

Jazz drummer still making a name for himself

By JIM WINDELL

James Charles Heard may be the most versatile, experienced and well-traveled jazz drummer in Detroit. Or even in the United States. Or the world. No one ever calls him James Charles, it's always J. C. But, even at that, he is not as well known to a lot of people as he deserves to be.

Heard was booked into the Haymarket at the Troy Hilton six years ago. His popularity there helped to establish that new entertainment night spot, and soon people were lined up at night to get in.

The manager of Haymarket's six years ago was Raoul De Morcia, now restaurant manager of Merrick's in the American Center Building in Southfield. De Morcia knows first-hand the drawing power of J. C. Heard and engaged the drummer for a three-week stint which began Monday, inaugurating a new entertainment format.

FOR THE LAST 13 years, Heard has lived in a Troy apartment with his Japanese wife and son. During that time he has tried to make a decent living in this area at the dwindling number of clubs where he can play jazz. More often than not, however, he has had to go on the road — to Atlanta, Las Vegas or Europe.

After attending Cass Technical High School in Detroit, Heard left Detroit in 1938 at the age of 21 to venture to New

York. He quickly, however, became the drummer in the Teddy Wilson big band. "I was with practically all the name bands," J. C. said. "There was Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Coleman Hawkins, Duke Ellington and Woody Herman for short periods until I joined the Cab in 1941."

The Cab was Cab Calloway. J. C. said, "I liked a lot of the bands I was with back then. Basie was great for swing, and Duke was so musical, especially when his ensemble played. But the band I liked best was Cab's... for the showmanship and entertainment."

The lessons he learned from watching the master showman Calloway have come in handy for Heard ever since. He enjoys entertaining people. Often when he has taken a job at a club or a restaurant, he is so well liked that a short contract stretches into a long-term relationship.

WHEN HE FIRST came back to the Detroit area in the early 1960s, he played at the Playboy Club for a year. A three-week engagement at Jayson's in Waterford lasted 18 months and stopped then only because the restaurant was sold.

Although born in Dayton, Ohio, Heard was brought to Detroit as a child. He began playing the drums while in high school in Detroit, and Chick Webb was a major influence.

"I had a chance to hear Chick Webb and his band at the Greystone Ball-

room here in Detroit. He inspired me so much. I admired him because he brought the drums to the forefront of the bands as a solo instrument. Gene Krupa later did the same with Benny Goodman's band," he said.

"When I was older and playing in New York with Teddy Wilson, Chick Webb came by to hear me play. I considered that a great compliment."

Heard's apprenticeship was served in the drum chairs of the big bands, but he gained a reputation among musicians by playing in the clubs along 52nd Street in New York.

HEARD REMEMBERED, "We would all play at different night clubs. If a guy sounded good, we would ask him to sit in and play with us. We all knew each other — Dizzy, Bird, Coleman Hawkins, Art Tatum — they were all there."

He was in constant demand as a drummer for recording sessions throughout the 1940s. He appeared on some legendary recordings with Charlie "Bird" Parker and Dizzy Gillespie.

"I think I recorded with every major jazz musician, even the singers like Billie Holiday, Lena Horne, Mildred Bailey and Ella, in the '40s. When I left Cab, I got my own band together up town at Cafe Society, and a little girl sang with us for a while — Sarah

Vaughan." When Norman Granz started the outdoor concerts known as Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP), Heard was often the drummer picked to back jazzmen like Oscar Peterson, Illinois Jacquet, Nat King Cole, and Gillespie. Frequently, he was paired in drum battles with Gene Krupa.

One such JATP tour ended in Japan in 1951. J. C. remembered, "We were on our own, so I decided to stay for a few days and see some of the country. Although the tour was over, the Japanese wanted to hear more drums. They loved drums. A man there made me an offer, and I began to play theaters, clubs and even did some TV and made three movies."

HEARD STAYED away from the United States for seven years. After leaving Japan with his wife, Hiroko, he went on to play in China, Singapore, Manila and Australia.

Since 1963, he has divided his time between playing locally in the Detroit metro area and making regular stops in large cities and returning to Europe. He believes Europeans remember him better than his own countrymen do.

He has been a regular on the Hilton Hotel circuit, appearing at those hotels in Dallas and Atlanta.



J.C. Heard, jazz drummer, opened a three-week stay Monday at Merrick's in Southfield.

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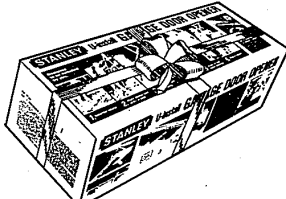
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