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The Nine Lives of Red Rodney
Part Two

After his three years with Charlie Parker, Red was badly strung out.

When I first encountered the term "strung out" -- probably in 1959 or '60 -- it struck me as grimly vivid. It suggested an image of an expiring soldier, arms outstretched in a tangle of barbed wire, the posture of crucifixion. Bill Evans began playing Alex North's love theme from *Spartacus* after seeing the film one afternoon with Scott LaFaro. That theme is heard at its most poignant in the scene wherein Jean Simmons holds their son up to be seen by Kirk Douglas, as the dying Spartacus, hung on a cross by a roadside. I watched Bill record it in the album *Conversations with Myself*. He was going through withdrawal when he made that track, but he wouldn't stop and he went on, despite the sweats. He was expressing all that beauty through a veil of pain. Whatever he saw in his mind, the image of crucifixion certainly was in mine.

Language is diluted by use. Expressions lose their power. "Turn on" originally denoted to get high on dope. Now it has all manner of bland meanings, even in television commercials. A breakfast cereal can turn you on. "Strung out" has been so weakened in its absorption into the general vernacular that you might be strung out on your credit card payments.

But it originally meant to be addicted to heroin -- no other drug -- and it was a mercilessly evocative term. And Red went home to Philadelphia strung out. His parents were devastated, his various cousins and other relatives, who were (and are) plentiful in Philadelphia, bewildered.

He floundered through 1955 and '56, working occasional local gigs, impeded by vice and narcotic squad cops, who would accost him and shove up his shirt sleeves to look for fresh tracks. There's another vivid term: the scars that follow the lines of violated veins look like the symbol for railway tracks on maps. Red said, "If you had recent marks, you were dirty. And that was a conviction in Philadelphia, as it was in L.A. at one time. They could put you in jail for it. So I didn't do it there."

There is a direct quality about Red Rodney. For all the ingenuity of the scams he designed, he has a disposition toward forthright confrontation. Furthermore, I think Red could charm his way out of hell. I have never heard him derogate his tormentors, never heard him speak ill of the police, and indeed, over the course of his improbable life he seems to have encountered a remarkable number of sympathetic authority figures.

Red went straight to the cop in charge, and thereby hangs a tale: how Red Rodney, archetypical bebopper, became the Lester Lanin of Philadelphia, playing business man's bounce, the very antithesis of jazz, the music jazzmen all cordially loathe, although more than a few of them have turned to it *in extremis* to put a little bread on the table.

"The captain of the vice and narcotics squad was a man named Clarence Ferguson, whose name struck fear in all the vice and narcotics offenders of Philadelphia," Red said. "And I went to his office one day, and I said, 'Cap, every time I get a job, your men come around, and shake me down looking for marks, and I lose the job.'

"He says, 'All right, you're right, and I'm going to help you.' And he takes me to a kosher catering house called Davis Caterers. Harry Davis was the owner and proprietor. But Clarence Ferguson owned the building and had a lot of money in the catering business. And he made me the bandleader.

"There was a false door there. I never knew why. It was a door with a glass to it that led to a brick wall. Maybe they built another building after that one had been built. And they printed 'Red Rodney Orchestras' on it. I didn't do it, they did it. It sounds like something I would have done, but I didn't. They did.

"When someone would come in to book a party or a wedding or a bar mitzvah, Harry Davis or somebody would ask, 'Who's doing your music?' And they'd say sometimes, 'We don't know yet.' Harry would say, 'You should get Red Rodney there, but he's not in right now. We'll call him and book him for you.'

"So the caterer booked me. He packaged me. And I hired all the good jazz guys in town. Billy Root lived in town then. There were a lot of good players. I hired Bernard Pfeiffer, the pianist. I was the first bandleader that had black musicians playing weddings and bar mitzvahs in Philadelphia. I had Butch Ballard playing drums, Specs Wright on drums, Nelson Boyd the bass player. I hired everybody that could play jazz, especially when I had some big-band work. But of course the music was crap.

"I even played Captain Ferguson's niece's wedding. I offered to do it free, but he paid me full price. Captain Ferguson never took a nickel. Everybody else said Captain Ferguson was this, he was that. But he was good for me.

"I had an office. I was making money hand over fist. Plus the guys in Captain Ferguson's squad would not mess with me when they saw me on the street. And I was strung out again. The music was so horrible. Of course, a junky doesn't need an excuse, but this was as good as any: the music is terrible! Look what I'm playing!"

This phase of Red's career lasted about two years. Eventually he sold all his bookings and band business to a club-date agency and left town, settling in San Francisco. "You're always running away," he said of the junky's life. "You figure, if you leave this you'll straighten up. But you can't run away from yourself."

He was insolvent again, back at the bottom, and with an expensive habit to support. It was in San Francisco that he embarked -- with what seems an oddly detached logic -- on the first of a number of elaborate schemes to get money.

"When I started getting into criminal activity," he said, "it was well thought out. I became Garfield Levy the lawyer. I'd already spent a few little bits of time in Lexington and Fort Worth as a volunteer, trying to get off heroin. You could

volunteer then. I'd been with prisoners, and heard things. I met printers, I met this, I met that.

