

# P R O F I L E S

## A WALK TO THE PARK

I WENT down to the Chelsea Hotel one afternoon a while ago to visit Elvin Jones, the unique and brilliant drummer, whose ferocity and originality and subtlety on his instrument have in the past six or so years changed the entire nature of jazz drumming and, to a degree, the nature of jazz itself. Jones is always a surprising performer, and often he is astonishing. During an immense number by the late John Coltrane's quintet at Philharmonic Hall several years ago, he developed such an ocean of accompanying sounds that he drowned the rest of the band, and not long after, at a celestial recording session with Earl Hines, Pee Wee Russell, Clark Terry, and half a dozen members of the Duke Ellington band, he turned about and demonstrated a Lord Chesterfield taste and aplomb. At the 1965 Newport Jazz Festival, in the middle of an afternoon devoted to drummers, he played a short, intense, almost slyly intricate solo that knocked the pins out from under a blue-chip platoon of colleagues that included Buddy Rich, Louis Bellson, Jo Jones, Art Blakey, and Roy Haynes, and next summer, at the Monterey Jazz Festival, he attempted to pull together a raggle-taggle pickup band led by Gil Evans and, failing, steamed off into his own labyrinthine patterns while the band limped behind. And for the past year or so he has led a small group at various New York clubs—Pookie's Pub (now defunct), Slugs', the Dom, and the Village Vanguard—with a freedom and explosive assurance that rank him with the greatest of drummers (Sidney Catlett, Jo Jones, Dave Tough, Chick Webb, and Buddy Rich) as well as with the handful of revolutionary jazz musicians (Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Ornette Coleman).

Jones met me in the hallway outside his first-floor room and ushered me in. The room was long and narrow and dark, and it was clearly a bachelor's nest. The bed hadn't been made, and on a small dining-room table were a box of Corn Flakes and



Elvin Jones

a used cereal bowl with a spoon in it. The bed was flanked by night tables, on one of which was a Welch's Grape Juice jar full of water and on the other an overflowing ashtray and a copy of "The Voyage of the Space Beagle." The bureau was littered with aspirin and Band-Aids and a travelling clock, which had stopped. Wedged between a bass drum and a snare drum in a window alcove were a pair of shoes and a bow tie.

Jones rummaged around in a bureau drawer and pulled out what appeared to be a thick sheaf of hotel bills. "I'm the world's worst bookkeeper," he said, in a sturdy, rasping voice. "I've been living here for several months, and, man, the seventy-some dollars a week I pay is *expensive* for me. And Pookie's Pub, where I'm at now, is not the highest-paying club in town. I make about scale, or about a hundred and fifty a week. This morning, I got a letter from my wife, who lives near the Haight-Ashbury district, in San Francisco—she's no hippie—and my kid, who is two, is sick again, which means more doctor bills. Everybody wants that bread all at once." He got down on his knees, pulled a box from under the bureau, and took out a copy of his newest album. He wrote something on the back of it and picked up one of the hotel bills. "Let me just lay this album on the man downstairs. Maybe it'll keep him quiet for two or three days."

He opened the door and collided with a large chambermaid.

"How's your towels?" she asked. "There's always a 'No Disturb' sign on the door, so's I never can get in here."

"I know it," Jones said, "but I forget it, and I'm not here that much to remember and take it off."

When he returned, the maid handed him some fresh towels. He put them on the table, then went into the kitchenette, got a bottle of Löwenbräu, and sat down on the bed. He picked up a package of French cigarettes and lit one. He was wearing a striped sports shirt, rumpled pipe-stem khaki pants, and unshined Italian shoes. He is

an arresting-looking man. His head is large and his face is winged by his cheekbones. He has a generous mouth, a firm chin, and a broad smile, which is heightened by a missing canine tooth. His eyes flash. He is six feet tall and has wide shoulders and a Scarlett O'Hara waist, and he hasn't an ounce of fat on him. His hands are big, with long, thick fingers.

Jones puffed up a couple of pillows and stretched out on the bed. "There. The hecticism of the day is dying down. I've been uptown and back already. I don't get to bed until about four-thirty, but I wake up like a firecracker at ten-thirty. I guess that's what happens to you when you turn forty. But I take a nap around four or five in the afternoon and then I'm all right. Tomorrow morning, at nine-thirty, I have to go out to the Gretsch drum warehouse in Brooklyn and pick out some cymbals. I use K. Zildjians, which are made in Turkey. The last time I was out there, it took me a whole afternoon to find just one. I must have tested five hundred cymbals. My head was ringing for days." Jones waved his cigarette around. "I've been smoking these things since Duke Ellington, who was with a Norman Granz tour in Europe, sent for me. It was about a year and a half ago. I joined him in Frankfurt, and my stay with him lasted just a week and a half, through Nuremberg and Paris and Italy and Switzerland. I was new. It



