Gene Lees
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P.O. Box 240
Ojai, Calif.
93024-0240

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The Worlds of Mel Powell
Part Two

"The question of accessibility in music has troubled me for years," I said. "Schoenberg is still considered avant garde art. And it's getting on toward being a century later. So are Joyce and Picasso. You were talking about the period when the best music of Europe was also the most popular. What is the responsibility of the composer to the public? You strike me as a fascinating dichotomy, because of your ability to make tremendously accessible music such as *Mission to Moscow*, and [illegible]n to go in this other direction."

"The answer is direct," Mel said. "I don't feel any particular responsibility toward anyone other than the severest critic, whom I identify as myself. It's not elitism I'm talking about."

"Well, I'm an elitist in the sense that I certainly prefer Jerome Kern to Lennon and McCartney."

"There you go," Mel said. "Exactly. So do I, by the way. Not only that. I happen to think of Rodgers and Hart as men of genius. Really. I'm absolutely bowled over by them. But from my work, you'd say, 'Did Powell really say that?'"

I said, "Well the question that has been hanging over us for a long time is: is the tonal system obsolete?"

"Oh, I see. Well. Actually, we're making a bad mistake in talking in terms of tonal or non-tonal -- I call it non-tonal -- music. Out of deference to Schoenberg, I call it non-tonal. It's a mistake on Schoenberg's part, on all our parts, to talk in terms of pitch, which is what the tonal or non-tonal system focuses on. It focuses on pitch. The truth is that the fundamental element, fundamental dimension, of the art is time, and the way time is used is *far more* strategic, more mystifying, and more important than the way pitch is used.

"It's easy enough to say that Schoenberg is obsolete, Berg is obsolete. Eurocentric is obsolete, if you hear John Adams. You'd think there had been a most remarkable regression, with the Beatles coming after Duke Ellington. Chronologically, there is something wrong in terms of sophistication, complexity, and so on. And here is John Adams, a young guy of thirty-eight or thirty-nine or so, writing operas and so on. It's simply music on a loop. It goes around and around and around. Like Philip Glass or Steve Reich. Just over and over again. What we would in jazz call two, three, four-bar riffs. They just keep going for twenty minutes, and then another riff.

"Non-tonality is extraordinary in what is implicit in it. But what is far more significant and extraordinary is the nature of the usage of time. That's where revolutions are made, you see. For that reason I think that Claude Debussy is perhaps the most revolutionary of all twentieth-century composers. He changed our view of time. There's been a mistake all these years to be looking at his thirteenth chords and whole-tone scales. Forget that. The extraordinary thing that Debussy did, and only *l'esprit Gallique* could do it, was to flatten out the difference between an up beat and a down beat.

"Here would be dominantic harmony, and *here* would be dominantic harmony. Unthinkable from the German point of view. So he began to equalize, and in doing that he touched on what I think is one of the essentials in the new music and the more interesting music."

"That's a startling thought," I said. "I have always viewed him for the harmonic factor."

"Let us grant that. But all that stuff was there in Cesar Franck. All that stuff was there in Wagner, all that stuff was there in Richard Strauss. Really.

"I think our teaching and learning have become so subordinate to the needs of institutions -- I'm sounding awful, saying this -- that we tend to emphasize the more teachable. Pitch happens to be very teachable.

"I could, in three days, show you the entirety of Schoenberg, Berg, Webern. I could show you how the pitch operates. And it's original and interesting. But I could show you the systematics.

"But I'd have a hell of a time telling you what Webern was up to with respect to *time*. And how he *prevented you* from sensing it. So when you looked at the score, you would say, 'My God, was that four-four? Where was the down beat? Was there a structural down beat?' Etcetera.

"*That*'s where the mysteries reside. And Debussy was the first. Where I bet the ranch is *L'apres midi d'un faun*. I always tell the students, 'Please, when the flute begins that piece, don't look at the conductor. Because Debussy has done everything possible to keep you from knowing what the hell is going on with . . .'" And he sang the opening flute line of the piece. "Weird. Where is one? He's done everything possible to conceal it. Don't watch the fool doing this . . . " And he waved his hand slowly, like a conductor. "Which gives you beats that aren't there. They aren't sonic, they aren't acoustic.

"No, I can't rave enough about the incredible invention by Debussy of a new usage of time, and I think that our century at its best is about that. It's one of the reasons why I think jazz is so important, and why I think rock and roll is not. Rock and roll is not only not a new use of time -- for the most part -- it is a very dull, old use. It would be like somebody writing in the so-called classical world like Clementi.

"So. Yes. The use of time. I speak, possibly for only aesthetic purposes, of temporal structure -- I am tired of the word 'rhythm'. Most of the analysis that I teach now -- driving the kids nuts -- is indeed to show how uninteresting (this is a terrible thing to say!) most eighteenth and nineteenth century European music is. Terrible. I should bite my tongue.

"I'm speaking only of the rhythmic dimension, of course. Not textural. Bach, I think, is the greatest composer who ever lived. Or the *incredible* brain work of Brahms that's not widely known. He was very much a twentieth-century kind of thinker. The music, disguised as pretty lyricism, has a lot of terribly serious, inventive kinds of things. There is an irony in that we thought Wagner was the *zukunstwerke*, the music of the future, artwork of the future, and Brahms was the old shoe of the Romantic era.

