

Creativity in Senior Years: The Case of Jazz  
Trumpeter "Doc" Cheatham

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In 1953 psychologist Harvey Lehman published the book Age and Achievement which made the claim that creativity and productivity reach a peak in one's thirties and forties and then steadily decline in later years. These conclusions were based on his studies of the lifetime productivity of eminent artists, composers, scientists and authors. The research gave credibility to the time-honored myth, accepted by the general public and perpetuated by the mass media, that adults in their later years must steadily lose their powers to learn, to produce and to create--leaving them only the choice of being bystanders and onlookers while young people participate in innovative and meaningful activities. Much of the substance of this myth can be traced to a misunderstanding of senescence, that is to say, the normal process of aging involving a gradual reduction of corporal functions during middle and old age. It has been well documented, for example, that the average individual experiences an 8 per cent reduction in brain size, a 10 per cent loss in nerve conduction velocity, a 30 per cent decrease in at-rest cardiac output, and a 57 per cent loss in breathing capacity between the ages of 35 and 75. But - do these normal and expected decrements in physiological functioning necessarily mean that there will be an attendant decline in intellectual functioning, particularly in the area of divergent or creative thinking? I think not.

Wayne Dennis, in a 1966 article titled "Creative productivity Between the Ages of 20 and 80 Years," maintains that a major shortcoming of the Harvey Lehman study is the fact that most of the people in Lehman's sample died when they were fairly young, and this produced a bias in favor of an early peak of productivity. And Irving Lorge (1963) believes that aging artists and scholars do not necessarily experience a decline in creativity, but there may be changes in performance due to changes in speed, sensory acuity, self-conception, shifts in values, motivation, goals or special responsibilities that may be associated with aging.

It should also be pointed out that Harvey Lehman's

study of achievement is more a study of productivity than of creativity, and the matter of quantity versus quality is a bit of a clouded issue. Lehman has tallied how many books, musical compositions or scientific discoveries are credited to individuals at various periods of their careers, and since most of his subjects were eminent men, we can assume quality, but we are not entirely certain from his study about the relative quality of creativity at the various periods. While the quantity of production may decline it may very well be that the quality would move steadily upward with the greater experience, skill and knowledge of the creative artist. Creativity, however, cannot be entirely divorced from productivity. In many cases our more creative artists have also continued to be extremely productive into old age. Picasso produced a total of 167 paintings in his 88th and 89th years of life. Senescence, can of course, take its toll on energy levels and therefore the time an individual is able to devote to production may decline, but it is quite reasonable to ask whether or not that will necessarily affect the quality of that diminished production.

In spite of the Lehman conclusions, there is abundant evidence that old age is not necessarily accompanied by a decline in creative or divergent thinking. The list of "old dogs" responsible for new and imaginative tricks includes Benjamin Franklin, who at the age of 80 invented bifocals (because of his annoyance at having to carry two sets of glasses), and the flexible catheter, and who experimented with a treatment for paralysis using electricity. Richard Jordan Gatlin at 82 turned his attention from the manufacturing of weapons of war, the Gatlin Gun, to the development of a motor-driven plow.

Somerset Maugham continued to write and publish quality work until his death at age 92, and P.G. Wodehouse published one of his better comic novels at age 93. At the same age Chagall pledged to "work as long as I have strength," and Matisse, Cassat, Braque, Miro, Rouault, Benton, Pissarro, Gainsborough, Michaelangelo and Da Vinci all remained productive and even produced some of their most highly regarded works well past the age of 65. Folk artist Grandma Moses began painting at age 73, held her first exhibition at age 80, and continued painting (by popular demand) up to the time of her death at age 101, having by this time achieved an international reputation.

At age 75 (and on his deathbed) Duke Ellington asked his son to bring him manuscript paper so that he might continue to work on his jazz opera, Queenie Pie. During the last ten years of his life Ellington composed his

Second and Third Sacred Concerts, The Far East Suite, the Timon of Athens Suite, The Virgin Island Suite, The Murder in the Cathedral work, The Latin American Suite, The New Orleans Suite, La Plus Belle Africaine Suite, The Goutelas Suite, The Togo Bravo Suite, The Afro-Eurasian Eclipse Suite, The River (for the American Ballet Company) and 137 shorter compositions.

