**BETTY CARTER**

She was unique. First of all as a singer, with that clever use of her voice, tender as velvet or sharp, scatting or lyrical, and always humorous, inventing. Each surprising performance was singular; always offering a new, unexpected aspect of each song. She was unique also as a human being, open, generous, forgiving; facing life with a keen sense of humour. She was a teacher-mother to the many young musicians fortunate enough to work with her. She was Lillie Mae Jones aka Betty Carter.

We had met at a Jazz Festival in Sicily where I had flown down from Rome to interview her for my National Radio Programme. She had been surprised and flattered to hear it and before long we were discussing, laughing and agreeing on various facts of life, as if sharing an ancient friendship. We discovered mutual basic points of view regarding the art of singing, although I confessed I would never have her spirit of innovation.

Another link between us was our desire to open the magic doors of jazz music to all young people who wished to study our music. I had inaugurated my “Dizzy Gillespie Popular School of Music” in Bassano del Grappa, with Dizzy’s active blessing, in 1982. When Betty had come for a concert I had organised for her in 1985 she had congratulated me, wishing our school all the luck possible. One day she asked me about the series of “concert-conferences” I would hold in a series of high schools, illustrating with my musicians the history of Jazz music. The title of the paper I handed her was “Jazz is Universal” and she read it with an approving smile. Here it is:

**JAZZ IS UNIVERSAL**

“It began from the first, repeated, moan bursting out of the chest of a Slave in a North American cotton field, forming within his soul a sobbing outlet; leaning on a spontaneous, repeated rhythm tied to his repetitious work in the field… “Oh Lord, have mercy on me.”

The Master decided he would save his Slave’s soul –no, not free his body, just his soul – therefore he should learn the prayers of the White Congregation, the Gospel, even if he did not really understand English enough. Just repeat what you catch being sung inside the church, while you are grouped outside it. The Gospel makes sense to the Master, as he sings it; so now repeat the same words and notes as best you can remember…Any void spaces you can fill up instinctively with a beat of the feet, and the moaning words can rise and fall in an Afro-European mixture of music and cadenzas.

Yes, that’s acceptable and even enjoyed by the Master. They will become eventually known as “work-songs”, ”gospel chants”, and then the Master will decide to play them on his own instruments, enrolling the help of his Slaves whom he will have educated in music, for his own entertainment and that of his white guests.

Thus a Black-American music was born; taken out of the slave quarters, part of it into the Church choir, and part into the mansion’s more sophisticated music room, where a properly trained Slave played the piano and sang. Somebody mentioned it as “all that jass”.

Today it is better known as Jazz, and across the centuries it has spread discreetly from the Southern mansions and cotton fields to the Churches, the Speak-easies, the dance floors and finally into the Theatre. From the moans of the first black Slaves up to the “Ebony Concerto” composed by Igor Stravinsky for Woody Herman. Today Jazz has developed into various musical forms and languages; various cadenzas from the South American rhythms to the oriental Mediterranean wails, with famous international artists playing in prestigious international classic music cathedrals like “La Scala” in Milan, Italy.

Another aspect regarding the historical essence of Jazz as a magic creator of brotherhood world-wide is proven by the immediate success of the Voice of America - through the well-known voice of Willis Conover – spreading the Jazz word into Russia, Poland, Yugoslavia and all the various Eastern European countries that had been politically separated from the West, at the end of World War Two. Soon these nations developed their regular Jazz Festivals with jazz musicians attending from the United States and other countries in the world.

Yes, Jazz is Universal today, and speaks in many languages and rhythms, the world over. It is part of our daily pleasures; a form of communication, of “belonging together”. Sometimes it is a form of political declaration, of ardent discussion to the point of creating factions between the various forms into which our music has evolved.

So now stop for a while and listen inside your soul, and hear that rhythmic call and pay your homage to that distant wail in the cotton fields: “Oh Lord, I’m on my way…”

During the years that followed I was able to organize special performances in northern Italy for Betty, when we would drive around the beautiful countryside, stop for a tasty snack, and talk for hours. She shared her dreams and her wishes with me, and also confided some of her most negative experiences, both as an artist as well as a woman. She had the utmost trust in my discretion, well knowing I would never fail her.

Alas, she left us far too soon, and today I look at her picture, on the wall of my office, where she had written: “Lillian! Stay young! Love, Betty” and I realise that’s what she is now: forever young, and at peace, I hope. I turn on her version of “Moonlight in Vermont”, close my eyes, and enjoy the soothing tenderness of her velvet voice.