Gene Lees
# Jazzletter

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## Letters

From the vantage of a small independent jazz label, I wouldn't want you to omit another bitch that musicians and publishers have just cause for. What gives record companies the right to withhold indefinitely unissued material? I am thinking of untold recording sessions that produced too much material for one album, not enough for two. Or, for that matter, sessions that produced enough commercially viable material for more than one album, but someone with the power of yeah and nay made an arbitrary decision to leave all but one album's worth in the can. Perhaps, as is often the case, forever.

As with deleted recordings, unissued material should also revert to its rightful owner after a period during which the recording company can decide whether it will put it out commercially.

Fred Cohen, East Coasting Records, New York NY

*Jazzletter* Vol 3 No 9 (*The Road to Gadgets*) was such a revelation to me. In my work, I sort of plodded along. I never did have a very good mind for business, just the love for putting notes on paper. The pay was just an accident. I'd have been an arranger if I'd had to do something else to support my family. The first time you hear your chart is a priceless experience.

I have read the April 1984 *Jazzletter* twice, yesterday and today. I'm trying to digest and retain some of the information to relate to friends. I wouldn't part with any copy even as a loan to my best friend. Thank you for such enlightening information.

Frank Hunter, Bucks County, Pennsylvania

The *Jazzletter* dated April 1984 is a splendid, courageous and important piece of work, dismaying though its contents are.

Now I hope you will tackle the subject of the jazz and jazz-related grants made by the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities. In my opinion, their misuse of the taxpayers' money, especially at a time of horrendous deficit, is a national scandal. (So, for that matter, is *The Cotton Club*!)

I now see why you oppose a tax on blank cassettes and now agree with you. The Swedish example is perfectly to the point.

Stanley Dance, Vista, California

Enclosed is my renewal and a little extra for someone who can't quite make it all the way. I will pay whatever you think is the proper rate. I get more information and enjoyment from your issues than *Billboard*, a weekly which goes for $150 or so per year. It's not how much one gets but the quality that one gets.

Jules Chaikin, Studio City, California

*For those who don't know him, former trumpeter Jules Chaikin is one of the best contractors in Los Angeles.*

Some years ago I told Leonard Marcus [then editor of *High Fidelity*] that inasmuch as Gene Lees was apparently the only real writer he had access to, he ought to give you the freedom to write anything you wanted to write for the magazine, regardless of subject or length.

So now *High Fidelity* is a wretched mess, Leonard is lost, and that old *High Fidelity* gang of his is not making it with their new journalistic effort *Opus*. And you are writing what you want, how you want, when you want. Thank God there are a few things in this world that get much better instead of far worse.

Your damn right "something important is being accomplished." As to whether I get twenty-four issues this month and then twelve in the next two years, I do not question the eccentricities of geese who lay golden eggs. And since you're willing to send me something that I find beyond price for thirty bucks, I am not about to ask you to knock down the price still further.

Keep layin' 'em golden.

Jack Schneider, Van Nuys, California

It's not fair. You have discovered another great musician who's also a great writer, Bobby Scott. He ought to have the decency to at least be worse than I at *something*, instead of better. The Haymes piece is fine emotional writing *and* fine nuts and bolts stuff. Paragraphs two and three of page three are simply magnificent analysis and you could not cut a word out of it with a scalpel.

George Warren, Pacific Grove, California

*George Warren is a guitarist and writer.*

I do agree that there is something 'great' about Woody, and it is evident too to those who know him. It is not just an aura that dissipates when he leaves the bandstand. It is a frank, confident, brass-balled bigness of character, and love. Men like Woody — and there aren't many of them — have a way of leading without leading. They exemplify my notion of an 'anarchist general', a contradiction in terms. It is a talent for sweet, and friendly, persuasion, carried to the ultimate. (I once heard a player say that Toscanini's silences were more commanding than his words.)

He was right in his answer to Benny. Woody could put a band together, and he did, somehow — near magically — put his own stamp on it. How? I still don't know! Considering the different arrangers, and sidemen, who contributed, it still had in every instance and every different band a homogeneity, a quality of having the same mother and father. A miracle of no mean order.

Well, just a note to tell you how much pleasure and joy your writing gives me. And a huge thank you for letting me contribute to the finest jazz publication there has ever been in its history. I find that honor among the highest I've ever received.

Bobby Scott, Forest Hills, New York

Your letter of March 18 regarding resubscription came just in time, I was composing a nasty letter to you about what I consider your unfair treatment of BMI and performing rights in general in your article regarding the Buffalo Case.

As far as I'm concerned your article brings to mind two adages: first, with friends like you, who needs enemies; second, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing

As for resubscription, I could not justify subscribing to a publication that takes such an antagonistic attitude towards performing rights and BMI in particular.

Very truly yours,
Ron Anton, Vice President,
Broadcast Music Incorporated

# A Day with Herb Ellis

One afternoon a few years ago, I found myself standing behind a red-haired musician in a line of people waiting to check into a hotel at a jazz festival. At the time I knew him about well enough to say hello. I leaned close to him and sang, very softly:

*It was many and many a year ago*
*in a kingdom by the sea*
*that a maiden there lived*
*whom you may know*
*by the name of Annabel Lee.*

The words were the opening stanza of Poe's *Annabel Lee.*

Herb Ellis turned, startled, and looked me in the face. "Where in the world did you learn *that*?" he said.

"In some club in Toronto that you and Lou Carter and John Frigo played when you were The Soft Winds. I can't remember the name of the room. It was probably not long after you guys set that to music."

"You must be the only guy in the world besides us who knows it," Herb said. "I don't even have a lead sheet on it."

