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The Worlds of Mel Powell
Part One

Mel Powell was seventeen years old when he joined the Benny Goodman band as pianist and arranger. But Ella Fitzgerald won her famous amateur contest at the Apollo when she was only fourteen. Gerry Mulligan was a professional arranger by eighteen. Stan Getz joined Stan Kenton when he was seventeen. Victor Feldman was a working musician at twelve. The list gets long. And this is not to mention the many prodigies of the "classical" world. Jascha Heifetz gave his debut concert at the age of six, playing the Mendelssohn violin concerto, and was touring the world by the time he was sixteen. Mendelssohn in turn wrote his *Overture to a Midsummer Night's Dream* at sixteen, and he discovered, appreciated the importance of, and at twenty conducted the *St. Matthew Passion*, thereby helping to launch the Bach revival. The Polish pianist Josef Hofmann similarly made his debut at six and toured the United States and Europe when he was eleven. Powell's friend Andre Previn was a music director at MGM by the age of eighteen. So perhaps too much is made of Powell's youth when he was hired by Goodman. Much has been made, too, of the fact that he had an extensive "classical" training in both piano and composition, as if he were the first of his breed to enter jazz. Again, mythology was in play: almost all of the better jazz pianists had solid academic training, whether formal or self-imposed.

What is more remarkable is that Mel Powell should have cast so long a shadow in the jazz world when his career in the idiom was comparatively brief. He worked with Goodman in 1941 and '42, and, bored with playing the same material night after night, left the band in the late summer of 1942, not yet twenty. His compositions for the Goodman band, not to mention his charts -- the arrangements of *Jersey Bounce* and *A String of Pearls* are his -- are part of the legacy of the big band era, along with his dazzling piano solos in both the big band and the Goodman chamber sub-groups. The arrangement for Goodman and Peggy Lee of *Why Don't You Do Right* is usually credited to him, but he says, "I didn't write it. I wish I had."

He was drafted into the Army. When the war ended, he began to drift away from jazz, going to Yale to study composition with Paul Hindemith.

He turned up in jazz from time to time to record or play concerts with Goodman, then gradually faded from the jazz world altogether, lingering in the memory of those old enough to have seen him or collected the Goodman records.

Powell now is head of the composition department of the school of music of the California Institute of the Arts, invariably called CalArts in the west. At sixty-seven he is still very active in the department despite a neurological disorder that causes him to move about on an electric tricycle. When he struggles to his feet and supports himself with two canes, he is still a little over six feet. His hair is plentiful and white, faded from the blond of his youth, and recently he has been wearing a discreet white mustache.

"Very often in the class," he said in a slow, cultivated, sonorous teacher's voice that leaves you time and air to digest what he is telling you, "we'll be talking something technical, say, Renaissance, and I'll point out certain syncopations, and then I will say, 'That's very much like what happens in jazz.' And at the end of the lesson, a student will say, 'Mr. Powell, how come you know that much about jazz?'" He laughed, which he does easily and frequently. "I'll come back and say, 'The *right* question is, "How come I know so much about the Renaissance?"' Then I tell them about my past.

"And they are *stunned*."

Last spring, Mel's concerto for two pianos was performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and won the Pulitzer Prize. Soon thereafter his malady, at first diagnosed as muscular dystrophy but later as inclusionary polymyocitis, caused him to take a fall, cracking his head so severely that he was hospitalized in a coma. For a long period of his recovery he was unable to speak, and when the ability was restored to him, he quipped to Peggy Lee, still his friend nearly fifty years after their service in the Goodman band, "It's a good thing I didn't win the Nobel Prize!"

I told Mel that while all that he had done had impressed me, none of it shocked or even particularly surprised me. The only real surprise was the discovery that he was Jewish. He looked like the archetypical WASP when he was young, and for that matter still does. For a long time I thought he was one of the very few WASPs in jazz, the exception that tests the rule. The vast majority of white jazz musicians in the United States have been and are Italian, Jewish, and Irish, with smatterings of other ethnic origins. But those of truly English origin are almost as scarce as they are in the American musical theater. It is the most curious thing. Even in England, a large number of the better jazz musicians, such as Martin Drew and the late Victor Feldman, have been Jewish or Scottish. The Benny Carter "English" band of 1936 was largely made up of Scots.

This perspective seemed to startle Mel, who had apparently not considered the matter before. "I suppose that's true," he said.

"I've sometimes wondered," I said, "if changing your name causes some sort of disorientation, a sort of loss of identity."

"No, not in my case," Mel said. "Because an uncle had done it before me, taking the name Powell from Poljanowsky. I didn't change it legally until I went into service. I encountered a southern sergeant who had a genuine hatred of Jews, and when he saw the name on my papers, he assigned me immediately to latrine duty. I changed it legally."

He was born Melvin Epstein in the Bronx on February 12, 1923, which, being Lincoln's birthdate as well, meant that he never had to go to school on that day.

