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A Special Accuracy

John Heard suffers from a speech impediment so severe that sometimes his jaw will lock open, the word he is trying to get out frozen into a silence that produces anguished suspense in whomever he is talking to. Then a broken bit of the word will emerge, a phoneme repeating itself like a sound coming from a stuck record, d- d- d- . The aspirated h seems to give him particular trouble. As suddenly as a sentence stops, it will resume, often broken by a burst of exuberant laughter. He is unselfconscious about his stammer and soon puts anyone he has decided to accept as a friend as much at ease with his problem as he is. When John, along with Frank Morgan and Tootie Heath, was interviewed on a TV news brief about jazz clubs in Los Angeles, friends called to chide him that he hadn't stammered once.

"I got a lot o' balls," he said, laughing about it.

So he does. This is evident in his playing. John Heard is a magnificent bass player of the modern school, one of the heritors of the Charles Mingus-Scott LaFaro tradition of playing. But for all the speed and fire in his fingers, he is able, in ensemble passages, to walk the instrument right into the ground, after the manner of George Duvivier and Ray Brown. Matched with an appropriate drummer, he is the living embodiment of what rhythm sections are supposed to do: swing.

John Heard sneaked up on everybody. There was no sudden prominence in magazine polls, no flurry of interviews -- partly, to be sure, because the speech impediment has usually caused him to decline interviews. He slipped into our awareness through his work with Jon Hendricks, Ahmad Jamal, Count Basie, and Oscar Peterson. One day there he was. Where did he come from?

From Manchester, a district of Pittsburgh sufficiently dangerous that many Pittsburgh people decline to set foot in it. He was born there July 3, 1938. His mother, who came from Mississippi, left school after the second grade to work. She taught herself to read from the Bible. His father, who also had a second-grade education, was born in Georgia. Both his parents liked to sing. He would wake up mornings to the sound of his father's cheerful blues, whose words were made up on the spot.

Pittsburgh lies in the valleys that have been cut by the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers, which converge at this point to form the Ohio, the major tributary of the Mississippi. By the late 1960s, legislation had forced its famous steel mills to put scrubbers on their smokestacks, and its air was cleaner than that of most major cities. Now many of those mills are out of business, rusting away in silence. But when John was a boy, the street lamps would sometimes be alight in the daytime. "That's how little sunlight got in," he said.

"My father was an alley cat. He was just built that way. He was probably the smartest man I ever met. He could do anything. He could tear a house down and put it up. I used to have to help him. He had a garden that fed the family. He would get an old model T Ford and he and his friends knew how to work on cars and they'd fix it up. We were all poor, but it was real close. My mother never really had to worry about me outside, because they knew if I did something too wrong, a neighbor would kick my ass and tell them later, and I'd get another spanking. All the families around there had six or seven kids. Everybody knew everybody else. I still stay in touch with a lot of those people. One of the kids I grew up with, who was a Yugoslavian, is an oceanographer. We all did well.

"My father never wanted anything, outside of taking care of his family. I don't know anything about my grandparents. He left Georgia when he was quite young. And he would never go back. We think he probably offed somebody there and got out. But he would never tell us. He used to take me fishing on the Allegheny."

John was the second youngest of the Heard children, six of whom were girls. One sister, Freddia, became secretary to the district attorney. John's only brother, now deceased, became a Pittsburgh policeman. He was a self-taught boogie-woogie pianist and, John says, "he was really tough. He was the only man I was ever afraid of." John takes a certain pride in being tough himself. He stands a sinewy five-foot-eleven, wears a beard, is balding now, and has flecks of grey in his tight wiry hair. Speaking of one musician he worked for and who gave him a hard time, he said, "I told him I would remove his ass from this earth, and I meant it, and after that he didn't bother me."

John has a strong sense of Pittsburgh about him, as many of that city's sons and daughters do. He is keenly aware of people in the arts who were born or grew up in Pittsburgh or the surrounding communities, particularly jazz players, and he will, with civic pride, rattle off their names at the drop of an excuse -- Art Blakey, Ahmad Jamal, Maxine Sullivan, Billy Eckstine, George Benson, Ray Brown, Al Aarons, Erroll Garner, Roy Eldridge, Earl Hines, Mary Lou Williams, Eddie Safranski, Joe Pass, Joe Harris, Dodo Marmarosa, Kenny Clarke, Paul Chambers, Stanley and Tommy Turrentine, Henry Mancini.

