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CLARK TERRY

BRILLIANCE WITHIN FAMILIARITY

By John McDonough II Photo by Michael Jackson

WHEN CLARK TERRY DIED ON FEB. 21

in Pine Bluff, Arkansas—eight days after moving from his home to a nearby hospice—the jazz world lost not only one of its greatest trumpeters, but also one of its finest ambassadors. Terry had been suffering for several years with failing health exacerbated by diabetes. He was 94.

Some of his recent activities (from 2010 to 2013) were documented by director Alan Hicks in the film *Keep On Keepin' On*, which chronicled Terry's decline with an unflinching honesty as he faced, among other things, amputation procedures for both legs. Through the health crises, he continued to mentor his latest protégé, pianist Justin Kauflin. Produced by Quincy Jones—another Terry protégé from long ago—the film debuted to great acclaim in April 2014 at the Tribeca Film Festival. The soundtrack, released Feb. 24 on Varèse Sarabande, features historic recordings of Terry performing with Count Basie, Duke Ellington and the Jazz at the Philharmonic All-Stars.

Most musicians—trumpet players in particular—foretell their demise through their horns: shorter solos, weakening intona-

tion, the strained high note or imprecise phrase. Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and even studio stalwarts like Harry Edison all buckled in their late years. Reluctant to give up the stage, they chose instead to devise ways of concealing and patching their weaknesses.

Clark Terry postponed that reckoning longer than nearly anyone, thanks to reserves of technique and an unquenchable optimism. Even as an octogenarian, he delivered masterful work. In 2005 I gave his recording of *Porgy & Bess* with Jeff Lindberg and the Chicago Jazz Orchestra a rare 5-star review in *DownBeat*. It was a virtually perfect performance.

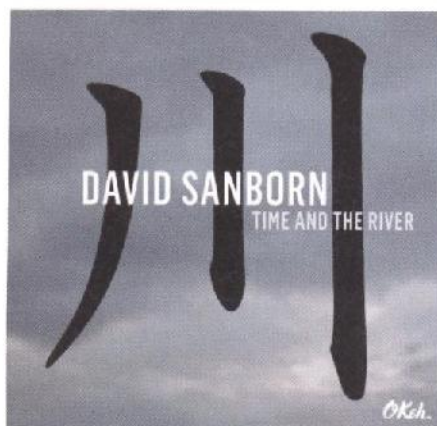
I saw Terry perform around the same time at the Iridium in New York City and found that it was not a mirage of post-production trickery. Though walking with a cane, Terry still played with the effervescence and elegance I remembered as a 15-year-old fan sitting a few feet from the Duke Ellington Orchestra at Chicago's Blue Note club back in 1957. At the Iridium, as Terry's eyesight and legs were failing him, his sound, breath control and attack seemed beyond the reach of time.

In 2008 Terry retired from performing, ending a career that spanned more than 60 years. His sound and phrasing were impossible to mistake for anyone else's. It's a kind of exclusivity shared by only a few trumpet players—Armstrong certainly, Ruby Braff and perhaps Edison. One could add Bix Beiderbecke, Gillespie and Davis (who is said to have studied Terry), of course, but they all became “schools” unto themselves and spawned many imitators and talented disciples. Terry owned his style so completely and protected it with such an impenetrable and subtle virtuosity that no one was capable of infringing on his territory.

“He taught so many cats,” Wynton Marsalis told me in Chicago just a week before Terry's death. “Everybody's been touched by him because he took his time with everybody. He carried the feeling of [jazz] with him, so when you were around him, you were around the feeling. He didn't have to explain a lot. He just had to be himself. I've known him since I was 14. He's the first person I heard who really was playing. It was the mid-'70s. Everybody was playing funk tunes. Miles was playing rock and funk, so nobody was playing jazz. But Clark Terry was playing. And no one played like CT.”



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Clark Terry's performances were a fizz of wit and urbanity.

JAN PERSON

Terry was so good, so unerring, for so long, that he suffered the penalties of perfection. He was taken for granted—probably because he was never caught climbing out of a cracked note, a clumsy turn of phrase or an indifferent 12 bars. His performances were a fizz of wit and urbanity, never anguish or indecision. He made it all look so easy.

