



ELVIN JONES' DETROIT YEARS

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Nearly a decade ago, a drummer friend of mine attended a Detroit music clinic and confessed to jazz great Elvin Jones: “Everything I learned to play on the drums I stole from you.” Jones smiled and assured him: “You didn’t steal anything. It’s a gift.” This gesture was indicative of Jones’ willingness to share his art, a musical gift made unique through an uncompromising spirit that refused to “comply,” said Jones, “to the standard form.” Best known as the drummer with saxophonist John Coltrane’s group (1960–1966), Jones had, before his death on May 18, 2004, awed audiences worldwide with his sheer musical power and improvisational brilliance. Throughout his life Jones credited his early Detroit years as preparing him for New York City’s competitive jazz scene and for shaping his skills as one of jazz music’s most innovative drummers.

In 1919, Henry and Olivia Jones left Vicksburg, Mississippi, for Pontiac, Michigan, taking with them their eldest child Olive (born in 1916) and infant son Henry “Hank” Jr.¹ By the time of the family’s arrival, Pontiac had been transformed from a carriage manufacturer to an automobile production center. The Great Southern Migration, beginning in the 1910s, had increased Pontiac’s African-American population that primarily occupied the city’s southeast side. Number-

¹ When Henry Jones arrived in Pontiac his brother Joseph E. Jones, one of the city’s most prominent African-American businessmen, was already a resident.

ing 500 by 1918, Pontiac's African-American residents lived under a city ordinance that prohibited them from being served by local white businesses.²

Olivia gave birth to daughters Malinda and Anna Mae and then Thaddeus in 1923. On September 9, 1927, Elvin was born the identical twin of Alvin Ray, who died of whooping cough eight months later. Jones later told writer Whitney Balliett about a deep connection with his twin brother: "I can remember the little wooden box sitting on the table in the parlor. I've been challenged on this but I have proved it by pointing out the exact spot where the coffin was, so it wasn't just that I was told about it later."³

In the early 1930s, the Joneses moved from 29 to 79 Lake Street, during which time Henry Sr. worked as a lumber inspector (or "material clerk") at the Yellow Truck & Coach Manufacturing Company. Six-foot tall, Henry was deacon of Pontiac's Trinity Baptist Church; Hank Jr. recalled that his father's religiosity "was a seven-day part" of his life. "He was sincere about it, deeply, deeply religious," and Elvin described him as a really fine man whose "example was in his living" and who "made you want to be like him."⁴

At Trinity Baptist Hank Jr. played keyboard and his sisters sang in the choir. Both Olive and Hank received private keyboard instruction and spent hours practicing the grand piano in the living room.⁵ Though Hank Sr. forbade the listening of jazz on Sundays, his home resounded with symphony and big band radio broadcasts, including the playing of 78 recordings by Jelly Roll Morton, Fats Waller, Chick Webb, and Art Tatum.

In the late summer of 1932, a traveling circus arrived in Pontiac by train. Five-year-old Elvin spent the day watching circus hands unloading railroad boxcars and setting up tents in a nearby field. Attentive to sounds, he considered it a visual and

² Woods, *Pontiac* 109, 124.

³ Balliett, 476–477.

⁴ Balliet, 468; Lees, 56.

⁵ Tragically, Olive, classically-trained and considered the family's most promising musician, died at age twelve during an ice skating accident.

aural wonderment. During the circus' pre-performance parade, Elvin broke away from his mother and pursued the procession of elephants, zebras, horses, and camels—accompanied by clowns—for blocks, marveling at the brightly coloured band uniforms and listening to the drums. “It was a kaleidoscope of humanity [and] animal life. I was a wide-eyed little boy. It made a big impression on me . . . I wanted to be a drummer so I'd maybe get a chance to play in those parades.”⁶

By the mid-1930s the Jones family lived in a large house at 129 Bagley. Hank's friend, musician and educator Emil Sutt, visited the Jones home in 1935 and recalled the family's generosity to people during the Depression. “Mrs. Jones was a wonderful woman,” recounted Sutt, “and she ran an open kitchen and had two tables set up in the house where people sat and ate, and money was set out in a bowl to help out friends and out-of-town visitors.”⁷