"It was hip," he said. "There's a lot of money in Pittsburgh for the arts. I grew up getting a lot of exposure to the arts. They had the Civic Light Opera, they had grand opera, they had one of the major symphony orchestras. We used to go on field trips from my high school to hear it. And they had the Pittsburgh Playhouse, where Gene Kelly came from -- and Frank Gorshen and Shirley Jones. We had field trips to that, too, if they were doing something like *The Petrified Forest*. It was kind of nice.

"When I was about twelve, I wanted to join the Boy Scouts. My part of town, the north side, had a YMCA, but it was white only. I went in there one day to talk about joining the Boy Scouts, and they told me I had to go over to another part of town. I didn't particularly care for that, so I vandalized the building one night. I don't remember what I did, but it was something. In junior high school, I wanted to take a photography class. I walked in to register, and the teacher just kind of put his arm around me and walked me out to the hallway, and booted me and said, 'Don't come back in here.' I've been laying for him for a long time. If I saw him now, I'd cold-cock him. As a matter of fact, when I got out of the Air Force, I went back, but he was gone from the school. I think that's the only guy I'd really like to run into."

I reminded John that he had once commented to me that so-called race relations in the United States were better at the turn of the century than they were later, because of the director D.W. Griffiths, a racist from Kentucky who also happened to be a great film maker. Hollywood -- and John is far from being the first person to make this observation -- reinforced this impression of blacks with Mantan Moreland, Steppin Fetchit, and a procession of eye-rolling cooks and maids. Furthermore, Marlon Brando insists, Hollywood created the general image of the American Indians.

"That's right," John said. "What D.W. Griffiths did with *Birth of a Nation* was to stereotype *us*. Watch that film some time. And then there are the blacks who are influenced by upper-class white

behavior. They're ashamed of being black. As a result, they won't eat watermelon in public, or whatever.

"In Nice one time, when I was there with Count Basie's band, they had this buffet laid out. And they had these seedless little round watermelons that looked fantastic. I walked over there and I copped. I just grabbed one and sat down and chopped it up and was eating. And some of the guys in Basie's band -- " he began to laugh " -- got up and walked away! They were saying, 'Man, you know you're embarrassing us, eating that.' I just hollered after them, 'You don't know what you're *missing*!' But all of that's because Griffiths made a movie."

"You know Les McCann's remark about wo-dee-melon, as he calls it? 'I'm not going to give it up because *they* say I like it.'"

"Perfect!" John said, and laughed.

"British social stratification," I said, "was maintained only through the acquiescence of the lower orders, as they put it. You cannot have an army big enough to suppress an entire social class, particularly in view of the fact that armies are always drawn from the suppressed class itself, excepting the officers who command them. So you must have their complicity in their own suppression. My grandfather, who was a Lancashire coal miner, used to say of anything that seemed fancy, 'That's not for the likes of us.' And he believed it. He co-operated with the very people who put him in the coal mines when he was only a boy."

"Right! It was easier to fall in place. That's the position people saw you in. If you fall in place, you're a good nigger. You're a 'credit to your race.'" He used the expression in audible quotation marks. "'If you behave the way we want you to, you're a credit to your race.' Well, my folks brought me up different -- to have a sense of pride. Every Sunday morning when I was a little boy, we had to walk about eight blocks from where we got off the trolley to the church. During that eight blocks, I had to walk out in front. My mother said, 'Don't slope your shoulders, hold your head up, don't drag your feet.' Eight blocks every Sunday morning, I had that regimentation. My mother wanted you to be aware of yourself. Love yourself.

"Now I reflect back on conversations I had with my parents. When I left home to go on the road, my mother said, 'Read the Book of Proverbs.' Those were her parting words. Just read the Book of Proverbs, and chances are you'll be okay. And I did it sometimes too. I'd meet somebody, an interesting kind of character, and I'd see if I could find that kind of person in the Book of Proverbs.

"And I remember what my old man used to say, 'Watch your friends, 'cause you know what your enemies are up to.'"

John, who took up the bass in a Manchester junior high school orchestra, plays with the precise and correct left-hand technique that modern bass players use, the two center fingers close together, the index and pinky fingers outspread. The close-together middle fingers accomodate the half-step between the third and fourth degrees of the major scale. The position is derived from "legit" symphonic bass playing. Earlier jazz and dance-band bass players for the most part used all four fingers in a closed grip, moving the entire hand up or down the neck to make the next note. Some of them did this with amazing dexterity, like those old-time two-finger newspaper reporters who got around on a typewriter the way Lionel Hampton plays piano. But they couldn't really dance over the instrument like Steve Swallow or Clint Huston. After LaFaro, the "legit" technique became almost universal. And it freed the bass from its rudimentary function of walking simple lines, usually made up of roots and fifths.

