ‘Em,” *New York Daily News* (May 13, 1958), 45.

<sup>55</sup> Patricia O’Haire, “Mod Jazz Quartet Severing Chords,” *New York Daily News* (November 20, 1974), 40.

They bowed in effortless unison to the applause. Furthermore, the concert, “which was neither too long nor too short,” was carefully worked out in both choice of materials and change of pace. There was “not a whistle or a catcall” that “edded the air. Indeed,” Balliett continued, “the audience seemed to be steadily holding its breath, a band of bird watchers that had suddenly stumbled on an unknown species.” A contributing factor to this general decorum was certainly the staging. The rest was due to the quartet, which “poker-faced and never fluffing a note or missing a beat, went at its instruments like jewellers intently at their work. After a time, one longed for a good sneeze or a rude shout to soften the atmosphere of unremitting energy.”<sup>57</sup>

Over a decade after that particular Town Hall concert, Lewis made these comments to Balliett about presentation and placement of various pieces on the concert programs.

The length of a piece is pretty much dictated by where it is in the concert program, and the program is figured out, balanced out, from the first number to the last, so that it has a design and structure. So the program as a whole comes first, the pieces next, and the solos last.

Lewis said that the group did not have any prearranged signals, aside from somebody just looking up from his instrument, for letting each other know when one of them is finished with a solo. Milt Jackson “almost always takes the same number of choruses, and I just seem to know when he is finishing, and it’s about the same with him when I solo. We abhor long solos. If good things don’t happen in the first chorus of any solo, it’s generally not going to happen at all.”<sup>58</sup> Other writers as well could see that the MJQ was a different kind of jazz group—in its manners as well as in the way it structured solos and choruses. Its members weren’t seen as rude or inconsiderate, but courteous and respectful of each other as musicians. *Esquire* magazine confirms this:

Now, mind you, with MJQ, when one man solos, the other

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<sup>56</sup> Whitney Balliett, “Musical Events: Jazz,” *The New Yorker* (May 24, 1958), 82.

<sup>57</sup> Balliett, 82.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted by Whitney Balliett, “Profiles: Room to Live In,” *The New Yorker* (Nov. 20, 1971), 98.

musicians are not reaching for a pack of butts or making jokes to each other about the bald customers. They are always in there, complementing and supporting the soloist with their own subtle and subordinated musical inventions.<sup>59</sup>

The perfection and planning that went into the MJQ's presentation of jazz attracted the attention of black writer and jazz musician Ralph Ellison, who longed for some "unguarded" spontaneity just as Balliett wished for an occasional sneeze or shout. After referring to the "clowning" of Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie, Ellison continued:

There is even a morbid entertainment value in watching the funereal posturing of the Modern Jazz Quartet. Doubtless, part of the tension created in their listeners arises from the anticipation that during some unguarded moment, the grinning visage of the traditional delight-maker will emerge from behind those bearded masks. The maintenance of dignity is never a simple matter—even for those [such as the MJQ] with the highest credentials.<sup>60</sup>

In 1983, a black writer for the *Village Voice*, Francis Davis, noted "an air of European gentility" that "hangs over the group's performances," that he described as "more a matter of ambiance."<sup>61</sup> Fifteen years later, jazz historian Scott Deveaux comments on the "portentous mood of solemnity and dignity" of the Modern Jazz Quartet that was "far removed from nightclubs and dance halls." He saw a kind of integrity of presentation in the Modern Jazz Quartet's performances heretofore associated only with classical music.

Classical music seemed like an exclusive club that in an egalitarian spirit might be persuaded to integrate. The discreet, gently swinging tonal structures of the Modern Jazz Quartet, performed by black men in tuxedos in concert halls for respectful audiences, provided a comforting image of what membership in this club might look like.<sup>62</sup>

Through their image and presentation, the accessibility and inherent structure of their music, which could be called a "cooler" kind of bebop, the MJQ was able to lure white

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<sup>59</sup> "The Slipped Disc" column, *Esquire* (January 1957), 12.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted by Ralph Ellison, *Reading Jazz*, ed. Robert Gottlieb (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 888.

<sup>61</sup> Francis Davis, "The Art of Fugue," *Village Voice* (June 28, 1983), 70.

<sup>62</sup> Scott Deveaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition," *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 500. This chapter was originally presented as an essay in *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (fall 1991), 525-60.

classical musicians who appreciated jazz, such as Gunther Schuller, into their camp.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps this is why tenor saxophonist and jazz educator Jimmy Heath, the brother of Percy Heath, refers to them as a cross-over group between Afro-American music and classical music. "Their presentation and cross-over style of music...it was all necessary to bring jazz to a wider audience."<sup>64</sup> A great part of that wider audience of which Heath was speaking, were white, middle, and upper-middle class music fans. It was the packaging of the Modern Jazz Quartet that attracted these kind of fans who might have read *Playboy Magazine* and had the latest current recordings in their collection. They might have had, along with their Peter, Paul and Mary and Kingston Trio records, an Ella Fitzgerald disc, something by Dave Brubeck, perhaps Erroll Garner's *Concert by the Sea*, and at least one record by the MJQ.