"It's turned out quite differently. Brahms' way of putting music together turns out to be much closer to what interests

post-Schoenbergians. Even though Boulez doesn't play him.

"After studying with Hindemith, I wrote quite like him, and quite like most Hindemith students. And I strongly recommend that people do that. I think it's foolish to study with, let's say, Bartok, in order to write like Schoenberg or Berg. If you are fortunate enough, as I was, to study with a world master such as Hindemith, the very best thing to do is write quite like him."

"That makes complete sense to me," I said. "In the Renaissance, students were made to copy the works of the masters. If you want to find out about his brush strokes, his texture, if you want to get the feel of the paint on the brush and give of the canvas, copy him until you get it right."

"Yes," Mel said, "and every now and then one of the masterpieces turns out to be a copy!"

I said, "I was planning to be a painter, and studied not writing but art. When I decided I wanted to write, I applied that method, no doubt unconsciously, to learning how. First I learned to type so that the physical process of writing became unconscious, although I did not have that much foresight. And I copied out entire passages of writers I admired, Steinbeck, Saroyan, Thomas Wolfe, Faulkner. I thought what I was doing was pathetic, this imitation of far-away gods. I just wanted to touch them. But it was a good method, and I'd recommend it to aspiring writers. When I had typed out paragraphs, pages, from *The Long Valley*, believe me, I had not only memorized much of it, I could actually feel how Steinbeck put it together, that King James version rhythm he had. I not only understood it, I *felt* it, and I learned how to convey visual imagery in words. I got that from Steinbeck and painters. Then, I think, very early, there was a period when I wrote like a pallid Dos Passos. And at one point, I got my hands on some transcriptions of your solos. We had no photocopy machines in those days, and the only way I could get to keep them was to copy them out by hand. It took days. I really knew those solos. I couldn't play them, but I knew them."

"Well," Mel said, "that's almost essentially what I did with Hindemith. Including the Louisville piece you heard. It's an analogue of a piece of Hindemith's. How else can you really come to terms with a master? You go deeply, deeply into what he knows."

"That's why I get annoyed when I hear critics saying some young jazz player is 'derivative' of somebody."

"My goodness, yes. Now, when you do that, copy a master, there comes a moment that is miraculous. Not necessarily happy. There comes the moment when you now have full grasp of the technique and craft of a great master in his terms, and you are aware of the fact that it ain't . . . your . . . cup of tea. It is not with lack of respect or even reverence for it. *Et apres*, as the French say. You're going to write another Hindemith piece? We don't need another Hindemith piece.

"You know, Hindemith taught negatively. He rarely gave a compliment. Eventually I gave him a piece, and he said, 'That's pretty good, Po-vell. I could have written it.' And he laughed and said, 'I think I did.'

"Now that takes a couple of years, to get that command of another man's usage. When it happens -- it was for me, in any case; and others I've talked to: Pierre Boulez, they've all experienced it -- it was one of the most strategic crises I've gone through. It came to me that now I could do *anything*, I had the technique to do anything compositionally, I could now sit down and plot out my life. I'll write ten symphonies, in order to get one past Beethoven. I'll do three operas, I'll do fourteen piano concertos, etcetera etcetera. But it would have to be in that language, because that's where the technique is.

"That was a terrible moment. I dropped the pen, at least metaphorically. I said, 'We *have* Hindemith. And we don't really require me to do anything, unless perhaps I should just teach, since I understand it so deeply.

"I realized it could not work for me, because the rhythm was square, and that I had been forcing myself in the early Hindemith pieces into, uh, corny rhythmic sequences in order to let the system work. It *demanded* that.

"A real style finds every one of its dimensions analogous. If Mozart ends a phrase melodically, he does so harmonically as well. He does so in terms of orchestral color -- the winds have just come in. Or just gone out. He does so in terms of pitch. Everything ends simultaneously. It may be only measure eight. Wagner does not. It's Romanticism. The dimensions are arguing with one another.

"When I say that every dimension in a real, real classic style -- in the other sense -- really works, all you have to do is imagine Debussy orchestrating Bruckner or Mahler. It would be absurd. Or vice versa. All the dimensions have to be aligned. Think of the vagueness in Debussy. There's no possibility that it would work, if he orchestrated Mahler.

"When it came to me that what I had been doing deliberately with the fundamental element, time, was making it very Germanic, very straight-forward, because it was the only way that that language Hindemith had taught, and invented for his artistic purposes, would work, that was a dismal day. I had to go crawling around elsewhere. What I could now do very well was not what I cared to do.

"On the one hand I had learned what I wanted to know about the craft. But no, this somehow would not serve my needs. And of course at the same time I ran into some other composers, Webern etcetera. Most important was that in order for Hindemith's language or any so-called neo-classic writing to work, it was necessary to have a pulse, or striated time." He tapped a steady beat on his desk. "The harmony would not work without it, the melodies would make no sense, indeed even the coloring -- although that begins to get complicated -- would make no sense.

"I once, in a class, speaking of timbre or color, showed -- maybe being a little too smart; I was a young professor then -- that Mozart with the simplest of orchestras manifested the most impeccable correlation of structure and color. For example, a move from X to Y, usually from tonic to dominant, would be marked. For it was there, when the dominant was reached, that the woodwinds came in. He's only got woodwinds and strings in his orchestra; the horns and the trumpets

play long notes. In short, all the dimensions have to stack up and agree, to make any sense. So, facing all these things really caused me a good deal of discontent. That was a rather dark night. Or in the title of a novel that struck me the other day: *The Past Is Another Country*.