"I had a friend, a young lawyer named Tom Cochran who was also a drummer. He worked in Melvin Belli's office in San Francisco. The firm in those days was Belli, Asch, and Geary. Tom worked for Lou Asch. I saw on the walls checks for awards from insurance companies for personal injury suits -- big-time awards. These were photostatic copies. They didn't have Xerox in those days. And I stole them one at a time and took them over to my printer. He'd duplicate the checks, saying, 'Manhattan Marine Fire Insurance Company' and things like that. I'd cop one and put it back, cop another one and put it back on the wall of Melvin Belli's office. All checks he'd won in damage suits.

"Each one had the signature of the officer responsible, and the co-signature. My printer used magnetic ink at the bottom of the check, so that when it went through the banking system, the ink was kosher. It wouldn't kick it out.

"There was a bandleader-booking agent friend of mine named Howard Frederick, who's dead now. I rented a little space from him and I put up a sign saying, Garfield Levy, Esq.

"I went to the Bank of America and said I was a brand new young lawyer, just starting in practice. I opened an account with a thousand-dollar deposit in the name of Garfield Levy, Esquire. I came in ten days later or something like that with my first award, a $30,000 check made out to Gussie Goldstein -- that was my grandmother's name -- and her lawyer, Garfield Levy, Esquire. That's how it's done, the lawyer deposits his check and then he makes one out to the client. I got some old junky lady to go in and cash the second check for me.

"That was the first one. I probably got away with about $75,000 in that six months.

"When the auditors figured out what had been going on, they started looking for Garfield Levy, Esquire. But he had disappeared. He was gone. I became Dr. Ronald Berger. I had a little doctor's office to write prescriptions for myself. I had my printer make the prescriptions. I'd send somebody to the drugstore for dilaudid. It's a derivative of morphine, used for cancer patients."

I asked a friend, a wholesale pharmacist, about dilaudid. Dilaudid, he said, is more powerful than morphine, almost as strong as heroin. "It is used for deep pain," he said. He buys it wholesale for 40 cents a capsule. These capsules, sold illegally on the street, go for $40 each -- one hundred times their wholesale value.

Red said, "I'd send a girl to the drugstore. My phone would ring, and I'd say, 'Dr. Berger's office,' and okay the dilaudid prescription.

"I went back to Vegas, and one night I broke into the Bureau of Vital Statistics office. It was an empty building. There was no money in there. I went in there and got death certificates. And while I was there, I stole the imprint seal.

"But I couldn't really figure out all of the things to do right. I'd read in the paper that so-and-so was killed in a hit and run or whatever. So I'd send away for their death certificates. They cost three dollars. When I got them, I'd erase the name, as clean as possible, with an electric eraser. And then I'd type over the name. You had the cause of death, the medical examiner's written statement, the doctor's statement if there was one. You had everything you didn't have to touch. I just had to change the name and the date.

"When I had a clean copy, I would Xerox it. Xerox had been invented. I'd Xerox over and over and over until finally it was perfect.

"All the insurance companies want is a copy of the death certificate. And my copies always included the seal of the State of Nevada, which made it look very official. I insured all kinds of people. This took some time. While I was putting this claim in, I was buying another insurance policy, then making out the death certificates and then cashing the policy.

"I was wanted for a phony narcotics sale. A kid came to me from Philadelphia, a horn player, who wanted help. It was one of the times I was trying to straighten up. The kid was so sick. I went upstairs to the connection, bought five dollars worth of heroin, and gave it to him. He gave me fifty dollars. I tried to refuse, but he insisted. It was marked money. I got out of the car and got busted by federal narcs. The kid had set me up. I made bail and ran. My hair would be gray, my hair would be brown. I couldn't play in any of the Las Vegas clubs or hotels.

"Life was very hard, and I would think up these outlandish ideas.

"But checks were a forte. Checks were very good.

"I always had the greatest ideas from this printer I had. I had a couple of printers, but this one was special. I had the American Express card. I had credit cards in teak wood. If I opened the flaps of the wallet, they looked real. You couldn't use them, you couldn't put them in a machine, but they looked good. I had all kinds of ID. I had ten different licenses in ten different names.

"I got along like that. It was a horror. I'd look at myself and say, What am I doing?

"The first time the insurance company came after me, they arrived with a state investigator. The insurance investigator started screaming. I noticed that the state guy wasn't saying anything. He's got a little twinkle in his eyes.

"The insurance investigator is screaming at me: 'Don't you realize what we can do to you?'

"And I'm saying to myself, 'Lord have mercy, they don't wanna bust me! They don't want the publicity!' Now the state detective, *he* can bust me. But he's just there for show.

"So I say, 'Yes sir, I'll never do it again!'

"So when they left, I thought, 'Wow! I've got a license.' And I had more certificates out. I didn't even remember the names, who was dead, who wasn't.

