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# Jazzletter

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## Letters

Aside from the letters meant for publication, I get some hilarious mail from my friends. One of these is Julius LaRosa, who is singing better than he ever has but shakes his head in wonderment at the behavior of members of the audience. In Dallas some time ago, a woman walked up to him in a hotel lobby, pinched and pulled his cheek, and said to her girlfriend, "See, I told you it isn't a face lift."

Julie wrote me the other day with a list of remarks he swears he's heard or overheard recently. Among them:

He's the one who made Arthur Godfrey famous.

You look good for your age.

He looks like himself.

I didn't recognize you.

If you didn't know it was him, you wouldn't know it.

I used to see you on TV. I'm old.

You're wearing your age well.

The last time I saw you, you were much younger.

Little boy: Who's that? Daddy: He was your grandmother's favorite.

Are you still singing?

I know you. You can tell I'm over fifty.

Woman: Would you autograph it to Tillie? Julie: Tillie? I haven't met a Tillie in years. Woman: Me either.

You got a bad deal. Too bad I remember.

So how come you're not around any more?

That's the guy that used to sing on Arthur Godfrey. Boy, he got old.

You're my vintage.

You've changed.

For my children. I know who you are -- they don't.

Sweet 30-ish lady: Excuse me, sir, who are you?

No accordion?

I used to love *O My Papa*. (It was a hit for Eddie Fisher.)

You know the guy I miss? Guy Lombardo.

And this from Phil Woods:

Last year I wrote a letter to the Rico corporation in re their new packaging. They used to put 12 reeds in a small box. Their new package contained 10 reeds in a big box. I suggested to them in my most gracious tone that their designer had obviously never been on the road for protracted periods. I re-packed their reeds, getting 20 in the box formerly reserved for 10, thereby conserving precious instrument-case room. I pointed out the error of their ways and suggested that they were not selling corn flakes, not at a buck a reed. I received this answer from behind the bamboo curtain. (I needn't point out that I have endorsed this reed to students, in master classes, in print articles, etc., for the past 30 years, helping sell a shitload of rain forest.)

*Dear Mr. Woods:*
*We are sorry that you are dissastisfied with our latest product improvement and if you tell us what instrument you play we will be glad to send you a complimentary box of reeds.*

I keep this on my humble wall.
These cats can't even get greed right!
Love,

**Phil**

## Kenny, Mel, and the Roots

Benny Golson prepared me for Kenny Washington. Benny said, "Unless you're ready to listen for three hours, don't ask him anything about jazz history, especially drums. He'll start probably with Baby Dodds and take you up to Tony Williams and beyond." Benny was right. I asked a question or two, and found that Kenny -- aside from being a highly admired drummer in the bebop tradition -- is a formidable scholar of the music's history. Living in a small apartment in Brooklyn, he was surrounded by his huge record collection, whose contents he knows thoroughly. You can't mention a record without his knowing the label, date of issue, and personnel.

Kenny, who was born in Brooklyn May 29, 1958, is one of the most respected drummers of his generation. He has recorded with Johnny Griffin, Kenny Burrell, Ron Carter, Frank Wess, Milt Jackson, George Coleman, Cedar Walton, and many others.

"My father turned me onto record collecting," Kenny said. Kenny has a warm, embracing, off-center smile. "He was the first cat to tell me, 'If you want to be a great player, you've got to listen to the people from the past.' He had a big record collection. His name was Charles Washington. He was an IBM computer operator -- before IBM got big. He didn't have as many records as I have, but man, he had a great cross-secion. He had everything. He had Dixieland. He was a Duke Ellington freak. He was a Count Basie freak. He was a monster when Duke Ellingon or Count Basie came to the Apollo. The family went to see them. I saw Duke when Clark (Terry) was with the band, and Cat Anderson and Johnny Hodges. I saw one of the sacred concerts, too. They did one of the sacred concerts here in Brooklyn. So he was very much into music. He turned me on.

"I must have been about five or six years old when I started playing drums. I studied with Rudy Collins, who used to play with Dizzy Gillespie in the mid-'60s. Actually, I learned from the records. I had a number of teachers. I grew up in Staten Island. Jimmy Knepper lives out there. Eric Dixon lived out there. Turk Van Lake, the guitar player, too. I think he still lives out there. I had a teacher named Dennis Kinney. I went to the High School of Music and Art, which at that time was on 135th Street, across the street from City College. I went up there and studied with Justin Di Cioccio. After that I went on to play with Lee Konitz. In fact, it was Jimmy Knepper who got me that gig with Lee. I played with Betty Carter. After that it was like a snowball, working with all kinds of

different people.

"I was always interested in finding out why somebody plays like they play. I was always interested in checking all kinds of music out in all kinds of different styles. The problem with most young musicians now is that they never do that. Most of the tenor players are into John Coltrane, but they don't really know anything about Coleman Hawkins or Don Byas.

"The drummers are too much into Tony Williams and Jack DeJohnette. And nobody knows anything *really* about Jo Jones or Shadow Wilson. Or even Mel for that matter." The intimate reference to Mel Lewis echoed a special and lovely relationship.

"Well," I said, "if that's so, what they're missing is that Jack DeJohnette *does* know about the older people.

