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Pee Wee

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I met Pee Wee Russell in Boston in 1956 when I was working with Gerry Mulligan's quartet at Storyville, the jazz club that George Wein operated in the Copley Square Hotel. Pee Wee was playing in the basement of the same hotel in another of George's clubs, Mahogany Hall, where traditional jazz was featured. I think Sidney Bechet was leading the band down there at the time.

Pee Wee and I were both early risers, so I often met the tall, cadaverous clarinetist at breakfast in the hotel coffee shop. Pee Wee was talkative at that hour, but it took me a while to catch everything he said. His voice seemed reluctant to leave his throat. It would sometimes get lost in his moustache, or take muffled detours through his long free-form nose.

Pee Wee's playing often had an anguished sound. He screwed his rubbery face into woeful expressions as he fought the clarinet, the chord changes, and his imagination. He was respectful of the dangers inherent in the adventure of improvising, and never approached it casually.

Pee Wee's conversational style mirrored the way he played. He would sidle up to a subject, poke at it tentatively, make several disclaimers about the worthlessness of his opinion, inquire if he'd lost my interest, suggest other possible topics of conversation, and then would dart back to his subject and quickly illuminate it with a few pithy remarks mumbled hastily into his coffee cup.

It was always worth the wait. His comments were fascinating, and he had a delightful way with a phrase.

Pee Wee's hesitant and circuitous manner of speaking, combined with his habit of drawing his lanky frame into a concave shape that seemed to express a vain hope for invisibility, gave me a first impression of shyness and passivity. I soon discovered that there was a bright intelligence and sense of humor behind the facade. Also a determined resistance to being pushed in any direction he didn't want to go.

I'd heard stories of the many years Pee Wee had spent drinking heavily while playing in the band at Nick's in Greenwich Village. Like many of the musicians of his era, Pee Wee as a young man found that liquor was an integral part of the jazz life. The quantity of booze he put away eventually wore him down so badly that once or twice he had been thought to have died, when in fact he was just sleeping. His diet for years was mainly alcohol, with occasional "meals" that consisted of a can of tomatoes, unheated, washed down with a glass of milk. On the bandstand he always looked emaciated and uncomfortable.

A friend told me that in those days Pee Wee came to work sober only once, when his wife, Mary, thought she was pregnant. That night Pee Wee arrived at Nick's in good focus, didn't drink all night, and actually held conversations with friends that he recognized. A couple of days later, when Mary found out her pregnancy was a false alarm, Pee Wee returned to his routine, arriving at work in an alcoholic fog, speaking to no one, and alternately playing and drinking all night long.

His health failed in 1951. Pee Wee was hospitalized in San Francisco with multiple ailments, including acute malnutrition, cirrhosis of the liver, pancreatitis, and internal cysts. The doctors at first gave no hope for his recovery, and word spread quickly through the jazz world that he was at death's door. It was reported in France that he had already passed through it. Sidney Bechet played a farewell concert for him in Paris.

When they heard of his illness, and that he was broke, musicians in California, Chicago, and New York gave benefit concerts that raised $4,500 to help with his medical expenses. Louis Armstrong and Jack Teagarden visited his hospital room in San Francisco and told him about the benefit they were planning. Pee Wee, sure that he was expressing his last wish, whispered, "Tell the newspapers not to write any sad stories about me."

Eddie Condon described the surgery that saved Pee Wee's life: "They had him open like a canoe!" Condon also was quoted as saying, "Pee Wee nearly died from too much living." Pee Wee miraculously rallied, and limped back to New York.

He changed his ways. He began eating regular meals, with which he drank milk or, sometimes, a glass of ale, though nothing stronger. He began to relax more and, at the urging of his wife, tried to diversify his interests.

"I haven't done anything except spend my life with a horn stuck in my face," he told a friend. He began to turn down jobs that didn't appeal to him musically, staying home much of the time. For a while Mary wasn't sure she knew who he was. She said she had to get used to him all over again. "He talks a lot now," she told an interviewer. "He never used to. It's as if he were trying to catch up."

After our first sojourn together in Boston, I played with Pee Wee on a couple of jobs in New York with Jimmy McPartland. Then the following Christmas I was at Storyville again with the Gerry Mulligan quartet and Pee Wee was once more at Mahogany Hall downstairs. Both jobs extended through New Year's Eve.

George Wein planned to have the Mahogany Hall band come upstairs before midnight to help us welcome the New Year with a jam session. Gerry offered to write an arrangement of *Auld Lang Syne* for the combined groups, since there would be six horns in the front line. George was enthusiastic about the idea.

Gerry finished the arrangement on the afternoon of New Year's Eve and called a rehearsal. Pee Wee made a lot of suffering noises because he was worried about having to read music. He sounded fine at the rehearsal, but he continued to worry.

That night both bands got together on the Storyville bandstand to jam a few tunes before twelve o'clock. As the hour approached, Gerry asked us to get up his chart. Everyone got out his part, but Pee Wee couldn't find his. We searched everywhere. With midnight only seconds away, the clarinet part was still missing, so we just faked *Auld Lang Syne*. Gerry was disappointed, but the audience, unaware of the arrange-

ment we hadn't played, was content.

