

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Urban decay, renewal.

Edward J. Sozanski, H4



"And
dou

Sunday, July 31, 2011 ★ Section H

Philadelphia's jazz elders riff on the golden times

By Gregory Thomas
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

philly.com

The walls of Conference Room 310 at WRTI are lined with a gray cushion that dulls sound. To the roomful of elderly jazz musicians who came of age in smoky, boisterous clubs, the acoustics can be challenging.

"I can't hear a thing in this room!" exclaims Morris "Mo" Bailey, stationed in a motorized wheelchair at one end of a conference table, wearing sunglasses and a baseball cap. Bailey, a 79-year-old saxophonist turned composer, suffers from muscular dystrophy in his legs as well as resentment toward today's radio, which jazz no longer pervades.



To hear some Philly jazz musicians reminisce about playing here, go to www.philly.com/phillyjazzstories

"How can you let rap take the place of jazz music?" Bailey asks in a tone of disgust and disbelief.

"That's the problem now," says Thelma Anderson, 83, a short lady with curly gray hair and glasses. "The young people don't have access to hearing jazz."

Anderson, Bailey, and the others around the table — four acclaimed jazz musicians and a radio host — are killing time before
See **JAZZ** on H5



RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

Drummer Charlie Rice (left) and singer **Billy Paul** share recollections. "You don't have the musicians like you used to," says Paul. "We got in the basement and jammed and it wasn't about no money."



remembrances
at WRTI:
(from left)
Saxophonist
Larry
McKenna,
singer Theima
Anderson,
bassist Jymie
Merritt, host
Bob Perkins,
drummer
Charlie Rice,
and singer Billy
Paul.

RON TARVER /
Staff Photographer

Philly jazz elders riff on the golden past

JAZZ from HI
their next recording session. In
about 45 minutes they'll move
across the hall for an informal
Q&A, in front of a small studio audi-
ence, about 20th-century Philadel-
phia jazz.

Jazz Bridge, a nonprofit support
network for aging musicians, is
hosting the event. It's for a segment
of *We the People*, a project of the
Pennsylvania Humanities Council
focusing on disseminating stories
on the American experience. No air-
date has yet been set.

Jazz Bridge has assembled a
group who honed their musical
chops in Philadelphia and played
with some of the biggest names in
jazz. Bassist Jymie Merritt, 85,
jammed with John Coltrane, Lee
Morgan, and Benny Golson, and
toured with Art Blakey and the Jazz
Messengers in the late 1950s and
early 1960s. Larry McKenna, 74,
played tenor saxophone for Frank
Sinatra, Rosemary Clooney, and
Johnny Mathis. Drummer Charlie
Rice, 91, played at the Downbeat
Club in South Philly in the 1940s
and 1950s and recorded with Chet
Baker. Singer Billy Paul, 75, might

be best known for his Grammy
Award-winning No. 1 single, "Me
and Mrs. Jones."

It's a rare opportunity for this
bunch of Philly jazz stalwarts to re-
connect. Conversation bounces
back and forth between laments
over what the old heads call an ero-
sion of jazz culture and memories
of the musicians who made Phila-
delphia a rich scene.

"You don't have the musicians
like you used to," says Paul, his
voice deep and raspy. "We got in
the basement and jammed and it
wasn't about no money. There's no
unity amongst the young musicians
today."

Fifteen minutes to showtime. Su-
zanne Cloud, Jazz Bridge executive
director, enters the room to brief
the group. "Listen up, everybody.
We only get one shot at this, so I
really need you to not talk over
each other," says Cloud, a jazz advo-
cate and musician who is coordina-
ting the event. "When someone is
telling a story, even if you think the
person is telling it wrong, let them
finish before you speak. OK?"

The panelists nod in affirmation.
For men who carved out their liv-

ings as free-stylists, playing off one
another's vibes, structure isn't natu-
ral.

"I'll be back in five minutes, and
then we'll all go over," Cloud says.
The conversation turns back to
former jazzmen.

"He was on my first record."
"He was a bad cat."

At 1:59 p.m. Cloud ushers the
group down the hall into a larger
room and arranges them side-by-
side in chairs facing about 40 audi-
ence members. Bob Perkins, 77, vet-
eran radio host and jazz lover, facil-
itates the discussion, calling on
each speaker in turn.

They reminisce about old times,
when hard bop spilled onto the side-
walks from clubs lining South
Street and Columbia Avenue (now
Cecil B. Moore Avenue).

Paul, who cut his first record, *Fee-
lin' Good at the Cadillac Club*, in
1968 in one 3½-hour studio ses-
sion, is still making a living with
music. He tours mainly in Europe,
North Africa, and parts of Asia.
(One of his favorite countries to per-
form in is Tunisia, he says, because
of its scenery and support of jazz.)

Perkins says Paul's touring over-
seas is a shame "because no Ameri-
can should have to go to Europe or
the Far East to make a name for
himself or keep his name or her
name alive and to make a living,
when the music was founded right
here."

Cameras stationed on each
side of the audience document the
event. A third cameraman, Jason
Fifield, stands in front of them,
training his lens on each speaker.

Fifield, 39, has been shooting in-
terviews and performances with
jazz musicians old and young alike
in Philadelphia for nearly seven
years. Assembling a feature-length
film that does the jazz scene justice
— his ultimate goal — is proving
harder than he once thought. The
subject is just too big. In that time,
he says, he's "barely scratched the
surface."

There's no dispute that only the
barest traces remain of the city's
once-proud jazz scene of 50 years
ago — even with the planned re-
opening of Ortlieb's Jazzhaus in
Northern Liberties. But Fifield dis-
agrees that the music itself is in
decline. He's seen young people

all over the city playing it. They
learn from music teachers and
YouTube clips of the greats in ac-
tion.

It's not the same environment
that nurtured the jazz revolution,
an era idealized in the minds of
those who were there, Fifield says.
Perkins recalls it being much more
person-to-person, listening and
learning, longer stretches of con-
centration with less competition for
attention.

"We used to go down to the base-
ment and listen to a stack of 33½s
for 1½ hours — just listen, and
study the music," Perkins recalls.
"That was a half-century ago. No
one would do that today. The atten-
tion span isn't there. The cell phone
would ring."

But alongside the criticism is a
certain gratitude for having lived a
life of music. At one point, Bailey
says, "I've had a good time. Not a
rich man, but I've had a good livin'
with jazz, and I respect everybody
here."

Contact staff writer Gregory Thomas at
215-854-5289, gthomas@philly.com, or
@GregRTThomas on Twitter.