No instrument in jazz has advanced in the last twenty-five years the way bass has. One of the ways to get more speed on the instrument is to lower the bridge. But you sacrifice that big tone when you do that. Heard and a few others get the speed without loss of the big sound.

It is all the more surprising, then, that John Heard cannot read a note of music. This puts him in that small and remarkable group of jazz players that includes Bix Beiderbecke, Erroll Garner, Wes Montgomery, and Lenny Breau. But Heard's case, like Breau's, borders on the miraculous because of the classical sophistication of his playing. His tone is big and beautiful, and he can sustain notes for great lengths. It seems almost inconceivable that anyone could achieve so much without formal training or theoretical understanding. Oscar Peterson was thunderstruck to learn Heard couldn't read. Finally accepting the fact, he would tell John in rehearsal what chord he was playing at a given point. "I didn't know what he was talking about," John said, laughing at the memory. So Oscar would simply play what he had to play, and John's ear would instantly strip the harmony into its component parts. Oscar then decided to teach him some theory. The effort was futile and he finally gave that up too. John's been working with him on and off for the last eight years. "But I'm phasing that out now," he said. "I won't be working as much with Ahmad or with Kenny Burrell either."

Why? Because John Heard intends to withdraw from music. By 1988, when he will turn fifty, he plans to put the bass aside forever. This is another of the odd things about him: he has achieved his present stature in jazz only to walk away from it --or at least to claim he's going to. It is a decision he made long ago.

What is he giving it up for? "This," he said, waving his hand around the garage he uses as a studio. It is attached to a low white brick house in North Hollywood, where he lives with his wife, Carolyn, and eighteen-year-old daughter Nicole.

The gesture took in several paintings in various phases of completion, including a striking acrylic portrait of Ella Fitzgerald, some of his pencil drawings, and three busts, a completed study of Duke Ellington and two works in progress, Louis Armstrong and Billy Eckstine. He was about to begin a bust of George Shearing, who commissioned it, a sculpture being the only form of portrait that Shearing can "see". John won awards for his art work in high school and continued to work as an artist during four funny years in the United States Air Force, a series of con-man adventures that recall the antics of Yossarian in Heller's *Catch 22*. Examining Heard's pencil portraits of jazz musicians made over the past twenty years or so, one notes the growing assurance of the style. The earlier pictures -- one of Bessie Smith, for example -- are rather cautious, the pencil markings rubbed smooth to produce an approximately photographic effect. But by the time of his 1984 portraits of a grinning Zoot Sims and a Frank Rosolino whose laughter you can almost hear, done from photographs, the technique is at once rougher and more polished, and certainly more confident. The sculpture is something new. He began working in clay only a year ago, and shows every indication of developing the proficiency he already has in other media.

John is also a capable photographer. Often he will shoot a subject extensively before beginning a portrait. He took countless photos of Eckstine before beginning the bust. Since he can't photograph Louis Armstrong, he has afixed to a board photos of Armstrong culled from newspapers and magazines, the face seen in the many angles prerequisite to the attempt at a rounded reconstruction. John also has a copy of the film *High Society*, and although he dislikes the picture and detests the shabby scene in which a condescending Bing Crosby and a tomming Louis Armstrong sing *Then You Has Jazz*, he uses it to study

Armstrong in motion. "Nobody has caught the essence of him yet," John said, and although the unfinished bust has the head back, the mouth open in that showboating smile, there is something dark in the expression. I told John to find, if he can, a print of the Danny Kaye movie about Red Nichols, *The Five Pennies*, which offers an image of Armstrong more as musician then jester.

Many artists have been fascinated by jazz musicians as subjects, the magnificent penman David Stone Martin among them. Heard's drawings and paintings have the virtue of being a jazz musician's vision of jazz musicians. There is an extra if indefinable something about them, a special insight.

"You'll see portraits of white people by white artists and of black people by black artists," John said. "But I'm going to break that barrier." In fact, he already has.

At the center of all this talent is the speech impediment. He was not born with it. Pennsylvania is coal country, and where there is coal there is often slate. Smooth flat chunks of it abound, and

Zoot by Heard

slate makes excellent missiles. The laws of aerodynamics cause the thin gray slabs to sail beautifully. John and a friend were having a horseplay fight. John was bending to pick up a piece of slate when a chunk of it thrown by his friend caught him in the temple. His mother said the stammer began with that accident.

