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Letters

Just read your piece on Woody. You captured his essence perfectly. There are two guys in this world I would seek out for advice if I ever got to the point where I couldn't figure it out for myself, Woody and Lorne Greene. They are the two wisest men I know. I worked that gig in Sparks with Woody and the Juggernaut that you mentioned, and he managed to charm the band, the audience, the hotel crew, everyone — without moving a muscle. Some cat.

I played with the band at the time Abe Turchin was dipping into the till, and I worked a small band gig with Woody in Reno, soon after Abe had died and Woody was in the clutches of the IRS. We all knew what the deal was, but Woody wouldn't say a bad word about Abe, not a one. I remember thinking how I would have reacted under the circumstances. But Woody would just smile and shrug.

I worked the Aurex Festival in Japan with him in '82, as one of the Four Others, Al Cohn, Flip and Sal. Woody looked like an old gnome schlepping his suitbag through airports, checking in and out, the old routine. But when he put on that white suit and hit the stage he was like a kid, jumping around, clowning, honking out the high notes. Amazing.

I have also just read the piece by Lynn Darroch. I don't know why, but I've never been able to muster anything but contempt for the whole Frisco Beat scene and everything it stood for. Being lucky enough to live in the Apple in the early 50s, I spent half my time in Birdland digging Bird, Bud, and the giants, and the other half working 8th Avenue joints in the Village and jamming with guys like George Wallington, in smelly little dungeons that called themselves coffee houses long before they sprang up in "The City" like mushrooms and captured the fancy of that nancy little town. I remember squatting uncomfortably on greasy cushions listening to that mindless babble which couldn't even qualify as doggerel, since it didn't rhyme. And it certainly didn't swing. And they were even then calling themselves "hippies". To me that was the ultimate sacrilege. And to top it off they weren't even properly funky. They had the smell about them of little boys who can't keep their rooms clean, not the exhilarating bouquet of some black jazz-joint deep in the bowels of Cleveland or Detroit. I remember thinking what a difference a few stops on the subway make. I haven't thought about it for years, but Lynn brought it back.

But the thing that really bothered me in Lynn's article was his statement that "the tradition of dissent in America found much of its inspiration in modern jazz." Jazz has suffered enough indignities through the years without being blamed for the contamination promulgated by that bunch of musical and political illiterates.

Anyone who can play knows that music, especially jazz, is the happy curse. If you can play it, you're never completely happy doing anything else. So if you're lucky, you just go ahead and do it. Chances are you won't end up in a fine house overlooking the river, but you sure in hell won't envy your old school chum who does, because while he's showing you around the joint, and bragging about the view and his position in the community and about how well his kids are doing in college, you can see in his eyes The Look, the look that says, *How did this guy do it? How did he manage to go out and do what he really loves to do while I'm stuck in this jerkwater town catering to a bunch of idiots who turned out just like me?* And the beauty of it is that you feel no sense of triumph in witnessing that look. You just feel sorry for him, even though you may only have ten bucks in your pocket and you're only out on the road because you're two months behind in your house payments. If there is a point to all this, it's that jazz has nothing to do with politics. If you can do it, do it, Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, Communist, Afrikaaner, bigot, religious fanatic, whatever. If you can play, play. As Phil said when asked what his next goal is, "Just to get better, I guess."

I've run on long enough. Let me say one more thing. If there is anything harder than blowing mindlessly free and inspired on the changes to *Giant Steps*, it's writing about jazz, and in doing so you and a handful of your colleagues — Leonard, Ira, Tony, Harvey among them — bring to the effort a sense of worthiness that is greatly appreciated by all who are afflicted by that happy curse.

Med Flory, Los Angeles, California

Nights Under the Bridge

by Michael Zwerin

PARIS

In the autumn of 1967, Joe Farrell walked up to Elvin Jones in Pookie's Pub in Greenwich Village and said: "I'd like to play in your band." He used to do that sort of thing. He had a lot of nerve.

They formed a trio with Jimmy Garrison, who had been John Coltrane's drummer and bassist until Trane's death a month earlier. Coltrane was a hard act for an unknown 30-year-old Italian-American to follow. A customer in a Philadelphia club called Farrell a "white devil".

Although over the next ten years he won three *Down Beat* magazine polls — on tenor and soprano saxophones and flute — and was a key figure in Chick Corea's high-impact band Return to Forever, somewhere along the line he lost his nerve. He lost everything. In December 1983, he found himself sleeping under a bridge in North Hollywood.

After having studied the clarinet for two years, Farrell switched to saxophone at the age of 13 because "I liked the way it looked." By the time he was 16 he was playing it mostly "to cop the ladies." He listened to Johnny Griffin and Ira Sullivan around his native Chicago, only gradually realizing that he was playing jazz and that it was important to him.

After a year with Maynard Ferguson he entered "the bleak '60s". It was "one dumb gig after another" — weddings, bar mitzvahs, anniversaries and showers on Long Island, four hours of continuous cornball music with four-bar modulations between songs. Lester Lanin, Meyer Davis — he played with them all.

He learned the oboe. Anybody who could read well on four instruments could make real money in those days. Farrell was sitting with his oboe in a 60-piece orchestra accompanying

Tony Bennett. Guess who had the first note. All alone. The baton came down. Silence. It came down again. They were all looking at him. He made it on the sixth take.

He earned up to $10,000 a month, three record dates a day, blew with Elvin Jones at night. He bought a Manhattan brownstone.

His fluid improvisations and personal sound on flute or soprano sax, playing the melody in unison with Corea's piano, were central to Return to Forever's successful and powerful fusion in the early '70s. He formed his own group, recorded albums that sold, played with Woody Herman, Thad Jones-Mel Lewis, Herbie Hancock, John McLaughlin, Santana, Al Kooper. "But then I stopped looking for the contractor and started looking for the dealer. I moved to Los Angeles and thought I could make it bigger out there but it didn't happen. I was concentrating on something else. I was totally out of control.

"I was hanging out with this lady who was into gambling — gorgeous lady. We used to go to Gardena, California, and play poker. It's just like dope. We'd sit at the table for three days without stopping except to go to the bathroom or when all the money was gone. It's a losing proposition."