"It's easier for me now to look at that comparatively young fellow who was meandering about. I was heading for or had arrived at thirty. So here I was, equipped as I had wished to be, and yet couldn't use the stuff. The only analogue I can think of is that it was as if somebody had bought you a baseball bat, a catcher's mitt, and a mask, and now you wanted to play football.

"I had to start all over again, within the domain of so-called serious music. And I began, to speak in the simplest terms, to veer from neo-classicism, which entails many things, not just tonality, which is the most notable perhaps or at least the most discussed. What should be equivalently obvious is the formal structures of classicism, sonata allegros, scherzos and trios."

"Debussy had little attraction to those forms."

"Well," Mel said, "Debussy is *so sly*. What he does is so underground.

"Now," he said, "I am now going to give you one thought that is going to be repugnant to you as a lyricist. I now tell my students that if they are interested in writing art songs, that the ideal thing for them to do -- and I give them some formulas and things -- is write melismatically. Why? The very thing you as a lyricist dislike."

"Not if it's total," I said. "If you're going to use the voice as a wordless instrument, that's another thing. But if you're going to use words . . . "

"Ah but there's a deeper reason," Mel said. "They always get the point, and it saves five lectures. I tell them, if you try to compete with the great American pop songs, you're going to be knocked out in the first inning. Because of the match of tone and words. Isn't that kind of clever of me? I tell them, don't compete. Go over somewhere else."

I said, "I am always conscious of intervals in speech and even in birds, all sorts of recognizable intervals. Once, in a Chinese restaurant I heard the owner and his wife arguing in the kitchen. I kept catching inversions of the major triad. And emotion was being conveyed. Entire communications can be made by speech inflections and pitch alone."

"That goes into training for actors, by the way," Mel said.

"Pitch to me has distinct communication value."

"No question," Mel said, and sang, "Johnny," a falling minor third, as if calling a child. Specifically, he hit A-flat and F.

"The first inversion of the major triad has a very playful sound," I said.

"Sure."

"Kern is an utterly distinctive melodist working within a system that is now centuries old."

"Yes."

"And you say 'Don't compete with the likes of Kern."

"Or Oscar Hammerstein or Lorenz Hart," Mel said. "My God. I actually pushed and taught the melisma because they ain't never gonna do 'Night and day, you are the one . . . . ' So in a certain sense, I've given them the easy way out. Now, on the other hand, abstractly, the melisma can be expressive of whatever you want to be expressive of. However, non-tonality restricts the expressive domain, the terrain. There are restraints. I could make you giggle by saying, Imagine Schoenberg writing a comic opera. It ain't there. Forget it. The only thing that will make you laugh is the idea of such a thing happening. It's not going to happen with Webern, it's not going to happen with Alban Berg. Non-tonality, or atonality as some like to call it, is restricted in its expressive power. Well, that's the price you pay. Most languages *are* restrictive in their expressive power."

"Sure. You can say and think things in French you can't say in English, and vice versa. The French have no word for upstairs. Or home."

"Exactly. You don't say, 'Thou shithead.' I mean, please. One or the other. I can handle either language. Similarly in music. I point out that, after all, opera was alive and well in Bach's time. Bach didn't touch it. Bach wrote philosophic disquisitions. The fugue is not a form, the fugue is a process, a thinking process. Whereas Verdi, more than a century later, would simply write a so-called Italian sixth chord with two clarinets and two bassoons in *Rigoletto* and scare the hell out of you. You look at the page and say, 'What *is* that? It's just a chord there.' Yeah, well, it's the *right* chord at the *right* moment for Italian opera. Bach didn't touch it. His language *also* had constraints.

"So. I make that quite clear. I say, 'Don't try for "the corn is as high as an elephant's eye." Don't try for it. You ain't gonna get it, unless you've got Oscar Hammerstein as your collaborator.'"

"But we're getting," I said, "at what is dichotomous with you. I have been on a collision course with this thought for years: What is music for? Why do we do it? What is its specific function? I've always said it's a mysterious language. We don't know why and how music affects the emotions."

Mel said, "One of my pet theories is that at some point, someone yelled, 'Help!' And that would have meant hysteria. And he or she in a moment of serenity when he or she had escaped recalled that peculiar effect of the heightened inflection, and did it again, only this time without the panic."

I said, "This is the theory of music as abstracted speech. But I have become convinced that speech is abstracted music. To me, the idea of music as symbolic speech must be inherently incorrect, because there was music before there was speech, if only in the cries of birds. So I suspect that speech *arises out of* music. We're never going to know."

"Oh, I'm sure we will," Mel said. "Some day we'll do it with confidence. The only way we can handle this is when we close in on 1. What we mean by emotion, and 2. What is the bridge that creates the linkage between emotion and the expression thereof. Words are there, of course. But music is there, so much more powerfully in so many ways. We organize the world into space and time. Fine. It seems to correspond to our senses. But that's the way we see the world. So do we

see the world as: This is intellect, this is intuition, etcetera. Although I can never do that seriously.

"One day I walked down the street in New Haven with a young colleague of mine, who was a professor of biochemstry. I at the time was practicing scientism. That is, my lectures eliminated all adjectives, etcetera etcetera. This guy, on the other hand, said, 'Are you familiar with the binomial theorem?' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Beautiful, isn't it?'

