

Come Back Last Summer Part One

The lakes and the rivers shaped all our lives. We learned early how to remember the names of the Great Lakes through use of the mnemonic word HOMES -- Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior. The word leaves out Lake St. Clair, an enlargement of the Detroit River but nonetheless part of that vast and complex waterway that drains the northeast of the North American continent by way of the St. Lawrence.

We were surrounded by Lake Huron, the Detroit River (and Lake St. Clair), Lake Erie, Lake Ontario, and the Niagara River. Southern Ontario is a peninsula, a word that means almost an island, and insular we surely were, made more so by an invisible line that runs through the lakes and down the rivers from somewhere around Sault St. Marie to a point a little east northeast of Massena, New York, demarking the border between Canada and the United States.

The Niagara River leaves Lake Erie at Buffalo and flows north 28 miles, descending 326 feet in the journey, 167 feet of it in the plunge over Niagara Falls. It then flows seven miles between the walls of the Niagara Gorge, churning with rapids for much of that distance, and another seven miles across a flat alluvial plain to debouch in Lake Ontario. It drains the upper lakes, Erie, Huron, Michigan, and Superior, whose combined surface is 260,000 square miles. How long it has taken the river to eat its way back through the dolomite is uncertain, but the process has been surprisingly rapid. One estimate is that it has taken 7,000 years, a mere hundred lifetimes if you accept the Biblical three score and ten as the norm. Niagara Falls, among whose misted rocks I used to play as a child, has changed shape in my lifetime, and the falls are moving upriver to Lake Erie, which will drain suddenly and cease to exist. Cottagers needn't worry, though: this process will take an estimated 25,000 years and lakefront real estate values are likely to hold for the foreseeable future, although you can no longer swim in the lake as freely as I did as a boy. It's dirty.

The strip of land approximately 30 miles wide lying east of the river between Lakes Erie and Ontario is called the Niagara Peninsula. I was taught its topography on a sand table when I was a schoolboy. A few miles north of Buffalo, a city where unbeknownst to me Sam Noto, Don Menza, and Mel Lewis were growing up, is Niagara Falls, New York, a shabby colorless city that gazes across the gorge at Niagara Falls, Ontario, a shabby garish city dedicated to relieving tourists of money. About ten miles east-northeast of Niagara Falls is St. Catharines, Ontario, whose name is misspelled in every piece of writing about Kenny Wheeler, Gerard Dennis, or Bernard Slade that I have ever seen.

The town has one more distinction. The zipper was invented

there by a doctor named Fox. He called it the Lightning Fastener, and the Lightning Fastener Company is still an important corporate citizen of the city.

Not counting a few second-rate politicians and the zipper, Gerard Dennis and Kenny are the most famous products of St. Catharines. Gerard Dennis was one of the world's great jewel thieves. Realizing that the practitioners of his unusual vocation usually got caught when they tried to fence their gains, he became a lapidary so he could recut stones and get the best price for them. A dashing and debonair figure, he moved in the highest social circles, cased the homes of his quarries carefully, worked the wealthy areas of Toronto until he thought the police might be onto his M.O., moved on to Montreal, then the suburbs of New York City, and finally to Los Angeles, where a disgruntled girlfriend blew the whistle on him and got him thrown into the slammer. In 1950 a Hollywood studio released a movie about him, *The Great Jewel Robber*, but David Brian, the bulky actor who played him, was nowhere near as handsome as the real Gerard Dennis.

On a visit home, I was riding around the town with a friend who said, as we passed Winston Churchill High School, "They ought to name a high school after you or Kenny Wheeler."

"No," I said, "they should name one after Gerard Dennis."

And his wife said, "Do you know where he is now?"

"Probably doing public relations somewhere," I said.

"He is!" she said. "He's with the Ford Motor Company!"

"It figures," I said. "Well he's got stories to tell, and I understand he's a real charmer."

Bernard Slade, the playwright (*Same Time Next Year*, among other plays), came from a place that wasn't then part of St. Catharines but is now. He was born in Port Dalhousie, a little lakeside town -- a village, then, really -- that had a small amusement park in which there was a dance pavilion, 10 cents a dance, where the kids used to go on summer evenings. St. Catharines has absorbed Port Dalhousie and the amusement park has long since disappeared. So has Bernard Slade, who left Canada an angry man to find fortune and a measure of fame in New York City and California. A fancy marina is being constructed at Port Dalhousie, which we always called simply Port, as we called Niagara Falls the Falls. We called St. Catharines St. Kitts, I have no idea why. An interurban trolley connected Port Dalhousie, St. Catharines, and other communities. I used to ride it to Niagara Falls to hear bands at an arena there. Like all such trolleys in North America it has been dismantled, and the Niagara Peninsula is criss-crossed with freeways. You can zip from St. Catharines to Niagara Falls in about ten minutes and reach the airport at Buffalo in about 45 if traffic on the Peace Bridge isn't too heavy. I used to ride my bicycle on graveled roads from St. Catharines to the Lake Ontario shore -- through orchards of peach and apple blossoms

in the spring. But they're gone. The city goes all the way to the lake.

