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A Small Tribute

A friend remarked recently, "I went to hear Jackie and Roy last week." Pause. "I'm afraid she's starting to show her age." Another pause. "She looks forty." And he laughed.

He laughed because, largely unnoticed in the music business, a milestone of a sort passed last year. Jackie Cain turned sixty. Jackie of the long blond hair and that voice of purest innocence turned sixty. Can you believe that? The jazz lover's heart-throb. The thinking man's dream girl. Ah, Jackie, how can you do that to me? I'm supposed to get older, you're not.

Jackie was born in Milwaukee in 1928. A few years ago, between sets in a club, she mentioned her age rather casually. I looked at her with slightly raised eyebrows; ladies do not usually blurt out confession of their years, especially those in the show-biz spotlight.

Seeing my surprise, she laughed a little and said, "Well there's no use trying to hide it! It's in Leonard's book." She was referring to Leonard's Feather's *Encyclopedia of Jazz.*

I think a lot of guys, particularly musicians, would have tried to get next to Jackie had it not been that they like Roy Kral so much, and, sigh! there he stands, right in the way. Handsome dude, too. He has no right to be looking -- and singing -- as young as he does, either. They've been married forty years!

Their joint career began four decades ago in Chicago in a place called Jumptown. Chicago is Roy's home town. He was born there in 1921. Newspaper interviewers refer to them from time to time as the Dorian Grays of music, though the analogy is inappropriate. Whereas Dorian Gray was a man of indulgent evil, they have a quality of pervading decency about them. And I think that is one of the reasons there is in their movements and in their faces and in their music itself something eternally youthful.

One of the bromides of TV talk shows is the phrase "we've been friends longer than I care to remember." Well I care to remember. Mr. and Mrs. Kral have been my friends for thirty years. I have been a fan of theirs longer than that -- all the way back to their record of *Lullaby in Rhythm* with Charlie Ventura's "Bop for the People" little band, which I loved.

The Krals, all of them, including Roy's late sister Irene, a dear and much-missed friend, had an enormous influence on me, which is why I can tell you something about the way Jackie sings. At the start of the 1960s, when I was writing my first songs and occasionally performing them, I had conversations about voice with Jackie, Roy, and Irene. Irene sent me to a Chicago voice teacher with whom she and Jackie had studied. Don Maya was a little sturdy barrel-chested man of Mexican Indian ancestry and an operatic background who knew a very great deal about the voice. I learned a lot from Don Maya. But I also learned a lot from just listening to Irene and Jackie.

For one thing, I learned something about simplicity. Most of what are called jazz singers demonstrate their skills by playing around with the melody, playing with the changes -- if their ears are good enough to do that. But this can destroy the meaning of a song. In a well-crafted song, the contours of the melody imply the natural speech inflections of the words. More precisely (since the melody is usually written first) the skilled lyricist feels speech inflections in the melody and finds words appropriate to its intervals. They *match*. They're meant to. Consider *I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face*. You cannot fool with the melody -- one two three five five five five two -- of that opening phrase. It has a sound of a sigh, the fall back to the second gives it a tentative, surprised, puzzled quality, and to alter it for the sake of showing how hip you are simply destroys its meaning. The next phrase, too, "she almost makes the day begin," which echoes the first phrase but comes to rest on the third, is absolutely perfect for the natural lay of speech. You just can't do anything with it but *sing* it.

Jackie doesn't dismantle songs, doesn't generally sing "hip," except in those beautifully polished wordless duets she and Roy do, in which case the voice is being used to instrumental purpose. She *can*, and in appropriate moments will, do it, but always briefly and with restraint. For the most part, when she sings words, she sings melody. Straight into it. She simply sculpts the shape of the line, shading it with dynamics and the use of vibrato. There is something that sounds almost naive about her devotion to the tune-as-written. There is nothing at all naive about it. I remember Donald Byrd saying to me, a good twenty-five years ago, "I've come to the conclusion after all my years in this business that the hardest thing to do is to play straight melody and give it feeling." Interesting point.

I am captivated by the purity of her tone. It is a beautifully centered sound. I have never been able to grasp the image of pear-shaped tone. But I do know that Jackie's tone is exquisitely round, like a perfect letter o. You can hear how open her throat is.

Finally, there is her intonation. Not many singers have it. I can name a handful who do, starting with Bonnie Herman. I'm not talking about good intonation. Carmen McRae tends to sharp, but it's all right, and I love her. I'm talking about perfect intonation. I'm talking about absolute center-of-the-pitch pin-point intonation. No hesitation, no feeling for it, no sneaking up on it. Bang. Right into the center of the tone from the opening edge of the note. That kind of intonation. And Jackie has it. She'll make your ears pop.

Let us not overlook Roy as singer. Because he is so skilled a player, and among pianists one of the most beautiful vocal accompanists anywhere, and because his most important work is done inside the group, it is too easy to ignore that he is also an excellent vocalist. You'd have to be to sing on the same bandstand with that lady. Otherwise the attributes I have mentioned would show you up something awful.

Because they are such captivating performers, we too easily overlook that Roy is an exceptional arranger. They have a new album on Fantasy called *Full Circle* whose personnel includes Bill Watrous, Conte Candoli, Bill Perkins, Bob Cooper, Monty Budwig, and Jeff Hamilton, and Roy on piano. So good is Roy's writing that before I listened hard and looked and realized I was hearing a septet on certain of the tracks, I

had an impression at times that I was hearing a big band.