The 1950's were a conservative time for America. Eisenhower was President. Discrimination was widely practiced in the South, and the Joe McCarthy hearings and the Rosenberg trial were still fresh on people's minds. Percy Heath says, "We didn't have funny acts, we didn't have any costumes. We were conservatively dressed. We played conservative music, and if you didn't listen, you didn't get it."<sup>65</sup>

John McDonough, in *The Wall Street Journal* in 1994, credits the conservatism and aloofness of the MJQ to the group's over 40-year-long success, "because nothing invites respect like a little aloofness," he said. Describing the MJQ's presentation, McDonough commented, "From the beginning the MJQ has wrapped itself in a nimbus of dignity and formality more befitting a Paris concert hall than a New York jazz room." He noticed that "in performance no MJQ member is ever seen snapping his fingers, singing a vocal or hollering 'yeah' at a colleague's turn of phrase." This "visual austerity," wrote

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<sup>63</sup> Schuller and Lewis collaborated on various projects over the years.

<sup>64</sup> Quote from Jimmy Heath, April, 3, 1999, in a personal conversation.

<sup>65</sup> Giddens, *Visions of Jazz*, 384.



McDonough, “allowed the musicians to produce a body of entertaining music without lugging on stage the clownish trappings of the entertainer.” And, he added: “through the years, the packaging has been thoroughly consistent with the product inside. The formality of the MJQ’s stagecraft has always been rooted in the formality of its music.”<sup>66</sup>

Because of a polished, formal, concert-like presentation, the jazz quartet of four aloof black men succeeded through America’s conservative years, through the years of Elvis, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones generations, and on into the early nineties. Through the MJQ, jazz music came to be heard by many who would never have listened to it. Presentation was the key reason. Perfection was necessary. The quartet entertained audiences in their own way without the traditional trappings of the stereotyped black entertainer. To do that, it had to borrow some of the “genteel” manners previously only used, for the most part, in classical chamber music.

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<sup>66</sup> John McDonough, “More Good Vibes from Contrapuntally Cool Survivors,” *The Wall Street Journal* (June 30, 1994), 10.

## 4.

### Changing the Venue from Night Club to Concert Hall

While they were not the first jazz musicians who ever played in a concert hall, the Modern Jazz Quartet established a reputation as “concert hall” jazz musicians.<sup>67</sup> The MJQ was able to pave the way for jazz in the concert hall, leaving a rich legacy for those musicians who followed. As reporter Bob Protzman noted about the MJQ in the *Chicago Tribune*, “The band played more concert halls than jazz clubs, leading some to credit it with bringing to jazz a respectability and even dignity that it had not enjoyed previously.”<sup>68</sup> Roy Eaton, a jazz and classical pianist who is a noted City College alumnus and who was a classmate of John Lewis at the Manhattan School of Music, stated that the MJQ--through its music and presentation--elevated jazz to a classical form of music. In fact, he added:

The Modern Jazz Quartet even made jazz the equal of classical music. They took it out of the smoky bars and into the concert halls.<sup>69</sup>

MJQ taking jazz out of those often dingy, smoke-filled bars and into classy environments made a noticeable impact. According to the former long-time *New York Times* jazz critic John S. Wilson, the “quartet became a strong influence in establishing

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<sup>67</sup> For a report on a “major cultural event” of Paul Whiteman, for example, “performing jazz” in concert (at Aeolian Hall) in New York City on February 12, 1924, see Gerald Early’s report, “Pulp and Circumstances: The Story of Jazz in High Places,” *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 397-405. Early describes, 427-28, Billy Holiday’s Carnegie Hall concerts, from March 27, 1948, and November 10, 1956. Says Early, “Holiday’s concerts were the final public acceptance of jazz as an art form, and of the black performer as artist,” 428. See also the work of Neil Leonard, *Jazz and the White Americans: The Acceptance of a New Art Form* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 143, in which he discusses the concert Benny Goodman gave in January of 1938 at Carnegie Hall, and the recital given by Fats Waller in 1942 at Carnegie Hall. “Such concerts were given to serious listeners,” noted Leonard. He cited the largest jazz concert in 1938 featured 25 bands at Randall’s Island, New York, in a stadium. He also mentions early concerts at Madison Square Garden, one a joint one with Count Basie and Goodman.

<sup>68</sup> Protzman, 20, Section 13, 20.

<sup>69</sup> Personal conversation with author, October 14, 1999.

jazz as a concert-hall staple.”<sup>70</sup> He made that comment in a newspaper review after the group had played together for 22 years, calling the MJQ at that time “the longest-lived small group in jazz history,” largely due to the image it had cultivated by giving concerts throughout the world.

The MJQ was unique in being a small jazz group that played entire concert programs. But it did not find its niche immediately. When it started, most of the jazz people who had played concerts were big bands. Duke Ellington’s Orchestra was the band most known in earlier years for performing complete concert programs. John Lewis’s love of “the Duke” was evident when he opined that the Ellington group was the only one that “could really do that [successfully]!” Duke Ellington abandoned his annual visits to Carnegie Hall in the late 1940’s.<sup>71</sup> The Duke had his own niche, and John Lewis hoped to find one for MJQ. Lewis told Chip Deffaa that his group’s “type of gentleness” was, in the fifties, “very much out of the ordinary in the jazz world.” In the interview with *Jazztimes*, Lewis said it took the group a bit of time to fully find itself—and its audience. “We tried playing for dances. The ballroom there [at the old City Center on 55<sup>th</sup> Street] was packed with people, and the impresario kept coming up and asking us, ‘Can’t you play louder?’”

“Then we tried playing in the Embers, a nice supper club. But that wasn’t good for us, because of the dishes and plates, and *all this* going on. We didn’t mind—but the people who came to hear us objected.”<sup>72</sup> It was “by trial and error,” Deffaa chronicled, that the MJQ decided that the ideal place was the concert hall. “But jazz combos did not work regularly in concert halls back then: the MJQ had a lot of doors to open. Producers who

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<sup>70</sup> John S. Wilson, “Modern Jazz Quartet Is Disbanding,” *New York Times* (Nov. 24, 1974), 7. The group did, however, get together again, and performed many times in the 20 years after their “final farewell” concert at Avery Fisher Hall.