If he was underestimated, the last several years saw a rush to correct the record. He was named a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master in 1991. Readers elected him to the DownBeat Hall of Fame in 2000. The Recording Academy recognized his lifetime achievement four years ago. He even scored a hometown star on the St. Louis Walk of Fame.

Virtuosity means different things to different people. Musicians worship it when they encounter it because they understand its elusive mystery and endless process. But critics sometimes distrust it as a distraction, suspicious that a veneer of well-practiced skill may be camouflaging an emotional or creative apathy. Consistency may be admirable, but inconsistency often makes a better story. Terry's surprises were subtle and came in oblique miniatures, easy to overlook and often undervalued. He was just so consistently brilliant, the wonders he wrought were hidden in their familiarity.

But musicians never overlooked him. One of the earliest to spot him was trumpeter Charlie Shavers, who had heard him playing in the late '40s with the George Hudson band, a regional orchestra in St. Louis, where Terry was born on Dec. 14, 1920. As musicians do, Shavers spread the word. While making *A Song Is Born* for Samuel Goldwyn in 1947, bandleader Charlie Barnet asked Shavers if he knew a good jazz trumpeter player. He immediately recommended Terry, who had become so captivated by the trumpet as a 10-year-old that he made one of his own from a section of hose and a funnel.

Terry was not a player whose style grew and evolved in public view over the years. He hit the Barnet band fully formed and singularly distinct, becoming an instant soloist in a brass section that also included Jimmy Nottingham and a young Doc Severinsen.

"To have an opportunity at age 21 to work with guys like that was inspirational," Severinsen recalled after Terry's death. "Clark was like my big brother. Anything he played, I was going to try to play it, too. I was pretty well-trained, but I simply could not do some of the things he did. He could play these long lines, for instance, because he learned to take in air as he would play—circular breathing. Yet, Clark never

used it in a way that wasn't good for the song. It was never a stunt. He was just a great trumpeter, period. He had a picture-perfect embouchure, which is why he was able to play as long as he wanted to."

On Terry's first record date with Barnet in September 1947, the trumpeter's arrangement of "Sleep" was already in the book, showcasing his long, glancing phrases and sudden flame-throwing dynamics. So was his wit. He tossed off casual references to Shavers and even Harry James. On "Budandy," his triple-tongue pirouettes contrasted sharply with Barnet's swaggering masculinity. But the best, most dazzling Terry work from the Barnet band was captured on its December 1947 *Town Hall Jazz Concert*, released by Columbia in the 1950s.

Terry's singing—he called it, more accurately, "mumbles"—was an explicit extension of his trumpet phrasing, a kind of rat-a-tat scat of double-talk: bubbling yet precise, with a bottled-up restraint that seemed itching to escape. Back then, his singing was less mumbles and more straight bebop. It was a small sideshow among his talents that Barnet never used on a commercial record and remained something of a secret until it became familiar to audiences via *The Tonight Show* in the 1960s. Terry's vocals didn't appear on a record until *Oscar Peterson + One*, released by Mercury in 1964. That album included a few Terry compositions, including "Mumbles."

Shortly after the 1947 Town Hall concert, Terry left Barnet for Count Basie's band. The timing could hardly have been worse. James Petrillo, head of the American Federation of Musicians, called a strike against the record companies, shutting down the entire industry through 1948. Bookings fell off, and one famous band after another shut down.

Terry stayed with Basie through 1949, but the records from the period are not memorable. One exception is "Normania" (a.k.a. "Blee Blop Blues") from Basie's final RCA session in August 1949. Terry etches a stunning solo, crowded with a dry pointillist precision that had no precedent in the Basie book. It was a kind of prickly virtuosity jazz had never encountered—fluid, contained and full of Haydienesque detail. But the band was in its final months and broke up on Jan. 8, 1950. For Terry, though, it would only be a brief layoff. He was back in a month, this time in a Basie combo that included clarinetist Buddy DeFranco.

