Gene Lees
Jazzletter

P.O. Box 240
Ojai, Calif.
93023

September 1983 Vol. 3 No. 2

Letters

When one learns a foreign language, one passes through a phase during which you feel thick-headed as you try to make yourself understood in a vocabulary that is limited and a structure that is strange. Yet the inventive mind, at this time, may well use the language with a flashing ingenuity that will be lost when a more fluent control is attained and one speaks the language in a "correct" and conventional manner. Adding to the beauty of this effect is a tendency to use locutions from one's native language. Malcolm Lowrey applies this principle — which I suspect he learned from Conrad — in the opening chapter of Under the Volcano, *when he was the Mexican doctor say, "Poor your friend, he spend his money on this earth in such continuous tragedy." This altering of sequence adds weight and penetrating power to every word in that sentence. The locution is normal to spanish —* pobre su amigo *— but not English. It once was, however. Ophelia addresses Hamlet as "good my lord".*

This is preamble to a letter from a friend it seems we have in Japan. I have condensed it a little but have not edited it or "corrected" the grammar. To do so would be a bit of a sacrilege. I suspect that Mr. Yoshino is all unaware that what he has written in English is poetry.

I wish to cover (a) new subscription for Pit Inn. Pit Inn, one of many jazz clubs in Tokyo where players come to play jazz, naturally it's not prosperous. I'm afraid the owner facing a lot of financial difficulties. (Lately I heard the Keystone Korner in San Francisco closed down.) Another local jazz club I frequent, there are always very few audience and though I'm in no way in a position to worry about the livelihood of the owner or the musicians it nevertheless gives me a pang of pity.

The more musicians become serious, further people stay out of their music. The same people starving to fulfill their lonely hearts of music, tutoring courses and lectures of music, buying musical instruments! These clubs remind me of a light house on a barren rocky cape under stormy weather.

On the other hand I'm optimistic about the future of jazz. I believe jazz is inherently healthy and stout, requires no patronage. It will always stand on both feet on the ground and survive even the gutter. The more adverse the circumstances, the more jazz would become sublimated, like a diamond formed under phenomenal pressure. Jazz... my precious diamond. Sorry I can't show you on my finger.

(You) seem to be fretful, much frustrated about public recognition on jazz very little compared to of classics. I feel sad about it too. But do you think any jazz musician of right mind wants to be honored by, say, Nobel Prize? (Come to think of it, is there any Nobel Prize in the field of music?) Or are they only too human to seek after fame?

Ciao.

Masaki Yoshino

I too dislike most extended bass and drum solos. Shelly Manne says it well. Thanks for your editorial re an industry tax on the consumer. I was able to oppose it at the NAIRD convention in Chicago last May. NAIRD did not support the tax.

Bernard Brightman

Bernard Brightman is the president of Stash Records. It is significant that many small independent record oppose this travesty of a tax on blank tapes.

How much joy each issue brings me. My only association with the music business is the business of loving music... What I want to say, briefly, is thank you for making it so personal, giving the music and the people who made it and make it flesh and mind.

Howard Kopet
Hewlett Harbor, NY

The House in the Heart

by Bobby Scott

NEW YORK, NY.

"We the whores, Socks," said the worn-out mouth. The bent shoulders, old before their time, fought to maintain a balance that the weight of the tenor saxophone hanging around his neck precariously played with. Lester always seemed to be leaning like that edifice in Italy, a topple imminent, never to realize itself but seconds away at all times. I swear the crepe soles of his boot-style shoes bore an equalizing agent. Prez *teetered* in those last years.

He was without a sense of the time dimension, like waves lapping one into another on a beach, each so much a part of what was before and will be after that no discernment is possible. You don't count waves unless you are prepared for madness. I do not mean that his playing straddled time and eras, as we've come to catalogue them. No, his mind did. The style of Lester was fashioned within time and imprisoned by it. You knew where he was. But there was so much more to Prez than the notes that crept out of his horn.

"We the whores, Socks."

I was the right proper young fool in the Autumn of 1955, when I went on tour with Jazz at the Philharmonic. Full of himself, as the Irish say. But at the time I thought I had a decent reason to make an ass of myself: I was playing with first-class musicians and I was eighteen years of age. In fact I had been playing with pros since I was twelve, earning a livelihood, and had even recorded my first album, for Savoy, at fifteen. Now I see myself playing then as an exercise in frailing. I still won't listen to any of the records I made in that period of my life.

I had been hired by Gene Krupa (who turned me onto Delius, by the way) to fill the spot vacated by Teddy Napoleon. Krupa had added a bass player to bail out the one-handed piano players of the new generation. I certainly was one of those.

It's not clear to me where we started. I seem to remember Hartford, Connecticut. I came away from the tour with changed opinions and musical values, although this was not obvious in my own playing. Sadly, the experience lowered my estimates of some of the men and their music. But in some cases it raised them. I'd heard very little of Buddy Rich, certainly not enough to make a proper judgment. But his technical prowess alone was mind-boggling. Krupa said to me one night, in an odd matter-of-fact tone, "No one ever played like that before, chappie, and no one will ever play like that again." We were standing in the wings, watching Bud play one of his fabled solos, and Gene — I remember this vividly — didn't share my wide-eyed amazement. I

was made to understand that Buddy was Buddy, and that was that. I think the old man envied me my newness of eyes and ears.

All the men on the tour had played too much and too long. I felt the frayed nerves on the plane flights, saw the drawn faces when certain hotels were mentioned, could almost weigh the years of singing for their suppers.

But I think of that time as the fall I met Prez.

"We the whores, Socks."