One of the things that keeps Jackie and Roy so young is that they have never lost their enthusiasm for the songs they sing. They are always coming up with fresh insights into familiar material or bringing unfamiliar or overlooked material to our attention. Their repertoire is constantly expanding.

But the whole with Jackie and Roy has always been more than the sum of the parts.

I'm not entirely sure why this is, although I think I know. I think it's love: love for each other, love for their fellow man, and love for music. It's a remarkably gentle quality, and it gives their work a sunniness that is utterly distinctive. I think the world of them. They are beautiful to look at and beautiful to be with and beautiful to listen to because they are beautiful inside. Ask anybody who knows them.

On May 22, Jackie turned sixty-one. Time will take its toll. I suppose this year she'll look forty-one. And sound seventeen.

Spike's Life

Boulder, Colorado

In Toronto, Barry Little, dark of hair and slight of build, sits down in a good restaurant for dinner. He lacks his usual optimism. He admits that this is one of the days when his work gets him down. He is a neurologist. This afternoon, he says, it has been his duty to tell a handsome young man with intelligence and ability and everything to live for that he isn't going to. Barry would just as soon be out somewhere playing jazz piano or at home writing string quartets. He does the former on weekends, the latter in the evenings. Sometimes he paints. His father ran a burlesque theater in the 1930s. His mother lived in fear of bad box office receipts. What else does a good Jewish mother want her son to be? So you set aside your ambitions as a jazz musician and became a physician, one of the best in your field. But the lure of music never wanes.

Elsewhere in Toronto, big amiable Doug Hamilton sweats out a night, not knowing whether one of his patients is going to make it. Doug is a surgeon. You know he would far rather be in a joint somewhere, playing his trombone, which he does superbly, or writing charts for his next album. He has made several as leader of the group he calls the Brass Connection.

Out in Seattle, Washington, Terry Rogers MD works with his patients. Handsome, an ardent skier in his late forties, Terry is a chest specialist. He loves his work, but he waits for weekends when he can play his soprano saxophone in a trad kicks band called the Ain't No Heaven Seven, which includes neurosurgeon John Gibson on cornet, cardiologist Ward Kennedy on trombone, gastroenterologist Dave Gilbert on piano, surgeon Karl May on banjo, and cardiologist John Mazzarella on drums. The only ringer is Al Runstad on tuba. He's a marine engineer.

Down the coast in San Francisco, attorney Bob Murphy told his law partners that henceforth he would be working only part time: the rest of his day would be devoted to practicing his soprano saxophone and playing in a group called the Natural Gas. A couple of hundred miles or so south, in Santa Barbara, attorney and former district attorney George Eskin is an admired singer and actor, much in demand for local theater. Still farther down the coast, in Santa Monica, family physician Ralph Gold plays bass in a group that includes Stephen Berens, considered one of the finest cardiologists in Los Angeles County. For a time Ralph played in the Doctor's Symphony, an orchestra made up entirely of medical men. New York periodontist Ronald Odrich is a fine clarinetist.

Nationwide, there is an organization of physicians who write poetry. And the Grumbacher company, maker of oil and acrylic paints and fine brushes, would go out of business if it depended for its income on professional painters: far the larger part of its clientele consists of the Sunday daubers whose work ranges from lurid stags-at-eve and polychrome sea scenes all the way up to the superb landscapes of an octogenarian Santa Paul, California, banker named Douglas Shively, which are beginning to command high prices in galleries.

Medicine is one of the more fascinating professions, to be sure, and the doctors who dabble, whether passionately or casually, in the arts are as serious about their work as they are about their avocations. Or at least, one hopes they are. Not everyone is as fortunate as they. In *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, James Thurber gave a name forever to men who live boring lives sustained by fantasies of high adventure. The mass of men (not to mention women) do indeed pursue lives of quiet desperation, as Thoreau observed. And Thoreau escaped it to Walden Pond only with the help of a mother who brought him lunch. There is no way of knowing how many people in America and the world pursue numbing careers to meet material needs and the obligations of family while nursing private passions, like the adherents of arcane religions -- all the secret poets, lyricists, painters, sculptors, composers, violinists, actors, who live out the week locked in work they loathe, consoled by the anticipation of escape into some beloved art, amateurs in the true and original sense of the French word, those who do it for pure love of the work. The classic example was Charles Ives, who spent his life as an insurance executive while composing complex and uncompromising music that anticipated much of what was to come in Twentieth Century Music.

Occasionally the siren song of the muse grows too strong and someone throws caution and convention to the winds to follow it. The classic case is that of the French-Peruvian Paul Gauguin, who at seventeen became a seaman and for six years sailed around the world, and for the next fourteen years was a Paris stockbroker, painting on weekends with Camille Pissaro and Paul Cezanne. Finally, in 1883, he quit his job, which cost him his marriage and earned him the enmity of his son, and became one of history's great painters. Nine years his junior, the Polish-born Joseph Conrad also became a seaman in the French merchant service, sailing out of Marseilles. He cherished dreams of being a novelist, and finally, with the

publication of *Almayer's Folly* in 1895, when he was thirty-seven, became one of the greatest in the English language. And a few years before Conrad wrote his first novel in his cabin on a ship, a Russian naval officer was writing his first symphony in the cabin of his. Nikolai Rimski-Korsakov resigned his commission with the first performance of his opera *The Maid of Pskov*. Albert Roussel was an officer in the French navy before he resigned to study composition.

