



Library Celebrates the Dexter Gordon Acquisition



Abby Brack

Maxine Gordon discusses the making of the 1986 film, “Round Midnight,” a film that starred her late husband, Dexter Gordon, in a role that earned him an Oscar nomination.

By Sheryl Cannady

Legendary jazz musician Dexter Gordon (1923–1990) is considered one of the world’s greatest tenor saxophonists and one of the first musicians to adapt the sounds of bebop to the tenor saxophone. He amassed an extraordinary body of work during his more than 50-year career, and it was his wish that his musical and cultural legacy join the vast collections at the Library of Congress.

On April 16, the Library celebrated the acquisition of more than a 1000 items from Gordon’s impressive collection of work with a special program in the Mary Pickford Theater. Several items from the Dexter Gordon Collection were strategically displayed, including an early script of the movie “Round Midnight,” which earned Gordon an Oscar nomination. The collection comprises a wide range of Gordon’s work from all phases of his

career. Consisting primarily of sound recordings, the collection also includes interviews and items from Gordon’s film and television appearances.

The melodic sounds of the legendary saxophonist filled the theater as the enthusiastic crowd took their seats, aptly setting the tone for the morning’s program. The audience, filled with jazz musicians, aficionados and fans, had a rare opportunity to screen an unreleased short film, produced by Arthur Elgort, titled “Dexter on Vacation.” The film included footage of Gordon’s last public performance on a jazz cruise in 1988, only a couple of years before his death. It provided an intimate glimpse of the jazz impresario at play.

The featured speaker was Maxine Gordon, who first met the iconic jazzman in France in 1974. “Dexter loved libraries, he loved books,” Maxine said, explaining her husband’s affinity for the Library of

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A Whole Lot Of Tweeting Going On

Twitter is donating its digital archive of public tweets to the Library of Congress. Twitter is a leading social-networking service that enables users to send and receive tweets, which consist of web messages of up to 140 characters.

Twitter processes more than 50 million tweets per day from people around the world. The Library will receive all public tweets – which number in the billions – from the 2006 inception of the service to the present.

“The Twitter digital archive has extraordinary potential for research into our contemporary way of life,” said Librarian of Congress James H. Billington. “This information provides detailed evidence about how technology-based social networks form and evolve over time. The collection also documents a remarkable range of social trends. Anyone who wants to understand how an ever-broadening public is using social media to engage in an ongoing debate regarding social and cultural issues will have need of this material.

“The Library looks at this as an opportunity to add new kinds of information without subtracting from our responsibility to manage our overall collection. Working with the Twitter archive will also help the Library extend its capability to provide stewardship for very large sets of born-digital materials,” he added.

In making the donation, Greg Pass, Twitter’s vice president of engineering, said, “We are pleased and proud to make this collection available for the benefit of the American people. I am very grateful that Dr. Billington and the Library rec-

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Congress. "He loved the Library.
...this is the people's library."

When Maxine became Mrs. Dexter Gordon, she did not foresee all of the divergent paths that her life would take, including the pursuit of a career as a historian and working with the curators at the Library to fulfill a promise to her husband. "Be very careful what you promise, because it could be your life's work," she jokingly told the audience in the intimate confines of the small theater.

Maxine, who is working on her doctorate in history at New York University, is the senior interviewer and jazz researcher at the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham University. She is currently writing a biography about her husband, another one of his dreams that she is fulfilling. "Since his death, I've slowly worked on his archives," she said.

Emboldened with the confidence of an expert who knows her subject matter, Maxine talked about her husband's work on "Round Midnight," a brilliant performance that earned him an Academy Award nomination as actor in a leading role. Playing the role of Dale Turner, a troubled expatriate jazz musician in Paris in the 1950s, the musician-turned-actor won Italy's equivalent of an Oscar for his performance.

She explained the genesis of the film project and the meeting between her husband and the movie's producer Irwin Winkler. "Dexter said the script wasn't real" and disliked the negative use of slang to characterize musicians such as Duke Ellington, who was elegant and refined in his speech. He told her, "If I made that movie, I would have to give up my lifetime membership in the NAACP." Script approval solved that problem, she said, allowing her husband to tell the story of jazz in a realistic manner.

