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More Charlie's

by Bill Crow

I loved *The Last Days of Junior's*. With every paragraph a flood of memories poured in. Two corrections, Al Thomson spelled it without a P, and he was a tenor player, not a bass player.

Al was the manager of a baseball team that formed at Jim and Andy's. Zoot and Dave McKenna were regular players. They called themselves "Al Thomson's Drunks," and played anyone who would field a team, up in Central Park. I think their proudest win was against the Harry James band. Al told me James had uniforms and new equipment, and even carried a pitcher who didn't play an instrument.

"And we beat 'em," he said. "We were doing so good I even put myself in at third for a while, but I struck out, so I sent myself to the showers."

Once, when Al was introduced to a musician he hadn't met before and asked, "What have you been doing?" the musician said, "Scuffling."

Al looked interested. "Is there an opening?" he enquired.

And, in Charlie's Tavern, after listening to a musician cry about how long it had been since he'd had a gig, Al, unemployed himself, turned grandly to the owner and ordered,

"Charlie, give this cat a gig! And put it on my tab."

The Charlie's on 52nd Street that you wrote about, as well as Junior's and Joe Harbor's, were descendants of the original Charlie's Tavern, on the Seventh Avenue side of the Roseland building, where the City Squire Motel now sits. Charlie Jacobs, the owner, died not long before they tore down the building. Roseland then moved to its present location, where a skating rink called the Gay Blades used to be.

I don't know who owned the Charlie's on 52nd Street, but I don't think it was Jacobs' family. Whoever owned it, Gene Williams attracted the musicians who patronized the place.

Joe Harbor had been a bartender at the old Charlie's Tavern, and another of Charlie's bartenders, Bert, a lovely man with a touch of an English accent, went to work at Junior's. All three places based their business on the large clientele from the original tavern that Charlie had built up over many years.

They tore down the Arcadia Ballroom, next door to Roseland, just before they razed the Roseland building. I remember standing on the sidewalk in front of Charlie's one Wednesday afternoon with the crowd of musicians who often gathered there after visiting the union floor on Sixth Avenue. The wrecking crane had taken down everything on the north end of the block except the wall of the Arcadia that abutted the Roseland building. The crane operator carefully lowered his wrecking ball into the space between the two walls and worked his boom sideways until he dragged the last remaining wall of the Arcadia down without harming a brick of the Roseland building. As the wall crashed, the assembled musicians, impressed with such skill, gave the crane operator a big hand. He opened his cab door and took a bow.

Charlie bore some resemblance to Wimpy, the character in the Popeye comic strip, but he was no wimp. Once a circus strongman, he was nobody to fool with. He knew his customers and encouraged outsiders to find another bar. He took care of the cops who dropped in during their regular rounds, but he didn't want them hanging around. They made his customers uncomfortable. He'd pour them a drink or slip them a sandwich if they came in when it was quiet, but if they arrived when the place was busy he'd meet them at the door and walk them back out to the sidewalk, laying the obligatory tip on them.

Charlie's was a clubhouse for musicians. If you gave up your room while on the road with a band, you could have your mail sent to Charlie's. He'd let you run a tab when you were out of work, and he'd cash your checks when you got paid. You didn't even have to drink to hang out there. You could come in and get warm and talk to other musicians all night long without ordering anything. Charlie just ignored you. If you drank regularly, or ordered an occasional meal from Felix, the cook, Charlie remembered your name and would take your messages for you. A guy could park his wife or his girlfriend in a booth there before a job and know nobody would bother her while he was gone.

Charlie was horrified when, in 1950, the *Daily News* ran a photo of his bar on the front page, identifying it as a dope pusher's rendezvous. There had been a junkie or two who would come in and sit quietly in a back booth, but Charlie never bothered them. Evidently somebody had gotten busted, and under pressure from the narcs had told them he'd copped from someone in Charlie's men's room. Maybe he had, but the *News* story made it look like Charlie's was some sort of narcotics supermarket. Charlie made a new rule: No More Junkies!

A musician fell asleep in a booth one night and was ejected. The next day I found him sitting outside the tavern on Brew Moore's tenor case, waiting for Brew to come out. "What's the matter?" I asked. "You look unhappy."

He gave me a piteous look and said, "I'm banned from bars and barred from bands."

The walls above the booths and behind the bars at Charlie's were completely covered with pictures of musicians, some professional promo shots and some informal shots taken by musician photographers. Over the cash register, next to an old postcard from Brad Gowans from Mexico, was a snapshot of a handsome bronzed man with a Clark Gable mustache and a devilish grin, dressed only in shorts and sneakers, wielding a shovel in the bright sunlight. I always wondered who that was, and found out recently it was Merv Gold. Merv sent it to Charlie while working in the south somewhere.

Merv took the last picture of the tavern, closed and boarded up, with a sign saying "This Building To Be Demolished." A copy of it hangs on my wall at home.

Joe harbor's was, as you say, more raucous than Junior's or Charlie's II, but he did have a great chef. The dinner hour was

always busy. Hawky Cogan, a tenor man who became a contractor for Broadway shows, dropped in one afternoon between shows and ordered dinner, and then noticed he was sitting next to Dizzy Gillespie. They chatted for a few minutes, and then Boris Malina stopped by Hawky's table on his way out. Boris started a conversation in Yiddish, and a few courtesies passed back and forth in that language as Dizzy looked on. Just as Boris left, the waiter arrived with Hawky's order, the chef's special, pork chops. Dizzy eyed the pork, gave Hawky a knowing look, and said, "You must be one of them *jive* Jews!"