"I do. Frigo gave me a copy in Chicago."

"Would you send me one?"

"Sure," I said. And subsequently I did.

The song is a memento of a superb trio that is now almost forgotten, as well as a phase in the career of Herb Ellis that few of his admirers even know about. I knew the song well not simply from casual hearings in a nightclub but from sitting at the piano, analyzing it, impressed by the way Ellis, pianist Lou Carter, and bassist John Frigo had turned a piece of classic metric poetry into song. The ability to lift poetry off paper and into persuasive fluent melody is far rarer than is generally realized. And they had done that to Poe's dark poem.

Nat Cole had established one of two classic trio formations, piano, bass, and guitar; the other being piano, bass, and drums. And a number of trios had been formed on the Cole pattern, including the Page Cavanaugh Trio, whose pianist leader, like Cole, sang. The Soft Winds used the Cole instrumentation, but there the resemblance ended, for the singing too was in trio, and they did adventurous things. They never became a famous recording group but some of their songs linger on, and a comparatively few people who were exposed to them retain an impression, like the image of a lightbulb after you turn it out in the night.

There are five phases to the career of Herb Ellis, whose name would turn up on almost every guitarist's list of his favorite guitarists. After he left his native Texas, there was a period of working with bands about which, until recently, I knew absolutely nothing. Then there is The Soft Winds phase, followed by the period that made him famous in the jazz world, a six-year tenure with the Oscar Peterson Trio. After that Herb worked in the studios of Los Angeles, emerging to play in clubs and at festivals. Then he walked away from the studio work and has in recent years been touring, devoting himself entirely to playing jazz.

A high percentage of the finest jazz guitarists have been from the south and southwest, including Charlie Christian and Barney Kessel, both from Oklahoma, Tal Farlow from Greensboro, North Carolina, Freddie Green from Charleston, South Carolina, Jimmy Raney from Louisville, Kentucky, Mundell Lowe from Laurel, Mississippi, and Wes Montgomery from Indianapolis, Indiana, although northeastern cities have contributed a few too — Kenny Burrell from Detroit, Gene Bertoncini and Chuck Wayne from New York City, Jim Hall from Buffalo and Cleveland, George Benson from Pittsburgh, and Bucky Pizzarelli from Paterson, New Jersey. With his Texas roots, Ellis is solidly in that south-southwestern contingent, and his playing has an incomparable earthiness and swing.

Even Herb's approach to the instrument is somehow uniquely his. He sits low in a chair, right ankle on left knee, the instrument at a slant as it rests on the raised leg. A lot of piano players sing what they are playing. Herb seems to chew every note he plays. As one bites one's tongue in threading a needle, Herb works his jaw in a way that bespeaks a total physical involvement with the music. He seems to make music with his whole body.

The instrument called the guitar in jazz should probably have another name. The true guitar is an unamplified flat-bodied instrument strung in earlier times with gut strings and later, after Segovia made them acceptable even to purists, nylon. It descends from a family of instruments developed primarily in Spain. A guitar with steel strings evolved comparatively early, and it is this instrument that is widely used in the folk music of the United States. The steel-stringed guitar has more volume than one strung with gut or nylon, but not enough to make it competitive to horns in jazz groups. Not until the development of amplification was it possible to play long-lined solos that you could hear over the surrounding din, and it was then that the instrument took its place as an important jazz voice. The credit for pioneering the instrument usually goes to Charlie Christian, although Alvino Rey played an amplified instrument before Christian. But Christian was the first great creative soloist on this instrument, as Alvino, now active as a classical guitarist, is the first to insist.

The character of the "amplified guitar" is as different from that of the historical guitar as that of an electric organ from a piano. Although they have the same tuning, E A D G B E', which forms an E minor seventh chord with an eleventh added, they are different in all other ways. The classical guitar has a strongly contrapuntal character. It is even built differently, the fingerboard being flat with the strings fairly far apart. The amplified "jazz" guitar has a slightly convex fingerboard and strings set closer together. The tones produced on a classical guitar decay rapidly; those produced on an amplified guitar have a long life, which lends to the instrument some of the nature of a wind instrument. Charlie Christian's great contribution was his perception that this was a new instrument, not simply a louder one, and his exploration of its possibilities through the exercise of a wonderful melodic imagination that made him a harbinger of bebop. This much the two instruments do have in common: as the late Hugo

Friedhofer, who loved it, used to put it, "The guitar is an unforgiving instrument." There is no instrument on which it is easier to play a little, and badly, than the guitar — and no instrument on which it is harder to play a lot, and well.

It is common now for guitarists to play both instruments. Herb has remained devoted to the jazz guitar alone, although he has played other plectrum instruments in the studios. He is at the pinnacle, one of the great jazz guitarists and one of the most powerful jazz players on any instrument.

Mitchell Herbert Ellis was born August 4, 1921, four miles south of Farmersville, Texas, then a hamlet of two thousand souls, about forty miles northeast of Dallas. This makes him a Leo, like Oscar Peterson (August 15, 1925), and it also makes him sixty-four years old, which is hard to believe, not only in view of the vigor of his playing but because of the cherubic youthfulness of his appearance. The red hair has faded and thinned a little now, but Herb has an eternal boyishness about him. His coloring is that of his Scottish and Irish forebears. His skin has that clear texture of one who does not smoke or drink.

Herb has been a member of Alcoholics Anonymous for thirty years. "I still go to meetings," he says. "It helps me keep a focus." His lapses have been few although, as he said a few years ago, "When I fall off the wagon, the crash is heard around the world." No doubt this is because Herb seems like a pillar of sanity to those who know him, a man who has conquered a flaw, whether of heredity or habit being irrelevant. One could say of Herb what someone said recently of his late and much-missed friend Shelly Manne: I never saw him in a social or professional situation to which he did not contribute something positive. Herb is a joy to play with, a joy to be with.