"Right," Kenny said. "And Tony Williams too. And Elvin (Jones) also. Those guys know all about the roots. They couldn't play as good as they play if they didn't. But some of the young guys now, they don't *have* to look back, see. That's the frightening part about it. Like, a young guy now that gets a recording contract, he doesn't have to go back and check those guys out. They get so much press play and what have you, they figure, 'Why the hell should I go back and check out all these old guys? I'm making all this money.'"

"I was talking the other day," I said, "with Chris Potter, the tenor player, who's now working with Red Rodney. He's only twenty, but he has an enormous sense of history, as you do, and he made exactly the same point you do. He says there's a generation of people in the middle, in their thirties and forties, who have been ignored in all the publicity over the new young people."

"Oh sure!" Kenny said.

"People like Brian Lynch and Dick Oatts."

"I first met Dick Oatts with Mel Lewis. When Mel started getting sick, I used to sub in the band for him. I did a record date the other day with Dick Oatts.

"And I met Mel through Lee Konitz. Lee said, 'Gee, Mel, I've got this young drummer, man, he can play.' I was working this place called Striker's Pub. Lee said, 'He can really play, but he plays too *loud*. Maybe you can come down and sort of give him some *advice*.' So then Mel came down, right? I didn't know he was there. We were all hanging out outside, because it was warm. Lee said, 'Okay, time to play. Mel Lewis came in to check you out.'

"I played a set. First thing Mel said, 'I don't like your cymbals. I don't like those cymbals at all. And you're playin' too goddamn loud! You could bust out the windows in this place!'"

We laughed. I said, "Mel was never exactly tactful."

"Oh buddy! Man. I knew he had a lot of hip cymbals."

"Yeah, you know where he got that big crash cymbal, I'm sure. Dizzy gave it to him."

"That Chinese cymbal," Kenny said. "That cracked, though, man. That broke. 'Cause I asked him about that cymbal. What I said to Mel, not out of disrespect, man, or being a wise guy, was, 'Well look, Mel, do you have any extra cymbals you could lay on me, or I could buy from you?' He looked at me. He wrote down his number. He said, 'Come on over to my house.'

"He was living right across the street from Ron Carter, 74th or 75th, something like that. I get up to his place. Doris, his wife, lets me in. Mel's sitting there. He says, 'Have a seat.' He says, 'How old are you?' I told him. I was about twenty.

"He said, 'Are you married?'

"'No.'

"He said, 'Good! Stay that way!' He said, 'Because, man, you can really play, and I've seen that kind of thing mess up a whole lot of potentially great musicians.'"

I said, "Since you knew Mel so well, I'll tell you a story. The other day Connie Kay said to me that he thought Mel was maybe the best big-band drummer he ever heard. I mentioned this last night to Roger Kellaway, who worked with Mel a lo and he said, 'Yeah, and if Mel were still alive, he'd be the first to tell you.'"

"That's *right*!" Kenny said, laughing. He laughs easily and heartily.

"Modesty was not his style."

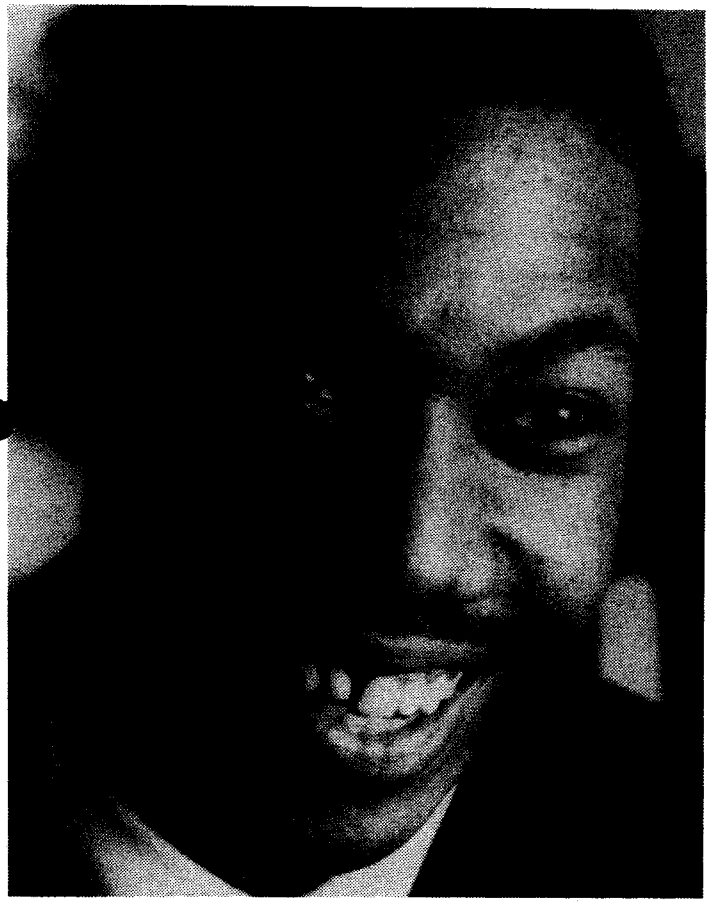
"Oh man! But Mel was just great for me. We sat and talked. He says, 'But you play too goddamn loud. And another thing, you young drummers, you never use your bass drum. Now if it was a funk record, and there was no bass drum, you'd think something was wrong, now wouldn't you? And you play too loud. The band doesn't come up to the drummer, the drummer adjusts to the band.' He says, 'You remember that, man.' And so from then on, man, I used to come and hang around with him, and listen to the band. Or he'd come around where I was working to check me out. He'd come down any old time, unnannounced. One time, I was working the Vanguard or somewhere and Mel says to me, 'Damn, Wash! Those drums sound like shit! Man, tune 'em, damn it, tune 'em.' Next night he comes back. He taps on my drums, he says, 'That's much better. Man, I knew yo could tune your drums better than *that*.