It was a transitional interlude. Terry marked his time as Basie struggled to rebuild. His trumpet was the backbone of the octet, but he soloed rarely on the few sides it made for Columbia in 1950-'51. He

remained with Basie through the beginnings of the New Testament band in the spring and summer of 1951. Then, Duke Ellington beckoned.

Terry joined Ellington on Nov. 11, 1951. It had been a period of swift changes and recalibrations for the band. Alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges and drummer Sonny Greer had departed in February, taking with them two of the primary spectrums of the band's color scheme. Ellington might have tried a patch job. Instead, he bet on a reformation. Between March and November 1951, Terry and drummer Louie Bellson became a wind of modernity sweeping through the band.

Ellington presented Terry with what would be the first magnum opus of his career, a concert-size version of "Perdido," a piece that had been in the book since 1941. Terry polished it to a high gloss, making it a full-dress, eight-minute summary of his entire work. Triple-tongued arcs flared like geysers, then leveled off, spreading into long, cool landscapes that rolled evenly across half a chorus without a breath. When he twisted a pitch or broke composure with a sudden spritz of schmaltz, it was always with a sardonic wink. His playing flexed and bristled with an unforced passion wrapped in a strict sense of form and musical intelligence.

"Perdido" was recorded in July 1952, just in time for Columbia to add it to what would become Ellington's first landmark album of the long-play era, *Ellington Uptown*. The band had stumbled into a new peak period, invigorated by Terry's crackling audacity and Bellson's barreling drive. For Terry, "Perdido" and *Ellington Uptown* were a career-making twosome that put him in the big time. But just as that album was released, the band moved to Capitol for an indifferent two-year period during which it was eclipsed by the sensational renaissance of Count Basie.

Then came the legendary performance at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival (and subsequent concert album *Ellington At Newport*). Suddenly Ellington was back on top and on the cover of Time magazine. For the next three years, Terry would play to the largest audiences of his career and develop a fan base of his own. He became a fixture in a band of extraordinary fixtures: Hodges, Paul Gonsalves, Juan Tizol, Ray Nance, Britt Woodman, Harry Carney and Ellington himself.

After the 1956 Newport fest, Ellington grew more ambitious, and Terry was well represented in the flow of new works. He became one of the first musicians to bring the flugelhorn into the jazz scene with "Juniflip" (from *Newport 1958*). There were wonderful odds and ends, among them "Spacemen" (from *The Cosmic Scene*) and "Happy Anatomy" from his final Ellington project, *Anatomy Of A Murder*. Best remembered may be "Lady Mac" and "Up And Down, Up And Down" from 1957's *Such Sweet Thunder*.

As Terry rose on the Ellington tide, other opportunities opened. He moonlighted on sessions with Clifford Brown, Maynard Ferguson, Dinah Washington and Horace Silver on EmArcy Records. He joined Thelonious Monk for the landmark 1957 album *Brilliant Corners* (Riverside). Monk returned the courtesy, appearing on Terry's *In Orbit* (1958). And Hodges used him often on his Ellingtonian excursions on Verve.

Late in 1959 Terry left Ellington, worked on and off with Quincy Jones, then Gerry Mulligan and Bob Brookmeyer. But Terry's real quest was to get off the road and stay in New York. The chance came in 1960 when the major networks, after years of pressure, finally began to integrate their staff orchestras. Terry became the first African American musician to join the NBC staff.

He may have settled down a bit, but the 1960s would become his most productive decade. Nearly half the jazz recordings of his career would be done during that time.

It was also the decade in which Terry became widely known beyond the jazz world. When Johnny Carson took over *The Tonight Show* in October 1962, conductor Skitch Henderson brought Terry into the band, where he proved a natural showman with his "mumbles" scat singing. A regular feature of the show became "stump the band," in which Carson would invite audience members to make offbeat tune requests. No request was too obscure for Terry, who would raise his hand. "I think Clark has it," Carson would say. Terry would then mumble a

made-up scat line as the other musicians nodded in mock recognition. He became the most famous sideman in America's most famous jazz band.

