

## A Musical Education: Lee Morgan and the Philadelphia Jazz Scene of the 1950s

By Jeffery S. McMillan

The guys were just looking at him. They couldn't believe what was coming out of that horn! You know, ideas like . . . where would you get them?

Michael LaVoe (1999)

When Michael LaVoe observed Lee Morgan, a fellow freshman at Philadelphia's Mastbaum Vocational Technical High School, playing trumpet with members of the school's dance band in the first days of school in September 1953, he could not believe his ears. Morgan, who had just turned fifteen years old the previous July, had remarkable facility on his instrument and displayed a sophisticated understanding of music for someone so young. Other members of the ensemble, some of whom already had three years of musical training and performing experience in the school's vocational music program, experienced similar feelings of disbelief when they heard the newcomer's precocious ability. Lee Morgan had successfully auditioned into Mastbaum's music program, the strongest of its kind in Philadelphia from the 1930s through the 1960s, and demonstrated a rare ability that begged the title "prodigy."

Almost exactly three years later, in November of 1956, Lee Morgan, now a member of the Dizzy Gillespie orchestra, elicited a similar response at the professional level after the band's New York opening at Birdland. Word spread, and as the Gillespie band embarked on its national tour, audiences and critics nationwide took notice of the young soloist featured on what was often the leader's showcase number: "A Night in Tunisia." Nat Hentoff caught the band on their return to New York from the Midwest in 1957.

My back was to the bandstand as the band started "Night in Tunisia." Suddenly, a trumpet soared out of the band into a break that was so vividly brilliant and electrifying that all conversation in the room stopped and those of us who were gesturing were frozen with hands outstretched. After the first thunderclap impact, I turned and saw that the trumpeter was the very young sideman from Philadelphia, Lee Morgan. (Hentoff 1965)

Morgan, who had been the subject of much discussion in the jazz recording industry for months preceding his debut with Gillespie, began his recording career as a leader with *Lee Morgan, Indeed!* (Blue Note BLP 1538) on November 4, 1956, followed by *Introducing Lee Morgan* (Savoy MG 12091) the next day. He continued to record, primarily with Blue Note, throughout his time with Gillespie and when the band dissolved in January 1958, he was an established musician with numerous recordings to his credit, including *The Cooker* (Blue Note BLP 1578), under his own leadership, and *Blue Train* (Blue Note BLP 1577) for John Coltrane. His fiery playing found an ideal setting in Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, with whom he appeared on many of Blue Note's premier recordings of the era: *Moanin'* (Blue Note BST 84003), *Africaine* (Blue Note LT 1088), and *A Night in Tunisia* (Blue Note BST 84049). Following his tenure with Blakey, Morgan led his own combos and continued to generate an impressive output of compositions and recordings, many of which are sublime in their blend of beauty, fire, and humor. Tragically Morgan's life and career were cut short in 1972 when he was fatally shot by a girlfriend at Slug's Saloon in New York City.

In the limited literature available on Morgan, authors almost invariably touch on at least one of three themes: Lee Morgan as a "prodigy," his "hit" record, *The Sidewinder*, and his spectacular early death. These *idées fixes*, along with references to the trumpeter's drug use, too easily make Morgan's life something of a characterization, sacrificing him and his art to a generic type—the prototypical jazz life. While two of these themes are slightly less contentious—*The Sidewinder* was his most successful recording and he was, in fact, murdered at the age of thirty-three during a performance engagement—the third, his reputation as a "prodigy," is more problematic and warrants greater investigation. The following narrative serves to reconsider the identification of Lee Morgan as a "prodigy," a term which often mystifies an artist by simplifying our understanding of their humanness and agency.

Authors and critics most often mention Morgan's youth when he emerged on the national jazz scene, variously referring to him as a "prodigy," "enfant terrible," "wunderkind," or *the young lion*.<sup>1</sup> In fact, a trend of exaggeration plagues some of the discourse on Morgan, leading some to erroneously state that Morgan was younger than he actually was when he made his head-turning debut with Gillespie.<sup>2</sup> The implication is often that Morgan's talent in some way predestined him for greatness and that fate launched him into the world of professional jazz.<sup>3</sup> While he undoubtedly had "natural gifts," such as perfect pitch, Morgan's talent and growth as a musician were more remarkable for his own conscious role in furthering

them, than for that of fate or the “God-given” ability often attributed to “prodigies.”

The truth about Lee Morgan is that he did not emerge, like Athena, fully formed from the head of Zeus. He passed, along with many other Philadelphia-based musicians, through a diverse and extensive musical apprenticeship that equipped him with considerable experience. The musically supportive environment of mid-century Philadelphia provided a complex positive feedback system that routinely produced experienced musicians of the highest caliber, such as John Coltrane and Jimmy Heath, as well as non-jazz musicians like Marian Anderson, pianist André Watts, and, much later, the vocal group Boyz II Men. Public school programs, interaction with professional musicians, numerous performance venues, and a civic emphasis on the performing arts combined to nurture talent in the city’s youth and encourage them to pursue a creative life in the arts. For jazz musicians like Lee Morgan, these elements were further complemented by the proactive attitudes of many of the city’s families, club-owners, disc jockeys, and, most of all, musicians, to provide the city’s aspiring young players with an invaluable foundation. This network can be called the Philadelphia jazz community. Lee Morgan was one of the elite to emerge from this environment and successfully make the transition from local hero to internationally known artist. Being recognized as a musical prodigy was not what determined Morgan’s success; his motivation and hustling resourcefulness allowed the trumpeter to make the most of his opportunities and develop his ability in such a way that his classmates at Mastbaum and, later, the jazz audience at large would take notice. An understanding of his early musical activity in Philadelphia is essential to appreciate Morgan’s career and success as a jazz musician.

