

Seeking Harmony: The Life of Luther Henderson

by Devra Hall

Introduction

I was unaware of Luther's accomplishments when I first met him. I do not remember how that first meeting came to be. He was close to many people who are, or were, important in my own life. Still, I don't recall any one of them making the introduction. My earliest recollection is of a planning meeting in the mid-1970s for the annual Jackie Robinson fundraiser, "An Afternoon of Jazz," held outdoors on the grounds of Robinson's home in Connecticut. Someone had recommended me to assist jazz pianist Dr. Billy Taylor with booking the artists, and I was in Marion Logan's living room with Rachael Robinson, Luther Henderson, Billie Allen, and a few others. I may have grown up as a liberal, supported Rev. Martin Luther King's work, and taken part in the March on Washington, but back then, I was unaware that Mrs. Logan was married to Arthur Logan, Duke Ellington's doctor, and that they were close to Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. I knew that Mrs. Robinson's husband was a famous baseball player, but I did not know that it was he who broke the league's color barrier. (Not being a sports fan, and not yet born when it happened, I guess that was understandable, but they really should have taught us about it in school.) There was no reason for me to know that Ms. Allen was an actress and stage director, or that Mr. Henderson had graduated from Julliard in 1942, but had he been properly credited on recordings, being a jazz fan, I might have known that he had written orchestrations for Duke Ellington. They didn't seem to mind my ignorance; I was just a college kid there to do a job.

Over the following years, I would return on several occasions to the annual summer concert at the Robinsons', no longer as naive booker, but as guest. One year I went with saxophonist Jerome Richardson, who I was dating at the time. Jerome and Luther were great

friends, and Luther hired Jerome to work on his projects whenever possible. While living in New York City, I got to know Luther's third wife, Margo, and we would occasionally shop together or have lunch at Café Des Artistes. I soon moved to California with Jerome, and we saw Luther on many occasions, most often during the productions of *Ain't Misbehavin'* in Los Angeles, California, and Paris, when Jerome was in the band. After a lengthy run close to our home in Los Angeles, the show ran for six months in Paris, where I joined Jerome for a month that included Christmas and New Year's Eve. Margo had died two years earlier, and Billie Allen flew to Paris to spend the holidays with Luther; just after New Year's they announced their plans to marry.

By the time they married, Jerome and I had split up. The new man in my life was John Levy, later to become my husband. John's client, jazz singer Joe Williams, introduced us, and both Joe and John were old and dear friends of Luther's. I was to return again several times to the Robinsons' with John and with Joe (by then I was Joe's publicist), and there, while the crowd enjoyed the music outside, we would always steal a moment in the gracious Robinson living room to catch up on the latest Henderson news.

Distance makes it difficult to stay connected, and we lived on opposite coasts, but whenever John or I went to New York, or whenever Luther or Billie would come to Los Angeles, we would get together. I had been in New York to see *Black and Blue* when it opened on Broadway, and John and I both saw *Jelly's Last Jam*, first in Los Angeles and later in New York. We knew that Luther was ill; we knew that he had cancer, but we thought he had beaten it. We would hear that Luther was very sick, and then we would talk to him and he'd tell us about a new project he was working on. This happened more than once. When the end finally came, we were blindsided, and unable to get to New York in time to see him. At least John was able to say a few words to him on the telephone during that last week when he was in hospice.

Later we learned that just a few weeks before Luther went into hospice care, Billie told him that he was to receive a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master Fellowship, an honor that pleased him greatly. She said that he responded with just one word: “Recognition.” He had little energy to say more, and died not long thereafter. John and I were not able to attend the New York memorial service, but we were there in 2004 when Billie Allen Henderson, accompanied onstage by Luther’s son, Luther Henderson III, and his daughter, Melanie Henderson, accepted the NEA Jazz Master Award in his memory.

As I watched the video montage of Luther’s life, I realized not only how little I really knew about this man and his legacy, but also how few of the three thousand people sitting around me in the immense ballroom of the Hilton hotel had even heard of him. I knew it was a situation I wanted to change.

