

Lilian Terry's Jazz Memoirs

ABBEY LINCOLN

In the Sixties, Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach were undoubtedly the most interesting and handsome couple of Modern Jazz. They were brilliant and intelligent and I need not dwell neither on their original artistic accomplishments nor the political and social importance they were deservedly given. I can only speak of them through the friendship that developed between our two families, from our first 'business' meeting in Milan, to their visit to Rome, and on through the many years that followed.

In 1967 Max was invited to Milan by the firm Meazzi – Italy's leading percussion firm – to discuss his endorsement and presentation of their Hollywood Tronic Drum at the Chicago Music Fair the following year. I was invited from Rome to act as interpreter for Meazzi and obviously the idea of meeting Max and Abbey was most stimulating, especially as, at the time, I was playing over the radio, over and again, their latest recordings I had personally acquired in the United States. Furthermore, their social involvement in the Black Movement was of great interest.

The Meazzi director had asked me to act as his hostess with the couple who stood tall and very handsome, among admiring musicians and journalists. Everybody was eager

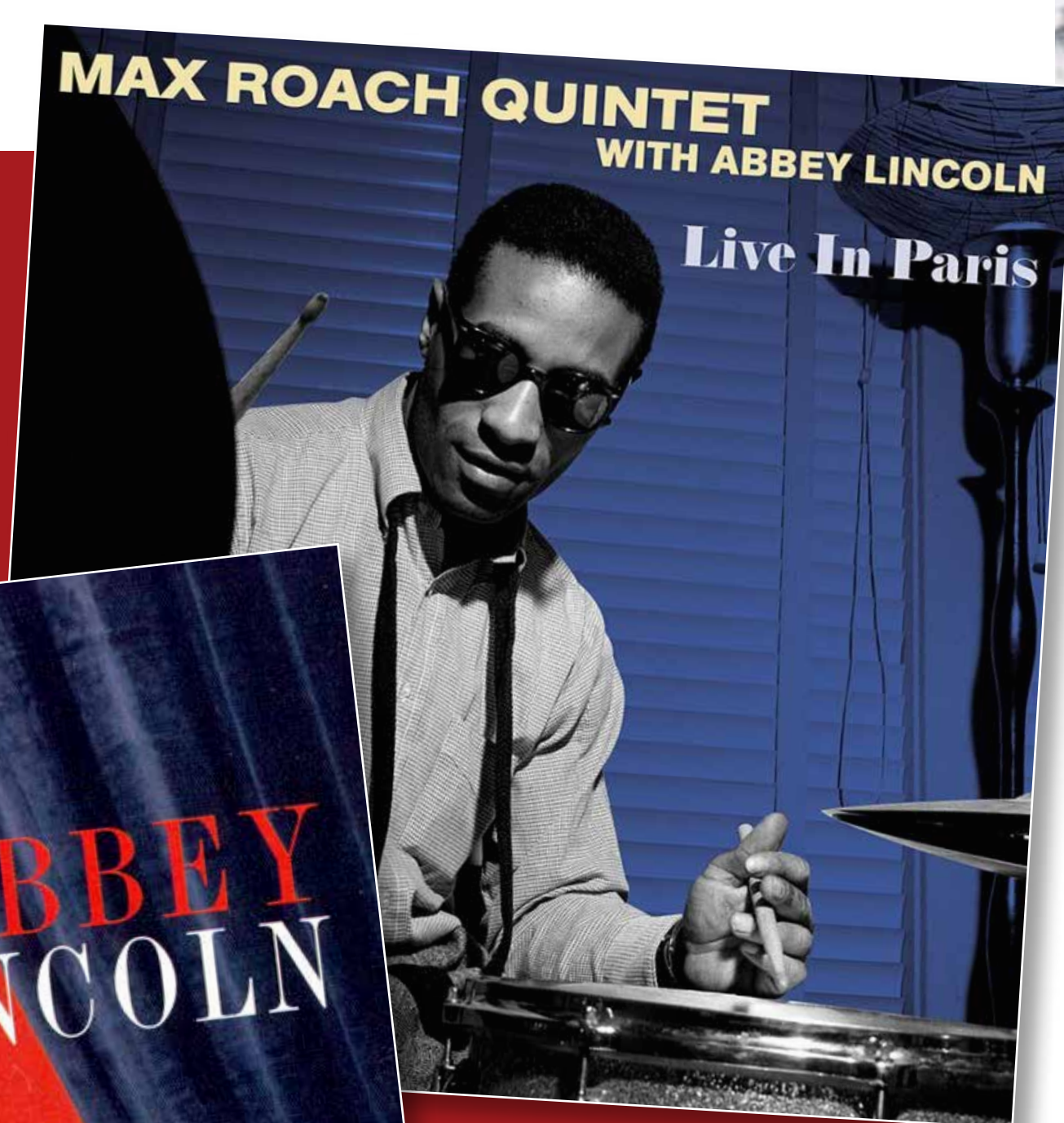


Abbey Lincoln and Lilian Terry in Milan, 1968.

to hear this odd Tronic Drum boom into life at the magic hands of one of the great drummers of all times.