His two children, now in their twenties, are gone from home, and he and his wife Patti live in a condominium in Studio City, California, one of the divisions of Los Angeles in the San Fernando Valley. One doesn't encounter him often in California any more, because he is away so much, playing. So I availed myself of an opportunity to see him when he was home for a few days, and spent a pleasant laughing afternoon filling the gaps in my knowledge of him.

"I played the harmonica first, when I was about three," Herb said as we sat in his living room, the conversation accompanied by the slow tick of a big clock. "I have not too much recollection of that, but I can still play it. They thought I had some musical talent, so my sister bought a banjo for me. I learned to play the banjo. I got a little book, learned how to tune it, and I played the banjo. I must have been about six or seven. Then, a little later, a cousin — one of my city cousins — left a guitar at our house. My older brother wanted to play music with me. He tuned this guitar, but he tuned it incorrectly. He tuned it in a way that you could just hit all the strings at one time and it would make a major chord. He'd just bar across, and get all major chords."

"What did he do about the two top strings?"

"Well, it just sounded, parallel triads. I knew this was not right. So I got a book from Sears Roebuck and learned how to tune it and play it, and then I showed *him* how to play it. So then we played together, banjo and guitar. Then I learned to play the guitar, and I played the guitar more, because I liked it a lot better. I just played. I listened to the radio. We had no recordings out there except a couple of things by a singer named Gene Austin."

"I remember him. I remember him well."

"Well he had a guitar player with him who sounded terrific. I can't think of his name. And so I learned to play a little of his stuff. I don't know what I was playing. It wasn't jazz, it wasn't hillbilly. *Some* country tunes. Then I went to high school. I got a little amplifier from Sears Roebuck, and another guitar. And I'd play for the high school assemblies. Then I went to college, to North Texas State University."

"You must have been one of the first musicians to go to North Texas State!"

"Ever," he said.

"There was no jazz program then."

"No. I was there at the same time Jimmy Giuffre was. I'll tell you who else was there — Gene Roland and Harry Babasin. Shortly after I had been there, majoring in music, I played on the Saturday night stage show. They had a stage band, and Jimmy Giuffre was in it, and Harry Babasin. And I played *Back Home Again in Indiana*, and I played it pretty fast. I had a lot of technique. I could play *fast*, play a lot of notes . . ."

"You still can."

"They heard me, and then they came to me, and asked me to move into a house where they lived together. Two-oh-four Normal Street was the address. They said, 'You've got the talent, but your music is *meaningless*.' They told me this. They said, 'You're really headed in the wrong direction.' That hurt my feelings. And then they said, 'Listen to this guy.' And they played Charlie Christian for me. The Benny Goodman Sextet records, after I'd moved in the house with them. They said, 'Now what do you think of that?' And I remember what I said. Very childish. I said, 'Well, he sounds good. But what's the big deal? I can play a lot faster than that.' I said that."

"Oh no. You know, I once made the mistake of saying something like that to Red Norvo about Bix."

"Oh boy."

"Red is too much a gentleman to get nasty, but he quietly let me know. I said something like, he didn't play very many notes. I was about twenty at the time. And Red said, 'He didn't have to.'"

"When we're young we often have our priorities in the wrong places. Well, they said, 'You haven't got the message yet. Listen some more.' So I listened some more to Charlie Christian. I don't know whether it was the same day or the next day, but it wasn't a long time, and it really hit me, like a spiritual awakening, what he was doing that I didn't do. How much depth he had. How great it sounded. And how scummy and shallow I sounded. His playing sounded deep and mine sounded shallow. I was very upset, very distraught. So I put the guitar underneath the bed, and said, 'That's it. I've just got too far to go.' It stayed there about one day. Then I got it out. Now I went from all notes to no notes. Each note had to drip with emotion and be sent from heaven. I went from one extreme ridiculously the other way. So that's how I got some of the direction. The other direction I got, which has been with me ever since, came from Count Basie. I loved Count Basie, and Lester Young was very appealing to me. They had a big influence. We had some records of Jimmie Lunceford. They were very meaningful to me. That was a great band. And Earl Hines had a great band. And I heard Dizzy Gillespie with Cab Calloway before he was playing bebop. I had some Coleman


## Notice

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Hawkins. But the main influences were Charlie Christian and Lester Young. Then, later, when I heard Charlie Parker and Dizzy together, that was a big influence. So those are my influences, and that's the way I've always played. I've never tried to change it. I've just tried to get better. As you get older, you get deeper, more mature. I'm sort of suspicious of people who change styles."

"Because the music obviously is not a manifestation of their own personality."

"It's not a big commitment."

"A guitarist friend of mine says that Django Reinhardt is more honored in conversation than in actual influence."

"I believe that's true. However, during all that time, I did hear Django and I liked him, but not as well as I liked Charlie Christian."

"Christian electrified me when I was a kid. And there was a guitarist in the Billy Mills Orchestra on the *Fibber McGee and Molly* program."

"Oh sure, I remember that. He played a little break in the theme. I tell you who it was. Bodkin. Perry Bodkin."

"I heard a young guy a year or so ago who played like Eddie Lang."

"Eddie Lang was tremendous. But I never heard him until later. I'll tell you who else I listened to, and who was another influence on me. George Barnes. I used to hear him on the radio from Chicago. A program called *The Plantation Party*. He had a spot on that show, and I used to hear him every week. I was very impressed with George Barnes."

"Where did you go from North Texas State? Did you graduate?"