Lester Young was the first person I had known who was outside my ken. He was a visitor from a small planet. Everything that I'd imagined to be 'way out and bizarre was living reality in Prez. And he gave me more food for thought than anyone I'd met, excepting my music teacher, Edvard Moritz, and a Lutheran minister named Jacob Wagner. But neither of them had the totality of Prez's person. His was a world, fully constructed with all the loose ends tied up, that created reality could not and did not puncture; not even slightly. Prez reminded me that there was such a state as St. Paul spoke of when he said categorically, "We are *in* this world but not *of* it."

I wondered about his spectral being every second I was in his company. It cut through every tidy notion I had formulated about the meaning of this existence. That he was upsetting to many people is an understatement. His voice did nothing to relieve a searcher's quandary. As it was in him, buried deeply, that to impose himself was somehow not fitting, the converse occurred. St. Anselm says that theology is "faith seeking understanding," the intent of intellectual exercising being the effort to create a "religion" or overt practice, the exercise of one's faith making it into a fortress that can stand up easily to the assaults of Reason. However, faith creates its own brand of counter-reason and couches itself in felt words, rather than legalistic scientific terms. That leads me to phrases like: *You don't find God. You lose yourself until God finds you.* That is the quality of understanding Lester required, if in your search for him you eventually noticed that he had found you.

What struck me most was his openness to younger musical talent. It wasn't patronization, a tip of the hat to the coming generations. It was genuine, and his interest constant.

Norman Granz that year presented every member of the touring party with a battery-operated record player. It could be set on one's knees, and gave a decent reproduction, considering the tiny speakers. I ran out and purchased some records, one of which was a wonderful album by Jimmy Giuffre on Capitol, which featured a trumpeter then unknown to me, one Jack Sheldon. Prez didn't cart his own phonograph about with him, for the compelling reason that he could only apply himself to the care of his clothes, his whiskey, and his horn. I had no notion then of the virtue of paring down one's duties in life. Prez, unlike myself, knew what he could and could not handle. So my phonograph was shared with him. But only in the measure that he listened, for never once did he ask me to play a recording he knew did not delight me.

Prez fell in love with Jack Sheldon's tone production and melodic invention. Sheldon played a solo on *I Only Have Eyes For You* that Prez found so agreeable — and I too — that we damn near wore the cut out. Prez tried repeatedly to get one of the trumpeters on the tour to take an interest in this young man's talent, to no avail. As the man was in Lester's age group, Prez used him as a measure of what one should not become: deaf to the newer generations. I became acutely aware of the differences in how Prez and his colleagues looked at life through the microcosm of music. His playing might be imprisoned by the years of his youth, but his hearing was not.

I was looking upon an actuated illumination. Other people perceived that illumination incorrectly. The uninitiated might think that what one saw in Prez was the defeat of the human spirit, or the surrender to alcoholism. Some no doubt thought they were seeing an expression of homosexual dislocation. The puzzle of Lester Young. An alcoholic he might have been; homosexual, no.

I came to think his was the exquisite loneliness that comes of a splendid type of isolation. His heart was an Islandman's heart, the heart of one unhappy on a mainland. It put him outside the temporal stream of life, much like an Aran Islander, judging tides with his eyes before trying twenty-foot waves of the ocean in a curragh made of skins and sticks and spit that no sane boater would take out on a quiet mountain tarn in northern California. And the most shocking thing, in gaining knowledge of where Prez was at, was the wholesale misunderstanding of everyone who crossed his path. He was half to blame for it, to be sure. But it was his dearest, his most precious fault, this almost inherent obfuscation.

Being black in America produces its own survival mechanisms. The most obvious and necessary is a facade. But I am not sure that Lester's behavior can be so easily explained. He was born in a time when "race relations" in the deep south had indeed formed separate communities — separate worlds, really. To hear him speak of his childhood was to be treated to experiences wherein the outer white community wasn't even mentioned. It is quite possible that in a place such as Woodville, Mississippi, the two never met. Yet he gave no indication of a general condemnation of any group of people. In his words he expressed many attitudes — but never contempt. In fact, his moral posture was refreshing, and, surprisingly, rang of a pure Christian view in which offenders are seen as pathetic. It was as if he were more concerned with *how* an offensive person "got that way." But he was pragmatic enough to know that there are junkyard dogs and junkyard dog mentalities. I think what made him almost sympathetic to bigots was his deepest understanding of what they had paid for their hatred and how unrewarding the whole exercise must be.

But he had his own fiction, and had transfigured it into the beautiful solos all of us who loved him are familiar with. That some people couldn't exorcise their demons as he did, I'm sure, led him to his sympathetic posture. It wasn't with condescension that he looked upon offensive people. That would have taken him where his heart wouldn't allow him to go. So he pitied, felt bad for such misguided souls. I'd call him Ghandi-like, except that Lester was more perceptive than that over-rated ascetic.

If Prez was made to feel he wasn't wanted, he left long before he

About the Writer

Born Dec. 29,1937, in Mount Pleasant, New York, Bobby Scott studied piano under scholarship with Dorothea Anderson La Follete, the teacher of William Kapell, and conducting under Edvard Moritz, a pupil of Debussy's. He began working in dance bands at the age of eleven, recorded his first jazz album at fifteen, his first album as a writer at seventeen (with Milton Hinton, O.C. Johnson, Hal McKusick and Eddie Bert). He left the Gene Krupa Quartet in the winter of 1956 and recorded as a singer a song called Chain Gang, *which became the No. 1 chart hit. At twenty-two he wrote incidental music for the play* A Taste of Honey, *the song from which became one of the great standards. He also wrote (in 1968) the hit song* He's Not Heavy, He's My Brother. *As an arranger, he has written for Harry Belafonte, Gloria Lynn, Aretha Franklin, Marvin Gaye, Esther Ofarim, Nana Mouskouri, Jackie Paris and Don Cherry (the singer). He was an a & r man for Columbia and later Mercury Records, producing Aretha Franklin, Chet Baker, and Roland Kirk, among others. He has written two symphonies, two operas, scores of chamber music and piano pieces, six novels and three film scores (*Slaves, Joe, *and* Who Says I Can't Ride a Rainbow?*).*

had to be asked to. I remember him saying wistfully, as he looked down at the passing acres of American heartland from a DC-3, "Sure as hell is enough room for everybody, ain't there, Socks?" Thus he summed up the overstuffed cities as culprit.

