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Re Tom Harrell

I must confess that I was reluctant to meet Tom Harrell. Yet he has emerged as so important a player that I felt he really belonged in the book of photos of jazz people that I am preparing with photographer John Reeves.

By now you have surely heard about Harrell, and I hope you have heard him. He is a spectacularly creative trumpeter, with a big tone -- he can get low notes that in ensemble passages sound like trombone -- wonderfully compositional thinking, and a fluent technique that is, however, always held in restraint and put to the service of a very lyrical style. Since leaving Phil Woods, he has been traveling in various ensembles, sometimes with the excellent Swiss-born alto saxophonist George Robert.

Harrell was born June 16, 1946, in Urbana, Illinois, which makes him forty-five. He grew up in San Francisco, and became known in jazz through his work with Woody Herman, Horace Silver, and Phil Woods, whom he joined in 1983.

But he became known almost as much for his behavior as for his playing. He had, I was told, a way of standing on the bandstand in an almost catatonic stillness, head hung forward, horn dangling from his hand. When it came time for him to solo, he would shuffle to the mike on small steps, burn the room down, and then retreat into that strange motionless silence. He suffered from some severe emotional disorder whose nature nobody seemed able to tell me. Had he been totally non-functional he would have been unremarkable. But this man is an amazingly fine jazz musician.

Furthermore, he is a witty, funny man, and the very strangeness is manifest in his awareness of his own condition. And, I found, telling Tom Harrell stories is almost a cottage industry among musicians forty-five and under in New York. These stories are always told with affection and admiration. And always the narrators quote him in his stuttering low monotone, which of course I cannot commit to paper. I believe this story is true; nobody could have invented it.

Harrell played a trumpet clinic for Jamey Aebersol. After a brilliant performance, he cracked a note badly toward the end. Aebersol asked him why it had happened. Harrell said, in that slow low unsmiling way of his, "Lack of sleep. Lack of motivation. Lack of practice. And I'm an alcoholic."

In order to photograph Harrell, I sought the intercession of two of his friends, the very capable arranger and saxophonist Bill Kirchner and trumpeter John McNeil, one of Harrell's closest friends and an outstanding player himself; they have recorded together.

John and I met them at Harrell's small apartment on the upper West Side. He met us graciously, dressed in a black shirt and black slacks. His face from time to time was contorted by some terrible emotional pain, the deep uncertainty that dogs him. The room was curtained and dimly lit. Glancing over his book-shelves, I noticed that Tom Harrell goes in for some very heavy reading.

I let McNeil do the talking. Harrell laughed at all the jokes, caught all the nuances of the conversation, seated on his haunches, back against the wall. He stayed in that position so long I thought his legs must hurt. I can't remember the context, but Kirchner said, "Did you ever get cut?"

"Well," Tom said, "only by other musicians."

John got our pictures, making the discovery that when Tom relaxes and his face goes into repose, its expression is almost angelic. And make no mistake about his intelligence. It is acute. When we left, I was perhaps even more baffled than when we arrived.

Nobody, I suppose, knows Tom Harrell better than Phil Woods. And so I present you with Phil's essay on Tom. Other than letters, this is Phil's first appearance in the *Jazzletter*. He promises me that it won't be the last.

Meantime, if you haven't heard Tom Harrell, you're in for a lovely discovery.

Tommy

by Phil Woods

It was Tom Harrell's last gig with my quintet. After six years Tommy felt it was time to move on and form his own band.

We were on our way to the Edmonton Jazz Festival and then the Saskatoon Festival. Edmonton has always had one of the best events in the world. A very friendly town with music and educational events and exhibits all over the nice-sized city. The concert was us and Helen Merrill with the Mike Nock Trio, and the music was first class.

We retired right after the gig in order to make the 7 a.m. flight to Saskatoon, the only direct flight of the day. There were three bands on the flight, and it was a treat to see the Air Canada ground staff deal with the three full-sized basses.

Why do people find a man lugging a huge instrument around the world so amusing? Don't they realize he has dedicated himself to playing quarter notes for the rest of his life? His fingers will always resemble ground chuck and he is forced to stow the leviathan in a huge box called a coffin, for obvious reasons. This is not a person to be taken lightly.

Back when the airlines required you to buy a seat for a bass (only coffins are allowed nowadays), a woman traveler watching Red Mitchell wrestle his bass aboard a flight said to him, "I do hope when you finally get to where you are going, they are going to ask you to play!"

Once, when I had the European Rhythm Machine, we did what the Air France people told us to do: we locked the bass in one of the two lavatories on a Caravelle. A man in a white linen suit soiled himself while waiting for the facility to be vacated and left a trail as he squished back to his seat. Quel odor. Quel dummy.

A businessman in South America somewhere refused to sit next to the bass. Claimed it was dangerous. Sir, it's only dangerous on the bandstand and is one of the best seat mates ever devised. It neither smokes nor drinks and doesn't talk much and if you keep your cool you can wangle the meal that goes with the seat, two sets of slippers, and two travel kits.

Why, the bass is your oyster if you are in on the game!

I find the bass to be helpful when I'm a little down and need a laugh. I go to the boarding area before the other cats and groove to the reactions of our fellow travelers when they see Steve Gilmore and his full-size axe.

