Gene Lees
Jazzletter

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

April 1992

Vol. II No. 4

The Children of Willis Conover

One of the unsung heroes of jazz is a handsome and beautifully-spoken Buffalo-born broadcaster named Willis Conover, whose name is known in every country in the world but his own. That's because, unless you listen to short-wave radio, you can't receive his programs in the United States. Conover is heard on the Voice of America, a government-funded service whose mandate forbids its broadcasting to the land of its origin, and thus Americans cannot hear Conover's marvelous music shows, even though they pay for them. Since he taped the first VOA broadcast in December 1954, and it was aired in January 1955, Conover has probably been on the air longer than any jazz broadcaster in the world: 37 years.

The Voice of America was born 50 years ago, during World War II as a counter-force to Nazi propaganda, a little like the BBC overseas service. After the war, as the adversarial relationship of the United States shifted to the Soviet Union, the VOA stayed on the air. It employed broadcasters speaking the languages of the countries who had fallen under the control of the USSR and whose own broadcasting systems were merely propaganda facilities of their governments, in accordance with Leninist doctrine. The VOA has remained comparatively objective and accurate in its news reporting, though men in successive administrations have eyed it hungrily. I cannot tell how much political interference it has endured at various times. But I have the impression that wiser heads have on the whole prevailed, realizing that the BBC maintained its immense credibility around the world precisely because its news was believed when the propaganda disseminated by dictatorships was not. I think that the VOA has on the whole done its job honorably; it certainly has done it well.

But whether you are telling the truth or lies, it matters little if no one is listening, and since you cannot force people in faraway lands to tune in, you must induce them to do so. During World War II, Allied troops in Europe listened to Lord Ha-Ha from Germany and those in the South Pacific to Tokyo Rose. They took the music and ignored the lies.

Even if the VOA was trying to disseminate truth, what was there to attract listeners in the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and other countries?

A program called *Music USA*. Host: Willis Conover. He played the very best of American popular music and jazz, presenting it with a quiet authority. That authority was founded on unfailing taste and a knowledge of jazz that is encyclopedic, as is his knowledge of the men and women who create it. In the old days of Jim and Andy's in New York, Conover was a regular, and there wasn't a major jazz musician, nor many minor ones for that matter, whom Willis didn't know. He interviewed them year after year, editing the tapes into broadcasts. The collective broadcasts of Willis Conover are an American national treasure of inconceivable value, and I hope preparations have been made to preserve them for future historians.

Historians are already evaluating the heroic historical role of Mikhail Gorbachev in ending the long tyranny by and in what was the USSR.

But to my mind, no one did more to end it than Willis Conover. Administrations, Soviet and American alike, came and went, but Conover was always there. I doubt if he knows the extent of his influence. I doubt if anyone does, and indeed I doubt that anyone has even given it much thought. But he more than any American, living or dead, created something that penetrated even an Iron Curtain like a fresh wind of spring.

In a curious way, Conover -- the name is Anglicized from something German, and one of his ancestors signed the Declaration of Independence -- combines a vast cultural cosmopolitanism with a deep American patriotism. Not jingoism, patriotism. There is a large difference. This made him the perfect spokesman for a country he loved to peoples he loved but whose governments he did not.

If we make it, we will owe more than we can ever pay, and probably no one will even try, to Willis Conover. Whatever the incidental political effects his broadcasts have had, the musical influence of this man is mind-boggling. Conover did more than any other human being to make jazz an international musical language. Speaking slowly so that those with little English could follow him, he introduced the music to people everywhere, inspiring countless musicians to learn to play it and laymen to appreciate it. If there is a vast audience for jazz abroad, it was to a large extent created by Conover. He turned people on to jazz all over the planet, and for this reason must be considered a force in this music at a level with Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Gil Evans, and Bill Evans. If that seems far-fetched, give it a moment's thought. He is the only non-musician to have that kind of influence, and his work shows just how powerful an educational medium broadcasting, in its proper use, really is. Time and time again, when you ask a jazz player from the erstwhile Iron Curtain countries how he became interested in jazz, you'll hear a variant on "Well, I heard Willis Conover's program and . . . " It's endless.

Willis Conover should have some sort of Congressional citation, as George M. Cohan did. He deserves it far more.

In 1962 I arrived in New York from Chicago. My friend Art Farmer introduced me to that joint of beloved memory on West 48th Street, Jim and Andy's. And there a casual acquaintanceship with Willis Conover grew into a deep friendship.

Something happened to me that year that I have never told anyone.

I couldn't, as they say, get arrested. I couldn't sell my prose, I couldn't sell my songs. I got through that grim year with the moral support of my friends. At any given moment I was ready to quit, scale back my dreams to the size of the apparent opportunities, leave New York and find some anonymous job somewhere.

No one encouraged me to persist more than Willis, in conversations at the bar or in those back booths on the east wall of the place next to those two telephone booths. Willis

believed in me, even if I didn't. And he kept slipping me money to hang on with. Ten dollars here, twenty dollars there. He may not remember it; I can't forget it. I kept notes on those loans, which Willis thought of as gifts and simply forgot.

