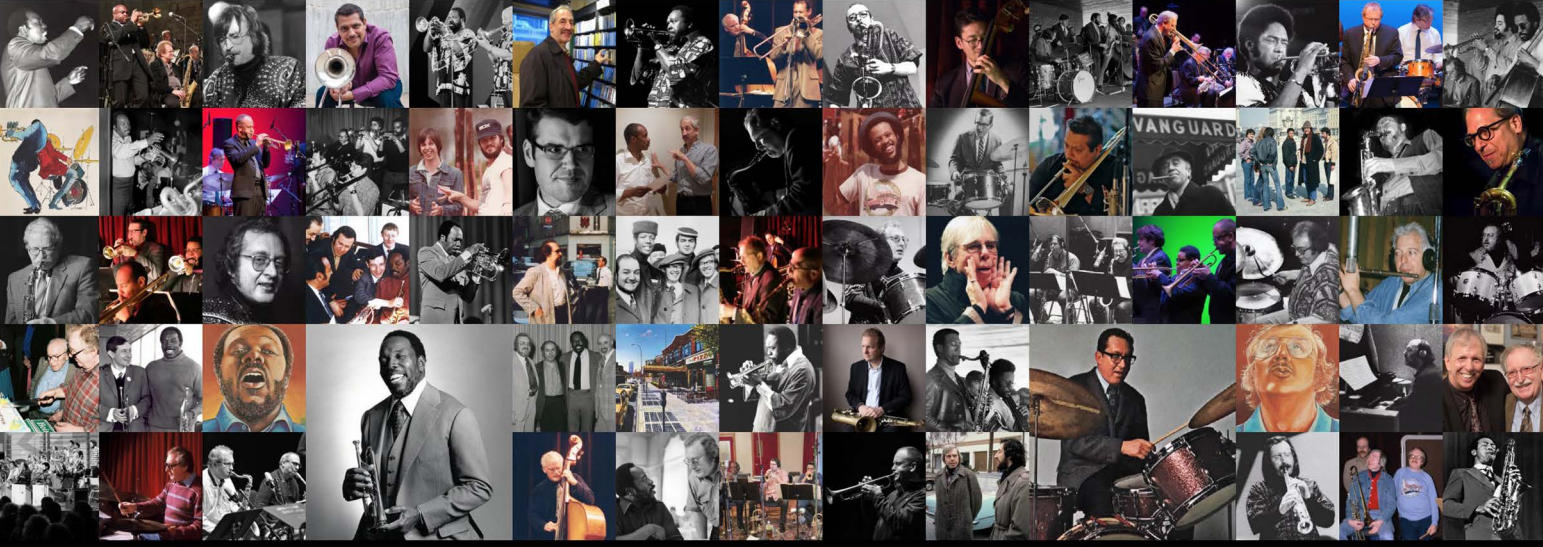


50 YEARS AT THE VILLAGE VANGUARD

Thad Jones, Mel Lewis and The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra

DAVE LISIK and **ERIC ALLEN**

CONTENTS

Even though Gerry Mulligan broke up his Concert Jazz Band in mid-1964 and the seed had been planted, Thad and Mel didn't embark on their partnership for some time afterwards. Mel was puzzled and began to feel frustrated by the lack of movement on Thad's part. In the spring of 1965, Count Basie played a significant role in making the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra a reality.

> MEL LEWIS: A year and a half went by. I didn't know what was happening. What it was was [that] Thad didn't want to write any music. Thad wouldn't write anything unless he got a commission, which is a trait of his that I learned about later on. He never wrote anything, even for our own albums, unless we got an album to do. That's why there wasn't more music in the book by the time he left. We should have had at least thirty more arrangements. Thad would only write when he knew there was going to be some money coming in.
>
> So he got a commission from Basie, to write an album for the Basie band, which he did. And Basie rejected every chart, all of it, because it was too difficult for his band and it wasn't really in the style of the band. So then [Thad] calls me up and says, "Well, I got some music, let's get together." So we sat down and we figured out who we wanted.[11]

Even though he rejected all of the music, Count Basie eventually paid Jones in full for the commission and allowed him to keep all of the scores and parts. Thad and Mel started calling the musicians on their wish list and scheduled the first rehearsal around Thanksgiving 1965.[12] Thad was surprised how easy it was to assemble the personnel.

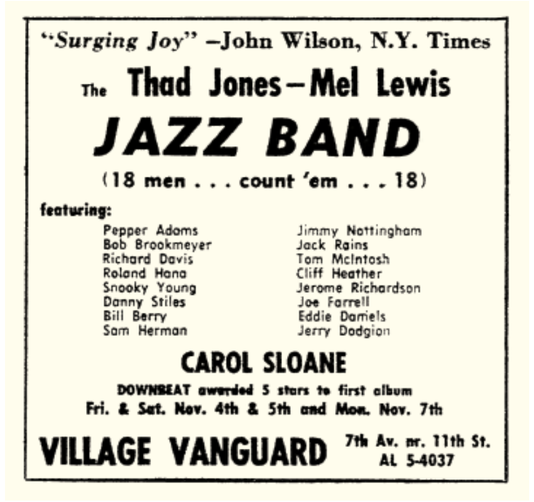
> We started calling people and, from everybody we called, we got an affirmative answer the first time. You know, there was no hemming and hawing or, "Can I call you back later?" They said, "Yeah. What time is the rehearsal and where?"[13]

Jerome Richardson was excited to get the ball rolling, but was skeptical about the logistics, given the extremely busy studio schedules of most of the musicians involved.

