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O.P. — Growing Up Canadian

Last autumn I made a trip home to Canada. After all my years in the United States, part of me is American. But there is a part that remains irrevocably Canadian. It is not a matter of allegiances. As Antonio Carlos Jobim always says, "I am prior to borders." As Oscar Peterson says, "I am not a Canadian artist, I am an artist who happens to be Canadian." It is a matter of conditioning. When I am talking to another Canadian, there are things that we both *know*. Christopher Plummer and I recently had each other laughing to the point of tears with stories about Canada. It is also something else, something indefinable, what Glenn Gould calls "the idea of North".

I went because my mother was dying, and when I reached Toronto, I knew I had stayed away too long — seven years, this time. The city had developed into one of the most beautiful in North America. The trees were crimson and gold. I wanted to see old places and old friends, including Oscar.

As I drove to his house in Mississauga, now a large and busy suburb of Toronto, I thought of all the cities in which I'd spent time with him, although he could probably name them better than I. His memory is phenomenal. Once, when I was interviewing him for a *Down Beat* article, I asked him a question. Long afterwards, preparing to write another article, I slipped the question to him again, just to see if I could elicit a different response. He grinned slyly and said, "I answered that question for you ten years ago in Chicago."

The Detroit jazz festival. Afterwards he drove me from Detroit to Toronto. That time we were both going home. As we came out of the Detroit River tunnel in Windsor, a bagpipe band was marching down the street. "Oscar," I said, "is the bagpipe a chromatic instrument?" "Sure," he said. "They're in B-flat."

San Francisco, New York City. Newport, Rhode Island, where I got caught in the 1960 jazz festival riot.

Oscar's penchant for practical jokes is notorious. But once in Los Angeles, in the Hong Kong bar of the Century Plaza Hotel, where I had gone with composer Lalo Schifrin to hear Oscar, I decided that I would get *him*.

He was playing brilliantly. There is Oscar when he's up, and Oscar when he's 'way up. And this was one of those nights. Lalo, himself a proficient pianist, kept shaking his head incredulously and saying in his Argentine accent, "No! Impossible! Ridiculous! Stop!"

Oscar Peterson has not always been treated tenderly by the critics. His technique approaches the frightening, and there is in jazz (or used to be; it may be fading now) a certain mystique of the careless, an unarticulated view that that which is sloppy and a little crude somehow has more "soul".

During my years as editor of *Down Beat* — the period when my acquaintance with Oscar turned into a friendship — I edited the work of many of the jazz critics and studied the rest. I arrived at a hypothesis that criticism is to a large extent a form of projected rationalization, particularly in jazz which, perhaps because of the immediacy of the art and the lack of a long tradition of intent and purpose and standards, serves as a kind of Rorshach test of the critics themselves. Those who wrote with limited skill were the champions of musicians who played that way. Men project everything from sexual problems to their political philosophies into reviews. It takes courage to admire without envy, to praise what you can never hope to equal or even emulate in your own work, whatever that work may be. Oscar Peterson is an astonishing example of what the human body and mind can be self-disciplined to achieve. He represents a triumph of the will beyond the dreams of Gordon Liddy, and so his very existence implies a criticism of weakness and lack of discipline — which is why some critics have called his work over-disciplined, a condition that does not exist, or mechanical, which it is not. Feeling themselves lesser creatures for lacking that iron control of the self that Oscar has, some critics have rationalized away their discomfiture by straining at gnats to find something, anything, wrong with what may well be the most perfect jazz piano-playing in the world.

Not that all critics have been down on Oscar. Leonard Feather has been one of his consistent champions. In any event the standards of art are set not by critics but by artists. And Oscar Peterson is the favorite pianist of every major jazz pianist I have known, including Bill Evans. Roger Kellaway, one of the best and certainly the most adventurous of the pianists in the generation behind Oscar's, rarely travels without a copy of Oscar's Stratford Shakespearean Festival album. Once he took a cassette copy of it with him to London, where he was scoring a movie. The little tape broke, and Roger was so upset that he dismantled the cassette and performed scotch-tape microsurgery on it so that he could continue to hear it.

When Oscar is playing, he seems like a force of nature, awesome in its power, as invulnerable as an avalanche or a typhoon, as imperturbable as a sunset or a cloud. Even I occasionally yearn to hear him blunder, just to be reassured that he is after all human. This is perhaps why his friends play practical jokes on him, causing him to devise his own in retaliation.

Anyway, there I was in the Hong Kong bar with Lalo Schifrin, and I had a plan. I had grown a beard and suspected that Oscar would not recognize me. Then I noticed a man wearing thick glasses sitting at the next table. I borrowed them, and as Oscar finished his set and left the bandstand in a cloud of applause, mopping his brow, Lalo led me to him; I couldn't see a thing. (Neither could the man who lent me his glasses.)