There were two other midtown bars patronized by musicians during the 1950s — the Copper Rail, across Seventh Avenue from the Metropole, and the original Beefsteak Charlie's, at 50th and Broadway. Milt Hinton paid visits to all the musicians' bars, but he was the mayor of Beefsteak's. There is now a restaurant a block north that uses that name, but it's not a musician's hangout. The Rail featured soul food, and was my introduction to that culinary tradition. Whoever wasn't on the stand at the Metropole could be found there. The place folded after the Metropole dropped jazz. I think it's a pizzeria now.

Your memories of Gerry and Judy were especially poignant for me. She was delicious, and we all loved her. She was excited about doing that album with Gerry but she hated the way she sang on it. She had a lovely voice, but she was intimidated by the band and by the arrangers, and she wasn't at all comfortable singing in a little booth with headphones. She was very down on her own performance that night, and felt better when we told her the vocal track was separate and could be redone later. I guess her illness made that impossible. It's lovely to have that record as a souvenir of her, but she could have done it so much better if there had been time.

I was amazed at her professionalism during that fiasco *Hot Spot*. She had a very un-simpatico director who spent all his time with the choreographer and dancers. She didn't get to rehearse with the full orchestra until dress rehearsal night. She asked my wife, Aileen, and me to watch a preview performance and tell her what we thought. We thought she did a hell of a job with mediocre material. Afterward she told us she had just learned a new production number half an hour before the first act, and that the order of the show had been completely changed from the previous night. In her performance, such problems were completely undetectable. She carried the whole show, such as it was, with amazing strength.

Aileen and I dropped up to Judy's house in Washingtonville, New York, where she and Gerry were working on *Happy Birthday*. They played and sang all the songs for us that evening. We were enchanted. They'd really done good work, and we were sorry when we heard they weren't going to get it produced. I think Judy said Anita Loos wasn't willing to work on the book with them, which was the reason the project died aborning. Loos evidently thought the play just had to have songs added to become a musical.

I used to share your concern about Gerry's not writing arrangements. He'd turned out so much good stuff before the quartet days.

I first met Gerry at rehearsals I used to attend as a listener at Nola, where the players would chip in for studio rental money in order to be able to play Gerry's charts. And a couple of times, when they couldn't put together the money for a studio, they rehearsed in Central Park, on the lawn below the 72nd Street lake. I have snapshots I took at one of them, showing two bassists, Harry Bugin and Phil Leshin, no drummer, Tommy Allison in the trumpet section, Brew Moore and Alan Eager in the saxes, Gerry and Gail madden. The first rehearsal was a great success, the music sounding wonderful in the open air. The second rehearsal was moved to the east end of the lake to be nearer the boathouse men's room. The men's room attendant complained about the music to a cop, who ran the band out of the park because they didn't have a permit!

Gerry's arranging sense was evident on the first quartet and tentette ten-inch LPs from California, after he moved out there. I was working with Stan Getz (Johnny Mandel and Johnny Williams and Al Levitt) at the time we first heard Gerry's quartet records, and I remember how turned on we were by them. John Mandel transcribed *Line for Lyons* for us from the record, and we played it on a gig in Baltimore. Stan fantasized at the club about what a great band we'd have by adding Gerry and Chet Baker and his quintet and having Gerry write for the group. Someone must have overheard him. The next issue of *Down Beat* carried a story announcing that fantasy as an imminent reality. They following issue carried a letter from Gerry suggesting that Stan go get his own band. A few years later, when Peck Morrison left Gerry's sextet, Gerry hired me from Marian McPartland's trio. My main reason for wanting to make the move was Gerry's writing. Also, with Gerry and Zoot and Brookmeyer there, I knew the front line would be hot. I hadn't met Dave Bailey before, but we got along great from the first day. Gerry wrote the whole book for that group, with the exception of *La Plus que lente,* a Debussy piece that Gil Evans scored for us.

When Zoot and Jon Eardley left the sextet, we became a quartet, and Gerry would occasionally find a new tune for us. But he often lamented not having a larger group to write for. Later, after I'd been away for a while, I rejoined him for the quartet with Art Farmer. Gerry complained that his life had become so full of other people that he never had time to sit down by himself and write. Just before we made the album for Columbia, I gave him the key to my cold-water flat in the Village and told him, "I'm staying at Aileen's tonight. Got to my place and write. There's a piano there, and nobody will know where to find you." He did, and came in the next day with a lovely treatment of *What Is There to Say?*, which became the title tune of the album.

Gerry had encouraged Art Farmer and me to write something for that date, and we both did. Art's tune was *Blueport*. I think the title was Gerry's. I wanted to name mine *Buckethead,* an old nickname of Art's, but Art asked me not to. So Gerry came up with a spooneristic title, *News from Blueport*. (Somebody at Columbia listed it on the label as Gerry's tune, but they send me the royalties.) During that time Gerry also wrote some very nice things for record dates with the quartet plus Jim Hall and Brookmeyer.

