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A Word for Willis

On June 14, 1993, the House of Representatives paid tribute to Willis Conover for his career broadcasting jazz and the best of American popular music to all the peoples of the world, except, of course, Americans. The Voice of America, on which his *Music USA* broadcasts have been heard for 38 years, is not allowed by its mandate to broadcast to the United States.

Lee Hamilton, Democrat of Indiana, and Robert Michel, Republican of Illinois, took part in the commendation, a review of the Conover career and a reading into the Congressional Record of a 1985 Readers Digest article that called Willis *The World's Favorite American.* The resolution was passed unanimously. But it is not enough.

Willis is heard eight times a week by an estimated 100 million persons. During the darkest days of the Cold War, many found some strange consolation in his broadcasts. One young Russian wrote him a poignant letter saying, "You are a source of strength when I am overwhelmed by pessimism, my dear idol."

I encountered Willis at the June 18 White House dinner honoring George Wein on the 40th anniversary of the Newport Jazz Festival. It was really only the 39th anniversary of the festival. Thus the festival and *Music USA* are almost the same age. I was dismayed to find Willis very thin after extensive treatment for cancer. I had not seen him in many years, though we talk from time to time on the telephone. And as I shook my old friend's hand, I thought, "Other than the musicians who created it, this man has done as much for jazz as anyone who ever lived."

Every jazz musician from the Iron Curtain countries that I have encountered has attested that he became interested in jazz because of Willis. People listened to his broadcasts even when they were forbidden to do so. They learned English from him. This opened worlds for them. The Butman brothers, Igor and Oleg, now living in New York, told me that just about every announcer of jazz concerts in Russia affected Conover's slow, sonorous manner of speech — a style he developed so that foreign listeners would find him easy to understand. Adam Makowicz will tell you that he became enthralled by Art Tatum through listening to Willis.

Willis cannot visit Poland without being mobbed. In 1982, he accompanied a group of jazz musicians to Moscow. Though there was no advance notice of the concert, 500 fans crowded a 400-seat auditorium to hear them. Willis stepped up to a microphone. He got no further than "Good evening" when the crowd, recognizing the voice, roared. One young man kissed his hand, saying, "If there is a god of jazz, it is you."

Willis has remained apolitical throughout this career. He has declined to join either Democratic or Republican clubs, a judicious course in a town where the payoff in jobs is one of its most iniquitous practices. This has permitted him to survive in a position that is more important to the country than partisan appointments. We have been close friends since 1959, and even I don't know how he votes. Most significantly, he has kept politics out of his broadcasts. He said some years ago, "I am not trying to overthrow governments. I am just sending out something wonderfully creative and human. If it makes people living under repressive regimes stand up a little straighter, so be it."

He generated around the world a mood of receptivity toward the United States. Music does that. My interest in France and the United States in part grew from interest in their music. Music is the language beyond language. And jazz is different than most musics.

I long ago realized that it is the perfect analogy of democracy: freedom within a framework, a set of disciplines within which each participant is permitted to make his own idiosyncratic statement without impeding the utterances of his colleagues. If all the world could model itself on jazz, there would be no more of the horrors of Sarajevo, no more slaughters of one people by another, no more ethnic cleansing, no more Islamic — and Christian and Jewish — fundamentalism.

That message of tolerance and understanding was always implicit in jazz. It certainly was not lost on the musicians of these other countries; and I doubt that it was lost on lay listeners, either.

There is another aspect of Willis Conover's work of which most people remain oblivious: the historical chronicle that it constitutes. For his broadcasts, Willis has done not dozens, not scores, not hundreds, but thousands of interviews with everyone who ever made a mark in American music from Irving Berlin to the young neoboppers. At lunch a day or two after the White House concert, I asked him what will happen to all this material when we are gone. I was much reassured by his answer: he is leaving it to the Library of Congress. It will be a national treasure. As, for that matter, is he.

I would be fascinated to see a dollar figure on what the Cold War cost the nations of the world, if anyone could ever compile one. In the end I wonder if it was all worth it; whether the Soviet Union would have collapsed anyway of its own inefficiency and the sheer weariness of its people with its long and tawdry tyranny.

I was musing on all this, after the White House party and after seeing Willis. The next day, I had a reunion with some of my old journalist friends from our Louisville Times days, one of whom is David Binder of the New York Times.

Sometimes it's good to test an idea by bouncing it off people to see what objections it raises. It is a way of finding the flaws in your thought.

I considered how many presidents had come and gone since

the end of World War II: Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, and Bush.

