CLIFFORD BROWN

The Life and Art of the Legendary Jazz Trumpeter

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For the East Siders
of Wilmington, Delaware

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Introduction

In Warren Leight's critically acclaimed Broadway show *Side Man* (a roman à clef of the playwright's disturbing life with his parents) one of the lead characters, "Gene," is a trumpeter of a special sort. Although he is a virtuoso during one of the great periods of jazz, he is most remarkable in his knowledge of what made a truly great trumpet player. Here, Leight echoes a familiar theme: It is musicians who are often the best judges of musicians. In *Side Man* Gene worships the art of trumpeting like Christians worship Jesus, and his unequivocal hero is Clifford Brown. Gene adores Brown so much that he names his own son Clifford. In this, the play dramatizes the long held belief of the jazz virtuoso fraternity: As a trumpeter, Clifford Brown stands alone.

In addition to his artistic achievements, Brown exuded virtue and magnanimity. He wasn't just a "nice guy"; he was much more than that, and the pages of this book help to create the picture of an extraordinary person. As the veteran critic Nat Hentoff has declared: "Nobody I knew in the jazz world ever had a bad word to say about Brownie. He was too open, entirely without guile, without even a hint of malice toward anyone." Hentoff's remarks are indicative of the powerful effect Clifford Brown had on people who knew him. It was precisely this combination of his amazing talent and his virtuous

life that set many musicians who encountered Brown on a different life path. Before he came along, droves of players used drugs in imitation of Charlie Parker. But because of Clifford Brown, many players cleaned up their act. He believed that in order to achieve success as a jazz artist, a performer had to live abstemiously with enormous focus and discipline. Because Brown was not a preacher it was only the respect that jazz musicians had for his enormous talent that led them to emulate his lifestyle.

As a youngster, Clifford Brown had created quite a sensation in his hometown of Wilmington, Delaware. One night when Dizzy Gillespie brought his band into town, Brown's friends urged the king of the bebop trumpet to let Brown sit in for a couple of tunes. Gillespie was awestruck. Immediately, he insisted that Brown, who at the time was attending a nearby college, launch himself into a performing career.

Clifford Brown had received considerable formal musical training and came from a family whose traditions included rigorous discipline and dedication. Soon after the Gillespie episode, he became a regular on Philadelphia bandstands playing alongside Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and other bebop pioneers. Quickly, he encountered other young "second generation" boppers (e.g., Gigi Gryce) whose intention was to develop the new style and concurrently adopt aesthetic standards equal to that of serious classical musicians. A few of his black compeers would seek to establish themselves as rhythm 'n' blues stars, thereby gaining fortune as well as fame, but Clifford Brown would shun this life. His desire was to create the best music possible in the bebop genre, and after he realized that he could improvise with the best, he worked even harder, practicing inexhaustibly and living fastidiously. In addition, he was one of those rare musical artisans who could spend a few hours figuring out the essence of an instrument and then be able to develop immediate facility on that instrument; he could spend a few days in North Africa, assimilate the colors of the indigenous music, and create a composition incorporating those elements that would become a classic in jazz literature. At age twenty-three, alongside the quintessential bebop per-

cussive virtuoso Max Roach, Clifford Brown created a musical explosion that continues to dazzle audiences to the present day.

What Brown and Roach achieved in their group of the early 1950s was unique. At a time when the art music of the great boppers was being diluted at "Jazz at the Philharmonic" blowing sessions designed to excite the appetites of screaming audiences, Clifford and Max turned elsewhere. Drawing upon training that had strong classical roots, Brown had found an unusual jazz colleague—a drummer who listened to Stravinsky. The two musicians spent long hours discussing new concepts of jazz performance that would incorporate many traditions inherent in classical forms. It soon became clear that only in the context of intellectually crafted compositions containing tapestries of exquisite improvisational design could the music achieve the artistic heights Brown and Roach desired. Solos, the raison d'être for any improvisational virtuoso, had to be economical, serving the needs of the compositional framework rather than the demands of egocentric players or hero-worshipping fans.

