

Ben Lifson

By Paul Edward Johnson

Why Ben chose me to be his friend I've no idea. Maybe it was because he noticed I was always entertained by whatever he said whenever he spoke to me.

Whenever Ben spoke, I listened attentively.

One of my first memories of Ben is when he first invited me into his family's "minimalistic modern" home.

That was back almost sixty or so years ago, when I was only 14 and enjoying our summer vacation from school. Back in the summer of 1955 when I was spending most of my time with friends who enjoyed listening to the 45-rpm recording of Bill Haley's hit "Rock Around the Clock."

Ben's family's living room had a cork-tiled floor. It seemed as soft as a carpet.

The northern wall of the living room was entirely windows, providing an expansive view of trees and vegetation along the southern bank of Minnehaha Creek in southwest Minneapolis.

Against the western wall of the living room was a hi-fi speaker. About four-feet high and three-feet wide. Other than maybe three chairs, a sofa, and several lamps, that was it. As spanking clean and spare as any living room I'd ever seen.

Ben wanted to show off the "fabulous" hi-fi speaker; demonstrate what it could do. He had recently purchased some new "long-play records" that could play more than one tune on each side.

He withdrew one of his new "LP records" (about 12 inches in diameter) from its cardboard sleeve, gently wiped its "wax" surface with a soft cloth, lovingly placed it upon a turntable, and carefully rested the needle-arm upon the record.

And that's when my life changed. For better or worse.

Instead of music I had always been hearing during the 14 years of my life, I was suddenly hearing what Ben called modern jazz.

It seemed to have hardly any melody. Hardly any form. And soon sounded like a wrecking crew tearing down a building.

Ben had the volume cranked up so high it seemed the northern wall of windows might shatter.

I shouted, "What in the hell is this Ben?"

"It Mingus, man."

"What's a Mingus?"

"Charlie Mingus. Playing his pithecanthropus erectus."

"Playing his what?"

Ben hopped up from his chair and handed me the album cover.

"Here Paul. Look at the liner notes on the back. It says this track's called pithecanthropus erectus."

"What's a pithy can't rope us erection?"

"No. I said pithecanthropus erectus. You know. Anthropology."

"What's an anthropology?"

What I'm wondering now, as I have often wondered during decades since then, is how and why Ben could abide me. He was a year older than me, but always seemed to be at least twice as old as me. Always knowing damn near everything I had yet to hear about or had yet to learn.

And so were his closest friends. Like Dave Andersen, and Bruce Zemlin, and Bob Olson. All of them being what are today called "nerds." Each of their IQ's must have gone above any chart that attempted to measure them.

During the summer of 1956, and during the summers that followed while the five of us were attending Southwest High School, we'd pile into a car and head anywhere we could to attend modern jazz concerts in Minneapolis.

Most of the concerts were held in a courtyard behind the Walker Art Museum near Loring Park next to downtown Minneapolis.

We'd show up at the concerts wearing French berets and sun glasses and ascots, so as to blend in with all the adult cool cats attending the concerts.

One summer afternoon when maybe age 17, Ben announced that Clark Terry's jazz band was going to appear with the jazz singer Joe Williams at the Marigold Ballroom in downtown Minneapolis.

We donned our berets, piled into a convertible, and headed over to Bob Olson's house to pick him up before going to the concert.

When Olson was about to leap into the convertible Ben shouted, "You're not wearing your beret."

Olson bounded back into his house and a moment later stood before us wearing his father's Shriners fez, with its diamond crested half-moon glimmering and gold tassel waving in the wind.

When we arrived at the Marigold Ballroom we bought our concert tickets and were told the doors to the ballroom would open in about an hour. So we sat down in a booth at the far end of the adjacent bar room.

Nobody in the bar could see us sitting in the booth because the booth's backrests were about six-feet high. And consequently we also could not see anyone within the bar room.

Ben got up from the booth, sauntered over to the bartender, and ordered five bottles of Grain Belt Beer. Cool as any cool cat could be with his sun glasses, beret, and ascot. At 17 he could pass as being 27.

We nursed our beers until we heard Clark Terry's trumpet wailing in the ballroom, got up from the cover of our booth, and headed for the ballroom's door.

The ballroom was dark. Pitch dark. The only light in the big ballroom was cast by the spotlights on Clark Terry and his band. And Joe Williams who began singing "Alright. Okay. You Win."

As our eyes began to adjust to the darkness, Ben turned to me and said, “You noticing what I’m noticing?”

“Damn right I am Ben. Joe’s voice is bigger in person than on your hi-fi speaker.”

“No. Not that. Look around. Everyone in here’s a Negro. We’re the only white guys in here. The only ones.”