I stood by, affecting a great dignity, as Lalo and Oscar exchanged greetings. Finally Lalo said, "Oscar, I would like you to meet Vladimir Gretchkov, the music critic of *Pravda*."

"How do you do, Mr. Peterson," I said in my best approximation of a Russian accent. "I am great admirer your music." And I went on to flatter him fulsomely. It was the kind of overpraise that renders every artist grindingly uncomfortable. But he maintained his courtesy, saying, "Thank you, Mr. Gretchkov, that's very kind of you." And when the hook was really in, I took off my glasses and said, "You jive mother------!"

He looked puzzled for a moment. Then he recognized me, went mock ferocious, and said, "Okay! That's *it*! I'll get you for this. Don't ever turn your back! I'll get you!"

When I reached Oscar's home in Mississauga, he made me some coffee and we were looking out a picture window at the falling leaves as we laughed about that incident. "You really got me that time," he said, and then, pensively: "You know when you come off the bandstand that people are going to be coming at you. You're warm — at least I am — and you're perspiring, and still breathing

hard, and the mind is still going. And people will come up to you and say, 'Oh Mr. Peterson!' And if they come out with that line, 'You don't remember me, do you?' I immediately come back and say 'No!'

"Add to that the fact of performance. At such a time I might not recognize my brother or sister. A friend of mine once said, 'Oscar, if I were ever going to make an assault on you personally, and I wanted to waste you, do you know when I'd get you? When you come off-stage. Because after a concert it's all lying open. And,' he said, 'all I'd have to do is go in there with a scalpel and do you up.'

"And I had to agree with him. You *are* vulnerable at that time."

Oscar Peterson is more vulnerable than he seems. He is a big man — six-foot one and physically powerful — who, for a time, studied karate. Such men usually have no need for manly posturing. There is often a gentleness about them, as if they just don't care whether anyone considers them brave.

Not that Oscar is incapable of anger. I heard a story about him once. In the early 1960s he was living in Scarborough, another suburb of Toronto. He had bought his wife a new car. They were on their way home. A careless driver creased her fender. The man stopped at a signal light. Oscar got out, the story had it, and tore the door off the man's car.

I asked him about it some time later. He became sheepish with embarrassment. "How do these stories get so exaggerated?" he said. "That's not what happened. I walked up to the guy's car, and he cranked up the windows and locked the doors, and when I grabbed the handle, it came off in my hand, that's all."

I roared with laughter. Oscar admitted that the evening after this event, while he was watching television with his children, four policemen came to his door. Was he being charged with anything? No no, they hastened to assure him. What was it then? Well, one of the cops explained, it was just that they all wanted to meet the man who could tear the door handle off a car.

This powerful figure was born 56 years ago near Place St. Henri in Montreal, an area he would memorialize years later in his *Canadiana Suite*, his first extended venture as a composer. His father was a porter with the Canadian Pacific Railways. During the Great Depression, then, the head of Oscar's family had a job, and for the era, the family was comparatively prosperous. Oscar remembers childhood as a happy time in a loving home that was always filled with music, both classical and jazz. His sisters, May and Daisy, played piano, as did his two brothers, Fred and Chuck. Oscar says that Chuck would have been a better pianist than he, but lost an arm in an industrial accident. "Fred," he insists, "was the best pianist of all of us. But he died when he was sixteen of tuberculosis." Instead of giving up music, Chuck took up the trumpet, on which instrument he worked in Montreal until two years ago. Oscar also came down with TB, when he was small, and he too, ironically, gave up his first instrument, which was trumpet, for piano. I asked him once why he sang the lines he was playing. He speculated that he did so in an attempt to overcome the lack of true legato on the piano, an after-influence, perhaps, of his early trumpet-playing.

Mediocre composers borrow. Great composers steal. —Sir Thomas Beecham (1879 - 1961)

A great many gifted pianists will tell you they hated studying the instrument during childhood. Not Oscar. He would come home after school and practise until dinner, then practise some more until his mother would order him to bed.

A friend of mine, who attended Montreal High School with Oscar, remembers him playing boogie-woogie in the building's basement with crowds of kids gathered around. Oscar played in a high school band; Maynard Ferguson was also in that band.

From 1944 to '47, Oscar worked with the Johnny Holmes orchestra, and then with his own trio at a nightclub called the Alberta Lounge. He recorded four boogie-woogie sides for RCA Victor. It would be difficult for an American to understand the impact of those records on young Canadians interested in jazz.

In the 1960's, when black activists in the United States were pressing to have blacks appear in television commercials, an essay appeared in a magazine — *Life*, I think it was — explaining that black children grew up with only Anglo-Saxons as heroes and heroines, which led to a lack of a sense of self-worth.