The Niagara Peninsula is divided into two distinct regions by the Niagara Escarpment, a sudden rise in the land that runs far to the west and whose treed precipitate face has been designated a protected area by the Canadian government. The land above it, which is to say on the Lake Erie side of the peninsula, has shallow topsoil and is of little agricultural use, except for a few enclaves where you can grow good wine grapes and larger grassy areas where you can graze dairy cattle. The land below the escarpment, a flat plain that anciently was lake bottom, is incredibly verdant, one of the finest fruit-growing areas on the North American continent. Naturally that is the part of the peninsula on which man in his wisdom has chosen to put malls and housing developments and factories and warehouses, and the rich orchards I knew are almost all gone, pillaged and paved by the most dangerously prolific animal on this planet.

Early in the nineteenth century, to circumvent the obstacle to shipping presented by Niagara Falls, a canal was built to connect Port Dalhousie to Chippewa Creek, which gave access to the Niagara River above the falls. From there on it was smooth sailing upriver to Lake Erie. My uncle, a dance-band trombone player, once took me fishing off a dock on Chippewa Creek, and I can still see the strands of dark green weeds waving gracefully in the current and the small fish shyly making their way among them. That water was clean enough to drink then. My uncle told me about Count Basie and said Jack Teagarden was a better trombone player than Tommy Dorsey. Nothing I ever did impressed him as much as that I got to know Jack Teagarden.

The early canal soon proved inadequate, and further versions of it were built. The present canal, with lift locks that make it in many ways more impressive than the Panama Canal, was opened in 1932. Remnants of an older canal, locks built of great stone blocks, are scattered about the land, grasses and wildflowers growing on their bottoms. They are like artifacts of another age, a sort of abandoned maritime Stonehenge.

These were the realities that set the flavor and the character of the area, which is peculiarly bland. The people of St. Catharines, a population of about 35,000 when I was a boy and about 125,000 today, were for the most part parochial, shallow, and aloof. I am told they still are. Therefore, if you found anyone who held interests in common with you, such as jazz, you clasped him or her to you, and made a friend, often for life.

One afternoon in 1945, as World War II was ending, I was visiting the bedroom of another young jazz fan, a boy named Tommy Fancy. Tommy had spent some time in a tuberculosis hospital, but had at last been discharged. He still was required to get plenty of bed rest. There was another boy there that day. His name was Kenny Wheeler. His family had just moved to St. Catharines, and I must have been one of the first kids he met.

I was 17, he was 15, but he was of slight build and looked

younger than his age, as he does to this day. I remember that we listened to Sarah Vaughan and Frankie Laine in that room. "Tommy was a big-band freak," Kenny told me a while ago. "I still get a Christmas card from him every year."

I was born in Hamilton, Ontario, then a busy steel town about 30 miles to the east of St. Catharines at the exact western end of Lake Ontario. Like the steel towns of Pennsylvania, it has fallen on lean times. Kenneth Vincent John Wheeler was born January 14, 1930, in Toronto, which is about 40 miles east of Hamilton, around the crook of the lake from St. Catharines, and about 30 miles due north of it across the water.

Toronto, Hamilton, and St. Catharines were separate entities then, but they aren't now. Toronto seemed like the far-away big city, though it was in fact quite provincial. In those days there was nothing to see from Port Dalhousie (which we pronounced d'loozy), but now on clear days the tall buildings of Toronto rise distinctly out of the flat plain of water. My family had moved to St. Catharines six or seven years earlier, which meant that I was a comparatively old hand when Kenny arrived. I never felt at home in that town. Nor did Kenny. I know people who have lived there 40 years and still do not feel accepted by the locals, although I haven't the slightest idea what gives these provincials their sense of superiority. The town's curious smugness is seen in its Chamber-of-Commerce name for itself: the Garden City. It isn't particularly pretty. Along the banks of the canal were paper mills which arose because the ships could bring to them the wood necessary to making sulphite and groundwood from places high on Lake Superior or far downstream on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River. Effluents from the mills, which fouled the running waters of Twelve Mile Creek, also known as the Old Canal, lent a distinct and unpleasant odor when the wind was wrong. When I read Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, and Henry Bellamann's *King's Row*, I understood St. Catharines better.

Kenny was the fourth of eight children in a Catholic family of mixed Irish, Scottish, English and German descent -- three girls and five boys, born just over a year apart over a ten-year period. Their father, Wilf, was an accountant and part-time musician, and their mother played piano by ear.

Kenny's sister, Helen Jelley, told me: "My father worked for car dealerships -- office management and accounting. We left Toronto and lived in Owen Sound for two years. Then we moved to Windsor for two years, where he worked in a war plant. When that folded up in 1945, we came to St. Catharines. He worked for Murphy's auto dealership. Remember Frank J. Murphy on Ontario Street? Buick and Pontiac dealership. We lived at 21 Salina. Murphy lived in the house next door. He bought the house next to it for Dad to bring his family to live in. We just rented it."

