

October 1989

Vol. 8 No. 10

Renewal Time

It's time for subscription renewal. It's difficult for me to grasp that the *Jazzletter* is ending its eighth year.

It amounts to something over 100,000 words a year. You made it possible by subscribing. It has produced two books of essays, *Singers and the Song* and *Meet Me at Jim and Andy's*, with two more in the works at Oxford University Press — one a collection of essays by all the musicians who have written for the *Jazzletter*, including Bill Crow and Bobby Scott, and the other a third collection of my own pieces. It has been a privilege to write for you.

The *Jazzletter* has been \$40 a year for the last seven years. Costs have gone up enormously, and we are going to have to raise the price to \$50 for 1990. However, for those who resubscribe before December 1, it will still be \$40. You'll save us an enormous amount of book-keeping if you resubscribe promptly. Those who have two- or three-year subscriptions extending through 1990 can simply ignore this notice.

We are exploring a possible *Jazzletter* jazz party in Ojai at the end of 1990. So far the response has been most enthusiastic, and a lot of musicians are interested in playing it.

But for the moment, to reiterate, it's renewal time. Please renew now.

Letters

I've just finished reading *Singers and the Song* for the second time, and it made me sad to think that I missed and will never see in my lifetime "an era when a lot of popular music was good and a lot of good music was popular."

I am a singer-pianist and I play in hotels and clubs in the New York City area. I was a child at the end of the good music era and I was greatly influenced by my parents' record collection. It was confusing and very frustrating but I gladly continued to sing and play the works of the great composers and lyricists of this century.

There seems to be a change in the air, though, because I am getting more requests for the glorious ballads of the 1930s and '40s. That's why I tend to stay around New York. I'm really afraid to venture to the hinterlands for fear of possibly being stoned.

Larry O'Leary, New York City

Fingers Revisited

As many of you know, my friend Sahib Shihab is not well. A few weeks ago, several of us performed in a benefit for him in a club on Long Island. He has gone to Tennessee to stay with his daughter, who is a nurse. He is not only a great musician, he is a wonderfully soft and gentle human being.

In the early days of the *Jazzletter*, I embarked upon a fantasy

a piece of fiction that permitted some comment that would otherwise have been impossible. While I did not base the characters exactly on specific persons, bits and pieces of a number of them did turn up. A number of people asked if the socialite record producer Park Benchley just might bear a certain resemblance to John Hammond. To that question I could only offer a smile. And anyway, John, who was a subscriber, didn't take offence.

The story, which ran a year in the *Jazzletter*, was in twelve parts, which seemed appropriate to the first pianist we know of (though there may be a few in some inbred populations in Pennsylvania) to be born with twelve fingers and a certain ambition to exceed the twelve-tone system.

Sahib, who was at the time living in Denmark, told me later that he waited every month to read of the adventures of the story's hero, or anti-hero, one Fingers Wombat. He said he'd laugh himself silly at these episodes, and the laughter helped gird him for the travails that a life in music so often entails.

That was back in 1981. Those early issues of the *Jazzletter* have grown scarce. Various persons have recalled Fingers fondly, and asked if his adventures might be recounted in a book. Alas, the story was too short for a book. But it did occur to me that it might be worth bringing all the episodes together in one enlarged, issue of the *Jazzletter*. For Sahib.

The Wombat Chronicles

Joe "Fingers" Wombat was born in Skye, Wisconsin, on Feb. 30, 1928. This gave him a serious complex as a child, since his birthday came only once every 412 years. It was this sense of being different that drew him to music in his early high school years. He was offered the flute chair in the Skye High Marching and Drinking Band.

But Joseph, as he was still known to everyone but his mother, who affectionately called him Klutz, became discouraged with the instrument because of a congenital physical malformation, the result of his unusual birthdate. Joseph was a double Pisces, with two trines and a sextile in his horoscope, which explains his later predilection for triads in root position with added sixths. But more significantly, he had Pluto rising, Jupiter falling, and Neptune undecided. Mercury was retrograde at the time, and Venus was in Cancer the Crab, which governs cancrasans. This caused an incredible traffic jam at 48th and Broadway and — which is more important — the unusual configuration of young Joseph's hands: he was born with six fingers and no thumb on each.

This made it difficult to hold the flute, much less play it, and in the end he gave it up. For a time he took up alto saxophone, since he could hang it around his neck, but he had trouble with the octave key and, after six fruitless months of trying to learn *My One and Only Love*, abandoned that as well. In a fit of despair, he told his guidance counsellor, who thought he should become a pizza-maker, that his last hope was the piano. Unfortunately, Skye High did not own a piano.

With his mother's best wishes, Joseph left home. He

hitch-hiked -- a process rendered more difficult by his lack of a thumb -- to Potsdam, New York, where, he had heard, the high school did own a piano. He had not been misinformed. At Pot. High he found an old Mason & Hamlin. It was so old, in fact, that the raised lettering on the harp stated A 435.

"That piano and I were made for each other," Fingers said in a recent interview. "On the piano I found that the way my hands are made was actually an advantage. The problem of the thumb cross-over in scale passages was eliminated. For example, I begin the E-flat scale not on the index finger, like everyone else, but on the third finger of each hand. My scales, therefore, are completely symmetrical and balanced. I admit, though, that B-natural sometimes gives me a hard time."

"And man! the voicings I can play! Twelve notes. Allowing, that is, for a little doubling, such as the third of the chord, with the melody note in the bass."

Pausing significantly, he added: "And of course, I am the only pianist alive who plays Bach authentically."

Since Fingers was in an unusually effusive mood during this interview -- a former sideman has described him as a "closet recluse" -- it seemed an appropriate time to ask him about the rumor that he is the slowest composer since Hugo Friedhofer.

"Oh man," he said, "I keep hearing that, and I resent it. It's not that I can't write fast. I write slow out of consideration for those musicians who are not fast readers."

It is not only the extra digits that work to Wombat's advantage. The sheer size of his hands permits him to play what has become a distinctive element of his style: parallel fifths and fifteenth. Many critics consider him the greatest jazz pianist since Buck Hammer, the famous three-handed virtuoso discovered by Steve Allen, or possibly even since Jonathon Edwards, who revolutionized jazz piano in the 1950s. Until then critics had been complaining that the average jazz pianist had "no left hand." Edwards, it will be recalled, has two left hands.

Fingers played his first professional job in the Head Room of the Slipit Inn outside Brockville, Ontario, long the rival of Evansville, Indiana, for the title of Sex Capital of North America. It was there that he was discovered by talent agent Darryl B. Mortecum, who had been sent by the late Freddie Schreiber to encounter what was obviously a unique musical mind. Mortecum introduced him to the famous jazz impresario and comic-book collector, Arturo Versee. Versee urged him to organize his own group, the now-historic Fingers Wombat Octet.

Besides Fingers himself, who had switched to accordion on discovering that pushing six buttons at the same time produced a very unusual noise, the group featured Pres Rohl on drums, Stan Dupp on bass, the French French horn virtuoso Zero Terry Valve, George "Bugle" Horne on fluegelhorn, Tom Bone on trombone, Simon Symbol on cymbalon, and Switzer Land on alpenhorn.

Like everyone else, Fingers had come under the influence of Charlie Parker, and he undertook a year-long project of transcribing Parker's solos and arranging them for octet.

Unfortunately, Fingers had an old Edison phonograph that ran counterclockwise, and so all of Birds solo's were written out backwards. This led years later to a landmark plagiarism suit in which Fingers sued Med Flory and Buddy Clark on the grounds that their Supersax arrangements were nothing but his own charts played while held up to a mirror. Flory and Clark (not to be confused with Lewis and Clark, whose sole contribution to jazz was that they anticipated Route 66 by two hundred years) argued that Bach did this all the time, and the suit was dismissed.

