



Milt Jackson

January 1, 1923 - October 9, 1999

New York, New York

Milt Jackson, the Detroit-born vibraphonist who made a percussion instrument sing the blues, died of liver cancer in New York City on October 9, 1999. He was seventy-six.

Milton Jackson was born in Detroit on January 1, 1923, and grew up singing gospel in church, where he picked up guitar and piano before he ever touched a vibraphone. He took up the vibes as a teenager, after hearing Lionel Hampton, and set out to play them his own way. Where most vibists ran the motor fast to get a shimmering, nervous tremolo, Jackson slowed it down, letting notes bloom and fade with the warmth of a human voice. Friends called him Bags, a nickname drawn from the tired look under his eyes.

Dizzy Gillespie heard him in Detroit and brought him to New York in 1945. He was soon working alongside Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk and the other architects of bebop, and recording for Blue Note. In the early 1950s he and the pianist John Lewis, the bassist Percy Heath and the drummer Kenny Clarke, later replaced by Connie Kay, formed the Modern Jazz Quartet.

The quartet dressed in tuxedos, played concert halls and blended jazz with the formal structure of European chamber music. Lewis provided the architecture; Jackson provided the heat. His composition Bags' Groove became a jazz standard. The group performed for more than two decades, disbanded in 1974 partly because Jackson wanted more freedom and better pay, then reunited regularly from the early 1980s.

Away from the quartet, he recorded with Ray Charles, Miles Davis, Wes Montgomery, Oscar Peterson and countless others, and he never stopped sounding like a man raised in a church choir. He was named a National

Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master in 1997. He was survived by his wife, Sandra, and their daughter.

Services

Died in New York City, October 9, 1999, of liver cancer, aged 76. Founding vibraphonist of the Modern Jazz Quartet. Portrait: photograph by William P. Gottlieb, c. 1946-48 (public domain, Library of Congress Gottlieb Collection), cropped, hosted by Notice Nearby.

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