"No. I went a couple of years, and the money was very short. So I went on the road with a big jazz band from the University of Kansas, led by Charlie Fisk. That band lasted a few months, and then we had to give it up. Charlie Fisk, he was a trumpet player, and I both had offers to go with Russ Morgan."

"That ain't exactly your groove."

"It wasn't my groove, but the reason I was hired was to play in a quartet context — plus playing with the band — with Joe Mooney, the accordionist."

"Oh, dear dear Joe. I never knew Joe was with Russ Morgan."

"Yeah, he was there. So we played some little jobs together, Joe and myself and a clarinet player and a bass player who is now a priest. Russ Morgan just petrified me. He ruled with an iron hand. If you made a mistake, he just zeroed in on you, he just scared me to death. So we were playing a theater somewhere, and I got sick, so they had to go on to the next theater and I said I'll meet you there. I never met 'em, I just split. I went to Kansas City and stayed about a year. That was about 1941. I just got the tail end of Charlie Parker. That was right before he joined Dizzy. A friend of mine, a saxophone player I'd met earlier on the Charlie Fisk band, was in Kansas City, and he was always telling me about Charlie Parker. He called him Bird, and he was trying to explain how he played. So when I went to Kansas City, he said, 'I want you to hear this guy.' He was playing out at Tootie's Mayfair, or some little place. And he said, 'Get your guitar and I'll get my sax, and we'll go out, and we'll play, we'll sit in. They know me.' This tenor saxophonist had perfect pitch, and ears, a sensational musician. So we went out to this little dark club, and we got on the stand, and Charlie Parker was sitting 'way in the back. And the first tune that they played was *Cherokee*. And they played it fast. I'd never heard *Cherokee*. The rhythm section was just playing for two or three choruses. When they got to the bridge, it was very foreign to me, I didn't know what was happening. At that time, that type of tune was not played. So the saxophone player called out the changes. And now Charlie Parker started playing. I'd never heard anything like this. I hadn't heard Dizzy then, except with Cab Calloway's band. I heard this and it sounded beautiful, but I had *no idea* what this guy was doing. So he played several choruses, and when he got through, they looked at me and said, 'You got it.' Well young and dumb don't have to go together. So I said, 'No thanks.' I mean, what am I going to do after that? So the rhythm section played three or four more choruses, Charlie Parker came back in and played another fifteen choruses. And then later on, we played something I knew at a reasonable tempo. Then I played. But what a shock that was. One of the biggest musical shocks of my whole life. It was a unique situation. I just love the memory of it. I don't know whether I dug him instantly. I knew it was different, and it sounded good, I suspected how good it was, but I was still championing Lester Young. Which you always should. Guys would say, 'Bird is the new thing,' and I'd say, 'No, man, Lester Young is *it* forever.' But it did have a great impact, and later on I learned not only to like it but to love it."

"What happened after Kansas City?"

"Oooh . . . From Kansas City? Oh yeah, Glenn Gray. Glenn Gray and the Casa Loma came through. I went with them and stayed a couple of years, and then I went with Jimmy Dorsey. From '45 to '47, when I went with The Soft Winds, then from '47 almost until I went with Oscar I was with The Soft Winds."

"How did that group come about?"

"We were all with Jimmy Dorsey."

"Lou Carter and John Frigo were also with Jimmy Dorsey?"

"Yes."

"Then you were three quarters of the rhythm section."

"And we left. Together. And Jimmy was very unhappy. We went to Buffalo and played at the Peter Stuyvesant, then we went to Canada a couple of times and played at the . . ."

"At the Zebra Lounge! That's what it was called! It was right across from the *Globe and Mail*. That's when I first knew you guys."

"The Zebra Lounge! That's *right*. Ray Brown heard me there."

"That was a wonderful group. How did you get the idea for that group?"

"We'd been playing together, and we'd get together when we could, and John Frigo, the bass player, got this job at the Peter Stuyvesant Hotel in Buffalo for a trio. We really liked playing together, and we had some great arrangements, if you remember. Magnificent arrangements, not just little heads, not just little-bitty first and last choruses."

"It was an orchestrated trio. Both instrumentally and vocally. Very hip."

"Orchestrated. That's exactly what it was. And Oscar heard me with that group."

"That group really was ahead of its time. Harmonically, my memory tells me it was kind of like what Gene Puerling was doing later with the Hi-Lo's."

"Sort of. That's very close. Well I stayed with them, and John left, and the group was dissipating. It lasted about five years."

"You guys wrote some marvelous things. *Detour Ahead* and that wonderful thing on *Annabel Lee*."

"*I Told You I Love You, Now Get Out*. That was ours. Woody recorded that. We had another one called *Ninety-nine Guys*."

"'. . . have eyes for Liza, but Liza has eyes for me.' Do you still get any ASCAP on it?"

"Yeah, I just got a hundred and twenty-one dollars day before yesterday. People still record it."

"You went with Oscar, and Lou did some albums on his own."

"He made some albums as Lou the Tax Driver, with all his funny songs."

"Marvelous wacky titles. *If I Had a Nose Full of Nickels, I'd sneeze them all atchoo.*"

"Funny and well written, the rhyme and everything. It was great. He was on the Perry Como show several times, and did very well. He moved to Newark and started a jingles business."

"And Frigo went to Chicago and worked with Dick Marx, and Dick went into the jingles business too."

"And John did a lot of jingles too."

"Do you ever see Lou?"

"I saw Lou when I played Gulliver's over in New Jersey. And I always see John when I play Chicago."

"So what happened after The Soft Winds?"

"Well I was going to go home to Texas. Oscar called me and said that Barney was leaving and going back to Los Angeles."

