

Jay Thomas: A Profile

by Doug Ramsey

Early Exposure

The son of a trumpet player, Jay was born in Seattle in 1949. His father, Marvin, worked as a lead player with bands in Seattle, went to Los Angeles City College with Jack Sheldon, then left music as a profession and returned to Seattle to become a pharmacist; "which was probably pretty difficult for him, considering that he had so many be-bop musician friends," Thomas observes wryly. Marv Thomas did not leave music behind. He continued to play at least two nights a week. The family home is described by Thomas as "littered with charts." It was often full of visiting musicians or alive with the sounds of his dad's practicing and his records. Jay grew up permeated with Art Blakey, Clifford Brown, Miles Davis and other jazz stars of the 1950s. He started on trumpet in the fourth grade. Inspired by the classic Blakey quintet recording, the first tune he learned was the beginning phrases of Bobby Timmons's "Moanin'."

"If it's true that kids are extensions of the unconscious of their parents, then I picked up a lot of aspirations and ideas about music," Thomas says. "My father would just talk to me the way parents will...sort of like you talk to your schnauzer...but I would pick up a quite a bit of it, about putting bands together and practicing and the musical life. So, I got started."

"I was a poor student. I was the kind of kid who broke into the Mexican exhibit at school to try out the bullwhip. But I did well in band. So, through the years I sort of narrowed my options down to what seemed to be working. I wrote my own agenda."

When he was in the 10th grade, Thomas met pianist Jack Brownlow, keyboardist Mike Mandel, trumpeter Floyd Standifer and tenor saxophonist Freddie Greenwell, some of Seattle's best jazz players. He first heard Greenwell at a jam session that included pianist Hampton Hawes and drummer Dave Coleman. Greenwell, considered a peer by tenor men like Zoot Sims, Al Cohn and Wardell Gray, had a powerful impact on the youngster. Brownlow helped Thomas learn standards and Mandel drilled Thomas in the basics of bebop.

"When I was 15 or 16, Jack used to let me sit in with him at a coffee house called the Queequeg. I'd play a chorus or two, and nobody minded too much. Freddie, through an intermediary, told my father that I was playing well but that I should pay close attention to my intonation. Sure enough, when I checked it out I was a little bit north. So, through just playing and through helpful comments from people who knew, I started to get it together."

As Thomas moved through high school, his learning process included big band camps and sitting in at jam sessions at the coffee houses that flourished in the 1960s. Then came his first jobs, playing for people who welcomed jazz for dancing. "The dances would be for groups like the Black Chamber of Commerce. The band's front line would be tenor and trumpet, and we'd play things like 'SideWinder', 'Watermelon Man', 'Song For My Father' and 'Tough Talk', jazz crossover tunes. It was a lot of fun and great experience."

Out of high school in the spring of 1967, Thomas went to Boston for a short time, then on to New York, where he took lessons from the legendary trumpet teacher Carmine Caruso, who helped him with technique. His continuing informal education included sessions in Greenwich Village clubs. At the Lynn Oliver Studios, where musicians paid to take part in big band rehearsals he met some players from New York's Latin music milieu who were sharpening their jazz skills. Through them, he got a job for the summer at the Concord Hotel in the Catskills with Machito, one of the pioneers of big band Latin jazz. That gave him valuable experience that might have set him up for rapid development in the competitive New York jazz environment. But when he returned to New York at the end of the season, Thomas became infected by an epidemic that had been rampant among a previous generation of jazz players.

"I was very young, I was by myself and I was pretty susceptible. I'd be in a roomful of people and a couple of them would hook up and split and I'd wonder, 'Gee, where did those guys go.' I found out, and I was caught up with something that just about got me. "After that I was the bad-news guy on every band. In fact," he says with a sardonic chuckle, "when they got me, their band was in trouble. Finally, at the end of 1970, they just mailed me home."

Back in Control

Back in Seattle, and in San Francisco from 1974, Thomas worked when he could, continued to develop in playing situations with musicians including the pianist Jessica Williams, and wrestled with his addiction. He returned to Seattle from the Bay Area in 1978 and by the mid-eighties had regained control of his life. With the impediment of drugs out of the way, his music blossomed. "When I came out of my hibernation, Jack Brownlow and Bill Ramsay filled in a lot of gaps. Brownlow knows so many songs and has a highly developed sense of harmony. With him, I got into examining contemporary kinds of chords. Ramsay gave me a boost professionally and encouraged me to write. Both of these guys have been a great inspiration and we had a lot of fun playing over the years." Jay has added alto, tenor and soprano saxophone and flute to his arsenal of instruments, learning by experimentation, observation and a good deal of practice.

— Doug Ramsey is the author of "Jazz Matters: Reflections on the Music and Some of its Makers" (University of Arkansas Press). He is a regular contributor to "Jazz Times" and a contributing editor of "Texas Monthly".