His father, Milton Epstein, and mother, nee Mildred Mark, were both from Russia. His maternal grandfather, who lived with the family, was a Talmudic scholar. Mel's father spent a period of his youth as a professional boxer, thereby typifying an element of America's ethnic evolution. Whatever group is at any given point in American history lowest in the social structure gives many of its sons to show business, the police departments, crime, and politics, all of which offer egress from the ghetto. At one time there there were a number of tough Jewish boxers, including Barney Ross. You'll search long for a Jewish boxer today. The great mob now watches black and Latino gladiators have at each other. Mel's father eventually abandoned boxing for the jewelry business and, with the advent of the Depression, when Mel was six years old, became a traveling salesman. Then Mel's parents were divorced, which was very unusual in Jewish families. Mel was the youngest of three children. He had a sister, Elinor, and a brother, Lloyd, four years his junior.

I mentioned to Mel that Glenn Gould never practiced: "He told me that if a piece presented some particular digital problem, he might go to the piano to work out the fingering in that passage. But otherwise, he thought the music through, and then just went and did it. A friend of mine said that if you build your technique early, it stays with you, but if you build it later, you have to work hard to keep it."

"That sounds reasonable," Mel said. "I've always thought I was fortunate in having begun so early."

"How early?"

"Four, five, with piano lessons. With a very stern German lady named Sara Barg, who'd slap you and all that. But I appreciated that later. And then, so far as my work in composition is concerned, I was delighted that she spoke sometimes like a theorist, rather than a piano teacher. She would say things like, 'No, no, no! Be sure to show the subdominant!' That was nice. Someone saying that to you, you're tempted to say, 'Well, what is the subdominant? What is its relation to this, and what is this relation to the whole?' And so forth. Learning by rote can ruin you."

Mel grew up in a building on 161st Street in the Bronx, so situated that from its roof one could look down into Yankee Stadium. People would gather there for a free view of games, and Mel showed a brief entrepeneurial spirit by selling them peanuts. Mel knew some of the Yankee players, and catcher Bill Dickey coached him personally during a short career in sandlot ball. Eventually a fast ball tipped his thumb and the family decided that playing piano was more important than playing baseball and that ended that.

Mel won a third prize in a city-wide contest for young pianists and was advised by Walter Damrosch to go to Germany to study. But his brother Lloyd had already turned him onto jazz. The family had moved, when Mel was about eleven, south to West End Avenue at 102nd street. Bill Evans later lived around the corner from where the Epsteins had lived, but then New York City is an infinite fabric of those ghostly crossings. Lloyd and Mel would listen to remote broadcasts of the bands during the time when Mel was going to De Witt Clinton High School. Later he went to City College, always referred to in New York as CCNY, where he majored in French.

When Mel was thirteen, Lloyd got him to go to the Paramount theater to see the Benny Goodman band. Mel was mesmerized by its polish and precision and the playing of Lionel Hampton and Teddy Wilson. Wilson's influence on him presumably began to exert itself there and then. Soon he was listening on records to Art Hodes, Jess Stacy, Bix Beiderbecke, Fats Waller, and, most significantly, Earl Hines. A friend took him to Nick's in Greenwich Village, where he heard Sidney Bechet, Bobby Hackett, and Zutty Singleton. One night he asked, with precocious courage, to sit in. A man sitting near the piano told him, "You're going to be a real one," and then sat down and played. It was Art Tatum. Soon Mel had a job at Nick's, working with Brad Gowans, Pee Wee Russell, and Eddie Condon.

One night Dorothy Parker and John Steinbeck, both jazz devotees, came into Nick's. She had already had a good deal to drink. A man approached their table, sat down, and began talking. She stared at him through fog until he felt the chill. He said, somewhat testily, "I guess you don't remember me."

"My memory," she said, "is so bad that I don't remember asking you to sit down."

Mel added: "That's not a story. I was *there*."

At one point he worked opposite a young pianist from Chicago, two or three years his senior, with whom he became friends: Nat Cole. "I think we were both influenced by the same people," Mel said. The primary influence was Earl Hines, the dominant force in jazz piano and the influence in turn on Tatum and Wilson.

"What in your view was the value of Hines?" I asked. "He was obviously your major hero."

"Yeah," Mel said, nodding. "Well, he was damn good! Well. Let's start with what everyone knows. It's a little bit fictitious, a myth by now: the business of the octaves sounding like trumpet, which is a far cry from ragtime and stride. That would come to some degree because of his association with Louis Armstrong, I would think. He also played trumpet when he was a kid.

"That seemed to me very important. Why, specifically, I thought so much of him . . ." Mel had a sudden smile of affectionate memory ". . . is that he was just this side of irresponsible. Of all the pianists, none lived so close to the edge of terrible risk. When he went for what we all go for -- octaves, runs, whatever -- it was always just a little more dangerous, from perhaps even the technical point of view, than it needed to be. Many of us found a haven in doing things that were very effective, but we knew we'd come out winners."

A short, one-beat chuckle: "Ha! I would never want to bet the ranch with Earl! And yet he would always be pheno-

menal. It was a temperament, that very disquieted and disquieting temperament, that I found absolutely irresistible. Compared, for example, to others I admired very much.