So I decided to throw out a vast and seemingly outrageous generality to see which of my realistic colleagues would shoot it down. I figured the one who would take issue with it would be Binder, who has not only been bureau chief in Washington for the New York Times, but has been the paper's correspondent in Germany, speaks fluent German (among other languages), has a rich knowledge of the erstwhile Soviet bloc, and had just returned from Yugoslavia. David plays clarinet and knows a lot about jazz. I made the remark:

"I think Willis Conover did more to crumble the Berlin wall and bring about collapse of the Soviet Empire than all the Cold War presidents put together."

And David said, "I think you're probably right."

Willis Conover's broadcasts, and for that matter the Voice of America, have not been without their detractors. How silly: broadcasting music at the taxpayers' expense! And jazz at that.

Really?

How modest was the investment, how momentous the effect.

I suggested in my piece about Willis in the April, 1992, issue that he should receive the Medal of Freedom. I do not know whether I originated the idea; but I do know that the article was widely circulated in Washington, and that a move is under way to seek this honor for Willis. One of the figures who favors it House Republican Leader Robert Michel; another is his special assistant, William F. Gavin.

Bill Gavin thinks it would help a lot if I, along with musicians and all other friends, wrote to President Clinton, urging that Willis be given this just award.

Please do it. Take the time to write a letter. Address it to:

President William Clinton
The White House
Washington DC 20500

My letter is on its way.

Mail Bag

James P. Pinkerton, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute's Washington office, recently wrote his prescription for the new president, which appeared in the newspaper Newsday February 25, 1993. One of his suggestions:

"Start by eliminating the National Endowment for the Arts — not because it funds pornographic art, but because it funds art, period, and that's a luxury we can't afford right now."

The imbecility of the statement beggars description. We need only consider the career of Willis Conover, without even touching on the broader powers of the arts. One can easily imagine Pinkerton urging the cancelation of Music USA.

One reader who took exception to the statement was Dr. Hale Smith, musicologist, composer, jazz pianist, and music educator. Hale wrote a letter to Newsday. The newspaper didn't print it. Hale thought our people might like to read it.

Genuine art is neither luxury nor frill. It is a primary element of the human condition and, as such, it predates all known forms of government and all known forms of technology. Any society that does not cultivate and support its art is both barbaric and suicidal because art is the quintessential product of the creative imagination. James Pinkerton . . . contradicts himself on a very deep level because without art the visual form of language might never have developed, including every ramification of that breakthrough of the human imagination. And let us not forget that *no* tyrant considers art to be a dispensable luxury. To tyrants it is a powerful means of communication that must be controlled and used for their purposes. But no tyrant has ever controlled real art for very long because it *is* so important a part of our human nature.

Yet I do think the National Endowment for the Arts should be changed. It should no longer exist at the whim of short-sighted, narrow-minded, horse-blinkered persons, many of whom actually fear and resent the creative process. Let those citizens who recognize the importance of art support it with a percentage of their taxes as designated on their tax returns. Those who do not like it will, at the least, not have to support it and should have nothing to say about its administration.

Hale Smith, Freeport, New York

Many issues ago one of the Jazzletter articles adverted to Sir Thomas Beecham's caustic comment about the music (si produced by playing a bagpipe.

Were he now alive he would be dismayed to learn that a bagpipe maker has developed a polycarbonate reed to replace those made of Spanish cane. It is said to remain in tune for up to 18 months.

My comments, and I suspect, Sir Thomas', on this claim is, "How can you tell?"

Just another example of better things for better living from those philanthropic folk at the chemical plants.

Richard H. Heilbron, Overland Park, Kansas

PS: As a final toss of the caber at the Scots, the inventor is an Irishman.

But the Irish also play the bagpipe, which is neither Irish nor Scottish. It was known as far back as Roman times. Nero is said to have played one, which may be why somebody burned the city. A thirteenth-century Spanish illumination shows bagpipe players.

In the late seventeenth century, there was a movement in France to make it an instrument of art music. Obviously it failed. But a pibroch still gives me a wondrous shiver.

I am perhaps better known for my presence on a Billy Joel hit (*Just the Way You Are*) than for any other work. This does not make me feel good, but it doesn't make me feel bad. A young sax man heard me in a club once and asked, "Are you the guy on the Billy Joel record?" I told him I was. "Have you done anything on your own?"

So when Mike Melvoin, president of NARAS, called to ask me to appear on a special TV show called *Grammy Legends,* I told him that my main thrust, as it were, was in different pastures and I would rather pass. The fee offered was all of $500. That would have given me the grand total of $850 for soloing on the largest-selling record in the history of the biz up to that point, celebrating this fact on TV ten years later. I got $700 for my participation in the Joel overlay and a Phoebe Snow bit at the same session — $350 a shot There's lots of money in pop music, except for the musicians.