Those who find in themselves whatever it requires to take the plunge -- desperation, perhaps -- are rare; and those who do usually do it early. Roussel did it at twenty-five. Somerset Maugham, an obstetrician, saw his first novel published when he was twenty-three.

One can only wonder how many men spend their lives, say, at the drafting tables of engineering offices, dreaming dreams of one day chucking it all and getting the old tenor saxophone out of its case and heading off into a wild blue uncertainty to groove with a good rhythm section and blow some jazz. People like Henry Bertholf Robinson of Boulder, Colorado.

Who? Well you may ask.

Like Spike Robinson.

Who? Well you may still ask.

The late Zoot Sims had never heard of him either. Zoot had just played a set at one of the jazz parties that have sprung up all over the United States in recent years. He was leaving the room when Spike Robinson began a solo on an old silver tenor. Zoot stopped and listened, and listened, and stayed to listen some more, occasionally shaking his head. Everyone hearing Spike Robinson for the first time does that. And it would be all right if he were fresh out of North Texas State University or the Eastman School or one of those many well-oiled machines that turn out innumerable skilled jazz musicians the economy is never going to be able to absorb. But Spike Robinson will turn sixty next January 16, and startled jazz fans all over the place are just making his acquaintance. He is better known in Europe than in America, but that is changing rapidly, due to a series of albums made in the last few years, both before and after he took his retirement from the Honeywell Corporation, ending a thirty-year career in engineering.

That a tenor player of Robinson's stature could have languished unknown in Detroit, Minneapolis, Cape Canaveral, Denver, and Boulder, all the cities to which his main career took him, is amazing. To be sure, there were murmurs, rumors, almost a legend, disseminated by those who passed through these places and heard him on his weekend gigs or sit-in sessions, as there were about the pianist Peck Kelly of Texas and John Park of Missouri.

Robinson is of the Lester Young school from which came Zoot Sims, Stan Getz, Al Cohn, and Brew Moore -- all players to whom he has been compared. And there are elements of their work in Spike, a highly lyrical player of the mainstream bebop persuasion. Perhaps he is closest to Zoot because of certain figures and turns of phrase he likes and the sunny and throw-away melodicism of his lines. Like so many jazz musicians, he plays much as he talks, and his speech is full of humorous contours and inflections. (Of a bass-player friend who fell down a flight of stairs: "We put him in the hospital. I put his bass in my glove compartment.") His almost indolent eloquence is characterized by surprising asides and codettas. People around him are always laughing, and one suspects, as one does of all continuously funny people, that Spike's endless jesting is a sublimation of pain. His humor tends to the whimsical, and is devoid of malice. The tone of his voice, like that of his playing, is at once airy and woody, and he is prone to a soft articulation in ballads, the notes beginning with an f-f- f- sound, like those of Ben Webster. Leonard Feather said, "He is beyond question one of a handful of giants of the tenor saxophone."

He stands six feet tall, weighs a hundred and sixty pounds, and has wavy gray hair and an indecisive gray mustache. He resembles the bebopper of legend in his casual, round-shouldered, S-shaped posture, but other than that, he looks more like, well, an engineer than a jazz musician. He dresses conventionally and well, even a little elegantly.

His little studio apartment, however, is a mess. Both were described by Colorado journalist Matthew Soergel in a Sunday supplement article:

"Spike Robinson welcomes a visitor . . . and offers a can of cold Budweiser.

"'Do you want a glass?' he asks, then looks absently toward his combined stove, sink, and refrigerator. 'I'm not sure I have one.'

"Robinson does not stand on formality, though for this visit he has taken the TV off the open oven door (it's placed there so he can watch it in bed) and removed his electric piano from over the sink . . .

"Receipts from recent trips to Europe are scattered over the brown wall-to-wall carpeting. ('There's my spring trip there,' he says, pointing to a heap of papers, 'and this one is my fall trip.'), as are letters and memos to himself. More memos, postcards and newspaper clippings are taped to each wall. His only furniture is a waterbed, a chair, two stools and a couch.

"Robinson wants to be able to move in an hour, to chuck everything in the trash if one day he decides to move to San Diego or somewhere in Europe.

"His needs are simple. You can see that in the car he drives. It's a 1976 Datsun 280Z, rusted out and beaten up, mostly green in color. It has 440,000 miles on it and has rarely been touched by a wrench, except maybe to change the sparkplugs every 150,000 miles or so.

"It's a marvelous car, Spike says, though he makes sure he never parks it too close to a dumpster. Then he laughs one of his smoky laughs. It's infectious.

"Friends have told him to write a testimonial to Nissan about the 280Z. Maybe the company will give him a new car. He doesn't need a new car."

It might be added that you can always tell when Spike is about to arrive: you can hear the Datsun's brakes. And the trunk lid isn't green, it's black, obviously a replacement. You have never seen such a car. It's like the wonderful one-horse shay. One day it is going to collapse, leaving Spike sitting on

the pavement with a steering wheel in his hands in a puddle of junk in the middle of a street.