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Six months later, on a hot Sunday afternoon one week after Father’s Day, a few dozen of us gathered in a recital hall at the Colburn School for the Arts, across the street from the new Disney Concert Hall in downtown Los Angeles. We were there to celebrate the life and legacy of Luther Henderson – his widow, Billie; songwriter and long-time family friend Mike Stoller; Bea Arthur of *Maude* and *Golden Girls* fame; composer Billy Goldenberg; biographer Anne Edwards; songwriter and author Stephen Citron; John Levy, my husband and Luther’s oldest friend and jazz cohort dating back to the 1930s; and actress Armelia McQueen, among others. Luther had died nearly a year before and a grand memorial had been held at The Riverside Church in New York City, but his daughter, Melanie, thought that there should be a west coast memorial as well. It mattered not whether she was seeking closure or reassurance that her father would not be forgotten; we all were glad for the opportunity to share music and reminisce.

Melanie opened the program with a few messages from loved ones who could not attend. “He never called her Tammy,” she said referring to actress Tammy Grimes. “He always called her Tim Tam – Tim Tam was a racehorse, I looked it up – so she said Tim Tam sends her love.” Actress Polly Bergen, Melanie’s godmother, also couldn’t be there, and Melanie tried to connect her via cell phone, to no avail.

Melanie told us the story of the first time her father accompanied her on piano, in a professional capacity. It was Melanie’s first audition for her first show, an off-Broadway musical called *The Me Nobody Knows*.

“I didn’t know any other piano players to call upon, phone, or to ask.”

We laughed appreciatively.

“So I said to him, ‘What are you doing on Thursday?’ And he said ‘Why?’ And I said, ‘Well, you know, I have this audition, and I have a song, but I don’t have anyone to play for me.’ So he said, ‘Sure, I’ll play for you.’

Melanie is a poised woman, with close-cropped hair, but we were all imagining her as a wild-haired, out-to-prove-herself teenager, and she was playing the role well.

“So we go to the audition, and for me, you know, it’s ‘Daddy’s gonna play for me,’ right? So we come into the room and there’s a panel of auditioners, and they all stood up. All at once they gasped “Luther!”

Melanie imitated the sound of that collective in-breath, a choral gasp. We’re really laughing now, clearly imagining the reception he got from colleagues who admired if not revered him. Melanie continued, just as she no doubt did back then.

“I’m 12, and I’m here for my own audition. So there’s this hubbub of ‘What are you doing with her?’ I was like [she shrugs]... you know, cause he’s here to play For Me; he’s My

Piano Player for today. So, this is the first song that he played for me, from *Oliver*, called *Who Will Buy?* The song, when I actually looked at the lyrics again, it seemed kind of appropriate because you have a moment that's a really great moment, and as you are enjoying the moment, you also realize it's getting ready to pass, and there's nothing to do to hold on to that moment."

After announcing that she will be singing it a little bit differently than she did when she was twelve, she crossed to the piano, found middle A on the piano to get her pitch, and hit her mark in the embrace of the piano's curvature. Then, she interrupted herself.

"Actually I just want to demonstrate where I heard most of the music from when I started," she said, as she sat down on the floor underneath the piano. "I was a little smaller." Then, standing tall once again, preceded only by a softly audible sigh,

Who will buy this wonderful morning?
Such a sky you never did see.
Who will tie it up with a ribbon
And put it in a box for me?

She sang for her Daddy and won the audition all over again.

The combination of Melanie's performance and something Armelia McQueen said later in the program made me wonder what sort of toll Luther's career might have taken on his family. Armelia was one of the five stars in the ensemble cast for both the original and revival productions of *Ain't Misbehavin'*. The show premiered on Broadway in 1978 with Nell Carter, André De Shields, Ken Page, Armelia, and Charlaine Woodard, and won the Tony Award[®] for Best Musical. It was Armelia's first performance in a Broadway show, for which she won the Theatre World Award. Luther was not only the arranger and musical supervisor for the show, he was also the conductor and on-stage pianist.

"He was the strong hand of the group," Armelia remembered. "And he led us on such a journey, and we had so much fun. Every day was just a party with him." But she also

acknowledged his role as a father figure, and in his memory, despite having a slight cold, she sang, a capella, *City Called Heaven*, a negro spiritual sometimes known as *Poor Pilgrim Of Sorrow*. She sang for us and for him.

I knew that Luther and Melanie had been estranged for many years (Melanie had told me that Luther had kicked her out of the house when she was fifteen), and I myself had seen Luther III, overshadowed by his father's talents, struggle for recognition of his own within the musical field. I imagined that it must have felt like a double-edged sword, for each of them, hearing stories about how profoundly Luther had nurtured the lives of others.