He sold the townhouse. His wife of 16 years divorced him. He pawned one instrument after another. The "gorgeous lady" dropped to less than a hundred pounds. One day he found himself sleeping alone under the bridge.

He pulled himself together. Last year he toured Europe with pianist Joanne Brackeen. He formed a new quartet with an aggressive, hungry young rhythm section, and they are working — just a Tuesday here and a weekend there around Los Angeles. But they have an agent, and now and then a week in a place like the prestigious New York club Lush Life. "I guess it's called a comeback," he says.

Chain-smoking ("I can't give up *everything*), he speaks with the same sort of warm, volatile intensity with which he plays. "It's amazing, brainwaves or something; you get what you give. I started to practice the flute again and a Japanese manufacturer gave me a $4,000 flute. A photographer gave me $500 worth of publicity photos I couldn't afford to buy. A record I made years ago in Europe is finally being released in the States. Things just started to come my way again.

"I wake up around seven, take a shower, get dressed, eat breakfast, and then I go out and hike in the hills, walk on the beach — whatever. I just think about what's exactly in front of me. I do what I have to do."

Oscar Peterson: The Early Years

Oscar Peterson grew up a member of a minority within a minority. In 1949, the year he made his *Jazz at the Philharmonic* concert debut, the black population of Canada was 30,000 in an overall population of about 13,000,000. The figure is approximately the same as that of the black American population at that time — 13,000,000 in a population of about 135,000,000. One American in ten was definable as black, but only one Canadian in about 430. Nearly all of them were English-speaking, and in Montreal, the English-speaking were themselves a minority among the French, although economically and socially they were in the predominant position. The historical position too of black Canadians was different from that of black Americans, since their ancestors had not been brought to the country against their will as slaves It is the widely-held illusion of Canadians that slavery never existed in their country. Emmanuel Allen, 33, became the last slave to be sold in Montreal on August 25, 1797, fetching a price of 36 pounds. Slavery was abolished in Upper Canada, now Ontario, by Act of Parliament on May 31, 1793, and in Lower Canada, which is now Quebec, in 1834. The institution was never extensive, however — in 1804 there were 142 slaves in Montreal, and as late as 1897, there were only 300 blacks in the city. Most blacks in Canada, therefore, are either themselves immigrants or descend from people who came to the country voluntarily, refugees from slavery in the American south or poverty in the Caribbean islands of the British Commonwealth. This is not to suggest that there was no racial prejudice in Canada or Montreal. There was, and Oscar Peterson experienced a great deal of it. Nonetheless, racism was never in Canada institutionalized into general law, as in the segregation statutes of the south.

Black Americans of Caribbean descent will tell you that they are often the objects of a hidden hostility from other blacks. "They say we're arrogant," as one of them put it. They have a reputation for ambition, energy, and strength of will. Both of Oscar's parents were born in the Caribbean, his father in the Virgin Islands, his mother in St. Kitts in the Leeward Islands. She came to Canada as a domestic and met Daniel Peterson in Montreal in 1917. They married that same year.

The late pianist Wynton Kelly was also of Caribbean lineage. When he and Oscar would meet, they would slip, laughing, into a dense Caribbean patois that was incomprehensible to whites and other blacks alike.

Oscar Peterson was the fourth of five children. His father, Daniel Peterson, was a porter on the Canadian Pacific Railway who led the family band in concerts in community halls and churches in Montreal. Oscar has said, "There's a good way and a bad way to expose children to music. If they're exposed in the wrong way, it can turn them against it. Fortunately we were introduced to it in a good way, and we all learned to play."

His first instrument was trumpet, which he began playing when he was five years old. At the age of seven, he contracted tuberculosis and was confined for thirteen months in Children's Memorial Hospital. When he left the hospital, he was pronounced cured, but his lungs had been weakened and his father decided he should give up trumpet for piano. Both his brothers, Charlie and Fred, played piano. Oscar says that Fred was the best pianist in the family, but he died at sixteen of tuberculosis, and Fred lost his hand in a factory accident. Oscar liked the instrument, he would say later, so much that he could not be kept away from it. "I practiced from nine a.m. to noon," he told me in 1959, "took an hour off for lunch, practiced from one to six in the afternoon, then went to dinner, and went back to the piano about 7:30. I'd keep practicing until my mother would come in and drag me away from it so the family could get some sleep."

In 1982, Oscar said, "The interesting thing about my dad is that he became a musician because of being a sailor. From what I understand he was a bosun on a ship and he bought himself some kind of little organ, I never did find out exactly what kind, and taught himself to play. And when he decided to settle in Canada — he sailed to Canada — and met my Mum, he taught my Mum how to play. And then he decided as the children came along that we should all have a workable knowledge of music. And I think it was wonderful. He worked a marvelous system, actually. He taught the older children, and then he expected them to pass on what they had learned step by step by step. Daisy did a lot of teaching in the house and she helped me tremendously.

"Daisy is a great tutor. Daisy has great patience. She understands human weaknesses, and she can relate to someone having difficulties. And Daisy is a great pianist." In 1946, when

he was twenty, Oscar told an interviewer, "I owe a good deal to my mother. In the write-ups about me my father always gets the credit for teaching me to play, but my mother should get some credit too. When I wanted to swing music, she backed me up and said she thought there might be some future in it."

Daisy in turn said of him, "He had the range and the depth that I've never seen as yet in pupils."

Daisy Peterson, later Daisy Sweeney, remembers growing up in Montreal during the Depression and World War II as "pleasurable, though sometimes painful." The family, she said, was not materially rich but was rich in culture, and in an environment that was socially stimulating, because "everyone knew everyone and felt responsible for each other." It is a memory of the Depression shared by whites and blacks alike.

The family lived near Place St. Henri, an area of Montreal Oscar would celebrate in his *Canadiana Suite,* evoking its mood with a vigorous stride piano. The style recalls an era, but also, "I used it because Place St. Henri was a bustling and busy area," Oscar has said.

The small black community of Montreal was closely knit and, since so many of its fathers worked for the two railways, Canadian National and Canadian Pacific, largely concentrated in that area: they could walk to work at the CPR station on Peel Street and the CNR station a little east of Peel on Dorchester.