"Manchester was really tough," John said. "I saw more people killed there. They'd throw them in the river. They'd just grab a club and beat the shit out of a guy and throw him in the river. They'd find him downstream about a mile."

"Is that why you learned to fight as a kid, because you had to protect yourself?"

"Yeah, and because of the speech impediment. It became a part of my life. It's the most important thing that ever happened to me. A blessing in disguise. Because when I go somewhere, the first thing I do is get off in a corner and just kind of check everything out. I would never talk to people. In high school, the teacher would ask me something. If I tried to answer a question, and I'd have a little problem, and somebody would start laughing, I didn't care whether they were bigger or not, they had to try me out. That's the way I grew up. I was about a hundred and sixty-five pounds, and I was always athletic. The speech impediment was a constant of my life.

"It made me go inside. And I observed things more. I didn't socialize, I didn't want to be bothered with it. But as a result, something else was happening. I was noticing people. I got to learn how people really are, just by being in a corner. In that sense it was a blessing. I never wanted to be an actor or a teacher. I always knew I was eventually going to paint."

"So music," I said, "was always something on the way to this?"

"Yes."

"Portraiture is a special thing," I said. "Even some very gifted artists can't capture the subtle proportions of faces. It's a special accuracy."

"It is," John said. "It's mostly in the eyes. The eyes and the hands are the hardest things to do. But I was always able to do it. Maybe the speech impediment had something to do with it. Getting off into a corner and observing people. I started when I was about eight years old. The eyes and the hands tell me more about a person than anything else. I'll look at someone and say, 'Maybe I'll stay away from this guy.'"

"You can judge a lot by voices, too," I said.

"I used to practice diction," he said. "After I got out of the Air Force, I'd call around, looking for a job. People could tell whether you were white or black by the way you talked on the phone, more or less. So I'd practice diction. And then I'd go out about the job and they'd see me and that would be that."

"I must have known you for at least six months before I ever noticed the speech impediment. What brings it on? Tension?"

"Yeah," he said. "I think so. People have told me I'm very intense."

"Does it ever disappear completely, like when you're really relaxed?"

"No. You see, I'm used to it. It's part of my life. I rely on it for different things." He started to laugh. "Like, when I first went into the Air Force -- this is a funny story -- down at basic training, they had us on guard duty. I was at the door, and a sergeant, a training instructor, was sneaking up on me, so I said, 'Wh- wh- wh-' and the guy's, like, trying to help me get it out, and I held that guy up there for about five minutes. I was gasping for breath, I was overdoing it so much. Man, that was the last time I pulled guard duty! So you can really use it to your advantage. Like, sometimes, when a cop pulls me over for speeding or something like that, I'll go into that, and they'll feel sorry for you and let you go. I will use it! But I don't like to talk into mikes, and as for talking to crowds, forget it! I'm not going to talk in front of a crowd in my *life*. So to me, it just became a part of life. And it's a hell of an instrument for observing people. Seeing what they're like. If someone is going to come up bugging me, in a nice way, I'll just go into that. And they don't know how to handle that. So they'll leave me alone. I can really listen to people."

"When were you in the Air Force?"

"From 1958 to 1962."

"Why?"

"Many reasons. Some of them I'm not going to tell you about. Someone told me that in order to play well, I had to shoot up. I am a religious person. I'm not into churches. As far as I'm concerned, they can get rid of all of them. But I am religious. And when someone you look up to tells you something like that, that I have to shoot up, a kind of conflict happens inside. So I said, 'No, I can't do that. I think I'm just going into the Air Force, there ain't nothing else to do.' Because I was becoming a hoodlum in Pittsburgh. Getting into a lot of fights and stuff. So the Air Force was a good out for me.

"When they gave me my aptitude test, the guy said, 'We can make you a mechanic or an air policeman,' and I said, "I'm not interested in that. I'm not workin' on nobody's fuckin' car! I want

to play my instrument.' He said, 'Well what do you do?' I said, 'I play music.' He said, 'What kind of music?' I said, 'Jazz.' He said, 'What else do you do?' I said, 'I'm an artist.' He said, 'Well, we may have something for you.' I said, 'Well if you don't, I'll leave right now, I'll go back home. Because if I'm an air policeman, I'll tell you right now, I'll shoot someone.' So they assigned me as an artist.