Edward Lee Morgan, the youngest of four siblings, was born on July 10, 1938, in a predominantly African American neighborhood of the Tioga section of north Philadelphia. His parents, Otto and Nettie Morgan, had settled in the neighborhood during the 1920s after migrating independently to the city from South Carolina and Georgia, respectively. Like a great number of African Americans that made up the Great Migration from the South in the first decades of the twentieth century, Morgan’s parents moved to Philadelphia with hopes of a better life and greater opportunity. It was there that they married and proceeded to raise a family in their home on West Madison Street.

The Morgans were a musical as well as a church-going family. According to Lee’s older brother, Jimmy, the first child in the family to display a talent for music was the eldest daughter, Ernestine. “Ernestine was an accomplished piano player and also an organist, but her music was basically playing in the church,” he recalled. “She had the basic knowl-

edge of music and she had been playing since she was about eight years old" (Morgan 1998). Ernestine, who also sang in community choirs and led the choir at the family's church, Second Baptist Church in north Philadelphia, had a significant influence on her youngest brother's interest in music. When they were in grammar school and junior high school, Ernestine took both Lee and Jimmy to performances at Philadelphia's Earle Theater. The Earle Theater, like the Apollo in Harlem, the Regal Theater in Chicago, and the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C., was a stop on the "Chitlin' Circuit," a series of theaters in major urban centers that showcased primarily black artists for primarily black audiences. At the Earle Theater, the young Morgan would have seen and heard the preeminent figures in black music including Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, and the Duke Ellington Orchestra.

Such early exposure fueled his interest in music and by the time he was twelve, Morgan began to experiment with musical instruments. Jimmy Morgan remembered his brother's first efforts at playing music: "His first instrument, which a lot of people don't know, was the vibes." Playing the vibraphone for less than a year, Morgan soon turned his attention to the trumpet. Ernestine again played a crucial role in Lee's musical development when she recognized the youngster's seriousness and bought him a trumpet for his thirteenth birthday. Although Morgan's interest in playing the vibraphone was short-lived, he became a dedicated student of the trumpet and began practicing diligently.

Morgan's desire to play the trumpet was by no means arbitrary. In addition to hearing trumpet players like Roy Eldridge and Louis Armstrong at the Earle Theater, many young musicians living near the Morgan home encouraged his eagerness to play and study the trumpet. Donald Wilson, an active pianist, trumpeter, and bandleader in Philadelphia, lived a block away from Morgan and mentored the young trumpeter by teaching him scales and how to improvise on chord changes. Wilson, who was only a few years older than Morgan, helped other young musicians in the neighborhood by hosting sessions where the musicians would take turns improvising along with a record. Another neighborhood influence was Alan Washington who, according to Wilson, loved Dizzy Gillespie and could play many of Gillespie's recorded solos. Washington was an inspiration to many young musicians in the neighborhood, especially those that gravitated toward modern jazz and were knowledgeable about the available recordings (Wilson 2001).

Through his exposure to locals such as Wilson and Washington, Morgan developed a passion for jazz, and during his teen years, with the help of his parents, he amassed an impressive record collection. Bebop horn players such as Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie dominated his collection. Bassist Reggie Workman, another celebrated Philadelphia musician, remembers

that Morgan “had an incredible record library and all of us would get together every week to listen to his records” (Rosenthal 1992:6). These listening sessions, like those at the Wilson household, were also jam sessions and offered the attendees a chance to play music together. The Morgan family frequently hosted sessions because, in addition to Lee’s record library, the family owned a piano. Unlike some church-going families of the time, the Morgans supported their son’s interest in jazz and did not view it as a morally depraved music, giving Lee’s creativity a chance to blossom. It is during this time, one in which Morgan was surrounded by jazz musicians—both students and professionals—that his ability began to develop rapidly.

Morgan began taking trumpet lessons shortly after he received the instrument and his first instructor was a man named Hy Wynn, a music teacher who also played trumpet for the Philadelphia Ice Capades (LaVoe 1999). Wynn and other music teachers were part of a program inaugurated by Louis Werson, the architect of Philadelphia’s visionary music education curriculum in the public schools, where children could go to designated sites throughout the city and receive musical instruction for free. “At the beginning we had free lessons on Saturday mornings at Broad and Olney [The Widener’s School For Crippled Children],” recalled Mike LaVoe who took trumpet lessons at the same location as Morgan. “On my first day there, we had thirty kids in the class, just as an introductory class” (ibid.). LaVoe, unimpressed with Wynn’s pedagogical techniques, began studying privately with Sigmund Herring, a trumpet player with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Morgan, on the other hand, learned what he could from Wynn, if only as a supplement to the primary musical education that had begun in his neighborhood.

During the 1950s many prominent jazz musicians lived throughout the city of Philadelphia. The older musicians, such as Coltrane, Jimmy Heath, and Benny Golson, were largely born in the 1920s. The flock of younger musicians born in the mid-1930s—i.e., Morgan’s contemporaries—included Workman, Ted Curson, Bobby Timmons, Archie Schepp, Clarence Sharpe, Kenny Rodgers, Jimmy Vass, Odean Pope, Jimmy Garrison, Spanky DeBrest, Albert Heath, and McCoy Tyner. Of these, only Tyner, born in December 1938, was younger than Morgan.

