Jon Hendricks, father of vocalese: a Toledo story

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Jon Hendricks, Father of Vocalese: A Toledo Story

by

Lee Ellen Martin

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Masters of Musical Performance Degree

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The University of Toledo

May 2010
An Abstract of

Jon Hendricks, Father of Vocalese: A Toledo Story

By

Lee Ellen Martin

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of Music Degree in Jazz Performance

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At 88 years young Jon Hendricks has lived a life of which some only dream. For over half a century Hendricks has changed the ways in which vocal jazz is performed. Hendricks’ creative genius lies in his prolific output of Vocalese, the art of setting lyrics to an established instrumental recording. From his vocalese lyric writing talents to his instrumental approach to improvisation, Hendricks revolutionized jazz singing and has become a historical icon in jazz. Like Art Tatum, Jon Hendricks spent his early years in Toledo Ohio and continues to be an important thread in the fabric of Toledo Jazz history. Using an oral history approach, this paper examines Jon Hendricks’ early life, his influences and what led up to his most successful recording, “Sing a Song of Basie” with Lambert, Hendricks and Ross. An in depth look into his childhood experiences in Toledo Ohio will be examined as a means of understanding Hendricks’ process of becoming the iconic figure of the vocal jazz group Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross. The emergence of bebop in the United States during the 1940’s, its translation into a vocal form known as vocalese, and how Jon Hendricks revolutionized lyric writing, guide this investigation.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost Professor Jon Hendricks and his family should be acknowledged for committing extensive amounts of their time for interviewing and answering various questions. With their help, a great deal of information concerning Professor Hendricks’ life and career were uncovered. Dr. Tom Barden and Dr. Patrick Fairfield were also invaluable to the completion of this project by providing different examples of oral history projects as well as research guidance. Dr. Barden and Dr. Fairfield were invaluable to the completion of this project. Lastly I would also like to thank Professor Gunnar Mossblad for entrusting me with the opportunity to serve as Professor Hendricks’ Graduate assistant for the past two years. This project would never have come to fruition without Professor Mossblad.
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Introduction

The primary documentation used in this biography of Jon Hendricks is the oral interview. Over the course of one year, several interviews were conducted with Jon Hendricks, his family, as well as local jazz musicians from Toledo who have worked with Jon Hendricks for an extended period of time. The methodology used in this research project of Jon Hendricks’ life is what is known as life history. Life history is an oral history study into the life of one person. A noted oral historian, Mary A. Larson sums up the categories of life history.

The first is similar to a standard biography but includes oral history interviews; the second consists of interviews with a range of people who discuss the subject of the life history; and the third is the ‘oral memoir’ which features the subject telling his or her own story, with the writer adding explanation and footnotes. (Larson 108-09)

This work on Jon Hendricks combines the second and third methods of research mentioned above. History from its very beginning developed as an oral tradition. Transmitting information from one generation to the next through verbal communication existed long before the written word became common practice. Similarly in music, jazz developed from an oral tradition. Enslaved Africans brought to the new world their cultural and musical oral traditions. In a foreign environment, forced to learn the languages and religion of their European captors, slaves were forced to adapt. In the United States a synthesis occurred from this adaptation resulting in a blending of African
musical culture with Western European musical culture to bring about the music that would be called jazz.

Similarly in this research project there was a blending of research techniques. Existing research regarding Jon Hendricks’ life was used as an initial study for this project. Most of the existing research that has been completed concerning Jon Hendricks is limited to his work with the vocal jazz group Lambert, Hendricks and Ross and more recently his experiences during World War II as an African American soldier. Existing research served primarily as a means to verify factual information obtained from the interview process, and as a means to analyze the data collected. Once a sufficient amount of background information was retrieved from newspaper interviews, CD liner notes, and a few scholastic texts on the life of Jon Hendricks, a rough outline was formed of subject areas to be covered in the interview processes for this project. Then an outline was created regarding subject areas, followed by an investigation into interview techniques commonly used in oral history. Research into common technological equipment used during the interview process also took place. An application to conduct this research was submitted and approved by the Social, Behavioral and Educational Institutional Review Board of the University of Toledo. People who knew Jon Hendricks were contacted and each potential interviewee was briefed on the interview process and invited to participate in the research. If the subject expressed interest in participating in the study, a date, time and comfortable area for interviewing was chosen for the subject and the interviewer. At this meeting the study was again explained, and written informed consent was obtained, including consent for recording interviews. Once the interviewee consented to take part
in the research, the interview process began, with each interview lasting no more than two hours at a time. For most of the interviews both a video camera as well as a tape recorder were used as a means of recording the interview to prevent loss of data from accidental technical mishaps from recording equipment problems. Notes were also taken in case both recording methods failed.

The second step in the research process was transcription. After the interviews had been completed a written transcription of each interview was produced. For the purpose of keeping the transcriptions as accurate as possible grammatical errors and other inaccuracies spoken during the interview process were left in the quotations used in this paper, exactly as spoken. This method kept the style of speaking of each interviewee intact, giving a more accurate portrayal of the interviewee to the reader. Lastly the transcribed data from all of the interviews was organized into subject areas and developed for use throughout the rest of the research. As many of Jon Hendricks’ musical contemporaries have now passed away it was very difficult to find many musicians who worked with Hendricks during the peak of his career in the 1960’s. Hendricks’ family members as well as Jon Hendricks himself were the primary sources for interview material regarding the subject of Hendricks early career and childhood in Toledo, Ohio. Some of the musicians who Hendricks worked with later in his career were also contacted for this project. Many of these musicians knew very little about his early life and focused more on Hendricks’ role in the development of vocalese and jazz voice. Here is a look into the life of the man whom some have called the “James Joyce of Jive,” and the Poet Laureate of Jazz.

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Chapter 1

Historical Setting- Vocal Jazz: Post World War II, Bebop to Vocalese.

1.1 Jazz in the Post War era- Swing to Bebop:
Early Toledo Connections

In order to understand the significance of Jon Hendricks’ contribution to the development of vocalese, one must first understand the historical framework from where bebop and later vocalese actually developed. Bebop initially emerged in the United States during the 1940’s but due to its radical nature did not become popular until the late 1940’s and 1950’s. Changes in the political climate of the United States because of World War II affected music as well as other aspects of American life. As everyday life in the United States became more complicated so did jazz. A loss of innocence brought on by the traumatic experiences of warfare, the threat of nuclear weapons and the concerns of the “Red Menace” led to a shift in the climate and feelings in the country to one of complexity and uncertainty. Art, music and jazz in particular, tracked the changing climate in the United States. Swing music of the mid 1930’s to the mid1940’s, became
“old hat” and was gradually replaced by the harmonically complex structure of bebop. Tempos began to speed up reflecting growing anxieties that Americans were experiencing.

In the post World War II period, American society changed in response to the new position of the country as a major world power. Simple traditions were replaced by complex rules, regulations, and modernism in order to form a new national American identity. Similarly, in the arts, traditional forms were being challenged. Jazz evolved from the seemingly simple melody improvisational style of swing, to a complex form known as bebop. Bebop broke down and reformed many of the traditional practices in jazz.

African American jazz musicians fed up with the lack of work in the predominantly European American swing band market, began to hold jam sessions, explored new improvisatory ideas, and broke away from the heavily arranged structure of swing. In bebop, African American jazz musicians were developing their own identity in a new anti-conformist musical style. In some sense bebop emerged as a new musical dialect among jazz musicians. In bebop, instrumentalists began to improvise based on chord changes rather than melodic contour, which radically changed the sound of jazz. Bebop broke down jazz structure to its elements and arranged the elements in new ways, requiring faster tempos and more complex improvisations. New technical skills were required for jazz musicians who wanted to master bebop. This new improvisatory skill set required a solid understanding of harmonic structures and proficiency in producing higher articulations of the harmonic overtone series. Bebop became one of the most complex and technically demanding improvisatory styles of jazz.
The first two musicians to distinguish and master the new jazz style of bebop were Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Their music would come to influence countless instrumentalists as well as vocalists. As a young man growing up in Kansas City, saxophonist Charlie Parker was exposed to a plethora of very talented musicians, including Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, and Art Tatum. Art Tatum, an innovative jazz pianist from Toledo, Ohio, was known for incredibly fast harmonic improvisation. After moving to New York and hearing Art Tatum, Parker began to improvise using modality and upper harmonic extensions at lightening fast tempos. Parker along with his most famous musical associate, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, became the emblems of the new musical movement known as bebop. Dizzy Gillespie was responsible for infusing Latin American rhythmic structures into bebop. Gillespie also led one of the first bebop big bands called the Dizzy Gillespie Orchestra from 1946-1950. By organizing bebop into the traditional instrumentation patterns associated with swing bands, audiences could identify more easily with the new music. Gillespie, through his orchestra was able to bring bebop to a much wider audience. During these years he made several television, radio, and other media appearances to try and bring bebop to the same popularity level that swing had enjoyed in the late 1930’s and early 40’s. Gillespie said of bebop:

For a generation of Americans and young people around the world, who reached maturity during the 1940s, bebop symbolized a rebellion against the rigidities of the old order, an outcry for change in almost every field, especially in music. The bopper wanted to impress the world with a new stamp, the uniquely modern design of a new generation coming of age. (Gillespie 170)
Gillespie, responsible for making bebop popular among audiences around the world, understood the technicality of bebop and was able to present bebop in such a way that made it fun and enjoyable. Initially many disliked bebop because it was not a dance music as swing had been. To many audiences bebop seemed unapproachable due to its unfamiliar musical language and rapid tempos. Through Gillespie’s comedic stage antics and tremendous abilities as a solo improviser, Gillespie managed to make bebop accessible to more people and give rise to bebop’s popularity.

Similarly Charlie Parker understood the complexities of bebop and also understood the importance of connecting with ones audience. Parker came of age in the late 1930’s in Kansas City, a city saturated with jazz. Parker, like Gillespie, grew up listening to jazz greats such as Count Basie, Lester Young, and Coleman Hawkins. Parker also had an affinity for contemporary classical music. With such a wide pallet of musical tastes, Charlie Parker revolutionized the way the saxophone was played. As a young musician he moved to New York to try and make a name for himself in the music business. While in New York Parker took a job at Jimmy’s Chicken Shack, a noted Harlem jazz venue, for the sole purpose of listening to Art Tatum. Tatum, a native of Toledo Ohio, was the house pianist at the restaurant. From listening and interacting with Tatum, Charlie Parker solidified his technical virtuosity on his instrument. Jon Hendricks, who grew up down the street from Art Tatum, remembered hearing Parker for the first time and recognized what he was hearing as Tatum’s piano vocabulary translated into Parker’s alto saxophone playing.
I suddenly heard this song over the ship’s radio, you know. And it was frenetic and exciting and fast and furious and brilliant and beautiful and I almost bumped my head jumping off my bunk, ‘cause it was everything that I heard inside my head and everything that I had heard when I was with Art Tatum. So I jumped up, ran up to the control room and said to the guy, “What was that?” He said, “What?” I said, “That last song you just played, the one you just played.” He said, “I don’t know.” I said, “Where is it?” He said, “It’s down there on the floor.” I looked down there on the floor, the floor’s covered in records. I said, “Come on. What color was the label?” He said, “It’s a red label.” So I begin to sort out the records and I would come across red labels and I would ask him, “Was it this one?” And he said, “No.” Finally I found it, it was a Music Craft label and it was called “Salt Peanuts.” And it was Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. And I gave him thirty dollars and I said, “Play this for the next hour.” And he did, drove all the other men crazy but I was in heaven. I couldn’t believe that the ideas that I could hear in my head from what I’d learned from Art Tatum were being played by other people. I was amazed. (Burns)

Parker learned from Tatum to hear upper extensions in chords based on the harmonic overtone series. He began to improvise based on chord changes rather than solely based on the melody. This radically change the ways in which jazz musicians approached improvisation. By incorporating Tatum’s theoretical and virtuosic approach to improvising with the sounds of Kansas City blues, Parker forever changed the course of jazz. The bebop movement was born.

Bebop was not initially well received. Many at first thought it seemed reactionary and extremist and even went as far as to call it the death of jazz. To those who played bebop, it served as an intellectual outlet that broke away from the established and popular structure of swing. Bebop also challenged the stars of the earlier swing era who had achieved public recognition and commercial success. With its faster tempos and technical demands, bebop was not a dance music like swing, which many swing musicians
believed was critical for commercial success. Even Louis Armstrong known by many as the originator of jazz initially did not like bebop. Louis Armstrong expressed his feelings towards bebop in this way.

I mean all them young cats along the street with their horns wrapped in a stocking and they say ,’Pay my first, pops, and then I’ll play a note for you,’ and you know that’s not the way any good music ever got made. You got to like playing pretty things if you’re ever going to be any good blowing your horn. These young cats now they want to make money first and the hell with the music. And then they want to carve everyone else because they’re full of malice, and all they want to do is show you up, and any old way will do as long as it’s different the way you played it before. So you get all them weird chords which don’t mean nothing, and first people get curious about it just because it’s new, but soon they get tired of it because it’s really no good and you got no melody to remember and no beat to dance to. So they’re all poor again and nobody is working, and that’s what that modern malice done for you. (Wolfe 153-54)

Not only did some of the most famous and well respected jazz artists not initially care for the new style, neither did many audiences. Another factor that slowed popular acceptance of bebop was the fact that because of the War effort, there was a recording ban in the United States from 1942 until 1944 and no new jazz was being recorded. As the recording ban was lifted, new recordings like “Salt and Peanuts” by Gillespie and Parker released in 1945 brought bebop out of the night club jam sessions into the homes of many Americans. (Gillespie, Shaw ’Nuff) Gradually over time opinions began to change. More bebop was being played on the radio and many artists began to record bebop albums.
1.2 Bebop and Early Vocalese

One of the other reasons that bebop was not as easily accessible to audiences as swing had been, was because in its early stages bebop lacked vocalists. Initially bebop was predominantly an instrumental music. However as bebop grew in notoriety it began to develop as a vocal style as well. Singers began learning to sing bebop from recordings and would add their own lyrics. This technique came to be referred to as vocalese. Because tempos in bebop were so fast and modal improvisation became so complex, it initially seemed impossible to apply this new musical dialect to the voice. Singers began to experiment with their voices trying to mimic the sounds of the bebop instrumentalists. Vocal improvisation mimicking instrumental improvisation was not a completely foreign concept in jazz. Prior to vocalese, scatting became common practice among singers. To scat sing was an improvisational tool used by singers. They would improvise using nonsense syllables, mimicking the sounds of various instruments. During the bebop era scat singing became very popular. Because bebop placed such importance on improvisation, singers began to sit in at jam sessions with instrumentalists and scat.