In 1949, the CNR employed 585 porters, of whom 340 were Canadian-born, 96 had immigrated from the United States, 118 from different parts of the British West Indies, and 31 from other parts of the British Commonwealth. The figures for the CPR were doubtless much the same. In an article titled *Three Thousand Nights on Wheels* published that year in *Maclean's*, the writer McKenzie Porter left us a vivid portrait of the life of a black railway porter in Canada. He wrote of a man named William Ruffin, but much of what he had to say about Ruffin applied to Daniel Peterson as well.

A railway porter at that time was paid $187 a month and could expect to pick up about $50 more in tips. His uniform was provided by the railway, and his food on the train was free. Within reason, he could eat anything he wanted from the dining car menu — and the food on Canadian railways at that time was famously excellent. Porters, however, were inclined to eat lightly. They were on guard against stomach ulcers caused by nervous indigestion, in turn caused by the constant motion.

A porter worked a nineteen-hour day, usually from six a.m. until midnight. If the run was from either Toronto, where Ruffin lived, or Montreal to Vancouver, some 3,000 miles away on the west coast, he would work on a sixteen-day cycle, reaching Vancouver on the fourth day. On the sixth day he would leave Vancouver, arriving back home on the tenth day. Then he would have seven days off. In twenty years, that amounted to three thousand nights and days spent over the click of the wheels.

"His routine is never the same," Porter wrote. "Some people sleep late, others rise early. Occasionally men will sit up all night yarning in the club car and go to bed just when others are shaving. He is kept on the hop. Yet to look at him, you would think from his bland smiling composure that he is your personal servant, wishing you would find him something to do.

"Generally he begins his day by cleaning the shoes of his stateroom passengers. Around six some of these are calling for coffee. Often he has a couple of mothers who give him baby formulas to prepare. He knows every infant food on the market and how to adjust quantities to every age. Between six and seven a.m. he dusts the club car, polishes the woodwork, and tidies up the magazines. While passengers are breakfasting in the diner he transforms their compartments from bedrooms to sitting rooms. . . .

"Soon after breakfast he is making morning coffee in his own kitchen, which separates the compartments from the club car and is so narrow there is room only for standing. He also serves soft drinks from a refrigerator. . . .

"During the afternoon, when passengers are given to dozing, he has his account books to make up. At night it is coffee and soft drinks and bed-making again."

Passengers expected porters to know the schedule exactly. Every once in a while one of them would ask, "Are we on time?" And the porter would look out the window at the coastal landscape of New Brunswick, the villages of Quebec, the bleak moonlike beauty of Northern Ontario or the great seas of wheat interrupted only by lonely grain elevators, or at jutting peaks of the Canadian Rockies or the frantic plunging waters of the Frazer River gorge, and he would glance at his pocket watch and say, "Two minutes behind, sir," or "Twelve minutes ahead." Daniel Peterson knew the contours of the land, the headlands and houses and valleys and crossings and bridges and church steeples of five thousand miles of CP line. The pieces that make up Oscar's *Canadiana Suite*, recorded first in 1964, proceed across Canada from east to west, which is the way the country thinks, in the precise sequence of the railway journey from the Atlantic to the Pacific: *Ballad to the East, Laurentide Waltz* (*Les Laurentides* is the French name for the Laurentian Mountains of Quebec, and anyone born and raised in Quebec, like Oscar, tends to think of them that way) *Place St. Henri, Hogtown Blues*, (Canadians traditionally dislike Toronto and have since time out of mind called it Hogtown), *Blues of the Prairies, March Past*, which refers to the Calgary Stampede parade, and *Land of the Misty Giants,* meaning the Rocky Mountains. Those pieces are like views from a train window; or perhaps memories of a father's descriptions of the land when he would come home from his journeys and supervise his son's piano lessons.

McKenzie Porter wrote that a porter often is "guardian to a child traveling alone and nearly always finds some elderly woman glad to help him with the responsibility. He tries to get the shy type of passengers into conversation by drawing them into sharing coffee tables. Sometimes he sees passengers begin the journey in a flurry of warm comradeship and end it bitter enemies.

"He keeps his eye on the men who spend the entire journey in an alcoholic miasma, and on the parties which build up between men who have whisky in their compartments and women who are bored. If mixed parties keep quiet and do not offend the rest of the passengers they are left alone. If they become noisy he tips off the conductor.

"He must do his utmost to remember what his passengers forget. He is always picking up after people. If many articles were lost he would fall under suspicion. So to protect his job (he) goes to great lengths in running things down."

Sometimes a porter would have to play midwife, and infants

Most unprophetic song title of 1959: *The Night that Rock and Roll Died,* **by Jimmy Van Heusen and Sammy Cahn, written for the film** *Say One for Me.*

Notice

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would come into the world in his compartment. Usually, however, he would be able to find a doctor among the passengers when a woman came to her time.

Tips ran to about fifty cents per passenger in each twenty-four hours, and to get them, porters made a ritual of politeness. "No porter can afford to be surly," William Ruffin said. The railways, he said, treated porters well, but would not let them rise to any higher position. Why, Ruffin wondered, if they could make the white man's bed, couldn't they also take his tickets? There was only one way he could be promoted — to become a Negro porter instructor. And the chances of that were one in a hundred.

Ruffin, who was born in Chicago, had become a Canadian citizen. He said, "I know that if I had an altercation with a white man that ended in court I would get a just hearing. In some parts of the United States I would be judged guilty before the proceedings opened." He noted that a black man had recently been acquitted of murdering an English war bride. "Cases like that," Ruffin said, "make me proud to be a Canadian."

Nonetheless, Ruffin and his wife once were refused service in a hotel beverage room, and he was denied admission to the old Palace Pier ballroom on the the Toronto lakefront when Duke Ellington was appearing there.

Ruffin lived in Toronto, the Petersons 500 miles to the east in Montreal. Ruffin worked for the CNR, Daniel Peterson for the CPR. But they must have known each other. Ruffin worked for a year for the CP and they both made runs to Vancouver. Given the small community of black Canadians and the even smaller community of black Canadian railway porters, it is almost impossible that they were not acquainted. And their work lives were much alike. Thus the McKenzie Porter article helps us understand the elder Peterson's determination that his children would achieve another life — through music.