Philadelphia’s musical population enjoyed a variety of performance venues. Workman recalled, “Lee came up when Philly jazz was very strong and there were lots of clubs: Pep’s, the Showboat, the Blue Note around 15th and Ridge, the Oasis, the Aqua Lounge in West Philly, plus all kinds of social clubs and taverns that had live music” (Rosenthal 1992:6). In addition to these were Spider Kelly’s, the Earle Theater, the Academy of Music, Music City, as well as countless other locales—lodges, musicians’ homes, community centers, the Musicians’ Union office—where musi-

cians could meet, listen, and play music. In addition to the numerous opportunities for jazz performance, the city was also home to the Curtis Institute of Music and one of the twentieth century's most prestigious symphonic aggregations, the Philadelphia Orchestra, under the direction of Eugene Ormandy.

The jazz community in Philadelphia was especially supportive of giving young musicians a chance to develop their skills. According to Workman:

The owners and managers (of performance venues) were so into music that they'd allow us to have jam sessions and come into the clubs and play during the early evening hours, even though we were too young to drink. There was a very healthy music scene in the community taverns at the time, aside from the fact that there were people like Tommy Monroe who ran music workshops for young musicians, or Owen Marshall's big band workshop with new music he wrote and that rehearsed in living rooms, taverns, ballrooms, any place that had a piano and chairs and where we could make music. (Rosenthal 1992:6)

Morgan took full advantage of his exceptionally musical city and his development and later success is a direct reflection of the supportive environment of Philadelphia during the 1940s and 1950s.

The two notables mentioned by Workman above, Tommy Monroe and Owen Marshall, were part of a rehearsal band scene that brought young musicians together. Although they met and practiced frequently, rehearsal bands rarely performed in Philadelphia's numerous nightclubs or bars due to union restrictions and the ages of the musicians. Their performance opportunities were often limited to social gatherings, school dances, and parties at Elk's lodges, small theaters, or high school gymnasiums. There were many such groups in Philadelphia during the 1950s and they often rehearsed in living rooms, community centers, and auditoriums. Wilmer Wise, a trumpeter from South Philadelphia who played in some of the ensembles, including the Tommy Monroe band, remembers, "I used to see Lee with the rehearsal band scene. Tommy Monroe had a big band and we played Dizzy Gillespie charts. That was the first time I heard Lee play jazz and he was, at 14 years old, absolutely awesome" (Wise 2000).<sup>4</sup>

Like Monroe, Owen Marshall was an important figure in Philadelphia's jazz community of the early 1950s. Marshall, a trumpet player and composer/arranger, led a big band comprised of basically "a bunch of kids," said Wise (Wise 2000). The band played the music of many different jazz composers, but tended to focus on rehearsing Marshall's own compositions. Bassist Jimmy Garrison also played in Marshall's band and said of its

leader, "Owen Marshall (was) one of the better writer/arrangers in Philadelphia" (Heckman 1967). Marshall's association with Morgan extended into 1956 when he contributed four compositions—"Gaza Strip," "The Lady," "His Sister," and "D's Fink"—and helped with arrangements on Morgan's first record dates for Blue Note.

The rehearsal bands of Monroe and Marshall, as well as those of others such as Cal Massey and Bill Carney (Mr. C), provided Morgan with an organized atmosphere in which to refine his sight reading, ensemble playing, and section playing skills. By the age of fourteen, Morgan was already beginning to earn a reputation as a talented player and he started to experiment with leading his own small combos. His apprenticeship was far from over, however, and in 1953 he made the important decision to study music in high school.

During his years at Gillespie Junior High, Morgan decided that he wanted to play music professionally, especially modern jazz. Although his older siblings had attended Simon Gratz High School, which was a short walk from the family's home, Morgan asked his parents to send him to Jules E. Mastbaum Vocational Technical High School in the Northeast section of Philadelphia, a lengthy trolley ride to the East. Mastbaum had a respected vocational music program that attracted the young trumpeter, and while the school equipped students with orchestral and concert band experience, it had also earned a reputation for training great jazz players including Joe Wilder, Buddy DeFranco, Johnny Coles, and Red Rodney. Many of Morgan's slightly older contemporaries—Ted Curson, Henry Grimes, Sam Reed, and Kenny Rodgers—were already students at Mastbaum when he made his decision to audition for the music program.

Music was just one of many vocational "majors" available to Mastbaum's student body. The school was built in the largely European immigrant section of Kensington (also known as "Fish Town" due to its proximity to the Delaware River) so the children of Philadelphia's working class could learn practical trade skills—machine construction, carpentry, sewing, etc.—while receiving an academic education. For students interested in the arts, the curriculum was equally practical. Music majors spent their afternoons in classes like music theory, harmony, composition, solfeggio, and rehearsals for the concert band, dance band, and marching band.

Morgan's decision to attend Mastbaum clearly demonstrates his commitment to a career in music. In addition to the daily, cross-town trolley ride, attending Mastbaum also meant leaving the security of a black neighborhood and traveling to a school that was overwhelmingly comprised of white students. "In 'Fish Town' there were no Afro-Americans living there at all," Mike LaVoe recalled. "Lee lived in an all Afro-American neighbor-

hood, but we had none in that school because it was a trade school. None of the Afro-Americans were going into trades." Black students were so uncommon within the student body that the only African Americans that LaVoe remembered were four students in the band. He said, "There was Lee, Kenny (Rodgers), a girl in the percussion section, and a guy, I think he played tuba, or something. They didn't live in that area" (LaVoe 1999).