His silver tenor was manufactured in 1900. He bought it when he was an impecunious engineering student. He kept bandaids, rubber bands, and sealing wax in its case for emergency repairs, but in recent years he has dispensed with the sealing wax, having, he says, noticed that most nightclubs have candles on the tables. This is wry hyperbole. He's long since had the horn put into good working order.

Spike Robinson is the divorced father of two and the grandfather of three. He has in recent years maintained a close relationship with the delicately attractive white-haired Texas-born Boulderite Betty Weems, a descendant of Parson Weems. She takes care of much of his business. They will no doubt never marry. He wants his freedom. So does she. At fifty-four, she followed her own Walter Mitty dream: she enrolled at Rice University in Houston, took a master's degree, and is now an architect.

Robinson was born January 15, 1930, in Kenosha, Wisconsin. His father, a fight fan, wrote a note saying, "Jack Dempsey the second was born tonight." Hence the tough nickname. But his father was also a jazz fan who took him to hear Count Basie when Spike was eight. Instead of boxing gloves, Spike acquired a clarinet, practiced six hours a day, played along with Benny Goodman records and, later, on alto, with those of Charlie Parker. In high school he organized a big band, mostly of musicians ten years his senior, and, exhausted by playing, almost flunked out of school. On graduating he went to Chicago and played in various bands, always scuffling for money:

"Trying," he said, "to get enough money to buy a candy bar and go to the all-night movie theater. The usher would wake you up with a tap on the head with his flashlight. I saw *The Song of Bernadette* eighty-two times, and I didn't like it the first time."

Spike joined the navy on learning there was a posting for musicians in London. British writer Brian Davis takes up the story: "It is London in 1948. Almost opposite the Windmill theater behind Piccadilly Circus is a narrow entrance and passage to the Copacabana Club, but just to the left of the club's door, down a steep flight of wooden stairs, is a basement, bare-floored with light bulbs to match and a small stand with a just-about-upright piano. On certain nights an upturned box at the top (or was it the bottom?) of the stairs acts as a cash desk; you pay your 3/6d and enter the gloom. Along the front are a few rows of hard chairs and those two ancient and incongruous horse-hair sofas along the left of the stand. Down here, if you are fairly uncritical, don't expect too much subtlety or concessions to the squeamish, you are in for a session of never-to-be-forgotten excitement! Bebop in the raw, as 'it is spoke' by Britain's young bloods -- this is Club Eleven, London's first modern jazz club; ten musicians and a manager/-cashier/compere. Of course, if they were 'with it' there were sitters-in and one such who became a regular was a thin, cropped-haired guy who seemed to come from nowhere, said little, but played the most fantastic Bird-like music on an old silver alto. We now know he was a U.S. seaman based in London but required by the navy to play anywhere in Europe. Union rules extant necessitated his low profile while jamming with the London beboppers and, in fact, things ended rather suddenly when posters proclaimed that guest soloist Spike Robinson would appear at a Ted Heath Sunday Palladium concert! He shortly returned to the U.S.A., leaving a legacy of six Esquire 78s of his music. This was the last anyone knew of the legendary Spike Robinson -- that is, until thirty years on!"

The pianist on the those 78s was a seventeen-year-old Victor Feldman.

When Spike Robinson got back to the United States, he made a career decision. As much as he loved it, he turned away from music. He wanted to marry and couldn't see himself pursuing an unstable profession. He chose to become, of all things, an engineer.

"I didn't want to go scratching around in New York or someplace," Spike said. "I saw the same thing I'd seen before I left, and even worse. Very meager money. And around that time, a lot of the good players were on hard stuff. Guys I had worked with in Chicago. I thought, 'Naw, I really don't want to get into this bag. That isn't the way I want to spend my life, trying to make enough in the kitty in some juke joint in Chicago to stay in the all-night theater. So that is why I got out of it as a main profession.

"I chose engineering because my father told me that during the Depression, there were two kinds of people who always seemed able to work, piano players in bars, who got free lunch and free booze and picked up enough cash to get by, and engineers. He said that even in the darkest days of the Depression, there were signs out in front of most manufacturing firms saying, Wanted: engineers. When he first started telling me that, I thought an engineer was the guy who ran the train. By the time I came back in '52, I knew pretty well what engineers did and what they made. Engineering was one of the most desirable things to get into.

"I'd gotten high on racing while I was in England -- cars, motorcycles. I'd sold my alto to buy a road-racing motorcycle, and used navy horns. I had this marvelous Conn alto, an old silver beast that was lovely, and I tried to get the navy to surplus it. Somehow it couldn't be done.

"Some of the records I'd done in England in '51 got picked up by MGM and released here, and they were getting some play in New York. I got a letter from Leonard Feather, who then had a column with *Down Beat*, and each month highlighted somebody you had never heard of before. He wanted to know what I was doing. He wanted an action photo. I thought, 'All the years I've spent in music, waiting for The Break, and now it comes, and here I am in my second year of engineering school.' I wrote him back, saying, 'Gee, I certainly appreciate your interest, but I am no longer in music as a full-time activity.' So often it doesn't come at the right time.