After another hiatus, I joined Gerry again, this time with the Concert Jazz Band. After a tour of Europe Conte Candoli and Buddy Clark were going back to the Coast, and Clark Terry and I joined in time for a gig at the Vanguard. We'd just been there

a week when they recorded the *At the Village Vanguard* album. The great thing about that band was that there was a good riff-maker in every section – Gerry, Clark, and Brookmeyer. Except on ballads, our procedure was to not go to the next written section of a chart after somebody's solo unless Gerry gave the signal. Gerry would start a background pattern on a soloist's second or third chorus and the reeds would join him. Bob or Clark would add a counter-riff in the brass, and soon we'd have developed something quite intense that led right into the next written section.

Gerry finally had the band he'd always wanted to write for, but he wrote only a couple of things for it at that time. We certainly played his music, but he'd had Bill Holman take a lot of the quartet and sextet music and expand it for thirteen pieces, always using the quartet sound as the core of it. In addition, we had the lovely things John Mandel had written for the movie *I Want to Live,* and Brookmeyer and Al Cohn contributed some wonderful stuff. Later we had something by Thad Jones and one by Wayne Shorter. At one point Gary McFarland showed up at a rehearsal, just out of Berklee, with two or three Dukish sounding charts. After hearing them, Gerry made a number of excisions and repositionings and they became Mulliganesque charts. Gary saw what Gerry wanted and came in with a few more, and we recorded them all. His exposure with that band really launched him into successful work on his own in New York.

One of Gerry's best pieces of editing happened when Al Cohn brought in a chart he called *Mother's Day*. (Gerry retitled it *Lady Chatterley's Mother.*) After rehearsing it a couple of times, Gerry said, "Al, it's a wonderful chart, but I wish there was more of it. It just gets going good at the end when it's over. Could you add a couple more choruses?"

Al nodded and gathered up the parts. At the next rehearsal, he passed them out again. The final hold had been turned into a two-bar chord with the rhythm section continuing to cook, leading into another solo chorus for Gerry. Then Al's great shout chorus began. The first time we played it, we cheered. If Gerry hadn't asked for it, we'd have had a very good Al Cohn chart without that wonderful climax.

I thought Gerry's talent at editing other people's arrangements was remarkable. He made their charts work for his band, and in doing so gave the book a unity it would not otherwise have had.

But I kept hoping he'd start writing again himself. At one rehearsal he came in and passed out some manuscript. We thought he'd finally come up with one. On everybody's part was the same eight bars of an arrangement, rescored ten or twelve different ways. Gerry had begun writing, but he found it hard to make final choices yet. He wanted to hear how each variation sounded before he made up his mind. I don't remember if he ever got that one finished while I was on the band.

Anyway, it's good news that he's writing more these days. Of course, he "writes" all the time, when he plays. But when he writes it down on paper, it spreads the fun around to the rest of us.

The China Song, which helped fill the void caused by the demise of Jim and Andy's, was the last old-style musicians' bar in the midtown area. It was in the Bryant Hotel building on Broadway near 54th Street; it was a Chinese restaurant with fairly ordinary food and a bar long enough to accommodate the musicians still working in the remnants of the daytime music business – the few jingle dates that still use acoustic instruments, and the old guard of semi-retired side musicians who like to drink together and talk about the old days.

The regulars who gathered at the Song over the past several years had decreased in number, and, since Local 802's offices moved downtown to 42nd Street, not so many musicians dropped in to socialize after the Wednesday afternoon gathering at the Exchange floor. The floor itself is less well-attended these days than it used to be. There isn't as much last-minute work now, and most of the club date offices book by phone instead of directly from the floor.

Early in March the China Song closed. A more modern Chinese restaurant will open soon at the location. The West Side Cottage at 52nd and Ninth Avenue, opened its first clone, the West Side Cottage Too, at 47th and Ninth last year. These restaurants are well patronized by theater musicians. The food is good, the price is right, and they serve brown rice and free chablis. Nobody hangs out at the tiny bar, though.

I've noticed a few musicians at the bar of Kodama, a good Japanese restaurant on 45th Street near Eighth Avenue, but it's a special group that digs sushi.

– Bill Crow

Gil's Pad

Gil Evans and Robert Farnon almost met early in 1984, and the city in which they almost met was Toronto, where they both were born. Each of them had told me he wanted to meet the other. Gil did a concert in Toronto, then went back to New York. Bob arrived in Toronto from England a week later, to receive an award from the city, and I got to Toronto about the same time, but it was too late for me to engineer an encounter. These two men, who have had such an enormous influence on innumerable composers and arrangers, and who so loved each other's music, never did meet face to face.

Bob was born July 24, 1917, and went away to England in World War II as conductor and arranger of the Canadian band of the Allied Expeditionary Force. He never came home; England became his home. Gil was five years older than Bob, born May 13, 1912.

Whether Gil should be considered Canadian is problematical. Gil and I talked about Canada a number of times, and I think he did to some extent consider himself Canadian, though he was far more a westerner, and more particularly a Californian. At birth he was given the name Ian Green. Pretty name. In full, Ian Ernest Gilmore Green. His father was Australian. The father, I believe, died when Gil was small, although this was one of the things I never got around to asking Gil. His mother remarried, Gil took the stepfather's name, and the family moved to Saskatchewan, whose winters Gil would recall to me with a wry smile half a century later. The family resettled in Stockton, California, when Gil was seventeen, and he considered Stockton, a farming center 78 miles east of San Francisco in the Central Valley, his home town. But he started listening to Louis Armstrong in 1927, when he was fifteen, and at that time the family still lived in Saskatchewan.