It was not uncommon for children of exceptional ability to travel great distances for the music program at Mastbaum. Many of the school's music majors, including Morgan, Rodgers, LaVoe, and, earlier on, Tony Marchione, Henry Grimes, Buddy De Franco, and Red Rodney, all commuted from different parts of the city to learn the "trade" and become professional musicians. The nature of this sacrifice is even more exceptional when one considers that a graduate of Mastbaum in the 1950s received a vocational certificate rather than a high school diploma. Students that left their own school districts to study music at Mastbaum were, in effect, foregoing any possibility of attending college after graduation because they would lack a diploma or sufficient academic credits to be eligible for collegiate study.

The music program at Mastbaum, among the first established at the school, had been directed since the early 1940s by Ross Wyre, the former director of the Annapolis Military Band. Graduates from Wyre's program received a respectable musical education and landed jobs in symphony and theater orchestras, became Hollywood studio musicians in the booming film industry, and worked in big bands. In 1953, Mastbaum was the logical choice for any student with enough talent to get in due to its prestigious reputation, the quality of training, and the networking potential. Morgan, however, had his own motives. LaVoe remarked, "Lee, he knew his destiny already . . . jazz was his thing, not classical music" (LaVoe 1999). In the wake of the innovative music of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and others during the previous decade, modern jazz required extensive harmonic knowledge and technical virtuosity. Morgan knew he would have to soak in as much music as he could in order to excel, and Mastbaum would provide a solid foundation.

Morgan learned about the school's outstanding reputation and decided to go there based on the encouragement of his neighborhood friend, Kenny Rodgers. Rodgers, who played alto saxophone, was a little over a year older than Morgan, but the two were very close and played together frequently as teenagers. Jimmy Morgan remembered, "Kenny Rodgers was sort of like, you might say, his 'main man' and [they were] playing gigs. They were very good friends. They used to go around and call themselves 'Bird and Diz'" (Morgan 1998).<sup>5</sup> LaVoe, who started at Mastbaum along with Morgan in the fall of 1953, also remembered



Morgan's friendship with Rodgers: "They used to argue every morning in the assembly hall in the auditorium before we went to class and they would be screaming about (chord) changes. They would be going back and forth, you know talking about it all the time." Morgan's and Rodgers's musical knowledge—and jazz connoisseurship—was quite advanced, even at the beginning of high school, and they, along with other jazz enthusiasts in the Mastbaum band, frequently discussed chord progressions and professional jazz musicians. Although Morgan was in a high school music program known for training students in Western classical musical, he gravitated toward those who played jazz and became part of the "jazz clique."

Lee used to scream at Kenny, "What are you talkin' about man? Here's a dime. Go buy yourself some soul. That change is wrong. You don't want to play that change. You want to play a C ninth," or whatever, you know. They'd be screaming at each other all morning. Henry Grimes would come in and get into the argument too. A lot of us didn't even know what they were talking about, you know. Lee would lift his hand up on his other hand and with the trumpet fingering show him, "No, this is what I would play on these changes" or "This is what Miles would do, man" or "This is what Clarence Sharpe would play." . . .

Early in the morning we would all come into the auditorium, the whole school, and we would wait until the bell would ring to go to our classes. So the band would all congregate in one corner of the auditorium in the seats and all these guys, these five or six guys, would talk about were progressions, and changes, and Miles, and the Bird, you know. This was the conversation. (LaVoe 1999)

The group of jazz enthusiasts, primarily students who played in the school's dance band, often had jam sessions before school in the auditorium. It was during one of these sessions during their freshman year that LaVoe first heard Morgan play in a jazz ensemble context, an experience that elicited the astonishment expressed in the epigraph to this article. "Right at that moment," said LaVoe, "it clicked in my mind that 'this guy is scary' " (LaVoe 1999).

Morgan's first year at Mastbaum was filled with activity, mainly musical activity, and his ability developed rapidly. He began taking lessons with a postgraduate named Tony Marchione, who, while only a few years older than Morgan, was considered by many in the know to be a master trumpet player.<sup>6</sup> In addition to beginning private lessons, it was during Morgan's first semester of high school that Wyre recommended him to the prestigious Philadelphia All-Senior High School Orchestra (or "All-City"), a "by recommendation only" ensemble comprised of the best young musicians

from the Philadelphia school system (LaVoe 2000). Morgan sat fourth chair in a trumpet section that included Wilmer Wise, Louis Opaleski, and Eddie McCoy, all one or two years older than Lee. Despite the prestige of playing in All-City, Morgan left the orchestra during his second year at Mastbaum. "He wasn't in the orchestra for very long," said LaVoe. "He was in it two years. The third year he wasn't in it because he knew it wasn't his scene" (LaVoe 2000).

Early in 1954, a Camden, New Jersey, DJ named Tommy Roberts began holding jazz sessions at the Heritage House, a north Philadelphia community center located on the second floor of what is now the Freedom Theater at 1346 N. Broad Street. These sessions became an important part of the Philadelphia jazz scene, especially for young musicians, and gave birth to a series of events known as the "Jazz Workshop." Beginning in April 1954, the Workshop met every Friday afternoon from 4:00 to 6:00 and featured prominent jazz artists who were in town playing evening engagements in the clubs in Center City. The first hour of each session entailed a performance by the featured artists and was followed by an intermission where members of the audience were free to socialize with the musicians. The second hour was devoted to young musicians and composers who were encouraged to sit in with the artists or submit their work to be performed by the band. This unique, hands-on opportunity for youngsters to learn about jazz was augmented by the quality of artists that appeared at the Workshop. In 1954 alone the artists included the Chet Baker Quintet (featuring James Moody), Johnny Hodges's band (which, at the time, included John Coltrane), Buddy DeFranco, Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, Bud Powell, Ella Fitzgerald, George Shearing, Roy Eldridge, the Erroll Garner Trio, and Billy Taylor. Besides a 75¢ admission fee, there was only one restriction to being admitted to the Workshop: every attendee was required to be twenty years old or younger. Those of legal drinking age, twenty-one or older, had to take their business to the clubs to hear the artists.

