Gene Lees
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Ojai, Calif.
93023

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Escape from Criticism

I ceased working formally as a music critic some time around 1968, when I gave up writing record reviews for *High Fidelity*. I wanted to escape from criticism.

Of course, every act of judgment entails an element of criticism. When you recommend a restaurant, you commit the act of criticism. The differences between you and the food columnist of a newspaper are that you are not getting paid for it and you aren't reaching as many people.

If you recommend the filet of sole to someone who has no taste for fish, your words are falling on deaf ears. And there is the flaw of criticism. It is entirely subjective. Criticism in the arts consists of trying to pass off subjective responses as objective facts. The problem of the critic's subjectivity is compounded by that of his reader.

This had been bothering me for years. I was in an ambiguous position in any case, because by the mid-1960s, many singers were recording my lyrics. This is not to suggest that no one else ever faced this conflict of interests. Some of the best music criticism has been written by musicians, Virgil Thomson's being a salient example. Debussy wrote some illuminating pieces under the *nom de plume* Monsieur Croche.

Thomson summed it up best in a remark whose source I cannot find and he cannot remember. I have often quoted it. He said somewhere that criticism was often clumsy and wrong. But, he said, and this is the phrase that sticks in my mind, it is "the only antidote we have to paid publicity."

Those words took on almost oracular significance with the rise of the rock groups and the propaganda of the record company press agents assigned to sell them. So successful were these campaigns that the arts have been undermined. Oberlin College a few years ago announced the establishment of a course on the music of the Beatles. It hadn't, however, bothered to teach a course on the music of Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Harold Arlen, et al. Various universities set up courses on the "poetry" of Bob Dylan, and I encountered a glowing encomium to Dylan by a British college professor who went on astonishingly about his "original" use of cliches. The man was so ignorant of songwriting that he apparently did not know that it is a standard device to look for some shopworn expression and build a song out of it — for example, *Night and Day, I Get a Kick Out of You, Anything Goes, Just One of Those Things, From Now On, From This Moment On* (Cole Porter), *The Boy Next Door, Suits Me Fine, Forever and a Day* (Hugh Martin), *Too Marvelous for Words, I'm Like a Fish Out of Water, You've Got Something There, Jeepers Creepers, Day In — Day Out, Fools Rush In (Where Angels Fear to Tread), If You Build a Better Mousetrap, How Little We Know, Out of This World, Something's Gotta Give* (Johnny Mercer), *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea, Happy as the Day Is Long, As Long as I Live, Ill Wind, My Best Wishes* (Ted Koehler), *My One and Only, How Long Has This Been Going On?, Bidin' My Time, Who Cares?, Isn't It a Pity?, Changing My Tune, It Happens Every Time* (Ira Gershwin). We have an entire generation that has grown up ahistorical, and some of these people are teaching in colleges and writing for newspapers and television. The professor who praised Dylan for his original use of cliches did not know enough about the art and history of songwriting even to be discussing the subject. And that sort of thing is now rampant in our society.

It was in the 1960s that I found myself a fascinated occasional reader of the letters-to-the-editor pages of comic books, boggled by missives gravely discussing the characterization, plot development, drawing, inking, and so forth of *Spiderman* as if it were Tolstoy or Aeschylus. These letters sounded like the writings of the rock critics.

This led me to coin a maxim that I find myself, all these years later, still using: There is nothing so trivial that someone, somewhere, will not take it seriously.

The rise of the rock culture proved that the Virgil Thomson antidote is, alas, ineffectual. If a magazine or newspaper cannot find among the seasoned critics one who likes the trash the entertainment industry grinds out, it will find someone new who *does* like it and make him an arbiter of public taste, because these publications are in the business of selling advertising. And the trash merchants spend far more on advertising than those who try to bring the public good and serious art. To understand why a given publication covers what it does, and takes the positions it does, first look at its ads. There are more rock and roll consumers than lovers of jazz or chamber music. The record companies want to reach that larger audience. A publication's job is to attract it, which is why it finds people who will write seriously and earnestly (and mean every word of it) about silly things.

It has long been accepted as a truism that great art lasts and bad or inconsequential art falls into desuetude and then oblivion. Mozart lives, Spohr is forgotten.

But the theorem applies only to the music of a farther past. And the reason it applied at all is that the public did not determine what music would live or die, musicians did. Bach lives because Mendelssohn said he should live. Experts pore over past scores and revise our esthetics and correct historical oversights. The reason you don't hear Spohr is not that the public has said it dislikes his music but that people who truly know music consider it not worth playing. On the other hand, the French musicologist Marc Pincherle in the 1930s said that Vivaldi had been unjustly neglected, and launched a revival. If Andre Previn or Zubin Mehta thought Spohr had value, you'd hear him.

But in popular music the situation is quite different. In popular music, the lay listener, and the record-industry merchandisers have the say. You need only watch the television advertising for repackaged trash from the past, dopey old country and western singers, maudlin hymns, the "golden oldies" of rock, and all manner of junk from the 1940s, to realize that something new has happened in our culture. There is a curious analogy to our growing inability to dispose of our garbage. Thanks to the record industry, musi-

cal garbage has a half life whose length we cannot yet estimate. As a culture we are carrying our crap with us into a future rendered dubious indeed by the greenhouse effect of our emissions and the destruction of the ozone layer.