<sup>71</sup> “Duke Ellington abandoned his annual visits to Carnegie Hall a decade ago,” stated John S. Wilson, “Jazz: Modern Quartet,” *New York Times* (May 13, 1958)

might have been willing to take a chance on a parade-of-stars type of jazz concert, wondered whether just four jazz musicians could hold an audience's interest for two hours," reported Deffaa. He quotes Lewis: "We learned how to play a concert. A concert—a real concert—for me is like a very fine piece of music, which has a beginning and an end to it. And has a climax. So you build a program for a concert, that's how it should be. I had to learn how to do that. It wasn't so easy for me." Deffaa aptly sums up the situation: "They managed to concentrate on concert appearances—with only rare club bookings in key venues—throughout most of their career. They wore tuxedos. They wanted the music—and the group—to be respected."<sup>73</sup>

According to John S. Wilson, the MJQ made particular news in the music industry in 1958. He recorded in his entry in *The New York Times* that the Modern Jazz Quartet offered at Town Hall "one of the first justifiably identified 'jazz concerts' heard in New York since Duke Ellington abandoned his annual visits to Carnegie Hall." Previous jazz concerts, Wilson said, would "herd" many jazz musicians across the stage "in dazzling disarray." Wilson found it newsworthy that the MJQ "had Town Hall to itself. The group," he said, "fully justified its singular position."<sup>74</sup>

Around that time, concert promoters overseas were questioning how to put on quality jazz concerts, debating the variety-show concept over the single-group show. In his article, in *Melody Maker* (1959), reporter Bob Dawbarn welcomed the arrival of the Modern Jazz Quartet in Britain as a single-act show, and he called this "the return to sanity in the world of jazz concerts." Dawbarn interviewed Harold Pendleton, executive secretary of the National Jazz Federation. Pendleton said, "I have viewed the tendency toward jazz circuses with abhorrence, and I don't propose to join in. I want people to

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<sup>72</sup> Chip Deffaa, "The Timeless, Enduring, Classic, Swinging, dynamic Quintessential, Creative, Expressive, Exciting, and Forever Hip MJQ—Modern Jazz Quartet," *Jazztimes* (February 1989), 18.

<sup>73</sup> Deffaa, 18-19.

have ample opportunity to hear the MJQ.” He said the concert was basically taking a “stand against the circus trend.” On his trip to America, Pendleton is quoted as saying that he met with a number of Americans who “are convinced that these big package shows are killing the business.” He explained:

I believe the jazz world is suffering from a death wish—at least the promoters are. If it is to be saved, we must start to treat jazz concerts like their classical counterparts. In this regard, the Modern Jazz Quartet, they would say, paved the way.<sup>75</sup>

The group’s foray into the world’s concert halls made jazz music history. According to Heath, “We did it on a very high level in Germany. We were used as a guinea pig to open up concert halls there for jazz. At that time, you had to pay a tax to play jazz in a concert hall because jazz was not considered cultural. But they accepted the Modern Jazz Quartet at such major halls without a tax.”<sup>76</sup> The group was the first jazz ensemble to appear in concert-music festivals such as the Donaueschingen Festival in Germany, and the Maggio Musicale in Florence, Italy.

Why was the MJQ able find favor in the concert hall venue? The reasons became evident in article after article from journals and newspapers chronicling their success. Besides noting the musical content, these articles usually stressed the quartet’s dignified manner, and their dress and presentation, which this paper has already explored. Robert Palmer explained why fans of both classical music and the MJQ were merging. In his “Pop/Jazz” column in the *New York Times* in 1981 he calls it “acceptance.”

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<sup>74</sup> John S. Wilson, “Jazz: Modern Quartet: Group Offers its Subtle Music at Town Hall,” *The New York Times* (May 13, 1958), 6.

<sup>75</sup> Bob Dawbarn, “Welcome to the Modern Jazz Quartet...and a Return to Sanity,” *Melody Maker* (November 21, 1959), 9. In this particular concert the MJQ would have two British guest artists, also. Dawbarn added in his article that “if the Quartet’s last tour” to Britain “is anything to go by, we shall be treated to a variety of different programs, and the usual jibes about the group’s ‘funereal’ appearance by those who consider music a secondary consideration at a concert.”

<sup>76</sup> Percy Heath, in a personal telephone conversation, October 5, 1999. I first spoke to Heath after I introduced myself when he performed in the early summer of 1999 at the Village Vanguard, New York, with his siblings in the Heath Brothers ensemble. He said to contact him regarding my thesis project and he would answer any questions.

The Modern Jazz Quartet also set standards for presentation—formal wardrobes, a restrained and dignified on-stage manner—that some fans found affected. But the quartet’s formality and dignity, as well as the music’s use of classical forms, such as fugues and rondos and so on, helped jazz move into concert halls more often and to win acceptance from audiences whose tastes also included classical music.”<sup>77</sup>

However, many jazz fans of the "hard bop" style of jazz criticized the music of the MJQ as being "too polite." Generally, they felt the group made concessions to white tastes in order to gain acceptance.