Such an opportunity to jam with professional jazz musicians was not lost on the young musicians of Philadelphia. Lee Morgan and others from north Philadelphia, as well as enthusiasts that had to travel from further reaches of the city, became regulars at the Workshop. Morgan was among the attendees for the inaugural session on April 9, 1954 when Chet Baker and his group, who were in town playing at the Blue Note, gave a performance. The *Philadelphia Tribune* reviewed the event:

Last Friday's initial affair was very successful and included James Moody, Chet Baker, Russ Freeman and others. James Moody played tenor sax on the occasion and was well received by all present. The

session was two hours long, with a break in the last half set aside for aspiring musicians and composers. Something very nice was done by 3 students from Mastbaum Vocational School. (McBride 1954)

Although Morgan's name was not mentioned in the review, he was certainly one of the three Mastbaum students according to another attendee, Wilmer Wise. "Chet Baker played there one day, and Lee came up and played—you know, skinny, scrawny, little Lee—and *blew* Chet Baker completely out of the room," Wise recounts. "Lee was that kind of player when he was a kid" (Wise 2000). This remarkable event, where a fifteen-year-old Mastbaum freshman "cut" Chet Baker, the year's winner of the *Down Beat* critics poll for best trumpet player, attests to Morgan's skill and confidence at this point in his development. At this and later sessions, Morgan's reputation within the Philadelphia musical community grew rapidly and he continued to make valuable contacts and secure gigs.

It was at the Heritage House that Morgan met Clifford Brown, the trumpeter who would become his idol and mentor. Born in Wilmington, Delaware, on October 30, 1930, Brown, whose recordings from the early to mid 1950s display some of the best trumpet playing in the history of jazz, became associated with the Philadelphia jazz scene by working with a locally based group, Chris Powell and the Blue Flames, and eventually moving to the city in 1954. Morgan frequented the Browns' household in west Philadelphia between 1954 and 1956, receiving invaluable instruction from Brown, though he did not take formal lessons with him. Larue Brown-Watson, Clifford's wife, recalled: "Clifford was never teaching, so whenever they got together it was a lesson, but it was never one where Lee planned to come and take a lesson. They were hanging out, you know, but it always ended up being a lesson." As their friendship grew, their meetings extended beyond musical matters, and a mentor-student relationship developed. "I think he (Morgan) knew he could trust Clifford," said Brown-Watson. "Sometimes they would go down in the basement, and I would not be allowed, because they needed to talk. What they talked about I never knew because it was never discussed." Although the Philadelphia jazz scene involved much hanging out and jamming at different musicians' homes, Morgan never brought friends to the Browns' home for a session. "He always came alone," Mrs. Brown-Watson said. "He and Cliff, I think, were jealous of their time together" (Brown-Watson 2000).

During high school Morgan played with many different jazz groups outside of school, often acting as the leader. One group that he led frequently played college parties and dances in the Philadelphia area and occasionally Atlantic City. This combo, which included Spanky DeBrest (bass), McCoy Tyner (piano), and Lex Humphries or Eddie Campbell (drums) was in demand and performing at Friday and Saturday night

functions as early as the summer of 1954, when Morgan was only 15. Sonny Fortune, a north Philadelphia saxophonist born in 1939, recalled Morgan's presence on the college dance scene: "Fraternities' and sororities' . . . parties were big. They would have these dances and McCoy Tyner and Lee Morgan and them, they used to play at these affairs" (Crouch 1964:79).

Odean Pope often co-led this group with Morgan. Born in the same year as Morgan, Pope also got started in music quite early and, like Morgan, was playing gigs in his early teens. Pope recalled life in Philadelphia as a young, aspiring musician:

I remember in the early '50s Lee Morgan and I used to play duets together. I was exposed to a whole host of musicians during that time. It was Jimmy Garrison, Spanky DeBrest, (pianist) Hasaan Ibn Ali, Jymie Merritt, Jimmy Heath, Benny Golson. It was a whole host of young musicians really developing the basic jazz techniques. I feel very fortunate to have lived during that period because there was so much knowledge. Spanky DeBrest for example, we used to go around his house for sessions. Reggie Workman too, during that time would always generate some kind of interest in terms of getting the musicians together. Plus two or three times a week we used to play in my basement. (Van Trikt 1989)

Like Morgan, Odean Pope was also a regular at the Jazz Workshop at the Heritage House.

Archie Shepp, an outspoken saxophonist who achieved both notoriety and acclaim as an avant-garde performer during the 1960s, was another young musician in north Philadelphia who attended Roberts's Jazz Workshop. It was at the Workshop that Shepp met Lee Morgan in 1954. In a 1965 interview, Shepp vividly recounted his high school years and the environment in north Philadelphia at the time. His discussion of Morgan, Mastbaum, and the Jazz Workshop conveys the richness and communality of the Philadelphia jazz scene in the 1950s and deserves to be quoted at length.

Mastbaum was the school—that's where there were a whole lot of cats playing—that's north Philly. Most of the cats lived further south in north Philly. Everybody was trying to get that early Jazz Messenger sound then. Lee Morgan and an alto player named Kenny Rogers (sic) really got me started playing jazz. Kenny first recorded with Lee . . . He used to sound like early Lou Donaldson . . . you know, that great big alto sound.

There was a place called the Jazz Workshop, run by a disc jockey, I used to go to after school. I guess that was the place where I really

began to hear it. Before that I just heard my father, mostly Dixieland and r&b.

