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Jazzletter

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Mail Bag

I'm deeply grateful to you.

Please let me express my thanks to a few others. I won't name any of the thousands of artists whom I never met, nor will I name here any of my friends who are alive today.

Persons who helped me but who are gone:

Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, John Wiggin, Irving Berlin, Harold Arlen, Johnny Mercer, Art Tatum, H.P. Lovecraft, Erroll Garner, Bill Evans, Gil Evans, Paul Desmond, Judy Holliday, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, John Hammond, Joe Hall, Nictzin Dyalhis, Virgil Finlay, Nat Cole, Pearl Bailey, Sidney Bechet, Ben Webster, Roy Eldridge, Woody Herman, Jim Koulouvaris, Taylor Perry, Joe Theimer, Max Gordon, Bing Crosby, Edward R. Murrow, Julian Adderley, Bob Share, Jackie Robinson, George London, Eubie Blake, Alec Wilder, Nancy Hanks, Gretchen Poston, Sandy Dennis, Emerson Parker, and many more whom I knew and without whose artistry I couldn't have composed a good program or lived a worthwhile life. Sincerely,

Willis Conover, Arlington, Virginia

Many thanks for the article *Kenny, Mel, and the Roots*.

Mel Lewis was and always will be one of my all-time favorite musicians. The big-band albums he made from 1960 on had a huge influence on me, and God knows how many other arrangers and composers. Drummers weren't the only musicians who loved what he did.

Especially the Gerry Mulligan Concert Jazz Band albums on Verve. Don't forget that wonderful, strutting shout chorus on *Black Nightgown* -- another scary groove on the *Live at the Village Vanguard* album. And the Solid State albums with Thad Jones! These are, along with the other Mulligans and some of the Woody Herman stuff on Phillips, about as good as big-band jazz has ever been or could ever hope to be.

I almost got to play a concert with Mel Lewis in the summer of 1985 while I was touring with Al Hirt. Our regular drummer, Joey Baron, had been doing triple duty, also touring with Toots Thielemans and the Red Rodney-Ira Sullivan group. He was overbooked. So Mel was subbing for Joey. We were doing a concert in Canandaigua, New York, with the Rochester Philharmonic -- just a one-nighter. I flew into Rochester from Dallas. Al Hirt, his wife, and Bill Huntington (a great bass player), flew in from New Orleans. Mel was already waiting for us at the baggage claim. If felt the adrenaline kicking in. It isn't every day that you get to play with a legend.

Two limos showed up to drive us south to Canandaigua where the symphony was standing by, waiting to rehearse with us. We were running a bit behind schedule, and somebody from the summer pops production staff was going to catch hell if the rehearsal ran overtime. The thought of overtime on a symphony rehearsal is enough to give any self-respecting comptroller heart palpitations. So we quickly piled into the limos -- the rhythm section, Mel, Bill, and me in one; the Hirts and some old friends in the other. The ride to Canandaigua would be 45 minutes. It was a beautiful summer afternoon on the Finger Lakes.

It didn't take much to get Mel talking. All I did was ask him a question about his big band, and Mel carried on as only Mel could. I don't see how anybody could hear Mel Lewis hold forth about his big band and not be moved to hear a great jazz musician talking about one of the great loves of his life. His bluntness didn't bother me. For me he was blunt -- or arrogant -- only to get the point across. He wanted to get it right on the first take, and it was a low-key bluntness. He was talking as he played.

Once during the conversation, the bluntness got funny. It seemed that an arranger had called him up cold:

"Hey, man, I've written a new chart for you."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah!"

"What's the instrumentation?"

"Well, you know -- standard big band, five saxes, eight brass, rhythm . . . "

"Is there a French horn part?"

"No."

"Are there two bass trombone parts?"

"Well, uh, no . . . just the fourth trombone."

"Well, man, I don't know who you wrote this for, but you didn't write it for *my* band."

End of conversation.

The rehearsal was over 40 minutes after it started. It was very easy music. I was afraid Mel would be bored. He wasn't. He was making it swing. You and Kenny Washington talked in the article about Mel's obsession over drummers not using the bass drum. For 40 minutes, I was able to experience playing with *that* bass drum. Unbelievable! A click track that swung! Playing with it was like driving a new sports car. Among jazz drummers, Mel was definitely a Mercedes -- or a Ferrari!

Mel didn't play the gig that night. As he was dressing in his hotel room, he had chest pains. He was conscious and was able to call 911. We watched in shock as the paramedics took him away. He was apologetic! "I hate to do this to you guys. I know what you've been through this summer already." We knew what he meant. My predecessor at the piano chair was Fred Crane, a superb player with great facility whose playing was strongly influenced by Dave McKenna, who was a good friend. Jimmy Rowles knew him. Bill Evans had known him. Allegedly, Fred was the one who had told bill about bassist Marc Johnson and helped to arrange Marc's audition with Bill.