As we left the stand after the set, I passed the chair where Pee Wee had been sitting. There lay the missing part. The crafty bastard had been sitting on it all the time.

In New York I lived on Cornelia Street in the Village. Pee Wee and Mary lived nearby on King Street, so I saw him occasionally around the neighborhood, usually walking his dog Nini up Seventh Avenue South. We'd stroll along together and chat about this and that while Pee Wee let the dog sniff and mark the tree trunks. Once in a while Pee Wee would invite me over to the White Horse Tavern for a beer. He'd tell me stories about growing up in Missouri or playing with bands in Texas or Chicago, but I was never clear about the chronology. I got the impression that he remembered life in the twenties and thirties with much more clarity than the forties.

One summer afternoon I invited Pee Wee to accompany me for a swim at the city pool between Carmine and Leroy Streets that was my spa in those days. He gave me an excruciatingly pained look and said, "The world isn't ready for me in swim trunks."

In 1960 George Wein called me to play in a sextet he was putting together for a few weeks work. George played piano and Mickey Sheen was the drummer. The front line was wonderful: Harold "Shorty" Baker on trumpet and Lawrence Brown on trombone, two old colleagues from Duke Ellington's band. And Pee Wee.

I was used to hearing him in a more traditional setting, where all the horns in the front line improvised together contrapuntally. On this band, Lawrence fitted beautiful parallel harmony lines to Shorty's melodic lead, leaving Pee Wee free to play whatever counter figures he chose without having to dodge anything else. His inventions were a wonderful surprise to us all, quite different from his usual ensemble playing.

Our first gig was at the Embers in New York. Then we played Storyville in Boston, a concert in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and a couple of college concerts. While I was sitting in a restaurant in Boston with Pee Wee, a nice looking couple came over and gave him a very warm hello. He looked a little uncomfortable as he acknowledged their greeting.

"Pee Wee, don't you remember us?" Pee Wee looked apologetic. "You stayed at our house in St. Louis for six months!" Pee Wee shook his head mournfully. He didn't have too clear a memory of his drinking years.

"If you say so," he said sorrowfully.

Lawrence Brown told George Wein, "For God's sake get some work for this band! Or I'll have to back with Duke and play those damned plunger parts!" Lawrence had always played open horn with Ellington's band, and evidently didn't appreciate Duke having conned him into taking over the plunger passages that had begun with Charlie "Plug" Irvis and Joe "Tricky Sam" Nanton and had later been passed on to Tyree Glenn and Quentin Jackson. Unfortunately George didn't get any more work for us. Lawrence went back with Duke and played those damned plunger parts.

Pee Wee surprised everyone in 1962 when, in collaboration with valve trombonist Marshall Brown, bassist Russell George, and drummer Ron Lundberg, he began to use some modern jazz forms. Marshall pushed Pee Wee into learning some John Coltrane tunes and experimenting with musical forms he hadn't tried before. He made the transition with the same fierce effort with which he'd always approached improvisation, and the group made some very good records.

Marshall was a so-so soloist who had been a music teacher at a high school in Farmingdale, Long Island. He was tremendously enthusiastic, but he was a terrible pedant, if a good-natured one. He couldn't resist taking the role of the instructor, even with accomplished musicians. Pee Wee told interviewer Bill Coss: "Marshall certainly brought out things in me. It was strange. When he would correct me, I would say to myself, 'Now why did he have to tell me that? I knew that already.'"

Mary Russell told Coss, "Pee Wee wants to kill him."

"I haven't taken so manyorders since military school," said Pee Wee.

One day Pee Wee told me that he and Mary were moving out of their old apartment. A new development had been built between Eighth and Ninth Avenues north of Twenty-third Street, where several blocks of old tenements had been torn down. The Russells had bought a co-op apartment there. I got married around that time and my wife and I moved into an apartment building on the corner of Twentieth Street and Ninth Avenue, so I was still in Pee Wee's neighborhood. I would bump into him on the street now and then.

In 1965, Mary came home one day with an oil paint set and some canvases on stretchers. She dumped it all in Pee Wee's lap and said, "Here, do something with yourself. Paint!"

He did. Holding the canvases in his lap or leaning them on the kitchen table as he worked, he produced nearly a hundred pieces during the ensuing two years, painting in a striking, personal, primitive style. With bold brushstrokes and solid masses of color he created abstract shapes, some with eccentric, asymmetrical faces. They were quite amazing works. Though he enjoyed the praise of his friends and was delighted when some of the canvases sold at prices that astonished him, he painted primarily for Mary's appreciation. When she died in 1967, he put away his paint brushes for good.

With Mary gone, Pee Wee went back to his drinking, and his health began slowly to deteriorate. In February, 1969, during a visit to Washington, D.C., where he thought he might relocate, he was feeling so bad that he called a friend, Tom Gwaltney, and had him check him into Alexandria Hospital. The doctors shut off his booze and did what they could to restore him to health, but this time he failed to respond to treatment. After a few days he just slipped away in his sleep.

The Jersey Jazz Society has kept Pee Wee's memory alive with their annual Pee Wee Russell Memorial Stomp, and there have been occasional showings of his paintings at art galleries.