But we are ahead of the story.

After he had rehearsed his group for a year in the Turbine Room of Consolidated Edison, Fingers unveiled it. Arturo Versee. Versee, elated at having acquired that afternoon a mint copy of Action Comics, Vol. 1 No. 1, decided to present the group in concert. That concert, Jazz at the Waterworks, is of course now famous, one of the milestones in the history of America's Only Original Art Form. But at the time, few were able to understand so radical a mind as that of Wombat, and the concert was a scandal.

II

Bitterly disappointed by the reception he had received and unaware that Pandit Mersey-Leslie, in a Baltimore *Amigole* review, had called his music "absolutely inexplicable," Fingers Wombat sailed for France. There, following in the well-worn path of Aaron de Djeestryng, Leonard Beerstein, Igor Bivovitch, and Quincy Mass, he studied composition with the great Nadia Boucher de Cheval, as well as organ under the tutelage of the Alsatian physician, medical missionary, and mystic Jacques Strahp.

"Boucher de Cheval was a great teacher," Wombat says. "From her I learned discipline." She sometimes forced him to stand in a corner for days, which inspired one of his earliest works of this period, his *Perpetuum Inmobile*, widely admired for its utter lack of harmonic motion. From Jacques Strahp, he learned how to handicap horses through prayer, and this enabled him to eke out a living at Longchamps.

His efforts were not to go unrewarded. After twelve years of study, he was given the prestigious Prix de Rome, not, as some of his detractors have claimed, to get him out of Paris but because there were no other contestants that year.

Fingers had been happy in Paris, where he had acquired a taste for fine wines, and in memory of his years there he wrote his haunting *Sous les tablet de Paris*.

He arrived in Rome in August of that year, and, overwhelmed by the beauty of the history-soaked Eternal City, wrote one of his most joyous works, *Catacomb Capers*. In Rome he studied with twelve-tone composer Largo Factotum and the Polish avant-gardist Jerzy Bountz.

Applying the discipline acquired from Boucher de Cheval, Fingers would arise each morning at six, play an hour of the six-finger exercises he had invented for himself, and then settle down to his heaviest philosophical reading of the day, the fine print on breakfast-food boxes. He was completing his repast about eight o'clock one morning, he recalls, when he noted that thirteen corn flakes were still floating, somewhat limply,

in the milk at the bottom of his mendicant's bowl. He immediately grasped the significance of this.

"You see," he explained, "because of my twelve fingers, dodecaphonic composition has always been a snap for me." Fingers tried to emphasize his point with a gesture but due to his lack of a thumb was unable to do so. The resultant silence, which produced a typically Wombatian syncopation, was, however, more eloquent than any mere finger-popping could ever be. "I just knew there had to be something beyond the twelve-tone row," he said.

The sodden corn flakes inspired him to the development of his thirteen-tone concept of music which, strictly applied, requires that each tone be played thirteen times before the next is heard. The system is known as triskaidekaphonic composition or, more commonly, cereal music. "It is definitely not for the superstitious," Fingers explains.

That very morning, he wrote his first piece in the new manner, a ballad entitled *Now and Zen*, which has become a standard with the harp bands of Paragnay. And in another week of feverish activity, he produced his *Romano Sketches*, including *Vespa Not*, *Ciao Ciao Boogie*, *Tiber Rag*, and *She's Too Fiat for Me*.

It is in this suite that we first encounter what would become a benchmark of Fingers Wombat's harmonic system, the flattened octave.

Unknown to Fingers, a recording of his Jazz at the Waterworks concert had been released in the United States, and the number of his fans in America had grown to dozens. He first became aware of the recording, in fact, when he received a royalty check for 98 cents. More important, the release of the album had given Wombat's champion, Mersey-Leslie, the opportunity to take up his cause again. He called the album "bewildering" and speculated about what had become of Fingers.

Fingers was, in fact, preparing to give his first, and as matters turned out, his last, recital in Rome. In that performance, he introduced his *Music for Prepared Piano and Unprepared Audience* and five sacred works, *Vatican Vagaries*, *Cardinals Sin*, *Up Your Chimney*, *Sacred Cows and Papal Bulls*, and *Tertium Orgasm*. The music critic of *L'Osservatorio Romano* immediately nominated Fingers for excommunication, but on being informed that Wombat was not a Catholic, said he would settle for deportation.

Pravda said that the music was sacrilegious even by Soviet standards, and the Italian Red Brigade said that if the authorities did not take care of Fingers, they would. Fingers went into hiding in the tomb of Victor Emmanuel, professing amazement at the response to his music, as mobs surged through the street culling for his head.

Deciding at last that discretion was the better part of valor, Fingers surrendered to the Carabinieri and was taken to the airport under protective military guard. Thus he was returned to America in July of 1965, to be given a hero's welcome by six admirers at Kennedy Airport.

III

Back in New York, out of money, friendless but for a fan club

of 288 members, most of whom lived in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Fingers Wombat began looking for a gig. Because he had always played his own music, Fingers knew only three standards, but he had forgotten what they were.

Deciding that this must be the next phase of his musical growth, he sequestered himself for six months in Brooklyn with a rented Solovox and a fake book, and quickly mastered *Lavender Blue* (*Dilly Dilly*), *Sincerely, Cherry* (*I'll Get You Yet*), *Papa Loves Mambo*, *Darling Je vous aime beaucoup*, *Hot Diggity Dog Diggity*, and other songs of that stature. Having exhausted the fake book, he began assembling a collection of sheet music. The reharmonization of these tunes, he said later, was one of the most enjoyable exercises of his life. He would learn the guitar chords and then look for simpler changes.

It was at this point that fortune smiled on Fingers. On the recommendation of a Sheepshead Bay auto mechanic named Carl Start, he was hired by Sonya Papermoon, the singer, who was not then as obscure as she later became. Fingers headed up a trio that accompanied her at the chic Semihemidemiquaver. The bassist was Simi Lowe, who years later would make headlines by killing an A&R man with a sharp contract, for which he received a Victoria Cross, a Hero of the Soviet Union medal, the Legion of Honor, and a *Down Beat* New Star award. The drummer in the trio was Willie Rushmore, with whom Fingers formed a close and lasting friendship. Rushmore, Fingers said, "is the only drummer I ever met who understands my concept of creative acceleration."

Fingers and his group were kept on at the Semihemidemiquaver to accompany such singers as Amanda Reckonwith and Isabel Ringin. (It was in fact for Ringin that Fingers wrote his great standard *Shostakovich Small by a Waterfall*.)

The job with Ringin was a turning point in the Wombat career. Impressed by his playing, which she described as "weird," she introduced Fingers to Walter Wohlkarwitz, president of Honest Records. Wohlkarwitz, after hearing one set by Ringin and the trio, left -- but not before telling Fingers, "We must have lunch some time."

Nothing loth, Fingers telephoned Honest Records the following afternoon and, on asking for Wohlkarwitz, was in turn asked by a sequence of secretaries, "Does he know you?" and "What is this in reference to?" and "May I ask what it's concerning?" Thrilled by this evidence of the company's deep interest in him, Fingers told the secretary of Wohlkarwitz' gracious invitation, after which he was left on hold for twenty minutes. The girl returned to say that Mr. Wohlkarwitz was "in conference" and would return the call. Since Fingers' only number was a telephone booth just south of the elevators in the Brill Building and twenty-three degrees south-southeast of Irving Mills, Minnesota, he said he would call back. He did so the next day and the next but was advised that Mr. Wohlkarwitz was out of town, a condition in which he remained for six weeks.