Lee frequented the place all the time . . . He and Kenny were like local heroes, and this was about the time Lee was 14. He was a very young cat, but he was playing. Henry Grimes, Ted Curson, and Bobby Timmons used to come in too. There was something like a rivalry between the north Philly and south Philly musicians. Spanky DeBrest was from north Philly. It seemed like some very good bass players came out of south Philly, Jimmy Garrison and Grimes. South Philly was the original Negro settlement, but the flux had been to the north.

[At the Workshop] they let the young cats come on and play. I started talking to Lee at this place one time and went home with him and Kenny.

They asked me who I liked. I said Brubeck and Getz. And they really wiggled out . . . but they were being very, very hip. I was square as a mother. You can imagine the reaction. They said, "Oh yeah?" So then these cats asked me to take out my horn and play something. I had a C-melody sax about that time, and I guess I had a sort of a Stan Getz sound. Print that laugh!

Lee was doing everything he could to keep from laughing in my face. But then he pulled out his horn and played the blues with me. The blues was something I'd been playing for a long time, because of my old man. I heard a lot of the blues then . . . I had to forget all about my Stan Getz stuff. Then I just played like I play. I didn't know any chord changes at all, but I could hear the blues. I could always hear the blues. So then these cats stopped playing and said "Yeah, that was right." Then after that they sort of took an interest in me. It was my introduction to real jazz music. (Jones 1965)

Shepp's account clearly demonstrates how the Philadelphia jazz community inspired and educated the city's youth. The Jazz Workshop sessions brought celebrated jazz artists into direct contact with children and teenagers and the more advanced young players, in turn, helped their peers' development. Despite his youth, Morgan's intense musical activity prior to April 1954 was considerable and he was a source of inspiration for other young players, including those, like Shepp, who were older than him. "Lee was very influential to me growing up, I'm just a year older than he was. And he was quite a mentor to me during those few years," says Shepp. "Saturday afternoons I used to go to his mother's house and very often I would either bring some music or play some music he had. Things like 'Sippin At Bells' or 'Tempus Fugit,' where I'd play the chords just straight up, you know, root up . . . And Lee was very helpful to me on the

saxophone. He led me to identify solos and to learn how to play, you might say, notes against the chords" (Sidran 1995:253–54).

Shepp and bassist Reggie Workman both lived in the northwest section of the city called Germantown, but their activity and that of Morgan overlapped and they worked and jammed together frequently. In 1954 and 1955 the three played together in a rhythm and blues group that went under the names of Carl Holmes and the Jolly Rompers and Carl Holmes and his Commandos. Holmes, from Willow Grove, Pennsylvania—also the hometown of Bud Powell—"knew a little guitar and sang the hell out of the blues" according to Workman. Morgan recalled the band as "the first rock and roll group I was in" (Gallagher 1970).

The Jolly Rompers made most of their appearances during the summer of 1955. Meanwhile, Morgan spent his junior year performing with the school ensembles, All-City, his own groups, rehearsal bands, at the Jazz Workshop, at fraternity parties, and wherever else he could play. All of this playing experience, combined with his music classes at Mastbaum, jam sessions, private lessons with Marchione and Brown, and a strict practice regimen, precipitated a dramatic change in Morgan's ability. LaVoe remembered,

Once he learned how to play the instrument, it was as if he had played it all his life. He was really something! And I don't know how it all came to fruition with him because we never did any of that stuff in school, you know. We just played concert band music mostly and we had a dance band and he was in that. All this jazz stuff he got on the outside. (LaVoe 2000)

A strong internal drive to play music coupled with his fertile environs built Lee Morgan into a formidable musician of talent and experience.

In 1947, a drummer named Ellis Tolin and his business partner William Welsh opened a music store called Music City on 18th Street and Chestnut in Center City Philadelphia. It started as a simple drum shop, but over the years it developed into a prominent venue for the top names in jazz to perform and engage in jam sessions both with each other and with the youth of Philadelphia. The jam sessions most likely began during the summer of 1954—possibly inspired by Tommy Roberts's Jazz Workshop—and came to a halt only a few years later when the business folded.<sup>7</sup> During a small window of about three years, Philadelphia had a unique performance venue that paired youngsters with the most prominent figures of the modern jazz world.

Tolin, a semi-retired drummer who had played with leading musicians of the thirties and forties, had many connections within the jazz world and was able to book the top stars for performances at his store. The performances usually occurred on Tuesday nights from 7:00 to 9:00 which allowed

musicians an opportunity to play at Music City without it interfering with their obligations at other clubs in town. Monday night was rehearsal night and was open for anyone to come and sit in. Tuesday afternoons often saw the professionals around the store offering clinics, jamming, and socializing with young musicians. Clifford Brown, Sonny Stitt, and others dropped by frequently and worked with the youngsters for two or three hours during these afternoon sessions.

Just as he had taken advantage of the Friday workshop sessions at the Heritage House, Morgan became a regular at the Music City sessions. In fact, most of the jazz players at Mastbaum became regulars, ditching their afternoon classes to get there early. LaVoe remembered how the “jazz guys” were always missing from band rehearsals on Tuesdays: “We never had those guys on Tuesday afternoons in our music program. They all ran over there and listened and learned even though they had their background with us” (LaVoe 1999).