After about a year, maybe more, things turned around. My first book was published. My first songs were being recorded, and I was seeing advances from them. One day I realized I had some money in the bank.

And Willis called. By then I could read his mood from the sound of his voice. I said, "What's the matter?"

He said he'd suffered some sort of financial setback -- I forget what it was. He was having money worries.

I said, as casually as I could, "Why don't you meet me at Jim and Andy's and we'll talk about it?"

On the way there I went by Chemical Bank and made a withdrawal in hundred-dollar bills. Willis and I sat down in the booth and ordered drinks. When they arrived I reached into my pocket and pulled out the cash. Vague memory says the amount was about $3,000 -- and that is 1963 or '64 money. With a grand flourish I dropped it on the table.

"What is *that*?" Willis said.

"*That's* the money you lent me," I said.

I never paid a debt with more pleasure.

There are countless musicians whose careers have been nurtured by Willis Conover, and countless more around the world whose careers he actually created. They are all the children of Willis Conover.

Willis knows who reads the *Jazzletter*. That's one of the reasons publication of the subscription list is valuable to so many of us, and why I caught some flak when I discontinued it: it gives us a sense of community. Johnny Mandel called the *Jazzletter* "a sort of Jim and Andy's of the mail."

I know without a second thought that I speak for all of you, particularly those from the old J&A's crowd.

Willis, this message is sent with love. From all of us.

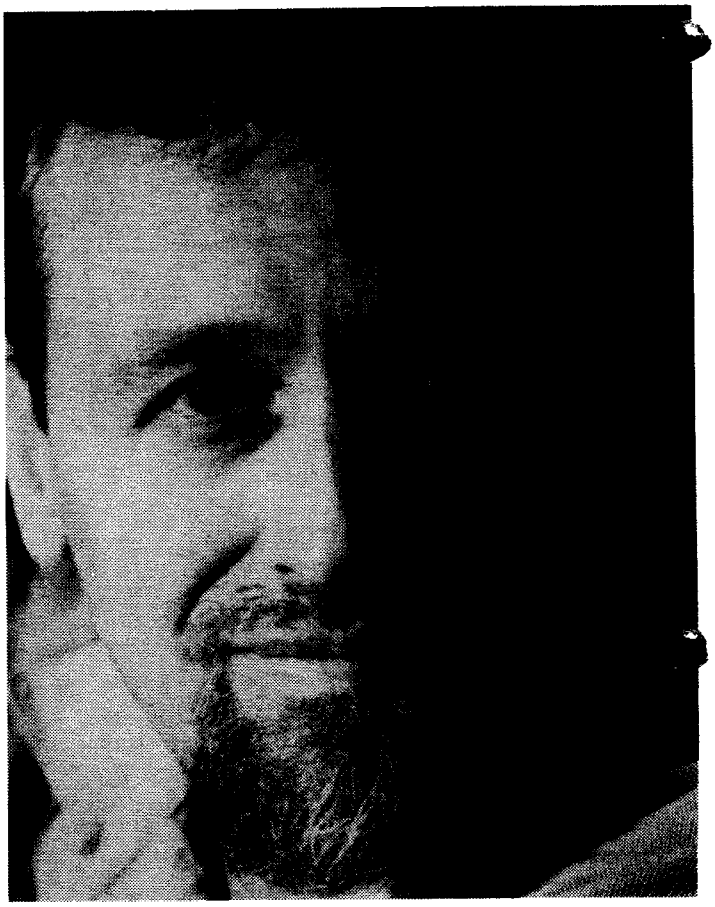
Man from Silesia

One of the careers Willis inspired is that of the pianist Adam Makowicz (pronounced ma-KO-vitch), born in Gnojnik, Czechoslovakia, August 18, 1940, of Polish parents. The town is near the Polish border, and things during the war were not as hard in Czechoslovakia as they were in Poland. The family stayed there until 1946, then returned to Poland. Adam grew up near Katowice, the capital of Silesia. He started studying music at the age of nine, and was headed for a career as a concert pianist. Enter Willis Conover. Adam remembers:

"Nobody knew about jazz at that time. Besides it was banned from public life. It was illegal music under the Nazis and under Stalin. My friends from music school told me about *Music USA*, which you could get on short-wave radio. I had a friend with a short-wave radio, and I found the program. It was Willis Conover, from Voice of America. It was the only source to learn about jazz."

Adam's parents were horrified that he wanted to abandon a concert-piano career, and such was the friction that he ran away from home and school, lived a desperate nomadic existence for two years before finding an underground club in Krakow where he could play jazz. "I played, practiced, or thought about jazz 24 hours a day," he says. And he kept an ear to the radio, absorbing from Willis Conover the music of Earl Hines, Benny Goodman, Benny Carter, Teddy Wilson, Erroll Garner, and new-found idol Art Tatum. "I was about 18 when I started to play jazz in student clubs and friends' homes," he said.

"Art Tatum was, musically speaking, like my father. When I heard his music for the first time, and each time was like the first time, he really excited me.



Adam Makowicz 1991 **photo by John Reeves**

"This feeling has not diminished. I still admire him, and I still say he is the greatest jazz pianist of all time. He was using the whole piano, the whole keyboard, all the time."