"Why don't you get a piccolo?" wins hands down as the most abused bass cliche, closely followed by, "That won't fit under your seat, son." And "My, that sure is a big cello."

So, considering the three basses on our flight to Saskatoon, everything went smoothly at check-in, and we were at the gate, boarding passes in hand with time to spare. We were looking forward to breakfast and more sleep after the short flight. As the three bands took coffee and chatted, we happened to look out a window and there goes Tommy, out for a walk five minutes to boarding time. And we watch as he disappears into the rolling hills surrounding the airport, his three cabin bags clutched firmly in hand.

I asked him at one point what he had in his cabin bag that made it weigh a ton. "The Real Book in every key," he responded quickly and clearly.

Steve Gilmore once got a peek inside the other two and said they were full of Dippety-Doo and other aerosol-dispensed notions, along with the largest pharmaceutical kit since Serge Chaloff. Hal Galper named Tommy "Dwayne" in honor of Duane Reed, one of the biggest east-coast pharmacy chains.

Sure enough, Tommy missed the flight and spent the day inching his way to Saskatoon by way of Calgary, Vancouver, and Nova Scotia. The jazz folks in all these places responded to his problem and at all stops he was met and aided. He got to the hotel in Saskatoon just in time for one of our infrequent sound checks. He does it the hard way, but he always makes it. In six years with my band he did not miss a gig.

When Tommy first joined the band, people would invariably ask, "What's wrong with your trumpet player?" I would try to be diplomatic and reply with a question myself, "What's wrong with your ears?"

Tommy is a disabled person. He was diagnosed as schizophrenic in 1967 after the first of several nervous breakdowns. He has been taking stelazine, a powerful psychotropic drug, ever since. He has also suffered from a series of collapsed lung incidents and alcoholism. He no longer drinks.

Schizophenia is a disorder characterized by loss of contact with one's environment, a deterioration in the ability to function in everyday life, and a disintegration of personality.

The medications that Tommy has to take to control the chemical imbalance that triggers this disorder have side effects that include muscular weakness and his lethargic appearance.

The disorder is such that Tommy's mind can deal with only one thing at a time, be it answering a question, playing a solo, or something as simple as pouring a glass of water.

When Tommy first joined my band and we would play the head, he would solo first. As he finished, and I was starting my solo, I could see all eyes following Tommy as he shuffled off to stage left. I felt like yelling, "Hey, it's my turn! Look at me! I'm playing my little sax!"

When we played a huge sports palace in Madrid, where bicycle races were a big draw, Tommy suggested we open with *In a Velo Drome*.

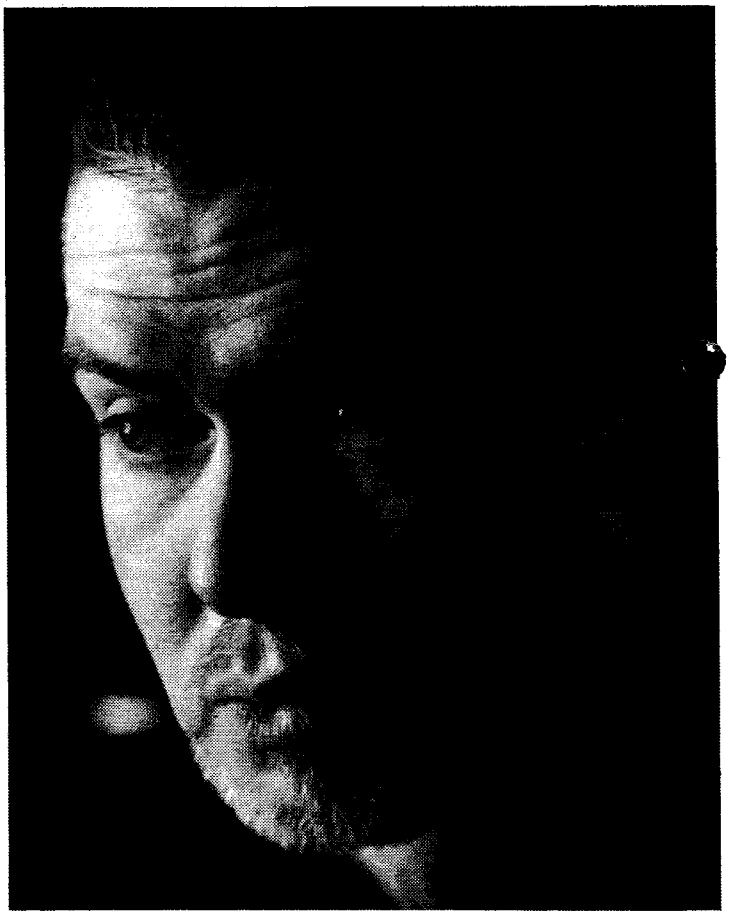
Somebody came up to Hal Galper and me at the bar before a gig and asked if Tommy had a speech problem. Without a rehearsal Galper and I replied, in unison, "W-w-w-well I-I-I-I d-d-d-don't th-th-th-think s-s-so."

While doing a solo gig in Canada, Tommy was late to the opening night first set. He announced to the politely waiting crowd, "I'm sorry I'm late and I would like to apologize for my lack of charisma."

This of course was a charismatic thing to do and he received a standing ovation.