"I was stunned to hear the word 'beautiful.' And he meant beautiful in the sense *we* mean beautiful. And I thought, 'This guy is over there in the biochemistry hence science department. I am talking about registral invariance, which is a very complex way of saying a certain tessitura is predominant. I'm talking like a brain surgeon or something, and this guy is talking like a jazz fan. It was like, 'Dig these changes!' or something. He meant *beautiful*. So therefore let us assume that it's only convenient for us to say, 'Thus and so is intellectual, thus and so is intuition.' Now you've got that wonderful Stravinsky expression: 'Intuition never misleads you. When it does, it's not intuition.' That's nice, that's cute.

"But that's the best we can do in organizing things. You read Einstein, as far as you can, which is not terribly far in my case. I can read ideas and opinions, I can read those books that he wrote. And if that isn't 'warm' and if that isn't almost vibrato on the cello!

"So I am willing to accept the modes of organization with a reservation underneath. When you come to the question of what is music *for*, we're touching on that kind of fundamental thing. You know, Verdi fell to the floor the first time he heard a big C-major chord in church, in the little Italian village where his mother took him to church. He fell into a dead faint. You can imagine this resounding, great huge organ playing a big C-major chord with all the stops out, two feet, four feet, sixteen feet, everything. And the kid went plop! Fainted dead away. I don't think there was any word or any combination of words that could have affected him that way.

"Maybe at that moment -- we can only guess -- all these things were integrated, what we call the intellect, the intuition, the emotions, all the things we have names for. Maybe music can do that."

I said, "It's been a mystery all my life, how music does this, causes tears, causes laughter. I've heard jazz solos that made me laugh, laugh out loud at something somebody played, and I can't even tell you what was funny. It just was."

"Absolutely," Mel said.

"Not Alec Templeton. A hot solo that was funny."

"Wit. Caprice," Mel said. "Bunny Berigan playing *I Can't Get Started*, if you happen to like that, which I do. Music can do that. Music can integrate. I always must say this apologetically: I know very few writers of words who can even approach this. Music can make you fully aware of the inadequacy of the verbal language."

"I call music the language beyond language. Music can express, and evoke, the emotions for which there are no words. Bill Evans could play shades of emotion you didn't know you had. Bill played emotions that were so private that I have never even *tried* to express them."

"Sort of as if he looked over to see is anybody watching?" Mel said. "This is *my* business."

"Given that this capacity is there," I said, "what do you expect people -- I am asking not the you you, but a whole range of people, including Milton Babbitt . . . "

"Elliott Carter," Mel added, knowing where my question was leading.

"What do you expect the audience to bring to this experience?"

"The ability to say 'Wow!' That's all."

"How do they get to this if the language is strange to them?"

"By giving up the attempt to understand anything, and marveling at imagination. Wow!"

"I got some moments of that out of your Pulitzer concerto, which I haven't yet listened to enough. I get moments of out of Penderecki and Ligetti. But not for long. I can't take an hour of it."

Mel said, "Well, I have these egomaniacal aspirations. I hope that the thirty-two minutes or so that the piece takes, the concerto, doesn't seem long. I've heard ten-minute pieces that sounded longer! At least to me."

"I didn't realize it was that long," I said. "I was going to tell you it seems rather short."

"Good! That's good. I'm happy about that.

"I think . . . This is dangerous to say, because God knows the younger people today don't need any authorization for stupidity. They seem to have all the stupidity they need. But you can take virtually any piece of music -- you might even be able to do this with prose -- and show relationships that are so involuted, so strategic, clever, crucial, yet were never known to the composer. You can only do it backwards. Here's the piece that one writes. And now the analysis."

"Sure. And if you were consciously aware of all these things while working, you couldn't do it in the first place. Technique must be unconscious. If you have to think about the clutch and the gearshift and the brake, you aren't ready to drive the car. Unless the mechanics of the craft have sunk to that level, you're not even in business."

"Yes," Mel said. "*That* then is what I meant. Now you haven't taught as long and as fervently as I have. There are tricks. I get into gags and tricks and gimmickry to save time. One of the things I do is to go into complex, difficult, Schenkerian analysis. Schenker's point is that the *Eroica* is about E-flat. Well that's a hell of a comment," Mel said, laughing. "Yes, I understand what he means. Brrrravo," he continued, rolling the Italian r. "Only an Austrian could say that. A Frenchman would say, 'Oh please, Heinrich, knock it off!' In any case, I do this very elaborate Schenkerian analysis. And the kids take notes. It's one way of finding out what the key Schenkerian ideas were." He sang fragments of a melody, emphasizing structural points. "The kids don't know what the tune is yet. And at the end, the tune turns out to be *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. The relationships make you salivate. But it's really only *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, not one of the monumental works, not the kind of piece you take to bed with you.

"If you approach the task of musical analysis as though you are decoding some cryptic message, you're wrong to start with. It's not what it's about. You will see and hear in the work of a gifted and competent craftsman many things that are craftsmanlike, just as you will with any writer. You will see them playing with words like wizards on the stage. Sometimes I'll read a sentence or two of Loren Eiseley, say, who was very careful about words. He's using one or at maximum two syllable words. But there probably are certain things that a writer would see, patterns of vowels, rhythm, long sentences, short sentences, the building of paragraphs. All those things should be known after you have learned the craft. But I can show you much more complex, profound relationships after the fact: did the composer know that?

