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Jazzletter

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Letters

Lyn Murray's account, in *Radio Romances*, of the experiment on WGH in Newport News had me laughing so hard that I had to read it three times because of difficulty in seeing through the tears. I may have known Lyn Murray back in the days when he was with WCAU in Philadelphia. I sang on that station from time to time, and remember one day when my offering was a song, *Beauty's Eyes* (Tosti?), that I used to sing at weddings. What sticks in my mind is the announcer telling our listeners, "We'll hear now from Henry Pleasants, who sees things through beauty's eyes." Well, he still does.

Henry Pleasants
London

Boy with Drum

Is he, I wondered as I drove into Los Angeles that evening, as marvelous a drummer as I remember? Or have time and affection colored my impression of his playing? I had not heard Edmund Thigpen play in person in twenty years, excepting in Dusseldorf, when he worked on the Sarah Vaughan album with us, doing a journeyman job in a big orchestra that offered no room for his personal expression — and left me no time to listen to what he was doing in any event. The reason is that he had been living in Copenhagen, part of the enclave of American players there that included Kenny Drew, Thad Jones, Sahib Shihab, Richard Boone, and Ernie Wilkins.

"There are as many reasons for living over here as there are musicians doing it," he wrote to me three or four years ago. "Race is only one of them. In my case it was love of a woman." The girl was Danish. Her name was Inga-Lisa. She became Ed's second wife and bore him a son, Michel, and a daughter, Denise. She died four years ago of the complications of cancer. "She'd been sick a long time," Ed said gently. He stayed on in Denmark to be, as Shihab and others will tell you, mother and father to his children. The children began to ask him, "When are you going to take us home to America, Daddy?" Two years ago he brought them on a visit. The journey was a landmark in their lives. Until then, their impression of American blacks had been obtained largely from television, and they knew little of the black American middle class.

Ed has been coming home more and more of late, playing and, particularly, teaching. He was always a natural and intuitive teacher, and I, for one, learned a lot from him. That was back in the early 1960s, in Chicago, his native city, although I for a long time thought he was from St. Louis. His real home is Los Angeles.

He was born September 28, 1930, the son of Ben Thigpen, himself a superior drummer best known for his work in the Andy Kirk orchestra. In 1951, Ed joined the Cootie Williams band at the Savoy Ballroom in New York. He was in military service from 1952 to 1954, first as a drum instructor at Fort Ord, California, later with the Eighth Army Band in Korea. After his discharge, he returned to New York and worked with Dinah Washington, the Johnny Hodges band, Gil Melle, Jutta Hipp, and Toshiko Akiyoshi, and recorded with many of the best young players of his generation. He worked with Lennie Tristano, with the Billy Taylor trio, then for six years with the Oscar Peterson trio. He went on the road with Ella Fitzgerald in 1966 and in 1967 returned to Los Angeles where, in a short time, he worked with Pat Boone, Andy Williams, Peggy Lee, Johnny Mathis, Oliver Nelson, and Gerald Wilson, and in the studios. He is a particularly excellent drummer for singers because of his sensitivity, the delicacy of which he is capable, and in 1967 Fitzgerald lured him back onto the road. He stayed with her until 1972, when he settled in Denmark and began playing the European jazz festivals and teaching at the Conservatory in Aarhus. And he gradually began to be forgotten in America.

I also mused, as I drove in to see him that night, on the reasons we had become such close friends. I liked Ed Thigpen the moment I met him, which was in mid-1959. He joined the Oscar Peterson trio January 1, 1959. I joined *Down Beat* a few months later, and came to know Thigpen when the trio played the London House, that excellent restaurant at the corner of Wacker Drive and Michigan Boulevard, looking across the Chicago River at the mad Gothic architecture of mad Colonel McCormick's *Tribune* building and the equally improbable wedding cake architecture of the Wrigley building. It was a historic club that brought in superb jazz groups, treated them royally, did first-class publicity on them, and served them and the paying customers some of the finest steaks to be had in all the American midwest. It's gone now, its location become a Wendy's or a Burger King or one of those. A friend in Chicago told me that when Art Farmer saw what it is now, he got tears in his eyes. The London House was a classy joint, and the Peterson group played it at least twice a year, which meant that I saw a lot of Edmund Thigpen in the years from 1959 to 1962.