was difficult for the band to adapt to my style and I had to do everything in a big hurry, trying to adapt to them. Then the bass player started playing games with me by lowering and raising the tempos to make it look like I was unsteady, and finally I had to speak to him and he stopped. Hodges and Cat Anderson and Gonsalves and Mercer Ellington knew what was going on, but Duke didn't. And I guess I didn't connect with the anchormen, because they complained about my playing to Duke. I don't know whether Cootie, who kept giving me the fisheye, wanted me to call him Mr. Williams and shine his shoes or what. Also, Duke had a second drummer in the band and he was an egomaniac. So Duke and I talked at Orly Airport and I told him to send a telegram to Sam Woodyard and tell him to get himself over there, because he knew the whole book. I saw Duke later, after he'd found out what had been going on, and everything was fine—no sweat. He told me I could come back with the band any time I wanted. He's such a great man. Given more time under different circumstances—being left alone and all—it might have been a beautiful thing for me. After I left the band, I holed up in a hotel room and slept for three days. I didn't want the terrible headaches I'd had out on the Coast in my last days with Coltrane."

Jones swung his legs over the side of the bed and lit another cigarette. He held it cupped in his hands between his knees. His eyelids suddenly drooped, giving him a secret, almost drunken expression, and his voice became low and husky. "I joined John Coltrane in 1960. Of all the bands and all the people I've worked with, the six years with him were the most rewarding. It seemed that all my life was a preparation for that period. Right from the beginning to the last time we played together it was something pure. The most impressive thing was a feeling of steady, collective learning. Every night when we hit the bandstand—no matter if we'd come five hundred or a thousand miles—the weariness dropped from us. It was one of the most beautiful things a man can experience. If there is anything like perfect harmony in human relationships, that band was as close as you can come. You felt so close nobody ever wanted anything destructive to happen to anyone else. Coltrane was humble in the finest sense of that word. He was a man of deep thought. He would never say anything trivial. He was honest with people and with himself. He was religious. I think

## ANOTHER KIND OF BURNING

The south wind's molded by a spine of hill—  
tree-dense, Appalachian—that from miles of woods  
brings the scent of another kind of burning,  
the fume of life, hair-thin, wrist-thick,  
that last season's and the one before's and before that's  
leaves resurrect,

and all the creeks composed of decomposings  
comb the hillsides, shape roads. Three meet  
where Back Creek crosses under a low  
highway bridge. Among those who died here  
was a boy

already caught by the same Heraclitean flux:  
a father at sixteen in his mother-in-law's house,  
driven out by women, driving too fast,  
met at this crossroads  
by the triple goddess.

The tracks of burning on the macadam's  
what's left—that and  
the wrist-thin, unbroken neck  
of an infant now fatherless  
in fact.

—RUTH FOX

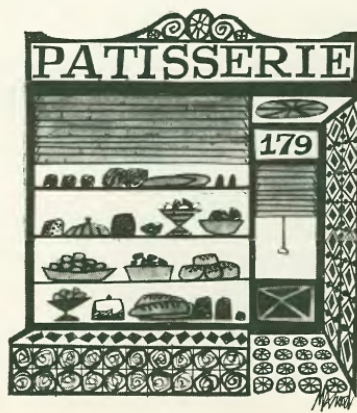
his grandfather was a Baptist minister. I'm a Baptist myself, but I quit going to church years ago. Yourself is the church.

"During my time with Coltrane, I could investigate my quest of how to play with other instruments. He left me absolutely alone. He must have felt the way I played, understood the validity of it. There was never any rhythmic or melodic or harmonic conflicts. At least, I never felt any, and you can spot those things coming a mile away. I was never conscious of the length of Coltrane's solos, which sometimes lasted forty minutes. I was in the position of being able to follow his melodic line through all the modes he would weave in and out of, through all the patterns and the endless varia-

tions on variations. It was like listening to a concerto. The only thing that mattered was the completion of the cycle that he was in. I'd get so excited listening to him that I had all I could do to contain myself. There was a basic life-force in Coltrane's solos, and when he came out of them you suddenly discovered you had learned a great deal. I didn't want to leave Coltrane, but the personnel had changed. He added another drummer, and I couldn't hear what I was doing any longer. There was too much going on, and it was getting ridiculous as far as I was concerned. I was getting into a whole area of frustration, and what I had to offer I felt I just couldn't contribute. I think Coltrane was upset, and I know in those last weeks I had a constant migraine headache."

Jones lifted his head and opened his eyes and cleared his throat. "When I heard about him being dead, I didn't believe it. Billy Greene, my piano player, called me early in the morning and told me. Later on, I called Bob Thiele, who recorded Coltrane, and he confirmed it. You know how you react when someone close and dear passes away—that bad feeling comes on you.

