Gene Lees
Jazzletter

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

October 1991

Vol. 10 No. 10

Letters

This is to inform you that

my beloved husband of 33 years

Charlie Barnet

passed away September 4, 1991

of Alzheimers and Pneumonia.

I trust he will be remembered

with love as he is by me.

Betty Barnet

John, Gil, Dave, and the Man on the Buffalo Nickel

Part Three

The curious thing is that Dave almost gave up before the quartet became a major national success. Dave said:

"At this point I was sick of the road. I told my attorney, that I wanted to quit. I just wanted to stay around San Francisco and work gigs. He said, 'Dave, your big years are coming up. Do you want to educate your children? Dave, go on the road for one year.'

"I said, 'I can't take it any more.'

"He said, 'Well what if you take your family with you and rent your house in Oakland to somebody for a year? You don't have any money.' And I didn't. I was penniless. At this point we were about ten thousand in the hole to the government for taxes. So I did need the money. I worked it out with Irving Townsend at Columbia Records. He was coming to California to become head of jazz for Columbia on the west coast. Irving said, 'You can rent my house in Wilton, Connecticut. The landlady likes to have artists around.'

"She was Alice Delamar. She owned about twelve houses there. Leonard Feather spent some time there. John Hammond lived there. Ballanchine lived in one of the houses. Artists all over the joint."

"Gene," Iola said, "that's the house you visited." I remembered it, a lovely spacious house in the woods, and Dave had a piano in every room, including the kitchen.

"We liked it so much, and life became so much easier, and I was with the family so much more, instead of traveling from the west coast to the east coast, that we stayed. At that time there wasn't that much work on the west coast. Now it's different, but at that time there was very little work for a jazz group. So we stayed on. We loved Wilton and we built our present house. Life just became a lot easier.

"Paul was on a percentage. He got twenty percent of everything. The attorney I mentioned, James R. Bancroft, set it up. He was also Paul's attorney. Paul and I never had an argument about money. He never looked at the books. He never asked the attorney to see anything. He said, 'Whatever you say is right.' And Paul never would sign a contract with me. He made *me* sign one!"

"You mean, you were contracted to him, but he wasn't contracted to you?'

"Yeah," Dave said.

"Boy, he was slick."

"Yeah." Dave laughed. "He never would leave, but he never looked at anything and he would never sign anything."

Iola said, "That twenty percent goes to Paul's estate, and he left his estate to the Red Cross."

"Like," Dave said, "*Take Five*, everything he wrote, all his royalties go to the Red Cross."

"You know, Dave," I said, "Paul always said you were his favorite accompanist. He loved playing with you, and he loved the Modern Jazz Quartet."

The Dave Brubeck Quartet and the Modern Jazz Quartet were probably the longest-lived small groups in jazz history. The MJQ was founded originally in 1946, with Ray Brown and Kenny Clarke in its rhythm section. Percy Heath replaced Ray Brown on bass and in 1955 Connie Kay replaced Kenny Clarke on drums. Though they have had sabbatical periods, each member pursuing his own career, they come together from time to time to make their exquisite pensive music.

The evening after my conversation in New York with John Lewis, I went by the Carlisle Hotel to hear the MJQ. John, in common with many and perhaps most jazz musicians, doesn't like playing jazz festivals, avoiding them as much as he can. I had only ever heard the group live in such settings, which are not optimum circumstances in which to listen to them. Because of the delicacy of their texture, they are best heard in conditions of intimacy, and the Carlille -- which was sold out every night of a long stay -- provide them. The room was hushed when they played.

There have been a number of great vibes players, but Milt Jackson is a phenomenon unto himself, extracting through fast chromatic runs effects that are almost glissandi. He is wonderfully inventive. Connie Kay, Desmond's favorite drummer, has an incomparable delicacy of touch without which the group would be different. He has a way of playing

cymbals with a brush that produces a soft steady sizzle, a sound you can recognize instantly on records. Connie Kay and Percy Heath, the one-time fighter pilot, together put out a pulse that is at once gentle and powerful, proof that you don't have to push hard or play loud to swing. And John, of course, plays that laconic piano, never a note more than he needs to. Every note is impeccably chosen and impeccably placed. And he is a master of comping, popping brief dry chords behind Milt Jackson's solos, sometimes laying out and then playing just three or four notes, a fragment of counterline, but the perfect three or four, notes that seem inevitable once they've gone by. The skein the group weaves is inimitable.