Indeed he might have remained so indefinitely had Fingers not read in the "Executive Runaround" column of *Trash Box*, the Bible of the record industry, that Wohlkarwitz was prepar-

ing to leave for the MIDEM conference. Deducing that the executive must be in town, if only for a moment, Fingers took the bull by the horns and went directly to the offices of Honest Records.

He had chosen an unfortunate time to arrive -- Thursday morning. Wohlkarpitz was in the habit of spending every Thursday morning at the company's warehouse in Queens, stamping "Quality Reject" on boxes of records. (Wohlkarpitz denied, during a grand jury investigation of the record industry, that these cartons were shipped to a distributor in Los Angeles who happened to be his cousin. He maintained he was merely maintaining the quality of pressings for which his company is known. Wohlkarpitz was completely cleared of corruption charges by the office of the Manhattan District Attorney after what was described as a "complete, thorough, and objective investigation." Wohlkarpitz is now chairman of the board of the international communications conglomerate known as International Communications Conglomerate at a salary of four million dollars a year, plus stock options.)

When Wohlkarpitz returned from the warehouse, he found Fingers ensconced in an armchair in his waiting room. Beaming with that warm affability for which he is famous and saying, with that warm resonance of voice for which he is also famous, "Wonnnderful," to Fingers' every utterance, he invited the pianist into his palatial office. Fingers took a chair facing the quarter-acre desk behind which Wohlkarpitz seated himself. On the wall behind the great executive was emblazoned the company's logo and its famous motto, "We'll give you an honest count."

"What can I do for you?" Wohlkarpitz said pointedly.

"I want a record contract," Fingers replied softly.

"Wonnnderful," Wohlkarpitz commented trenchantly.

"And I think I'm ready for one," Fingers replied modestly.

"Wonnnderful," Wohlkarpitz asserted cogently.

"I've paid my dues," Fingers said proudly.

"Wonnnderful," Wohlkarpitz observed keenly.

"And I can play the blues," Fingers said confidently.

"Wonnnderful," Wohlkarpitz averred thoughtfully. "What kind of terms are you looking for?"

"Anything fair," Fingers said graciously.

"Wonnnderful," Wohlkarpitz responded quickly. "Do you have a lawyer?"

"No," Fingers said shyly.

"Wonnnderful," Wohlkarpitz asseverated enthusiastically.

After six minutes of negotiation, Fingers signed his milestone record contract with Honest Records, becoming the first artist in history with a 20 percent royalty -- 20 percent to be paid by Fingers to the company for every album sold, the figure rising to 25 percent after 20,000 albums, and 40 percent to be paid for all remainders, with a 75 percent breakage clause. Further, Fingers was charged only for production expenses, studio and mixing time, tape, mastering, limousine service, advertising and publicity, album cover design and production, paper sleeves, coffee breaks for secretaries, and an annual vacation for Wohlkarpitz at La Costa.

When Fingers left Honest Records that afternoon, he was elated. He was in debt to the company for two million dollars.

He had feared the figure would be much higher. He realized however that he would now need a patron. It was out of this need that he became acquainted with the Duchess of Bedworthy, famous in jazz circles for her unstinting kindnesses to the Count Basie band, the Duke Ellington band, the Boyd Ruchman band, the Stan Kenton band, the Tommy Dorsey band, the Sonny Dunham band, the Guy Lombardo band, the Blue Barron band, and the Fordham football team.

It was to be a fruitful relationship.

IV

The Duchess of Bedworthy is one of the major minor figures in jazz history. Though not a musician herself, she had an influence on the music's development that is nothing less than puzzling.

Little is known about her early life in England. Ivor Novello denied to his dying day ever having met her. Leonard Feather's failure to mention her in his *Encyclopedia of Jazz* must be considered a major oversight -- if it was an oversight -- in an otherwise estimable and scholarly work.

She was descended on her mother's side from a chambermaid of the mistress of Charles the Second and through her father from Mad King Ludwig of Bavaria. Her grandfather was raised to the peerage for smuggling Limburger cheese into England for Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's homesick consort, and gefilte fish for Disraeli.

Always a lover of American music, the duchess -- Blinky, as she was known to her intimates -- tried when she was in her twenties to induce the Scots Guards pipe band to march to a medley of Cole Porter tunes. Later she almost succeeded in arranging a Fats Waller concert by the band of the Coldstream Guards, but at this point her family became incensed on learning she had been spending weekends at Stonehenge with the members of both bands. Despite her protestation that she was merely engaged in research on the fertility rites of the Druids, she was sent on remittance to America. "After all," her Aunt Mathilda said at the time, "we had the Yanks for four years. It's only fair."

Arriving in New York, Blinky immediately made her presence felt among the denizens of 52nd Street. In her continuing efforts in behalf of Anglo-American relations, she offered to put up her own money to record an album to be titled *Charlie Parker Plays George Formby*. Tadd Dameron reportedly was writing a chart on *Me Auntie Mabel's Knickers Have Got Holes in the Back* when Bird disappeared. She never heard from him again, except for a picture postcard from Camarillo.

Nothing daunted, the duchess then tried to promote an LP to be called *Duke Ellington Meets Gracie Fields* and another -- one of her more imaginative projects -- titled *Joe Albany Plays Melachrino*. Nothing came of either venture, although Duke told her he loved her madly.

The duchess was frequently seen at Minton's and the Apollo during this period, urging her favorites on with cries of "I say, too much!" and "Far out, what?" But for several

years after that, her movements can be traced only intermittently. It is known that she spent some time in Ottawa, where her efforts to get the hand of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to record favorite selections from *Rose Marie* earned her persona non grata status with the Canadian government.

It was during this period that the duchess became strung out on M&M's. At the age of forty-two, she kicked her habit on the Rockefeller alcohol substitution program, and in six months lost more weight than Charles Mingus and Jackie Gleason combined. But the years of neglect had taken their toll and when she next turned up, she was modelling for the Albright brothers. Then, in a desperate fight to restore her dignity, she flew to Brazil for plastic surgery — a face-lift so extensive that it had the unexpected though not unwelcome side effect of raising her bustline four inches. The operation left her face permanently in B-flat.

Shortly after her return from Brazil, she met Fingers Wombat for the first time. She had dropped by the Semihemidemi-quaver to catch a set by Isabel Ringin. Settling at her favorite table with a coterie of admirers, she saw Fingers, hunched in his characteristic cadaverous curve over the keyboard, and said, "My word!" Fingers, catching a glimpse of her at the same moment, said, "Outasight."

Introduced after the set, the duchess and Fingers felt an immediate rapport and repaired to a dark corner of the club. It was so dark that Fingers took off his shades to see her, then put them back on. Blinky poured out her heart to Fingers, whose playing, she said, she had found obtuse, remote, inaccessible and obscure — all qualities that she admired. She told him of her struggle to overcome her M&M habit, her trip to Brazil, and her operation.

Wild with enthusiasm, Fingers said he would like to record an album in her honor and immediately sketched an outline on the back of an AFM envelope containing a notice that he was behind in his union dues. The tunes would include *That Face, You've Changed, Black and Blue, Smile, Elevation, Grownin' High, and Tummy Tucker Time*. As a tribute to her face-lift, he told her, he would use as a unifying motif an altered major-seventh chord — F-A-C#-E.

Blinky — Fingers was already on a first-name basis with the duchess — was aglow at the prospect. But Fingers fell into a melancholy, thence into a swoon. When the duchess asked what was troubling him, he said, "Money," and showed her his contract with Honest Records. Blinky assured him that money was no problem: she would finance the album.

The next day, Fingers made plans to reassemble his old octet. This was to prove more difficult than he anticipated. Switzer Land had joined the Flower Children and was now convinced he was a geranium. Tom Bone had abandoned music to become a surgeon. He had in fact made history as the first man ever to perform a pre-frontal lobotomy on himself, thus becoming the only person ever to be featured on the covers of both *Meironomie* and *The American Journal of Neurology*. He was no longer interested in music and spent his days quietly in an office with an "Out to Lunch" sign on the door.