"But I've been very fortunate in the variety and number of great musicians I've worked with. When I started out in Detroit, in 1949, there were a lot of clubs and a lot of musicians working—Barry Harris, Billy Mitchell,





Paul Chambers, Kenny Burrell, Tommy Flanagan, Milt Jackson, and Doug Watkins. It was a revelation to me, because Pontiac, my home, was like out in the country. I got my first professional gig through Art Mardigan, the drummer, with a five-piece group in a bar on Grand River Street, and everything was fine until Christmas Eve, when it was time to get paid, and I looked out the window and it was snowing like hell and there was the piano player, who was also the leader, running down the street with all the money. So I went back to Pontiac and took a job in a little roadhouse that had a floor show with a Sophie Tucker-type singer. She didn't have *any* music in her, but she was the owner's sweetheart, and when she told him I didn't have any music in me I got fired. Then Billy Mitchell called me from Detroit and wanted me to come into the Blue Bird with him. It was a small place owned by three sisters and a brother, and it had delicious food. I stayed about three years. Tommy Flanagan came in on piano, and Thad, my brother, who'd been on the road or in the Army since 1939, came in on trumpet. Pepper Adams, the baritone saxophonist, sat in, and so did Sonny Stitt and Miles Davis and Wardell Gray. Then Thad went with Count Basie, and six months later I went into the Rouge Lounge. I also played a lot of concerts and all the after-hours places where you could jam. I don't know any other city like Detroit was then. It got behind its musicians and supported them. At the Rouge Lounge, I was working with Kenny Burrell backing Carmen McRae, and one afternoon Ed Sarkesian, who ran the place, got a call from New York from Benny Goodman, who was putting together a big band and wanted me to come and audition. Sarkesian was a great Goodman fan, and when I came to work that night he was ecstatic. His face was lit up like a Christmas tree. He told me about Goodman and then he asked me did I need any money, did I need any clothes, did I need anything at all, and I took off for New York the next day—right in the middle of the week. The audition was



"Woman, are you mad?"

at the old Nola Studios, on Broadway and Fifty-second Street, and I walked in and the whole band was there. The only person I knew was my brother Hank, on piano. Budd Johnson was in the band, and I think Buck Clayton, but I didn't know them then. Benny wasn't there. They got out the music for 'Sing, Sing, Sing,' and if there's one number I've *never* liked that's it, and anyway they wanted all this heavy four-four time on the bass drum. We started, and I just didn't belong in it. Nothing came out right. Then, in the middle of the next number, the bass player had to leave, and I began noticing the guys in the band looking at their watches. When the audition ended, the manager gave me a nice pep talk and Benny called me later and thanked me for coming and gave me a lot of en-

couragement. But I didn't get the job. I did get a gig, though, in a quartet with Charlie Mingus and Teddy Charles and J. R. Monterose, the tenor player. There was never a dull moment with Mingus. Eccentric as he seems, it's mostly a put-on. He's really an almost shy man and he tries to be boisterous to cover it up. Half the time he's frightened of one thing or another, like a little boy. But when he stops talking and starts playing, the virtuoso, the genius, comes shining out. That's a different Mingus. We made a short tour to Newport and Toronto and Washington, but Mingus and Teddy Charles argued all the time, and so Mingus had one of his crazy ideas: I'll fire you, he told me, and then I'll quit, and we'll go to Cleveland and play with Bud Powell. We did. When Mingus left the





*"You don't fool me, Miss Corlis. You're a real person under that pretty face."*

group, Tommy Potter joined, and we stayed with Bud for a year and a half."

Jones sat up and said, "I'm hungry. Let me order a couple of sandwiches and some more beer." He telephoned and then got up and walked around the room.

"Bud was very shaky, very sick," he went on. "He was almost completely withdrawn, but we got along fine. It ended up that I became the leader and was consulted about setting up and various routines. And during the day I'd visit with him and take him to the movies or on long walks. He would open up and be very rational. His thing by then was alcoholism, and all he needed was a couple of drinks and he'd go berserk. I rationed him to two bottles of beer a day and he was all right. But every once in a while he'd get away from me—like once, when some people poured some wine into him and he was found the next morning in an alley in his underwear with even his shirt and tie stolen. Then, one night at Birdland, during an intermission, he took off and I didn't see him again for two years. Before he died, a couple of

years ago, he came by an apartment I had on Sixteenth Street on my birthday and brought me an autographed picture of himself as a present. He was the most mistreated man I ever knew—by managers and bookers and club owners and police. Somebody told me that Cootie Williams believes Powell's troubles started when he was in Cootie's band in the forties and they were playing a gig in Philadelphia. Powell got drunk or something and was picked up by the police, and they beat him up so badly—mostly around the head, probably causing brain damage—that his mother had to come down from New York to get him. And he couldn't have been more than nineteen. Man, he never had a chance.

"After that, I worked with Tyree Glenn, and then with Sweets Edison. Sweets is a real cat, in the true meaning of the word. As slick as grease. Hip. And what a trumpet player, what a beautiful tone—a tone as pure as mountain water. There's no trumpet player living can play a ballad like Harry Edison. It was funny travelling with him. We had a contract to play a jazz festival in this resort at French Lick, In-

diana, in I think it was October of 1959, and so all five of us—Jimmy Forrest, Tommy Potter, and Tommy Flanagan were also in the group—squeezed into this station wagon, and because there wasn't any room inside I tied my drums on top and we drove eight hundred miles non-stop through rain and hail—the drums out in it all—and when we get there we get the greeting 'Where have you been? You were supposed to play yesterday.'"