Fred Crane had dropped dead of a ruptured aorta right after a gig in Ruidosa, New Mexico, only two months before tonight,

and now, Mel Lewis was down for the count -- or so it seemed. Bill Huntington was incredulous: "This gig is jinxed!"

As many people now know, Mel underwent much medical testing in the ensuing weeks. Joey Barron came back to the drum slot. He kept us informed. Finally the doctors had good news and bad news for Mel. The good news was that he had not had a heart attack as everyone had assumed. There was no evidence of blockage or damage to his heart.

The bad news: there was a large melanoma on his left arm.

Mel, I'm sorry about what happened to you that day. I was looking forward to actually playing a gig with you, hearing Al Porcino stories, Bob Brookmeyer stories, Pepper Adams stories. Just hearing you hold forth some more would have been the end.

But I'll never forget that ride in the limo and that short but sweet rehearsal. I'll bet some of the symphony players were bugged when they realized there wasn't going to be any overtime after all. You should be proud to take the blame. After all, you pulled it all together and made it swing, just like always. Shooting from the hip. No wasted motion. No drummer in jazz, or in all of American music, ever played more *for the band* than you did.

At least I got 40 minutes of it first hand.

And I'm still a believer.

Dave Zoller, Dallas, Texas

You know of my love for the music of Paul Desmond and now a friend from Berlin, Germany, and I are trying to start a Desmond fan club and appreciation society.

Would you put this letter and my address in the *Jazzletter* in the hope that someone will respond?

Mathias C. Hermann
2098 Carefree Lane
Florissant, Missouri 63033

The June Jazzletter absolutely floored me! You could have been writing about South Africa. It's dreadfully sad that racial bigotry still permeates this planet. We were staggered to find it alive and well in Australia when we were there in '84/85. And we all know the problem is rife in certain parts of the U.K. Naturally we have known about its existence in the States, but your Ordeal of Ernie Andrews was a stunning expose from my viewpoint. Perhaps when you are forced to live with an outrageous situation such as racial inequality, you are inclined to think that your part of the world is the only place it exists.

I was talking to a black guitarist in Cape Town a couple of years ago. His name is Chris April. When he was much younger Chris was filling in a form to apply for the infamous "dompas" or identity document that in those days had to be carried by blacks (and only blacks) by government decree. The unfeeling white guy at the counter looked at Chris' form and crossed out the word "musician" under the heading Occupation. He scribbled the word "laborer" in its place. Glaring at Chris he said, "If you want to be a bloody musician, piss off to America. Here, we need you buggers to dig potatoes."

I was shaken to the core. No matter how often one is exposed to that sort of thing, you never become inured to it. Chris saw how much the story had upset me, but he just put a hand on my arm and laughed. Chris has never earned a cent in his life other than as a professional musician, and he was genuinely amused by the idiotic attitude.

Rod Willis, Ramsgate, South Africa

The Fire This Time

The Return of Red Mitchell

Part II

"My father learned all the opera roles," Red Mitchel continued. "He had choirs. For quite some years there was a Gilbert and Sullivan company in our town -- Radburn, New Jersey. Radburn is part of Fairlawn, which is outside of Paterson, which is not too far from New York.

"It was an experimental little town founded in 1927, the year I was born, although I was born in New York City. My folks lived in Brooklyn then. Four or five years later they moved to Radburn. It was built for the co-existence of kids and cars. A whole lot of dead end streets and parks. By coincidence, maybe, it was all WASP with a few exceptions.

"I must say there was some strangeness in the town. When I started going into New York as a teenager, going to 52nd Street and Harlem, meeting some of these giants that I'd heard on the records, they made me feel more welcome there than I had felt in my home town.

"I have one brother, Gordon, who picked up the nickname Whitey and also learned bass. Everybody used to say we should get together and make a record, Red, Whitey, and Blue Mitchel. We had a picture taken together in Birdland, Whitey and Blue and me. We just all happened to be there.

"Gordon is four and a half years younger than I am. I had taken him in to 52nd Street, even though one time he was fourteen and I was eighteen. We dressed him up in my father's clothes, which were too big for him. I told him to suck his cheeks in and walk like he was falling asleep and everybody would think he was a junky. It worked, it was okay.

"I didn't start playing bass until I was in the army. As a bad letter writer, I had been out of communication with my family for some months. And he started playing bass in high school at the same time. No direct link. We took up the instrument simultaneously, perhaps by coincidence. I really don't know."