It is an axiom of criticism that a work must be judged in terms of its intent. But with new art the only way to determine the intent of it is to ask the man who made it. You should not judge jazz by formal structural criteria of what we call classical music. Nor can you expect of a string quartet playing Schubert the same charging spontaneity that you can find in jazz.

As jazz developed through the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, such pioneer critics as R.D. Darrell and Otis Ferguson and then Leonard Feather and George Hoefer and Stanley Dance and John S. Wilson and Whitney Balliett had to go to the artist to find out what he was doing and why. Inevitably, in such circumstances, the ogre of friendship raises its head.

At least in theory, a classical-music critic could go to a conservatory, get a degree in music, and never know personally any of the opera singers, conductors, and pianists he was writing about. This was never possible in jazz. Someone who wanted to know the intent of bebop had no choice but to go and talk to Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, and their colleagues. It is hard to write public criticism of private friends.

Unaware that they were were touching my discomfort with that dilemma, Ahmad Jamal began my downfall as a critic and Mary Martin completed it.

In my early days at *Down Beat* I wrote something sarcastic about one of his more commercial recordings. Then he opened a nightclub on the near south side of Chicago. It was my duty as editor of the magazine to attend its opening. Ahmad was standing in a reception line. Someone introduced us.

"I've been *waiting* to meet you," he said with a wry and meaningful smile that told me he'd read the piece. "I have a special table for you."

He seated me at the bandstand, right by the piano. And, when all the guests were assembled, he and Vernel Fournier on drums and Israel Crosby on bass played a set that seemed likely to set off the sprinkler system. It was a powerful performance and Ahmad's own playing was dazzling. I sat there amazed by it, fearing I had made an enemy of an outstanding musician.

When the set was over, Ahmad came to the table, sat down, and with a warm but sly smile, said, "I can *play* when I want to." We were friends from that evening on.

My main job was the assembling of information, and a journalist's most valuable assets are the contacts from which he derives it. To write criticism of the people whose story it was my duty to tell compromised my position as editor, so I quit writing record reviews.

In 1962 in New York I began writing for what was then called *Hi-Fi Stereo Review*, working for the brilliant editor and writer Robert Offergeld. I told Bob I preferred not to review jazz: by now too many of its players were personal friends and sometimes songwriting collaborators. What I could do, however, was explain them to the public, and in that sense I wrote a lot of what I suppose could be called criticism *on behalf of* the artists.

I agreed to review popular music, seeing the pervasive, pernicious, and growing influence it was exerting in our culture. Offergeld, knowing that it could sometimes inspire me to heights of fury, deliberately assigned to me records he knew I'd hate. After a ghastly afternoon of screening a bunch of particularly bad Nashville albums, I wrote a letter of resignation, stating that I simply could not go on listening to sewage like this. Bob printed the letter as my review.

Bob loved me to do things like that. I was still a young Turk, and had fun with some of the reviews. But I was falling into a trap that awaits everyone who writes criticism.

It is easier to condemn cleverly than to praise persuasively. It is far easier to be funny when you're excoriating something. It is in damning things that a critic gets to parade his skills as a writer and thus attract readers. He is serving himself, not the art he is writing about.

It is one of the central theories of comedy that it entails an element of what the Germans call *Schadenfreude* — pleasure taken in someone else's pain. The man slips on a banana peel; you laugh. Standup comedians live by this, although they do not all apply it the same way. I have never cared for the comedy of Bob Hope, in which someone else is always the butt of the joke. I adored that of Jack Benny, who always turned the jokes in on himself. All the old radio comedies had galleries of characters who would be on every week. On the old Bob Hope radio show, there were two desperately man-hungry spinsters named Brenda and Cobina, who made me squirm with unease. I still do not think the loneliness of old maids is an appropriate subject for humor. On the other hand, on the Jack Benny show, in which the supposed stinginess of its star and his bad violin playing were main elements of the comedy, everyone on the show, including his valet Rochester and his wife, outsmarted him. Benny was always the victim. In consequence, there was something gentle about his comedy, although perhaps it was the man's real-life decency that infused the character he was playing and disarmed you.

In criticism, the only approach to humor is that of Bob Hope. A Jack Benny style is not even feasible. Your subject matter must be the victim. And as the years wore on in New York, I found myself more and more falling into that pattern. Then I was called on to review a Broadway musical called *I Do, I Do* and the original cast album derived from it. The show was based on John Van Druten's two-character play *The Four Poster*. The story, which is set in a bedroom, follows its two protagonists from the time they enter it as young marrieds until they are old. In the musical version, they were played by Robert Preston and Mary Martin.

Now, several years later I learned a great deal about the construction of a musical comedy from one of its masters, Joshua Logan. I wrote a musical that Josh was going to direct, though for a complex of reasons it never got to the stage. It lies in a filing cabinet, with my script and lyrics and some excellent music by Lalo Schifrin. Still, for all the disappointment of watching that project go down the sink, I would have paid money for those months of working under Josh's guidance and tutelage. No university course in drama could have come close to teaching me what Josh did. Josh and I became friends, and his recent death saddened me indeed.

One of the things I learned is that you would be well-advised to have a secondary plot in your musical. Almost

all musicals do, with an outstanding exception in Lerner and Loewe's dazzling *My Fair Lady*. The reason for the subplot is simple. It spells the two lead characters. It lets them get offstage long enough for a glass of water. It lets them rest their voices and catch their breath, and go back out to do more of the strenuous physical work that stage-acting is, particularly that which includes singing.