"And about the bass drum. One of the last times that I saw him, I was working up at Bradley's. He was working at Knickerbocker's, which is about three blocks down University Place. So I'm playing. I'm sitting up there playing. I didn't see him walk in. I'm looking someplace else, looking straight ahead. And all of sudden I see Mel! He's down there *under the piano*! All of a sudden he pops up his head. He says, 'Yeah, man, you're using that bass drum.' He was down there listening to see if he could hear the bass drum or not.'

"Mel was beautiful to me."

"Dizzy makes that same point," I said, "about young players not using the bass drum."

"Oh yeah," Kenny said. "Mel used to get on me about that. Miles got on me about it. Miles came down to hear Johnny Griffin one time." He slipped into the whispered rasp that almost everybody does when telling Miles Davis stories. "Miles says, 'Yeah, man, you're playin' you' ass off, but if you don't use that bass drum by the next time I see you, I'm gonna kill you. Come on, man, put a weight on that right foot. That's what I used to tell Tony (Williams) to do.' They were right.



**Kenny Washington 1991** **photo by John Reeves**

"Mel was great. I used to come and play when he couldn't make it, or if he had another gig. Or when he got sick. Especially during his last year. I used to come down and sub for him. I used to watch him. He was incredible.

"When has going through chemotherapy, they had a big tribute concert, the American Jazz Orchestra. I used to play in that band. When Mel couldn't make it, he'd send me in as a sub for the concerts at Cooper Union. They decided to do a tribute to Mel. They play all his music, a retrospective of his career. They got a Johnny Mandel thing that Mel did with the Gerry Mulligan Concert Band back in the '60s. They got some Terry Gibbs things. Some Stan Kenton stuff, all kinds of pieces. Mel was worried about whether he was going to be able to remember all that stuff, because of the chemotherapy and what it does to your brain. By then he was completely bald.

"I came in. I said, 'Man, can I sit behind you so I can read the charts?' He said, 'Sure, man.' They called this tune off quicker than he could get the music out. He just started playing. There was this place where the band stopped and started, on the and and the one, and he was catching everything. Bam, bam! And he hadn't played this, man, in thirty years. There was a place where he came in on the down beat instead of on the and, a half a beat off. He said, 'Damn, Wash. I don't remember this stuff.' And he was, bap, bap, bap-di-bap-bap, swingin' his ass off. And so after the tune was over, I said, 'Right, Mel. Right! You don't remember this stuff! You came in a half a beat early a couple of times, and you don't remember the stuff. Riiiight, Mel.' And the band started cracking up.

"I had never seen anything like that. He was an amazing cat, man. The best thing for me is, like, he was able and willing to show me anything I wanted. Just to be able to sit there and talk to him. That first night at his house, I sat there from seven in the evening until three in the morning. He was playing all these different records he had made, showing off his own talent and what he had done all these years. But! I learned a whole lot. He was showing me about adaptability. He said, 'Listen to what I played on the Barbra Streisand record *Color Me Barbara*.' He fit into every one of those situations. I learned *a lot* that night.

"Any situation Mel was in, big band or small band, he took care of business. He didn't *make* any bad records. At all. Period."

"Do you remember the Mulligan big band record *News from Blueport* . . . "

"Yeah, yeah."

"Gerry and Clark Terry are trading fours and eights, and Mel and Bill Crow get a groove going that is scary!"

"Yeah. You know, that just came out again, on CD. I must get that from Polygram."

"I just put together a two-CD package for Polygram on Oscar Peterson, a retrospective."

"Yeah," Kenny said. I should have known he'd know about it. "I see that you included *Con Alma* from the big-band record. That's a *mean* record. That was one of the first Oscar Peterson records I ever heard."

"Ed Thigpen is wonderful on that," I said.

"Yeah," Kenny said enthusiastically. "He's got the six-eight time thing, with the mallet on the cowbell." Kenny sang Ed's figure. "I learned how to play six-eight time from that record. From that and Rudy Collins, who learned it from Dizzy.

"That Oscar Peterson Trio with Ed Thigpen was a big influence on me. Learning how to play trio. Between that trio and Ahmad Jamal's trio with Vernel Fournier and the Jo Jones Trio with Ray Bryant and Tommy Bryant, Ray's brother. There was one record on Vanguard and one on Everest. Man, Jo's brushes. That record *Affinity* by Oscar Peterson, I tell all my students, 'If you can find that record, buy it.' I have students come in to America from Germany and different places, they take a couple of lessons. They've heard me on records. I don't have a lot of steady students."

"Jack De Johnette," I said, "says that the Bill Evans Trio with Paul Motian and Scott LaFarro influenced not only pianists but the very concept of trio, breaking up the time in that conversational way. Jack thinks that's one of the big innovations."