Adam began playing jazz at student clubs, put together a group that won a jazz contest for southern Poland, made a few records. Some of them found their way into the hands of John Hammond. Benny Goodman -- who, as I'm sure you know, was married to Hammond's sister -- was about to visit Poland. Hammond asked Goodman to listen to Adam and

seek out more of his records. Goodman was impressed, and brought back more records. By then, Adam had recorded 26 albums, and had for six years running been voted Europe's number one jazz pianist by readers of the magazine *Jazz Forum*. Hammond brought Adam to the United States and in 1977 got him a gig at the Cookery and recorded him for Columbia Records. Adam and his wife, Irena, decided to settle in New York, a city he has come to love. For all that Americans denigrate it, particularly New Yorkers themselves, Adam still sees it as the great melting pot, and finds this phenomenon of cultural clash and interplay fascinating. In the 14 years since he came to this country, Adam has recorded ten albums -- a shockingly small output for so gifted a musician. All of them have received great acclaim, and he has played most of the major jazz festivals in the United States, JVC in New York, Atlanta, Seattle, Saratoga, Wolf Trap, Artpark, and Chautauqua, and in Europe, North Sea, Nice, Madrid, Montreux, Umbria, and others. He has been guest soloist with the National Symphony in Washington D.C., the Atlanta Symphony, the Minnesota Orchestra, and the Royal Symphony Orchestra of London.

His albums -- and his playing in general -- can only be called astonishing. Gifted with a fertile imagination and an unlimited technique, he is not only an extraordinary pianist, he is also an unusual and fascinating composer.

For all the acclaim, he has not had an easy time of it in America. He has received something far under the recognition that is his due. His friend, concert producer Edith Kiggen, says, "He's such a sweetheart. He never complains about anything." At one point, some eight years or so ago, this incredible musician told me he was seriously thinking of giving up playing to make a living as a piano tuner.

On most instruments, jazz musicians pushed the technical level of playing always higher, although most of them -- such as the young bassist Christian McBride, Donald Byrd, Art Farmer -- have found there is much to be learned from the "legit" teachers. But Jack Teagarden, Tommy Dorsey, and spectacularly J.J. Johnson, hugely increased the technique of trombone; jazz players virtually invented good saxophone playing (I loathe the way "classical" symphony musicians play that axe and I squirm at the alto passage in Bizet's *Arlesienne*, a suite I otherwise love); and there isn't a symphony player alive who can do what Dizzy Gillespie, Maynard Ferguson, and Clark Terry can do on trumpet. The one instrument jazz musicians have not improved is piano, because keyboard technique had evolved so far by the time jazz was invented. If you think you can play piano better than Horowitz, Rachmaninoff, Josef Hoffman, Emil Gilels, Glenn Gould, or Dinu Lipatti, lotsa luck. Most of the best jazz pianists, from Hines to Hancock, have had solid "legit" training, but they could not push beyond what astronauts call the "envelope" because there isn't any beyond. Every time a jazz pianist shows that he can play fast runs, some jazz critic with no classical background will pop up to say he is derived from Art Tatum. They should look back a couple of centuries and more to what Mozart, not to mention Bach, demanded of keyboard players. Playing fast on the piano doesn't mean you copped from Art Tatum. You may have got it from Beethoven's friend Czerny.

Adam reiterates his adulation of Tatum. But he doesn't sound remotely like him. What his playing does project is his enormous classical technique. During his years in America, his playing has grown in originality, subtlety, and force.

He has a new CD, *Adam Makowicz Plays Irving Berlin*, that I cannot commend too strongly, except to that apparently rare person, the jazz lover who is uninterested in classical music. I am not sure this album actually is jazz. Maybe it should be called classical improvisation; Chopin, Beethoven, Liszt, Mozart, and indeed most of the major keyboard-playing composers, were formidable improvisers.

I find the album nothing less than breath-taking. Adam takes 11 Berlin standards apart and puts them back together in odd ways, with unexpected harmonies, sudden striking modulations, and hinted polytonality. But it isn't just a technical exercise, a flamboyant display of chops, although it certainly is that. There's great emotional depth to it. Pianists particularly should be blown away. He gets down deep *into* the instrument, gets down into its guts, the hammers, the strings, producing a vast ringing classical tone. It helps that he's playing a Boesendorfer. The album is on the VWC label, and you may find it hard to find in stores. I would suggest you order it direct from Adam for $13. The address:

Adam Makowicz
PO Box 725
Times Square Station
New York NY 10036

Last year, my photographer friend John Reeves and I, staying for six weeks in the New York area to work on our photo book of 100 jazz musicians (it will be out in Canada in the fall, in the U.S. probably next year), spent a delightful few hours with Adam and his wife Irena. She's a nurse by training. They were so grateful that we were doing this shoot on Adam! And she got out her equipment and started taking my blood pressure, saying, "It is something *I* can give *you*." I thought instantly of the Anatole France story *The Juggler of Our Lady*.

