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Jazzletter

P.O. Box 240
Ojai, Calif.
93023

May 1986 Vol. 5 No. 5

Don't Shoot the Critic, He's Doing his Best

by Doug Ramsey

If you heard me play the trumpet — and you never will — you would ponder the thin tone, lagging time, missed intervals and wrong chord changes and be puzzled. Why? you would ask or, possibly, scream. Why does he make the attempt?

Let's admit the truth of an ancient suspicion frequently voiced by musicians. Most jazz critics are failed performers. Some have demonstrated their failure publicly and been laughed off the stand or, more likely, tolerated by real musicians; jazz players are among the most civil people and rarely show open contempt. Other critics are performers only in their living rooms or the closets of their minds and have never put their real or imagined musicianship to the test of combat. When a musician has been harshly handled by a critic, the conventional wisdom among musicians concludes, the jazz writer is a frustrated and bitter amateur who is driven by jealousy to try to tear holes in the achievements of the talented. To alter a charge often made against teachers, those who can do; those who can't, become critics.

It has been years since I have inflicted on an audience other than my family my attempts at improvisation. One of the last public displays was a New Year's Eve gig with Don Lanphere at the Enchanted Gardens of the Chieftain Hotel in the heart of downtown Yakima, Washington. That was some years before Lanphere's Christian reformation, and about the only clear recollection either of us has of the evening is its conclusion. At dawn we stood calf deep in snow in an apple orchard playing *Auld Lang Syne*. Some time later I took part in one of Les Lieber's *Jazz at Noon* pro/am events in the appropriately named Rough Rider Room of the Roosevelt Hotel in Manhattan. Zoot Sims was the guest star that day. Lanphere and Sims have the distinction of being the only two of the many Four Brothers thus afflicted.

Despite all of that embarrassment, I have always felt that if I had a few weeks to practice I could win an audition and play third trumpet for Woody Herman. That's the solo chair, I believe.

I persist in picking up the horn and jamming with records, hamburger chops be damned. My current rhythm section of choice is Bill Goodwin, Hal Galper and Steve Gilmore, on loan from Phil Woods by way of Jamey Aebersold's mail-order play-along emporium. I'll tell you this: I'm still fumbling through the bridge of *Chelsea Bridge*, but those guys never complain when I have to go back over the transition from the five flats of the first sixteen bars to the four sharps of the bridge, or the bar change from E7+9 to A. Need I mention the D-flat+4 to C7 in the eighth bar of the bridge? Strayhorn was a master of beauty, but a sadist. I'll tell you something else: Having humiliated myself repeatedly with that exercise, I stand more in awe than ever of Ben Webster.

When I start spinning out phrases of architectural logic; when I conceive of a quote to snuggle into a remote corner of a chord structure where it has no business fitting; when I ascend suddenly from a low G to a high F; when all of that inventiveness collapses in smouldering ruins, I appreciate Lester Young, Paul Desmond and Ruby Braff. When I throw caution to the winds and blossom into a flurry of sixteenth notes, harmonics, and half-valve effects, doubling the double time, and it sounds like a drunken bugler, Don Cherry begins to make sense. When, on the other hand, I put together a simple series of descending whole notes and it sounds like a first-year student laboring through Arbans, I see the genius of Harry Edison.

These excursions in mashochism build character. I'm a better person because of them. And, I hope, a better listener and writer about music. So, friends, when a reviewer wounds you fairly or unfairly and you ask, "Oh yeah, I wonder how well he plays?" the answer is probably that he plays badly. But give him the benefit of the doubt.

Maybe his trying to play at all has improved his hearing a little.

— DR

Doug Ramsey has had a distinguished career as a television journalist. He was anchorman at WPIX in New York City and WDSA in New Orleans, and news director of the ABC San Francisco station KGO-TV. He is now senior vice president of the Foundation for American Communications where, among other duties, he arranges seminars on important journalistic issues for journalists of the upper echelon. He writes on jazz for Texas Monthly *and* Jazz Times.

Two-Track Mind

by Grover Sales

SAN FRANCISCO

"The good thing about being famous," quipped the late Howard Gossage, "is that you don't have to explain yourself." Though famous in two divergent arenas, jazz pianist-composer and psychiatrist Dr. Denny Zeitlin has been forced to "explain himself" since he first pursued his dual career.

