Madd About Tadd

by Con Chapman

Tadley Ewing Peake “Tadd” Dameron once described himself as “the most misplaced musician in the business,” and one needn't call the missing persons bureau of the jazz precincts to determine that he may have been right.

Tadd Dameron

An unabashed romantic in a guild that, like the butcher's union, isn't supposed to sample the marbled inventory that it handles on the job, Dameron tried to marry the sentimental products of Tin Pan Alley with the hard-edged experiments of be-bop. He synthesized the two schools under the higher principle of beauty. “There's enough ugliness in the world,” he told Metronome magazine in 1947. “I'm interested in beauty.”

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Harlan Leonard

Dameron was a passable pianist, but he found his calling first as an arranger, then as a composer who crafted not just melodies and chords but fully-instrumented charts for Harlan Leonard's Kansas City Orchestra, then Jimmie Lunceford, Count Basie, Billy Eckstine and Dizzy Gillespie. If your only exposure to big band jazz has been to the white “sweet” orchestras that took the music of black arrangers such as Fletcher Henderson and cooled it down and straightened it out, check out Lunceford, whose motto (and hit song) was “Rhythm is Our Business.”

Jimmie Lunceford

You have probably heard Dameron's music even if you don't know it; he wrote jazz standards such as “Good Bait,” “Hot House,” “Lady Bird” and “If You Could See Me Now,” a tune inspired by a riff of Gillespie's that became a hit for Sarah Vaughan.

While Dameron is known for his lush and yet surprising harmonies, he was no mere effete aesthete. He played and arranged

for Bull Moose Jackson, the honking R&B tenor, his bop credentials include a nonet with Clifford Brown and he collaborated with John Coltrane on *Mating Call* in 1958.

Bull Moose Jackson

Dameron's principal interpreter was Fats Navarro and while the association produced memorable music, it may also have contributed to his downfall. Navarro was an explosive trumpeter who epitomized the “hard” bop style, but he eventually priced himself out of gigs because he needed to support the heroin habit that contributed to his early death at 26. Dameron became a user of the drug, which has filled the long, lonely and boring stretches between gigs for many jazz musicians, and he eventually ended up going to jail for it in 1959.

Fats Navarro

When he was released Dameron was still highly-regarded, and he wrote for Sonny Stitt, Milt Jackson and Benny Goodman, among others, but he would die of cancer within four years at the age of 48.

Much of Dameron's music is still in print, including his complete Blue Note sessions, and there have been both tribute bands (Dameronia) and recordings of his music by all-star groups (Continuum, “Mad About Tadd”). The quality that will keep his music alive, however, is something that is often overlooked these days by artists who think their first priority should be to shock, offend or irritate: “It has to swing, sure,” Tadd told jazz critic Ira Gitler, “but it has to be beautiful.”