Adam is a brilliant man. He speaks English quite fluently now, though with hesitations and sometimes without definite or indefinite articles, as Russians too do when they learn English. I deduced they do no exist in the Slavic languages, and Adam confirmed this to me, though there are locutions that permit the specification of the general or specific. We talked extensively about Poland, which he and Irena had recently visited, after thinking for years that they would never see it again. He occasionally found himself out of synchronism with some of his old friends, because his world had enormously expanded and theirs, until the Solidarity thaw, had not. Adam was learning that, as Thomas Wolfe put it, you can't go home again. Not completely. He is still Polish, but he is no longer only Polish. Now he is watching his beloved homeland grow.

Hitler's forces rolled into Poland in the fall of 1939, eleven

months before Adam was born. After German occupation came the Russian domination. In Adam's lifetime, his country had never known anything but dictatorship. "In spite of 50 years of suppression," Irena said, "initiative is not dead. The spirit lives."

In 1991, Adam went yet again back to Poland. He toured the country triumphantly for two months, playing an all-Gershwin program, including two of the *Preludes* and, with the Great Symphony Orchestra of the National Philharmonic, *Rhapsody in Blue* with his own extended improvisational insert. One of the major Polish daily newspapers reviewed him under the headline "The Phenomenal Adam Makowicz." And they know about piano players in Poland, numbering Chopin and Paderewski among their national heroes. On his return to America, Adam was awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to perform three concerts in tribute to Art Tatum -- the first in New York on April 2 (that's next week) in Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, the second in Washington D.C., the third in Toledo, Ohio. Why Toledo?

Art Tatum was born there.

"Willis Conover," Irena Makowicz said, "is the best representative of the American culture, and the best representative of all that's best in that culture. He has done more for America than all its ambassadors combined."

The Boys from Leningrad

"Everybody," Igor Butman said, "was imitating Willis Conover's voice. Announcers on jazz concerts, to try to sound cool, would imitate his voice." Adopting a low vibrant tone, rather accurately like Willis's, he said slowly, "This is the Voice of America."

"Willis told me," I said, "that he did that deliberately, speaking very slowly, so that people with a minimal grasp of English would be able to follow him. And he said he got that from the style of President Franklin Roosevelt."

Igor said, "To tell you the truth, I didn't understand English, except names of musicians." He speaks excellent English with the slang of a jazz musician and a trace of an accent.

Igor Butman is a young Russian tenor player now living in New York. I first heard about him from Billy Taylor, who'd heard him in Moscow. Billy said that the young man was going to be something. Then I heard from someone that Butman had come to America to study at the Berklee College of Music. Billy told me that the stay in America had changed and deepened Butman's playing. Then I heard that Butman had done a concert with Billy.

After seeing Adam Makowicz, John Reeves and I visited Igor at an apartment he and his brother shared with a friend on the upper West Side.

Igor was born in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg again) on October 27, 1961. I had not realized that he had a brother, a drummer named Oleg, four years his junior, who had already worked with such people as Monty Alexander. Oleg was born in Leningrad, July 9, 1966.

How did they get interested in jazz?

"My father -- his name is Mikhail -- was always an amateur jazz drummer. He really loved Louis Armstrong and Benny Goodman," Igor said. "He went to the concert in 1961 when Benny Goodman was in Russia, just before I was born." This information should make Bill Crow and Phil Woods, who were on that tour, feel the years.

"I tried to get into music school to play drums, but they said my fingers were good for clarinet. And I played clarinet and got into musical college. Then they threw me out because I was not a very good boy. I was interested in rock and roll and played guitar. And I had a bad clarinet teacher. He was getting old and sleeping in the classes. Snoring. He would yell at me, and he scared me. I thought I could find freedom in jazz.

"At that time, there was a teacher in my college whom I respected and loved. I had heard about him all my life. My father used to tell me he was a great saxophone player. His name was Genady Goldstein. I wanted to study with him. From the day I met him, I wanted to play jazz. I forgot about rock and roll the first day I met him, and then he told me to listen to the Voice of America.

"The next day I got Willis Conover on the short-wave radio.

"Phil Woods and Genady Goldstein became friends. They were writing each other. Victor Feldman and Joe Zawinul recorded an album with four tunes of my teacher."

I asked Igor if he had seen the film *Moscow on the Hudson*, a comedy in which Robin Williams plays a Russian tenor player who loves jazz and defects to America.

"Yes," he said. "I loved it!" I've yet to meet a Russian musician who didn't.

"How was his Russian?" I asked.

"Pretty good." I'd heard that, too.

Igor added, "The guy who played the KGB agent, he's a very famous Russian comedian. He can stand there and make you laugh." (If you haven't seen *Moscow on the Hudson*, I'd urge you to do so.)

"When did you take up saxophone?" I asked.

"When I was sixteen. I had a good clarinet background and I picked it up pretty fast. At eighteen I got a gig with probably the best group in Leningrad. From then on I was working as a professional saxophone player.

"Gary Burton helped me get a full scholarship to Berklee, so I came in 1987 and I was there for two years. Al Grey's son Michael was there when I was. And I played with Al Cohn's son Joe in jam sessions. Grover Washington introduced me to Al Grey and he let me sit in for three sets in Philadelphia. Michael Grey and I became good friends.

