

The Formative Years of Herb Lovelle / by Paula Lockheart, vocalist, songwriter, and interpreter of classic blues and jazz. (1997)

The name “Herb Lovelle” has been mentioned in various books and periodicals on jazz history, African-American music, rhythm and blues, American popular music and drumming. He is probably best known as a New York “studio” (recording) drummer in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s—with major recording credits covering everything from mainstream jazz and bebop to folk, mainstream pop, country, “bubblegum,” rock, R&B, “funk,” and more. Herb also played the gamut of major performers tours, Broadway shows, television and live radio. It is possible that there has never existed a more versatile American drummer.

Before this interview of April 18, 1997, I already knew a lot about Herb. Therefore, it was a challenge for me to see if I could uncover new information and themes about his musical career and his contributions to American music. In fact, I got so much new input that I am limiting this report to a few of the early influences that shaped this highly successful musician, whose career was itself a big chunk of the American history of popular music and jazz.

Herb was born sometime in June, 1924, and was raised in Brooklyn, New York. His parents were from Barbados and Trinidad, and came to the U.S. as children. His father was a Baptist preacher. The first music Herb heard and saw being played was most likely church music. There was the singing and handclapping, of course, but no tambourines, and, although he saw the organist, he was not close enough to see how the instrument was played.

One of Herb’s strongest and most influential early-recollected musical experiences was when he heard his older sister and brother practicing classical violin and piano respectively (the parents made them take lessons). He remembers that he would sometimes “play” two Popsicle sticks on the wooden floor, while his sister practiced the piano. When the parents were out, she played a little “jazz” figure, and he’d “play” with her.

Herb says he must have heard drums in parades, but he doesn’t think he saw the drums as a small child. He remembers that the first trap drum set he saw was on a merry-go-round, where the set played automatically. He was fascinated with it.

All of this had taken place while Herb was a small child. At the same time, Herb's parents taught him principles to live by, and these had a lasting effect on his approach to musicianship: "Mom taught me I can do whatever I want ... Daddy taught me, if you're gonna do something, do it right. Know as much as you can about it."

Both Herb's uncles (his mother's brothers) were drummers. One of them, Uncle Leon Monk Herbert, would take Herb along on his gigs, and later, actually turned over some of his gigs to Herb. In fact, Uncle Leon was indirectly responsible for Herb's first "paid" gig, at 11 or 12 years of age. In the 1930s "rent parties" were a popular form of entertainment in his area, and Herb was going to go to a neighborhood party and watch his uncle play drums with a pianist. (The pianist played the blues and stride styles of the time.) His uncle never got to the party for some reason, so Herb played a whisk broom and hairbrush on the body of a banjo, made from skin at that time. Herb says, "The piano player must have been tickled or amused ... I guess I didn't get in his way, and I got a dime ... I ran out of there cause I had to get home ... my parents would not have approved [of my being without supervision] at a rent party. After that my uncle never told me where those gigs were unless he took me with him."

But it was Herb's other uncle—Arthur Herbert—who gave him his intensive instruction in musicianship and drumming: "My Uncle Arthur fine tuned it. [He told me] 'This is the right way to do it'. Uncle Arthur was 'a big time guy'. He played drums with Coleman Hawkins, Jan Savitch (Shuffle Rhythm Orchestra, a little hipper than Paul Whiteman, a big band) and taught Shelly Manne."

Herb was beginning to hear big bands like Count Basie, Bennie Goodman, etc., on the radio and on records, and since big bands featured saxophones, he told his Uncle Arthur he wanted to be a sax player. His uncle said that to play sax he should first take up the clarinet. Herb tried, but he hated practicing clarinet, and could hardly get a sound out. He decided to take up drums, since "I liked rhythm anyway." By this time, at about 12 or 13 years of age, he was watching his Uncle Arthur play, and he didn't see any music sheets, so he thought drums would be easier than clarinet. His uncle agreed to teach him drumming, and Herb credits this early training for much of his subsequent success.