Mike called again, tracked me down on the road, in fact.

"Man, you got to do it. Billy wants you. We need you, baby. I can get you $2500."

Well, hell, I'm pure but I ain't dumb. I can keep my band going a little longer with a plum or two. I said, sure, I'll do it.

I showed up the night before for what I believe are called blocking assignments. The twit with the clipboard asked me if I was the "horn blower." I should have split then. He told me to use dressing room 25 on the seventh floor. There was a rap group sharing it with me but they weren't due till later.

Well he was wrong. They were partying their ass off in my dressing room, so I descended the stairs and sat in the audience to watch these giants of our industry put on this spectacular salute to Quincy Jones, Aretha Franklin, Johnny Cash, and Billy Joel. Truly humbling.

After I had waited for a couple of hours, my clipboard-toting friend came looking for me. He was huffing and puffing, having had to negotiate the six-flight walkup, and was furious. "Where were you? We've got to have you in place immediately!"

Perhaps I over-reacted in calling him a dick-head, but I got out my horn and took my place onstage. This was the only spot din a two-hour musical special that actually used live music. Bob James and I accompanied some singer on *Just the Way You Are.* I had eight bars before the reprise. We rehearsed it ten times. At one point the clip asked me to "go easy on that ad-libbing stuff." The floor manager explained the technical aspects of my entrance and the need to hit my mark just so. I like it when people tell me how, why, where, and when to walk and then stop. Show Biz is, after all, my life. It's every horn-blower's dream to be given orders by cretins. Years of club owners prepare you for it.

Rehearsal was finally over and Billy thanked me for making it. I told Quincy I thought it was ironic that Billy had asked for me and he hadn't, and I was gone.

Next day I returned and we began the long arduous task of taping this paean to America's Music Industry. It took forever but seemed to go O.K. I met James Woods, who was emceeing, and that was nice.

Weeks later, the show was being shown on TV. I told all my kids and friends and family that I was on network TV and be sure to watch me — I was the horn blower.

I reclined in my easy chair, put the VCR on, and got ready to bask in the wonder of my own damn self. We had taped the Joel segment first but as the show progressed, I realized it would be shown last. And since I was at the end, I would be in the choice spot, virtually closing the show. Wow! Maybe Letterman next!

James Woods introduced me as the sax man on the original recording. A girl sang the opening chorus, then it was my eight bars and out.

Except there was no sax solo. You hear my pickups but the camera returns to the singer and the song is over and the show is over and I'm sitting there listening to James Woods saying what a wonderful thing it is to have the original soloist etc., and we cut to black. God damn! What happened to my moment in the sun?

The phone is ringing. "Where were you, Dad? We heard you introduced but didn't see you."

I resigned form NARAS shortly after that. Maybe Show Biz isn't my thing.

Phil Woods, Delaware Water Gap, Pennsylvania

Ah NARAS

I resigned from NARAS in the 1960s. It was clear that it was more and more about money, self-congratulation, and greed.

Periodically somebody gets incensed about the way NARAS ignores jazz. A few years ago, in Los Angeles, a group of people that included Leonard Feather and Mel Torme founded what they wanted to call, if I remember, the American Academy of Jazz. I protested in a meeting that this was another example of the jazz community sitting in a corner and eating worms. By giving it that name, the jazz people were cutting themselves off from their natural allies, those in the classical music world and those who were dedicated to the best of popular music. I referred in the latter case to people like Steve Lawrence and Julius LaRosa, not jazz artists per se, but allied to jazz, and performers at the highest level. After all, Jerome Kern wasn't doing too well in the recording studios either.

The founding members put it to a vote. The word *jazz* was

used, I declined further involvement, jazz again contemplated its navel, and the group did what was inevitable: it failed.

This collective solipsism (an oxymoron, to be sure) of jazz people, some fans and some musicians, has always been detrimental to the art, both commercially and aesthetically. I am put off by the people who, chip on shoulder, are always ready to enter combat on the grounds that their favorite tenor player is better than your favorite tenor player. For all the laments of jazz fans that the art doesn't get the recognition it deserves, one of the factors that undermines it is that some of them secretly don't want it to be popular. So long as they can say, "It's awful the way jazz is treated. But then, only someone with exceptional taste like me can appreciate it," they can at once be martyrs to a cause whose triumph they do not really crave and congratulate themselves for their arcane knowledge and mountaintop taste.

But the musicians are not without blame. Long ago in Jim and Andy's, I suggested to Gerry Mulligan that we should form a new academy. Gerry said that it would be almost impossible to get people as individualistic as jazz musicians to join and co-operate in anything. I realized that Gerry was probably right. Their co-operation is limited to the making of the music.