The house, which is still there, is a two-story red-brick place with a pillared porch. It is fifty yards from Yates Street, which

ran perhaps seven blocks or so along the brow of the valley through which flowed Twelve Mile Creek. The swells lived there, the richest people of the town, and although some of their daughters and sons attended our high school, they seldom spoke to us members of the lower orders. "Yates Street was only a few doors away," Kenny said. "But it seemed like a million miles." The great houses of Yates Street appear small to me when I look at them now, but they were impressive and intimidating then.

Two years ago in Toronto, Kenny made an album called *Forgotten Memories* with Don Thompson. Don, who composed all the pieces, played piano on that session. When a pianist and bassist of Don's stature hires another bassist, who would he choose for the date? Dave Holland, with whom Kenny had had a close association in England. The album, which is brilliant -- I attended the session and I have a tape -- has yet to be released.

Kenny and I talked the next day in the kitchen of his niece Michelle, daughter of his sister Helen, in Toronto.

"I guess my dad was born in Toronto," Kenny said. "Or maybe Belleville. Belleville rings a bell." It is 40 miles or so east of Toronto, on the north shore of Lake Ontario.

"I don't know what my father did before. He tried to become a professional musician. He played around New York a little bit. But I don't think he did what you'd call jazz jobs, although he knew how to play jazz, I think, in those days. But he played like, I suppose, Jewish gigs up in the Catskill Mountains and all that stuff. I'm told he played in one of the Paul Whiteman road bands."

"Whiteman had a number of road bands," I said. "Just as Lester Lanin had a number of bands."

Kenny said, "Lester Lanin came to London once and did a record I was on, just third or fourth trumpet. We were just going to start a tune and the guitar player says to him, 'Mr. Lanin, I think there's a wrong note here.' And Lester Lanin says, 'Wrong notes, I don't care. My first record had a million wrong notes and it sold millions of copies, One two . . .'"

We both laughed. The Lester Lanin stories are endless.

"How'd you get started on trumpet?" I asked.

"I guess we were living in Owen Sound," Kenny said. Owen Sound is 125 miles northwest of Toronto on an inlet of Georgian Bay, which in turn is part of Lake Huron. "That was the first of our moves around Ontario. He just came home with a cornet one day and gave it to me. He didn't say, 'Play it,' or anything. I took two or three weeks looking at it, lying on the bed, and then I picked it up and tried to play it."

"What happened?" I asked.

Kenny laughed. "I guess nothing much for a long time! I thought I'd better get myself a book. So I started playing out of a book. Something kind of simple. My father showed me a couple of things, but it wasn't like he was my teacher on a

regular basis. He just left me to do it. I guess I didn't get a teacher until we moved to Windsor.

"We left Toronto in '41 and Owen Sound in '43, and left Windsor in '45. In Windsor this guy had a navy band. He was a petty officer. He was the bandmaster. I played the notes. He was teaching kids from 13 to 18 or something. I remember I had my own actual real navy uniform. Navy whites and all that stuff. I was, I guess, 14, and I looked about seven. I had one of those little faces, y'know. Marching up the street with my cornet and my uniform on, very proud. He kind of took a shine to me. I played all the wrong notes physically, but I had a good technique. The lip was wrong. I stuck my tongue through my lips, which you're not supposed to do. You're supposed to keep the tongue back behind the teeth. And he used to try to get me to . . ." Kenny made the motion of spitting a bit of tobacco off the end of the tongue. "But I could never get the hang of that."

"Did you eventually?"

Again the laughter. "I'm almost there now! At 60 years old! I came to some compromise years ago, where it's not too damaging for me to do whatever I do."

"Were you already interested in jazz?" I asked.

"I suppose I started getting interested in Owen Sound a little bit. But much more in Windsor. My father, playing trombone, was more interested in the Tommy Dorsey-Glenn Miller type of thing. I was already a great fiddler with the radio. By doing that, you'd hear Glenn Miller, and stumble on something a bit different, and you'd say, 'Wait a minute, what's that?' This was jazz, I guess. So I started to get a liking for that stuff.

"Then we moved to St. Catharines."

Helen, who is very petite and still pretty, said, "My father played trombone and baritone sax. He worked in dance bands, polka bands, marching bands. He played in a lot of marching bands. He played up until about two years before he died. He played with Murray Morton at the YMCA dances. For years. You probably never realized, but Dad was in the band. Kenny played with Bruce Anthony's band. I sang with that band.

"My father encouraged us all to learn music. I took singing lessons. I have a good ear. I like to sing." (And she sings very well, I might interject.) "All my brothers, except George, the oldest, play semi-professionally. George became captain of the Meisner. You remember the Meisner? It was the biggest ship on the Great Lakes. I think it carried iron ore. George retired about two years ago, and the Meisner is on its way to India, or it's already in India, to be scrapped."

I assuredly do remember the Meisner. Those Great Lakes ships hauled wood to the paper mills and ore to the great smelters. They were long, rust-colored ships, and the Meisner and the Lemoyne were the biggest of them; their names were romantic to us, because they went to far places.