"I began to get calls for jobs, but I didn't own a horn. I thought it would be nice to make that extra loot. I borrowed

a guy's horn a couple of times, but I thought I'd been going to the well too often. I thought I'd better buy a horn. Playing again sure beat the hell out of hot-roofing. So I went down to the music store here, but they didn't have an alto. They only had one horn, an old silver tenor, made in 1900, hanging on the wall. So I bought it. I paid eighty bucks for it. I went to the bank and got a loan. I paid for it in ten months, eight bucks a month. It was a good investment. It's paid for itself a couple of times over. I'm still using it."

One of Spike's friends at the University of Colorado (invariably referred to by Spike and its students and alumni as CU) was a music student four years his junior named Dave Grusin, native of Denver. Grusin is one of the few people who is unsurprised by the acclaim being accorded Spike now. "He was just the same then as he is now," Dave said, "and he played the same way --beautifully -- although of course he's better now. We used to play weekend gigs together, and we had some wonderful times. One of Spike's jobs was collecting garbage. He found an old baritone under a building in the veteran's housing, and gave it to me. I don't know what ever happened to it. I left it somewhere in New Jersey."

"I gave it to him," Spike said, "because Dave played clarinet in those days. But piano was his main instrument." With a chuckle: "If he'd gone on playing the clarinet, he wouldn't have the Academy Award." Grusin had just won the Oscar for his score to *The Milagro Beanfield War.*

Spike continued his *curriculum vitae*:

"Because of my interest in racing, I thought maybe I ought to point my studies as specifically as I could to the automotive industry, and maybe I could hook up with Ferrari or Alfa Romeo or somebody, and really have some fun. That didn't work out, but after I left CU in '56 with a bachelor's degree, I was offered a job with Chrysler Corporation, which included continuing for a master's degree at the Chrysler Institute of Engineering in Detroit. I worked half time at a good salary -- unheard of at that time, to me; I could now afford a six-pack -- and studied half time. I don't know why they chose me, because everyone else there had been a straight A student, and I'd been about a C student. When I was interviewed, I told them I'd been doing hot-roofing during the day, pumping gas at a gas station all night, selling insurance door-to-door on weekends, and playing gigs, which was probably why my grades were considerably lower than they should have been. I guess they bought that, because they took me on.

"I really didn't like Detroit that much. Coming from Wisconsin, I loved the lake area. I loved to be around water. And when I came out here to CU, there was nothing in terms of water. No river, no lakes near-by. Boulder was considerably different then -- about 11,000 permanent residents and about 7,500 students. Now the town is maybe 140,00 and the student body is about 22,000. There were always articles in the paper describing Boulder as gravel roads and barking dogsdogs. And that's about what it was. After I graduated, I was anxious to get back to water, and that was another reason we moved to Detroit.

"One day we drove out to Cass Lake, which was supposed to be very pretty. It was probably about twenty miles away, and I think it took us something like three hours to get there in the traffic. When we got there they'd closed it because they had too many people, and it took us about three hours to get home. I never went near water again in Detroit in the three years we were there.

"I got my master's at Chrysler and came back out here on vacation in '58. The outlook for engineers in this county was not good. Because of the desirability of living here, they kept wages considerably below national average -- except for aerospace. They had to pay because they had to hire certain talents. I hooked up with Martin Marietta. I went back to Detroit, and thirty days later we came back here. I was a principal engineer in ground support equipment. I did a lot of co-ordination with their sub-contractors, one company for silo design, another for propellant system design. I traveled a lot, going back and forth to Los Angeles for meetings, meetings, meetings. I'd try to co-ordinate what the customer, the Air Force, wanted, with what our designers wanted to do, so you wouldn't be putting the toilet where there was already a sink.

"In the early phases of Apollo, they were launching Polaris missiles off barges at Cape Canaveral, simulating submarine launchings. The missiles then weren't very reliable. They would go up in the air and write Phillips 66 or Eat at Hank's or something, and then go out of control, and the destruct officer would blow 'em up and they'd come down in pieces. They'd tumble down in bits that would land in the trailer courts and on the block houses and everywhere else.

"Between all these missile launch block houses, there were great spaces, each one about the size of a football field, filled with heavy, heavy, heavy typically Florida underbrush, surrounded by chain-link fences, so you couldn't get in there, and you'd have been crazy to try. Everybody knew what was in there. One of the missiles came down in flames in the space right next to the block house where we were working. It scared the hell out of the inhabitants, and they came pouring out, crawling through the fence. I never saw so many snakes in so many sizes, assortments, and colors. Some of them couldn't even get through the fence, they were so big. We were standing on the tops of cars on the asphalt driveway, and the security people were shooting the snakes with forty-fives.

"Another morning as we were all arriving for work, there was a big alligator, about fourteen feet long, lying by the door to the block house, sunning himself, sound asleep. There was no other entrance, so one of the guys went and got a big long two-by-four. He jabbed the alligator in the ribs to wake him up and tell him it was time to get the hell out of here. Without even opening his eyes, the alligator moved his tail. You never saw anything so fast. It came around, and you could have picked your teeth with what was left of that two-by-four. We all said, 'Hey, let's go to the bar and get something to drink. Leave that mother alone.'