Nat Hentoff had commented on racial stereotypes in 1961, saying that some black musicians "react to what they consider to be the white stereotype of the Negro by adopting a studied reserve and priding themselves on their urbane deportment."<sup>78</sup> Roy Eaton, when questioned whether he felt it was necessary for the MJQ to do everything it did in terms of dress and presentation in concert halls to achieve success, quickly replied: "Yes! --for the good of the music. It was a very good marketing concept by John Lewis. It was intelligent marketing. They needed to wear tuxedos and act the way they did to get into the concert halls."<sup>79</sup> Echoing that sentiment, Douglas Anderson, a New York City classical music conductor who also followed the MJQ career, said, in discussing the group upon the death of Jackson, "They were very clever."<sup>80</sup>

“There’s not four musicians in jazz that can do what the quartet does. It cannot be duplicated,” Milt Jackson once said of the group.<sup>81</sup> In answer to criticism of the MJQ for being academic or effete, one jazz observer said, "That's the way they wanted to present themselves, I think. It all came together.” The Rev. Dale Lind, of St. Peter’s Lutheran

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<sup>77</sup> Robert Palmer, ‘Modern Jazz Quartet Is Reunited,’ *New York Times* (October 30, 1981), 11.

<sup>78</sup> Hentoff, *The Jazz Life*, 174-175.

<sup>79</sup> Personal conversation with Roy Eaton, a classical pianist living in New York City who also enjoys jazz, July 8, 1999.

<sup>80</sup> Personal conversation, June 8, 1999. Doug Anderson conducts the Downtown Symphony, in Lower Manhattan, New York City. I played the violin in this orchestra during the time I discussed my thesis research with the conductor. Mr. Anderson is a member of the music faculty at the Borough of Manhattan Community College.

<sup>81</sup> Milt Jackson, in a personal interview, January 4, 1998.

Church, known as “the Jazz Church of New York,” reminisced, “I remember them as playing such cool and classic jazz. It reflected in the intensity of their roots. They were the best, the way they did everything.”<sup>82</sup>

While the MJQ played in clubs—the top ones—throughout their career, their niche was achieved in the concert venue. When asked about his preference for clubs or concerts, John Lewis said, “We’d almost always rather play concerts than clubs. Clubs are backbreaking, so they make you strong. But if we play three concerts, it’s so good it’s amazing to me. You can’t do that for hours at a club every night. It’s good training, but now we have the training.”<sup>83</sup>

John S. Wilson explained to *New York Times* readers why he felt the MJQ’s performances were best appreciated in the concert hall:

The Quartet has developed a subtle, tightly knit, loosely flowing yet complex form of jazz that is lost in a night club, useless in a dance hall but excellently suited to the atmosphere of the concert hall.<sup>84</sup>

The concert hall was the location where the structure of the MJQ compositions could best be appreciated. Author Burton W. Peretti praised composer and pianist John Lewis, who was responsible for the “complex form of jazz” (as Wilson called the MJQ’s music) in his book, *Jazz in American Culture*. “Lewis developed a command of classical counterpoint unmatched in jazz; no one else could so skillfully compose fugues based on blues melodies.” If performances were booked in clubs rather than the preferred concert hall stages, the MJQ demanded the same respectful silence. “Lewis would demand that cash registers be silenced during the group’s performances.” Peretti contends that the

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<sup>82</sup> Personal conversation, October 5, 1999.

<sup>83</sup> Giddens, *Visions of Jazz*, 389. Lewis commented on his preference for concerts over clubs in a taped discussion in 1956 with Nesuhi Ertegun, president of Atlantic Records.

<sup>84</sup> Wilson, 6.

Modern Jazz Quartet “presented an African-American vision of jazz as elite concert music.”<sup>85</sup>

How does an African-American MJQ member describe this vision? “Well, that’s true... we’ve realized a dream. It’s amazing. We’ve taken jazz into the concert halls of the world, even into the Mozarteum, in Salzburg. We performed with a lot of symphony orchestras, and respect for jazz has grown among symphony players. Some of them have even become jazz players,” responded Percy Heath, MJQ bassist.<sup>86</sup> He noted, “For a long time white Americans only understood polkas and fox-trots and waltzes.”<sup>87</sup> His colleague, Milt Jackson, once told listeners of WKCR-FM Radio in New York, when asked by Phil Schaap, “What experience really stood out during the MJQ years?”: “I liked playing in ‘62-‘63 with the Stuttgart Symphony. I thought it was quite impressive to play with the Chicago Symphony and the Detroit Symphony [the latter, he noted in his home town].” In this three-hour radio interview, in 1990, between Schaap and Jackson, re-run as a Memorial on October 12, 1999, Jackson also discussed the use of strings, string quartet as well as orchestral performances with the MJQ. The addition of strings to the quartet facilitated acceptance of the MJQ in traditional concert halls usually reserved for classical music. The string parts were written and arranged by John Lewis, Jackson said, for performance by classical musicians with the quartet. These concerts brought additional respect from listeners around the world, he said in the radio interview.

Indeed, the listener was paramount for the Modern Jazz Quartet whenever the group performed. Therefore, the need for a place where the listener could really hear the music became another reason for the MJQ’s preference of the concert hall as a venue. As jazz columnist Gary Giddins so poetically noted:

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<sup>85</sup> Burton W. Peretti, *Jazz in American Culture* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), 114

<sup>86</sup> Percy Heath, in a telephone conversation, October 7, 1999.

<sup>87</sup> Percy Heath, in a telephone interview, October 8, 1999.