Jones laughed in a loose, swinging way. The sandwiches and beer arrived, and he spread his sandwich out beside him on the bed and put his beer on the floor. I asked him if he had ever had any trouble with drugs.

He looked hesitant. "I've had my turn," he said softly, and took a swallow of beer. "I guess it got started in 1949, after I came out of the Army and began going to Detroit. I developed a secret desire to see what everybody was enjoying so much. I wanted to be one of the crowd, to be hip, down, part of that image. Also, there are times when you just don't

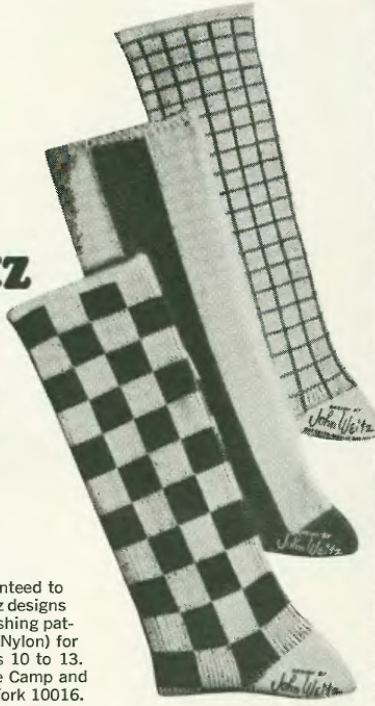
want to think of certain things. You want to escape from being a liberal or a conservative or a Democrat or a Republican or a Negro or anything else. You just want to live. And later I'd get in trouble when I wasn't working. I'd suffer from despondency and boredom and general depression. Slowly, you learn the delusions about what you think you are under drugs and what you really are. Whenever I was under the influence it would make me play terrible. It would make me sluggish and slow me down. It destroyed what could have been great performances. I've been drastically embarrassed by being high on the job. It was embarrassing to me and my associates. It seemed that I had let myself and my friends down—the people who depended on me. Oh, I wouldn't be hostile, but I'd sit there and go to sleep in people's faces when they talked to me or walk around in a kind of part oblivion. When drugs really get hold of you, you move into a whole different world—an area where you associate with nobody but other users. You're taking drugs and they're taking drugs and that's your relation-





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ship, and you begin to think of them as friends, until you find out they're boosters or thieves or pimps or whatever. You suddenly discover you're involved in criminal activity, that you're about to get involved with the legal branch of the government, which happened to me in Detroit and happened to me again in New York in 1959. I'd been walking around the city all day and I had this little bag of heroin in my watch pocket. I'd been sniffing on it off and on. I'm all dressed up and I go to a hotel on Forty-ninth Street to visit a friend who'd played with Lionel Hampton, and I forget all about that little bag in my pocket. I get in the lobby and this guy sticks a gun in my back and tells me to come upstairs. It was a cop. When I get to my friend's room, there are other cops, and they've got him stripped and up against the wall and they're going over his clothes like a vacuum cleaner. I think they found some benzies—nothing worse than that. Then they started patting me down and they find the bag, and that's it. Man, I felt queer—like I was suspended in the air in that room, watching all this happening down below to two cats I never saw before."

Jones crumpled his sandwich wrapper and put it in the ashtray on one of the bedside tables. "They sent me to Rikers Island for six months. That was depressing, being locked up, and particularly being locked up with all those repeaters. Those guys have worked out this life where they go out in the streets for six months or so and hustle or push and then they get busted and are sent back to Rikers Island, probably to the same job they had before, and after they've eaten three meals a day and gotten their health back and their terms are up they go back to the streets until they get busted again. But what was worst about it was the rats. I have a great fear of rodents. These guys would take food and candy and stuff into their cells, and at night—there wasn't much light—the rats would come and I'd stay up half the night watching and trying to keep them away from me. So that was the last time for me. I've been clean ever since, and I intend to stay that way. I'm not going to abuse myself, I'm not going to get in that groove. I was never on the stuff more than six or seven months altogether in all those years, and in a way I'm glad it happened. I learned from it. I also learned that I could never get a cabaret card to work clubs in New York. I filled out all the forms I don't



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know how many times and nothing, no card. So what I finally did was go down there and apply under the name of Ray Jones—Ray is my middle name—and I got one. Of course, now they've wiped out the cabaret-card law, which is the best news I've heard in years."