The major labels have all but abandoned classical music, except for CD reissues which, like jazz CD reissues, cost them virtually nothing. Independent labels have taken over the duty of recording new music in both fields. As for poor old Harold Arlen et al, nobody is paying much attention to them, except for some girl "jazz singers" who celebrate the art of the past by seeing how many syllables and extra words they can cram into songs that were exquisitely crafted in the first place and need no such "help" to improve them.

Jazz people are always insisting — as if anyone with any intelligence contested the point — that it is an art form. If it is, then it's time it allied itself with other art forms and withdrew completely from the commercial music business.

And one step in that direction would be the formation of a new academy, an academy dedicated to real music. All real music.

Hindsights

When I became editor of Down Beat in May, 1959, I was quite intimidated by the responsibility of the position and the high public visibility it imposed on me. I listened to those who had more experience than I, including the late Ralph J. Gleason, who articulated to me an essential truth: "You cannot understand jazz unless you understand the way records are distributed." I would add: "And unless you also understand the broadcasting industry."

I underestimated two highly visible men at that time.

Dave Brubeck has always been in an anomalous position.

When I first heard of him, he led an octet in San Francisco. At that time he was studying composition with Darius Milhaud. It all sounded very high-falutin'.

Because too many jazz critics haven't done their homework, it was not — still is not — generally understood that throughout the history of this music, the best musicians have been going to important classical teachers to study technique and composition. Donald Byrd used to laugh over the way critics would talk about his tone. It is, he said, a straightout symphony trumpet tone.

And here was this guy Brubeck who'd studied with Milhaud, and was now playing jazz.

Then, too, the hipper-than-thou element in jazz knows perfectly well that what is popular cannot possibly be good. Right? Not necessarily.

Back in that period at Down Beat, I got to know Dave Brubeck and Paul Desmond. Paul became a particularly good friend, partly because he was the one who used to hang out while Dave always went home.

The conventional wisdom held that the Dave Brubeck Quartet was all about Desmond. The conventional wisdom was wrong.

I remember how Dave was attacked by certain critics when he made the *Time Out* album. He was being cute, he was being effete. That album was revolutionary, the first recording to break with the four-four time that was the uncontested norm in jazz. He made compound time signatures not only acceptable but even popular. He has not to this day been given general credit for that departure. Before *Time Out*, jazz musicians were not all that comfortable even in three. Now they are. And in five. And seven.

The Sony corporation has issued a four-CD Columbia Masterworks package titled *Dave Brubeck: Time Signatures: A Career Retrospective* that I find revelatory.

I expected to love the Desmond solos. Paul too was an underestimated player. After all, he was immensely successful; how could he be good? Cannonball Adderley suffered from some of the same kind of condescension.

But time is lending perspective, and in the years since we lost Paul I have come more and more to admire his brilliance. He plays a solo on *Tangerine* that is awesome. His powers of melodic invention seem infinite, his lyricism as always lightened by his wit.

The surprise to me is Dave. I have not until now clearly recognized what a remarkable and original jazz musician Dave Brubeck is.

Back in those Down Beat days, I wrote an extensive article from an interview I did with Dave. The interview was not taped — the cassette recorder hadn't been invented — and I made notes as we talked. I edited the quotations rather carefully, knowing from experience that people seldom remember exactly what they said. After the article came out, Dave said something I've never

forgotten: "You didn't quote what I said. You quoted what I meant." I was slightly shocked at the accuracy of his memory, and at the same time complimented by his recognition that I conceived my duty to be helping the subject make his point.

In the course of that interview, I asked Dave who his favorite pianist was. I think I can quote his answer verbatim, and if I can't, I can certainly give you its essence. He said, "I like counter-rhythm, and I always try for it in my solos. I don't always bring it off, but when I do, it gets very exciting. That's what I look for, and since I'm the only pianist trying for what I want to hear, I'd have to say that I'm my favorite pianist." I think I may have left that out of the article, knowing how easily the last clause could be quoted out of context by anyone anxious to make a case against him.

But the fact is that Dave's own evaluation was apt.

Listening to this four-CD set, I am repeatedly astonished at the rhythmic complexity of his playing. Far from being effete, his playing is powerful, driving, complicated, and extraordinarily inventive. Dave said at the time that he was anything but a classical player. Indeed, he said his playing was technically wrong. He was inclined to plunge at the piano, rather than sitting there in exquisite control. I now realize that if there is one pianist with whom he has a certain something in common, it's Monk.