"One of my favorite similes in contemporary literature is in a short story of John Updike. The couple is getting divorced. It's all very civilized. They are back in Rome. That's where they were married. Updike does some marvelous tricks with light, and so forth. He was, like you, trained as a painter.

"Updike has these two people riding on a bus, reliving the better part of their lives as they bid farewell to one another. They ride past the Coliseum which, he says very cavalierly, looks like a collapsed wedding cake. I go to pieces. Dear John! Am I right? Look what's happening. First of all, if you've ever seen the Coliseum, you don't have to know anything about these two people, *that* is what it looks like. And then you have the double whammy of the breakup of the marriage. A collapsed wedding cake, a collapsed marriage. Please! It's almost too good. I say, 'Yes, that's magic.' Now, nobody can convince me that John didn't *know*. He knew what he was doing. That's typical, high-level craft. But there's plenty of stuff I'll show you in Updike that indicates that John did not know."

"He did and he didn't," I said. "That's back to Yes and No."

"Yes. It's also yes and no. The Coliseum. What a symbol."

"Well," I said, "it's always coming up: if you work hard enough, God will be nice to you."

"Yes!" Mel said, chuckling. "If you work hard enough, God will drop something in your pocket. Eventually the *geist* will be there. That's one of the reasons why going to your desk, at whatever you do, on a quite steady basis, is crucial. You have to, as the gamblers say, be able to cut your losses. But you have to be there where the action is. And sooner or later, I think God will be nice to you if you work hard enough."

Mel made the move from Connecticut to California in the mid-1960s, when Aaron Copland recommended him to head the music department at CalArts, an institution set up partly with money from Walt Disney and designed as a place where artists from the various disciplines could meet and talk and affect each other. Kingman Brewster, president of Yale, urged Mel not to make the move to California, saying, "All they have out there is carnivals," but the idea of an interdisciplinary institution was attractive to Powell, and he took the job. He was provost of CalArts from 1972 to 1976, but he hated the job and resigned to devote himself strictly to teaching, which he obviously loves, for all his wry humor about the limitations and lack of cultural education of today's young music students.

The house in which he and Martha live is modest by the standards of many of their friends. Though she never retired from acting, she has in recent years been more active as a producer. She and Henry Fonda and Robert Ryan for some time had a production company for plays, but both are gone now. She said, "I just can't believe Laurence Olivier is gone. It's as if he's still here. Hank Fonda, on the other hand, I know he's gone. I can feel his absence." Martha is very active with the wife of former presidential press secretary James Brady in an organization seeking to pass a bill controlling hand guns. "And we're going to get it," she said. Though time has drawn its lines on her, you would, if you remember her from her old movies, recognize her instantly.

The Powell house, which is pleasantly and comfortably crowded with furniture, is, like most Southern California homes, on a one-story plan. It differs in that it is equipped with ramps to accommodate Mel's electric cart.

Mel was a dedicated tennis player until about eight years ago. One day he was on his way to a match when his legs gave way and he fell on a sidewalk. He got up, went on to his game, and didn't think much about it, but it happened again, and he consulted his doctor. Eventually his disorder was diagnosed as inclusionary polymyocitis. The disease had affected the quadriceps, making it difficult for him to lift his legs. He is a man remarkably devoid of self-pity, although he admits to missing tennis, and when I first met him, about four years ago, when we were panelists in a discussion of music at a university, he said, "My reaction wasn't: Why me? It was: Why not me? And I felt how lucky I had been not to have had anything wrong with me before."

Mel writes in a study off the kitchen, down a step that is now covered by a ramp. He tells you to stand back as he comes down the ramp on his electric cart, saying that the gadget, which he maneuvers with great skill, has been known to misbehave. "A regular Barney Oldfield," he said. The studio contains a baby grand piano, some sort of electronic keyboard, a desk, a writing table, and the inevitable messy clutter of books and scores and manuscripts. A few floppy disks on the table remind you of the electronic music which is one of his interests.

Mel has maintained his friendships with many of the colleagues from his jazz days. His record collection is an eclectic mix, and it contains plenty of jazz. I noticed a newly-issued Earl Hines CD amid the clutter.

A few years back, Martha became part of a cabal to get him back to playing some of his beloved jazz. Also involved in the conspiracy were Hank O'Neal and Shelly Shier, who run the jazz cruises on the S.S. Norway. Finally they persuaded him to take part in the 1987 cruise. I'd heard that Mel practiced for six months to get ready for that cruis. Was it true?

"Yes! That probably sounds a little more ferocious than it actually was. But there is no question that for *at least* six months, I'd get up in the morning, and I'd go to the keyboard like a good boy, and I'd do what I had not done in a long

long time, which is essentially practicing."

"Playing or practicing? Formal practice? Or both?"

"I think I always did an amalgam of the two. I would never care to play three-part Bach inventions or volumes one and two of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* in public. I consider it so demanding that it is practicing. I would not play it in public. And I would advise most players *not* to play it in public. A couple. Glenn Gould and my old friend Ralph Kirkpatrick, they're okay. But that music is practicing because you should have ten hands for it, rather than ten fingers. And if you're really honest -- and why shouldn't I be, since I was in here alone? -- I'd never touch the pedals. This note is long while that's short, etcetera. That would be the opening of the day. Then I would do actual practice, real exercises. Tausig. The Carl Tausig exercises. A contemporary of Wagner. I think he was at the premier of *Tristan und Isolde*. I don't know why I know that. It's the kind of information I don't need."

