

Taking care of Buddy

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GREENSBORO - Buddy Gist doesn't wear his suit anymore.

He rests in a single bed at the Golden Living Center, in a hospital gown, surrounded by posters that remind him of the people he knew when he was the King of New York.

Comedian Bill Cosby. Actress Diahann Carroll. Jazz man John Coltrane. And, of course, Miles Davis.

Miles and Buddy met in 1949 at Birdland, the famous jazz spot in New York City, and over time, they shared a fondness for boxing, business, women, sharp clothes, jazz and the horn.

Or really, The Horn.

It's the trumpet Miles Davis played in high school in East St. Louis. He brought it to New York and later played it during a two-day recording session in the spring of 1959. That recording is now a cornerstone of modern music: "Kind of Blue."

Miles loved that horn. He never let anyone else carry it. In the late 1960s, he gave that horn to Buddy. And 30 years later, Buddy gave it to UNCG.

"This is what Miles would've wanted," Buddy always said, his high, tinny voice — an orchestra of Southern rhythm — stressing every word. "He was an educator. Miles knew I would do exactly what he wanted me to do."

Buddy's voice could be heard almost anywhere in our city — in a downtown restaurant, in the Central Library, in the hallways of UNCG's jazz department. He walked everywhere and told stories at every chance.

"Maaaaaaaaaaaaan," Buddy would say. "Hey, listen! That's how it was!"

Now, he's hard to understand. To decipher even a single word, you have to concentrate and read his lips.

Four months ago, he lost his dentures when he suffered a stroke. Now, Buddy talks in a constant mumble.

That is, if he talks at all.

That's tough for the people who know the story of Buddy and The Horn.

In 1996, he was simply a well-dressed stranger who knocked on a music professor's door and later donated the Holy Grail of Jazz: the Miles Davis trumpet from "Kind of Blue," an instrument valued at \$1.6 million.

The Horn was academic gold. It helped recruit students, attract big-name musicians, build the stature of the jazz department and ultimately led to a new name: the Miles Davis Jazz Studies Program.

Buddy wasn't so lucky. He became homeless. But he never told anyone that. He was too private, too proud. He would rather regale you with stories than ask for help.

If you pushed him about his hand-to-mouth existence, he'd say he was fine and toss off the comment with a wave of his hand. Or he'd simply repeat one of his favorite sayings: "I can drink air. I can eat water. A phone booth is my office."

He's a complicated man, Arthur "Buddy" Gist. And now, he is a stroke victim, in a single bed, a shell of his old suit-and-tie self.

He can't safely swallow. He gets fed through a tube in his stomach. He can't walk. And he's nearly destitute, his care covered by Medicaid.

For a time, he had no one, no advocate, no legal guardian to take care of him or his affairs. He's 84, a man whose family members were either too hard to find or too old to care for him.

That's when he spoke to Karen Fraire, his social worker at Golden Living, a nursing home near Moses Cone hospital where he has lived since July.

"I want John to take care of my business," Buddy told Fraire.

That's UNCG jazz professor John Salmon. On Oct. 6, after a hearing in a Greensboro courtroom, he became Buddy's legal guardian.

Salmon doesn't take the job lightly. One of the first of many things on his list: Get Buddy some dentures.

"I'm hunched over with this feeling of great responsibility," Salmon said. "But compared to the incredible generosity of this man — and the beacon of light that trumpet is and the inspiration to our students — my contribution is miniscule."

But Salmon also shoulders some guilt. Buddy never wanted anything for The Horn. No money. Nothing.

"No, man," Buddy told everyone who asked. "Miles wanted me to give it for students' inspiration."

That response always bothered Salmon — "especially when his own indigent condition became apparent," he said.

"If I had known back then when he gave the trumpet that his own finances were not in the best of shape, I might have tried to persuade him otherwise," Salmon said. "But no one had any idea."

At first, students played The Horn. But later, it was put under Plexiglas, protected by alarms, just outside UNCG's Music Recital Hall. Students gawked at it, took pictures of it and dreamed.

At least several times a month, Buddy dropped by to visit. He walked the hallways of UNCG's new \$25 million music building off West Market and peeked into classrooms.

And every time he came, he looked like Esquire magazine, in a suit and tie, his Afro swept back in the style of boxing promoter Don King.

When asked, he told stories. And his stories sang.

About the Magnolia House, the spot off Gorrell Street that his mother ran. It was the only place between Atlanta and Richmond, Va., where blacks could stay during the Jim Crow era. Musicians such as Louis Armstrong ate country ham cooked by Buddy's mom and slathered with maple syrup.

About his time in New York, after graduation from N.C. A&T in 1947 and a two-year stint in the Navy.

And, of course, about Miles, his good friend. Miles lying down behind a sofa to relax before a show. Miles keeping \$2,000 in cash in his breast pocket. Miles punching out bassist Paul Chambers because he couldn't get the tune "So What?" just right.

Buddy saw all that.

He grew up in Greensboro and went to New York in 1949. He started out waiting tables, then turned into a business entrepreneur, a sharp-minded Southerner who sold coffee and cars. He became a big-time mover in a tailored suit and befriended some of the biggest names in jazz. He hung out with them, partied with them and co-signed loans for them so they could buy cars.

A Jaguar for Count Basie. A Buick station wagon for Coltrane. A Mercedes Benz for Miles.

Students loved those stories.

