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Jazzletter

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Sorry About That

I apologize for my long silence. Since this is a one-man operation, when the work load gets heavy, I fall behind. Readers have been remarkably gracious about it.

My problem this time was yet another book. I have just completed a biography of Woody Herman. This one took it out of me like no other, because of my deep feeling for Woody.

Oxford University Press is bringing it out in about ten months. And I'm getting caught up on the *Jazzletter*. The first subject is Leonard Feather, the next will be Robert Farnon, and after that Milton Hinton.

Again, my apologies.

Last Rally in Manhattan

The *Wall Street Journal* recently carried a piece about Oscar Peterson by John McDonough, an extraordinarily elegant writer about jazz. What Peterson had to say to McDonough and McDonough had to say about Peterson was provocative and fascinating.

McDonough pointed out that when Oscar played the Ravinia Festival near Chicago last August, the audience filled the facility's 3,500 seats and thousands more listeners sprawled out on the grass. McDonough said he could think of more than twenty jazz performers who could have done this thirty years ago.

"Today I can think of only one," he continued. "Jazz in the '90s may have a wealth of young talent insuring its future. But it has a dearth of veteran star power holding a broad audience now. What's the problem?"

"Critics," Oscar told him.

McDonough said that while Ravinia would not discuss Peterson's fee, an informal estimate suggested that it was $60,000.

McDonough said: "Prolific, prosperous; yet for all that, Peterson has remained remarkably pristine. Between his first trio records for Victor and his CDs for Telarc lies a body of work nobly uncorrupted by pandering. His success has evolved slowly but on his own terms, steered for decades by the sagacious management of his producer and friend Norman Granz."

Discussing the reissue of *Oscar Peterson at the Concertgebouw* on Verve, McDonough says, "There is nothing more mesmerizing in jazz than the precision mechanisms of a cohesive ensemble at full throttle. But the controlling force from which all coherence and swing generate is time. And Oscar Peterson has the chronographic precision of an atomic clock . . .

"On the current *Side by Side* (Telarc), violinist Itzhak Perlman sits in with Peterson, Ellis and Brown for a recital of unexpected conjunction. Although the date put no great strain on anyone's skills, it reminds us in a quiet way that in virtuosity there is brotherhood.

"Paradoxically, though, it has been Peterson's altitudinous technique that has brought him the most grief from jazz critics. Only in jazz, whose roots are in folk art but whose dreams are in the high-art clouds, could such an intellectual inversion occur. But there is something in this music that is profoundly suspicious of technique without rough edges; something that regards precision as the enemy of freedom, and craftsmanship as camouflage."

No one I've read has so clearly delineated this problem in jazz, which has dogged it since critics derogated Art Tatum.

John McDonough probably hasn't read as many reviews of Oscar as I have, for when I was writing his biography, *The Will to Swing*, I gathered them from all over the world. While Oscar had admirers, including McDonough and Leonard Feather in the United States and Richard Palmer in England, those writers in the other camp didn't just dislike his playing, they vociferated against it as if it were a crime against humanity.

On September 3, 1964, Patrick Scott — a critic detested by musicians for surpassing viciousness — wrote in Toronto's *Globe and Mail*, "I keep going back to hear Oscar Peterson for the same naive reason I keep getting his records: a childlike hope that one night he will lose the key to his automatic piano and be forced to play it by hand again."

In England, Max Harrison, who has carried on something akin to vendetta against Peterson, wrote in the January 1960 *Jazz Journal*, "If Peterson's work is individual and always immediately recognizable, that is because of its negative qualities. His technique, at least in digital dexterity, is formidable and he clearly has abundant vitality. Unfortunately these admirable qualities usually are employed to little purpose. Peterson's figurations derive, rather obviously, from Art Tatum but have none of that great musician's harmonic vision or skill in melodic variation."

They assuredly do not derive from Art Tatum. When I was working on that book, I said to André Previn, who I think may know a thing or two more about jazz piano (and classical piano and symphony orchestras) than your average jazz critic, "I don't hear much Art Tatum in Oscar." André said, "I don't hear any."