Sometimes he and his first wife, Lois, would stay with me and my then-wife in our apartment on a street with an appropriate name — Bittersweet Street. It was at what Chicagoans call forty hundred north, in the block between Broadway and the lake in one of the most beautiful city fronts in the world. I have lovely floating memories of that time, the four of us at the beach down at the Indiana Dunes, going to openings, laughing in the night, talking. Always talking. Ed and I had interminable conversations.

He was a notably polite young man, quite good-looking, of middle height, dapper, with a resonant clear voice and literate enunciation. His manner with people was serene, direct, open, and devoid of suspicion.

One day as we were driving home we heard a clanking under his car, a small European station wagon. We got out, looked, and found the exhaust pipe and muffler dragging on the pavement. We took the car to a garage in my neighborhood. A young mechanic, with that kind of stringy blond hair, wiping his hands on an oil rag, asked what seemed to be the trouble. I winced at his accent — that of a cracker, whether from Tennessee or Kentucky or Georgia I couldn't tell, but a cracker — and anticipated hostility. This was only three or four years after Selma and Montgomery and Bull Connor and the cattle prods.

The mechanic ran the car up on the hoist and looked at its underside. He told Ed he didn't have a pipe to fit it but thought he could make one. Ed told him to go ahead. He fired up an

acetylene torch and began cutting the broken pipe away, close to the gas tank.

"You can stay here and get blown up if you want," I told Ed, "but I'm standing across the street." And we watched from a distance through the open garage doors as the mechanic tried to bend a pipe to fit Ed's car. At the end of an hour, he said he just couldn't do it.

Ed thanked him and said, "What do I owe you?"

"Nothin'," the young man said. "Ah didn't fix it, did ah?"

But Ed insisted on paying him something.

As we drove off (in a very noisy car) I told Ed of the twinge I'd felt when I heard the man's accent. "You can't judge people like that," Ed said. "You can't judge them by their accent." Which tells you something about Ed, who majored in sociology at Los Angeles City College before deciding that his life lay in music.

But judging people by accent, I have realized in the years since then, is just what America does — as England does. American bigotry is rooted perhaps as much in speech as in color. His accent contributed to the destruction of Jimmy Carter. And Lyndon Johnson's didn't do him much good, either.

Another insight into Edmund came through an incident involving a butcher. My wife had made a connection with a butcher who gave us very good cuts of meat. He turned out to be a jazz fan. When she mentioned that Ed Thigpen and his wife were staying with us, he was overwhelmed. When she got home, she told us that he had asked if he might come by and meet Ed. I had misgivings but Ed saw no reason why he shouldn't, and the next afternoon the man turned up. In a rapture bordering on mesmerism, he hung on Ed's every word. Ed was patient with him, even as the afternoon turned into evening and he showed no signs of leaving. Finally, we made it obvious that we had to get dressed to go to the London House, and, reluctantly, the man left. And we dressed.

As we were descending the front steps of the building, the man returned, carrying a large tray covered in aluminum foil. He said he had a present for Ed and Lois, and removed the foil, like an artist unveiling a painting or a sculpture. And a sculpture indeed, or at least a sort of bas relief, was what it was: a great red heart made out of ground beef, pierced by strips of steak or veal, the whole strange thing surrounded by smaller hearts shaped out of filet mignon. He had made it, he told Ed and Lois, "as a tribute to your great love." I never forgot the phrase — nor the tribute. It was one of the most astonishing things I had ever seen.

And one could not laugh. I remember vividly the graciousness and sincerity with which Ed thanked the man, who almost glowed as he went home, no doubt to listen to his Ed Thigpen records. We took the tray into the house, set it in the refrigerator, and left. In the taxi, we began to laugh. Although I am not sure whether Ed laughed.

He was under a lot of pressure in those days. So was I. Although he already had a solid reputation, joining Peterson had propelled him up to a high national visibility. And I, just having become the editor of *Down Beat*, was in a somewhat similar position. Maybe that had something to do with the relationship. We were both in hot seats, and I for one was scared.

Oscar puts pressure on players. I think it made Ed nervous, but he survived it, and pianist Eddie Higgins, who led the house trio at London House during those years and thus probably heard the group in person more than anyone else on the planet, excepting its own members, has argued (*Jazzletter* 4/7) that it was the greatest piano trio in jazz history.

There are in one's life those relationships wherein conversation seems to resume where it left off years ago. As Ed and I settled to dinner in the restaurant at the Sunset Hyatt hotel in the Sunset Strip area of Los Angeles, I said something about that pressure.

"Geniuses have a tendency to do that," he said with a smile. "Buddy Rich is like that."