The most amazing performance of the afternoon came from the Canadian Brass, a primarily classical ensemble of five musicians. They began their tribute to Luther with an appropriately jazz-tinged rendition of *Amazing Grace*, after which Billie playfully called out, "Who's arrangement was that?" knowing full well that it was Luther's. And Anne Edwards called out, "I bet he's listening to you out there."

Chuck, one of the trumpet players, spoke about how Luther was their "link between the [jazz] tradition and five guys who went to classical music school and studied Bach." He explained how Luther's belief in what was jazz differed from that of Wynton Marsalis. "Wynton made a statement that I think he subsequently softened – 'if it ain't improvised, it ain't jazz' – and Luther felt like the improvisations he could do for us would be an organized cogent improvisation that would then be codified. It would become the classical music that could be handed down."

But Luther also loved what is commonly referred to as classical music, music in the European tradition by the old masters. Introducing their second piece, Chuck said, "Bach being

very important to Luther, he requested somewhere along the line that it was our duty to perform the *Toccatina and Fugue in D minor* in his honor, which we will fulfill this afternoon.”

The piece in question is a keyboard work, one with which Luther was totally familiar, and Chuck added, “I think he was amazed that we would play this at all on brass instruments.” Hearing a Bach piano piece rendered by two trumpets, a French horn, a trombone, and a tuba was certainly different, and Luther’s arrangement was both clever and delightful.

“We play Luther Henderson’s music every night,” Gene, the trombone player, told us. “He hasn’t missed a concert for at least twenty years. So we feel an attachment to him, and you can imagine it’s sort of emotional. Without Luther, there would have been no Canadian Brass. We feel that strongly.”

And with that, they launched into their final selection, an arrangement Luther had written for them early on, called *Saints Hallelujah*. Despite the fact that it was a memorial service of sorts, the atmosphere was festive, and I heard Billie say, “My favorite.” In this arrangement, the trombone leads off solo, and is then joined by the tuba. Meanwhile, the other three horns execute a few choreographed steps across stage, followed by an elaborately gesticulated preparation for what we anticipate to be their next musical entrance. They moved their horns toward their lips, but it’s a fake out, and instead of brass notes we heard them shout, “Hallelujah, Hallelujah.” The audience roared. Smiles were wide, even through an occasional tear, and that was how Luther would have liked it.

Creating a medley with *When the Saints Go Marching In*, a traditional New Orleans funeral parade song, with the classic *Hallelujah Chorus*, not only illustrates Luther’s humor and mischievous pleasure in tickling an audience, but it also epitomizes his desire to bridge the jazz and classical worlds. Luther agreed with his dear friend and collaborator, Duke Ellington, when

Duke said that there are only two kinds of music: good, and the other kind. I thought about the work that Luther had done for Duke in the 1940s, and the monumental symphonic Ellington project he had completed for Sir Simon Rattle and the Birmingham Symphony in Great Britain just a few years ago. On the surface you might say that it began and ended with Duke, and while to limit it thus would be a disservice to the outpouring of Luther's talent that filled the decades in between, it is true that Duke did play an elemental role in Luther's career.

It is equally true that Luther played a major role in the careers of many others: musicians, fellow orchestrators, and especially singers. From 1947 to 1950, Luther worked as pianist and musical director for Lena Horne. After that, singers flocked to him, wanting him to write their shows – a trend that continued for decades. Bea Arthur, Robert Goulet, Diahann Carroll, Nancy Wilson, Goldie Hawn, and Florence Henderson sing his praises to this day. Ms. Horne even called him back thirty years later to work on her one-woman show, *Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music*.

Bea Arthur, accompanied by Billy Goldenberg, was on hand that Sunday to share some memories. As Billy got settled at the piano, Bea told us a story about her invitation to sing a song called *It Amazes Me* at an affair honoring Cy Coleman twenty-five years ago.

“I thought, ‘I know there's going to be a lot of terrific talent honoring Cy,’ and I decided that rather than just slide in and go to rehearsal next day, I thought, ‘No. I'm going to go a day earlier and work with Luther and really kill the people.’”

We had no idea how the story would end, but already we were laughing

“So I did, and we worked; we worked all that day. Quite wonderful. And then the night of the event, which was, I remember, at Peacock Alley at the Waldorf – black tie, oh, I mean it was fabulous – a number of people got up and performed Cy's stuff. And then Tony Bennett came

and started singing and, of course, he leveled the place, just tore the place up to such a degree that – I don't know if you remember this, Billy – that he had to do an encore. So Cy sat down at the piano and Tony sang...*It Amazes Me*. I never in my life ... I was so devastated! So after that, we just went to the bar and got loaded.”