In 1990 an incident occurred that made clear how little Oscar's work derives from Tatum. Backstage at a concert for Ella Fitzgerald at Lincoln Center, I had occasion to introduce Oscar to Itzhak Perlman. (This meeting led to their recent album.) Perlman told Oscar that he had always wanted to play with him. Oscar said, "Let's do it." I took them to the so-called green room, where they sat down to set a couple of keys. Perlman started playing Tatum runs on the violin. Oscar laughed and started throwing other Tatum figures back at him. And Oscar did an imitation of Tatum that would have deceived anyone had it been recorded. Hearing him when he *wanted* to do so revealed how little he sounded like Tatum in his own playing.

After a 1949 Peterson concert in Paris, a critic for *Le Jazz Hot* wrote, "I swear that I was bored to death and that I was able to stay right to the end only by superhuman effort . . . ."

That statement crumbles on the great rock that lies in the path

of all criticism: the subjectivity of the perception of art of any kind. It tells us nothing about Oscar's playing; it tells us only something about the critic: what bores him and thus what he cannot hear. To call Peterson or anyone else "boring" is a truth not about the artist but about the critic. If there are critics who say Bill Evans is boring, it tells us only that the nuances and beauties of his playing are lost on them: they don't get it.

Ten years ago, preparing to work on the Peterson book, I ran a poll of pianists to which forty-seven of them replied. To minimize one of the problems of polls, I set up three categories, those the pianists considered best, the most influential, and their personal favorites. They voted Art Tatum, Bill Evans, and Oscar Peterson the "best"; Bill Evans, Art Tatum, and Oscar Peterson their personal favorites, and Art Tatum, Bill Evans, and Bud Powell the most influential. Oddly enough, I disagree with them about the influence of Art Tatum. He has had very little influence, standing there in history as a solitary monument, because as Lou Levy once put it, "Who the hell can play like Art Tatum?" I think the most influential pianist in jazz was Earl Hines, both directly on other pianists and indirectly through the expanding influence of his disciples, such as Nat Cole. Horace Silver told me he picked up the Hines influence first from Cole. Cole was a major influence on Bill Evans. And if you listen to early Oscar Peterson you hear not Art Tatum but Teddy Wilson and Nat Cole.

Dizzy Gillespie, who voted in the poll (he played piano) asked if he could add a category of his own, pianists he had liked playing with: Art Tatum, Oscar Peterson, Nat Cole, Tommy Flanagan, and Erroll Garner. Oscar was one of Count Basie's favorite pianists. I think Dizzy Gillespie and Count Basie too may have known a thing or two more about jazz than your average jazz critic.

Oscar told John McDonough: "I have exact peeves with certain jazz writers, no names. I believe they pose as self-appointed discoverers who want more than anything to say they saw the next new wave coming before anyone else. So they patrol the fringes. They don't regard any music as having value unless it's removed and utterly esoteric. Then they write and people get curious. But audiences aren't dumb. No amount of publicity can force audiences to accept music they don't like."

In consequence, he said, audiences for jazz have diminished steadily for the past three decades.

"There's been a disconnect between jazz critics and the audience. Frankly, I blame the critics for building false idols. In the long run those idols either have failed to hold a major audience or have become so merged with pop music they can't be extricated. This has had a devastating effect on jazz."

McDonough checked into this matter by examining the readers' and critics' polls through back issues of *Down Beat*.

"And bingo! There it is, the smoking gun. Year after year, without exception, the critics have collectively dismissed the hard-swinging Peterson and embraced instead the enigmatic Cecil Taylor, whose cryptic, atonal marathons have bewitched the avant-garde for nearly forty years. Not once did the arithmetic of the critics' poll rank Peterson ahead of this perpetual experimenter. Turn to the readers' poll, however, and you get a mirror image of the critics' survey. Here Peterson is No. 1 for five of the last ten years. Taylor never comes close to outranking him. And significantly, when Peterson was outranked, it was by artists whose work lies within the same common body of musical law as his own."

But this brings us to a dilemma, one I have never been able to resolve.