"I played my last job in Moscow with my quartet. Billy Taylor came. He heard two or three sets. He sat in with us, and he gave me his address. When I came here, I called him. In November, 1990, he called me to do a really nice concert with him at the Metropolitan Museum. He didn't hear me for about three and a half years.

"I've been playing here all the time. I was fortunate. I met a lot of people when they traveled to the Soviet Union --

Grover Washington and Dave Brubeck and Pat Metheny. I played with Dave Brubeck and Pat. I recorded with Grover. They helped me a lot."

Igor was still using the term Soviet Union. A few months after our conversation, it ceased to exist, and Leningrad by the overwhelming demand of its citizens had had its old name restored. It was once again St. Petersburg.

Igor and Oleg Butman 1991 photo by John Reeves

"Oleg," I asked, "how did you start playing?"

"I started playing with my brother. My brother asked me to play drums. I first played balalaika. Because we had drum set from my father, I took lessons from my father first. Igor showed me some effects. First we had recording of free music. I had never played before. I just banged. But I've learned."

"What has being in the United States done to your playing?" I asked Igor.

"It's changed it a lot, in terms of sound, understanding of time and feel, everything. Just to be able to see some other people playing, very good players. When you see somebody doing something, and you're right there, not listening to a record, you can do the same thing, try to play different. Different ideas you pick up from different people, and you try to put them through you. Something comes up and I feel the difference from what I'm doing."

One of the things they don't tell you about Russians is that they are humorous, an impression that is reinforced by the English translations of Russian fiction. In translations of literature, humor, the essentially leavening even of tragedy, is largely lost, making the writing seem heavy.

Igor and Oleg Butman are quite funny. They sort of bubble. Let loose in the land of jazz, they struck me as being like two kids in a toy store. I think we're going to hear more of these two boys from Leningrad. Or rather, St. Petersburg.

More of the children of Willis Conover.

A Death in the Family:
The Rise and Fall of the American Song
Part Three

Jerome Kern, widely considered to be the greatest melodist of all the American song composers, is a transitional figure in the evolution of American theater music. He was educated at the New York College of Music and in Germany at the Heidelberg Conservatory. Kern's music has always seemed to me to have a mid-Atlantic accent, and I am far from being the only one to notice this: Richard Rodgers said Kern's music had one foot in Europe and one in America. Alec Wilder wrote of Kern:

"In his earlier efforts it was not nearly so evident as later on how extraordinary his talent was. Nor did his songs strike the public as 'Americanly' as did those of Berlin, Youmans, Gershwin, and Arlen. Yet one must remember that, except for Berlin, their first songs were written many years after Kern's, and that the world of American popular music had changed greatly by the time they began writing. But without any doubt, Kern does exemplify the pure, uncontrived melodic line more characteristically than any other writer of American theater music . . . In the days when I first became aware of his songs, he had not become as involved in complex harmony as he did later. But even when he did use more elaborate harmony, and I had become involved myself in the excitement of lush harmonic patterns, I didn't need to know or hear his harmony in order to enjoy thoroughly his lovely melodic flights. Once he freed himself of his European predilections, and after publishing many more songs than I would have believed possible, he never lowered his sights. He continued to experiment, he took breath-taking chances, and practically every time he did they were accepted and absorbed by the public as part of the American musical ethos . . . . "

It was customary in the early days of musicals to interpolate songs by different composers into a show. Between 1905 and 1912, Kern contributed almost a hundred songs to Broadway shows. He wrote his own first musical for the stage in 1911, the same year that Berlin published *Alexander's Ragtime Band*. After that he wrote about one show a year until he moved to Southern California in 1933 to write for movies.

In 1974 I talked about Kern with the late Arthur Schwartz, one of the truly great composers of American song, in that select group with Kern and Gershwin, although Alec Wilder assigned him to a tier just under Kern. Arthur said:

"I don't think there are many original composers. The only original composer in America in the popular field is George Gershwin. I don't think Rodgers is original, I certainly don't think I am.

"I think Kern was more original than anybody else except Gershwin. Before there was Kern in the musical theater, there was European-derived musical theater. And Kern invented a kind of writing which broke away from the European style of Lehar and Leo Fall and Sigmund Romberg and Friml. The first evidence of that is Kern's piece in 1911 called *They Didn't Believe Me*. It set a new kind of music that hadn't been heard

1914

before in America. So he, I would say, was an originator, but not like Gershwin. And the rest of us, Vincent Youmans, Burton Lane, all the descendants of that kind of music were good in various degrees. But I don't think that originality itself is the only measure of a person's taste or ability.

"It is not the only measurement of the quality of music, or the style of music, or the importance of music. How many original composers have there been in the serious field? Very few. Schumann and Schubert were not really original. Brahms started to make harmonizations that hadn't been heard before. Wagner, perhaps, too. Debussy, because of the whole-tone scale. But most of the composers people like to hear in concert were not very original."