"I was offered a permanent job at Canaveral, but I told them, 'First we have to discuss my salary. Then we have to discuss my alimony, because my wife just isn't going to live

"The ballistic missile research and development phase was almost over for Martin Marietta by 1963 and my job became mostly a matter of paper-pushing, and that bored me to death. And I kept going by this restaurant and bar south of Boulder that I visited now and then for years. It had a beautiful view. And I thought, Oh boy, wouldn't it be wonderful to have your own place and not have a manager telling you what to play and when to play. Wouldn't it be lovely to do that full-time. During the day you could practice and just have a ball and make all kinds of money. And so with a couple of other guys I leased this place three or four months before I left Martin. We were very undercapitalized. I thought, My God, ten thousand dollars, that's enough to get a restaurant going forever and a day. I didn't know what I was doing.

"And I never worked so hard in my life. I was there twenty-two hours a day. I had to call and see if my wife could send me pictures of the kids. I didn't have the money to hire someone to manage it during those times I didn't want to be there. And I swore that Boulder was ready for seven nights a week of jazz. So five nights I had an excellent pianist out of Denver named Billy Sloan, who's no longer playing, and Paul Warburton on bass. I usually played drums, once I had everything under control. I'd played drums a bit in the navy. I was the only one in the group who'd ever got near a set of drums, so I played drums. It started out like wildfire. On weekends we had Johnny Smith on guitar. Sometimes he'd fly his plane up from Colorado Springs.

"Bullets Smith. Johnny was in those days a great hanger-outer. We'd sit at the bar and have brandies and swap music stories, and later we'd wander down to an all-night restaurant where we could get steaks.

"I had a really good bartender, a great guy, an Italian with a short temper. One of the customers started bugging him. He was also bugging the other customers, so I told the bartender to cut him off. The guy got mouthy and Frank, the bartender, helped him out the front door. The guy took a swing at him, and Frank plowed him one, right in the nose. I didn't know this had all gone down. Johnny and I were sitting there at the bar having brandy and coffee. We closed the place. There was a knock at the front door. I walked down and Johnny walked with me. There was this drunk, and he had a few friends with him. He said, 'I want to talk to Spike.' I said, 'I'm Spike.' He said, 'Why don't you come on out here? I want to talk to you.' I said, 'I'm not coming out there.' The guy said, 'Your bartender hit me in the nose.' I said, 'No, I'm not coming out there. Come back tomorrow and I'll talk to you.' And I shut the door. Johnny said, 'Let's put the cash away and get the hell out of here, because I noticed one of those guys had a tire iron.' We were 'way out of town, with not very much sheriff's patrol. I said, 'Okay, you wait in your car while I put the cash away.' Johnny went out to his car and just sat, waiting for me.

"These guys were sitting in another car. They came over to Johnny and told him to get out, they had some dealings with me. A couple of them had coat hangers, and another had a tire iron. They were bloody well going to do me in. They were drunker than ten skunks. Johnny had a good friend, a guitar player in Philadelphia, who'd pulled up to a stoplight one night after a gig, and two guys jumped into his car and beat him to a pulp, and the guy died. Ever since then, Johnny had carried a gun in his guitar case.

"One of these guys came up to the window and said to Johnny, 'You get your ass out here.' Johnny put the revolver right on the guy's nose. They all took off. I came out and Johnny told me what had happened. By then I was so mad. We went to a restaurant in Boulder, and I was hoping those guys would come in. I was going to take a chair and break it over one of their heads.

"That story has gotten so much embellishment now that it's really out of control. Everybody calls Johnny 'Bullets'. I've heard that story all over Colorado, and it gets better with every telling.

"We packed the place on weekends. But Boulder was not ready. Boulder wasn't anything but a two-night town.

"I found out about my dreams of having your own place. I'd get to the bridge of a tune and somebody would be pulling my coat sleeve to tell me the women's john was overflowing. Next night I'd be at the bridge again and somebody would be telling me, You've got a hell of a fire going in the kitchen.

"This wasn't quite what I thought it was going to be. Because I was a small operation, I had to go into Denver to do all my own buying. I'd go to the meat packers and pick up stuff, then go for something for the bar, you'd have to go to eighteen different distributors, because I wasn't big enough for them to deliver to, or to hire someone to do it for me.

"You'd just be in fat city and you'd go down and buy forty lobster tails for the weekend, and you'd put them in the freezer, and come in the next morning and the freezer had quit at, like, ten o'clock the previous night, and you'd throw all the lobster out.

"We were on a well. There was a swimming club next door. People would go in there and leave the showers going and walk out. Come dinner time, you'd go to serve a customer a glass of water, and no water. You couldn't flush the john. We'd go down the road to get water in a tank from a friend, so we could get through until the water table filled up. It was a rough business, a real headache. I think everybody ought to do it. Everybody ought to run a restaurant for a year at least.

"At the end of a year, I let the lease go. I just wanted out. I had a hell of a lot of bills. If I'd had any brains, I'd have declared bankruptcy and told the bakery and everybody else to go to hell, but I didn't. It took me three years to pay off the debts. I went back into engineering, and told everybody, I owe you so much, and if you'll just cool it, you'll get it.