I must have had a suspicion even then about the value of Dave's playing. Though the critics were chewing Brubeck up at every opportunity, I remember saying to Oscar Peterson, "You know, O.P., I have a lot of respect for Dave Brubeck's playing," thinking he would take issue with me. He said, "So you *should*."

Yet still I was intimidated by those I thought must know more than I, keeping an uncourageous silence about Dave's playing, though I always recognized his gifts as a composer.

I would urge you to get the Columbia package. For me, at least, it inspired a rediscovery of one of the most interesting and individual players jazz piano has produced. The public was right; the critics were wrong. Dave Brubeck is one of the great jazz musicians.

The other man whose value I failed fully to perceive is Norman Granz. His importance of course was obvious. In terms of commercial power, he was a colossus bestriding the entire jazz world.

The reason I misevaluated Granz was a purely personal one. I didn't like him. I found him arrogant and rude. Oscar Peterson consistently defended him, insisting that everyone should look not at the man but at his work.

It was hard to do.

Oscar also said that Norman could be enormously charming. I didn't believe it until I began writing my biography of Oscar, *The Will to Swing*. Oscar urged Granz to sit still for an interview. I went to his office in Beverly Hills. I found him to be everything Oscar had described, charming and brilliant. And I thought, "This is a man I would like to have for a friend."

Norman asked if, before our next meeting, I would write the questions I wanted to ask in a memo, to give him time to search his memory and think about his answers. One of my questions concerned his famous art collection. I grant that this was a matter of personal interest — I'm interested in art. A day or two later I got a phone call from Oscar, asking what I had done to upset Norman. Granz had apparently taken offence at the question about his art collection. I kissed the whole thing off, concluded Granz was exactly what I had originally thought him to be — you know the word — and forgot about it. I'd gleaned most of what I wanted to know in the first interview, and a second interview never happened.

A few months ago, Norman phoned me from Geneva, Switzerland, where he lives. He had finally read the Peterson biography, and wanted to correct a minor detail in the book. Essentially his point was that he had indeed heard of Oscar Peterson before the famous incident of hearing him on a taxi radio. He had heard Oscar's boogie-woogie records and hadn't liked them. Neither had I. (Neither does Oscar, who I suspect would like them erased from human memory.) During that phone conversation I was completely taken by Granz. He can be utterly compelling, and fascinating.

If Norman Granz is not given his due in the history of jazz, it is to some extent his own fault. He has alienated some of the very people who are in a position to evaluate it.

And so I'm putting in my two cents' worth here and now.

The current flood of CD reissues is full of revelations, like the epiphany I've had about the playing of Dave Brubeck. So too Norman Granz.

Polygram is reissuing huge quantities of the albums he produced for Clef, Norgran, and Verve, all labels he founded. Meanwhile, Fantasy is reissuing the catalogue he recorded for Pablo, yet another label of his own making. Stop and think about that for a moment. While he did not invent the jazz concert — there were jazz concerts in new York in the mid-1930s — Norman Granz made it an enduring entity with his inestimably successful Jazz at the Philharmonic series. Then he founded his own companies to make permanent record of the work of the players he'd hired. Can you think of anyone else who founded four major jazz labels?

To look at a collection of the printed music of Franz Schubert boggles the mind. The books containing it fill a huge shelf, and he died at 31. Well, a consideration of collected jazz works produced by Norman Granz does the same. For one thing, there is that huge body of work by Art Tatum available from Fantasy. Then there's that collection of songwriters' albums that Ella Fitzgerald did for Granz during the Verve days. I have been relistening to them, and they're even better than I remem

bered, with wonderful charts by the likes of Nelson Riddle and Paul Weston. Together, Fitzgerald and Granz virtually defined the epoch of great American songs. And there's all the other stuff, by Johnny Hodges, Stan Getz, Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge, Ben Webster, Buddy Rich, Lester Young, J.J. Johnson, Basie, Dizzy, and Billie Holiday. The Polygram reissue of work by Holiday that Granz produced fills a fat little box of 10 CDs!

Norman Granz flooded us with riches, and made some of his people rich themselves, including Ella Fitzgerald. I understand that a discography of Oscar Peterson runs not to 300 albums but 300 pages. What must a total discography of Norman Granz amount to? He made the music so available, so hugely accessible, in both concerts and on records, that people carped about it: this album wasn't as good as that one, and so on.

But time has passed. Our society is flailing in a sea of its own cultural toxic wastes, its body being corroded by the acids. The collective work of Norman Granz can be seen now, for those who care to re-evaluate it, as being among the important musical canons of the twentieth century.