"You know, I recently got my file through the Freedom of

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Information Act, and they've got more things crossed out. It's this thick. You wonder how they catch people, as badly as they did this. I know damn well that if I were arrested today for something, any detective or FBI agent would have my full record at his disposal. But I couldn't get it even through the Freedom of Information Act. They goofed. They said, 'You're still subject to punishment for impersonation.'"

"That's nonsense," I said. "There are only two crimes that have no statute of limitations."

"Right," Red said. "Murder and treason. They said I was still subject for impersonation. But they didn't even charge me with that. They turned me over to the narcotics agents for that phony sale. I was on the run from that. Hiding out. I was hiding out in the home of an old lady. She knew the whole story, and I was paying her. What am I going to do? I'm wanted, I can't play anywhere, I can't work."

It was at this point that Red came up with his most bizarre caper. Red passed himself off as a general in the United States Air Force and almost succeeded in stealing a payroll. This is how it happened:

"I was reading a newspaper and saw a headline: *Shortest General in U.S. History*. The story says Air Force General Russell T. McIntyre is five foot five. I'm five six. He's the auditor and comptroller of the United States Air Force. I was looking at a picture of me with gray hair and a gray mustache. He looked very much like me.

"I'm not thinking anything, just reading the story. And then it says that this guy makes spot audits. They never tell where he's going. They never tell what air base he's going to visit. He just shows up. And immediately the books are opened to him, and the safes.

"There's an atomic energy test site there in Nevada. It's big now, but at that time it was just a little hole in the wall, on Nellis Air Force Base. It was maybe five miles away from Nellis. It was a separate division. Once when we played the Flamingo Show Room, we went out there to play a show with the Mills Brothers. The guys who were stationed there could not get out. They were there for their tour of duty, eighteen months or whatever it was. So shows would come to them. I'd been in there three or four times.

"I read that there was a payroll there like $300,000 every other Friday. I started forming a plan to get it. I thought, 'If I'm going to go, I'm going to go righteously.' What could they give me for sale of drugs? Five to fifteen? What are they going to give me for stealing on an air base? Five to ten? I'm already going to get something. I'm already wanted.

"I went to a costume store. I told the guy in the store I was playing a part in a movie. I got a general's uniform. The story didn't say whether Russell T. McIntyre was a brigadier or a lieutenant general. It just said 'general.' So I made him a brigadier. And I got the salad for the chest.

"I went to a beauty salon that I knew in that area, and they grayed my hair. I grew a mustache and touched it up gray.

"I had to sneak into San Francisco and get my printer to make all the applicable ID. I didn't know what kind of ID I was looking for, but *he* knew. Department of Defense. He made me up perfect ID. And all the teak credit cards and right driver's license and all that. And people like ID. You go to banks, stores, to cash something, you show this ID, Oh, you're all right. I even had a Masonic card.

"So I drive up in my car. Man, I'm loaded. On heroin and methedrine. Wired. If I'm going to go, I'm going to go swingin'. 'Cause I expected to be busted any minute. I never thought I'd get away with that.

"But from the very beginning, salutes! They take me back to the colonel who was in charge of the base. It was a little teeny base. I had all this ID ready. He didn't even want to see it! It was: Yes sir! No sir! People believe whatever they see. If I put on a pilot's uniform, they'd think I was a pilot.

"I'm pretending to look over the books. I couldn't tell one thing from another. But the pretense was good. Now I'm thinking, How am I going to get him to open that safe? I didn't even have to. He opened it without my asking, and walked away.

"There was thirty grand in there. There was no three hundred grand. I found out later I'd missed the payroll by a week. But I took the thirty grand and I took some other papers, parchment papers and what I thought were securities. They saved my life.

"I see that's all I'm going to get. This colonel wants me out of there. They might have been doing something too, I don't know. Later on, when I was busted, this guy came in with the FBI and said, 'That's him! That's him! I'll never forget him! His hair was gray, but that's him!' He'd have killed me if he could have got through the bars.

"So I leave. Now I'm so wired. There were a lot of whore houses in Nevada. They're legal. I stopped at the nearest one. I picked this one girl. We go in the room. I see she's got tracks. I said, 'Hey, have I got a present for you!' And like an idiot I whip out the works and some good shit, and I turn her on, and I turn on. And she says, 'What the hell kind of general are you?' A dope fiend general!

"That was a big mistake. The FBI traced me to that place and figured out who the general was. Rodney!

"I was going east. I stopped at Provost, Utah. I put on the uniform again. Walked into a bank. Got a check. Fixed it up with a check machine. I asked for the bank manager. I got one who said, 'Oh yes sir!' and wanted to take me to lunch. Cashed a check for eighteen hundred dollars. I did that almost cross country. Every time I had to go into a bank, I'd put the uniform on.

"I was running and running, and more strung out. You always need money when you're not working and you're shooting drugs and running from place to place and hiding. It's very expensive.

"That life is a horror, a twenty-four karat horror. By then I was strung out on the depressant, which was heroin, or morphine or dilaudid, and I was always shooting methedrine. It came in little vials. You go up and down and in and out, and you're very paranoid. I was very forlorn. You think, 'When is this going to end?' You almost ask to be caught.

