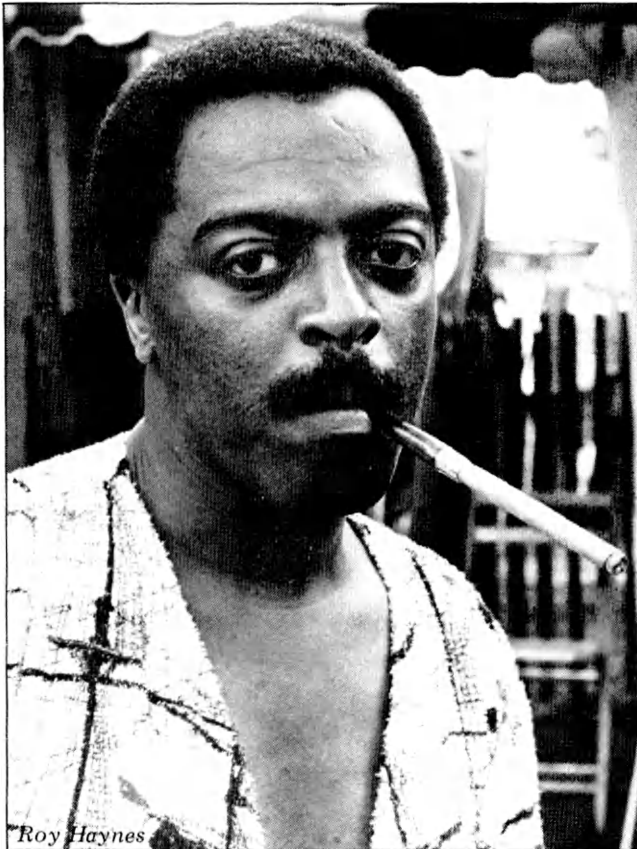


Jaki Byard, to borrow a phrase James P. Johnson used in describing Fats Waller, is *all* music. He is also a man of parts and his music changes shape and mood unpredictably. Or, rather, it seems to have many shapes and moods at once. Allusions spanning the history of jazz surface unexpectedly in his playing like fish breaking water in different parts of a lake.

The recurrent theme of all the writing about Byard seems to be: "Why isn't this man a 'star'?" A star, presumably, is one who is easily recognized by large numbers of people, makes more money than he needs, and has more demands on his time



than he can meet. Such a life has blunted the talents of more than a few of America's most sensitive artists; it is hard to survive as a complex or self-contradictory human being in a culture that must reduce everything to the quickly-recognizable images and catchwords with which our media manipulate taste and values. Jaki's personality, both as a musician and as a man, resists this sort of treatment. He is unclassifiable.

Byard was born in 1922 and grew up around Boston. He took piano lessons briefly, as a child, but spent his teens teaching himself and listening avidly to the bands that came through town. He played piano with several bands in the area, and also played trumpet, which he learned with some help from his father. He was drafted just as his career started rolling, and spent the years from 1941 until the end of the war in the service, bunking, for a time, with drummer Kenny Clarke and pianist Ernie Washington. Here he learned trombone, which he played in the Army band.

After the war, Byard free-lanced in Boston for a couple of years before going on the road with Earl Bostic in 1947. Then he spent some time in Canada, studying saxophone while there. He returned to Boston, where he was becoming something of a local legend, and besides playing piano regularly at several local clubs played tenor next to the great baritone saxophonist Serge Chaloff in Herb Pomeroy's big band. He also began teaching in earnest, and influenced a number of younger musicians, among them Don Ellis and the fine, short-lived pianist Dick Twardzick. In 1959 he joined Maynard Ferguson's band and began working regularly in New York. It was at about this time that he met Charles Mingus; when he left Ferguson it was to join that great bassist and composer.

Byard spent a significant period with Mingus, after which he free-lanced around New York and recorded an extraordinary series of group performances for Prestige. But despite the enthusiasm of fellow musicians and a few of the more perceptive critics, he never seemed to receive notice from the jazz public commensurate with the size of his talent. The Sixties were a time for partisans, in and out of jazz, and for the most part the new players who gained the most recognition were those who aggressively asserted a *new* approach to playing. It was a bad time for an individualist with a predilection for history and no axes to grind.

Byard started teaching at the New England Conservatory of Music in 1969. He still teaches there, dividing his time between Boston and his home in Hollis, Long Island, where he lives with his family. Jaki maintains active playing and private teaching schedules as well.

In the late spring of my senior year at college I drove with some friends to a concert in Bennington, Vermont. There, from the loft of an old carriage house, we looked down and watched Jaki Byard, trumpeter Jimmy Owens, bassist Chris White, and drummer Warren Smith. I no longer remember what they played but I remember how it felt, which was very close to the spirit of some of Fats Waller's small-group recordings. The music kept changing shape, molded largely by Byard with dissonant chords, facial expressions, and shouted remarks. It was exhilarating, and the glow stayed after they finished playing. We offered the pianist a ride back to his hotel, and when we got there he invited us in. We had some sandwiches and a jug of wine; Jaki had a can of small sausages and some cheese. We put it all in the middle of the floor and ate and drank until three-thirty in the morning, listening to Byard expound on nightclubs, the American educational system, the dangers of hero worship, and lots of other things. I remember how comfortable he made us feel; we might have been in a dorm talking to an exceptionally alive, witty friend.

Later that summer I attended a jazz program at Bennington College for a couple of weeks; Jaki was

one of the faculty members there. Late one night, while wandering out by a cornfield, just soaking up the evening and the country, I heard, faintly, a Bird-like alto coming from the direction of the arts complex. As I got closer I could hear a rhythm section; they were playing the changes to "Half Nelson." I walked in and saw Jaki in a chair in the middle of the room, wailing away on alto with a student rhythm section at midnight just for kicks.

