

Jon Hendricks (born September 16th 1921) is a renowned jazz vocalist, lyricist and exceptional improviser. At ninety years young, Hendricks continues to cultivate exquisite lyrics to instrumental Jazz masterpieces and charm audiences around the world with his captivating scat solos and momentous recollections of his past. According to the acclaimed jazz journalist Leonard Feather, "When Jon Hendricks sings wordlessly, in the idiom traditionally known as scat singing, he becomes a human horn. When he sings words, specifically words he has set to improvised jazz solos, he is a walking dictionary...A man who wrote the lyrics for Miles Davis' 'Four,' about 30 songs out of the Count Basie library, tunes by Antonio Carlos Jobim, Charlie Parker, Cannonball Adderley, Horace Silver... not for nothing did Dizzy Gillespie dub Jon Hendricks 'the Poet Laureate of Jazz'".¹

Growing in Newark Ohio until the age of four and then moving to Toledo Ohio, Hendricks first started singing in the church. His father, Reverend Alexander Brookes Hendricks, was the minister of the Warren African Methodist Episcopal Church. As Jon's love for music continued to grow, he began performing jazz in local clubs. Hendricks had the unique opportunity to work with Art Tatum, one of the most revered pianists in Jazz History, whom Hendricks claims taught him how to improvise and sing bebop. At the age of 14 he performed twice a week with Tatum at the popular Waiter's and Bellman's club, meeting some of the biggest names in jazz.

In 1942 Hendricks was drafted into World War II. Sent first overseas to England and then deployed in France, he experienced brutal racism from fellow White American soldiers. Out of fear for his own life Hendricks and a few other soldiers went AWOL. As he stated, "We went to Bescanson and started selling army supplies on the black market." (Personal Interview March 26th, 2009) He was eventually caught and served eleven months in the stockade.²

After the war Hendricks began law school at the University of Toledo but upon a chance encounter with Charlie Parker, he decided to move to New York to pursue music. He began working with vocal arranger and bebop singer Dave Lambert. Having trouble finding work, the two men decided to arrange a vocal album of Count Basie's music. From this idea the album Sing a Song of Basie was created. Looking for someone to sing the higher trumpet parts they found Annie Ross and from there Lambert, Hendricks and Ross was created. As Hendricks recalled, "We Loved Basie that's why

we did *Sing a Song of Basie*, not for ambitious reasons, we thought that we ought to do a really great cultural thing before we die...So Dave said, 'Well why don't we do something to let them know we were here?' I said, 'Okay what do you suggest?' He said, 'Well if we can get an album of Basie's things and you can lyricize them and I can arrange them. I say's 'you know how long it takes to lyricize a big band tune? You have to have a word for each sound the words have to not just be any words they have to be a part of a sentence and the sentence has to be part of a paragraph that's telling a certain story about a certain person, place or thing. It's like putting libretti to opera it's very difficult and it takes a long time.' Dave says, 'Well what else do you got to do?' I picked up a pad and started working and sure enough it did just what it was supposed to do. It made us stars." (Personal Interview March 27, 2009)

Lambert, Hendricks and Ross went on to become one of the most successful vocal groups of all time. They toured the world and inspired other singers such as *The Manhattan Transfer*, and the *New York Voices* to perform vocalese, the setting of lyrics to instrumental music. The legacy of Lambert, Hendricks and Ross continues to live on. As the primary lyricist of the group Hendricks proved to the world that he had a tremendous gift for words.