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## A Tribute to Hale Smith (1925–2009)

by Regina Harris Baoicchi



Hale Smith, self-proclaimed “World’s Most Famous Unknown Composer,” lives on through the genius of his music and through his distinguished circle of friends: Marcel Dick, Howard Swanson, Noel DaCosta, Arnold Schoenberg, Raymond Patterson, Oliver Nelson, and Mary Lou Williams; Quincy Jones, Eugene Redmond, Kermit Moore, and Dorothy Rudd Moore; Milton Babbitt, Dolores White, Olly Wilson, and T. J. Anderson.

Smith was among an elite breed whose encyclopedic knowledge was marked by holistic interests and boundless intellectual curiosity. He spoke eloquently on wide-ranging topics. Silk bowties, cigars, and Mont Blanc pens were his trademarks.

Born in Cleveland on June 29, 1925, Smith hailed from a family of four. Hale Smith Sr. owned and operated a barber-shop and printing press, where Hale Jr. developed his love for calligraphy and engraving. He was a master copyist with an impeccable hand. In his family barbershop, Smith learned the art of dialogue: from playing the dozens to philosophical discourse; his love for self expression and attentive listening was matchless.

Both Smith sons studied music. Bruce learned trumpet. Hale, nicknamed Sonny, learned piano, baritone horn, and bass. Bruce jokingly credited himself with Hale’s success: “As kids Mother said, ‘If you hear Sonny at the piano, you do his chores.’ Sonny practiced often to avoid chores!”

As with many geniuses, Smith loved learning but was not a good fit for public schools. After graduating high school, he served in the U.S. Army (1943–1945), playing piano and writing charts. Smith used GI funds to finance his bachelor’s degree (1950) and his master of music (1952) from the Cleveland Institute, studying composition with Marcel Dick, violist of the Kolisch String Quartet, which was dedicated to performing Schoenberg’s music.

Smith recalled Dick saying, “I’ve taught you all I know . . . go make a name for yourself!” Following his advice, Smith created masterpieces while playing piano in Cleveland clubs. In 1952, he won BMI’s inaugural student competition award. One of his first gigs was with Dizzy Gillespie, who taught Smith to “woodshed” and inspired his move to New York.

In 1948, Smith married Juanita Hancock. They had 3 children—Michael, Marcel, and Robin—before moving. His first week in New York, Hale bumped into Langston Hughes, who asked, “Hey, aren’t you from Cleveland?” (They had met at

Karamu Theatre.) Hughes invited him to dinner. Smith eagerly accepted since he had subsisted on chyme and buttermilk while seeking work. Dinner led to a lifelong friendship, Smith’s classic setting of *Ask Your Mama*, and carte blanche to set any Hughes poetry he fancied.

Smith edited at several publishing houses: Sam Fox, E. B. Marks, Frank Music. All of them, along with Theodore Presser and C. F. Peters, published his music. He often testified as an expert witness for copyright-infringement lawsuits.

His first day as a music editor, Smith said, “As I sat in my office, reflecting on the Black composers who paved my way, I wrote William Grant Still [dedicatee of *For one called Billy*] to thank him.” They became lasting friends, as Smith did with Eubie Blake, Anne Brown, and Eric Dolphy—for whom his son is named. Dolphy studied with Smith and recorded his music. Smith penned liner notes for Dolphy’s albums; program notes for Chicago, Cleveland, and other orchestras; and musings such as, “It’s not who you know, but who knows you!”



On the heels of Sam Fox's successful *Man of La Mancha*, Fox commissioned Smith to produce Miriam Makeba's *Children's Hour*. Fox shelved the album when Makeba married civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael in 1968.

Smith taught at Xavier University, C. W. Post College, and the University of Connecticut, Storrs. His protégés include Dr. Malcolm Breda, Dr. Nkeiru Okoye, Wynton Marsalis, and this writer. Composer Marilyn Harris recalls,

U-Conn lore has it that Hale was hired to educate me and other wayward composition students. Hale provided a glowing example of how we might create a musical life.