Kenny said, "My second brother, Wilfred, named after my father, is still a semi-professional musician on trombone and

piano. He still lives in St. Catharines. He just retired, too, from accounting. Paul, my other brother, plays clarinet and baritone.

"My father was always a very careful man. He encouraged us in music, but he always said, 'Make sure you have another profession handy, something to fall back on.'"

"But unlike the others," I said, "you never did get anything to fall back on."

"I tried many, many times," Kenny said. "I had several office jobs in Toronto, but they all seemed to last about three months, and then I'd come back home again."

"I got my papers and went to Detroit and got a job in a supermarket. The manager of the store eventually just had to look at me and he turned blue with anger. I was one of those fumbly type people that keep knocking things over. I'm horrible with my hands. Eventually he just looked at me and said, 'Why don't you go back to Canada?' So I did go back to Canada."

"Did you give up your papers?"

"I must have."

"I remember you in that high school orchestra. I never could understand how you stood it. I think you were the only trumpet in it. It was a weird instrumentation, anything they could find. Lots of fiddles and no cellos."

"You probably hated me because I was so loud, I guess."

"No no," I said as we both laughed at the high-school memories. "I used to sit there on those Wednesday-morning assemblies, and listen, and I just couldn't understand how you put up with it. That orchestra was so out of tune all the time. But I guess you were getting some kind of experience."

"Yeah, that was it," Kenny said.

Kenny and I attended the St. Catharines Collegiate Institute and Vocational School, sometimes called St. C.C.I. I hated that school, and its principle, a man with a ruddy face and pate surrounded by a clamp of white hair. He looked like a beardless Santa Claus, but there the resemblance ended. He was a cruel man who intimidated the school's population of about 1,300.

"Wilson Salter," I said.

"That was his name!" Kenny said.

"He strapped me once," Helen said.

"He strapped me two or three times," I said. "But I'm surprised that he strapped a girl." Salter was a drunk, and a bad one, a man totally unfit to supervise the education of the young. The school was devoid of morale. Even its football team was listless. The physical plant was a long yellow-brick structure with heavy stone pillars running in a vaguely Roman style about four stories up a portico that faced west. Across the street was a candy and sundries store that carried a weekly magazine containing the lyrics to the hit songs, which I memorized by the hundreds. When I meet people who went to places like Cass Tech in Detroit or the High School of Music and Art in New York, or Malvern Collegiate in Toronto, which Glenn Gould attended, I still vaguely envy them.

"Wilson Salter was a bad son of a bitch," I said to Helen,

and then to Kenny, remembering how we both wanted to get out of that town, "Didn't you used to go over to Buffalo and sit in with groups?"

"I don't know if I actually sat in," Kenny said. "I used to go over to Buffalo regularly for lessons. There was another bandmaster. This guy ran a military band. He was a bit of a con man, in a way. He used to get me to do musical problems, y'know, weird problems to do with theory. And I'd spend a long time doing that, and I enjoyed that, but I used to think, 'Well what's this got to do with a trumpet lesson?' He wasn't really very good, but I liked him a lot, and he said to me one summer, 'Do you want to come to New York with the army band?' I said, 'I can't do that, I'm a Canadian.' He said, 'Don't worry about that.' So I went to the Catskill Mountains with this army band, only because he said we'd get two days off at the weekend, and I knew I could get to 52nd Street, which seemed like a dream to me."

"When the weekend came, Friday night, a bunch of us got the train and I got off at Grand Central Station and practically flew up to 52nd Street. I was 17 and looked about 12, and I had this American army uniform on. People looked at me as much as to say, 'What's this kid doing with the army uniform on?'"

"I went straight for, I think it was, the Three Deuces where Charlie Parker was playing with Miles. That would be '47, I guess."

"You were the first one who turned me onto Miles," I said. "I was listening to Dizzy and Bird. Of course I didn't understand that music first time I heard it."

"I didn't either," Kenny said. "It took me three or four listenings. I remember in New York, this is my great claim, I spoke to Charlie Parker. I went up to him at intermission and I said, 'Where's Miles?' And he said, 'He's out back.' And that was the extent of my talk with Charlie Parker. I couldn't find Miles."

"Did you know him eventually?"

"I met him once," Kenny said. "I think he probably knew of me, through Dave Holland." It was a typical Kenny Wheeler remark.

Anyone who has ever known Kenny, in those days or now, in St. Catharines or London or New York or Toronto, will tell you of his lifelong reticence, his almost disabling shyness. I asked Helen once, when Kenny wasn't around, "Was Kenny like other members of the family, or different?"

"Different."

"Was this reticence in any of the others, that painful shyness?"

"Not really. Some of them may be a little quieter than others. He was terrible: you remember how he was."

"It was awful," I said.

She said, "He used to pass me on Salina Street and wouldn't speak to me."

I said, "I don't know how he and I ever became friends,

because he never talked."