Uncle Arthur was vehement that Herb had to be able to read music. He insisted that he "write down" the drum part onto manuscript paper from

listening to a song on a record. (Bass drum, sock cymbal, high hat, and snare drums each has a different line, space and symbol on a music score.)

As it turns out, this was a pivotal factor in Herb's career. For example: "I was playing in Sammy Davis's show [1950's], and in a rehearsal, one of the arrangers came up to me and said 'Wow, you're catching everything'. He wondered how I caught the licks that he wrote for the brass, and the saxes. I told him I was reading their music, over their heads. He said 'I could write for you?' Sammy's regular drummer at the time could not read. The general tendency was to think that black musicians didn't read, and especially the black drummers were not known as readers. The arranger all of a sudden was giving me charts. I showed him how to write for drums as I'd learned from my uncle. That's why I got the job on Sammy's TV show. Reading was important, because there wasn't time for a lot of rehearsal, and direction."

Of course that TV show led to many other important jobs. In studio recording, this kind of efficiency, made possible in part by literacy, was very important. Says Herb, "We'd record about four hit records in three hours ... You never knew who was going to be in the studio. Leslie Gore, or Leslie Uggams, or Jerry Vale, Johnny Mathis, Aretha, Connie Francis. You never knew. You went from one studio to the next, and there these people would be, and you do what you gotta do, and on to the next."

Literacy also made the advanced art of bebop possible. Herb points out that the beboppers were literate and highly educated. "Bebop was total structure—that's how come they could go that far out." He was speaking of Roy Haynes, Max Roach, Elvin Jones, Kenny Clark, Tony Williams ... and himself, Herb Lovelle.

Uncle Arthur taught Herb to tune the drums. "You don't pound your instrument. You touch it, caress it, and it will respond. But it must be tuned. The bass drum was tuned to enhance the bass fiddle with sympathetic vibration. Now if all the drums are tuned with themselves, you then get an over all sympathetic vibration of the band, so that when you hit with the brass, you didn't over power the brass. When you pump with the saxophones, you didn't thud the saxophones out. It was a warmth that came out, that felt good, so they'd pump some more! The brass are ready to roar, because they're being enhanced; they're being punctuated by a sympathetic instrument."

He'd tune to the piano, like all the other musicians. The technique for playing this tuned drum kit, taught by Uncle Arthur, held him in good stead for all of his career. "I would always like to think that I was the drummer coming off of it [the drum] rather than digging into it. The acid rock groups were ... power-boom bang. I never saw it like that. I saw ping more of a touch, and the touch brought about articulation, more definition."

Tuning to be "sympathetic" with the bass player was important in that Herb claims that he learned a lot from bass players. His general technique was to "lock in" with the bass. "The nature of that instrument [the bass] is to keep the melodic beat..." When Fender (electric) bass became important in popular music, Herb had to adjust in many cases. "Many of the Fender players had no definition between one note and another... I had to lessen the function of a bass player, who had one continuous hum. I had to find another approach—latch onto somebody else. I'd pick out guys to deal with and have conversations with them musically."

Herb is quick to point out that this wasn't the case with all Fender players. For example, Jerry Jamont, of Aretha Franklin fame, was very articulate in his playing, and Herb could lock in with him quite readily!

Part of Uncle Arthur's training was to make Herb take the drum set down and set it up again "nut for nut, bolt for bolt, screw for screw... washer for washer." Later, even when there were roadies to set up for him, he'd still do his own tuning and make sure everything was in order.

Herb got his first good set of drums right after he did his first real professional job (meaning he had a union card, and everything was "on the books") in 1949. This was with Hot Lips Page at Yale University. Buddy Tate and Walter Page (from Count Basie's Orchestra) were in the band. Mary Lou Williams was on the bill. It was a big deal. Herb had a set of makeshift drums, mismatched, which fell apart completely after he played the first few bars! "Everything went rolling off in several different directions into the audience." Herb had tears streaming down his face as he gathered it all up and put it together, while everyone else waited. When the job was over, Hot Lips said to Herb, "You better get you some drums." The implication was that if Herb didn't get a functional set of traps, he wouldn't be hired for the upcoming tour.