The argument was one I could understand. When I was growing up, all my radio-serial heroes, such as *Jack Armstrong the All-American Boy* and *Don Winslow of the U.S. Navy,* were American, as were all the movie heroes. It seemed that only Americans ever did anything interesting and adventurous, anything exciting. To me, and to most of us growing up there, Canadians seemed colorless and untalented. Thus Oscar Peterson's boogie-woogie records came like a thunderbolt when I was in high school. He was a player of astonishing technical accomplishment and rhythmic propulsion. I daresay I did not believe any Canadian could play jazz piano at all, much less play it like that. (I had never heard of Bill Clifton, whose work Bill Evans so admired.)

Still, seen in retrospect, those records did not represent Oscar accurately. He gave RCA the flamboyance it wanted. He was already, I am told by those who knew him then, a far better jazz pianist than those flashy and shallow sides indicated.

Shortly after that, Oscar was discovered by jazz impressario Norman Granz, who took him to New York to play an engagement with *Jazz at the Philharmonic* in Carnegie Hall. *Down Beat*'s New York correspondent reported that Oscar left the audience gasping. His international career had begun. He was 24. It was not long after this that I met him for the first time.

After his explosive New York debut, Oscar went on the road with a duo comprising himself and Ray Brown, who was already one of the great bassists. They played a bar in Hamilton, Ontario. I was a neophyte reporter at the Hamilton *Spectator*. A barber refused to cut Oscar's hair, and I was assigned to the story. (The barber almost lost his business license.)

Years later, in Chicago, I recalled the incident to Oscar. He chuckled and said, "Yes, but there's something you don't know about that story."

Ray Brown had been to that same barber earlier that day. The man had given him a good haircut. And that kind of hair is hard to cut, Oscar said, if the barber doesn't know how. Finding a good barber in an almost all-white city was a stroke of luck. Ray recommended the barber, and that afternoon Oscar trotted off to get a haircut himself. "The guy probably panicked," Oscar said. "He probably thought, 'Now I'm going to get all of *them*!' " And he laughed, a wicked little-boy chuckle he has. And that gives you another insight into him.

"Oscar," says his friend Maurice Kessler, "has an unusual talent for forgiveness."

Coupled with it is an uncompromising sense of ethics, an unshakable moral rectitude. This is part of his strength, and his strength is the reason Norman Granz has always made him the straw boss, as well as star performer, of *Jazz at the Philharmonic.* Whenever anything would go wrong backstage, Norman could be heard yelling, "Oscar!"

A certain drummer was touring with JATP, a man justifiably proud of his time. But he had the habit of playing tempi that showed *him* off to advantage while making some of the older jazzmen, such as Roy Eldridge and Coleman Hawkins, unhappy. Oscar would count off the tempo of a tune, *one... two... one two three four.* And the drummer would come in, *chicka-ding chicka-ding,* at about twice that tempo. Hawkins and others complained to Granz. Norman complained to Oscar, and Oscar took it up with the drummer. The drummer, all innocence, said, "Oscar, I'm just playing the tempos you kick off."

"You are? You really think you are? Then I apologize. You've got a problem, and I didn't realize it," Oscar said, and then stabbed him with: "You've got rotten time."

The structure of jazz is of course similar to classical theme-and-variations form, except that it is improvised, not written music, and several men may improvise collectively. While solo keyboard improvisation is part of the classical tradition, collective improvisation is not.

The fun of jazz therefore lies in part in one's ability to perceive how well the musicians are doing this. In that sense, it is a little like viewing an athletic contest, combined with the suspense of watching a high-wire act. Will he make it? Whitney Balliett, the gracefully articulate *New Yorker* critic, called jazz "the sound of surprise". Bill Evans used to call it "spontaneous composition".

Oscar is at the pinnacle of the art. He managed to combine the speed and facility of Art Tatum, the rhythmic stride style of James P. Johnson, Willie the Lion, and Fats Waller with the taste of Teddy Wilson and the odd bouncy melodic quality (listen to the way they both play triplets) of Nat Cole. Besides that, Oscar brought to bear the rhythmic power of swing-era big bands and the harmonic advances of the bebop movement. Finally, he brought to jazz piano a widely-ranging classical kind of technique. Jazz had pushed ahead of classical music in several areas, but piano had lagged behind in development, consisting largely of melody lines in the right hand accompanied by chords in the left. As one of the older jazz musicians said of him, "Oscar plays piano *both* hands."

This synthesis was an enormous achievement. Oscar revolutionized jazz piano and paved the way for Bill Evans (who told me he started out playing like Oscar), Roger Kellaway, Herbie Hancock, Joanne Brackeen, and more. He permanently altered the criteria of jazz piano. It was a little like the fifteen-foot pole vault or the four-minute mile. Once Cornelius Warmerdam exceeded the one and Roger Bannister the other, anything less was never again good enough. There is a flaw in the analogy: on his own terrain, nobody has ever "beaten" Oscar, as it were, to this day. The man who set the record still holds it.