"Oh yeah!" Kenny said. "The only thing about that is, as great as it was, I always felt if they'd just break in and play

more of a groove. They sort of carried it on kind of long for my taste. I thought it was great anyway."

"I always found a little puzzling that Bill so admired the sound of the Oscar Peterson trio. Bill and I went by to hear Oscar one night, and Bill said, 'Why can't I get my rhythm section to sound that way?'"

"You know what?" Kenny said. "I believe what he was really going for was his first rhythm section on his first record, with Sam Jones and Philly Joe Jones. It seems to me that's why Philly Joe Jones stayed so long with him at the end of his career. The thing with Paul Motian was great. But people sort of associated Bill with that, whereas I think he was trying to get into a groove. He loved Philly Joe, and that's why they were together a lot at the end."

"Yeah," I said, "whenever Bill was in trouble and didn't have a drummer, he'd call Joe. And Joe would go, even if he had other gigs. That went on for years."

"Oh yeah! But I'm telling you, those Oscar Peterson records of that period. *West Side Story*? Man, that's how I learned to play ensembles. How to play in a piano trio situtation. Listening to those records."

"Thigpen is such a lovely colorist."

"Yep."

"And there's always Elvin, when it comes to color. That guy moves around a top cymbal like it's a melody instrument."

"Elvin's *mean*, boy."

"How many albums have you done?

"I've done about eighty albums. I made an album with Tommy Flanagan called *Jazz Poet*. That's a good record, man, I was on that record that Phil Woods and Benny Carter made. It's a good one. I've recorded with Betty Carter, Lee Konitz, Walter Davis Jr., Lena Horne, Kenny Burrell, Mingus Dynasty, Johnny Coles and Frank Wess together, Hod O'Brien."

Kenny's conversation ranged over Will Marion Cook, the sharp-key writing of Fletcher Henderson, the playing of Roy Eldridge, and what he sees as an injustice in the record industry -- the emphasis on youth, to the detriment and indeed ignoring of a generation of players in their thirties and forties who have reached their prime.

"You know what happens, man," Kenny said. "The best players are the best-kept secrets. To me, there's a lot of musicians out here who have all this name, but they don't play that well, man. It's all hype. I mean, the guys who are getting all this press play, they're supposed to be this, that. But they don't play that well.

"They think they're getting away with it. They *are* getting away with it. But the real people that know, they know what's going on. To me, the hype and publicity are unbelievable. What I see is that the more you play, the better you try to play, the less you're recognized for it. I really believe that. I know some guys who don't have *anything* together, y'know, and there they are, they're stars. Certain guys I know who talk all this stuff! Certain musicians I won't mention. It's all Park Avenue. But when you get down to the brass talks, and really start talking about history and facts, you find that they know a donut hole. Zero. Really, man! It's amazing."

And then he began playing me records. When I heard recently that Kenny now has his own FM record program in New York, I was not surprised. He was made for it -- aside from being a wonderful drummer.

From time to time one hears, Jazz is dying. Really?

Not with people like Kenny Washington around.

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

*Alexander's Ragtime Band* in 1911 was a catalyst in a craze for dancing that would last for more than three decades in the United States. To cater to it, hundreds of ballrooms and dance pavilions sprang up across the country, many of them in amusement parks and at lakesides, and uncounted dance bands were formed to provide the music. The quality of songs in Broadway musicals was rising steadily, and in the 1920s, the radio broadcasting industry, which started in Canada, where Marconi had gone to do some of his most advanced experiments, developed rapidly throughout the United States. As so often happened, a Canadian innovation found its fullest development in the United States, a pattern that has changed now, with American innovations being brought to fulfillment by the Japanese. The Canadians never did have much initiative about the exploitation of their own genius; and now the Americans appear to have lost theirs.

When through a series of international conferences, broadcasting frequencies were assigned to different nations, the United States made a devastating cultural mistake. It did not establish a public broadcasting network comparable to the systems being set up in Europe. It assigned virtually all the frequencies to commercial interests, with stations funded by advertising. Three big broadcasting networks emerged toward the end of the 1920s and grew constantly more influential through the 1930s and '40s.

The men who controlled these networks drew on the general cultural pool for material to present: symphony orchestras, opera, comedy, drama, dance bands, many of them playing jazz and most of them influenced by it, and popular music of a high quality, drawn in part from Broadway musical theater. A three-way symbiosis emerged: movies and theater as a source of popular music, dance-bands and their singers to perform it, and radio as a medium to present it. The level of public musical taste throughout North America soared.

