

## Jazz Legend 'Between a Smile and a Tear'

**Toots Thielemans (1922-2016)**

Those musicians people can recognize after only hearing a couple of notes are few and far between. Only the truly great are endowed with that power. Toots Thielemans was one of them. According to connoisseurs he was, after Jacques Brel, probably the greatest Belgian musician of the last century. 'Toots' passed away on August 22, 2016 at the age of ninety-four.

His biography reads like a succession of fortunate coincidences. He often found himself in the right place at the right time and was able to make contact with those people who were instrumental in promoting his career. The truth is that Toots was extremely talented which connoisseurs always rapidly acknowledged. That was already the case even as a young boy playing his first tunes on a children's accordion at his parents' café in Brussel's *Marolles* district. Toots later discovered the harmonica after watching a movie. He soon became a virtuoso on this unusual instrument. But since his friends still deemed it a novelty instrument, he learned to play guitar. He was especially fascinated by the repertoire of Django Reinhardt. By the end of the war Toots was playing so well he regularly performed in clubs in Brussels frequented by American soldiers. It is also the time when he was dubbed 'Toots'. Jean-Baptiste Thielemans didn't have enough swing. A colleague who played trumpet suggested he assume the name Toots. He had found it in an American magazine and it is presumably borrowed from the Italian musicians Toots Mondella and Toots Camarata.

Toots Thielemans began his career with Belgian bands. Some of his earliest musical collaborations were with Flemish composer and performer Bobbejaan Schoepen's group and such jazz musicians as Bobby Jaspar and René Thomas. Édith Piaf and Charles Trenet also requested his services when they came to play in Belgium. But Toots dreamed of a career in the United States. He travelled there for the first time in 1947 and met jazz photographer Bill Gottlieb. Gottlieb introduced him to a few New York jazz clubs where one of the many people he met was Benny Goodman's impresario. Goodman invited Toots to come and play in America in

1948, though unfortunately, Toots was unable to get a work permit. When Goodman came to tour Europe in 1950, he asked for Toots again. This time around turned out to be his real introduction to the world of professional jazz. The tour also took Toots to Stockholm, where he met Charlie Parker, one of the most influential jazz musicians of all time. Toots often played in Sweden later on in his career. He was tremendously popular there, not in the least because of his musical contribution to the 1974 animated movie *Dunderklumpen*. Reportedly, the film score he composed and on which he performed are part of the collective memory.

Toots got his green card in 1951 and emigrated to America. He would later become naturalized as an American citizen. The blind British-American pianist George Shearing hired him as his guitarist. Toots developed his own special sound. He whistled along with the melody while playing his guitar. That and his harmonica were his unique trademark.

The next six years were an extremely hectic period in which he took his seat in touring buses, often as the only white player, with the other members of the Shearing Quintet, the Count Basie Big Band, the Miles Davis Quintet, and even Billie Holiday and her chihuahua. It was also when he was introduced to trumpeter, arranger and producer Quincy Jones, who would later gain great fame and fortune as Michael Jackson's producer. Toots and Jones became friends for life. They shared composing duties on quite a few movie scores. Toots's contribution to the opening title song on *Midnight Cowboy* became world famous, but he also participated in *The Getaway* and various French films. Everyone in Flanders and the Netherlands knows his contributions to the movie *Turkish Delight* and to the detective series *Baantjer* and *Witse*. Toots was also often asked to perform on commercials. That was the easiest way to make money. He could once be heard playing in a Chrysler ad with his great idol Louis Armstrong. Still, they never actually met, since their parts were recorded separately. Toots also played the opening signature tune for the world famous children's television series *Sesame Street*. It made him hugely famous, but not a lot of money.

In 1962, Toots composed *Bleusette*. A stroke of luck, he called it, but it became a global hit covered by several other prominent musicians including Ella Fitzgerald and Ray Charles. One of the most



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spectacular versions of it was the maestro's duet with Stevie Wonder, one of his greatest admirers. Toots referred to *Bleusette* as his retirement fund.

Toots suffered a stroke in 1981. That made playing the guitar increasingly difficult, so he concentrated solely on playing the harmonica, on which he became the world's number one player. Everyone wanted to make music with Toots, including pop artists with a global audience. Sting, Nick Cave, Paul Simon, Billy Joel and countless others shared the stage with him. Some critics blamed him for becoming too commercial. But in the end, he also came back to jazz. In 2009 he was duly bestowed with the Jazz Master Award, the highest American accolade in the jazz world. He was the first European to receive it. The Belgian King Albert II raised him to the peerage in 2001. In order to receive the title of Baron, he had to become a Belgian citizen again. Ever since Toots enjoyed dual citizenship.

Dual citizenship might well have suited this amiable man best. His musical inclinations were very American, though in actual fact he remained a true native of Brussels. An 'AfroAmerican *Marollien*,' as he called himself. That he had never renounced his Brussels origins was clearly most audible whenever he spoke in Dutch or French. But if you asked him where he liked situating himself most, he always replied: 'Between a smile and a tear, that's where you can find me.'

DIRK VAN ASSCHE

Translated by Scott Rollins

## A Modern Troubadour

### Jozef van Wissem and His Lute

Jozef van Wissem (b. 1962) is among the most celebrated lute players of this day and age. The Dutch-born, but Brooklyn-based musician is on a mission to free the lute of its stuffy image and to that end combs international stages with success.

Since 2000, Jozef van Wissem has released more than a dozen records, not including collaborations with avant-rock pioneers Gary Lucas and James Blackshaw. Moreover, he recorded three records with his friend Jim Jarmusch, who besides being a filmmaker is also known as a noise guitarist. The Dutchman's music for Jarmusch's vampire film *Only Lovers Left Alive*, starring Tilda Swinton and Tom Hiddleston, was awarded the prestigious Cannes Soundtrack Award in 2013. He could also be heard for the first time as a vocalist on the 2014 album *It Is Time for You to Return*.

Van Wissem became enthralled with the lute at the age of twelve when he saw one in the corner of his guitar teacher's room in Maastricht. 'I was especially attracted to its shape,' he recalls. 'Something mystical emanated from it.' The lute in question was so fragile he was not even allowed to touch it, but he did learn how to play pieces that were especially composed for it. The melodies compiled in the book *Music from Shakespeare's Time*, turned out not to be very intricate. Van Wissem would later use one of them, referred to in *Much Ado about Nothing*, in one of his soundtracks. Before he thoroughly immersed himself in the lute, however, he switched from classical to electric guitar, playing in punk and new wave bands.

Lute players use their thumb to produce constantly varying bass notes and the rest of their left hand to form chords, a technique similar to the one employed by harpsichordists. Jozef van Wissem considers it an advantage there is such a large repertoire for the instrument. 'What interests me is how to create something new from something old,' he says. 'I do that, for instance, by mirroring existing scores. My debut album *Retrograde* consisted mainly of lute music that was played backwards.'

Technique and discipline are crucial to any lute player aspiring to achieve a certain level. The neck of the instrument is equipped with a double row of strings that he must press in a specific way to ren-