I had been aware of the couple's involvement in the political scene of the United States from their first Long Play called most appropriately "Freedom Now Suite" and I could tell they felt slightly out of place in this typically noisy and good-natured Italian luncheon crowd. We were introduced and Abbey and I, shaking hands formally, were measuring each other with open curiosity. I had smiled at her, admiring her African headdress.

"You know, THAT turban will be the envy of all the fancy Milanese ladies at today's luncheon, especially knowing that they could never hope to wear it with the same results. Actually you are both a very handsome couple.





*Abbey Lincoln performing in Amsterdam, 1966.
Photo credit: Jack de Nijs for Anefo.*

Another thing, your record covers don't do you justice. You're much more interesting in real life."

Shaking hands with me with an amused smile they had accepted my compliment and Abbey had asked:

"Oh yes? Well thank you. And which records do you refer to?"

"Good Heavens! I'm a MESS with titles of LPs but I do recall 'Freedom Now Suite' and especially the one called 'Abbey is Blue.' I am always playing on my radio programme your version of Kurt Weil's 'Lost in the Stars.' With that lightly rasping voice you have, it really gives the lonely feeling of those lyrics."

"Yes, it's one of my favourites."

She had been amused by my outspokenness. We had talked for a while about African clothes and the way they were being worn by black Americans as a political statement and I could see that she was trying to figure me out.

"Where are you from?" she had asked suddenly, "You're not European...."

"Nope, I was born and raised in Egypt but my father was Maltese and my mother is Italian. You might say I am Mediterranean."

Shaking her head, amused, she had exclaimed:

"You know, what you really are...is a Mess!"

"I told you so in the first place but then, why not?"

And that was that. There were no more barriers but instead a light teasing camaraderie. She had asked, pointing a finger at me:

"So you are not a Soul Sister...?"

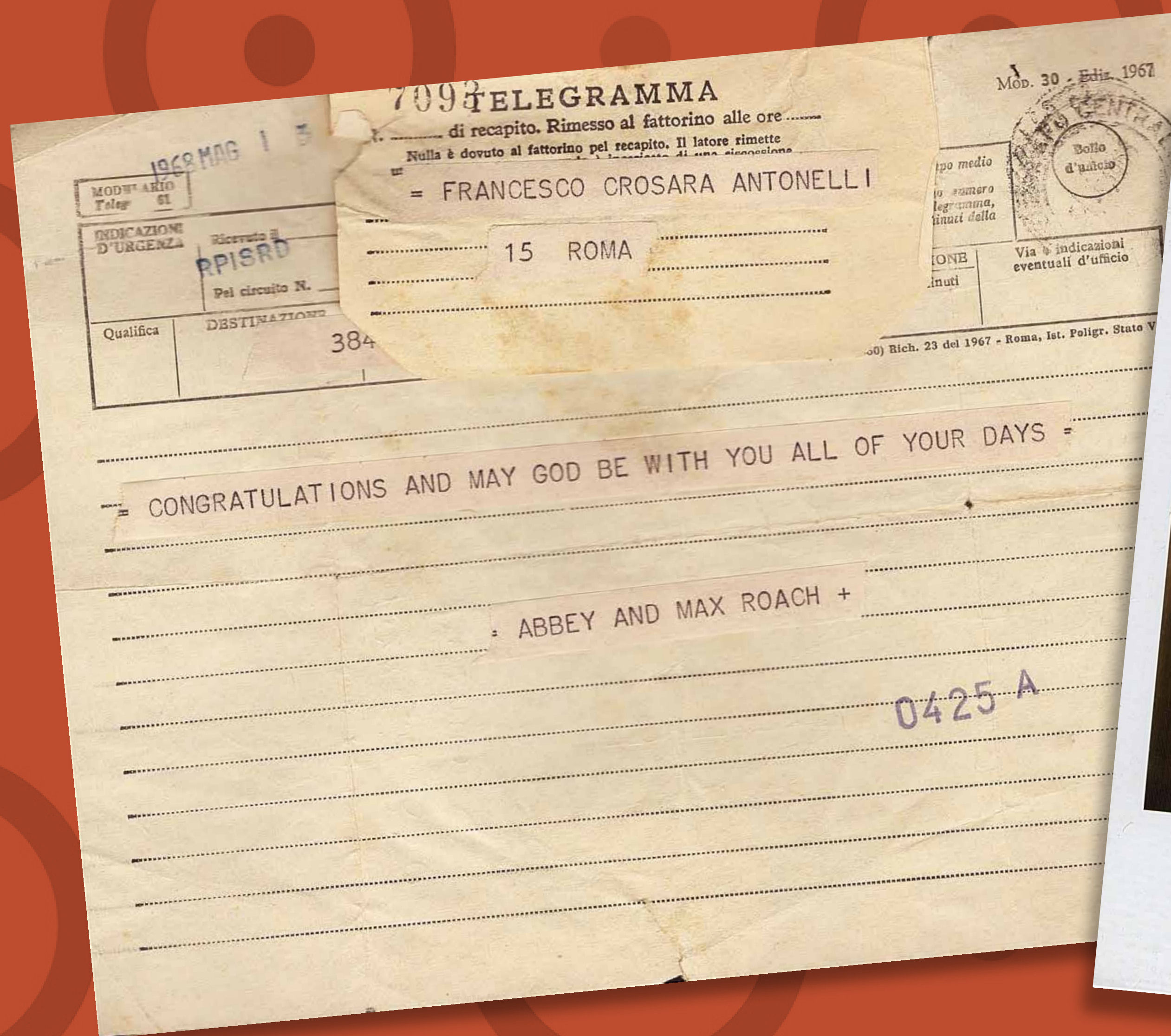
"No, my dear, but I am a Sister of the Soul."