"When somebody had a brainstorm about, like, getting a picture from behind the pilot while he was on a mission, that's what I'd do. I'd draw it for them, and they'd mail it back to Washington. Easy job. I was AWOL five times, never got busted. I used to hang out in Amsterdam all the time. The Scheherazade Club. Rita Reyes was working with the Diamond Five. I used to go in there and play. I was stationed forty-five kilometers north of Luxembourg, in Germany. It was right on the Moselle in the mountains. I was there two and a half years.

"I used to go down to Paris a lot to hear Bud Powell. Benny Bailey was there. When I first went over there, I landed at Orly outside Paris. They took us to a hotel in the Bastille area where they kept military personnel. I went out walking one night, and there was a club, and there he was, playing -- Benny Bailey. So I just walked in and said, 'Can I play?' 'Cause I was in Paris, I didn't have to impress anybody, they can't play over here anyway. That was my attitude then. There was a West Indian guy playing bass. They let me sit in on bass. So after one tune, Benny said, 'Play another one.' I went the whole set. Afterwards Benny said, 'You know, I need a bass player.' So I went AWOL the first time I landed in Europe. I was supposed to be headed toward Etaine in France, the air base there. I wound up playing with Benny Bailey for a week. The Air Force didn't even know I was there. I just went to the base and they processed me. At that time De Gaulle was telling the Americans to get out of France. So they shipped me up to Germany. So that's how I landed in Europe. I made money my first week, playing. In Paris, yet! I was having fun! Then I went up to that other base, an Air Force fighter wing. It was more regimented."

"You weren't exactly marching in step," I said. "I'm amazed you could handle it."

"Well, I got on the base, and I did a portrait of the base commander's wife. And from then on I had it made. I wouldn't salute officers, I had a beard, I wore civvie clothes, and I worked in the service club. I organized tours for the officers. They wanted to go to Bertchesgaden for the weekend, that kind of thing. A woman was in charge of this section, a GS 9, a civilian, and in the military they give those ladies a hard time. So I was a blessing to her. I used to go down to wing headquarters and con these guys out of everything, pinochle decks, pingpong balls, whatever. I was dealing my ass off. Getting her what she wanted. So in return, when I didn't have anything to do, I'd say, 'I'm going to Amsterdam,' and she'd say, 'Why don't you take my car?' And I'd be having fun and sometimes I'd just forget to come back, and I'd call her, and she'd say, 'Well, there's nothing going on here.' But the officers didn't like that. I was an airman second, I was doing paintings of all these guys who came over there. They'd have these old ladies and girl friends back home. And I'd do paintings of them and sell them to them for forty-five bucks. I was teaching officers' wives how to paint with the palette knife -- paint the Matterhorn and things like that. Each of them was giving me fifteen bucks a month, and I had fifteen of them going. So I was racking in the money. All of it perfectly legal. And this made the officers mad.

"On top of it, I was playing the NCO clubs on the weekends. And that was pretty nice bread too. So I would just take off, I'd say, 'They don't need me, checking in every morning at eight o'clock.' So that's what it was like. I had a lot of fun.

"That two and a half years was an eye-opener for me, with both the art and the music. I had a chance to hang out in the Louvre in Paris and the Prado in Madrid. In Amsterdam I saw Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. Europe opened up that world for me. And I used to hang out with a German guy who was going to architecture school. He also played drums. I got into this little tight German circle. Through them I was exposed to Mingus, for instance. I wasn't into Mingus when I went into the Air Force. I was into Ahmad Jamal, Monk, Art Blakey, real hard-core bebop. West Coast music to me at that time didn't mean anything. The East Coast guys I was hanging out with said, 'Fuck that gingerbread music out there, let's *sweat*!' So that's how I grew up, always playing hard. But over there, they introduced me to Bill Evans, at the time Scott LaFaro was with him. And

Fitz by Heard

Mingus. And Eric Dolphy and Ornette Coleman. John Coltrane I was into before I went into the Air Force. And Phineas Newborn.

"And I'm saying to myself, 'Gee, I had to come all the way over here to learn all this about *my* music.'"

"Who were the painters you got turned onto? El Greco, I presume, at the Prado."

"Yeah. El Greco. The cubists. German cubists were particularly fascinating to me. And Braque. He was a heavy in this close-knit group. They were always talking about Braque."

"What did you get out of going to the Louvre?"