The MJQ and the Dave Brubeck Quartet were dominant sounds in the jazz of the 1950s and '60s. There were areas of similarity, as well as difference. Both were led by pianists; both pianists had a taste for counterpoint, and both were (and are) composers of distinction with strong interests in European concert music. As soloists, they are different, John usually understated almost to the point of diffidence, Dave assertive and plunging, as eager and innocently enthusiastic as a player as he is as a man. But both men are generous and sympathetic compers, feeding the soloist with sensitivity, understanding, and restraint.

The Brubeck Quartet is generally thought to have reached its classic period after Joe Morello joined it on drums in 1956 and Eugene Wright on bass in 1958. This personnel remained stable until 1967, when it disbanded. Dave and Paul were an odd couple, the former devoted to his family, the latter to his own hedonism and a succession of gorgeous and sometimes quite kinky girls, and he seemed to live his true love life in gentle, distant, conversational affection for the wives of his friends. "Hi there!" he'd say on the phone in a bright cheery way I picked up from him. Gerry Mulligan says it too; maybe he also got it from Paul: Gerry was another of his close friends, and it fell to Gerry to give me the melancholy reports on Paul's declining condition. "This is your friend Paul Breitenfeld," his real name. Or sometimes it was, "Hi, it's me, Desmond."

Paul was family to the Brubecks. Darius told me once that he was about twelve years old before he realized Paul wasn't actually his uncle. Dave had a trick to deliberately annoy Paul onstage. Left to his own devices, Paul would play ballads or medium tempos all evening. Dave would kick off very fast tempos early in a concert, having discovered that Paul played his best when he was angry. Joe Morello angered him too. Joe is a deliciously busy drummer, and a witty one -- Don DeMicheal, who was a drummer as well as a writer, said Joe could have written a joke book for drummers. Joe had a rapport with Eugene Wright like that of Connie Kay with Percy Heath, but of a different order: they would set up a loud, churning kind of rhythm, swinging like mad, as in their recording of *Let's Get Away from It All*, pushing Paul to some of his most inspired solos.

There was a tendency among critics to patronize Desmond during his life as too "white." He was considered derivative of Lee Konitz. I reject that out of hand. I know he admired Pete Brown. But I think I know where Desmond came from. If Lester Young, as he said, developed his tone and approach from trying to emulate on tenor the C-melody sound of Frank Trumbauer, Desmond, in my opinion, got his tone from trying to emulate on the alto the clarinet sound of Lester Young. You hear this if you listen to the Lester Young Commodore recordings in the Mosaic reissue package. What he did with his sound -- high, lyrical, piercing yet soft, witty, allusive, sly, peerlessly melodic and inexhaustibly inventive -- was his own. History has not taken his measure. He was a wondrous player, which I see more clearly now that I no longer have to question my bias toward him on grounds of friendship. Now he is gone into time, and I know just how good he was.

The Dave Brubeck Quartet of that period was, like the MJQ, a highwater mark of jazz. Both groups are, in a phra[illegible] of my photographer friend John Reeves, safe on Parnassus.

On Christmas Day, 1971, Paul was the guest artist in a Town Hall concert by the MJQ. Paul, who called himself the John P. Marquand of the alto, used to say that if he ever recorded with the MJQ, the cover should be a picture of four cats stalking a mouse. He had recorded with Connie Kay, and he was obviously happy that day to be playing with the full group. The concert was taped, but not on professional equipment.