At Washington Junior High School Elvin set school track records and was a marching-band drum major. From Washington's music teacher, University of Michigan music graduate and drum major, Fred N. Weist, Jones received first-rate instruction and philosophical guidance. “I thought he was one of the greatest musicians I had ever seen,” recalled Jones. “So I learned to be a drum major through him. I learned to twirl the baton and lead marching bands.” As he added, Weist “had the integrity and dignity of what I believe and still do . . . He told me that you hear incoherent sounds in a traffic jam and that music should go far beyond the reproduction of traffic jams.” A few years after Jones graduated from Washington, Pontiac historian and Jones' friend, Esmo Woods, studied drums under Weist. Woods played marches with Washington's band and a concert repertoire, including Bach's “If Thou Were Near” and “Parade No. 2” by Goldman. “The closest we got to

⁶ Elvin quoted in Ken Jones, 17; Elvin Jones Wayne State University drum clinic, November 15, 1991.

⁷ Phone Interview with Emil Sutt.

anything resembling jazz,” commented Woods, “was the playing of “Dancing in the Dark” and “Dancing Tambourine.”⁸

Around age twelve Jones acquired a Paul Yoder drum-method book and learned all twenty-six rudiments, practicing them for six to eight hours a day with sticks and a drum pad. “Being able to read music,” observed Jones, “opened up a whole world of possibilities.” Following his brother Hank’s suggestion, he furthered his drum technique by playing along with Art Tatum recordings. Given the syncopated complexity of Tatum’s keyboard style, Jones initially found this exercise extremely difficult. “I got stiff as a board . . . I said, maybe I should relax. So I think it’s the same principle of breath control that woodwind players, brass players have to use—that same principle so that your body can respond, your mind can respond without being tied up in knots . . . whatever the tempo.” Not long afterward, Jones purchased a drum set with money loaned to him by his sister. Jones’ friend and Bagley Street neighbor, Art Hovesepian, told how “It was awhile before Elvin got a drum set. I used to follow him up to the attic of their house, where he would practice with sticks on a book. We went up there because Hank would be downstairs practicing on the piano in the living room.”⁹

Despite Hank Sr.’s opposition to his teenage sons working at dances and venues where liquor was served, it did not stop them from taking such jobs. At age fourteen Elvin played drums at a bar that attracted drinkers from a nearby factory. “On a good night I could make two bucks,” he told an interviewer: “Anyway, one customer came up to me and said, ‘Play a drum solo. Go on, make some noise.’ I didn’t know much about playing so I guess I made quite a bit of noise. That’s how people thought about drumming then. Many musicians felt like that too.”¹⁰

During the mid-1940s, Jones studied music at Pontiac

⁸ Nash, 18; Jones quoted in Art Taylo, 228; phone interview with Woods.

⁹ Wayne State drum clinic; phone Interview with Hovesepian.

¹⁰ Issacs.

Central High School, most likely with instructor Dale C. Harris. Elvin quickly made first drum chair, but quit the tenth grade to work at Pontiac's GM Truck and Bus plant, unloading boxcars and stacking engines on the assembly line. In 1946 Elvin and his brother Tom left Pontiac for Boston, where he worked at a dry cleaners pressing clothes—a vocation he had learned as a youth from his paternal uncle, Joseph Jones, owner of the Kenwood Cleaners in Pontiac's Kenwood Hotel.

Jones then enlisted in the Army Air Corps in New Jersey and completed basic training at Fort Lee, Virginia. Stationed at Lockbourne air base outside Columbus, Ohio, he served in the 766th Army Air Corps band. The ensemble had both a concert and marching band, and Jones enjoyed playing John Phillip Sousa marches and listening to the brass sections. Surrounded by the unit's experienced musicians, Jones still considered himself an understudy: "I was a stagehand rather than a drummer. I went along just to watch. And I began to play dances on the post and I gained confidence. I never got that many compliments and I never got that much criticism. The man I played with liked me enough not to repudiate my shortcomings."¹¹ Jones' military band mates included pianist Dwiki Mitchell, saxophonist John Gilmore, and bassist and French horn player, Willie Ruff. Sharing Jones's lack of musical experience, Ruff recalled, "We were all outclassed. We were the youngsters of the group, and on the receiving end of the whole learning process."¹²

As the band's timpanist, Jones found a worthy mentor in African-American bandleader, Chief Warrant Officer John Brice. A former Howard University ROTC instructor, Brice had, during his long residence in Washington D.C., led bands for presidential gatherings and the society balls of generals from Mark Clark to Omar Bradley. Under Brice's meticulous direction the 766th band performed marches and concert material, including Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat*

¹¹ Balliett, 470.