As an improviser, Clifford Brown created flowing lines of soaring melody and improvisation containing geometric symmetry and punctuated with an articulated attack and buttery tone that became the envy of trumpeters everywhere. With Max Roach, Harold Land, and later Sonny Rollins, the group played to audiences packed with musicians and other cognoscenti who were continually astounded at their performances.

Clifford Brown's artistry reaches its apotheosis in the area of improvisational design. Like Charlie Parker and Art Tatum, Clifford Brown commandeered the vast resources of his creativity to construct solos that contained revolutionary melodic language and new rhythmic subtlety. With the advent of academic interest in jazz in recent years, Brownie's achievement has been analyzed in dissertations and discussed in professional conferences. His focused approach to composition has influenced countless musicians, and, as bebop steadily gains a greater place in the aesthetic hierarchy of even the most establishmentarian critical circles, his art continues to emerge.

As is the case with all artists, environment played a quintessential role in the shaping of Clifford Brown's life. Too often, urban black neighborhoods have been stereotyped as centers of broken homes, drug dealers, and social unrest. The situation could not have been more different in the Wilmington east side where Clifford Brown grew up. Because of several factors, including the quirky post–Civil War history of Delaware's black population, the east side evolved into an intriguingly stable area during the time Brown lived there. Families were close-knit, social life was highly ordered, and the cultural atmosphere was rich. Above all, the segregated public schools of the neighborhood provided curricula that rivaled the best that the white schools could offer. Brown, his siblings and friends, received heavy doses of science, mathematics, and language courses that enabled them to enter colleges and universities in unusually heavy numbers. As a result, large groups of east siders wound up in important professional careers, which resonate to the present day. Ironically, the practice of segregation in Wilmington infused a strength and cohesiveness to the community that later integration legislation would dissipate.

Geographically situated very close to Philadelphia (about twenty-seven miles), Wilmington took advantage of that city's rich cultural legacy, particularly focusing upon the enormous jazz activity that developed there after World War II. In this context, Clifford Brown's life brought him into seminal musical contact with several other artists whose enormous contribution to post–World War II jazz remains largely unexamined. During a very short period in his life Brown worked very closely with Tadd Dameron, Fats Navarro, Gigi Gryce, Horace Silver, Lou Donaldson, Max Roach, Sonny Rollins, Art Farmer, and other important figures who have never been subjects of sustained biographical study. Thus, in this biography of Clifford Brown, frequent references to these artists appear, enabling readers to reexamine this pivotal period in jazz history.

This book attempts to trace the stages of Brown's life and simultaneously illustrate his musical accomplishments in language intended for the general reader. Throughout, the approach has been to present the man and his music and avoid protracted judgments

and distracting commentary. Included in the account are specific examinations of all of Brown's published recording sessions (and a few important unpublished ones). As greater critical attention is focused on Clifford Brown's music, which is inevitable, others will follow who will provide specific instructional insights and finely tuned critical guidance. However, even though the analysis of Clifford Brown's artistry contained herein exists in base outline, certain developments emerge. That his improvisational vision and execution achieved a new aesthetic plateau in jazz is inescapable; that he and Max Roach advanced the bebop form in their performances is indisputable; that Brownie's achievement as a composer deserves greater attention is clearly apparent.

In conclusion, I have followed John Keats's dictum of negative capability and tried to spare the public my own whims and opinions. In this manner, I hope that readers will discover on their own the compelling character of this remarkable American artist and that new audiences will be drawn to his musical achievements.

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One
The Brown Family of Wilmington

"If you don't practice, I'll whip you," said Joe Brown, addressing his family at one of the frequent songfests at their house on Poplar Street. Although he was a loving father who deeply cared for his family, Joe Brown was serious about the importance of music.

The family lived in a row house built before the turn of the century, in a modest Wilmington neighborhood that remains charming to the present day. The father of eight children, Joe Brown was chastising his sons; there were five, four of whom he was trying to organize into a vocal quartet (the oldest, Harold, had moved out by this time). His older daughters had already begun to distinguish themselves: Marie, the eldest, early on became a soloist at Mt. Carmel Church; and Geneva was an outstanding singer who would one day earn her B.A. in music at Howard University and have an important career in opera.