"Do you consider Buddy Rich a genius?"

"Yes. Definitely. He's just incredible. He's a great, *fantastic*, player. If it can be done on a drum, he can do it. He's absolutely incredible. I've heard people say he doesn't swing. I think he swings. I used to practice with things he does. I've heard it said he's not subtle. I've heard him be so subtle, so gentle. The man can *play*. I told him — and I'd tell Oscar — that geniuses don't realize that what they do is hard. They just do it. They're hard on themselves as well, though. Extremely. If they're not *fair*, in such cases, it's debatable what's fair. So far as the pressure is concerned, it's what one allows oneself to be subjected to for what one's personal goals are.

"I had pressure, a lot of it, but a lot of it was due to myself. It doesn't mean that a person won't apply it, because they certainly will, but if I sat there and took it, I had my reasons. It was a great honor, and I learned a great deal. Certainly in the long run, I made it work. I benefited from it. And my contribution, which I found out many years later, was obviously worth all of it. The performances we did had a lasting impact. It took a long time for me to realize what my contributions to that group had been."

"Well," I said, "a classic example of what you did with that group is *Con Alma*. You recorded that twice with them, including the *Swinging Brass* album with Russ Garcia and the big band. Take out what you did with the tymp mallets on cowbell and tom-tom, see what a difference it would make." We sang the rhythm figure together.

"You know," Ed said, "many people still associate me with that group."

"They still call me the former editor of *Down Beat*. I was there not quite three years, and left twenty-five years ago. But you read what Eddie Higgins said about the group. You hear arguments from people who think the trio with you was the greatest and the ones who think the trio with Herb Ellis was the greatest."

"The same way with Ahmad's group with Israel Crosby and Vernel Fournier. That was an incredible group. They were unique. I didn't listen to our records for about ten or twelve years after I left in 1965. It's been twenty-one years."

"When did you join the group?"

"Officially, '59. January 1, 1959. I was called right before Christmas of '58. I had been called earlier in '58 for the job, when I was with Billy Taylor. It was a matter of how much bread. It seemed I asked for a little bit too much, and Norman Granz decided to get someone else. I could have kicked myself. I just could have kicked myself. But, as they say, the Lord provided, and the call came anyway five months later."

"How did you happen to be chosen?"

"I first encountered Oscar in Japan. I think Ray had something to do with it. I was in Korea. I had gone down to Tokyo on R. and R., right before I came home. *Jazz at the Phil*

Notice

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was there. Naturally, I knew Ben Webster and most of the guys because of my father. And I knew Ray from New York. I was very young when I first met Ray, and he was very kind. He took me out and gave me a milk shake and sent me home.

"I started doing a lot of Prestige and Blue Note things, some dates with Coltrane, some things with Art Farmer and Kenny Dorham. I was recording just enough to get reviews every couple of months, and they were always very favorable. And I started moving up that way. And then I recorded Toshiko's first album in America, and Lee Morgan's first album. It was the young new ones coming around. Then, Ray, Kenny Burrell, and I recorded with Blossom Dearie.

"I always wanted to be with Oscar's group, even when Herb was with that band. I told Ray in Japan, 'The only thing wrong with this group is you need a drummer.' Ray said, 'Well, y'never know, kid.' I said, 'I need to play with this group. I love this group.' And they went out and proceeded to swing so hard I thought, 'Well, maybe I'll miss it, but I still would like to play with the group.' So it was four years later that I joined them. Yeah, it was a lot of pressure though, back to that. It was. Because whatever insecurities I had . . . I was in awe of those guys, I loved them, I really loved them, and when it's like that, you give everything you have. They were so heavy, so fantastic and, obviously, so acclaimed, that I was in awe of both of them. Ray was very kind. All the time. He just took me under his wing and saved me."

"I don't think Ray is as moody as Oscar. Oscar's told me stories that . . ."

"Well; let me put it this way. Like I said, geniuses are different. Oscar's just as kind as Ray. He knew what he wanted. There are certain things he looks for. He was just as hard on himself. He was a perfectionist. One thing you learn with people like that, and you never lose it, and I'm very grateful for it, is a standard of performance. It was so high. He had a thing where he said, 'On our worst night, we've got to sound better than most people on their best night.' And so consequently, every song was an opener and a closer, there was no skating, no nothin' — never. You never cheat, ever. When you come up under that kind of discipline, it stays with you, man. So wherever you are, man, something must happen.