AROUND eight that evening, I picked Jones up at the Chelsea after his nap, and we took a cab down to Sayat Nova, an Armenian restaurant on Charles Street. He looked refreshed. He had changed into dark pipestem pants, a clean tan button-down shirt without a tie, and a vest-like cardigan sweater. "I wish my wife would come on East," he said, "but she hates New York. She won't live here. She came from North Dakota and she's smart—college-educated—and sensitive and calm. I get lonely." Jones laughed. "One thing—I was never lonely when I was a kid. I was the youngest of ten children, and I was a twin, an identical twin. But when my brother and me were eight or nine months old we got the whooping cough, and he died. His name was Elvin Roy. I can remember the little wooden box sitting on a table in the parlor. I have been challenged on this but have proved it by pointing out the exact spot where the coffin was, so it wasn't just that I was told about it later. My oldest sister and the oldest of all the children, Olivia, drowned when she was twelve. There was a lake down at the end of our street and she was skating and fell through the ice. The kids she was with got frightened and ran home and nobody told my mother until late that night, and they went and found her under the ice. She was very talented. She was already composing music and, even at her age, giving piano lessons. My brother Hank was born next, and there was Melinda and Anna Mae and Thad. Right above me was Edith and Paul and Tom. Edith still has our house in Pontiac, and she has four children. It's a big old place with three stories and eighteen rooms.

"My father came from Vicksburg, Mississippi, and he died in 1949. He was about six feet four and very lean. He was a lumber inspector for General Motors and a deacon of the Baptist church, as well as a bass in the choir. I'm told I resemble him more than any of the other boys in the family. To me he was a very fine man. His example was in his living. The way he lived—he was as straight as could be—made you want to be like



him. He loved to bake. He was up at four every morning and he'd go down to the kitchen and start our breakfast and sometimes pack our lunches. He'd pour coffee into this enormous cup, and when I came down he'd let me drink the spilled coffee in the saucer. Twice a week he'd make a big three-layer cake and put some of my mother's jelly—mulberry or blackberry or strawberry—between the layers. And he'd bake bread and gingerbread. My brother Tom and I would take a piece of gingerbread and make it into a hard ball and I'd put it in my pocket and when we went out we'd pretend it was chewing tobacco. I'd break off a piece and ask Tom, 'Here, you want a plug?' or 'You want a chew?' He'd stick it in his cheek and bulge it out and we'd break up. My mother was a big warm woman and the greatest lady in the world. She gave me every kind of encouragement. She'd tell you to make up your mind at what you wanted to do and then just *do* it. When I finally decided I wanted to be a musician, that was it to her. But she tried to make you into a man before anything else, so that you learned how to take care of yourself, you learned how to survive. That was especially valuable to me in the beginning as a musician. She died of a heart attack in 1951. She had a weak heart but she never let on and she'd never go to doctors."

AT Sayat Nova, Jones ordered a beer and egg-lemon soup and shish kebab. "I never learned any prejudices at home," he said. "In fact, I never knew anything about that until the Army. Our schools were unsegregated, and my father and mother taught us you met people as individuals, that you judge a man as a man. They both came from Mississippi, so they must have had good reason to think differently, but they didn't pass any of it down to us. I grew up in the Depression, and I guess we were lucky, because my father always worked. There was plenty of food even though I never saw any *money*. We weren't allowed to go to the movies, because it cost ten cents. And instead of toys from a store I'd go into the woods near our house and make a slingshot or a bow and arrow.

"I quit school after the tenth grade and went to work at General Motors in the truck-and-coach division, unloading boxcars and stacking assembled motors. I already knew how to do everything in the dry-cleaning line. I had gone to work in my uncle's dry-cleaning shop when I was six or sev-

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en. School didn't give me what I wanted. The only interests I had there were music and recreation—sports. I was on the track team, and I set records that still stand. I could high-jump six feet, and I ran the four-forty and could do the hundred-yard dash in nine-five. It would take me nine *minutes* now.

"I started playing drums in junior high. I got a practice pad and sticks and a Paul Yoder method book. When I first looked at those notes it seemed so complicated. I didn't have the least idea of note evaluation. I asked a kid I went to school with about it. He took private lessons for fifty cents and I thought he must be rich. He taught me about whole notes and half notes and quarter notes, and suddenly it dawned on me. I walked around all the time counting—a-one, a-two, a-three, a-four. I went through the whole book and I learned all twenty-six rudiments. I learned that book upside down and back and forth. I was moved from the junior-high marching band up to the high-school band, and in a week I was in the first chair. If anybody really influenced me on drums it was the band director, Fred N. West. He made me to realize that the drum is not something to bang on, that it is not a round disc to be pounded. He told me you can hear incoherent sounds in a traffic jam and that music should go far beyond the reproduction of traffic jams. We had quite a collection of records at home, and I'd try and play along with them. It was very unsatisfactory, but I learned how valuable it is to keep time, that that is the drummer's primary function."