And, of course, there are still the records, reminding us of

how wonderfully Pee Wee's playing teetered at the edge of musical disaster, where he struggled mightily, and prevailed.

-- BC

Piano Solitaire

When in 1952 Gerry Mulligan launched his quartet with Chet Baker, critics and others were startled that it contained no piano. This very fact lightened its texture and enabled Mulligan and Baker to engage themselves in contrapuntal lines a piano would only have cluttered.

There was precedent for what Mulligan did, both in the New Orleans marching bands -- the piano is conspicuously not a marching instrument -- and in European chamber music. The piano, indeed, is not really a member of the orchestra. In a symphony orchestra, excepting when the orchestra accompanies it in forms such as the concerto, it is assigned to the percussion section.

In common with the other keyboard instruments, it has tempered pitch. We have become so accustomed to tempered pitch that we forget it is inherently, though subtly, false.

Tempered pitch was developed to make it possible for keyboards to play in all keys. To achieve it, certain tones were raised slightly, others lowered a little, to make them the same. On the piano keyboard, A-sharp and B-flat are the same. In true pitch, they are not. Allyn Ferguson, the film composer, said to me once, "If you ever hear a string section play a true untempered triad with perfect intonation, it'll knock your ears off."

Because of its ability to play harmonic sequences by itself, the piano has been the instrument of composers since Bach's time. Many composers -- Mozart, Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninoff -- have been major virtuosi. And quite a number of jazz musicians play at least a little piano as a second instrument.

Immediately a piano is used as a member of an ensemble, the other instruments have to be in tune with it. This, and the fact that it can play simultaneous notes, makes it a dominating instrument.

And it is an independent one. There is a small body of music for unaccompanied violin and cello, very little for other unaccompanied instruments, excepting the guitar and the piano. There is an inestimably vast body of music in all forms for solo piano. It is this independence of the piano that sets it apart in jazz, as it does in European music.

In an issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1922, Carl Engel, head of the music division of the Library of Congress and one of the musical intellectuals who admired this emerging new music called jazz, wrote, "Franz Liszt had a way of playing the piano orchestrally. There are few people who can play jazz on the piano. Jazz, as much as the gypsy dances, depends on the many and contrasting voices of a band, united in a single and spontaneous rhythmic, harmonic, and contrapuntal will."

A great many gifted musicians would expend talent and thought on finding out how to play jazz on the piano. Like Liszt, they started by playing orchestrally.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the piano was a common fixture in homes throughout America. (In 1912, there were more than 270 piano manufacturers in the United States. By 1932, the Depression and the trend to passive entertainment had reduced that number to under 20.) To serve the innumerable non-professional pianists, a great deal of sheet music was printed. This was the primary means of disseminating music. And it was through the sale of sheet music that composers made their living. One of these was Scott Joplin, the major figure in the ragtime movement that preceded the development of jazz. Ragtime grew out of the sheet music industry, whereas jazz was a creature of the recording industry. Although there were pianists who could improvise in the ragtime form, its commercial dissemination came through print.

Its period of popularity was not that long -- from about 1899 until World War I, when early jazz and "stride piano" began to displace it. In ragtime a syncopated melody was played against a strong, straightforward bass. To modern ears, much of this music sounds rigid compared with the fluidity of later styles of jazz piano. It does not have the rhythmic looseness and swing that are among the defining characteristics of jazz.

The position of Jelly Roll Morton, sometime procurer and gambler -- let us not forget what his nickname meant -- as a pianist is subject to debate, but not his his role as the first major jazz composer. Morton, though he was New Orleans-born, made his musical mark in Chicago with a group called his Red Hot Peppers, which played in a style modern scholars think of as New Orleans polyphony.

In his *Black Bottom Stomp*, recorded in 1926, you encounter an effort to integrate the piano into an instrumental combo. It is not entirely successful. When it comes time for Morton's piano solo, the rest of the band simply stops playing, and he goes it alone. With his solo completed, the band resumes playing.

By the 1920s, a new style was developing in the cities of the northeast, particularly New York. It would come to be known as "stride" or "Harlem stride" piano. The finest of its performers, the "ticklers" and "professors", developed astonishing technical facility, even though many were largely self-taught. "Self-taught" distinctly does not mean uneducated, and their comments indicate they were familiar with the European musical tradition. In their youth they played the usual repertoire of popular songs, ragtime, waltzes, the schottische, and other forms. James P. Johnson, widely considered the best of these pianists, was born in 1894 in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and reared in Jersey City and New York.

Johnson departed from ragtime in developing a powerful swing, and in relying on his own powers of improvisation. In the stride style, the rhythm is established in the left hand. A characteristic of the style is the way the bass note of the chord is played with the left hand which then jumps up an octave or more to establish the rest of the harmony. Meanwhile, the right hand improvises melodies. One of the criteria by which a great stride "tickler" was judged was the speed and accuracy of the left hand motion. The style remains orchestral and full,

like that of ragtime. But the right hand departs from ragtime in straying farther away from the beat of the left hand: its flexibility increases the quality of swing.