"Why does anyone take up bass?" I asked. "I love the instrument, but it is so thankless."

"There are a lot of reasons in my case, a whole lot of reasons. I started on piano, studied nine years classical music as a kid. Then my teacher died, and I got interested in music. It

was jazz. It was around that time that I heard a Count Basie record on the radio, and that did it. It was a message of love from the whole band. I started dancing immediately. I couldn't dance then and I can't dance now. But I danced all over the living room and I just said to myself, 'I gotta do something like that.' And by the way on that record there were two tenor solos. I didn't know at the time that it was a tenor saxophone I was hearing, but I decided immediately that the second one was the greatest one in the world. And it was Lester Young, I found out later. It was one of those moments of truth.

"That was when I was somewhere between twelve and fourteen. It took me a while to get from there to nineteen, when I chose the bass. But I tried all the other instruments first. I played alto and clarinet for four and a half years, and at Cornell for one year, and in the army.

"I took electrical engineering at Cornell. My whole youth I had thought I was going to be an inventor. My father was an executive at AT&T and he had all sorts of friends in the Bell Laboratories. They took him out of Stevens Tech, a tough engineering school in Hoboken. He finished first in his class. The telephone company grabbed him in 1921, and he never had to look for a job. The only thing is they didn't teach him how to tell people what to do, and that's what the job involved, so he got a real bad case of ulcers. But he was a whiz, and he was a beautiful person. A gentle man. William Douglas Mitchell. A great man. He just died a couple of years ago.

"My father taught me to fix things, and I used to go around in the neighborhood and give people my business card. My biggest hit as an inventor as a kid was a six-shot repeater rubber band gun made out of coat-hanger wire. All the kids bought them. I sold them for ten cents each. So when the teacher would get hit on the back of the head and would look around, there was nobody to blame because we all had 'em. My father helped me a lot, in a well-intentioned way. He helped turn me off to the profession of inventing. He encouraged me to get a patent on that gun, he took me through the patent search process, and we got into materials and marketing, and my eyes glazed over and I said, 'Let's talk about something else.' I found out a lot later that the ultimate motivation of an inventor is the Eureka! moment. I've found it! And the ultimate motivation of the jazz musician is exactly the same thing. But in jazz, you don't have to get a patent, you go on to the next moment, and there are a lot more of them.

"I guess you can read between the lines that my parents were supportive."

"Well, Red, if I have discovered one constant in the lives of scores and maybe hundreds of jazz musicians I have examined, and for that matter artists in other fields, it is parental support. It is critical, and I suspect that this is so in other fields. Sometimes it's a teacher, but far the majority of musicians, whether from the poorest people or the really wealthy, had parents who encouraged them to study music."

"My father was very supportive of me as an inventor. He helped me get a four-year scholarship to Cornell in electrical engineering. I went the first year and I loved it. I never did my homework, I was trying to figure out how to play bebop on the piano. I played clarinet in the marching band. I had a trio. We played on a local radio station. I was there in '45 and '46.

"One of my friends there was Don Asher, who was taking chemistry. We both played piano and we both had trios. His was patterned after Nat Cole's trio. My trio had piano, bass, and clarinet. The bass player, whose name was Wally Thurell -- the janitor at the library, who was African-American -- was the first person who showed me how to pick a bass.

"I loved engineering, and made the dean's list without even doing my homework, but then I was drafted. In the army, they asked me what do you want to do. I put *communications*. So they put me in a band. It was an eight-month comedy of typographical errors before I was finally sent over to Germany. And in Germany there was a big band that played only jazz. This was a special deal of a colonel who was a jazz lover. All the jazz musicians who came to Europe came through our band. If we wanted 'em, we could keep 'em. Jack Elliott, who was then known as Irv Zucker, auditioned me. He knew he would be getting out of the band in two months. And in the army they have no MOS number -- military occupational specialty -- for piano players or string bass players, because you can't march with them. That makes sense, doesn't it? It's the army way. He said, 'You stay in the band and copy for two months and when I leave you'll be the piano player.' I said, 'Thank you. Amen.' Anybody we wanted to keep in that band, we could have. We played only jazz. We had several arrangers, two of whom had been with Glenn Miller's band. It was a really good band. We played a half-hour broadcast every Sunday over American Forces Network. I still run into people around Europe who heard that stuff. The singer who got out of the band just before I got in was Anthony Benedetto -- Tony Bennett. There was a trombonist named Doc Mancell who was my idol in the band. He's still unknown. He's a giant of a musician. He's still one of my idols.

