

J.C. HEARD'S BIO OF RHYTHM

His drums still explode into pure fire and color after fifty years as one of jazz' top performers. by Mark Lipson

J. C. HEARD IS relaxing in the living room of his Troy apartment, amid rich teak and butter-soft leather, samurai swords and wispy rice-paper prints. He is dressed casually, but in style. He has a pencil-thin mustache, and his hair is short, nattily parted off to one side, Cab Calloway-style. He is sixty-five, and, without a doubt, one of the world's greatest jazz drummers.

He is sifting through an enormous stack of some 1,000 LPs that he has recorded over the past fifty years. Somewhere in that collection is the first album he recorded with Teddy Wilson's big band in 1939. Since that time he has made records with many of jazz' greatest vocalists and instrumentalists. Among them are Charles Mingus, Ray Brown, Charlie Parker and Frank Sinatra. He has recorded extensively with Billie Holiday, and has also performed and recorded with Ray Charles, Nat King Cole and Dinah Washington. In terms of pure technique, only a Buddy Rich could even come close to rivaling J.C. In fact, Buddy Rich is one of his greatest fans, and the two have been good friends for over forty years.

A peripatetic musician with an international reputation, J.C. has not forsaken his old hometown. Besides making his home in the metro area, he still occasionally treats jazz audiences to the delight of his drums; he is performing in four concerts at the Montreux-Detroit Kool Jazz Festival, September 1-6.

Born in Dayton, Ohio, on August 10, 1917, he spent virtually all of his childhood in Detroit. It was here that he nurtured his young musical gifts, and he still feels the attraction of a town that became the cradle of some of the world's best jazz.

J.C.'s rhythmic roots lay in his experience as a child performer in vaudeville. "Actually, I started out as a tap dancer. I was a big fan of Bill Robinson and used to do some of his stuff. When I was ten, I won first prize dancing in one of those lit-

tle talent contests, and as the winner I got to dance with Butterbeans and Suzy and their show. That was in 1927. In this show, I wore short pants and a bow tie. They had six chorus girls, a girl singer, and a comedy team — Ashcan and Lewis.

and Canfield. He spent many nights riveted to the bandstand there, listening to drummers like Chick Webb, Kaiser Marshall, Big Sid Catlett, Jo Jones and Davey Tough. Like many aspiring young drummers, J.C. began beating on everything in sight, trying to imitate the rhythm of his idols.

"I didn't have my own set of drums 'til I was eleven or twelve. I used to beat on my mother's pots and pans. I'd bust holes in the furniture tryin' to sound like Chick Webb. My mother finally got me a little set of drums with trading stamps from *True Romance* magazine. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing."

At thirteen, J.C. began playing and singing professionally with local bands, making frequent appearances at the Cozy Corner bar on Hastings Street. By 1936, he had met and sat in with Lester Young, Count Basie and Benny Goodman. *Everybody* stopped by the Cozy Corner. It was there that Teddy Wilson first heard J.C. play. Two weeks later, J.C. got a telegram from New York: Wilson had just left Benny Goodman's band and was forming his own. And he wanted J.C.

"Man, when I got that wire from Teddy, I was so excited I didn't even think about money," he says. "I knew Teddy was already on top. I moved right to New York. The band only lasted a year, but it was

enough time for me to get known around New York. We played all the major spots, like the Apollo and the Famous Door."

J. C. HEARD: ESQUIRE HONORED HIM; JAPANESE FANS LIONIZED HIM. AS A CHILD, HE IMITATED BIG BAND DRUMMERS BY POUNDING ON DRUMS HIS MOTHER BOUGHT WITH TRADING STAMPS.



"I'd been dancing with Butterbeans for five weeks when one night the drummer was sick and couldn't make it, so I filled in. I never played the show on drums before — in fact, I never touched a set of drums before that, but I knew the show by heart and I just sat down and played it."

J.C. was able to hear some of the great big bands of the Thirties and Forties at the Graystone Ballroom on Woodward

P E R F O R M A N C E

J.C.'S WORK with Teddy Wilson marked the start of a career that has spanned fifty-five years and four continents. Back then, he made world tours, movie appearances and recordings with jazz' most brilliant innovators. After Wilson's band broke up, J.C. was the driving force in the orchestras of Benny Carter, Louis Jordan and Benny Goodman. He played in live radio broadcasts from the Savoy Ballroom with Coleman Hawkins, Cab Calloway and Woody Herman, and in 1946 won *Esquire* magazine's drummer-of-the-year award. That same year, he competed in an Olympian drum battle with Buddy Rich and Gene Krupa at Carnegie Hall.

In the Forties, the movie industry began hiring big bands to feature in musicals, and J.C. started appearing in films.

"I was in Richard Widmark's first movie, *The Kiss of Death*. Then I did *Something to Shout About* with W.C. Fields in 1945 . . . *Two Tickets to Broadway*, with Tony Martin, *Stormy Weather*, with Cab Calloway and Lena Horne."

In 1950, record producer Norman Granz assembled the "Jazz at the Philharmonic," a band that consisted solely of jazz luminaries, and in 1953 took the twenty-two-piece orchestra (along with J.C.) to Japan, where it played to sold-out crowds of ecstatic Japanese fans. The performances were recorded by Columbia and released as *The Greatest Jazz Concert Ever*. When the "Jazz at the Philharmonic" finished its tour, J.C. organized his own big band — the Sharps and Flats.