An article in the old Canadian *Liberty* magazine in 1946 said, "Despite his comfortable income, (Oscar) Peterson continues to live on Montreal's shabby St. James Street West, down by the railway tracks and the canal. Canadians know St. James Street as the workshop of high finance, but not many persons who live outside of Montreal know that it is also a narrow, straggling, dirty street of factories and tenements. That's Oscar's street, although his home is well furnished. Oscar was born poor, in a rented parsonage on Deslisle Street in St. Henry Ward . . . . In Montreal, there is no Sugar Hill, New York's residential area for the well-to-do Negroes. Almost the entire Montreal Negro colony lives in an ill-defined section down by the railway tracks."

Daisy Peterson Sweeney, considered one of the great classical piano teachers in Montreal, worked as a domestic when she was a girl, for $4.50 a week, and took formal piano lessons for which she paid $3 a week. She continued to study under adverse conditions until she earned a bachelor's degree in music from McGill University in 1947. Daisy recalls that racism extended into the black community itself. At community dances, she found that girls with darker skin like hers were passed over by Negro boys for those who were lighter. She teaches in black community centers, charging whatever her pupils can afford.

Just before Christmas in 1945, Oscar, then in the first flush of fame and prosperity, was on his way home from shopping in downtown Montreal, his arms full of packages. He saw a taxi pull over to the curb. As its passenger was paying the driver, Oscar moved forward to enter the still-open rear door. A woman rushed up and said that *she* wanted that taxi. Before Oscar could even reply, the previous passenger turned on him, called him a "dirty nigger" and hit him in the face. Oscar fell to the street and the woman got into the cab, which pulled away. A policeman who witnessed the incident simply turned his back. Oscar, six feet two in height and at that time weighing 246 pounds, most of it muscle, rose in silence and hit the man who had hit him, sending him sprawling. The man picked himself up, and, calling for the cop, took another punch at Oscar. When Oscar hit him this time, he had the sense to stay down. The policeman now told Oscar he was under arrest.

"You turned your back when he hit me," Oscar said, bending to pick up his packages. The policeman said they could finish the argument at the station. "If you want to take me to the station," Oscar said, "you'll have to use that gun." And he walked off, leaving his assailant and the cop to stare after him.

Oscar's father worked mostly the Toronto-Montreal run on the CPR, and during World War II made occasional trips to Halifax on troop trains. Oscar has described the discipline he imposed: "My dad would leave and he would give us each a task, pianistically. You had to know this, you had to know that, and when I come back from Vancouver or St. Johns, have it together. There were no ifs, ands and buts. Have it together. It was that simple. He would come back and then he would call each of us in turn into the room where the piano was, and he would say, 'Okay, fine, may I have the scale. What did you have?' 'I had the G scale.' And he'd go through the scales, the arpeggios, all the things we were supposed to have learned. And when he found one of us, usually me, I guess, had been playing games and wasn't practicing, he'd sit there with a little strap, and if he knew for a fact . . . I think my Mum used to used to cue him; he'd come in off the railway, and my mother would say, 'You know, for whatever it's worth, he may have signed the book, but I don't think Oscar spent a half an hour on the piano while you were gone.' But usually that was the routine, he'd go through this work book, categorically, from point one to the end, and say, 'Well, what have you done and what haven't you done?' And if you did well, he'd say, 'Fine, now here's what I want you to do next week.' I think this was all designed to give us a sense of responsibility, of having goals to reach, having certain debts we had to honor musically, and we had a time limitation to do them in."

"I think at ten I was playing the usual things that kids play at ten, *The Minute Waltz*, and some things I wouldn't even *attempt* to play now. And I would hear my older brother, Fred . . . fooling around with things like *Oh Dem Golden Slippers* and *Tiger Rag* and I'd say, 'What *is* that?' And finally I found out that it was jazz, and it kind of intrigued me."

When he was eleven, Oscar studied with Lou Hooper. Hooper was himself an extremely interesting figure. Born May 18, 1894, in Buxton, Ontario, near Windsor, one of eleven children, he was of mixed Irish, African, and Amerindian blood — his mother was full Cree. That area around Windsor was the upper terminus of the Underground Railway during the era of slavery in the United States. The late Kenny Kersey, to whose playing the British critic Richard Palmer has compared Oscar's, was born in 1916 in Harrow, which is also near Windsor.

Lou Hooper's father died before he was born. The family moved across the Detroit River to Ypsilante, Michigan, when he was three. He sang solos in church and at twelve played piano and trombone in the Hooper Brothers Orchestra. He studied piano at the Detroit Conservatory, working the while in dance and theater orchestras. The band played regularly at the Koppin Theater, working with such acts as Ma Rainey, Ethel Waters, and Sammy Davis Sr. Graduated with a bachelor's degree, Hooper moved to New York in 1921 and continued studying through 1923 and '24 at Columbia University, meanwhile teaching at the Martin-Smith Music School, a subsidiary of the Damrosch Institute, which later became the Juilliard School of Music.

Hooper almost immediately became a figure in Harlem jazz,

playing with banjoist Elmer Snowden and clarinetist Bob Fuller. They recorded as the Three Jolly Miners, the Three Hot Eskimos, the Three Monkey Chasers, the Rocky Mountain Trio, the Three Blues Chasers, the Bob Fuller Trio, and the Choo Choo Jazzers, for Columbia, Vocalion, Okeh and other companies. Researchers have turned up some five hundred Hooper recordings from his Harlem days. He earned $7.50 a side, and no royalties.

When he was seventy-seven, Hooper was interviewed by the Montreal *Gazette*, a newspaper founded by Benjamin Franklin during one of the periodic American attempts to conquer Canada and the temporary occupation of Montreal. Hooper said of the Harlem part of his life, "Oh man, those times were something else. I knew Fats Waller and Willie 'the Lion' Smith and the Duke. I remember one night at a place called the Hoofer's Club there was the Lion, Fats, Lucky Roberts, and the great James P. Johnson, all playing against one another. And then Fats got up and made that famous statement, 'Ladies and gentlemen, here is an artist.' James P. took a bow and the session broke up.