Whether he began writing then or later, in Stockton, I don't know. He was a self-taught musician of preternatural talent. He said, you will note later on, that one of his teachers-by-radio was Don Redman. Interestingly, Bob Farnon told me that Don Redman showed him how to lay out a score.

Gil's name became known to jazz lovers through his writing immediately after World War II for the Claude Thornhill band. At the same time, in England, Farnon was recording the large-orchestra arrangements of standards that would be grabbed up by every arranger I ever met. After Thornhill folded the band, Gil worked around New York, living in a little apartment on West 55th Street that was a bohemian open house and music school to innumerable influential musicians. A few years later, another arranger, also an Evans, Marion Evans, would use his own midtown apartment the same way, with the Farnon albums emphasized as teaching materials and such people as J.J. Johnson, Pat Williams, and Torrie Zito learning from them. A case could be made that the apartments of the two Evanses had more influence on post-war American non-"classical" writing, from jazz charts to film scores, than all the conservatories and music schools on the North American continent put together.

Gil's apartment has become legendary. In the late 1940s, Gil and Gerry Mulligan and Miles Davis and others carried on in that apartment a series of theoretical conversations that were to have incalculable consequences. The album on Capitol that would be known as the Birth of the Cool – they used no such terminology – was laid out in that apartment. The group was a co-operative. They elected Miles Davis the leader of record.

Gil made a series of albums with Miles that must be considered among the masterpieces of twentieth century music. *Miles Ahead, Porgy and Bess, Sketches of Spain*, are such jewels that arranger Bill Mathieu, who had worked for Stan Kenton, wrote: "The mind reels at the intricacy of his orchestral and developmental techniques. His scores are so careful, so formally well- constructed, so mindful of tradition, that you feel the originals should be preserved under glass in a museum." Gil's palette was something beyond the traditional jazz orchestra with its "sections" and antiphony; he used color in blocks. He virtually abandoned the jazz orchestra with its trumpets, trombones, and sax sections, choosing to work instead with the wind instruments usually associated with the symphony orchestra, including French and English horns, flutes and oboes. This was probably one of the reasons traditionalists were sometimes upset by him. I wrote once that he used sound the way such Canadian painters as Lawren Harris and Tom Thomson and A.Y. Jackson used blocks of color. The subject matter – the tune – is no longer consequential; the suspended blocks of color are everything. Gil read that and he didn't disagree.

The novels and short stories of John Steinbeck vividly portray California during the time of Gil's youth. The influence of Mexico and, earlier, Spain, is everywhere, in the red-tile roofs, in the names of places and in the faces of people whose families have forgotten Spanish and the recent arrivals who don't yet know English. And in the music. I can only speculate that Gil's love of Spanish musical colorations began then, in his late adolescence. It's another of the things I was going to ask him about.

The *Miles Ahead* album reflects the Spanish-Mexican influences notably in *The Maids of Cadiz* by Delibes and Ahmad Jamal's *New Rhumba*. Later, Gil suggested to Miles that they use a movement of Rodrigo's *Concierto de Arranjuez* in their *Sketches of Spain* album. He thereby turned the movement's theme into a jazz standard. I wrote once that Gil's music sometimes struck me as being like *A View of Toledo* as painted by Lawren Harris.

The whole album is strongly Spanish in flavor. When *Sketches of Spain* came out, I mentioned to Gil that it bothered some people (*Miles Ahead* had bothered them too). I told him they didn't know whether to call it classical music or jazz or Spanish music or whatever. Gil said something to me that I quoted, and which has been often requoted: "That's a merchandiser's problem, not mine. I write popular music." An astonishing statement for a man whose music never got the wide recognition it deserved. But its point is simple: he rejected categories. He had no interest in (he wasn't hostile; he just wasn't interested) in the kind of person who says that something "is" or "isn't" "jazz". Gil didn't care; he and Miles (who doesn't like the word "jazz" either) were too busy making music.

The most Californian of Gil's albums, to my mind, was *The Individualism of Gil Evans*, recorded in 1964. Gil asked me to write the liner notes for that album.

Creed Taylor was head of and sole producer for Verve at that point. He produced some excellent albums, some of them very commercial and aimed at the marketplace, others for the art alone. *The Individualism of Gil Evans* is in the latter category.

Gil did not have a big commercial name – not then, not ever. The Miles Davis name sold the albums produced by their collaboration. But Creed considered Gil a genius. He set aside a certain sum – $10,000, if memory serves me, which was a fair amount of money then – for the album. He told Gil to bring the album in at whatever price he could and keep the balance as his fee. I don't think Creed expected the album to sell much; but he wanted to do it anyway.

Now Gil was notorious for fiddling with his scores on the date, making changes as the clock was running. He kept changing and fixing and fixing and changing until he had recorded 68 minutes and 23 seconds of music, far more than could be put on an LP; and he had spent the whole ten grand and more, leaving nothing for himself. He had worked on the album for over a year. The first date was in September, 1963, the last on October 29, 1964. In that time, and over the course of at least five recording sessions, he had put some remarkable music on tape.

I first heard the album – the original two-track mix on fifteen- inch reels; there were no cassettes in those days – with Gil in Creed's office.

Creed released about half the music they'd put in the can. Polygram, which now owns the Verve catalogue, has put out all of it in the CD reissue.