One of the first successful bebop scat singers, Babs Gonzales popularized the style by using very unusual syllables. Born Lee Brown in 1919, Babs was a comedian and singer who even created a new way of speaking that became popular slang during the bebop era. In the 1940’s Capitol Records released a collection of Gonzales bop terms known as the “Boptionary,” (Shaw) that popularized the use of bebop slang from the mid
1940’s to the mid 1950’s. Gonzales was one of the first entertainers to scat in the bebop style. Gonzalez led his own musical group that was called Three Bips and a Bop from 1946-1949. With this group Gonzalez recorded a very famous bebop tune entitled “Oop-Pop-Pa-Da” which sold over 45,000 copies in the late 1940’s. He toured Europe playing in well known jazz clubs such as London’s Ronnie Scotts club. He eventually ended up running his own nightclub in Paris called the Maison D’Idiots. Gonzales helped to bring bebop to international audiences and was well liked for his unusual way of speaking and unique way of scatting. (Friedwald 224)

As Gonzalez brought popularity to bebop scat singing abroad, a particularly gifted scat singer named Buddy Stewart helped to make bebop scat singing popular in the United States. In 1945 Stewart teamed up with Dave Lambert and Gene Krupa to record what some consider the first bebop vocal recording called “What’s This?” (Stewart) The album not only proved that singers could in fact sing bebop but that bebop could be commercially successful. Lambert and Stewart continued to work together until Stewart’s untimely death in 1950. Dave Lambert went on to become the vocal arranger for the Stan Kenton orchestra. His vocal arrangements blended well with the rest of the Kenton band and demonstrated to the world that he was one of the best vocal arrangers in the business. Jazz scholar William Gottlieb said of Dave Lambert, “a director of vocal groups and himself a singer, extended the use of voices as horns. He used actual words as well as nonsense syllables to produce the effects of a bop combo.” (Gottlieb 112) Dave Lambert had an ear for instrumental bebop and translated the style onto the human voice.
As scat singing became more popular during the bebop era a new form of jazz singing emerged known as vocalese. The new style required the ability to make the human voice into an instrument with lyrics. Each note of an instrumental solo not only had to be learned by the singer but also put into rhyming poetry. A well known vocalese singer by the name of King Pleasure explained vocalese as follows:

“I believe that where there is a sound, there is a mood which can be interpreted into words-at least in a general way. And it is my ambition to interpret a full band arrangement into words, with individual voices replacing individual instruments, expressing into words what the instruments expressed in mood.” (Friedwald 223)

One of the first recordings to put words to an instrumental solo that foreshadowed the vocalese movement which began in the Post World War II period was recorded by Bea, the Shimmy Queen, Palmer in 1929 in Chicago. Bea Palmer was a vaudeville entertainer who was the first singer to record a lyricized instrumental solo. She wrote words and recorded a vocal version of Bix Beiderbecke’s recording entitled “Singin the Blues.” This recording was way ahead of its time musically. While “Singin the Blues” did not include the complex improvisatory theoretical transformations that would become associated with bebop, it did foreshadow the vocalese form that would develop in the bebop era. (Friedwald 233)

Vocalese as a bebop vocal art form was initially created by Eddie Jefferson whose work “Moody’s Mood for Love” was recorded in 1953. This song was based on a James Moody recording of the jazz standard “I’m in the Mood for Love,” and it became the first
vocalese hit that would influence many jazz singers including Jon Hendricks. Jefferson learned James Moody’s bebop solo from the original recording, and wrote lyrics to the solo. This was the first time that words had been added to a bebop instrumental solo and sung by a solo singer. (Friedwald 234-35)

From this recording singers like Jon Hendricks learned that it was possible to write lyrics to compositions longer than thirty two bars. Prior to Jefferson, lyricists only wrote lyrics for Broadway shows and popular songs whose form was limited. The development of vocalese led to a shift in the role of the lyricist, creating one of the most technically demanding forms of lyric writing in jazz. Lyricists had to learn how to make the words evoke the temperament of an instrument, and they had to write lyrics to fit different instrumental solos. Not only did lyricists have to write words that not only fit particular rhythms and notes, they also had to depict a fluid narrative. Unfortunately Jefferson never received acknowledgment for his transformation of vocal jazz music. King Pleasure recorded Jefferson’s work “Moody’s Mood for Love” and claimed it as his own. King Pleasure heard Jefferson perform the piece in Cincinnati and brought the lyrics back to Harlem. He then performed and recorded the piece at the Apollo Theater on the Prestige label in 1952. While Pleasure received fame and fortune, Jefferson was left struggling to gain recognition as a jazz singer and a jazz lyricist. While he did not receive public recognition, Jefferson paved the way for vocalese artists and established a set of standards for vocalese lyricists and singers. (Friedwald 235)
The key element of success in the vocalese style of singing was mastery of a higher level of technical skill in terms of note accuracy and rhythmic precision. Singers were now required to have highly developed ear training as well as pitch accuracy. Since singers have no physical buttons to push or strings to pluck in order to identify and create a certain note, all pitch recognition in singing had to be learned through mental processes. Vocalese singers had to remember many more lyrics, recognize chord changes instantly, and adjust vocal registers very quickly to mimic the range of the instruments that they were tracking. Vocalese required singers to accurately sing complex lyrics as if they were performing difficult instrumental solos very quickly with total and complete pitch accuracy.

1.3 Jon Hendricks and the Development of Vocalese

What makes vocalese so unique, is that it is both a musical form as well as a literary form. A lyricist must create a rhyming narrative that tells a story and enhances an instrumental solo, giving it life. Above all else the lyrics are the crucial element in vocalese. Early vocalese lyrics by Eddie Jefferson and other artists often did not make sense poetically, because these artists primarily focused on making words fit into an instrumental line. Early vocalese lyrics were often written about the instrumentalist who originally played the solo. These soloist based lyrics often lacked meaning and most often were not integrated into a theme for a piece as a whole. Jon Hendricks changed all of this when he began to write vocalese lyrics for large instrumental ensemble recordings.
Hendricks began to write lyrics based on the title of a song or based on the meaning of the song described to him by the composer.

Hendricks would often call up composers and ask them the meaning behind their specific works. He would then write lyrics which created a narrative voice for each instrument in the piece, in effect creating independent characters within a musical work. These vocal characters could actually interact together creating a rhyming musical narrative.

Hendricks lyric writing seemed far beyond that of his contemporaries. As his career developed so did Hendricks lyrist skills. When Hendricks writes lyrics, he becomes a playwright, a poet, and a musician all in one. Because of his lyrical talents he is often referred to as the “poet laureate of jazz.” (Feather 2) Hendricks is able to take a great instrumental recording and make it even more monumental by adding poetry to the work. With each piece he creates a story for the audience as well as a dialogue for musicians and vocalists performing the piece. The intent of the musical work is made more accessible for the audience when captured through words. Will Friedwald a vocal jazz scholar said of Jon Hendricks, “Hendricks effortlessly matches every note of the ensemble parts and solos, capturing the mood, the cadence, and the idea of each phrase while at the same time maintaining the continuity of the overall narrative.” (Friedwald 245)
From Art Tatum to Jon Hendricks, jazz has continued to grow and develop into what it has become today. As a young jazz bebop singer from Toledo Ohio, Jon Hendricks grew up taking music lessons from the great Art Tatum and learned to approach singing as an instrumentalist. From his father Hendricks learned the power of the spoken word and strove to master the art of the sounded word. During a chance encounter with Charlie Parker on Parker’s tour throughout the Midwest, Hendricks was encouraged by Parker to move to New York to become a jazz singer. After hearing “Moody’s Mood for Love” on the radio Hendricks realized that all of the bebop scatting he had learned working with Art Tatum could be expressed in lyrics. In his mind, song form was no longer limited to thirty two bars. Lyrics were no longer confined to the melody. They could now be written over bass lines, horn solos, and even drum parts.

Hendricks wrote his first vocalese lyric to Woody Herman’s popular work “Four Brothers,” and followed with “Cloudburst” (Hendricks Cloudburst). Hendricks recorded these tracks with the collaboration of Dave Lambert in 1956 under the name of Jon Hendricks and the Dave Lambert Singers. While the record was not commercially successful in the United States it was revolutionary in its development of vocalese.

During the mid 50’s Dave Lambert and Jon Hendricks were both at the beginning of their careers, and they were experiencing serious financial troubles. They had both recently divorced and had financial obligations to their families but did not have steady work. They became friends and co-workers. Jon Hendricks moved in with Dave Lambert to help pay rent. At one point they no longer had enough money to buy food.
Lambert suggested to Hendricks that they write vocalese arrangements to Count Basie’s big band. When they were finished writing they had arranged twelve Count Basie pieces. They managed to arrange an album’s worth of vocalese pieces with separate parts for an entire big band, something no other artist had been able to accomplish. Never before had anyone written lyrics for several different instruments to be sung at the same time. Together with a young Scottish singer by the name of Annie Ross, the group recorded the album Sing a Song of Basie (Lambert, Basie). It became the hottest selling jazz vocal or vocalese record in history. Overnight Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross became international celebrities as well as the number one vocal jazz group in the world. What was so unique about their work was the combination of Lambert’s incredible arranging abilities, Hendricks’ ingenious lyricist talents, and Ross’s tremendous vocal capabilities. Together they created a new sophisticated form of jazz singing. Over the next five years Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross revolutionized group vocal jazz into what we today call vocalese.

Another factor that set Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross’s work apart from the rest of the vocalese singers were their lyrics. Jon Hendricks wrote almost all of the lyrics that the group performed. Similar to an opera libretto, Hendricks’ lyrics ingeniously developed a central narrative with different characters’ dialogues all in rhyme within complex bebop improvisational music. Hendricks sometimes even referred to Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross as the Metropolitan Bopera Company. (Boppin' at the Blue Note) Hendricks ingeniously wrote clever and often humorous lyrics that had some sort of life
lesson attached to them. He did this for each instrumental part of a jazz band arrangement. Hendricks’ gift is in his ability to communicate complicated musical messages in beautifully simple lyrics that everyone can comprehend. When asked where his talents for lyric writing come from Hendricks says that sometimes he is not aware that he is the person writing, claiming that sometimes when he writes he looks down at what is written and laughs saying, “that’s funny, wonder where it came from.” He has even gone as far as to say that he sometimes thinks, “I am God’s pencil.” (Hendricks, personal communication Sept 15, 2009) He has the ability to hear a narrative in his head almost instantaneously as he hears music. Hendricks gave voice to hundreds of jazz composers of the bebop era and brought their music into the homes of millions.

As bebop radically changed jazz forever, vocalese helped to popularize, strengthen, and enhance the new jazz style. Hendricks set a high bar for all with his lyric writing. As the most recognizable instrument, the human voice has the ability to narrate. Hendricks exceptional talent with words gave bebop a voice and by doing so helped to create an identity for the bebop movement. Just as Dizzy Gillespie communicated instrumental bebop to a larger audience through the use of his horn as an extension of himself, Jon Hendricks translated bebop into an esteemed literary form in jazz. All art is a reflection of the growth and change in society. Traditional harmonic structures were broken down in bebop to explore and rebuild the form and structure of jazz music. In much the same way vocalese rebuilt the style of jazz singing during the 1950’s. Hendricks took vocal jazz into new territory by adding a story, a literary experience,
giving voice to the complexities of bebop. Bebop and later vocalese attracted new audiences from around the world to the genius of American jazz culture.

Hendricks continues to be the beacon of American culture. He continues to impact today’s jazz vocalists. As any great artist, Hendricks is able to reflect the universal human condition through his lyrics and thus cause society to reflect on itself. Hendricks is in a category of his own. In order to understand where his genius came from an investigation into his early life experiences was undertaken as part of this study. As a child Hendricks selected passages from the Bible for his father, who was a minister, and watched his mother write lyrics for the church choir. This paper will use an oral history approach to examine some of the early influences on the developing genius of Jon Hendricks, some of the events related to the creation of the most popular vocal jazz album in recorded history, and some of the influences that Jon Hendricks has had on vocal jazz today.
Chapter 2

Jon Hendricks Early Life in Ohio

Born September 16, 1921 in Newark, Ohio, Jon Hendricks came to this earth as the seventh son of fourteen brothers and three sisters. His father was Alexander Brookes Hendricks and his mother was Willie Carrington Hendricks. Unfortunately a few of his brothers died in infancy bringing the number of children in his family down to fifteen. From an early age Jon had an extraordinary talent for music and a great intellect. Surrounded by a large family Jon grew up in a very loving and supportive environment.

I was born in 1921, in a railroad switch town called Newark, Ohio. It was just a hamlet with a dirt road running through it. My father was pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which served the area. No one was famous there. If you were alive back then in the Depression, you were a celebrity [laughs]. There were 17 of us--14 boys and 3 girls. There was no TV then, so getting along with each other was necessary and easy. You had no choice. (Meyers)

Sharing, patience, and close living quarters were a part of everyday life at the Hendricks’ household. Often Jon and his siblings slept three to a bed in order to make sure everyone had a place to sleep. Jon never complained, saying it was good because it forced the family to remain close. His two older sisters, Florence and Vivian were responsible for helping out their mother Willie, with the cooking and cleaning around the
house. Bonny Hopkins, Jon Hendricks’ niece whom he considers as his sister, grew up in the Hendricks’ household around the same time as Jon. As a young girl, Bonnie remembered spending most of the time trying to get the boys out of the room so that she could do her chores. Jon recalls his sisters working around the house at a very young age. “The three girls as soon as they were old enough to stand on chairs then they wiped dishes. They swept rooms in the house. They were taught to do housework as soon as they could walk around and handle instruments.” (Hendricks, Interview Part A: Nov 29, 2009) With so many children around the house the work had to be distributed among family members. Willie’s oldest daughters would help their mother run the household especially while she was pregnant. As Willie was pregnant frequently, the doctor would come to visit the house often. At a young age Jon Hendricks created his own idea of where babies came from. “We used to see a doctor come with a little black bag. And we thought the baby was in that bag. Because he would go upstairs and after about twenty minutes you would hear „wah’ and they would come down and we would be staring in the bag.” (Hendricks, Interview Part A: Nov 29, 2009)

Having so many children around meant that there were always opportunities for the children to play. Bonnie Hopkins remembers, “There was a lot of love in the home. We always ate together and prayed together. We would pray before breakfast, dinner, and supper every day.” (Bonnie Hopkins, Interview Dec 17, 2009) Because of the large size of the family they became their own community. All of the siblings played with each other, and there was no need to go over to friends’ houses because they became their own network of friends.
Aside from their closeness, the Hendricks children all shared the experience of growing up in a very religious household. When Jon was four years old his father, Alexander Brookes Hendricks, became the pastor at the Warren African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Toledo, Ohio. The family moved to Toledo. Reverend Hendricks led daily prayers in the household before each meal, and gave a weekly sermon at the AME church. This instilled in Jon and his siblings a deep spirituality that fostered a sense of obligation to one’s fellow man. Jon Hendricks’ parents focused on teaching all of their children life’s most essential lessons. Jon continues to follow these teachings throughout his life.

It was great; I grew up with twelve brothers and three sisters. There was Norman Stanley, William Brooks, Charles Lansell, Florence, Bela, Stuart Devon, Vivian, Edward Allen, myself, James, Robert, Donald, Clifford, Arthur, and Lola Mae. We had our own gang you know. We didn’t have to go and run with a lot of kids, we were a lot of kids. Our father and our mother ran a great household, because he being a preacher and she being a sister of the church, everything was always on a very high level, a very spiritual level. Our day began at seven in the morning, we all had to get up to go to the bathroom and wash up, with the little ones first going up to the oldest every morning. After we all got through washing up, we had to come downstairs before we had breakfast. Our father would have everyone kneel down near a chair or a table or a couch and he would say a prayer for the whole world really. Then he would tell us, you are children of the living God, and every living thing is your relative. If it’s alive you love it and you’re responsible for it. If it’s a bug on the sidewalk you don’t step on it you step over it or walk around it. You have respect for what’s alive because all the life comes from the same place… it’s from God. As children of the living God you respect all life. Every woman is your sister, every man is your brother. He said now, outside this front door, you are in the world and they don’t believe that. But you take that message to the world and you bring them that message by your actions. Every man is your brother, if a man speaks harshly to you, you don’t fight. If you see someone in trouble you help them out as if they were one of you. You are responsible for women, if you see a woman in danger you have something
to say about that. We were taught all of that so as a result we had no enemies. (Hendricks, Interview Part A, March 26, 2009)

Jon’s father, Reverend Alexander Brookes Hendricks, was a large man with a kind heart. As the pastor at the Warren African Methodist Episcopal Church on Collingwood Boulevard in Toledo, he was a very hard working man. Being part Cherokee possibly a runaway from a Cherokee reservation, Alexander Hendricks’ origins remain a secret. He travelled to Huntington, West Virginia to work as a coal miner and stayed in a boarding house where his future wife Willie Carrington worked. He quickly fell in love with Willie Carrington and wanted to marry her. As a young man Alexander Hendricks, known for being a roustabout and a drunk, was forbade by Willie’s mother to court Willie. He continued to work as a laborer in Huntington in order to make enough money to elope with Willie. Once his funds were in order he bought a covered wagon and asked Willie to marry him. They married and moved to Newark, Ohio and started a family shortly after arriving. According to Jon, as a young man, his father Alexander Hendricks continued to suffer from alcoholism, and after drinking too much one wintry night he slipped on the ice and hit his head. He laid unconscious in below zero temperatures for two hours. During this time, Mr. Hendricks had an out of body experience, a revelation that he must not only change his ways, but become a man of God. The next day Alexander Hendricks left for the Payne Theological Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio to become a preacher. The Payne Theological Seminary was one of the first African American seminaries in the United States. Upon completing his training,
Reverend Hendricks became a very talented preacher. He was often relocated to start up new congregations of the African Methodist Episcopal Church throughout the Midwest.

As Alexander and Willie began to have more children parenting also became a primary aspect of both of their lives. As a father Alexander was known for being a very loud, boisterous, and kind man. He filled the house with prayer throughout every meal and helped to organize the household so that things ran smoothly. He made sure all of his children were at the table for prayer on time before dinner and he oversaw the completion of chores. While he was a very strict father he was also a very loving father. Bonnie Hopkins said that Reverend and Mrs. Hendricks were very beautiful people. Reverend Hendricks’ mother had a big impact on Jon Hendricks. As a youth, Jon Hendricks recalled that during the summers he visited his paternal grandmother and he speaks of how much of a spiritual person his grandmother was. “Being fifty percent Cherokee, my grandmother was very mysterious. She used to glide through the house. She was tall and she let her hair down that would reach past her waist and she was strong. We would go up there every summer and we never got sick because the minute we got a cold or anything, she would go out in the morning about 4:30 quarter to 5:00 just as the dew was settling on the plants. And she would pick these herbs. I never knew what they were.” (Hendricks, Interview Part A: Nov 29, 2009) The women role models in Jon Hendricks’ life were very strong and instilled in Hendricks a deep respect for women. From a young age he learned from his mother and his grandmother the ways in which to interact with and respect women.
Aside from teaching her son to respect women, Jon’s mother, Willie Carrington Hendricks, was Jon’s first musical influence. She sang in church choir and would often sing around the house. His mother’s singing exposed Jon Hendricks to the rhythmic elements of gospel music being played at church and to the deep and spiritual lyrics of the spirituals he heard every day. Jon Hendricks developed an appreciation for music from a very young age. Willie Hendricks also would often write lyrics for new choral arrangements at the AME church. Jon’s mother became his first musical mentor.