"I had all Japanese players in it. Toshiko Akiyoshi was playing piano. When you closed your eyes, it sounded just like Count Basie. I mean, it was perfect!"

J.C. met with such great success in Japan that he lived there for the next four years. During his stay, he met his future wife, Hiroko, acted in three Japanese movies (he was a samurai warrior in one), and hosted a late-night talk show, complete with interpreter.

Through his Japanese agent, J.C. played a series of concerts in Southeast Asia and ended the tour with a one-month engagement at the Calcutta Hotel in India. By the time he returned to the United States in 1957, the big-band era had ended. He began playing with small groups — first with Roy Eldridge and Coleman Hawkins, and later with Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker.

"I did all the first stuff with Bird [Parker] and Diz," he says. "A lot of people think it was Max Roach on those recordings, because the sidemen aren't listed on the album jackets. I was in that band before Max. People wonder how I

can play a commercial thing like Cab Calloway and then go play with Bird and Diz. I'm just flexible."

THIS VERSATILITY is reflected not only in the wide range of artists with whom he has recorded, but also in the sheer number of his recordings.

"I've made records with so many people that I forget who I recorded with. I didn't know exactly how much I'd recorded until last year. This guy from France sent me a four-page list of everybody I'd ever played with. He listed 1,100 albums that I'd recorded on!" he says incredulously. "And that was mostly as a sideman. I've made quite a few records singing, too."

After a ten-year respite from traveling, J.C. has resumed his touring schedule. He prefers to tour at a leisurely pace, traveling for three or four weeks, then taking a few weeks off. His annual tours take him through France, Spain, Italy, Switzerland and Sweden, and he is a regular guest artist at most major European jazz festivals. Twice a year he performs at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island. He usually travels alone, hiring local musicians to fill the twenty-one chairs in his band. When he goes to Japan, his band is all Japanese. In Australia, all Australian.

"I've probably been more successful in Europe and Asia than I have in the U.S. People overseas seem to understand jazz a little bit better than we do here. You should see the jazz halls they have in Switzerland — beautiful! They wouldn't build nothin' like that here. In the North Sea Jazz Festival in Holland, they have 600 musicians performing in 100 concerts over the course of three days. Now why do you have to go all the way over there to see that?"

In spite of the fact that J.C. is an international traveler and could easily afford to live anywhere in the world, he prefers the Detroit area. "A lot of my friends ask me what I'm doin' in Detroit. They want to know why I don't move to New York or L.A. I like Detroit! Some of the best jazz players come out of Detroit.

"I belong to the world, and I want the world to hear me! I've been around the world three times already. You can't live in the past. Everything is moving forward, and that's the way I want to go."

At sixty-five, J.C. Heard is swinging relentlessly toward his seventies. His powers seem only to increase with age, and he shows no signs of slowing. He is a master at timekeeping, and his solos are brilliantly developed — pure color and fire. His musical genius is complimented by his expertise as an entertainer. Remi-

niscant of the late Duke Ellington, he has a natural ability to put his audience at ease. He is a firm believer in rapport.

"I was taught to talk to the audience and to make them feel good. Some of these jazz musicians nowadays don't say a word to the people. Now the rock 'n' roll guys know how to put on a show. They just don't say too much musically."

J.C. strikes a balance as an entertainer and an artist — which may account for much of his success over the last fifty years. His talent and showmanship were nurtured by luminaries in jazz' golden era and persisted after onstage style shifted from warmth to impersonality. So J.C. remains an eternal talent from another age. But his music — and J.C. himself — are home to stay.

J.C. HEARD will perform at the Motreux-Detroit Kool Jazz Festival at the following dates and times:

September 3, 7:30 and 9 p.m., Detroit Institute of Arts, with Benny Carter and Doc Cheatham.

September 5, 2-3:30 p.m., Hart Plaza in "A Tribute To Duke Ellington."

September 5, 8 p.m., Detroit Institute of Arts, with Teddy Wilson and Slam Stewart.

September 6, 8-11 p.m., Hart Plaza, "Detroit Jams"—Detroit All Stars.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY OF AVAILABLE RECORDINGS.

The Fabulous Apollo Sessions
J.C. Heard and His Orchestra *Vogue Records LD 769 (France)*

The Original Recordings
Billie Holiday *Columbia C 32060*

The Divine Sarah — The Early Years
Sarah Vaughan *Musicraft MVS 504 Jug*

Gene Ammons *Prestige 7192*

King of the Tenors
Ben Webster *The Original Verve Jazz Classics UMV 2081 (Japan)*

Pres and Teddy Oscar
Lester Young *Verve VE-2-2502*

Giants of Jazz—Red Norvo
Red Norvo (and Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie) *Time-Life STL-J14*
Dizzy Gillespie Vol. 1/2 (1946-49)
Dizzy Gillespie *RCA Double Black & White PM 42408 (France)*

Statements and Improvisations
Teddy Wilson *The Smithsonian Collection R005 P 13708*

Live at the Nichigeki Theater
Jazz at the Philharmonic *Pablo Live 2620 104*

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