"There was nothing east for me. I couldn't work. This was 1965, and the whole jazz scene had changed. I drove back west. I was in bad shape. I had gone through a lot of the money and I was thinking of new avenues. And I got busted in San Francisco copping. I went to somebody's place to cop and crash! the door came in. They were there to bust the connection. They took me in and of course they found out who I was and that I was wanted by the feds.

"They put me in the San Francisco County jail. They sent a guy from Washington. They freaked out. This guy asked me about the securities and other pieces of parchment papers I'd taken. It was gobbledygook. He said, 'Have you got 'em?' I said, 'Yeah, Bank of America, in a safety deposit box.'

"He said, 'If you'll give them back, we won't charge you with the impersonation or the theft. We'll just turn you over to the narcotics bureau, and you'll get tried for the narcotics charge.'

"I had to sign something to let them get into the box. It was not very far from where I was. I had all kinds of things in there. They got them all out and they gave me back what didn't have anything to do with them -- like, for example, a check writer, which I had no use for in jail.

"The papers they wanted were classified information. I had no idea. They made the deal with me. They wanted to make a deal anyway. They didn't want the publicity either. Penetrating a secured area. They wanted to keep it out of the papers.

"But one of the detectives there was a friend of mine named Jim Hurley, a trumpet player. He's retired now. He was telling the reporters, 'This guy's a great trumpet player.' And they gave me a horn, and that picture was on the front page of the San Francisco *Chronicle*. There was another story in the *Examiner*. It was ridiculous, a side show. When I went back to the county jail the next day, I was a hero, everybody calling me 'General'.

"One of the papers had a story about the general; the other one had a story that Garfield Levy, Ronald Berger, and Robert Lehman, the stock broker, all were Red Rodney.

"I took the name Robert Lehman because there was a Robert Lehman, who was Governor Lehman's brother. And there was Lehman Brothers, investment bankers. The name sounded very good, in case I ever wanted to come up with a brokerage or stock scam, but I was never good enough to figure one out."

There is a great irony about this, which I pointed out. Maybe he couldn't figure it out, but Boesky and Millikin and Vesco and other high rollers got away with millions, and this even their swag is as nothing to the collective handiwork of the manipulators who plundered an entire nation through the savings and loan institutions, comparatively few of whom have been charged with crimes, much less punished, and whose depredations ultimately will cost the American taxpayer upward of half a trillion dollars. Since they got away with it, and you and I will have to make up losses, they stole our money on a carom shot. Seen from this perspective, Red's thefts seem almost innocent by comparison. "You were a callow amateur," I said. Red laughed and said, "You're right. They're the real thieves."

All the names Red took, one will note, were Jewish, a fact not lost on some of the authorities who questioned him: "The FBI guy said, 'Well, you're very loyal to the Jews.' I said, 'Of course! Who thinks of them as committing crimes?'"

"If I'd gone to trial, I'd have lost anyway and got a big sentence. So I made a deal. I plead guilty to the narcotics charge and I got five years. And the five years wound up being twenty-three months. They sent me to the Fort Worth Public Health Service hospital. It was not a prison then. I had a beautiful room. Now it's a prison. Lexington and Fort Worth have become correctional institutions. Ever since the methadone programs came out, they didn't need any more government treatment centers, as they were called.

"After I finished that sentence, I was back in Las Vegas. I had no teeth, I was in bad shape. I was able to play fourth trumpet in a show band there. It was horrible. It was a tough period, and I was strung out again. And I went back to the insurance fraud, figuring they're not going to bust me anyway. This time they did.

"I was living in my aunt's house in Las Vegas. I had a nephew -- he was really my cousin, but because of the age difference, I thought of him as my nephew. He was going to college and found a little apartment and moved out. He had some insurance. It was a college policy, a lot of money for a little bit of premium money, and it was double indemnity in case he got killed. My aunt, his mother, was the beneficiary.

"She was very sick at the time. We had a joint bank account, she and I. I took care of everything, her social security money and her pension money. And it all went together. So it was very easy for me to do this. My nephew had the same name as his father, who had been killed. I took his father's death certificate and I copied it. The copy I made was better than the original. And I had that official state stamp. When I declared my nephew dead and got all the documented evidence that he was dead, and killed in an accident at that, the check came to her. I just deposited it. Forty thousand dollars.

"The fraud was great, the scam was great. They couldn't get me. But they came around and said, 'We're going to get her. Now you cop to it or we're taking her.' So what was I going to do?

"And I was ready then. This time I knew if they put me away, I'd never mess up again. I wasn't going to let them take my aunt, even though she probably would have got a probation. She's still alive, by the way; she's ninety. She didn't even know what the hell happened. I had to tell her. I copped to it. Plead guilty. They gave me three years."

But he wouldn't serve even that much time. Furthermore, he went not to a prison but back to Lexington, where he encountered a sympathetic warden, as he had so often encountered sympathetic cops and FBI men.

Red recounted: "I'd been there three times as a volunteer, long before I ever started any criminal activities. And now I

was ready. This was 1976-77.