Kern's supple melodies were deceptive in that they sounded simple and weren't. At times they bordered on the operatic, as in *Old Man River*, at others on the folkloric. But the harmonic usage was, for popular music, revolutionary; indeed, in the current age of banal harmonic practice, it still is. Consider his *The Song Is You*, written in 1932 (lyric by Oscar Hammerstein II). The main melody -- the front strain and its repeat -- is in the key of C. The B section (what French and American songwriters both call the "bridge" of a song) moves through tonal areas of E and A major. At the end of the bridge, Kern goes to B7, a dominant chord that would in conventional harmonic practice resolve to E; but Kern goes directly back to the original key, C, and the movement from the B7 to the C chord provides one of the most startling emotional and spiritual lifts in all music. Yet the melody stays on the same note, B natural, until the singer's voice and ear are reoriented to C. It's an astonishing bit of writing. The song was published in 1932. Consider how relentlessly diatonic most American popular music had been when he started his career. And it wasn't only in harmony that Kern was adventurous. Some of his tunes have odd and unexpected structures. The front strain of *The Folks Who Live on the Hill* (lyric by Oscar Hammerstein) is 12 bars long, the release is six bars. *The Touch of Your Hand* is 23 bars, 24 if you hold over to the next bar. It's the division, however, that is peculiar. The opening phrase (When you shall see flowers that lie on the plain) is five bars; the next (lying there sighing for one touch of rain) is four; the third (then you may borrow) is three bars; followed by three bars (some glimpse of my sorrow), and another four (and you'll understand) followed by a five-bar closing phrase (how I long for the touch of your hand). Furthermore, the song does not contain a single repeat. About the lyric: I have often pointed out that Johnny Mercer's lyric to *Days of Wine and Roses* consists of two sentences; Otto Harbach's lyric for *The Touch of Your Hand* is only one. It is a seamless statement from start to finish.

Arthur Schwartz again: "I was asked to produce a motion picture for Columbia Pictures in the '40s, when I hadn't produced anything. They wanted me to write the music as well. I said, 'No, if I'm going to be a producer, I'm going to get somebody else,' and I got Kern. And I got to be a good friend of his. He told me loads of stories about himself, of course. Do you know a song he wrote with Dorothy Fields, *Lovely to Look At*? It's 16 measures. The producer was very unhappy with the fact. He called him up and said, 'You know, Mr. Kern, I like this song, but it's only 16 measures.'

"And Kern said, 'That's all I had to say.' It stayed 16 bars."

These Kern compositions, remember, were successful popular songs, not "art" songs designed for the salon. Kern educated the communal American ear to accept a rich harmonic vocabulary and a fresh kind of construction.

Kern was a prodigious influence on other composers, and lyricists too for that matter. In 1915, a musical by Kern with book and lyrics by Guy Bolton -- American by parentage, English by upbringing -- opened at a small theater called the Princess. It was called *Ninety in the Shade*. Songs in musicals up to that point had little if anything to do with the story, which was usually frivolous. Kern and Bolton started working toward integration of the two, and moved farther in that direction with another show, *Very Good Eddie*. Then P.G. Wodehouse joined them to work on book and lyrics, and the quality of both rose. Alan Jay Lerner wrote, "Wodehouse was the forerunner of Lorenz Hart, Ira Gershwin and all who toiled thereafter in the lyrical vineyards. He was indeed, in his own way and a different atmosphere, the descendant of Gilbert, and brought charm, literacy and rhyming ingenuity to the theater."

The Bolton-Wodehouse-Kern shows, which enormously affected Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, severed the umbilical cord between American musical theater and operetta.

One of Kern's most avid admirers was George Gershwin who, according to legend and perhaps in fact, used to stand outside Kern's house in New York to hear his idol play piano. Gershwin's music is more "American" than Kern's, in part because he was deeply aware of jazz, which was developing around him, and reflected its influence in his writing, both his theater songs and his all-too-few orchestral works. Gershwin's death in 1937 at the age of 39 remains to me an absolute cultural tragedy: I believe he was just coming to maturity as an orchestral composer.

I once had a conversation with Robert Russell Bennett, who orchestrated a number of Gershwin's theater works, including the opera *Porgy and Bess*. He said that Gershwin had an amazing facility at absorbing the innovations of others into his own work. He talked of Gershwin as if he were some sort of idiot savant, an eclectic without convictions. I demurred by saying, "But tell me, Mr. Bennett, how is it that you can hear four bars of a song and know it's Gershwin?"

"Ah," Bennett said, "but that's genius."

There was little of jazz in Kern; there was a lot of it in Gershwin. Kern remains a favorite of singers, Gershwin a favorite of jazz musicians, who find his songs propitious foundations for improvisation.

Songs are by definition vocal compositions: melodies wedded to words. Paul Dresser, Irving Berlin, and Cole Porter wrote their own lyrics, but for the most part the great American songs have been created in collaborations, the lyricists in their way being as important to the aesthetic effect as the composers. The United States developed some superb lyricists.

Alan Jay Lerner, himself one of the finest lyricists, was of the opinion that the greatest American lyricist was Johnny Mercer. Mercer in turn admired Lorenz Hart, who was Richard Rodgers' collaborator until Rodgers began working with Oscar Hammerstein II.