Although he is generally associated with the stride school, Willie the Lion Smith is a figure unto himself. Some purists would argue that what he played was not jazz. A masterful pianist with roots in the nineteenth century Romantic classical tradition, he was able to fuse ragtime, impressionism, and a skill at counterpoint into something his own and hard to classify. He was best known for performing his own compositions, which owed much -- as their titles often indicate -- to the salon pieces popular in the late nineteenth century. Yet his music was unmistakably American.

The Lion said he came from black and Jewish parentage, and even that at one point he had served as a cantor. The nickname derived from bravery in action during World War I. He was a major figure of the stride school in New York from the time of his discharge from the army in 1919, but he recorded little until the middle and late 1930s, when he gained the recognition that was due. With his derby hat and a cigar forever clenched in his teeth, he affected a bellicose mien, but the ill-repressed smile gave him away, and he was a humorous man. His character is in his music: challenging to his competitors but sunny and poetic and gentle and welcoming.

It was said that he was never at his best in the recording studio but during a session he did for Commodore in 1939, he was very much at his best, playing those marvelous little compositions of his such as *Morning Air, Echoes of Spring, Passionette*, and *Rippling Waters*, along with a few standards. (That session has been reissued in the massive twenty-four-LP Volume One collection of the Commodore catalogue by Mosaic Records.) The Lion's is intricate music. It has been written that no one imitated him because no one could. These pieces are too complex for imitation, involving rhythmic displacements that are strikingly difficult.

Duke Ellington admired the Lion. And the kind of harmony he used was creeping into jazz generally, as jazz musicians listened to Debussy, Ravel, and Stravinsky, among other European composers. The recording of *What Is There to Say*, one of the Lion's ventures into the popular songs of the era, refutes the idea that he had little influence on other pianists. The most influential pianist in jazz in the last third of the twentieth century was Bill Evans. Bill recorded this same song almost exactly twenty years after the Lion did it for Commodore. It is difficult to believe, on listening to Bill's record, that he had not known and loved the Lion's version. The Lion's music is adorable. There is no other word for it. You want to hug it, it is so exquisitely charming. And whether we call it stride or not simply doesn't matter.

But the chief source of what jazz piano became was Earl Hines. And one of the early records that reveals his place in it is Louis Armstrong's *West End Blues*, recorded in Chicago June 26, 1928.

When you consider that Morton brought his art to fulfillment in Chicago and Armstrong really defined himself there, you begin to understand Bud Freeman's claim that jazz, at least jazz as we know it, developed in Chicago. Armstrong's opening cadenza on *West End Blues* seems to have been to a whole generation of young musicians an assembly call to a new kind of music. Armstrong was departing from his New Orleans roots, establishing himself as the first great virtuoso jazz soloist. From then on jazz musicians would be expected to be improvising soloists. Armstrong further liberated the music's rhythmic character. The stiffness typical of both ragtime and the New Orleans polyphony found in Morton's work is gone.

There is no bass player on that famous recording. The bass line is the responsibility of the pianist, who has the job of laying out the harmony -- in this case just the blues changes. The pianist is Earl Hines, destined to have an influence on jazz pianists that is probably not sufficiently appreciated to this day.

But, in consequence of its very nature, the piano plays an anomalous role on this recording. Armstrong sings a wordless chorus in a voice that is youthful and rather sweet. Then comes the Hines piano solo.

And no one knows what to do about it. There are no sustained chords from the trumpet, trombone, and clarinet. Everybody just lays out, as they do for the Jelly Roll Morton solo aforementioned, allowing Hines to do his turn. The left hand walks the harmony in a style that derives from stride, but isn't quite stride either. And the right hand is not playing in that chorded "orchestral" style of stride. It is playing a melodic line of single notes.

Eleven years later Hines made a solo recording of *Rosetta* for RCA Victor. It shows, among other things, that he was a superb technician -- for which he also was not always given credit. The fluidity of his playing has increased. The left hand is essentially playing in a light stride style, but the right is improvising free and fluent lines. Because of his use of single lines in the right hand, the Hines way of playing became known -- inaccurately, actually -- as trumpet-style piano playing, as if he were imitating a horn.

The stride pianists were particularly competitive, though their contests seem to have had a joyous quality. It is notable, then, that they were all impressed by a young man named Thomas "Fats" Waller, destined to become one of the most popular of all American entertainers. James P. Johnson was one of his mentors.

Waller went beyond Johnson. He polished this approach to playing to its greatest luster, and his mastery of stride is breathtakingly evident in pieces like *Smashing Thirds,* or *Handful of Keys*, recorded for Victor on January 3, 1929, six months after the Armstrong-Hines *West End Blues*. You note immediately the powerful, driving left hand. But Waller too was beginning to take a more linear, rather than orchestral, approach to the right hand. Five years later, on September 29, 1934, he recorded *Serenade for a Wealthy Widow* with his own group, known as Fats Waller and His Rhythm. Pops Foster is on bass, Al Casey on guitar. And Waller's approach to the piano is radically different from that heard in his solo perfor-

mances. Somewhere along the way, he has learned how to work in and with a rhythm section.