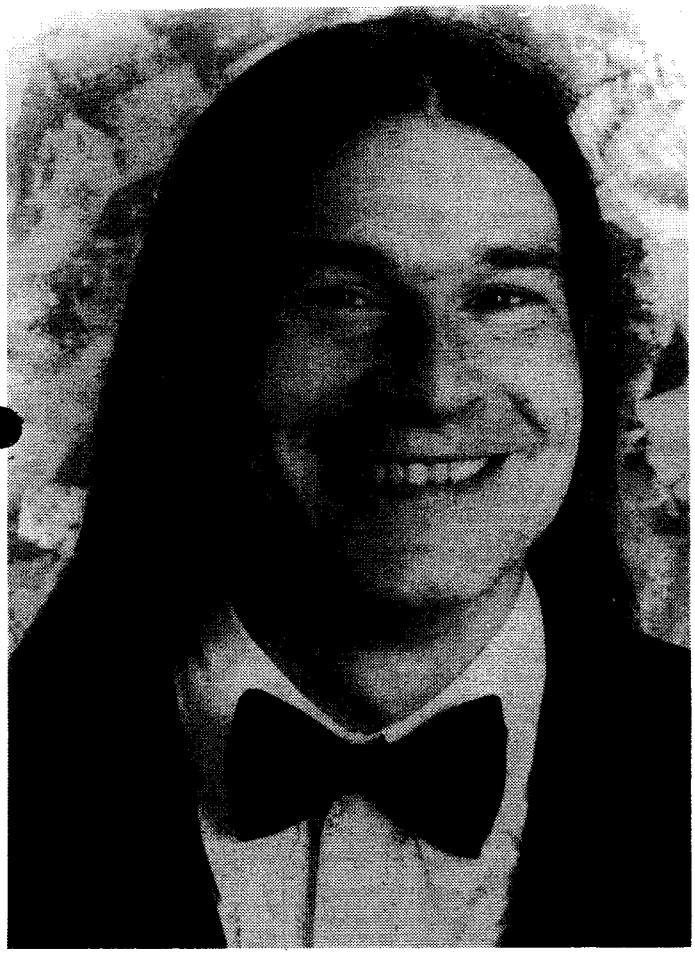
Ten years later John Lewis worked with an engineer to bring the sound of the tapes to the highest level possible. "At first I didn't think of it as an album," John said, "but when Paul died I knew we could never play together again and I listened to the tapes and decided it should be heard. For Paul's friends. I think they'll like it."

Indeed. The album was issued on Ken Glancy's short-lived Finesse label and is now out of print, alas: it is delightful.

Dave Brubeck is a deeply religious man. His mother was a Methodist interested in Christian Science and far eastern philosophy. Ten years or so ago Dave wrote a Mass. After its premier, a priest upbraided him for not including an Our Father in it. Dave took the family on vacation in the Caribbean and while there he dreamed the Our Father section in detail and in its entirety, and later added it to the Mass. He chuckled: "I thought that the church must be saying something to me." He became a Catholic convert.

Dave is enormously decent, sensitive and moral and absolutely faithful to Iola. Paul Desmond, who was no more able to commit himself to a permanent relationship with a woman than he was to sign a contract with Dave, used to jest, "I spent seventeen years trying to get Dave Brubeck laid."

Dave is devoid of animosity. He seems almost naive. But he has one deep anger: a lifelong hatred of racism. I



Danny Brubeck

reminded him of a tour he once cancelled. "Oh yeah," he said. "I cancelled twenty-three of twenty-five concerts in the south because of Eugene Wright. I could work them if I'd bring Norman Bates. And I wouldn't do it. We lost half a year's work. I was working at the Blackhawk, but you made your money going on a tour. I also lost out to Duke Ellington on the Bell Telephone Hour because they wanted me to put Eugene Wright where they couldn't put the camera on him. I wouldn't do it, and they hired Duke. I never did tell Duke. Because Duke was innocent; they just hired Duke instead."

The situation at Bell Telephone was peculiar: it was not that the company would not book black artists on their show; they would not let black and white performers appear together. Norman Granz got into a crunch with Bell over their effort to conceal from the camera that the guitarist in Ella Fitzgerald's trio, Herb Ellis, was white.

Dave has an abiding interest in the welfare and culture of the American Indians. He said, "I wrote a piece called *They All Sang Yankee Doodle*. It opens with an Indian song that Al Walloupe had taught me.

"The conductor at the concert at Yale University, Erik Kunzel, said, 'Dave starts this piece with an Indian song because he wants us all to remember they were here first.' There was a ruckus in the audience, and this man got up from his seat and made his wife and son, probably, follow him and leave the auditorium. The piece uses national anthems or songs from the melting pot, as we used to call it, all with *Yankee Doodle* going against *O Tannenbaum* and *Meadowland* and the Portuguese *Holy Ghost March*. And then it ends with the Indian song, which is important."

The hatred of racism has been passed to his six children, all of whom have been trained in music, and four of whom are professionals. Darius, also a pianist, has for many years now been teaching jazz to young black South Africans. He is director of the New Center for Jazz and Popular Music at the University of Natal in Durban.