Mercer used to say, "We all come from Gilbert," referring to the English librettist William S. Gilbert. He was undoubtedly right that American lyric writing descends from that of Gilbert. I am not one of the heavy Gilbert and Sullivan admirers. Satire requires that one be aware of what is being satirized, and since the conditions of English social and political life at which the two were directing their jibes are forgotten, much of it is meaningless today. The most I can say for Sullivan's music is that it was functional, a largely *recitativo* setting for Gilbert's clever words. Only occasionally did it become strongly melodic, as in *A Wandering Minstrel I*, and never did it contain or inspire deep feeling. Gilbert's writing was urbane and witty, but you will find no trace of the darker emotions in his work. The Gilbert and Sullivan operettas are all relentlessly sunny and sardonic, amusing in a way that grows ever more inconsequential as the subjects of their sarcasm grow fainter in the mists of the past.

It was the Americans who brought the song lyric to perfection. The collective body of this work is without precedent in England. American lyrics of the golden period are different, remarkably concise vignettes which, coupled with music by these "wizards," as David Raksin calls them, are a moving collective exploration of emotional relationships. There are a few good modern English lyrics, but nothing to compare in quantity or quality with the work of the major American lyricists.

Excepting odd little forms such as Japanese haiku, the great mass of the world's literature is about survival. Melodrama deals with survival of the individual, tragedy with failure to achieve it, and the love story with the survival of the species. Sex and gore permeate our collective writings, from *Oedipus Rex* to *Rashomon*. This is implicit even in a play such as *Hamlet*, wherein the line of royal succession is broken by the tragedy: Gertrude says over the grave of the drowned Ophelia:

I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife;
I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid,
And not to have strew'd thy grave.

Given this universal theme of survival, it is scarcely surprising that most of our songs deal with sex transfigured: they are love songs. A few songs touch on death -- Dave Frishberg's wonderful lyric *You Are There*, Gilbert Becaud's powerful *L'Absent*, and some of the songs of Edith Piaf But even they are about the deaths of loved ones. Patriotic songs in the long run are about love and survival: love of country and the desire to preserve it.

English presents special problems to the lyricist, for it is a language very poor in rhyme. Often when I am interviewed about my work as a lyricist, a reporter will ask, "Is it true that there is no rhyme for orange?" Of course there isn't. I know a lot of words that have no rhymes. There is no rhyme for April. Or: almost, ambush, angel, ballot, bargain, charcoal, common, cutlass, donkey (monkey doesn't rhyme with it), film, gallstone, gospel, homely, hundred, jackass, junior, month, oval, poverty, princess, rainbow, respite, sabbath, segue, shamrock, shorten, wolf, and perhaps two hundred more. Occasionally a brilliant lyricist will combine two words to make a fresh feminine rhyme or a three-rhyme, as in that glorious line of Howard Dietz, describing *Hamlet* in *That's Entertainment*: "where a ghost and a prince meet, and everyone ends in mincemeat." Wow. Outasight. Larry Hart was particularly ingenious at this trick, as in the line: "I've a cozy little flat in what is known as old Manhattan."

In Hart's case, rhyming amounted almost to an addiction, which indeed it can become. When I was writing my rhyming dictionary some years ago, I found myself trying to rhyme all the road signs I passed. Hart did indeed carry it to extremes on occasion, prompting Howard Deitz to quip, "Larry Hart can rhyme anything -- and does!"

Hart defended himself against the charge that all he could do was write three-rhymes. He said, "Now look at this lyric: 'I took one look at you, that's all I meant to do, and then my heart stood still.' I could have said, 'I took one look at you, I threw the book at you.' But I didn't."

Hart had a bent for making fun of his own lyrics. One of his couplets has drifted down through the folklore of the trade: "How can I ignore the whore next door?" And God only knows what he did to the lyrics of others.

Lyricists are prone to this kind of thing. Irving Caesar is reputed to be the author of a parody of Berlin's *Always*:

I'll be loving you always
both in very large
and small ways.
With a love as grand
as Paul Whiteman's band,
it will weigh as much
as Paul weighs,
always . . .

Hart's point, of course, is that ingenuity of rhyme works only in humor. The rhyme that calls attention to itself, producing as it were a gasp of admiration, destroys darker moods. When Cole Porter seeks to evoke a sober emotion, as in his exquisite *In the Still of the Night* or, a particular favorite of mine, *I Concentrate on You*, he uses unobtrusive rhymes. Rhymes fall on rest points in songs, the long notes at the ends of lines, and these require long vowels, preferably open at the end or else with the liquid consonants m, n, l, or r at the end. And since most songs, as noted, are love songs, the lyricist in English is horribly constrained by the fact that there are only four true rhymes for "love" in English -- above, dove, glove, and shove, with the preposition "of" forming an imperfect fifth. (In precise enunciation, it would rhyme with suave.) French has more than 50 rhymes for "amour". This greater richness of

rhyme makes French an infinitely more flexible language for the craft of the lyricist, or *parolier* as the French deftly call the craft. (It sort of means "wordist".) And this flexibility may explain why French songs get into some interesting subject matter that somehow eludes us in English.