I always felt he was *visiting* pockets of urban discontent, bringing a message. He often looked at the city we had just played and were flying away from with eyes that brought to mind the words of the Carpenter about shaking the dust of a town off one's sandals.

Dusting off one's sandals and blessing the unfriendly congregation was, in his case, initially effected by Scotch and marijuana. As he spoke less than almost anyone I have ever known, I came to read his silences, hoping to see what it was that he wasn't saying. He once said to me, "The best saxophone section I ever heard is the Mills Brothers." That made me laugh, and made me think. The Mills Brothers, a vocal quartet, had a blend one rarely heard in the sax section of a band. This kind of indirectness, the very hallmark of his verbal expression, enhanced the misguided ideas about him. Not that he gave a damn. It bothered me though. Truths become throw-aways if life deems that they emanate from an eccentric.

By his late years, Prez was more revered than taken seriously. This was to everybody's loss. For his judgments on music had risen from the same source as his unique musical improvising. Oh, I can't say that hearing him live in 1955 was as invigorating as his recordings of the '30s and '40s. He had become debilitated and, worse, bored. But not with music. More with his own making of a contribution.

At eighteen, I found nothing sacred. I still am not a hero worshipper, believing Admiral Halsey's evaluation that "there are no great men, only little men who do great things." I do lay claim to an understanding, a historical one, of just where Lester fit into jazz, and how tall the shadow he had cast. One had only to listen to Zoot and Stan, or Art Pepper and Paul Desmond, to hear Prez' voice, his heart, hurdle a generation. I leave out the obvious players like Brew Moore who more imitated Prez than were stoked by him. Once, told of a player who "plays exactly like you" and was even called the Something Prez, Lester said, "Then who am I?"

In fact, I think Lester was tickled by my sacrilegious attitude toward giants. He chuckled and chortled at my teen-age mind's evaluations. He saw jazz, as I did, as a counter culture, knowing that whatever the critics tried to make of it, it would remain inaccessible to people more disposed to swim in the broad river of Culture than in a streamlet.

Like all good things, jazz is inherently at odds with what it is around it. Like philosophy, it contends for ears and hearts and minds. It will never rule, for its nature is to subvert.

One of the great poetic voices of the Twentieth Century, Padraic Pearse, went to his death relatively unknown and largely unpublished but secure in the knowledge that he had fathered the Irish Republic. (He led the Easter uprising of 1916.) In a poem called *The Fool*, he said, "Oh, wise man, riddle me this. What if the dream come true? What if millions shall dwell in the house shaped in my heart?"

When a man is miscast and talented, he of necessity builds a house in his heart to live in. Some men, like Pearse, though dead, build dwellings that others live in. Jazz players are miscasts, too, — my mother quite seriously considered them social mutants — and in their case there are further difficulties in that their houses are not discernible to the casual listener. Their playing then remains — to the large audience — noise from reeds, bent brass, and wind columns. Even noise of course can serve a simple purpose. God forbid that the majority had no noise at all. What then would drown out their own hearts' voices? Mantovani has halted countless important discussions, stayed the dissension in all too many breasts. It is as if Andy Williams typified Voltaire's "best of all possible worlds". (Aaron Copland once bitched about hearing Brahms on Muzak in his bank. The manager said he thought it better than pop music. He didn't understand Copland's reply that he liked to "prepare" himself for Brahms.)

We're all like Pearse. We all try to build houses inside ourselves. Some, like Pearse and Prez, have their houses recognized and the dream becomes a reality that someone can dwell in; and some insinuate the dream and themselves into the main flow of time and culture. They're oftimes whole communities, as in the cases of Bach and Beethoven. And the most alienated has the greatest need to build a house in his heart, so that he may find a home. From this perspective, it is easy to see Kafka's work in an understanding way — or a projectionist like Bradbury. The physical disability of deafness, in the cases of Beethoven and Faure, might have affected their ordering food in a restaurant, but little else. When told that he was deaf, Beethoven shouted, "Tell them Beethoven hears!" He had long since taken up residence in the house he shaped in his heart.

A talent has a design. The walls are its totality, not its limitation. Within them are color and decor, shades or Venetian blinds, tissue-like curtains filtering light. And these houses are filled with other voices, soft compelling ones, abrupt rhetorical ones, often angry voices seeking more than an ear.

The visiting of such a house can impel the guest to go about building his own or, at the very least, cultivating an interest in esoteric architecture. I have always seen my own heart as a door. But it has no knob on the outside. It can be opened only from the inside. If you have been following this rather oblique line of reasoning, you'll know we have arrived at the second phase of the search.

What would make a Lester Young open his door and let us in?

Ten years or so ago, a prominent tenor saxophonist with a reputation of giant proportions needed a rhythm section for a gig. Another pianist asked whether I'd do the job. I didn't know the saxophonist personally, so I went to hear him with the players he was using at the moment. I came away confirmed in my mind that the man had no intention of pleasing *any* audience. The evening was a study in anti-social behavior, back-turning included. I am not talking about an off night. We all have those. All this man's nights were "off" nights.

I pondered the reason for his display, knowing I was going to take a pass on the gig, truly wondering why a mature person would be doing something that so obviously pained him. When I remembered Pascal's warning that the brain is a *cul de sac*, I realized that the man was probably trying to open his heart and not succeeding, and I felt sympathy. His heart was locked, from fear of critical judgments. I was made to evaluate the enormous weight of character and balance required for the successfully-lived life. Most important of all in his case was the absence of courage. Pure courage. The kind only lovers know of. The kind of giving that opens one's whole person to scrutiny and judgment. And criticism.