John Hammond is an icon in the jazz world. This is possibly because he was so unfailingly pleasant to people, at least to their faces. I once saw him say 'Wonnnnderful, Les, wonnnnderful, to bariton saxophonist Les Rout in the control booth and then deplore his playing when Les left the room. I thought he was something of an unctuous poseur, more than willing to take bows for things he didn't do. As a producer, the body of his work wasn't all that large. But he deserves his due. There are careers that probably wouldn't have happened without him.

But Hammond's collected work doesn't even compare to that of Norman Granz. With this flow of reissues on CDs, it's a little as if the library at Alexandria had been discovered in the sands with all its books unburned.

Oscar will tell you of Norman's great kindnesses to the people he likes, the help he has extended to those who needed it. And that's all well and good. But . . .

There's a moment in the movie *One-Eyed Jacks* when Marlon Brando says to Karl Malden something like this: "You're a one-eyed jack, Dad. I've seen the other side of your face."

Norman Granz is a bit of a one-eyed jack. If John Hammond was two-faced — and he was — Granz is a different kind of creature. The same face has two profiles, and I've had glimpses of both. They're both real. There is no deliberate deceit; he simply changes, sometimes before your eyes.

Normally I can keep my personal feelings about someone out of my evaluation of their work. It is a discipline you have to work at. And in the case of Norman Granz, alas, I let it slip.

The founding days of jazz are over. Its legacy is in the recordings. An inestimable part of that legacy was recorded by Norman Granz. No one else created anything remotely resembling the collected body of his work. And, let us note in passing, nobody else created so much work for so many musicians.

Almost all the important figures in jazz history have been musicians. There have been some exceptions. One of them is Willis Conover, whom we have already discussed. Another was Hammond.

Granz? I don't think we have even begun to evaluate him. This much we can already say: during his active years he was the most important, the most creative, the most fecund producer in the history of this music. It is hard to imagine what jazz would be like today if Norman had never been born. There are in the arts occasional great catalysts. In American literature, there was the incomparable editor Maxwell Perkins who, while not a writer himself, made all sorts of major writing careers happen. And in ballet and classical music, there was Sergei Diaghileff. Norman Granz is the Diaghileff of jazz.

So a tip of the old chapeau to two men I once underestimated — Dave Brubeck and Norman Granz.

American Scot

"I've never mastered bebop, that's for damn sure," John Abercrombie said. "But the music I play comes from that tradition more than it comes from pop music or rock-and-roll."

This is an intriguing insight from a guitarist who brought some of the techniques and sounds of rock into jazz and is associated in public image with the fusion movement. As it turns out, for all his prominence in fusion, he is something less than enchanted by it.

The ethnic origins of Americans often are evident in their faces, the Germans looking German, the Irish looking Irish, the Italians looking Italian. Abercrombie looks as if he'd be at home in a kilt, tossing the caber.

The majority of white American jazz musicians are drawn from three pools: Italian, Irish, and Jewish. The bemustached John Abercrombie looks like a Scot. I mentioned this to him as we were chatting in his loft apartment in the Soho district of New York City.

He laughed. "I know," he said. "You can see it. I have a cousin in Los Angeles who's an actor, and he has the same look. When I was touring with Kenny Wheeler, we played in Bracknell, right outside of London, and my cousin, Donald Abercrombie, came to hear the concert and visit me. As soon as John Taylor, the piano player, saw him, he said, 'You're an Abercrombie. There's a similar look.'"

John was born December 16, 1944, in Port Chester, New York, a wealthy suburb of New York City on the north shore of Long Island. The Abercrombie family did not partake of its affluence.

"My father was a laborer," John said. "I think my mother and my father were for a while a couple, a butler and a maid. They're both Scottish, though my father will consider himself an Englishman. His mother was Scottish, his father was English,

and he grew up outside of London. My mother grew up in Scotland. They met here and got married and became a butler and maid. For a while he was a chauffeur and she was the cook. They worked like *Upstairs Downstairs*. When I was born he was driving a truck for some company.

"The last gig he had before he retired, he was the janitor for my old high school."

In the families of most musicians, it will be found that there was a deep interest in music in one or both of the parents. Not in John's case. The music seemingly came from nowhere.

"In elementary school, about eighth grade," he said, "I'd go to the local place to get my sandwich and my drink for my lunch, and there was a juke box, and there'd always be something like Chuck Berry — rhythm and blues. Rock-and-roll was happening. I was taken by the sound of that music.

"I had two friends, two brothers, who played saxophone and trombone, and they got me into jazz. They're the ones who really turned me on. They said, 'You've never heard jazz? Come with me!' And they took me into a room. I think the first thing they played me was Dave Brubeck.

