

Yusuf Salim and Friends

Will spirit of TV jazz series prove contagious

ALVIN HALL

SECOND OF TWO PARTS

Although jazz may not be dying in the Triangle area, it is assuredly gasping for air. With no audience large enough to support it and little interest from the financial powers that be, one wonders if jazz will become something people only talk about after they visit New York or Washington. The question of the week was "Will The Heath Brothers concert on Friday, April 11, at the New Cultural Arts Center break even?"

If cheaper exposure is what the fans want, listen to the local radio jazz shows. If the performers want larger audiences, remember that stage presence is as important as good music. There is enough blame to go around, even to the local papers and critics who largely ignore local and lesser known national musicians until they receive attention from another media.

It is difficult to present an evaluation of local jazz without devoting some attention to a "member of the human family" who is always sincere, warm, and generous and a musician who, to use his own words, "has been blessed with knowing some of the greatest musicians of our time." This man is Yusuf Salim of the Sallam Cultural Center in Durham.

Before this interview I had seen Brother Yusuf on several different occasions. I had watched him greet friends and fellow musicians with an embrace. I had watched him applaud musicians with whom he was playing. All of this struck me as being a bit much, perhaps an insincere show. Yet, I was fascinated by him. I had been told that he had played with Charlie Parker and Billie Holiday. (The latter is a misconception arising from his friendship with Bus Brown who was a friend of Holiday's.) Even in the face of much thoughtful and level-headed praise other musicians gave him, I remained skeptical. The interview with Brother Yusuf was one of those times when I sincerely regretted that I had reached my conclusions without knowing him better. His embrace, both literal and figurative, is totally sincere and captivating.

Yusuf Salim was born 50 years ago in Baltimore, Md. His Christian name is Joseph Oliver Blair. He grew up in what was called a "good time house" (no negative connotations) where jazz musicians gathered on weekends and evenings to have healthy good times. "There'd be musicians with names like Happy - that was the way he played and the way he made you feel - a saxophonist named Doc Specks, and pianist Joe Bailey." Being Catholic, his mother discouraged involvement and interest in this "happy music;" she would send all the children upstairs. When the family decided to pay for music lessons for one of their children, it was not Yusuf they chose; rather it was his younger sister. Yusuf, however, had an instinctive drive for music: "it was like a love affair. I was going to get it whether it was sponsored or not."

As soon as he was able to talk with the musicians at their levels, he began asking questions and buying books. After one attempt to get formal training on the piano failed, Yusuf's curiosity and determination proved his teachers.

Because he was, and still considers himself, basically an accompanist, Yusuf played more often than most house musicians in Baltimore during his early twenties. "I was blessed to get involved in sessions with and meet artists such as Charlie Parker and Coleman Hawkins." Yusuf was quick to note that he spent more time socializing and talking with Parker than he did playing with him. Actually, Yusuf only played two tunes with Parker, "Long Ago and Far Away" and "The Song Is You."

Yusuf moved to Boston in the early fifties. In those days jazz and drugs had an almost symbiotic relationship. "Just about all the hip musicians had a habit," Yusuf recalls. "But," he adds, "the drug scene was a closed society. No one encouraged a young person to get involved with drugs. I had to fight my way in. The reason was the music."

The dynamic and developmental encounters

with musicians continued, not as much on musical stages as in shooting galleries - places where addicts would go to use paraphenalia and make transactions. During this time he met and/or played with Sonny Rollins, Jackie McClean, Andy Kirk Jr., Richie Powell, Miles Davis.

Yusuf not only recalls the jazz scene in the fifties, but also the racial atmosphere of the fifties when he was a marine in Cherry Point, N.C. He remembers vividly being the only black in the U.S. Marines Performing Band; taking the oath with "my Caucasian brothers" and then eating in different dining halls and riding in separate, curtain-drawn train cars to Cherry Point. In places where jazz was on the rise - Boston and New York, Yusuf says that there was more socializing between the races.