"Well it was the interest in music," Helen said. "He's still that way, shy with certain people. To this day he doesn't like to meet a lot of new people. He'll tell me right off the bat when he comes home. I'll have a little barbecue, and he'll say, 'Well you know me, Helen, I don't want to meet a whole lot of new people.' I always make sure I invite people who aren't going to ask him a lot of dumb questions."

"We just accepted Kenny the way he was. I don't know why Kenny turned out to be so shy. It's really strange. Because we all had the same upbringing. I'm very outgoing."

Kenny studied at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto -- trumpet with Ross MacLathan and harmony with John Weinzweig, one of the pioneers in Canadian serial composition. "I studied harmony with him," Kenny said. "I used to come over from St. Catharines to Toronto to study with him. Traditional harmony, Paul Hindemith's book. I was probably just one of a hundred students he had. I know I enjoyed it. I thought he was a great teacher."

There was little work for Kenny in those days.

"I suppose you could get a job a week in a dance band, if you were lucky," Kenny said. "Maybe two. It wouldn't be enough to live on."

I said, "There was nothing then. There were a few dance bands, Ellis McClintock, Mart Kenney"

"Bert Niosi," Kenny added.

"When your dad was playing in the 1920s," I said, "there was all that theater work, but with the talkies, it all went, and with the Depression it got worse. Now in St. Catharines, there was that band that played at the little pavilion by the lake in Port Dalhousie"

"Bruce Anthony," Kenny said. "I played in that band. He was the slightly more jazzy of the big bands. It was nothing to do with jazz, really, but it wasn't quite so commercial as the other bands. There was another band, Murray Morton. My dad used to play for him. That was a real commercial thing."

"Mynie Sutton had a band then, too," I said. Mynie Sutton was a black American musician who had settled in Canada and led a band called the Canadian Ambassadors. The pianist at one point was Lou Hooper, who was briefly one of Oscar Peterson's early teachers.

"Yes, but he had more to do with the Falls," Kenny said, meaning Niagara Falls. "Rod North played in that band for years." Rod North is a drummer friend of ours who still lives in St. Catharines. "But there wasn't any work in St. Catharines, much. I used to go over to Toronto to play Polish weddings and stuff like that. I don't think I was a good enough jazz player to actually play with the jazz guys in Toronto, and I was much too nervous anyway to even sit in. I would be shaking, if they'd let me sit in. And I don't think I was good enough anyway. Some

people like Herbie Spanier were in full flight then. I considered them far above me. But I was good enough to do Polish weddings."

By the time I was 22 and Kenny was 20, I was a reporter at the Toronto Telegram, covering courts in the old Toronto City Hall, a great red sandstone Victorian structure at Queen and Bay Streets. What jazz there was in Toronto was largely imported. There were a few indigenous jazz players, but naturally I was amazed that anyone Canadian could play jazz at all. I was convinced that only Americans could play jazz and I wasn't entirely sure they could do it well if they were white. Certainly the Canadian players had to be inferior. Without realizing it, I was imposing a prejudice on them, just as black militants in the United States today impose their bias on the white players they hear. I have no idea how good some of those Canadian jazz players were, for my ears then were not fair.

Kenny came over to Toronto and, desperate for work, played some non-union gig at a club in the downtown area. I spoke about it to Helen, whose recollection of his career is precise. I said, "I seem to remember he got hauled up on charges by the union."

"Yes," she said. "I went to see him play. It was the Club Norman. I think he lied about his age." At 20, Kenny wouldn't have been allowed to enter any place in Toronto that served liquor, much less permitted to work there. "One of his so-called friends," Helen said, "a part-time musician from St. Catharines, went there to see him and then squealed on him. He's the one who went to the union."

"Kenny was expelled. Dad was very up-tight. He worked for the union for years. He was sergeant at arms. He wanted Kenny back in the union. It cost him quite a bit of money to be reinstated in the union here. Kenny still belongs to the union in St. Catharines, still pays his dues every year. He figures it's better that way, because it's the American Federation of Musicians, and it makes it easier if he has to play in the States."

Kenny was deeply humiliated by the incident.

About then I moved to Quebec to become a reporter at the Montreal Star. I made the move for several reasons, one of which was simply to escape puritanical Ontario. There was a solid jazz movement in Montreal, with people like pianists Steve Garrick and Paul Bley, the outstanding bassist Hal Gaylor, later with Chico Hamilton and Tony Bennett, clarinetist Al Baculis, a remarkable jazz accordionist (the best I ever heard) named Gordie Flemming, the French-Canadian vibist Yvon Landry, and more. Part of the reason was that Montreal was an unabashedly corrupt city whose nightlife was wide open and roaring. Prohibition had never been enforced in Quebec, and Montreal had plenty of what Gide, I think it was, called "that leisure without which we can have neither vice nor art." It had superb restaurants and nightclubs both dark and intimate and loud and garish. It had a thriving black neighborhood in which there were

two famous clubs, Rockhead's Paradise and the Cafe St. Michel, where you could hear lots of jazz, homegrown and imported. Oscar Peterson was an alumnus of those two clubs, but he had already left on his road to glory, having made his famous breakthrough with Norman Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic in September, 1949.