**Then came another war, and the song industry again turned** at least part of its attention to patriotism. But something had changed. The war songs of the first Great War had at least the virtue of a natural enthusiasm. Those of the World War II did not. They had a synthetic quality, as if they had been manufactured on request of the Office of War Information for the purpose of boosting morale: *We Did It Before and We Can Do It Again, Remember Pearl Harbor, Ballad for Americans, Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer, Rosie the Riveter, Praise*

*the Lord and Pass the Ammunition,* and *There's a Star-Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere.* The songs the soldiers and their girl-friends actually sang included *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree, Deep in the Heart of Texas,* and the *Beer Barrel Polka.* Certainly they didn't sing *Any Bonds Today.* In 1941, the Andrews Sisters recorded *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy.* The following year brought *Johnny Doughboy Found a Rose in Ireland,* which managed to combine patriotic kitsch with the lingering interest in things Irish, *Goodbye Mama, I'm Off to Yokohama,* and Berlin's *This Is the Army, Mister Jones.* In 1943, the Spike Jones band had a comedy hit called *Der Fuhrer's Face.*

Most of the popular songs of World War II had a wistful cast to them, including *The Last Time I Saw Paris* by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein, and *I'll Be Seeing You,* words by Irving Kahal and music by Sammy Fain, which is also about lost Paris, as one realizes on hearing the seldom-sung verse. Woven deeply into the fabric of the war's mood were *When the Lights Go on Again All Over the World, Goodbye Sue, I'll Walk Alone, I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire,* and *I Left My Heart at the Stage Door Canteen.* Two of the biggest songs were imports, *A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square,* from England, and oddly, *Lily Marlene,* from Germany. It was popular with troops on both sides of the war. *My Sister and I* was about two children lost in the turmoil of the war. If Berlin had made fun of army life in the first war with *Oh How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning,* Johnny Mercer did the same in the second war with *G.I. Jive.* One of the most poignant songs of the war was also Johnny's, music by Harold Arlen: *My Shining Hour.* In *They're Either Too Young or Too Old,* Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz had fun with the limited sexual choices of the girls left behind at home.

The change in tone between the two great wars is striking. Popular music had, of course, become more sophisticated with the rise of Porter, Gershwin, Arlen, Schwartz, Warren, Youmans, and their colleagues. But more striking is the loss of enthusiasm for war, which no longer seemed a romantic adventure. The acceleration in communications was robbing it of its glamour. When George Armstrong Custer's force was destroyed at the Little Big Horn, the news took two days to appear in the New York *Herald.* But telegraph links had improved, the telephone became commonplace, and by the 1920s, commercial radio was spreading rapidly, to evolve into the great radio networks of the 1930s and '40s. In World War II the public got the news of great battles within hours via radio, and news broadcasters such as H.V. Kaltenborn, Gabriel Heater, and Eric Sevareid became household names. In some of Edward R. Murrow's broadcasts from London, people throughout North America could hear the bombs falling. Though Hollywood movies tried to make war heroic and glamorous, the newsreels and photojournalism worked to an opposite effect. We saw the long lines of Allied soldiers trudging up dusty Italian roads, saw the shattered buildings, saw the wide-eyed hungry children, saw the bodies stacked like cordwood when the Nazi death camps were over-run. One of the most unforgettable photos of the war appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine, a picture of a dead American soldier half-buried in the beach sand of a nameless Pacific atoll, the uniform on his slightly bloated body sprinkled with white maggots. If Richard Harding Davis was the correspondent of the Spanish-American war, faithfully disseminating Theodore Roosevelt's deceits, Ernie Pyle -- himself to become a casualty -- was the beloved correspondent who recounted the soldier's ordeal in World War II. The communications media were taking the fun out of war, and it would have been hard to sell an optimistic image of it through popular songs.

For all practical purposes, war songs became extinct in 1945. The United States had entered World War I three years after it started, when it was almost over of attrition anyway, and World War II more than two years after its onset. The Korean War came suddenly, allowing the government propaganda machine no time to prepare the public for it. Furthermore, World War II was only five years in the past, and people were yearning for peace. America went to Korea achingly. And a curious thing happened, or rather didn't happen. The Korean War produced almost no songs at all. Indeed, it produced only one that I can thing of, *Dear John Letter* (1953), about a soldier who gets word that his girl is going to marry someone else.

Then came Viet Nam, the most thoroughly reported war in history, a record it still holds. The military lied about Viet Nam and so did the executive branch of the American government, and then compounded the confusion by saying that the news media were lying when they were telling the truth. Had there been only newspapers to report on the war, the truth might have been lost, but by now almost every home in America, no matter how humble, was equipped with at least one television set. The motion picture crews were swarming over Viet Nam, the still cameramen right beside them. The illusion that only the enemy was cruel, a staple of war propaganda from beyond the dawn of history, died. A G.I. flipped a Zippo lighter, touched a flame to the thatch of some peasant's pathetic home, and a cinematographer caught it. American soldiers murdered men, women, and children at My Lai, and a cameraman caught it, all of it. Agents of the CIA dropped a prisoner out of a helicopter, and a cameraman caught it. The chief of police of Saigon put a pistol to the head of a prisoner and killed him in the street, and a cameraman caught it. The evidence of the pictures came in day after day and month after month. It would have been impossible to sell the American public a song such as *Over There.*

For the first time in American history, almost all the songs to come out of the war were anti-war. One such songs was *The Eve of Destruction.* Another was *Saigon Bride,* a Joan Baez recording about a soldier who marries a Vietnamese girl and begins to feel guilt over killing her people.

Satirist Tom Lehrer wrote and recorded mocking songs such as *Who's Next* (about the spread of atomic weapons), *So Long, Mom, I'm Off to Drop the Bomb,* which he called a bit of pre-nostalgia for World War III, and *Send the Marines,* which Lyndon Johnson did in the Dominican Republic. One of the most powerful voices was that of Bob Dylan, whose songs were

all anti-Establishment.