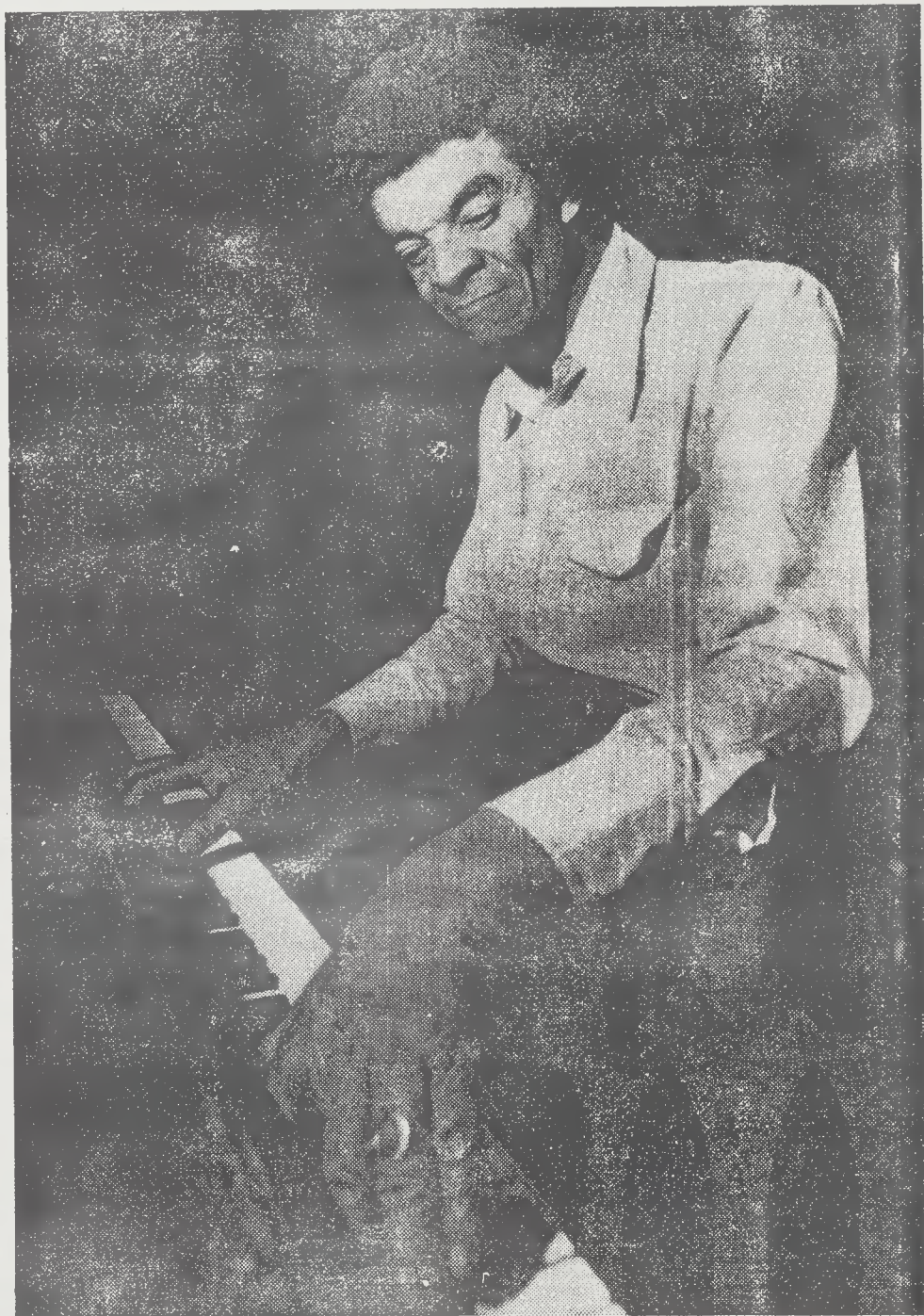
In the late fifties and throughout the sixties, Yusuf continued to compose, contributing songs to the recorded work of Cannonball Adderly and

Mongo Santamaria. He also recorded and arranged for Riverside and Blue Note records.

In 1974, Yusuf became a Muslim and kicked

his 28-year addiction to heroin. When he looks back on his experiences (including two stints in the Maryland House of Corrections), he sees them as lessons: lessons in understanding human nature, lessons in compassion - having known both external and self-inflicted pain, and "preparation to do the work that God has prepared for me." Yusuf is part-owner of the Sallam Cultural Center, a restaurant, nightclub, and community center in Durham. He is also involved with the local community through the West End Community Action Group.

He is a man from and to whom many good things radiate. After meeting Joe Vanderford, Yusuf discovered that many of their observations and attitudes on jazz were similar. Also a program which Vanderford had done on Bus Brown, a local jazz musician with legendary footing and background in the Harlem Renaissance, had inspired Yusuf. Yusuf hopes that the spirit of the series "Yusuf and Friends" (Thursdays at 9:30 p.m. on WUNC-TV) will prove contagious. Perhaps too it will bring more people to jazz concerts.



Durham Morning Herald/Jim Thornton

Brother Yusuf Salim

SISTER SLEDGE

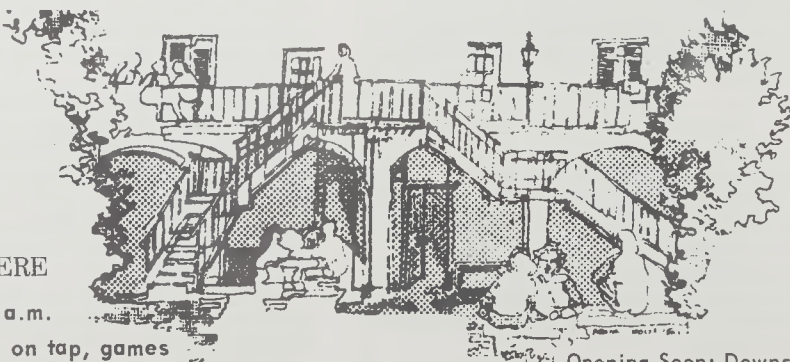
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