A great concert is ultimately a collusion between artist and listener, in which the alertness of one is inseparable from that of the other. The musicians may savor the joys of a shining performance before a dull audience, just as a falling tree may crash through an uninhabited forest, but art burgeons only when its nuances are shared.<sup>88</sup>

In that review, Giddens marveled at the 1995 MJQ concert at the Masonic Auditorium in Nob Hill (San Francisco), regarding it the epitome of what he called “his listening pleasure.” The Modern Jazz Quartet, his review went, “now at the close of its 43<sup>rd</sup> year, opened the San Francisco Jazz Festival with a performance worth savoring—a performance that restored the wonder elicited by this longest-lived chamber ensemble at its best.” In this concert, Albert Heath, the youngest brother of Percy Heath (and of Jimmy Heath), had replaced the late Connie Kay on drums. John Lewis chose this concert for release of a CD entitled *Dedicated to Connie* (Atlantic).<sup>89</sup>

The Modern Jazz Quartet fully intended for its chamber ensemble to share nuances with the audience and to be listened to. They did not play music for dancing: theirs really was music for listeners, as “can also be said of bop and other post-swing forms of jazz,” comments Prof. Scott Reeves, a noted jazz expert [Dec. 1, 2010]. Fans and reviewers especially loved the MJQ music and the cultivated image.

The Modern Jazz Quartet's first concert tour of Europe was as part of the Birdland All-Stars Tour in 1956 with Bud Powell, Miles Davis and Lester Young. John Lewis originally had no intention of taking the group overseas, as he said, “until we were ready. And when we did go to Europe, we were ready and everyone knew it.”<sup>90</sup> But the big breakthrough came the following year when they returned to Europe, touring Germany, France, and the British Isles, playing 88 concerts in four months.

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<sup>88</sup> Gary Giddens, weekly “Weather Bird” column: “Different Drummer,” *Village Voice* (Nov. 14, 1995), 10.

<sup>89</sup> Giddens, *Village Voice*, (Nov. 14, 1995), 10.

<sup>90</sup> Giddens, *Visions of Jazz*, 387.

It was in Europe where the Modern Jazz Quartet received the highest acclaim at concerts. "After the European critics voted us 'Group of the Year' in 1957, the American critics jumped in," said Percy Heath. "The European writers may have liked the European-sounding titles of some of our compositions--*Queens Fancy*, a British kind of title, and *Vendome*, for the French. Maybe that's why the Europeans liked us, and it took the Americans to follow."

As a chamber jazz group, the quartet paved the way for jazz performances in concert halls.<sup>91</sup> A concert setting provided the better location for listening to the group than a noisy club. The critics and fans eagerly followed the MJQ to their various concert engagements over the years. Some writers compared the "gentle-sounding" jazz quartet with classical music. Many of the structured jazz compositions had European-sounding names, further denoting some connection for new fans between the MJQ and classical music. Perhaps these are a few reasons many classical-music concertgoers merged with those who went to hear the MJQ. Of course, it didn't hurt the formal packaging of the jazz group that it often appeared in traditional classical halls around the world complemented by string quartets or symphony orchestras!

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<sup>91</sup> The phenomenon of jazz concerts has come a long way in the new millennium since the MJQ persevered in doing concerts during its career. A premiere center for jazz in New York City in a concert setting is Jazz at Lincoln Center [at the Time Warner Center] which moved in its \$103 million location in the fall of 2003. An article by Frank Lombardi and Gene Santoro, "Bold New Jazz Center Will be Scat's Meow," *New York Daily News* (May 24, 2000), 8, was one of the first stories to describe the architectural plans in the media. At the press conference that I attended, then Mayor Rudy Giuliani announced that the jazz center is named after the late Frederick Rose, a real estate developer who donated \$10 million toward construction. The City of New York contributed \$19 million. The center has a 1,100-seat hall for jazz concerts. It is part of the redevelopment of the former New York Coliseum site in Columbus Circle next to the southern end of Central Park on the West Side. "It gives musicians more places to play," explained Wynton Marsalis, artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center. "There is irony in this," said Gordon Davis, then the board chairman of Jazz at Lincoln Center. "The mayor who loves opera bequeaths jazz with a home [at Lincoln Center]."

## 5.

**Professionalism of the MJQ**

Further important evidence that the Modern Jazz Quartet brought respectability to jazz music and musicians is found in discussions of the professional practices of the group. Members have stated that the group was a successful cooperative, and always has been. The group set up its own rules and followed them. They had their own pension plans. They organized their duties. They worked together for the good of the group. They published their music. While MJQ is no longer together, the publishing company, MJQ Music Inc., still exists.<sup>92</sup> Scores of their music have been available since the early decades of the group. Punctuality and other important aspects of behavior as successful professional musicians were stressed. This attitude and behavior brought respect for them as musicians and artists. The MJQ never had the hierarchical organization of the usual jazz combo: leader and rhythm section. John Lewis made sure of that.

We have a cooperation, the Modern Jazz Society. I'm president, Milt (Jackson) is vice-president, Percy is treasurer, and [the late] Connie (Kay) is the secretary. We pay ourselves a weekly salary, and we don't have any such thing as a leader, in the old-time concept of a leader. I serve as artistic director and musical director.<sup>93</sup>

“Occasionally, I have to make the group do something, and later they generally see it's what we should have done. Sometimes,” John Lewis once told the *New Yorker*, “I cut things so fine trying to make everyone happy, it frightens me. We've gotten along well or we wouldn't still be together.” In the interview, conducted 20 years after their formation, Lewis discussed how they got along:

We're smart enough and clever enough to give each other room to live in, to have respect for each other's personalities. It's not

<sup>92</sup> I checked (Nov. 14, 2010), and MJQ Music Inc. is no longer independent and located in New York, N.Y., but is now a division of Hal Leonard Corp., 7777 W. Bluemound Rd., Milwaukee, Wisc. 53213. The telephone number is (414) 774-36330. Email is: permissions@halleonard.com.

