

LILIAN TERRY'S JAZZ MEMOIRS

DIZZY'S DAY



Thinking back along those many years it gives me great satisfaction to remember two special occasions that Dizzy held very dear. One of them was the unforgettable adventure of his one and only European symphonic concert with the full orchestra of RAI Torino.

The other was “Dizzy’s Day” in September 1987 when I organized – with the City of Bassano’s blessing – a huge “concert-party” for Dizzy’s 70th birthday. The authorities decreed that he would be given official honorary citizenship to Bassano on that occasion and we were announcing that our music school was opening a section for blind students.

The organization began a year ahead and I will not go into the harrowing details such a huge task entailed. I’ll just mention that the “happening” would take place in the Bassano Velodrome which seated 5000 people while about 80 jazz musicians were invited. The press,



Above: Dizzy Gillespie & Lilian Terry, Pistoia, Italy, 1981.

Right: Dizzy becoming an honorary citizen of Bassano del Grappa, Italy, 1987.

radio, and TV media were attracted from various parts of Europe and the large, handsome, and colorful poster soon became a collector's piece.

What follows is a portion of the last letter I sent to Dizzy:

28 August 1987

My dear Giovanni Cappuccino. Here is the program and please take careful note:

Leave NY by ALITALIA on Wednesday 09/09. Please be at Kennedy by 5.30pm at the ticket office of Alitalia where my friend Clara Chernin will take good care of you. Departure at 7.30pm.

Arrive at MILAN Malpensa in the morning. You will be picked up and driven to Bassano at Hotel Belvedere to your usual suite, where you will rest until 5 pm when I shall come and pick you up to go to the Town Hall to witness the Meeting of the Council (40 aldermen). Then the Mayor will confer upon you the official citizenship, probably with some gold key, and everybody will kiss you. Then we'll go to dinner and possibly a party to celebrate the affair. Incidentally, you will travel with Max Roach and Sandra Jackson. Milt will fly in the next morning from Los Angeles, just to play with you that night and then fly back again... Also Randy Brecker will fly in and out on the 11th just to play with you. Johnny Griffin and Madame will come from France, Tete Montoliou from Barcelona and Eric Peters from Switzerland, and that's your band. There will also be another 70 musicians who will play in your honor.

On the morning of the 11th, at lunchtime you will elope with me to go home where mother will fix you some gourmet surprises, the farmwoman will pick your fresh figs and we shall have a bucolic luncheon with lots of goodies cooked by different guests who want to honor you through your taste buds. Of course also Max and Bags and the other musicians of your group will be there, not to mention Roberto Beggio, the director of our music school who burst into tears when he first met you. While you relax in your



Dizzy Gillespie & Lilian Terry, Bassano del Grappa, Italy, 1987.

favorite garden chair, everybody will tell you how great you are and what you mean to them. Another ego trip, in other words.

At 4pm we'll go over to the Velodrome for a sound check and brief rehearsal of your group then off to rest until 8pm.

The concert starts at 6pm with all the young jazz musicians who are coming from various parts of Italy to join in the Festivities. You will be brought back to the Velodrome around 9pm when the festivities will get into high gear until well after midnight. I seem to remember your weakness for a certain pistachio cake you tasted last time you were here? Well, who knows what surprise we have up our sleeve...?

I think of our school, and the Integrated Section for the Blind, of the response and the need for such a school, and I am grateful that you let me use your charismatic name to bring it all about. So I go back to sleep saying to myself it will all work out beautifully and God will keep His hand on my head.

I am so tired, physically and mentally, but I must send this to you before the Monday morning rush. I'll phone you in a week's time. Regards to Lorraine, is the house all fixed up by now? How is her health? Are you sure she won't change her mind and come after all? Love to both of you.



Dizzy greeting fans at the Velodrome, Bassano del Grappa, Italy, 1987.

For once, to my great amazement, there was no unusual problem to solve. Everybody arrived from everywhere at the right time and everybody did his best for a smooth and successful unwinding of the concert.