But I didn't know this when I reviewed *I Do, I Do*, and instead of being struck with wonder at the ability of Mary Martin and Robert Preston to carry an entire musical by themselves, on stage constantly, without a subplot, without any time for that glass of water and that deep restorative backstage breath, instead of praising them for endurance if nothing else, I concentrated on the fact that Miss Martin was too old for the part. The girl is only twenty or so at the beginning of the story. And I said that while you can age a young actor or actress, you cannot youthen an older one.

I forget what else I said, but it was a Bob Hope review, perhaps even a Don Rickles review.

Something happens when a piece of writing goes into print. It undergoes some kind of sea change. It always seems just a little different than what you thought it would be. And when that review came out in *High Fidelity*, I read it with horror. It struck me that somewhere in Manhattan there was a lady named Mary Martin, a real live person, and that it is not a sin too grow old, and that if I had felt a need to say that she should try to avoid roles no longer appropriate for her, there should have been a gracious way to say it. I prayed that the lady named Mary Martin had not read and would never read that review.

And I quit writing reviews. Incidentally, my discomfiture over that review grew acute several years later when I was working with Josh Logan. Mary Martin lived in the same East Side neighborhood he did, in fact his apartment had a window that overlooked her terrace. They were friends, having worked on *South Pacific* together. Every time I went to Josh's apartment, indeed every time I went to any kind of social gathering with him, I hoped she would not turn up. She never did. And if she did read that review at the time, and if by any chance she ever reads this, I apologize for it.

Nicholas Slonimsky wrote a book called *A Thesaurus of Musical Invective*, culled from writings about music from about the time of Beethoven on. It is a fascinating book, but in a sense it is a deeply dishonest one. By selecting only derogatory reviews that have been proved wrong by history, Slonimsky abets that belief dear to musicians, particularly jazz musicians, that the critics are usually wrong.

This takes the form of such statements as "Leonard Feather really missed the boat on Bird." As a matter of fact, Leonard did not miss the boat on Bird. He was one of Charlie Parker's early champions in print and one of the first producers to record him. I can tell you that *I* missed the boat on Bird, although I was still in high school and not yet a writer. For the first few months after those early Savoy and Dial records came out, I thought he was crazy. So what? I missed the boat on Delius for years, and on Dave McKenna too. Then one day in a nightclub I suddenly understood what Dave was doing and why so may pianists are in love with his playing. I got the message of Bill Evans within the first sixteen bars I heard, but Paul Weston tells me he didn't get it for the longest time. And then it hit him, as Dave McKenna's playing hit me. So what? If an artist does something genuinely new, it is only to be expected that a good many people, including critics, won't get it for a while.

The idea that Bird was neglected is refuted by a new Bluebird reissue of the Metronome All Star Band records from the RCA vaults. The players on those records were selected by a popularity poll of *Metronome's* readers. The recording of 1946 features veterans of the big-band era, and the music is firmly in the older style. The poll-winners in 1949 include Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Fats Navarro, Kai Winding, J.J. Johnson, Lennie Tristano, and Bird, among others. One of the tunes is an original called *Overtime* by Pete Rugolo that is uncompromised bebop. Indeed, it is exaggeratedly so, with all the mannerisms that characterized bop at that period. So Bird and his music achieved just that much recognition in only three years.

The fact is that the bulk of jazz criticism in America has stood the test of time, from the early 1920s when Carl Engel sang its praises in *The Atlantic*, through the late 1920s when R.D. Darrell wrote perceptive reviews accurately taking the measure of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, through the 1930s when Otis Ferguson was writing insightfully about Bix Beiderbecke, through the time Leonard Feather was praising Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie in *Metronome* and *Esquire*, on into the general praise of John Coltrane in the 1960s.

Thus I find myself occasionally playing devil's advocate with Oscar Peterson, defending the critics collectively and individually. To Oscar, jazz critics are anathema, and he has been publicly vocal about it for years. One can understand why, in view of the way some of them have savaged him, although I remind him how much others have praised him. I mentioned a record he made that I particularly like, *If I Should Lose You*, which is in a 1983 Pablo album called *If You Could See Me Now*. It is, by the way, one of his best albums, and out now on CD.

His work on that track is some of that simple, selective, almost lazy playing his detractors would have you think he never does. But there is something else about that track that particularly interests me. In the process of writing his biography, I read almost everything ever printed in periodicals about Oscar in English or French, and even a little of the Italian, to the extent that I could. I particularly remember a French critic who said he was deeply boring. This illustrates what is wrong with criticism. He is not boring *to me*. The critic stated *a fact about himself as a fact about the playing*. There was a time when Dave McKenna's playing was *boring to me* because I had not yet come into contact with that incredible juggernaut time of his. When I did, my subjective state of boredom ceased; but nothing had changed in Dave's playing.

One of the things I repeatedly encountered in reviews of Oscar was the statement that his music has no form, that he throws it all away in the first few bars of the blowing. In the history of jazz, there has never been a pianist with as strong a capacity for restraint and a control of the building of interest in a solo.

As for form, like all jazz musicians he has more of it in some solos than others. And, I submit, if you elevate form to the position of a primary criterion in the evaluation of jazz, you are imposing on it a standard more appropriate to Mozart quartets. This is one of the differences between the

two musics — between what Bill Evans called spontaneous music and contemplative music.