The combination of sources Oscar wove into his own style has caused his detractors to call him "eclectic". When and how *eclectic* became a term of derogation is a mystery. Certain critics decided that eclectism is Not a Good Thing. The ruling is not in accord with the realities of musical history. The longer judgment is less interested in who did it first than in who did it best. This is evident to anyone who has ever examined pages of Bach's music and the source melodies from which he adapted it. Bach didn't start baroque music, he finished it. He was its apotheosis. Oscar Peterson is the apotheosis of all that went before him in jazz piano, and more.

That Oscar idolized Art Tatum is no secret: on the wall of his basement studio are photos of Tatum and one of Oscar with Vladimir Horowitz, whose playing, in an altogether different musical idiom, Oscar's somewhat resembles. Oscar gets disturbed if I say I think he has more scope and invention, rhythmic drive, control of dynamics, and emotional range than Tatum. It is as if I were desecrating the image of the godhead.

But then, virtuoso pianists are a strange breed. Most other instruments function well in sections. The piano is at its best alone, and besides, it is a tempered instrument. It is not inherently an orchestral instrument and when it is used in a symphony orchestra (except when it is a solo voice *in front of* the orchestra), it is assigned to the percussion section.

On a jazz date, there may be several trumpeters and saxophone players, but usually there is one pianist. Jazz pianists are politely but passionately competitive with each other. Oscar laughed when I said, "Piano players are all a little nuts. I wonder if it's because they get lonesome, shoved out there all by themselves."

"No!" he said. "they're *planning* on being out there alone!" Then he became serious. "It's because, I think, pianists have dreams of being the primary, all-encompassing soloist eventually in their careers. Pianists think of going out there by themselves, or with a trio."

"Maybe," I said, "that's why they choose the instrument in the first place."

"It goes beyond that," he said. "You choose the instrument, I think, because it's a matter of wonderment. It's a *lot* of instrument. You look down and see that whole keyboard with all the possibilities sitting in front of you. I'm sure it intimidates everyone at some point. It did me. I looked down and wondered what the hell to do with all those keys, and where they go, and how I'm going to work them, and then the three pedals, with the mysterious middle one.

"Piano-players are therefore a product of a certain amount of intimidation. They do a fair amount of accompanying, vocalists and horns and other instruments. And that can be a hair-raising

When the rhythm section ain't makin' it, go for yourself. —Ben Webster (1909 - 1973)

experience, depending on who you're accompanying and how that person feels from night to night. So some pianists get a little brow-beaten, and they get this inner rage that they manage to keep dormant. And they start to think, 'I'm gonna play whatever I have to for this cat, but past that, I'm not giving him a thing.' And when they get their solo chance, they *go* for it.

"Pianists are the worst old women in the world. When they meet each other, they gossip. There's a lot to gossip about. Because of the very set-up of the instrument, there are so many ways of going wrong." He chuckled. "You'll be playing your buns off with your left hand and playing a fairly good line with your right, you'll have the time together and everything, and maybe you don't pedal right. No matter how good the performance was, the pianists will say, 'You know something funny? He just doesn't have his densities together with the pedals, does he?' Pianists *revel* in this."

He laughed again. "You can almost categorize attitude by instruments.

"Guitar players are really clannish. They're the inside group. You can't get in *that* group, I don't care how good you play. You can come to town with the world's *worst* guitarist, and he will outdraw you in the dressing room, with the other guitarists. And if you make the mistake of going over to that room to say hello, you're gonna get frosted.

"Bass players are very protective of each other. I would find it almost unbelievable if you told me you'd ever heard a bass player say something about another bass player that wasn't good. They will *always* protect each other. If you look at the history of the instrument in jazz, they were always sort of slaves in the early days. The public never used to notice bass players, until Ray Brown, Scotty LaFaro, and Nils Pedersen, and so forth. They were always the guys who came into the group and were given one order: 'Walk!' Once in a while they'd be thrown a bone, like, 'Walk — one chorus solo.' Finally they managed to break away, because of the proficient players who came along.

"Drummers I can't account for. I'm not even going to get into that one."

"Maybe the noise gets to them," I suggested.

He laughed some more. "Now saxophone players tend to be very mysterious. They're even mysterious with each other. Maybe it's because they're going to go out and be combatants on the stage. They'd be in the room, talking to each other, 'Hey man . . .' Very friendly, right? And you could tell that there was something underneath all that. And I'd think, 'Hey, I don't know what he *isn't* saying, but whatever it is, I don't think I want to hear it.'

"You said something earlier about violin players. I've never hung out with violin players. I've seen them on the record dates and I've noticed the other players are leary of them."

"Oh sure," I said. "They've got the cigar in the mouth, and between takes they're reading the *Wall Street Journal*, checking on their investments."