> Thad got the guys together and everybody said they wanted to do it, but then I wondered, "When can we rehearse?" Everybody was working in the daytime in the studios. So they finally said, "Why don't we try to rehearse at midnight somewhere?" Everybody said, "Yeah, okay. Let's do that." But I didn't believe that was gonna happen. Then, when I went up there, everybody was ready to play.[14]

Eddie Daniels fondly remembered the friendly atmosphere of the first rehearsals and described how one of Thad's arrangements, in particular, came to have special meaning for him:

> It was like a party, kind of. It was old home week for a lot of the guys who had played and done a lot of dates together. Not for me, specifically, because I was the youngest guy in the band, but they were all very friendly. A lot of laughing—the guys laughed a lot.
>
> It was very special. I had one feature tune, "Mean What You Say," that I had to play on the rehearsal. I had been to a family dinner that night before the rehearsal. There was a big fight at the table with all of the parents and the uncles and all of that. Finally, I left and went downtown to play "Mean What You Say" at the rehearsal with the band. It was such a relief to get out of there. That became kind of a special tune for me because it had all of the overtones of the night of the rehearsal: getting away from crazy family members who are fighting and then sitting down in this band that is now your new family, in a sense. I got a chance to share what I did and everybody else had their solos. It was a very happy, very special time.[15]



Top: Mel and the trombone section, circa late 1960s. Bottom: Advertisement for a November 1966 weekend engagement at the Village Vanguard for the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Jazz Band with guest vocalist Carol Sloane.

The Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra performing (with Chick Corea on piano) at the Pacific Jazz Festival in Costa Mesa, California on October 6, 1967 (*Photo by George Hall*).

Mel was also very pleased with their relationship with Solid State and the level of autonomy afforded the band.

> We have complete freedom in the choice of material, which isn't often heard of today. Though we've been asked to include a few standards, nobody has told us which ones to choose and how to treat them.[33]

Over the next few years, the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra also recorded albums with vocalists Joe Williams and Ruth Brown, as well as two live albums at the Village Vanguard. These early albums helped redefine the very concept of the big band sound, especially the roles played by the soloists and rhythm section. They were also particularly influential for another eventual member of the band, pianist and composer Jim McNeely.

> The first Thad and Mel records had a big effect on me. The first one, which was the studio recording with Hank Jones playing piano, and the first two live albums with Roland Hanna and Richard Davis. The sound of the writing, the harmonic stuff…I couldn't really figure out what it was until some years later, but it really spoke to me. I was knocked out by the fact that there was a big band where the solo language was reflective of what I was hearing at the time on Coltrane records, Wayne Shorter, Art Blakey's bands and all of that. And Thad himself—the angles in his lines were really cutting and dissonant. So to hear all of that within the context of a big band just woke me up.[34]

The band's Monday night performances at the Village Vanguard became extremely popular. They also started performing at universities, jazz festivals and even full-scale touring, which will be discussed later in the "Life On The Road" chapter. Within the first five years of its existence, the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra recorded seven albums, was critically acclaimed and on its way to becoming everything its leaders had hoped for, showing no signs of slowing down. Mel reflected on their good fortune:

> I don't think any two guys could be as lucky as Thad and I, as far as having something that you can be proud of till your dying day. The kind of thing you dream about…we're two of the happiest guys in the world right now.[35]
>
> We actually have the greatest band in the world. And we know this, and the fellows in the band know it. Nobody can touch us. That's not a brag. We're talking as musicians, stating a fact. There are very few musicians who don't agree with us.[36]

Thad echoed Mel's effusive sentiments:

> Mel and I are very lucky because we didn't know this was going to happen. All of a sudden, here it was. All of a sudden, we found ourselves surrounded by the most beautiful people, musical people, that we've ever been around in our lives. To me, this is the most beautiful band in the world.[37]
>
> We wanted to play with guys we enjoyed associating with. We wanted guys who could really pop on their horns individually—to see how they would fit together as section men. This band could play anybody's arrangement on "Yankee Doodle" and make it sound like a masterpiece. It isn't my music that's complementary to the band; it's the band that flatters my music.[38]

Above: Solid State Records advertisement featuring the first two Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra albums. Opposite page left: 1970 Kendor Music advertisement (*Courtesy Kendor Music*). Opposite page right: *DownBeat* magazine's review of the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra's first album (*Courtesy DownBeat magazine*).

Mel Lewis and the Jazz Orchestra performing in the early 1980s
(Photo used by permission of the University of Missouri-Kansas City Libraries, Dr. Kenneth J. LaBudde Department of Special Collections).