He doesn't play stomping left-hand parts. On the contrary, he lets Foster and the drummer propel the rhythm forward, in conjunction with Casey. And much of the time Casey is handling the rest of the voices of the harmony. Waller's left hand takes on a function of countermelody. The harmony has become more chromatic and impressionistic and may owe something to the Lion. Though the group is a septet, the music is tightly orchestrated. Waller's piano solo is distinctly in the new direction. This is no longer stride piano: it is jazz piano integrated into an ensemble.

It should be kept in mind that in a good deal of earlier jazz, bass lines were produced by tuba, and in some cases by baritone or bass saxophone. Sometimes, as in some early Ellington recordings, arco string bass was used, although this produces a leaden and unswinging effect. Gradually pizzicato bass was being explored for its lighter and more swinging effect.

In the first choruses of *Serenade to a Wealthy Widow*, the pulse is on the first and third beats of the bar, played by Foster on bass. This is two-beat playing. After Waller's piano solo, this changes. Foster starts playing all four beats of the bar, and there is a strong emphasis on the second and fourth. This kind of rhythm-section sound was characteristic of the big instrumental numbers of the swing era. Waller and his rhythm section seem to presage the sound of the soon-to-be Count Basie band.

There was a direct connection between Waller and Basie. Basie had studied piano with his mother in Red Bank, New Jersey, where he was born. Then he went to New York where he met James P. Johnson, another New Jerseyite, and, perhaps more significantly, Waller. He studied informally with Waller. It was Waller who introduced him to the organ, and showed him how the pedals worked. After that Basie went on the road with a show and ended up in Kansas City, where he joined the Benny Moten band. There is an RCA album of the Moten band, including such tunes as *Moten Swing*, recorded in 1932, on which one can hear that Basie was a formidable stride pianist, much under the influence of Waller. Moten died in 1935, and Basie formed a group of his own, which began recording for Decca.

By the time the band made *One O'Clock Jump* for that company in 1937, Basie had simplified his playing for its judicious function in the context of a band. His piano work is laconic, very spare, and imbued with a kind of humor that reflected the impish smile he used to wear. The style is whimsical and charming, and his placements of notes and light chords in the orchestral context is masterful. Basie understood space. He knew when to let the rhythm section breathe. (According to Jo Jones, the idea of that structure of the rhythm section came from Walter Page, who had developed it in his own band.) What Basie played was often trite, but it was deliberately so, like well-remembered catch phrases, repeated for their old associations and humor. If we hadn't heard Basie's little musical jokes, among them his plink, plink, plink, we'd have felt cheated.

Later in his life, when he made records with small groups, Basie repeatedly demonstrated that he remained an adept and inventive pianist. And farther down the line, he made a series of two-piano albums with Oscar Peterson and a rhythm section. Oscar plays less than usual and Basie plays more than was his wont. Oscar said that although Basie's health was failing by the end of that series, "he gave no quarter." And John Heard, who played bass on one of the albums, said Basie remained a fast and accurate stride player.

Basie's work would influence pianists as diverse as Peterson and John Lewis and though his reputation as a bandleader overshadowed that as a pianist, he must be considered one of the masters.

In the late 1930s, there was a division among jazz fans over who was the "better" pianist, Teddy Wilson or Art Tatum. His detractors found Tatum a cold pianist, spinning lines of icy sparks. But every pianist I know is a Tatum fan. To their minds, he was and remains the towering giant of jazz piano.

Tatum, a native of Toledo, Ohio, had some formal training as a teenager, but otherwise was self-taught, learning from piano rolls and records. He acknowledged Fats Waller as his major influence, and Lee Sims as a secondary source. Sims was a pianist who used to be heard on radio from Chicago.

Sims is known today chiefly from his compositions, which reflect the kind of salon-music influence heard in the work of Willie the Lion Smith. His compositions are notable for intricate and interesting harmony and a demand for prodigious technique, both of which are embodied in Tatum's work.

Tatum seemed to have limited interest in the blues, though he could certainly play blues when he wanted to. Contrary to the fundamentalist dogma of jazz, not every jazz musician has an affinity for blues. Sarah Vaughan told me how deeply she had resented it when, in her youth, John Hammond had tried to cast her as a blues singer, and Ben Webster once said to me in Jim and Andy's, "If I never have to play another blues, that's all right with me." Tatum drew largely on the repertoire of American popular songs, for whose melodies he showed great respect. He was able to weave them with embellishments of astonishing dexterity.

Tatum eventually formed a trio with Tiny Grimes on guitar and Slam Stewart on bass, but he seemed to feel restricted in that setting. He liked to work alone, and he was at his best as a soloist. There were a few exceptions, though. One of these is a 1955 trio session for Pablo with Buddy Rich, the drummers' equivalent of Art Tatum. The album is diminished by the presence of Lionel Hampton on vibes. When he and Tatum play together -- sometimes doubling the melody, alas -- there's just too much plinkety-plink going on. But when Tatum solos (or duets, really) with Rich, the music is incomparable. It swings inexorably as he and Rich goad each other on, and the level of invention is awesome. Anyone who thinks Tatum couldn't swing should listen to that album.

Comparisons between Tatum and Wilson were pointless, in any event: they were very different pianists, in every way.