Oscar Peterson has been on the road now for more than 30 years. He is able to have about four months a year at home with his wife, Charlotte, and their four-year-old son Joel. When Oscar is home, he spends much of his time in the basement, a well-equipped recording studio, composing and experimenting with various electronic keyboard instruments. Recently he set up a synthesizer to sound like a guitar. Then he recorded with it, at his own dizzying speed. When Norman Granz heard it, he put Oscar up to telephoning guitarist Joe Pass in Los Angeles. Oscar told Pass, "Listen, I want you to hear a tape of this new young guitarist from Japan." Pass was positively unnerved by the tape, until Oscar told him what it was.

The trio of Oscar Peterson, Nils Pedersen, and Joe Pass — Peterson, Pedersen, and Pass — is one of the best groups he has had. Of the several editions of the trio, my favorites are those that included Ray Brown on bass and Herb Ellis on guitar, and, later, Brown and drummer Edmund Thigpen. The latter group often played the Chicago restaurant London House in the early 1960s.

Milton, of all people, gave the most perfect definition of the state of mind required to play jazz: "with wanton heed and giddy cunning". That's how you play jazz.

—Paul Desmond (1924 - 1977)

In those days Oscar was always lighting someone's cigarette. His Dunhill would come out of his right-hand suitcoat pocket so fast that it seemed already alight. The recipient of the courtesy was always startled. For this bit of legerdemain, Dizzy Gillespie nicknamed Oscar The Flame.

Now as everyone knows, Oscar's left hand is as facile as his right, which one can observe on his records in sweeping downhill-racer passages in double octaves. And one evening at London House, a woman at a table close to the piano took out a cigarette in the middle of one of Oscar's solos. Without breaking pace he continued the solo with his left hand as his right flashed out of his pocket to put a flame to her cigarette. Thigpen and Brown started laughing so hard that the tune fell apart.

I almost lived with that trio. Indeed, Ed Thigpen would sometimes stay at my house when they were in Chicago. Ray Brown gave me an insight into Oscar at that time: "Oscar will come to work and say, 'I feel awful. I sure don't feel like working tonight.' And then the first tune, he'll kick off a tempo so fast it'll nearly kill you." I saw Ray's point proved at the Monterey Jazz Festival. Oscar, who in spite of his physical strength has a tendency to catch every wandering respiratory ailment, had the flu and a temperature of 104. Damp air was coming in from the Pacific, and several of us backstage thought he should not perform that night. He went on, opened at a scalding tempo, and gave one of his most exciting performances. It seems as if, at such times, he pushes himself all the harder.

In recent years he has achieved that dream of working solo, filling European opera houses night after night. He is the first jazz pianist to do this successfully, and it is said that he is now the highest-paid jazz artist in the world. He will neither confirm nor deny this; it's probably true.

When he does want to work with other instruments, he has the alumni of his various trios to call on — Brown and Ellis, Pass and the remarkable Danish bassist Nils Henning Orsted Pedersen, and drummer Bobby Durham. They always come. Ray Brown, one of the busiest bassists in Los Angeles, last year flew back and forth to Toronto *daily* to work on a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation television series with Oscar.

Oscar has had international recognition since 1949, but it is only recently that Canadians seem to have awakened to the fact that their country has produced a major and seminal jazz artist. Rob McConnell, leader of the Boss Brass, visited Los Angeles last year. I said, "How are things back home, Rob?" "Well, I'll tell you," Rob said, "recently I worked on an Oscar Peterson album. All the musicians on the date were Canadian, and it was a pretty big deal. The Toronto *Star* sent a photographer, and he said to Oscar, 'Would you mind showing me where you're going to stand, Mr. Peterson, when you play your trumpet?' " After a beautiful pause, Rob said, "I think that about says it for the state of the arts in Canada." It's humor only another Canadian understands: something we know about the country's asceticism, its contempt for dreams and adornment, its pride in that contempt, its relentless practicality. When my sister was four, she saw Niagara Falls for the first time. She said, "What's it for?" You can be a [redacted] to the world, but you remain a nobody to your fellow Canadians. "Oh I tell you," Chris Plummer said that day, wiping his eyes, "it's a wonder any of us got out of there with any of our talent intact."

But Oscar is getting his recognition at home now, even appearing as a spokesman in television commercials. He says he is happier than he has ever been. He has warm relations with his five grown children by his first marriage. He said he never thinks about age, the passage of time, or death. I quoted Gore Vidal: After forty, the death watch starts. "A lot of people think that way," Oscar said. "Most people die fighting off death. I've just got so much going. There are so many things I want to learn, so many things I want to do — without being corny about it — for my own art form, that I don't have time for that." (Note the Canadian touch of reticence about the use of the term "art form". God forbid that you should seem immodest.)