"The Mona Lisa. The minute I saw it, I got goose pimples. It blew me away. Also in Paris, I was very impressed by the impressionists -- Degas, Monet in particular. Not so much Renoir. And I loved Van Gogh. The color! I got involved in all of it.

"When I got out of the Air Force in '62, I went back to Pittsburgh. I went to the Pittsburgh Art Institute for one month. It's a commercial school. They would pile all this work on you, but I still wanted to play at nights. They'd give you homework, and you'd have to do five layouts. You'd have to do five airbrush things, and you'd go to life drawing, and you'd have to do five of those. So I gave it up, and went to work in a vulcanizing place, vulcanizing tires. The heat is something like twelve hundred degrees. They had me and a Polish guy working together. Those Polish guys can work their asses off. The molds were so hot, when you'd have to lift a tire out, sometimes I'd touch it, and I'd get hot silicone on my arms. Both of my arms got infected to the point where I couldn't move them."

"Great for a bass player," I said.

"Right!" John said, laughing. "So I left that job and went to Buffalo. I worked at a hotel with a piano player named Jimmy Manuel. All during that winter, I kept telling him, 'Hey, man, you better get somebody else for next year, 'cause I'm not going to be here another winter.'"

"The sky just unloads on that town in winter!" I said. "And the wind comes off the lake. It's almost as bad as Chicago."

"It is. But, while I was there, I met Sammy Noto, and Joe Romano, and some other cats. Sammy had an after hours club called the Boar's Head. I used to go over and play with those guys after I'd get off the other gig. Around April, after that winter, Jon Hendricks came in town, working at the Royal Arms. I worked with him that week, and he said, 'I'm going to Toronto, and I need a bass player. Why don't you come on the road with me? We're going back out to San Francisco.' Working with him was more than I bargained for, because he used to do Count Basie things, so eight months of that with Jon, traveling, was wonderful.

"After that I stayed in San Francisco. I used to play at the Half Note. George Duke was in the conservatory then, just out of high school. He copped the gig. And Al Jarreau was the vocalist. Al was a social worker at the time, moonlighting as a singer. Pete Magadini was playing drums, a hell of a drummer. That was the group in this club. We worked Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. We were two blocks from the Both-And Club, where John Handy played a lot.

"I was learning the instrument by watching everybody play. I had just gotten married. I met Carolyn in Pittsburgh. She's from Duquesne, Pennsylvania, Earl Hines' home town. We lived in a boarding house with John Handy's rhythm section -- Don Thompson on bass and Terry Clarke on drums and Michael White on piano. That's when John made the record of *Spanish Lady*. I used to listen to those guys all the time, and Don and I used to hang out every night. Don is one of my biggest influences. Handy brought Don and Terry down from Vancouver at that time. They were hot. They blew the Monterey Festival away that year.

"Before that there was a bass player from out here named Albert Stinson, who came through Pittsburgh. He was playing with Chico Hamilton's group, with Gabor Szabo and Charles Lloyd and George Bohanon. I went down to hear them. I was watching this kid Albert Stinson play with this facility, all those fingers going, playing his ass off, just a young cat. So I hung out with him a couple of times. He was turning me onto all these method books, which I hated doing, because I hated practicing. I never practiced. I'd get migraines from it. I'd go mow the lawn, wash windows, run errands, do anything but practice. But I always worked. Every night I played a gig somewhere. That was my practicing -- on the bandstand. But Don Thompson and these guys, I learned the fingerings, the thumb positions, from watching them. Then I heard Eddie Gomez, who came out here to the West Coast, before he joined Bill Evans. He was playing melody with chords. I kept thinking, 'What is *this*?'

"Israel Crosby with Ahmad Jamal was my first big influence. Israel played the root plus all kinds of counter-melodies. And there was Slam Stewart singing with the arco. And then you got Major Holley who kind of plays the same way, but not exactly. Major sings an octave lower than Slam. That's how you tell them apart. And Andy Simpkins. I loved Andy Simpkins. I listened to him a lot.

"That period at the Half Note in San Francisco was very important to me. Once in a while they'd bring in Miles, bring in 'Trane, bring in Wes Montgomery. They used to come down to the Half Note. And Cannon, when he'd play the Workshop. Sundays they'd be off and they'd come over to the Half Note and play with us. So I was playing with everybody, and learning a lot.