"There are other great artists, actors or whatever, when they place this kind of demand upon themselves, to get the optimum that they can do, whatever that extra something is — outside of our gifts from our good Lord — that extra effort is what makes the winners, the real ones. It's like that's the whole thing, that's your life."

I have always wondered how people chose their instruments. There are only two instruments that I can imagine appealing to a child, the piano and the guitar, since they can function both melodically and harmonically and thus in complete independence of other instruments. I am always amazed that someone somehow in his past endured the anguish of learning to play drums or bass or trumpet or saxophone, the practicing of which in the early stages must be singularly unrewarding if not downright agonizing. I am both bemused that they have done this, persisted in it long enough to attain that mastery that has given me a lifetime of delights, and infinitely grateful. I mentioned this to Ed, adding, "Ray told me he took up the bass because it was the last instrument they had left in his high school band." Ed chuckled, as if he were not quite buying *that* story from Ray. I said, "Of all the instruments, there is none that I can imagine would be harder to get started on than drums."

"It's relative. Piano is very difficult. You've got four limbs, and the problem of co-ordination. It depends on the teachers, the motivation. Certain people have certain little gifts. Some people just *do* it."

"Did you have a good teacher? Or did you just start?"

"No, I just started. I took little lessons. The first real teacher I had was just a joke. He wasn't teaching anything. You learned on your own. He was giving me a press roll while he was practicing his piano lessons. It was during the Depression."

"But why did you choose drums? Because of your father?"

"Partially because of that, I guess. I didn't grow up with him."

"You're from St. Louis, aren't you?"

"No, I was born in Chicago and they brought me up in St. Louis until I was four."

"But *he* was from St. Louis."

"No. He moved there when he left Andy Kirk's band. People associate him with St. Louis because most of the later years he was there. East St. Louis is actually where he went."

"That's where Miles is from."

"Miles's father's dental office was right around the corner from my father's house. My father's and Rosemary's. My spiritual mother. I guess you'd say step-mother, I don't like that word, I think of her as my mother reincarnated. They had a house around the corner from Miles's father's dental practice. I lived there for one year exactly, from my nineteenth to the middle twentieth year, then I went to New York and on the road."

"The rest of the time you were in California with your mother. Didn't you go to high school with Vi Redd?" Vi remembers him as very shy and polite. She says she was surprised when he emerged as a major drummer in the 1950s, having had no idea he was even involved in music when they were young.

"No, junior high. Actually, I went to junior high school with Vi's brother Buddy. They were with the Hightower Orchestra. My mother brought me here in 1935. I grew up here, on the east side, 48th Street. I had most of my schooling here. I had a beautiful experience here last week at the NAJE convention. I saw some of the guys down at the union, and they said you should call Mr. Browne, Samuel Browne. He was our music teacher. I called him, he's retired now, and he said, 'What are you doing here?' And he was about to receive an award at the NAJE convention."

"Where did he teach?"

"The Jefferson High School swing band. Dexter Gordon went through that band earlier. Art and Addison Farmer. They were from Arizona, but they grew up here. And one who came up after me, Frank Morgan. He was playing everything in the Tenth Grade."

"Due to Samuel Browne?"

"Due to their talent, they were all great players, but he nurtured it. He encouraged us to go on as far as we could go."

"Did you know Art all that way back?"

"Sure, and his brother too."

"Yeah, I knew Addison. Fairly well. What a shock his loss was."

"They were one year ahead of me. They graduated with the Prometheans. I graduated with the Carthaginians."

"What were they?"

"High school class names."

"Well, I didn't grow up among you Americans. I don't know all your strange folkways."

Ed laughed, then said, "We had a lot of good players. Good arrangers too. When I was in junior high school, we had a drum battle in the assembly. There were three players, including Buddy Redd, Vi's brother. I came in third. It was a good lesson, I didn't even know how to use a high hat. They played good. But I remember walking in the hallway, and a girl saying to me,

'Thig, you didn't win, but we liked what you did.' I've never forgotten it, all my life. It showed me that, in the United States, in America, with all the negative things you hear about it, we were taught as a credo that it doesn't matter who wins, the thing is that you were able to participate. There may be only one winner, but as long as somebody cares what you do, you're still in the ballgame, and you always had the chance of getting better. Whatever your limitations today, if you continued, maybe tomorrow the limitations would be gone."