Among the more striking tracks are two of Gil's compositions, *Flute Song* and *Las Vegas Tango*, both of which are drenched in Spanish influence. And nothing I have ever heard more vividly evokes the American southwest than *Las Vegas Tango*. It has a strange brooding mood. Jimmy Cleveland's gorgeous dark-toned trombone solo, without vibrato, is so perfect that I had to ask Gil, "Did you write that solo out?"

"No," Gil said. He's doing it."

Gil had an exceptional ability to get appropriate improvised solos out of his players. But then of course they loved to play his charts.

Another of the notable features of *Las Vegas Tango* is the work of Elvin Jones. All through it, he is playing not just rhythm but, almost, melody on the top cymbal, working the stick from the outer rim inward, then dinging it off the bell. Uncanny.

Gil claimed nothing for himself. "I'm just an arranger," he said once. Not so. What he arranged was always transmuted into orchestral composition, and the composition was Gil's.

Gil was a handsome man. He had a craggy face and beautiful thick straight hair. His eyes were gentle, and he had the sweetest smile.

I had long been planning an extensive interview with Gil, and was simply awaiting the next trip to New York when he and I would both have time to talk. And then in Mexico, where he had gone to recuperate from prostate surgery, Gil contracted peritonitis. There are better places to get sick than Mexico, and on Sunday, March 20 of this year, Gil died. I heard the news on television. It struck me as ironic that this medium, which had almost totally ignored his life, except for one notable program with Miles, widely chronicled his death.

Miles Davis, who was himself in hospital at the time, told Leonard Feather, "If you had a boxful of uncut diamonds and threw them all in the ocean, the one you would want to keep is Gil."

In April, in Colorado, I mentioned to Ben Sidran that I had been planning to do a piece on Gil. Ben told me that only two years ago, he had taped an interview with Gil, then 74, for National Public Radio. He said he would send the transcript. It follows herewith; the copyright, dated 1988, belongs to Ben Sidran.

The next issue will be devoted to two of the friends who were part of the crowd at Gil's pad on 55th Street — Billy Exiner and Dave Lambert, the portraits written respectively by Gene DiNovi and Bill Crow.

Conversation

by Ben Sidran

Ben: You're a busy man these days. You've written the scores to a couple of films, *Absolute Beginners* and also *The Color of Money*, and you continue to lead a big band on Monday nights here in New York City. But you've been wearing many hats for many decades.

Gil: It's hard to believe. Really hard to believe. Of course, the only time I know how old I am is when I look in the mirror, right? When I don't look in the mirror, I never think of that. But the mirror has to remind me.

Ben: Allow me also to remind you of a time back in the 1930s when you became associated with Claude Thornhill's band.

Gil: Yeah, right, I met Claude Thornhill in Hollywood. I came out there to write some arrangements for Skinnay Ennis's band, who was on the Bob Hope show.

Claude had an insurance policy that he was going to cash in, and he couldn't decide whether to go to Tahiti for the rest of his life or go back to New York and start a band. Which he decided to do. So I said to him, "If you ever need an arranger, let me know." So when his chief arranger got drafted, he sent for me. That was in 1941, '42. Then we all got drafted. So when he reorganized back in '46, I was with him again for a while.

By that time the scene had changed. The swing band era was over, right? He just missed it by that three or four years in the service. He could have scored, but coming back into it again, pop music had come along and rock-and-roll, and folk and all that. So he had a hard time booking the band. And the band was big. It was a wonderful workshop for me.

It had three trumpets and two trombones and French horns and two altos, two tenors, baritone and a separate flute section, right? Three flute players, didn't play anything but flutes. And a tuba. So it was a big nut for him, and he finally had to give it up.

Ben: Was it Claude's idea to include the French horns and the tuba, initially?

Gil: The French horns were his idea, yeah. But the tuba, I got that in there. And the flutes. But the French horns he had quite a while. He had them before the war, too, you know..

He was like a practical joker, in a way. And so a clarinet was out in front of the band, playing *Summertime*. I don't know if you ever heard of a clarinet player named Fazola?

Ben: Sure, Irving Fazola.

Gil: Beautiful tone, and oh, no one ever had a more beautiful tone than Fazola. So he's out there playing *Summertime*, and Claude signaled to these two guys, and they came up from the audience and sat down and started playing these French horns in sustained harmony underneath him. And nobody in the band knew that was going to happen. Foz couldn't believe it. He looked around.

But the band sounded like horns anyway, even before he got them. It was one of the first bands that played without a vibrato, you know. Because the vibrato had been "in" all the time in jazz, ever since, well, Louis Armstrong, you know, that vibrato. But then Claude's band played with no vibrato, and that's what made it compatible with bebop. Because the bebop players were playing with no vibrato. And they were also interested in the impressionistic harmony, you know, that I had used with Claude. The minor ninths and all that.

That's how we got together, really. That's the reason we got together. Because of the fact that there was no vibrato plus the harmonic development. Because up until that time, with the swing bands, mostly the harmony had been from Fletcher Henderson, really. Where you harmonize everything with the major sixth chords and passing tones with a diminished chord, you know. So that was how things changed with bebop.

Ben: Also, the addition of the French horns and the tuba got the arrangements out of the more traditional "sections" — brass section, woodwind section — and made it more of a continuing palette for you.

Gil: Well, when Miles and I together to do the Capitol record [*Birth of the Cool*], we just had to figure out how few instruments, and which ones, we could use to cover the harmonic needs of Claude Thornhill's band, you know. Naturally, with a big band like that, you have a lot of doubles. But we just trimmed it down to the six horns. Six horns and three rhythm, and those six horns covered all the harmonic needs that we had.