"Some musicians I work with," he says, "feel threatened that I'm trying to psych them out; some are envious that I'm making a comfortable living as a psychiatrist while they're scuffling. Some doctors wonder, 'What is he doing with this *jazz*?' — still a dirty word to some people. Some in both music and medicine doubt I can be good at something I'm not doing full time, and even get angry about it. But there are many who can see that the dual career enriches both my medicine and my music — which I *know* to be true — mainly in Europe where the pursuit of a double career does not seem as bizarre as in America. And it's always been a problem in American that you should be having *fun* with your work.

"On both sides there's been a tendency to suppose that I do psychiatry primarily for the money and music mainly for the fun. Actually, I get equal pleasure and fulfillment from each, and couldn't imagine not dividing my time this way. Also, music and psychiatry are not as afield as some assume. One of their many similarities is perpetual newness. I know a lot of doctors who become bored and burned out with their three-hundredth appendectomy, and many musicians drugged with recording repetitive jingles and schlock movie scores. Even

though many psychological themes are common to many people, each individual's mode of experiencing and expressing is unique; and in music, I've been lucky enough to be able to pick and choose projects that are challenging and exciting."

Tall, athletic, bearded, and with a rabbinical cast, Zeitlin combines the seeming incompatibles of seething intensity and relaxed grace. Reflecting his diverse trades, his professorial speech is laced with staples of the jazz argot. A radio announcer's voice resonates with untempered enthusiasm for his multiple interests. This associate clinical professor of psychiatry has played the Newport and Monterey jazz festivals and has recorded nearly a dozen albums of his own works, as well as standards, all raptly acclaimed by jazz critics. In the recent *Jazzletter* poll of forty-two pianists, Zeitlin garnered as many votes as Count Basie, McCoy Tyner and Jimmy Rowles.

Zeitlin came by both music and psychiatry honestly. He was born in Chicago in 1938 to a radiologist father who could play any popular tune on the family Steinway by ear and a speech pathologist mother who was a classically trained pianist. "At two and three I started doodling at the piano, climbing on mother's or father's lap and putting my hands on theirs while they were playing. I started studying music at six, but was always more interested in composing and improvising than playing. A comment on my parents' remarkable sensitivity is that when I was nine, they rejected my teacher's advice that I start grooming for a concert career to the exclusion of all other interests. They knew that, as much as I loved Bach and Chopin, my object was not to include them in a concert repertoire but to learn how their music was constructed, and use this knowledge in my own compositions.

"I first heard jazz in the eighth grade when a wonderful piano teacher brought me an early George Shearing album that just knocked me out! Here was a pianist with all the technical chops, playing this marvelous new music. And that rhythm! Then she brought me Art Tatum records, and I was totally blown away by his technique, but even more by his incredible ability to reharmonize pop tunes. In high school I played with Dixieland bands that were popular at that time, but my heart wasn't in it; this music never spoke to me emotionally like Debussy or Ravel. Then I got into Stravinsky, Bartok, Schoenberg and Berg, who knocked me out, man! Galvanized me! And when I first heard Bud Powell and Lennie Tristano I immediately moved over to that. Because I was tall and looked lots older, I started going to jazz clubs in Chicago in the mid-1950s, digging major players, and again, my folks were so sympathetic and so *trusting* because here I was at fifteen, and often the only white cat in these clubs, sitting in, coming home at five in the morning, and my folks never batted an eye, even though they knew nothing of jazz.

"My medical career also started early, in the fourth and fifth grade. I became a spontaneous playground phychotherapist, interested in the kids, their problems, and they'd ask me, 'Why do the other kids pick on me?' or, 'Why can't I get along with my father?' 'Why does the teacher have it in for me?' And a leader would talk to me about how he felt lonely at the top. From my mother, who was a marvelous listener for me, I seemed to get this intuitive radar about people. I was a member of a peer group, not the neighborhood four-eyes, which I could have been if my folks had let that piano teacher suppress every urge in me but a concert career. My uncle was a psychiatrist and I felt in the playground that I would become one, as well as a musician.

"At the University of Illinois I took four years of pre-med with a major in philosophy, mainly existentialism, and again lucked out running into top jazz players like Wes Montgomery and Joe Farrell, who was a classmate of mine, and played gigs with them. The same thing happened at Johns Hopkins med school from 1960 to 1964 when I ran into the great reedman Gary Bartz, whose dad owned a jazz club in Baltimore.