"Mental junk," I said, laughing. I was becoming very susceptible to Mel's kind of professorial humor, not unlike that of Stephen Leacock. "My mind's a gallery of useless information."

"Nadia Reisenberg, with whom I studied when I was young, showed me that those exercises would do pretty much what I wanted exercises to do. It's like physical therapy. These will tighten the hands, these will make them loose, and so on. After all, arpeggios and scales are the only things you've really got. Then it's a matter of how to use them. So I used the Tausig scales and things, and Bach, and that would be it. Interestingly, I never tried to play any jazz. I was being strategic, and I think it worked. I wanted to be as fresh as the thirty-year hiatus represented. I wanted really to see what was it like to come on and play with these wonderful guys whom I hadn't played with in so many years. Louis Bellson. Benny Carter, whom I'd never played with at all. Diz. Buddy Rich. So I decided, What the heck. I wanted to come out of the starting gate like a frisky horse that hadn't been raced for a long long time. And it worked that way -- for me. It was virtually selfish. And yet it worked very well for me.

"Hank O'Neal and Shelly Shier make an atmosphere for the listener, and for the player, that is just paradise. I had no idea there could be people who could put on a floating jazz festival like that. Very comfortable. Yes. For six months I practiced, because I hadn't touched the piano in a long time."

"How did it feel, to be back out there sitting in a rhythm section, banging away?"

"I was just grinning for two weeks. At the time, since it was considerably before some of the affliction took hold, I had a drink of Irish whisky, got up on the bandstand . . . and there were old friends like Joe Williams. It was nostalgia. Simone Signoret wrote an autobiography, I loved the title. *Nostalgia Ain't What It Used to Be*. I loved that. But yes it is! It was wonderful! Wonderful to see Joe again, and Dizzy! And Louis Bellson. You don't know how good these guys are until you've been a long time away from them. *Then*. The way Louis played! I mean, the way he wasn't there and was there, you know? Oooh! I was stunned. I'm surprised I didn't stop. I was just stunned at that kind of support. And Milt Hinton! And Major Holley. A young kid named Howard Alden on guitar, very good. Buddy and I and Dizzy playing some stuff. God, the way these guys play!"

Mel Powell embodies what for me is the aesthetic dichotomy of our time. He not only has not resolved my bemusement over it, he has deepened it.

The question of accessibility in art is a vexed one for which there is no simple answer, perhaps no answer at all. Some years ago during a television interview in England, Tony Bennett politely expressed distaste for a British rock group. The interviewer thought to put him on the spot by pointing out that they were immensely popular. Tony said, "So was Hitler."

Popularity is no proof of excellence. Having reached this obvious conclusion, one must be cautious, for neither is the lack of it. One of the problems of jazz has always been that a certain kind of admirer prefers that it be considered arcane, in order that his or her taste for it can be self-seen as informed, exceptional, and superior. This attitude is pilloried in Dave Frishberg's lyric *I'm Hip*. It is probably not as common as it once was, but one encounters it.

Whether this story is apocryphal or true, I don't know, but the idea it expresses is interesting:

A woman told James Joyce that she could not understand *Finnegan's Wake*. Joyce is said to have answered that understanding it was the work of a lifetime. The woman replied, "It is not the career I had planned for my children."

Finnegan's Wake must be the best-selling unread book in the history of the English language, unless Hawking's impenetrable *A Brief History of Time* has displaced it. Publishing a book takes money, whatever the prevailing economic system. In order that his publisher not fail in business, a writer must in all decency aspire to at least a sale sufficient to recover costs.

I will even grant that *Finnegan's Wake* might reward a life of study, but if we are to give it that dedication, the time for it has to come out of our consideration of all the other artists and thinkers whose voices cry out through the corridors of history for our attention, not to mention the time one must spend in one's own survival. Mel says we don't need another Hindemith composition? Maybe we don't need any more art at all. You don't believe that and neither do I.

Joyce's claim on our time is at minimum presumptuous. The public doesn't owe the artist a thing. It is up to him to wave the hands, catch the attention, do the magic, *suspend the disbelief*, carry his audience into that state of transport which is the only reason we allow him this access to our souls. That's his job. And the artist himself is audience for other artists, like Dorothy Parker and John Steinbeck listening to Mel Powell, who then goes home and reads their work.

I have believed since my earliest years that if the artist wishes to communicate, the onus is on him to be clear. But clear to whom? An imbecile? Or to the sophisticated, informed member of the audience, capable of detecting every echo and inversion and retrograde presentation of a piece of thematic material and all its implications of rhythmic and harmonic and orchestrational texture? Should one listen to the

"serious" composer for the purpose of solving his puzzles? Mel says not. So much for a possible theory of contemporary composition as an exercise in acrostic decipherment. But what can make us say "wow" if we do not understand? Somone might write an emotional poem, but if it's in Urdu, it cannot make us say "Wow."