Ben: You mentioned the Miles session. I'm thinking particularly of the song *Boplicity*, with the ensemble that included J.J. Johnson, Lee Konitz, John Lewis, Kenny Clark,

John Barber.

Gil: Who was on French horn? Gunther Schuller?

Ben: I think it was Sandy Seigleson.

Gil: Sandy, yeah, he played with Claude Thornhill. Great horn player.

Ben: That particular recording very quietly started some sort of revolution in jazz.

Gil: I wasn't even there. You know, I had to go home to see my mother in California, so I wrote that arrangement and gave it to Miles. But we were all so in tune with each other that I didn't have any worries at all. They just played it, and when I heard it, it was as though I had been there.

That's the way it was with all the records I made with Miles, the big-band records too. Because even though the notes were different, and they weren't familiar with the arrangements, they were so familiar with the idiom, you know, that we made those big-band records in three three-hour sessions with no rehearsal. Nowadays, that's unheard of, right? You get a hundred hours, now, or more. But we got nine hours to make that thing, with no rehearsals. But the band, the whole band I picked out, they had the idiom under their fingers. So it was possible to do that.

And that's the way it was with the *Boplicity* band too. And Miles, he's the best lead trumpet player I know.

Ben: That band, the *Boplicity* band, came together through a series of informal gatherings at your apartment over a couple of years.

Gil: I rented a room a couple of blocks from 52nd Street, you know. When I got off the train, I got in a cab and I went right to 52nd Street. I didn't have a place to stay. I threw my bag in a check room and I just walked up and down The Street there and met a bunch of my heroes. First night, I met all my heroes! I met Ben [Webster] and Lester [Young], Erroll Garner and Bud Powell, all these people the first night.

So I got a room a couple blocks away, a basement room. Just one big room with a bed and a piano and a record player and a sink. And I left the door open for two years. Just left it open. I never locked it. When I went out, I never locked it. So sometimes I'd come home and I'd meet strangers. And most of the time I met people like Miles and John Lewis. George Russell.

We talked a lot about harmony. How to get a "sound" out of harmony. Because the harmony has a lot to do with what the music is going to "sound" like. The instruments have their wave form and all that, but the harmony means that you're putting together a group of instruments, and they're going to get their own independent wave form, right? You can't get it any other way except as an ensemble together.

So Miles and I talked about that lots of times. And played chords on the piano. And that's how it happened.

Ben: The "sound" that you did come up with so perfectly suited Miles' sound that it almost seemed like one gesture.

Gil: That's right.

Ben: You talk about the extension of the Thornhill band. You once said about the Thornhill band that "the band was a reduction to inactivity, a stillness . . . "

Gil: Oh, it was. That's right.

Ben: And ". . . the sound would hang like a cloud."

Gil: That's right. Oh yeah.

Ben: Part of what you created, then, in the *Boplicity* session, is a new approach to jazz, where even with a small group, it wasn't a separate thing, a rhythm section and a horn section, but rather was a "sound." Almost a studio form before there were studio forms.

Gil: Yeah, right.

Ben: You mention the *Miles Ahead* big-band session. *Boplicity* was recorded in 1949 . . .

Gil: We didn't get together again until '57 . . .

Ben: *Miles Ahead* was eight years later. What did you do in the interim?

Gil: (Long pause.) Let me see, what did I do? Well, I got married. That was the big thing for me, you know. I was thirty-eight before I got married the first time.

I was really waiting around for Miles, to tell you the truth, during those years. I did a lot of like club-date work. A singer would want an arrangement that would sound okay with five men or fifteen men, so I would write some stock arrangement type things for singers. Not the greatest work, by any means.

There was a vocal coach named Sid Shaw, and he had me and a piano player named Jimmy Lyons, and we would go around to these different people's houses, and Sid would pick out the songs that he felt they should sing in their act, and we would write the music for them. So I did quite a bit of that.

Ben: You had started playing piano too, professionally, in that period, hadn't you?

Gil: That's what I did. Yeah, that's right. I went out and played weddings and beer parties, and I played a year downtown at a place called the Nut Club, which is now called Studio One. On Sheridan Square. Well, there was a place that had been there since the speakeasy days called The Nut Club, so I worked there for a year, just to get the practice of playing. And we had drums and tenor, so I would play the bass part. It was a good experience for me. Seventy-six a week.

Ben: Seventy-six a week?

Gil: Seventy-six dollars a week. Incredible. And then in 1956, I made my first album with Helen Merrill. And then I saw Miles in '56, and we got together in '57.

Ben: Well, back in 1949, the *Boplicity* band had played one little two-week engagement at the Royal Roost Club. And out of the club, for the first time ever, there was a sign that said "arrangements by Gil Evans". That was the first time an arranger had ever been given public credit like that, in a club. It was unprecedented to promote the arranger, and yet it took eight years for you to finally come around and get some sort of recognition.

Gil: Right, that's true.

Ben: When you finally went in to record *Miles Ahead* in 1957, again the arrangements were "seamless," and they were almost a translation of Miles' "sound" into orchestral terms. At the same time, I remember some little things that you did that were very distinctive. For example, at the end of the song *Miles Ahead,* there's an ensemble trumpet figure that's used almost as acoustic guitar, a Spanish guitar. There were a lot of things like that in your writing that were very unusual, very deceptive.