"Then I got a fellowship in psychiatry at Columbia, a period that shifted my whole life. Paul Winter dragged me kicking and screaming to John Hammond. I grew up believing that to record was to put yourself at the mercy of some soulless megastructure, prostitute your music and give away artistic control. I heard all the horror stories from other musicians, so why should I bother with this? But Hammond was such a marvelous, exuberant, open guy, and so genuinely excited about my music. He said, 'I'd love to record with you! What do you want to do? Play whatever you want! How would you like to record with Jeremy Steig?' And he played me tapes of Steig's wonderful, wild flute things, and I said, 'Sure!' So 1963 saw my first album with Steig, Ben Riley and Ben Tucker, just a blowing date — we'd never played together before — and in the studio everything clicked. Six months later, with Hammond at Columbia Records, I cut *Cathexis*, my first record date as a leader, and then *Zeitgeist* — they had to come up with something cute for a title, but it was nothing as horrendous as *Group Therapy*, which is what they were going to call the album until I threw a fit.

"I moved to San Francisco in 1964, having fallen in love with the place, and never applied for an internship anywhere else. I was at S.F. General on a tough one-year rotating internship: One night, I had a woman on the verge of delivery and her baby conveniently came an hour before I was due to play at the Trident in Sausalito. The Trident experience was fortunate because I was part of the woodwork there every Monday night for two and a half years, an incredibly long time for a steady gig, with a chance to develop. And manager Lou Canapoler was such a warm, utterly sympathetic boss. At the Trident I was playing what I call 'acoustic modern jazz piano trio music,' but augmented with unusual time signatures and more extended compositions, which hadn't been done much at that time. This continued until the mid-'60s when I began to get restless and feel limited. Synthesizers were then at their primitive, unwieldy state, so I dropped out of public performance for several years to do research and development in synthesized and electronic keyboards, integrating jazz, electronic and avant garde classical with some things in rock that many in jazz were too contemptuous of — a lot of rhythm 'n blues, Muddy Waters and Chicago, a dynamite group. I loved Frank Zappa, the Band from Big Pink, and the Stones, which had a fantastic rhythm section, and of course I adored the Beatles. But when I started to expand into this new territory, the record companies said, 'How can we sell it? What is it? We have no established conduits to market this kind of music.' So I put out the record on my own mail-order label, Double Helix records. It sold well enough and got good reviews, so a small, classy label in Berkeley, 1750 Arts, took it over. I did two more albums for them, one of the few labels that truly care about music, but sadly, it looks like they're disbanding.

"Then in 1978 my career took a shift when Philip Kaufman did a remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and hired me to write the film score because he dug my records; he wanted a contemporary symphonic acoustic-electric mix, big stuff, and I had never written for a symphony orchestra before. I had to sell producer Bob Solo, and frankly, if I had been him, I never would have hired someone with as few credentials. I only got the gig because Phil Kaufman twisted his arm. I closed my medical office for five weeks to undertake the most exciting and exhaustive experience of my life. The thrill of hearing my music performed by the very best of L.A. musicians was a gas! Overwhelming, man! During a break, the first violinist said, 'I

love your music, but of course, you have done many scores.' When I told him no, this was my first, his eyes widened and he said, 'But you should be doing this all the time!' After *Body Snatchers* I got a lot of movie offers, but shied away now that the mystery was gone. There are too many extra-musical considerations in sculpting music to fit a producer's and a director's concept of what the film is about, and if you can do this and still please yourself, that's rare. Film composers have told me that I could do a thousand films before lucking into a unique situation where, thanks to Phil, I could hire the best conductor, the best musicians, the best studio, the best sound engineer — absolutely unheard of!

"After the tremendous musical congestion of *Body Snatchers* I had the urge to return to the simplicity of the acoustic piano, and recorded *Soundings* for 1750 arts, and then a duet with bassist Charlie Haden, *Time Remembered One Time Once*, live at Keystone Korner for the German label ECM, followed by *Tidal Wave* for Palo Alto Records, mostly my own compositions. Herb Wong then included me in a potpourri 'twofer,' *Bill Evans — a Tribute*, in the exalted company of John Lewis, Teddy Wilson, George Shearing and Dave McKenna. Almost anyone playing acoustic piano today owes a debt to Bill Evans, but I started early enough so that my first influences were before Bill's time, which I'm glad about because his influence on younger pianists is so formidable that it's hard to get from under. But I'm grateful for the exposure to his early work on Riverside, which I feel is Bill's best, and thankful that I had him for a friend. He was rare in that he was so comfortable with his talent that he never felt the need to be competitive, and took great delight in encouraging other players, like me.