And Brookmeyer became even stronger. So when he brought in "Skylark," "Ding Dong Ding" and the suite with Clark Terry, "El Co," that was like, "Wow." Mosca and I felt, "This is like a dream." To work with a guy like Brookmeyer, it was fantastic. It felt like we were starting something fresh.

But we still kept our love for Thad. That was always our center. That was always our rhythmic personality.[12]

Some of the band members, like John Mosca, greeted the beginning of the Brookmeyer era with great enthusiasm.

> Brookmeyer rehearsed the band on Thad's music and his own. He had started writing again and we rehearsed every Monday for quite a while. So that was totally exciting. It's one of my favorite things in a rehearsal when you get a new piece of music, especially when it's written by somebody like that. It's really a pregnant moment in your life. So to get down here in the afternoon and have Bob Brookmeyer pass out music, that was very exciting. And he took the band to a different level, especially that young band.[13]

However, some of the musicians resisted the transition. Mosca recalled the chilly reception Brookmeyer's new work received from the dissenters:

> Not everyone in the band was on board with Brookmeyer coming in. That's one of the reasons Bob made some personnel changes, because there were some guys who were just never going to get with it. Guys who couldn't adjust to the fact that Thad wasn't here anymore and there was different music happening. Some guys just wanted to swing and the things Brookmeyer was bringing in, they didn't always swing. He was pushing the envelope. He said it was his intention to make people's ears hurt. He was really trying some new things.[14]

Maria Schneider, who would later study with and become close to Brookmeyer, spoke with him about the difficulties he faced during this time.

> I know that was a hard time for the band and it was hard for Bob. He told me that there were times he went home from those rehearsals, if not in tears, near tears. It was very difficult for him. He was coming through a huge change in his life when he wrote that music, so that represented a new place that he was in. When you have music that, in a powerful way, is representing who you are at that time and it's not embraced, that has to be really painful because it was such a change for the better for him. His life was turning around at that point, so I think that was rough.[15]

Alto saxophonist Ted Nash also recalled Brookmeyer's struggles and frustrations at the helm of Mel's band:

> Bob had written modern, through-composed pieces featuring several of the key players in the band. Although the music was great—exploring new textures and harmonies—a few of the band members resisted the new direction, preferring the more traditional repertoire. I would see Bob standing in front of us, trying to engage the full support of the band and, over time, feeling dejected.[16]

According to John Mosca, the Brookmeyer era came very close to being over before it had ever really begun.

POSTER COURTESY DICK OATTS; PHOTO COURTESY JOHN MARSHALL

Dick Oatts, Bob Brookmeyer and Mel Lewis during the 1980 European tour. Above: Poster for a March 21, 1980 performance in Salzburg, Austria.

PHOTO BY ERIC ALLEN

the band were saying, "Yeah, 'Thad Jones/Mel Lewis!' That way, it'll be easier to get work." I disagreed and told them, "We'll just get work playing Thad Jones' music. We need to keep going…keep doing our thing." Somebody said, "We can't just call it something else."

"Look," I said, "they never wanted a ghost band. We have plenty of ghost bands already: Ellington, Basie, Dorsey, Mingus. Let's still keep *our* thing going." Because it was always "Thad Jones, Mel Lewis *and* the Jazz Orchestra." Or "Mel Lewis *and* The Jazz Orchestra." That's what we wanted to keep alive, so I came up with the idea: "We work at the Village Vanguard. Let's call ourselves the 'Vanguard Jazz Orchestra.' Because 'vanguard' means moving forward and doing your thing."

> We took a vote on it. There was some resistance at first, but I said, "Let's just give it a shot." I think the name was apropos and I'm glad we chose it because it means that we can still play the best of Thad and Brookmeyer and all the stuff from those periods but still continue on with our own voice. I think that is what they would have wanted, especially Mel. Spending that many years with Mel, I *know* that's what he would have wanted.[5]

As mentioned previously, Kenny Werner, the band's pianist at the time and one of its key composers, disagreed with Oatts' sentiments. Werner explained his initial resistance to the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra identity:

The VJO performing at the Village Vanguard on September 19, 2016.

PHOTOS BY ERIC ALLEN

Thaddeus Joseph Jones (March 28, 1923-August 20, 1986) is a legendary figure in jazz history, widely regarded as one of the music's greatest composers, most dynamic bandleaders and most innovative improvisers. Thad was so respected as a soloist that Charles Mingus declared him "the greatest trumpet player that I've heard in this life."[1]

In a relatively short period, especially when compared to the lengthy careers of bandleaders like Duke Ellington, Thad produced a prolific amount of highly creative and challenging big band music, ushering in a new era for the jazz orchestra. Today's most successful large jazz ensembles are clear successors of his music and many practices established by the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra.