"The warden at Lexington was a nice guy. Warden Rauch. He had come from a tough penitentiary, McNeil Island. And he's suddenly at a place like Lexington, that was co-ed! He sees girls sitting there with practically nothing on, sunning themselves, walking up and down the yard with their boyfriends -- no physical contact. That was a no-no.

"Once the word got around that I was there, one of the disc jockeys at the University of Kentucky called and asked for me. And then the school asked for me. The warden finally called me in and said, 'What is this about?'

"I told him, and he said, 'I think it's good community relations for you to go out. And this is a community custody institution anyway, so we'll have to get you your proper classification, and you can go.'

"So then I was going to the University of Kentucky, giving a little jazz theory class. One of the professors -- who was also the head of the dental school -- played saxophone. He got me out to play with the University of Kentucky pep bands for the basketball games.

"A great trumpet player named Vince Di Martino was a professor of trumpet there. He got me to do classes, to speak. I would get out a lot. The warden would laugh and say, 'Hey, you think you could spend the weekend with us this week, Rodney?' And I'd say, 'Well, I'll have to see my schedule, Warden Rauch.' He loved that.

"By now I was forty-eight or forty-nine. I *knew* that once I got out of there, I'd never mess up.

"The parole board came, and they weren't going to let me go. You know, those guys who work on the parole board are former employees of the prisons. They're Bureau of Prisons people. They may have been unit managers or hacks or guards or whatever.

"My unit manager went with me to the parole board. It was, 'Hey, Jim, Harry, how are you?' They all knew each other. They said, 'What are you doing here?' He said, 'I'm here for this man. I want him out.'

"I made parole. It was cut and dried: you've got a year more to do. Which was great: it gave me twenty-three months, and three months before that I went to a half-way house in New York.

"Remember the Bryant Hotel at Fifty-fourth and Seventh? It was like a flop house. Musicians used to stay there. Years ago it was nice. That became the half-way house. And that's where I was. From there I looked out and I said, 'This is going to be tough.' Here I am thrown into New York with very little money. In the back of my mind, I still thought I would go back to Los Vegas. I still had some leaders who would put me in their bands. But I said, 'No, man, I don't want that. If I'm going to play, I want to play jazz.'

"I was downright scared. I had no teeth. I needed implants, which were very expensive. This was 1979.

"I didn't know what I could do when I got out of the half-way house. I knew only that I wanted to get back into jazz and do the best I could. I had no idea that anything good was going to happen. I just knew that there would be no more nefarious activities."

And at this point Red's life changed completely. The woman's name was Helene Strober. She was then a buyer of women's wear for the 2,000-store Woolco chain, which meant she had a great deal of power in the garment district of New York, that crowded and shabby area, not far south of Times Square, of narrow streets and double-parked trucks where workmen push carts full of dresses hanging from horizontal poles along the sidewalks from one establishment to another. It is incredibly busy in the daytime, bleakly deserted at night.

Red said:

"I knew two garment manufacturers and a Mafia guy, trucking guys from the garment center, who were in the half-way house for income tax when I was there. They befriended me. One time they said, 'We want you go to go dinner with us. There's a lady we want you to meet. Be nice to her, she's very important to us. She's a buyer with a big pencil.' I didn't know what a buyer was.

"That's how I met Helene. That was the first date. I'm sure at first she thought, 'Who is this so-called musician who was in jail for something?' And then we talked and I told her why. Another date, and I took her to a jazz club. And they introduced me. She didn't know anything about it, but I guess she thought, 'Somebody must know him.'

"After the half-way house, I planned to get my own apartment. But I moved in with Helene. Out of a flop-house to a gorgeous apartment.

"My first gig was in a restaurant called Crawdaddy's at the Roosevelt Hotel. It was only a trio gig: piano, bass and me. An old publicist named Milton Karle, long dead, who had Stan Kenton and Nat King Cole, got me the gig. And on piano I hired Gary Dial, who was then twenty-three. That was the beginning of a long association. We worked there five or six weeks. We did good business, because Helene had the place packed with garment center people. The job was six to eleven; they'd finish work and come over. The manager wanted us back quickly.

"She had her natural mother instinct. Here I was in trouble, just getting out of it. She saw that I was really trying. She watched it very carefully at first. By the time we were ready to get married, she knew everything was fine.

"I was very lucky, because now I didn't need to take any other kind of work. I got my teeth taken care of. I needed endodontic implants. I still had some teeth on the bottom. They could do root canal and put steel pins in. A dentist in New York did them for me. He said, 'If you're lucky they'll last five years.' They lasted five years. By that time, I needed new implants, a kind they developed in Sweden, which I've got now. They're great.

"My chops were good. I started working. I went to a gig in Florida and we bought an apartment in Boynton Beach. Ira Sullivan had the house band in the place, Bubba's, in Fort Lauderdale. I spoke to Ira. I said, 'I'm supposed to go into the Village Vanguard. Why don't you come in with me?' I talked him into it. He never traveled. So we had a band together for almost five years, Rodney-Sullivan. Gary Dial on

piano. We had Joey Baron on drums for a while. My favorite kid, man, he was sensational. I started recording quite a bit, some for Muse, some for Elektra Musician, for Bruce Lundvall."