Herb's father had not wanted him to be a jazz musician, so he wouldn't give him the money for drums. His mother had remarried, and his

stepfather said “OK, how much do you need?,” and he gave Herb the money. “Later his story was always, ‘Y’know, he paid me back, and he never looked back’, meaning that I just went up, up, up. I got a beautiful set—I went to Manny’s. My uncle was well known—‘Arthur Herbert’s nephew!’ They let me pick out my own skins, drums. It wasn’t like you walk in now. My set came from the factory to my specifications. Spine head hide—the back of the animal, less fat, much more sensitive. Even the shells were shaped, cured, baked. That was before metal shells. The factory, Gretch, was in Brooklyn. I kept those drums as long as I could. My next set didn’t come till the 60s.”

Uncle Arthur made Herb apply a certain “mental application” to drumming: “There were certain basic things I should apply when I play... ABCs. I should know what I play. If there’s a lyric, I should know it... I should also have a feeling as to what the music was about for me, personally, and was that compatible with what was going on [with the other musicians]? You begin to do this instantaneously; you fall into what you call a groove. The people playing together are in agreement with what’s going on.”

Herb is describing his ability to adapt to each playing situation thoroughly and quickly, which of course has everything to do with his versatility. “Early on I prayed that I want to be able to play with anybody, anywhere, anytime, from Count Basie to Guy Lombardo. Well, Joe Jones, (Count Basie’s famous drummer) recommended me for The Count Basie Alumni Band in a European tour, which was a high point of my life—and, by the time I was up there, John Denver was the equivalent of Guy Lombardo. Or Peter Paul and Mary, Gordon Lightfoot, Bob Dylan, and I enjoyed it. My uncle’s teaching was my success in those things. As far as I’m concerned there’s no bad music to be played. It’s your attitude that makes it good or bad. If you don’t want to play that music, don’t go. You make it bad for everyone else. People say ‘How can you play the same show every night?’ But it wasn’t the same show every night—it never was, for me. The minute you sit down you don’t feel the same as last night. I’m not the same. Everything around me is not the same. That singer on stage... there’s more energy, less energy, in tune, out of tune, slower, faster... it’s alive, it’s the moment. You can’t find it boring if you’re living the moment.”

A few years before he left the music business, Herb tells about some studio producers who called him in to record some of his “hot licks,” as they put it. “This was completely out of context—there was no other musician, no song to be performed, nothing.” Herb laughed, and told them he didn’t do

it that way. [Of course, we now know they were simply trying to digitally “sample” him, which, no doubt, they were eventually able to do anyway, by “sampling” from tracks he had already recorded.] “Hot licks?” he says, “I told them I didn’t have any, and I didn’t.” To Herb, every performing situation was a different event, a different context, requiring a different participation from him.

When I asked Herb in what area he felt his biggest contribution(s) to music, his answer was “R&B.” R&B, he felt, was “spawned in the studio,” where he had the most influence. Herb maintains that R&B came from gospel music, but his early technique was to “simplify Black music to make it more understandable for white people.” Then gradually R&B got more sophisticated, and eventually, “Funk” was born in the studio. Again, it was Uncle Arthur’s training that was influential. “I was taught that the bass drum should be felt rather than heard, which made me, in my mind, sort of compromise the bebop foot, so that when I applied it to playing—not jazz, but pop music—rather than just drop the bomb anywhere that I felt, which was wonderful for bebop, but didn’t fare too well with popular music, which needed to be more consistent, [so] it became a pattern. That’s how I applied it. Bernard [Purdy] came along later on and put the New Orleans street beat [a kind of triplets against eighths groove from the 1950s] with that and whipped it up, and went ten steps further. Steve Gadd took it way out, but it all came off the bebop.”

When bebop left pop, and there was a real separation, people tried to decide which way they wanted to go. Herb went both ways. He wanted “to be able to play for anybody or anything.” But a lot of musicians made a decision. “One thing was square, one thing was hip.” To Herb, “there was no difference, just what was going on in my head at the time I was playing—it was all music to me.”

Paula Lockheart, 1997 (uploaded 2021)