Yeah, she was wonderful, and she was also a lyricist. That, I think that's where I came by my gift as a lyricist. She wrote lyrics to spirituals that we sang in church. And she was good. She was very good. She was an extraordinary woman.” (Murphy)

Due to the large size of the family Willie Hendricks spent the majority of her time taking care of her family and the house. She was known throughout town for her great culinary talents as well as her beauty. Willie grew up in Huntington, West Virginia where she helped her mother run a boarding house for miners and it was there that she learned to cook. She was in charge of providing meals for all of the guests. Aside from her culinary talents, Mrs. Hendricks was a very kind, sympathetic, and religious woman. She taught her children forgiveness in the face of guilt.

Your parents, if you spend time with them closely, they may not be aware of it but they're subtly teaching you how to conduct yourself when you grow up, and my father and my mother did that with me. My mother taught me a lesson in spiritual behavior that I remember to this day, and I'll never forget it. A man had killed another man on the railroad tracks. You know, they were drunks and ne'er-do-wells and everything, and so he had shot this other guy, and the police were investigating and measuring distance from the place he stood and where the guy was when he got shot. We were all looking out our windows because we lived on the railroad tracks, and some of the itinerant travelers, which we used to call "hobos,"
would stop by the house. (One of them was [blues musician] Josh White when he was on the rails. He had his guitar on his back, and he knew my father and he knew my mother's cooking, so he would stop quite often.) So this guy, when he got shot, it kind of interrupted everything, and so all the women in the church came into my mother's kitchen to talk about this terrible thing. "That man, I knew he was never going to amount to anything! He was always out of work, and he was lazy, and he spent his money if he did get a job." They were really putting him down and castigating him. And so they finally all had to go home and cook supper for their families, so my mother must have forgotten that I was sitting on the stool by the window, because she looked out the window. She was washing the dishes, and she said, "Poor [man]." And I sat there very quietly because I didn't want her to know I was there, since she didn't seem to know. But she was having sympathy for the murderer, and I was amazed by that. (Hendricks Interview Part A: Nov. 29, 2009)

As a practicing Christian and a pastor’s wife, Willie Hendricks would go to her husband’s church every Sunday for worship and to lead the church choir, When Jon was seven years old, Willie encouraged her son to sing in the choir. Jon’s earliest musical training came from singing in choir with his mother at the Warren AME Episcopal church.

My father had the choir in church and my mother led the singing. I started with her when I was seven so I was singing with her, so my father understood about what it all meant. He couldn’t sing. He was in a contest for best preacher who could sing the best and the prize was a coconut cake. He was so bad they gave him the cake. My mother was a great singer but my dad couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket. She sang just in church she was a church girl. Church was the first place I heard music and it was an influence. It was an influence on everybody because everybody went to church in those days. The people that didn’t go to church in those days were out right criminals, pimps, ladies were whores… they were outlaws. Everybody went to church so everybody heard all that good music. (Hendricks, Interview Part D: March 27, 2009)
Music was a big part of the Hendricks family. Jon and his brothers would often beat on anything they could find around the house and sing together. With so many children making music together, quiet was non-existent in the home. Jon persisted in his musical interests and continued to sing and play. Bonnie said of Jon, “He was always into music and he played a little drums. Jon was always singing around the house, and playing drums, taking sticks and beating on things. He was very musical” (Hopkins, Interview December 17, 2009) The younger children found ways to entertain each other, and music was a big source of entertainment. According to Hendricks, by the age of nine he performed professionally at a Toledo roadhouse called Chateau La France run by mobsters. At only nine years of age Jon was making $60.00 a night bringing home money to help support his family. (De Boer) During the Depression this was a lot of money for a child to be bringing home so his parents allowed him to work late as long as he had someone looking after him, usually an older musician.

Aside from helping his family financially through performances, Jon truly had a gift for words. Reverend Hendricks realized Jon’s strong affinity for poetry from his ability to create lyrics. He would observe his son changing lyrics to popular songs in order to make them sound better. Jon as a young performer invented his own lyrics to popular songs at times because he disliked the originals. Reverend Hendricks heard Jon Hendricks as a young child reciting passages from the Bible by memory. Impressed by Jon’s talents, Reverend Hendricks assigned Jon the task of selecting passages from the Bible for his weekly sermons. Reverend Hendricks reasoned that Jon’s gift for words proved that he was the most capable of his children to select insightful passages from the
Bible for his weekly sermons. Jon developed a deep understanding of the Bible and used it as a basis to write his own lyrics later in life. Jon Hendricks frequently recalls his deeply rooted spirituality, and claims the Bible to be the greatest literature ever written. Jon recalls his early experiences of working with his father as very rewarding.

“Well my father being a preacher and me being a star English student. He needed someone to pick texts for him from the King James Bible so he picked me because I got all A’s in English. Which is true I got A’s from first grade to University, at this University (referring to University of Toledo.)” (Hendricks, Interview Part C: March 20, 2009)

Along with his gift for words also came a gift for rhythm and music. Jon could hear anything, complex rhythms to difficult melodic passages and be able to sing them. “I can hear around the corner. Sweets Edison told Joe Williams, they were talking about my ears so he says, „Oh man, Jon can hear a gnat piss on cotton.” (Hendricks, Interview Part B: March 20, 2009) Jon seemed to have an extraordinary sense of hearing that could distinguish all types of sounds. Hendricks described his own musical talents as follows, “I got a great orchestra in my head, plays me anything I want to hear. It’s a really good request radio station. I can hear anything on the air, the whole thing. Just let it go and it’s all there. Well you know Art Tatum, he said, „You gotta listen and store it up.’ So I would listen to him and I used to start and try to sing those runs and it improved my scatting to no end.” (Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 27, 2009)

Hendricks primary source of early musical education came from his experiences in church. When he heard jazz he soon realized that jazz had a lot of the same melodic and rhythmic elements he grew up hearing in the church. Hearing the connection Jon
realized that he had to sing jazz. As a young adolescent in Toledo, Hendricks had a jazz quartet that he performed with. To his dismay the group did not understand “swing feel”, the syncopated rhythm in which accents are placed on beats two and four. The intrinsic “swing feel”, that Jon heard every week in his father’s gospel church choir, came to him naturally after being exposed to it from infancy. Realizing that not everyone had a musical education from church experiences, Hendricks introduced his band mates to “swing feel” by taking them to church.

Everything started in the church. The Church was swinging before anybody else, that was interesting, that is interesting. I had a quartet at the Waiters and Bellman’s Club on Indiana Avenue, but they weren’t swingin’ to my idea of swing. I was playing drums and I had to swing them. I had to make them sound like they were swingin.’

Five houses down from mine became a sanctified church and they had a piano, bass, drums, and guitar. Man they swung like dogs. They swung those spirituals man with that back beat you know and the guitar player (sings) ‘wang dang’ and the drummer, ‘bap bap bap.’ So I took my quartet on a warm summer night, I said, ‘let’s go in and stand by the door’ and we stood against the wall. I just let them listen to these guys do a couple tunes then I said, ‘let’s go.’ I said, ‘now that’s the way we should swing, that’s swingin,’ and we got better after that. But another couple times they went down and stood outside in front of the church by themselves and listened to those guys, they were swingin. (Hendricks, Interview Part D: March 27, 2009)

As his music experience grew, Hendricks sang professionally more frequently at weddings and banquets. At the age of nine he was known around town as “Little Johnny Hendricks.” During the Depression Jon learned popular songs played on the juke box at Cowell’s hamburger joint. He would go to the place and ask the restaurant customers to give him their nickel and he would perform their desired song. Because he was so young his parents were not always thrilled with the idea of little Jon going into bars and singing.
late into the night. However with so many mouths to feed any extra income that came into the household was a blessing, so his parents let him continue singing.

I was the only source of hard cash you know; I worked saloons with a grown piano player. You know we would go in and I would see the predominate ethnicity of the place and I said ,’Oh Irish.’ So I said, ,’Okay ‘Mother Machree;’’ sure I love the dear silver that shines in your hair and your brow that’s all worried and wrinkled with care. Should I kiss the dear fingers so toil-worn for me, Oh, God bless you and keep you, Mother Machree.’ And these guys would be seen crying in the saloon you know. Then they would say ,’give this guy a quarter or fifty cents.’ Then we would go to the next bar and if it was Italian I would sing ,’Guarda il mare com’e belle! Spira tanto sentimento’ (lyrics to “Torna a Surriento”) because we were learning all of this in school. (Hendricks, Interview Part D: March 27, 2009)

Jon Hendricks related similar stories of his early experiences singing in different spots in Toledo as a child. The following story was part of the Ken Burns Jazz series.

I had already found a way to earn money ,’cause this was in the middle of the great Depression and that was really hard times. And it was a nickel to play the jukebox, so I would learn all the songs on the jukebox, every song, all the riffs and everything and I would stand in front of the jukebox and someone would come to play and I’d say, ,’Wait a minute, what are you going to play?’ And they’d say, ,’Yard Dog Mazurka” by Jimmy Lunsford.’ And I’d say, ,’Okay, gimme the nickel, I’ll sing it.’ And this was so audacious and unusual that they would give me the nickel and I would sing, ,’Beedle ee oop boo bop boo bop, deedle ee oop bo bap bo ah. Duh da uh uh uh, boodoo be oop doop dedoo doo dum,’ everything, the saxophones, the trumpets. I would sing the solos, and that’s how I would earn twenty cents, you know, dime for the movie, nickel for popcorn, and nickel for a bar of candy. (Burns)

Jon Hendricks developed a talent for understanding what his audiences wanted. He knew what songs would please his audiences and made sure he was prepared to sing them. Not only was Jon gifted with great stage persona he also had a tremendous talent for remembering both words and music. As he grew older Jon’s experiences of frequently
performing and working closely with his father allowed him to develop a unique compositional and poetic style in his work. From a very early age Jon realized that lyrics spoke to audiences, and he often created lyrics to instrumental melodies and solos. He started off altering lyrics to popular songs that did not make sense or fit well with the melody.

When I was small I was singing popular songs and I used to like the song, “It’s the same old Dream.” I can see a steeple surrounded by people (lyrics) and I said wait a minute what are they on stilts? And so I changed it, ‘I can see a steeple, a church full of people.’ Then I would go on. I used to alter songs when I didn’t like the lyric because how are you going to see a steeple surrounded by people? Oh I changed a lot of songs that I sang that the lyric didn’t make sense… you have to make sense when you write a lyric because… if you don’t you can get the singer in trouble. (Hendricks, Interview A: March 20, 2009)

At only eleven years old Jon Hendricks was not only writing and rewriting lyrics, he would also walk five houses down from his home on City Park Avenue to his neighbor’s house to practice with his accompanist. His neighbor happened to be Art Tatum, one of the most gifted piano players, in the country. Jon asked Art once how he had learned to play the piano and he said that his mother had bought him a piano roll that featured two pianists. Since Tatum was almost completely blind he did not realize that it was for two players and learned the piece himself. “He had learned to play four hands anyways and didn't think anything of it.” (Meyers)

 Jon claims that he learned to sing bebop from Art Tatum. On the piano, Tatum would play Jon passages with different chords and their extensions and Jon would sing them back. These early years of musical training in Jon’s life were some of the most
important in his development as a musician. Individual musicianship lessons with Art Tatum allowed Hendricks to build a complex musical vocabulary. These exercises were challenging to say the least, coming from one of the most gifted piano players in the world. Jon Hendricks’ musical training was solidly based in Tatum’s theoretical concepts as well as his virtuosic style of playing. With Art Tatum as a teacher, Jon Hendricks developed an instrumental vocabulary unmatched by any other singer.

When I started to sing as a kid, Art accompanied me on the radio. Soon he began calling me for gigs. Can you imagine? Art Tatum calling me to sing with him? When I was 9 years old, I was known as Little Johnny Hendricks and sang at the Rivoli Theater in Toledo. Art was 21 years old. He lived five houses from us. His parents were friends, his brother Carl and my brothers Charles and Stewart were friends, and Arlene and my sister Vivian were friends. So they hung out together and we knew each other, we grew up together. He knew me since I was seven because I was singing at seven. But we all knew each other that was no problem. He saw me across Indiana Avenue once. His left eye was totally gone but his right eye was only partly closed. When he lifted his head like I am now he could see your outline. He can’t see you but he would open the eye so he could see your outline, and he saw me across the avenue. He said „Hendricks” I said, „Art.’ He said come on over here. So I crossed the street and we would hug each other. That’s when he would come back into town. He could see a little bit out of this eye but only just like a shape and a suggestion of eyes and nose and mouth and all that. But he knew everybody’s shape he had a great mind. He was very intelligent and he could hear, boy could he hear. You know if you asked him about the song so and so, he would say, „How does it go?” And you sing it. He played it perfectly with the right chords and everything. He heard the chords amazingly. He was a reincarnation of Blind Tom. They say Blind Tom was a slave that could play anything on the piano. He could hear an opera once and play it on the piano and his masters thought very highly of him, kept him in the house and he entertained at parties and things. I think Art Tatum was a reincarnation of Blind Tom. (Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 20, 2009)

By the age of fourteen Jon performed twice a week with Art Tatum at the popular Waiters and Bellman’s Club (W&B) in Toledo on Indiana Avenue. Jon worked at this
club two years and encountered some of the most respected musicians in jazz. Hendricks met many musicians over the course of his time at the club but some of his most memorable encounters were with Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Sweets Edison, Count Basie, and Teddy Wilson. The Waiters and Bellman’s Club from the 1920s to the 1940s was Toledo’s hottest place for jazz. Toledo, because of its location on the railroad line between New York and Chicago, became a hotspot in the Midwest for jazz. Touring musicians often stopped in Toledo to play at the Waiters and Bellman’s Club. Hendricks performed frequently at the club as an opening act for the headlining artists. Many jazz legends in their own right would stop in Toledo to hear Art Tatum and exposed Hendricks to superb jazz at a young age.

The W&B was an after hour’s club, but it was also a regular club. It was open all night. It had a restaurant next door. It was a regular club during the day; you see it was the Waiters and Bellmen’s Club at night. Those were the two professions in which a Negro gentleman could engage with some dignity, waiter and bellman…But it was open all night, and had jazz sessions. And because Art was playing between shows every band and musician that came to Toledo came there, to jam and listen to him. And I was lucky because I was singing with him and I met all these people. I met Louis (Armstrong) when I was 14. And the whole Lunceford band came to my house to eat, ’cause my mother was the greatest cook in the world. Well, in those days they had shows, every club had a show, consisting of girls—you know a chorus line. There was a featured singer, usually a man—that was me. And there was a girl singer, and there was a comedian. And we all used to dance at the finale, and there was a very hip band. In those days the music was jazz, it was the only music there was. There wasn’t any line between jazz and pop and rock and all that stuff, there was just jazz music. (Lester 87)

Hendricks also mentions the importance of the Waiters and Bellman’s Club in his earlier years in Toledo. Not only did he perform at the club regularly but he met many of the important jazz artists of the day.
So that was it, I met Basie in Toledo when I was a boy. I was about sixteen. I met him in the Waiter’s and Bellman’s Club and I was singing there too. I toured at that club along time I started singing on the shows at 14. I knew everybody in show business by that time. If they were in show business I knew them and they all came there because it was the only joint in town there wasn’t any other places. There were other places but they closed at 12:30 1:00 o’clock, but the Waiters and Bellmen’s started at midnight, that’s when they started the afterhours club they would turn the lights off in the front and draw that curtain and then people would come in the side door and the place would be full. It was what they called Black and Tan in those days.

Lester Young used to say the place is full of grays. That’s what he called white people that came over to hang out with black people he called them grays. (Hendricks, Interview D: March 27, 2009)

Hendricks continued to perform around the Toledo area as a young man. A local bass player by the name of Clifford Murphy remembered seeing Jon Hendricks performing for the first time at a small club called the M&L club. (Murphy, Interview May 6, 2009) With such a rigorous work schedule Hendricks was forced to grow up very quickly. He had to adapt to the performer’s lifestyle where normal or “respectable” societal order was thrown out of the window. As a young boy Jon grew tired of rehearsing every day after school with Art Tatum. Seeing the other boys fraternizing with girls Jon had other things on his mind besides getting ready for the night’s performance at the Waiters and Bellman’s Club. Jon wanted to go out and socialize with the young girls from school. “I was in Robinson Junior High and we got out at 3:00pm. By 3:30 I would be at Art’s house practicing for that nights show.” (Cornelius) Growing up fast did have its advantages according to Jon. He remembers when he first started to perform at the
Waiters and Bellman’s club being put in the same dressing room as the dancing girls.

This exposed Jon to a woman’s form from a young age.