"Fats Waller. Fats had an enormous sense of humor, had a *gorgeous* bounce in the stride that he would play. If you didn't smile at *that*, then you ought not to listen to music altogether. Or Teddy Wilson, with that gorgeous civility. Teddy coming from Earl, I think. But none of them, except Tatum . . . I think Tatum had the kind of temperament that Earl had. I think that's true. Although it's a totally different creature. That kind of temperament was not around, except with Earl Hines and Art Tatum.

"And once a young pianist like myself confronted that, it was quite clear what the Olympian heights were, and what a steep incline to get near there.

"The more specific answer has to do with choice of notes, things of that sort, and sounds to me more trivial than what I was trying to say. He added to the risk of improvisation this technical peril that would make you want to duck. He'd wade right into it. And so, again, with Tatum as well, there was this ability to -- how should I say it? -- embrace ecstasy. Earl Hines could do that. Transporting the listener . . . and probably himself as well. I don't think I ever heard him do anything safe."

Mel played a few years at Nick's. One can imagine that he startled the customers, the lanky kid with his glasses and fair hair and serious respectable mien. Writer George Simon eventually arranged for him to audition for Goodman, who promptly hired him for the enormous (for the time) salary of $500 a week, and Mel found himself in the fast company of Sid Catlett, Cootie Williams, and Goodman.

His compositions for the band included *The Earl*, written in tribute to Hines, *Mission to Moscow*, and *Clarinade*. In *The Earl*, his own solo work revealed how much of Hines he had absorbed, including the fluent running octaves and a startling dexterity. These works were the foreshadow of his later career.

I said, "When I was a kid, classical music and jazz were looked on as two separate musics, and when some of the guys went to conservatories, why, jazz was being corrupted. But I have become more and more aware that a hell of a lot of the early people, such as James P. Johnson and Willie the Lion Smith, had good training. You can hear the roots of stride in Chopin and that set of variations Schumman wrote on his wife's maiden name. The left hand pattern. Even the trumpet players had good brass training. The myth of separate, competitive musics doesn't make sense."

"Of course," Mel said. "I never took the separatism seriously. I thought it was merely a way of making bad use of bad categories. Pay no attention to it. You know, I remember there was a guitarist, I wish I could remember his name, a jazz player, he was the first one I ever heard play excerpts of *Wozzeck*."

"On guitar?"

"Yes! I was *stunned*. This was in the thirties."

"That he even knew *Wozzeck* . . . "

"There wasn't a player in the New York Philharmonic who knew it, I can guarantee you. The fact is that not only the eighteenth and nineteenth century had been exploited and explored by a lot of early jazz players -- I'm talking about Fats Waller and so on, not today's kids who are in the atmosphere of college. You're exactly right. Jazz and classical music were looked on as very different because of the sociological, not the musical, environment."

"Well," I said, "there were a lot of writers for publications like *Down Beat* who knew nothing of the classical repertoire, and were incapable of noticing sources."

"There's something else," Mel said. "When I think of Bix and *In a Mist* and so on, I want to say that the jazz player could be counted on to respond more intelligently to the more interesting advanced, serious music, than any of the so-called classical players. I loathe the term 'classical', it's a misnomer, but you know what I mean."

"Yes, but we're stuck with it, as we're stuck with the term 'jazz.'"

"Yes. But the jazz player, unquestionably, even if he only said, 'My God, dig those changes!', was responding in a far more profound sense to everything advanced -- that includes Chopin, by the way -- than the classical players. I think you've hit it on the head when you say there were a lot of guys writing who simply didn't know. They didn't have the foggiest."

"Did Earl know the legit repertoire?"

Emphatically: "Yes!" Then: "It was a narrow range, by which I mean he knew some Beethoven, some Brahms. He certainly knew some Scarlatti and some Bach. Then at that point in his life he got busy with Detroit, Chicago. I heard him play some Chopin, by the way, kidding. He would laugh. You don't have the technique that Earl had out of the gutter, don't kid yourself. He was a startling player.

"In that sense, I never thought of myself as an exception."

I said, "Don Redman was a schooled musician, Lunceford was a schooled musician. Bix was listening to Stravinsky."

"No question," Mel said. "You can note it from his piano pieces."

"Now, all of those guys were becoming aware of the movements in modern music in the 1920s. William Grant Still was studying with Varese by 1927. The harmony in dance bands became more adventurous through the 1930s until you got Boyd Raeburn in the '40s, and Bob Graettinger's *City of Glass* for Kenton, which sounded radical to me at the time but no longer does. I can't believe that the arrangers were not aware of all that was going on with the extension of harmony in European music. Bill Challis was starting to use some of that stuff when he was writing for Goldkette. Is there an answer to this question: were the writers waiting for the public to catch up?"

"I think I'll surprise you," Mel said. "They were waiting for the bandleaders to catch up. The bandleaders were much more aware of what a negotiable commodity was." He chuckled. "When an arrangement would be brought in and rejected because 'That's too fancy,' that was a signal that I was no longer welcome. So I meant exactly what I said. If the

arrangers were waiting for anything, they were waiting for the bandleaders."

"Okay. Given Benny Goodman's inherent conservatism, I am surprised that he welcomed what you wrote. Because some of it was very radical. *Mission to Moscow* is radical for the period."

