"Softly, with Feelings" **The Life of Joe Wilder by Sterling Wilder 10/30/14**

Breaking Barriers - Music - Military The Marines – ABC Studio - Broadway
Summary:

The making of a man is so powerful. We are all faced with challenges in life. These challenges help to shape us and mold us and our behaviors. When we are faced with difficult situations it is up to us how we will react and if we will let that difficult situation alter our course in life. Some difficult situations will make us better or bitter. As we look at history we can see an evolution of clothes, wealth and attitudes towards race and culture. The American Revolution was fought against the British government and now they are one of our great allies. The Civil War was a fight against the North and the South. At one point in our history African Americas were slaves and considered to be less than human. Also at one point in our history African Americans could not go to the same school, restrooms, eat at the some lunch counter as whites or drink from the same water fountain or vote. Today we have an African American President.

I am always touched by those that helped to pave the way so I can have a better life from George Washington to Martin Luther King, Jr. I did not experience the discrimination that my parents had to face but I have had challenges in life. I look to those who have gone before me and see their strength and how they are better and not bitter.

One story I would like to share is a story of obstacles and triumph and how a young African American boy from Philadelphia grew up to break racial barriers in the music industry, the marines, ABC studio and Broadway. He overcame the obstacles of life and came out better and not bitter. As a jazz musician he used his talent and musical ability to break barriers. His strong upbringing gave him the strength to overcome. He did it softly and with deep feelings. He was not a civil rights leader but he always stood up for what was right.

Joe was not an activist , in the sense that he did not seek out battles. But when confronted with injustice at all stages of his career, he refused to back down, whether the perpetrator was black or white, a powerful bandleder, club owner, contractor, or music industry executive.

Joe Wilder broke many barriers

Musician -

Joe Wilder was born in Colwyn, Pennsylvania on February 22nd, 1922 into a musical family including his father Curtis, a bassist and bandmember in Philadelphia. Curtis Jr., Wilder's older brother, also played bass. Wilder was initially attracted to the trombone, his father bought a cornet for him and began to take him to some of his dance jobs.

His father, Curtis was a part-time musician who delivered coal, and other other jobs, to make a living, was a major influence, overseeing Joe's early musical development and instilling in him the strict standards of deportment for which he later became known and which enabled him to avoid the pitfalls that consumed so many musical colleagues of his generation.

Curtis Wilder saw to it that his sons had every opportunity to develop their own musical talents. Curtis's teacher was a noted Philadelphia African American cornet soloist names Frederick Griffin, who would later teach Joe as well. In addition to his musical abilities, Joe inherited his devotion to learning from his father. His father took classes up in his 80's.

During elementary school he and his brothers where the only African Americans in the schools. He felt like they were treated like all the other kids, until one day when he was coming out of school and one of the kids saw him and said look at that nigger.

In 1929 Joe's family home caught on fire and they had to move in with his grandparents. They lived in a row house and the entire row was destroyed. He had to go to a new school. During assemblies they would sing all the old-fashioned Stephen Foster songs with "nigger' in them. For example when sang "Old Black Joe" all the kids would turn and point to him.

On another instance his young brother Calvin went home with a white friend and his mother said "Don't you ever bring one of those people in here again".

During this time Philadelphia was not completely segregated. They had a variety of ethnic groups on block – Jewish neighborhoods next to Italian

neighborhoods next to black neighborhoods. That was a good quality about the music in that area because black, white, people of different ethnic groups played together. They would rehearse in each other's homes. There was a common feeling among all of them as musicians. They valued the area's diversity.

Stories of survival during Depression

Before school Joe would accompany his father to Yeadon, an affluent Philadelphia suburb, to go through the trash cans looking for items to see at the junkyard – old lamps, newspapers.

His next door neighbor was an engineer for Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. He would help his family with free coal. He would tell them what time he as passing by and would throw coal from train.

Musical Beginnings

Since Joes father was a musician naturally he tried to instill his love of music in his four sons. His oldest brother Curtis Jr was also a professional musician. He recorded with many jazz, pop, and rhythm and blues groups including the popular group Do Ray Me Trio, the Counts and Countess and more. He was also a fine vocalist. They never had a chance to p lay together, except in a hotel room when they were both traveling in LA. Curtis Jr. died from cancer in1963. . His father had a wide range of musical tastes and exposed his sons to all kinds of music. His father would always call attention to things.

Joe's fathers band would rehearse at his home. The kids in neighborhood would sit on porch and listen to some good music for free. Joe appeared to show special interest. His father brought Joe his first instrument at the age of 7. His first instrument was Holton cornet. His father paid .50 cents a week for lesson. It was pre-Depression, and it was chore to get the money together. One of his first teachers was Frederick D Griffin. Griffin was a local legend. He also taught his father. He was also taught by Cliff Haughton. Haughton provided Joe's first formal training in Jazz. Mr. Griffin was strictly classical. Joe progressed rapidly. It was not long before Joe played in public for the first time. His principal decided that he should play taps at the school's Armistice Day celebration. There was such a reaction to his playing that he really enjoyed. It was at the point that he decided that he might be a professional musician.