What I told Oscar about the solo on *If I Should Lose You* is this:

Nat Cole recorded that tune in — I think — a ten-inch LP called *Manhattan Serenade*. I loved the way he did it, and from the first notes of Oscar's recording it is obvious that he did too. For he is playing with Nat Cole's kind of tone and time, which are integral to Peterson's playing anyway but especially obvious in this track.

That tune is built on an octave leap on the third, which is followed by an octave on the tonic. Oscar plays an exquisite melody chorus, very simple. There was another song with which Nat Cole was associated that is built out of the octave on the third — *Nature Boy*. And the first two bars of the blowing Oscar plays the melody of *Nature Boy*. Then he begins to develop it, and all through his solo and the out-chorus that follows the guitar solo by Joe Pass, he is weaving his material out of that octave on the third and allusions to *Nature Boy*. It is the most elegantly constructed thing. And whether Oscar did this subconsciously or by design is irrelevant: he did it. The result is a beautiful track in loving even if unpremeditated tribute to Nat Cole.

I asked Oscar, If I were to write that, isn't that criticism? He insisted that it was analysis and teaching.

Now that is splitting the hair pretty fine.

And yet he indulges in the act of criticism every time he tells me I should listen to this person or that, or says that he doesn't care for so-and-so's playing. Like someone recommending a restaurant, he just isn't getting paid for it.

Taste, the French say, is the result of a thousand distastes. Taste is built out of a process of learning what to reject. And the artist himself is constantly making judgments, criticisms, when he selects this interval instead of that, this color instead of that, this word instead of that. An artist grows not just by building his technique but, which is equally important, by finding out what is *not*-good and excising it from his work.

In the late 1960s, I saw the futility of criticism in a mass society. No longer were people with knowledge of the arts able to set a standard that seeped down to a less-informed public. When the record industry discovered that it was possible to sell a million albums — and later, ten million, and eventually thirty and forty million — it lost interest in anything less. An excellent jazz album that sold perhaps twenty thousand copies was laughable to the lawyers and accountants who had taken control of the major record companies and for that matter broadcasting and book-publishing industries. Anticipated sales became almost the only standard of the communications industries.

So I wrote what I did in protest against the rising tide of the meretricious. And found that what I was doing was about as effective as King Canute's effort to hold back the sea.

I wrote that if the rockers were allowed to continue to write songs about drugs, and allowed to extol their use by their own example, we would have within a decade or two a drugged-out society. And we've got it. Recently a prominent television producer said that in those years he thought I was crazy for writing such things. Surveying now a society in which drugs are one of its most deadly and pervasive problems, and an incredible drain on the national economy — I favor full legalization, by the way — he saw that I was right and he was wrong back then. But hearing that now does me no good, and writing those things then did the society no good. My writing prevented nothing. Oh, I scared RCA Records once in the early days of the rock pandemic to the point where they held back release of a Jefferson Airplane album, but when they saw that drug records were being released with impunity over at Columbia, they put it out. Such decisions were consciously taken, with consequences to American society we see in every crack vial around a high school.

To the extent that I continued to write criticism, it was of the industries that distribute our "art." Because of my experience as a songwriter, I came to know how the publishing and record industries really work, not the way their p.r. departments would have you think they work. I became aware of the rampant theft of royalties. In one case an accountant openly boasted to Helen Keane, Bill Evans' manager and producer, about how much money he had stolen from her, from Bill, from the Mamas and the Papas, and from MGM Records. She asked why he was telling her this. He laughed and said she could never prove it, and there was no other witness to the conversation. And the music business was full of people like him.

Oscar Peterson told me very early in my career that the music business was corrupt, dirty, evil. "But the music is another thing," he said. I have never forgotten that.

What is the function of criticism? Unless it teaches, it hasn't any. The ideal though unattainable goal of criticism should be to put itself out of business by so informing the audience that they don't need it any more. Beyond that, it is all opinion, and the opinion is formed on an interaction between the artist's psyche and that of his listener. The oft-repeated statement, attributed variously to Duke Ellington, Debussy, Richard Strauss, and probably others, that there are only two kinds of music, good and bad, founders on the rock of our inability to determine firmly what they are. Not even the musicians can be considered infallible arbiters. They do not agree even among themselves. If they did, all our art would be the same. Each man — if he is worth anything — is committed to his own aesthetic, and inevitably will judge others according to it.

I remember something Dave Brubeck said to me, many years ago. Dave said he looked for certain things in jazz piano. He said he strives for them. He said he didn't always pull them off. But when he did, it was very exciting. He said that if he had ever heard a pianist who played exactly what he, Dave, wanted to hear, he'd probably quit playing. So, he said, since he didn't hear anybody doing what he was striving for and sometimes achieving, "I'm my favorite pianist."

Can you see what a nasty little headline I could have put on *Down Beat's* cover? "I'm My Favorite Pianist: Dave Brubeck."

Oscar Peterson made a similar statement, which could easily have been misused.

It must be kept in mind that Erroll Garner, like every other jazz musician, was playing the way he wanted to within his limitations. Style, Charles Aznavour once said to me, is the result of our limitations, not our abilities. It's a fascinating point, and I think valid.