"To get back to medicine, I did a psychiatric residency at Langley Porter from 1965 to 1968 when the human potential movement was burgeoning and studied a broad range of psychiatric disciplines, including many Esalen workshops with Fritz Perls. Later my training and orientation became more psychoanalytic. My feelings about groups like est are mixed; est is a blunt instrument that has proved its unquestionable value for some people, providing them with a genuine breakthrough experience; for others it was a form of adult recreation. But serious studies have found that among est, and most encounter groups of this kind, a disturbing rate of casualty exits, in some cases as high as ten percent.

"During the '60s I worked with the drug study unit at Langley Porter, the first unit to deal with the ravages of the 'flower children.' Drugs have never been part of my life. Apart from the legalities, I don't condemn it for others who seem to function better on *judicious* amounts of drugs, but I do condemn it when it gets out of control like cocaine, which is *the* major problem today among middle- and high-income people. Cocaine is totally destructive, far more than LSD, and is incredibly addictive, psychologically; it's worked its murderous way into every sector of society.

"In more recent years I've become increasingly interested in the creative process. Many of my patients are involved in creative pursuits, and not necessarily people labeled by society as 'artists,' but entrepreneurs, business people who are feeling blocks to the flow of their creativity. I conduct workshops and lecture-demonstrations on 'unlocking the creative impulse: the psychology of improvization.' All creative pursuits share a common task of entering an ecstatic or merger state where the artist can tap into the wellspring of his emotional and unconscious life, while simultaneously, in some subliminal way, bringing to bear everything learned, felt and believed about his or her art. There's a parallel between playing jazz and doing psychiatry because the deepest kind of creativity and communication is involved in both fields. Ideally, when I'm playing with a group, a state of subconscious merger exists between me and my fellow musicians, just as it ideally exists between me and my patients — a completer immersion and a state of genuine trust allows something special, musically or psychologically, to emerge. When that state is reached, whether in music or in therapy, I give up all sense of my physical body, or the positional sense of self.

"One of the reasons drug use is often prevalent among jazz musicians is so they can achieve this state despite the distractions of noisy audiences and bad amplifying systems, and also deal with the *internal* noise which is potentially much more insidious and disruptive. Like, I'm playing a concert in Edmonton, and am going to Japan the next day, and in the middle of a phrase, suddenly I think, 'Where did I put my plane tickets?' and get pulled out of the music. Being a professional, I'm still moving my fingers and maybe haven't made an actual mistake, but I'm no longer *centered* in the music. Another common kind of internal noise is self-doubt, and self-flagellation for making a mistake. My fascination with Bjorn Borg's tennis experience — I'm a wild tennis nut and an avid player — is that Borg is able to get into a state of total concentration, playing *at* the moment, that no other player has been able to achieve in quite this way. This is what I try to do at the piano and my medical practice: I try to merge with my patients, their dream and fantasy life, leaving a part of myself free to observe and comment and help the patient understand what they are experiencing. I try to merge in this same way with the other cats on the stand.

"One of my patients, an extremely gifted jazz musician, had this tremendous block about performing in front of people, so severe that he began to withdraw from playing entirely. What he was *consciously* aware of was a fear of failure, of humiliation, and on the surface he chronically undervalued his own playing. But after we worked for a while, what at first seemed a fear of failure slowly emerged as a tremendous guilt over success, which is what he was *really* afraid of, that he would get up on the stand and blow the other cats away, show them up, knowing himself to be supremely gifted. For him, the act of performing was the recapitulation of an important childhood conflict, wherein he felt he had always outdistanced his younger brother, crippling him, and his brother never had as good a life. And as he became more consciously aware of this dynamic, and could re-live early experiences, he began to feel less guilty, more free to perform, and went on to become extremely successful. Without giving any clues as to his identity, let's just say he was able to actualize his talent. This took many months, there was no sudden Hollywood breakthrough. Certainly there are 'ah-ah' experiences in psychotherapy, but the bulk of change occurs as a result of slowly working these things through."

One night at the Trident in 1967, in mid-performance, Zeitlin experienced "an external distraction of the most delicious kind" when his future (and second) wife, Josephine Shady, entered the room: "The hell with the merger experience — who is this woman? I couldn't wait for the set to be over. We've been together ever since, and she's the hub of everything in my life. Josephine's one of the most creative people I know, as a professional landscape and garden designer, as a photographer and as a gourmet chef. She can look at a recipe and instinctively sense how much to add and what to leave out, just as she can see a client's disaster-area backyard and get an immediate physical impression of what can be there. When we went on a restaurant safari in France, very few of these three-star outfits came up to her level."