Lester had no such problem. He was never touched by such a fear. The point is rather simple. Prez exhibited the bravery of the human spirit.

The remarkable aspect of his offering informational aids to my

Jazzletter is published twelve times a year at Ojai, California, 93023, and distributed by first class mail to the United States and Canada, air mail to other countries. Subscriptions are $30 per year in U.S. currency for the United States and Canada, $35 for other countries.

young self was the way he made me absorb them by osmosis. He seemed to be engaging himself in conversation and allowing me to sift through the points made by both sides. He didn't sell me. "It's all in the *way* you look at it, Socks," he'd say, reminding me how powerful were the fictions of life, and how the *way* in which you viewed them altered them for good or ill.

I don't want you to get the idea that Prez was a fountain, gushing forth knowledge. If you had asked Prez a ridiculous question like, "Do you hate Polacks?" he'd have answered, "I don't know them all." He had an ability to see through many fictions ("Walter Cronkite and the seven o'clock white folks' news," he called it). And often his own questions ended as answers! He didn't presume to possess intelligence, either. That alone was refreshing, considering that he was forty-five and could have cried out his empiric gatherings. But he didn't even trust himself. He was in every way an outsider, vigilant and artfully suspicious.

That fall of 1955 saw a dream boxing match that made partisans of everyone on the tour. Archie Moore was challenging Rocky Marciano for the championship of the world. Archie was the overwhelming favorite among the musicians. I call him Archie, familiarly, because on several occasion he sat in on bass with my trio. He was no player, of course, but he did thump his way through some blues.

Buddy Rich and Birks, as Dizzy Gillespie was called by friends, led the voices for Moore. All the musicians wanted to lay bets, but they all wanted Moore. Only Prez was for the Rock. So dutifully, he bet "thirteen of my motherfuckin' dollars" with every musician who was hollering for Moore. Lester never did explain to me why he always bet no more and no less than thirteen dollars on anything.

"I have eyes."

Lester originated this expression. It derives from the song I Only Have Eyes for You, which he recorded with Billie Holiday. To express disinclination, he would foreshorten the negative to "No eyes." "I have eyes" became part of the deliberately abstruse argot of jazz, but ultimately has been absorbed into conventional American speech.

When they had firmed the bets, saying, "You're on, Prez," Lester whispered to me, "Who they think bein' sent in there with Moore? Little Lester?" (He referred to his own son.) "The Rock knocked Joe Louis' ass *through the ropes!*" he chuckled, hearing Buddy and Birks proclaiming Moore's virtues and Marciano's failings. Being a fight fan myself, and having boxed in the amateur, I saw it as a toss-up with a slight edge to Marciano. The Rock had a cast-iron jaw that had been tested and a resilient nature that he had proved against Jersey Joe Walcott. Marciano's fight with Ezzard Charles saw him hit about as hard as a man could be, and still he came away a winner. And he took just a bit better than he could give.

The fight is history. Marciano put the challenger away, but not before Moore provided some first-class moments of his own. He came close to dropping Marciano, but you don't get paid for *close*. Marciano topped off the falling Moore with a hammer blow to the top of the head that would drive someone of my weight through the canvas.

And Prez gloated.

"Give me my motherfuckin' money," he taunted, at the last referee's count, digging into his colleagues' sensibilities in an unkind way, which surprised me. Later he said to me, "*You* should have bet a lot o' money, Socks. They got off too easy." It dawned on me that in laying it into him for his prediction of the outcome, they had offended him. And it seemed that it didn't matter to some of them that they had, as if Prez were not a part of the family, if that's what it was.

Even the respect shown him was often perfunctory, and too many musicians seemed merely to suffer him. (Illinois Jacquet was an outstanding exception.) I was suffered too, reminded by the musicians in an exquisitely subtle way that at my age I was not entitled to an opinion. I've often thought I came by Lester's friendship as a result. We were both suffered.

In his early years, Prez told me, he'd had trouble at jam sessions. His playing had put more people off than it turned on. He said it was his aversion to gymnastics and the "big" sound. Though he thoroughly enjoyed some of his colleagues — Bean, Byas, and Ben Webster to be sure — he wasn't influenced by them. He mentioned, rather, solos by the Louis Armstrong of the 1920s more than he did his fellow tenor players. Prez didn't arpeggiate in the style of his age. His was a more horizontal linear expression, more in keeping with the approach of a trumpeter, trombonist, or adventurist singer. That distinction is the key to his heavy influence on later players.

It doesn't take a speculative genius to surmise that Getz, Pepper and Desmond did not like the natural sound of the saxophone. Possibly the enigma of the bastard quality of the instrument — half reed, half brass — nettled them to soften and neutralize it. Prez did the laboratory work for all the successive players, and pointed the *way*. Nor do I mean to minimize their accomplishments.

Prez was less harmonic than Coleman Hawkins. His preoccupation with the pentatonic scale sang more of his Mississippi folk roots than it did of his later big-city life. It evoked a country preacher more than a street-wise tart. Zoot often makes me feel Prez is in the room, when he's playing a piece that allows for that brand of proselytzing. Peculiar it is, too, for it makes less use of the blues than it does rural folk elements. That Zoot plays in that manner, coming as he does from a suburb of Los Angeles, can only mean to me that he didn't merely stay in the foyer of the house Prez shaped in his heart. Prez has become a *Tao*, a way, a path. Few artists in the Twentieth Century have had so many surrogate vicars.

O.K., you may say, you've got a point, but I think you're making a mountain out of a molehill. The man played "simple," easily digestible, solos. His facility wasn't in a class with the other giants I can name.

