ALAN NAHIGIAN

Antonio Hart learned one of the first consequential pieces of his musical life over the telephone. He was in ninth grade in Baltimore when music and art were cut from his public school, removing a comfort zone of belonging. A friend at the then-new Baltimore School for the Arts (BSA) helped him secure an audition, but Hart couldn't comfortably read the music he had chosen. So, the night before, with his friend, he spent hours on the telephone learning Brahms' *Hungarian Dance No. 5*. He played it the next day, added some scales and learned he'd been accepted.

Yet, that success had future consequence. At its core he was just a teenager trying to get into school, yet the episode introduced a problem he would repeatedly encounter in his subsequent life as alto saxophonist, bandleader and educator: music can be written down but the most important knowledge within it isn't transcribable. At BSA, private teacher Chris Ford accelerated Hart's development as a classical musician. Jazz came later, drawing him toward improvisation and toward musicians in whom he could recognize something of himself. At Berklee College of Music, where he studied with Bill Pierce, Andy McGhee and Joe Viola, Hart remembers arriving behind classmates who already seemed fluent in a language he was only beginning to acquire. "If there was a level zero, that was me," he admits.

So he practiced. He listened. He met trumpeter Roy Hargrove, and by graduation, he was playing with Hargrove and had a record contract, developments that somehow failed to persuade Hart that performing could be a plausible career. His imagined future remained graduate school, perhaps a doctorate, a teaching position back in Baltimore and, with luck, an occasional appearance on somebody else's record. "I didn't dream of it because I didn't think that was going to be a reality for me," Hart says. Yet he spent three years touring and recording with Hargrove, appearing on the trumpeter's leader debut, *Diamond in the Rough*, then other albums including *Public Eye* and *The Vibe*. "We were peers," Hart says. "Sometimes we spoke to each other, sometimes we didn't, but on the bandstand I kind of felt him and he felt me."

Hargrove's governing instruction was considerably less mystical: "Get on the bandstand and play your ass off!" The bandstand required responsiveness, risk, timing, collective intuition, the ability to recognize another musician's intention quickly enough to answer before it became past tense. Hart remembers the band attempting to "light the place up" every night. Their friendship later survived years when they did not speak before finding its way back, leaving Hart's recollection of Hargrove suspended somewhere between musical history and grief after the trumpeter's passing in 2018. "That was my brother," he says. "I love him. I miss him."

By 1991 Hart had released his own debut as leader, *For the First Time*. The decades ahead would bring further albums under his own name, a GRAMMY nomination for *Here I Stand* and an extensive sideman discography. Yet even as professional success accumulated, Hart enrolled at Queens College, pursuing graduate studies under Jimmy Heath and Donald Byrd. Beyond institutional study, what Heath offered was another category of knowledge altogether: proximity to a musician whose biography intersected directly with Miles Davis and John Coltrane. Jazz history is one of transmission—one musician begets another—but Hart describes it as something messier and more social. To him, musical inheritance is conduct: how to organize a band, how to listen, how to relate, how to create conditions in which another musician can give more of himself.

Trombonist Steve Davis places Hart inside such a continuum. "He and I, along with several of our generational colleagues, have had the absolute honor of working with and learning from true masters such as Frank Wess, James Moody, Charles Davis, Slide Hampton and, of course, Maestro Jimmy Heath, who loved Antonio. He even wrote a composition 'Like a Son', dedicated to him. It was always beautiful to observe their very close relationship." Although Hart remembers Heath as a model for how information circulates between people—how a leader could develop relationships, disperse knowledge and establish "a spirit that's welcoming and loving"—he refuses to confuse inheritance with replication. "I don't feel any obligation to anything," he says. "I still have to do it the way Antonio would do it."

After decades of teaching at Queens College's Aaron Copland School of Music, Hart has watched jazz become increasingly institutionalized. Harmony can be diagrammed, substitutions named, meters counted, vocabulary transcribed, improvisational systems practiced and evaluated. None of this is trivial; but codification creates its own danger. What can be most efficiently taught can masquerade as the whole of what must be learned. "There's a reason why musicians play the way they play, and it's through life experience," Hart says. Younger musicians may become extraordinary technicians while having fewer opportunities to acquire "the communication, the story, the spiritual aspect of it, the historical aspect of it."