The association of Sullivan and Rodney was to produce a series of memorable albums.

"I was finding much more success than I did in my early life," Red said. "And of course I was now a much more mature person, a healthier person, one who knew what the pitfalls were, and one who knew the advantages of a clean, healthy, good home life. It took many years for me to straighten my life out. But once I did, my career went along with it. Today, I guess I would say it's a human triumph. That's the term I would use.

"Because I really hit rock bottom. I neglected all of the talent I had. When I did play, it was in show-room orchestras and funny bands in Las Vegas. The crimes I committed were outrageous, outlandish. They may seem funny. And they are funny, when you look back and say, 'Wow. This guy had the balls to do all of this?'

"It wasn't balls so much. The improvisational quality was there, of course. But I realized, 'Hey, I got nothing to *lose*. I'm in bad trouble anyway.' And when I did get caught, it wasn't that bad. I *needed* that rest."

One immediate reward of Red's altered life was a reconciliation with his family in Philadelphia.

"My mother and father were heartbroken when I messed up. But they were with me at all times. Always stayed with me. I'm glad they lived long enough to see that I was beginning to straighten out.

"I have a brother who's five years younger than I am. He's a manufacturer's representatives in sporting goods. And I have a sister who's seventeen years younger. She's a city employee, and I still see her whenever I'm in Philly. I have lots of cousins in Philly. When I came back into the family, after all the years of being away, it was as if I'd never left. They were all very, very nice. They responded beautifully and never asked a question until I brought it up.

"One of my cousins has an adopted son who got messed up with drugs, not with heroin but with the other crazy shit. When I heard about it, I talked to them. Of course that's when they let it out and asked all kinds of questions. I told them, 'Don't ever give up. There's always a chance.' And sure enough, the kid straightened up."

Red has been traveling now for twelve years, acquiring a growing reputation as a major jazz soloist. Currently he heads a quintet which features a brilliant twenty-year-old saxophonist from Columbia S.C., named Chris Potter, whom I first heard in his home town when he was sixteen. He was startling even then, and he is better now, a superbly inventive player on all the saxophones with technique enough to execute anything he imagines.

Early in 1991, Continuum, a new label, recorded the quintet in an album called *Red Alert*. The group, which includes David Kikosky on piano, Jimmy Madison on drums, and the remarkable bassist Chip Jackson, is excellent. The tracks alternate between a kind of 1990s bebop played with "acoustic" instruments and tunes that use synthesizers and electric bass with saxophone and trumpet. Red was vaguely apologetic for the tracks utilizing electronics when he played the album for me at his home, assuming, I imagine, that I am some sort of unrealistic purist.

But I am hardly unaware of the demands of the marketplace, and furthermore, I liked the tracks, some of which are designed for exposure on those radio stations that designate themselves "the Wave". These tracks are very pretty. The playing is wonderful. I was particularly struck with how tight Chris Potter and Red are, both for intonation and time, in the unison passages in fast material. Red, on fluegelhorn and trumpet, has never been more effortlessly fluent.

I listened to the album for the first time in the basement of Red's pleasant house on the bank of a stream in New Milford, New Jersey. This was Red Rodney, living the suburban good life, like a bank manager or the owner of a car dealership. He is stocky and husky and almost boyish, and he still has a full head of wavy red hair.

"You don't have to apologize for this album," I said. "It's wonderful."

"Do you really think so?" he said, in that uncertainty that bedevils every artist excepting the most irrationally self-admiring. "I know that *I* like it."

He was sitting on a low sofa. It was late February, and to his right, beyond a picture window, a premature spring was coming up in the garden. Clear brown water flowed full in the creek, and a dusting of green tinted the faded winter lawn. Red said:

"I think going through that kind of ordeal makes a kinder person. You're more sensitive to other people and human frailty and to other people's feelings and thoughts and ambitions and desires. And you're also more alert to people's needs. You know, you'll find someone in the audience who can't wait for you to finish and to come over and talk to you. Well, years ago, I'd just say 'Thank you' and walk away. Now I realize this man perhaps needs to talk to me, so I'll give him a little time. I find that most of the time I'm right, that they need it.

"You know, adversity stinks. Adversity usually knocks a person down forever. But if someone can overcome and bounce back from adversity -- and not many do -- then it makes you a better person, a much more understanding person. Believe me, adversity is a horror. And I'm not going to say I was an exceptional person, or exceptionally strong, because I don't think I was, or am. I think I was very lucky.

"Now my ability, of course, is not luck. That had to be nurtured. And when I stopped playing, I didn't play well. When I started playing again, all of those years of pent-up frustration of not playing came out. And that is one reason I am playing better now in these last twelve years than I've ever played."

"How much to you practice?"

"Ummm, not as much as I should," Red said, which is an

answer to that question you'll hear frequently from musicians. "When I'm off, I should practice more. I'm not a practicer. Many guys are. Like, a Buddy De Franco. All the time, he's practicing. It's not good. The first night I go to a gig, I suffer! Is the sunlight in your eyes?"

"Not really," I said.