"I played at the Lafayette Theater in Harlem, too. I was in the pit when Bessie Smith played there, and I was there the night that Louis Armstrong came to New York. He made his debut with the Fletcher Henderson band, playing the *Whatcha Callem Blues*. The people received him almost boisterously, but he didn't like New York and went back to Chicago shortly after that."

Throughout the 1920s, Hooper accompanied on recordings trumpeters Johnny Dunn and Louis Metcalf, as well as Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey, and Mamie Smith. He accompanied Paul Robeson in 1926, then toured with Lew Leslie's *Blackbirds of 1928*, a revue that has been called the first important black musical. One member of the company was dancer Bill (Bojangles) Robinson. The show closed in 1929 at His Majesty's Theater in Montreal. Hooper went back to Detroit for a time, then in 1932 returned to Canada permanently. In Toronto, he joined Myron (Mynie) Sutton's near-legendary Canadian Ambassadors, an all-black dance band that played throughout Quebec and Ontario. He formed and led a male choir, the Hooper Southern Singers, in concerts and on radio, worked in dance and jazz bands, accompanied Billie Holiday in a 1939 Montreal appearance, and taught piano. He spent part of World War II in the Royal Canadian Artillery as a pianist and entertainer, then returned to work in Laurentian resort hotels, almost forgotten. In 1962, he was rediscovered and began to be recorded, then joined the faculty of the University of Prince Edward Island. He died in Charlottetown, P.E.I., in 1977.

This, then, was one of Oscar's early teachers. And Hooper never forgot his first encounter with Oscar. In an unpublished autobiography the manuscript of which is in the hands of Margaret Hooper, his widow, the pianist recalled getting a phone call from Dan Peterson, asking if he would take his son Oscar as a student. "I was not fully aware of his playing ability," Hooper wrote in his curiously courtly style, "nor the theoretical knowledge he already possessed. Suffice to say, I was in for a delightful surprise when I arrived at the Peterson home for the first lesson.

"I met Oscar, a rather plump eleven-year-old, looking very neat in an overly snug dark suit, buttoned up to the top and with knee-pants. My first pleasant experience came, when I was presented to him, in his polite manner and the pleasantly modulated voice in which he replied. As I came to know the parents and other members of the family at that time, I discovered this kind of courteous dignity to be a strong characteristic of all of them.

"When, on that first day, I asked Oscar to play for me, I was indeed astonished, not only at what I was hearing but at the intelligent interpretation; the easy and adequate technique while playing entirely from memory. This from a boy of eleven was, to say the least, unusual. Then followed a short period of basics — scales, arpeggi, keys, chords, minor versus major. He knew them all, as well as possessing nature's gift of perfect pitch, which I observed and tested fully.

"The Petersons were a family of six. The father was a one-time horn-player; Charlie, the eldest boy, played trumpet and piano until he met with a tragic accident in which he lost one hand, amputated at the wrist. With indomitable courage and an artificial hand-in-glove, he continues to play fine horn, using only his one hand . . .

"Following a few lessons with young Oscar and realizing his outstanding potential, I advised Mr. Peterson that, in view of Oscar's present ability, I had decided to select only such musical pieces as would challenge to the utmost his musicianship, leaving him to deal with them in his own way. As I observed the results through biweekly visits to his home, I was satisfied that this practice was proving satisfactory: it freed Oscar to forge his own illustrious way.

"Eventually we parted, I to leave Canada for six years of military service. When I returned to civilian life in 1945, I soon began to hear the name of Oscar Peterson, always in words of highest praise, and during a visit to his home, hearing him play I quickly understood and agreed. His playing that day was to me an experience in controlled power, facility, and gentleness. I heard Oscar from time to time following this meeting, and learned he was doing some studying with Paul de Marky."

Butch Watanabe says, "Art Tatum was the jazz influence on Oscar, but I don't think he was the pianistic influence." Pianist Mike Longo, who studied with Oscar, said, "I think his personality is like Liszt's." In 1963, Lalo Schifrin, the film composer, himself no mean pianist (he preceded Longo in the piano chair with Dizzy Gillespie), made this observation: "In their own time, it was said that Liszt conquered the piano, Chopin seduced it. Oscar is our Liszt and Bill Evans is our Chopin."

Pianist Paul Alexander de Marky was born in Gyula, Hungary, May 25, 1897. He emigrated to Canada in 1921, continuing to perform throughout Europe, the United States, and Canada while teaching from 1929 to 1937 at the McGill University Conservatory. Oscar studied with him throughout his years at Montreal High School. Demarky studied in Budapest with Istvan Thoman. Thoman studied with Liszt.

Oscar says, "Paul de Marky came into my life at a very important time. I was fourteen. I went to this man. He totally awed me with his beautiful sound on the instrument, his beautiful touch, and his command of the instrument, and I was so inspired by him I can remember unbeknownst to him going early to my lessons because I found he would practice, and I'd sit and listen to him. He'd be sitting there playing and playing, with this beautiful sound that he'd get out of the instrument.

"After the lesson, he'd say, 'What are you doing now, in your field, in the jazz field, what are you working on?' And I'd be teaching myself different tunes. I remember playing *The Man I Love* for him. He'd say, 'I don't hear the melody singing. The melody is choppy. Make it sing.'"

In 1982, de Marky, then eighty-five, recalled those lessons. "I taught him," de Marky said, "technique, speedy fingers, because that's what you need in modern jazz. Tatum had the speediest fingers. I gave Oscar Chopin studies. And then mostly, as I found that he was so good at melodic ballad style, I gave him the idea of big chords, like Debussy has them. Big rich soft chords. And his ballad playing is remarkable, when he plays those old-timers like *Laura* and *Tenderly*. If you have a

natural talent for your fingers and harmony, they can't go wrong if they wanted to."

"I had a certain amount of confidence," Oscar said, "but Paul de Marky really sort of made a believer out of me, from a musical and artistic standpoint. It's one thing to know you can play, to know you can skate up and down the rink, but as to how well you look doing it, how much finesse you have, how much confidence, how much interest you can create in your audience, I guess that all has to do with it. He made me believe that I did have something to offer the music world."