Hart calls the distinction one between science and soul, but he is not rejecting analysis in favor of instinct. He is describing its limit: the point at which knowing what happened in a piece of music ceases to explain what that music means when somebody plays it. Saxophonist and educator Neil Leonard heard that distinction embodied at Bill Pierce's retirement tribute, where Hart appeared alongside Pierce, Mark Turner and Melissa Aldana. On Freddie Hubbard's "Birdlike", Leonard remembers Hart's playing as "original, passionate, fluidly in command of the alto." It was, he says, unforgettable.

Trombonist Robin Eubanks has watched Hart develop over decades. They became friends after the saxophonist moved to NYC, their careers repeatedly intersecting on bandstands and recordings, including as members of Dave Holland's various bands. "The thing that remained most consistent with him is a desire to improve as a musician," Eubanks says. What has changed most, he adds, is that Hart is "investigating his spirituality and development as a person more than when I first knew him."

Saxophonist Isaiah Collier met Hart at 16 through the then Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, performing with him for the first time at Chicago's Jazz Showcase. Collier remembers Hart as "intense," because of his seriousness about both the music and the tradition behind it. Hart stressed diligence, historical context and the necessity of returning repeatedly to records a musician might mistakenly believe he already understood. "These records aren't just records," Collier says. "They're sonic illustrations, they're sonic books, and you have to read them." Eventually, Collier says, depth of listening becomes inseparable from experience itself: "We're not just playing songs, it's a storytelling of your life, and until you've experienced certain things, you just will never get it." What Hart changed for Collier was not simply how to play the saxophone, but how to hear it. "Tone," Collier says. "That's how you recognize your parents. That's how you recognize your friends. That's how you recognize anybody." Put on a record, and tone is what allows a listener to recognize Hart, Heath or Coltrane. "You don't really care about what people are playing. You care about how they say it."

Hart speaks about Charlie Parker in much the same way. "Musicians can become so occupied with Parker's harmonic and rhythmic sophistication that they cease hearing how thoroughly the saxophonist remained grounded in the blues." Written notes remain consistent; what changes is the accumulation of inflection, history, intention and experience through which that information reaches another person. Hart tests this proposition with his students by simile. "It is raining in New York. How do you play that? What if it is sunny? What if you are hungry? What if you are in love? What if you have fallen out of it? What are you saying when you play that?" The exercise requires the student to locate experience, decide what it means and convert it into sound.

This month, Hart leads the Queens Jazz Orchestra at Flushing Town Hall for the Jimmy Heath Centennial Concert. Hart was personally selected by Heath to succeed him as conductor of the orchestra, making the centennial not merely an act of commemoration but another turn in the process of transmission. "Honestly, masterpiece music plays itself," says Hart, whose responsibility as he sees it is not to reconstruct Heath, but to create the conditions in which the music can become present again. Photographer Adriana Mateo, who documented Heath's big band for years, sees Hart's leadership as an extension of that communal history. "Antonio doesn't just lead the big band, he carries Jimmy Heath's torch and keeps our community connected," she says. "By surrounding himself with the musicians who shared the stage with Jimmy, he brings back that same spirit of togetherness."

Ever since his earliest days in Baltimore, Hart has encountered an elementary fact: a page can contain music without containing everything required to make it live. What he continues to search for—and asks his students to search for—is the moment when experience enters the sound. The moment when a black note becomes blue. Or yellow. Or the color of rain.

For more info visit antoniohartmusic.com. The Queens Jazz Orchestra's "The Jimmy Heath Centennial Concert" (led by Antonio Hart) is at Flushing Town Hall Nov. 7. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Roy Hargrove—*Diamond in the Rough* (Novus, 1989)
- Antonio Hart—*For the First Time* (Novus, 1991)
- Nat Adderley Quintet—*Mercy, Mercy, Mercy* (Alfa Jazz, 1995)
- Dave Holland Sextet—*Pass It On* (Dare2, 2007)
- Jimmy Heath Big Band—*Togetherness (Live at the Blue Note)* (Jazz Legacy Productions, 2011)
- Antonio Hart—*Blessings* (Jazz Legacy Productions, 2013)