> JOHN MOSCA: Thad's music speaks to what jazz does to the listener in general. The rhythmic content of his writing is unique and very sophisticated, just as it was in his playing. It all works together and it's hard to isolate one thing. It's melodic and, at the same time, so dense harmonically. And it all happens in this matrix of great swing and rhythm. He also writes a lot of "drum work" for the horns; so much of what we play is like drum fills. For me, this is the greatest book of music in the last half of the twentieth century. It's such a privilege to sit in front of this stuff every week. We feel about this music the way orchestra musicians feel about Beethoven, Brahms and Haydn.[2]

Thad Jones was a native of Pontiac, Michigan. He grew up in a family that included brothers Hank, a jazz piano legend, and Elvin, one of the most celebrated drummers in jazz. Alto saxophonist Jerry Dodgion, who played in the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra from 1966-1978, marveled at the musical ability in the Jones family:

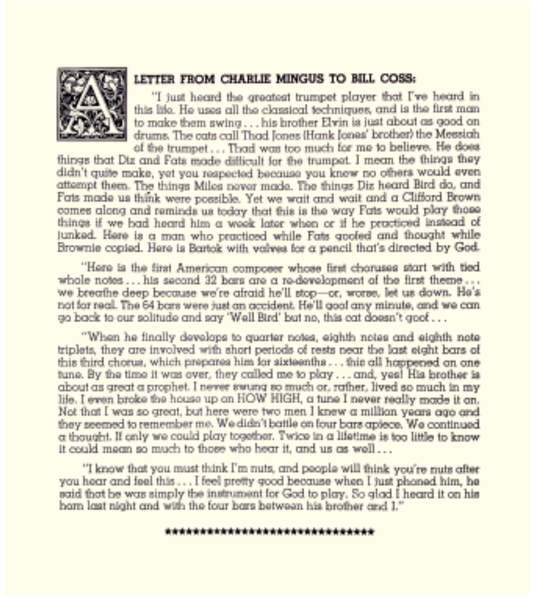
> Thad had such a great direct line to music. His two brothers, also. I always used to tell people that, if the Jones family had a dog, it probably sang arias. That musical environment must have been unbelievable.[3]

In addition to the Jones brothers' strength as jazz artists, there is also the musical family tree of Thad Jones, the jazz composer, the branches of which spread across more than half a century and contain the names of a majority of the music's most significant writers.

Thad wrote his first jazz arrangement at the age of thirteen or fourteen, when he played trumpet in the Arcadia Club Band in Pontiac, Michigan, which was led by his trumpet-playing uncle. Thad made the following comments in 1968 about his earliest writing efforts, which were not very successful. "As a matter of fact," he quipped, "the first arrangement I wrote, I [accidentally] wrote every horn in a different key. That was real freedom."[4]

Thad was a trumpet player and arranger for the Count Basie Orchestra from 1954-1963. He contributed arrangements for much of the 1959 Count Basie album, *Dance Along With Basie,* including the charts "Can't We Be Friends," "Fools Rush In," and "How Am I To Know?" Thad's original tune, "The Deacon," appears on the album *Chairman Of The Board* (also 1959) along with the chart "H.R.H. (Her Royal Highness)," for which Thad shares writing credit with Basie. Both of Thad's contributions to Basie's album, *Not Now, I'll Tell You When* (the title track and "Sweet And Purty"), are also listed as Thad and Basie sharing writing credit. "The Deacon" and Thad's "Counter Block" were recorded for the live *Breakfast Dance And Barbecue* album, but only appear as bonus tracks on the CD reissue.

During this time, Thad also established a successful solo career and emerged as a highly respected improviser and small group leader. Several records were released under his name, including three for Blue Note Records. Jones and baritone saxophonist Pepper Adams co-led a quintet that performed regularly throughout 1965 and 1966. Mel Lewis often played drums in the Thad Jones/Pepper Adams Quintet, which recorded one album, *Mean What You Say.*



A LETTER FROM CHARLIE MINGUS TO BILL COSS:

"I just heard the greatest trumpet player that I've heard in this life. He uses all the classical techniques, and is the first man to make them swing . . . his brother Elvin is just about as good on drums. The cats call Thad Jones (Hank Jones' brother) the Messiah of the trumpet . . . Thad was too much for me to believe. He does things that Diz and Fats made difficult for the trumpet. I mean the things they didn't quite make, yet you respected because you knew no others would even attempt them. The things Miles never made. The things Diz heard Bird do, and Fats made us think were possible. Yet we wait and wait and a Clifford Brown comes along and reminds us today that this is the way Fats would play those things if we had heard him a week later when or if he practiced instead of junked. Here is a man who practiced while Fats goofed and thought while Brownie copied. Here is Bartok with valves for a pencil that's directed by God.

"Here is the first American composer whose first choruses start with tied whole notes . . . his second 32 bars are a re-development of the first theme . . . we breathe deep because we're afraid he'll stop—or, worse, let us down. He's not for real. The 64 bars were just an accident. He'll goof any minute, and we can go back to our solitude and say 'Well Bird' but no, this cat doesn't goof . . .