As a guest at the Zeitlin table, I can attest that Denny's enthusiasm goes well beyond routine husbandly pride:

Josephine Zeitlin is indeed one of the world's great cooks. Since 1973 the Zeitlins have occupied a captivating house in wooded Kentfield with a rare Egyptian Pharoah dog and three exotic cats. A gleaming grand piano dominates the living room, but the household centers around the kitchen. Spacious gardens and orchards provide "live" fare for sublime lunches and dinner. Downstairs is Zeitlin's suburban office; he has another across from Langley Porter in the city. Adjoining the home-office is a studio crammed with an array of electronic keyboards, plus a cavernous temperature-controlled wine cellar. Zeitlin approaches wine and food with the same breathless rapture that marks his passion for music, medicine and tennis: "I got interested in wine in high school, not drinking it, but reading about it. Then as as intern I got started collecting great French vintages – in those days you could buy Chateau Lafitte for three, four dollars a bottle! Fantastic!

"All of my activities seem organically related, I can't say exactly why. When I run on Mount Tam, I get the same sense of merger with the mountain that I do with my music and my patients, I find a deep, sensual and aesthetic pleasure in all of these activities, all of which make me appreciate the wonder of humans, what they feel, what they think about."

— GS

Peg

"When I was small, my mother died," Peggy Lee said. "My father remarried when I was six. She started beating me then and continued to beat me for eleven years, until I left." She said this in the oddest way, her voice detached, as if she were talking about someone else. "I think that is what made me so nonviolent."

"You know, of course," I said, "that the great majority of people who abuse children were themselves abused."

"Yes," she said, "I keep hearing that. But it had the opposite effect on me. I lived my own inward life, and I came to hate violence."

In those few phrases one finds a key to her work — the secret of what makes her one of the greatest singers in the English language, the leading exponent among women of the post-vaudeville naturalistic school of singing with its a sense of the improvised, the spontaneous, the conversational. It is the school that began suddenly in the early 1940s, displacing the belting and the Irish-tenor styles exemplified by Al Jolson on the one hand, Kenny Baker on the other. It is a Stanislavskian approach to singing that gives a deep sense of the life behind it and emotion within it, creating the illusion of intimate, unpremeditated self-revealment. It is deceptive in that the skills are hidden. There is no straining. Sweat does not appear on the face, no veins stand out on the brow.

Peggy's voice seems small, slight, fragile. In fact it has great power in reserve, and occasionally, in the early recordings, she turns it on. It is far harder to hit high notes pianissimo than fortissimo and she does this difficult thing casually, like Perry Como. One day when we were talking on the telephone, I told her I thought no one had achieved this minimalism to the extent she had. You could hear the soft smile in her voice. "Most people don't know how hard that is."

The conventional critical wisdom has always been that Lee is a derivation of Billie Holiday, saying she built her style on the earlier singer's. "But I don't think I sound at all like her," Peggy said. "I admired her very much. But Billie sang like this." And she did an eerily accurate imitation of Holiday. Very occasionally in her early records, she'll pronounce a vowel as Holiday would — "kin" for "can", for example. Holiday's vowels are small and closed; Lee's are open. In her early recordings for Benny Goodman, whose band she joined in 1941, you'll hear touches (but no more) of Holiday. Later they fade away, as her sense of identity grows and she develops her own distinctive lovely enunciation.

She was born Norma Egstrom in Jamestown, North Dakota. She must have been an exquisite child, judging by the beautiful young woman she grew into. She left home as soon as she was able, taking her record collection with her. It included a great many "race records", as they were known in those days. Her listening during that period of her life resulted in her later development of a style that is more attuned to the black experience and vocal style than perhaps that of any other white American singer. And she did this without any affectations of enunciation, and without, indeed, foregoing her own white experience and identity. Her style is a remarkable amalgam, alloyed of her life experience and her early taste for the work of black singers unknown to most white Americans of the time.

A friend introduced her to a man named Ken Kennedy, program director of radio station WDAY in Fargo, North Dakota. He auditioned her, liked her voice, and put her on the air within an hour. He told her, "We'll have to change your name. Norma Egstrom just won't do. You look like a Peggy . . . Peggy, Peggy Lee!"