We, too, were ready to go to the bar and get loaded, but we quieted down as Bea, casually dressed in white pants, tunic top, and sandals, regal as ever, began to sing. Even without a microphone, her voice was strong and sure, her delivery, striking. She gave us two songs, *It Amazes Me*, and *Don't Miss the Chance to Sing*, composed by Billy with lyrics by Tom Jones. I didn't learn until later that while I've been at home watching twenty-year-old reruns of *The Golden Girls*, Bea has been on the road with her one-woman musical show *And Then There's Bea*, later renamed *Bea Arthur On Broadway*.

“Well, I can't sing, and I can't play the piano,” said Anne Edwards when she got up to speak. “Once I could dance; now I have an artificial hip, so that's impossible. But I would like to say a few words about Luther, my friend, my very very dear close friend.” As she spoke of the times they shared, not only as neighbors, but also working together on a show, getting lost on the road, and pacing hospital floors with one another, we could see “that wonderful smile on his face, and the glow in his cheek, and the way he would look over the top of his glasses at you and pull on his beard just a little when he was talking.”

Anne's husband, Steve Citron, had his own stories about Luther that ranged from their regularly shared morning swim in the basement pool of their apartment building, to their discussions about the importance of lyrics and harmony. He told us that Luther often wrote the lyrics underneath the music on the violin parts to enhance the musicians' understanding of the

piece, and they would discuss for hours the harmonic changes in songs, like the modulation from major to minor in *Every Time We Say Goodbye*, which he then played for us.

Billy Goldenberg had a story too. It was 1964, Billy was in his twenties, and had been hired to do the rehearsal piano and dance music for a show called *High Spirits* with Tammy Grimes and Beatrice Lillie, directed by Noel Coward. Hugh Martin, the show's composer, asked Billy if he'd like to write the overture. Billy was ecstatic, and petrified. It was Luther, a man he had never met before, who came to his rescue by helping him to orchestrate the overture.

“Luther came in and he looked at this sketch and he said, ‘This is really interesting.’ ‘Is it really, Luther? You’re the best. If you can do it, make it sound good.’ I said, ‘You know, I’ve done my best here, but I can’t really orchestrate.’ He said, ‘What do you mean, you can’t orchestrate?’ He said, ‘You’ve already done it here.’ He said, ‘I’ll add a few things and see if you like it.’ I said, ‘See if *I* like it!’ I said, ‘What does that matter?’ I said, ‘You do your genius thing,’ you know. Anyway, he did it, and well, everybody, the whole cast, they all stood up and clapped after the first orchestra rehearsal. And Luther came over to me and he said, ‘Next time you’re going to do it.’ And I did. And from then on, I did all my own things: stage, and then television and movies, and all of it. But it was Luther who said to me, ‘You can do it.’ That’s all he had to say. For someone who was so important to me, really to say that, changed my life. It really did. I’ll always remember him for that. Thank you, Luther.”

Jazz guitarist Kenny Burrell had made copious notes of things he wanted to tell us. If anyone loves Ellington's music more than Luther did, if anyone is more committed to the goal of preserving music history than Luther was, it is Kenny. While he was tuning up his guitar, he spoke at great length about Luther being Ellington's “classical arm,” an unsung hero, and a bridge between musical genres. He told us about how he first met Luther and hung out with him

in Duke's hotel room, and how much he learned from Luther when he studied with him in later years. And he cried when he remembered how proudly Luther displayed near his piano the UCLA plaque, a token of appreciation for which Kenny had arranged, and Kenny bemoaned the lack of recognition that Luther received during his lifetime. With time running out, Kenny played an original composition and an Ellington medley.

Luther III thanked his half-sister for arranging the afternoon, and introduced their older brother, Denson, who was sitting in the audience. He thanked everyone for attending and seemed especially moved by the stories told, many of which he had not heard before. After mentioning some of the amazing people that his father had introduced him to – Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie – and laughing about how everywhere he went, musicians knew his dad, Luther summarized, “His life is a lesson that we should do things that will make a difference, make a positive difference.”

What more was there to say? Plenty, I thought. After Luther III's stepdaughter sang *Precious Lord*, and Bille Allen Henderson thanked Melanie, the celebration was over...and my work had just begun.