Fingers finally elected to record in a trio context and began rehearsals with bassist Simi Lowe and drummer Willie Rushmore.

V

The Duchess of Bodworthy changed Fingers Wombat's life.

In a week of whirlwind activity she engaged attorneys Art Schmartz and Shuster Scheisster to represent him and hired accountant Sawyer Cockoff as his business manager. Jess Fein became his public relations counsel, and the duchess contacted the British booking agency of Bean Belk and Ava Banana to arrange a tour of Guernsey, Jersey, Skye and the Outer Hebrides.

Since she circulated in the highest circles, she was able to arrange an introduction to Park Benchley, the socialite record executive and patron of the arts. Fingers had read his heralded autobiography, *The Importance of Being Me*, in which Benchley modestly admitted that he had personally invented jazz, with a little help from Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, Louis Armstrong, Don Redman, and a few more.

Fingers was soon being invited to art gallery openings, and that great arbiter of American taste, Piggy Friggentime, personally showed him, at her apartment in Sutton Place, her celebrated collection of paintings by her now-famous protegee Jason Shure Camdor. Privately, Fingers thought they looked like Technicolor bird droppings but, realizing that politics is the better part of valor, praised them as "interesting, different, and fragrant." Friggentime became one of his devotees.

Decreeing that Fingers must give more thought to his image, the duchess outfitted him in suits by Hard, Pecker, and Marx, shoes by Hucci-Cucci, shirts by Pierre Six, and cologne by Pute de Paris. For his gloves — Fingers had always had trouble getting gloves that would fit — she sent him to her personal *goutiste*, Hans Zap. She thought he should begin to use his real name, Joseph Wombat, but Fingers drew the line at this, saying he had grown attached to Fingers and vice versa.

By now items about Fingers were appearing in the gossip columns. *Trash Box* reviewed Fingers at the Semihemidemi-quaver, hardly mentioning Isabel Ringin at all. The trade paper's New York editor, Heidi Hoe, thought Fingers was "cute" and his music "challenging." But inevitably it was Pandit Mersey-Leslie who wrote the most perceptive review. He flew in from Baltimore and sat discreetly in a corner, sucking on Quaaludes (he had given up smoking) and making notes. His review next afternoon in the *Aureole* said:

"Mr. Wombat's relentless throbbing beat and restless probing lines are among his most distinctive characteristics. His richly exploratory music has a certain *je ne sais quoi*, an indefinable *soupeon* of perversity that sets him not so much above his contemporaries as apart from them.

"What is most admirable is his maturely developed contempt for the audience. Some jazzmen go in for cheap and pleasing melodicism, or shallow dexterity and clean attack, or mere beauty of tone and voicings, or an obviously sensual swing. Mr. Wombat succumbs to none of these easy tricks. There is no trashy pandering to the listener's pleasure. He

offers you absolutely nothing, being lost in his own profound thought. This renders his music extremely difficult to listen to -- one might almost say unbearable. This clears the way for all puritans, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish, to like it.

"And his music is rich in social significance. It more than meets the quota for inherent revolutionism that I have set for jazz musicians before I will even consider considering them important. Fingers Wombat expresses in his music his uncompromising opposition to bad things, like war, cruelty, exploitation, discrimination, poverty, and famine, which everyone is in favor of excepting a few of the more advanced and spiritual beings like me.

"No one listening to it need feel any of the haunting guilt that steals over Americans whenever they commit the nation's two most serious sins, wasting time and having fun. There is no fun in listening to Mr. Wombat. And one is not wasting time: one is being enlightened. One is having one's consciousness raised, so much so that there are reports that an evening with Fingers Wombat is a cure for baldness.

"His art has Meaning. His art is Relevant. Indeed, Fingers Wombat is the harbinger of western decline, and I alone had the insight, foresight, hindsight, scholarship, and direct connection with revealed truth to recognize it. Let Gnat Penhouse of the *Village Vice* and Ralph Seesaw of the *San Fernando Monocle* put that in their pipes and smoke it."

Fingers, reading this over brunch at Toots Shore's, was elated. He celebrated with a bottle of Chateau du Pompe. He had never thought of himself as Socially Significant before. But it was immediately obvious to him that everything Mersey-Leslie had written was true. Now that he thought back over his life, his time at Pot-High, the gig at the Ship Inn, his years with Boucher de Cheval, his Prix de Rome, his invention of triskaidekaphonic composition, it seemed to him that he had always been destiny's tot.

VI

When Walter Wohlkarpitz read the Mersey-Leslie review, he decided to record the pianist as soon as possible. In view of the sudden acclaim he had received, however, Fingers determined to take a hard line on his recording contract. He sent his attorneys to renegotiate it. Schwartz and Scheisster announced that they had successfully done so: Honest Records agreed to pay for the paper sleeves in his albums.

(Fingers paid Schwartz and Scheisster five thousand dollars for their work. Honest Records paid them ten.)

In view of the publicity, and the growing crowds resulting from them, Wohlkarpitz decided that Fingers should be recorded live at the Semibemidemi-quaver. The Duchess of Bedworthy and Park Benchley planned a gala social affair, and while recording engineer Tom Mix was setting up his Wohlensack in the men's room, Bella de Ball, society editor of the *New York Daily Nu*, was busily making note of the famous names in attendance.

These included acting mayor Ward Hieler, the noted Reichian psychotherapist Hammond Orgone, Grover and Dover Andover of Horace Heights, Medusa van Bicycle of Westchester, Chester and Esther Lester of Leicester, Aretha Holly of

Port Chester, Richard Chichester of Rochester, Lancaster Ancaster of Doncaster, and Field Marshall Helmut von Spike, West Germany's dashing ambassador to the United Nations, who escorted Cecile, the ravishing wife of the distinguished French diplomat, sportsman, and novelist Ilya Cocu. Cocu arrived later, accompanied by the Hungarian beauty Iona Ferrari, and exchanged friendly waves with his wife and von Spike.

A hush fell as Rushmore and Lowe came on to the small handstand, followed by a burst of applause as Fingers stepped into the spotlight and sat down at the piano. As opener, he played a medley of *Red Wing*, *Indian Love Call*, *Cherokee*, *Along the Navajo Trail*, *Pale Moon*, *By the Waters of the Minnetonka*, and *Sweet Sioux*.

During the subsequent applause, the Duchess smiled so broadly that her face modulated for a moment into C. Park Benchley, in authoritative and vibrant tones that could be heard several tables away, proclaimed Fingers "the greatest pianist of the last thirty years . . . No, forty," effectively dismissing everyone since James P. Johnson. Piggy Friggen-time found Fingers "divine."

Modestly acknowledging this acclaim with a slight nod, Fingers then launched into one of his originals, *Wombat Ramble*, followed by another of his compositions, based on the chord changes of Charlie Parker's *Dougie Lee*, which he had entitled *Indiana*.

"Refreshingly new," Benchley said.

Now, with a blue gel on the spotlight, Fingers, head down close to the keyboard and eyes closed, went into two rhapsodic ballads, Alec Wilder's famous *If You See Kay*, followed by the Zoot Sims classic *How Many Times Do I Have to Tell You I Love You?*

"Sensitive," Benchley announced.