While numerous examples of highly productive and creative people may be cited, the American value system offers little encouragement to the average senior citizen to expand his or her mind or indulge in innovative or divergent thinking. This is primarily the result of anxieties that such activities will bring unfavorable criticism from peers, or it may be partly because of self-underestimation of their ability to create. Gregory Bateson has written,

Man lives by propositions where truth depends upon his believing them. If he believes that the old are no good, weak, stubborn . . . then to a great extent that will become true of the old in the population where that is believed and the old themselves will believe it and will reinforce the general belief that that is so. (1950:52)

In America, the power of the myth (that old folks cannot be creative) has perhaps become a self-fulfilling prophecy for the elderly who either are convinced that they cannot learn and use their imagination effectively or that maintaining an interest in such activity is inappropriate at their time of life. It takes a very strong and independent nature to stand against the opinions of friends, relatives and the general public who believe that some kinds of activities are unseemly for old folks and that it is better to "act one's age."

Margaret Mead has pointed out how cultural ideas can have a tremendous impact on creative thinking and performance. Ours, she has pointed out, is a youth oriented society where it is only appropriate for young people to create the products that are novel and imaginative. Older men and women, who in retirement, return to college to acquire new knowledge are often looked upon as eccentric and unconventional.

Mead has further suggested that some of our attitudes toward late life learning may indeed stem from our particular religious heritage. She maintains that in Bali, for example, there is no concept whatsoever that associates age with the ability to learn or to create. If

an individual at age 70 or 80 wishes to learn how to carve, paint, play a musical instrument, or dance, no one is surprised or shocked. The aged are encouraged in these activities because in their cultural context this makes sense. The Balinese believe in reincarnation, and therefore what is begun in one life can be carried over into the next. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, on the other hand, people have but a single life to live, and learning and experimentation is considered to be necessary and appropriate only in youth.

Still further insight into the force of culture as a sanction for creativity is to be observed in a study of Brahmin folk painters in West India. Investigation of 110 such artists by Renaldo Maduro in 1974 found that creativity among this group appears to peak in early middle age and then remains constant into old age. These painters were asked to rank one another in regard to degree of creativity, and Maduro administered the Barron-Welsh Revised Art Test which can be used to scale creativity. While there may be some question about the cross-cultural validity of this test, Maduro maintains that these measures indicated that the older artists suffered no decline in creativity as compared to their younger colleagues. But here again it is important to understand this phenomenon within its cultural context. In the Hindu life cycle the final stage of life is designated the "forest hermit" period. This is the time of life when a man has fulfilled his family obligations and has also satisfactorily performed his duties to both his caste and society. At this stage he may now "turn inward and contemplate the inner light," and as a consequence, "a man's powers of imagination increase fourfold because he has learned to reach into himself for light, bliss and balance" (1974:308).

While I had been interested in studying aging cross-culturally, and particularly the impact of modernization on age status, since 1962, the question of creativity in senior years had not been an interest of mine until 1977 when I received a copy The Mississippi Rag (a magazine of traditional jazz) and read a review of a new LP record by saxophonist/trumpeter Benny Carter (age 71) which had been recorded live at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Europe. Having worked as a professional jazz saxophonist myself at various periods of my life, and having idolized Benny Carter since I was a boy, I eagerly read the review which stated that "Benny Carter is playing better than at any time in his life." This was also about the time that another jazz performer, blues singer Alberta Hunter, was very much in the public eye, because at age 80 she had come out of a 50 year retirement and was one of the hottest attractions on the

Greenwich Village nightlife scene. She had been making numerous television appearances and her records were much in demand.

These examples of especially gifted artists still performing prompted me to wonder how many other jazz stars who reached their peak of popularity during the 1930's might still be playing and might also be "playing better than at any time in their life." A trip to Leonard Feather's Encyclopedia of Jazz revealed that Count Basie was 74, Benny Goodman was 67, Roy Eldridge was 67, Lionel Hampton was 65, Earl Fatha Hines was, 73, Mary Lou Williams was 68 and Red Norvo was 70. In spite of their age I knew that all had continued to record, play jazz festivals and make world tours with various kinds of jazz groups.