Sure enough. Must have been as many as 500 people sitting on folding chairs. All facing Joe Williams and the Clark Terry jazz band. All Negroes. And Ben and Dave and Bruce and Bob and me? The only white guys in the ballroom.

For the first time in my life I was “a member of a minority.” And no longer feeling all that cool.

But Ben? He was grooving.

And during the intermission he was actually approaching and conversing with the cool cats in the audience. And waving me over to join him in his conversations.

Turned out the guys we were talking with were from north Minneapolis. And they invited us to attend their jam sessions they held every week in their north Minneapolis homes.

Leave it to Ben. Leave it to Ben to be able to do that!

Fact is, Ben became my mentor. From age 14 to age 20. Always introducing me to what I had yet to discover. And upon helping me make each discovery, moving me to the serendipitous journey of pathways I perhaps would never have taken.

When I enrolled at the University of Minnesota as a freshman, I signed up for a five-credit course in anthropology. And a music theory course. And oh yes, a five-credit world literature and expository composition course. Because Ben said I would need that course, too.

During my sophomore year, Ben insisted I join him in an English lit class taught by Robert Moore, a guy who Ben said had earned his PhD from Yale at age 21.

“At age twenty-one. Imagine that, Paul!”

I sat next to Ben in Professor Moore’s classroom, attending every class, five days a week.

The mid-quarter “bluebook essay exam” was a question about the epic poem *Beowulf* and one other question about Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

I may have written one page in response to both questions.

Ben filled several blue books.

About a week later Moore returned our bluebooks, passing them out to each of us as we sat in our chairs in his classroom.

But Moore did not hand Ben his bluebooks. Instead of handing them to Ben, Moore took Ben’s bluebooks back to the podium, opened it, and began reading from them.

For the rest of the hour!

Removing his reading glasses, Moore said, “And that concludes the lecture for today.”

Ben and I enrolled in all three of Moore’s five-credit English lit classes, Ben getting “straight A’s” and me? “Straight D’s.” Well maybe I got one “C.” Seems I could never figure out how to satisfactorily answer Moore’s essay questions.

Moore didn’t actually provide lectures. Instead he would stand before us reciting from the literature he assigned us to read.

He was always pausing and waving his reading glasses; sucking the stems of his glasses; and often swooning after reading passages from Shakespeare, Shelley, and Keats.

About all I had in my classroom notes was how Moore would emote “Oh my! Oh me! Oh my!”

Ben never took notes in Moore’s classes.

But after Moore’s class Ben often went to the library, where he would check out books written by literary critics. To see what they

had to say about what we were assigned to read in Moore's class. And to tell me later in the afternoon what he had discovered.

We'd meet over in Mart Aldre's apartment near the university and Ben would expound on what Samuel Johnson, Matthew Arnold, I.A. Richards, Northrop Frye, and Allen Tate had to say about what we were reading. And Allen Tate was the head of the university's English Department, so how could anyone go wrong by paying attention to what Tate had written?

While Ben went on and on telling me what the literary critics were writing, I could hardly understand a damn thing Ben was telling me. His literary "terminology" was way over my head.

Ben had become a virtual "glossary of literary terms."

But I must say Ben's passionate "lectures" impressed me. Much more than the poets we were reading. To listen to Ben talk about the poet Blake was to hear Ben singing about Blake in a manner that seemed to exceed the music within Blake's poems.

The last time I listened to Ben was several years ago. On the phone. During the phone call he told me he was not feeling well.

He said, "I'm not going to be able to meet my deadline."

"What deadline, Ben?"

"The deadline for a magazine article I'm writing. And I've never ever failed to meet a magazine deadline before. This will be the first time I've failed to meet one."

"You shall meet the deadline, Ben."

"Why you saying that, Paul?"

"Because you're a published pro. And professional writers meet their deadlines."

"You're right. Thank you. I needed to hear that. Now goodbye."

"Goodbye Ben."

Yesterday I read in the Minneapolis Star Tribune's Obituary Section that Ben, at age 72, met his last deadline on July 3.

At four this morning I woke up and felt I must write about Ben, knowing full well I had no choice but to do so.

And now, I must stop for awhile and click on YouTube, to once again hear the Charles Mingus performance of “Pithecanthropus Erectus.” And oh yes, one other Mingus masterpiece: “Goodbye Porkpie Hat.”

Ben would also want me to hear again an uplifting Mingus “melody.” One called “Better Get It In Your Soul.”

Here’s all three if your wish to join in with us:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZB6GkA54n_Q

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sfe_8RAaJ0

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-R11B7EGt0>