She sang briefly with a local band in the Minneapolis area, then got a booking at the Ambassador West Hotel in Chicago, where Benny Goodman's wife, Alice, happened to hear her. Alice brought Goodman in to listen shortly after that. Goodman seemed cold. "I thought he didn't like me," Peggy said. She was rooming at that time with another singer, née Jane Larrabee, who had changed her name to Jane Leslie and would later change it again when she married Leonard Feather. When Peggy returned to their room after some errand or other, Jane told her Goodman had called. "I didn't believe her," she says. "But she was insistent, and I called Benny. I joined the band without even a rehearsal, having to sing everything in Helen Forrest's keys. Mel Powell was wonderful to me. He helped me so much."

Goodman is notorious for his coldness and even overt rudeness to musicians. One can listen between the lines when she talks of joining the band. Goodman apparently did nothing to make her comfortable, and Mel Powell, one of the truly great jazz pianists who later left the jazz world to become a classical composer and teacher, although he occasionally works with Lee even now, helped her learn difficult vocal arrangements, and would cue her for her entrances.

She made a number of recordings with Goodman — *All I Need Is You, Everything I Love, How Long Has This Been Going On* among them. One of the records she carried with her on the band's travels was Lil Green's performance of *Why Don't You Do Right?* "Benny heard me playing the record in my dressing room," she said. "He could hardly help it, I was always playing it. Finally he asked me, 'Would you like to sing that with the band?'" The record, a huge hit for Goodman and for her, truly launched her.

Heard today, it reveals the first signs of her maturity, her very personal ability to internalize a song and *act* it. Earlier recordings sound like apprentice work, but in this one the "character" singing the song seems tough and cynical, two qualities that assuredly are not part of Peggy Lee's own personality. Some years later (on November 19, 1947), she re-recorded a still better performance of it for Capitol. This time the arranger was Billy May, the conductor Dave Barbour.

She met Barbour, one of the fine jazz guitarists, while she was with Goodman. "She was in love with him," Jane Feather said, "from the moment she met him." Plagued by terrible shyness when she performed, and now deeply happy after a desolate childhood, she left the Goodman band, married Barbour, and

retired. They settled in North Hollywood, California, where she gave birth to her only child, her daughter Nicki, now an artist of distinction. (Peggy too is an excellent painter.) Her retirement wouldn't last. Neither would her happiness.

Barbour thought her talent was too important to be abandoned. He said that if she did stay retired, she would some day regret it. In 1944, she was approached by Dave Dexter of Johnny Mercer's fledgling Capitol Records.

The company was about to do an unusual project that would be called *New American Jazz* — an album of four discs by various jazz players. "Albums" consisting of several discs were rare in the jazz field in those days, and the project, when it was completed, would have a considerable impact in the jazz community. Peggy thought, "Well, I could get a baby sitter and go down there and sing." Which is what she did. On January 7, 1944, she sang two songs for the album, a blues called *Ain't Goin' No Place* and the ballad *That Old Feeling*, accompanied by an illustrious group of jazz players: Eddie Miller, tenor saxophone; Barney Bigard, clarinet; Les Robinson, alto; Pete Johnson, piano; Nappy Lamare, guitar; Shorty Sherock, trumpet; Hank Wayland, bass, and Nick Fatool, drums.

For a girl who wanted to retire, the two sides were something of a disaster: they established her as one of the great vocalists in American music. What is more, though nobody noticed it at the time, they hinted at the range of her work: the blues had a toughness, akin to that heard in *Why Don't You Do Right*, while *That Old Feeling* conveyed an impression of a gentle and vulnerable woman badly hurt. Those two sides hinted at the eventual great psychological scope of her work.

No singer, male or female, in American music (and none that I have heard in any other country) has shown the ability to play so many different "characters" in song form as Peggy Lee. Piaf embraced the kind of character songs that appeal to Lee, but her audience would not let her be anything but a tragedienne, for all that she loved laughter. Peggy somehow avoided that trap, and audiences accepted her as a happy character in one song, comedienne in the next, tragedienne in the one after that. To watch her in a concert or nightclub performance proceed through a whole gallery of characters is to take a lesson in acting. It is no accident that she was nominated for an Academy Award for her portrayal of a fading nightclub singer of the 1920s in Jack Webb's picture *Pete Kelly's Blues*. She hoped that this would open the way to a broader career in films, but it never happened, which is one of the disappointments in her otherwise starry career.

Interestingly, Peggy recorded one of Piaf's songs, *My Man*. The music is by Maurice Yvain, the English lyric by Channing Pollock. This is one of the few examples of an English lyric that bears some relationship to a French original. She gives us a vivid picture of a beaten creature who for whatever reason continues to endure life with an abusive man. This performance, recorded in 1958, is one of a series in a gallery of portraits of women.