Chet loved Tommy. So do Dizzy, Clark Terry, Nat Adderley, and most of the older guys. And some of the younger trumpet players exhibit a bit of insecurity when Tommy's name is mentioned.

I once said in a *Down Beat* profile on Tommy that he was the best improviser on his instrument I had ever heard. One trumpet player I loved called me on it. He said it wasn't about being the best. The hell it ain't. It's all very well for the O.K. players to prop each other up. I know. I'm an O.K. player but I ain't no Tommy Harrell, and if you can't tell the



Tom Harrell 1991 photo by John Reeves

difference your ears are on crooked. His sense of melodic development is astounding -- pure genius.

When he first joined the band, he told my wife he was sorry and didn't want to tarnish my reputation. He would come off the bandstand and start his weird stuff: "I'm not worthy to be in the band. Everybody hates me and my life is a joke. I have to talk to you about this, Phil!"

I finally blew up and told him the next time he was unworthy and had to quit, I wanted it in writing. I didn't want to hear any of this, especially after he had just got through carving my ass into hamburger helper.

While traveling through Holland by bus, Tommy bought what he thought was a bar of maple syrup candy. He bit into it with gusto to find out it was soap. He was foaming, and sick to his stomach, and we made an emergency stop. But we were hysterical with laughter and puns like "cleanest trumpet man in the biz," "Lava back up to me," and other really funny mature stuff like that.

There was a trumpet summit in Scandinavia under Clark Terry's general direction. When Tommy arrived, Clark told him it had been decided that each of them should sing a number. He asked Tommy what tune he wanted to sing. Tommy said, "W-w-w-well, it'll have to be *The Impossible Dream*." Clark is still telling the story.

Tommy said he was going to join Amnesiacs Anonymous as soon as he could remember where the meetings were.

When it came time for Tommy to make his move, he handed me a ratty piece of manuscript paper as he struggled down the aisle of a crowded 727 with his three bags of Dippety-Doo and stuff. It read:

To Whom it May Concern:
I have to quit the band. I am sorry.
Tom Harrell.

My new name for the next few weeks was Towhom Dubois.

We love and miss Tommy very much.

His new group and recordings are knocking everyone's socks off, as I knew they would. Bravo Front Line!

-- PW

Jazz and The Russia House

The Czech composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold had an interesting idea about movies. Korngold had a solid career in "classical" music before coming in 1934 to America, where he wrote scores for, among other things, *The Adventures of Robin Hood, King's Row, The Sea Hawk*, and *Captain Blood*. Hugo Friedhofer, who orchestrated for him, told me that Korngold looked on movies as operas without arias. He had a point, and although Hugo was a master of staying out of the way in his own scores, he repeatedly showed in such films as *One-Eyed Jacks* and *The Best Years of Our Lives* that he understood the principle well. So did Hugo's friend Alfred Newman, as one perceives instantly when one tries to imagine *Captain from Castile* without the music.

Given Korngold's maxim, you'd think by now Hollywood would have been able to make some good movies about jazz and jazz musicians.

I didn't like *Bird* for the reason many musicians didn't: it didn't capture *Bird*, and it certainly misportrayed Dizzy Gillespie. It concentrated on Charlie Parker's drug and other personal problems to the near exclusion of the passionate commitment to music. And the film is unrelievedly dark, with many of its exteriors shot in the night and rain. The picture proceeds in a relentless stygian umbra, even the interior scenes. One scene looked as if there wasn't a lightbulb in the room over 25 watts. One could hardly see the faces of the characters.

And the characterization of Charlie Parker is in keeping with the film's production design. There are no flashes of light, either visually or intellectually, none of that soaring genius of the man.

One of the abortive attempts of Hollywood to explore the jazz world was *Paris Blues*, with Paul Newman and Sidney Poitier. Then there was *A Man Called Adam*, in which Sammy Davis Jr. played a trumpet player. Another story about your standard B-flat exploited and bitter jazz musician.

Young Man with a Horn, based on the dubious Dorothy Baker novel "inspired by" Bix Beiderbecke, was overwrought and overblown, especially in the scene where Kirk Douglas bashes up his horn in frustration, reprise of the scene in *Champion* in which role as a boxer he punches out a locker in frustration. It was a numbingly false image of a jazz musician's life, the worst picture about jazz except for all the others. *The Benny Goodman Story* was dreadful. *The Glenn Miller Story* was awful. *Orchestra Wives* and *Sun Valley Serenade* were silly. Many musicians, however, seem to think *The Gene Krupa Story*, with Sal Mineo improbably cast as the drummer, is the nadir of films dealing with jazz or near-jazz. As Dallas pianist Dave Zoller put it, "It's almost worth seeing for laughs, like *The Return of the Killer Tomatoes*."

But the perpetual grouse of jazz musicians, "Why can't they make a good movie about jazz?" should be expanded to, "Why can't they make a good movie about music?"