The lyric is the most difficult and exacting of all literary forms. The lyricist must avoid awkward abutments of consonants, circumventing as far as possible using a word whose first consonant is the same as the one that ended the word preceding it. Only recently did I realize that what I'd always thought was duck tape, and wondered how it got that name, is actually duct tape. Violating this rule confuses the ear of the listener and presents problems of enunciation to the singer. The lyricist must try to put long vowels on long notes, short vowels on short notes, stressed syllables on strong notes and unstressed on weak. English is a language full of diphthongs; its vowels are not pure, like those of Italian. Diphthongs on high notes are awkward for singers: the change in the shape of the throat and mouth tends to affect intonation. A word such as "May" does this. It really contains two vowels, and is pronounced meh-ee. Closing the throat on the ee sound is very awkward if the syllable falls on a long high note. Vowels in French are purer. The month of May is pronounced meh, without closing it off in the tighter ee vowel. (You'll notice that French people have a hard time getting the hang of our diphthongs.)

In addition to these considerations, the emotional inflection of the words must match the contours of the melody: the melody must approximate the rhythmic and intervallic way in which one would speak the words. This is ignored in current pop music, and indeed in some art music, but in the period of the great American songs, lyricists such as Porter, Fields, Dietz, Mercer, the under-recognized Tom Adair (*Let's Get Away from It All, Everything Happens to Me, In the Blue of Evening, Will You Still Be Mine?, Violets for Your Furs, The Night We Called It a Day, There's No You*) and others of comparable stature were acutely sensitive to this. At the technical level, writing poetry -- even strict, conventional, metric and rhymed poetry -- is child's play compared with lyric writing. On a TV show in Paris, I heard the late French novelist and lyricist (and trumpet player) Boris Vian, whom I greatly admired, say that he was far more proud of his lyrics than his novels.

It is out of these collaborations between superior lyricists and composers that the great American songbook was developed.

Some years ago, Johnny Mercer introduced me to the late Harold Arlen. Arlen's wife had recently died, and he had become reclusive. Johnny wanted me to interview him. He thought it would in a small way draw Arlen out of his isola tion. I went to Arlen's handsome apartment on Central Park West. Near the south wall of the living room, if memory serves me, was Arlen's grand piano, the keyboard end by the window, so that the light would fall on sheet music. I noted, with a sharp sense of history, a painting on the wall to the left of the piano bench: a George Gershwin oil portrait of Jerome Kern. Gershwin could have been a professional painter, and indeed studied art in Paris. The painting probably prompted this question: I asked Arlen if he and Gershwin and Kern and colleagues had been consciously aware, in the 1930s, that what they were creating was not popular music at all, it was art music. He looked a little startled, as if the question had never been posed before, then said, "Yes, we were."

Then he produced a paper from somewhere and read me a list of songs. Since nobody can remember a list like that, I later looked it up. It included:

About a Quarter to Nine, Begin the Beguine, Bess You Is My Woman Now, Broadway Rhythm, Cheek to Cheek, East of the Sun and West of the Moon, I Can't Get Started, I Feel a Song Coming On, I Got Plenty o' Nuttin', I Loves You Porgy, I Won't Dance, I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter, I'm in the Mood for Love, If I Should Lose You, Isn't This a Lovely Day, It Ain't Necessarily So, It's Easy to Remember, Just One of those Things, The Lady in Red, Lovely to Look At, Lullaby of Broadway, Lulu's Back in Town, Maybe, Moon Over Miami, My Man's Gone Now, My Romance, Paris in the Spring, The Piccolino, Red Sails in the Sunset, Stairway to the Stars, Summertime, These Foolish Things, Top Hat White Tie and Tails, When I Grow Too Old to Dream, Why Shouldn't I, A Woman Is a Sometime Thing, and *You Are My Lucky Star.*

He asked if I knew what it was. I could only say it was a list of great American songs. He said, No. It was a list of songs that came out in 1935 alone, most of them hits. Later I scrupulously examined lists of the songs that came out in the years fore and aft of '35.

If you examine these lists of songs written in America in the twentieth century, you will note that they start to improve in the second decade, attain a higher quality in the 1920s, get still better in the '30s and '40s, and then begin to decline in the 1950s, increasingly crowded out by such trash as *How Much Is That Doggie in the Window, O Mein Papa*, and *Vaya Con Dios*, all from 1953? But Cole Porter was still hanging in there, and the year produced *I Love Paris, It's All Right with Me,* and *From This Moment On.*

The songs of the Broadway musicals were music of the rich, by the rich, and for the rich, and by corollary of the educated and by the educated -- but *for* everybody.

We can perhaps see, now, that the great American songs were not in essence popular music: they were art music rendered popular through a temporary confluence of historical and technological circumstances, proving that given good education, which the radio networks in the 1930s serendipitously disseminated, the general public taste and perception can be raised very high.

And what was this confluence of circumstances?

(To be continued)

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

Copyright 1992 by Gene Lees. Published 12 times a year at Ojai, Calif., 93024-0240. Subscriptions are for the current calendar year, January to December. A subscription is $50 U.S. a year to the U.S. and Canada; other countries $60, $70 air mail.