"When he finally develops to quarter notes, eighth notes and eighth note triplets, they are involved with short periods of rests near the last eight bars of this third chorus, which prepares him for sixteenths . . . this all happened on one tune. By the time it was over, they called me to play . . . and, yes! His brother is about as great a prophet. I never swung so much or, rather, lived so much in my life. I even broke the house up on HOW HIGH, a tune I never really made it on. Not that I was so great, but here were two men I knew a million years ago and they seemed to remember me. We didn't battle on four bars apiece. We continued a thought. If only we could play together. Twice in a lifetime is too little to know it could mean so much to those who hear it, and us as well . . .

"I know that you must think I'm nuts, and people will think you're nuts after you hear and feel this . . . I feel pretty good because when I just phoned him, he said that he was simply the instrument for God to play. So glad I heard it on his horn last night and with the four bars between his brother and I."

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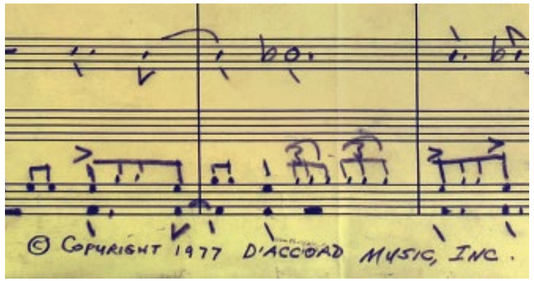


Top: Charles Mingus' 1954 letter to Bill Coss about Thad Jones. Bottom: Close up of a handwritten Thad Jones score (*Courtesy the Thad Jones Archive at William Paterson University*).

EVERYTHING STARTS WITH THE DRUMMER. MEL IS THE BEST. I THOUGHT SO THIRTY, TWENTY, TEN YEARS AGO AND HE CONTINUES TO SURPRISE, DAZZLE AND DELIGHT.

–Bob Brookmeyer[1]

Mel Lewis wasn't a flashy drummer and he didn't play many solos, but he was one of the absolute best and most respected drummers in jazz history.

Mel Lewis (May 10, 1929–February 2, 1990) was born Melvin Sokoloff in Buffalo, New York and was exposed to music very early in life by his father, Sam Sokoloff, a professional drummer.

> My father was my first influence. He was a pit drummer, a show drummer and also a good wedding and bar mitzvah drummer. I knew his style backwards. He could read anything and he had excellent time. Bill Robinson (Mr. Bojangles) was crazy about his feel. He was also a very tasty drummer, and I think I was blessed with his time and taste.[2]

Mel started playing drums at the age of three and said that he couldn't remember a period in his life when he didn't play them.[3] His first public performance was at the age of six, when he sat in for his father for part of the night at a cousin's wedding.[4] By the age of thirteen, he was playing professionally in and around Buffalo.[5] In 1946, at the age of seventeen, Lewis toured and appeared on a recording for the first time.

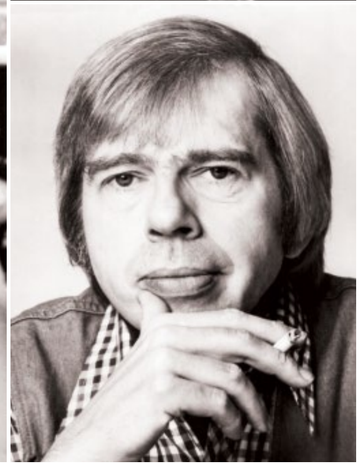
Mel moved to New York City in 1948, just before his nineteenth birthday. Later that year, he was offered the drum chair in the Count Basie Orchestra, which he enthusiastically accepted. However, just before Mel was set to join the band, Count Basie and his manager informed him that they had just booked a tour of the Deep South and, because of racial prejudice, it wouldn't be safe for a white drummer to travel with an African-American band.[6] Basie also offered Lewis a job playing in his seven-piece group two years later, but Mel had to turn it down because it paid significantly less than the steady job he already had playing in Tex Beneke's band.[7]

Mel would go on to play with many other groups, the most high-profile of which were the orchestras of Stan Kenton and Benny Goodman.

Duke Ellington offered Mel the opportunity to play in his band in 1960 as a temporary replacement for Sam Woodyard, who was struggling with alcoholism. However, Mel turned down the gig because he had just agreed to be the drummer in Gerry Mulligan's Concert Jazz Band.[8] In 1963, Ellington once again offered Lewis his drum chair, this time on a permanent basis. Mel was set to join Duke's band on a State Department-sponsored tour of Africa beginning in late November. That tour, however, was canceled when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.[9]

Mel Lewis appeared on over 600 small group and big band recordings.[10] But, of course,

Mel in January 1962 (*Photo by John Tynan*).



Left: Bob Brookmeyer, circa late 1970s (*Photo by Gordon Johnson/Courtesy Eastman School of Music Historical Jazz Photo Archive*). Top Right: Bob, circa late 1970s/early 1980s (*Photo by Robert A. Miller*). Bottom right: Bob, circa 1980.

BROOKMEYER'S TEACHING LEGACY

In addition to his compositional skills, an important component of Brookmeyer's legacy stems from his long teaching career and the significant impact he made on younger generations of writers. His most well-known pupil is multiple Grammy Award winner Maria Schneider, who studied with Brookmeyer from 1986-1991.