I was eleven when I started working with Art around town. I was playing at the Waiter’s and Bellman’s Club at fourteen. They would hide me downstairs. They had two rooms down there one for the musicians, and one for the dancing girls. They had four dancing girls and they said little „Jonny Hendricks he shouldn’t be in that room with those musicians, they smoke those cigarettes with no names on em. You know and they use all that profanity he should be in here with us.’ So that was an idea (laughs.) So here I am just getting into my awareness you know, and these girls they were built different from girls today… huge, they had breasts and they would come in and make these quick changes and take these bras off you know. And then they would say „Oh there’s little Jonny, Oh he is so cute.’ (Gestures to being hugged in breasts) and I would be (smashes face) like a man caught in a bus door… driver open the door. I am getting feelings I ain’t supposed to have. That was a terrible time for me and all these ladies went to my father’s church. They were sisters in my father’s church. But they would run in and rip off these bras and I was…. (Stares shockingly) man that was rough; I don’t know how I made it through that. (Hendricks, Interview Part A, March 20, 2009)

Jon’s hard work with Tatum paid off. It helped him to learn the business and the real life side of jazz performance as well as the music. After hearing Tatum night after night along with all of the musicians who came through the Waiters and Bellman’s club, Hendricks solidified his instrumental approach to improvisation. Jon’s harmonic vocabulary became so advanced at a young age that he was hired quite frequently. As a young teenager Jon’s grueling rehearsal schedule did not allow him much free time, but he continued to rehearse and perform out of love for music.

I would come home after school, eat an early supper, and go to bed. Then my mother would wake me up at 8 p.m. and I would get ready to go to work from 9 until about 1:30 in the morning. We did it because the family needed the money and I loved to sing. (Cornelius)
After Hendricks had established himself as a singer at the Waite’s and Bellman’s Club, Art Tatum spoke to the manager of the Rivoli Theater about Hendricks’ talents and soon Jon began working there. The Rivoli Theater in Toledo alternated between playing movies and showcasing live performances. The stage manager at the Rivoli Theater taught Jon important lessons about appearance and stage persona.

“The stage manager taught me to smile on stage, to be clean and neat. And if I wasn’t, he would slap me hard. I was just a kid, maybe out shooting marbles between shows. Then I would come in dust off my hands, and, paying no attention to how I looked, thinking I was ready to go on stage. If I didn’t clean up and fast, he made sure I felt it. I learned my lesson to this day, when they say „Ladies and Gentleman, Jon Hendricks,“ I am smiling and ready to go.” (Cornelius)

Because of his busy schedule, Jon did at times feel regret for not being able to do what all the other boys were doing at his age, mainly trying to find girlfriends. Jon made the sacrifice of having a normal adolescence in order to pursue his musical career. In looking back on his adolescence Hendricks expresses his regrets.

I was about 14 years old. I would have to come out of Junior High and go to Art Tatum’s house. And you know out of school you want to go around the girls to do what boys and girls do. They flirt with each other and all that stuff. That’s very sweet you know and it’s a part of growing up it’s actually getting you ready for marriage. Actually it’s a part of life that gets you ready for marriage because you pick your best girls at that time and a lot of guys pick their girls that they marry in high school and if not in High school then certainly in college. Because you just saw the girl that you wanted, you just fell in love. You just said oh that’s for me and you didn’t know why or anything but you found out because usually they felt the same way. Love is strange but it is mutual very seldom is it unrequited. If you have a strong feeling for some girl or you have a strong feeling for some boy chances are he has got that same feeling for you he just doesn’t know it yet. You will figure it out after two or three meetings because that’s the game that is played. Men think it’s them chasing women but actually it’s men chasing women „til the women catch them. Yeah, it’s
true the women are in charge from the beginning. They run because they are supposed to run. You see a boy coming and women run to see how far in your direction he is going to run otherwise you are not going to waste your time anymore. If he is always following you then chances are you say oh okay alright. I will go out with you that’s how it starts everybody is in love. Love makes the world; it’s a ritual. Love is a ritual everybody goes through it its very tender and very gentle it’s a great thing there is nothing like it. Poets can’t describe it. Cole Porter just asked a question and had a hit song. “What is this thing called love?” He didn’t try to answer it because it’s impossible. It’s too basic to life itself; life is love. (Hendricks, Interview Part A:, March 20, 2009)

Because of Jon’s upbringing he was able to understand the important aspects of life and to enjoy them as much as possible. His optimistic, youthful outlook on life has remained a central feature of his personality. Hendricks endless desire to keep working on music and to keep improving as an artist have kept him 88 years young. His tireless drive to make music began in his childhood and has continued throughout his life. His unending drive to create music came into fruition during the 1930’s at Scott High School. Jon wrote, produced and starred in Scotts-A-Poppin, the yearly musical revue at Scott High School. (Concord Music Group)

As he continued to work as a performer around Toledo and the surrounding areas, Jon’s recognition began to grow both locally and nationally. Throughout his adolescence Jon was often asked by many artists who passed through Toledo to become part of their groups. Willie Carrington Hendricks, Jon’s mother, met several of the musicians whom Jon worked with including Fats Waller. Seeing how Waller lived his life drinking heavily and touring from place to place, Willie decided that Jon was too young for a life on the road. She forbade Jon from going on tour until he was old enough and mature enough to make good decisions on his own.
I did the jam sessions you know all the bands that sat in at the Waiter’s and Bellman’s Club. I heard them all because I was working there. You know Bob Crosby and his Bobcats, he wanted me with the band; he wanted me on the road, but I was only fifteen. I asked my mother and she said no. Fats Waller’s father and my father went to theological seminary together at Wilberforce. Reverend Waller and Thomas senior went to the seminary together. So whenever Fats came through Toledo he had to stop and say hello to Reverend Hendricks. I would be hanging around my father because I did this texts from the Bible thing, so I was always around you know. Fats would come and we had a piano in the house but he would play only hymns and church songs you know. And he was drinking a fifth of gin a day, and what he did was, he got one of my little friends - he gave him fifty cents to hold the bottle out the side of the window. He would be talking to my father and he’d say “Just a minute Reverend.” And he would lean out the window and take a swig from the gin and then he would lean back in the window. And my father would go like this (pulls his head down closing his eyes.) Fats Waller was funny. That was a funny cat. (Hendricks, Interview B: March 20, 2009)

While Jon could not go on the road, he found other ways to promote himself outside of Toledo. When he was sixteen he began singing with a local radio vocal group called the “Swing Buddies.” The group was made up of four singers and a guitar player. They performed three evenings a week on a local Toledo radio station, WSPD. The group’s lead singer had quit in hopes of making it big in New York as a solo artist. The remaining members of the group were looking for a replacement and at the suggestion of Art Tatum they took Jon Hendricks on as the new vocalist. The group was on contract for three years and brought financial stability to Jon’s entire family. Jon earned $125 a week. Back then this sum was considered a small fortune. When Jon was sixteen years of age, his family moved to Greenup, Kentucky, when his father was assigned to a new church, because Jon had such a great job at the radio station, he stayed behind in Toledo with his older brothers and sisters to continue working. He also worked for a club owner in Toledo where he was required to write a new song every week. From this job Hendricks
became a songwriter as well as a vocalist. After his contract with the “Swing Buddies” expired and he finished high school, Jon moved to Detroit for two years where he sang with his brother-in-law in a group called the Jesse Jones band. Jesse played violin and trumpet while Jon sang. It was in Detroit where Hendricks would meet Dizzy Gillespie for the first time. Gillespie would later consider hiring Jon Hendricks as the lead singer in his band.

Even as a child Jon had an extraordinary life. Toledo was a thriving and vital location for jazz music in the Midwest. When asked who were some of the musicians who he came in contact with in Toledo, Jon replied, “Everybody just name them I met them. Everybody came here that’s why people who live in Toledo don’t even realize what a great center Toledo was for jazz.” (Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 27, 2009)

From growing up surrounded by music in the church and later in local clubs to his private lessons with Art Tatum, Jon Hendricks developed into a very gifted musician. His musical and literary talents set him apart from other adolescents. Hendricks’ childhood in Toledo, Ohio served as a spring board of development for one of the most prolific vocal jazz careers in history.

However before his musical career could develop Jon was severely tested in ways that challenged the core values his parents had taught him. Drafted into the military during World War II, Hendricks’ exposure to racism brought him the unwelcomed understanding of the unlimited capacity of human cruelty that can exist in the world. What had been somewhat in the background during his childhood became part of his
everyday life. Forced to confront racism and the atrocities of war, Hendricks’ musical career was brought almost to a standstill. Performing infrequently his focus on music waned, indeed it practically disappeared. Hendricks’ military experience led to one of the most challenging periods of his life.
Over 2.5 million Black American’s registered for the draft in World War II from 1941 to 1945. (McRae) During this time racial segregation of Black Americans in the United States military, forced Black Americans to fight on two fronts. They fought against the Axis powers overseas as well as against the racism within the United States military. On September 16th 1940 President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed The Selective Training and Service Act. (Roosevelt) This act was the first peacetime draft in US history with an anti-discriminatory clause that established a 10 percent quota system to enforce integration. Shortly after signing the act, it was swiftly undercut by Assistant Secretary of War Robert Patterson’s memo on segregation that reinforced segregation as a standard U.S. Army policy throughout World War II. Patterson argued that racial separation of military forces was not discriminatory. (Flynn)

Jon Hendricks recollects that his experiences in the military were anything but equal. Black soldiers were not trained for battle and many soldiers stayed in the United States because White commanders claimed that Allied forces objected to the presence of Black American soldiers. In reality mostly the White American commanders did not
want to interact with Black American soldiers. The U.S military during World War II was a cruel and inhospitable place for Black soldiers. Jon Hendricks recollects on the experience, “It was miserable. You were supposed to be fighting to teach Germany democracy, and this you were supposed to do under segregated conditions, which was actually a denial of your whole purpose. It was reprehensible to me. I still am angry at the whole miserable experience.” (Josephson)

Of course racism was not something new to Jon. He had grown up in Toledo, where even though there was not the formal segregation that existed in Southern states, Blacks were still expected to stay in designated areas. When musicians would come into town they could only stay in certain hotels or certain areas of town. Hendricks recalls a story that Dizzy Gillespie told him about racism that Louis Armstrong experienced in Alabama.

Nobody was as funny as Dizzy. He told me that joke about Louis boy, he swore to his death that that was true. Louis said that during the 30’s you know Negros couldn’t come in any White hotel, not even the lobby, you couldn’t walk in the lobby. At that time he had suites in all those hotels. All he had to do was go around in the alley and go up the freight elevator to his floor and into his suite. And he says he lived just like the White folks. Now the thing is he had to go up and down the freight elevator.

So they didn’t have the air conditioning in those days, so he would raise the windows and let the air in while he was at the concert. Well this time in Birmingham, there was a big oak tree right near the window. One of the limbs of the oak tree...like this is the window (gestures box figure) one of the limbs of the oak tree came right by the window. So Louie come home, turn on the light and he looks...over by the window. There were two windows you know. By this window in the easy chair there was a raccoon. He was sitting there and he looked at Louie with these black stripes you know. He’s lookin’ at Louie and Louie’s lookin’ at the coon. So Louie picked up the phone because he had a direct connection to the desk. The
guy says „Ya Satch?” and Louie said „There’s a coon in my room.’ And the man said, „I will be right up there to get that nigger out of there.” Louie said, „Naw I’m the nigger there’s a coon in my room.” (Hendricks, Interview D: March 27, 2009)

While Hendricks looks back on this situation with humor, racism was common throughout the entire United States. In the military conditions became even worse.

Jon Hendricks recollects his personal military experiences as follows. In 1942 Jon Hendricks along with his brothers Edward and Charles were drafted into the army and sent over to Europe. As any soldier, Jon completed basic training being assigned first to Camp Shelby in Missouri and then to Camp Rucker in Alabama. At only twenty two years of age he landed in Scotland and was then stationed at an air base in Kettering, England. During his time in Kettering Jon was assigned the task of loading bombs onto US Air Force planes that were being sent to France and Germany. From his earliest days in Europe, Jon Hendricks and other Black soldiers were forced to work in racist, hostile conditions. Upon arriving in England, Hendricks and the other Black soldiers were sequestered for three days without explanation. Once released Hendricks learned that while under confinement the White American troops spread rumors among the English townspeople that Black American soldiers had venereal diseases and were unfit to socialize with. Hendricks realizing the seriousness of these horrific remarks convinced the other Black soldiers to round up their sugar rations to give to local children in order to clear their reputation with the local population. After two weeks Jon and the other Black soldiers plan succeeded they became very popular with the locals in Kettering. Hendricks’ relationship with the townspeople of Kettering came to an end in the summer
of 1944 when he was given notice that he would be shipped out to France. D-day had just occurred and all hands were needed. The threat of death had now become a reality. (Hopquin)

On June 18, 1944 Hendricks and his company landed in Normandy on Utah beach to shots being fired from Nazi soldiers. Having been through basic training Jon understood what he must do in order to survive.

Coming off of the landing craft I knew I was going to die. I just knew I was going to die. I said goodbye because two guys to the right of me and one guy to the left of me boom. (just got shot?) Ya. What I did was I took off my pack, most guys had their pack and their rifle, I took off my pack and carried it and got on my knees in the water so I was less visible to the shore and then I didn’t stand up until I got to the shore. When I got to shore I ran as far inland as I could because guys were dropping all around me.

Well you know the landing ships dropped us and went back for more. They had to go all the way across the English Channel. That took about forty five minutes. What they did was try and keep every company together, so we went looking for some of our men that we thought had been killed and we found them because they were looking for us. So we didn’t lose anybody, that’s strange. (Hendricks, Interview B: March 20, 2009)

Hendricks and his company had been lucky. Landing twelve days after the D day invasion had started, they faced a weakened German army, and the chances of American soldiers’ survival had greatly increased. The Germans refusing to surrender continued to fight even as their numbers dwindled. The rough terrain in Normandy with its steep cliffs allowed the remaining Germans to continue fighting.
Well most of the shore was pretty safe. On the hill where the Germans had their turrets - that was doing the damage. There were no more shooting soldiers from Germany up there just those who manned those look out points and bunkers and they were doing all the firing. The 88’s had packed up and retreated but see the Germans were ridiculous those guys in those bunkers, they had to blow them out, they wouldn’t surrender. They were defeated because the whole thing was getting milder and milder every day, we landed D plus twelve. At D plus 20 it was over. So I think all those Germans were nuts. (Hendricks, Interview B: March 20, 2009)

While Hendricks had hostile feelings regarding the German soldiers, once he arrived in France he developed a deep fondness for the French. Taken aback by the hospitality that the French civilians showed him, Hendricks for the first time in his life was treated as an equal by White Frenchmen. They invited Hendricks into their homes, offering him food and wine, and even introducing him to young French women. The French civility that Jon experienced was in stark contrast to the behavior of many of the White American military. The American military command believed that Black soldiers were physically, mentally, and emotionally inferior to White soldiers and were therefore unfit for combat. Jon’s skin color confined him to physical labor and physical engineering. Due to Hendricks’ exceptional intelligence and gift of words he was promoted to the position of battalion clerk. The tasks of his new position included keeping track of food and fuel rations, as well as frequent communication with other infantry divisions in France and Belgium.

I was a battalion clerk so that means I had all of the records of all the different companies, because it takes several companies to make a battalion. So I ran everything. You know the clerks run the army. The generals depend on their clerks. Our highest officer was a major and he depended on me for everything because I knew where every record was, I knew where every form was, three day pass, one day pass, two week pass,
special pass, travel pass, requisitions for drugs, guns and ammunition all of that. I had that right under my fingertips and Articles of War as they came in. I had to read them and memorize them and then file them. So I knew the Articles of War very well. (Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 26, 2009)

With Hendricks’ position and training he developed an understanding of the inter-workings of military procedures and military laws, which later became a tremendous asset to his military experience. Even as a higher ranked soldier Hendricks still experienced racism. In the beginning of 1945, Jon and his battalion were relocated to Epernay, the capital of the Champagne country in France. He soon befriended a few local women and often spent his free time with them and some of the other Black soldiers. This infuriated the White American military police (MPs). Enraged by witnessing Black soldiers interacting with the local women, the MPs arrived at Hendricks’ station and began firing guns at him and the other Black soldiers. Out of fear for their lives, Hendricks and five other Black soldiers decided to desert the military and go into hiding.

So when we went to the Champagne country and we had Italian prisoners working in the vineyards. They spoke French because French and Italian are Latin languages and they’re very close. They turned us on to the available girls in this little town Epernay. If you buy any champagne and you read the label you’ll see either on the label or on the bottle shipped from Epernay, that’s the place where they ship Champagne and they did the business in Reims. Reims has this beautiful cathedral that’s out of sight. In this little café in Reims these Italian prisoners knew the girls and so they introduced us and then these American MP’s came in and there were no girls for them and we had girls. So they got really angry ‘What are you doing with these niggers? Can’t you do better than that?’ Talking all that stuff and on and on…oh we were used to that it didn’t bother us. So they decided that I wasn’t going to allow the men to retaliate when they broke our glasses and poured wine on our heads. I said ‘don’t retaliate.’
This was way before Reverend King. My father was a preacher and he knew the Sermon on the Mount and I said, „If we retaliate we’re gonna suffer not them. Just be calm and take whatever they got to give you” and we did.