<sup>93</sup> John Lewis, quoted by Whitney Balliett, “Profiles: Room to Live in,” the *New Yorker*, (Nov. 20, 1971), 97-98.

a perfect marriage by any means. When we're out on the road we always have separate rooms. Milt gets up early and so I do, too. Percy and Connie don't. Some of us, Connie in particular, like to watch TV, and some don't.<sup>94</sup>

The members respected each other. This is reflected in the attitude and actions towards their cooperative arrangement. Just as important as each member having his own room when touring was the demand that members arrive on time to rehearsals and engagements—or there would be a penalty. Lewis discussed the penalty with Whitney Balliett.

We have a fine for lateness. It's fifty dollars for the first five minutes and fifty dollars for each fifteen minutes thereafter, unless there's a sufficient excuse which traffic and such isn't. You just start early enough. If anyone were to be late, it would probably be Percy or Connie. Milt and I generally come early. It would be impractical to break the group up. We're way past the point of no return financially.

Lewis's job was to “bring in the music and the arrangements, and the group starts learning.” In his role as musical and artistic director, he believed in challenging each one of the quartet. Every now and then he put “something in a piece that they [the others] can't play, so there isn't any dullness.”

They are fair readers. It takes us a long time to learn things, but they're much faster than they used to be. It generally takes us three hours to learn a piece, which is the length of a standard rehearsal. The whole thing on my part is to anticipate this or that musical difficulty, which means spending more time writing and thinking.

They had over 300 numbers in their repertoire, which was still growing and changing all the time. Not only was the repertoire always in flux, but also the way the MJQ performed the individual numbers changed. Lewis often worked on the structures of the

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<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Balliett, 97-98.

pieces and the speed of the various sections. The end result in performance came to sound as if the pieces were improvised, typical of jazz.

Sometimes I change certain passages in numbers, and tempos automatically tend to get faster through the years. Gradually each piece comes to sound as if it is improvised all the way through. Some actually are and some are almost all written.”<sup>95</sup>

The professional practices of the Modern Jazz Quartet worked, according to my sources. But with at least one other group, which tried to copy the MJQ in their business methods, the results were a disaster. This group, the Jazz Messengers, began as a cooperative. The early Messengers consisted of Art Blakey, Kenny Dorham, Hank Mobley, Doug Watson, and Horace Silver. Silver attributes many of the problems suffered by the group to certain members of the group not “taking care of business”:

It was a cooperative in the beginning. We didn't go to a lawyer nor have papers drawn up. It was a gentlemen's agreement that the group was to be a cooperative... We got the idea from the Modern Jazz Quartet. They did it, and they did it successfully. We did it, and we didn't do it successfully. People in the group weren't taking care of the business, and so it fell apart on a business level.<sup>96</sup>

There was a distinct contrast between the Jazz Messengers and the Modern Jazz Quartet. Lateness and drug use were the Messengers' downfalls. As Horace Silver described the problems to Gene Lees, the contrast between the two jazz groups is evident:

Several times I was very dissatisfied with the business aspect of it, because the guys were goofing off. Sometimes the guys would show up late for the gig and we'd get docked money. Several times, I told myself I'm gonna quit, But I couldn't quit! Every time we'd hit a gig, the band would be cookin' so tough, I said, 'I can't go nowhere. Where'm I gonna find guys like this to play with? The thing that made me leave was the drug problem. Art and myself and Nica's

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Balliett, 97-98.

<sup>96</sup> As quoted by Gene Lees's compilation of his stories from his *Jazznewsletter* in *Cats of Any Color: Jazz Black and White* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 84-85.

daughter, we got arrested in Philadelphia. [The Baroness Nica de Koenigswater is the famous patroness of jazz for whom Silver named the tune *Nica's Dream*.] I had to stay in the precinct station over the weekend. Some of the guys in the group were into drugs. I said, 'I gotta leave these guys now, because as much as I love them, they're just too hot.' Doug Watkins is dead, Kenny Dorham is dead, Hank Mobley's dead. They're all gone.<sup>97</sup>

Some jazz musicians in the 1950's and thereafter could live by rules and do business cooperatively and others, such as the early Jazz Messengers, could not. And drug use did not crop up as a big problem with the MJQ, as it apparently did for the Messengers. The Modern Jazz Quartet was a group that succeeded in its cooperative.

When I spoke about the MJQ with a number of younger jazz musicians in New York during the course of my research, many of them, in conversations, were aware of the professional behavior of the Modern Jazz Quartet. I frequently received positive comments about the influence of the MJQ on their conduct and careers. "They projected a good image, the way they behaved and did business," one performer told me about the MJQ. This was a familiar theme. I heard this same comment said one way or another from those I interviewed. The MJQ set a good influence. John Lewis's plan ultimately worked. As Joe Goldberg said about Lewis, "His concept of jazz" had to do with "more than the music itself." Being an Afro-American jazz musician had a lot to do with the way he proceeded in his role in the MJQ cooperative. As Lewis had once said, "I am an American Negro. I'm proud of it, and I want to enhance the dignity of that profession [of jazz musician]."<sup>98</sup> He had a mission. The quartet was the perfect musical vehicle for Lewis to elevate respect for his ethnicity! Therefore, image was essential. The group—as well as each member—managed to counter stereotype.