"Yeah. It gets close to peril," he said. "Now, why would Benny respond very favorably to that? And also, by the way, to Eddie Sauter. I don't think we did this out of slyness. The clarinet music was very interesting. And it was great fun for Benny to play. Yes. *Mission to Moscow*, he had this duet with the piano. So he would put up with these quasi-innovations. I thought that Eddie Sauter brought in some of the most inventive, imaginative things. Eddie was really devoted less to composition than he was to arranging, in the best, deepest sense of 'ranging'. He was really given over to that. I can recall rehearsals when Eddie Sauter would bring music to us, and it would be rejected. A lot was lost. A great deal was lost. On some pieces that we do know -- for example his arrangement for *You Stepped Out of a Dream*, which I always regarded as a really advanced, marvelous kind of thing -- Benny would *thin it out*. And sometimes get the credit for it being a hit, getting it past the a&r men. I don't think the thinning out was an improvement. Quite the contrary. I think that Eddie, and I to a lesser degree, were exploring harmonic worlds that ought to have been encouraged, rather than set aside."

Powell loved the job, the travel, the glamour of the moment when the band rose out of the pit at the Paramount, the attention. Goodman's notorious quirks, peculiar moods, absent-mindedness, and even downright rudeness never fazed him.

"Benny and I got along very well," Mel said. "We remained friends to the end of his life. He always used to make me laugh a lot. I had my own bargain-basement psychology involved. Benny seemed to think that I had a lot of money. I don't know why." He laughed. "It must have been the way I behaved. And therefore he thought I didn't need the job. But he always made me laugh.

"He expected us to fight over who was picking up the tab. And he was making all that money. And then marrying a Vanderbilt!"

Mel Met Peggy Lee when she joined the band in Chicago, "this gorgeous blonde Scandinavian from the deep midwest," Mel remembered. Benny was as cool to her as he was to most new members of the band. Peggy had to sing everything in keys set for Helen Forrest, who had just left the band. She has said that Benny gave her no rehearsal, and that her saviour was Mel Powell, who patiently rehearsed her in whatever little time they had.

"You know the story about Peggy and Benny in the cab?" Mel said. "No? They got into a cab. She was still very shaky. And rightly impressed. Benny at the time was something like Mick Jagger or Elvis Presley. They were sitting in the cab. Benny was chewing his tongue." Mel imitated one of Goodman's mannerisms; he is, aside from anything else, an uncanny mimic. "And he was talking to her. The cab driver was waiting for his instructions. Peggy said, very timidly, 'The driver's waiting.' And Benny said, 'How much do I owe you?'"

Mel laughed hugely at the memory.

"Sid Catlett was in the band when you were," I said.

"I used to really love Sidney Catlett," Mel said. "Whitney Balliett, who I think was a drummer when he was younger, absolutely adored Sid. So did Buddy Rich. So did Louis Bellson. So did Gene Krupa. And there was good reason. I did too.

"Teddy Wilson had a marvelous band at Barney Josephson's Cafe Society Uptown in which Big Sid was the drummer. Often I'd go in. Teddy and I were very good friends. Teddy would ask me to play. And I loved to play. I thought I was imitating him all the time. And playing with Big Sid! It was enchantment to play with that drummer. The taste, the touch. I can't even imagine what would have happened if he'd had the kind of equipment that later drummers had. He had a bass drum, a snare drum, a couple of cymbals, and that's it.

"Sid had an ear for pitch, indefinite or indeterminate pitch. You'd marvel at the way he'd pick spots on the snare drum. And then when he went on the cymbal and started pushing the band! In fact, he was the only one who ever got me to take my hands off the piano. I was taken by the force. I'm sitting here, he's sitting up there. I'm doing whatever I'm supposed to be doing. This was in Chicago in the Sherman Hotel. Sidney was sitting up, third level, with the trumpets. Band's playing, wow! *One O'Clock Jump*. Marvelous! And I'm looking at him. A kind of wink, a smile. It was there, it was actually happening. And he was gritting his teeth, he had the greatest control of that kind of tempo. It *seemed* as if it was loud, but it wasn't. You know what I mean?"

"Sure. When drummers get forceful, they tend to get loud. The drummer who can play forcefully without getting loud is one of God's gifts to music."

"Buddy Rich," Mel said. "That's one of the things Louis Bellson certainly learned from Big Sid. Big Sid was doing this and I was so stunned that believe it or not, unbeknownst to me, my hands just fell. I was just in the audience. And then the piano solo came. It took me a couple of beats. Happily, thank heaven, it wasn't the *Emperor Concerto* or something. I was so taken by that guy's playing."

"Supposedly Benny fired Catlett during a record date. Why?"

"I've never known really what was what," Mel said. "We made *The Earl* on that session."

"Is that why there are no drums on it?"

"Exactly. I am almost certain it was in Liederkrantz Hall in New York. Right then and there, as we were recording. I have been asked a hundred times what happened between Sid and Benny. I will never know."

As much as he liked working with Goodman and the superb musicians Goodman hired, including Charlie Christian, Mel would within a year begin to tire of the band.