"I saw something on the news the other day, a young black kid, nineteen years old, had won some athletic award, and the interviewer asked, 'Is this what you're going to do with your life?' and he said, 'Oh no, bio-engineering is my direction,' and I thought that twenty-five or thirty years ago he might not have been able to say that."

"That would depend on who it was. It depends on what your talents are, and when you were coming up," Ed said. "As I come back to this country, I see so much progress in the society in some ways. I see other things where it's standing dead still with the intent of going backwards. I come back to *my* America, if you want to call it that, my people — you, and people I know that you don't hear a lot about, people who are busy just trying to do the right thing. I refute the idea of the so-called silent majority."

"You're right. It's not a silent majority. It's a mouthy minority."

"In many ways, yes. This country is sick, in many areas. But it's sick all over the world. We were brought up to believe you have to do what you have to do. It's a matter of courage. We were brought up with the Christian ethic, and taking it to heart. Not the misuse of it, but the fact of forgiveness as a very very powerful force. Jo Jones, my mentor, used to say, 'To hate makes sickness.' When you hate, it makes you sick. The longer I point out, the more my finger starts curving, until it's pointing at me. It behooves me to carry myself well. There but for the grace of God go I. It could be me just as well as them — acting stupid.

"It's interesting, coming back here. Seeing the changes. Time moving on. The changing in styles. The changing of the guard, so to speak. Youth must be served. All the cliches which, in later life, you begin to find out have a definite meaning. The young, many of them, they want the truth. Here I am coming back into the big pool, so to speak, the United States, re-establishing myself for the last four years or so, not so much in playing as in education. Many of these kids haven't a clue who I am, not that it matters, many of them don't know who Duke Ellington is, either. So who am I to complain? At the NAMM convention today — " he referred to the National Association of Music Manufacturers, gathered that week at Anaheim. " — I was with a very fine young drummer, doing a lot of recording, very visible, one of the people who are very strong. A young man came up to him and wanted to pay him a compliment and have his picture taken with him. And he said, 'Do you know this gentleman here? This is Ed Thigpen.' And the guy didn't know me, and he wanted to almost push me out of the way to take the picture. It's like watching the fighters, the new breed coming in. And you're out here still trying to do your thing, too. But the music has evolved into another thing that is popular. And you can't go into all the business of why it is, whatever it is. The point is: What is your worth in this whole scene now? And how do you compete in it? Because you have to compete to make a living. What role do *you* play? You're not as visible, so everybody doesn't know who you are at the moment. And you're trying to get back on the covers, so people will know your presence. So it's like starting over in some ways. Then somebody walks up to you with a salt and pepper beard and says, 'Hey, I know everything you ever did,' and he's raving. And you're leaving and all of a sudden a young man — a *young* man, one of the up-and-coming people — walks up to you and says, 'I have your brush book, and it's helped me so much,' and so on and so on. And he is doing contemporary things. So you could have been down because of that lack of recognition on the one hand, and you turn around and it all balances out. So the recognition is coming not through some record you just made, but on another plane, because your contribution now at this point in your life is through a brush book, and a video cassette I made. This is what I wanted, and this is what I went after. And then when they hear you play, with Tommy Flanagan or somebody, and you can present the music, then it becomes something else.

"It's a very productive area. It's like watching your kids grow up, the way they had to watch us grow up. He — or she — is looking you dead in the eye, but you may be looking up to them, because what they're talking about is valid. The trick is where you can become truly the extension and share this learning experience of life together. You take your experience or my experience — the experience of the older ones — youth can use that. But there must be mutual respect for them to accept it. By the same token, you can take what they have to offer and add it to what you have, because *that*'s valid. There are certain things that I have in mind to do, but physically I can't do them. I can hear 'em. But this young cat's got the technique that he *could* pull it off. Like a good athlete. You need that extension of you out there, with that physical thing, to bring it forth. And it's quite rewarding. When it happens, boy, the joy! I can readily understand the joy and importance of a coach, of a choreographer, of a director who is sympatico with the artist who can bring it off. They become extensions of each other."

"Are there, then, some of the rock drummers you like?"

"Yeah, loads of 'em!"

"To me, they are the essence of non-swinging."