"They were quietly in awe of Buddy," said Steve Haines, the director of the jazz studies program. "I'd sit with Buddy in the front of the classroom, and he could remember everything."

In February 2006, when Miles' three grown children came to UNCG for a concert, Buddy kept them calm. And that's no small feat.

They had feuded for years over their father's estate after his death in 1991. Daughter Cheryl Ann Davis came with a bodyguard as big as a defensive tackle.

But they came because of the jazz program. And because of Buddy, the man who baby-sat them so long ago.

After a reception on campus, Buddy brought them together, circled them up within a few feet of one another. He clasped their hands and cajoled them in his own Buddy way.

"Hey, listen!" he told them. "Y'all got to get along. This is for your father."

Soon afterward, the whispered rumors about Buddy started spreading.

Everyone who knew Buddy — and that's a lot of people in Greensboro — had heard about him sleeping in his blue Cadillac behind the fast-food restaurants along Summit Avenue.

They saw him driving around downtown with mountains of clothes filling the back seat.

Some people tried to track him down. The folks at the Bargain Box, Buddy's favorite clothing store downtown, coaxed him to meet with a representative from the Greensboro Housing Coalition.

Always, Buddy declined help.

Then, in the summer of 2008, Haines returned from a year-long sabbatical in New York to find a once well-dressed Buddy disheveled and unshaven.

"Look, you need to level with me, Buddy," Haines told him. "Tell me where you're living."

"I'm living with friends, and they love me," Buddy responded. "I get to tell stories about Miles."

"Where's that?" Haines asked.

"Center City Park," Buddy said.

"Well," Haines replied. "We have to change that."

He did. In August 2008, Haines and a constellation of friends and colleagues — jazz faculty, students and fans — helped Buddy move into Partnership Village. It's a transitional housing program run by Greensboro Urban Ministry. In its 10 years of operation, Partnership Village has helped nearly 300 homeless people get back on their feet.

People like Buddy.

He lived in a furnished studio apartment with piles of newspapers, towels and clothes everywhere. But in the middle of the room was a CD player.

It always played music. Jazz music.

Soon, this constellation of friends created a loose-knit web of care. They visited Buddy and brought him blankets and linens, pots and pans, clothes and shoes, CDs. Lots of CDs.

Chad Eby, a UNCG jazz professor, took Buddy home for a big feast at Thanksgiving. James Houghton, a former UNCG jazz student, took Buddy to Fisher's Grille every Monday for hot dogs.

And every time Houghton came, he found Buddy waiting. In a suit.

"You could tell he was deteriorating," said Houghton, 25. "I remember this one time I got there early, and he hadn't changed yet.

"He was sitting in his T-shirt, and I waited for him to get dressed, and it took him an hour just to put his clothes on."

In July, inside his studio apartment, Buddy called out for help from one of his neighbors because he couldn't open his door and get out. The doctors later determined the cause: A blood vessel had burst in his brain.

Buddy had suffered a stroke.

That's how he came to be at the Golden Living Center. He has good days and bad days. Days he remembers everything. Days he remembers not much at all.

He sleeps a lot. But when he wakes and recognizes someone, he gets excited and tries to talk to his flow of visitors.

Like Eby, Houghton, Haines, Salmon and Matt Russ.

Russ and his wife, Ann, run Tate Street Coffee House near UNCG. When he came by a few weeks back, Russ brought Buddy a present: a poster of Miles Davis from the coffeehouse wall.

Then he went to the nurse's station.

"You guys, you realize who this is down the hall?" he told everyone there. "He was the king of New York City in the 1950s, man. He and Miles were like this."

He crossed his fingers.

Still, like many, Russ is perplexed.

"It seems so counterintuitive that Buddy didn't have the resources for basic necessities, but a lot could happen in 60 years, man," Russ said later. "That was the '50s, and he was so proud and so successful it was hard for him to admit he was having struggles, you know?"

A lot of questions. Not many answers. All you know is The Horn is in Paris on loan to Cite de la Musique until next April for the exhibit, "We Want Miles."

And Buddy is at the Golden Living Center, where he tells stories. Or at least he tries.

And the people come.

"I just feel honored to have gotten to spend as much time with him as I've had," Houghton said. "There is a gem in everyone if you give them the time to share it with you."

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Buddy & The Horn

Over the years, Buddy Gist saw Miles Davis give trumpets to people such as prize fighter Sugar Ray Robinson.

For three years, Gist asked Davis for a trumpet. Davis said nothing until one day, in the late 1960s, when Gist saw him walk down the stairs, holding a trumpet covered with spots where the instrument's gold finish had turned dusty yellow from constant use.

It was the trumpet Davis's father had bought for him when he was a teenager.

"Miles had all these pretty horns," Gist says. "Some were green, some were red, but all of them were shiny, and when he came down the stairs with this one, I couldn't believe it.

"He gave me a horn that's sacred to him."

Gist kept the trumpet at a friend's home in Winston-Salem. For nearly three decades, it sat in its case, unused. That changed in 1996, when he loaned it to UNCG. Five years later, he gave the horn to the university permanently.

"Miles knew I'd never sell it," Gist once said. "There was this oil sheik who would have paid \$1 million for it. But Miles was a teacher. He had a love for the music, and he knew I would keep the trumpet as an instrument of learning. That's what he would have wanted."

Source: News & Record, November 1997.