¹² Ruff quoted in Sidran, 94.

minor and Antonin Dvorak's *Symphony No. 9 in E minor*, "From the New World." Brice vehemently disliked his band members' extra-musical activities on base, most notably their involvement in Thursday night amateur shows. "Brice had a desire to project serious music as a calling that young Negroes might aspire," asserted Ruff. "He had taken it as his mission to build a symphonic ensemble to rival the prestigious all-white Army Air Corps Band in Washington."¹³

Brice's musical vision, however, ended with his death from leukemia in 1948. Afterward the 766th band was assigned to take part in a touring variety show, "Operation Happiness"—a production with a jazz orchestra, twelve chorus girls, a comedian, and a magician. Around this time Jones heard the recordings of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie that were just reaching audiences outside New York City by way of the recordings released by (Guild) Musicraft and Savoy in 1945. Gillespie's 1945 Savoy side "Salt Peanuts," featuring Sid Catlett's drumming, impressed Jones as "just fascinating" and inspired him to embrace modern jazz as a lifetime pursuit.¹⁴

In 1949 Jones, discharged from the army, returned to Pontiac and bought a new drum set with his military pay. On his nightly trips to Detroit, he met saxophonists Wardell Gray and Billy Mitchell, pianists Barry Harris and Tommy Flanagan, guitarist Kenny Burrell, and bassist Paul Chambers. Through drummer Art Mardigan he landed a job at a Grand River nightclub that ended on a snowy Christmas eve when the band leader made his way down the street with the group's money. In Pontiac he worked in local roadhouse, backing a floorshow with an amateurish Sophie Tucker-style singer—the club owner's girlfriend whose criticism of Jones' musicianship (or supposed lack of) eventually got him fired.

Detroit's modern jazz scene offered Jones more supportive musical company. In 1948 pianist Phil Hill established one of the city's premiere nightspots for modern jazz at the Blue

¹³ Ruff, 173.

¹⁴ WDET "Fresh Air" radio interview with Elvin Jones.

Bird Inn at 5021 Tireman. In 1951, after Hill took his group over to the Crystal Show Bar on Grand River, saxophonist Billy Mitchell assumed leadership of the club's house band, which included Mardigan, bassist Jimmy "Beans" Richardson, and pianist Terry Pollard. When Jones visited the Blue Bird, he recalled how Mardigan would "ask me to sit in, but I would never do it. I thought it was presumptuous to sit in with these musicians because to me they were the people I knew. I found it an honor even to speak to these cats socially. I never had the faintest idea that I would actually become a member of the group and be a regular."¹⁵ After Mardigan left the group Mitchell recruited Elvin and his brother Thad.

At this time Elvin moved to Detroit and lived in a one-room flat over Lavert's Bowling Alley on Linwood. "My main purpose was to learn as much as I could about the music that fascinated me so much." Elvin's drumming and Thad's exceptional trumpet and compositional skills brought notice to Mitchell's group. A 1952 *Michigan Chronicle* article noted that it was "the kind of jazz, which is consistently above par, especially in view of the countless mediocre organizations in the state." Mitchell's group, featuring Elvin and Thad, caught the attention of independent record label owner Dave Usher, who recorded the band for his Detroit-based Dee Gee label, a short-lived enterprise co-owned by Dizzy Gillespie.¹⁶

Because Monday was a slow night in the nightclub business, Elvin and Thad held weekly jam sessions at their mother's Pontiac home, Hank Sr. having died in 1949. "Every Monday night the house would be mine," stated Jones, "and all the musicians from Detroit would flock out there. We would jam and have a ball . . . My mother made it comfortable for everybody." As Jones accounted, she "was a big warm woman and the greatest lady in the world" and "gave me every kind of encouragement." Beginning around 10:00 P.M. the open windows of 129 Bagley attracted neighbors who gathered outside to hear the

¹⁵ Taylor, 220.

¹⁶ Jones WDET interview, 21.

sounds of jazz. “I got off work about midnight,” remembered Art Hoveseppain, “and I would go around back and knock on the door. Mrs. Jones would let me in, and I enjoyed the music until the wee hours of the morning.”¹⁷ Guest musicians included Billy Mitchell, Pepper Adams, and the extremely talented Detroit trumpeter Clair Rockamore; a former neighbor related that Miles Davis came to the house as well. Occasional visitors included teenage pianist Roland Hanna, who was invited by fellow Detroit musicians to visit the Jones’ home, but because of the participants’ high musical caliber opted to observe rather than play at the sessions.