"It's a different kind of swing. The groove. It's different. The epitome was the English drummers, until Steve Gadd came along. Harvey Mason. Some of the English kids are the best, at what they do. So much of it has to do with marketing, labeling, promotion, a lot of hoopla and brain-washing that doesn't have much to do with the music. I've been trying to put it into words. You mentioned swing. Somehow it clicked today, the difference. There's a groove. To get a funk groove — that's more jazz-oriented, with the twelve-eight, whereas with rock they're basing it on the eighth note. Now you can get a *groove* on it. You can pop your finger on it, you can get a groove. An eighth note is not a swing groove. But it *is* a groove, and you can get down with it. It's like salsa. Like marches, in some instances. Now the closest you can get, with that jazz emphasis on two and four. Then you put those other minipulses in there. That's the part that comes from the swing, that kind of two-four lilt."

"You know, Klook's playing amazes me. He could boot a big band playing comparatively quietly."

"He was playing *music*. It's the pulse. You let the music come through the rhythm — through the swing, through the ride rhythm. It's like punctuation. When you phrase, you don't always use an exclamation mark. You're enhancing what's already there. It's like spice. At the same time, you lay a foundation that can function properly, secure."

"I can't believe what Klook could do with a cymbal. I've heard Elvin Jones do wonderful things with different tones out of a cymbal, with where the stick is placed. Klook was so so subtle with the way the tone shifted."

"Playing with Thad, I'm learning that very well. It's a very interesting thing. It's what do you hit, what you don't even have to hit. If you have good arrangers and if you play the music. . .

let the music play itself, almost, if they're good arrangers . . . you have to love the music, love the people. It's not your own little personal ego trip. You know, I'd like to write some things. There are a lot of myths in jazz. Like the use of the bass drum. I mean the myth of the evolution of bebop drumming. They attributed bebop drumming to putting the time up on the cymbal."

"Yeah, you read it day after day."

"See, that wasn't true. It really wasn't true. I argued that back when I was in high school and I heard Max Roach and Art Blakey and different people on those early records. I used to argue with my fellow students that it wasn't true. And then when I got to New York, I found out the truth, and then when I moved in with my Dad again, I found out more. They explained to me how they feathered the bass drum. They played four beats to the bar, they kept the pulse down there, but they learned to play with a *touch*, so that when people like Jimmy Blanton and Milt Hinton came along, who were classically trained — Milt was trained as a violinist, and picked up the bass because he couldn't make any money playing the violin — they had harmonic and tonal awareness and the bass was carrying the foundation of the harmony. So the bass drum couldn't be louder than the bass. It had to be *there*, to give that extra punch, but it couldn't be louder. I do a thing in my classes, man, where I show that you can't carry no band with a ride cymbal. Can't do it. It's impossible."

"Well, you know, I heard Dizzy complaining years ago that so many of the young drummers couldn't use the bass drum."

"Well, they haven't been taught that. Nobody told them otherwise. When Dizzy stays with them, some of them eventually learn. I did an interview with Kenny Clarke, published in *Modern Drummer*, which clarified what happened. He said that in those early days, he got tired of what he called digging coal. Digging coal refers to what you do on the snare drum, that doom-derry-doom-derry-doom-aderry-doom. And that's the way they kept the time. From the drum, they moved it up to the cymbal, that ting-tingta-ting tangta-tang. And that's what it was, 'cause he said he had to stop digging coal. I remember seeing his bass drum at Minton's, when I first saw him play. I didn't even know how important he was. I saw a lot of great people and didn't know how important they were. I just knew that I liked them. Anyway, I was looking at his bass drum at Minton's. And he used this big sheepskin, I think it was, beater ball. It was very very *thick*, to keep a soft tone, because they didn't have any mufflers in the drums. He still had a big tone but it was soft, he'd get a muffled sound out of it, but you still could hear it. That's an important thing, that's the foundation. So important.

"I've had guys . . . Lennie Tristano once said, 'Don't use the bass drum.' I used it anyway. It didn't bother him a bit. It's the *way* you play it. Jazz encompasses all of the classical disciplines of the instruments, all the disciplines period. Anything of worth I have ever listened to got into my work on my instrument. It's not a matter of labels. The thing in jazz is the *interpretation*. Guys say, 'Today, what's wrong with the music?' I say, 'It's the repertoire.' Jazz has a history. We have great jazz compositions. We have a jazz repertoire, and people who play the music should be versed in it. The old show tunes, the Ellington tunes, whatever. This music has a tradition, and it's very important. When you have to record, and everything has to be original, so-called? Quote? You go on a date, and you say, 'What tunes are you playing?' And you hear, 'Well, they're all originals.' And I think, 'Oh boy, here we go.' Now sometimes it's hip, but I'll be darned if some of these people have enough background. What of all that went down before? Do you just throw it away?"