Do you recall *A Song to Remember* with Cornel Wilde as Chopin and Merle Oberon as George Sand? (Both were miscast, particularly the exotic Oberon. Liszt said George Sand looked like a horse.) And what about that turkey with Stewart Granger as Paganini? (Granger at least looked rather like Paganini.) Or Charles Drake and Mickey Rooney as a sanitized Rodgers and Hart in *Words and Music?* Or *Till the Clouds Roll By* with Robert Walker as a Mr. Nice Jerome Kern, and Frank Sinatra in a white tuxedo singing *Old Man River*? Or *Rhapsody in Blue* with Robert Alda as George Gershwin? Or *Night and Day* with Cary Grant as Cole Porter? Or *The Fabulous Dorseys*, with Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey playing Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey -- among the most bizarre examples of miscasting in the history of film, with the middle-aged Dorseys playing themselves as young men. It

wasn't that they couldn't play their instruments. As actors, they couldn't even play themselves.

Yet it is not quite correct to say there's *never* been a good movie about a musician. I can think of two or three such films, including a British television mini-series about the two Johann Strausses.

Then there was *The Eddie Duchin Story* with Tyrone Power. It's a very good picture about a not-very-good musician. (One of the trombone players in that band told me that the musicians would take bets on how many wrong chords Duchin would play in a chorus.) Director George Sidney got from Tyrone Power a subtle portrait of an ambitious social climber who uses music to attain his ends. Sidney understood the uses of music in film. There is a long beautifully photographed and edited sequence in which Duchin falls in love with his wife-to-be. Music and image tell the story; there is no dialogue.

There was one film about a jazz musician that I rather liked, *The Five Pennies* with Danny Kaye as Red Nichols. It was intelligently written, and Kaye turned in one of his best dramatic performances. And an especial virtue is that it is the only film (as far as I know) in which Louis Armstrong appeared and was treated with respect as a great artist instead of manipulated into self-satire as a grinning clown. It was the only movie use of Armstrong that didn't make me squirm. I don't know enough about Nichols to comment on how accurate the film was, but it was a reasonable and convincing story about a jazz musician. Still, it was still another story about a jazz musician's struggle with addiction, in this case booze.

There is, I am told by musicians, a worth-seeing movie about amateur musicians in the Catskills called *The Gig*. I haven't seen it, but intend to. A current movie about Chopin and George Sand, *Impromptu,* has received mixed critical notices. I'll probably see it. *Amadeus*, though it was very well-done and received eight Academy Awards in various departments, somehow mislaid the point of the play, which was about Salieri's jealous and therefore distorted image of Mozart. It made the point that jealousy, even more than imitation, is the tribute that mediocrity pays to genius. The film, however, seemed to be about Mozart not as Salieri perceived him but as he really "was": a vulgarian and buffoon and something of an idiot. I enjoyed it by viewing it as fiction.

And then there was *The Fabulous Baker Boys*. This film got very good reviews, but since it was about two brothers (Jeff and Beau Bridges) who play cocktail pianists and a girl singer played by Michelle Pfeiffer, and since I don't trust film reviews, I avoided the picture for a time. So many musicians told me to see it that I gave in and rented the video. I was in love with it in six seconds, from the discomfiting show-biz patter of Beau Bridges as the "responsible" brother viewed with jaundiced eye by his sloppy cigarette-smoking brother, to the very end. The picture is hilarious, particularly a sequence in which the two brothers audition an incongruous array of aspiring girl singers of all shapes and sizes, a sequence made all the funnier by the way it was edited. The Beau Bridges character is supposed to be untalented, but he gets the duo the work. Jeff Bridges feels that the music they play night after dreary night is beneath his talent, and slips off to a black nightclub to play some jazz. One of the subtleties of the picture is that he really isn't all that good, not good enough certainly to be looking down on his brother and the world with such disdain. And Pfeiffer is outstanding as the hooker-turned-singer who gradually learns a little about what singing is all about (she did her own singing) as the story progresses. I have encountered only one musician who disliked this film, and he said, "I hated it! I've played those joints, I've lived that life. It made me remember a lot of things I don't want to think about!" Which was only testimony to its authenticity, from the on-the-mark musician's dialogue to the performances by the Bridges brothers (both of whom have played piano) to Dave Grusin's excellent score and sound-track subbing on piano for the Jeff Bridges character. The film is a funny piece of satire on mediocrity in music, which on repeated viewing takes on an undertone of melancholy desperation.

The rise of the *auteur* theory, which bears a French name because it is a French theory imported to America in that lingering adoration of European esthetic opinion that still afflicts this country, perceives the director as the main man in the making of a movie. One manifestation of it is the dogma of the Assumption of St. Alfred. Hitchcock, of course. Let me say in all sacrilege that I consider him the most over-rated director in motion-picture history. His pictures are wooden, flat, and shallow, with the possible exception of *Psycho*. He pre-planned them to the point that he (by his own admission) had all but lost interest by the time the shooting started. His exploitation of the two natal fears, loud noises and falling, is endless, redundant, and predictable: someone hanging off the arm of the Statue of Liberty, Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint trying to climb down the faces on Mount Rushmore in *North by Northwest* and, in *Psycho*, the use of the camera spinning upward to the sudden onslaught of high screaming strings (the Bernard Herrmann score was marvelous) as Martin Balsam gets stabbed and falls backward down the stairs. Hitchcock denied that he said actors were cattle, quoting himself gleefully as saying they should be treated like cattle. His failure to get human performances out of them is the conspicuous verification of this contempt.

The scene of the stabbing of Martin Balsam is scary only the first time you it. When you know what's coming, the effect vanishes. Indeed, a Hitchcock picture seen twice seems a purely technical exercise, like the work of a jazz player with lots of chops and nothing to say.

