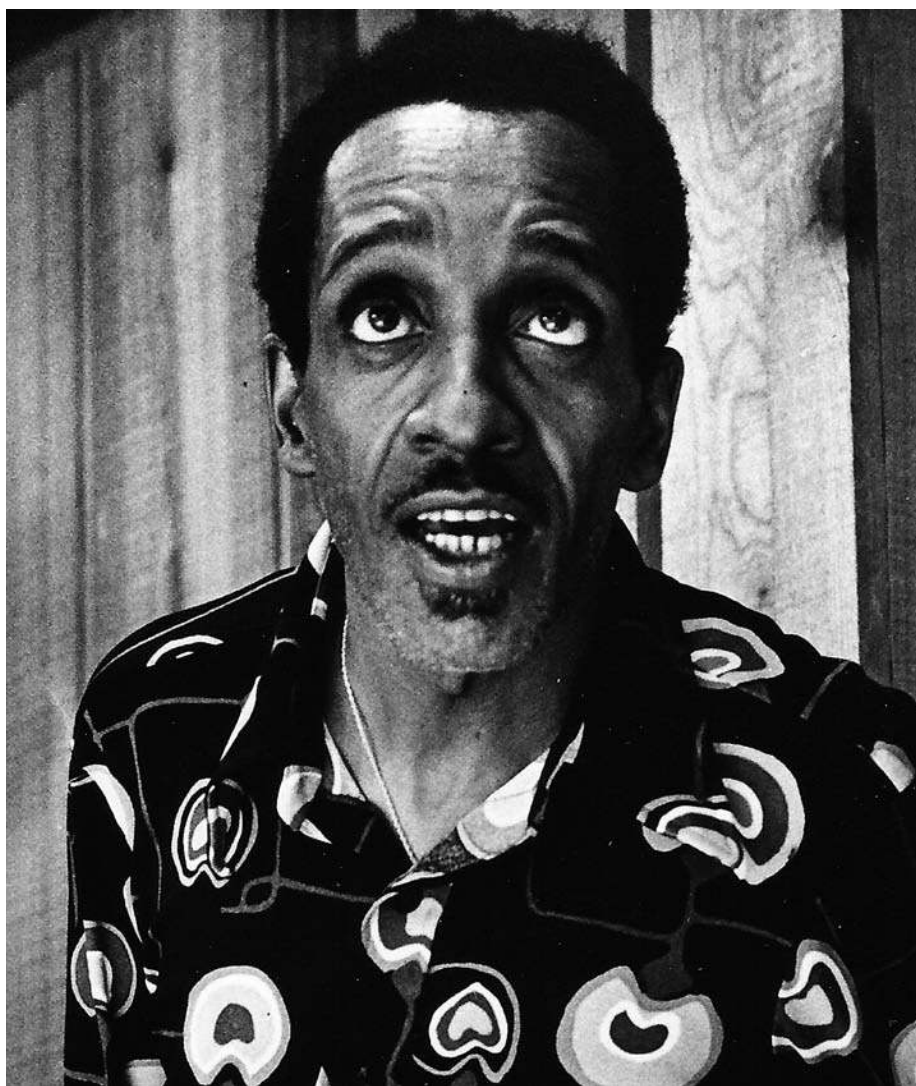


# Milt Jackson reconsidered

Part one of a survey by Richard Palmer



Apart from record reviews and the obituary I wrote for December 1999's *JJ*, I have not written extensively on Jackson for nearly a quarter of a century. It struck me that the time is ripe for a full appraisal of the peerless vibist's career, not least because it's now 10 years since his demise.

In that obituary I opined - hardly an original remark, but a telling one nonetheless - that Jackson was a great artist who happened to play the vibraharp. I'm more convinced than ever of that; I also have come to admire almost beyond measure the breadth of his art and its deceptive depth. That breadth is eloquently illustrated by the sheer number of different

artists with whom he recorded and the invariably enabling effect he had on all concerned: many added a new dimension to their art as a result (the names of John Coltrane, Monty Alexander, Cannonball Adderley, Ray Charles and Oscar Peterson come most immediately to my own mind).

This appraisal - suitably celebratory but I trust also suitably stringent where necessary - is in four parts. This opening article traces Jackson's origins; his prentice work in Detroit; his crucial encounter with Dizzy Gillespie, which led to his joining the legendary DGBG and, perhaps even more important, the evolution therein of the quartet that eventually became the MJQ.

MILTON "BAGS" JACKSON (the nickname "Bags" attached itself early in his career, on account of the prodigious pouches under his eyes) was born on New Year's Day, 1923, and his musical life began early. When it was discovered that he had perfect pitch, his family, devoutly religious anyway, encouraged him to sing spirituals and gospel music - a background that imbued every note he played thereafter. From the age of seven he took up a number of instruments, including guitar, violin, drums and piano before settling on the xylophone and vibraphone in his mid teens; he also sang - indeed, his first professional engagements were as part of a touring gospel quartet. Later he graduated to the vibraharp, the vibraphone's larger brother.

In some respects this might have seemed - and still does seem - an odd choice for an ambitious and multi-talented young musician to make. Despite the success of Lionel Hampton and Red Norvo, as World War II approached (and the almost coincident birth of bop), it would be idle to claim that the vibraphone was a mainstream jazz instrument. It could be a significant source of orchestral colour, yes, just as the celeste still is in a symphony orchestra; like the celeste, however, it was not taken seriously by many beyond that filigreeing, decorative role. And like so many of his Afro-American peers Jackson was determined to be taken seriously as an artist. For all his geniality and studiously non-controversial public personality, Jackson was absolutely representative of his generation: he was not interested in being a mugging entertainer, a servile turn "for the folks" or any of the Uncle Tom antics that had in effect been imposed upon their seniors. They were dedicated musicians, self-conscious in the best sense, who wanted to make a mark both for themselves and for their race.

Given all that, one would expect an ambitious young man to plump for one of the major front-line instruments or the piano: after, all that's what nearly all the innovative boppers did, and the course Jackson took could be seen as almost perverse, albeit brave. That judgment gathers extra weight when it is remembered that, as some of his earlier recordings demonstrate, he was a good enough pianist to have considered a career on that instrument. Why not go that way rather than into what a jazz-friend of mine once described, not entirely jokingly, as "ice cream music"?

Two reasons. First, he was concerned about his relatively small hands, especially the limitations of the third and fourth fingers of the right hand; launching a career as a jazz pianist was tough enough in the era of Tatum, Wilson, Cole and the imminent Powell and Peterson even without the extra pressure brought about by physical diffidence and, thereby, technical anxieties. Second - and more decisive, I have no doubt, signalled by my use of "brave" just now: the sound of the vibes must have spoken to him, fundamentally and consumingly. Certainly, he brought a voluptuous lustre to the instrument that no one has come near to equalling, and his two-mallet technique had a sonorous power that not even the primitive recording techniques prevalent in the bop years could disguise.