"What attracted me at first was the smoothness of the music. I was used to music having a heavier beat, and all of a sudden there was this lighter thing, with Desmond's horn just floating through it. To this day I love Paul Desmond. I think he was an amazing player. I still have some old Dave Brubeck records at my mom's house in Connecticut. Desmond is so melodically inventive.

"He did some records with Jim Hall that I loved. And I started listening to Jim, and then to the Art Farmer group with Jim Hall. From all that initial exposure to jazz, I decided I wanted to go to music school. I didn't know whether it would work. And the only place that would accept me, with my terrible high-school grades, was the Berklee School in Boston. They just wanted your tuition. At that time, I think it was four hundred and some odd dollars a semester. You just went up there, you met the guy, you paid him the tuition, and you were in school. That was 1962. Sadao Watanabe was there when I was. I remember thinking, 'What am I doing here?' I was a kid, I was still coming from Chuck Berry. I think I could play *Tenderly*, because someone had taught it to me by rote. I couldn't play a blues. I could read a few changes from the fake book. My reading for chords was actually okay, even at 17 years old. I didn't know what improvising meant. I nearly left school when I heard guys play, because they were already professional musicians.

"I stuck it out because I didn't know what else to do. By the second year, I began to get really excited about wanting to be a musician. I had to give it my all, I had to try. People like Herb Pomeroy and John LaPorta and my guitar instructor, Jack Peterson, were so supportive. Without them I might not have played."

John stayed the full four years at Berklee. "I was in the music education program, I was going for a degree. To be honest with you, I was trying to keep from being drafted. It was during the Viet Nam war. I didn't want to go, and I didn't want to run away to Canada. I wanted to stay at home, and Berklee kept me out of the army."

He laughed. "Two days after I graduated, I received my draft notice, and I flunked the physical. Staying in school hadn't been necessary. I could have quit and done anything!

"It turned out to be a good thing. I stayed in school and learned a lot. It was a great place. I learned as much outside the school as I did in it.

"I was working in some rhythm and blues bands and going to school during the day. One of the people I worked with was good friends with the organist Johnny Hammond Smith. I heard he was looking for a guitar player to work seven nights a week plus a matinee on Sunday at this hooker-infested club down in Roxbury. I said, 'I'll give it a try.' And Johnny liked me enough to keep me on the gig. I did that gig for probably a year while I was in school. Talk about a steady gig! And when I got out of school, Johnny called and said, 'Do you want to go on the road?'

"The road really just meant coming to New York and going up to Buffalo and a few places. So I said, 'Sure.' And that got me into meeting some musicians in New York.

"I'd already met people like Mike and Randy Brecker. They came through Boston with Horace Silver and heard me play. They called me at one point. They were forming a fusion band called Dreams, which had a real short existence. I came down from Boston to New York to audition for them. That was around '68. I got the gig. Billy Cobham was in the band.

"That was the period where a whole lot of jazz musicians were playing with wah-wah pedals and wearing headbands and looking weird. It was an interesting time, though. It was real experimental. It was vital. But I don't think all the *music* was so great.

In 1970, John got a gig with Chico Hamilton. "A friend of mine was working with Chico. He took a couple of weekends off and called me to sub. It was this funny little club on 14th Street that's no longer there. Marc Cohen was on the gig, playing alto."

To the eternal confusion, no doubt, of many a listener, Marc Cohen, then one of the hottest young alto players in New York, simply put the instrument aside and became a pianist, a superb one, and then more recently changed his name to Marc Copland, to avoid a clash of public identities with the country-and-western singer Marc Cohn.

"Marc was a great alto player," John said. "Victor Gaskin was playing bass in the band. Chico Hamilton said that when my friend left, I had the gig. My friend left and I got it. I got

all my stuff together and came down to New York and found a place to live in the East Village and started playing with Chico. It was in a discotheque somewhere on Park Avenue — really weird. After that I started to meet different people. I kind of stayed in that quote-unquote fusiony kind of school of playing, mostly because that's where I would get gigs. I never listened to that music at all. It didn't interest me to listen to it, but I made my living doing it.

"And then Jack DeJohnette called me somewhere around 1972, and said, 'Do you want to play? I want to form a band.'

"And that was kind of my departure from that whole fusion scene, although Jack liked to play some of that too, and we experimented. We played very free, we played standard tunes, we played bebop tunes, electronic stuff, all kinds of crazy stuff.

"I stayed with Jack quite a while and got hooked up with the German ECM label. I worked with Jack and Dave Holland. I started my own group around '76. And it's been going on. That was the turning point, meeting Jack. That got me back into playing some form of jazz music again. The fusion music just left me kind of empty. It was fun to play, it was exciting, it had a lot of energy to it. But you never got to play on chords. You'd play on one chord until the cows came home. It has its place, and it can be fun, but if you like harmony, you're in the wrong band! With Jack I got back into what I wanted to do.