Soon after I moved to Montreal in the fall of 1952, Kenny turned up. Until recently I'd forgotten that he had come there with his mind on enrolling at the music school of McGill University, which was purported to be pretty good.

"Where did you stay when you got there?" I asked.

"It wasn't a real hotel. The YMCA or something like that."

"I remember we went by the Cafe St. Michel and you wanted to sit in. There was a Japanese trombone player. I remember being astounded at a Japanese trombone player. The rest of the band was black."

That trombone player, I realized years later, was Butch Watanabe, who had attended Montreal High School, the same high school that produced Oscar Peterson, Hal Gaylor, and Maynard Ferguson. Butch and Oscar were lifelong friends. It is likely that the drummer in the band that night was Floyd (Floojie) Williams, who had, along with his friend Roger Kellaway, studied composition in Boston, where he was born. Later he played with Lionel Hampton and Miles Davis, and in the 1960s Floyd and I would write some rather nice songs together. Floyd later took a doctorate in Black Studies. He is now head of the jazz program at Allegheny College in Pennsylvania, plays piano in a trio on weekends, and is writing a biography of Clark Terry. Strange, how the lines of our lives cross and cross again.

That night I urged Kenny to ask the musicians to let him sit in, but he couldn't do it, he simply couldn't do it: he was emotionally incapable of it. I remember sitting with him at a small round table near the bandstand. He was a slim discouraged figure looking far younger than his age. My heart ached for him.

"Yeah," Kenny mused when I reminded him of that night.

"I'd begun writing songs by then, or trying to," I said. "I was fascinated with French songs. I had concepts of songs, because I was beginning to be influenced by the French songwriters, but they were so different I realized I would have to perform them. Getting a visa for the States wasn't easy, and certainly not for anyone in something as uncertain as the arts. I remember our discussing that visas were not feasible. And somehow or other I said, 'Why don't we go to England?'" I was always very conscious of England, because my parents and grandparents and all my aunts and uncles were born there; indeed I had grown up in an English ambience, always aware of English comedy and music hall songs and rhymed recitations, steeped in second-hand memories of the coal mines and cotton mills of Lancashire, where my father was born.

Kenny said, "My piano chops at that time were pretty good.

I think you were surprised. I'd had to get up to a certain proficiency to get into McGill University.

"McGill was my last hope. I'd gone home with my tail between my legs so many times. And I thought, 'Well, I could go to McGill University and take this course that would enable me to be a high-school teacher.' That's what I was going to do. And I had to get my chops up on piano reasonably well for that. When I walked around there, I realized there was no way I was going to be a high school teacher. Never could I do that."

My disillusion with journalism had already set in. I was all too aware of the political dishonesty of newspapers. There would be no great Crusade for Truth and Justice, as in the movies; we reporters were there to serve the secret ends of those who owned the press.

Kenny said, "We decided we were going to go to England, and form a trio, and you were going to sing. It was going to be something like bass, piano, guitar, and you."

"Well," I said, "I'd heard the Jack Parnell Trio on records, and I guess we'd all heard the Ted Heath band. I was familiar with what Bob Farnon was doing on records. Farnon told me long afterwards that the reason he didn't come back to Canada after the war is that there was no recording going on here, and there was in England. There was some sort of music scene going on over there, and we as Canadians didn't need visas to go there, as we did to go to the States."

Kenny said, "I remember you said there seemed to be bands over there, and they must need brass players. I'll never forget that. That's when it clicked. I thought, 'I've gotta go somewhere, man, and that's going to be it.'"

"You shocked me," I said, "because the next day or something, you'd already bought a boat ticket. This was a fairly radical decision, to dump the country and leave!"

"Well it seemed obvious to me," Kenny said, laughing. "It was the only thing to do. I had decided I wasn't going to back to St. Catharines, no matter what. I just couldn't go back any more."

I said, "The Korean War was on. If we'd been able to get to the States, we'd probably have got drafted anyway. Now I realize that the best thing I could have done was move to the States, join the army, get into some kind of communications or public relations situation, and then get the G.I. Bill and go after a university education I never had. And you would almost certainly have been in an army band. I wish we'd gone down and joined up. Some of the musicians refer to those military bands of that period as the Khaki Conservatory. A lot of them got their best training there."

"I guess I wasn't convinced they would put me in a band," Kenny said.

"That's your usual lack of confidence," I said. "You know, I have a vague memory that I saw you off on the boat. Down at the Montreal harbor."

"I think you did."

"I was just astounded that you were doing this."

It astounded everybody. Kenny's father learned of it when he tried to reach Kenny at a boarding house in which Kenny was living in Montreal. He got back a telegram saying Mr. Wheeler had gone to London. Helen said, "The whole family was in shock for two weeks. It was unbelievable. Not Kenny! I don't know about the rest of them, but I was glad. Because I knew it was really important for Kenny, and I was glad to see him do something different."