Most of Morgan’s networking with musicians from outside of the Philadelphia area was through Music City, as it was for many up and coming musicians. LaVoe believed the sessions had a tremendous impact on many young musicians in Philadelphia. He said, “I don’t think those jazz musicians that came there realized the influence they were having on these young players . . . the positive influence that they had.” LaVoe remembered the musicians who gathered in the auditorium before school were always especially animated in their discussions of changes and jazz musicians on Wednesday mornings (LaVoe 1999). Trumpeter and Mastbaum alumnus Ted Curson, who traces the beginning of his professional career to Music City, recalled the store’s significance: “It was like the scene in Philadelphia for young cats and old cats. They would bring guys in from New York to play and they would have the young guys sit in with them. If you played pretty good you always ended up with some kind of gig” (Giddins and Rusch 1976).

Lee Morgan graduated from Mastbaum on June 15, 1956, almost a month shy of his eighteenth birthday (see his yearbook photo in figure 1).<sup>8</sup> After graduation he remained active musically throughout the summer of 1956, playing with McCoy Tyner, Clarence Sharpe, Lex Humphries, and others at venues in Philadelphia, Atlantic City, and Wildwood, New Jersey. This was an important summer for Morgan and his life and career underwent dramatic changes. On June 26, following a jam session at Music City, Morgan’s friend and idol, Clifford Brown, accompanied by pianist Ritchie Powell and Powell’s wife, left Philadelphia in an automobile headed for Chicago. Heavy rain precipitated a crash on the Pennsylvania Turnpike in

**Figure 1:** Lee Morgan's 1956 yearbook picture from Mastbaum Vocational Technical School.

**FRANCIS JOSEPH MICENEC**

2211 E. Sergeant St. MC  
*Frank*—Varsity Football 10A, 11A and 12A; J.V. Basketball 10A, 11A; J.V. Baseball 10A, 11A; Guide 12A.  
*Hobby:* Sports.

**LEONA MIELOCK**

3051 Salmon St. CG  
*Lee*—Alternate 9B, Swimming 11A.  
*Future Plans:* To become a secretary.

**ROBERT MILLER**

2013 E. Clementine St. RT  
*Whimpy*—Lunch League Softball 11B, First Merit Award.  
*Future Plans:* To become a radio and television technician.

**EDMUND J. MISKO, Jr.**

5016 Cottage St. MD  
*Eddie*—Banker 9B, 10A and 10B; Lunch League Softball 9B, 11A, 11B.

**CONSTANCE G. MITCHELL**

3622 Edgemont St. CG  
*Connie*—Senator 10A, 11A, 11B; Alternate 10B, Junior Prom Committee 11A.  
*Hobby:* Basketball.  
*Future Plans:* To become a secretary.

**EDWARD LEE MORGAN**

2035 W. Madison St. MU  
*Lee*—Lunch League Softball 11A, 11B; Jems 10B, 11B; Football, Band, and Combo.  
*Hobby:* Collecting jazz records.  
*Ambition:* To be a jazz trumpet player.





the early morning hours that killed all three passengers. Brown's death shook up the jazz community and had a profound effect on many musicians who were close to him, including Lee Morgan. According to Jimmy Morgan, Lee was crushed by the news of the twenty-five-year-old trumpeter's death and had a difficult time dealing with the loss. Brown, whose successful quintet with drummer Max Roach was on the rise at the time of his death, was the preeminent young talent on trumpet in 1955 and 1956. His death left a vacuum and left the press and record companies searching for the next "Brownie."<sup>9</sup> Whether the tragedy galvanized Blue Note and Savoy's interest in getting Morgan into the studio in November 1956, Morgan's arrival on the scene certainly helped fill the void and provided jazz with a new and exciting trumpeter.

Another pivotal event involved Morgan and his long-time friend and band mate Spanky DeBrest being invited to fill in as Jazz Messengers when Art Blakey came to Philadelphia during the summer of 1956. The Messengers had undergone many personnel changes in the weeks leading up to their July 23–28 engagement at Philadelphia's Blue Note. A few months earlier the band included Donald Byrd on trumpet, Ira Sullivan on trumpet/tenor sax/alto sax, Wynton Kelly on piano, Wilbur Ware on bass, and Blakey on drums. By mid-July, Byrd had quit (ceding trumpet duties to Sullivan), Kenny Drew had replaced Wynton Kelly, and Dutch vocalist Rita Reyes had begun to perform occasionally with the band. Adding more instability, Ware and Drew were also on their way out as the band prepared for the Blue Note gig. Ware described his reservations about going to Philadelphia and what happened when the band arrived.

Now, I didn't want to go to Philly, because I had heard that the police were so tough on the addicts or people they thought were addicts, and if you had scars on your arm, you'd go to the penitentiary.

Well, anyway, Kenny Drew and I both said [to Blakey], "Well, man, you got to get somebody else to make that gig." And Art fumed and screamed and said, "No, you're gonna make it—I brought you out of Chicago." Ira Sullivan was just quiet—he was going along. So we finally said, "Okay." So we come down to Philly and this was when I was introduced to Lee Morgan. Lee made the gig. Spanky DeBrest and Lee were very good buddies, and he [DeBrest] played at the old Blue Note.

Now we went up . . . the thing was on a Wednesday. Now, I had a hole in my tooth that I was walking around with . . . And Friday night, I'll never forget, I started dancing, this tooth went up on me and started aching, and I couldn't play; I was a nervous wreck, and so Spanky played a night. (Ware 1977)

Morgan and DeBrest played for two weeks with the Messengers, replacing Ira Sullivan and Wilbur Ware who both returned to New York. Although Blakey wanted to keep Morgan, the trumpeter left after a short time with the Jazz Messengers. In 1956, Morgan told Leonard Feather, "Spanky and I helped them [the Messengers] out. Spanky stayed on. I could have stayed too, but I didn't want to sign a contract, so I left after two weeks" (Feather 1956). DeBrest signed with Blakey and became the first member of a new Jazz Messengers group which eventually included Bill Hardman (Morgan's replacement on trumpet), Johnny Griffin on tenor sax, and Philadelphian Sam Dockery on piano.