He said, "When I to some degree lost interest and went on to do some other things instead, it was largely because

formulas were replacing improvisation in a certain sense. It was still improvised. But very predictable. I don't really want to make anyone sound like a culprit. But the demands of the profession -- I think it was a wonderful band -- nevertheless, every night the same pieces . . .

"I preferred the small band. I think Benny played better when I was the leader than when he was. He was able to loosen up and forget about it."

"I think the best I ever heard him play," I said, "was on your Commodore record of *The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise*."

"I'm not kidding," Mel said. "I do think it was his best."

"Cannonball Adderley came to hate his own hits because he had to play them every night."

"Sure. It's very difficult to stay at the perilous stage. It's very difficult to do that when you know everything that's coming. The whole point is not to know almost anything that's coming.

"I think jazz is the ideal performer's music. Spontaneity is *it*. Make it up as you go. I think it *has* to be that. I think Benny tried hard. There's a great difference between pianists. Certain of them, you hear them, and it sounds like they improvised that. The catch, however, is that every time you hear them, they play exactly that. That's a different business than we're talking about."

I said, "There are some records of Teddy Wilson, different takes of the same tune, where what he plays is pretty set. There's some variation, but a lot of it is set. Certain patterns at certain places."

"Pretty set, yes," Mel said. "No one admired him more than I did. Nevertheless, I'll be audacious enough to say that despite the fact that I took much from him -- as I did from others, from Earl, from Fats too, I think, from Tatum -- the fact is that at any cost, I was improvising. I would be willing to be bad, but I was going to improvise. Teddy would not do that. He always sounded *marvelous*, of course. But that didn't seem to me to be what was necessary.

"Even Louis of all people played as though it were a set piece. But Earl didn't. Earl didn't. Again, the peril, the risk. You had no idea what was going to happen when Hines started to play. And I don't think he did."

After leaving Goodman, Mel did some freelance studio work in New York but then got his draft notice and was shipped to Fort Dix, where he encountered the sergeant who disliked his name. He would not have stayed on latrine duty long in any event: hardly was he accustomed to the feel of his uniform than Major Glenn Miller commandeered him to play in the latter's Army Air Force band, probably the finest Miller ever led. His bandmates included Ray McKinley, Carmen Mastren, Zeke Zarchy, and Peanuts Hucko. The band had a large string section, and Powell was able to write string trios for some of its players. And it began rehearsing at Yale University. Mel had no way of knowing that Yale would become his home in a few short years.

No one in that band was more than thirty years old excepting Miller, who was thirty-eight. Probably the youngest member was a trombonist from Brooklyn named Nat Peck who, at eighteen, was not long out of high school. In due course, a Swing Sextet was organized within the Miller band, with Mel as its director. Long afterwards, Peck said that "Mel took a liking to me for some odd reason and I was chosen to do it . . . The reason I was picked, I think, was that I was the only one in that trombone section who had any sort of experience in playing jazz . . . . Mind you, at the time I was very nervous about it -- I didn't know Mel that well. Mel was a very distant sort of a personality -- not that he was unkind, or anything like that, but he was already very big-time . . . and I used to sit in (the) band a little worried about things and he misinterpreted my attitude. He thought that I was putting him down, or being critical about what was going on in the band, when, to tell you the truth, I was more scared than anything else. He discovered that, though, soon enough and we ended up really very, very good friends."

Peck made these comments to a British writer, Geoffrey Butcher. They are quoted in Butcher's book *Next to a Letter from Home* (Sphere Books, London, England, 1987), a thorough chronicle of the sojourn in England and France of the wartime Miller band, which was far better known to British audiences because of its BBC broadcasts than it was to those in America. That Miller thought as highly of Powell as Goodman before him is evident in Peck's further comment:

"Mel had a completely free hand. The only time Miller ever turned up was on the first rehearsal . . . . Probably it wasn't from lack of interest, but he listened to the broadcasts and he found them eminently satisfactory and decided not to intervene in any way and Mel was free to do as he wanted. If he wanted extra musicians like Bernie Privin he just had them."

The image of an aloof and austere Mel Powell -- and photos from the period show him always serious and unsmiling -- are hard to reconcile with the accessible, affable, very humorous man he is today. But then, the Mel Powell I know has four decades of teaching behind him.

Paris was liberated August 24, 1944. Mel, by then a sergeant and on the testimony of Nat Peck allowed considerable liberty by Miller, managed to slip over from England two or three days later, when the city's mad partying was still in progress.

"I went to the Bibliotheque Nationale," Mel said. "At the time my French was reasonably fluent, which was gratefully acknowledged by the music librarian. As a matter of fact, everybody was out drinking and running around, and here I came in with the eyeglasses and speaking French. The place was absolutely empty. And I asked if I could see some of the early work of Debussy.

"He said, 'Sure.' This was before Xerox, of course. This was the original stuff. Perhaps they had microfiche by then, I'm not sure. There were some photographs, certainly. I have *The Golliwog's Cakewalk* in the autograph. I was shown work he did at the age of eleven or twelve, work that nobody knows. This was the grandest discovery I made. The most remarkable thing was that there was the stuff, the parallel fifths marked as mistakes by the teacher. The harmony was poor. But the counterpoint was incredibly good. Twelve to sixteen part stuff!