"Yes it is," he said, and got up to draw a curtain against the afternoon sun. He sat down again.

"By now, I've been back in the music scene for twelve years and what I hope is the next thirty or forty years. My sights are squarely set on making the best music I can make, embracing all of the newer forms of jazz that specifically fit my style. I'm not going to take anything that sounds like snake-charmin' music and fit that in, because it doesn't fit in.

"So that's what's happening to me now. I'm enjoying a nice run of success. The music I'm involved in, I'd like to say it's bebop of the '90s, but it's even a little more. I think I'm leaping into the twenty-first century, using the new electronic instruments, but being me. We're playing jazz and using those instruments as colorations. I don't want to do what other experimenters have done, even though they've been very successful, like Weather Report. And they're very good. I just don't want it that way.

"And even what Wayne Shorter is doing, I don't think that's jazz. It's very good, very neatly done and marketed and packaged. But I don't hear the Wayne Shorter I love. I may not be right. But certainly I want to try it this way and keep growing. And I'm taking the younger players, because I think they've got so much more to offer me. I offer them the roots and tradition, but what they can offer, I can take. One thing I've learned. Whatever they bring in, I usually am in charge of arranging it, without writing down a note. So I do re-arrange everything.

"Having been with Charlie Parker did me a world of good. But what I did before is not what I'm working on and how I'm putting my work today.

"Life isn't lived yesterday. If I had to live through yesterday, I think I'd commit suicide. I look back at all these things and say, 'Oh my God! How could I have done that? It's not me, it's a different person.'

"Yet, when I look at it realistically, all I can say is, 'Well it was me.' I'm very proud that I could overcome this. I didn't expect anything.

"I've seen so many very fine players never come back: lose their health, lose their ability to play, lose their careers, then lose their lives.

"This in a sense was not planned. It was hoped-for. I didn't expect to accomplish this much."

"What's your wife like?" I asked. She was away at work, in Manhattan.

"My wife," he said, "is a very nice lady, six years younger than I, a business woman. She's very sensible. She didn't know anything about jazz until she met me. She's given me a whole new life, and she's also made it possible for me to stay in jazz without having to embrace club dates or weddings and bar mitzvahs and whatever else you had to play to make a living. She could afford me not to work until things came along.

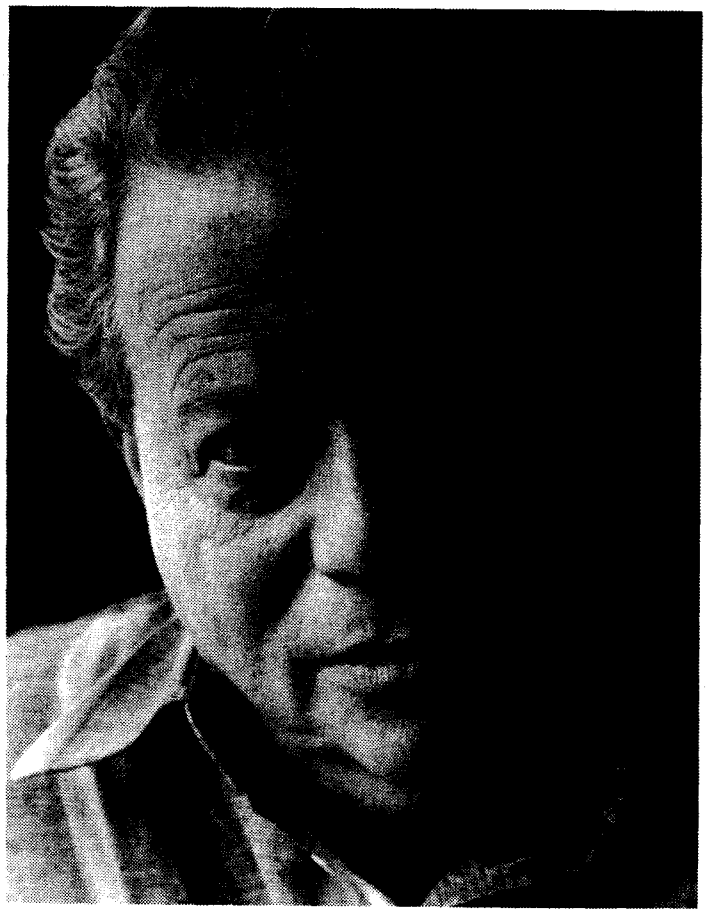
"We've both developed in this marriage. She didn't know anything about me. She gradually learned.

"She's no longer a buyer. She works for a big manufacturer. She now sells to the buyers who were her friends." (A few weeks after this conversation, Red and Helen sold the New Milford house and moved into a condominium in Hackensack, a short run from the George Washington Bridge. They have another home in Florida.)

"In colleges," Red said, "all of the kids ask me about the drug years. I'm up front about drugs. I always let them know that it was very heavy in jazz during the late '40s, through the '50s, and into the '60s.

"I love it today. There are no drugs in jazz today. It's all in rock-and-roll. These kids have learned from us what not to do as well as what to do. Today, smoking is unsociable, which is great.