I ran the *Down Beat* polls from May 1959 through September 1961. I came to pay no attention to them.

But a little background is necessary. The critics' poll was founded to counterbalance the readers' poll after the latter consistently overlooked the achievements of major musicians while glorifying lesser jazz players who were merely more popular. Leonard Feather and others repeatedly pointed out the injustice of these votes. One year Alvino Rey won over Charlie Christian in the guitar category, and even Alvino was indignant about it.

The theory behind the second poll was that critics "know" more about jazz, listened more, and would render better judgment.

I have for thirty-two years declined to vote in the critics' poll for three reasons. One is that I do not consider myself a critic. The second is that I cannot and will not rate musicians as best, second best, and so forth. If I had to name the jazz pianists I like "best" the list would run to at least thirty names. The third reason is that I do not believe in polls in the arts. Even the *Esquire* poll of which Leonard Feather was so proud was flawed. As Leonard admits in the piece that follows, it was deliberately stacked.

A readers' poll can give a measure of popularity, but you cannot quantify art. A critics' poll deviates in the other direction, as McDonough notes. A musicians' poll would be a better idea, not that musicians are without bias. But at least it would define the standards of the people who make the music. Artists, not critics, determine the directions of any art. I have yet to hear of a musician in any field changing his work on the fiat of a critic. Mostly musicians despise critics, though they tend to keep still about it since they are forced to court their favor.

One of the problem with critics, particularly in jazz, I think, is that, knowing that a lot of trash achieves huge popularity, they conclude, perhaps unconsciously, that what is popular is automatically bad, which does not follow.

Often in the past, critics have hailed a new performer only to turn on him when he became popular. George Shearing, Cannonball Adderley, and Dave Brubeck come to mind.

But if popularity is no proof of merit, neither is the lack of it. I have long thought that somewhere in a strange and undefinable middle ground between the two, the best art is made. Bill Evans is *not* accessible to just anyone. It takes some knowledge and experience of music, not to mention good ears, to perceive and appreciate what he's doing.

I'm sure there is some validity to Oscar's argument that the critics have in effect driven away the audience. But McDonough's examination of the *Down Beat* polls tends to *disprove* the argument. It shows clearly that audiences never paid much attention to the critics anyway. And when I was at *Down Beat* I knew that.

In 1961, I edited Volume V of the annual collection of *Down Beat*'s record reviews, a 302-page book. I browsed in it recently. It contains example after example of records that got bad reviews and sold well. *The Cannonball Adderley Quintet in San Francisco* got two and a half stars and a bad review; it had already sold about 30,000 copies, and was a huge hit. Dave Brubeck's *Time Out* got two stars and a panning. It was not only an excellent album, it was a pioneering one, since this was the work that at last broke jazz free of four-four — at one time jazz musicians couldn't even play in three comfortably — and entered into compound time signatures. It became one of the biggest-selling albums in jazz history.

At the same time, the book contains all sorts of four and five-star albums that sank promptly from sight.

To make matters more complicated, there are a great many reviews in that book that time has proved to have been not only accurate but prescient. *Oscar Peterson at the Stratford Shakespearean Festival* got five Stars; *Oscar Peterson at the Concertgebouw* got four and a half. Taken as a whole, the reviews in *Down Beat*, read these thirty years later, were substantially sound. All of which proves nothing so much as that the relationship between the body of critical evaluation and popularity is obscure. Reviews, good or bad, seem to have had no influence on public acceptance.

I doubt that criticism has had any effect whatsoever on the evolution of jazz. When Orrin Keepnews owned Riverside Records, he told me that he ran ads in *Down Beat* not because he thought they sold records but because it made his artists happy to see them there; and he didn't think reviews did much to sell records, either.

And so whereas I have reservations about jazz criticism generally, there are other and more significant factors at work. One of them is that jazz is rarely heard on the radio, except on scattered public broadcasting stations with straitened budgets and limited range. To drive from New York to Los Angeles with a radio playing will depress you about the condition of musical art in America.