Fingers then featured his bassist in a pyrotechnic display entitled *Lowe Blow*. It was during this number that the only misadventure of the set occurred. During a stream of sixty-fourth notes, Lowe got his fingers so entangled in the strings that Mix had to stop the tape while Wombat and Rushmore extricated their colleague from his instrument. "Unprecedented!" Benchley intoned. "Brilliant! I've never heard anything like it before!" Regaining his composure, Lowe picked up his bow and concluded his solo with a ferocious arco passage played on the steel peg of his bass -- a technique perfected by the late Freddie Schreiber. Fingers took over from there and played an out-chorus of burning intensity, filling the room with what *Five* magazine has called his "table-napkins of sound."

The acclaim at the end of the set was deafening. Everyone in the room applauded wildly, excepting Ilya Cocu, whose Saint Cyr class ring was caught in Ferrari's garter belt. Never having mastered the sound of one hand clapping, Cocu dinged enthusiastically on a highball glass with a swizzle stick. Wohlkarpitz rushed out to be assured by Mix that he had everything on tape, excepting the three minutes when Wombat and Rushmore were freeing their friend. Mix said that, because the equipment had been set up in the men's room,

there was a problem of leakage on the tape. "But we can fix it in the mix," he said. "Wounnunderful," Wohlkarpitz said.

The second set was even more of a success than the first. By now Benchley was calling Fingers "the greatest pianist of the last hundred years." But the high point of the evening came about midnight when Fingers saw in the crowd his old friend Zip Cody, a trumpet player so original that he had spent most of his professional life working in the post office. (Because of his musical knowledge, he had been assigned to the record warping room.)

Fingers had in fact wanted Cody for his first octet but an unfortunate accident had prevented his joining the group. Cody, who played a Dizzy Gillespie model trumpet, had been caught in a downpour during a solo at the Bullfinch Island Jazz Festival and had almost drowned. The resultant pneumonia had precluded his joining the octet. He and Fingers had not seen each other in years. They had met again by chance while cashing checks in the drug store across from the Brill Building.

Fingers insisted that Cody sit in for the last set. Cody unpacked his new horn, which had a Dizzy Gillespie bell and a Don Elliott fourth valve that permitted him to play on purpose the quarter tones he had been achieving throughout most of his career strictly by accident.

During the set, Cody played notes so high that they were inaudible in the Semihemidemi-quaver, although they set off performances by every poodle between Fifth Avenue and the East River.

"We've got an album, we've got an album!" Wohlkarpitz cried amid the stormy and prolonged applause. At this point, Cocu managed to free his class ring with a loud Snap! which prompted Ferrari to comment demurely, "Ouch."

The evening had been for Fingers a triumph that would erase forever the humiliation of his long-ago Jazz at the Waterworks concert. He had been justified at last.

VII

Fingers-Wombat Live at the Semihemidemi-quaver was released six weeks after it was recorded, in both mono and re-channelled-for-stereo versions. *Jive* magazine called it "the most unusual album since Miles' *Behind*."

Fingers was in fact overwhelmed by the reviews, which the Duchess collected in an ostrich-skin covered scrapbook. He was particularly pleased by one in *Occasional Keyboardist*, which said that he combined "the tone of Thelonious Monk, the harmonic sophistication of Floyd Cramer, the inventive imagination of Eddie Duchin, and the touch of Maurice Rocco."

Our There, the quarterly of avant-garde jazz and contemporary occultism, said, "The convoluted bipolar imploding subtlety of his music, its ineffable dynamism, its exponentially recurring inward-outward tangential involvement will be found, when divided by pi, to conform to the proportions of the Great Pyramid at Giza. There is nothing sanpaku about Fingers Wombat, who through his exploration of the higher harmonics of etheric energy has freed the astral body of jazz to travel to other planes."

The *Ohio Apianist* said Fingers had a "stinging attack

varied by a honeyed approach to ballads," while *The International Mercenary* praised his "deadly accuracy and rapid fire and long trajectories of sound culminating in devastating rhythmic explosions." Dr. Lancelot Carver, writing in the amusement section of the *American Journal of Unnecessary Surgery*, admired his "sure slashing technique, the pulsing crimson flow of his thought, and his ability to stitch together the most improbable ideas." A review in *Yank*, the journal of American dentistry, called the album, "transcendental."

Rough Riders, the official voice of the Teddy Roosevelt Fan Club, said in an editorial, "A poor boy from Skye, Wisconsin, who had to hitch-hike to Potsdam, New York, to find a piano on which to practice, Wombat illustrates the triumph of the American dream. His career proves that the poor don't need help. Those who have the grit and guts and other virtues that have made America what it is today will get there on their own. The rest don't deserve to."

My Friends, the official voice of the Franklin Roosevelt Fan Club, said, "A poor boy from Skye, Wisconsin, who had to hitch-hike to Potsdam, New York, to find a piano on which to practice, Wombat illustrates the faltering of the American dream. His career did not begin to blossom until in Europe he was subsidized by a Prix de Rome, which permitted the flowering of a talent that, in the underfunded American educational system, might have withered on the vine."

Struggle, the official voice of the Nikolai Lenin Fan Club, said that Fingers illustrated, "the hypocrisy of the American dream. His music is a searing outcry, the heartfelt protest of the downtrodden masses against the running dogs of gangster capitalism."

The reviews were not unanimous, however. *Mississippi Mudder* called the album "bullshit." And the jazz critic of the *Climax New Mexico, Star-Chronicle-Enquirer-Expositor-Tribune-Journal-Post-Globe-Telegram-Democrat-Republican*, said that Fingers was "an appendix on the intestine of jazz."

Fingers was at first troubled by the few negative reviews, but Park Benchley reassured him that the great artist can always expect to be misunderstood, and the reviews on the whole reflected what Benchley had said in the album's liner notes, namely that Fingers was the greatest pianist of the last two hundred years.

In any event, Fingers had little time to brood on reviews, since he had to fulfill engagements generated by the album's success. Turning in his rented Solovox, he left on a tour of North America:

June 2 and 3: Palm Room of the Tropicana Hotel in Fairbanks, Alaska. June 4, 5 and 6: Club Montmartre in Wanchula, Florida. June 7: Club Aristocrat in Kaposkasing, Ontario. June 8: Club Coparabiana in Fairbanks, Alaska. June 9 and 10: Minton's in Waycross, Georgia. June 11: Club Waikiki in Fairbanks, Alaska. June 12: La Cucaracha in Merida, Yucatan. June 13: Le Park Avenue in L'Achord-a-Plouffe, Quebec. June 14 and 15: Tahiti Lounge in Fairbanks, Alaska. June 16 and 17: Neptune's Net in Malibu, California. June 18 and 19: Cafe Chic in St. John's, Newfoundland. June 20: Palm Room of the Tropicana Motel in

Kodiak, Alaska.

The tour concluded with four months in the Persian Room high atop the beautiful Hotel Leonard in downtown St. Catharines, Ontario, with its breath-taking view of the Old Canal. Fingers was happy about this. It gave him time to get his laundry done.

VIII

Fingers used his time at the Hotel Leonard well. Indeed the four months were among the more productive periods of his life, and he turned out a considerable body of classical composition.

During his Paris years, he had become convinced that composers were wasting their time in experiments with quarter tones. Fingers had written a few works in eighth tones, and at least one work -- now, alas, lost -- in sixteenth tones, and then had begun reducing the size of his intervals even further, dividing the octave into 77 1/2 parts, finally producing his famous Fifth Quintet, Opus 80, No. 174, known as the *Glossando*, scored for four violins and a slide whistle. The work had been widely acclaimed -- "astonishing," one of the French critics called it -- but seldom performed, due largely to the scarcity of accomplished slide whistlers.

Fingers revised it during his stay in St. Catharines, rescored it for four violas and trombone, which gave it a darker tone. At the same time, he decided to tighten the work somewhat, eliminating the fourth, seventh, and eighth movements, thereby reducing its playing time to two hours.