In any event, I suspect that if you could get past the

affectations of modesty that our society expects, you'd find that every first-rate jazz musician is his own favorite jazz musician. (Come to that, one can think of a few who haven't been first-rate who were alight with self-admiration.) This being so, the same strong convictions that give his work its strength color his estimate of the work of others. He may know more than some of the critics, but his judgment is no less biased; it is perhaps even more so.

Criticism will always go on, if only in the private act of recommending a restaurant or a record. Of those critics in the formal sense, those whose judgments are made to the public, some of them teach. One reads them with an anticipation of those little moments of I-never-thought-of-that, I-never-noticed-that, when your perceptions expand.

I never escaped from criticism at all.

I just switched sides.

I understood with a great clarity that the artist is never the enemy, the people who manipulate his destiny are.

Stereo Oldies

There is nothing as useless as the prediction that comes too late. Shortly after I wrote in April that some time soon someone would no doubt use computer technology to transform jazz records of the 1920s into modern stereo CD sound than a carton arrived in the mail. It contained 11 CDs, a gift from a subscriber, W. Cone Johnson of Abilene, Texas. Cone is a doctor and a well-informed jazz devotee and broadcaster with whom I have exchanged letters.

I examined these records with amazement. An Australian jazz collector, broadcaster, and sound engineer named Robert Parker had already done exactly what I had described. The material, restorations of records by Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, Duke Ellington, Red Nichols, Jelly Roll Morton, Bessie Smith, Joe Venuti and Eddie Lang, and many others, had been purchased by the BBC in England and broadcast in a radio series called *Jazz Classics in Stereo*. Later the restorations were released by the BBC on its own label, in LP and CD form. They are now available in the United States as imports.

The stereo is fairly realistic. I had reasoned that it should be possible, using computer techniques, to lock onto the individual instruments and spread them across a stereo spectrum. That turned out to be correct. The early "rechanneled for stereo" records from mono masters were a travesty, a mushy spreading of the sound. This is not the case here. This is real stereo, as you will find by flipping the balance knob of your equipment to the left and right.

The information is the same on both walls of the groove of a monaural recording. To clean up the sound of his 78s, Parker used a noise suppressor that fed both signals to a monitor which instantly switched to whichever wall contained the least noise, thereby eliminating clicks and pops. The resulting sound was then put through filters and a special Dolby system and an equalizer that partly compensated for the deficiencies of 1920s recording. Then the mono sound was divided by some other high-tech artifact into five "channels," after which the music was recorded as a digital signal on videotape.

The resulting recordings were hailed by one critic as an "audio miracle." That is not an exaggeration. The sound is not, of course, that of modern digital recording. But it is remarkably good, particularly with those records made after the change from acoustic to electrical recording around 1925.

Because of the detail in which you can hear things previously inaudible, these recordings are going to cause — at least they should — a re-evaluation of some of the music of the 1920s and early 1930s. It certainly caused me to reexamine that era. I set out to write a report for you on the technical advance, and ended up thinking totally anew about the jazz of the 1920s and the society that surrounded and sustained it, listening to these records — and others relevant to them — over and over for two or three weeks. The results of that process will be in a near-future issue.

If you can't find these records in stores, write to Marvin Electronics, 3050 University Dr. So., Fort Worth TX 76109 and ask for their catalogue of the BBC CDs.

Fiddler Joe

Contrary to widespread impression, the violin is not an intruder into jazz. The instrument has been involved in the music since the beginning, as far back as the proto-jazz of Will Marion Cook's Southern Syncopators. References to the instrument crop up in early descriptions of jazz. The problem for the instrument, and its players, was that though it has great dynamic range, its volume is very light. In the days before amplification, one solo fiddle player wasn't going to be heard very well against a front line of saxophone or clarinet, trombone, and trumpet.

As for its use in sections, the bands of Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey, and Gene Krupa demonstrated that strings were not practical for exuberant up-tempo numbers. Sections of twelve or even eighteen men cannot outshout four trumpets and three trombones, much less five and four. A full-scale symphony orchestra employs up to sixty strings, and if you ever saw the Woody Herman band perform jointly with one, you know how easily a jazz brass section can drown them.

And string sections are incapable of jazz ensemble passages of their own: you could not round up sixty string players on this planet capable of phrasing jazz. They come from too different a tradition.

So those musicians who have played jazz on the violin have tended to be loners. They have not been many: Eddie South, Stuff Smith, Ray Nance, Joe Kennedy, Sven Asmussen, Jean-Lucy Ponty, Stephane Grappeli, and the pioneering Joe Venuti. Four of those eight, one notes reflexively, were born in Europe. And Venuti was the first important jazz soloist on the violin.

Three things prompt this memoir of Venuti, one of them a coincidence. First, he has been on my mind because of the remarkable BBC CD album that documents his collaboration with Eddie Lang. Second, I came across the notes of an interview I did with Joe in 1974 that had never been published. And third, when these notes prompted me to look up a couple of short biographies of Joe, I noticed that he had died ten years ago that very day, on August 14, 1978.

Giuseppe Venuti was born in Italy. He told me once he came from a family of sculptors and that he was trained

entirely in classical music; jazz came later.