It was at this time that, considering my interests and background in both gerontology and jazz, I came to feel a study of senior citizen jazz performers would be an appropriate way to test or at least shed light on the whole question of age and creativity, because jazz playing by its very essence involves a maximum of creative, spontaneous activity.

In the summer of 1978 I contacted a former saxophone teacher of mine in New York, Walter "Foots" Thomas (once musical director for the Cab Calloway orchestra) and Milt Hinton (who I had worked with at a collegiate jazz ensemble competition at my university) to help me arrange a series of interviews with senior jazz musicians still active in the business. They assisted in establishing contact with Mary Lou Williams (piano), Eddie Barefield (tenor saxophone), Doc Cheatham (trumpet) and Andy Kirk (former leader of the Clouds of Joy orchestra and now a conductor and composer). The following year I traveled to Los Angeles and acquired interviews and observed performances of Marshal Royal (alto saxophone), Johnny Guarnieri (piano), Jess Stacy (piano), Eddie Miller (tenor saxophone), Howard Rumsey (bass), and Nappy Lamare (guitar, banjo and blues vocals). On both of these trips I had the able assistance of John W. Thomson, head of Jazz Studies at Wichita State University.

Before I discuss the particulars of what I learned from my interviews, observations and investigations of this sample of jazz greats I believe that it would be appropriate to discuss what is meant by "creativity" and why jazz musicians represent an especially fitting sample of artists with which to test the capacity of the elderly to function creatively.

In his book Creativity and Innovation John W.

Haefele defines creativity as "the ability to formulate new combinations from two or more concepts already in mind" (1962:5). And in a special article titled "Creativity," jazz bassist and composer Charlie Mingus maintained that "creativity is more than just being different. Being different isn't necessarily being original. Anybody can play weird; that's easy. What's hard is to be as simple as Bach. What you have to do is know where you're coming from, be able to do what's gone before, but go on from there in your own way. Go where you go but start from somewhere recognizable" (Mainliner 1977:25). He also contended that "love of something sparks creativity." In the same article someone from a very different area of art--that of gourmet cooking--sounded a similar note when defining creativity. Julia Child insisted that "What is new comes out of what is old. To be truly creative involves taking the art form seriously, really learning the basics. It is a lot of work" (1977: 31).

All of these ideas are very much in line with the theoretical position of William F. Ogburn, a well established authority on social change. In discussing the creative process he states that since an innovation is made up of "existing elements of knowledge, any particular invention can be made only if the elements which go to make it up are known; a positive correlation exists between the number of inventions made at any given time and the size of the existing accumulation of old culture traits" (Ogburn and Kimkoff 1958:643-644).

In other words, all of our experts on creativity would agree that birth of the new comes from the old; that no new work, however original, is without roots in the past, and in the tradition of the art itself. I believe that it should also be understood that when a number of the older musicians interviewed maintained that they are not making a special effort to keep up with modern trends that that did not mean they are no longer playing creatively. They are continuing to elaborate, develop and expand upon what they have already experienced; they are drawing upon a lifetime of experience with multiple musical styles and a host of valuable impressions gained from the skill and artistry of the musicians with whom they have shared the bandstand. I believe, as gerontologist Robert Butler has stated, that the "the essence of so-called new ideas or new forms is not a test of creativity per se, because one's mode of being, one's past interests, training, skills, experience, may be creatively elaborated and expanded. • The fact that other 'new directions' do not occur is not equivalent to declining creativity" (1967:39) •

For the jazz musician the very essence of the art is creativity. If one is not capable of imaginative improvisation then one is not truly a jazz performer. Charles Nanry defines the essence of jazz playing as follows:

Improvisation in music means pretty much the same thing it means in other areas of life. It is a synonym for spontaneous creativity, for solving a problem that has not been solved before when working with existing materials. In jazz playing, improvisation usually refers to melodic invention that is created out of conventional melody. (1979:17)

What Nanry is saying is that the jazz player is not actually composing, although there are many jazz artists who do compose, but rather that the jazz soloist in his or her improvisation is developing a new melody which relates to some standard existing melody and chord progression. Every time a jazz musician plays a solo there is the expectation that a new counter-melody will be produced which will make reference to the composed melodic line of the song writer and will keep within the harmonic structure of that composition. The hallmark of a good jazz player is the ability to improvise, and this sets him/her apart from the good classical musician, although some improvisation is found in classical music as well, but it is not typical of it.