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**Rock journalism is people who can't write interviewing people who can't talk for people who can't read.**

**— Frank Zappa, 1978**

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"Barney Kessel was only with Oscar a short time, wasn't he?"

"Just about a year. Oscar remembered me from The Soft Winds. He came over to Buffalo to hear us and played with us. And he remembered that, because he's got perfect memory."

"It's creepy. He's rattled me with it a few times."

"He's done it to me too. He's got total recall. It's eerie. So he asked me to go with them. So I went down to New York, to hear them play. It was awesome. They didn't have nearly as many arrangements as they did when I had been with them a while. But they had a lot of them and I could hear how hard it was going to be. But I just said, well, I'm gonna give it a try. So I went with them and I was there until 1958, I guess. Six years. That period was one of the highlights of my life and my career —playing with Oscar and Ray. The challenge that Oscar put on me and put on Ray and put on himself. So you couldn't have any qualms about it, he made it as hard for himself as he did for everybody."

"Ray told me that Oscar would say, 'Can this be done on the instrument?' And Ray would say, 'I don't think so.' And Oscar would say, 'Well I think it can.' And he would end up doing it."

"Exactly. You'd end up doing it, after a lot of sweat and practice. And Oscar would say, 'See, I told you.' It was very difficult, but the rewards were well worth it. Because we reached musical and emotional heights that you don't reach very often. We reached some musical peaks that I doubt I will ever attain again. It was a trio where we were totally involved with each other, musically and personally. There was a lot going for it."

"Oscar and I were talking about the difficulty of judging your own work. I've talked to Dizzy about it too. Oscar was putting down critics, and I said, 'Hey, just a minute, have you ever been wrong about your own work?' He said, 'Yes, now that you mention it.' And he told me about an evening when he came off the stand in a club, somewhere, and he was mad as hell. Ray Brown said, 'What do you expect of this group?' And Oscar said, 'Just a little music.'"

"Sure. It was in Chicago. At London House."

"Oscar had tapes of it, and started listening, and then he called Ray. You and Ray were rooming together."

"Did he tell you the end of it? He called Ray about five in the morning and said that *Sweet Georgia Brown* was just great, and Ray said, 'We knew that last night,' and hung up on him."

"You know, Oscar has received so many rotten reviews . . . ."

"Oh man, yes."

"What did you think of them?"

"At present he doesn't get bad reviews, but then he did, and we were very conscious of them. They all said the same thing, in essence. It's cold, it's mechanical. Granted he's a technician of the piano, but he's got no definitive style. First of all, they're really not hearing him. They're not hearing the depth of it. They're only hearing the surface. They're only hearing a lot of notes. Because sometimes he does play a lot of notes. Of course I'm not saying that's bad. I think they arrive at the conclusion that if you have a tendency to play a lot of notes, it's got to be cold. They miss the point. They just miss the whole point. I've played with a lot of people, and a lot of piano players. I've never played with anybody who had more depth and more emotion and feeling in his playing. He can play so hot and so deep and earthy that it just *shakes* you when you're playing with him. Ray and I have come off the stand just shook up. I mean, he is *heavy*. If you're not up to hearing it, well that's your loss. I won't even discuss it with anybody, because there's nothing to discuss. If that's the depth of their hearing, then we don't have anything to talk about. You can listen to the first two or three choruses of some of his solos. Sometimes he plays very sparingly. And it's *grooving*, it's about as hot as you can get. Then later on he may play faster and double it up to give it some build and some flavor. You see, most piano players end where he starts."

"There's a bit at the start of *Our Love Is Here to Stay* that he did with Ed Thigpen and Ray, in which he plays . . . " I sang the little figure to Herb. "He bends the note up, or seems to, a half step. He creates the illusion of a rising glissando, like a trumpet. He delays the first note slightly until he's into the second, and it's like a doit. I have never heard anyone else do that on a piano."

"Yes. And his ballad playing is absolutely lovely. Harmonically, it's quite involved. It's Tatumish. And he's got a love for playing the melody. I hope I have that too. And the sound that he gets out of a piano is so lyrical. If you have to name the world's best piano player, I can't see that there is much competition. There might be somebody that somebody personally would like better. But as far as playing the piano, and I'm not just talking about chops, I'm talking about all of it, the feeling, the emotion, he's the man."

"Tatum to me never had the rhythmic drive that Oscar has."

"No. Art Tatum didn't have the deep hard swing that Oscar has. I'm not taking away from him. Oscar has that earthy, deep commitment of swing."

"What caused you to leave the trio finally?"

"Patti and I were married while I was with Oscar. I met Patti out here in California. She's from Oklahoma."

"Who was I talking to recently who went to high school with her?"

"Oh sure. Maynard Ferguson's wife, Flo. They grew up together."

"That's an interesting coincidence. Maynard and Oscar were in a band together in high school. The Montreal High School Victory Serenaders, which was led by Maynard's brother Percy, who is now a psychologist."

"Yes it is a coincidence. Patti and I were married while I was with Oscar. First we had Kari, and then Mitch was on the way, and we moved out here."

"To stay in one place?"

"To stay in one place. I've made several moves in my life where I didn't know what was going to happen. Of course I had some name value, but how did I know I was going to get into the studios? I wanted to. And it happened. I did seventeen years of it. I went first with the *Steve Allen Show*, with Donn Trenner, about 1960. Ella Fitzgerald called me, wanted me go with her, and she made me a really good offer. So I went with her for about a year and a half and then I did come back and stayed."

"What was that incident with *The Bell Telephone Hour*?"