His birthdate is given as April 4, 1898, in John Chilton's *Who's Who in Jazz* and in Leonard Feather's *Encyclopedia of Jazz*. Robert Parker, in his annotation to the stereo album he engineered of the Lang-Venuti material, gives Joe's birthdate as September 16, 1903. On occasion Joe was known to say he was born on a boat to America around 1904. Dick Gibson says he once met one of Joe's uncles who told him that Venuti arrived in Philadelphia at the age of ten in 1906. And, he told Gibson, "Joe could play good when he got off the boat."

It seems that he was born in Lecco, which is near Milan. And Joe's career, which began in the 1920s, was long and famous, despite his long and equally famous taste for the sauce.

Joe grew up in South Philadelphia, where he met Salvatore Massaro. Massaro, like Venuti, was a violin student. They played together in the string section of the James Campbell School Orchestra. Though they gave private performances of Italian folk music and material from opera, they were also experimenting with jazz by the early 1920s. Joe moved to New York. Massaro, who had changed his name to Eddie Lang and put aside his violin to devote the rest of his all-too-brief career to guitar and banjo, toured with Red McKenzie's Mound City Blue Blowers.

Venuti and Lang crossed trails in New York in 1926, which is when their true professional partnership began. Robert Parker describes them as a "classic example of the attraction of opposites. Eddie was cool, logical, and a good businessman (also a remarkably good billiards player, rumored to have made more in the poolrooms than he did as a musician). Joe was a hot-head, flamboyant and irresponsible (always spoiling for a fight and much given to cracking violins over the heads of the unwary.)"

Venuti and Lang made some superb recordings together between 1926 and 1932, in all sorts of contexts — sometimes as a duo, sometimes with that other team, Bix Beiderbecke and Frank Trumbauer, sometimes with groups of their own, sometimes as part of Red Nichols and his Five Pennies. They had a marvelous rapport.

Lang worked extensively in the New York studios, aside from his jazz playing, which gives an indication of his musicianship. But it is the collaboration with Venuti that endears him to history. There is a captivating exuberance about their playing, and a kind of nutty irreverence. They are fun to listen to, and more so than ever in the Robert Parker restorations.

Lang was a great guitarist. In the praise of Django Reinhardt and Charlie Christian, justified though it is, I am always mystified that more credit isn't given to Lang and to Eddie Durham as the pioneers they were. Because of Lang's influence on Reinhardt, and Reinhardt's influence on the whole evolution of jazz guitar, Lang is a true *source* in the French sense of that word, meaning a spring — and in this case one that flowed on to become a river. Django is foreshadowed in Lang's linear solos. And he could do things that Reinhardt, due to that damaged left hand, could not. He could comp chords superbly. He was all over the instrument when he played rhythm, with total command of the voicings, as far as the harmony in use at that period went.

Possibly he doesn't get the credit he deserves because he didn't live long enough. Jazz evolved enormously through the 1930s. But Lang was not to take part in that development. He went into hospital in New York for a tonsillectomy and died of its complications March 26, 1933. He was thirty.

There is far more to the Venuti collaboration with Lang than you will find in the Parker CD, which contains sixteen tracks. They recorded seventy sides together, in various contexts. In the early 1960s, Columbia Records issued their 1920s material in a three-album package.

"The first record Eddie and I made," Venuti told me in a conversation in Colorado Springs in 1974, "was a thing called *Doing Things*. You'll hear *Musetta's Waltz* from *La Boheme*. But we did it in four-four, and I interpolated the melody in a different way. A tune we did called *Wild Cat* was just an exercise by Kreutzer." In another recording in that Columbia collection, Venuti uses the pentatonic melodic material of Debussy's *Maid with the Flaxen Hair*; he was one of the earliest to start assimilating the influence of the Impressionist composers into jazz.

Joe told me this story of how he came to join the Jean Goldkette band in 1924. He said he worked for short periods in both the Boston and Detroit symphonies. He said he was fed up with the forty bucks a week he was making in the latter orchestra and walked down to a club where some of Goldkette's musicians were playing and asked if he could sit in. They were playing a blues in C, he told me. He loosened his bow, looped the hair over the fiddle, and played his solo in four-note chords. All his life this was one of his most startling devices, and it was no trick: he could make real music that way.

Goldkette hired him, and he never again played "classical" music for a living, although backstage, when he warmed up, it was always on the old masters, with a particularly partiality to Bach and Vivaldi. He was intimately familiar with the "classical" violin repertoire, and I remember that he had a great love for Palestrina.

Joe was as famous among musicians for his practical jokes as he was for his playing, and the stories about him are part of the folklore of jazz — in danger of fading now, I daresay, since there are no hangout clubs where the older musicians can pass them along to the younger.

One story concerns a tenor player he worked with whose foot-tapping so annoyed Joe that finally he came on stage with a hammer and nailed the man's shoe to the floor. I don't believe it. Unless he suddenly and psychopathically drove a nail through a man's foot, he would have to had to slip the nail through the edge of the sole. The image of someone sitting there and passively allowing this is not convincing.

One story that I know is true is this:

One Christmas Joe sent his friend Wingy Manone, the one-armed trumpet player, a single cufflink.

The next year he sent the other one.

Then there was the time he hit several balls into a golf-course water hazard. In a fury he threw his club into the lake, then the rest of his clubs, then the bag, then the caddy, and finally himself.