Iola told me, "Darius's wife, Cathy, was an assistant to Alan Paton. She was born in England and went to South Africa as a very young girl. Her history of working with the African National Congress and anti-apartheid groups is extensive. Her whole life has to do with the struggle in South Africa. When the ANC was no longer outlawed, she was in Lusaca where the ANC had headquarters. She got the first news that the ANC was no longer outlawed when it came across on a fax or something. She ran through the streets of the town, having to use the password to get through, getting to ANC to say, 'You're no longer outlawed!'"

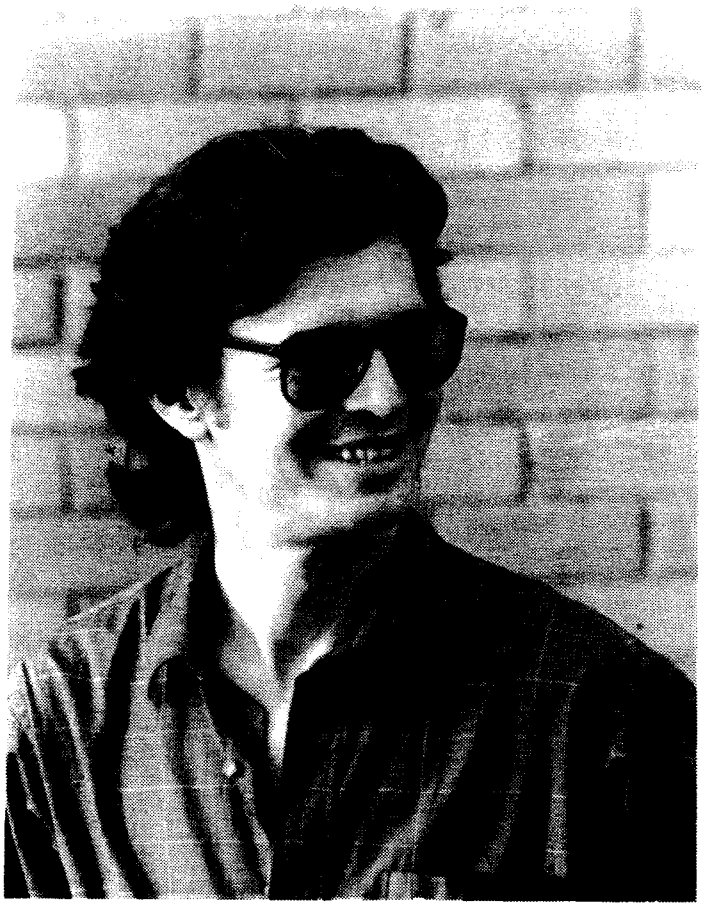
Darius is about to become an associate professor at the university. "They're even putting up a building for jazz in the music department," Dave said. I thought there was something interesting, even inspiring, about a one-eighth Modoc Indian devoting his life to teaching jazz in Africa.

No matter how misty the family history, the visual evidence is there. Desmond said white man speak with forked tongue. For years I've kidded Dave that he looks like the man on the buffalo nickel. "And I'll tell you something else, Dave. Darius looks a bit Indian. But do you know who really looks Indian? Danny." Danny is the drummer of the family. Paul's second favorite drummer, according to Dave.

Dave laughed. "Danny always *did*!" he said. It's hard to believe I knew them all as little kids. No. It's hard to believe that Darius, the eldest of them, is forty-four.

Iola said, "There is a photo of a young Modoc that looks almost identical to Dave at the same age."

On June 1, 1991, the Hartford Symphony and Hartford Chorale premiered a composition by Dave titled *Joy in the Morning*, using Biblical texts. Dave said, "It's really about my heart. Only I used this for the music. Ten years ago I was going to have my first angiogram. It was the first time I was in the hospital in real trouble. I was sitting up and I was writing Psalm 30. My doctor came in. It was about 10:30 at night. He said, 'I've never come into a room with manuscript paper all over the bed when someone was going to have an operation in the morning.' I didn't know him well enough to tell him what I was doing. When you read Psalm 30, you see



Darius Brubeck

What good am I to thee if you put me down in the pit? Can the dust praise thee?' It goes on: Let me live!

"Nine years after that I had another angiogram." (He also had a triple bypass operation.) "I finished the piece that I had written that night for baritone and piano. I finished it for chorus and added to it for orchestra, to be the opening piece for the Beethoven Ninth, which threw me into a terrible panic. When they hired me to write, they didn't tell me I'm opening for the Beethoven Ninth, which can destroy any composer. The way I found out they wrote to say be sure and use the same instrumentation as the Beethoven Ninth so we don't have to hire anybody. They allowed me to add a tuba and third trumpet. But it's the same instrumentation. I poured a lot into this piece."