This kid at twelve or whatever he was at the Conservatoire." (Debussy entered the Conservatoire at ten.)

"It was exactly the opposite of what you would think," Mel said. "You'd think the harmony would be excellent, the counterpoint perfunctory. Un-unh. The exact opposite."

I found this image -- the bespectacled gangly American kid jazz musician, just twenty-one, alone at a table in the silence and vastness of the Bibliotheque Nationale, poring over childhood manuscripts of Debussy in the midst of the madness of war -- curiously haunting.

Miller prepared to move the entire band to France by Christmas. On December 15, he took off in an 8th Air Force Norseman aircraft piloted by Flight Officer John R.S. Morgan. Mel, Ray McKinley, and singer Johnny Desmond were supposed to be on that flight. But Miller, who detested flying, wanted to keep the plane light because of the inclement weather, and he left the three behind to follow him to Paris in a DC-3. Miller's flight was lost over the channel. McKinley, the one member of the band who was an experienced bandleader, took over the direction of the Miller crew. On Christmas Eve they made a broadcast from the Olympia theater in Paris.

By then Mel's brother Lloyd was also in Paris. A straight-A student in high school, he had been turned down by every American university to which he had applied because he was Jewish, even as the United States was involved in a massive war over, among other issues, the anti-Semitism embraced by Wagner and brought to logical and hideous fruition by Hitler. Lloyd Epstein had been accepted as a medical student at the Sorbonne, and arrived to take up his studies. Mel introduced him to Nat Peck, who was close to Lloyd's age.

After the war, Nat stayed on in Paris, then later moved to London, where he is now a well-known musical contractor. I know him through Francy Boland; Nat was a member of the Kenny Clarke-Francy Boland big band. I mentioned Nat to Mel as one of our mutual acquaintances. Nat's name caused a slight pause. Then:

"Nat discovered my brother's body," Mel said.

"He *what*?"

Mel told me that Nat had gone to Lloyd's rented room and found him dead. "Of what?" I asked.

"We've never known," Mel said.

"Well didn't the French do an autopsy?"

"Yes," Mel said. "The report said essentially that he died of fluid in the lungs. But a doctor friend later told me that that is a result of death, not a cause. I don't know to this day."

Friends say that Mel still carries the trauma of Lloyd's death, and this is apparently so. Mel said, "He's been gone forty-two and a half years."

With the fall of Germany in May of 1945, the Miller band was shipped home to the United States. It was being readied to go to the South Pacific under Ray McKinley's direction when the bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and suddenly it was over.

Mustered out of service, Mel returned for a time to Goodman. He was offered a job on the composition staff of MGM, probably on the recommendation of his friends Lenny Hayton and Andre Previn, who were already there. He took the job and hated it, but it was during this period that he met Martha Scott, who unsentimentally describes herself as "an old actress from Kansas." But, she quickly points out, she grew up in Kansas City when the Basie band was forming there and, later, when Charlie Parker was flexing his wings. She was a stone jazz fan, and the affinity of Mel and Martha was immediate.

Scott, whose professional career began on Broadway when she originated the role of Emily in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* -- "He said it was about life seen from the viewpoint of death," she remarked -- was never one of the Hollywood bathing beauties. She was, rather, an actress of dedication and emotional depth. She and Mel were married in 1946, eventually had two daughters, and remain devoted to each other to this day.

As his duties at MGM palled on him, Mel applied for admission to Yale, submitting a composition to Paul Hindemith, head of the composition department.

By the end of the 1920s, Hindemith, then twenty-five, was esteemed as the outstanding German composer of his generation. Like Mel Powell, he was considered something of a prodigy: conductor of the Frankfurt Opera Orchestra by the age of twenty, and then an outstanding viola player. It was said that he could play every part of every piece of music he ever wrote. He was an outspoken opponent of the serialism pioneered and expounded by Arnold Schoenberg and argued that all music was inherently tonal. (It should be noted that Schoenberg himself objected to the term "atonal.")

In 1934 Hindemith was publicly denounced by Josef Goebbels as "a spiritual non-Aryan" and a "cultural Bolshevist" and although he was not, as Arnold Schoenberg was, Jewish, he joined a large migration of German artists, Schoenberg and Thomas Mann among them, and more from other countries, including Stravinsky, Milhaud, and Bartok, to the safety of the United States.

Hindemith's music is notable for its economy, clarity, and total command of craft. His masterpiece is the opera *Mathis der Maler*, best-known to modern audiences in the orchestral suite he derived from it.

His devotion to craftsmanship as opposed to private aesthetic expression caused his work to be dubbed *Gebrauchsmusik*, or utility music, a term he disliked as much as Schoenberg did "atonalism."

Hindemith was an outstanding educator. He had taught in Berlin and Ankara, and continued his work at Yale University. His prestige at the time Powell applied to study with him was enormous. Indeed, probably the biggest names among classical composers living at that time were Hindemith, Shostakovitch, Schoenberg, Bartok, and Stravinsky.