This is one of the best-known Venuti stories, and I suspect it's true:

A certain famous singing-cowboy movie star, known for his flashy suits and self-admiration, succeeded in annoying Joe during some stage show they did together. The

audience was full of mothers and their children. Joe slipped his bow under the belly of the cowboy's famous horse, just ahead of the legs, and began tickling. The cowboy brought the horse on stage. On signal it reared on its hind legs. It was immediately apparent that the animal was in the mood for love. The curtains promptly closed, and Joe left. "I wasn't going to stick around," he growled in the gravelly Italian voice.

Another time Joe telephoned thirty-six tuba players listed in the union directory and told them to meet him for a job on a certain corner. Joe told me it happened in Hollywood, not New York, as one version had it. He told them to meet him at Hollywood and Vine, and watched the chaotic scene from the twelfth floor of the Taft hotel with Jack Bregman of the publishing firm of Bregman, Vocco, and Conn.

"The joke was on me, though," Joe said. "They took me to the union and I had to pay ten bucks a man. Two weeks later, Jack Bregman said, 'Call them again and I'll pay the fine.' But I said, 'No chance.'"

In the early days of television — and it was live television, remember — Joe was on a show sponsored by a hair cream company. In the middle of a commercial, he aimed his bald head at the camera and said, "This is what —— cream oil did for me." The sponsor dropped the show.

Again, there are variant versions of the story of Paul Whiteman, Joe, and the long pole. This is the one Joe told me.

In 1936, Joe and his twelve-piece band were hired to work in Fort Worth opposite the Paul Whiteman band in a huge theater-restaurant called the Casa Manana, as part of the Texas Frontier Centennial. The extravaganza was a Billy Rose production, with chorus girls, a revolving stage a block long, and a lagoon with a jet spray of water to separate the proscenium and the audience. Rose had suggested two bands be used; Whiteman had suggested Venuti. At some points both bands played together. In his biography of Whiteman titled *Pops*, Thomas A. DeLong wrote, "The Whiteman bandstand was placed opposite the smaller platform holding Venuti and his players. As the open-air theater was generally dark, Paul decided to use a lighted baton so that both bands could see him directing them when they played together."

Joe thought this was a bit much. DeLong said he got a broomstick with a flashlight attached to the end; Joe said it was a fishing pole with a huge lightbulb on its end.

He came onstage in long underwear, carrying this "baton." "It lit up the whollllle arena," Joe said. "Billy Rose came back and said, 'What do you think I'm running here, a circus?'

"I said, 'That's exactly what you're running.'

"But they couldn't fire me, because I owed Paul five thousand dollars. I was with Paul on and off for nine years. When I quit the band . . . Well, I didn't quit, we all got fired. He couldn't hold the band. His payroll by then was something like $9,600 a week. And he said, 'Boys, I've given everybody notice with pay, and that's it.'

"I said, 'How are you gonna give me notice with pay? I owe you money.'"

"He said, 'That's all right, you'll make it.'"

"I said, 'I don't have a cent now. How're we gonna start our own band? Loan me five thousand.' And he loaned me five thousand dollars. So now I owed him ten, and I finally paid him back."

There's a bit of a problem with that story. Venuti's fulltime period with Whiteman lasted from May 1929 to May 1930, with time off for Joe's recovery from an automobile accident in California. Joe was, let us keep in mind, recalling events forty years in the past. It is likely that the incident happened not in 1936 but after a 1930 run at the Roxy, when Whiteman — faced by the Depression and shrinking audiences — lopped ten people off the payroll, including Joe, Eddie Lang, Lennie Hayton, Boyce Cullen, Bill Challis, Charlie Margulis, and Min Leibrook.

The critics and jazz historians have been slamming Whiteman for years, but one would be ill-advised to do so to the face of anyone who ever worked with or for him. Such people harbor the most immense respect and affection for him.

"Ooooh, to me," Joe said, with almost a reverence in his voice, "Paul was the greatest man in our business."

Joe took issue — as most people who knew Bix Beiderbecke do — with the image of Bix so unhappy having to compromise art for the sake of commerce in the Whiteman band that he was driven to drink and death. That idea, perpetrated by the Dorothy Baker novel *Young Man with a Horn*, has done Whiteman's memory grave damage.

"Bix wasn't unhappy," Joe said. "He played all he wanted to in the Whiteman band. The only thing was, when we played a concert, Paul would never let us go out and play a solo. He'd play the [Gershwin] *Concerto in F* and *Rhapsody in Blue*, he'd play the [Grofe] *Mississippi Suite*. And on those concerts, we'd never get a chance to play any jazz.

"You know, I played in a symphony orchestra, and then I went to a dance hall, and then I cracked out of that and wound up in a cellar, the Silver Slipper. In the old days, in the early 1920s, jazz was always played in a cellar.

"Well, Paul Whiteman got a bunch of guys together and he took us out of the cellar. Actually.

"George Gershwin helped a lot with his compositions, and we had a wonderful arranger in the Whiteman band named Ferde Grofe. He wrote . . . well, it was semi-jazz and semi-classical. But that helped us a whole lot. The band played Aeolian Hall, 1924, and did the *Rhapsody in Blue*. From there jazz went to Carnegie Hall, and Town Hall, and that brought the level up, and the college boys latched onto jazz."

Whiteman was a notoriously inept conductor. As far back as his youth in Denver, his father — superintendent of music in the Denver Public Schools, and Jimmie Lunceford's teacher — had said of him, "He doesn't know how to conduct."