"Jack's music actually was getting real abstract. At one point we had a group with Eddie Gomez on bass and Lester Bowie on trumpet. That was a great band, but we weren't playing too many tunes with chords.

"I felt this need to play harmony again, so I formed my own band with Richie Byrack and George Mraz, the Czech bass player, and a drummer who lives in L.A. now, Peter Donald, an old crony of mine from Boston. That band was together for about four years. I wrote for that band, Richie wrote for the band, and almost all the tunes were harmonically based.

"That got me back into learning how to play on chords again. I hadn't forgotten how to do it, but I wasn't as good as I used to be at it. I have a record from 1968 that I did with Johnny Hammond Smith, and I remember listening to that record and saying, 'Gee, I played on changes better when I was a kid. I've got to get out of this fusion music.' I kind of lost it. But the fusion music did give me something. It gave me a certain kind of energy, and I enjoy playing around with the different guitar effects. Although I've played a lot of it, I like it in small doses. I like to use bits and pieces of it. But to play a night of it?

"At ECM I recorded with different people. I recorded with Dave Liebman and I did my own record with Jack DeJohnette and Jan Hammer before Jan Hammer went over into rock-and-roll. And I've toured and recorded with Kenny Wheeler."

I mentioned that I'd seen Jack de Johnette a few days earlier at his home near Woodstock, New York. Jack had talked about the influence of Bill Evans, not only on pianists but rhythm sections as well.

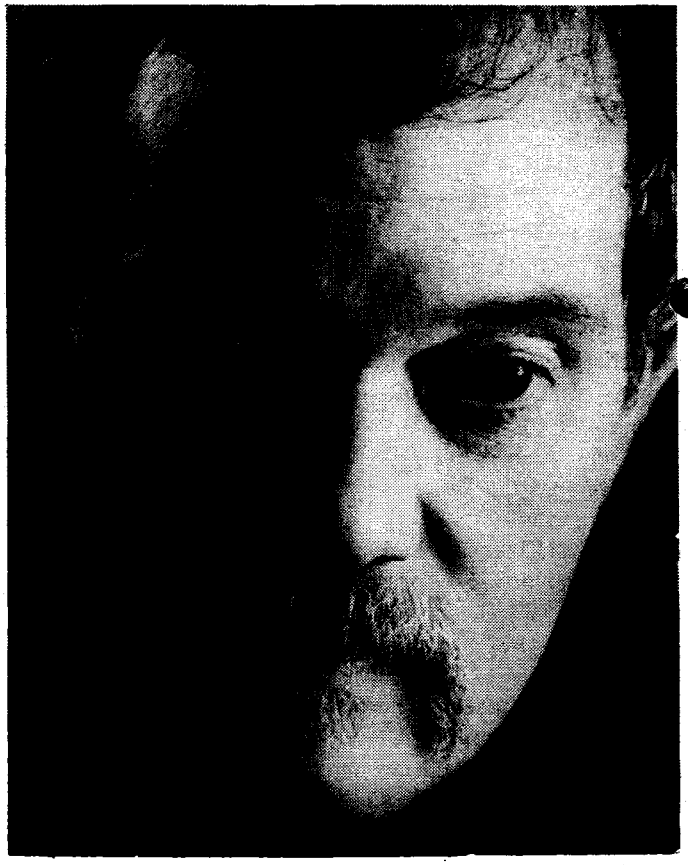
"Sure," John said. "That trio with Scott LaFaro and Paul Motian changed the whole notion of how guys play together. And that was my big influence, being a guitar player. It was through Paul Desmond and Bill Evans I came to Jim Hall, and Jim Hall was influenced by Bill, and that whole notion of the drummer not just marking the time and the bass player not just playing roots. It's the interactive quality. I love to play that way."

John is married to a psychotherapist in private practice.

"We met in San Francisco," John said, "in a now defunct club, the Keystone Korner. I played there a couple of times, and we met. She was in school, going for a degree. She'd heard one of my records and came to the gig to hear me play. When I came back east, my telephone bill began to get outrageous. It would be cheaper for me to live in San Francisco, rather than fly there every couple of months. So I took a couple of guitars and a tape recorder and moved there. I was out there almost two years. It was a great experience, to be in that area. I met people like Denny Zeitlin.

"We've been married now for several years, and we moved to New York. I've worked a lot in a trio with Marc Johnson and Peter Erskine. I freelance and go to Europe quite a lot.

"It's pretty good."



Abercrombie photo by John Reeves