He assuredly did. The piece has little to do with jazz, though one movement draws on string voicings used by the better arrangers in popular music and film scoring. Otherwise it is pure symphonic and choral writing in the European tradition, and at the highest level. You cannot, as Andre Previn wryly put it once, treat strings merely as if you have "the world's biggest sax section." Dave's writing is nothing like that. The piece is glorious, and filled with the sense of the unexpected that has always been characteristic of Dave's piano solos.

But what do we call this music? Is it "European" music or is it "American" music? Ah, but this gets more complicated. If being one quarter black or even one eighth black gets you identified as black, does being one quarter Indian get you defined as Indian? Certainly it will get you recognized as such by the U.S. Department of Indian Affairs. Is *Joy in the Morning* then Indian music? Or more specifically, Modoc music? It gets still more complicated:

John Lewis last year made an exquisite solo album called *Private Concert*. It's on Polygram. It reveals many things, not least of them that John's touch is among the most distinguished to be found in jazz. He produces a delicate click at the front edge of each radiant tone, as Nat Cole did. An occasional burst of speed, a sudden run, shows that John's taciturnity, his selectivity, is of choice, not lack of technique. I am not sure that the album should be called jazz. Not that I care for category. Spare, airy, gentle, reflective, it draws almost completely on European tradition, from Bach to Debussy, with occasional hints of jazz and stride. But then stride itself derives from practices found in Beethoven and Chopin.

Do we call it European or "black" music? Or, since he is a quarter Comanche, is it Comanche music? The questions are logical absurdity. But then, racism is illogical. Any competent anthropologist will tell you there is no such thing as race, and recent computer studies of genetic material from all parts of the world have established that we all descend from a common African ancestress who lived a scarce 200,000 years ago. Chief Seattle of the Suquamish Indians of the Pacific understood the essential oneness of the human species by the mid-nineteenth century.

In 1852, Franklin Pierce defeated General Winfield Scott, hero of the decimation of the Cherokees in the Trail of Tears, to become president. That same year, Frederick Douglass questioned whether Negroes should celebrate the Fourth of July. In 1854, a politician little-known outside of Illinois named Abraham Lincoln called for the gradual emancipation of slaves. In 1855, American interests built a railroad across the Isthmus of Panama to shorten the trip to California by 19,000 miles, thereby accelerating the extermination of the Indians of California. Longfellow published Hiawatha, mythologizing the life of an Ojibway. And President Pierce proposed to the Suquamish the purchase of their lands, which at least was an improvement on appropriating them by genocide. Seattle, their chief, made a speech in reply, a speech Dave Brubeck has just set to music. If Dave is a quarter Modoc, and Seattle was all Suquamish, what do we, in our mad ethnic system of classification, call the piece of music Dave has made out of the speech? Five-eighths Indian? Whatever it is, that speech is an astonishing document. Chief Seattle said:

The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of

the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory of my people.

We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and man, all belong to the same family.

The shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you our land, you must remember that it is sacred. Each ghostly reflection in the clear water of the lakes tells of events and memories in the life of my people. The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father.

The rivers are our brothers. They quench our thirst. They carry our canoes and feed our children. So you must give to the rivers the kindness you would give any brother.

If we sell you our land, remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also receives his last sigh. The wind also gives our children the spirit of life. So if we sell you our land, you must keep it apart and sacred, as a place where man can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow flowers.

Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth befalls all the sons of the earth.