While I admire the good ones, directors are the most over-rated people in the chain of development that leads to a picture, good or bad, and writers the most under-rated.

I am reminded of something Hal Needham told me after he directed his first picture, the very funny *Smokey and the Bandit*. Until then, Needham was known as a top stunt man. The transition is not as odd as it might seem, since such people as Needham and Yakima Canute often wear the hat of second-unit director, because they of necessity have full control of complex action sequences. Needham told me that when the picture was pending, The Brass asked him how he was going to direct it. He replied, "What do you mean, how am I going to direct it? I'm gonna get a good cameraman, a good crew, some good actors, and I'm going to say, 'Quiet on the set. Action.' And then I'm going to say, 'Print it!' And then I'm going to turn it over to a good film editor. That's how I'm gonna direct it." I'm sure he was exaggerating for comic effect, but the comment does make mock of *auteur* theory.

It is hard to judge the work of a director because of the effect everyone in the chain of creation has on it. This is a very complex symbiotic process. Yet it is common, almost universal, for reviewers to wax lyrical (or deplore) the work and track records of directors as if they were the primary or even sole *auteurs* of movies. They rarely, rarely indeed, say a thing about producers. And producers are, after all, those who hire the directors. And the directors of photography. And one must pay attention to the contribution of a great production designer, which may be the subtlest in the picture since it sets the entire visual tone of it.

I would never hesitate to watch any film starring William Holden. Though he was not the greatest actor I've ever seen, he was (I realized long ago) an extraordinarily good judge of film and what goes into it: scripts, directors, designers, all of it. And he obviously knew when to say yes and when to say no, and had the courage to act on that judgment. He just did not let himself get into bad films. Thus I acquired respect for Holden's qualities as a *judge* of movies. And he was able to judge them in imagination -- in advance and in abstraction from the available information, not merely as a Monday-morning quarterback at a typewriter or word processor. And for this reason the total body of his work, from the gigolo writer in the brooding and macabre mockery of Hollywood and the film industry, *Sunset Boulevard*, to the acerbically funny Blake Edwards satire on that same industry, *S.O.B.*, is at a much higher level than that of Marlon Brando, who was far the greater actor.

So too Sean Connery, who simply is not seen in bad pictures. You can count on it: if he's in it, it will be good.

And then there's the composer. I would give serious consideration to any film with a score by Basil Poledouris or Bruce Broughton, who are in their forties, or James Horner, who is in his thirties. Film scoring has sunk far since the days of Friedhofer and Newman, thanks in part to electronics, but there are some lights, these three being among the brightest.

One of the finest composers in the history of the medium is Jerry Goldsmith. Often it happens that in the opening moments of a movie I'll hear some excellent music and wonder who did it. And very very often it will turn out to be Jerry Goldsmith. There are three levels to Goldsmith's contribution to a film. The first of them is that he is a composer of the first rank. The second is that he has a deep sensitivity to and understanding of film. The third is that, like Connery, he is in such demand that he can accept only the best pictures. And, again like Connery, he obviously has the judgment and understanding of the medium to know, and know in advance, what the best is.

I can think of no case of a Goldsmith score on a bad picture. Even *The Exorcist* wasn't bad, and Goldsmith's score was outstanding, for all its obvious debt to Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms*. (Too many Hollywood composers limit their Stravinsky lifts to *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Lately a lot of them have been ripping off Steve Reich.)

And this brings us to *The Russia House*, based on a novel by John LeCarre. The reviews of the picture were mixed. The New York *Times* panned it. What I got out of them was that there's this aging British book publisher who used to play jazz saxophone. He's a drunk. Here we go again: the jazzman as drunk or junky. He goes to Russia on a spy mission on behalf of British Intelligence and the CIA and meets this beautiful Russian girl . . . Oh yeah, I really need this picture.

But let's hypothesize a movie producer. He is an ex-jazz trumpeter. He leaves music reluctantly because it's a tough way to make a living and gets into movies. He becomes a famous producer, turning out some top-drawer films, some of them makers of money, some of them not, but invariably good. And all the while he so loves the music that he tries to stay in touch with both the music and the musicians. And he always takes his horn with him, never quite losing the yearning to get back, some day, somehow, to music.

The problem with this character is that, improbable as he may seem, and unlike the boozy British book publisher who used to play jazz, he isn't fiction. His name is Paul Maslansky. Had I known he was the producer of *The Russia House*, I'd have surmised instantly that something interesting would be done with jazz in the picture. Certainly it would not have been treated shabbily or falsely: he loves and knows it too well.

I would expect a good score in any Maslansky picture, but I would have had an even better fix if the reviews had said that Jerry Goldsmith had done the music. The focus would have grown even tighter if the reviews had said that Goldsmith uses Branford Marsalis on soprano saxophone all through the score. I saw no review that mentioned it, though Marsalis gets a full-screen credit of his own right after Goldsmith. Doubtless most movie reviewers don't know who he is. And I wish they had said that in the end credits, Mike Lang is identified as the pianist featured almost equally with Marsalis through the film. Lang is one of the most respected studio jazz players in Hollywood, a reader of fly-specks and an improviser of sensitivity and invention. You'll notice too a prominent use of a virtuoso bassist in the score. The end titles identify him as John Patitucci.