One of Mel's works is *Die Violine* (1985), a three-minute piece described as a *Pierrot Lunaire* setting for soprano, piano, and violin, available on a Musicmasters CD with five more of his works from the 1980s. Let us start with Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. I cannot say that this piece, composed in 1912, doesn't move me. I have heard music that bored me, music that made me uneasy or indifferent, music I disliked. But *Pierrot Lunaire* is the only work in history that I actively and consciously and viscerally and fiercely detest, although I once found a cunning use for it. I played it over and over for three days straight in a ploy to drive an uninvited guest from my apartment without insulting him. He finally left, but had his nerves held out, I think I would have gone instead. Or been taken under restraint to Bellevue.

What then am I to make of Mel's *Die Violine*? The words are in German to begin with and my knowledge of that language is meager. And I have trouble understanding sopranos in *any* language. I listen to the violinist, the soprano sliding up and down, and Mel producing disjunct (to me) tones from the piano, and find I can say neither wow nor its palindrome nor mom nor anything else. I am simply baffled.

The next piece in the CD (*Mel Powell: Six Recent Works)* is *Madrigal for Flute Alone*, a short 1988 piece that I find attractive in part because the player, Rachel Rudich, has a compelling tone and in part because there is a real if remote loveliness about the line itself. Then we come to *Strand Settings: "Darker"*, defined as a song cycle for voice with electronic-music accompaniment.

This piece lasts nearly twelve minutes. At least the text is English. But it presents another set of problems, problems I think are inherent in *all* electronic music, from Luening and Sobotnick to Vangelis and Jan Hammer and the whooonng-whooonng-whooonng-husha-husha-husha-screeeeeee-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-wooooooosh-rachet-rachet-ratchet kind of film scoring that made it impossible for me to watch *Miami Vice* on television.

These problems arise from the mind's unsleeping imperative to identify the nature and source of sounds. We recognize those of our traditional orchestral instruments and accept them in the abstract expression we call music. Confronted, however, by the sounds of electronic instruments, we immediately reference them to what they resemble: running water, tuned pie-plates, heartbeats, breaking glass, wind -- and, occasionally, traditional musical instruments.

Mel's *Computer Prelude* (1988) does not have that effect, because one settles quickly to the impression of a Yamaha electric grand for the lower keyboard and some sort of celesta at the top. It is a piece that could be played on a piano.

The album contains as well a *String Quartet* (1982) and a *Nocturne for Violin Solo*, both of which leave me puzzled.

G. Schirmer, publisher of Mel's music, lists in his catalog eight pieces for concert band or orchestra, twelve chamber works, six works for instrumental solo (including one for percussion), eight pieces for voice, two other pieces for electronics alone. This amounts to thirty pieces of music since 1949, less than one work a year. Most of them are short, as little as three minutes, with only one, *Duplicates: a Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra*, which took from 1987 to 1990 to write, running as much as a half hour. This is an austere output, smaller even than that of Paul Dukas, whose sense of self-censorship caused him to burn his manuscripts shortly before his death and leave us, if memory serves, only twelve works, though one, *La Peri*, is a full ballet and *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue* is an opera.

It is with relief that I discover that I genuinely like Mel's concerto, not that my taste is particularly the measure of anything. It is the only piece of his for orchestra I have heard since his *Symphonic Suite* of 1949, which I encountered in Louisville in the mid-1950s. It seems to me to be all textures and shifting colors, and at the end there is a passage of middle strings that is truly beautiful, almost poignant. If I cannot communicate much more about it than that, I take consolation in something Andre Previn wrote about Mel. Andre, as I am sure you know, has X-ray ears, immense knowledge, and outstanding powers of analysis. Johnny Green once said to me about him: "If you have a film score that you don't want Andre to know, don't carry it past him in the parking lot -- not even in a closed briefcase."

And Andre said that Mel's music became "more and more complicated and private, and some of his work taxed any musical mind severely, unless it had been schooled by the likes of Elliott Carter." Andre described it as being "as easily assimilated as the Dead Sea scrolls but . . . quite marvelous."

I went back in time to the *Sonatina* (1953), first recorded by Mel on Vanguard and recorded again in 1989 by a pianist named Delores Stevens.

I was surprised at how accurately I remembered it. It is an exquisite piece of music, strangely serene. It is from the time of Mel's studies with Hindemith, but I cannot see it as neo-classical except in the constant discretion of its choices and in the same sense that Ravel was Mozartean. It puts me in mind not of the classical period so much as the "modern" French, while in its American quality, it faintly evokes Charles Tomlinson Griffes, or perhaps what Griffes might have done and been had he lived longer. It is more severe than Griffes, more mature, less sentimental. Mel Powell, as one sees immediately from the Schirmer catalog, sedulously avoids repeating himself. He has, apparently, a low threshold of ennui. This is after all the boy who grew bored with the Goodman band before he turned twenty. Still, I wish he had elected while he was on that plateau at the time of the *Sonatina* to turn out, say, a book of preludes, things like Debussy's *Pour le piano*.

And so back to the Goodman band, and the charts Mel wrote, many of them available again through the CD reissues on CBS. They are wonderful. They remain as fresh as when

they were written. And he was apparently churning the stuff out then, utterly prolific. His playing is exuberant, exultant, laughing, and inventive. Then comes the diminuendo of the late '40s and early '50s, the Vanguard records, and at last tacet, at least from *that* Mel Powell.