Gil: Right. People used to think there were strings in those albums. Even somebody as knowledgeable as Gordon jenkins. Now you know he wrote for strings all the time. And I thought, "Gee, that's funny. Imagine him thinking there are strings." Because he wrote for strings, wow, I've seen him. And he had

such a feeling for those things. He'd have a big string section, and they'd all be playing an ensemble that he'd write for them with Louis Armstrong in mind, you know?

Ben: You said that in the interim, from 1949 to 1957, you were waiting for Miles . . . .

Gil: I was waiting for Miles, basically, I was.

Ben: It's so romantic. It sounds like a love affair, when you say that.

Gil: I know.

Ben: Much has been made in the past about how Duke Ellington would write for an individual, as opposed to just bringing different people to his notes. Is this in that tradition?.

Gil: You know, I never met Duke. But one day he called me, you know. To tell me that I was his favorite jazz orchestrator. It was really nice. It really made me feel good.

But we got some very bad reviews on that album. The *Miles Ahead* album, when it first came out. They called it the "anti-jazz" album. Stuff like that.

Ben: The *Boplicity* session got the same sort of reaction, too, didn't it? Critics said it was "devoid of emotion."

Gil: Yeah. We're all victims of the terrible habit of convenience, right? And when you're used to hearing a certain type of music, or a certain sound of music, and it changes, and you're not with it, or don't follow it any more, you're home and you stop going out to the clubs and all that . . .

Like for example, Coleman Hawkins developed his sound starting in 1924, right? And he was the jazz saxophone player for ten years. Well, when Prez came along, people were outraged. Oh, everything you could think of they said about him. You know, "You sound like an alto, why don't you play one?" All that kind of thing.

Well a new generation comes along and picks up on it, and then the innovator, if he's still alive, and not a disaster, can get some credit. But a lot of times an innovator can come and go and not have a very good life, you know.

The same thing happened with Coltrane. People were outraged at that sound. "Why would he want to do that when the sound was so good up until now?" You know, that's convenience, right? The world's most prevalent addiction. It's convenience. We all suffer from an over-use of convenience at the expense of passion, right?

Ben: Do jazz critics seem notorious in that regard?

Gil: They're not alone, but they are.

Oh, they were terrified of Lester. They used to be so scared of him because of his rhythmic freedom, for one thing. They were used to having somebody play that would take their hand and hold it all the way through, you know what I mean? But with Prez, it was different. You weren't going to get the accents in the usual places, right?

Ben: One of the things I've found fascinating about your arranging is how over the years you've applied it to older forms, older compositions, and really made something new with them. I remember a chart you did for a record in the late 1950s, I think it was for the Pacific Jazz label. It's an arrangement of Don Redman's *Chant of the Weed.* [It has been re-released by Blue Note as *Gil Evans: Pacific Standard Time*.]

Gil: I made two albums originally for that company. One with Cannonball. Cannonball played great on that album too. Just the very opening he plays on *Saint Louis Blues*, it still gives me chills.

Ben: *Old Wine New Bottles*

Gil: Yeah, and on the inside it said *Old Bottle, New Wine*. They couldn't get it straight, so they put one on the cover, one on the inside. So I sent the tapes out to the owner of the company, and he just raised hell with me. Because he said, "What are you doing featuring some saxophone player that nobody's heard of? Why didn't you use Bud Shank? Well, Cannonball became the number one alto player, and so of course the owner of the company didn't hesitate a minute to print "Cannonball Adderly, number one alto player" on the cover and go through all that when they reissued it.

That's how it goes.

Ben: That's how it goes.

Gil: But Don Redman was one of my first teachers, you know? Because I lived in a little town in California where nothing like that ever happened. But a man from San Francisco would come up every week to a little record store there and brought all the latest releases. So I was really raised on Don Redman, Duke Ellington, the Wolverines, and McKinney's Cotton Pickers. The Casa Loma band . . . I heard them all. I bought the records. And the radio was a big thing then, in the early '30s. Every day you'd hear a band from New York. At least every day. Duke would be playing from some supper club there, or something like that. And Don Redman had a great band, wow! He had a big band, but they were packed together tight. Did you see that video of them? Three trombones, three or four trumpets, four saxophones, they're all bunched up together.

Don Redman was the original arranger, big-band arranger, of jazz. And he used to broadcast from there all the time. He used to sing these sings in his funny little voice. And *Chant of the Weed* was his theme song.

Ben: Like many self-taught musicians, you used the radio and the phonograph as your classroom. .

Gil: Yeah, I copied all the records. I had a little crank-up phonograph, you know. And it had a speed regulator on it, which you can't even get now, with all the modern things. You either got to have 33 1/3 or 45 or 78. But in those days, it went from zero to 80. You had it at any speed you wanted.

So I spent many years of my life copying arrangements off records.

Ben: That's how a lot of guys got Bird's licks. They just slowed it down until they were able to hear it and grab it.

Gil: Yeah. Konitz still does that. When he's on the road, he still plays cassettes of Bird at half time.

Bird still sounds great. There's no thought of him being dated, you know?

Ben: Similarly with your charts, I have to say. They don't sound dated. Whether we hear one that was done in the '40s or one that was done in the '80s, there's a continuity that relates more to the man than to the historical era.

Gil: Yeah. They're all melancholy. That's one of my characteristics.

Ben: Perhaps that's at the heart of your great compatibility with Miles. Miles is the voice of melancholy.