The script is by Tom Stoppard, a British playwright and film writer I enormously admire, and yet another man who doesn't get entangled with bad pictures.

To suggest that this is the best movie portrait of a jazz musician isn't saying much, considering the competition. So let's call it the first good one. Part of it is in the writing. The dialogue is sharp, literate, clever, and credible. There is a sequence in which Connery is questioned by intelligence agents about his past. One of the Americans asks him if among his jazz musician friends he has ever known one with anarchistic tendencies. I won't tell you his answer; but I laughed out loud at it. Under Fred Schepisi's direction, Connery is compellingly convincing as the musician, a man who once played in the Ray Noble band and yearns forever if bootlessly to find his way back to his lost music.

This is a complex picture. The plot is complicated; the plots of all mysteries and especially espionage stories are. This is the very point of the exercise. Following the threads is part of the fun. Perhaps one reason this film failed with many critics is that it is even harder to follow than most of those in this genre. Nor is it filled with violence, car chases and shoot-outs and teeterings on the edges of cliffs or tall buildings. The only violence is the death of one of the characters, and that happens off-camera. No. This is not a film of physical action. The action is all in the minds of the characters.

While, as we have said, it is more difficult to judge the contributions of a director than the *auteur* theorists would hold, there is one clue. When every performance in a picture is excellent, as is the case in this one, this suggests that the director has a great gift for working with actors, eliciting fine performances through whatever it takes. I don't know how Fred Schepisi -- who was co-producer as well as director of *The Russia House* -- gets his results but he does get them, and every performance in this film is flawless: that of Roy Scheider (the best piece of work I have ever seen from him) as the CIA man, James Fox as the British Intelligence man, the noted German actor Klaus Maria Brandauer as a Russian physicist, and all the secondary characters who make up the mosaic.

Michelle Pfeiffer plays the Russian girl with whom Sean Connery, as the ex-jazzman, falls in love. I first saw Pfeiffer in *Lady Hawk*, a fairy tale of a film with a medieval setting, a lovely little picture seriously diminished by the music score: it contained inappropriate elements of electronics and rock. She was every young man's dream of the perfect maiden, one of the most beautiful creatures I had ever seen. I concluded long ago that perfect beauty, such as that of Michelle Morgan, is bland. The greatest beauty, I decided, is imperfect -- somehow slightly marred. Having arrived at this bright conclusion, I discovered that Francis Bacon beat me to it by four hundred years: "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion." And sure enough, watching *The Russia House* for a second time, studying it in detail, I found what is wrong with Pfeiffer's face. When she faces the camera head on, particularly if her head is lowered a little, you realize that her seemingly perfect nose is a little crooked, bent a shade to her left. And viewed from three-quarters left, it has a dip and then a slight pointed rise at the tip. Her chin is a little short, too. And she is one of the most breath-takingly beautiful women of our time or any time.

But great physical beauty militates against character and intellect and talent, in both men and women but more particularly in women. For such is the catering that begins in childhood and lasts long that these people do not have to try hard. Doors are opened for them, early and often. Smiles are sent their way. Attention is paid. The best of them don't know why; the worst of them do, and use the knowledge ruthlessly and well. But beyond that, few of them are great achievers. Tyrone Power and Errol Flynn were adequate and entertaining actors, but certainly not in a class with Richard Attenborough, George C. Scott, or Brando. And in the history of the film industry, few great beauties have been great actresses: they don't have to be. We all intuitively know this. There are the beauties and then there are the actresses, the Lana Turners and the Colleen Dewhursts.

Pfeiffer could just stand there in front of the camera and be a success. But she doesn't. She may already be the finest American actress of her generation. She has astonishing range. In *Lady Hawk* she is the naive dream of every boy. In *The Fabulous Baker Boys* she exhibits a great talent for comedy. From the moment she enters, arriving for the audition and breaking a heel in the doorway and saying, "Oh shit," she has a perfect grasp of that tough but somehow pathetic little tart. And suddenly in *The Russia House* the American hooker has metamorphosed into a gentle, frightened, brave, intelligent, loving young Russian mother. And the character evolves: as the story advances, you watch her proceed from inhibition to interest to cautious and then glowing love. Watch how it all registers in her eyes. Furthermore, she does this all in a credible Russian accent. Her enunciation changes from picture to picture. She has a phenomenal ear, and she may emerge as one of the great dialecticians, like Brando, Attenborough, Laurence Olivier, and Michael Parks.

Finally we arrive at Sean Connery. He has no ear at all. Unlike the best British actors, and much like the American school that includes Gary Cooper and Spencer Tracy, he acts always in his own voice, always in his own accent. And it is a strange one, with peculiar vowels -- note how he says "do", for example, almost "dew". And his r's have a Scottish burr. He chews his words, pushing out his lips and grinding his jaw sideways, rather the way Herb Ellis does during a guitar solo. His accent is his limitation. It is his only one. He is a very great actor, and he has evolved enormously since his James Bond films, in which he was merely good. In recent years he has been consistently superb, as the aging Englishman Robin Hood in *Robin and Marian*, as the tough old American army officer in *The Presidio*, as the Irish cop in *The Untouchables*, as the Russian submarine commander in *The Hunt for Red October*, all with a Scottish burr that somehow doesn't matter. And in *The Russia House*, as the English musician-turned-publisher he does what I feel is his finest work to date.