"When I came home from the Army in 1947, and told my parents I was going to be a *jazz* musician, that was something different. I was not going to go back to Cornell, which I could have done free, between the scholarship and the GI Bill. My family and everybody I knew were telling me, If you're going to be a musician, at least go to Juilliard and get a degree, and then if you don't make it you'll at least have the degree to fall back on and you can teach.

"I went to Juilliard for three months in 1947. I took two courses, music appreciation and bass. Phil Woods came slightly after me. I got A in music appreciation and C in bass. I studied bass for three months with *the* man. If you were going to study bass in New York, who did you go to? Frederick Zimmerman.

He was the assistant principal of the New York Philharmonic -- which he was very bitter about, having started off as principal, having been Herman Reinshagen's star pupil. He was really the boss in New York, one of the major players in the New York Philharmonic, he had all the good students, all the good jobs. When he retired he gave it all to Frederick Zimmerman, and they demoted Frederick Zimmerman after a short time because he was not leading the section. He was a pretty good bass player. I heard him play in his apartment. I'd have given him about a C, which is I guess what he gave me.

"You have to understand, I had been trying to play the bass for only three months before that. Having tried all the other instruments and failed, and finding myself more suited to the bass, having a one-track mind, and wanting always to get to the bottom of things. That may sound corny, but it has a lot to do with it. After three months with Frederick Zimmerman, he said, 'Forget it, kid. There's a lot of bass players out there, it's a rough world. What was that other thing you were going to do?'

"I said, 'Inventor.'

"He said, 'Yeah, yeah, be an inventor, you'll make a lot more money.'

"This was 1947. Five years later, in 1952, in Los Angeles, I'm playing with Red Norvo and Tal Farlow, and here comes in this elderly couple, both with white hair, sitting down and listening. Somebody introduced me to them after the first set. It was Herman Reinshagen and his wife, Muriel. They came to hear me. His wife, who was very nice, said confidentially in my ear, 'You know, Herman is retired now, he's not taking any more students. But I think if you asked him, he'd take you on.' And I said, 'Thank you,' and I did, and he did, and I studied with Zimmerman's teacher for six months. He was inspiring."

Diane said that she had recently come across Red's baby book, in which his father had written about how musical he was at the age of two.

"I do remember I'd go to the piano," Red said. "I'd make fun of my father's music when I could just barely reach the keyboard. He was into classical music so deep, I used to imitate it. Especially the pompous endings. Tah-dah! He built his own pipe organ. He started out with a reed organ and then a pipe organ in the house, with a low C. I was hearing that from the time I was a kid. I kind of got it by osmosis.

"When I was a very young kid my father turned on the radio one day to turn me onto Jasha Heifitz. My father had hi-fi long before it was called that. This was in the early '30s. It was mono, but it was very good sound. He said, 'This is the man, he's the master.' He said, 'Well?' I said, 'I can hear that he's great, pop, but I hate to tell you, he's a little out of tune on some notes.' My father said, 'What?' I said, 'That one.' And I said, 'That one there.' And he said, 'I'm glad you heard that. You were brought up with the tempered scale and he's using the natural scale.' And I said, 'What's the natural scale?'

"There again I was extremely lucky. My father was actually able to explain to me what the difference was.' Heifitz' thirds sounded a little raunchy to me. Later on my father wrote a paper for the American Acoustical Society, which was also presented to the American Guild of Organists, on tuning pipe organs. As far as I know, it's still the definitive paper on the subject. He used his engineering knowledge. He carried it out to four or five decimal places, a degree of accuracy that no one had ever reached before. He explained what was wrong and what was right with previous papers on that subject.

"He was able to explain to me that mother nature never promised us a rose garden, that *the* scale, as we call it, is a matter of wishful hearing. It doesn't exist anywhere except within the human race, it doesn't happen anywhere else in nature. It's an acceptance of a series of compromises between the scale you would get if you tuned an instrument in fourths and the scale you would get if you tuned it in fifths. If you tune an instruments in fourths, you get a scale that is shorter physically. The top notes are lower, the bottom notes are higher in pitch. If you tune an instrument in fifths, you get a *bigger* scale. The top notes are higher, the low notes are lower.

"One day I'm going to write a book about this. One chapter will explain why some bass players and some cellists get along like some cats and some dogs. They could all get along just fine, except they tune their instruments differently. All the other stringed instruments are tuned in fifths. As a matter of fact, that's the tuning the bass started with.

"The 'normal' tuning today, which is causing this war between between the bass players and all the other string players in the symphony orchestras -- *every* symphony orchestra -- is this difference in tuning. The 'normal' tuning of bass is fourths. It was a catastrophic mistake. I believe it started gradually around the 1700s. The bass originally had only three strings, tuned exactly as I have them tuned, from the top down A D G.