Whitney Balliet amplifies further on the art of jazz improvisation, stating "Jazz musicians are at the mercy of a particularly demanding music. Improvisation, the core of jazz, insists that a performer be an instant and nonrepetitive poet, not simply an assiduous reader of orchestrations, and that he be this lyric creature several hours a night, six nights a week, year in and year out" (1966:240). When one's reputation and livelihood depends on this ability to improvise with imagination and be accepted by the jazz public (a critical audience indeed) on the basis of such skill, aging could conceivably be a particularly precarious and painful situation if old age is, as the myth suggests, a time of intellectual and creative decline.

Our somewhat randomly selected sample of senior jazz people proved to be interesting from the standpoint of creativity and adaptability. Johnny Guarieri, for example, felt that the creative quality of his piano work had been constantly improving. In the early 1970s he had begun to play many of his numbers in 5/4 time instead of the usual 4/4 because of the new and different effect it

produced. According to Guarnieri, "You have to do something different to be noticed."

Milt Hinton, former Cab Calloway bass player, rejected the idea that age diminishes creativity and explained, "I'm less daring than I used to be but more sure of myself. My technique has improved and I can draw from my experience."

Mary Lou Williams believed she was playing better than when she was young because she had had the opportunity to play through a number of musical style eras and had been influenced by all of them. She spent considerable time talking about her recent concert where she shared the stage with avant garde pianist Cecil Taylor. She concluded, "I'm playing better than I've ever played in my life. The older you get the better you are. It takes a long time to become seasoned. I think I'm improving creatively. I think you can tell it from my records. The recent stuff is a lot better." Pianist Marian McPartland agrees. She is on record as stating, "Mary Lou always believed in what was new and creative . . . She kept moving along with the times; that's what I like about her most of all."

Jess Stacy, at age 75, had just cut two solo piano albums without a rhythm section, an entirely new experience for him. He confided, "I didn't know if I could even do it. But I took a chance and said I would do it, and I think it turned out real good." In discussing Jess's performance on the albums, George Avakian describes him as a musician with "razor sharp time, errorless fingers and a musical sense and spirit that have grown through time."

When I returned from California and began transcribing our interview tapes I accidentally came upon three reviews that appeared in Down Beat magazine in 1975, 1976 and 1979. In a way I felt that they expanded the evidence about creativity and age and are worthy of being reproduced in part in this discussion. All the reviews were written by the same person, John McDonough, of concerts by Benny Goodman at the Ravinia Festival in Highland Park, Illinois. In 1975 McDonough wrote:

Unlike many veterans of Goodman's star status, the clarinetist has refused to fall into routine solo formulas. •. Anything can happen, and when it does the excitement is unmistakable. • Even when cruising, there is a freshness of thought in the uncluttered construction of his lines. In this respect, Goodman seems to have grown



considerably in the last decade.

The following year, when Goodman was 64 McDonough reported concerning his playing:

The capacity for surprise is constantly there. And the exceptional can always lie just beyond the next bar. Goodman has kept his integrity as an improviser.

And in 1979, when Goodman was 67 McDonough wrote:

Goodman's concerts are often among the most spontaneous jazz performances heard today . . . Goodman was full of simple powerful ideas that swung without mercy . . . Throughout the performance Goodman played with exceptional fluency and feeling. . Goodman seems to be still at the top of his form and anxious to play.

We had wanted to schedule an interview with Benny Goodman but received a very pleasant note stating that he would be out of the city during our visit.

While our sample included many cases of sustained and even growing creativity, the most convincing example of an older musician who had demonstrated an ability to move in a new creative direction with skill and imagination was Adolphus "Doc" Cheatham, who in 1979, at age 73, and still today at age 84, is one of the most respected and sought-after jazz trumpeters in New York City. One review of a Doc Cheatham record album maintained that if this elderly trumpet player isn't the best horn man working the New York scene today, then he is surely the most neglected by the public.