Although he was a prodigious solo pianist, Wilson was the ensemble player par excellence.

Teddy Wilson was a native of Texas, the son of teachers. He grew up in Tuskegee, Alabama, where he studied piano and violin for four years and played oboe and clarinet in a school band. For a year he majored in music at Talladega College. Wilson's academic grounding infused his work, which was all his life characterized by grace and elegance. And whereas he had a great command of the left-hand elements of stride, he -- like Waller -- followed the example of single-note melodic lines set by Hines.

In a 1938 Commodore solo recording of *Tiger Rag*, done at a fierce tempo, you can take the measure of the command of the instrument that Wilson had. The track is not truly typical of him, since it allows us to catch him in the act of working. On other solo tracks from that session, he played at the more casual tempos that allowed expression of the urbane civility that marked his music, and for that matter the man. Teddy Wilson was a great gentleman.

Jazz histories have inclined to suggest an autodidactic development of the music, but from early times, its major figures have revealed a knowledge of the European tradition. This is particularly so of Teddy Wilson, who became a major model for other pianists. (By 1950, he was teaching at the Juilliard School in New York.) If Wilson's work reveals a familiarity with Hines, his sense of counterpoint manifests a knowledge of Bach.

In 1935, after a period with Benny Carter's band, he became a part of the Benny Goodman Trio, with Goodman on clarinet and Gene Krupa on drums. Their recording of *Where or When* shows how well he functioned in an ensemble. There is no bass player, but Wilson's playing is nonetheless light and airy where it needs to be, full when that is required, and suggests not so much the ragtime and stride history of jazz as the body of European composition for clarinet and piano and sometimes string ensembles. Goodman was deeply interested in the European musical literature, as was Gene Krupa. This classicism is evident in this lyrical and lovely track. And of course in all the other Goodman groups, which did utilize bass and drums, Wilson is the consummate team player.

In the long run of jazz history, Wilson was more influential than Tatum. He was imitated because he was imitable. But, as Lou Levy said to me recently, "Who the hell can play like Art Tatum?"

During the period when Wilson was making those sides for Commodore, a sudden fad for boogie-woogie swept the country, impelled largely by John Hammond's enthusiasm for the form.

If stride piano was strongly associated with nightclubs in New York City, particularly Harlem, boogie-woogie was at home in Chicago honky-tonks and rent parties.

It is probably impossible to trace the roots of boogie-woogie, which is in essence a blues for the piano with the beats divided into two in the bass line. Examples of its bass motions can be found in printed music from the first decade of the twentieth century.

One of the ways to make music move forward is to double the notes in the underlying rhythm pattern. This occurs in Brazilian samba. A percussionist, working on one of the many folk instruments derived from Africa, plays not a simple one-two-three-four but a rapid ONE-two-three-four-FIVE-six-seven-eight in the same bar. He plays not four quarter notes but eight eighth notes in the bar. Think of it as SHUCK-a-ducka-SHUCK-a-ducka. This is related to what in North American music is called shuffle rhythm. It is also related to boogie-woogie.

Boogie-woogie too uses a rhythmic pattern of eight eighth notes to the bar, produced not by a percussionist but by the left hand of the pianist. There are various ways to do this, one of the most common being to play a note and then the note an octave above it, "walking" the pattern up and down the keyboard.

The etymology of the term boogie-woogie is hard to trace. One theory is that it derives from a reference to the "boogie man" because jazz and the blues were associated with evil. That seems fanciful. The term sounds like an onomatopoeia. Simply say the word twice, boogie-woogie-boogie-woogie, and you have the character of the left-hand pattern of most of this music.

An exception occurs in *Yancey Stomp*, recorded late in 1939 by one of the seminal figures of the movement, Jimmy Yancey. He breaks the mould. His left hand pattern consists of two eighth notes and a quarter, making the rhythm into boogie-woo, boogie-woo, and it is more interesting for the irregularity.

Yancey, a native Chicagoan, was a singer and tap-dancer who toured in vaudeville shows. He never was able to make a full-time living as a pianist, working instead as a baseball stadium groundskeeper. He was one of the important figures in establishing the boogie-woogie style, playing at rent parties and in clubs and influencing such exponents of boogie as Meade Lux Lewis, one of the finest players in the idiom.

Lewis, another Chicagoan, was also influenced by Waller. He first recorded *Honky Tonk Train Blues* in 1927, then slipped into comparative obscurity only to be brought back to public attention by Hammond. Lewis recorded a new version of the piece in 1937, just ten years after the first, and he was able to make a living at his music. He was one of a triumvirate of pianists -- the other two were Albert Ammons and Pete Johnson -- who launched the boogie-woogie fad of the late 1930s.

For a while, boogie had an immense vogue, with such bands as those of Count Basie, Tommy Dorsey, Will Bradley, and Woody Herman recording orchestrated versions of it. It was always a limited form, monotonous in continued exposure. Almost as suddenly as it had arrived in the 1930s, the fad waned in the 1940s.