When *The Tonight Show* moved to Los Angeles in 1972, Terry remained in New York and became increasingly active with younger musicians through a growing network of jazz educators, often recording with various student bands. He toured with a big band of his own periodically, playing festivals, cruises and other venues. (Vanguard released *Clark Terry's Big B-a-d Band Live At The Wichita Jazz Festival 1974*).

Terry's most consistent recorded output through the '70s and '80s was on Pablo, where the label's famous founder, Norman Granz, regularly featured him with Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson and on his own

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leader projects. He recorded on smaller labels with endless pick-up groups as he traveled the world. But alongside the playful spirit and adroit craft lived a powerful blues player as well, never more so than on Abbey Lincoln's 1990 album, *The World Is Falling Down*.

On the bandstand, Terry combined his formidable instrumental skills with a strong sense of showmanship. "Being able to entertain is very important," he said in a June 1996 *DownBeat* cover story. "The real jazz fans may think that's commercial—playing the horn upside-down or working with both horns at once. But the idea of playing music to an audience is to present it so they'll enjoy it. If you don't want to do that, you may as well rent a studio and play there. I try to pass on to young players the importance of remembering that when you're onstage, you're entertaining. Playing jazz is not heart

surgery. You're there to vent your feelings and have fun. We don't work our instruments. We play them."

Among Terry's last sessions were *Friendship* (a collaboration with drummer Max Roach) and the *Porgy & Bess* project in 2003 with the Chicago Jazz Orchestra.

Terry also had an important impact as a pioneering jazz educator. In addition to conducting clinics and workshops, he had a long stint as an adjunct professor at William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey. He donated instruments, correspondence, print music and memorabilia to the university in 2004.

Clark Terry lived a long life—with a coda that gave his many friends time to say their goodbyes. Some are movingly captured in *Keep On Keepin' On*. But one special goodbye came last December. The entire Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra diverted from its tour

route and played a birthday concert at Terry's hospital bedside. "We didn't want to stop," Marsalis later wrote on his Facebook page, "but it was time for all of us to go. But before that somber moment, we gathered around the bed and played 'Happy Birthday' for him. When he went to blow out the candles, he broke down. Many of us joined him. We all said goodbye and he once again recognized each individual with a touch and some kind words. ... And then it was that time. What is deeper than respect and love? That's what we felt: veneration."

On Feb. 23, bassist Christian McBride posted a tribute on his Facebook page in which he reflected on Terry's influence: "Every musician in the world who ever met Clark Terry is a better musician and person because of it. He now belongs to the ages." **DB**





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Original 1970s parts for Ernie Wilkins' arrangement of Clark Terry's composition "Sheba" (Clark Terry Archive at William Paterson University)

Terry's Archive

In 2007, Clark Terry visited the New Jersey campus of William Paterson University. He was doing a Q&A seminar with students in the school's jazz studies department, founded by Thad Jones in 1973. Near the end he announced that he wanted the university to become the site of his entire personal archive and music collection.

"We were stunned," said David Demsey, department coordinator. "He hadn't talked to us at all, but he and [his wife] Gwen had obviously done their homework."

They had, indeed. They wanted an institution in the New York City area associated with an active jazz studies curriculum, not just an archive or research center such as the Smithsonian. Terry wanted his music cared for but available so students could play it. A year after the announcement, the collection was officially inaugurated.

Terry visited often and helped oversee its early development. "We started with the core of it," Demsey recalled, "the music, the actual scores, the band library, and then the awards, letters and correspondence, pencil copies of his small group pieces, and records."

"Right now we're adding films, kinescopes, and videos. A lot is very rare. There are NBC film canisters still in the courier pouches."

At the time of his death, the school had digitized much of the collection and was at the point of completing a website. "We're working with Lois Gilbert at jazzcorner.com," Demsey said, "and that will be the portal for Clark's archive."

The digital ribbon is expected to be cut early this summer.

"We have been so blessed and honored to work with Clark so closely over the last decade," Demsey said. "His death may be the end of an era. But for us, it's the beginning of one. We're hoping we can be a big part of carrying his legacy forward."