"It was," I told her, "an act of incredible courage for someone so reticent. I couldn't believe it myself."

Though Kenny has repeatedly told the true story of how and why he decided to make the move -- to the late Peter Clayton of the BBC, to Mark Miller of the Globe and Mail in Toronto, to Down Beat -- Ian Carr wrote with that quaint faint British tone of self-congratulation, "Although naturally reticent and self-effacing, Wheeler has always had the inner necessity and vision of the true artist, and this brought him early in his career to Europe, the perfect environment for him because it does not have the gladiatorial competitiveness of the American jazz scene."

Songs had always fascinated me. One reason is that the song lyric is the most exacting of all literary forms. It is far more difficult technically to fit a lyric to an existing melody and then achieve high levels of emotional expression than it is to write poetry. You must put long vowels on long notes so that singers can sustain them, stressed syllables on stressed notes, weak syllables on weak notes; and in an ideal song, the inflections of the words will match the intervals of the melody in an approximation of natural speech. The poet faces no such problems. I hold Johnny Mercer in higher esteem than I do W.H. Auden or S. Eliot, English professors to the contrary be damned.

But it is only of late that I have begun to understand what song does in fact do to us.

Song slows up emotional experience. Proust held that experience can be understood only in retrospect, and he is obviously right. But a song does something no other literary form does. Like a slow-motion movie of the flight of a hummingbird, it lets you look at emotion and, with music to help the words, experience it.

In the elongation of words that singing entails, the experience is intensified. What would take a few seconds to say can take perhaps a minute to sing, and you savor every nuance of the experience.

Johnny Mercer was never really convinced that he could sing. I didn't think I could either. But I wanted to try. I desperately wanted to try. And I was already old for it: 24.

An American in Paris, with its marvelous Gershwin score, came out the year before Kenny left for England. I was enthralled by that picture, partly for its music, partly for Gene

Kelly's choreography, and partly for its image of Paris, the city I most wanted to see. There is a scene on the bank of the Seine just behind Notre Dame in which Kelly dances with Leslie Caron to Gershwin's *Our Love is Here to Stay*. It is one of the most convincing evocations of the doubt and vulnerability of early love ever achieved in any art, and it is all done with motion.

Some time not long after Kenny left for England, a friend of mine, Joan Naylor, who was very musical, heard me singing along with some record, probably by Sinatra. She was startled by it, and recommended me for a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation network radio show called *Opportunity Knocks*. It was an amateur show, but at a high level. It was indeed the show through which Oscar Peterson a few years before had made the leap to national prominence. I was asked to audition, and did, though I'd had no experience singing and hadn't the slightest idea what I was doing. To my amazement I was accepted.

I was asked what I wanted to sing. Almost without thinking I said, *Our Love Is Here to Stay*. The rehearsal pianist set a key, I was assigned a broadcast date, and an arrangement was commissioned. When I arrived at the studio an hour or so before the show, I found that I was to be accompanied not by a pianist or a trio but an orchestra of about 35 men. I was terrified. This was live network radio.

We had a run-through, and the On the Air sign lit up. My moment in the show began. I got through the first eight bars without problem. The song has an ABAB structure. As we approached the B section there was a complex swirl of strings, and I got confused. The first eight ends on a whole note, and then there's a one-beat rest. I thought I was late; I jumped in probably two beats early. Up in the control booth the arranger, as I learned later, slapped his forehead and said, "Oh my God, that's my fault." Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. But I was suffering terrible humiliation, and couldn't stop. The conductor, John Adaskin, heard in his headphones what was happening. Still conducting with his baton, he held his free palm up to me, signalling me to wait. I felt like a pilot being talked down through fog. All I could do was sing slowly, and then gradually, ever so gradually during what seemed an eternity, I came back into synchronicity with the chord changes. Somehow I got through the rest of the song, feeling like a puppet hanging on strings in the dark over all of Canada.

At the end of the show, I probably went off to some bar somewhere. I don't remember that part of it. I do know I vowed I would never, ever, ever try to sing again, and never would I try to write a song. I just didn't have the talent.

Many years later someone sent me an acetate of my performance. I listened to it as an experienced songwriter who had worked for years with singers, brilliant singers, many of them my friends. I cringed as the music approached the B section. When I got to the bad spot, I heard it of course, the rushed time. But

I have heard countless singers make comparable or worse mistakes in the years since then, and I was surprised at the apparently calm professional recovery from the error. But I did not know that then. I only knew I had made a fool of myself.

And that is one of the reasons I didn't go to England to form a group with Kenny. I've never told him that. And I never realized that in England, he was waiting for me. I didn't think I mattered that much to anybody. To coin a phrase, how little we know.

"Even after three or four months," Kenny said, "I still expected you to come. Suffering away I was in England and I kept thinking, 'Gene'll be here any day, and save me.'

"You seemed so much stronger than I. I thought, 'We'll form this nice trio, and Gene will be singing, and it will be all right.' And then after three or four months, it dawned on me: He's not coming."