The next week he began work on his Woodwind Quartet, Opus 812, scored for ocarina, bagpipe, bass saxophone, and eunuch flute. This lovely work, which shows the composer's mastery of unusual instrumental colors, has unfortunately been overshadowed by the celebrated *Aleatory Rhapsody*, composed immediately after it.

Fingers was of course familiar with the work of the Flemish composer Pierre Mouche, which offered, he felt, some improvement on the usual chance mechanisms. Mouche's technique of hanging sticky score-paper outdoors at his farm and then having orchestras of indeterminate size, chosen by firing buckshot through a union book, play the notes indicated by flies attached to the staves, was interesting, but only as far as it went. Since the flies usually died, this tended to give the music a static quality. Fingers wanted something that would be more alive.

In St. Catharines he got the idea of spraying honey with an atomizer (experiment established that it was best to dilute it) onto score paper and then releasing ants of different sizes and colors to walk across the field of random tackiness. The ants would get stuck on the honey spots. Large black ants could signify whole notes, red ants quarter notes, the small kitchen ants eighth notes, and so forth. Since the ants in their struggles would tend to wriggle, this would produce interesting tremolo effects. And since the ants would eat their way free of the honey spots and move on, only to become stuck again, the resultant music could not be predicted even by the composer, for it would constantly change even as it was being performed.

Like all great artists, Fingers did not at first grasp the significance of his own innovation. As usual, the work was not fully understood until Pandit Mersey-Leslie clarified the issue. "The advantages of the system," Mersey-Leslie was to write some time later, "are enormous. It frees the composer from the tedium of dealing with harmony, counterpoint, rhythmic notation, and all that other boring stuff. But most important of all, it frees music itself from the intercession of fallible human judgment and the subjective selection process of composers."

At the moment, however, Fingers was merely fascinated with the technique in and of itself. He learned that there were 4,712 known kinds of ant. This made the number possible combinations virtually indeterminable. Given a large enough orchestra, the range of colors became infinite. Yet chamber groups could also perform the *Aleatory Rhapsody*, which is why the work has been subtitled *Any Number Can Play*.

Fingers was tired when he finished work on this composition, but his creative juices were still flowing. He thought he might try his hand at a song, and although he had never written a lyric before, he was confident he could handle it. After all, he had once read a book entitled *How to Get Rich in the Music Business*, which contained a paragraph on writing lyrics. He decided he would like to write a California song, one that incorporated some of the more romantic names of places in that state. Several such songs had already been written, of course: *I Left My Heart in San Clemente*, *Do You Know the Way to San O'Fay*, *It Happened in Morro Bay*. During the job at Neptune's Net in Malibu, Fingers had become entranced by the name of the naval base, Port Hueneme, pronounced Why Knee Me, and he decided to immortalize it in song. And that is how he came to write:

The moon was new over Point Mugu
the night I came from Simi
to share with you a rendezvous
on the beach at Port Hueneme.
We strolled the sand, you held my hand,
my glasses grew all steamy.
The waves did crash and splash and splash
on the beach at Port Hueneme.
It was rather strange on the rifle range,
my darling little Mimi,
but we had no where else to go
but the beach at Port Hueneme.
The M.P.'s came, we had to leave
as dawn came up like thunder.
I still hold dear the memory
of romance torn asunder.
I see again the Oxnard plain
in dreams that will not free me.
But that was Oh so long ago
on the beach at Port Hueneme . . .
oh yeah,
the beach at Port Hueneme.
Fingers was pleased with the song. He liked its imagery

and symbolism and felt that it had a certain French realism about it. He sent a lead sheet to his friend Sonya Papermoon, who recorded it on Obscure Records.

The job at the Persian Room ran its course pleasantly. Fingers received a rave review from Victoria Lawn, jazz critic of the *St. Catharines Substandard*, who described his playing as "unexpected." He returned to New York in the fall of 1966 or '67 -- he could never remember which, creating a problem that still has his biographers baffled.

IX

Fingers recorded a new trio album shortly after his return to New York, the unjustly neglected *Modal Yodel*, which included tunes by Miles Davis and the legendary Yoyo Yokum. But it was the Semihemidemi-quaver album that continued to generate interest, and fan mail was becoming a problem, which the Duchess of Bedworthy alleviated by screening it. She passed only the most interesting mail to Fingers, including that which contained gifts. An admirer in Still Hollow, Tennessee, named Mason Jarman sent him a case of high-grade white lightning, an intemperate sampling of which rendered Fingers comatose for three days.

Two women -- Helena Hanbasket of Troy, New York, and Lois Carmen deNominator, an algebra teacher in Cumming, Virginia -- proposed marriage. Aurora Sneddle of Fruitful, Utah, wrote to say that she had an unusual hobby: she had babies by famous jazz musicians. She already had eleven and hoped that Fingers would help her bring her collection to an even dozen. Reflecting that she had almost enough to start her own band, Fingers considered making a contribution, but in the end he declined the invitation with thanks.

One of the most interesting letters came from a Navajo shaman named Drumdrum Snake Eyes, who said that in his tireless quest for ever more modern agricultural methods, he had induced his people to do their rain dance to Fingers' album. This had trebled the rainfall, quadrupled the maize crop and, most important of all, produced an eighteen million dollar profit on pot sales, which the tribal leaders planned to use to build a school and hospital. This puzzled Fingers. Try as he might, he could not see what his music had to do with this increase in ceramic production.

Colin Yuhu wrote from Ruptured Mounty, Alberta, to say that he and his wife had decided to play Fingers' album over the sound system of their chicken farm instead of the usual Mantovani records. This had increased production by twenty-seven percent, although the eggs came out square.

Fingers was pleased by this evidence that he was improving the world through music, but he had little time to muse on such matters. For one thing, he had personnel problems with his trio. Simi Lowe and Willie Rushmore had decided to form their own group, a duo consisting of bass and drums. They felt that other instruments got in their way. Fingers was sorry to lose them but wished them well and promised to come to their first opening, if any. After auditioning musicians for two weeks, he hired Sleepy Walker on bass and Chick Chickering on drums.

At the same time, his career as a classical composer was making steady progress. He received a commission to write a new piece for the Arcane String Quartet of Bayonne, New Jersey -- not, as has been erroneously stated elsewhere, for the Sioux City Sue Sousaphone Society. Indeed, the circumstances of the writing of this work have been frequently misrepresented.

The facts are these:

Fingers was spending a quiet Sunday keeping up with the other arts, as was his wont. He had just left an exhibit of Keane paintings, which he greatly admired, and was on his way to a retrospective on the films of John Payne. Heading uptown on the IRT, he was enthralled by the screech of the wheels in the turns. He noticed that the pitch was E-sharp, and decided that this should be the key of his new quartet. Admittedly, the key signature would be a little hard to read, but Fingers chose not to compromise.

He began to sketch the work on a Nedick's napkin, and completed it within a week. It is in this quartet that we encounter the next major advance in his harmonic system. He had been using the flatted octave for some years, and it was now widely imitated, although few musicians have utilized it with the consummate skill of its originator. In the Quartet in E-sharp, we first find the flatted eleventh. Occasionally, adding further tension, it is used in suspension.

Because of the circumstances of its composition, this work is sometimes referred to as the *Keane Payne Quartet*. It had its premiere on September 15 of that year in Bayonne, before an audience of eleven, two of whom stayed to the end.

X

Fingers was disappointed by the initial reception of this quartet. The Bayonne Bayonet cut him to the quick, saying, "It is hard to see the point of this work. There is a section in the third movement (marked *allegro ma non troppo loco*) in which the high melody (?) line is carried by the cello while the bass line is assigned to the violins. Though admittedly original, this procedure is odd, to say the least."