"I'm really enjoying my life. There were times when I didn't. But I'm having a ball."

"You should be," I said, "with all the toys you've got around here." The "toys" included a Boesendorfer grand piano, a Fender-Rhodes, and several synthesizers. Above the double glass window shielding the recording booth hung eleven wood-and-brass *D[redacted] Beat* award plaques, at least three of which I had presented to him myself.

Although in the past Canada contributed comparatively few important musicians to the world, those it did produce have generally been technically superb: Glenn Gould, Percy Faith, Robert Farnon, Ralph Grierson. And this holds true in the other arts. Whatever they may or may not be as artists, Canadians are usually masters of *craft*. Could it be, I asked, that the paucity of opportunity in the arts in earlier years forced a Canadian to make the most of the few chances he got, making him highly skillful in the process — or that, lacking confidence in the first place, he compensated for doubt of his talent by mastery of his craft?

Oscar didn't quite see it that way.

"I think in Canada," he said, "we have a little more time to mature at a slower rate than you would in the States. I'm not talking about Dubuque, Iowa, but the major cities. If you take a jazz pianist and put him or her in New York, or start that same person in Vancouver, that person in Vancouver would have a little more rounded seasoning. We're just talking about craft now, not talent. The pressures are not the same in the two countries. The competitive factor here is a lot lower.

"That has its drawbacks also. I think we need a little more competition here. Because Canadians tend to be lazy anyway, and self-satisfied.

"It's only now that we suddenly look and find out that we're all human beings, and we've got the same kind of bigotry and greed as

the rest of the world. We can't point the finger any more. We find that we have the same isms that many people in the world suffer with. We were too bloody complacent before. We'd sit around and say, 'Do you *believe* what's going on *there*? It couldn't happen here.' It could and it did."

He was referring to racism. Canada always took a smug pride in its lack of racism. Since an extensive immigration from India, Pakistan, Viet Nam, Africa, and the West Indies, there have been incidents, and the Klan has appeared.

"The world has changed," Oscar said. "There are no more borders. You can't run home and be safe from the bomb, from the terrorists, from anything. We're all open to anything — certainly to the viruses we're sharing. If we're going to share the ills, I think we should share the good things."

It was at the old Colonial Tavern in downtown Toronto that Oscar got his revenge on Vladimir Gretchkov. I was living in Toronto in 1972. I asked Oscar if he wanted to bring his wife over to our place for a late dinner after his Saturday night performance.

For some reason, the invitation completely slipped my mind. The following week, a mutual friend called me to say, "What's this I hear about bad feelings between you and Oscar Peterson?"

"There are no bad feelings between Oscar and me," I said.

"Well, he's sure mad at you. Apparently you invited him and his wife for late dinner Saturday, and he got to your apartment about one-thirty in the morning and kept ringing your bell and got no answer. And she'd gone to a lot of trouble getting dressed and all that."

I hung up the phone, rattled, and told my wife what had happened. "There's something suspicious about this," she said. "She wouldn't have come without calling me, to see if anyone else was going to be here, and how formal or informal it would be. Women don't do that. I think Oscar dreamed this up, just to get even for the Hong Kong bar."

> We are the music makers,
> We are the dreamers of dreams ...
> — A.W.E. Shaughnessy (1844-1881)

"Maybe," I said, unconvinced. "But we're going down to hear him tonight, just in case. I've got to get this straightened out."

When we arrived at the Colonial, Oscar was sitting with friends at a table on the balcony. "*You!*" he said, pointing a finger at me. "You're *jive*! That's what you are. Jive!" To my wife, getting her a chair: "Would you like a drink, dear? *You* are very welcome here. *He* is not. Jive! That's what he is."

"Wait a minute," I said. "I've got to talk to you."

"No," he said, "I've got nothing to say to you. Besides, I've got to go to work." To my wife: "You order anything you want. But not him. I'm never buying him a drink again."

And he got up and went downstairs to the bandstand.

Now it happens that I love to sing. I suspect all songwriters do. And though I had done recording, radio, and television work, some of the latter with Oscar, I was extremely timid about public performance, and he knew it. What, have fun and draw attention to yourself? Be conspicuous? It's unCanadian. (Once the *National Lampoon*, several of whose editors were Canadian, ran a questionnaire to help you determine if you were a "latent Canadian". One of the questions was, "Is your favorite color gray?") Oscar loves to sing too and one of our running jokes has been about singing. I'd say, "You may be able to play that piano, but I can outsing you." He'd say, "We'll see. One day we'll see."

As he reached the bandstand downstairs, he set up a microphone. A vocal microphone. About the right height for me. He sat down at the piano and began to play — the chord changes and introduction of one of my songs. My wife said, "He's going to get you to sing."