I give that argument its due. There's much sense in it, and a modicum of truth.

But once I asked Prez why he didn't play certain licks, which everyone I knew did, knocking out a few of them on the piano for him. His face took on a great incredulity, and he fired back, "That's the way Bird played!" He paused, and then he said, "He plays those licks, I play my licks, you play your licks." I nearly fell off the piano bench from the weight of his truth. I had been raised in the high noon of bebop, and wherever I went in those days, I was judged by how well I had adapted myself to the Holy Writ of Bird, Bud, Monk, and Birks.

I am always amazed at how well Prez *wears*. His expression is not one of *immediate* importance, like Charlie Parker's was, nor so energetic in the rhythmical sense. (Bird suffered terribly from rhythm sections that were a decade behind him in understanding.) Bird was subjective and biting, Prez more sedate and objective. Bird's playing was locked into the range and the character of the

---

I feel a draft.

— Lester Young

---

alto. That is why the bit of tenor-playing he did on record is nondescript. In contrast, I am forced to remember how interesting Lester's clarinet playing was. Lester could move into a new setting — export himself, as it were. Was it because his playing was so organic? Was his conception more melodic, of its very nature?

I remember walking into a nightclub where he was performing with a local rhythm section. "Oh Socks, baby, I'm glad to see you here! This boy playin' piano plays *very well*. But he puts eight changes where there oughta be two! You know me, Socks. Somethin' like *These Foolish Things*, I mean, I like the E-flat chord, the C-minor, the F-minor seventh, the B-flat nine. You know. Shit. I can't play when there are eighty-nine motherfuckin' changes in the bar!"

I spoke with the pianist, who wasn't as yet aware what Prez liked to hear behind him. Whether he followed my suggestions or not, I never learned, because for Prez every job ended sooner than later. I mentioned the incident to him at Birdland one night a month or so later, and he was puzzled: it was ancient history by then and he couldn't raise up a memory. All he remembered of my visit in fact was my outrageous show-business silk suit, required by the straight-up singing act I was doing at the time. A stranger he remained, alienated from the moving parts of watches and never noting the differing structures of cities nor the many faces he would pass.

For those who became his intimates — alas, a surprising few — he took on a Lewis Carroll dimension. At times, his innocence was baffling. Lester could say, "I don't believe it!" and *mean* it. Most of what we see in life is so destructive, so bizarre, that most of us experience a confusion not unlike Prez did. I still have not

---

To Sonny Stitt, who had played fast and fluent bebop lines on a band bus when Lester was trying to sleep: "That's very nice, Lady Stitt. Now sing me a song."

---

adjusted to the notion that there are best-selling diet books, going at fifteen or twenty dollars a pop, in a world in which ten thousand human beings are starving to death *each week* in the Horn of Africa. It was only when I realized how hard it was for Prez to commit himself to understanding the unrepentant world out there that I connected a hidden portion of him with the rest of his behavior.

You could call him superstitious, though not to the degree that it froze him. Willie Smith, he once told me, was a "number" person. Prez said that if Willie came up with the wrong numerical position on boarding a plane, he was apt to get off it. Lester felt a huge surge of anxiety if a very ill person — or worse, one in a wheelchair — got onto our flight.

"God damn it, Socks," he'd groan, "it's a Johnny Deathbed!" His eyes would remain fixed on the plane's entrance — until he saw a child, or an infant, board. If it was an infant, he eased immediately, noticeably. Though he never talked about religion, Prez let me know that the Deity was to be taken for granted. He obviously believed in the fair mercy of God, for the presence of the infant on our flight ruled out any chance that God would take out the entire flight to collect the Johnny Deathbed. The implications that vibrated outward from this view amused, and stimulated, me greatly. It was Lester's conviction that people about to take the Big Journey ought to be in their "cribs" waiting, not out here where innocents might have to share their fate. He felt we shared responsibility with the Deity, and had to "get our shit together."

I always felt that I must have said something or done something that *signaled* Prez. He was a believer in such things, always open to the unspoken, the unexpected, even to the unwelcome sign. It is told that he had two weeks left of a gig in Europe in 1959 when he upped and flew back home to his almost immediate death. A sign no doubt, danced before his eyes in Paris.

There was a brilliance to Lester's other-worldliness that made me weigh what is called *educated*. Lincoln defined learning as telling ourselves what we knew all along to be the truth, but were afraid to tell ourselves. Prez *sensed* everything. He was somehow aware that the gray matter in the cranium is a first-class deceiver. and relied on intuition. Once, when we were looking for a restaurant in a city new to both of us, he said too comfortably, "One more block, Socks, and we'll eat." He was right! I've since credited a good deal of his obliqueness to a preoccupation with inner voices he let lead him. Often people thought they had run up against an alcoholic mist too thick to penetrate. But that was rarely the case. He just wasn't listening, for there were moments when his lucidity was remarkable, though his intake of grass and booze had been his usual.

His day-to-day existence was like a pendulum. Besides, he was a night person. The day for him was a many-houred awakening of a long-toothed spirit. He *entered* the evening. Even the quantity of his words increased as the light of day waned. It was as if he'd climbed a ridge of small hillocks, then settled into a golden period. a span of bewitched time. In a very real sense, his day was ushered in by the pushing of air columns through instruments, the heartbeat of a walking bass, the glistening punctuations of a ride cymbal. His stick-like body, so worn by his utter disregard for its health, straightened to its limit only during those hours of music. And the music turned on his capacity for cameraderie and humor.

For a reason I have never been able to isolate, he shouldered the burden of being resident jester on that 1955 tour. And he was good at it. His brand of story-telling was unique. It was littered with so many "motherfuckers" that it was shushed down, and out, when we found ourselves in the company of the general public. But when we traveled in quarantine, he was allowed to stretch out, and never since then have my sides ached so much.