Her stationery and often her advertising have long borne the inscription Miss Peggy Lee, pointedly asserting identity as a woman. She assuredly is not Ms Peggy Lee. The character in *I'm a Woman*, which she recorded four years later, is not the one we encounter in *My Man*. This is no brow-beaten victim but, on the contrary, a woman boasting of her prowess at the complex of tasks that society imposes on her sex. *Hey Big Spender* vividly conveys the mockery of a hooker putting the mark on a john.

Another song in this gallery is *You Came a Long Way from St. Louis*, by John Benson Brooks and Bob Russell. Again, it portrays a woman skeptical about a man's accomplishments. The lady in the song may be on a higher social plane than the girl in *Why Don't You Do Right*, but the two have a lot in common in their refusal to be taken in by a man's tall tales and efforts to impress.

Black Coffee, which borders on being an art song, has music by Sonny Burke and a strikingly dark poetic lyric by Paul Francis Webster. It laments the general condition that women — particularly in those pre-lib days — so often faced. This was recorded not for Capitol but for Decca.

Her famous *Lover* was also recorded for Decca. Peggy had an idea for this arrangement, derived from watching galloping horses in a movie. She begged the brass at Capitol to let her record it, but Les Paul had only recently had a hit on the same song and they tried to talk her out of it. Her contract came to an end just at this time, and she was approached by Decca. She told them she would change labels if they would let her record *Lover* the way she wanted to do it. Decca agreed, and Peggy signed. The song was a huge hit, no doubt to Capitol's chagrin, and at the end of the Decca contract she returned to what was really her professional home.

Don't Smoke in Bed, which she recorded in 1969, is the work of Willard Robison, whose songs superbly evoke images of America, including *Old Folks* and *Guess I'll Go Go Back Home This Summer*, and of troubled family life, such as *A Cottage For Sale*. *Don't Smoke in Bed* is another portrait of a woman, one who is leaving a man but doing it with heartbreak. Whether Peggy was aware of it or simply chose it because it reflected her feelings on leaving Dave Barbour probably even she couldn't say now. But that echo of her own life certainly was in her choice of this material.

During the 1960s, her performances at the Copacabana were for me one of the highlights of the New York entertainment year. People in the audience, laymen and professionals alike, would barely breathe in order not to miss a sigh of her incredibly subtle performances. Unlike most singers, she never repeated herself — never relied on what she had done the year before and the year before that. She would come in each year with an entirely new act and new, and always superb, arrangements. The orchestra she would put together included the best of New York jazz and studio players, the likes of Grady Tate and Al Cohn and Ben Tucker. White-haired Lou Levy, her usual pianist, would set her up with a long vamp from the orchestra. She'd come out onto the floor slowly, usually in a loose-fitting robe that made her look like a high priestess at some elegant but pagan rite. She would open with a swinger, then go to a ballad. And instead of opening with familiar material, in keeping with the conventional practice, she often would introduce the new songs first, saving the familiar to the end. That takes guts.

More than listening to records, seeing her emphasized her genius as an actress. She would be the fragile rejected girl of the Dick Manning-Luiz Bonfá ballad *Empty Glass*, which has experienced an obscurity it doesn't deserve. Then with a wink and a bawdy wave of the arm, she'd become instantly the frowzy London hooker of *Big Spender*, or the happy round-heeled jet setter of the late Carolyn Leigh's *When in Rome*. Then, perhaps, she'd move on to the mature woman finding love on a new level in *The Second Time Around*. Or the wistful woman contemplating her vanished youth in *What Is a Woman?*.

To see a great actress build a convincing characterization in the ninety minutes or so of a movie is impressive enough. To see Peggy Lee build fifteen or so such characterizations in an hour is one of the most amazing things I have experienced in show business. How she accomplishes these instantaneous transformations mystifies me.

It was always the strongly feminine material that worked best

for her. She once recorded *By the Time I Get to Phoenix*, a small masterpiece by Jim Webb. It deals with the fragility of man's relationship with a girl, his inability to accept the responsibility of it. The meaning is subtly altered when a woman sings it. The moods in the song, the inner attitude, are essentially masculine, and so completely feminine is Peggy that for all the sensitivity of her reading, her performance just didn't work, which is probably why it was not released at the time. *Time-Life* records finally put it out in a 1985 retrospective on her career.