Hooper is Peterson's link to the Harlem of the 1920s, his deep early root into the earth of Willie the Lion and James P. Johnson. And de Marky is the link to Liszt and the great Nineteenth Century tradition of bravura piano playing, of which those who see Peterson simply as a derivation of Art Tatum seem unaware, particularly those jazz critics with little knowledge of classical music.

In 1980, when he was asked during a *Contemporary Keyboard* interview whether he still liked playing classical pieces, Peterson replied, "I enjoy some of the Liszt things, and Ravel, and of course Bach. It's hard to find a pianist who doesn't play Bach."

If there should remain any doubt of the extent to which de Marky steeped his pupil in the tradition of Liszt, it is dispelled by this exchange:

"I was most honored," Oscar told the interviewer, "when I played at the Montreal Olympics in 1976, because (Paul de Marky) came down to hear me play. I'm not nervous about playing in front of anybody, but that night I was like water backstage when I was told that he was seated with my sister down in front. My knees started to shake. It was obviously a throwback . . . . But I finally got rolling into the set, finished it, and went down to see him. I remember his first words to me. He grabbed my hands, looked at me, and said, 'You know, Franz Liszt would have loved to have played with you.'"

Oscar once told his friend Andre Previn:

"My first bruising with Art Tatum came at a very tender age, in my teens. I thought I was pretty heavy at school, you know — I'd play in all the lunch hours with all the chicks around the auditorium. And my Dad was watching all this quietly, and he got the feeling that I was getting a little too egotistical about it. And one day he came home and said, 'Listen, there's something I want you to hear. It's a record.' And he put it on, I'll never forget — it was Art Tatum's *Tiger Rag*. And, truthfully, I gave up the piano for two solid months; and I had crying fits at night."

During that time he played, along with trumpeter Maynard Ferguson, in a band called the Montreal High School Victory Serenaders, led by Ferguson's year-older brother, Percy, now a professor of psychology at Adirondack State College in Glenns Falls, New York. Oscar's father disapproved of his playing jazz, but his mother supported him. Maynard's father, also named Percy, was a respected teacher, principal of Aberdeen School, one of the English-speaking elementary schools within Montreal's unique bilingual school system, since abolished. He allowed the band to rehearse in the school's kindergarten, and Oscar's mother was able to point out that he was in a respectable place under respectable auspices. Mike Ferguson, as Maynard has always called his brother, remembers Oscar as "serious and responsible, particularly for someone that age. He was honest and punctual, never the one who was late. And he was very big. I still have pictures of us somewhere, rehearsing at the school."

As the high school's star trumpet player, Maynard was impressed into playing the bugle at the raising and the lowering of the flag, even in bitter winter cold. He says Oscar would stand inside a glass door, in the warmth, pointing at him and laughing helplessly. He says that Oscar and he were very close in those days, and that he has never lost the feeling. Oscar was already becoming a celebrity, Maynard says. Another Montreal High schoolmate remembers that Oscar always had a crowd of fellow students around him as he played boogie-woogie at tempos none of them had imagined possible.

One evening when Oscar was fourteen, Daisy asked him to go for a walk with her. She knew that Ken Soble, who conducted a nationwide amateur contest on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, was holding Montreal auditions. She took Oscar to the CBC studio. She had to push Oscar, who was then extremely shy, onto the stool and make him play. Soble immediately scheduled him for the program and put him on the air. Oscar went through the semifinals of the competition and won, then went on to Toronto to win the finals and a cash prize of $250. This led to a weekly broadcast on Montreal radio station CKAC, called *Fifteen Minutes Piano Rambling*. He performed during the war years on CBM, the CBC's English-language outlet in Montreal, and nationally on *The Happy Gang*, a CBC network radio program whose alumni include Robert Farnon.

Oscar fell under the influence of a pianist named Steep Wade, who played with the house band at Rockhead's Paradise, one of several clubs in the black neighborhood. Across the street from Rockhead's was the Cafe St. Michel, another St. Antoine Street jazz club.

"Steep was like a godfather to me, musically," Oscar says. "First of all, Rockhead's wasn't exactly in the safest part of town. I used to go there every night just to hear the guys play. They used to sneak me in because I was under age at the time. Steep used to call me 'kid'. On different nights when he used to go for a walk or listen to someone else's music, he'd say, 'Okay, kid, go on and play the show for me. I'll be back.'

"That's where I really served my jazz apprenticeship — in that environment."

Oscar finally dropped out of Montreal High School. He says, "The strongest memory of my dad is the day that I came home and told him I wanted to leave high school. And that was the day he told me I could leave, not to be another piano player, but to be the *best*. He didn't see the same obstacles that I saw. I'd say, 'Gee, y'know, this can't be done.' And he'd say, 'Why not? It got there. If it got there, you can remove it. Or if it isn't there, you can put it there.' It was that simple to him. And I think he instilled a great determination in me. Because he was a determined man."

But the move was not made without doubts. "After I made the decision to go into music," Oscar said, "I remember thinking about it and saying, 'How do you manage to put this all together, how do you string this together to make it financially and environmentally feasible?' I'd say, 'It's okay to play, but what do I do? Do I play a concert this week? You have to be good to play a concert. How do I get to that stage? How do I make money until I get to that stage? Do I play in an orchestra? And if I got into an orchestra, does it mean that I'm going to be stuck there for the rest of my life? Or do I do some studio work? And does it mean I'm going to be stationed there the rest of my life? And how do I get to make recordings, and what if the recordings don't work?' I can remember sitting up one night thinking that there really was no way for me to make a decent living being a jazz artist. And happily, of course, I've proven myself wrong."

From 1942 through 1947, Oscar was a member of the Johnny Holmes Orchestra, one of the leading bands of the area in that period, whose personnel included Maynard and Percy Ferguson, Nick Ayoub, and Al Baculis, as well as Peterson. In a

1959 interview with *Down Beat*, Peterson said that Holmes had a considerable influence on him in that he helped him grow as a ballad player at a time when he was caught in boogie-woogie. (Indeed, he had become known as the Brown Bomber of Boogie-Woogie.)

Holmes recalled, "He started with us in 1942. The amazing thing is that when he came into our band at seventeen, he had a technique I think every bit equivalent to what he has now. But he was a diamond in the rough. He would blow everything in the first chorus. So I had a talk with him. I said, 'Look, your piano playing is great, but . . . You've heard Tommy Dorsey's band. You know the way Joe Bushkin plays. Fills in behind the saxophones, does some solo work. But he doesn't monopolize the entire thing."

