

Jazz Musicians: In Dire Straits

Ed Hamilton on the difficulties faced by jazz musicians without proper health care coverage and pension benefits

A musician once said, “The Jazz life is not an easy path to wealth or even to basic living---you didn’t choose Jazz as a way of life---Jazz chose you.” And during this life many obstacles have their way of interceding into the musician's life in negative ways hampering the professional progression of their jazz plight.

Recently, Congress presented its last National Endowment for the Arts \$50,000 Dollars endowment for selected Jazz musicians. So what’s now available for jazz musicians needing help?

Lucky Thompson was found living on the streets of Seattle; Dakota Staton and King Pleasure were sometimes picked up wandering L.A.’s Washington Blvd. near the famous Parisian Room where they had once performed in better and healthier days. Billy Higgins, house drummer on more than 100 Blue Note recordings died a victim of liver disease having had 3 transplants with money provided by Bill and Camille Cosby; as well as Ray Charles and Milt Jackson’s liver problems; Prolonged pancreatic cancer took James Moody and Teddy Edwards; guitarist Barney Kessel’s wife asked for contributions to battle his long fight with a brain tumor; Art Pepper, Stan Getz, Bill Evans, and Gene Ammons’ fight with drugs; Sonny Criss’, Phineas Newborne’s and Roy Brooks-battles with mental illness; Buddy Collette’s stroke claimed him finally; Art Hillary’s long illness that recently took him; Barbara Morrison recently lost her leg; Etta James lost her alzheimer fight; Henry Grimes was recently found after years of wanderings unassisted. All these musicians at one time in their professional careers were in need of some assistance not provided at the time of their need. They were lacking health care associated with physical, mental, or substance abuse counseling, monetary assistance for subsidizing income, needing housing (there are no more Princess Nicas) or saving homes from foreclosure, rent, dental assistance, transportation, purchasing and or repairing instruments. And let us not forget Jazz musicians have no Social Security and no pensions available.

The [California Jazz Foundation](#) and Emergency Musicians Fund now provides an avenue making these services available to those needing assistance.

In 2006, based in in Los Angeles, Edythe Bronston founded [The California Jazz Foundation](#) and in 1989, Jimmy Owens, trumpeter and recent NEA recipient started the Emergency Musician's Fund In New York. These foundations created needs for jazz musicians.

The California Jazz Foundation and Emergency Musicians Fund have both been striving to provide for musicians without government help. Vocalist Sandra Booker says the California Jazz Foundation helped with her healing process and demonstrated a love, respect and a genuine concern for Jazz musicians. And as an Advisory Board member, Dr. Kenny Burrell says he is happy to support the Foundation and that they are strongly committed to helping jazz musicians in crisis.

Bronston and Owens must be commended for their ongoing and relentless efforts for jazz musicians.