Even as her career soared in the 1940s, her personal life took a tragic turn. Dave Barbour, in the years before he met her, had wrestled with a drinking problem. Now it returned, at times becoming so bad that his life was endangered. She stayed with him, helping him fight it.

She did everything she could to help him. At one time she went on vacation with him to Mexico. "Dave and I were both workacholics," she told me. "We just loved Mexico, and the people we met, and we admired their attitude, the relaxed philosophy, and wished we could be more like them. We wrote *Manana* as a result." Later the song was criticized for being condescending to Mexicans, which, she insisted, was not its intent.

Her aspirations of that period are revealed in still another song she wrote with Barbour, *It's a Good Day*, about clearing out past problems, paying off debts and obligations, getting rid of regrets and making a new start in life. Her lyric expresses what she wanted for her husband, but its optimism proved premature. She had begun writing lyrics in the mid-1940s, showing some of her efforts to Mercer, who gave her encouragement and suggestions, helping her develop into the lyricist who would produce something as skilled as *It's a Good Day*.

It wasn't, however. Barbour went on drinking. "I didn't want to divorce Dave," she told me. "He insisted on it. He made me do it, and it was the hardest thing I ever did in my life." Barbour moved out to Malibu, where she would visit him, to be sure he was eating properly.

She was remarried three times, but never happily and never for long — to actor Brad Dexter, percussionist Jack del Rio, and actor Dewey Martin. "It was always Dave," Jane Feather says.

Once, when I was writing something about Peggy, she said, "Please tell people for the last thirteen years of his life, Dave didn't have a drop to drink. He asked me to marry him again. We were going to be remarried, and he had a physical. His doctor told him he was in excellent condition. Four days later, the aorta burst in his heart, and he died."

All of this life experience turns up in her work. She never overstates a song, never tries to "put it over". The feeling is perceived in flashes, like lightning in a summer cloud. This is the secret of the striking dramatic miniatures of the human and especially woman's condition that make her the extraordinary artist that she is.

Like Sinatra, she has an almost uncanny ability to find and bring out the meaning of a song. Once, in the late 1960s, this ability was brought home to me at the Copacabana in New York. It was the the closing night of her engagement. She performed one of my lyrics, *Yesterday I Heard the Rain*:

> Yesterday I heard the rain,
> whispering your name,
> asking where you'd gone.
> It fell softly from the clouds
> on the silent crowds
> as I wandered on.
>
> Out of doorways,
> black umbrellas
> came to pursue me.
> Faceless people,
> as they passed,
> were looking through me.
> No one knew me.
>
> Yesterday I shut my eyes,
> face up to the skies,
> drinking in the rain.
> But your image still was there,
> floating in the air,
> brighter than a flame.
>
> Yesterday I saw a city,
> full of shadows
> without pity,
> and I heard the steady rain
> whispering your name,
> whispering your name.

That song has a meaning few people have ever caught. The phrase "brighter than a flame" refers to the Sacred Heart icon of Catholicism; and the name is the Holy Name. It suggests that without some higher significance, something beyond the short painful life we pass through, life is dark, and the shadows are pitiless. The yearning for a higher meaning is expressed in the constant repetition of the name.

I never expected anyone to take it for anything but a conventional torch song. But that night, Peggy gave it a reading of astonishing religious intensity.

Afterwards, she had her usual closing-night party. She introduced me to two of her friends, a monseigneur and a younger priest, telling them I had written the lyric to that song.

"Ah," said the monseigneur. "Then you can settle an argument I've been having with my friend here. I say that that song is about the loss of God."

I think my mouth fell open. I confirmed that this was indeed its intent and meaning.

And *that* is how deeply Peggy Lee can penetrate into the heart of a song.

Later, when only a few guests remained, and there was music playing on a stereo set, she said, "Do you dance?" Her performance that night had been brilliant and I think she knew it. Whatever the reason, she was in an almost euphoric mood. She did a turn to the music. She seemed almost weightless, as if her feet were not quite touching the floor.

"Not very well," I said.

"Well dance with me anyway," she said.

I did, marveling somewhat that I should be dancing with one of the idols of my adolescence.

"You wrote a column about me a while ago," that soft voice said. I had indeed, expressing my admiration for the subtlety and brilliance of her work.

"Yes I did," I said, a little apprehensively. You never know, when you write about people, what odd and unexpected little thing may cause offense.

"I read it," she said, "on one of the dark days of my life. I won't even tell you what I was thinking about that day. And then I read that. I can't tell you what it meant to me. I wanted you to know that."

And we danced for a while.