"Well, there's another thing," I said. When you're dealing with an improvisatory music, that repertoire gives the listener a point of departure, whether it's a Broadway show tune or an Ellington or a Benny Golson tune."

"Yes. If you're playing *A Train*, improvising on *A Train*, at some point in there you should feel *A Train*. People who play on the changes, it could be anything. But it's very interesting when a guy thinks melodically. Those cats took earlier tunes and made other *tunes* out of them. It's interesting to hear front-line people who improvise melodically, whether they're doing it on the changes or on a combination of the changes and the melody. If you're improvising on just the changes, with no reference to either the mood or the melody of the original . . ."

"When you get a tune like *Groovin' High* built on *Whispering*, and then Dizzy starts to play something on top of that, you've got layers of tradition and music."

"And you can have layers rhythmically, too," he said. "That's the epitome."

We paid our dinner checks. The steaks had not been as good as those at London House. Or was this another illusion of memory?

The Silver Screen Room, adjacent to the restaurant in the Sunset Hyatt, where Ed was to play with pianist Harold Danko and bassist John Heard, was almost empty. Ed looked around and said, "This is a reality. It's sad, but it's a reality. Look. The bottom line is that the man pays you two hundred bucks a night to come in, and you haven't got twenty dollars worth of people. I want to make as many friends as I can, because we've got to get these people back in these clubs, man."

"The problem," I said, "is that the constituency for small-group jazz came from the teen-agers who used to stand around near the bandstands in the ballrooms, *listening* to the big bands, and knowing all the soloists. When the era ended and the small groups went into the nightclubs, those kids, now grown up, followed them. But these were places where liquor is served, and so a potential new audience of kids couldn't get in to hear the groups. So the audience has aged, and not enough kids have replaced them."

"And there's another important thing, man," Ed said.

"Yeah, radio. It has done nothing to build a new audience. Only the jazz stations are doing a job, and they're doing it for people who already love the music."

"That's right," Ed said, and we found a table. "Jazz represents freedom, he said. "It demands freedom, it demands love. It demands individuality, but most of all love and freedom. Because otherwise it doesn't work. Freedom with *discipline*. A very high form of discipline. You can't patch the solos in. It's a certain thing that happens one on one, a certain magic that happens with the instrumentalist or the vocalist. No matter how much you study, it's a very spiritual experience. This magic that happens, that becomes the gift. Forget all your talent, I don't care who you are, Buddy Rich, Art Blakey, whoever it is, no matter how much talent you have, when it's really at its highest point, it's like a gift. You say, 'How'd I come up with this?' This whole thing is a gift."

We greeted John Heard, the fine bassist and prodigiously talented artists, about whom more in a near-future issue. John began tuning his bass, Ed sat down at his drum kit, set up his cymbals, pulled a new set of brushes out a plastic wrapping.

Until about ten years ago I often wrote about music. I no longer do. The writing was usually polemical in content. In recent years I do not want to argue with talent. I want to be thankful for it regardless where it comes from.

— Morton Feldman, 1975

"You and your brushes," I said.

"Buddy too," Ed said, with a grin.

"Yeah, he can play brushes," I said.

John Heard jumped in, "I saw Buddy Rich kick the whole Basie band with brushes."

"That's *right*," Thigpen said.

"He'd been talking to Butch Miles about it," John said, still tuning his bass. "He did it as a demonstration, to show him how you do it."

Ed ran a pattern across his drums and cymbals, shook his head dubiously, grimmaced. "Boy," he said.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Doesn't feel right."

"What doesn't?"

"The whole thing. Man, I have to get home and practice. It just doesn't feel right."

Ed tuned the drums, then sat down again at our table. He asked me questions about some magazine articles on drums he had written and I gave him some advice on copyright law: Never sell anything but first serialization rights. Suddenly his face lit up, he stood up, and he said, "Here you are," and to me, "This is my family. This goes 'way back, to my childhood." He introduced me to Beverly Watkins, principal of a San Fernando Valley, and her husband Harry. Beverly, Ed explained, is his sister — not really, but *really*. She and her husband sat down at the next table.