"We did a Bell Telephone television show, with Gus Johnson and Wilfred Middlebrooks. I was the leader and I was the only white guy in the group. So they told Norman Granz, 'Now we will want to use another guitar player.' And Norman said, '*What*?" And he found out the reason."

"Because they wouldn't have a white and black on camera at the same time?"

"Right. And Norman found this out, and said, not only would I not do it for that reason, but they had to use me, because I was the leader. Well, they diffused the picture, with vaseline on the lens, so you couldn't tell who was back there. Norman took out a two-page ad in *Variety* about it. And he *wiped* them out."

"You had a good relationship with Norman."

"He was very good to me. He was very understanding at that time when I was struggling with booze. The problem had hit me and I really didn't know I had a problem. We didn't know about alcoholism, he didn't know, Oscar didn't know. But he knew that I missed the plane to Europe and some incidents later . . . I was a periodic type drinker. And Norman and Oscar must have known innately that I wasn't a bad guy. That the sickness, when I would drink, would make me do those things. He stuck with me. He told Oscar, after the second time when I fouled up with that group, 'You know, I don't want to get into your business, it's your group, but I wouldn't get rid of him.'"

"What would happen? You just wouldn't make the gig for a few days?"

"I'd get so sick. We'd have time off and I'd start to drink. I never drank on the job. When I was with them, I hardly ever drank. But we'd have some time off, I'd start to drink, and it would be okay for a few days, and then it would get the best of me. One time I got so sick in New York that I just couldn't make the plane. I couldn't get the passport, I couldn't get the transformer I needed, I just got so screwed up, so sick, I just had to call A.A., and they put me in a hospital. And then it happened again a year or so later. Oscar was very understanding about it. And then the second time it happened, nobody knew where I was for a month."

"Not even you?"

"I only knew I was in New York, just surviving from drink to drink and day to day. I couldn't make any moves, because if I'd stopped I'd have gone into D.T.'s or shock or something. I didn't know that, of course. I even made Walter Winchell's column."

"For what?"

"Where is the red-headed guitar player? Because nobody knew where I was. My folks didn't even know."

"Now what about the practical jokes? I've heard so many stories."

"You didn't hear the story, did you, about Ray Brown and me dying our hair opposite colors? This was out here in California. We had a day off. Ray and I played golf, which we did frequently. On the way home from the golf course, late in the afternoon, we were walking from the bus, and we passed a drug store. And there was a new thing in the window. It said, 'Dye your hair any color, and if you don't like it, you can shampoo it out immediately.' I said, 'Hey, I got an idea. We'll buy some red dye and black dye. I'll dye my hair black and you dye yours red, and we'll call Oscar over to the apartment, and there'll be a lot of fun.' Ray said, 'Okay,' but he looked at me as if I manufactured this stuff, and he said, 'Are you sure this shit's gonna wash out?' I said, 'I don't know. That's what it says.' He said, 'It better.' It's late in the afternoon, and we dye our hair. Ray's is this flaming, sickening light red, and mine was jet black. We call Oscar. We said, 'How you doin'?' He said, 'Fine.' I said, 'We need to see you.' He said, 'Wha'dyou mean, you need to see me? You saw me last night, you see me every day. I'm on my way out to dinner with some people.' I said, 'Well there's something we gotta talk about.' He said, 'Well, we'll talk about it tomorrow.' I said, 'Well this can't wait till tomorrow. We gotta talk to you, man. It's semi-serious. Why don't you just drive by on your way out?' He said, 'What's the matter with you guys?' 'Just come by,' I said. He said, 'Okay.' Ray's in a chair, reading the paper, Oscar knocks on the door. I open the door, and he says, 'Hey, Herb, hey, Ray. Well, what do you guys want?' Looking right at us. He didn't crack a smile. He said, 'What did you want?' Ray said, 'Don't you get it?' He said, 'Get what?' He said, 'You guys detained me from my dinner.' He said, 'Get out of here. I'll see you tomorrow.' Next day we told him about it, and he maintained for a year that he never noticed anything. Now that's control, isn't it?"

**Don Byas, reluctantly leaving the Count Basie band and unable to find words for his resignation: "Basie, in one month I will have been gone two weeks."**

"It sure is. What would he do to you in turn?"

"He would untune a guitar string during intermission, and get your attention when we went up to the point where you wouldn't even touch the guitar. He could do that. He could keep you talking like that, and then it would be, Here we go. Or sometimes he would look like he was retuning it, and then he would start the tune in another key, up a tone or half a tone down. In 1953, the first big jazz tour ever in Japan, Jazz at the Philharmonic . . . it started with Norman and Oscar playing a joke on Ray. Ray and I were in the wings. We played with Ella. We played with everybody. Ray was standing backstage, waiting to come on with Ella, and Norman introduced us all, with Ray last, right before Ella. And Oscar had tuned Ray's G-string down, a *lot*. Then he got Ray's attention while Norman was announcing, some way he kept Ray from hitting the strings. And then Norman introduced Ray Brown and then Ella, right on top of it, so we walked out, and bang! counted off and hit. And Ray started to play, and the string was just loose, dunk dunk. And Ella wasn't reacting too nicely to this. And she's giving him a lot of rays back there. And Ray looks over at Oscar, and Oscar and Norman are just guffawing. And Ray said, 'Okay, all right.' Ray can take a practical joke, but he's not one to play it on, because he can really pay it back. Ray went out between shows. There's a game over there called Perchinco, and if you win you get a lot of little steel balls, and when you have a hundred, you turn them in and you get packs of cigarettes or whatever. Ray played and won a lot of little steel balls, which he put in his pocket. So now we came back. Oscar, during that show, his hands were hurting a little bit. First time he made his entrance was when we did the ballads part. So he walks out to great applause. Bill Harris is walking out from the

other wing to play his ballad. It's dark and I see Ray lean into the piano. I have no idea what he's doing. He's scattering these little steel balls right across the strings. It's Bill's ballad, so he says, *But Beautiful.* Oscar starts to take the intro, and every note is brrr, brrr, brrr, it sounds like a whorehouse piano. He knew that Ray did it and he's taking them out of the piano and flinging them at Ray and they're hitting the bass. And Bill Harris is suffering out there. So we finally wade through that. And Bill Harris comes over to the piano and says to Oscar, 'One day, one day.' And nothing happened during that tour. Not till we got to Rome the next year."