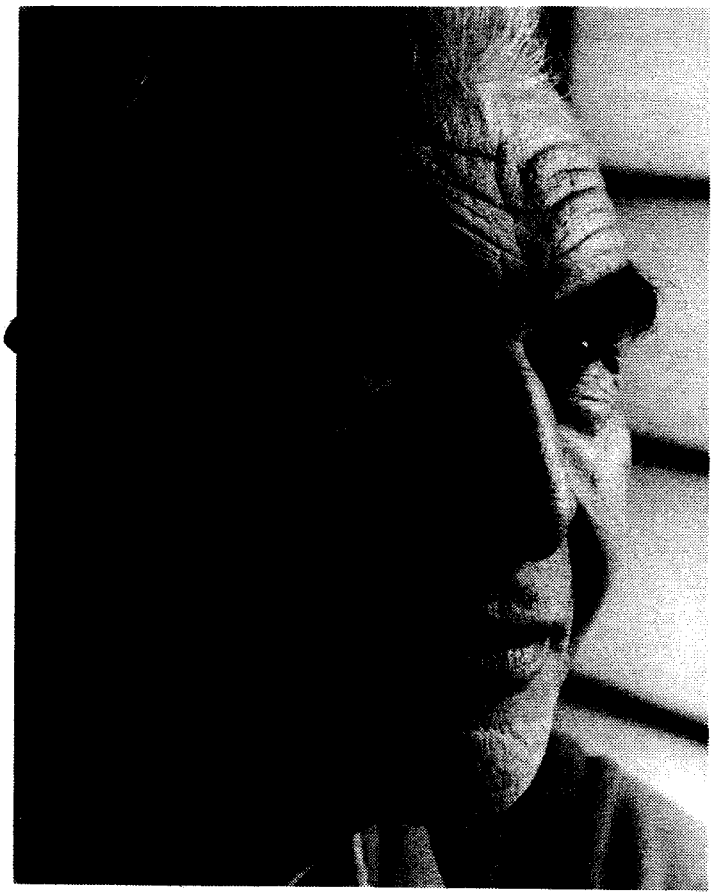
This we know. The earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood which unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

One thing we know. Our god is also your god. The earth is precious to him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator.

Your destiny is a mystery to us. What will happen when the buffalo are all slaughtered? The wild horses tamed? What will happen when the secret corners of the forest are heavy with the scent of many men and the view of the ripe hills blotted by talking wires? Where will the thicket be? Gone. Where will the eagle be? Gone. And what is it to say goodbye to the swift pony and the hunt? Will there be any of the spirit of my people left?

We love this earth as a newborn loves its mother's heartbeat. So if we sell you our land, love it as we have loved it. Care for it as we have cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you receive it. Preserve the land for all children and love it, as God loves us all.

As we are part of the land, you too are part of the land. This earth is precious to us. It is also precious to you. One thing we know. There is only one God. No man, be he red man or white man, can be apart. We are brothers after all.



Dave Brubeck 1991 photo by John Reeves

I look out my window at the hills where the invisible Chumash giants were supposed to stand guard, and I see the ugly talking wires across the sky, bringing me each day news of the ethnic killings in Yugoslavia and the states of what was once the Soviet Union. John Lewis's wife Marjana is particularly torn: her mother is Serbian, her father Croatian.

When Columbus discovered the island he named Hispaniola, there were 500,000 Indians on it. A half century later there were 500. The European policy toward the Indians was thenceforth unwavering. For all the horrors of the chattel slavery of Africans, the whites wanted the blacks to live, indeed to proliferate, for they had utility as self-propelled farm machinery and household implements. The Indians were simply in the way.

Ishi, the last of the Yana and the last of the wild Indians, died September 30, 1915. He had been captured four years earlier at Oroville, which is near where Iola Brubeck was born, and taken to a San Francisco museum to sit on exhibit and make arrowheads and other artifacts for the edification of the people who had extirpated his own.

Where the Yana and the Miwok and Shastas and all the others once roamed there are talking wires and ribbons of asphalt and rows of frozen custard and fast-food joints and

expanses of glinting used cars girded by polychrome ugly pennants snapping in the wind.

In the range of the Chumash new towns materialize almost overnight along the road from Los Angeles to San Francisco. In Santa Barbara the other day, they dedicated a park to the Chumash. Beneath it, under seventeen feet of soil, is a Chumash burial ground. Nobody seemed to see the irony of this dedication. Culturally and ethnographically, the Chumash are extinct.

At night, out there in the Santa Barbara channel, where they used to propel their elegant dugout canoes to Anacapa and the other islands, oil platforms scintillate like Christmas trees on the water. A few years ago there was a spill. Pellicans and terns and gulls and sea otters died in masses in the ugly slick of crude exuding from the sea floor.

One of the Lakota Sioux said it:

"The white man made us many promises, more than I can remember, but he kept but one. He promised to take our land. And he took it."

The Subscribers

In past years, we've run the full list of subscribers. We haven't done it for a while. So, just to bring things up to date as the *Jazzletter* approaches the end of its tenth year, here is the list:

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