One of the gentlest songs of the period, Pete Seeger's *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?* became the theme song of the war, somehow associated with the general mourning for human folly and destruction. On July 4, 1968, I was in Montreux, Switzerland, whose townspeople had arranged a lake-shore bonfire party for American students. In the glow of the flames they sang. What? *God Bless America*, an old Irving Berlin song revived during World War II? No, they sang *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?*, repeating it at least three times in the course of the evening.

**By then, of course, the era of the truly professional songwriter** was over, and so was that of the professional singer. The remarkable body of songs developed in these cirumstances eventually had developed a group of singers worthy of it.

Prior to the 1920s, singers rose through vaudeville. They sang the songs in theaters without microphones, and this entailed a kind of heavy, loud voice production. It is not generally understood that "classical" singing did not always require "big" voice production: this came with the gradual enlargement of opera orchestras and opera houses, culminating in the big operas of Verdi and, ultimately, those of Wagner, requiring their glass-shattering sopranos and heldentenors. Vaudeville, too, required loud voices, but these lacked the refinement of opera singers. The nature of the work led to singers like Sophie Tucker, and in a hold-over into musical theater, Ethel Merman, who couldn't act, couldn't sing, and couldn't dance but whose sheer self-confident enthusiasm made her a delight to watch on stage. Furthermore, she had a small range, which enforced on Cole Porter the discipline of producing songs within a range of a tenth if not an octave. This makes many Porter songs, for all their ingenuity, surprisingly easy to sing. All this changed with the invention of the microphone and the public address system and the burgeoning of the big bands, both of them concomitant with the emergence of this remarkable body of American songs.

In 1921 Paul Whiteman hired singer Morton Downey, who at first appeared only with one of Whiteman's farm-team bands and then moved up to the main Whiteman orchestra. The idea of a singer with a band was so radical that Whiteman had him hold an instrument -- a French horn, of all things --to make it appear that he was doing something when he wasn't standing up and singing a song. In 1925, Downey joined a Ziegfeld show, becoming what was later known as a "single", and went on to fame on his own. From that point on, most of America's pop singers would come out of dance bands, including Bing Crosby, another alumnus of the Whiteman organization, and Russ Columbo. These singers were oriented to rhythm sections, whose foundations were and are in jazz. Such singers, in other words, were sensitive to the pulse.

In the mid-1940s, Frank Sinatra acted as a conductor in an album of 12-inch 78 r.p.m. recordings of six of Alec Wilder's orchestral works, which fused elements of jazz and classical music. Since Sinatra claimed not to be able to read music, I asked Alec if Sinatra really had conducted the pieces. "Yes," Alec said, "he did." Alec explained that Sinatra learned the music from acetate recordings of air checks of the pieces. "And," Alec said, "he did them better than any classical conductor before or since ever did them, because Frank understood something they don't: dance tempos." This would be characteristic of all the best singers that came up from the 1920s on.

There is, however, one singer who in retrospect appears to be a transitional figure: Al Jolson.

Those who knew Jolson tell me he was never at home in the recording studio. He was at his best in a theater. If you have not seen, and get a chance to see, Jolson's 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, may I urge you to do so. The picture is terrible, but it has historical interest in that it was the film that brought sound to the movies. It is a numbingly mawkish story of a cantor's son who becomes a stage star. It isn't a talking picture. The dialogue occurs in silence, with printed titles. Sound is used only for the songs, one of which is *Toot Toot Tootsie*, a Jolson signature number written in 1922 by Gus Kahn, Ernie Erdman, and Dan Russo. Jolson performs it in blackface, and the scene provides us with one of the last examples of this weird practice, a hold-over of the minstrel shows. The camera faces him head-on, full figure. And how he sings that song. Until you see the film, you cannot imagine why it has the title it does. For Jolson indeed drew on jazz, and how he swung. He moves, he dances, he does his odd bird-call whistling routine, and all of it driven by some inner motor of secure rhythm. Songwriters may not have liked Jolson for his gargantuan ego and his extortionist practice of cutting himself in on the credit -- and royalties -- of songs he didn't write. But the man could sing.

For a while, some of the singers with bands attempted to solve the problem of volume by the use of the megaphone, most notably a saxophone player turned bandleader out of Yale University, Rudy Vallee, but the megaphone produced an oddly distant echoed effect that made it seem the voice [illegible] was made of cardboard. Then came the microphone.

The microphone does not make it possible for bad singers to sound good, for "weak" singers to be heard in large halls, as my father and many others who grew up in the vaudeville era thought. There is, as we have noted, nothing inherently natural about a voice that can fill an auditorium that seats 3,000. On the contrary, the microphone magnifies flaws. What it does do is make possible a more intimate kind of singing.

Maureen Forrester, the great contralto, once told me, "I can stand on a stage singing opera or oratorio and hit the back wall. But I can't sing Cole Porter without a microphone."

The late Jeri Southern, accomplished pianist and one of the finest of all American popular singers, who hated performing and retired early to teach, said that each of us has two voices. She (like Jo Stafford) had been trained for opera. Her success came, she said, when she began to sing in her speaking voice. The microphone makes this possible. It isn't that the singers can't sing without a microphone; they don't want to. Tony Bennett sometimes sets the microphone aside and performs

without it.