So the next morning they came shooting at us, and these were American military police. They came shooting and we could hear the bullets popping, because we were in an abandoned rifle range that was made of concrete, so you could hear the ping. So I said, „what the hell?” I checked what was going on and I got back in the office right away because they were shooting right into our concrete camp. So I go to the captain and I said, „Captain we need guns.” He says, „What for?” I said, „We are being fired on.” He said, „I know that, I’m calling the other MP’s.” I said, „By the time they get here, they’re at least an hour and a half away from here, by the time they get here we could all be dead.” I said, „We need guns.” He said, „Well I’m not giving you any guns.” I said, „Captain may I remind you that the Article of War so and so and so and so… every American soldier has the right if fired upon to fire back. That’s a part of the Articles of War captain and you’re in breach of those unless you give us a gun.” He said, „I don’t need you to tell me a damn thing Hendricks….I am not giving you the guns to shoot at American soldiers.” I said, „What are we?” He said, „I don’t care what you are but I’m not giving you any guns.” I said, „Yes sir,” saluted and these four guys were out there outside. I told them to go pack their bags and be back here in fifteen minutes. And so I took all of my requisitions papers I would need to run an office; all of the forms to requisition gas, food everything you know, everything I would need and I only took a few copies so I wouldn’t have to carry a lot, because I could get them printed at any printing place. I requisitioned two semi trucks that’s the biggest army truck of all. It’s as big as this room almost, about half of this room and just about three quarters the length. Huge trucks you can get a lot of gas piled up with those cans three or four high you know a lot of gas in them, a lot of food and I requisitioned one of those and one command car that’s a little bigger than a jeep; that carries five people and guns and ammunition for us, cow beans, bullets and two forty five automatic pistols with ammunition and we left.

So we went to Besancon and began selling army supplies on the black market. We went there and we set up our thing there and started operations and made a lot of money. I had over a million dollars when I got caught. (Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 26, 2009)
Jon tells the story of how he and the other men commandeered a hotel and hid out. They would sell army gasoline and food to the highest bidders on the black market in order to survive. They were able to stay absent without leave (AWOL) for almost a year staying as far away as possible from American troops and disguising themselves if need be.

We stayed AWOL successfully because we didn’t hang out with soldiers, that was not our stick. We were soldiers ourselves but we weren’t going to hang out with any of the soldiers, that way we don’t catch the eye of anybody. There were five of us. Sometimes we needed to dress in civilian clothing to affect a sale, like some of the guys that we delivered gas to. We had these clients that sent us to other places and they wouldn’t want to see soldiers in uniform, so then we had to put on clothes to make that delivery. They didn’t want to feel that they were going to get busted by the US army which of course they were going to get busted by the US army, but they didn’t want to be reminded of it. So we wore civilian clothes. These were very rich people because who could afford to buy a truck load of gas. That’s at least 35, 40 thousand dollars that’s a lot of money. People had money, the devalued French franc was still being spent in France although it was devalued 50 percent it was still potent. (Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 26, 2009)

As their business became very successful their paper trail back to army headquarters grew larger and larger and they were eventually caught. When Jon was captured he states that he had over a million dollars. He recollects his capture as following.

We didn’t think about it, but all of these requisitions ended up in Paris headquarters, SHAEF supreme headquarters of allied expeditionary forces, S-H-A-E-F, it was called. So somebody said, „what is this 548 headquarters quarter master company Besancon? They said, „they’ve requisitioned an awful lot of food an awful lot of gas for a small company.‘ You know it was only 19 men at the headquarters battalion but we were really only 6 but I put down headquarters battalion because that’s a category they recognize. I couldn’t say 6 men they would know that’s not headquarters. So then they started to look through all these requisitions, all this gas and food and everything you know.
So one morning I woke. I dreamed I was coming back into New York through the Lincoln tunnel, and I could see through the tunnel it was very black, it seemed like the tunnel wasn’t getting lighter. Because this tunnel I was looking through was a 45 automatic pointed right at my forehead. So I woke up and I looked down the barrel of this gun and this voice said, „With your left hand take the covers back and get up slowly or you’re going to get killed now.’ So I slowly got out of the bed and he brought the other guys from their rooms into my room because they knew I was the boss they saw all of the papers and they lined us up. So this CID (Criminal Investigation Department) guy says, „You sons a bitches you been making a lot of money on United States army goods you know you’re gonna hang don’t you?’ I said, „No, what are we gonna hang for? I didn’t kill anybody.’ He says, „Desertion in the face of the enemy.’ I said, „What enemy? You mean the White military police firing on us? Yeah we deserted in the face of that enemy. But I think when we tell the court I don’t think we’ll get hanged.’ He says, „Never mind just get dressed.’ And we were all in line and he says, „You sons a bitches,’ and he is going down the line looking at each face. He comes to this guy, big Dave Tinsely, big black guy and he says, „Selling patens of gas you son of a bitch. Big T says, „Shit I’ll sell Patens if you put wheels on it so I can roll it up to a Frenchman’s house.’ The guy goes bam right in the teeth and bloods spurting and I’m standing next to DT (Dave Tinsley.) So when the guy comes to me I say, „Guilty’ and he walked passed me to the next guy.

So we went to the stockade in the Reims headquarters for the Champagne territory. They put us in a building across from the cathedral and it was six floors up and so there were no bars on the windows. So they sent us this defense counselor from Kentucky he says, „Well you boys know what you did’ and I said, „Let me tell you something they’re aint no boys in here.’ I said, „We’re soldiers in the United States army you know what that is? You should, you look like one yourself.’ He said, „You don’t speak to me like that.’ I said, „You’re talking to an officer in the United States Army.’ I said, „You are here to save our lives not to harass us. So if you’re going to do your job get to it if you’re not get going.’ So his face got blood red. He says, „You know you deserted in the face of the enemy and so this is a capital offense.’ I said, „We did not desert in the face of an enemy, we deserted in the face of racist White soldiers who liked to kill Niggers. So it looks like you are not the defense counsel that we need.’ He said ‚I’m the one you got.’ I said, „Did you ever read my record?’ He says, ‘no.’ I said, „you should read my record. I was battalion clerk and my duties were to know everything that went on in the battalion.’ I said, „So what you’re talking about has nothing to do with the truth. The truth is White American soldiers… came out shootin at us, that’s the truth and we ain’t deserted in the face of no enemy. So you don’t sound like the kind of defense counsel we want. So you’re fired.’ He said, „you can’t fire me.’ I
said, „Under the Articles of War number (one so and gave him the number) I said, „If you are involved in a capital case, and this is a capital case, and you are dissatisfied with the defense counsel, you have the right to dismiss them. Now you are dismissed.’ These five guys were there and he says „I’m not leaving here you have no authority to dismiss me.’ So I said to Dave Tinsley, „So Dave what do you think we ought to do to this cat? He said, „Throw the mother fucker out the window.’ That guy packed up his briefcase and was out of there (as fast as he could get out.) He was gone. They called me professor and they said, „Well professor what’s going to happen now?’ I said, „Well it’s a capital case we have to have defense so it’s just a matter of time. I don’t know if it will be this week or next week or a month or two months, I don’t know when they are going to do it but they are going to send us another counsel.’

So two or three weeks went by and this little short guy five foot six from the Bronx who was Jewish shows up. I had told the first captain we had mitigating circumstances. He said, „What do you know about mitigating?’ I said, „Mitigating m-i-t-i-g-a-t-i-n-g mitigating’ and I’m looking at him dead in the eye and his face turned bright red. Son of a bitch I was ready to kill his ass. So you know I told the new guy of these mitigating circumstances and he said, „Oh no you are not going to hang if I can help it, this is not a hanging offence.’ So I said, „Whew.’ So we all served time in the stockade.

We all did time I did eleven months. It was a US army stockade in a time of war. Only time off was when someone got hanged or shot then you got a day off. You’re completely off the day someone is executed but otherwise you drill the whole day on the quad and you dug ditches you did everything all kinds of stuff. Sometimes it was your job to help the farmers in the area that was good work because you got some food. They fed us in prison but it was terribly cooked there was no taste. In the morning the oatmeal was lumpy and the boiled eggs were hard boiled it was really bad so I did eleven months of that. Then I got out and reinstated into the army and I got all my back pay. Two of the guys went to Fort Leavenworth a little guy named Cannonball and another named big Dave Tinsley because they were criminals they were real crooks and they had records.

I got reinstated into the army and I went to the third replacement in Bremerhaven Germany. Bremerhaven is the seaport of Bremen every big city that has ocean traffic has a seaport. So they were looking at my records and they found out I was a clerk type and I was the head of a battalion. So they knew what I could do. So we had a psychiatric examination and it was this psychiatrist named Doctor Jacobs, and he was from Vienna. He had studied under the master Doctor Sigmund Freud. He
talked like zis and he vas a very great man. „You are Jon Hendricks ya?” I said „Ya that’s my name.’ He said, „You have very interesting record here, you are a typist and you are a clerk. You speak the French language and some German.’ He said, „About average I would think.’ I said, „Yes.’ So he said, „Would you like to be my clerk?’ Being his clerk got me away from my duties and I had my own room and I didn’t have to be in a big room with all the soldiers. So I became the replacement clerk. (Hendricks, Interview C: March 20, 2009)

After working with Doctor Jacobs in Bremerhaven for several months Hendricks finally felt secure and was able to relax. As he shifted out of survival mode all of the atrocities that he had both witnessed and experienced throughout the War overwhelmed him. He woke up one morning and was unable to speak.

After being in the third replacement and getting that cushy job with doctor Jacobs the relaxation from all of that brought all these other memories to me. Because I hadn’t really looked back at what I had done, gone through you know, and I hadn’t suffered through any of it because I didn’t pay much attention. As long as I’m alive that’s all I care about. I don’t want to get involved in anything and all the sudden become useless which is what happened. I was having a good time with Doctor Jacobs, he and I were talking late into the night about life. I told him the story of my grandmother and my grandfather and how they met. He was intrigued by that and then he was intrigued by my IQ you know my intelligence quotient. He asked me about that. He said, „Where did you attain all this wisdom?” I said, „Well my father being a preacher and me being a star English student. He needed someone to pick texts for him from the King James Bible so he picked me because I got all A’s in English.’

So Doctor Jacobs and I were talking about that so I think disclosing a lot of autobiographical stuff to him brought back what had happened to me and for the first time I formed a judgment about it, because before that I hadn’t stopped because I knew it might tear me apart, so I kept going moving through life without really stopping and saying what do you think about this and then that? So I woke up one morning and I could see and I could hear but I was mute. I couldn’t talk and so I motioned the soldiers and I wrote what I wanted to tell them, „I’ve lost my power of speech, not my voice but my power of speech.” So they sent me to the infirmary and that wasn’t going to do me any good because they didn’t know what the
hell was going on. So they said, „He works for Doctor Jacobs doesn’t he?’ And I’m listening to these guys and they say „You should send him to Doctor Jacobs.’ So they said, „Well first we better put him in the hospital.’ So they put me in the hospital and I sent for Doctor Jacobs. He brought a yellow legal pad and he said, „When I talk with you, you write to me the answer to this question.’ I would write „Okay.’ So he asked me how I felt physically, was there any part of my body that was feeling bad. I wrote „No,’ and he says, „Alright.’ So he excuses himself and got up and went out. When he came back he had this gallon jug. He had a rubber hose and at the end of this hose he put a hypodermic needle he put the needle in my arm and took my blood and the blood was running out through the tube into this gallon jug. This is my blood it went around the bottom and then it filled over the bottom and it started to fill up. So I said, „Hey this is my blood. HOLD IT!’ And he said, „Ah.’ He came up to my bed side and said, „Now tell me.’ I said, „Well I guess what has been happening to me, I faced it and I couldn’t talk.’ He says, „Good, well you are all right physically you can come back to work tomorrow and you will be fine.’ So the next day I was back to work and I liked Doctor Jacobs he was a funny cat he had a good sense of humor. (Hendricks, Interview C: March 20, 2009)

Doctor Jacobs had managed to give Hendricks back his voice and throughout the following months would work with him very closely to help him come to terms with the atrocities he faced throughout the War. Again Hendricks was shown kindness from a White European doctor. Hendricks began to realize that Black Americans were treated with more respect in Europe, and Hendricks had no desire to return to the United States.

„I wanted to stay. I was engaged to marry a German girl and when they (US military personnel) found that out they broke that up, and put me on a ship with chains on. I was chained like this (holds up fists). And I had to get on the ship and sail three days before they took the chains off. So then I knew. So I said to myself that I would look out over the rail at the water and I made a vow to myself. I said when I get back to that rotten country I am going to live within its laws and do anything that is legal… I have always lived at the top of the heap. I wasn’t going to live in the ghetto or in the slums and nobody was going to degrade me.” (Hendricks, Interview C: March 20, 2009)
What kept Hendricks’ spirit alive at this time was music. On the trip back on the ship a familiar style of jazz he associated with Art Tatum was playing over the ship’s radio. Hendricks heard for the first time the musical language of Art Tatum being translated onto horns. In the Burns Jazz series Hendricks describes his return to music in this encounter with the new development in jazz that became known as bebop.

Well, I can tell you what it was like to me to hear it for the first time. I was on a troop ship coming home from Bremerhaven Germany to New York harbor in 1946. November of 1946 and I had won three hundred dollars or so shooting dice on the boat. So I was loaded with money and I suddenly heard this song over the ship’s radio, you know. And it was frenetic and exciting and fast and furious and brilliant and beautiful and I almost bumped my head jumping off my bunk ’cause it was everything that I heard inside my head and everything that I had heard when I was with Art Tatum. So I jumped up, ran up to the control room and said to the guy, „What was that?” He said, „What?” I said, „That last song you just played, the one you just played.” He said, „I don’t know.” I said, „Where is it?” He said, „It’s down there on the floor.” I looked down there on the floor, the floor’s covered in records. I said, „Come on. What color was the label?” He said, „It’s a red label.” So I begin to sort out and I would come across red labels and I would ask him, „Was it this one?” And he said, „No.” Finally I found it. It was a Music Craft label and it was called “Salt Peanuts.” And it was Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. And I gave him thirty dollars and I said, „Play this for the next hour.” And he did. Drove all the other men crazy. But I was in heaven. I couldn’t believe that the ideas that I could hear in my head from what I’d learned from Art Tatum were being played by other people. I was amazed. And the first thing I did when I got off the boat after we went through the, what is it, the processing that you go through getting out of the army. It was to go into New York and say, „Where are Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie?” And somebody told me they’re on the West coast. I said, „Agh.” So I went to the record store and bought up all the records of theirs that I, that I could find and listened to them and for the next two months I was just in heaven. It was heavenly music. (Burns)
Bebop became Hendricks’ reconnection with his country and with the people he respected the most, jazz musicians. After experiencing so much racism in the army, jazz reinvigorated his soul, became his hope for humanity, and gave him a strong will to pursue his dreams. While his experiences in the military were traumatizing he learned a great deal about how the United States army operated and he initially wanted to go to law school in order to join the civil rights struggle in the United States. As a battalion clerk the law had sparked his interest. By being in France, Hendricks witnessed the possibility that Blacks and Whites could get along as equals and he decided to fight for that freedom in his own country. France would forever remain in his heart as the first place where he was shown respect by Whites.

On June 6, 2004, France honored Jon Hendricks with its highest decoration of the “Legion d’honneur” for his service in the military during World War II, as well as his extensive contribution to the vocal jazz idiom. Hendricks was given the award in Herouville-Saint-Clair by the governor of Normandy. (Scott Global Music Group) This award reinforced Hendricks’ love for France because it not only reinforced the respect he felt for France, but it also honored Hendricks’ performance career on an international level.

Hendricks experienced two brutal wars during 1942 until 1946. In those four years he learned about the horrors of war on the Normandy beaches and about the horrors of racism. He encountered equality for the first time from White Europeans. Realizing that life did not have to be so unjust for Blacks in the United States, he developed an
interest in law in order to help fight against racism. By returning home and studying at the University of Toledo he hoped to join the cause of the NAACP in the United States. The end of the War signified a new beginning in Hendricks’ life, as it did for the lives of millions of other Americans. Hendricks learned the importance of education through his adaptive means of survival in the military. Music reinvigorated his hope and enthusiasm when returning to the United States. As jazz developed into bebop, it had elements of the music he had learned from Art Tatum. Bebop would become the defining musical style of his career. His gift for rhythmic and melodic complexity learned from his work with Art Tatum would transform Hendricks into one of the best scat singers and vocalese artists of his generation. As Tim Hauser has said of Jon Hendricks, “He was way above anybody else that was doing what he was doing.” (Hauser) Jon’s experiences throughout his life lead him to become an international star.
Chapter 4

Jon’s College Years (1946-1951) and Moving to the Big Apple

After being forced back to the United States in 1946 Jon Hendricks decided to live within the law and to strive for greater things. He moved to Rochester New York where two of his brothers were located.

Jon's brother Stewart was part of the management of The Pythodd Club. It was a private club -- actually an old large house -- that was owned by the (black) Knights of Pythias and the Oddfellows Club; thus the name. His brothers Clifford and Jimmy were involved with the place as well at various times and in various jobs there. (Mangione)

With his family connections in Rochester Jon aspired to study law and medicine at the University of Rochester. With his funds from the G.I. Bill, Hendricks’ initial aspirations were to study medicine at the University of Rochester however the school informed him that they had filled their student quota.