One of the undersung heroes of jazz piano is Mel Powell. Born Melvin Epstein in New York City, Powell was a child prodigy with extensive classical training and a taste for jazz. At the age of fourteen he sat in with a group one night in a

New York club. Art Tatum, who was in the audience, was deeply impressed, and for the next few years Powell pursued a career in jazz. By the time he was sixteen he was working with Bobby Hackett, George Brunis and Zutty Singleton. Before he was out of his teens he was writing arrangements for the band of Earl Hines, one of his influences. Later, for Benny Goodman, he wrote and was featured in a composition called *The Earl*, a tribute to Hines. It was during his sojourn with Goodman that Powell became famous.

The Mosaic reissues of the Commodore catalogue contain a great deal of material by Powell, both as soloist and leading a group of his own in which Goodman, appearing only as a sideman, does some of his most brilliant jazz playing. In *Jubilee*, a solo recorded in 1943, Powell is heard as a prodigious two-handed technician. He is at ease in the stride style, although the dexterous motion of his left hand shows that he has made his own adaptation of it.

By that time it was beginning to be fashionable to deplore what were called "one-handed pianists", those who chose to play "trumpet lines" after the manner of Earl Hines. Those who made the charge clearly were not cognizant of the nature of the piano and that so-called one-handed piano was not a problem but the solution to a problem. Many of those who played that way were quite capable of "two-handed" piano, as Powell's *Jubilee* amply demonstrates. In an ensemble, he simply played a different way, as Wilson did.

There is in the Mosaic-Commodore material a wonderful 1942 septet performance of *The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise*. During his solo, Powell leaves the task of propelling the rhythm to the bassist and drummer, and lets the bass player define the bottom of the harmony. His left hand is confined to playing whole-note counterlines to the inventions of his right. Then when Benny Goodman starts to solo, Powell slips into the background to comp chords beautifully for Goodman. Comping -- and the term evokes not only the word "accompanying" but also "complementing" -- had become one most important functions of the jazz pianist.

In the first chorus of his blowing, Powell plays with the rhythm section alone. In the second the horns join in to play sustained chords behind him, which is exactly what does not happen on the Earl Hines solo on Armstrong's *West End Blues*.

Powell is heard on any number of Goodman recordings, as both arranger and pianist. The charts and originals he contributed to the Goodman book were some of the finest in what many people think was the most brilliant period of the Goodman band, the World War II years at Columbia Records, and since the other writers for the band included Fletcher Henderson, Buck Clayton, and Eddie Sauter, that is saying a lot. The charts on *Dark Town Strutter's Ball* and *Why Don't You Do Right* are Powell's, and his compositions for the band -- some of which used some of the quirky little turns that were characteristic of his piano work -- include, besides *The Earl*, *Mission to Moscow* and *Clarinade*.

Powell played in and recorded with the wartime Air Force band of Glenn Miller, then recorded with Goodman at war's end and increasingly pursued a career of his own. He made some excellent ten-inch LPs for Vanguard, one of which contained an exquisite *Sonatina* that had nothing to do with jazz or with his jazz piano style. This composition was the public presage of his future.

In 1952 he went to Yale to study with Paul Hindemith and begin a career as a "classical" composer. As Andre Previn put it in a liner note, "His music was becoming more and more complicated and private, and some of his works taxed any musical mind severely, unless it had been schooled by the likes of Elliott Carter." Previn said that Powell's later music "is about as easily assimilated as the Dead Sea Scrolls but . . . quite marvelous."

I remember that there was a funny mood among jazz fans and even some critics as he took up his new career, as if Powell had demeaned jazz and deserted them, spurning a music that had been good to him for the sake of cultural social climbing. This was rooted in part in ignorance of the extent to which jazz musicians knew and had been drawing on European concert music from the earliest days.

A couple of years ago, I was talking to Powell about that phase of his life. He was younger than Charlie Parker or Dizzy Gillespie, and only a year older than that other Powell, Bud. He said he considered himself pre-bop. I said I thought he was sort of proto-bop.

"Proto-bop," he said. "I like that."

Powell never turned away from jazz and never lost his love for it. In private he continued to play it now and then, though with his work as a composer and his teaching responsibilities as a professor at Yale and later head of the distinguished music department at CalArts, he had little time for performing. Finally, after much pestering by his wife and others, he went on the 1986 jazz cruise of the S.S. Norway. A Chiaroscuro album derived from the next year's cruise, made with a personnel that included Benny Carter, Milton Hinton, Louis Bellson, and Howard Alden, is titled *The Return of Mel Powell*. His playing has grown simpler, possibly because he has no reason or opportunity to keep his jazz chops up. But it's excellent nonetheless.

A few years ago, Powell was afflicted by an irreversible neurological disorder that forced him to get around on crutches. Despite this, he retained a notable optimism and an original sense of humor. In April 1990 he won the Pulitzer Prize for a double piano concert performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Then, because of his disability, he took a bad fall, hitting his head and sustaining serious skull damage. For a time he was unable to speak, but his wife, the actress Martha Scott, says he is recovering well.

Considering how long his career has been, it is surprising that Mel Powell is only sixty-seven. But he started very early, and in those years when he was active in jazz he created a legacy, both as pianist and writer, that should not be forgotten.