"The problem with that regimentation," Oscar said, "was getting used to it. Up to this time, I'd been playing anything I wanted to play any way at all. I went up and sat in with the band, and I enjoyed it. And I suddenly thought that this is another facet of music that I hadn't really been exposed to — a big dance orchestra. And I wanted to get some experience in that way, and I remained in that band I can't really recall how many years." In 1946, when he was still with Holmes, he told *Liberty*, "(Johnny) is responsible for building up my technique. He really broke me all apart when I started with him. I was overdoing boogie-woogie and was completely at a loss for slow music. He showed me the style I'm using today. He's responsible for the style I put out on my records."

The *Liberty* article relates: "Peterson is the only colored man in the Holmes band, and despite a bit of pressure caused by racial prejudice, Johnny Holmes took Oscar with him and the band to a summer assignment in the Laurentian Mountains, at Ste Adele, last year." Later it says, "Montreal, like its sister cities everywhere, is not consistent about racial prejudice. Johnny Holmes' band, with Oscar at the piano, has played in the homes of rich young debutantes at coming-out parties, and Victoria Hall, the band's regular stand, is in one of Montreal's better areas. The bobby-soxers and others plague the black boy for his autograph and they crowd around the bandstand five deep on Saturday night to listen in ecstasy as Oscar 'sends' them. . . . In the band, Oscar enjoys high popularity, and Holmes gets very bitter about the prejudice shown on occasions to his number one attraction. 'You couldn't meet a finer guy anywhere,' he says." This is consistent with the memory of everyone who knew Oscar in his youth. Maynard Ferguson says his father just adored Oscar.

The *Liberty* piece describes him: "big and broad and a shade darker than most Negroes. When Oscar smiles, his huge face is suddenly alight with white and his shy eyes smile too, so that strangers get a feeling of personal warmth and eager friendliness. There isn't anything peculiar about this, because he is a genuine person who has not been spoiled."It was only a year prior to that article that Oscar told his mother he wanted to record. There was virtually no recording industry in Canada at the time. Nonetheless, she urged him to call one of the record companies and simply say so. With trepidation, Oscar telephoned Hugh Joseph, who was in charge of RCA Victor recordings in Canada. "It has worked out well," Joseph said after Peterson's first boogie records exploded across Canada. "I had the boy in mind for some time because his popularity was growing and the young crowd in Montreal were talking about Holmes' band and the boy at the piano. I guess we would have got after him if he hadn't approached us. He is under contract to us now and we are happy about it." Peterson's first four records had sold in the thousands, to the company's happy surprise, and Joseph made what has turned out to be an accurate prediction: "The future looks long and promising."

Oscar began an association with RCA Victor Canada that was to last four years. The first side he recorded was *I Got Rhythm*. It was followed by about two dozen sides, including one called *Oscar's Boogie* and Ellington's *Rockin' in Rhythm*, which for a long time he used as a theme. "They weren't too representative of my playing at the time," he said years later. Listened to now, they are very poor Peterson. He had not yet assimilated the various elements of his work. But they were played at ferocious speed and demonstrated what a prodigious technician he was.

By 1948, he was leading a trio at the Alberta Lounge, whose personnel included Clarence Jones, drums, and Ozzie Roberts, bass. Guitarist Bernard Johnson later replaced Jones. The trio was heard on radio station CFCF. A legend has grown up that Norman Granz, on his way to Montreal Airport in a taxi, heard one of these broadcasts, was astounded, ordered the driver to go to the Albert Lounge instead, heard Peterson, and swept him off to sudden fame with *Jazz at the Philharmonic* at Carnegie Hall. In the June 4, 1979, issue of *Maclean's* magazine, Marsha Boulton, accepting it without question, wrote, "His obsession with learning paid off and at twenty-five, Oscar Peterson was discovered in fairytale fashion by U.S. jazz impressario Norman Granz who whisked him off to New York to make his debut in Carnegie Hall, after which *Down Beat* wrote . . ."

Both Oscar and Granz tell the story. Granz says, "The cabby had some music playing, and I assumed that it was a disc that some disc jockey was playing, and I asked him if he knew the station. I'd like to call them and find out who the pianist was with the trio. And he said, 'No, that's not a record, it's coming live from a club called the Alberta Lounge.' He said, 'It's Oscar Peterson.' And I said, 'Well, forget the airport, turn around and let's go to the club.'"

Oscar's version is this: "I couldn't believe he was sitting in the lounge. And he sat and talked to me, and he said, 'Why do you make those terrible boogie-woogie records? That's not you, you don't play like that.' I said, 'Well, that's what I was asked to do at the time.' He said, 'Well, I'd like you to take a shot at the American jazz market, I think you could bring something to it, I think it would be a tremendous innovation, the fact first of all of the way you play, and secondly the fact that you're not an American.' He said, 'I think it would be great.' And when I finally agreed to do it, he decided it should be in Carnegie Hall. I was thinking of a smaller city. But he decided the proper place would be Carnegie Hall. He said, 'Take your best shot, you'll know in one shot. You won't have to dilly-dally. If you make it, you'll know it. If you don't make it, you'll know that too.'"

There are some serious problems with the story, no matter that Granz and Peterson are the authorities for it. Oscar already had a considerable reputation among American musicians, including some with whom Granz worked. Jimmie Lunceford had asked him to join his band. So had Count Basie. Both leaders had, according to contemporary reports, made him substantial offers. Three years before the meeting with Granz, Oscar was telling reporters, "I prefer to stay here. Bands here in Canada easily measure up to some of the name bands in the States. I believe I'll make just as much right here in Montreal. This is my home, anyway. With Johnny we play along about the same style as any top band in the United States. And I get more kicks and bangs out of playing with his band." Note the typically Canadian reflexive comparison to the work of the Americans.