When I first applied for school there I was going to be a doctor not a lawyer, but they said they had met their quota. I didn’t know what that meant but I found out that only so many Black people could apply to the medical school per year. Oh we have come a long way in this country. So then I came to UT and applied in the law school. I got 18 months to get my law degree and I wanted it to. The law school says they will put me through classes and give me my degree. (Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 26, 2009)
Since his scholastic plans did not work out he began to perform around the Rochester area with some local musicians. Hendricks began performing with a jazz group he created called “Jon Hendricks and his Beboppers.” The sextet was made up of local Rochester musicians. The drummer, according to Hendricks, did not know how to swing properly so Hendricks began playing drums to demonstrate swing feel to the drummer. The other musicians were so impressed with Hendricks’ demonstration that they suggested that Jon himself play drums. From that point on he performed around Rochester as the singing drummer.

“As After World War II when I settled in Rochester for a while (two years), I wanted to organize a bebop band. I found an alto player, a young trumpet player that played like Dizzy and Bird in that style. And I found a good, young bassist who was influenced by Curly Russell, but the drummer wasn’t making it. So one day at rehearsal I said, ‘No man, it goes like this,’ and I sat down and I played. So all the other guys said, ‘Man you should play. Why don’t you just play?’ So I started playing. I never had any lessons or anything like that. I had it in my ear, so I just played what I had in my ear what the drums should do.” (UT Times)

As he performed more frequently in and around Rochester, Hendricks missed a unique opportunity to work with Dizzy Gillespie’s new band. Gillespie had originally played with Hendricks as a young man in Detroit. Impressed by Hendricks’ instrumental approach to vocal improvisation, Gillespie came looking for Hendricks to be the lead singer of his bebop band. Unfortunately Gillespie came looking for Hendricks in Toledo, not knowing Hendricks had moved to Rochester. Gillespie unable to find Hendricks hired Joe Carroll instead.

I was singing with Dizzy’s big band when they were playing in Detroit. And when they would play he would call me up to sing… Then he told me, ‘I am getting this big band and I want you to be the singer.’ And I said, ‘well okay.’ But in the mean time I found out I could go to school on
the GI bill and I moved to Rochester without telling Diz and he came to
get me here in Toledo but I wasn’t here so he hired Joe Carroll.
(Hendricks, Interview A: March 27, 2009)

After spending two years in Rochester, in 1949 Hendricks decided to return to
his hometown of Toledo, Ohio to study pre-law at the University of Toledo. He started
writing poems for the student newspaper and he received the first A in creative writing in
several years.

“I moved back home and enrolled at the University of Toledo on the G.I.
Bill. I majored in English and minored in history and was studying pre-
law. I got all A’s in English including the only A awarded in creative
writing in seven years. My English professor was Milton Marks, who had
written a book on creative writing used in all the universities. (JazzWax,
Interview, Part 1)

Along with his gift for words Hendricks also became the first Black American
president of a student run organization. Hendricks headed the United World Federalists
on campus.

When I was a student at the University I formed an organization called the
United World Federalists which was interesting because it means that the
countries of the world should federate and be the United States of the
World and whenever a fight broke out between two countries it would
immediately be arbitrated and there would be no killing. It would be the
United States of the World and so we formed that and they elected me
president and I was the first African American to be elected president of
an on campus organization and I did it for two years. So I have always
done what I wanted to do and anybody that got in my way that was too
bad for them because I was always within the right and within the law. I
was always straight. (Hendricks, Interview A: March 20, 2009)

Even though he was known as a performer, a veteran, and an outstanding student
at the University of Toledo, Hendricks continued to experience racism throughout
Toledo. Once he was arrested for simply walking a young white female member of the United World Federalists to a taxi cab. Hendricks was able to evade formal charges because of his understandings of the law as well as his eloquent demand of the English language. Hendricks could talk his way out of a paper bag.

One time I walked into the secretary’s office. She was a blonde haired blue eyed German girl. After meeting at my house with the United Word Federalists, she and I walked to get a cab and a squad car picked us up. And they put me in the back seat and they put her in the front seat. They put me in one room and her in another. I didn’t know what was going to happen with her but I went before the captain of detectives and he said, „Before we are through with you, you are going to admit that you were going to try and rape that girl.” I said, „Captain that is so stupid and that is so wrong I don’t know what to tell you.” He said, „You don’t call me stupid.” He said, „I’ll knock your teeth out.” I said, „Captain before you strike that blow let me tell you something, my father is the pastor of Warren AME church, the biggest African American denomination in the world and the biggest African American church in Toledo. I am an artist. I am also a pre-law student at the University of Toledo with a 3.5 average. I got the only A in creative writing in seven years. I got the only A in speech in three years.” I said, „You may hit me but you ain’t going to be hitting no ordinary idiot because that blow will be heard around the world.” He couldn’t believe it. He said, „Who the hell do you think you are?” I said, „You got my name and you got my father’s name too, Reverend Alexander Brookes Hendricks pastor of Warren AME church.” So he called the guy and said, „Get him out of here.” He didn’t touch me, (laughs) Son of a bitch, (laughs) but I was always like that. (Hendricks, Interview A: March 20, 2009)

With his gift for words Jon became well known at the University of Toledo. In addition to the world he began to establish for himself at the University, he also continued to perform at local music clubs. Hendricks became well known among respected jazz musicians. At one of his many performances, at the Gay Nineties
club in Toledo, he encountered a beautiful Irish singer named Colleen Moore. Hendricks and Colleen Moore soon fell in love and started a family. Hendricks and Colleen Moore had four children. Colleen was well liked by Hendricks’ family.

I met her in the Gay Nineties nightclub. She was a singer, she was good too. She was cute as a button. She was very cute as only the Irish can be… She was an Irish girl. I say Shanty Irish you know. She and her brothers were a funny bunch. I always had an affinity for the Irish… So her brother and I got along well and then I met her. She was a singer so I let her sing and she sang good. So I let her sing whenever she came in the club and then the next thing I know we were married. Her mother lived in Texas she came up and lived with us for a while in New York. Her name was Colleen Moore. There is a movie star named Colleen Moore they named her after her. (Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 27, 2009)

Bonnie Hopkins, Jon’s niece who grew up in the same household with Jon Hendricks, became close friends with his wife Colleen. Everyone referred to Colleen as Connie. Bonnie who still lives in Toledo remembers Connie very well.

We were close friends. Connie could sing she used to sing with Jon in the clubs a lot. She could sing and she was a great mother for her children until they left. She was Irish, and tall, nice looking and a wonderful voice. She was a good mother till she left Toledo. They split up in New York. I don’t know why she came back to Toledo. She had her mother here at the time but her mother was from Texas. She moved to Texas years ago. Connie had another sister and right now they are somewhere in Texas. (Hopkins, Interview Dec. 17, 2009)

As two singers Jon and Connie’s lives revolved around music. They were constantly performing and listening to live music around Toledo. One night in 1950 Jon had heard that Charlie Parker would be playing at the Civic Auditorium in Toledo. Having bought many of Parker’s albums after the War, Hendricks was thrilled with the
opportunity to hear Parker perform live. The night would forever change Jon’s life.

Parker was one of the most talented bebop musicians and Hendricks had an immense respect for his playing. Connie knowing Jon’s love for Parker’s music went up to Parker and asked if her husband could sit in with the band during the jam session. Jon had been too nervous to ask to sit in with one of his idols.

After I got married and my son was born, Bird came through on a one nighter to the Civic Auditorium. I didn’t have the nerve to ask him to sit in, so my wife went up and asked him. She said, ‘My husband is a great bebop singer and a big fan of yours. He would like to sit in.’ Bird says, ‘Bebop singer?’ and she says, ‘Yeah.’ He said, ‘Heck yeah. Tell him to come on up.’ So I came up, I was expecting to see Miles you know and Bud Powell instead it was Al Haig. Al Haig could play. Max was on drums, Tommy Potter was on bass and the trumpet player was Kenny Durham. So I scatted after Bird when he got through he says (gestures to go ahead.) So I went up and started scatting. I must have done about thirty choruses. Well its fear you know, you are afraid to quit because you might latch on to something. You know there is something out there that you are looking for all the time. When I got through I started off the stage because I figured well I guess they are through with me. Then Bird reached out and grabbed my coat tails. So there I am tugging and I look back and he says, (motions hand to come closer.) So I turned around and come back and he patted Kenny Durham’s chair and he taps the seat to sit down. So I sat down and had this fast conversation because Kenny was playing and Max was (mimics playing drum set and then mimics playing bass) you know Tommy Potter. Al was thumpin and Bird says, ‘What are you doing in this town?’ I said, ‘I am in school this is my home town.’ He says, ‘Oh what are you studying?’ I said, ‘I’m studying law’ He said, ‘You ain’t no lawyer.’ I said, ‘What am I then?’ He says, ‘You a bebop singer just like your wife said.’ I said, ‘What do I do about that?’ He said, ‘Well you got to come to New York.’ I said, ‘I don’t know anybody in New York.’ He said, ‘You know me.’ I said, ‘Where will I find you?’ You know I am thinking ten million people, a million a day pass through, where will I find you? He said, ‘Just ask anybody.’ (laughs) So I said to myself this mother fucker is crazy. So I said, ‘Well if I get there I will get in touch with you.’ I didn’t even think of seeing him anymore. Then we ran into some difficulty here so we figured we better move. I am married to an Irish girl. Well the town don’t like it but there is nothing they can do about it and I don’t give a damn about that. I never did. I never cared about people who would look at life through eyes that judge like that. I think that’s the depth of human ignorance because you are denying God that way. We are all
children of God so you are going to say God made a mistake? So you
don’t like this dark skinned person because… what are you talking about?
So when I am around racists I feel like I should say, „It’s okay, It’s okay.’
(Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 27, 2009)

Racism finally became too much for Jon and his new wife. In 1950 they had their
first child Jon Jr. which did not help the situation. Being a Black man married to a White
Irish girl during the late 1940’s in Ohio was rare to say the least. Their marriage could be
trying at times with people staring at the couple in disbelief. One night Hendricks was
arrested simply for being married to a White woman. With no cause for his imprisonment
or no sign of being released at any point Jon had to resort to having a note smuggled out
of jail by a newly released prisoner.

I was able to write a note to her and sneak it out hidden in the sole of the
shoe of a prisoner who was being released,’ said Hendricks. „In the note, I
asked her to write to the jail and tell them she was divorcing me. It must
have worked because they let me out.’ (Hendricks, Interview Part A:
March 27, 2009)

Even after being released from prison and having an excellent standing at the
University of Toledo people could just not accept an interracial couple. Because of
Hendricks’ academic standing at the University he was to be appointed as the Juvenile
State Probation Officer, however they discreetly refused him the position because of his
marriage.

Because of my high academic average, I was going to be appointed
Juvenile State Probation Officer. That would have given me the privilege
of socializing with police court and juvenile court judges. They didn’t
want that because my wife and I were an interracial couple. But they
couldn’t just dismiss me. I had earned the grades I got and the position I
was to receive. So they got the guy with next highest grades, a black guy.
They told him that if he didn’t convince me to move out of town, they were going to fire him.

The guy came over to my house and laid out the situation for me. He said he had a wife and two kids and that they told him to come over to my house and threaten me or he’d lose his job. The guy said to me, „I’m not going to do that. I’m just going to leave it in your hands if you prevail and stay on your job they’re going to fire me. I have two kids. But I’m just going to leave it with you.‘ So I decided to leave, didn’t make much sense staying after that. (JazzWax, Interview, Part 1)

With little prospect in Toledo Jon, his wife Connie, and their son Jon Jr. left Toledo. They initially were going to move to Canada where they thought they might be more accepted as an interracial married couple. When they reached the Canadian border they found out that they had to have $1000 to move into Canada. The money was a way for the government to prove that new immigrants would be self sufficient and not have to go onto social welfare. Not having enough money and nowhere else to turn, Jon remembered his encounter with Charlie Parker two years prior and decided to move to New York to try and get a job as a singer.

“I had packed up my family and my set of drums and we had planned to move to Canada. Racism didn’t seem to exist up there. I had $350 in my pocket. When I got to the border, the immigration officer told me I needed to have $1,000 in cash to show that I wouldn’t be applying for welfare in the Canadian system. I only had part of the money on me, and although I told him I could go back and raise the other part, he told me no, I had to have it all then or forget it. That was at Buffalo, so we drove on to Rochester where although it had been more than two years earlier, I remembered what Bird had told me about coming to New York.

We decided to drive on the New York City, but the carburetor fell out of the car. I was twenty four. I said, „Look the car is no good. The transmission has dropped out on the highway so let’s abandon the car and
have the highway people pull it over.’ And they did, they came and they said, ‘What’s the trouble?’ I said, ‘Well my car just broke up and I can’t move it by myself.’ So they said, ‘Okay well don’t worry, we will take care of it.’ And we caught a lift into Buffalo we were only about fifteen miles out of Buffalo and we went to the Greyhound station and got on the bus and went to New York. I got off the bus and I put Connie and the baby at the counter of the restaurant and I went to the phone and I called Joe Carroll. I said, ‘I’m here.’ Joe Carroll took my job with Dizzy Gillespie. I was supposed to be Dizzy’s first vocalist in his big band…So I got Joe on the phone and I told him I am at the Greyhound with my wife and child and my luggage and my set of drums. He said, ‘Well if you need a place to stay there is great hotel on 110th street the Claremont hotel across from Columbia University very neat, very clean, only $18.50 a week and all musicians stay there.’ Then I thought okay I’ll do what Bird said ask anybody so I said, ‘Wait a minute Joe?’ I said, ‘Where is Bird?’ He said, ‘The Apollo bar 125st and 7th avenue.’ I dropped the phone I couldn’t believe it, exactly what he had said. He knew who he was. If somebody had told me that I would have said you got to be crazy. (Sojourner’s Truth Volume 5, No. 16; Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 27, 2009; JazzWaX)

After finding the hotel and getting his family situated Hendricks went out the very first night he arrived in New York to go and find Charlie Parker. Hendricks realized that the only way for him to find work as a singer in New York was through Charlie Parker. Jon walked to the Apollo Theater from his hotel and almost did not go in. Hendricks thought to himself that Parker would never remember him and that it was pointless to just walk in the club. As Jon started to walk away from the club, he realized that the only musician in New York who would be able to get Jon work was in the club right in front of him. So Hendricks turned around and went in the club. As he walked into the club Parker immediately recognized him and asked Hendricks to sit in and sing. By the end of the evening Parker even went as far as to connect Hendricks with other musicians and book him his first gig in New York.
I went to the hotel and it was great a big room. We had one of these folding cribs and we unfolded that and made a place for the baby. I told Connie I said, „I got to go out, and find Charlie Parker. I won’t be gone that long.” So I figured I would walk up to 125th street because this hotel was on 110th. I had fifteen blocks, because cabs would of cost me money, so I walked up there, it was a nice walk. And I get to the club and I said, „You are going to walk in this club. You from Toledo, Ohio met Bird on a one nighter that means he just played Youngstown, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, Toledo and on his way west. He is going to remember you right?” I said, „He ain’t going to remember you. Who are you kidding?” So I turned around and said, „Well I gotta go back to the hotel and figure out something for tomorrow.” Then I said, „Wait a minute, the only guy that knows you and what you do is in that club.” I said, „So get your ass in that club and let him know you are here.” I said, „If anybody can get you a gig he can. You can’t walk away from this.” So I opened the door and the bandstand was right here and it was a thin aisle and the wall was here. You walked right passed the bandstand. Gerry Mulligan was playing baritone high as a loon, Bird was playing alto, Roy Haynes was poppin’, the bass player Curly Russell and Bud was playing piano and it was a gas. They were playing something so I walked past the bandstand and Bird, he is standing on the bandstand and he says, „Hey Jon how are you doing? You want to sing something?” (Mimics horn playing) I grabbed the wall to steady myself. Whoa can you imagine that? That’s over a year ago I said „Whoa holy mackerel.” Then I went in and they were going in on the second set and so they went out doing what they do, you know getting some stuff. Roy Haynes didn’t do anything so he was there but he was talking to this young girl at the bar. So I was at this table by myself and when they all came back, they all came around the table and Bird introduced me to everybody. I had met Bud once before also in Toledo he was on a tour with just his trio, but I had met him. But I don’t know if he remembered me probably not because he was high all the time. So Roy Haynes I had never met. I had seen him with Lester Young when he was nineteen. He used to sit on the drum stool and wheel around shook around like the President of Spain. He was like a little baby boy but he sure could play. So then they are getting ready to go up for the last set and Bird says, „Okay Jon we’ll play one number and then we’ll call you up to sing something.” I said, „Oh Okay.” And Roy says, „No Bird this is the last set we don’t want no singers. We don’t want no singers man.” I looked at him and my heart broke you know. Bird says, „Look Roy you don’t know what you are talking about I am telling you this is okay so just cool it.” So Roy cooled down so then after I got up I scatted three numbers. I was only going to do one and Bird said, „Do something else.” I said, „Well you all just play and I’ll join in.” I took solos on the next two things and it was a gas, the audience was eating it up because I was playing, I was scatting some stuff I wasn’t just ba ba da ba da ba. I was running chords you know from Art Tatum, the father of bebop. So I was something hip you know.
and Bird said, ‘oh man.’ He was happy and so was Gerry Mulligan he said, ‘wow man.’ So I made a great debut and then Bird says, ‘I’ll see what I can get for you. I’ll see what I can find.’ I said, ‘Oh thanks man.’ He said, ‘Oh not at all.’