At 21.30hrs, when the concert had been underway since 18.00hrs, Dizzy's limousine arrived behind the huge bandstand which was set in the very center of the Velodrome. They led him to his caravan car 'for his privacy' but he was soon sneaking around, embracing old friends – and pretty assistants – and finally he reached the corner edge of the bandstand and, leaning lazily against it, he looked around at the 5000 people gathered for him. He was holding his periscopic trumpet by his side and in no time somebody recognized him and soon there was a huge roar calling him. "Ciao Dizzy!", "Hey Dizzy!"

Before we could guess what was on his mind, he had walked out across the field towards the

stands, waving his trumpet and grinning. As he climbed the flight of steps that separated the public from the field and started shaking hands, there was as large wave of movement from the very far end row of seats and the police and firemen had to rush to him, to escort him safely backstage where I scolded him!

"You realize that a crowd of 5000 fans was about to break down the safety barrier in order to get to you? And that the musicians on stage had to stop their performance?"

"Gee, I'm sorry..." then an impish smile "I only wanted to say ciao to the guys who had noticed me...I didn't think the whole crowd..."

"Lorraine would say you just don't think. But it's OK, I'm glad you were able to feel this huge wave of love..."

"Yeah, incredible...I'm sorry I couldn't shake everybody's hand..."

"Yes, and then play with your feet? Five thousand handshakes?"

“Look at that! It’s beautiful...”

He was looking at the large scoreboard high above the field where the technicians had designed a periscopic trumpet with stars and flowers flashing the words “Dizzy’s Day”. This was followed by “Happy birthday Dizzy”, and “Auguri Dizzy” interspersed with electronic fireworks. He watched with joyful wonder, turning to shake his head at me.

Another unexpected moment took everybody by surprise. During a pause, while one group was leaving the stage and the next one was setting up, Dizzy managed to sneak on stage, unnoticed. He sat himself at the piano and started playing a blues. One of the technicians passing by turned on the piano mike and when we looked to see who was playing...and there he was! He motioned to the



same man to set up a voice mike and suddenly we had the most unexpected performance of Dizzy as pianist and blues singer! He sang his joy at being there and as a finale he sang-shouted “Nobody treats me the way that you do...Gee baby...Shoobe-doobe-doo...”and closed right there. He rose to bow very formally, like a concert pianist, and walked off.

But what really floored him was when five strong stage hands set up an enormous seven-tiered pistachio cake. The first tier was at least three meters in diameter, the last one on top carried a very large golden periscopic trumpet held by a chocolate hand. Seventy gold candles shone around the seven tiers and a tall folding ladder was opened for him to climb to the top.

I went to get him and talking, arm in arm, we turned the corner and he stopped short, gasping and looking way up to the top of the cake.

“Here’s your pistachio goodie, Giovanni Cappuccino, and happy birthday.”

As I leaned to kiss his cheek began the huge wave of 5000 voices singing together “Happy Birthday to you” in Italian. He closed his eyes tightly, shook his head and heaved a sigh, then turned to the cake.

*Above: Dizzy cutting his seven-tiered, pistachio birthday cake.
Left: Stage hands setting up the cake during the celebration.*



“Happy birthday, von Karajan...”

“Yes...and that makes two gifts of yours I won't forget, long as I live.”

“We'll have another 'Dizzy's Day' to celebrate your 75th. In October '92.”

But of course in October '92 he was unable to accept any invitation and on 6th January 1993 he said goodbye.

Thinking about it, what is certain is the fact that he has never really left us. At least as long as some trumpet player, anywhere on this planet, will raise his horn to the skies to play “A Night in Tunisia”. Way up above, Dizzy will be there listening and explaining to Archangel Gabriel just what was Chano Pozo's special rhythmic lick. He might be teaching Gabe to play his periscopic horn. They might be “exchanging fours” right now. Why not? 🎺



Above: Event poster turned collector's piece.
Below: Dizzy's birthday lunch at our home, 1987.