Gil: That's how we got together, basically. Really. The "sound," you know. The "sound" is the thing that put us together immediately, and it's always been like that. It's still the

same way today. Even if we don't see each other very often, we're still life-time friends. On account of the "sound."

Because he was a "sound" innovator, and he had his problems too, you know. When he started playing, people were outraged at that. "Why would he want to do that when Louis Armstrong was so great?" He didn't even realize it. One night he was playing at the Village Vanguard, and we were sitting around during intermission and I said, "Miles, it just occurred to me. I don't know if you ever thought about it or not, but you're the first person to change the tone of the trumpet since Louis Armstrong." Which he was.

Because everybody up until that time came out of Louis Armstrong. Maybe out of somebody else, like Roy Eldridge came out of Louis Armstrong, and then Dizzy came out of Roy. But it was all basically like that.

Miles loved the trumpet, but he didn't like "trumpet" trumpet. And so he had to just start with no tone, no sound whatsoever at first. That first record he made, *Now Is the time*, it's just a skeleton tone that he uses. He gradually filled it in with flesh and blood, from hearing other people that he liked, like Clark Terry, Harry James . . .

Ben: Freddie Webster . . .

Gil: Freddie Webster especially. And it all went into that funnel and came out his sound.

Ben: Speaking about the melancholy aspect of your work, one has to mention the record *Out of the Cool.* The song *Where Flamingoes Fly*, for example, is terribly sad . . .

Gil: Actually, that's a field song. A man just leaned up against a fence in a field somewhere in Alabama and sang that melody. And Harold Coulander, who was a musicologist, among other things, he gathered together, with Books' help, something called *Negro Songs of Alabama.* And *Where Flamingoes Fly* is one of those.

I also used some little spice in there that I learned from flamenco guitar players. So there's always a little spice to the sound. It takes away some of the blandness, you know.

Ben: So the sound doesn't just lay there, it hovers. It has internal motion.

Gil: It gives it a little . . . tortured sound. (He laughs.)

Ben: A tortured sound?

Gil: Something hurting a little bit there.

Actually, I learned how to treat a song and all that from Louis Armstrong. I bought every record of his from 1927. The first one I bought was called *No One Else But You*, and it was him and Earl Hines and a band with an arrangement by Don Redman. It's great, even now. The rhythm section sounds old-fashioned but the arrangement is something else.

So anyway, I bought every one of his records from 1927 till around 1936. From then on, he repeated and became more of an entertainer. But for those ten years, he was a great creative artist, you know. Even though he never had any special arrangements for himself. Mostly, he played just stock arrangements. But in every one of those three-minute records, there's a magic moment somewhere. Every one of them.

I really learned how to handle a song from him. I learned how to love music from him. Because he loved music, and he did everything with love and care. So he's my main influence, I think.

Ben: Each of your compositions also seems to have a magic moment. Do you remember the song *So Long* from an album you made called *Blues in Orbit* a while ago? That song has some real drama going on.

Gil: You know, *So Long* was written for Coltrane. Because he died just then, he died that week that we made it. And I brought the tape home before I named it. I brought it home and played it and cried bitterly all night long. Because I hadn't really let myself go at the shock of his death. That's how I happened to call it *So Long.*

Ben: So it was recorded in 1966?

Gil: I don't know. I'm so old, I don't keep track of years, hardly. (Laughs.)

Ben: There's a little acoustic guitar passage at the end of that composition which reminds me of the trumpet figure we talked about on the end of *Miles Ahead*. But for the most part, you had gotten away from traditional writing completely. It's as if you were using "pure sounds," dramatic sounds. Darkness. Light.

Gil: Yeah.

Ben: Was it orchestrated or improvised?

Gil: Either way. Both.

Ben: Your style of orchestration is also reminiscent to me of Charles Mingus' in that so much of it is coached out of great players as opposed to imposed on them. And you did record some of Mingus' compositions. Not long ago, you did *Orange Was the Color of Her Dress* on the *Priestess* album. It featured a long- time MIngus associate, and a man who has played with your band for a while, George Adams.

Ben: Yeah, that was originally recorded in England, at Festival Hall. We still play that with the band. We also play Mingus' *Boogie Stop Shuffle*. In fact, that's the first number in the movie *Absolute Beginners.* And we played *Better Get It in Your Soul* in the movie too, but as it became more of a pop movie, they had to cut it out.

Ben: Movie work has been good to you lately. As I said at the beginning, you've been busy in general.

Gil: Yeah, I'm working. It's a little different, because I'm so used to living from hand to mouth, you know. (Laughs.) Then all of a sudden this last year I had two concert tours. Italy and France. Then I came home. But even while I was on the road, I had a VCR and a videotape of this movie *The Color of Money*. So I worked on that after the concerts at night. So when I got home, I went right on working.

But it was nice to get a job and work with someone where you both go away with a certified share, right? It's so rare, you know. Most all the time, you're either gonna get fucked out or you're gonna have to fuck somebody, right? And naturally, you don't want to get fucked. But it's not a pleasant thing to have to do if you don't want to do it, right? But many, many of the business relationship that you have are just on those terms.

So with Robie Robertson, it was a pleasure to work with him [on *The Color of Money*] because it was even-Steven.

Ben: I spoke with Mose Allison yesterday. He said he's got it figured out. It always comes down to this: it's somebody's money against somebody else's life. That's all of it. Any situation can be reduced that that.

Gil: That's right.

— Ben Sidran