"The Rome Opera House, wasn't it? What happened exactly?"

"In those theaters over there, they serve Cokes and booze and beer and everything backstage. You can order them. Bill Harris overheard Norman talking to the trio before we went on. Norman asked Oscar to sing. Oscar was very hesitant. Norman said, 'Sing something. To them it's a foreign language. It'd be just right for you.' So Oscar said, 'Okay, I'll sing *Tenderly*.' So Bill gets the waiter and gives him some lire, and gets one of those big trays, and piles it up with glasses and empty bottles, and puts it up on a ladder, and just waits back there. Oscar starts, and it's *quiet*, man. I remember it was one of those true dramatic stages that slant down, a raked stage. Norman is standing right in the back, you could just see him. He's loving the trio. And Oscar, he was kind of nervous, he goes, 'The evening breeze . . . caressed the trees . . . tenderly,' and when he goes 'tenderly,' Bill Harris gives a push, and crash! Oh! It went on, for*ever*! Crash! Brang! And it went on, and on, like it was never going to stop."

"I understand Bill Harris ran up to Granz and said, 'Norman, what's going on? Do you realize there's an artist playing out there?'"

"That's right. He ran upstairs, so he could come down like he heard it. And nobody copped out on him. For a long time. Because Norman was so mad. Nobody told on him."

"What happened after you came out to California?"

"I became Mr. Television. I did the *Steve Allen Show*, the *Danny Kaye Show*, the *Red Skelton Show*. At one time I was doing the *Della Reese Show* in the morning, five days a week, and the *Joey Bishop Show* in the evening. I did all the movie calls and record dates, and played whatever they wanted, I was there to do it, from banjo to wah-wah pedal. Then I did Merv Griffin's show for six years. I did it for seventeen years, up until a few years ago."

"We talked once about what the studios do to your playing."

"The studios take a lot from your playing. It takes the stamina, the longevity, out of your chops. You can't play hard or fast or intense for a very long time after you've played a lot of studio work. I never stopped playing jazz. I'd play maybe once every two weeks. My ability to play strong jazz and sustain it did diminish, but not as much as some people, because being with Oscar all those years, I had built up such reserve stamina and technique that it lasted me through those years. So the transition to coming back into playing wasn't *that* hard. And that's all I do now. I'm either home like this, or I'm out on the road, playing. And when I do play, most of the time, because of a suggestion of Ray Brown, I don't use a piano. I've liked it."

"You do have a conflict with a trio with piano and guitar, because you have two harmonic instruments."

"Yeah. Unless you get someone very sensitive. I love to play with Roger Kellaway, and I love to play with Ross Tompkins. There are a few piano players around that I do like to play with if I can get 'em, but when I go out to most towns and have to get a rhythm section, I just get bass and drums. I'm doing that, and I'm very happy doing it, and my playing seems stronger than it's ever been. Musically, and in depth."

"Does playing in studios get in the way of your inventive thinking?"

"Absolutely. The only invention you're doing is giving them the type of sound they want. They might say, 'Give me some kind of a swamp beat.' But that's not really inventing. It's coming up with the jive they want."

"The conception of a line, the development of a little piece of material into logical continuity, does the studio get in the way of that, your mental chops?"

"Sure. First of all, you're not creating. And the stuff you are playing is a deterrent to the creation of good logical music. You're on a rock date, and they want you to play the wah-wah, and you create a certain sound. Well who's going to use the wah-wah when you're playing *Stella by Starlight*? Or you have to play the banjo or the ukelele or the twelve-string."

"Did you do all that? Folk dates and all that?"

"Yes sir, all that. Rock and roll dates. I made a lot of money just playing that chick-tick-*whack*, chick-tick-*whack*. It's a funny way to make a living. And the music you're playing and the music you hear coming out of the orchestra, be it big or small, is for the most part very low-grade. Sometimes you'll get a Johnny Mandel date, but not often, and most of what you

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"Your defeats will not come from those more brilliant than you. They will come from the patient, the plodding, the mediocre. Your scorn for mediocrity blinds you to its vast primitive power. You stand in the glare of your own brilliance, unable to see into the dim corners of the room, to dilate your eyes and see the potential dangers of the mass, the wad of humanity. Even as I tell you this you cannot quite believe that lesser men, in whatever numbers, can really defeat you. But we are in the age of the mediocre man. He is dull, colorless, boring — but inevitably victorious. The amoeba outlives the tiger because it divides and continues in its immortal monotony. The masses are the final tyrants. See how, in the arts, Kabukiwanes and Noh withers while popular novels of violence and mindless action swamp the mind of the mass reader. And even in that timid genre, no author dares to produce a genuinely superior man as his hero, for in his rage of shame the mass man will send his yojimbo, the critic, to defend him. The roar of the plodders is inarticulate, but deafening. They have no brain, but they have a thousand arms to grasp and clutch at you, drag you down."

"What do you advise me to do then?"