He would have mock fights with Roy Eldridge and othe "shorter" fellows who would grab his arms as if to do him up "Midget motherfuckers!" he would cry in pretended desperation "Lawyer Brown, Lady Pete!" he would call to Ray Brown an Oscar Peterson. "Socks! You gotta help me with these midge motherfuckers!" Only Prez could carry it off. For minute afterwards, he'd mumble to himself, still in his fiction an dramatic mockery, "Those... *midget*... *motherfuckers*!" And h would say, "Socks, I could take 'em — one at a time! But th midget motherfuckers gang up on me! They gang up on ol' Prez!

Nobody ever made so much fun so consistently, so hard, s freely. Sometimes, when he was on a roll, it went on for days. No jokes or one-liners, although he had a few of those. No, it wa always situational and personal. As I'm writing this, I can *hea* him again, hear the fake dramatic pauses, the ham acting, th truncated exclamations he was known for and, most of all, th disarming sweetness. The bastard!

It takes a considerable amount of confidence to laugh at one' self. "Dr. Willis Wiggins," as he referred to himself, had it. H knew all about what Rodney Dangerfield has turned into science. Prez tripped that thin line between self-deprecation an wholesome abandon. To my eye, unseasoned at the time, ther was a truth I couldn't see.

He had the courage that makes for *self*. The quality of braver that never asks dumb questions or looks for conspiracy in hones words. The great danger of *becoming* your musical expressio was one to which Lester never succumbed. It set him apart fro other musicians, made less by their inability to be something othe than their music. No one who knew him would call him a "regula guy". Not ever. But he *could* be, if he so chose. That in itse broadens his humanity.

Most players of note get used to applause, as they do to the growth of their vanity. Prez acted upon Solomon's assessment that *all* is vanity. He never promoted himself to me, or anyone, in any way. It was odd. Most of the musicians I've spent time with always touch that base, either quietly or with trumpeting.

I got behind the wheel of my car yesterday, and the radio was on with ignition, automatically. The exquisite lyrical tones of Paul Desmond jumped out at me, and my first thought, if sweet Paul will forgive me, was, Dr. Willis lives!

A lot of things seem to have changed since 1955. Even memories are refurbished. I find myself re-evaluating friends and family, thinking of collisions of Will and Personality, the packets of wrong words we have all let slip at one time or another.

But Prez never changes.

He alone makes me look to my "gate receipts", as he called all bottom lines, and check out the bases of all social comings-together I deemed important over the years.

That he is gone, and has stopped, frozen in time, has only strengthened the outline of his self in my memory. A handful of people I've known have a near degree of his definition. But no more than a handful.

He never spoke of his lineal roots, but there was no mistaking his being a product of woodpile philanderings. His skin was off-white, a light coffee alabaster, and his hair an obvious auburn that was darkened by a conk. When it was in need of a conk, Roy Eldridge would whisper to me, "Call him a big red motherfucker, Socks. He'll jump up and down."

His clothes draped his frame. I took it that he'd lost weight and simply wouldn't waste money playing at being a fashion plate. There was something rumpled, but not dishevelled, about his appearance. His walk, which was more a shuffle than an honest

---

Now, Lady Bellson, don't drop no bombs on me. Just give me that tiddy-boom tiddy-boom all night and I'm cool.

— Lester Young

---

walk, had something Asiatic about it, a reticence to barge in. He sidled. It was in keeping with the side-door quality of his nature. He was punctual. He started early and left later than most of us, maintaining his cool and living rhythm, but his pace was that of a sleepwalker. I think that Prez thought there was nothing worth hustling for.

The two of us, like old Pick and young Pat, shilly-shallied most of the time, rapping. He liked to draw on the romantic liaisons that littered his youth, hoping I'd learn something from the retelling. While he was living with one aggressive and hostile lady, he said, he took to putting his horn, in its case, into a garbage can outside her house before he entered, never knowing how she'd react to his absences, catting. So he took no chances with the "Green Horn-et," as he called the case.

One night, though, he'd had enough of her "beatin' up my ass." So he decided to do a little number himself. "You oughta've seen the bitch... drop t' her knees, Socks. Bitch hollerin', 'Don' make a fist, Prez, please don' make a fist!' Shit, I tol' the bitch, 'You been using your goddamn nails on ol' Prez for a year now!'" He'd pause, the light that made the bloodshot eyes seem so alive going down, and he'd look me square in the face. "You *got-ta* be a man 'bout some things, Socks."

There was, of course, a lot of comic bravado in his kiss-and-tell stories. But I took away from them an idea of what I might expect if I continued being a gyspy with a song that had to come out.

He was too gentle to have kicked ass. I couldn't imagine him doing it. I might get into a fight, but not Prez. Yet he harped on taking a stand. The late Jack Dempsey said to me, "Don't ever let people use the name you had to fight for, kid. Never." He said it in a restaurant called Jack Dempsey's, which he did not own. And he echoed Prez.

Lester was inclined to remind me that music was a universe, and that I ought not to sit only in a corner of it. His own attitude was one of discovery. I once asked him what would most knock him out, and he answered, "My own big band, with Jo Stafford and Frankie-boy as my singers." The few feet between us became a revelation ground as he touched on things no interviewer ever asked him about. His tastes were catholic, and when he liked something, you couldn't run it down to him.

He forced me to think of *music*, not just jazz, and I thank him for it. In fact I had to watch out for his underselling, or I might have come to the conclusion that jazz was no more than an aberration. It's not that he downgraded it. He just took the edge off my idolatry. I thought of jazz as my life's breath; he thought of it as second nature.

It wouldn't have surprised him that a man like Leonard Bernstein would have liked to play jazz. Lester would have encouraged him, regardless of the fact that Bernstein wasn't a first-class jazz talent. For Prez, it was unthinkable that the joy he had known would not be of interest to a fellow countryman with musical abilility. I suspect that Lester believed no one owned music. Not even a part of it. I welcomed that openness. Few players have earned a niche like his, but there he was, sundering the very notion of the proprietorial.