"Oh boy, if you thought I was stronger! I must have been faking it, man, because I was scared to death of the world. Scared to death of life. One of the reasons I didn't become a singer was terror. Just plain terror. I was afraid of being on display. I also didn't think I was any good. Performing is an act of courage. And jazz more than any art. Jazz takes tremendous guts. As a writer, if I turn out something I don't like, I get rid of it. You can't do that in performing, and particularly jazz."

"Yes," Kenny said. "Jazz is instantaneous."

I sat there in silence, digesting it all, imagining Kenny's disappointment as he waited for me in England. In all these years I had never known about it.

"What happened when you got to England?" I asked at last, feeling a little bleak, feeling all these years later that I had failed my friend.

"I met a trio on the boat," Kenny said. "Johnny Bell was one of them. He's changed his name to Thick Wilson. He plays heavies in the movies. He was the bass player. I think you gave me the address of someone over there, an old black singer. Or I thought he was old. He was about fiftyish. I mean, I wasn't worried in the least. I suppose at that age you're not. The guys in the trio on the boat said, 'Well, come with us.' They showed me how to find a bed-and-breakfast place. I got a place right in the center in London, and I went to see the singer you'd mentioned. He was glad to see me, and said, 'Oh, a friend of Gene's! That's fine.' But that was the end of it."

"I can't think who that would have been," I said.

"He was West Indian."

I said, "He was probably a friend of my friend Cedric Phillips, a pianist and singer from Barbados."

"I don't know. But I had his name on a piece of paper you gave me. He was a nice guy, and I think I had a cup of tea with him, but he couldn't do anything for me.

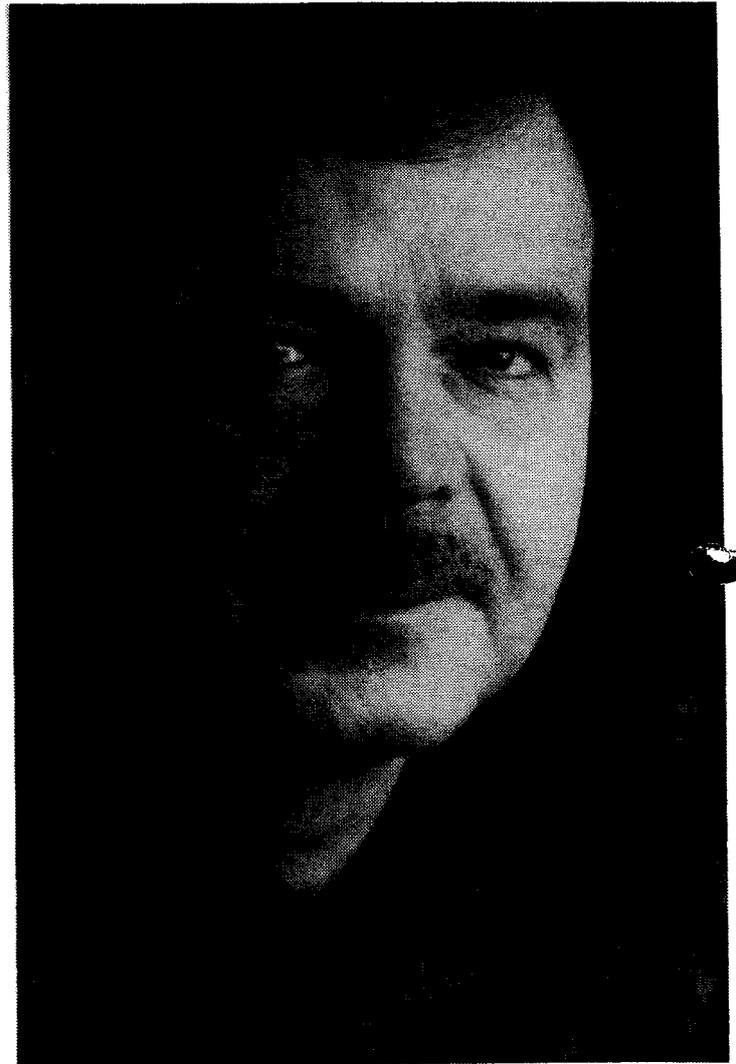
"I got the newspapers and looked where the jazz clubs were. I went around to the clubs, one in particular. People like Joe Harridge, Tony Crombie, Dizzy Reece played there. They had

late-night sessions. Eventually I asked to sit in. They let me sit in. Nobody said a word when I finished. They kind of acted like I wasn't even there. This did set me into a kind of a shell. They didn't even look at me and say, 'What are you doing here?' Nothing.

"Eventually I started to run out of money and started to get a little bit worried, but the guy who was the doorman there, a young guy -- I got friendly with him -- he said, 'You can come and stay at my place.' He was supported by a homosexual guy, which I didn't know until I got there.

"The homosexual guy was very pleasant, and he had no designs on me whatsoever. The young guy was a Scotsman. I stayed there two or three weeks, and then I still had to find some way of making my own way."

(To be continued)



Kenny

photo by John Reeves