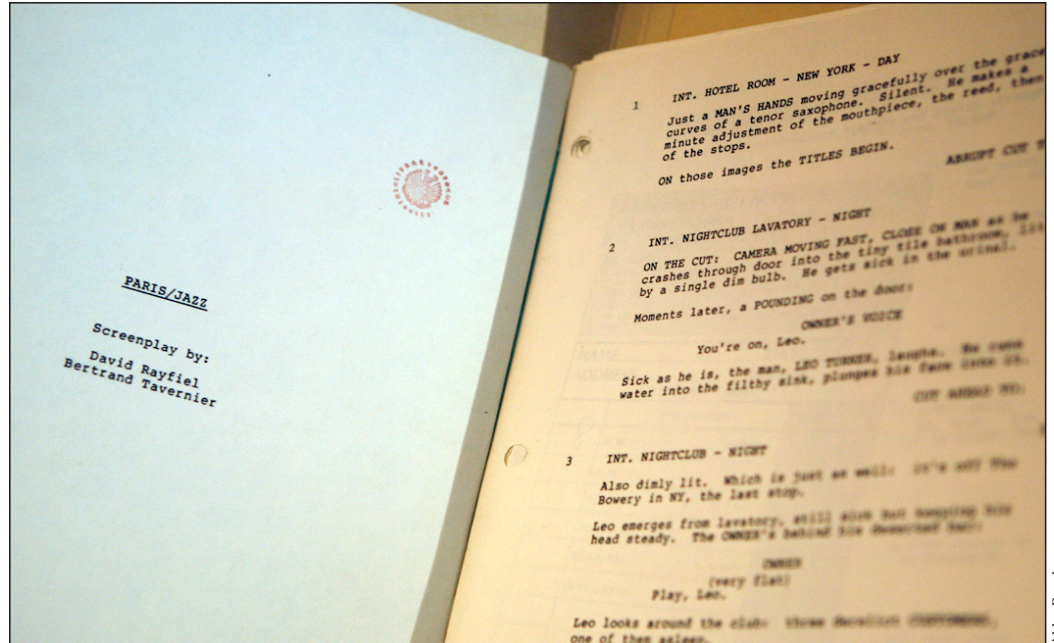
Among her other memories of the making of "Round Midnight" was that the music was recorded live. The film's director Bertrand Tavernier wanted the realism and magic that came from real

performances. Herbie Hancock, the film's music director, won an Academy Award for the film's original soundtrack.

Another person who worked on "Round Midnight" was Martin Scorsese, who played "Goodley" in the film. Maxine recalled that Scorsese warned her to pack her bags because her husband's performance was Oscar-caliber. Ironically, Paul Newman won that year for best actor in Scorsese's "The Color of Money."

The Oscar nomination brought increased fame as the world rediscovered Dexter Gordon's talent. Maxine laughingly lamented to her spellbound audience that her husband once said that it was the first time that the police were in front of him with sirens, instead of chasing him.

Maxine praised the Library's staff for their efforts to preserve and make accessible her husband's collective memory. The collection's curator, Matthew Barton of the Library's Recorded Sound Section, said that he was constantly surprised, discovering different aspects of Dexter Gordon and his work. It led him to dub the phenomenon "Unexpected Dex." For example, he said, the world knows Gordon as a tenor saxophonist, but there are unexpected moments in his music when he switches to soprano saxophone, such as in his 1976 composition "A la Modal."



An early script of the Warner Bros. film "Round Midnight."

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Maxine returned to the Mary Pickford Theater on Monday evening for a showing of "Round Midnight," part of the April "Jazz in the Spring" film series. A full house was on hand to view the Library's 35mm print, a 1980s copyright submission with exceptional color. The film's stereo soundtrack, which calls up the ambience of a cramped Parisian jazz club of the 1950s with startling realism, was heard to good advantage over the theater's recently upgraded sound system.

In a question-and-answer session with Maxine following the film, many in the audience commented on the film's enduring vitality and marveled at Dexter's nuanced and powerful performance. Maxine stressed how important making the film was to him, and how he saw it as a chance pay tribute to the many unsung heroes of jazz who never received the acclaim that he had. As hard as the process was for them, though, she added: "We got to live in Paris for four months while we made the film. Poor us!"

Although Maxine Gordon feels that jazz supporters are always fighting to ensure the music's place in history, she has won at least one battle: getting her husband's legacy forever preserved for future generations. ♦

—Matthew Barton also contributed to this report.