At Blue Bird jam sessions Jones accompanied Sonny Stitt and Miles Davis, who, while stranded in Detroit for six months during 1953, was a featured Blue Bird soloist. Awed by Elvin’s talent during his Blue Bird tenure, Davis later informed an interviewer that Jones “is another drummer who plays real good. Elvin comes from the Detroit area which is producing some very good musicians.”¹⁸

At the Blue Bird, Jones had already found a following among younger musicians. Too young to gain admittance to the club, drummer Roy Brooks and saxophonist Charles McPherson gathered outside, and Jones worked out a code so that they could watch the performers. When they knocked at the window, Jones, playing on-stage with his back to the front window, would pull back the venetian blinds, allowing a view of the band. “And I would do that for Roy and Louis [Hayes]. Along with Frank Gant they became attached to me. They asked me a lot of questions about drumming and music, and I’d try to give them as much knowledge as I could.”¹⁹

Apart from his Blue Bird engagement and his Pontiac sessions, Jones performed Tuesdays at a private music collective, the New World Stage located at Woodward and Davison, and appeared at Detroit concerts with his brother Thad and Kenny

¹⁷ Phone interview, Hoveseppain.

¹⁸ “Miles.”

¹⁹ Taylor, 220.

Burrell. As he commented later, music “was happening all over the city . . . It was amazing! I’ve never seen anything like it before or since: a whole community actively participating in the development of the form.”²⁰

Visiting Detroit in 1954, bassist Charles Mingus sat in with Thad and Elvin and lauded Thad as “the greatest trumpet player that I’ve heard in this life,” adding: “His brother [Elvin] is about as great a prophet. I never swung so much or, rather, lived so much in my life.” Following Thad’s joining the Count Basie band in 1954, Elvin ended his Bluebird stint to play other Detroit clubs and after-hours spots. Down river from Detroit in Del Ray, Jones performed in Burrell’s quartet at the Rouge Lounge, backing local and nationally known jazzmen. When bassist Bill Crow accompanied vibraphonist Terry Gibbs at the Rouge Lounge, he found a thriving scene; taking notice of Jones and Burrell, Crow related in his memoir: “I was amazed that were that many first class musicians that I never heard of. They were happy jamming together in Detroit, but I don’t think they were making a living.”²¹

While playing the Rouge Lounge in 1955, Jones learned that his brother Hank’s big band leader, Benny Goodman, was auditioning at New York City’s Nola Studios for a new drummer. Jones quickly left Detroit to audition but failed; he was required to play “Sing, Sing, Sing,” a number he disliked. Instead, he joined Charles Mingus’ quintet featuring vibraphonist Teddy Charles and tenor saxophonist J.R. Monterose. In July 1955 Jones, Mingus, Charles, and trombonist Britt Woodman were the back-up musicians for Miles Davis’ *Blue Moods* for Debut, co-owned by Mingus and Max Roach. During the following year, Jones and Mingus joined the trio of bebop pianist Bud Powell. Upon Mingus’ departure, Jones, paired with bassist Tommy Potter, stayed in Powell’s trio for over a year.

Jones’ move to New York was typical of most jazzmen who

²⁰ Taylor, 221.

²¹ Priestly, 57–58; Crow, 109–110.

found it difficult to make a living in Detroit, a city that had few jazz performance and recording venues. Center of the entertainment world at a time when jazz discs still sold in the hundreds of thousands, New York offered the possibility of attracting the critics' attention, thus launching a successful career. It did not take long for Jones to be noticed; in 1956 Leonard Feather, in his *Encyclopedia of Jazz*, wrote that Jones was "considered by musicians to be a future star."²²

Over the next ten years, Jones rose from a musician's musician into an internationally recognized talent. Reflecting on his long career as a sideman and a bandleader, Jones credited his hours of study and years of performing in Pontiac and Detroit with providing him with a richness of musical experience, and he always cherished the place of his birth where his musical talents first found expression. As his friend, Art Hovesejian, asserted, "Elvin always boasted he was from Pontiac. He never forgot his roots."

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²² Feather.

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