It would not be until the quartet was issued on Deleted Records two years later that the world would begin to take its true measure. For the present Fingers was in a funk. As usual, it was the Duchess of Bedworthy who offered the wisest counsel. She said he should immerse himself in some new project. She urged him to compose a song cycle, something serious, not mere popular songs, and even suggested the subject: some of the Canadian rural poets of the late Nineteenth Century, with whose works she had become enamored at the time of her contretemps with the RCMP. When Fingers read the poems, he immediately cast his depression aside and went to work, setting to music one by James McIntyre (1827-1906), written when the farmers of Ingersoll, Ontario, sent a seven thousand pound cheese to the Paris Exposition of 1897, where it shared honors with the Javanese music that so captivated Debussy.

ODE ON THE MAMMOTH CHEESE

We have seen thee, queen of cheese,
Lying quietly at your ease,

Gently fanned by evening breeze.
 Thy fair form no flies dare seize.
 All gaily dressed soon you'll go
 To the great provincial show,
 To be admired by many a beau
 In the city of Toronto.
 Cows numerous as a swarm of bees
 Or as the leaves upon the trees
 It did require to make thee please,
 And stand unrivalled, queen of cheese.
 May you not receive a scar as
 We have heard that Mr. Harris
 Intends to send you off as far as
 The great world's show in Paris.
 Of the youths beware of these
 For some of them might rudely squeeze
 And bite your cheek, then songs or glees
 We could not sing, oh! queen of cheese.
 We'ret thou suspended from balloon
 You'd cast a shade even at noon.
 Folks would think it was the moon
 About to fall and crush them soon.

Fingers considered submitting the song to Florence Foster Jenkins but decided to write more of the cycle before determining how to dispose of it. He went to work setting another of McIntyre's poems, a praise of other poets:

We have scarcely time to tell thee
 Of the strange and gifted Shelley,
 Kind-hearted man but ill-fated,
 So youthful, drowned and cremated.

Fingers was next occupied with one of McIntyre's sea poems, including this vivid quatrain:

An English ship when homeward bound
 Near to its port was shipwrecked found,
 For it had struck a sunken rock
 And was slowly sinking from the shock.

Fingers then turned to the poems of John Gay (1693-1732), including:

Mary, Mary, Queen of Scots
 Your needlework is not forgot;
 Three hundred years have passed, they say,
 Your beautiful piece of tapestry is still in the hands of
 Mrs. Thomas Dunn, of Nassagaway.
 And this:

England, with all her faults, I love her still
 Let men of no principle say what they will
 There are thousands of rotten Englishmen, I must confess,
 Turn their back on their country and dirt their nest.
 For my Queen and my country I've always proved true,
 And my colours will stand by the Red, White, and Blue.

Finally, he set a poem by James McRae (1849-1930), complaining of deceitful devices used by women to embellish and disguise their figures:

How oft thus lay the secret way
 In which the game is played: --

A shapeless mass, by name a lass,
 Is artfully arrayed,
 Is neatly bound with metal round
 And trimmings wisely made,
 And padded o'er with worthless store
 To cover unbetrayed
 The sad defects, which one detects
 When nature is displayed.
 With tender care they leave quite bare
 What parts are fit to face,
 Or please the eyes of youths they prize
 No matter what their place.

Fingers played the song cycle for the Duchess and Pa Benchley at a special social event at the latter's apartment. Some of the listeners were overwhelmed and sat in silence until Benchley led the way by acclaiming the works "marrrrrvellous," after which the applause was considerable.

Fingers made a demo of the songs and enthusiastically played it for Walter Wohlkarpitz at Honest Records. Wohlkarpitz said that he did not think the songs were "commercial enough" and told Fingers he was free to take them somewhere else. A similar verdict was delivered by other record executives. Finally, Fingers took the advice of a friend he had made during the Hotel Leonard engagement and applied for a Canada Council grant.

The Canadians, thrilled by this evidence that the Americans were faintly aware of their existence, offered Fingers the opportunity to record the songs in Toronto. Fingers immediately began looking for a Canadian artist to perform them. He soon learned that Deanna Durbin and Bobby Breen were retired. Ann Murray was unavailable, since she was only five at the time. Fingers settled on the Toronto Symphony, the Mendelssohn Choir and the St. Michael's Boys Choir. The Canada Council gave him a recording budget of half a million dollars, most of which he spent on overdubs.

Seven hundred thousand copies of the album were pressed and it can now be found in remainder bins from Pawtucket, Rhode Island, to Bondi Junction, Australia, sometimes selling for as much as sixty cents. In fact, a traveller recently reported coming across several copies in Cochabamba, Colombia, where the natives were using them as frisbees.

XI

Despite initial indifference to it, the *Canadian Caper* album gradually grew into a success d'estime, if not a commercial one. The Duchess of Bedworthy added to Fingers' scrapbook rave reviews from the *Medicine Hat Band*, the *Minneapolis Bore*, the *Burbank Bang*, the *Tombstone Engraver*, the *Orange County Heil*, the *Schroon Lake Nooners*, and the *Yukon Yellow Icicle*. The *Icicle* found the album "mystifying, intimidating, incomprehensible, and therefore probably profound."

Fingers appreciated that, and several photos of him taken at the time -- a dashing figure -- would seem to indicate that he was happy. But his emotional state was not that simple. He was suffering from an acute attack of the divine discontent that is never far below the surface in the true artist. It was at this time that he decided to organize the Fingers Wombat

Ghost Band.

The band's first (and last) album for Honest Records, *Ghost of a Chance*, a collectors' item within a week of its release, contained, in addition to the title tune, *Ghost Writers in Disguise*, *Haunted Heart*, *Danse Macabre*, *I See Your Face Before Me*, Fingers' haunting arrangement of *A Night on Bald Mountain*, *Spirit Feel*, *If You Could See Me Now* and *I've Got My Mojo Working*.

The band, which was highly experimental, contained Peatrice Eardrum on lead trumpet, Slide Rule on first trombone, Slip Horner on jazz trombone, and on lead alto, Pearl Keyes, of whom many enthusiastic critics had said, "She plays good for a chick."

Why Fingers elected to organize a ghost band before he was even dead remained a mystery until recently, when Pat Bottoms, jazz columnist for *Modern Tobogganist*, caught up with him while he was skating at Cstaad and did an in-depth interview about the state of the art at that time.

"It's hard to say," Fingers said. "All I can do is give some input to your overview. Like, I was having trouble interfacing with my record label, communication-wise. The company was kind of profit oriented, money-wise. And I don't have to tell you, that can be a drag. But I was younger then, like, you can dig it, and naive, business-wise. At that point in time, I wanted to give it my best shot and build a viable band, if you know where I'm coming from. The bottom line is that I was into the public. I had been suffering from terminal boredom, and I decided to really go for it, organize a world-class band that people could arguably identify with and relate to. That was the main thrust, momentarily, of what I was doing; if you know, hopefully, what I'm saying. That's where my head was at, head-wise."

Fingers, in a laid-back mood, laid back, sipping a Pernod. "In some ways, like," he said, "I guess it was a happy period. I wasn't feeling up-tight or anything, because I was having a meaningful relationship. It ended sadly, though." He declined to elaborate, but he was probably referring to the French danseuse Tutu Divine, for whom he was composing a ballet at the time. That she was the partner in this meaningful relationship cannot be confirmed because Mlle Divine, while posing for some publicity stills, did a jete' off the observation platform of the Empire State Building.

She never reached the ground, thereby arousing the interest of the Fortean Society. Erik von Daniken says she has been seen dancing on the waves in the Bermuda Triangle, usually in *Les Sylphides*.

"Yeah," Fingers said pensively, "it really impacted on me. It was a real bummer."