> Bob's music was kind of like stretching a rubber band. Those years when he came back to Mel's band and shortly thereafter, when he started working more with European groups, his music really stretched and really got "out there." He was influenced by Stockhausen and all sorts of things from the modern classical world. Then, in later years, it came back into a much more tonal realm.
>
> When I was studying with Bob, he was kind of in that "way out" period. He was putting a lot of pressure on me to write in terms of pitch cells and all sorts of things. It didn't entirely feel right for me. We talked pretty directly about it. I had left the classical world largely because it had so thoroughly ditched tonal harmony. In the eighties, everything in the classical world was serialism. I was frustrated because I felt that they were so hardline about it. To me, you should write in a language that feels poetic to *you*. The jazz world was so open. It could be anything from Cecil Taylor to Bill Evans' kind of harmony. I felt like it was so much more inclusive. When Bob was a little bit in his hardline era, I was holding out for more tonal harmony.
>
> He was good for me because he pushed me out of my comfortable corners, but he allowed me to still stick to certain things. I think, sometimes, he wanted to push me further than he was able to, but he respected where I was. There was one lesson where I was actually in tears and I said, "I just don't hear music that way. I just don't." So he kind of took a step back, but he was very helpful with breaking me out of the norms. For instance, I was writing a piece for Mel that was very Thad Jones-like. It was a medium-tempo thing called "Lately," which I ended up recording on one of my own live albums. I really wanted to write something and hear Mel play classic medium swing on it. I brought it in to Bob, he looked at it skeptically and the first thing he said was, "Why is there a solo *there*?" I answered kind of sheepishly and apologetically, as I knew I was being judged harshly. "Because there's a tune and there's a send-off and now comes the *solo*?" He said to me, "A solo should only happen when the only thing that can happen is a solo." I really had no idea what that meant, but nodded as if I did. Then he started asking me about other very obvious things like, "Why are they soloing on chord changes?" I said, "Well, these are the chord changes of the tune," with a kind of, "*Hello?!?*" in my answer.
>
> But then, I quickly started to realize, through his questions, how limited my thought process really was. Of course, I was purposely making that piece pretty traditional. But still, the point was taken that there are infinite possibilities in every aspect of the music: the form, the harmony, what they solo on, what kind of indicators of harmony you give to the bass player, everything…
>
> I started to realize that the way I was writing was a bit like putting up a prefab house and that really, I had infinite choices I wasn't entertaining. When I started looking at those, my music started to emerge as my own. I really thank Bob for that, because there are a lot of teachers who try to help you find who you are by helping you try to do something unique. But it's not just doing something unique that makes your music your own. It's doing something where *you* are really making every choice in your music. Committing to choices as being your own—not something you're doing because that's what the norm is or because you don't think there are other choices. Bob really helped me with that and I'm really grateful. Bob and I just loved each other so much. We really got along and I so deeply respected him.[40]

Bob Brookmeyer and Maria Schneider.

Darcy James Argue, who studied with Brookmeyer at the New England Conservatory of Music, discussed Brookmeyer's teaching legacy:

> What really struck me was how seriously he took teaching and how incredibly generous he was with his time and his emotional investment. He took an incredibly personal stake in the success of each of his students, even when he felt like some of them weren't succeeding. It wasn't something he did for the paycheck. It was something he did because he legitimately believed there were things that he needed to communicate to younger generations of composers and arrangers that were necessary for the health and vitality of jazz. He brought that intensity to his teaching and made you feel like the weight of all of this cool stuff was on your shoulders. He really wanted, more than anything, for all of his students to live up to the example

I CAN'T TELL WHO SOMEONE IS FROM HOW THEY BLOW OVER "GIANT STEPS." THAT GIVES ME NO SENSE OF THE PERSON AT ALL. WHAT I WANT TO HEAR IS FOUR BARS OF "STELLA BY STARLIGHT" AND THEN I KNOW WHO THEY ARE. *–Bob Brookmeyer*[41]

I was playing a gig with Ted [Curson] at a club on Sixth Avenue called Hoppers. Ted's banging the cowbell and blowing the whistle and he's in his leather suit and going crazy... I got off the bandstand and thought, "Man, I gotta do something to change my direction." And the maitre'd handed me a note saying, "Call Mel Lewis," and I thought, "Thank you, god..." This was before cell phones, so I got on a pay phone and called Mel, and he said, "The band has a twelve-week tour of Europe coming up and Harold [Danko] doesn't want to make the tour, so we're going to make a change. Do you want to join the band?" And I said, "Yeah."

–Jim McNeely[1]

A native of Chicago, Illinois, Jim McNeely moved to New York in 1975 and became the pianist for the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra in mid-1978. He left Mel Lewis' band in 1984, but had already started to write for the group and continued to do so during his years away. He rejoined the band, by that time the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, in 1995 as pianist and composer in residence. Like his predecessors, Bob Brookmeyer and Thad Jones, McNeely has written extensively for European jazz orchestras, including the Danish Radio (DR) Big Band, WDR Big Band, HR Big Band (Frankfurt) and the Stockholm Jazz Orchestra. McNeely has become one of the most original and influential writers the big band idiom has known.