Byard is a natural teacher; his endless enthusiasm for playing and his real concern for younger players is a great inspiration. In 1976 Jaki played with a trio on Sunday evenings at a Greenwich Village restaurant called Willy's. I spent a few nights there listening and occasionally sitting in. Many young musicians came to play, and Jaki was gracious to everyone, always introducing the sitters-in from the stage and making sure everyone got a chance to blow. When we weren't playing we sat at a table behind Byard; from time to time he would play big, rumbling, train-wreck chords and look over his shoulder at us and give us monster-movie eyes and break us up.

What comes through, I hope, in these glimpses of the man, is some of his generosity of heart, his enthusiasm and openness. Ordinarily, it is dangerous play to look for parallels between an artist's life or personality and his work. Jazz is, however, a unique form which, by fusing the creator with the thing created, by making the work of art an *act*, turns that work into evidence for all kinds of existential inductions about the artist. From this comes the peculiar sort of hero worship that surrounds many players, the same kind that surrounds many athletes.

Some musicians enjoy playing the public figure role to the hilt, and seem to suffer little inner conflict from it. Many who find themselves in that role are never sure whether their audience sees them as artists or as dancing bears. Some of these kill themselves, quickly or slowly; some emigrate to Europe; some are able to keep a perspective and continue creating despite the contradictions and disproportions of their position. Byard belongs with the latter group. He is in no way reticent about performing, or less than generous when he appears. He is, in fact, a most witty and entertaining presence, but he is unwilling to focus all his disparate moods into a consistent, recognizable persona. That is, he is unwilling to fashion an image for himself and thereby become fixed, predictable, packageable and consumable by a society with little use for artists but an insatiable craving for romantic heroes and, especially now, messianic father figures. His music is the most important part of him, and mirrors his absolute individuality.

Byard's version of the jazz continuum is like a web; everything in his musical personality suggests breadth and simultaneity. A reference to Erroll Garner is sounded, resonates, and brings Fats Waller to the surface, followed quickly by Monk.

Within one chorus his piano might suggest bells, fog horns, Bud Powell or a riffing big band. He has performed or recorded on piano, tenor and alto saxophone, guitar, violin, drums, trombone, and trumpet.

Half the tunes here are Byard originals showing a real diversity of mood and approach. The other half are from composers as different as Thelonious Monk, Randy Weston, James P. Johnson, John Coltrane, and George Gershwin. Byard plays Weston's "Hi-Fly" with a lope and spareness that, by having a little more to do with Monk than with Weston, reminds us of Randy's roots in Monk's



playing. He treats "Round Midnight" in a very un-Monklike fashion. And if we are aware of Thelonious's roots in the stride piano tradition in which James P. held such a towering place, it will not be too surprising to find an excerpt from Johnson's large-scale work *Yamekraw* on the same album with the Monk and Weston selections. Jaki might take an old Basie big band tune and rip it apart and reassemble it (as he did once on a memorable recording of "Broadway"); flip the coin and he might play "Giant Steps" in stride.

So it would be inappropriate to place Byard within a stylistic category, or at the front of a movement. His work is illustrative of a certain tendency in playing, however, which explains why he is usually grouped with "modern" players. Bebop was the peak of the art of the soloist-with-rhythm. After Charlie Parker, the major contributors to the music have been people who thought as orchestrators, who heard the *total* sound in their heads (think of Miles, Mingus, Ornette, Zawinul, and

Shorter . . .). Bird's melodic innovations pointed the way to this later approach by demanding a new vocabulary of the rhythm section, a vocabulary that began to seem more and more like an improvised counterpoint to the soloist's line. Consider that the early "modernists" were fascinated by Latin-American music. In Latin and African-based musics, simple rhythms combine to form compound rhythms which are heard not merely as the combination of two distinct rhythms but as entirely new rhythmic shapes. Many early bebop recordings (Bud Powell's "Un Poco Loco"; Bird's contrapuntal lines "Ah-leu-cha" and "Chasin' The Bird"; Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia") seem partly to be studies in how one rhythm may trick another to the surface. You can hear this also in the way Bird would echo and play against his favorite drummers, particularly Max Roach and Roy Haynes. Harmonically, too, his music demanded a more subtle and equal interaction between pianist, bassist, and soloist. Each member became a more flexible part of the total group, and no part could be taken for granted.

It is this approach to music that Byard carries forward in his playing and composition. The recordings reissued here, made shortly after he began playing regularly in New York, show an approach to piano trio music that was rare at the time. Rather than being a series of piano statements with rhythm accompaniment, they are as varied in shape and mood and texture as a series of paintings by Paul Klee. Ron Carter and drummers Haynes and Pete LaRoca perform different roles from tune to tune, but always they are present as equals with Byard in performances which add up to more than the sum of their component parts.

Our sense of justice tells us that great talent ought to reap great material rewards but justice, in this respect, is cheated as often as fulfilled. Posthumous fame is, as Hannah Arendt said, "the lot of the unclassifiable ones, that is, those whose work neither fits the existing order nor introduces a new genre that lends itself to future classification." Stardom is a mixed blessing; Jaki Byard's music bears the signs of one engaged in endless pursuit of form and beauty, rather than shallow recognition. Let us end with a quote from another individualist, e. e. cummings, from the little self-interview that serves as an introduction to his novel *The Enormous Room*:

*If people were interested in art, you as an artist would receive wider recognition—*

*Wider?*

*Of course.*

*Not deeper.*

*Deeper?*

*Love, for example, is deeper than flattery.*

—Tom Piazza