"I came to L.A. after being up in the Bay Area in '68 and '69, and played around town here. I worked with Shelly Manne. And then I got a call to join Count Basie. I thought, 'Maybe I should pass on this.' But I went, and, as it worked out, I showed up out at Disneyland. The band was getting ready to hit. Basie was playing one of his intros. I asked Al Grey, 'Which tune?' Al said, 'Four twenty-five.' Somebody else said, 'Five ninety.' Somebody said, 'A hundred and twenty.' I said, 'Well fuck these guys.' But when the band came in, I knew the arrangement from working with Jon Hendricks. And the whole night went like that. I didn't read one note. And that's how I caught that gig. I was with Basie for about two years that time. Then I left and worked with Ahmad Jamal, then I went back with Basie. And then with Oscar Peterson. And Kenny Burrell."

"Aren't you going to miss music?" I said.

Again John waved a hand at his pictures. "This *is* music," he said. "It is the culmination of all the years I've been painting and playing. People have asked me, 'What do you think about when you're playing?' I think about color, form, line, texture. As opposed to playing C, E-flat, G and B-flat on this chord. I hear a chord and I think, 'Man, that reminds me of this.' And I play forms, like a landscape or something. Or like a figure moving. I've never thought about the academics of playing, the notes. Or the math of music. I never thought about that. Which, in the back of my head, kept telling me, 'You're *inadequate* to this situation.' I'd see guys writing, and saying, 'This melody doesn't go with this diminished here, why don't you play A?' and then they'll write the chord change F-sharp over A, or whatever. I never knew what the hell they were talking about. I was just waiting for them to play the chord so I could hear it and play what I wanted.

"When I turn fifty, that'll be about it for music. This is more important. For personal gratification. For being master of my own universe. I don't have to deal with anybody when I paint. I don't have to deal with anybody's petty emotions, never have to play up to them. Which I never did very much anyway. This way I can totally eliminate all that. It's like a perfect way to live."

I said, "There's a difference between music and literature compared to painting and sculpture. Painting and sculpture exist in space, music and literature exist in time. It takes you this long or that long to listen to a song or read a story. But a painting or a sculpture is simply there. It may take you a certain amount of time to perceive it and digest it, but that's your problem. But in music there's a constant flow-by."

John said, "When I paint -- this is odd -- it's work work work. People come by, and I get them involved with it. So I constantly have this dialogue. A woman came by last week, and we were arguing about something about how she makes salsa, so I got the paint and did it the way she saw it. Her eyes kind of lit up and she said, 'You're a performer even when you paint.' I said, 'I never thought about it.' The vibes coming from an audience when you're playing make you reach for that ultimate moment of magic, which we all do -- or should. When that moment happens, and you're not thinking about it any more, you don't have to think about it, it's right and you know that it's right, the ambience in the room is perfect, the audience is perfect, their response is making you reach for things you normally wouldn't, because you're on that level ... you try for that moment, and sometimes it comes out perfect. That's what keeps you performing that eighty-five percent of the time when it ain't happening, right? That one moment can make you say, 'Oh yeah, I know what that's like, I'm going to try for that again.' But

painting, I can work on it at my own pace, my own rhythm, there's no hurry. It's not something that's here and then gone -- that one note, it's not right, but it's gone. In painting you don't have to deal with that. I can try something and say, 'That's not exactly what I wanted,' and walk away and come back next day and say, '*That*'s what I wanted.' Music's not like that.

"And there's always the matter of playing up to other people, which is a role I had myself in for twenty-five years -- playing in a sideman situation. And I'm not a company boy. Like, when a piano player calls out a tune, *How High the Moon*, and at that time I think, 'I don't want to play this tune.' But the piano player goes into *How High the Moon*, and I play *How High the Moon*, and since I'm there playing, I'm going to try to make this guy sound like the best piano player in the world. That's always been my attitude as a sideman: make the guy out front sound as great as he possibly can. Maybe that's why I work all the time. Rhythm is my thing. I like grooves. But many times, playing with people -- Oscar, or Ahmad, or Count Basie's band -- I'll be saying to myself, 'I don't like this tune,' but I'll always try to make it sound fantastic. Later for how I feel. But I've done that, man, for twenty-five years, and now I want to get into the world where I'm master of my own thing, without having nobody else over me *or* under me."

I said, "So many musicians write well, so many are interested in photography and painting. Bill Evans used to doodle constantly with a pen, and the things he did were quite interesting."

"Yeah, I know," John said. "I've got some of Bill's things. We were hanging out one night, in a restaurant. He was talking and doodling, making things, and I said, 'I *want* them.' He says, 'Oh, I'll do you another one.' I've got them here in the house somewhere."