"I was in dire shape. I saw an ad for a project engineer in Denver. An outfit in Detroit had just bought a screw machine and punch press outfit in after-market products in the automotive field, replacement parts. They wanted someone with some automotive background, which I had from Chrysler.

"I was never a good engineer. I was a common-sense engineer. I probably used only five-tenths of a percent of everything I learned in my university training, but I was a

pretty good common-sense engineer. That's probably why I ended up more in production. I was happy as hell to get that job. I was there about a year and a half. And then they were having some trouble with their radiator and auto cooler business, which was a prime contractor to Chrysler. The worst plant was in Ohio. They were losing all kinds of money, and the customer was threatening to take their business elsewhere. Another guy and I went in there and cleaned it up in about two and a half years. Then I got bored. I found out that the owners were going to sell the company. They offered me a plant in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and another in Washington, Indiana, neither of which inspired me too much. They're probably lovely places.

"I had resumes out, and I heard from IBM and Honeywell. Honeywell interested me. The vice president of operations hired me and I moved to Minneapolis and became superintendent of production of one of their four groups. I stayed there about three and a half years, and I got bored there, too, I must admit. My sister, who was living in Colorado, died in 1970, and she had two kids about a year older each than my two kids. We thought we could be of some assistance, if we came back to Colorado. I started putting out resumes again, and talked to Honeywell about a transfer to the test instruments division, in South Littleton, which is about fifty miles from Boulder. Then my driving career started, a hundred miles a day, for sixteen years. Honeywell was very good to me.

"About 1980 or '81, I started to think it's damn near time to get out of this business, which doesn't interest me."

"You told me that about five percent of it was enjoyable," I interjected.

"That's not saying much for thirty years, is it?" Spike replied. "That may be a high number. Did I say five percent? More like point five. I may have inflated it. But it's somewhere between the two. I was just never cut out to be an engineer, I hated it from the time I got into it. I didn't like the field. I liked the money. Engineers are dull. I know a few interesting ones, and I guess there are dull doctors, dull plumbers, dull electricians. The worst time I ever had was evenings at Cape Canaveral. All there were there down at Cocoa Beach were engineers. All those motels were filled with engineers. You'd go into a bar and *everybody* was talking engineering. Missile men. Oh God! If there's a horrible way to spend an evening, it's listening to engineers talking about engineering. They didn't talk about anything else. It was as if nothing existed in the world except: When did the Vanguard go off, and how did that compare to the whatchamacallit?

"I used to sit in at a motel where they had Sunday jam sessions. And of course I'd take out the horn now and then to scare away the snakes. But I didn't do much playing, other than to try to keep the chops up a little bit. And I was too busy down there, working my buns off. Anyway, I found most engineers boring because I don't like to talk engineering. And I found it boring from the first day I walked into an engineering class. Maybe challenging, but still boring. As far as: Can I figure this out? type of thing. But not really interesting. I knew from the first day that I would never really be interested in engineering. But nothing else interested me, either. I didn't want to go into medicine, I didn't want to become a brain surgeon. It was the lesser of evils that still paid well. That's how I approached it."

"What happened to your marriage?" I asked.

"It ended," Spike said, chuckling at his own evasion.

"Why?" I said, knowing that no one ever really knows the answer to that question.

"Well," Spike said, "just because I'm an asshole." Then, pensively, "It ended in 1980." After a while he said, "Both my kids were stop-and-start about their education. I told my daughter in 1980, 'In 1985, when I reach fifty-five, the money's going to stop.' I knew I was going to take my retirement from Honeywell. She went back to school and got her business degree with straight A's. My son, who'd been working in a bank, went back to school, Colorado College, and aced through in economics, then came back here and got a master's in business at CU. So they were both fixed up.

"And now here comes '85, and I have no more financial responsibility that way. By 1980, I could see the direction I wanted to go. I got the idea to put out a record. I talked to Rich Matteson, the tuba player, and George Masso, the trombonist, both good friends of mine. George had done what I was thinking of doing. He was teaching at the University of Connecticut. His kids had grown up, and he said, 'Hey, I'd really like to get back to playing.' He got an apartment in New York, and started picking up some jingle activity and getting some gigs. Now he's traveling all the time. I worked with him a few months ago. George recommended that if I wanted to test the waters, I'd better get a record out. Rich Matteson said the same thing. And Rich said, 'Pick three people who are well known and will comprise a hell of a rhythm section. Your name's not going to sell. If you're going to get that album played on the air, it will be because of the other names on it.' So I called Victor Feldman, who was the last guy I'd recorded with. I'd kept in some contact with him.

"Victor said, 'Hey, you were going to call me after that other date. It's been thirty years.'

"I told Victor what I wanted to do, and he said, 'Let me get Ray Brown and Shelly Manne.'

"Then I began to have doubts. I was a little scared, really.

"Victor got hold of Ray, who was traveling with the L.A. Four. Then he tried Shelly. Every time Ray could be there, Shelly couldn't, and vice versa. Victor said, 'Why don't I get John Guerin?' whom I'd heard years before in a concert with Dave Grusin and Chuck Domanico. So we put that album together in a hurry to test the waters. It was released in '82, and it did what it was supposed to do. It got a lot of airplay, particularly on Voice of America. I started to hear from people all over, particularly in Europe, who never knew what happened to me after I left in '51.