"They couldn't make a C string in those days without it being as thick as your thumb, because they used only gut. They didn't have wrapped strings. So the low note was G, a seventh above the lowest note on the piano, which is an A. It's that G. Then a fifth up to D, and then a fifth up to A. That's the way the bass started. Them some smart-asses -- I think Bottisini was one of them -- found that if they lowered the top string a whole tone, from A to G, they could do finger tricks across the strings, and play faster. Because of course speed was a problem on an instrument that big. For a long time the bass was tuned G D G. It was a fifth on the bottom and fourth on top.

"As a matter of fact, there are still different ways of tuning the bass, and the symphony players haven't straightened it out yet. Three times now the Royal Philharmonic in London has been in New York when I was working at Bradley's, and six of the eight bass players have come down to hear me. Partly because they're jazz fans, but partly because they're interested in the fifth tuning. And the last time, they invited me to a

concert of theirs at Lincoln Center. And I went, and it was a very good concert, a very good orchestra.

"They had eight basses tuned four different ways. The principal and assistant principal used what most jazz players use, E A D G from the bottom up. The next two bass players had five-string basses, with B, not C, on the bottom. I remember because they played Brahms' First Symphony, and he wrote a low B. Only two of the bass players had it, but it sounded great anyway. From the bottom, B E A D G. And the back row, the first two had extensions -- that piece of ebony that goes up beyond the fingerboard. They have to cut the scroll to put it on. The low string goes on up over a pulley and down to the tuning peg. And there are two kinds of extensions. Two of the guys had the one, and the other two had the other.

"The one extension is without metal fingers. There's a clamp that goes over where the low E normally is. If you want to use that, you have to open that first, and you get a loud Clack! And then you have to finger the whole scroll. Bass players with large hands can in fact play certain limited passages on that -- Ron Carter, for example, and Rufus Reid. But it's not really practical. You can't just play a walking bass line down there and back up. You can't use it in a solo as Zoot Sims used to use his low register. You remember Zoot going down to his low register, and right back up as though it wasn't low? Zoot could do that, and Zoot has always been one of my idols.

"The other two guys had the metal fingers on 'em. That's even worse. With the metal fingers, which clamp down on the strings and are connected through telescoping tubes to four metal knobs that stick over the top of the neck, you can at least attempt to play classical music on the bass. There's no way you can play jazz on it, but you can at least try to play classical music that is written down there -- but with a *lot* of problems.

"During my years as the first bass player at MGM, it wasn't because I was the best of the bass players around, it was about flexibility. I could play rock-and-roll -- I played the electric bass for ten years -- I had studied enough to play well enough the classical music that we got to play. But when we would turn the page and see a cue like that, depending on how many bass players we had, I would hear 'Sh-sh-sh-shit' right down the line. Those guys learned to hate those low notes, because they were a big problem when you had those extensions.

"There are a lot of other ways to tune the bass. Glenn Moore, the Oregon bass player with the group Oregon, has several tunings. His main is high C, which Chubby Jackson and Eddie Safranski used to have on their five-string basses, down a seventh to D, down a fourth to A, and down a sixth to C. The two Cs on the outside are two octaves apart, and he calls them his melody strings, and the D and A in the middle he calls his harmony strings. And he has a lot of music he can play on that bass that nobody else can play.

"There's a particular phenomenon on a stringed instrument when you get a perfect fifth, and that is that you get a crescendo when you let it ring, instead of a diminuendo -- you play two strings, in my case, the top A string and the D, it'll get gradually louder over a period of about ten seconds.

"I was extremely lucky when I was a kid. My father was one of the few people in the world who could have explained it to a kid. If you started with the low A on the piano and then measured the frequency of it, it would be 27.5 cycles. If you double that, it's 55, and you get a natural octave, and if you double that it's 110, another natural octave, and if you double that 220, and if you double that 440 -- that's where A is supposed to be, most of the time -- 880, and on up. And you get a certain number at the top. If you start with the low A and take three halves of that, that's the ratio that a fifth is. Think of the open G string, whatever that frequency is, you've got a D harmonic, which is a matter of dividing the string in thirds. The D harmonic is an octave and a fifth above the open G. If you divide that in half, you'll have a fifth. So that's three halves, that's where the interval comes from. My father was able to explain to me that if you started with the low A, 27.5, and took three halves of that and three halves of that and so on up until you get to the next A, you'd have a a completely different number -- higher than if you went up by octaves. Audibly higher. You'd hear it in a second. Anybody except somebody who's tone deaf.