—John McDonough

Bob Shimizu

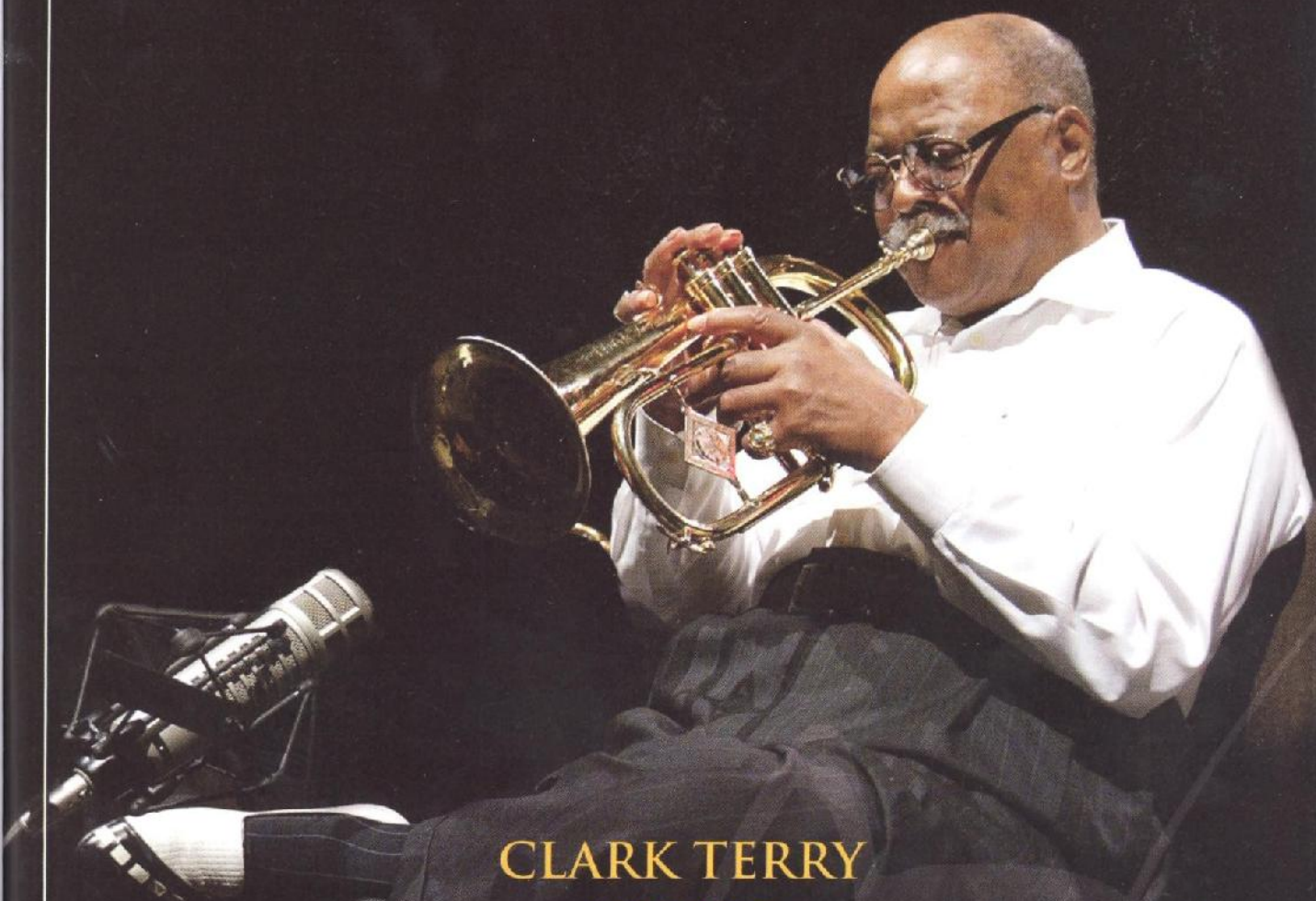
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