Throughout its history, performing members of the band have written a large percentage of its repertoire. Thad Jones, Bob Brookmeyer and Jim McNeely have each developed clear and unique musical identities as jazz writers but, as Maria Schneider describes, McNeely's music demonstrates a cohesive lineage emanating from Thad's influence:

> Jim [McNeely] is such a great combination, in a way, of Bob and Thad and his own sound. It's just so obvious that Jim was born and bred in that band. His music has got that rhythm. He has his own sense of line, but it feels very akin to Bob, with the intensity of Thad. It definitely sounds like music from someone who played with Mel for all those years. He's just a brilliant writer.[2]

Before Jim McNeely became a composition major at the University of Illinois, he was a student at Notre Dame College Prep in Niles, Illinois and wrote for his high school big band. Father George Wiskirchen, a dedicated teacher and early jazz education pioneer, was the band director there at the time. McNeely felt fortunate that he was at the school at the same time as Wiskirchen.

> At that time, the few schools that had big bands, at least in suburban Chicago, most of them were into Maynard Ferguson or Stan Kenton. But Father Wiskirchen was into the Basie band and he knew some of the players personally, particularly Frank Wess.

CHAPTER 8

RIDING THE BUS: LIFE ON THE ROAD

You can't keep a band together sitting in one town because too many things are going to pull you in too many different directions. If the band is to remain complete, we're going to have to do some traveling. As good a band as it is, you can't just play on Monday night forever.

–THAD JONES

L to R: Ed Xiques, Mel Lewis, Earl McIntyre, Thad Jones, Larry Schneider, Pepper Adams, Billy Campbell, Bob Bowman, Frank Gordon and Sherman Darby outside Domicile in Munich, 1976.

PHOTO USED BY PERMISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-KANSAS CITY LIBRARIES, DR. KENNETH J. LABUDDE DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Poster for a 1976 performance at Munich's Domicile jazz club, where the *Live In Munich* album was recorded (*Courtesy Ed Xiques*).

PHOTO COURTESY THOMAS BELLINO

CHAPTER 9

SOLO SPACE: THE SMALL GROUP WITHIN A BIG BAND

We are a jazz orchestra, featuring jazz musicians. The cats got to play. It's got to stay that way. I wouldn't change that for anything.

–MEL LEWIS

On February 1, 2016, the 2,609th Monday since the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra's first performance, the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra kicked off its 50th anniversary celebration of eight consecutive nights at the Village Vanguard.

Alto saxophonist and charter band member Jerry Dodgion played with the band on February 5th and 8th. Garnett Brown and Jimmy Owens, themselves members of the original band, were also at the club during the week and National Public Radio recorded the final night of the 50th anniversary celebration, which was later featured on its *Jazz Night In America* program.

Many current and former band members, and others with expert opinions, shared their thoughts about the significance of this 50th anniversary and the combined legacy of the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra, Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra and Vanguard Jazz Orchestra.

BILL KIRCHNER: The band changed jazz. Because of that gig, there are Monday night big bands all over the world now. They started a whole new thing in jazz with that gig and paved the way for many others. For my money, the band is still the best large jazz ensemble in the world. I hesitate to say something in the arts is the "best" anything. Music is not the National Football League. But in this case, with all respect to all the other great large ensembles out there, where else can you find a band like this that has the library they do, the players they do and the number of guys who have been there as long as they have? It's an unbeatable combination of elements that nobody else can touch. It's an unparalleled achievement.[1]

GARY SMULYAN: For a musical organization to last fifty years is certainly a milestone. Fifty years of having the chance to play jazz every week in New York—I don't think there's any other instance of that happening. I think this really is a singular occasion where a big band has had this kind of a run. And I don't think anybody saw it happening, to be honest. I think that, all of a sudden, it's fifty years and it's like, "Whoa…how did we get here?!?" I think there was a sense of "Wow…this is really fifty years!" There's a sense of amazement about it. It's hard to believe that this band started in 1966 with what was only supposed to be a few gigs. As long as we have a place to play and as long as there is interest in the music that this band is playing, I think it's just going to keep going.[2]

JIM MCNEELY: One thing that separates this band from many of the great bands is that it never had to exist as a dance band. I think this band is the most influential of all the postwar bands. It is certainly the longest-lasting. The music that is at the core of the repertoire and the spirit of the leaders, Thad and Mel, is so special that the band is continuing today and it's still a very vibrant, live organization. To me, it has no equal. Because of the two guys that started this thing, the repertoire, the players and the commitment of those players, the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra is very special.[3]

JASON JACKSON: Jerry Dodgion got up at the 50th anniversary and said it was mind-blowing to him that he was in the original band. It's really hard to wrap your head around it—hard to imagine. I've been in the band half the time of some of these guys. And all that they can say is, "I felt it that first night and I feel it every time I play." There's this thing, this energy and it can only come from that length of time. The building up of unwritten elements like specific lengths of certain notes. It's not all written in the music. It's a language that has