The lessons of Earl Hines turn up again in the work of Nat Cole. Cole's enormous success as a singer has overshadowed his importance as a pianist. Cole was one of the greatest

pianists in jazz history. Since he is an evolution of Hines and immensely influential in turn on still other pianists, the legacy of Hines continued to grow and spread.

I was fascinated by Hank Jones' recent remark that, when he overheard Cole playing in private, he played remarkably like Art Tatum. But Cole understood the restraint with which a pianist must work in an ensemble setting. And this was especially so in the format of piano, bass, and guitar that he established in Los Angeles in 1937.

It was an odd setup for a group whose leader was a pianist, and an accomplished one. For, after all, bass and guitar are capable of carrying all of the harmony. And the integration of piano with such a group is a matter of some delicacy, if a thick and cluttered sound and a good deal of awkward doubling are to be avoided. Cole did it magnificently.

(Art Tatum formed his trio on Cole's model.)

Cole continued to work in this format for the next seven years, sometimes recording with other performers, such as Lionel Hampton and Lester Young, and touring with Jazz at the Philharmonic. In 1943, he had a hit record with a vocal on a comical little song called *Straighten Up and Fly Right*. This launched his career as a singer, and he was soon one of the major commercial attractions in popular music. He continued to record as an instrumentalist for Capitol Records. Little of this outpouring thus far has been released, although a pending project at Mosaic is to bring out all of it, beginning in the spring of 1991, something equivalent to about nineteen LPs.

Cole's work was full of felicities. He had an exquisite tone. There was that little click at the start of each note that is the product of a perfect touch, one that *aims* the note so that the felt hammer strikes the string just so. He had a way of playing triplets with a bouncy rolling ebullience. And he was inventive.

Chief among his wonders was his time. Nat Cole had the most perfect time -- both as pianist and as singer -- of anyone I ever heard. He always knew more deeply than knowing where the center of the beat was, and this gave him a magnificent security about it. He could play with it. Listen to him sing *Just You Just Me* in that *After Midnight* album he did with Sweets Edison, Juan Tizol, and Stuff Smith. He isn't slavishly banging on the time. He is all over it, leaning in, leaning back, and oh! does that vocal swing. And it is all so effortless.

Cole once said something interesting to me in a conversation about singing that swings.

I noted that Frank Sinatra had acquired this ability; it is not there in his early up-tempo ventures during the period with Columbia Records, or that foolish song he recorded on RCA with Tommy Dorsey's band, *I'll Take Tallulah*. Nat smiled slightly and said, "The difference is that the band swings Frank and I swing the band." And he was right. Cole generated swing in the musicians around him, and like everything he did, it seemed to come to him as naturally as breathing.

One of the pianists he affected was Bill Evans, once again a formidable technician in solo performance but a skillfully restrained one in an ensemble. Given the scope of Evans' influence, we see again the importance of the lineage of Earl Hines.

One of Cole's first and most gifted off-shoots was Oscar Peterson. Peterson bloomed late, compared with some of the other major figures in jazz. While Mel Powell was a fully finished artist by nineteen, Peterson at the same age -- this is evident from radio air checks made in Montreal the summer he turned nineteen -- was unformed, flashy but callow, his influences as yet unassimilated. But they were conspicuously those of Teddy Wilson and Nat Cole, whose *Easy Listening Blues* was in Peterson's repertoire. There was nothing of Art Tatum.

In high school, Peterson had proved adept at boogie-woogie then at the height of its craze. Peterson began recording in 1945, when he was twenty, for RCA Victor in Montreal. Over the next four years he turned out a large body of commercial recordings made with a trio that included bass and drums. A good many of them were boogie-woogie, recorded at the behest of the record label. Indeed, in his radio broadcasts he was sometimes referred to as "the brown bomber of boogie-woogie" which, in its allusion to Joe Louis, embraced the stereotype. The musical content of Peterson's boogie records was minimal but the tempos were unbelievable. This was probably the fastest boogie-woogie ever recorded and indeed might be considered the last hurrah of the idiom, although Peterson will occasionally employ elements of it for color even today.

Peterson recorded for RCA for four years, ending the contract in 1949, shortly after the Carnegie Hall Jazz at the Philharmonic concert that exposed him to the world.

As his playing grew in power and maturity, his reverence for tradition seemed only to increase and in time he assimilated apparently every element and style in the heritage of jazz piano, including stride, which he plays powerfully. In Peterson's work, virtually the whole history of jazz piano after ragtime is summarized, and the evolution was synthesized. He made his Montreal records some thirty years after the Scott Joplin piano roll of *Maple Leaf Rag*.

The modern era begins. The music comes under the influences of Mary Lou Williams, Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell, Lennie Tristano, and, in California, Jimmy Rowles. Bud Powell too was careful in the use of the left hand, becoming one of those accused of being one-handed.

And always in the background, there was Hines. Well, not so far in the background. After all, when Bud Powell was first heard, Hines still was very active. Indeed, far from remaining content with past glories, he led one of the pioneering bands of bebop. He went on playing -- and smiling -- until he died in 1983, a daring and adventurous player to the end.

Little wonder they called him the Father. He was indeed.

Beginning with him, the piano, that loner among instruments, was gradually assimilated into the ensemble.