I might add parenthetically that Newt Gingrich and the thugs around him want to dismantle public broadcasting, a point to be pondered by those who think you shouldn't discuss politics in a publication about the arts.

It must be remembered that radio built the big-band era, not *Down Beat*. *Down Beat* didn't make the bands popular; the bands made *Down Beat* popular. And it wasn't just big bands that you heard on the networks. Small groups like that of John Kirby had good radio exposure and consequent popularity.

There is another factor that is often overlooked. John Lewis pointed out to me recently that jazz developed in a kind of symbiosis with an excellent body of popular music, the music of Kern and Gershwin et al, that was evolving simultaneously.

This gave jazz a body of good material *the public knew and liked* on which to improvise. Musicians played familiar music, not an interminable stream of "originals." Look at the credits on the back of any album by one of the younger groups and you will usually find there is nothing there you know. The tracks often are all "compositions" by the leader of the group or its members.

In fairness to them, why should they play the great standards from the past for audiences who don't know them, particularly the younger audiences jazz must build if it is to survive at all?

And as for the current popular music, there is precious little in it worthy of being used in jazz. And so Oscar's point needs amplification: there is nothing wrong in principle with jazz musicians "merging" with popular music. As John Lewis points out, jazz was built on it. But there is plenty wrong with the merger if the popular music is bad, and most of it today is pretty bad. This is one of many points on which I agree with Wynton Marsalis: Miles Davis recorded some terrible trash, "melodies" by the likes of Cindi Lauper, toward the end of his career.

Still another factor affecting jazz is that it is now widely taught in high schools, colleges, and universities as a legitimate academic subject. The problem here is that when you teach something, you have to standardize it, and this is producing a sameness in young players that is in strong contrast to the individualism of players such as Roy Eldridge, Dizzy Gillespie, Bix Beiderbecke, Miles Davis, Art Farmer, and Clark Terry. Clark learned to play on a piece of coiled garden hose with a funnel acting as a bell. I have wondered if this in some way contributed to the development of the astonishing and highly individual fluidity and inflection of his playing. I don't think we're going to hear his like again, although we will hear imitations of him.

Hale Smith, the composer, who used to teach composition at the University of Connecticut, and I were talking about the flat fifth chord. Hale said, "Even though it has become identified with bebop, that chord has been around. Bach used it. Mozart used it. The difference is that when Monk first came upon it, it was a sheer act of discovery. He didn't know about any of this other stuff. He came across this sound, and saw this thing as an isolated entity."

The bebop players started using the minor seventh flat-five, which Monk termed half-diminished. It is a very pretty, wistful chord, and it is, like the dominant seventh with a flat five, chromatic. Yet it was not new. Hale said, "There's an example of it in the very first string quartet that Mozart wrote when he was a child. It is in the fourth measure."

Once when pianist Harry Evans, Bill's brother, asked Bill to show him certain things, Bill was reluctant to do so, because, as he put it to me, he didn't want to "cheat him of the joy of discovery." In New York in the 1960s, when I was studying piano with Tony Aless, Bill saw a pattern of chord substitutions that Tony and Sanford Gold had diagramed. He said, "This is very interesting. You know, we had to work all this stuff out for ourselves."

There is something about what you discover for yourself that is different from what is learned academically. There was always, of course, far more "classical" training behind the best jazz musicians than has been recognized. But what the players did was to study with classical teachers to acquire technique, and then figure out for themselves how to apply it to jazz. And each musician had to do that for himself. I often recall something Eddie Harris told me. When he asked Lester Young a question about embouchure, Prez said, "I can only tell you about my mouthpiece in my mouth. I can't tell you about your mouthpiece in your mouth."

I think of jazz as a marvelous and vast musical conversation of idiosyncratic thinkers and stylists, all of them with interesting things to stay. It isn't going to be interesting if that individualism becomes a thing of the past, although there will be excellent younger players (and New York is full of them) playing what is essentially music of the past.

Jazz was always a music inventing itself. The institutionalization of it in repertoire orchestras indicates that it is a music that has begun to look backward, not forward. It won't be as much fun. And jazz, although it demanded serious craftsmanship, was supposed to be fun, as Woody Herman used to say.