Jones spooned up some soup and doused the bowl with pepper. "I listened to all the drummers I could, on records and in person. I'd hear Buddy Rich, say, do something on a record and I'd wonder if he was doing that snare-drum pattern with one hand or two, and finally I'd get a chance to see him, with Tommy Dorsey, and I discovered he was using two hands. I saw Jo Jones with Basie, and on records I heard Chick Webb. He takes a little solo at the beginning of 'Liza,' which was made, I believe, around 1938, and it's so melodic and clean and modern it's unbelievable. It could have been recorded last week. I heard Sid Catlett on 'Salt Peanuts' with Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, and he was flowing and flawless. And I listened to Dave Tough and Max Roach and Kenny Clarke and Tiny Kahn. I began to develop my theories on drums. I figured that a lot of things drum-





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mers were doing with two hands could be done with one—like accents with just the left hand on the snare, so you wouldn't have to take your right hand off the ride cymbal. And it didn't seem to me that the four-four beat on the bass drum was necessary. What was needed was a *flow* of rhythm all over the set. I never learned any tricks, anything flashy—like juggling sticks or throwing them in the air. That kind of thing stops me inside. After all, Artur Rubinstein doesn't play runs on the piano with his chin."

Jones doused his shish kebab with pepper and ordered another beer. "Of course, I learned from my brothers Hank and Thad. When Hank came home in the forties from being on the road with Jazz at the Philharmonic, I'd ask him a lot of questions. He'd tell me different things to listen for in a performance, or he'd tell me to get my wire brushes and play along with him. You don't realize how much you are learning at times like that until much later, when it hits you like post-hypnotic suggestion. I didn't see much of Thad until he joined our band in Detroit. Both Hank and Thad are C.B.S. staff musicians now, and they live in New Jersey. We don't see each other that much, but we're close, particularly in times of crisis, when there seems to be a kind of telepathy between us. To me, they're both perfect. I don't know anything bad about them. Hank is the greatest pianist in the world and Thad is the greatest trumpet player. Hank has stubby fingers and hands, but they spread out like wings when he plays. He doesn't feel right if he doesn't practice three or four hours a day. I can understand that. He wants to have that response when he needs it.

"Around 1946, when I was nineteen, I took off for Boston with my brother Tom and a friend. I worked in a dry cleaner's there, and then I went down to Newark, New Jersey, by myself and enlisted in the Army. They sent me to eight weeks of music school at Fort Lee, Virginia, after basic training, and then I was sent to Columbus, Ohio. Part of the time I travelled all over the country with a Special Services show called 'Operation Happiness,' but I was a stagehand rather than a drummer. I went along just to watch. And I began to play at dances on the post and I gained confidence. I never got that many compliments and I never got that much criticism. The men I played with liked me enough not to repudiate my shortcomings. They wouldn't do anything deliberately to hurt me. You





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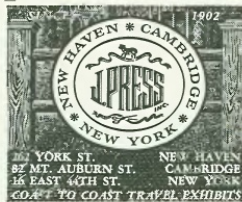
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give kindness to human beings, you allow them to grow."

Jones took a sip of Armenian coffee, and I looked at my watch. It was going on ten. "We'd better get down to Pookie's," he said. "The owner is nervous, and he gets upset if I'm not on the stand by ten. Maybe he's nervous because he just got married. Before I got married, six years ago, I asked my wife—we'd been pretty close—if she would change afterwards. 'Oh, no. Oh, no.' Man, the words 'I pronounce you man and wife' were still ringing around the room when she started telling me to do this, do that." He laughed, and went up the stairs from the restaurant two at a time. We found a cab on Charles Street.

"My drums are my life," Jones said, resting his head against the back of the seat. "Sometimes what happens to you during the day affects your ability and shows up in your work. But once you get to your set, you can obliterate all the troubles, which seem to fall off your shoulders. If you aren't happy before, you are when you play. Playing is a matter of spontaneity *and* thought, of constant control. Take a solo. When I start, I keep the structure and melody and content of the tune in my mind and work up abstractions or obbligatos on it. I count the choruses as I go along, and sometimes I'm able to decide in advance what the pattern of a whole chorus will be, but more often five or six patterns will flash simultaneously across my mind, which gives me a choice, especially if I get hung up, and I've had some granddaddies of hangups. If you don't panic, you can switch to another pattern. I can see forms and shapes in my mind when I solo, just as a painter can see forms and shapes when he starts a painting. And I can see different colors. My cymbals will be one color and my snare another color and my tomtoms each a different color. I mix these colors up, making constant movement. Drums suggest movement, a conscious, constant shifting of sounds and levels of sound. My drumming can shade from a whisper to a thunder. I'm not conscious of the length of my solos, which I've been told have run up to half an hour. When you develop a certain pattern, you stay with it until it's finished. It's just like you start out in the evening to walk to Central Park and back. Well, there are a lot of directions you can take—one set of streets going up, then in a certain entrance and out another entrance and back on a different set of streets. You come back and maybe take a hot bath and have some dinner



and read and go to bed. You haven't been somewhere to lose yourself, but to go and come back and finish your walk."

**P**OOKIE'S PUB was on the northeast corner of Hudson and Dominick Streets, a block north of the Holland Tunnel and a block south of the Half Note, a bar and spaghetti palace with jazz.