"Avoid contact with them. Camouflage yourself with politeness. Appear dull and distant. Live apart and study shibumi. Above all, do not let men bait you into anger and aggression. Hide."

— From the novel *Shibumi* by Trevanian

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play is pretty trashy. And you hear that, if you have a big day, from eight o'clock in the morning until twelve at night. You hear that crap. So that's gotta sink in. Got to."

"I believe that if you do that enough and rationalize it enough, it'll destroy your standards of taste."

"Absolutely. I can name guys it's done that to, and so could you."

"When Tom Scott left the studios to put a group together, I asked him why he did it. He said, 'I got tired of playing music I didn't like for people I didn't like.'"

"That's right on it. And there's usually somebody in charge who knows far less than you do about music, and you have to do what they want."

"You did jingles too?"

"Yep."

"But you got your family raised."

"Got 'em raised."

"You stayed sober."

"Most of the time! Ninety-eight percent of the time. I'm sober today."

"Did you feel with the kids raised, you could now do that riskier thing of just going out and playing, fulfill your responsibilities to yourself?"

"Yeah, I just needed it. I did it kind of slick, if I do say so. I was doing *The Merv Griffin Show*. And I would take a week's engagement here and there. I'd go out for a week, and come back for a month. I'd use a sub on the show. Pretty soon I'd be gone for four weeks, I'd come back for three days, and I'd be gone again. And I got a call from Mort Lindsey, the leader on the show, saying, 'What are you gonna do here? Are you gonna keep this job?' I said, 'Well, if it's down to it, I'm not gonna keep it.' So then Mundell Lowe took it. Now they've got a rock player. Merv wanted all youthful rock players.

"Of course. Get the young audience. The one that isn't there any more."

"It was an interesting life, the studios, but I had to get rid of it, because, you know, I never got used to it. I never got used to going in and never knowing what they're going to put up in front of you. It could be easy, it could be boring, it could be so-so, or it could be absolutely straight fright. They put it up there and they want it right now. And I never got to be a zippo reader like Tommy Tedesco or Al Hendrickson or cats like that. 'Cause I started too late."

"Clark Terry told me that when he was doing *The Tonight Show* in New York, he was reading fly specks, but after a few years on the road playing jazz, his reading wasn't what it had been."

"Right. Mine got to be pretty good. But you've got to keep it up."

"There are very few guitar players Roger likes to play with, you know, but you're one of them. He says Herb's got grounded time. He says guitar players have jumpy time."

"They do. They rush."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It must have something to do with picking a note and fingering it at the same time."

"But bass players do that too."

"The only thing is that a bass player digs in a little harder."

"And also the clarity of the attack isn't as sharp, as bang! as it is on the guitar."

"It's one of those questions I really can't answer. But they do rush. And why do a lot of tenor players have good time? You can get a rotten tenor player sometimes, and his time is grounded. Why?"

"If you've got a piano with an even action, and you get used to it, you know how deep that key bed is. But with the guitar, the split second of releasing that string is very hard to judge. I wonder if the problem lies in the critical moment of releasing the string."

"It could be that. But I do know most guitar players rush."

"I've heard it argued that Oscar rushes."

"Well, we're talking about guitar players rushing within a phrase. The phrase is not steady. Oscar and Ray Brown and myself would push a tempo, we'd *push*, but it would take a long time to go up. That's all right in my book, because something is happening. It's just an edge you put on it."

"Yeah, there's a right way to go up tempo, but there's no right way to go down. It feels like it's going to sleep."

"Right, it feels like a weight on your shoulders. You can climb a tempo so long as everybody does it together. And the space between the beats will still be even. It's compressed a little bit. But there are all types of rushing. And the way Oscar does it, if indeed he does, I do it too and Ray does, and a lot of people do, and it doesn't bother me."

"I asked Oscar a question once. I said, 'If everybody goes on top of the time, doesn't the time itself change, and you're back in the center of it?' He said, 'No, not really.' And I said, 'This question verges on philosophy.'"

"Well . . . That's a great question. And I've got a pretty good answer for you. I don't think everybody does it *really* together. When I was with Oscar, and I was playing rhythm, when Ray would climb on top of the beat, I would hold it in the center, and I loved it. I love to do that! It wasn't a labor. I would be just under him, you wouldn't hear the difference. And that gives it the tension. You've got to play on top of something. If you're all playing together, you're not on top of anything."

"I think a certain amount of pull within the rhythm is part of the excitement."

"You've got to have tension. Of course, we all know when it goes past tension." And Herb laughed that big laugh of his. "God, those were exciting days with Oscar and Ray. Hoo! Did you ever see us?"

"I don't think so. Heard a lot of records."

"Oh I wish you'd seen us. The Stratford album comes about as close as anything to what we sounded like."

We went out to the kitchen then. Herb opened the refrigerator to search among various fruit juices. "Do you want a drink? He said. "I mean, a drink?"

"No thanks," I said.

"How about some pineapple juice?"

"Perfect. When are you going out again?"

"Monday. Matter of fact, I'm going up to our old stomping ground, Toronto."

"Give everybody my best."

Driving home that day, I thought about the long arc of time since I first heard Herb with The Soft Winds. There is something exceptional about him that is evasive of definition. That expression "down-home" has long since been worn to a tatter but it could have been coined for Herb Ellis. His playing has the feeling of sun on warm dark loam, which quality is the direct expression of what the man is. There is no art in which it is harder to lie than jazz, although a few men have managed it. But Herb would never even think of trying. The candor is complete. In his casual admissions of weakness, there is enormous strength. This makes him and his music profoundly human and peculiarly comforting, and time spent with Herb Ellis always lingers sweetly in the memory, long after the conversation itself is forgotten.