Knowing Hale existed and had a music career gave us hope. I studied analysis, arranging, composition, copying and editing under his tutelage; skills that pay my bills. Hale generously introduced me to his friends in the music world, where he seemed to know everyone! I can trace all my contacts and gigs directly to Hale. He led me to enduring friendships with countless musicians, producers and recording engineers.

Dr. Rae Linda Brown met Smith in 1974 at U-Conn:

Hale was a legend due to his Black Arts course. I took his Music Arranging class. As a non-composer, I found the class difficult. So I spent time after class seeking Hale's aid. He took me under his wing.

Hale understood his influence as a musician, and mentor. He often invited me to join him for dinner at a nearby inn. We talked for hours, where deep learning took place. I learned to take chances in my work, gained confidence to try for a concerto competition (which I won). Hale taught me about Black composers and why it is vital to study their music in the context of history.

Smith mentored contemporaries like Ulysses Kay, Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson and Melba Liston. Pianist/author Randy Weston recalls,

In 1981 Hale and I presented *Three African Queens* in concert with the Boston Pops Orchestra. My five-piece combo and a 100-piece orchestra were conducted by John Williams. Before I submitted the music my arranger, Melba Liston, insisted Hale check the score. That's when I realized Hale Smith was a heavyweight composer and arranger.

In a 1990s tour of France I traveled with a 10-piece group. In Leone, we added 25 strings from the Leone Symphony Orchestra. When Melba took ill Hale completed the music and the tour. A DVD of the event will soon to be released. Juanita showed an excerpt at Hale's memorial. Hale and I played a piano-4-hands duet, and I scatted for the first time. The Spirit led me to invite Hale to sit in; nothing was planned; it was just a wonderful thing that happened. Hale was warm, generous, quiet: a brilliant genius, an incredible man.

Smith described his music as "formal" or "informal." The latter has been recorded by Dolphy, Coltrane, Betty Carter, Ahmad Jamal, and others. His formal music appears on the CRI CD *Music of Hale Smith*; Deutsche Grammophon's *Spirituals in Concert* with Kathleen Battle and Jessye Norman, conducted by James Levine; and Public Radio International's

African-American Music Tree Project recording of *Meditations in Passage*, conducted by Kay George Roberts.

Dr. Roberts recalls, "I met Hale through Sam Floyd Jr., founding director of the Center for Black Music Research and Black Music Repertory Ensemble (BMRE). Hale wrote fine arrangements of music by Frank Johnson, Montague Ring, Will Marion Cook, and Camille Nickerson. Hale attended all rehearsals and concerts: radiating warmth; watchful that his arrangements went unchanged."

Maestra Roberts, who conducted the Alice Tully Hall and Chicago's Orchestra Hall debuts of *Meditations* to rave reviews notes, "Hale had exceptional talent. He expressed his diverse musical background in compositions assimilating gospel and jazz, as well as African elements, creating a highly rhythmic and colorful sound. He was this incredibly versatile, multifaceted composer who should be performed far more often!"

Cellist/author, Elaine Mack recalls,

Hale Smith arranged music for the unusual combination of instruments that comprised the BMRE. He knew his craft! His work was crystal clear, detailed without being fussy.

Once a musician changed a passage in Hale's music, deeming it unplayable. Hale insisted the passage was playable, and that his music be played as written, 'You wouldn't change Beethoven's music, so leave mine alone!' Hale did not run rehearsals in the traditional sense but provided useful insight into what he wanted. His style was hands-on, yet unobtrusive. Hale was tough, but had a wonderful sense of humor.

Smith's wry humor and acerbic wit surfaced when he spoke of the one lesson he gave trumpeter/composer Cecil Bridgewater. Bridgewater sought Smith to hone his string writing. Prior to the lesson, his music had been recorded by Thad Jones and Mel Lewis; and he performed with Max Roach.