So I went back to the hotel and a couple nights later Bird had a gig for me you know it wasn’t with him but it was with a bunch of guys, beboppers and I would make twenty five bucks. So things started running like that. But after that first night that last set Roy Haynes came up and hugged me and he says, ‘Man I apologize I was a stupid idiot. I had no idea.’ He says, ‘Man you can jump up on my bandstand anytime.’ So I said, ‘Thanks Roy.’ (Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 27, 2009)

After Hendricks and his family got settled and had enough money they moved into an apartment in New York up in the Bronx on 206th street. The Hendricks family continued to grow on September 27th 1953 Michelle Hendricks was born. Two years later on February 21st 1955 their son Eric was born. Lastly they had another daughter Colleen in 1955. As Jon’s family continued to grow he began to perform nightly in order to provide for his family. Connie stayed home and looked after their four children. During this time life was anything but simple. Hendricks would work during the day as a clerk at a newsprint company and perform at night. With his busy schedule Jon was not able to spend very much time with his family. “I was working for a newsprint company. That’s the rolls of newsprint that they would print newspapers off of. Great big newspaper rolls that were this big around just like a factory and I was the clerk so I did that.” (Hendricks, Interview Part B: November 29, 2009)

While the newsprint job allowed Hendricks to pay rent and feed his family, music was his true passion. With his first performance in New York he learned quickly the
harsh realities of drug addiction among jazz musicians. His idol Charlie Parker was a severe drug addict as were many of the jazz musicians in New York during the 1950’s. A growing availability of new drugs in New York after the War affected the lives of countless musicians.

My first gig in New York was up in the Bronx with a piano player that stayed at my house in Bronx because it was way, 206th street and the club was even further up, and he lived down around Midtown. So rather than go right straight home I told him, „You can sleep on the couch.” And when I got up my son’s piggy bank was missing. This guy was a junky. I knew who had done it so I went down to the office where he worked and he was in there and he had taken a hammer and broken the piggy bank. He was sorting through the change and I was mad at him. I was going to bust him. He says, „I can’t help it man I need it I need it.” I looked at him; I saw that it was true. He was a junky and so I said, „Alright go ahead.” I let him go. (Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 20, 2009)

This would not be Hendricks first experience with the severity of drugs in New York. He himself would begin to experiment with drugs but made sure never to become addicted to any substance. As his performance schedule increased Hendricks saw less and less of his family. Finally his wife Connie who suffered from alcoholism left Jon and moved back to Toledo leaving the kids with Jon’s relatives. Jon’s daughter Michelle Hendricks remembers her childhood as follows.

I was born September 27, 1953 in the Bronx. Until I was 4 years old, we lived in New York. Then my parents split up when I was 5, I think and eventually divorced. This happened when *Sing A Song Of Basie* took off and my father was touring all the time. We (me, my 2 brothers, Eric & Jon Jr. and my sister, Colleen) were sent to live with relatives. I saw very little of dad until I was 12. I saw very little of her (Connie) after the divorce. She was an alcoholic. (Michelle Hendricks, Interview)
Hendricks distraught by his family’s absence left his apartment and moved into the Alvin Hotel on 52nd and Broadway. The Alvin was located right in the center of the New York jazz scene located just across the street from the famous Birdland club. When living at the Alvin, Jon came in constant contact with many different artists.

I hung out outside of Birdland because Birdland was downtown. I lived downtown at the Alvin Hotel across the street from Birdland. So I was right in the middle of it. When I got up I was in the middle of it. That was where everybody stayed. The Basie band lived there. Those that didn’t live in New York stayed in the Alvin. They would all be staying at a hotel like the Alvin, and the Alvin was the main hotel. Almost all of the guys stayed at the Alvin. Basie’s Band stayed at the Alvin, Ellington’s band stayed at the Alvin, Duke of course stayed in his apartment uptown. He had an apartment up in Sugar Hill. But everybody else stayed around the Alvin, so whoever was at the Alvin you had access to them, you know. They were from all the bands. Andy Kirk, his men stayed there. Jimmy Lunceford stayed there, his band stayed. So everybody was always available at 52nd and Broadway, that’s where Birdland was. (Hendricks, Interview Part D: March 27, 2009)

Being at the epicenter of New York’s jazz scene, Jon came in contact many different musicians. In order to make some money in the music business he wrote rhythms and blues songs to sell to publishing companies in the music business district of New York. In order to try and sell his songs Jon would go over to 50th and Broadway on his lunch break from his day job and sing his pieces to various agents. During his time in the area Hendricks met his future collaborator Dave Lambert along with many famous Broadway song writers.

I was on with these song writers on 50th and Broadway, with Quincy Jones. We were out there every day. I was getting this extended lunch hour on my job. …it was supposed to be an hour, but I told the guy, „I got to go all the way up to 50th street and take care of song writing business. So can I have a long lunch hour? Then if you need me any night I will work late.” (Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 27, 2009)
Hendricks’ boss at the newspaper company allowed him the extra time at lunch as long as he worked the missing time at night. This meant Hendricks was hardly home at all and sleep became a luxury. Hendricks’ persisted in his endeavors. His songs were so good that many of the other song writers began to steal Hendricks’ ideas. Other song writers would ask him what he was working on and he would sing his pieces for them. Shortly after Hendricks would hear his song on the radio with someone else’s name on it. Hendricks learned that New York was a very cut throat city. He realized if you can make it into the music business in New York then you can make it anywhere.

I started to, hanging out with Soul records up on the corner of 50th and Broadway in front of this restaurant which was right next door to Lindy’s which was immortalized by the late Damon Rutgan from the Guys and Dolls he called it Mindy’s, that was really Lindy’s. So all the songwriters hung around that building because it was where the publishers had their offices.

Adler and Ross, they wrote two of the greatest musicals in Broadway history, one was Pajama Game and the other one was Damn Yankees. Great writers these guys and they were writing for Frank Lesser. He and Irving Berlin had writing factories with writers that would write songs and Irving Berlin and Frank Lesser would put their names on them. So these two guys they always stayed together and they did everything together. One of these guys was also a gag writer for a lot of comedians. He would write gags and would get in Walter Winchell’s column and you know Winchell was the big thing that was the biggest. So Dave sees these guys coming and he says, „Here comes Adler and Ross the two evils of Lesser.” And we all cracked up, that was funny, these guys were funny and I was very naïve. They were picking my brain all the time. I later found out because I started hearing songs on the radio and I said, „Wait a minute didn’t I think up that melody and the lyric? Isn’t that my song?” And I would hear it every day on the radio these guys were picking my brains. As soon as I came on the corner they would all rush me and say, „Jon how are you doing? What a’ ya working on now?” And I would stupidly sing it for them. So after I met Dave we decided first to do “Four Brothers.” So I came up on the corner and I said dig this: „We’re ready to show you we’re
blowin’ (Starts singing “Four Brothers.”) They all split. They didn’t bother me no more. (Hendricks, Interview Part C: March 20, 2009)

As his songs began to sell he started to tailor his writing to specific artists. Jon had heard several of Louie Jordan’s recordings on the radio and decided to write songs for him. This collaboration would give Jon a name in the songwriting industry and allow him to expand his writing into jazz.

Well I wrote “Gimme that Wine” with Louie in mind. So I knew the guy at Decca records where Louie was, and I said, „Hey I got a tune I want to show Louie you know.’ So he says, „Okay he will be recording tomorrow in Decca studio B you know where that is?’ So I went down there. He introduced me to Louie. He says, „This guy is a good singer and a good writer.’ So Louie said, „What cha got?’ I sang my “Gimme that Wine” song. He said, „I just did another drinking song, “Drinking Wine Spoodie-Odie”’ He says, „You got anything else?’ I said, „Yeah I got a song called “I want you to be my baby.” He says, “How does it go?” I sang it and he said, “Okay yeah, right that up for me.” So I did that for him and he recorded it and it sold not so well because he put two choruses of the blues before he sang it and in those days they wanted you to go right to the song. Because you only had three minutes and so it didn’t take with him but a truck driver in Philadelphia a woman truck driver well she recorded it and sold millions, a million records. I made a lot of money off of that, that song made a fortune. (He is referring to Lillian Briggs. The song hit #18 on the billboard 100 charts. (Ankeny)

I am still collecting from that. Then I showed him “I’ll die Happy” and that was on the cover of cash box number one rhythm and blues song of 1957. So Louie and I formed a kind of a partnership.

I wrote another one for him called “Messy Bessy” that was in a show called Five Guys named Moe. (Show premiered in England 1990 and then on Broadway 1992) It was on Broadway and it was in London. I saw it in London and so you know “Messy Bessy” was the hit of the show. So I went backstage and I said, „Hey “Messy Bessy” is my composition but I’m not getting any royalties.’ He got a paper and he says, „Yeah well we send it to Ray Charles.’ I said, „Ray Charles didn’t write that I wrote that.’ He says, „Well somebody wrote down Ray Charles.’ I said, „Just because they put it down there that’s my tune.’ So I had to get that money back and
that was good. I was able to get it back because Ray didn’t even know about it. So Louie did a lot of good for me. He made me some money. I wrote five years for him. He was great. He was a really beautiful musician. Good alto player, he was lead alto in the Chick Webb band when Ella was in the band. He took over Ella. He became her guardian she was only 17 and so he was the guy that you had to go through to get to her. I knew Ella for a long time. When she died there were only two pictures in her bedroom, one was mine. (Hendricks, Interview Part B: March 20, 2009)

As royalties started coming in from songs Hendricks had written he was able to send money home to his children. His song writing changed dramatically after hearing King Pleasure on the radio one day performing “Moody’s Mood For Love” a vocal version of James Moody’s instrumental hit “In the Mood for Love.” Jon realized from this recording that song form could go beyond thirty two bars. Lyrics did not have to stop at the melody they could extend into solo sections. From this inspiration Jon wrote lyrics to Woody Herman’s instrumental recording of “Four Brothers.” Having heard all of Dave Lambert’s recordings, Hendricks decided to work with Dave on the “Four Brothers” recording project. This recording session brought Jon and Dave together on a professional level. Unfortunately the album was initially unsuccessful in the United States. Both men would later learn that it had become a hit in England however this did not help their careers in New York.

I met this guy that had a record company and he heard the “Four Brothers” and he says, „Man you oughta record that.” And I said, „Man I don’t have a record company.” He says „I have a small company.” He said „I’d like to do it.” His name was Tejo Wilshire and he was a Black guy. He was an entrepreneur a business guy very good. I said, „Okay well, I’ll talk it over with Dave so he transcribed it.” We all got together and he came down to Dave’s with me and we got together and did „Four Brothers.” Our first version of it was four minutes. Then we had to have something on the other side so I heard this “Cloudburst” thing with the guitarist Lee Roy Kirkland used to play with Chick Webb. He was in the band with Louie Jordan who was the lead alto. Wilshire wanted to make this album but he
wanted to make it commercial so he hired Sam the Man Taylor a tenor player. Sam played this solo called “Cloudburst” so he called himself Claude Cloud and his thunderclaps and everybody new Claude Cloud and his thunderclaps but nobody knew Lee Roy Kirkland. So he lost all identity from that… So “Cloudburst” didn’t do too well in the United States it got attention but it was number one in England. We said, „Wow.” So that made us a little bit of money…

We were starving and Dave would get record dates and call me and Bunny Briggs and a guy named Gene something he used to play trumpet with Stan Kenton and he could sing and we would do these dates. Dave would always give me sheet music. And I would say, „You know I can’t read.’ Dave would say, „Yeah but these guys don’t know that so look at it like your reading it.’ So I said „okay.’ So I would look at the music like I could read. I just sang whatever someone next to me was singing. If I was supposed to be singing a third I would go a third above. We were pro’s we knew what to do but I didn’t know anything about reading. It looked like I knew how to read but I did it because these guys would fire me if they knew.

Like I worked with Dizzy for a week and he didn’t know I couldn’t read because I would say, „Hey give me the lead sheet to this thing.’ And then I would take it to some friend of mine who could read music and I would say, „What is this?’ And he would sing it, and then I would learn it. And the next day I would come and put it up on the stand and sing it like I was reading it. So Dizzy thought I could read and it was two weeks before he found out I couldn’t read. He said, „You mother’.(Hendricks, Interview Part C: March 20, 2009)

Not being able to read music Hendricks still found work as a musician, especially after he began to work more frequently with Dave Lambert. Unfortunately much of his work in music was not well paid. The money he did make he sent home to his family. With funds running low, Hendricks moved into a lower rent hotel until one day he received a phone call from Dave Lambert saying he had space available in his apartment. Hendricks decided to move in with Lambert in order to bring his rent costs down.
Well I was living in the Eros hotel and I was paying $17-18 dollars a week and it was hard to come by that and so Dave said, „Well I am divorced now.’ I had met his wife and I knew her and I said, „I’m sorry you divorced.’ He said, „No man, it’s been coming.’ So he says, „So I got an extra room why don’t you move in with me and then we only have one rent to pay. Instead of scuffling for two rents we only have to scuffle for one.’ So I said, „Okay.’ So I moved my few belongings into his five floor walkup with the bathroom in the kitchen. And Dave was the funniest. He was a strange guy. When I moved over with my stuff I knocked on the door no answer. I just told him I was coming over so I went back down five flights I left my stuff. I went down five flights went to the phone and I said, „Hey.’ He said, „Where are you?’ I said, „I’m here but I knocked on your door but there was no answer.’ He said, „Well you didn’t call and let me know you were coming.’ He said, „You gotta call first.’ I said, „Okay I’ll be right back up.’ So I came back up knocked and he opened the door. So that’s the first day with Dave. (Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 27, 2009)

Hendricks claims that his new apartment on Cornelius Street with Lambert was an area known to be run by the mafia. Being close to the river Jon claimed that the mafia would often drop bodies into the river right near his apartment.

We were living at 24 Cornelius Street right across the street from the building that they used as the Genco oil company in The Godfather, because they were powerful in that part of New York. They used Cornelius Street to drop dead bodies that they had executed, either in the basement of that nightclub uptown, the Copacabana that they had tunnels under there. They kept bodies under there until they could dispose of them, then they would drive them down Seventh Avenue make a left on West Fourth street and just half a block before Sixth Avenue there was this little street Cornelius Street and it went right into Bleaker so they would go to Bleaker turn left and go back to Sixth Avenue and uptown. That’s where they used to dump bodies in Cornelius Street. So Dave lived there and I moved in with him when I couldn’t pay my hotel bill anymore and his wife had divorced him and he had extra room. (Hendricks, Interview Part C: March 27, 2009)

Jon and Dave continued to live together. They could barely afford to eat and often the only thing they would have all day was coffee. Many claim that in times of struggle great art emerges and this was certainly the case for Lambert and Hendricks. They would later
go on to record the best selling vocal jazz album in the history of recorded music.

Initially struggling to get by, they dreamed that someday their hard work would lead to success. Their endless love for music kept them going through the worst of times.

Lambert and Hendricks were standing on the threshold of greatness and would soon become international superstars. Their journey to success will be discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter 5

The Birth of Lambert, Hendricks and Ross

Jon Hendricks moved in with his new roommate Dave Lambert. Both musicians performed fairly regularly in and around New York. The two became musical associates. Whenever Hendricks would have a show he would bring Lambert and vice versa. Both singers had a well honed ear for bebop and were extremely gifted improvisers. Lambert was a very gifted singer as well as vocal arranger. Prior to working with Jon Hendricks he wrote vocal jazz arrangements for Johnny Long’s Orchestra and later sang with Buddy Stewart in the Gene Krupa orchestra. In 1949 Lambert recorded two, twelve-voice arrangements of the standards “Always” and “When the Red Red Robin” for Capitol Records. On the same recordings date he also recorded two bebop vocal ensemble pieces sung only with scat syllables entitled “Hawaiian War Chant” and “Beban Cubop.” (Friedwald, 230) Having a record of bebop vocal arrangement provided a considerable impetus. With Hendricks’ gift for bebop lyric writing, together the two would write the most commercially successful vocal ensemble jazz album of all time. Hendricks recollects that when he first started working with Dave Lambert things were not always easy. They would often work with tap dancer and singer, Bunny Briggs, who became close friends with Hendricks.
We were scuffling and you know he’s one of the best vocal arrangers and conductors in the business so he was getting phone calls for record dates all the time and so if he needed more singers he would get me and Bunny Briggs the tap dancer… and the lead trumpet player that used to play with Stan Kenton, I forget his name, he’s a good scat singer. Johnny Green and his orchestra called him one time for a record date. So Johnny Green wanted to know if anyone could whistle. I said, „Yeah I whistle all the time.” He says, „Well I got this whistling song.” He says, „Do you think you can handle it?” I said, „Yeah.” So he gives me the music. I took it over to Dave I said, „What does this say?” And Dave said, „Well” and laid the first chord you know. (Begins whistling the melody motions for chord and continues melody) I said, „Is that all?” He says, „Yeah.” I said, „Piece of cake.” So we did take one and something went wrong. Then we did take two and take three and by the time take four came I figured I had to put a little grease on it. So I said (whistles slightly altered melody) and he says, „NO JAZZ” (waiving arms in the air.) I said „okay,” (whistles the melody straight) and he says „Yeah.” So this was our record date and it was Gene something I forget this trumpet player and Bunny Briggs. So I told Bunny, „Man I sure am glad I stood next to you.” He says, „Why?” I said, „Cuz I can’t read.” He says, „I can’t read either.” (laughs) I fell out and Dave cracked up because he told me to stand next to Bunny and sing a third up from what Bunny hit and I got through the whole record date, didn’t make any mistakes. (Hendricks, Interview Part A, March 26, 2009)

While Lambert and Hendricks began to get more paying jobs in the music business, the jobs were not as a steady as both men wanted. Often they would go hungry for a few days because they would run out of money and could not find work fast enough.