Venuti somewhat hesitantly confirmed that Whiteman used to instruct new players in the orchestra to watch not him but the lead trumpeter, and was quite capable of giving five beats where four should be. Still, it may be time for a re-evaluation of Whiteman's role in American music, which is a little analogous to that of Diaghlev's in ballet and twentieth century European music. He was a man who made things happen. Certainly Whiteman must have been blessed with immense tolerance, not to say a sense of humor, to put up with the antics of Venuti.

While Whiteman was filming *The King of Jazz* in Hollywood, he was also doing a weekly radio show for Old Gold cigarettes. Charles King, then starring in *Broadway*

Melody, was a guest on one show. As he stepped up to the microphone to sing, Joe drew an old shotgun out of his violin case and aimed it at him. The musicians exploded, of course. Whiteman was furious, and lost control of the band. The roars of laughter went out "live" on the radio network, coast-to-coast as they used to say.

"Undoubtedly," Bing Crosby, a bandmate of Joe's at the time, wrote later, "Venuti helped age Whiteman."

At first I doubted the following story, which Joe told me, but I've concluded since then that it may well have happened— when *The King of Jazz* was playing at the Roxy in New York. It opened May 2, 1930. Whiteman's band was combined with the Roxy Symphony to form an orchestra of 130 musicians. As always, the *Rhapsody in Blue* was to be featured, with Gershwin playing the piano part. Concertmaster Kurt Dieterle was to lead the orchestra as it came up out of the pit, and then Whiteman would appear.

What Joe said he did may have been at the opening night dress rehearsal. That was the impression he gave me. In any case, by now you should know that Joe had a conspicuous intolerance for anything that smacked of bombast.

Joe said, "We had no fanfare or tympani roll to open the curtain. There was a big tuba note.

"George Gershwin was a good friend of mine, and I thought I ought to come up with something special for the occasion.

"So I put five pounds of flour in the tuba.

"We had blue full-dress suits, and all of a sudden as the curtain went up, the tuba player blew that note and they became white full-dress suits. We looked like snowmen. Paul came out and said, 'Pardon me, where are we?' We had to close the scrim, and get ourselves dusted off, and then we played."

In 1944, Venuti settled in California to work as a studio musician at MGM. He led a west coast band in the late 1940s. But in time he began to be forgotten. He seemed to have dropped off the planet and a good many people assumed he was dead. The stories about him began to take on the tone of legend.

The reason for this disappearance was booze. He told me that at that period he drank two quarts a day, which very nearly destroyed his liver. It also, he said, destroyed a happy marriage.

And then he quit drinking. That must have been around 1960. He began turning up in nightclubs. Dick Gibson presented him at his Colorado jazz party in Vail in 1968. Gibson has recorded that Zoot Sims stood at the apron of the bandstand and listened to Venuti transfixed. Gibson said Zoot told him later, "I never saw him before. I've heard stories about him all my life. Wild stories. I wasn't sure he was real, you know, maybe he was invented, like that Paul Bunyan guy with the ox. Man, he's real though. Gee, he can really swing."

I saw Venuti in person for the first time in my life in Toronto, sometime in the early 1970s. I was as flabbergasted as Zoot.

In 1974, Zoot recorded an album with Joe and a rhythm session comprising Dick Wellstood, George Duvivier, and Cliff Leeman. It's called *Joe and Zoot* and it's on the Chiaroscuro label. I still treasure it.

It was later that year — in September — that I talked to Joe at Gibson's jazz party, held in the Broadmoor hotel in Colorado Springs. Joe played with various groups during that party. In one of them, the pianist was Roger Kellaway. Roger was then thirty-two, Venuti was seventy-six, if Chilton and Feather are right, seventy-eight if Joe's uncle was right. Roger said afterwards, "That old man will run you ragged. You constantly feel as if you're being goosed."

Joe and I talked on a terrace by a lakeside behind the hotel. It was a soft sunny afternoon, just prior to fall. Beyond the lake the Rockies rose steep against the sky. He told me that he had relatives — including twenty-three grandchildren — scattered from Seattle, where he was living with his second wife, to Milan, which he visited at least once a year to hang out with cousins. Other Italians told me Joe had no American accent in Italian; he had no Italian accent in English. Photos taken in the early days of his career show him as a handsome young man. But by that September afternoon, he had grown thick-waisted. He was bald and he wore dark-rimmed glasses.

"Looking at his waddling walk and potbellied figure," Leonard Feather wrote in the Los Angeles *Times* shortly thereafter, "you would never guess that this man is one of the few certified geniuses of jazz . . . along with Armstrong, Tatum, and Bix."

Seeing us sitting there talking at a table on that terrace, other musicians began to pull up chairs and enter the conversation. They talked to him about Gershwin, about Ravel, whom he said he'd met during the composer's period in America. He talked to them of Ravel's orchestration with broad and detailed knowledge. He talked to them about Milhaud.

Though they weren't, you had the feeling that they were sitting at his feet.

"The amazing thing about you, Joe," I said, "is that above and beyond the music, and the jokes, and all the rest of it, you are one of those rare people who has reached an age, and can look back and know that you've lived."

"Well," he said, "you reach a peak, and you go on, and you reach another peak, and that's the way I like to do it in music."

Someone came to tell him a car had arrived for him. He was leaving for a gig somewhere, and then a European tour.

And I never saw him again.

Notice

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