There are black jazz musicians who agree that Lewis's public relations plan to create the MJQ image succeeded. Kenny Washington is an example of one of them who

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<sup>97</sup> More details are told in Lees, 84-85.

acknowledges Lewis and the Modern Jazz Quartet's success and influence on himself and others like him. Washington, who played the drums at Milt Jackson's funeral, told me this story, when asked how he felt about the combo:

I saw the MJQ as a group in the sixties. As a kid, my parents took me to see the MJQ. I was a good friend with all of them. They took the music to another level, with their own presentation of it by making white people realize that jazz musicians could show up on time, that it was a business. They looked great. And they played great. What stands out most for me, is that they were very professional. Their being so professional made white people look at jazz musicians in a whole different way. With the way most bebop musicians behaved, Caucasians looked at jazz music in a certain way. They had the wrong ideas about what jazz was about. What was so good about the MJQ is that they made white people see that jazz is very dignified!<sup>99</sup>

Being on time or paying a penalty, sharing certain responsibilities in addition to performing, and trying to treat each other in a professional way contributed to the best interests of the quartet. Audiences, journalists, authors, producers, record-buyers, and other musicians have been impressed by the professionalism of the MJQ. Their cooperative worked; the group thrived during its history. Respect for the MJQ grew over the years. Its cultivation of professional habits and attitudes--along with its approach to dress, presentation, and other non-musical aspects discussed above--enhanced the respect accorded to the MJQ.

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<sup>98</sup> Goldberg, *Jazz Masters of the 50s*, 117.

<sup>99</sup> Personal conversation, November 10, 1999.

## 6.

### **Personal Concluding Remarks**

My study explores aspects of the cultural context of the Modern Jazz Quartet— aspects that had to do with “image” and gaining “respectability.” Press reports were invaluable, although I found no approach similar to mine while I was doing research. Because the volume of my research became so large, I was able to cite only selections from the many sources I read and people I spoke with and to tackle only certain aspects of the famed quartet’s image as seen through the eyes of certain media. However, I believe the chapter topics I explored were important historical aspects of the group’s legacy. I am not listing most of the hundreds of newspaper, magazine and journal articles I pored over, nor most of the dozens of books I studied that also discuss the MJQ and its history. A great deal of material has been written about the group since the 1950’s, including a lot about its work in the “Third Stream.” But that is another research paper. I am including some of my initial research into the “Third Stream” in the bibliography because that topic and the MJQ’s involvement in it first intrigued me. There is a cultural aspect, as well, to that involvement that impacted on the group’s image and legacy. Certainly the merging of jazz and classical musical idioms, a direction taken by the MJQ, was a source of much press and scholarly discussion (sometimes controversial). That aspect also enhanced the group’s “respectability” factor among certain segments of music



connoisseurs. MJQ concert audiences heard many fascinating compositions by John Lewis and others, especially during the sixties, of “Third Stream” music. That is another reason why classical audiences merged with the MJQ fans during the long reign of the quartet. However, I shaped the specific material I selected to illustrate my points on the mostly non-music aspects of the MJQ that gave it the “respectability” it received.

My aim was to study the image and reception of the Modern Jazz Quartet. I agree with Jon Faddis’s comments in the last interview done with Milt Jackson before his death in October 1999. Faddis said the MJQ did “a lot to bring a certain type of respect to the music.” Jackson had the opportunity to clarify: “I think the idea was that we could bring another level of respect to the music, and in doing so, captivate a much larger audience.”<sup>100</sup> I believe this “new level” of respect was achieved. My research documents their achievement and traces their reception. I showed various aspects that helped the MJQ create a “bridge” to a bigger audience. I explored how the group influenced the style and presentation of jazz. The way the group dressed received a lot of press, and my paper presents but a sampling of comments. The MJQ was a pioneering group in bringing jazz into concert halls.

The MJQ, this paper shows, presented jazz as serious American classical music. Through their stressing the importance of solemn and well-tailored dress, rehearsed self-presentation and behavior on the performing stage, and professional and courteous conduct in their relations with one another and outside the group, the Modern Jazz Quartet influenced jazz, lending it a respectability. Their dress, practice in conduct, style and presentation, and use of the concert-hall stage helped them to do this. The members incorporated professional practices into their operations by working effectively, collectively. Space in this research paper does not enable a lengthy discussion of their

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<sup>100</sup> Jon Faddis, “Lessons from Bags: The Milt Jackson Interview,” *Down Beat* (November 1999), 26.

use of managers, booking agents and press agents, but clipping files showed evidence of the group's use of outside help to achieve their success and longevity—and respectability.

Nowadays, newspaper articles do not necessarily point out the dress of a particular jazz group, as writers often did about the MJQ through the years. I think perhaps there might be some race issue involved, but that would be a more complex topic than I am able to handle in my conclusions. At least several authorities felt all of the packaging was necessary for the MJQ to be able to perform in the right venues, where people were receptive to the music. Thus, the packaging enabled the MJQ to thrive economically and to demand larger fees.

It should be noted that the group first appeared in 1952 at a transitional time following the introduction of be-bop and did return to jazz, my research shows, the sense of high bearing it had lost after the introduction of be-bop. The jam-session approach of various be-bop groups, as at least one newspaper writer pointed out, had contributed to that decline in the public's image of jazz. In many of the articles through the years, writers commented on the dress of the group, or mentioned its elegance. I believe the members of the MJQ were artists in the highest sense, and these other aspects of their careers brought attention to the music and helped to exalt the status of jazz.

The MJQ's unique vision--a dignified jazz—became a reality for 40 years. Initially, the group somehow startled audiences “by the authority of their quietness; eventually it became one of the few jazz bands embraced by an audience much wider than jazz fans.”<sup>101</sup> Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington were among the few artists whose bands also had wide appeal beyond “jazz” audiences.

