Menlo Park’s Dr. Herb Wong is a legend in jazz circles. The music lover has been friends with some of the greatest musicians of the 20th century. When many might retire, this hep octogenarian is still going strong as a powerful force in the music industry.

text by EVAN PRICCO  •  photography by JACK HUTCHISON

After meeting with Menlo Park resident Dr. Herb Wong several times over a period of a few months in late 2006, I finally worked up the nerve to ask the ultimate question. To me, Wong is jazz. His words are the notes, history, venues, and the personalities. His stories include personal conversations with Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck, and being the long-time deejay on Bay Area’s KJAZZ. He embodies the culture and its entrenchment in American history. The week before one of our meetings, he had an interview on CNN as the authoritative voice on the history of the Monterey Jazz Festival, celebrating its 50th year in 2007. I myself am a jazz fan—too young to understand its impact, but devoted to studying the great albums and musicians. And Wong became my mentor during our few meetings, and now I’m going to ask him my pertinent question: “What is your all-time favorite jazz album?”

Without hesitation, and before the final word left my throat, Wong replies, “Kind of Blue,” Miles Davis, 1959. Miles was the visionary looking to the future, and that is the perfect album, jazz or otherwise.” I believe jazz has spoken.

Wong was born in Oakland, California, in 1926. Soon after, his family moved to Stockton. To most, a move to Stockton might appear a distance away from the epicenters of jazz that were popping up on the West Coast, yet the move proved to be a pivotal moment in Wong’s life. One day, a box addressed to the previous homeowner of the Wong family’s new residence showed up at their doorstep. Inside was a treasure chest of jazz albums. “I remember Count Basie and Duke Ellington being in that box, and I really wanted to see those people in person,” Wong says.

In the late 1930s and early 40s, Oakland was a regular tour stop for traveling jazz bands and musicians. This meant Wong could see the objects of his new passion in person. I myself am a jazz fan—and too young to understand its impact, but devoted to studying the great albums and musicians. And Wong became my mentor during our few meetings, and now I’m going to ask him my pertinent question: “What is your all-time favorite jazz album?”

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the train from Stockton to Oakland, and went to jazz clubs. "Oakland had all these theaters with live performances from bands, with movies before the performance. So you would get a cowboy movie, a cartoon, then a T Arboran or Flash Gordon feature, then a live swing band. Unbelievable. And a lot of theaters had this, Ni Colas Brothers, the Orpheum, and the Roisin Theatre were all so great.

Wong says with his 40-cent train ticket, the whole evening would cost him around $1, entertainment and all. This, after he told me I spent $50 on my recent concert ticket, and I didn't see D uke Ellington, either.

As World War II became the reality for most young men in the early 1940s, Wong decided he wanted to join and become a navigator in the Air Force. Things didn't work out as planned. "I figured that being in the Air Force would be something pretty neat, but I passed audio portions of my recruitment test so strongly that they put me in radio and communications." While stationed on an aircraft carrier off the coast of Japan, Wong made a friend who helped after the course of his life. "One of the good friends I made was Hans Conron, who would eventually become a Hollywood actor," Wong says. "This guy was so scrounghul at getting away from combat duty, always bringing his superiors, how he worked it so he was a radio broadcaster for the Army in M anila and Tokyo.

W hen the war was over Wong was stationed at Fort D raelin, 34 miles north of Tokyo. T here, he became the head instructor of the Signal Corps, and began to teach all manner of communication.

"And then H ans calls me out of nowhere and asks me if I want to do a radio show in Tokyo playing jazz records. And, of course, I said yes! Wong got access to a jeep, took the drive a few times a week, and began his career as a jazz deejay.

"We had the show, the Army would send me V Dis, Victory Discs," Wong recalls. "If they came out of the War Office in Washington, D.C., and each month, I would get 25 new albums to entertain the troops. And these albums were one-of-a-kind, rare albums. So, I had it all set up that I would get 25 albums sent to me in Tokyo and 25 albums sent to my address in California Bay, that was great! Wong says, laughing. Spending extended time in Tokyo allowed him to explore Japanese swing bands, and he soon realized the popularity of Glenn Miller. An example of Wong's knowledge of the inner languages of jazz, with attention to notes creating moods and unique expressions, is apparent when he describes the appeal of Glenn Miller. "Miller had this sound that made fans out of a lot of people who were not swing heads. He would hit chords, this high note that sounded more like a clarinet than a saxophone, and it was very nice. And I saw how people loved it."

After his service was up, Wong returned home just in time to enroll at the University of California at Berkeley. Continuing to expand upon his immense background of music, Wong was on his way to a graduate degree in Education. "I had a final to take the same night as a Woody Herman show at Swee T's Ballroom in Oakland," Wong remembers. "I had to convince the professor to let me take the test orally at 3:00 a.m. I got to go see this Woody Herman show, and the professor said, 'O h jazz, I wish I could go.' Wong says, laughing again. Wong went and took the test.

In September 1959, the local radio station KJAZ announced a contest that had listeners send in a postcard to be randomly picked by a deejay. The winner won 15 Columbia records and a five-minute interview on the station. Wong thought sending a postcard was too easy. Instead, he wrote a letter. T hat letter was so impressive, that deep jerry D ran proclaimed Wong the winner and invited him in for the interview. T he interview lasted over 30 minutes, with Wong and D uke Ellington, either. Wong received a letter from the station saying he had made over the years who were major musicians would come out. It's always about chemistry."

Now for the past 15 years on the campus of Palo Alto H igh School, Wong has taught jazz courses for the Palo Alto Jazz Alliance. For two-and-a-half hours, he gives a history lesson of America's musical heritage, teaching adult students and teenagers alike about artists and jazz styles. Wong will sometimes bring in artists for demonstrations and Q & A sessions. But his catchphrase of "People still talk about him, after all these years, I want to do it all." For example, Wong's three-semester course on Bill E. Jones was quite the hit.

T hen there is the M onterey Jazz Festival, the world's longest running jazz festival. Wong has been to all 49, T his year, Wong's 50th, will see him on a panel for an international conference on the festival that will occur prior to the September event. "CNN has asked, 'I'm on a panel to speak, and I'll interview a bit,' Wong says. 'It's all pretty good stuff.'"

A sking Wong about his favorite jazz album, stimulated me to other "what's your favorite all time" questions. W hat is your favorite jazz musician? "That's a hard one, but L ester Young, Bill E. Jones, and Woody Herman are ones I love." W hat about instrument? "Piano and tenor sax," he says.

E he continues: "The old Black H awk in San Francisco was my favorite place to see live jazz. It was smoky as hell, but it was where anybody who was somebody would play. T hat was jazz. "T o say the least, to the generations that Wong has touched with his wisdom, devotion, and care, he is a living legend of jazz."

"I always liked to assemble a fresh act, or garner up a new combination of artists together that made a new sound."

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