Coleman Hawkins, Woody Herman, and Ella Fitzgerald were well aware of him and in the habit of dropping by the Alberta when they were in Montreal. Coleman Hawkins said he had heard and been tremendously impressed by Oscar as far back as 1945. Oscar had even received a long review in

Metronome, at that time *Down Beat*'s competitor. In 1947, Jim Butler wrote in the magazine, "His better (RCA Victor) sides, *Blue Moon, One Hour with You, China Boy*, and *Louise*, show a good amount of clean harmonic ideas. His slow and medium-tempoed recordings show off his ideas, which incidentally are closely similar to those of Nat Cole, to the best advantage. On up tempo numbers many fluffs are apparent. With further experience, however, these faults should be corrected."

Butler even gives us, in this near-forgotten review, an insight into Peterson's relationship with Johnny Holmes. "Early last August," Butler said, "this writer had the chance of hearing Johnny Holmes' fine, jumping band which still features Oscar. At this point it might do to mention that Oscar and Johnny have built up a very fine friendship. Holmes, who was Oscar's manager for a time, would give his right arm for his idolized pianist. Oscar's loyalty to Holmes is quite obvious. With the popularity he has gained through the country, especially in his recent personal appearances, Oscar could easily have a permanent job as a single attraction in any number of local night spots. Instead, Oscar prefers to remain with the Holmes band, insisting that he gets more kicks by following the latter policy.

"On par with his personal loyalties is his desire to remain in Canada instead of accepting some of the big offers he has received from American band leaders, such as Jimmie Lunceford. Realizing that competition below the Canadian border is also much stiffer, Oscar is wise in sticking to Canada for the present where he has virtually free rein in his line.

"If Oscar Peterson continues to improve as steadily as he has done in the past year there is no reason why he can't be in the same class as Teddy Wilson, Erroll Garner and, yes, even Art Tatum."

Butler's piece, which precedes by a year and a half the much more famous and quoted Mike Levin review in *Down Beat*, tells us two things: that Peterson had formed a professional and personal attachment to Johnny Holmes much like the one he would have later with Norman Granz; and it is all but impossible that Granz had not heard of him until he was taking a cab to Montreal Airport. Even the *Metronome* piece was not the first exposure Peterson had had in the United States. In 1944, a full three years before it, *Down Beat* had headlined: "Count Basie raves about young Canadian pianist!"

And there is that *Liberty* magazine article of January 12, 1946, which described him as "the most commercially successful pianist of his age in Canada — and perhaps the most commercially successful anywhere," and said that both Basie and Lunceford had made special trips up from New York to hear him. Oscar had already turned down a bid from Hollywood, and an American tour was in the planning stage. It was to follow a three-month tour of Canada. The *Liberty* article, written by Harold Dingman, said that Oscar was constantly jamming with New York musicians during visits to Montreal. "On two occasions recently," Dingman wrote, "he set huge crowds wild in His Majesty's Theater with Frank(ie) Newton and Wilbur de Paris when they came up on tour."

According to Lou Hooper, Dizzy Gillespie also discovered Oscar at this time. Hooper was there when it happened. His manuscript relates: "One night when name bands were being booked into the former nightspot called Chez Maurice, the Dizzy Gillespie band was the current attraction. My son and I were there, as we both dug Dizzy's playing. Oscar had finished his appearance at the Alberta Lounge, and had come into the hall while the band was playing a set. His name was immediately spread by the real cats via the grapevine through the hall, on its way to the bandstand. Evidently Dizzy had not heard Oscar play, and he invited him to join the band for a set. The look of sheer disbelief on Diz's face when Oscar took his spot in the number with a display of solid dance-band piano which, even in its great rhythm, did sound here and there as though four or even six hands might have been combined in the performance, was something to see."

We can fix the time of that discovery within a few weeks. Leonard Feather, in his book *From Satchmo to Miles*, remembers getting a phone call from Montreal from a wildly enthusiastic Gillespie. Dizzy told him, "Leonard, there's a pianist up here who's too much. You've never heard anything like it!" It was toward the end of 1948. So Leonard Feather too knew of him that far back.

According to Hooper, Dizzy wanted Oscar to join his band there and then, but Oscar declined. In later years Dizzy and Oscar would record together almost innumerable times.

Finally, there is a self-evident contradiction in Oscar's version of the meeting with Granz: he says Granz denigrated the boogie-woogie style of the records as not typical of Peterson's way of playing, which indicates that Granz knew the records before hearing that possibly apocryphal radio broadcast. The truth seems to be that Granz asked Oscar several times to appear with JATP, but Oscar kept insisting he wasn't ready. Finally, in 1949, he agreed.

However it happened, Granz took him to New York that September and planted him in the Carnegie Hall audience, then introduced him as a visitor from Canada. Granz called him up to play, accompanied by Ray Brown, then the husband of Ella Fitzgerald and one of the most prestigious bass-players in jazz. In the October 21, 1949, issue of *Down Beat*, the magazine's New York editor, Mike Levin, reported, "A Montreal citizen, Oscar Peterson, stopped the Norman Granz *Jazz at the Philharmonic* concert dead cold in its tracks here last month. Balancing a large and bulky body at the piano much in the fashion of Earl Hines, Peterson displayed a flashy right hand, a load of bop and (George) Shearing ideas, as well as a good sense of harmonic development. And in addition, he scared some of the local modern minions by playing bop ideas in his *left* hand, which is distinctly not the common practice. Further than this, Peterson impressed musicians here by not only having good ideas and making them, but giving them a rhythmic punch and drive which has been all too lacking in too many of the younger pianists. Whereas some of the bop stars conceive good ideas but sweat to make them, Peterson rips them off with an excess of power which leaves no doubt about his technical excess (sic) in reserve."

Recalling that period of his life, Oscar said, "When I went to the United States, I'd go into the studio to do radio shows or television shows, and I'd look over and there wouldn't be any blacks in the orchestra, and I knew really that it was a clique thing, everyone had their pets, and they did what they did. This is why black musicians had to go the way of the jazz route. We had no other route to go. And I decided that if the only way I was going to make it happen was to frighten the hell out of everybody pianistically, then that's the way I was going to make it. If that's what it took to get the attention, then I was going to do my best to do it that way."

The foregoing is from a work in progress. I am writing a biography of Oscar Peterson. If you have any stories, any reminiscences, about him — either seeing him or working with him — I would deeply appreciate your taking the time to write me about them.