The interesting thing about Doc Cheatham from the creativity standpoint is that although he has been a professional musician since he was a teenager in Nashville, he did not begin a career as an improvising jazz soloist until he was 64 years old. No wonder he tends to think of himself as an "old cat who can learn new tricks." After playing the local Nashville scene for several years, often backing up jazz greats as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey at the Bijou Theater, in 1926 (at age 21) Doc Cheatham packed up his horn and headed for Chicago, a mecca for all jazz musicians at that time. But after being fired on the opening night of his first job because he couldn't read a note of music, Doc returned to Nashville and learned, since he was certain he wanted a

career in music.

He then discovered that opportunities for a trumpet player were better if he would play lead trumpet. He claimed,

"No one wanted to play lead trumpet because there was no opportunity to play solos. It's too much for one man to play lead and solo too. But I decided I would do anything to get a job. And I learned to like lead trumpet, and I didn't see where it was going to do any harm to me, but it did. Nobody ever heard of me."

Doc played lead trumpet with Marian Hardy's Alabamians, McKinney's Cotton Pickers, Cab Calloway (8 years), Benny Carter, Chic Webb and Teddy Wilson orchestras. He even played lead trumpet with a series of Latin bands such as Marcelino Guerra, Prez Prado, Machito and Vincentico Valdez. He played lead trumpet for over 40 years, and sure enough, nobody ever heard of him--until Benny Carter invited him in 1969 to play with him in a salute to Louis Armstrong at the Monterey Jazz Festival. And this was not a lead trumpet job but a solo trumpet opportunity. Lee Jeske described that performance in a 1981 Down Beat feature article on Cheatham. He wrote,

"His one solo on '5truttin' with some Barbecue' was the beginning of a new phase in the career of Doc Cheatham--from lead trumpeter to name soloist in the course of one chorus" (1981:27).

Doc's next big break came when Benny Goodman approached him shortly after the festival with an offer to tour Europe with him as a jazz soloist with his quintet and sextet. While Cheatham had undoubtedly played some jazz solo horn sometime during his lifetime (perhaps at after-hours jam sessions) he now embarked on a new kind of career which called for creativity and imagination in improvising the music which, for so many years, he had merely played as written off the manuscript page.

In describing the metamorphosis of this great jazz star Lee Jeske wrote,

"Once the thorny label of "lead trumpeter" was removed, Doc Cheatham emerged as one of the sweetest, most elegant soloists we have--he has a lovely, soft, singing tone and a delightful, parenthetical way of improvising\_. With his two elbows spread out like wings and his trumpet pointed skyward, Doc Cheatham can solo with the best of them, and he's finally getting his chance" (1981:26)

The quality of Doc Cheatham's creativity is further documented by Whitney Balliet who describes his solos in New Yorker as "moving with logic and precision of composition, yet they have the spark of spontaneity.

Like most players of his generation, he is a master of the embellished melodic statement" (1979:120)

Doc's new career as an improvising jazz player has not only brought him recognition from musicians, critics and fans alike, it has brought him more money than he ever thought possible. He was asked to join the prestigious New York Jazz Repertory Company, and he recorded the sound track for Robert Altman's film Remember My Name with Alberta Hunter. In the last few years he has played in nearly every jazz festival in Europe and North America, toured Russia, recorded with Buck Clayton, Jay McShann and with small groups of his own, and was a guest of President Jimmy Carter at a jazz concert the south lawn of the White House. Cheatham has not only distinguished himself as a top jazz player but has begun to do scat singing as well. One of his offerings, "What Can I Say Dear After I Say I'm Sorry" became a big hit in France.

Seven years ago Doc Cheatham went into the Sweet Basil club for a two week engagement and he is still there. He also works steady at the Roosevelt Hotel's Crawdaddy restaurant, at the Wa Chong restaurant, at Michael's Pub, The Ginger Man and The Overseas Press Club. His two new record albums, It's a Good Life and The Fabulous Doc seem to convey in their titles alone the story of the one-time lead trumpet man who refused to believe that advancing years means that one must forego creative activities and settle for a rocking chair.

But why does the Doc Cheatham story read so differently from that of the average elderly American? To begin with, we might call attention to the Charlie Mingus contention that "love of something sparks creativity." In my interview with Cheatham in his apartment in New York he confided:

"I'm looking forward to living a long time and playing. Playing and living. I have a burning desire to play and play. That's why I never drink whiskey. I already have my addiction." And when I asked him what ingredients are essential to a good jazz performance Doc stated, "First you have to like what you're doing. Some people say that they hate some of the tunes they have to play. You should make yourself like whatever you have to play. Louis Armstrong taught me that."