As for trying to push it forward through the celebration by critics of some avant-garde players, it won't eventuate in revitalization. The very word *avant-garde* suggests that somebody is following, and that isn't happening.

The desire to create an avant-garde jazz, premised on classical music, does not take into consideration that a similar process failed in classical music. Its imitation by jazz is likely to meet a similar fate. Schoenberg began writing music that could no longer be related to a single tonal center in 1909. Much of that music is getting to be a century old, and still has only a limited audience, as indeed does much subsequent twentieth-century classical music.

The assumption underlying this, rooted in the model of classical music, is that it is in the very nature of music to be endlessly explorative, a language inventing itself and thereby going "forward" — and that, furthermore, the only individualism and, more to the point, critical respectability, lies in doing just that. But the public seems able to follow only so far, in terms of harmonic and other developments, and the new music has to be propped up by grants and foundations and importation into the academy. That happened to classical music; it is happening to jazz.

Prior to bebop, jazz wasn't following the harmonic practices of the 1920s. It was rooted in much earlier European music. With bebop it leaped forward to the end of the nineteenth century, at least adopting some of the chromaticism of composers such as Debussy. A few jazz musicians had tried to do this earlier: this is evident in Bix Beiderbecke's small body of piano pieces. But for the most part it didn't take hold. By the 1930s, Jerome Kern's harmonic practices were far more advanced than those of jazz. And his music, and that of other composers such as Porter and Youmans and Gershwin, made popular by radio, gave jazz that superb body of songs that formed a *lingua franca* for jazz, as John Lewis notes. Jazz didn't *lead* popular music harmonically, it followed it. Popular music, abetted by radio, prepared the audience for the changes in jazz that came in the 1940s.

When the big-band era ended, it had already built substantial reputations for numbers of jazz musicians who had worked as sidemen. When they took to the recording studio and small clubs to make small-group jazz, that audience, now in its twenties, followed them there. But young people could not for the most part go to places where liquor was served, and jazz was impeded in building a new audience of young people by this usually overlooked alteration in the cultural structure. To be sure, young people were able to hear it from jazz disc jockeys, of whom there were many in the country. But as radio changed and rock-and-roll came to predominance in the 1950s, jazz was heard less and less on radio. This contributed further to the erosion of the audience.

Now there are fewer and fewer nightclubs where you can hear jazz. When I was living in Chicago, there were lots of them and both the north and south sides. There are few of them now.

All of these changes seem to be converging on jazz. When Oscar Peterson told me perhaps ten or fifteen years ago that jazz had another ten years ahead of it, I thought he was wrong. And the prediction was indeed pessimistic. But I am beginning to think he was in general right.

And then Gerry Mulligan told me what John Lewis had said in the late 1940s, that when their generation was gone, jazz would be finished. Gerry thought then that John was wrong, but now Gerry isn't very optimistic either.

Perhaps the music has almost run its course.

Forms of music, and for that matter, any art, are rooted in their time. We don't make Frank Capra comedies any more, or Broadway musicals in the style of the 1930s, though the works from that time live on. Baroque music was of its time. So was sonata-form symphonic music and Italian grand opera. The music *made during a given era* continues to find an audience, but little music is made in the style and with the methods of that era. Maybe some kid ten years from now will hear a Clark Terry record and learn to play trumpet more or less in his manner. But it won't be new music.

I came to realize, working on the Woody Herman book, that the social and economic and other circumstances that permitted the big bands to come into being were more complex and interwoven than anyone had previously believed. And then the circumstances changed and the bands were gone.

Something similar may be happening to all jazz. It is quite true that the Lincoln Center jazz program draws large audiences. That's New York City. The disappearance of the clubs in the rest of the country is a far more significant phenomenon.

When Woody Herman was a child performer, there were ten vaudeville theaters in Milwaukee, a much smaller town then than it is now — and it still isn't very big. Theaters presenting live plays were all over America. They've grown scarce, and there are

fewer of them in New York than there were in the 1920s. Vaudeville gave its last gasp in New York City. When any art dies in America, it makes its last rally in Manhattan.