But the microphone presents problems of its own. For example, the plosive consonants, particularly p and b, but also t and the aspirated h, release sudden bursts of air that shock the element of a microphone. If this occurs in the recording studio, the resulting record will later cause a shock wave to come from the speakers in your living room. The phenomenon is known as popping the mike, and skilled singers like Sinatra acquire tricks to obviate it.

The microphone, then, permitted a more naturalistic approach to singing, one that was appropriate to the body of songs developed by Kern, Gershwin, et al.

Bing Crosby had one foot in the past. He knew enough not to shout into a microphone, but he did not grasp that it permitted a focussed private kind of acting. His singing had a certain detachment about it. Billie Holiday brought a curious intensity to the craft. Privately, many singers -- the late Johnny Hartman was one of them -- have had reservations about Holiday, and Fats Waller is said to have remarked that she sang as if her shoes pinched. Whoever said it, its repetition in the profession ever since the 1930s is indication that it is considered worth quoting. Singers harboring such reservations rarely express them: Holiday is such a cult icon that to do so incurs a reflexive contemptuous condemnation. Whatever one's feelings about Holiday, she brought to singing a way of phrasing for the meaning of the lyrics rather than for the lay of the melody that was fresh, and her influence was extensive.

Sinatra combined all of these influences, forces, and factors into a style of electrifying originality, as arresting as the first work of Marlon Brando. He combined the improvisatory feeling for lyrics with a high musicality, derived, he has said, from the trombone of Tommy Dorsey, which he listened to night after night when he was with the Dorsey band. This entailed breath support and phrasing across the bar lines -- tying the last phrase of one part of the song to the start of the next without the normal break for a breath. Another distinguishing characteristic was exquisite enunciation with broad, almost Oxonian vowels, and long Italian double consonants. Sinatra developed his art studiously and consciously. In his first recordings, he has a light tenor sound, vaguely indebted to the Irish tenors who previously had been fashionable in America -- Morton Downey, Kenny Baker, Dennis Day among them, and even Buddy Clark. It soon deepens, and takes on an Italianate character. His voice develops a baritone quality. By the mid-1940s, he had developed his art to a level of genius, able to capture the inner emotion of a song like no one before him. One could call it Stanislavskian singing. And it was completely American. In the 1950s he entered his most magnificent phase, re-defining and reinterpreting the classic American songs.

What few of us realized, listening to Sinatra at that time, is that he was, whether consciously or not, preserving a repertoire that was already classic. When in December, 1947, he recorded *Try a Little Tenderness*, the song was already 13 years old. He recorded *My Melancholy Baby* in 1945; it was written in 1912. He recorded *How Deep Is the Ocean* on March 10, 1945; Berlin published it in 1932. By the way, Alan Jay Lerner was entranced by that song. Noting that old-world Jews traditionally answered a question with a question (Does Macy tell Gimbel?), Lerner observed that every line in that song but one is a question. He thought that lyric was ingenious, and it is.

Sinatra inspired a generation of singers, including Vic Damone (considered by singers to have the best voice), Jack Jones (probably the best vocal technician of all the men), Steve Lawrence, one of the most musicianly singers, and Julius LaRosa, probably the best reader of lyrics. Tony Bennett is considered part of that school, but he also has roots in Louis Armstrong, manifest in his use of vibrato. Tony too knows how to get to the heart of a lyric. He likes to say that his education was completed when he toured with the Count Basie band, but whatever did it Tony has the hard to describe but unmistakable feeling of jazz in his work.

Among the women, the most gifted dramatic singer to grow up in this aesthetic is Peggy Lee, who developed an ability to bring out the inner meaning of a song exceeding perhaps even Sinatra's. Her singing is like Montgomery Clift's acting: you never realize she's doing it. You merely get the emotion, transmitted in some mysteriously quiet way that defies analysis. And, like Sinatra, she is a very good musical technician.

From the 1930s on, this burgeoning of singing talent commensurate with an outpouring of great songs is one of the glories of American cultural history. The list is huge, and cannot be fully explored here. A particular favorite of other singers is Dick Haymes. Perry Como's art is deceptively effortless: layman do not know that it is far easier to hit a high note with the veins standing out on your forehead than it is to do it softly. Como can land on a high E-flat very quietly. It's awesome. Como has always shown a penchant for commercial material ranging from the dubious down to the dreadful (*Papa Loves Mambo*), but when he does treat good material, as in the Rodgers and Hart song *You're Nearer*, he does it superbly. Then there was Lee Wiley, another singer with a strong jazz feeling.

And there was Nat Cole. His success as a singer overshadowed his importance as a pianist, one of the most important in jazz history. As many Italians (Sinatra, Como, La Rosa, Brenda Vaccaro, Aldo Ray, Peter Rodino) have a woody Italian sound, many blacks have a soft, airy, African sound. Dizzy Gillespie has such a voice, and so did Cole. The sound itself was glorious; and Cole was extraordinarily musical, with a faultless and secure rhythmic sense and a melodic elegance that lent distinction to even trivial material.