"When I started playing bass, I asked several people how do you tune this thing? They said, 'In fourths, E from the bottom.' That makes it quite different from cello, which is in fifths. All of the nineteen years I played that way, I had a lot of problems, most of which disappeared when I changed the tuning. It's exactly like the cello, C G D A, but an octave lower. The bottom string is a major third lower than the normal E."

"Did you have trouble getting strings?"

"I experimented from '66 to '71 with all the strings in the world that I could get a hold of. Hampton Hawes was particularly tolerant in that period. It was when I was with him, at Mitchell's and Donte's, that I made the change. I had piles of strings on the piano. I would change every set. After five years, I had gone through all the strings in the world, and it was close but no cigar. So in 1971, I called the Thomastik company, which makes the best bass strings, and that's when I got this young renaissance man who was head of the company. He was 29, was a jazz fan, and knew who I was. He said, 'Of course we'll make strings for the fifth tuning. It's a great idea.' And they did.

"Now they make four types of fifth-tuned strings, three-quarters bass, four-quarters, normal and soft, more gut-like. It took them a year and a half to get the first batch right. They made three batches. The third batch was okay, and they've gone from there.

"When I made the change in '66, I took my second wife and her son boy down to the beach near San Diego and practiced for nine days around the clock over the sound of the surf. There's

a motel that goes right out over the surf."

"Legend has it," I said, "that you changed the tuning and played a gig two days later."

"That's a little exaggerated," Red said. "It was nine days. I came back to Los Angeles, and the first job I worked with the bass now tuned in fifths was with Andre Previn. I was playing first bass with 65 men at the Sam Goldwyn studio. I figured, Okay, Andre Previn with a big orchestra. If I can fool Andre, with his elephant ears, I can fool anybody. I didn't tell Andre I was doing anything different. About twenty minutes into the session, I made a gross mistake. I pushed my finger down on the first string, and it would have been right if I'd had a G string. But it was a whole tone high. Andre stopped the orchestra. He didn't usually do that. This time he looked over at me and said, 'Red, really. If it weren't you, I'd say that note was out of tune.'

"I said, 'Thank you, Andre, it was a whole tone out of tune. It will happen again and I'll explain to you on the break.'

"I explained to him what I had done.

"He said, 'You mean, I can think of the bass the same as I think of cello? It looks the same on paper but it sounds an octave lower?'

"'Yes.'

"He said, 'The same string crossings?'

"I said, 'Yes.'

"'The same flageolets?'" (Flageolets are the harmonics of stringed instruments.)

"'Same bowings?'

"'Yes.'

"And he slapped his forehead and he was the first of a long line of composers who said, 'Damn! Why doesn't everybody do that?'

"I said, 'Well? Why don't they?'"

"Dizzy Gillespie said the same thing. Dizzy understood it immediately. I didn't find out until fifteen years later that it started with that tuning. Gary Karr in New York has a bass built in 1611 by Amati. He started playing seriously when he was eleven. When he made his debut in New York at, I think it was Town Hall, he got a phone call the next day from a woman who said she was Serge Kousevitsky's wife, and she loved his playing and was going to give him Serge Kousevitsky's Amati. He laughed and said, 'Who is this?' It was her, and she gave it to him. He paid $10,000 for his bow, but he got his Amati free."

"Is there such a thing as a $10,000 bow?" I asked, naively.

"Oh boy!" Red said, raising his eyes. "I'll give you the same answer I gave my son when he asked, 'What is it with women?' I said, 'You must keep it in mind that all women have one thing in common, and that is that each one is unique.' And it is exactly the same thing with bows. Two bows made by the same maker, forget it, they're going to be different. I finally found the bow of my life in 1972. It was a French-style bow made by a German maker, Pfretschner, and I was playing all my solos with the bow, and finally getting the bow to sound like I always thought it could -- like Gene Ammons a couple of octaves down. I was not out after that classical sound at all. I was after Gene Ammons' sound specifically.

"It started to sound that way. And then a customer came into a little jazz club in Stockholm, a young guy who was totally drunk. This guy took the bow and started conducting us with it. I took it away from him. It happened three times. I said, 'Look, I'm not angry at you at all. But if you do that one more time, I'm going to kill you? You got it?' He laughed, ha ha ha, and sat down. I thought I had cooled him out. We took a break. We came back and he was gone and the bow was gone and I haven't played with the bow since. That was the bow of my life. That was 20 years ago. It may sound a little childish.

"After two or three years, I realized that not having that resin on the strings allowed them to sing much longer. And I could get all the colors out of the strings that I couldn't get when that resin was stuck on 'em."