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CONSUMMATION

1970, Blue Note

1 **DEDICATION** (5:13)
(Thad Jones)
SOLOS: Thad Jones, flugelhorn; Jerome Richardson, alto saxophone

2 **IT ONLY HAPPENS EVERY TIME** (3:07)
(Thad Jones)
SOLOS: Marvin Stamm, trumpet; Roland Hanna, piano

3 **TIPTOE** (6:42)
(Thad Jones)
SOLOS: Snooky Young, trumpet; Jerry Dodgion, alto saxophone

4 **A CHILD IS BORN** (4:09)
(Thad Jones)
SOLOS: Roland Hanna, piano; Thad Jones, flugelhorn

5 **US** (3:37)
(Thad Jones)
SOLO FILLS: Jerome Richardson, soprano saxophone

6 **AHUNK, AHUNK** (7:57)
(Thad Jones)
SOLOS: Roland Hanna, electric piano; Eddie Daniels, tenor saxophone; Marvin Stamm, trumpet

7 **FINGERS** (10:38)
(Thad Jones)
SOLOS: Benny Powell, trombone; Roland Hanna, piano; Danny Moore, trumpet; Billy Harper, tenor saxophone; Richard Davis, bass

8 **CONSUMMATION** (5:09)
(Thad Jones)
SOLOS: Thad Jones, flugelhorn; Roland Hanna, piano

SAXOPHONES: Jerome Richardson (alto saxophone, soprano saxophone, flute), Jerry Dodgion (alto saxophone, flute, clarinet), Billy Harper (tenor saxophone, flute), Eddie Daniels (tenor saxophone, flute, clarinet), Richie Kamuca (baritone saxophone and clarinet on 1, 2, 3, 8), Pepper Adams (baritone saxophone on 4, 5, 6); Joe Farrell (baritone saxophone on 7)
TRUMPETS: Snooky Young, Danny Moore, Al Porcino, Marvin Stamm, Thad Jones (flugelhorn)
TROMBONES: Eddie Bert, Benny Powell, Jimmy Knepper, Cliff Heather (bass trombone)
RHYTHM: Roland Hanna (piano); David Spinozza (guitar on 5, 6); Richard Davis (bass); Mel Lewis (drums)
FRENCH HORN ON TRACKS 1 AND 8: Jimmy Buffington, Earl Chapin, Dick Berg, Julius Watkins
TUBA ON TRACKS 1 AND 8: Howard Johnson

Recorded January 20, 21, 28 and May 25, 1970 at A&R Studios, New York City
Engineer: Don Hahn
Produced by Sonny Lester

PHOTOS BY ERIC ALLEN

RALPH LALAMA

Tenor Saxophone

MEMBER OF THE BAND SINCE 1983

This band has always meant a lot to me. In college at Youngstown State, I was a clarinet major and the jazz band had a great director, Tony Leonardi, who was an ex-Woody Herman bass player. We played Thad's charts and they were incredible. My last semester, he was our guest artist. I had to pick Thad up at the hotel and bring him to the school, so I had a chance to talk to him. "Hey, come on in." I sat down and he was still combing his hair.

There was all of this music sitting on the bed. I said, "Thad, what's this?" He said, "That's a chart. 'Little Rascal On A Rock.' It's half-done." He stayed for a couple of days, so I got to know him. I even played with him in a quintet during a clinic. Tony threw me in there with him.

Thad also encouraged me to come to New York. I thought I was going to be a band director in Pittsburgh and play gigs. Thad said if I was serious and wanted to play that New York was the place. I wasn't that good, but he knew I wanted to do it. He sensed that. I moved there soon after: September 7, 1975.

When I got into town, I gave Thad a call. He asked me to do a gig, but not the big band. It was Thad, Mel, George Mraz and Walter Norris. So I was a kid and I played this gig, my first in New York, at William Paterson College. Three nights with Thad and Mel. I just closed my eyes and played. I was happy when they called a tune I had even heard of. Not played, but just heard of.

WHEN I GOT INTO TOWN, I GAVE THAD A CALL. HE ASKED ME TO DO A GIG…MY FIRST IN NEW YORK…IT WAS THAD, MEL, GEORGE MRAZ AND WALTER NORRIS. I JUST CLOSED MY EYES AND PLAYED. I WAS HAPPY WHEN THEY CALLED A TUNE I HAD EVEN HEARD OF.

–Ralph Lalama

I started subbing a little bit with the big band. The first gig I ever played with them, we met at the Vanguard at 2 a.m. and drove all night to Michigan. It was Pepper, Jerry and all of these cats and I was thinking, "Holy shit!" I knew some of the charts, but not all of them.

As a regular, I started in February 1983. I had subbed with Thad and Mel and then with just Mel. At that time, it was Lovano and Gary Pribeck playing tenor. I was making a lot of gigs because I played both tenor chairs. Eventually, Pribeck quit and it was me and Lovano for ten years. Then Joe split and it's been me and Richie ever since.[13]

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