"The first record in '82 got me a feel for what could happen. A young woman in Denver knew a fellow in Britain, a critic for *Jazz Journal International*, Brian Davis. I was sitting one

night in Denver listening to Art Pepper, right before he died. This young lady said she had written to this fellow in England who was going to send her some tapes of some things I had recorded over there. She gave me his name. He had written an article about the Club Eleven, where I had played. I sent Brian a copy of the record I had made with Victor Feldman and Ray Brown and John Guerin. We corresponded, and he said, 'How about coming over for a tour?' I said, I'd love to. I was sure I could get a leave of absence from Honeywell, two weeks and add my two weeks vacation time. Brian set up an '84 tour, and it was a smash. It was beautiful. I saw so many friends I hadn't seen in thirty-five years, musicians and otherwise.

"I took the proceeds of the tour, which I didn't really need because I was making a good salary, and put it into another record. Martin Taylor, the guitarist, and I had worked a trio thing with Tony Lee, the pianist, a couple of nights at Pizza on the Park. I was very impressed by Martin's playing. I'd also worked with Dave Green and Spike Wells. We went into the studio and did an album, just before I was to leave. I said, 'If we don't like it, we throw it away.'

"In '85, I had another tour lined up, and I told Honeywell that I needed two months leave of absence this year. And they said, 'Okay, we'll do it again. But the only way you're going to get it again is if you become pregnant.' And I tried. God, I tried. But I knew I was done. I'd already booked a tour for later that year, in fact. When I came back from that tour in the summertime, my daughter was just finishing school, and I said, 'Well, this is it, I'm going to retire and go back to playing, I can survive somehow.' I made an album in London with Roy Williams on trombone, and Ted Beament on piano, Paul Bridge on bass, and Allan Ganley on drums. That got a lot of play. I was getting one album out a year, which I still think is essential.

"I came back and was told at Honeywell to cool it. Other people were saying, 'How come he can get all this time off?' And I could understand. Honeywell was putting out a little bait to get some people to retire early. I was the first guy in line. I disappeared, and haven't regretted a minute of it since.

"The pension was sufficient for anything I wanted. My material desires are very, very limited. You can tell from the looks of my car that I'm not trying to accumulate enough to go get a Mercedes next month. The oil's been changed ten or twelve times, the oil filter's about twice." Laughter. "I get emotionally involved in things like that. I talk to that car a lot, as I do to the saxophone. They look kinda similar.

"There isn't really anything I want. Well yes there is. There are a few places I'd like to work some time. For historical reasons I'd like to play the Village Vanguard. I'd like to play in Chicago again, maybe Joe Segal's place, because that's where I come from, that area. I'd like to get back to Chicago, I've got some good friends back there. I'd like to play more in the United States. I've been going to Europe two or three times a year, because I made a name there between '48 and '52. The British consider me a Brit. In fact there was an album that came out listing me as British. Except that I don't know how to speak well -- they say. They say, 'Gee, you speak funny.'

"About every three years I go down to the plant and walk in the front door and go around and see a lot of friends, and they're scurrying off to their meetings, and I walk out a half hour later and think, 'Oh God, why didn't I do it earlier?'

"I consider myself very fortunate.

"I never wanted to play studios. Playing in the studios or with a big band was like sitting down and reading the same novel you read last night. It became work to me, very quickly. That's why I had a lot of apprehension about going back into it. I thought, 'Are you going to become saturated again? Are you going to have to play things you don't like?' A lot of the people I'm playing with have been in the business full time one way or another. They've paid horrible dues, traveling on buses in big bands and playing in studios. I couldn't do that. I wouldn't want to recommend that anyone go the way I did either. That's a different type of dues.

"But the thing that really got to me in a hurry, once I got back into it again, from 1984 on, is that there was no reason why all the players were so helpful, and warm, and accepted me. I'll never quite understand. But that's what happened. You think they'd say, 'Let's keep it to ourselves.' Instead they've been 180 degrees to the opposite. I couldn't ask to meet a warmer, more supportive group of people in my life."

From time to time one reads that there are 30,000 stage bands in the high schools, colleges, and universities of the United States. If this is so, there are 450,000 kids playing tenors, altos, baritones, trumpets, trombones, pianos, drums. The instrument manufacturers of South Bend, Indiana, know perfectly well that they are a far larger market than the professional musicians. Most of them will give up music for other professions. Most of them will practice medicine or law become engineers or businessmen. All of them will always appreciate music. Some of them will go on playing weekends.

And, no doubt, thirty years or so from now, a Spike Robinson or two will emerge from the mass.

Spike said, "I can be in the worst position -- I just missed a train, my bag's heavy, I'm frustrated. I think, 'Oh shit, why did I do this?' And then I think, 'Oooooh, well, but yeah, you could be in a three-hour quality control meeting.' And then I feel wonderful again."

Looking for a Pad

Thank you all for being so patient with delays in the *Jazzletter*. I've been with workingf Henry Mancini on his autobiography, which is due out this fall. Now I'll get caught up.

In the meantime, I have begun work on a biography of Lerner and Loewe. To complete it, I want to spend the summer and part of the fall in New York City. Does anyone know of a possible sublet in New York or the surrounding areas? If so, I'd appreciate your calling me at 805 646-0840.