But the boys were another story. Leon and Eugene reluctantly obeyed their father, while Elsworth purposely sang off-key, pretending he couldn't carry a tune. "We'd be laughin' at Elsworth," recalled Leon, "and my father would stand there with that strap in one hand. Maybe that turned me off from music."[1]

Joe Brown's frustrations continued. As long as anyone could re-

member, he had surrounded himself with musical instruments–violins, horns, percussion–and had kept collecting, playing, and repairing them. He proudly told his children about his brother, Uncle Arthur, who was leading a band in New York. Estella, his wife, had a sister who was a successful concert singer. His neighbors and friends played instruments and sang. But, alas, his sons' vocal quartet struggled without results.

Finally, one day when his youngest boy, Clifford, had turned twelve, the lad asked his father if he could play the shiny silver trumpet that Joe kept carefully stored in a closet. "He took to it like a fish to water," said Leon. "My father played trumpet and violin and piano for his own amusement," recalled Clifford Brown years later, "and from the earliest time I can remember it was the trumpet that fascinated me."

Even today, Wilmington, Delaware, appears to be an odd little city. Surrounded by much larger cities, Wilmington has long been an international corporate stronghold. Low taxes have attracted large companies, many of whom register as Delaware corporations. The city is quite small, its population about 43,000, and the corporate towers dominate the downtown area, with black working class neighborhoods surrounding them. It is a short walk from Rodney Square in the center of town along Delaware Avenue or Ninth Street to the Christina River at the edge of the city. The row houses have been constructed in a Federal style that gives an antebellum look to the area.

The ancestors of the people living in these neighborhoods had, of course, been slaves, but for a state that had practiced slavery since its founding, Delaware had a singular history. In Wilmington, "slavery was practically unknown in the city even before the Civil War."[2] In fact, before the war began in 1861, only 1,798 slaves remained in the entire state, while freed Negroes numbered 19,829.[3] Most historians feel that manumission (liberation from slavery) continued steadily in the state largely because of economic reasons. Since the climate did not permit a long growing season, slavery simply did not pay. Had there not been a war, it is certain that the role of blacks would have run a far different course in this period. During the Civil War, however, "slavery became a symbol of opposition to the north-

ern government, a gesture of defiance."[4] Although Negroes had the right to vote after the war, they faced great difficulties in exercising this right, with the state Democratic Party taking a tough anti-Negro stand. In his inaugural address, Delaware Governor Gove Saulsbury declared: "The true position of the Negro was as a subordinate race excluded from all political and social privileges."[5] Anthony Higgins (later a United States senator) stated that "the enfranchisement of the Negro would guarantee a majority for the Republican party."

In the 1870 election, although the Republicans counted on support from 4,500 newly enfranchised Negroes, they lost convincingly to a Democratic Party that had campaigned on a vigorous anti-Negro platform. It was a violent time during which Democrats accused Republicans of importing Negroes from other states to vote, and Republicans accused Democrats of trying to keep Negroes from the polls. At one polling place in Wilmington shots were fired, and several people were reported injured.[6] Anthony Higgins telegraphed President Grant to request military intervention because Negroes had been driven from the polls by "clubs, bludgeons and revolvers."[7]

The *Delaware Gazette*, a Democratic newspaper, declared that "Negroism is dead and buried forever."[8] But in 1888, when the Republicans won the legislature with the aid of the Negro vote, the former slaves' status noticeably improved. "Formerly spurned by officeholders, (the Negro) was cozened, entreated, or even paid to vote."[9] While this development exacerbated a growing racism among the white population, the Republican administration began to help Negroes, mainly through providing for their education. A multimillion dollar gift from Pierre S. duPont made it possible to construct schools for Negroes in every district, and a new school code, adapted in 1921, forced standards, teachers' salaries, and length of sessions to be equalized in colored and white schools. By this time Wilmington's Howard High School, under the guidance of a legendary black principal, Edwina Kruse, had become "one of the best, possibly the best, in the entire school system."[10] This would be the school in which Joe and Estella Brown's eight children would be educated.