Two books and a videocassette by Ed Thigpen are available from Donald Meade/Action Reaction, 617 East 83rd Street, Chicago IL 60619. The videocassette Ed Thigpen on Jazz Drumming *is $60 plus $2 shipping. The books are* Rhythm Analysis and Basic Co-ordination + Rhythm Brought to Life, *$7 plus $1 shipping, and The Sound of Brushes $12.95 plus $2 shipping. The first book is a teacher's manual. The latter contains diagrams of the patterns with which brushes are used to obtain different sounds and effects, and is accompanied by an audio cassette illustrating them. It is a clear, concise treatise on what Billy Higgins says is rapidly becoming a lost art. These studies are recommended by Jack DeJohnette, Billy Cobham, Harvey Mason, Butch Miles, Jeff Hamilton, and Max Roach.*

Ed's mother and father separated when he was five. She moved with Ed to Los Angeles. She died when Ed was twelve. Ed was boarded out with a family who could not abide his interest in drums. "There were four children in our family," Beverly told me between sets. "My father liked people, he liked people around him. But he didn't go out much. He couldn't even drive. We didn't own a car."

"In Los Angeles?" Of course, in those days the street railway system had not yet been dismantled.

"In Los Angeles." There are certain rhthms and inflections in her speech that are identical to Ed's. Whether they are particular to certain parts of Los Angeles, to that neighborhood, or that family, I do not know.

The neighborhood was not a ghetto. Blacks had begun to move into it, but the Anglos had not begun to move out. "Nobody moved," Beverly said firmly. There were Italian families and Mexican families as well. It was a good solid middle-class working neighborhood. "Families were very tightly knit," Beverly said. She is a beautiful woman, quite distinguished in bearing and appearance. She is of Creole descent, very light-skinned, her name at birth Guero, pronounced gay-ro, probably a variant of a French or Spanish spelling. Her mother had remarried and the step-father of whom she spoke with such affection was named Collins, Tony Collins. "When there are four kids in a home," she said, "one more doesn't make much difference. I remember Ed brought his little drum set over to our place, and he used to practice there.

"I think he saw in our household what he felt he was missing. My mother never worked outside the home, and she was always there when we came home from school. And you know, a young boy with a drum set, that would drive most people crazy, but it didn't bother her.

"He was pretty much like he is now — very positive, very active, very much in love with life itself. He was the kind who would say that the glass was half full, not that it was half empty, even then. He's always been a giving person. He always sees where he can share."

By the end of the trio's first set, there was a goodly audience for the music. Ed, rejoining us, said, "Oh, that feels better. to see some people. The fans, they're wonderful. They ar[illegible] interested — in you and in the music."

"Yeah, like the guy in Chicago with the hamburger heart," I said. And Ed chuckled at the memory. I told the story to Beverly, who laughed. "And Ed was so nice with the guy," I said.

"Of course," Ed said. "It was what *he* had to offer. It was very touching."

I stayed for two sets. I heard the groove that Ed and John Heard attained almost immediately. Ed played some solos. I am one of those who are not partial to drum solos. But I have always liked Ed's. I remember discussing them with him in Chicago. He said you build a small crest, then back off, then build a larger crest, and back off again but not so far, and then a still larger crest, until by this process you achieve a great crest, after which you descend from it quickly and go back to the group. It's not a bad rule of thumb for any of the temporal arts, including the drama and fiction.

And yes, he was as good as I had remembered him. You could watch Ed through a studio window with the sound turned off and *see* the swing in the motion of his hands, splendidly graceful hands whose movements are not, interestingly, unlike th[illegible] Buddy Rich.

The great dancer Carmen Delavallade has a distinctive way of using a *ralantando* at the end of an arm motion that is unforgettably beautiful. The arm will come back or down or forward in a fluid movement that somehow slows at the end with a subtle graceful break of the wrist. Arnold Ross, with the Harry James band in the 1940s, had a comparable way of slowing a fast run as it reached the bottom, like a skier coming out of a steep slope onto level ground, that I never heard in another pianist. Ed's hands move like that. They pause, float, in the air, then snap. Buddy's do that.

And his solos are endlessly inventive. He is so aware of pitch in his equipment. "A good cymbal," he said, "has at least five tonalities." The solos go to unexpected places, you hear unexpected rhythms, but the continuity and form are flawless. In Thigpen's playing, rhythm itself is an entire music. He begins softly and builds to tremendous power, without ever sacrificing sensitivity or tone. Yes indeed, he was all that I remembered and more. Edmund Thigpen is a poet of percussion.

I told him before the last set that I would probably leave in the course of it. Harold Danko announced the next tune, *He There*. It stirred memories for Ed and me. He was cooking away on the snare drum with brushes during the first chorus as I stood up to go. He grinned and called out to me, "London House!"