And in commenting on the role of experience in creativity Cheatham maintained, "I also think a good jazz player should be flexible and versatile. I don't like doing just one kind of thing in music. For example, I don't want to get stuck playing with just one group. You need a wide range of experience. With all the different kinds of bands and all the different people I've played with, I have a lot to look back on and a lot to draw on. It's been a big asset in my playing. It's hard to beat experience. And it's also good to have played all kinds of tunes. The more tunes and their chords you know, the easier it is to function as a good jazz soloist."

The fact that the greater number of the musicians we interviewed and observed perform were definitely growing in musicianship as well as creativity can perhaps be explained by the possibility that our sample was made up of very exceptional people and not just the run-of-the-mill performer. In a profession in which death at an early age is all too common, Doc Cheatham and the rest of our sample had achieved remarkable longevity. Perhaps they are among the fittest of their profession in mental health, artistic motivation, and capacity to adapt to the physical and cultural restrictions imposed on older people by age itself and by society. In general they approach jazz as an important life work and speak of their art with a sense approaching reverence. Their music is characterized by structure; their solos are seen as mini-compositions. They think of themselves as composers and not just as performers of someone else's creations. Their musical interests are eclectic, and by and large, they like the classics and are tolerant of new jazz trends and avant garde artists.

Not only are these jazz greats capable of exceptional artistic creativity but they are handling old age with skill and resourcefulness. They live in moderation, working sensible hours, traveling only when it suits them and guarding their health, which is regarded as no less a valuable commodity than their musical talent. These people live in the present and have an eye to the future. They love their music and their lifestyle. None expressed this better than 80-year-old Andy Kirk who concluded his interview with: "Heaven is my home, but I'm not homesick."

We must also consider the fact that the cultural context in which these people function, like that of the Balinese or the folk painters of West India, is indeed very different from that of the average elderly American. Alan Merriam and Ray Mack once wrote in an article about the "Jazz Community" that "there is the almost total lack of prejudice on the basis of race, religion, ethnic

origin, etc. There is probably less prejudice of this sort in the jazz community than in any other segment of American society" (1959-1960:219). It would appear that it is also possible to state that there is less discrimination based on age in this community than in any other. When good jazz musicians play, their peers and their special public turn out to applaud and enjoy them without reference to age. In speaking about young musicians, Doc Cheatham says, "They seem to accept me and appreciate the things I do. Even teenagers seem enthusiastic. When they come out to hear us they often rave over what we do." Marshal Royal maintains that he is often contacted by directors\_of young rehearsal bands (ones that get together for rehearsal only so musicians can increase their skill) in Los Angeles to come to their sessions and give their sax sections some pointers. After 20 years as musical director and lead alto player with Count Basie they believe he has much to offer on how to phrase, blend and execute. He jokingly adds that they like him to come because instead of having to pay \$50 a piece for a private lesson the whole sax section gets a lesson for free. It is undoubtedly satisfying for Royal to still be in such demand as an instructor of young musicians.

Eddie Miller remains one of Los Angeles' more respected musicians of any age. While Miller tends to play with a number of musicians roughly his age--John Best, Nick Fatool, Bobby Haggart, Nappy Lamare--he states that most of the young musicians "know my background and I am treated very well. That is what makes me feel good. I don't know what they say behind my back but they have all been very complimentary."

Robert N. Butler writes that "in the presence of health and in the absence of personal and social adversity, creativity is more apt to persist into late life" (1967:38). While all of our jazz greats spoke of tough days on the road when they were young, and great anxieties over making a living in jazz, all but a very few are now extremely enthusiastic about their lifestyle and their opportunities to perform. They are involved in an environment where they are expected to improvise well because they are jazz musicians and improvisation is the essence of their art. They are not afraid of criticism for not "acting their age," for age is not all that important to peers or public alike. And perhaps because they have been life-long performers, they are freer from conventional restraints on behavior. They believe in their art and their ability to perform it. It is the self-fulfilling prophecy that makes creativity possible.

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