Bridgewater recalls,

The lesson was in 1973. Hale played his informal music and asked me to identify the saxophonist. I said Johnny Hodges. It was Eric Dolphy—who had studied with Smith and Hodges. Hale asked a few questions then suggested I study Berg's Five Movements for String Quartet.

"Years passed and Hale came to teach at New School, where I was teaching. Hale said, 'Hey you never came back for your second lesson.' I told him he gave me so much in the first lesson I was still synthesizing.

When Smith took ill, Bridgewater copied his music using engraving software. He depicts the task as

ironically like taking more lessons. I copied piano music, lead sheets, and orchestral music. I get to study what Hale did and how. It is a labor of love, an education I would not have gotten otherwise because I might not have known what to ask. Some think music is in the notes, but it's in the stories, the never-end-



ing life cycle. . . .

Hale continues to be a never-ending source of information. As I copy his music I hear his advice: 'Don't do what I do: Follow your own Muse.' He never lost sight of the fact that he was a Black man. Yet he put it aside because we're all Americans—that's why he didn't believe in Black history month. He didn't walk just one path.

People have a vague notion of Hale—the composer, pianist, editor, teacher; but few realize that his music helps Black folks gain recognition in various areas: publishing [Halsco], formal music [*Rituals & Incantations*], informal music [*Mountain Oysters*] and serialism [*Somersault*].

Bridgewater arranged Smith's music posthumously, commissioned by Kathleen Battle, who has performed Hale's music more often than any musician.

Juanita Smith says,

Hale was and remains an American Composer. The Smithsonian Institute recognized Hale's worth and recorded him discussing his life and work. His music has been performed widely this year: by Kathleen Battle; Chicago Sinfonietta; CUBE Ensemble on WFMT; Grace Mims did a Cleveland radio tribute; Joel Smith at Tufts; Tim

Holley at NC Central State; Long Island Composers; South Bend, Indiana, Symphony Orchestra & Chorus. Detroit Symphony Orchestra tentatively scheduled *By Yearning & By Beautiful; Innerflexions; and Rituals & Incantations* for 3–4 March 2011 as part of their subscription series.

Robin Smith notes, "Dad surrounded us with music, taught us to think, and instilled in us a love of knowledge. To Dad: thank you for what you wished to give us. With your wish, all has indeed been given."

Eric Dale Smith remembers,

Hale Smith is the greatest human being I ever hope to meet. His brilliance, insights, contradictions, and frailties combined to make him a truly remarkable individual, a classic who so richly touched the lives of those he knew and those he touched.

As a father Hale Smith instilled in me the conviction that the one thing we must never lose is our good heart; for from that flows our good name. All else in this world is expendable, including our lives. No words articulate the sense of loss his passing left in its wake. No words adequately convey our feelings of gratitude for having crossed his path. In our hearts Hale Smith lives on; through his music he lives forever.

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As a performer as well as composer, Logan founded several performance ensembles at Oberlin including the Oberlin Jazz Ensemble which made a tour of Brazil in 1985 that was sponsored by the United States Information Agency; the Oberlin Jazz Septet that performed at such eminent sites as the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the Detroit Jazz Festival, and the Oberlin Jazz Faculty Octet that performed at several International Association of Jazz Educators Conferences.

Among Logan's large catalog of jazz compositions and arrangements are several compositions recorded on the album *Hear And Now* (1990) by the Faculty Octet, plus the compositions "Shoo Fly" and "Remembrances" featured on the 2007 compact disc entitled *Beauty Surrounds Us*.

Professor Logan is survived by his wife, Bettye Reese Logan, whom he met at Florida A&M University and married in 1962; two children, Wendell M. Logan Jr. and Felicia Logan; two brothers, Alvin and Howard Logan, and four grandchildren.

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