And then the 1987 burst-out, the cruise on the Norway, some of which is to be heard on the Chiaroscuro album *The Return of Mel Powell*. This too is delightful stuff, his interplays with Benny Carter, Howard Alden, Milt Hinton, and Louis Bellson. It's loose, it's unrehearsed, and happy.

It is as if sometime around 1959, Mel Powell shoved his ship into warp drive and accelerated past the red shift and vanished, leaving on the retina a faint after-image of stardust, the memory of years gone by. *The Earl, Mission to Moscow, The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise.* Then, suddenly, in 1987, he reappears, playing those lines in octaves, trying for long ski-slope runs and bringing them off, embracing ecstasy and laughing all the way. The music hasn't aged. Einstein was right.

In the end we must face economic realities.

The aspiration to art is, I think, in everyone, no matter how muted. If one chooses to do Sunday paintings while surviving on work in a bank (as Gauguin did for years) or the insurance business (as Charles Ives did all his life) or by teaching (like Schoenberg, Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Hindemith, and Mel Powell), then society has no claims on you as an artist (though it does on your work as a bank clerk or insurance executive) and you have none on society. You ask nothing, and reject society's judgment. But the moment you turn pro, you must make claims on society if only because you need a new tube of alizarine crimson. And when you make that claim, society in turn has a claim on you: captivate me, and I'll give you the money for your paint. That is the compact.

Who is going to put up the money for the performance of your symphony? The musicians must be paid, for they are professionals and have families, and one of them may even have a hobby and need a tube of alizarine crimson. The concert hall must be maintained, and perhaps at the moment there is a leak in the roof overdue for attention.

There are patrons of the arts. There always were. In Europe the church and the aristocracy were the primary patrons of composers. In America, the patrons have been the wealthy descendants of bandits with mostly Dutch and English and Scottish names, many of them now afixed to foundations, which have become institutional patrons, though even here there are the appointees to boards, who may or may not be qualified and may or may not be disinterested, deciding which composers or painters or writers shall receive the dispensations of the gods. The dispersal of this largesse is so politicized as to be byzantine, and this funding of the arts doesn't work very well. But neither does the other one, the one that allows record and television and movie executives to shape our culture by seeking the lowest common denominator of taste and making sales the measure of merit, thereby rendering Madonna a star and ignoring (at the end) Sarah Vaughan.

I make my usual mistake. I long for a perfect world.

On October 31, 1990, there was a performance of his works in tribute to Mel Powell in the Terrace Theater of the Kennedy Center in Washington. Mel was in the audience.

Will he ever play jazz again?

"Right now," Mel said, "I haven't touched the piano for six months. Unfortunately, there's been a kind of extension of the disease to my hands. So it might be problematical. However, one can live with these things."

One can?

I try to step back and look at all the worlds of Mel Powell, peanut salesman, baseball buff, jazz musician, composer, teacher, raconteur, wit, the kid reading Debussy manuscripts, the white-haired wise professor. I always admired the musician; I have come to admire -- and like -- the man and, God knows, deeply respect him. I would respect, if nothing else, the courage, although I imagine he will not like that word.

Yeah. I get back a little, and look at the whole career.

Wow.

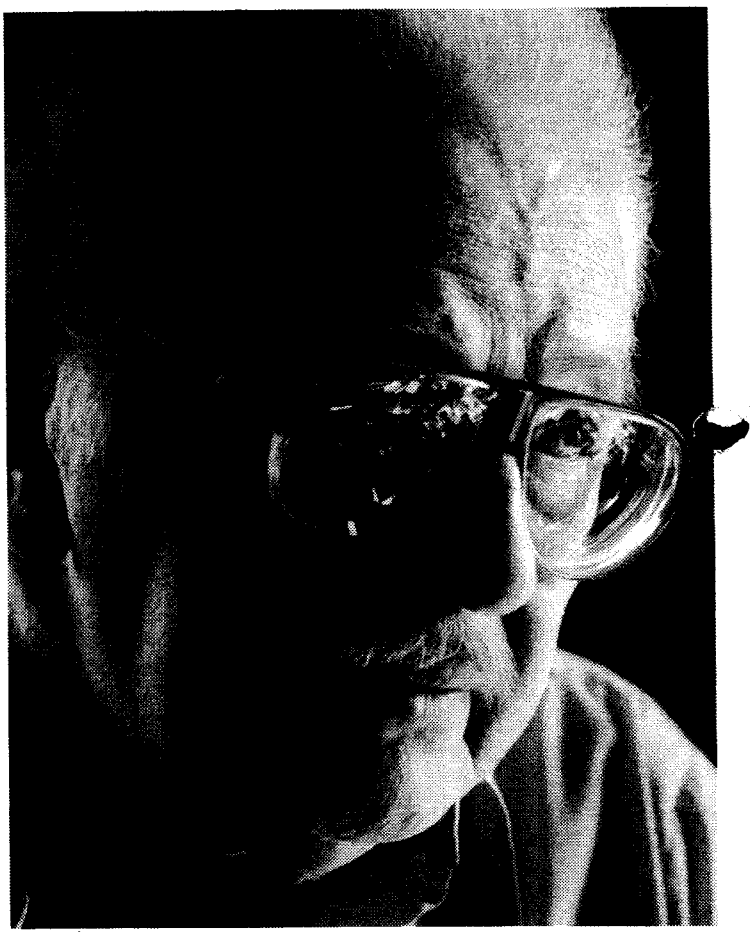

Photo by John Reeves