

Ray Brown, A Personal Farewell



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Writer Mandy Flowers remembers her mentor, Ray Brown.

By Mandy Flowers

i met ray brown in 1995 at the Stanford Jazz Workshop. We liked each other right away. When I left, I gave him my card, explaining that I lived near the airport and could give him a ride. Less than a month later, when Ray called, I was stunned. He wanted me to do CD sales at his regular week-long Yoshi's engagement. I would get a commission, dinner, and free admission to every show. We spent a lot of time together, as he would sit with me and sign CDs. I remember turning to him at one point and saying, "I'd like you even if you didn't play the bass." His eyes widened and his face lit up in surprised delight.

the first lesson

At the end of the week, he invited me for my first private lesson. These were not paid – the subject never came up. I worked hard as his assistant, and the instruction was something he chose to give. What a lesson! Yikes! Ray did not pull his verbal punches. "You *almost* sound like you know what you're doing."

He practically shouted at me to run – not walk – and get myself a classically-trained teacher and learn proper technique. Ray Brown yelling made quite

an impression. I mentioned it later, and he said he had spent the extra time with me earlier so I would know what kind of man he was before the lesson.

never too old

I expressed concern that I might be too old to retrain. "How old are you?" he asked. "Twenty nine," I replied. "I have TIES older than you!" He explained that he had already been in his fifties when he retrained his own technique and that I should get over it and begin; playing would be so much easier when I was through. Soon enough, I was able to tell him he'd been absolutely right. When I later advanced, he told me his wish for me was to play at the level of my aspirations. After I began teaching some years later, we compared notes on that too.

Ray was a focused, detail-oriented powerhouse with an astonishing memory. I would get worn out, trying to keep up with him. Behind his commanding presence lurked an effervescent sense of humor just waiting to bubble up, full of surprises. He liked people to push back a little. He could swear fluently, at every other word.

a two-way street

His deep growl of a voice, accurately caught on many recordings, would readily break into a giggle. His humility and flexibility amaze me to this day. Over a meal one day, I found a rare chance to land a small potshot. "See," I crowed, "you can learn something from me, too." Seriously, but with a twinkle in his blue eyes, he leaned forward and replied, "I never said it was a one-way street."

I used to drive Ray back to his hotel after the gigs. One night, we were to meet very early the next morning. He wanted me to hand him the bass and rush home to rest, leaving him to struggle up a flight of steep stone stairs with the bass and a bad knee. I refused. Picture the scene – in

the middle of the night, Ray Brown wants his bass right now and the answer is "no." Again, that incredulous look, but he ceded gracefully, and I ran the bass up the stairs.

The next morning, while I was pouring milk on my cereal, he said, "I'd have the perfect job for you if you were a boy." Now there's a statement guaranteed to spark a lively conversation. If he'd seriously thought that, the topic wouldn't have come up, but that's how he introduced the idea that he might need help after knee replacement surgery. Apparently, my stairs trek had inspired the unlikely thought to hire a girl 40 years his junior to carry equipment. After long consideration, he did, and flew me out to the Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival for a week as a roadie. Now *that's* flexibility!

goodbye

Ray passed away July 2, 2002. I last saw him on May 19, as driver/roadie for a local performance. As it was only he and I in the van, we had a great chance to have a good visit. I regularly had a little list of questions for him, either about music or life, and as usual he patiently considered them one by one, dispensing his unique brand of no-nonsense advice. When we said goodbye at the airport, he said, "Thanks, you've been a doll, as always."

Ray, thank you so much for enriching my life and art for seven years. You've been a doll, too.

Mandy Flowers is a graduate of Berklee College in Boston, and was fortunate enough to study with Ray Brown and Charlie Haden. She performs full-time and offers technical and spiritual bass instruction. She can be reached via mandyflowers.com or 650-616-9408.

In Memory of Ray Brown

ray brown, who passed away on july 2, had been scheduled to play at Yoshi's July 9 through 14. The performances that week were accordingly transformed into a tribute to Ray Brown, with local musician and composer Marcus Shelby filling in on bass. Marcus had the following to say about Ray:

"Ray Brown redefined the role of the bass chair. His innovative melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic concept was an extension and progression of Jimmy Blanton and Oscar Pettiford and set the standard for every bassist who came after."

"The first bass method book I studied was written by Ray Brown, the first record I transcribed was an Oscar Peterson record featuring Ray Brown, and my first bass teacher I studied with was John Clayton, who was a student of Ray Brown. Even though I did not know Ray personally, I feel like I've lost a musical father and teacher."

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