"The young musicians are very serious. They're involved. One good thing about music in the schools: learning music teaches you how to learn. I would say seventy-five percent of the kids in the music programs will never embrace music as a profession. But it will help them in learning whatever they choose as a profession.



Red Rodney 1991 photo by John Reeves

"Art Blakey said, 'If you pass through this life without hearing this music, you've missed a great deal.' And this is very true.

"Our fans listen to our music with their ears and not their feet. Sure, a taste has to be acquired for our music, just as it does for classical music. You have to listen for a while before you see the value and the beauty of this music. That's why it'll probably never have mass popularity, like rock and roll.

"But at this stage of my life, I'm glad it doesn't. I would rather play for the select, special few, than for a mass. You know, rock gets worse every year. It doesn't get better. The old rock and roll bands -- and they were never good either -- were better than the new ones. Whereas the new young jazz players coming up are very proficient, they're educated, they play their instruments beautifully.

"Clark Terry, Nat Adderley, Snooky Young, and I just judged the Thelonious Monk Foundation's Louis Armstrong trumpet competition. The winner was a seventeen-year-old kid from Sioux City, Iowa, named Ryan Kaisor. He was magnificent. But the others, all nineteen of them, were magnificent. I told the Washington *Post*, 'I would not want to have been a contestant in this contest.' And the others agreed. The one who won was top of the line, but he wasn't that far ahead of the last of these trumpeters. They were so great. We sat there and laughed, saying, 'Look what the hell we're confronted with. Look what's happening to the trumpet.' These kids, no one ever told them, 'You can't do this,' so they go right ahead and do it. They're more proficient, they're technically better. They do everything better than those in my generation.

"Now of course they've got to learn how to play with experience, how to play with ensembles, which they will. But I can see from that contest what the trumpet players are going to be playing like ten years from now.

"And this is not only happening with the trumpet. The music is just going to perpetuate itself. The players are going to get better and better and better. The writers are going to get better. It's going to be great.

"I want to embrace it. I want to continue with it as long as I can stand up and hold the horn. We're not supposed to be moldy figs. We're supposed to keep two ears open."

Grover's Corner
by Grover Sales

I had my first encounter with black music in 1932 in a holy roller church in Millersburg, Kentucky, pop. 804.

It may seem unlikely that a Jewish teenager from Louisville would luck into such exotica, but father had packed me off to military school in Bourbon County to develop discipline and character. He couldn't afford this extravagance after the Crash of '29, but that's how much trouble I was at home.

I was the first Jew Millersburg had ever seen, so on the first day of school the cadets threw me on the floor to feel for my horns. Rustic Southerners in those days knew that Jews had horns.

Classes met on Saturday and not Monday; the Colonel deemed it sinful for cadets to prepare Monday's lessons on the Lord's Day, when he marched the entire school in full parade dress to services at one or another of the town's four white churches.

These ghastly ordeals outlasted the Ring Cycle, with rock-like pews, doleful come-to-Jesus ministers, and a form of music that inflicted acute physical anguish. When those home-town sopranos cut loose on *Rock of Ages*, their high notes, oscillating between C and C-sharp, would crack glass.

I longed wistfully for Mother's Chopin on the parlor upright and the grand exaltation of Temple Adath Israel's resplendent organ.

My only friend in this Dickensian orphanage was Jesse, the black cook. Jesse commiserated with my endless woes, made jimson weed poultices for my ravenous boils, and warned me off the tomato juice that the Colonel laced with saltpeter "to keep you cadets from gettin' too randy," as Jesse put it. "Don't think it does no harm, myself, but you never know."

"Jesse," I said, "I can stand anything about this hole except Sunday church and that awful music."

"You prob'ly find colored-folks' church music lots more fun. You ain't goin' home Easter; be here by yourself. Come to church with me. Colonel never need to know."

Easter Sunday, Jesse walked me to his ramshackle church in the back-alley part of town. In their Sunday best, the congregation filed into their pews with obvious delight. They seemed *happy* to be in church. I was quite relieved when Jesse sneaked me almost unseen into the last row.

The cheerful Reverend welcomed "all you smiling and happy people. And I see all different colors of God's little flowers in His house today."

Then he began the Jesus-talk, but nothing like Millersburg Presbyterian. He was singing! Shouting and singing with three-octave range throbbing with passion and utter conviction: "And Gaaaaaawd so loved the wor-uuuuuuld, that He gave his *only begotten Son*!!!" The beaming choir, backed by a hunchback at a battered upright and a sister whacking a tambourine, broke into *Jerusalem, The Holy City,* with a lot of wrong notes that sounded strangely wonderful, while the whooping congregation clapped on the body-based jazz beat of two-and-four.

A new emotion shook me, terrifying yet thrilling, like the first time a horse under me broke into a runaway gallop. This same feeling gripped me five years later when I heard *Jerusalem* for the second time -- in the ominous opening of Ellington's *Black and Tan Fantasy.*

Richard Pryor said: "When you goes to a black church you gets a *show* for your money!"

I got a show I never got over.

A little belatedly:

Thank you, Jesse.

-- GS