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<sup>101</sup> Ben Ratliff, *The New York Times* (October 17, 1999), A17. In a personal communication with jazz historian Scott Reeves (Dec. 1, 2010), Reeves, however, raises this issue: “It could be argued that bebop took jazz from being dance music to a more intellectual art form, in spite of the perceived lack of personal control by some of its practitioners...After all, the MJQ were beboppers as well.”

I believe this is the Modern Jazz Quartet's biggest legacy: bringing enjoyment of jazz in its particular, subdued, structured, chamber form to a larger number of people around the world. It was only able to perform in the best places around the world *because of* the elegant public image it created. With Milt Jackson's bluesy improvisations on vibraharp, the genius of pianist and musical composer/arranger/director John Lewis, along with the inventive Percy Heath on bass, and the drum talent--at various times, of Kenny Clarke (the first three years), Connie Kay (for most of the time), and Albert Heath (at the end)--the band persevered. It is now part of history. The death of Jackson in 1999 dispelled any notion of an MJQ reunion. They are irreplaceable, but we can learn from them. There has been no one else like them. The Modern Jazz Quartet set a high standard. It influenced the subsequent professionalism and respectability of jazz.

I listened all day during the three-day Milt Jackson Memorial Broadcast on WKCR-FM Radio<sup>102</sup> on October 11, 1999, particularly to the long segment of the Modern Jazz Quartet's music, which lives on in their many recordings.<sup>103</sup> It will also live on in the memories of those who also heard the group "live"—including myself. The Modern Jazz Quartet was one of the first jazz groups I heard in the 1970's, when I moved to New York City. I enjoyed its sophistication, its look, its bearing, and most of all its music as I heard it played at the Carnegie Hall concert I attended many years ago. I was thrilled with the ambience. It was one of the first concerts of a small jazz ensemble I had ever attended. I followed its career in the press. Without the elegance and special, collective style and presentation, I think there may not have been a Modern Jazz Quartet of such longevity. I recall that when I attended the packed Memorial Service for John Lewis at St. John the Divine Church in New York City, I paused to think that there also would not have been an MJQ [for me to study and thousands to enjoy] without the wisdom and talent of

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<sup>102</sup> The Columbia University radio station, with jazz host and commentator Phil Schaap.

Lewis. It was a thrill for me to know that I once met him after seeing him presented with a lifetime honor.<sup>104</sup> I think jazz drummer Kenny Washington made a good point when he said that the group made “white people” look at black jazz musicians in a different way, that the group made people see that jazz can be very dignified.

While I do not really feel that jazz needs to have a respectability—almost all of it is interesting to me because I appreciate a variety of music—the MJQ went a long way toward garnering respect for jazz. Press coverage confirms this and the promotional material for the group wanted the media to know the group's aim. I recall an early undated press release of the MJQ that let the press know that after jazz came into the country's concert halls, many people were realizing for the first time that *it is a serious art form*. After examining such a large volume of material on the MJQ, I learned that the group--through consistent writings about them in the press--kept the seriousness of jazz as a high art form before the reading public.

An early Atlantic Records press release quoted a writer for the *New York Herald Tribune* [date not given] who had heard the MJQ for the first time. The critic's quote sums up what I feel many people may have wanted to express through the years, but Jay Harrison said it so well:

The Modern Jazz Quartet is quite a wondrous group, though not having heard it before I was totally unprepared for its vast originality in details of sonority and the members' genuine grace of execution. The ensemble plays in a jazz style that is the very opposite of hectic or frantic. Perhaps the style might be called cool, others may prefer the word erudite. But to these ears it was svelte, the artists together producing sounds not only fascinating but also genuinely musical. And since the quartet seems to breathe as one—even in matters of rubato—the performance was stimulating in a refreshingly artistic sense. In sum, the Modern Jazz men are a credit to the calling,

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<sup>103</sup> Particularly the albums on Atlantic Records, beginning in 1956.

<sup>104</sup> Now defunct International Association of Jazz Educators (IAJE) honored him as an NEA Jazz Master in 2001 at its New York City conference in early January. I said hello to John Lewis and congratulated him!

an asset to the field of Jazz.<sup>105</sup>

Percy Heath and John Lewis performed in a concert organized as a tribute to the evolution of the MJQ at Lincoln Center in 2001.<sup>106</sup> Fans mourned the passing of Lewis during the same year, when he died on March 29, 2001, of prostate cancer. Four years later, Heath died on April 28, 2005, after his second bout with bone cancer, in Southhampton, N.Y.

Credit goes to the quartet for leaving us a cultural legacy that, in fact, extends way beyond the music. Through more than 40 years, it set a standard by upholding the image of black integrity and self-respect that paralleled the social changes of the times, reflecting African-Americans' growing sense of identity and strength. Yet ethnic differences were often overlooked. White audiences responded to the music and the dignity epitomized by the MJQ, which was also popular in Asia as well. The group influenced jazz musicians of all ethnicities. It dared to open the concert halls around the world to wider audiences for performances of jazz, helping more people to understand that jazz is a serious, respected art form. The Modern Jazz Quartet, in its own unique packaging, had succeeded. It is now an important part of our history. Its image is part of the legacy.

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<sup>105</sup> The passage in the Modern Jazz Quartet press release is undated.

<sup>106</sup> The MJQ tribute dates were January 18 and 20, 2001, at Avery Fisher Hall, New York, N.Y. I attended both concerts. The hall was packed with MJQ fans, and the compositions by John Lewis were well-received. I said hello to Percy Heath after the second concert. He said he enjoyed the tribute to MJQ.

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