"You can't own... what ain't, Socks."

How could someone "own" what those still unborn might say on a horn twenty years hence? Once I mentioned a talented bass player of real stature who was a rabid racist. A despairing look came into that quiet-eyed face as I told him a story of a man's unkindness, saying that none of us is responsible for the tone of his skin. Prez then told me a story about a man who thought he had lost something valuable, only to remember in his panic that he'd left it at home. "Ain't no truth there, Socks. That's the only good thing about mirrors. They make you look at yourself."

And then he said that a fool makes the other man pay for his inadequacies. And because he doesn't take the loss himself, "he loses the chance to find out who the fuck he is." Prez said that such people hungered for something they had never given themselves. Trouble was, he sighed, "nobody else *can* give it to them."

He was dying then.

I knew he was. I dreamed, and I rationalized. But there were moments when our eyes met and the weariness in his told me. Like an old maid, I counseled him to take better care of his health. It occurs to me now how I bored the shit out of him by doing that.

Prez had come to me, to life, from out of nowhere, really, and it seemed he'd always been around, like the wind in October and the weeping clouds of March. Where would he go, in any case? A person such as Prez *is*. But there were signs. A few shallow-sounding laughs. Twice, quite remarkably, he referred to himself in the past tense and didn't seek to rectify the mistake.

The bottle of Scotch he carried in a red plaid bag was always in his lap. It took priority over his horn and clothing. I began to see that his juicing had gone through the worst form of transubstantiation. Booze was medicine now, and I wasn't fooled by his excuses, good as they were. I remember the sadness that came from that lonely face — that of a kid whose candy had fallen into the dirt. He's been dealt a low blow, his greatest pleasure having been turned into an anesthetic imperative.

Two "sanctified" old ladies lived behind Prez on Long Island, their yards abutting his. They had never conversed with him, indeed did not know him or anyone else who didn't belong to their

photo by Ted Williams

church congregation. As Lester dressed rather zoot-suity, drank, and played jazz, they had reached their own opinion of him.

One summer afternoon, while the ladies were back-porching and gossiping, Mr. Young and his son, Little Lester, sauntered into the yard and commenced to toss a ball around. The ladies couldn't but start revising their opinion of their neighbor. "Isn't that nice?" they chirped, watching father and son.

They were still watching when Prez decided he'd had enough ball-tossing. He and Little Lester walked to the back door. Prez tried the knob. He turned his face down toward Little Lester and said, "*There*, you dumb motherfucker, you done locked us both out the house!"

The ladies never recovered.

Prez used profanity — and *all* language — creatively. And he had oddest gentle way of saying *motherfucker*.

In a Texas airport he came under the scrutiny of some Texas Rangers. They looked at him as if he were a Martian, in his crepe-soled boots and pork-pie hat with the wide brim, forgetting of course their own western headgear. Prez elbowed me and whispered, "Go tell them I'm a cowboy, Socks."

In the winter of 1956, I made a vocal recording that became number one on the Hit Parade. The "success" it brought ruined the quality of my life and sent me off doing an "act" in nightclubs which, thank God, I never did carry off well enough to be marketed like a bar of soap.

During that time, I ran into Lester. After the greetings and questions about immediate family, he said, pointedly, "They say your hat don't fit no more, Socks." I was taken aback. I told him, "That ain't the story, mornin' glory."

He smiled and said, "Letter A, then, Socks," meaning of course, Back to the top.

There were entire conversations like that. Countless people said to me, after hearing us talk for a few minutes, "What the hell was he talking about, Bobby?" In the 1980s, his behavior would be regarded as mild. So too Lenny Bruce's. But being inaccessible didn't help Prez.

Lester was very aware of how people broke hearts with their tongues. A man misjudged as often as Prez was, and offended so easily, would know about that. Accordingly, his own observations were couched in "unknown" terms, that he might not give offense. I saw it as very responsible behavior. In any case, Prez wasn't a presumptuous man and considered his judgments no more important than anyone else's. He was sensitive but not touchy. He took the ribbings of his colleagues well. For instance, every few nights, with much aplomb and mock assurance, Oscar Peterson would lay in those "extra" chord changes during Lester's solo in the Ballad Medley. During a concert in the Montreal Forum, Prez sidled back to the nine-foot grand piano, unaware that just below him and inside the instrument was an open microphone. Turning to Oscar his puzzled pleading face, he said, "Where are you motherfuckers at?"

The audience's laughter sounded like Niagara Falls.

Norman Granz told Lester to stay after the concert. I found him sitting cross-legged, his face as forlorn as the head of a cracked porcelain doll.

"What are you waiting for, Prez?" said his worshipping eighteen-year-old friend.

His eyebrows raised, in acknowledgment of his *faux pas*. "Lady Norman's gonna give me a reading." He winked. "I bought it, Socks," he said, as I walked slowly off the stage, looking back and thinking how much he seemed like a kid kept after school.

He never said he thought Norman was wrong about the incident, and he credited Granz with bailing him out of many predicaments.

He had names for everyone, or almost everyone. For some reason, he never invented one for Herb Ellis, who, like Lester himself, is a very gentle man. But Lester hung "Sweets" on Harry Edison, and now everyone knows him by that name. And he gave the title Lady to men — Lady Pete, Lady Norman, Lady Stitt, Lady Krupa. And he gave me my name. Because I was the

youngest member of the troup, Bobby Scott became Bobby Socks, and then just Socks.

