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DEAR FRIEND

A tribute to Dr. Billy Taylor

By JIMMY OWENS

Dr. Billy Taylor at a Jazzmobile concert in 1977

Over many years, Dr. Billy Taylor was at the forefront in making significant and lasting contributions to jazz music and its musicians, educators and audiences throughout the world.

In the 1940's, he was the first jazz artist to write a book about how to better perform in the jazz tradition. From the 1940's until 2010, he provided work in his various ensembles for countless jazz musicians.

When he became the musical director of the David Frost Show in 1969, he hired a variety of musicians, including Frank Wess, Seldon Powell, Bob Cranshaw, Barry Galbraith and myself – among many others – to play in his band. When it was time for him to negotiate the contract, he negotiated the highest wages for the side musicians of any of the TV bands in that time period.

In 1964, Billy founded Jazzmobile in Harlem to bring jazz to hundreds of thousands of people. During its summer concerts, internationally acclaimed jazz artists performed at different public venues in NYC. Billy also

took his quintet on tour.

Along with the outdoor summer concerts, Billy and Paul West started the Jazzmobile Workshop in 1970. The mission was to hire performers and educators to teach students of all ages how to become more proficient jazz performers. Among the artists/educators who taught workshops were Lee Morgan, Kenny Dorham, Sonny Red, Jimmy Heath and Frank Foster.

Today, Jazzmobile concerts and the Jazzmobile Workshop continue to thrive and grow. In 1981, Billy decided to appoint an educational/musical director because the program had grown tremendously. I was honored to be appointed the first director at that time and held the position until 1986.

Every chance that Billy got throughout his long career, he tirelessly promoted and advocated for jazz music and its art-

ists, while continuing to keep his hands on those piano keys. He consistently performed melodic, beautiful, and creative music with his trios and quintets. He was an impeccable master of the piano. One of his biggest influences in his early years was Art Tatum, with whom he had a close friendship.

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From a personal perspective, what I learned from Billy Taylor would fill a book. Briefly, he taught me about the business of music, jazz education, firsthand accounts of jazz history, and what he learned musically from his jazz elders.

Most importantly, he taught me how

to put one note after the other to create a better jazz improvisation.

In the late 1960's, after Joe Newman left the quintet, I became Billy's trumpet player. Every performance was akin to a jazz master class.

BILLY WILL BE GREATLY MISSED by so many of us whose lives he generously touched in both personal and professional ways.

One of Billy's major contributions was that he brought to the attention of the public the concept that jazz is America's classical music, with its own standard of form, complexity, literacy, and excellence. His legacy is solidly in place. The world has lost one of its greatest and most gifted jazz pianists and jazz ambassadors. I have lost a dear friend and his memory will always be in my heart. *À bientôt.*