Caring teachers, such as cornet virtuoso Frederick D Griffin and Alberta Lewis, orchestra director at what was then called the William T Tilden Junior High School, in Philadelphia, had a profound effect on the youngsters, as did the many renowned musicians Joe encountered while playing on the Parisian Tailor's Colored Kiddies Radio Hour.

His fast progress led to a regular feature on a weekly children's radio program in Philadelphia called the Parisian Tailors' Colored Kiddies of the Air. The youngsters were backed by bands appearing at the Lincoln Theater, including Duke Ellington andCab Calloway. "I would be playing the first trumpet part of some popular tune—just reading it note for note. And these bands would be playing backgrounds for us! Wilder had an early encounter with Louis Armstrong on one of these occasions. "He was awfully nice to me. He gave me a pass and said, 'You come and see Louis every day.' Pops remembered the young trumpeter from the broadcast in later years: "He always encouraged me and I think he was proud of the fact that I made it in the studios.

In 1932 The Colored Kiddies show was an immediate hit. The audience grew to over 2,000. The audience was both black and white. The press would refer to Joe as a Louis Armstrong in the making. He played with Kiddies Show until his first year of high school.

In 1935 Joe Wilder attended the William T Tilden Junior High School, an integrated school. His music teacher Alberta Lewis who directed orchestra had a profound impact on Joe's musical development. She introduced him to classical music. The orchestra gained a reputation and soon began to receive invitations to play at other schools. They traveled to one school and a teacher asked "Why would you bring a nigger into our school". Mrs. Lewis threatened to leave if he was not able to play. Joe had several instance like that but he always had someone like Mrs. Lewis to help eliminate those situations. During the summers Mrs. Lewis taught at Girard College in Philadelphia, PA. The school had restricted enrollment to poor, white, male orphans. Mrs. Lewis had Joe and another African American student to perform at the school. Joe remembered that his father used to deliver coal to the college and was not allowed on the grounds. They dug a big hole on the sidewalk outside the school so they could deliver the coal through a cute without coming on campus.

In 1938 He studied at the Mastbaum School of Music in Philadelphia. He was one of only a hand full of African Americans admitted. Another African American student was pianist Sam Cosby, the uncle of Bill Cosby. The curriculum at Mastbaum was entirely classical. Jazz was not only excluded from the curriculum it was not tolerated on the premises. If they caught you playing jazz you were in big trouble. Joe played by the rules at Mastbaum but he did have some incidents race related. The York Band Instrument Company supplied the instruments for the school and sent a photographer to take picture of the orchestra for the catalog. Joe took his normal place in the front of the orchestra. The school director argued with him to move to the back. Joe was devastated by the incident. This helped to contribute to his departure from the school. He also had to help support his family.

Early on he was drawn to classical music but soon realized that a career in the symphony was not a realistic goal for a black musician coming of age in the late '30s. So Wilder began playing in big bands, leaving home in 1941 at 19 to join Les Hite's band.

None of his achievements came at the expense of someone else. As in most fields, self-promotion and internal politics play a role in the music business, especially in the highly competitive world of the studios. Joe never lobbied for any job. His place in the leading big bands and his breakthroughs on Broadway, in the studios, and in the classical world all came as a result of his musical abilities, not his connections.

Joe spent much of his career defying commonly held stereotypes of both African American musicians and jazz players. His friends would say that he always dressed a bit more formally than he needed to.

"I remember my mother standing there at the side of the bus all loaded with strangers and saying: 'Now, you behave yourself and don't you do anything to disgrace the family!' She had nothing to worry about because Wilder is known as one of the most dignified gentleman in the business. In fact, when he was with the Lionel Hampton band in the early '40s, fellow bandmembers would offer him ten bucks if he would simply say one profane word. He politely refused.

He played in the orchestras ofJimmie Lunceford, Herbie Fields, Sam Donahue, Lucky Millinder, Dizzy Gillespie, and Noble Sissle during the '40s to the early '50's.

His last big band gig was with the Count Basie Orchestra in 1953, after which his career remained close to home—he's a devoted husband, father of three daughters and a grandfather too. He started playing in hit productions such as Guys and Dolls and Cole Porter's Silk Stockings, the touring company of which he joined in late 1953. "They went first to Mr. Porter and asked if he had any objection to a black musician playing first trumpet, Joe recalls. "All he asked was, 'Can he play my music?' When they told him I could, he answered, 'Well, that's all that matters.'

He earned a secure place in the studio scene as a 'first call' musician and served on staff at ABC from 1957 to 1974. "A lot of times you just went in and were completely surprised, he recalled. "We took pride in being able to sight-read anything that was put before us and in playing any type of music as well as the people who specialized in that particular style.

The fact that Joe grew up in a diverse working-class neighborhood in Philadelphia certainly helped him acquire the ability to get along with people of all backgrounds. As an African American coming up of age in the 1930s America, Joe was subjected to indignities on almost a daily basis and, on occasion, to far more serious dangers. But he emerged from these experiences without bitterness, with his dignity, humor, and most important, his humanity intact.