This picture is not about jazz; it is about espionage. But that's why, perversely, it is the best portrait of a jazzman in film history, documentaries excluded of course. Hemingway said that if you did not know everything about the subject you

were treating it would leave, as he put it (and if memory serves me), holes in the writing. One can compare this with what Stanislavsky taught actors: though the scene in the play is a single room, you must know what is in the room next to it and the rooms upstairs, rooms that exist only in your imagination. Spencer Tracy's advice on acting, "Know your lines and don't bump into the furniture," is not as flippant as it sounds. He didn't say *learn* your lines, he said *know* them. And a sense of where the furniture lies is precisely what Stanislavsky was taking about. Know the room as if you had lived in it for years and couldn't, even in the dark, bump into the furniture. James Cagney's advice about acting was: "Never let them catch you at it." Too many actors do. Sean Connery never lets you catch him at it. Never. Never. Scottish burr and all. And however he got his grasp on the character, you believe, you truly believe, that his head is full of chord changes and a thousand melodies and half-forgotten images of old gigs and ballrooms; he *knows* his lines, and his jazz musician's character never bumps into the furniture, particularly the main piece of furniture of his life, his soprano saxophone. He picks it up with assurance, the instrument an old friend. Sitting in at a jam session, he wets the reed, slides it across his tongue. Any musician will know that it takes longer than that to wet a reed, but it also takes longer to warm up an airplane engine than it does in movies. This much poetic license can be allowed, and I didn't even think about it until later, so convincing is that moment when, a joy in his face, at ease on the bandstand with musicians who are old friends, at home in this familiar atmosphere, he prepares to play. And then he puts the horn in his mouth and starts playing, directly to the girl, *What Is This Thing Called Love?* Even the unheard lyric is part of the story: it is what in his heart he is asking her.

It would, I suppose, have been possible to teach Connery accurate fingerings for a bar or two, and then cut away. Saxophonist Pete King gave him a few lessons on the soprano. The camera tends to stay away from his fingers, which in any event might have been the easier part of playing to learn. The verisimilitude is achieved by muscular movements around the mouth and more particularly in the cheeks, which are perfect. You'd swear he was playing. He is assisted in this brilliant piece of deception by someone you do not see but do hear: Branford Marsalis, who plays soprano all through Jerry Goldsmith's lovely score, usually with Mike Lang's piano and strings.

And who would this aging soprano player sound like? Well, the soprano wasn't in general use when he was with Ray Noble, but he might well have taken it up later, as Woody Herman did. And who might the idol of this older player be? On whom would he have modelled his style?

It's rather like Artie Shaw. Or maybe Zoot Sims. The intervals, the phrasings, the wails, the glissandi, the runs, the climbs, the high notes, the lyricism, are of that era and style. The style Marsalis imparts to these solos complete the character. Thus part of the acting of that character is done not by Connery but by Marsalis.

There is a long shot of Connery playing in a London club. He is standing there tall, leaned back a little, hunched forward a little, curled around the horn. *What Is This Thing Called Love?* The camera cuts to the girl back in Moscow, then cuts back to him. Yeah, he is playing his heart out to her, thousands of miles away, getting this growing love out the only way he can, through a horn. You aging old fool, falling in love with a girl thirty years your junior. Man, musicians are such jerks. We're not part of it all, we don't like anybody's establishment, Russian, American, English. We don't make arms deals or plot anybody's downfall. We're at one with the painters and poets and dancers and acrobats and clowns, we have something better to do. Yeah, I believe this character, I believe he exists, I believe he's a musician. And a good one. No other movie has ever done that to me.

The make-up and costume people deserve notice and credit for some of what happens. As we meet Connery at the start of the picture, he is a rumpled, untidy, indifferent man, his hair uncombed, his beard untrimmed, wearing a sloppy and unpressed desert jacket. In one memorable scene, he has the look around the eyes of serious hangover. As he falls in love, his appearance changes. He takes care of his looks and his clothes. He is never portrayed as alcoholic, just as a hard drinker. When he decides to cool it, he does, and his face changes. This evolution of manner and appearance is one of the picture's many subtleties.

Now, how have they put all this on film? Brilliantly. The film is visually compelling. In part this is the consequence of the work of the location managers. The film was shot in Vancouver, British Columbia, specifically at a lodge overlooking the splendor of Howe Sound, with the mountains in the background; in Lisbon, London, Moscow, and Leningrad. The other cities are familiar to us; but in no previous movie have we seen so much of Moscow and Leningrad. The visual effect of the latter two is the work of its two Russian location managers.

This is a Russia we have never seen. If we have come to feel that it is a drab and ugly country, that's partly their fault: before Gorbachev, westerners were not allowed to take even tourist pictures of many areas seen in this film. This censorship created precisely the impression of a colorless, dreary society that we all carry in our heads. Now, before the cameras of director of photography Ian Baker, entire areas of Moscow and Leningrad are revealed to be brilliantly colorful and very beautiful. There are vistas of rivers, lovely parks whose clean lawns are scattered with autumn leaves, broad boulevards lined with trees. Even the monumental "proletarian" sculpture we had been told were tasteless bulky monstrosities turn out to be in many cases quite beautiful. The familiar onion-domed churches are on close-up even more striking than they seemed in still photographs.