"Can you get a sound without resin on a very good bow?" I asked.

"The best players use the least possible amount of resin," Red said. "Gary Karr, after a concert, wipes the resin off the bow. The less resin you use, the better it sounds, right down to zero. I had always preferred my pizzicato sound to my arco sound. That's not about anybody else, that's just about me."

"John Heard," I interjected, "says that there are all sorts of techniques of bass playing, including harmonics, that have not been fully explored by jazz players."

"He's right," Red said. "And there are all sorts of tricks and techniques used by cellists. When I made the switch to fifths, I got together with Fred Seykora, who is now working with Roger Kellaway's new cello group. He was the second cellist at MGM and one of my best friends. Fred and I got together every da for a week at my house. He wanted to learn how to improvise. I had been teaching that. I wanted to learn how a cellist thinks with this fifth tuning. I think we helped each other. I think he's the only cellist in Los Angeles now who can improvise, unless Fred Katz is still around. He blew my mind with his explanation of the tricks and physical things cellists have to go through that bass players never even think of.

"To get from one note to another note on the same string, let's say from F to B-flat on the D string. You have four fingers up there to start with, not counting your thumb, and your nose, and your elbow, and anything else you might be able to get up there. You should be able to go from any of the four fingers on the one to any one of the four fingers on the other note. That means you've got 16 ways to get from one note to the other, and you've gotta know all sixteen ways. It's gotta be in your muscle memory, you can't be thinking about it. And they all sound different, and each one has a different function. Especially as a jazz player, you need to know those alternatives, because you

don't know where you're going from the second note."

"One of my favorite tricks -- I got it from Charlie Christian -- is like false fingering on saxophone, to go back and forth to the same note on different strings. You get a bloop-blop bloop-blop effect.

"My idols are not all bass players. Zoot Sims was one of them, and Sarah Vaughan for her intonation, among her countless other qualities. She could land on a note perfectly and then it would get better. How in hell did she do that? She'd land right in the center of the bull's-eye and then go deeper into the middle of the center of the middle of the bull's eye. That alone could give me goose-bumps and make me cry.

"Sahib Shihab said you could listen to her just for her use of vibrato," I told Red.

"That too. I usually advise my students to emulate horn players, not bass players, and I recommend most heartily Miles Davis from the '50s and '60s. First of all, because he was not a natural trumpet player, he had to fight for everything he got out of the trumpet. So he thought and thought. He both fought and thought. And what he came out with was so simple and so deep that any bass player could play it. So if you're going to emulate a horn player, emulate Miles Davis. A couple of octaves down it sounds even deeper.

"I think Miles used his problem as an instrumentalist to the nth degree. He thought hard and fought hard behind every note he played. He never *ever* played thoughtlessly."

Back in the 1960s, when I was in Paris translating some of the Charles Aznavour songs into English for his first Broadway appearance, he made a comment that I would never forget. Charles said that the artist builds a style not on his abilities but on his limitations.

I told Red about that, then recalled an evening I spent hanging with Miles at the Cloister, a basement club of fond memory in the Maryland hotel in the Rush Street area of Chicago, some time in the early '60s. After a set, Miles slipped onto a stool beside me at the bar and ordered drinks. He liked to drink champagne from very small glasses. I said something to the effect of Jesus, Miles, the group sounds good tonight. And Miles rasped, "Maybe you're just listening good."

Red chuckled, then said, "When you reach the fourth state of consciousness and you're in tune, within yourself, with your fellow players, with the audience, with the entire universe, and it's perfect, afterwards get a copy of the guest list. Remember who was there. For whom were you playing? That's one rule I will never back down on -- when it is happening, get a copy of the guest list.

"I have two basic physical problems that should almost have made it impossible for me to become a bass player. One of them is that I'm very right-handed. And when you play the bass the normal way, the left hand does 80 or 90 percent of the physical work. The left hand has to be like a flexible vice, and the right hand has to be like a freshly-caught dead fish. The answer has to do with the left and right brains.

"How do you make your much stronger hand much looser than your weak hand? I have to think about this consciously every time I play the bass."

"Why didn't you reverse it?" I asked.

"I tried it, and I could not do it. But when I found out a little about the right and left brains, then I realized what we do is correct. There was a trombonist named Hoyt Bohanon, Steve's father. He was right-handed. He played the trombone normally, and he never liked his vibrato. And then one day at a party he got drunk, turned the slide around, played it left-handed, and he loved his vibrato for the first time in his life. So he relearned the trombone. It was the limp wrist of the left hand of a right-handed person that did it.