Jones groaned as he got out of the cab, for the owner of Pookie's Pub was striding back and forth in front of it. He buttonholed Jones and talked intensely into his ear. I could hear the words "time" and "late" and "people inside." Jones said softly, "Now, man, cool it. Don't bug me. When I *get* here, I *work*." The owner charged through the door, and Jones raised his eyebrows and laughed. We followed the owner in.

Pookie's was long and narrow and dusty-looking. A bar was on the left and banquettes were on the right, with closely packed tables between. At the rear, between the end of the bar and the men's room, was a tiny, jerry-built bandstand, two feet above the floor. Jones headed for the stand, and the rest of his quartet—Billy Greene, Joe Farrell (tenor saxophone), and Wilbur Ware (bass)—got up from a table and followed.

Jones' drums were strictly functional. They included an eighteen-inch bass drum, two tomtoms, a snare drum, two ride cymbals, and a high-hat. He hung his sweater on a hook by the upright piano, sat down, and tapped his way around the set with his fingers. He tightened his snares and his bass drum-head and picked up a pair of sticks. Then he looked at Farrell, said something, counted off, and the group went into a medium-tempo blues.

Jones and Sidney Catlett are probably the most sensitive and daring accompanists jazz has ever known. Catlett depended for his lift and push on a steady four-four beat on the bass drum, a light one-two-three beat on the ride cymbal, and a series of simple, ingeniously placed left-hand accents on the snare drum. His accompanying was statuesque and precise. Jones is a wild man in comparison. It's as though he had taken the methods of Catlett and his students (Max Roach, Art Blakey, Philly Joe Jones), put them in a bag, shaken it violently, and poured the blend into his own unique mold. The center of Jones' beat, which is as commanding as Catlett's, shifts continually. Sometimes it is in his constantly changing ride-cymbal strokes and sometimes



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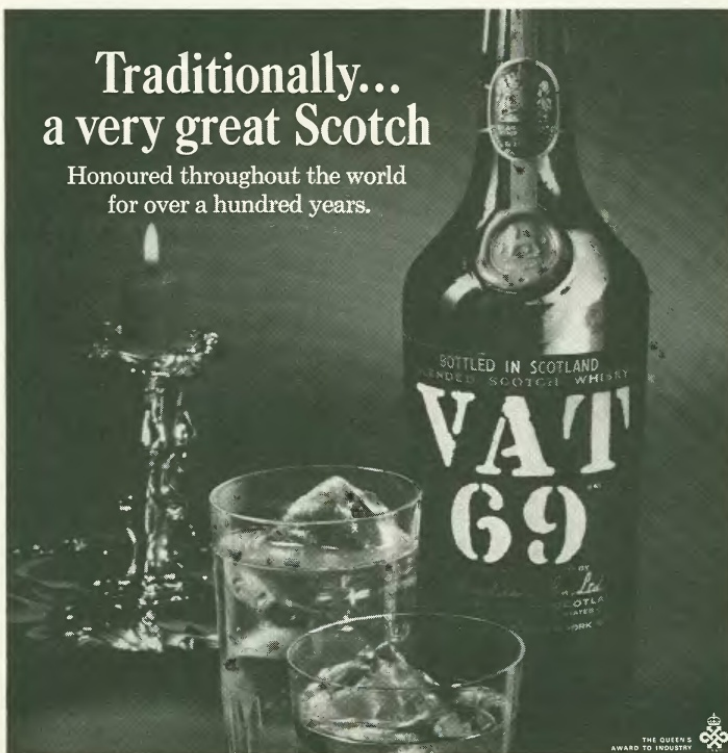
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he softens these and bears down heavily on his high-hat on the afterbeat. Sometimes swift, wholly unpredictable bass-drum accents come to the fore and sometimes the emphasis shifts to left-hand accents on the snare, which range from clear single strokes to chattering loose rolls. Jones' hands and feet all seem to have their own minds, yet the total effect is of an unbroken flow that both supports and weaves itself around the soloists.

Farrell started quietly on the blues and Jones set up light *tic-tic tic-tic-tic tic-tic* strokes on a ride cymbal, while his left hand played five behind-the-beat strokes on the snare, followed by softer irregular strokes and a shaking roll. The high-hat jiggled unevenly up and down and the bass drum was quiet. Farrell grew more heated, and Jones began throwing in cymbal splashes, bass-drum accents, and complex, charging left-hand figures. His volume rose steadily, though it never eclipsed Farrell, and suddenly one realized that Jones' quadruple-jointed rhythmic engine was in high gear. Pookie's was rocking. At the end of Farrell's solo, Jones abruptly dropped his volume to some sliding cymbal strokes, which shimmered below the opening of the piano solo. Jones scuttled and rattled behind the piano. His snare-drum accents were light and loose, and the center of his efforts fell on the ride cymbal, on which he would run softly ahead of the beat, fall exaggeratedly behind, then catch up and ride the beat before shooting ahead again. During Ware's solo, Jones whispered along on the high-hat, dropped occasional bass-drum beats, and made Ware's tone sound fat and assured. Farrell returned, exchanged some four-bar breaks with Jones, and the number ended with a shuddering rimshot.

