



ALL THAT JAZZ

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 HUTCHESON

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 my brother

and I immediately began to play these albums. Not just playing them but studying them in their entirety. Notes, styles, instruments, everything," Wong says. As children often do, Wong and his brother played games to keep each other company. Whereas most would play hide and seek, they would play "name that jazz tune." Actually, he would play name that note, musician, song, album, and instrument as fast as he could. His brother would start a record, and immediately Herb would run off the first instrument heard, the note, musician, and song. He was almost always right. "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. In fact, he took

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 Tarzan or Flash Gordon feature, then a live swing band. Unbelievable. And a lot of theaters had this. Nicolas Brothers, the Orpheum, and the Rio 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 I told him I spent \$50 on my recent concert ticket. And, I didn't see Duke Ellington, either.

As World War II became the reality for most young men in the early 1940s, Wong decided he wanted to join and

"And then Hans 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.

"When I did the show, the Army would send me these V-Discs; Victory Discs," Wong recalls. "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. Boy, 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 and Jazz Ecology. "I had a final to take the same night as a Woody Herman show at Sweet's Ballroom in Oakland," Wong remembers. "I had to convince the professor to let me take the test orally at a later date. So I told him, 'I got to go see this Woody Herman show,' and the professor said, 'Oh jeez, I wish I could go,'" Wong says, laughing again. Wong went and took the test later.

In September 1959, the local radio station KJAZZ 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-

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 alter the course of his life. "One of the good friends I made was Hans Connery, who would eventually become a Hollywood actor," Wong says. "This guy was so resourceful at getting away from combat duty, always bribing his superiors. Somehow, he worked it so he was a radio broadcaster for the Army in Manila and Tokyo."

When the war was over Wong was stationed at Fort Dralan, 14 miles north of Tokyo. There, he became the head instructor of the Signal Corps, and began to teach all manner of communication.

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minute interview on the station. Wong thought sending a postcard was too easy. Instead, he wrote a letter. That letter was so impressive, that deejay Jerry Dean proclaimed Wong the winner and invited him in for the interview. The interview lasted over 30 minutes, with Wong and Dean's banter on Jazz records and musicians impressing everyone at the station. Twenty minutes into their talk, the president of KJAZZ called in and gave Wong a radio show on the station. A week later, he did a six-hour show on the history of Bay Area jazz. Shortly after, he did a jazz perspective show on Sundays. Eventually, he did other shows, and was a staple, if not the voice, at the station until 1996.

While still a deejay at KJAZZ, Wong and his wife moved to Menlo Park in 1985. He had met with a jazz band called Full Faith and Credit, comprised of stock exchange types in the Bay Area, and they wanted Wong to start a record label to promote their album. He started Palo Alto Records, and became the president/A&R/producer of the label. After five years of Palo Alto Records (a label that was dissolved after six albums were on the Billboard Top 15 for jazz recordings), Wong started Black Hawk Records. After another successful run with that label ("People still talk about Black Hawk. Good graphics, good artists, really good stuff," Wong says), he became a producer of various peninsula jazz events. He produced both the Stanford Shopping Jazz Series and the Palo Alto Jazz Festival. "I had a lot of fun doing these events. I always liked to assemble a fresh act, or garner up a new combination of artists together that made a new sound. A lot of the friends I

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 High 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 here's the catch: he has never taught the same course twice. "I've taught over 50 courses, and I have so much material, I want to do it all." For example, Wong's three-semester course on Bill Evans was quite the hit.

Then there is the Monterey Jazz Festival, the world's longest running jazz festival. Wong has been to all 49. This 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 called, I'm on a panel to speak, and I'll emcee a bit," Wong says. "It's all pretty good stuff."

Asking Wong about his favorite jazz album, stimulated me to other "what's your favorite?" questions. Who is his favorite jazz musician? "That's a hard one, but Lester Young, Bill Evans, and Woody Herman are ones I love." What about instrument? "Piano and tenor sax," he says.

He continues: "The old Black Hawk 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. That was jazz." To say the least, the generations that Wong has touched with his wisdom, devotion, and care, he is a living legend of jazz. ■