"It is in fact the left brain that controls articulation. The right hand. That's what the right hand does -- articulate. The right brain controls spacial visualization, fantasy, forms, abstraction. That's what the left hand has to do.

"Gary Peacock and Scott LaFaro were both protegees of mine. I remember one session particularly in east L.A. when I showed them both this two-finger technique, which I had worked out in 1948 in Milwaukee, on a job there with Jackie Paris."

He was referring to the alternating use of the index and middle finger on the right hand to pull the strings.

"It's a little harder than patting your head and rubbing your stomach. But it's the same kind of problem. You have a tendency, if you go one-two one-two one-two with your fingers, and you want to go two-one two-one on the other hand, they hang up. So you have to develop the independence. So that you can go one-two one-two one-two, or, even better rhythmically sometimes, two-one two-one two-one with the right hand and then random -- you have to practice -- fingering with your left hand so you can keep the right hand consistent and the left hand can go anywhere and not be hung up. When you get it down, the one hand doesn't know what the other hand is doing.

"And then you use your weaknesses. As Miles and Dizzy both used their pauses between phrases. You use the unevenness of it later so that the accents are where you want them. The loud notes are where you want the accents."

Red and I talked late that night.

Next morning I asked what was the biggest shock on returning to America after his 24 years in Sweden.

"Finding that so many of my friends have died," he said. "Of course I was aware of it in most cases. But coming back and finding that some people I haven't thought og for 30 years, are alive and well.

"For all the problems, I have the feeling that we *are* going to muddle through. I am not an optimist, but basically in my gut I feel that if you view the world from the point of view of the

astronauts -- I keep writing things like this into songs:

You know how the world looks from outer space --
A small distant ball
with some swirling weather,
well, whatever we call ourselves,
or this place,
we're all on this thing together.

"I have a feeling it'll be the genius of nature -- I don't use the word God without qualifying -- mother nature, whatever -- If you take the step back and call it World or Earth, you must kind of accept that everything that happens on it is natural, even the violence, even the violence in language, the violence people do to each other, the violence species do to each other, is all beyond our ken, in some way.

"We came back with our eyes open. We know who's sitting on the Supreme Court. We saw Uncle Thomas and his confirmation. And we saw all the other assholes that were already appointed before him. The riots in Los Angeles didn't surprise us at all. It was a shock of course, but it wasn't surprising after the verdict, and the verdict wasn't even surprising after the shift of venue to Simi Valley.

"Yet it was totally understandable. The reaction of the government was exactly the same as Lyndon Johnson's reaction to the Kerner Commission's conclusion that it was white racism that caused those riots in '65. In this case, the racism -- unfortunately being a contagious disease -- has spread. You can nail that jury for white racism. The decision they handed down was typical, glaring, blatant, obscene white racism. They actually were persuaded that Rodney King was *in control* of the situation while the shit was being beaten out of him and the whole world saw it. That's astounding. It can't be anything but outrageous white racism, and our government hasn't faced that fact yet, and they're not about to. They're about to sweep it under the rug, exactly as Lyndon Johnson swept the Kerner Commission report under the rug. He filed it in the round archive, if you remember.

"So we're coming back to America with our eyes open. But! What we're coming back to is America, more particularly to Oregon, and more particularly to Salem. There is a native American word that Jim Brown filled me in on. Jim and Mary Brown are the people who put the Oregon Jazz Party on. Salishan means a coming together from diverse points to communicate in harmony. They had one word for that. Don't we need that word? Isn't that a bull's eye? Isn't that what jazz is all about? I think more salishans is what the world now needs more than ever.

"We're supposed to be healers. In Bradley's in New York, Kirk Lightsey and I knew three very well-paid psychoanalysts who told us they came to us for their therapy.

"In one episode of a Swedish TV detective series, they had a murder in a subway station in Stockholm. In fact there had never been a murder in any subway station in Sweden. One week later, there was a murder in the same subway station. And, dig this, the guy who committed it had not seen that show. Maybe somebody told him. Who knows? I think there is some kind of cosmic relationship.

"I just read a couple of days ago that we actually have magnetic crystals in our brains, and it might be why people who live near high-tension power lines develop sicknesses. It might be why some people lose their sense of direction. It might have something to do with how the sense of direction works in the first place. I have no suggestion as to how we're going to fight this thing. My brother and I were talking about it, and he said there's only one thing worse than all the violence on television and in the movies and that's censorship. I don't think censorship is the answer, but I think there's going to have to be some kind of peer pressure.

"I'm almost sixty-five now," Red said. "I am thrilled and delighted to still be alive, and I've been thinking about starting a group soon called The Grateful Living."

Red Mitchell