We would do things like that and then we’d have money to eat for a couple of days. Then sometimes Dave would get gigs singing somewhere so he would say, „You mind if I bring another singer along with me?” And they’d say, „As long as it don’t cost us anymore money.” So then he would take me on these gigs, and I would sing stuff with him. We would do “Gussy G” or “Cent and a Half” or one of those things and knock the audience out, but I wouldn’t get paid. Only he got paid, but were splitting everything anyway it went for our rent and food. So we lived like that hand to mouth, we lived hand to mouth for a long time. (Hendricks, Interview Part B: March 26, 2009)
Frustrated and hungry Hendricks’ life as a musician in New York was anything but simple. Dave Lambert who continually experimented with the idea of making a vocal arrangement sound like an instrumental arrangement suggested to Hendricks one night that they embark on writing vocalese to Count Basie’s music. Big band vocal arrangements had never been done and Dave realized that this particular project would set them apart from other singers. Hendricks initially felt overwhelmed by the prospect of writing lyrics to every instrumental part in the Count Basie orchestra, but with no other substantial work Hendricks embarked on the project with Lambert.

We loved Basie that’s why we did Sing a Song of Basie. Dave and I decided to do Sing a Song of Basie, not for ambitious reasons, we thought that we ought to do a really great cultural thing before we die probably from starvation, that’s the reason we did that. We thought before we die let’s let them know that we were here. So Dave said, „Well why don’t we do something to let them know we were here? So if we do die they’ll know who we were.’ I said, „Okay what do you suggest?’ He said, „Well if we can get an album of Basie’s things and you can lyricize them and I can arrange them.’ I say’s, ‘you know how long it takes to lyricize a big band tune? You have to have a sound for each, a word for each sound and the words have to not just be any word they have to be a part of a sentence and the sentence has to be a part of a paragraph that’s telling a certain story about a certain person, place or thing. It’s like putting a libretti to opera it’s very difficult and it takes a long time.’ Dave says, „Well what else do you got to do?” I picked up the pad, (chuckling) I started working and sure enough it did just what it was supposed to do. It made us stars and solved the starvation problem. We were in six months from the time Sing a Song of Basie came out, we were overnight stars. We opened at Birdland six months after Sing a Song of Basie came out. So we decided to do this and when we did it instead of dying we got rich. We could pay for dinner so it was a good thing all around. (Hendricks, Interview Part C: March 27, 2009)

The album was entitled Sing a Song of Basie and was recorded in 1958. While the album was a monumental success, the journey to completing the album was not without
its trials and tribulations. With such a new musical process the first difficulty that Lambert and Hendricks ran into after they had completed writing all of the arrangements and lyrics was to find a record company that would agree to record their music. Many companies refused to offer Hendricks and Lambert a record contract due to the radical nature of the project. The record companies thought that their musical materials were too different from what was currently monetarily beneficial to their companies. They were unwilling to invest in something with high financial risk that had no guarantee of success.

Lambert and Hendricks had not found work for a while and they were running desperately low on funds. As fate would have it Dave Lambert knew a young talent scout named Creed Taylor whom he had met in Greenwich Village. Taylor recently got a job at ABC Paramount records. Dave Lambert and Jon Hendricks showed some of their work to Creed and he loved the idea immediately. Taylor signed them for a record date.

Hendricks was both excited and relieved by this news because living was becoming very difficult in New York.

We got in real trouble when the restaurant cut off our tab because we would eat dinner there every night and then when we got a substantial gig we would give them some money against what we owed them. But we weren’t getting many gigs so that was really serious because we didn’t have any money anywhere to do anything. Dave says, „Well look you love Basie I love Basie.” He says, „Why don’t we do a Basie album? Why don’t you write three or four Basie tunes and well take em up town and try and sell them to a record company.” I said, „Well you know it takes a long time to write words to everything going on in those arrangements you know with all the horns.” And Dave says, „You got anything else to do?” So I started out right then.

Then we did four tunes and we walked uptown from West Fourth Street to west 57th and back down. We walked; we didn’t have any money. So we were told about this new company ABC Paramount Ampar and they had a new A& R man just out of Yale, Creed Taylor. So we went to see him and
we told him what we had. We sang some of the form and he said, „Wow, it sounds great.” (Hendricks, Interview Part B: March 20, 2009)

With a new record contract Dave Lambert hired thirteen singers to sing all of the parts of his arrangement. When the group met up at the recording studio Lambert and Hendricks found that the studio singers could read music perfectly but they did not understand how to swing. With the groups inability to swing the recording date seemed hopeless. Out of the thirteen singers there was one who stood out and who could swing. A young Scottish woman by the name of Annie Ross stood out to both men. She had written her own vocalese lyrics to the songs “Twisted” and “Farmers Market” and so they realized that Annie understood what they were doing. Annie was hired to train the studio singers “swing feel,” which proved to be impossible. Out of the thirteen singers Annie was the only singer they kept. Creed Taylor had to cancel the first record date because the group was not working. Here are his recollections of the first studio meeting.

The studio singers Dave brought to Beltone Studios at 4 West 31st St. didn’t swing. We started recording, and about a half hour into it, I knew the session was a bust. The singers were too rigid. I’m sure they were great at singing ad jingles, but this required phrasing and all the nuances that most studio singers don’t have. With Basie, it’s a swinging thing, meaning you have to sing behind the beat, not on it. Eddie Jones, the bassist, tried to help the singers, saying, „Look, this is the way the band plays it. It’s got to be laid back.’ But they never got it. So I had to stop the date. When the singers cleared out, Dave offered up a solution. He asked whether he, Jon and Annie Ross could overdub all the parts. I said, „Sure, let’s give it a try.’ Dave said Annie would sing all the trumpet parts, he’d do the trombones, and Jon would handle the saxes. (Taylor, Interview)

Annie Ross came into the project thinking that she was only going to coach the studio singers but ended up being the only female singer. As tensions escalated in the
studio with Creed Taylor afraid that he might lose his job over this failed project Lambe, Hendricks, and Ross decided to act quickly. After agreeing with Dave to undertake a very technologically challenging recording, Annie Ross was kept to multi-track all of the high horn parts. Annie Ross’s recollection of this story also demonstrates what new ground the project rose to.

I happened to be at a friend’s house, Bob Bach and he and his wife Jean Bach were very dear friends of mine. They got a phone call from Dave I think it was, and he said, „I have this idea about putting words to a Count Basie album can I come over, bring Jon and demonstrate what we have?“ He said sure. So he said, „Do you want to stick around Annie and see what’s happening?“ I said, „Sure.“ So round they came they played one of Basie’s numbers they both sang the solos I thought, hey that’s great. And the next thing I knew they asked me up, and asked if I would come down and conduct some session singers that they had engaged to record about I think four or six tracks. They said the women; they wanted me to give the women the Basie feel. Well that was a laugh in itself. I mean you can’t teach that to anybody you have to be born with it, be brought up with it, and I tried. The upshot was that the session time had a couple of hours to go on the record session. They had no more that they could do because what they had was not good. They were going to scrap it and the producer was tearing his hair out and saying, „My god we’ve lost this money…“ Dave Lambert who was in to electronic things etc. said, „Well what about if we multi track?“ So I said, „Okay.“ I mean you know we all had great ears we heard the chord sequences, learning the solos was not that difficult for us. And it was I think one of the great moments of my life because we heard the first track back and that was fine that was the melody. Then we recorded the second track and played it back with the first track. Well, well that was something else. Then the third track was unbelievable, the fourth track was mind blowing. We knew we had something absolutely great. It was that feeling that we were breaking new ground that we were creating. And it was exciting and I felt giddy. I mean it was just a wonderful, wonderful moment. (Ross Interview NPR on Fresh Air)

Hendricks recollected that it only seemed natural to keep Annie Ross as one of the
principle singers on the Sing a Song of Basie album. He had heard some of her previous work and was impressed with her talent.

She was the only one we kept. She knew what we were doing because we were fans of hers. On prestige she had “Farmer’s Market” and “Twisted”. We loved those because that was what we were doing, it was the same thing. We were put together by God, had to be, it was too perfect, it was perfect. Annie never did any other gig any place else. They offered her Broadway; a woman called us in, afraid we might have to bust up the group because Vera Martin wanted Annie to do this new Broadway musical. Annie says, ‘I don’t want to do a Broadway musical.’ And they said, ‘What? It will make you a huge star overnight.’ Annie says, ‘I’m already a star.’ She says, ‘I don’t want to do anything else. Tell them no.’ And Willie got mad because he lost a big commission, a lot of money out of his pocket. He says Jesus Christ. But nobody could have ever have broken us up, it had to be time itself. (Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 26, 2009)

Fate had brought the group together and they were certainly tested from the very beginning. While the final project became a huge success, the recording was anything but simple. As multi-tracking was in its infant stages, the project was very difficult for the sound engineer to balance. To make matters worse Lambert and Hendricks had already spent their budget from Paramount, on the failed studio singers. Dave Lambert fortunately happened to be a problem solver as well as a technology expert. He suggested that they come into the studio when it was closed and multi-track the album. Hendricks recalled the first conversation regarding multi-tracking between Dave Lambert and Creed Taylor.

So Dave says, ‘Well we could multi-track it.’ Creed says, ‘What’s that?’ And he looked at me and I said, ‘Don’t ask me I had never heard of it.’ Then Dave explained it he says, ‘We record Annie, Jon, and me on four tapes. Annie will do the trumpets; she does the lead and the second trumpet.’ Dave and I will fill those other parts in, and the trombones. Dave and I will do the first and second and third and fourth. Then the reeds I can do the first tenor, Dave can do the second tenor, Annie can do the two
altos, and Dave can do the baritone.” So we started on that, well Creed says, „How are we going to get the studio?” Dave said, „Well what time do you open?” Creed said, „Seven in the morning.” Dave said, „What time do you close?” He said, „Eight at night.” Dave said, „Well we’ll come at 8:30 and we’ll stay till 6:30 in the morning and nobody will know what we are doing.” Dave says, „The only thing we need, we need an engineer.” Creed says, „Well that guy Irv Greenbaum, he was at Columbia and he knows what to do.” So we met him and we talked to him, we told him what we wanted to do and he says, „Sure I’ll do it,” and he did it and wrote a book about it called In one ear and in the other… So we did that; it took three weeks. We had it all done. (Hendricks, Interview Part 6: March 26, 2009)

As they came into the studio by night to record, the sound engineer ran into issues with the tapes making noise while recording. As they continued to record several different tapes to multi-track the noise became worse. Creed Taylor remembers the recording process as follows.

First I recorded the Basie rhythm section with Dave, Jon, and Annie providing a guide track, which was a straight reading. Once that was done, we had the swing down. Then they overdubbed the additional harmonized tracks wearing headphones and listening to the guide track. I was recording at the studio with a great engineer named Irv Greenbaum, who loved jazz. We captured each track on a ¼-inch Ampex recorder, but the hiss was piling up like you wouldn’t believe. Each time you add a track to tape, hiss builds. When we got to the final master, we had some careful EQ-ing [equalizing] to do. In those days, the technical ability to manipulate tapes and get rid of small problems was non-existent. I sat there for days with Irv trying to fix the hiss. Finally we just rolled off 10 to 12k [kilowatts] from the sound, and the result was great.

Annie frightened me, she was so good. I was in awe of her. And the session wouldn’t have existed without Jon’s great lyrics. He was totally engrossed in the Basie sections and his words brought the whole thing together. (Taylor, Interview)

Hendricks recalled the moment after they had spent three sleepless weeks recording each voice part and listening to it for the first time. The balance of the
recording was completely off and the recording sounded like something out of a horror film.

So we started out and we recorded for three weeks. When we played it back it sounded like a song playing backwards like „eee wa wa ah woah wow.” Because we had put the lead voices on last so we had these inside voices and you couldn’t even hear the lead voices because they were on the last tape. (Hendricks, Interview Part B: March 20, 2009)

Hearing the distorted recordings disheartened everyone. By the end of the three weeks everyone was at wits’ end. Hendricks claims that the group had to actually re-record all of the parts and rebalance the recording. While Creed Taylor states that he worked with Irv Greenbaum and was able to tweak the sound on the first recording of the trio in order to balance the sound. While stories may differ as to the actual number of takes that were needed to complete the album, everyone was amazed by the final outcome. Hendricks recollects the feeling of hearing the final version of the songs back for the first time.

When it was over and we heard it back all four of us just sat down on the floor and cried like babies. We just wept it was so pretty it sounded so great, it was really good. I never heard anything that beautiful in my whole life. That was great it brings tears to my eyes to think of it now that’s just the most beautiful thing. I never heard anything like it in my whole life. I think it’s the greatest thing that ever happened to music and obviously so do a lot of other people because our fan base really increased from that. When that album came out our popularity shot up. We were the number one vocal jazz group in the world six weeks after our album hit, in the world. The French after three years voting us number one just got rid of the whole vocal competition and gave it to Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross. That was a great honor and it made us icons. Annie’s an icon. Every female singer wants to be Annie Ross. She is amazing she’s still working. She is doing every other Tuesday and she’s ill but she climbs up on that stand. She’s from a great Scottish show business family. (Hendricks, Interview Part B: March 20, 2009)
As the project came to a close Hendricks nearly collapsed from exhaustion. While he was recording all night he was also still working his day job at the newspaper print factory. The strain of little sleep and not enough food finally wore on his body.

Too much marijuana, no sleep, and working on the recording project completely exhausted him.

That took everything, that put me in the hospital I had a fatty tumor right here (points to stomach) and it was burning so they took it out. You know the wrong foods to eat and not enough, too much marijuana, and wine, and all that stuff. (Hendricks, Interview Part B: March 20, 2009)

Their hard work would eventually pay off. Lambert, Hendricks and Ross became the number one vocal jazz group in the world. It only took the group six months after the album was released for it to become a success. Hendricks remembers his first gig with Lambert and Ross.

The first gig we had was at the Bankus Club in West New York, New Jersey. It was a bank that had been made into a nightclub so it was called the Bankus Club and our pianist was Al Haig and Zoot Simms was on the gig. The guys were supposed to pay us $75 dollars a night and we did so well they paid us $150. It was good we made some money off of that gig. And then we just went on from there working 52 weeks a year. We toured everywhere around the United States and Europe, we worked all the countries. Well everybody wanted us they couldn’t believe it. They had to see it to believe it. So then we got bookings coming in from all over the world. We were booked everywhere but Russia. We couldn’t get into Russia because they weren’t open yet. But our records got there. (Hendricks, Interview Part A: March 26, 2009)

In that same year, 1958, the Sing a Song of Basie album went on to win the Grammy for Best Jazz Performance by a Group. After the award they performed sold out shows around the country and became a household name. In 2000 the album received another Grammy when it was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame. The group not
only revolutionized the recording industry by creating the first successful multi-tracked vocal album, but they also revolutionized vocalese. Prior to Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross, there had been no vocalese of big band music.

Lambert created some of the first vocal big band arrangements. He broke new ground in terms of vocal arranging as well as vocal recording techniques. Annie Ross’ innate sense of swing and tremendous vocal range added depth and power to the recording that has yet to be matched by groups who now sing in the same style. Hendricks’ lyrics brought the entire project together. His lyric writing was witty and intellectual, way beyond what anyone else was writing at the time. Hendricks had a tremendous talent for creating a rhyming musical narrative that had a clear and universal message. The three artists together created one of the most successful vocal jazz groups in history. From this album the art of vocalese has forever changed. Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross added another branch to the great tree of jazz history.

At 88 years young Jon Hendricks continues to perform the works of Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross. Hendricks’ career continues to prosper today and the time frame from the early Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross years up until the present are also very interesting parts of his journey to becoming a master vocalese artist. He currently tours with his daughter Aria Hendricks and Kevin Burkes in a group called “Lambert, Hendricks and Ross Redoux.” From his early work in Toledo with Art Tatum to his work with Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross, Jon has managed to become one of the most influential jazz singers of his generation. As a true artist dedicated to his craft, Hendricks
never grows weary of the musician’s life style. In fact he revels in the long hours of travel and rehearsal where he finds true satisfaction. He truly lives and breathes music. His exceptional lyric writing is truly a gift to mankind, for he is able to reflect the most important aspects of life in ways that we all can understand. His connection to the creative force of his psyche is unearthly. This paper is merely a picture into the vast lifetime of work which Hendricks has been a part of and created. By studying his childhood and early development as a performer one can understand how he became the artist that he is today, an internationally recognized jazz icon.
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