"I love that!" She had laughed out, "A Sister of the Soul!"

And with that phrase our friendship was set, with a bond that grew and strengthened through all the many years.

A few days later they had come to my house, in Rome, and met my mother and son. Mother had admired their looks and their elegance, declaring Abbey "an African goddess". As for Max – mother always had a weakness for tall, strong men – she had said, "You are the powerful African Lion, the King of the Forest!" My seven-year-old son, Francesco, just sat next to Abbey in speechless admiration.

The next day we had gone to the beach at Fregene and while Abbey and I stretched in the sun gossiping, Max had taken Francesco by the hand asking for his assistance



Francesco Crosara & Abbey Lincoln in Rome, 1980.

at the ice cream stand. When they had reappeared, Francesco was nursing a huge motorboat, grinning from ear to ear. I had scolded Max for spoiling him but he had shaken his head, asking, "Francesco was saying something to me in Italian that I didn't quite catch. It was about black and white people, I think?"

I had asked Francesco to repeat what he had said, so I could translate it for my two attentive friends.

"I said that I know now the difference between black and white people...."

"And?" had asked Abbey, cautiously.

"Well, black people have a very kind heart and treat children much better than white people do!"

She had given him her special laugh, pulling him onto her lap and, rocking him, she had said: "Well, bless your little heart, Francesco!"

He had looked surprised but delighted. A year later, when eight-year-old Francesco was to receive his First Communion, in Rome, he received a personal cable from New York congratulating him for this very important day of his spiritual life. It was signed Uncle Max and Aunt Abbey. And that's how he had obtained an aunt and an uncle, and I two friends very dear to our heart.

Through the many years that followed Abbey and I had established a pattern. During her tours in Italy she would come and stay at our country home near Venice where mother would ply her with tasty dishes, while giving her wise advice on how to deal with men in general. In turn, it became customary that I stay at her apartment on 355 Riverside Drive – and later in Harlem, at St. Nicholas Avenue.

I recall our lengthy long-distance phone conversations and can hear that wonderful, aggressive laugh of hers. The time I had recorded a successful LP with Tommy Flanagan, in 1982 and, sometime later, she had called me from New York to tell me that WBGO, the New Jersey Radio Station, kept playing the whole LP from top to bottom and daily. And she declared she loved it. The next year she had sent me her latest LP "Talking to the Sun," scribbling on the back:

"Dearest Lilian, I love you for everything you are. Thank you for your friendship. It's love. Abbey, Aminata, Anna Marie."

Yes, it was truly friendship and love. We do miss our Sister of the Soul, very much so. 🌹