"Oh no he's not!" I said. I rose from my chair, looked down at Oscar, waved goodbye, hurried down the back stairs of the Colonial, went out to the parking lot, and kept right on walking into the night.

Skating to Music and the New Physics

There are two kinds of skating. One is done on metal blades, the other on wheels. The former is by far the colder method.

Skating in the mid-Twentieth Century was heavily dependent on the electric organ, and the electric organ was heavily dependent on skating. This is called symbiosis. Without skating rinks and cocktail lounges in places like Elmira, N.Y.; Xenia, Ohio; Klamath Falls, Oregon; Petoskey, Michigan, and Medicine Hat, Alberta, organists would have been hard-pressed indeed to make a living, and the Hammond company might not have survived. Had it failed, would Bob Moog have developed his synthesizer, and for that matter Martineau his *onde?* Would Arp have put all those fiddle-players out of work? And what became of the theramin? It is, as you can see, almost impossible to exaggerate the importance of skating to the development of modern music.

There were at one time about 5,000 indoor rollerdomes in the United States alone, and may still be, for all anybody knows. Ice-skating is done on lakes, ponds, rivers, and swimming pools that somebody forgot to drain last fall, as well as in Rockefeller Center and the plaza in front of the Toronto City Hall. Skating thus generated a great deal of employment over the years for organists, particularly the kind who used the most nasal stops and, in daring explorations of modern harmony, sixth chords, and worked the pedals as if they were attached to bicycles. Jimmy Smith, Sir Charles Thompson, Walter Wanderley, and Count Basie were never able to get work playing for skaters. It's their own fault.

There are references in literature to skating as far back as the Twelfth Century. References to the electric organ do not, of course, go back that far.

A lot of skating went on in the Scandinavian countries and in Holland, which is exceptionally well endowed with canals. When not in use for skating, these canals are used to transport Dutch loaf, tulip bulbs, Edam cheeses, and Japanese tourists with cameras. The canals sometimes smell bad, but you can't blame that on skating — or for that matter on the electric organ which, under the hands of some players, develops a piquant odor of its own.

The first skating club was organized in Edinburgh, Scotland, probably for profit, but organning did not yet make its great leap forward. There are reports, difficult to confirm from the scanty extant documentation, that a Scot named Allyn Tavish Ferguson-MacAndrew invented a coin-operated electric organ shortly thereafter, but the instrument proved impractical, since no one had yet invented the wall socket.

Skating advanced enormously in the Nineteenth Century, when wooden blades were finally abandoned in favor of those made of steel. This led to speed skating, which is the fastest sport in which man moves under his own power. Speed skaters reach speeds of thirty miles an hour or more, which makes it advisable that they all skate in the same direction. Speed skating did not at first have much to do with music, except insofar as a whistling skater produced a Doppler effect. It was figure skating that proved to have the greater affinity for music.

Figure skating requires special skates. The blades have more rock or curve than hockey skates, and they're shorter than speed skates. There are teeth on the curved front of the blade, which Freud thought was an indication of latent aggression in figure skaters. Roller skates have little sideways wheels at the front, which serve the same purpose: skaters of both persuasions are able to spin like dervishes, preferably to something like *Hora Staccato*

or the *Minute Waltz* or Strauss's *Perpetual Motion,* to say nothing of Paganini's. It is not true that ice-skaters, in moments of passionate abandon, have been known to drill their way right through the ice.

Although it would be pleasant to think that the main reason for the popularity of skating was a widespread love of music, it would be naive to overlook the fact that rollerdomes and ice rinks have traditionally been great places to meet chicks, or birds, as they are called in England. The maneuver is well-known. One glides gracefully up to the best-looking or, failing that, the most-available-looking girl (in earlier times, the brevity of the skirt indicated the availability of the girl, but the mini-skirt confused the issue and then the jeans craze totalled it) with a devil-may-care air and says, "Hi there, would you like to go 'round a few times?" or, in more recent times, "Hey, baby, what's happ'nin'?" In skating parlance, this is known as a Pickup. In the 1940's, the very raciness of it led many parents to forbid their daughters to go to roller arenas, which had shadier reputations than ice rinks, probably because at the latter, one is usually too close to frozen to think about anything but keeping on the move. Nowadays, of course, roller arenas seem like citadels of innocence, and those parents who worry at all usually worry more about their daughters' attendance at rock festivals where, it is interesting to note, the skating is done without wheels *or* blades.

Music to skate by predates the invention of the phonograph or the electric organ. The Nineteenth Century produced *The Skaters Waltz. Over the Waves* became a particular favorite of skaters, although it's hard to understand why: it is well-known that it is difficult to skate on water until it gets hard. To overcome this problem, researchers eventually developed water skis. Water skiing is not done to music, due largely to the influence of the movie *Jaws,* which created the widespread impression that sharks are attracted to music, particularly if it sounds like Stravinsky. Surfing has its own association with music, but that is another and sadder story.