"Tony Bennett paints," I said. "So does Peggy Lee. I think the fascination with one form of art carries over into all the others. George Gershwin was a good painter. There's a wonderful portrait he did of Jerome Kern that I saw on the wall of Harold Arlen's apartment in New York. George Wettling was an artist of professional stature."

John said, "At Bradley's restaurant, in New York, on the walls of the office, there are a lot of Jimmy Rowles' caricatures, with little captions on them. They're little classics. Just a couple of lines. He's fantastic at that."

John fell silent for a moment, as if reflecting on that future time when he will no longer pick up the bass.

"I owned my first bass when I was twenty-two years old," he said. "I played first on a high school bass that was just a piece of lumber. One bass I played was made out of aluminum. Not much fun, if you really want to play.

"You should hear my bass now. I just had a new fingerboard put on it. Now I want to play! I'm really working on it. I told my wife, 'I think I messed up. I should have never started messing around with that bass.' It sounds really good now. The bottom end. I can hold a note forever on the bottom end! I've got a record date coming up with George Cables, and I can't wait!

"The instrument is totally unexplored. For one thing, jazz players haven't got that real clean arco playing down."

"They're often fuzzy and out of tune," I said.

"Yeah, they are. Arco tells on you, real fast, as opposed to pizzicato. That will probably evolve. And then that chord thing that Eddie Gomez and those guys got into, there's a lot more that could be done with that. And there's also false harmonics, that make the bass sound in the higher register, like a cello. They're all things I've done. But to *improvise* doing that -- no one's ever played a solo with the bow in false harmonics. It would be incredible. And it's possible."

"And you say you're going to walk away from it?" I said. "We'll see! Are you going to go back to Nigeria?"

"You bet."

The man's name is Augustine Alibi, pronounced All-ee-bee. He is the son of a tribal chieftain, a warm and friendly man who speaks elegant English -- "the King's English," as John put it. He is the police commissioner of Ibadon, one of Nigeria's largest cities. Some years ago, he attended a seminar on law enforcement at Pitt University in Pittsburgh. Through her position in the district attorney's office, John's sister Freddia met him, and married him.

Four years ago, John went on a concert tour of Nigeria with Pearl Bailey and Louie Bellson, partly in order to visit his sister. Much of the slave trade to America originated in Nigeria. The Portuguese began it. Then it was taken up by the British, though not for long. They outlawed slavery in 1807 and began a legitimate Nigerian trade in palm oil and other products. They also stationed a naval squadron off the Nigerian coast to intercept and interrupt the slave trade of other nations. These actions left Britain in good order with the Nigerians, and they are part of the historical reason why Nigeria in 1960 became an independent state within the British Commonwealth. Nonetheless, for a time there was a brisk slave trade in Nigeria, the coastal tribes selling off captives, taken in internecine wars, to white slavers in the markets of Lagos. Though John may know little about his grandparents, and nothing at all of their lineage, it's entirely possible that his people came from Nigeria, which touches the sea in that elbow of the West African coast.

Enjoying the company of his sister and his Nigerian in-laws, he made other friends as well. He told one of them that he was particularly interested in the country's tradition of ebony carving. In the city of Benin, his friend took him to the large work hut of a famous wood-carver. There were two or three generations of apprentices at work. Near the front of the hut, which was twenty-five or thirty feet wide, young boys were cleaning up the detritus of the work. Farther into the hut, somewhat older boys were sharpening and repairing the carving tools. Still farther in, young men were making carvings and taking their work to the master for finishing or approval.

The old man, with white hair, was seated at the back of the room. He did not rise. John's friend told him in Ibo, "We have a visitor from America. He has come to see your work."

The old man looked at John and said something. John's friend translated: "He says, 'Welcome home.'"

John began to come apart emotionally. The master carver smiled. "He reached up and patted me on the back," John said. "I stayed all day and watched him work. I learned a hell of a lot." His voice was becoming frayed as he recalled the incident.

He didn't sound so tough to me.

Ordering Prints

You can buy limited-edition prints of John's portraits, signed and numbered, by writing to him at 11044 Kling Street, North Hollywood CA 91602. The color prints are: Jimmy Blanton $75; Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, and Carmen McRae, $50 each. The pencil portraits of Zoot Sims and Frank Rosolino are $25 each. The bust of Duke Ellington is $250 in a fibreglass reproduction. Similar reproductions of the Eckstine and Armstrong busts will be available at a later date and eventually bronzes as well.