XII

After the commercial failure of his ghost band, Fingers began to wonder if he might be in the wrong business. Honest Records let his contract lapse and Walter Wohlkarpitz sent him a final royalty statement indicating that he was in debt to the company for \$11,692,431.09, of which more than seven million was for photography and liner notes. The Duchess of Bedworthy, looking elsewhere for amusement, became the

manager of a troupe of midget acrobats from Nepal. Sensing her coldness, Fingers asked if she would send him his scrapbooks, his record of happier days, but the Duchess said she had accidentally thrown them out with a pile of old *Down Beats*. Park Benchley and Piggy Friggentime no longer invited him to their parties, and Benchley had his unlisted phone number changed. The Hemisemidemiwaiver became successively a strip joint, a macrobiotic restaurant, a discotheque, a massage parlor, and a Nepalese restaurant staffed by a troupe of unemployed midget acrobats.

It was the darkest time of Fingers' life. Twice he overdosed on ZZZs, obtained from a connection in Toronto, staying stoned for two days the first time, three the second. Isabel Ringin returned the lead sheets he sent her. Amanda Reckonwith didn't bother to do that. Even the members of his old rhythm section, Simi Lowe and Willie Rushmore, who had given up their dun to go into the fingles business and had purchased Darien, Connecticut, were barely polite to him when they encountered him on Seventh Avenue, looking for a gig.

It was at this point that Fingers heard about Woody Herman's remark that the best preparation for the music business was a law degree. He got a job as a cab driver and enrolled at Cheatham Law School. Although he pursued his studies ardently, his love of music would not leave him. He wrote a song consisting of a rising and then descending C major scale, which he called *All of a Sudden My Heart Sinks*. Fascinated by the principle which he had discovered, he wrote similar songs in all the major and minor keys, utilizing the same rising and falling pattern. He continued his exploration of the principle and wrote similar songs in all the modes and in the whole-tone, diminished, chromatic, and pentatonic scales. He copyrighted this massive song cycle under the title *The Ill-Tempered Clavichord*. "He has it covered," as Pandit Mersey-Leslie -- his only remaining friend during this difficult period -- put it.

Fingers was graduated in only two years at the head of his law class. He was quickly admitted to the New York State bar and hung out his shingle. He missed music, of course, and spent his Sundays improvising in his trisdaidekaphonic system, relishing the rich colors of his flatted fourths and octaves. His law practice flourished and he moved to Park Avenue and East 64th Street. Gradually his old life faded into memory.

One afternoon, however, lacking anything better to do, he decided to re-read his contract with Honest Records. For the first time he was able to understand it. "Like, wow, man, I've been screwed," he said to himself. He filed a malpractice suit against his former attorneys, Schmartz and Scheister. He won his case and was awarded two million dollars. Schmartz and Scheister were disbarred in New York State and moved to California, a national wildlife preserve for crooked lawyers and judges. Fingers then sued his former business manager, Sawyer Cockoff, for mismanagement of funds. Cockoff settled out of court for a sum that has never been disclosed, though he was seen some months later selling Blackwing pencils in front of the Brill Building.

But Fingers' great legal masterstroke was yet to come.

Driving home one night to his estate in Old Lime, he noticed that after the radio station to which he was listening went off the air, it emitted only silence, marred of course by a little surface noise.

Fingers had always recognized that silence is a major component of music, and the more he listened to the silence being broadcast by the station, the more it resembled his Eighth Octet, Opus 888. This octet is notoriously difficult to play, containing as it does such details as double stops on oboe. So many notes had been marked *tacet* that the recording consists of twenty-three minutes of silence. The album had not sold well, in spite of a review in which Pandit Mersey-Leslie had called it "restful," but Fingers remained fond of it.

Fingers stayed up that night, making notes on all the radio and television stations that played his octet during the early morning hours. He realized that he had a massive hit on his hands and neither BMI nor ASCAP nor for that matter SESAC had bothered to log it.

He began preparing a suit against the broadcasting industry -- and the recording industry as well, since they were playing segments of his octet in the grooves between the tunes on LPs. Meantime, for recreation, he worked on another magnum opus, his *Twelve-Tone Tunes We All Love to Sing*. (He felt that his triskaidokaphonic system was too difficult for most singers.)

The broadcasting and record industry lawyers laughed when Fingers sat down to play hard-ball with them, but stopped when Federal Court Judge Fairleigh Honest ruled in Fingers' favor on grounds of recognizable resemblance, which is the criterion in music plagiarism cases. Going into panic, networks and radio stations began broadcasting music all night, but Fingers filed a second suit and proved that he had been granted copyright on all the scales and modes and any portions thereof.

Pandemonium reigned in the Brill Building and, when Fingers put liens on all the music publishers, it began raining royalty thieves in New York. Music business executives were O.D'ing in men's rooms all over Nashville, Los Angeles, and Mussel Shoals. "Wombat Owns Music!" *Trash Box* headlined.

The suits and countersuits dragged through the courts for years. On May 12, 1985, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled for Fingers. The damages amounted to more than ten trillion dollars, which the industry was unable to pay. The nine corporations that controlled virtually all communications in the United States came into Fingers' ownership. Legal experts predicted that he would win pending cases in England, France, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Andora, Lichtenstein, and Micronesia. Fingers Wombat owned all the tones and all the silence on earth.

Fingers was as generous in victory as he had always been forgiving in defeat. He allowed Walter Wohlkarpitz to stay on at Honest Records as his general assistant. Shaken by this magnanimity, Wohlkarpitz underwent a conversion and became a champion of ethical behavior and the rights of the artist, almost to the point of being boring. Fingers announced that

he was donating all the scales and chords to musicians everywhere, to be used by them in perpetuity without paying royalties to him. He forbade royalty theft by his record companies and publishing houses, and set Wohlkarpitz to police the industry, on the grounds that no one in the world knew better how these larcenies were committed.

He required that his far-flung broadcasting empire pay royalties to performers, and he increased the airplay royalties to composers and lyricists. He required BMI and ASCAP to do full and accurate loggings and, since he owned the publishing industry, he had the clout to see that it was done. He raised the mechanical royalty to ten cents a track. Following the French practice, he gave composers and lyricists two-thirds interest in their own songs, rather than the fifty percent previously paid by American publishers. He commanded that all record contracts be structured like those of Brazil -- studio and production costs to be borne not by the artist but the record company, royalties to begin with the first record sold.

He prohibited the graphic portrayal of violence on television, one result of which was an eighteen percent decline in public violence. He forbade the recording of bad music and illiterate lyrics, which produced an immediate and startling rise in the literacy of school children. Accused of censorship, he replied that a measure of censorship was implicit in any selection process and that whereas the broadcasting and record industries had for years systematically censored out the good, he was merely censoring it back in.

Fingers endowed schools all over the world with scholarships and band instruments. Children were trained in sight singing at the age of six, and so it was never again possible to con or deceive the young about music. And the stimulus of dealing in abstractions raised the general level of intelligence by twelve points and brought about improved performance in all forms of logical thought. The music of the world was changed. Hatred waned, beauty reigned, and serenity followed in its wake.

Fingers was awarded an honorary high school degree in his home town. When he returned to Wisconsin, the Skye High Marching and Drinking Band performed a concert of his classics, including *Wombat Rumble* and *Tiber Rag*. Fingers thought the performances left something to be desired, but smiled in gentle tolerance, and he was touched by the tribute.

He encountered many friends from his childhood, including Patience Hopefully, with whom he had attended kindergarten. She was now the Skye librarian. Fingers was amazed to learn that she had through all these years kept a scrapbook of his achievements, and so his clippings were not lost after all.

He postponed his departure for a week, and then another week, and Patience finally admitted that she had always loved him from a distance. And so they were married and went to live in a house in a far-off forest, by a lake with swans.

And we all lived happily ever after.