"Now," I said to Mel, "the last jazz records of yours I had were in the early days of the LP, the ten-inch LP. You did some sessions for John Hammond on Vanguard, things like *Russian Lullaby* with Ruby Braff and Edmond Hall and a wonderful rhythm guitar player named Steve Jordan."

"Yes."

"Why did you keep going back to jazz and working with Goodman if that was not going to be your direction? For money?"

"Yes. Money."

"And how were you funding your studies?"

"The G.I. bill. And don't forget, by then I was married. I had a wife who was a working actress. We could not have lived as well as we did had it not been for Martha's income." A chuckle. "I hope I've made it up to her."

"You wrote a *Sonatina* that you recorded in one of those albums. And I realized a change was in the works."

"That was serious."

"Then I heard a piece you wrote for the Louisville Orchestra."

"Really?"

"Yeah. For three years I covered that program. Elliott Carter, Ginastera, Orrega Sallas, all of those new works. I reviewed all that stuff. But that's when I heard one of your orchestral pieces. And then you just ceased to play jazz?"

"Yes. Except when we got a little bagged, Hindemith and I. He was to deliver the Norton Lectures at Harvard, *A Composer's World.* I had written a paper on Alban Berg. Apparently I was the most literate of the group that interested him. So he invited me to his house to touch up his lectures.

"Which I did. You know, Andre Previn is a phenomenon for his command of English, when you consider he didn't speak it until he was fourteen. Andre used to howl when I told him about this: how I would say to Hindemith, 'No, we don't say, "now to my house going." We don't do that in English. I would change it and he would always fight. He would say, 'My words! You're changing my meaning!' I'd say, 'Maestro, no. Take my word for it.' And we'd get loaded. Liebfraumilch was his big drink.

"Sure enough, he had two pianos upstairs. He'd get a little bit bagged and we'd go up, and we would do two things. We would play Verdi opera. Or we would play his jazz of the 1920s. He had played it in bad bands in Germany. Very few people know that. I was amazed. He would sit there and play the most atrocious stuff."

"Okay," I said. "Now, about *gebrauchsmusik* . . ."

"Yes. Which he hated. He did say it once in an interview. What he meant was really directed at Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, whom he knew. He was younger than they. He meant that music could not continue this enormous schism between public and composer and indeed between composer and performer. He said it had to be more direct, more accessible. And that there was no longer any need to extend modernism. It had had its extension, and it was time to consolidate. It was really directing a critique against those three."

"He didn't mean music for the assembly line, music for the maternity home, music for the insurance office . . ."

"He did not mean what Stalin meant by music of the people, no."

The students in music schools of the present day may not know that Mel once played with Benny Goodman, but those at Yale did at the time he enrolled there. Hindemith was unimpressed by his extreme facility and subjected him to severe compositional disciplines. Mel says that Hindemith had the greatest pedagogical mind he ever encountered.

"He would look at something of mine and say, 'Po-vell.' Being German he couldn't pronounce Powell. He'd say, 'Povell, why have you written this?' I would say, 'I feel that -- " And he would say, 'I don't care how you feel. That is for your doctor. Why did you write it?'"

Mel survived, earning his master's and becoming Hindemith's teaching assistant. People in the jazz world would hear of him occasionally, but he seemed like a fading wraith. When Hindemith left Yale to return to Europe (where he died in 1963), Mel succeeded him, becoming a full professor and head of the composition department.

The friendship with Benny Goodman continued. And Mel continued to be amused by his former employer.

"One evening," he said, "we were going to his apartment to have dinner with Mel Ferrer and Audrey Hepburn, who had been married. And I was so mad about her. The apartment was at Sixty-sixth at Third. We were riding. It was raining. We were going down Fifty-seventh Street. The cabby doesn't know it's Benny Goodman. Probably would have been affected, had he known. He was kind of surly. And he is *speeding* and it is *raining.* I'm young enough to think nothing can ever hurt me. But Benny is nervous as can be. So Benny said, 'Hey, hey, hey . . . Pops' -- of course. 'Hey, hey, Pops, take it easy, take it easy.' The cab driver slows down, says, 'Jesus Christ, you can't make much money on this run.' He wants to get rid of us. We come to Third Avenue. This is the time when the Elevated is still there. Steel pillars. Now, especially with rain, look out! We turned up Third, and Benny says, 'Now go fast.'

"That's a typical Benny Goodman story."

I said, "Everybody seems to have Benny Goodman cab stories."

Mel said, "Do you want another one?"

"Sure."

"This is not a cab story. But it's an honest to goodness Benny story. When I had already become a professor at Yale, we lived nearby. Benny was in Stamford. Martha and I and our kids were living in New Canaan. New Canaan and Stamford are really twins. Eight miles, ten miles at most. We spent a lot of time together, actually, laughing and scratching. Even then we were talking about the old days.

"I was very fond of Alice Goodman. She was so attractive as a human being. She was delicious. Martha and I and Alice were much closer in many ways than when we'd be with Benny. Alice was a big baseball fan, New York Giants before San Francisco. Loved Leo Durocher and so on. One Sunday, she's sitting there knitting, as only a Vanderbilt can knit. We were chatting. We're sitting on approximately fourteen acres. Alice has got a couple of bucks. Benny's got megabucks from the times before the taxes. The spread is very tasteful, very

classy. It wasn't ostentatious, largely because Alice knew how not to be ostentatious. So there we are, sitting, chatting, baseball game, when out comes Benny, red-faced, clearly agitated. He's got a bunch of paper in his hand. And this has become a theme song in our family.