Jones' face was as elusive as his motions—a boxer's assortment of jabs and feints and duckings, supported by steadily dancing feet. At first, it looked tight and secret; his eyes were shut and a dead cigarette was clamped in his mouth. Then he opened his eyes, which appeared sightless, and nodded at Farrell and Ware. Smiling widely, he closed his eyes in a pained way and turned his face toward the wall. A slow version of "On the Trail," from Ferde Grofé's "Grand Canyon Suite," came next, and it was converted into an intense marching blues. The set closed with a delicate reading of "Autumn Leaves." Jones put on his sweater and jumped down from the bandstand, ordered a beer, talked to a couple of



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admirers, and came over to my table. He was mopping his head with a limp handkerchief, and his shirt was so wet it was transparent. "Wait a minute," he said. "Big Jim's at the bar and I just want to check in with him. I don't know what he *does*, but he's always got plenty of bread and he supports the musicians, follows them around to all the clubs. He makes you feel good." At the bar, he pounded the back of a chunky, well-dressed man sitting with a platinum blonde. The man jumped off his stool and started shadowboxing. Jones put up his hands and the two men weaved and bobbed down the bar and out onto the sidewalk, boxing back and forth in front of the door for several minutes, then slapped each other and laughed. A jukebox went on and Billie Holiday started singing. The owner said in an intense way, "Do you know who that is? Do you know what that is? That's Billie Holiday singing 'My Yiddish Mama.' Tony Scott, the clarinetist, taped it at a party not long before she died and put it on a record and gave it to me. You won't find that selection on any other jukebox in the world." He darted away, and Jones sat down at the table. "Oh, my. I dig Big Jim." He took a long swallow of beer. "I think this will be one of those rare nights that seems like they're over before they begin, with everybody in the group *listening*, everybody in the group *hearing*. I want to build my group into topnotch quality. I want it to make a significant contribution. I'm not interested in flash-in-the-pan activity, and I think the men I have with me feel the same. It takes a lot of the agony out of things. Occupying your time for yea amount of dollars just doesn't work. Jazz is infectious. There's no way to avoid it. If you're going to play music—any kind of music—you can't avoid it. It just naturally takes over. This is my first group and I like being a leader, but then I guess I've been sort of a leader in most of the groups I've worked in. A drummer should conduct."

The owner appeared and touched Jones' shoulder, and he made a face. "All right, man, all right," he said. He turned to me. "Man wants some music, we'll oblige him."

The first number, built around Jones' wire brushes, was a fast version of "Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise." Farrell soloed on flute and Greene and Ware followed. Jones handles brushes the way a great chef handles a wire whisk, with fast, circular, loose-wristed motions. He began almost inaudibly, with polishing, sliding, ticking sounds

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on the snare, broken by silvery cymbal strokes. Slowly he rent this gentle flow with bass-drum beats and with jagged, irregular wire-brush strokes on the snare and the big tomtom. These were multiplied and intensified until it sounded as though he were using sticks, and the solo ended. It was a short, perfectly designed warmup. The group went into "Night in Tunisia." It started in a high, intense fashion, and by the time Farrell had finished a ten-minute solo Jones had switched to sticks and Pookie's was ballooning with sound. Then Jones took off. He began with heavy rimshots on the snare, which split notes and split them again, then broke into swaying, grandiose strokes on his ride cymbals, accompanied by lightning triplets and off-beat single notes on the bass drum. Switching patterns, he moved his right hand between his big and small tomtoms in a faster and faster arc while his left hand roared through geometrical snare-drum figures and his high-hat rattled and shivered in the wind. He switched patterns again and settled down on his snare with sharp, flat strokes, spaced regularly and then irregularly. He varied this scheme incessantly, gradually bringing in bass-drum beats and big tomtom booms. Cymbals exploded like flushed birds. Jones had passed beyond a mere drum solo. He was playing with earsplitting loudness, and what he was doing had become an enormous rolling ball of abstract sound, divorced from music, from reality, from flesh and bone. It trampled traditional order and replaced it with an unknown order. It delighted the mind and hammered at the guts. Jones waded through his cymbals again and went into a deliberate, alternately running and limping fusillade between his snare and tomtoms that rose an inch or two higher in volume. Suddenly he was finished. Farrell played the theme and Jones slid into a long, downhill coda that was a variation on the close of his solo, paused, and came down with a crash on his cymbals and bass drum.

There was a shouting silence. Jones was back from the Park.

—WHITNEY BALLIETT

For three weeks I lay on a possible death bed, but in that dark time God did rekindle television shows from Channels 7 and 14 in Evansville, and Channel 8, WISH, Indianapolis, Indiana.

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