Toward the end of the summer of 1956, Morgan was offered the first chair trumpet job in Dizzy Gillespie's big band. Gillespie, in town with Norman Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic tour, had disbanded his big band in August after their South American tour and was recruiting members for a new band to begin after JATP ended. On the recommendation of his old pianist, James Forman, Gillespie called on Morgan to replace trumpet soloist Joe Gordon, whose unreliability and drug usage were a distraction for the bandleader. This was a tremendous break for Morgan and, perhaps for the first time, the brash trumpeter was nervous. "James Forman recommended me to him," said Morgan, "I had met Dizzy before at the Jazz Workshop one evening when I was 17 and when Dizzy asked me to play I was so scared I couldn't get on the stage. I didn't want to look like a chicken in front of Dizzy" (Postif 1959; translation by the author). The new band debuted at Philadelphia's Academy of Music on October 26, 1956, heading a bill with Billie Holiday. Their New York opening at Birdland occurred a week later and, along with the inception of his recording career during that same week, Morgan's professional career outside of his home territory took off. What many spectators, critics, and record buyers did not know, however, was that the eighteen year old taking the break and solo on "Tunisia" nightly was an established veteran in Philadelphia where he had been playing for years.

Although to some he apparently came "out of nowhere," many professional musicians were aware of Morgan's talent long before November 1956. Chet Baker, Sonny Stitt, Art Blakey, and almost any musician who brought a group to Philadelphia—not to mention those that lived in the city such as Clifford Brown and John Coltrane—were likely to see Morgan lingering around, waiting for his chance to sit in. An understanding of Morgan's presence and active role within the Philadelphia jazz community is essential for understanding the trumpeter's rise to prominence with the modern jazz scene. Further, when one considers the influence of his sister and the supportive elements in his neighborhood, it is clear that Morgan's talent did not develop in a vacuum. The musical activity and opportunities

afforded aspiring musicians in Philadelphia during the 1950s fed Morgan's passion and he took full advantage of every chance to play that he had. Considering the training and aggregate experience he had amassed by 1956, Morgan's talent needs no romanticization. Labeling him a "musical prodigy" adds nothing to our understanding of his art and obscures what was perhaps Morgan's most extraordinary attribute—his commitment to playing music.

#### Notes

1. For "prodigy," see Lee Morgan's obituary ("Jazzman Morgan Dead") in *Melody Maker*, February 26, 1972. For "enfant terrible," see Tynan (1960). For "wunderkind," see David McElfresh (1997).

2. Perhaps in a "what becomes a legend" flourish, Owen Cordle (1991) wrote, upon Morgan's induction into the *Down Beat* Hall of Fame in 1991: "He began his big-time career at 17 with Dizzy Gillespie's big band." This claim, which erroneously put Morgan in the band during high school, was likely fed by such misinformation as Barbara Gardner's assertion that Morgan forwent his final year of high school to play with Gillespie (Gardner 1960). Morgan graduated from Mastbaum Vocational Technical High School on June 15, 1956 and debuted with the Gillespie band the following October at Philadelphia's Academy of Music.

3. Contrary to these implications, Leonard Feather, in his liner notes to Morgan's first recording for Blue Note, wrote: "Lee Morgan is eighteen. Yet he is no mere prodigy, no freak sensation limited by youth and inexperience" (Feather 1956). Many later writers are guilty of romanticizing and simplifying Morgan's development as a jazz trumpeter by ignoring this pearl of wisdom from what is certainly the first feature written on Morgan as a professional musician.

4. Individuals that played in Monroe's band at one time or another included Wise, Morgan, and John Splawn on trumpet; Kenny Rodgers, Sam Reed, and Clarence Sharpe on alto saxophone; John Coltrane on tenor saxophone; McCoy Tyner and Kenny Barron on piano; and Eddie Campbell and Lex Humphries on drums. Monroe himself played bass.

5. Kenny Rodgers appeared on Morgan's second Blue Note recording as a leader, *Lee Morgan Sextet* (Blue Note BLP 1541) on December 2, 1956.

6. Marchione studied trumpet with the Philadelphia Orchestra's principal trumpet player, Sam Krause. LaVoe recalled, "Tony was a fabulous musician. He could reach notes that were way out of anybody's normal register, like Maynard Ferguson. The only thing was that Tony wasn't a jazz player" (LaVoe 1999). Wilmer Wise also knew Marchione. "Tony was a neighbor of mine in South Philadelphia," Wise said. "Tony was one of those Philadelphia legends that very few people aside from Philadelphians know anything about" (Wise 2000).

7. LaVoe believed that many of the young musicians that went to Music City were stealing from the store, which eventually precipitated the end of the sessions. "The store was a wide open store," he recalled. "Everything was out and they had the sessions in the back of the store and used that equipment. But on the way out

these guys were dipping in and stealing sticks and books and mouthpieces. They were robbing the place blind! So they stopped having the sessions there" (LaVoe 1999).

8. In a class of sixty-four graduating seniors, only four were graduates from the school's music program.

9. David McElfresh argues that Morgan's being thrust into the limelight was a direct consequence of Brown's tragic death (McElfresh 1997). While this conclusion seems to overlook Morgan's reputation and talent, it is possible that the plans for recording the trumpeter were hastened by the event. Morgan's move to New York City upon joining the Gillespie band, and the word-of-mouth reputation that preceded him, were more than enough to interest the record labels in the fall of 1956.

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