The problem in the Nineteenth Century, for the skater, was that only live music was available. And trumpeters, violinists, and other instrumentalists have a hard time performing in precisely those conditions that are ideal for skating. Lips get frozen to mouthpieces, frost forms on trombone slides, reeds get jammed with ice. And of course it is notoriously difficult to finger a fiddle with mittens on. It is, therefore, a tribute to the forebearance of our forebears that there is any association whatever between skating and music.

One sees clearly here the working of Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. The conditions favorable to making music are those unsuitable to skating, and vice versa. Heisenberg postulated his uncertainty principle when he was 25. By the age of 30, he was certain of it. It is not known whether he could skate, although Einstein played the fiddle. The marriage of music and skating, like wave mechanics, is a modern development. The organ held the shotgun.

The electric organ can put out as much sound as an orchestra. And the player can sit in a warm room — without mittens, remember, which improves the playing of some organists — while his music is being piped out over the ice. This was discovered by Jonathan Edwards at the Dartmouth ice carnival of 1933.

But the real breakthrough came with electronic recording. It became possible for a musician to be heard on skating rinks and in roller domes everywhere, even while he lounged by a roaring fire in Sudbury, Ontario, or by a swimming pool in Key Largo, Florida (the opposite arrangement is not advised), sipping a martini.

Probably no musician in history has ever been heard over more acres of ice than Ken Griffin, who was and may still be a favorite with members of the Roller Skating Rink Operators Association, which has its headquarters, as one could guess, in Detroit. With a keen ear for the market, if nothing else, Ken Griffin recorded a lot of waltzes, including *The Anniversary Waltz, You Can't Be True Dear, Let Me Call You Sweetheart, Now Is the Hour,* and *Cruising Down the River.*

The problem of skating to a waltz has proved to be one of the most tenacious that science has ever encountered. The average human being, as we know, has two feet, which is why we are known, somewhat unflatteringly, as bipedal. In view of this, it would be logical to skate in duple time or multiples thereof, since when you skate in two or four, you always come out on the same foot. This isn't true with the waltz, which is almost always in three. That is to say, the rhythm when skating has to go LEFT-right left, RIGHT-left-right, and so on. The pattern comes out right on the third bar. But since songs have an annoying tendency to be 32 bars long, unless they were written by Cole Porter or Antonio Carlos Jobim, and 32 bars is not divisible by three, the whole thing works out, according to Heisenberg's method of matrix mechanics, only every 17 years, which is a long time to keep skating.

This made Einstein uneasy. He denied familiarity with the Michelson-Morley experiments. Theorists suggest that he could not have been unaware of the Lorentz transformations. But the truth is that it was the problem of skating in three that inspired him to develop his special theory of relativity, and the revelation that the faster you skate in a given direction, the greater your mass and the shorter your breath. This only confirmed the wisdom of everyone's skating in the same direction. If you don't, there's no way to tell each other the time. This led to E equals mc^2. Bohr, Fermi and Oppenheimer finally proved that Einstein's theory was a bomb. Some theorists suggest that he was, however, quite correct when he said that God did not dice with the universe. These thinkers believe that He is playing the slot machines with it.

In the end, all this anguished ratiocination came to naught. While working on her doctoral thesis at Sophie Newcomb, Constance Plank resolved the whole problem in one simple but brilliant insight: she concluded that we should have always been skating in two in the first place. Even *The Skaters Waltz* can be absorbed into the equation by lenghtening the third beat to a half note. This leads to some pretty jerky skating, but at least you come out on the right foot.

With modern technology, Plank's Constant proved revolutionary. Roller-skaters began tuning into rock-and-roll stations on their portable radios, skating so fast that the mass of the radios reached levels where shoulder straps had to be used to support them. On the streets of New York City, the fad reached epidemic proportions and the noise of competing radios became deafening. John Cage immediately filed a copyright on the sound, and the admirers of aleatory music were enthralled. No one else was. But again, technology has come to our aid. The light-weight stereo headphone radio may save us all. Anyone can skate anywhere listening to anything he wants, even to *The Dream of Gerontius,* Varese's *Ionisation,* or Glenn Gould's *Iceberg Variations* without bothering anyone else. This sort of thing should be tried only by the most experienced skaters, of course. The rest should listen to traffic reports.

Space age technology is quickly taking the fad into the world of the ice-skater, as well. A Canadian engineer has mounted miniaturized speakers in thermal earmuffs, which are now being tested just west of Flin Flon.

But skating to music has unquestionably reached its most advanced development near Venice, California, where the sidewalk by the sea is long and smooth and the acid is both plentiful and potent. Skaters there are approaching the speed of light and some, reportedly, have already disappeared, like Judge Crater and the crew of the Marie Celeste.

We can only wish them bon voyage, wherever they are.