"Out he comes, and he says, 'Alice, who's been eating all this butter?'"

At this point Martha entered the room and Mel told her he'd been recounting the incident of the butter. Martha said, "I had a theory about Benny. I said there was a great big long electrical cord that ran to Benny. And sometimes he was plugged in and sometimes he wasn't."

Gradually the laughter subsided. I said, "When you withdrew from jazz, the air in the press was sort of like you had deserted this music for classical music. There was that view of jazz as gutter music and your move being an aspiration to respectability."

"Yes. To this day, I will come upon old friends from the jazz world, who will, in fun and good spirits, call me a traitor. It always seemed absurd to me, since what passes for my own philosophical outlook is that we ought to do *everything* -- when we can.

"Oddly enough, I am still known, I think -- well, this generation doesn't know anything -- as a decent jazz pianist, despite the fact that I spent comparatively little time in jazz, which must mean I came to the attention of people when jazz was the most attractive, the most illustrious, the most public and the most famous kind of popular music. It was just extraordinary. I've often thought it was much like late nineteenth century Italy, where the best music of the time was by coincidence also the most popular."

I said, "It was a very short period. If you date the era from Whiteman and Ellington and Goldkette, it lasted about twenty years, but its big period was from the time Benny broke through until 1946, when so many bands folded, which makes it about ten years. Rock-and-roll has been with us for nearly forty."

"Isn't that amazing?" Mel said. "I assume I've missed something very important in not knowing about rock-and-roll."

"I assume I haven't. Someone is always telling me there are nuggets there if only you have the patience to search. I say that Bach is nothing but nuggets. The lode is infinitely richer, and how much time does each of us have to explore it?"

"Yes," Mel said, laughing hard, "but I deal with young kids every day."

"That music has no harmonic interest to me."

"None whatsoever."

"I find it rhythmically stiff."

"Rhythmically, it's terrible," he said, "and melodically, it's absurd. And the lyrics, whenever I can understand the declamation, which isn't frequently . . . Well, I do understand the word 'baby.'"

"The other one is 'girl,'" I said. "As in, 'Hey, girl.' They throw 'girl' in a lot."

"Much beyond that, I don't hear. Perhaps the lyrics are interesting, though I think not."

"Well I, as a lyricist, find them horribly boring."

"Well, you must reassure me," Mel said with mock sobriety. "You know, I think the inability to admire contributed greatly to the growth of rock-and-roll. When you and I first heard music, we began right off the bat saying, 'That's marvelous! I can't do that!' I don't care whether it was Jascha Heifetz or Fats Waller. When I first heard Tatum, my inclination was to say, 'I can't do that!' But the kids hearing rock-and-roll say, 'I can do that.' And I think that that kind of narcissism came into the world . . . . "

"Adlai Stevenson came up with the phrase. He said, 'We have lost our regard for excellence.' It was in everything, every field."

"In everything. It also got confused with what was politically perhaps very attractive, and that was the disrespect for authority. That's fine. But I think it got mixed up with tha

I said, "Well, there was a p.r. campaign by the entertainment industry to the effect that any respect for excellence was elitism, and that this was somehow anti-democratic. That's more of the nonsense that helped wreck this culture, which is in pretty bad shape."

"Bad shape," Mel concurred with a sigh. "You're talking to someone who tomorrow morning meets with young people in their twenties. And I have to bear in mind that it's something like thirty-three years since Humphrey Bogart died. So I have to be careful. Some of my references are useless. I'm talking about so-called classical music."

"You mean, young classical musicians, who don't know the tradition?"

"Don't know it. My contribution to the kind way of looking at it has been to argue that, ironically, composers like Elliott Carter, Milton Babbitt, and myself, are in fact Eurocentric. It's ironic since, certainly in my own case, and in Milton's, jazz played a big part in our development."

"Yeah, Milton Babbitt played jazz clarinet, I believe."

"Yes. There's no reason to know that. What I was going say is that our form of composition tends to be Eurocentri It derives from Stravinsky and Schoenberg, two different worlds merging, more or less. Schoenberg has won out for the waning years of our century.

"But the kids coming up today are *not* Eurocentric. One day I was talking about Mahler, and I made a reference to *The Magic Mountain*. I got those glazed eyes. And then I realized they were thinking of the playland Magic Mountain, and they wanted to know what Mahler had to do with a roller coaster. We no longer have a common referential framework.

"I was talking to Susan Sontag. She was bitching that she had done two weeks teaching in Salt Lake City or someplace. I said, 'Two weeks? I've been teaching for forty years. What chutzpah to say that.' I told her about the Magic Mountain business. She said, 'You were looking for kids to know Thomas Mann?' I said, 'Yes, I was.' She said, 'I just spent two weeks in Utah looking for anyone who had heard of Mussolini!'

"That broke me up."

(To be continued)