As a vehicle for his high humor, he conjured up a conspiracy against the two of us. Often, if we boarded a flight at the last minute, the seats we got were served dinner last. Too often we were just digging into our food when the plane began its desent. Lester trotted out his paranoia, blaming everyone from the Midget Motherfuckers to the White House. I couldn't eat for laughing. He'd squinch up his face in a deviltry that could bring me near to wetting myself, and mumble, "You see this shit, Socks? You see *this*?" He would shake his head, glancing furtively toward the back of the plane where "the enemy" sat. His voice, still softly clandestine, would push out, "They're tryin' to *get* us, Socks." And I of course had to go along with him or let the splendid humor of it die.

The quiet that surrounded and covered Lester was of a contemplative nature and origin. If he allowed me to "divert" him, he did it out of an interest in, and a love for, me. He didn't need diversion. Small things could and would draw his interest and attention.

Whatever he was in his totality, and no one is privy to such knowledge of another, the one observation I could make about him was that the peace that emanated from him was a glowing proof of a *balanced* personality.

Happiness depends, it has always seemed to me, on the health of one's moral condition. Lester was a happy person, no more besieged than the rest of us. But he had the conviction that gives a fighter staying power. He never gave up what was consistent with his values. He skirmished frequently, as sensitive people do, with becoming a number instead of a name, a figure rather than a living person, a reputation instead of a producer of beautiful music.

He knew what made him happy and what he would have to tolerate, and his baleful puss told you how hard it was sometimes to keep apart the rights and the wrongs in the affray.

At the time, I found his complaints nothing but griping. Now that I am a man and have, as the Indians say, walked a mile in his moccasins, I have become an echo of those gripes. He experienced doubts of tremendous size, and often converted them before my eyes into something else.

When I arrived at the airport apron one morning, I made my way through the small group of passengers and found Prez with a perplexed and doom-filled face, eyeing our aircraft. It was a DC-3, slightly worn-looking but otherwise apparently fit.

"Socks baby, it's a *two-lunger*!" Prez felt much safer in a four-engine craft. "We gotta have a *four*-lunger, Socks! Shit! You lose one, you still got *three*! One of *these* motherfuckers goes, an' we only got *one* lung left!"

Moments later, having accepted the inevitable, he was sitting next to me, back in his groove, snapping his fingers at the engines outside the window, and hollering (to the chagrin and embarrassment of the tour members): "Get it! Get...*it*! God...damn...IT!"

He talked to the engines, shouting his encouragement as we barrelled down the runway. He was still hollering, to the shushing sounds of Ella Fitzgerald and Norman Granz, when the creaking weight of metal lifted up out of the uncloroxed clouds into the sunshine.

He smiled then. He had fortified himself with Dewars. He whispered, "It's only gettin' here that bothers me, Socks." I told him I had no inclination to be a bird, either. And yet he trusted the pilots implicity. "They got their shit together," he said.

I have never enjoyed travelling as much since then.

Nor have I ever met anyone who wore aloneness as forthrightly as Prez.

St. Augustine offers us this: God created man that man might seek God. The implication is that even God cannot escape loneliness. Nietzsche quips, not untruthfully, that crying is the same as laughing, except that it is at the other end of the same rainbow, differing only in intensity, not character. Why is loneliness the major tone quality of large cities, where millions congregate? Is Augustine right? Or is what we call "loneliness" an outgrowth of personal dislocation, inasmuch as we are among the multitude? Are we, as the Bishop of Hippo implies, made in the image of our Maker, and marked by the loneliness of His own dispersal?

One can safely say that the groundbreakers in the arts are nearly always testaments, monuments, to loneliness. What the artist seeks to offer to others he must hone by himself. Does he then give us his solitariness? Are not the solitary and the lone one and the same? And why is it most likely the source of all the world's joys?

She's still my Lady Day.

— Lester Young

I trust Augustine, and believe that loneliness is the glue and ether of existence. Further, how one handles it marks one's life as successfully lived or as a failure. The friendship I developed with Prez was marked by the reeking exquisiteness of his loneliness. What confounded me, and still does, was what made him confident enough to lower the weir that damned his precious solitariness and allowed me to join with it, in concert.

When music is not pedantry, as in Buxtehude, or gymnastics, as in Varese, or structure, as in the canons of Bach, it is the transfiguration of the loneliness its creator has come to acknowledge and live with. Lester's sound was profoundly beseeching. It sought out the tired residue of the greatest war a human being wages, the one with and inside himself. Prez echoed his own despair, raising it miraculously until it took on a new aspect. What better way to serve one's brothers in loneliness? To be able to express one's own deepest feelings of limitation and incertitude, breaking the fetters and raising up the specter in others so clearly that they begin to see the silhouette of their own solitariness, is a reward unto itself.

For me, the best moment of each evening was Lester's solo in the Ballad Medley. That year he played *I Didn't Know What Time It Was*. I never became bored with it. I realized that it was his sound production and phrasing that seduced me. And there was, to my ears, a reverent quality that he instilled in the notes. Though he couldn't help but sound labored and worn, it was the voice of a sage, and there was no shooting from the hip in it. He had to work harder than the other players. They were healthier. He was deceptive, though. I swore I heard hectic winds when he looked me squarely in the eyes. On those few occasions I did indeed see defeat there. But I could do nothing that would alter the situation. At eighteen, I wouldn't take it upon myself to inform the powers that be that he might be unable to perform. But on he'd trudge, miraculously, his crepe-soled shoes scraping...

He plays the melody so well that it is a bit of a shock to me. Me, who learned three-quarters of the tunes I know purely harmonically. Prez won't play a tune if he doesn't know the lyric — the entire lyric. Knowing the lyric, he makes the shape of his offering more organic, his phrasing elegant. Ultimately Lester shows me *who* and *what* I am; he makes it come to life in his playing. In among the notes I find my recognizable shape and identity.

The tired figure of a man who befriended a boy walks on and points the bell of his horn upward in a strange supplication.

Then come the tones of wonder.