Some singers are more intensely involved in jazz than others. Ella Fitzgerald is, if anyone ever has been, a jazz singer, more interested in exploring the melodic and harmonic implications of a song than the lyrics. Fitzgerald has reflected little influence of the blues in her work, in contrast to a particular favorite of mine, the late Dinah Washington, whose interpretations were always deeply inflected with blues and gospel. She has had a considerable influence on other singers, though none

of them has managed to capture her intensity.

Perhaps the finest of all jazz singers was Sarah Vaughan who, ironically, resented being called a jazz singer. Sass thought the term was too limiting. Nonetheless, Sarah owned what to my mind was the greatest voice in the whole history of recorded American popular music, and perhaps any kind of music. Like Cole, she was a pianist, and her harmonic hearing was sophisticated. Her approach to a song was to explore not the lyrics but the music. To be sure, these improvisations destroyed lyrics. When she got through improvising on the melody, all thought of the lyrics and their meaning was usually lost. And in Sarah's case, the demolition of the lyrics -- even when they were my own, and she recorded a lot of my songs -- simply didn't matter to me. I was too fascinated with the way she could project emotion through sheer tone color. I once asked her what she looked for most in a song, and she said, "Good lyrics." The answer baffled me, and I still cannot reconcile it.

I do not, as a rule, care for scat singing. It strikes me as a peculiar thing to do, inherently antipathetic to the dramatic content of lyrics. Jazz is a music in which instruments emulate the human voice. It strikes me as an inversion, if not a perversion, of the essential aesthetic of jazz to have voices imitate instruments, straining to do poorly what instruments well: make music in the abstract, without verbal meaning. When I do like scat singing, it is almost invariably by an instrumentalist, such as the trombonist Richard Boone or Dizzy Gillespie, putting the horn aside for a while to sing in the abstract. Dizzy is the only jazz musician I know who can sing drum patterns. He sang a drum solo at the start of his big band number *The Champ* that is astounding. But then the genius of John Birks Gillespie is beyond explication anyway. The two best scat singers I ever heard were Frank Rosolino and Clark Terry, and in the case of all these men, the practice was leavened by the laughter implicit in it. And that is about all scat singing can do, evoke amusement and a little suspense. It can induce no other moods.

One of the very few singers who can improvise on the melody without destroying the lyrics is the remarkable Carmen McRae. Somehow what she explores the harmony of a song while at the same time adding depth to the lyric. She is unique; and like Nat Cole and Sarah Vaughan, she is a pianist.

Joe Williams has a physical instrument -- the diaphragm, the rib cage, the throat, the bone structure of the head -- that is the most magnificent ever owned by any American singer in in any idiom. It is like a great Boesendorfer or Bluthner piano. And he plays it magnificently, from dark low body notes up into head tones and pianissimos. He is a great ballad singer, he is a great blues singer, he is a great rhythm singer.

All these singers, be it noted, came up through and out of the big bands, with the exception of Nat Cole, who was nonetheless of that era. And they were nurtured by radio.

**Adolph Hitler's rise could not have happened had the micro**phone never been invented; not only did he make great screaming speeches to crowds in huge stadia, he used broadcasting to unite Germans all over the world, including those in bunds in the United States and Canada. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the first American president to understand radio's power, used it to pull a nation out of the Great Depression ("We have nothing to fear but fear itself."), then mobilize it against Hitler and the Japanese. With one broadcast, he implanted December 7 forever in the American consciousness as "a day that will live in infamy." Winston Churchill too used radio to unite his people and all those of the British Commonwealth. "We will fight them on the beaches . . . blood, sweat, toil and tears . . . " Like Roosevelt, he installed phrases, bits of slogans, in the mind. Later, a cunning former sportscaster returned to radio, after years in movies and television, to hoodwink a nation. He understood how effective it is. Ronald Reagan's Saturday radio "chats" were his most effective tool of deception.

The power of radio to change a nation's tastes was demonstrated in the 1930s with the rise of the great networks, the Red and Blue Networks of NBC, CBS, and the Mutual Broadcasting system. Broadcasts from the Cotton Club in New York established Duke Ellington as a major American musical figure before the 1930s began. One "remote" broadcast of the Benny Goodman band from California launched the swing era; other remotes established other bands, and soon there were dozens of them, excellent bands, traveling the U.S. and Canada, packing the young people in at ballrooms and pavilions and hockey arenas.

The networks also brought us the Metropolitan Opera and the NBC Symphony under Arturo Toscanini. On Sunday afternoons one could hear the CBS Symphony conducted by Bruno Walter. The networks aired a great many weekly programs devoted to "light classical" music, sponsored by Firestone, the Bell Telephone, Cities Service, and others. If you turned on a network station and left it on, you got an education in music. It was almost impossible not to know such names as John Charles Thomas, James Melton, Albert Spalding, Vivian Della Chiesa, Lily Pons, Andre Kostelanetz, Eugene Ormandy, Rise Stevens, Arturo Toscanini, Donald Voorhees, John Kirby, Woody Herman, Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller. Many of the evening comedy shows featured well-known bands. Regular headliners on the Bob Hope show, for example, included first the Skinnay Ennis band, then Stan Kenton, and later Les Brown, all first-rate bands. Most of the major bandleaders had regular network shows of their own. Radio was a potpourri that instilled Americans with astonishingly broad and eclectic tastes, and considerable sophistication. And then something went wrong.

(To be continued)

**SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION**

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