And this is a moving picture. The camera moves more in this picture than in any I can remember. But the movement is subtle, and slow.

Some of the shots are so ingenious that I found myself rewinding the tape to see how they were done. There are

some very long sequences that at first seem like tracking shots. But one concludes that these amazing sequences were made with a shoulder-mounted steady cam. This is a camera with a gyroscope built into it, which steadies the shot even when the device is being carried by a walking cameraman.

One of these sequences is shot in Revolution Square in Leningrad. Connery meets Klaus Maria Brandauer, in the role of a Russian scientist who wants to publish in the west information on the essential weakness of Soviet arms. The camera follows the two men through an archway in the Hermitage, then on a long walk around the square. In the process, the camera gives us a complete 360-degree vista of this vast, exquisite plaza, so striking that afterwards you feel you've been there.

As they talk, two men pass them, one with a camera hung around his neck. You hear a click of that camera. Brandauer turns briefly to look at him, then continues his conversation with Connery. A lesser director would have zoomed in on the camera, poking you in the ribs to make sure you got the point. Schepisi doesn't. You're left uncertain, as Brandauer's character is, whether the man with the camera is KGB or merely a tourist.

(There is not a single zoom shot in the whole picture, which adds to its visual riches.)

Another striking visual sequence is shot in a bell tower of a monastery, a conversation between Connery and Pfeiffer. The camera is almost always in motion, yet there are few cuts or reverse shots. The sequences are long, and the way the camera softly moves imparts to the viewer that he is actually there. The camera *is* you; and you have been drawn right into the scene, a silent and unseen participant.

Of all the visual effects, and there are many, the most striking to me is a telephone conversation between Connery and Pfeiffer. The camera pans slowly from screen left to screen right, observing Connery in a room. Then it cuts to Pfeiffer in a room, moving at exactly the same slow speed. When there is a cut to close-up on Connery, there is a matched close-up on Pfeiffer.

This tells you a great deal about the way the film was made. It has nothing in common with the way Woody Allen, for example, makes a picture: shooting miles of film and then leaving it to a gifted editor to make sense of it. It is a truism among film editors that directors who have been film editors do not shoot less footage than other directors, as one might expect. The brilliant David Lean, for example, shot all sorts of extra footage precisely because, being the veteran editor that he was, he knew the tricks that could be done in the cutting room.

The Russia House was not made that way. The telephone conversation had to be planned in advance in order to make those matches. The sequence -- like that in Revolution Square -- is virtually choreographed, with the camera itself one of the dancers. This bespeaks an extraordinary rapport between Schepisi and Ian Baker, the Australian director of photographer with whom he worked, not only on this but on other pictures, including *Roxanne*. Finally, there's the work of film editor Peter Honess. The match of the work of these three men is remarkable, and I have seen very few films so beautifully assembled.

I do not want to tell you too much about the nature of the plot, in case you want to see the film. This much I will say. Early in the picture, Connery, attending a dinner of Soviet writers, gets drunk and makes an impromptu speech saying that the only way to be true to your country is to betray it. This speech impresses the Russian played by Brandauer, who writes a manuscript exposing major Soviet secrets, showing, as one American puts it, that the Soviet military couldn't hit Nevada on a clear day. This manuscript is delivered by the girl played by Pfeiffer. Connery is asked to return to the U.S.S.R. to meet her and verify the legitimacy of the manuscript. The underlying theme is that the military powers and manufacturers in both the United States and the Soviet Union do not want a detente: they want to go right on making weapons and building military strength. The recent coup attempt in the Soviet Union confirms the thesis.

In the last analysis, this espionage drama isn't about espionage. It's a story about the love of an older man, an aging jazz musician, for a younger woman in whom he finds a compatibility he has never found in anyone else. Two scenes, for example, establish her sensitivity to music: it's all in the rapt expression on Pfeiffer's face as she listens to it. There is a scene in the girl's kitchen where Connery's character confesses his love for her. It is incredibly touching.

If the film has a flaw, it is that at two hours length it is too short. I have learned that about forty minutes were cut out of it, and I wish they hadn't been. This is perhaps one reason that it is hard at times to follow: it could have used more exposition and explication. You have to pay close attention to its details, or, better, see it two or three times. It bears up to this close examination. I also could have used more and longer musical sequences, and more of Ian Baker's loving cinematographic examination of mother Russia.

This caveat aside, it is one of the best movies I've ever seen, and the most persuasive portrait of a jazz musician ever -- to my taste, in any case -- put on film. Why is this so? Because Tom Stoppard's script and every detail of the direction and performance are in strict accord with Scott Fitzgerald's astute dictum on writing: "Begin with an individual and before you know it you find that you have created a type; begin with a type and you find that you have created -- nothing."

Korngold's theory certainly applies to this picture. With its use of music, and jazz at that, it's almost an opera.

The Winter in Lisbon

The Russia House music is on MCA records. On the Milan label, distributed by BMG, is another outstanding score: *The Winter in Lisbon*, by Dizzy Gillespie. It uses a string quartet and four French horns, plus soprano saxophone and of course Dizzy. It shows us dimensions of his writing we have not encountered before. The 1990 film has never been released. Trust me: check the album out.