Joseph Leon Brown was born probably in 1891 in Seaford, Delaware, in the southern part of the state. "The best guess is sometime

in November," says his older surviving daughter, Geneva Griffin. He was raised by a foster mother who was "very mean." One of the earliest musical recollections alludes to Joe's ability to "buck dance," an activity he could have acquired from traveling minstrel shows.

Estella Hackett was born in Marydel, Maryland, and moved to Wilmington to stay with her Aunt Fina and finish high school at Howard. Her sister Rella had musical talent and became a concert singer. Intellectually gifted—"I can spell any word in the dictionary," Estella would say—she was one of eleven graduates from Howard in 1912. The yearbook says she helped write the school's alma mater, but Geneva feels that her mother only wrote the lyrics.

In 1913, Joe Brown was working as a laborer and living at 1013 B Street. City records show that Estella was boarding at 1009 B Street, probably while attending normal school studying to be a teacher. She was going with Enos Dickson when she met Joe Brown. Joe wore "country boy" outfits and "thought he was hot stuff," recalled the urban-bred Estella, but, evidently, he finally charmed her, and soon they were married. (The rejected Dickson was so frustrated that he continually harassed the couple.) The couple moved in with Joe's Aunt Sarah, and on January 9, 1914, their first child, Harold Boyd Brown, was born. Joe and Estella soon moved out of Aunt Sarah's house and would live in a number of houses in the next few years as their family grew.

Although poor by any economic standard, the Wilmington Negro neighborhoods were far from being socially, educationally, or culturally impoverished. A contemporary of the Brown children, J. Saunders Redding, whose family lived close by, was one of the many students who benefited from the rigorous education at Howard High School. Born in 1906, Redding, one of the first three Negroes admitted to Brown University, later wrote a compelling narrative describing life in Wilmington. "In the early years, when we were a young family, there was always talk at our house; a great deal of it meal talk, a kind of boundless and robust overflow of family feeling. Our shouts roared through the house with the exuberant gush of flood waters through an open sluice, for talk, generated by any trifle,

was the power that turned the wheels of our inner family life. It was the strength and that very quality of our living that made impregnable, it seemed, even to time itself, the walls of our home. But it was in the beginning of the second decade of the century, when the family was an institution still as inviolate as the swing of the earth."[11]

This strong family connection that Redding found so important persists on the Wilmington east side to the present day. When I went to visit Clifford Brown's neighbors and friends, I encountered a warmth and cordiality that was very stirring. These things are available in large urban centers, but in Wilmington, the east siders meet and greet with a genteel enthusiasm that can only be a relic of southern antebellum aristocracy. To have dinner at one of the row houses in the east side on a warm summer evening is to go back in time. The tempo of the evening is slow paced, but the lively conversation, punctuated with animated but delicate humor, makes one feel that dinner is over all too quickly. The subjects of conversation echo the sophistication of an urban coffee house: literature, art, government, and, of course, music. Each conversation is orchestrated by unusual counterpoint between avid listening and purposive talk. It is the art of conversation referred to by Hazlitt, Carlyle, and other nineteenth-century stylists that has been obfuscated in most present-day American families by television, constantly ringing telephones, and fast food dinners. And yet today in Wilmington's east side one can still feel the shadows of the old southern ways.

All of the Brown children currently living–Geneva, Rella, and Leon–wear bemused expressions when the "talk" element of their family is recalled. "Talk," Geneva recalls, "my father was such a droner that it was dangerous to ask, 'how are you, Joe?' Momma was a talker too." Conversation would range over a wide variety of subjects, but often it revolved around education. Many times "we called the library to check things out." In the Redding family, "we children were all trained at home in the declining art of oratory and were regular contestants for prizes at school."[12] In the Brown family, the emphasis on speaking correctly would seem unusual in today's society. "Where's the jelly at?" a youngster would ask. "Right in back of the preposition," was the retort.