Maybe jazz is a music whose period of vitality is ending.

If so, I still have my record collection, and it contains some of the most exciting and beautiful music of the twentieth century.

A Man Nobody Knew
Part I

Leonard Feather died September 22, 1994. A day or two after I heard the news, I was talking to a certain jazz musician and asked if he had heard that Leonard Feather had died. He said, "Yes, and I'm not sorry," knocking the breath out of me. For Leonard was my friend, and a good friend, too, as he was to so many persons.

Critics in any art alienate at least some of its practitioners, and the usual defense of anyone who has suffered the sting of a bad review is to say that the critic is stupid and doesn't know what he or she is talking about.

But Leonard did know. In 1984, I worked on an odd and very difficult project. I had been commissioned to translate into English an album of songs by two Italian composers based on poems of Pope John Paul II. I did succeed in rendering this material into English. (It became an album by Sarah Vaughan.) Leonard asked if he could see it. At his home in Los Angeles — he lived his last years in Sherman Oaks — he spread the music out on his piano. The songs were fully scored in bass and treble clef piano parts. One of the songs extended over four pages, a blizzard of notes.

There was one chord that had given me pause when I had been working on the song in Milan. It was a B-flat diminished seventh, but the melody note was a B-natural. Leonard's eye went to it instantly. He said, "What's this B-natural doing on a B-flat diminished?" And then, "Well, yes, it works."

Leonard knew.

When I was in high school, deeply interested in jazz, Leonard was one of the writers I read. He was then with *Metronome*, in its day (at least I thought so) the best of the two predominant jazz magazines. His name loomed large indeed in the jazz world and in my mind. He wrote a satire on jazz history under the byline Professor Snotty McSiegal; I had no idea that in that period of the bebop wars, it had political significance. I simply thought it was funny.

I met him for the first time in 1959, not long after I became editor of *Down Beat*. He had been contributing to the magazine for many years, in one capacity or another; at that time it was as the author and conductor of the Blindfold Test.

I was quite frightened when I went into that job. I had never run a magazine, and I was suddenly to be surrounded by people I had long admired. There was a certain hostility from some of the critics, whose attitude to jazz was proprietary. I was unknown to them. Two men were very good to me: John S. Wilson, who, like Leonard, had at one time been the New York correspondent of *Down Beat*; and Leonard. I never forgot their kindness.

The problem with Leonard's life is that he was known primarily as a critic, when that was the least of his accomplishments, the least significant part of his career. But he chose to go down that avenue of his life, and inevitably he was hated by some people for it. The wife of one prominent musicians said she didn't dare even mention his name; her husband would almost froth at the mouth if she did. That goes with the territory. I quit writing jazz criticism in 1959, perceiving that the honest execution of the job inspired wrath, and that wrath interfered with my larger duty as an editor, which was the acquisition of information.

It troubled Leonard, who was a very kind man, that his reviews caused hurt feelings and anger. He once wrote that Roger Kellaway was the greatest pianist in the Southland, which is what journalists call Southern California, if not in the world. Not too long after that, he reviewed a concert in which Roger performed. Roger went into his wilder mode, with clusters of notes banged out on the piano with his elbows, bitonality running rampant, all of it exuberant and funny. But Leonard took it seriously and called it, as I recall, "pretentious." The next day, Roger and I read the review over lunch and laughed. I said, "Well, since he has already called you possibly the greatest jazz pianist in the world, where can you go but down?"

Leonard called me that afternoon to ask if Roger had been upset by the review, and I could only laugh and say, "Why don't you ask Roger?"

They remained friends.

Not all musicians took Leonard's occasional raps that placidly. "He made a lot of enemies," Roger said. And some of them retaliated against third parties, or at least one third party.

His daughter, Lorraine Feather, a gifted singer and superb lyricist, told me, "I sometimes got caught in the middle with people who were angry at him for something he had written. And some it splattered on me."

How small.

The fact is that Leonard Feather, in his functions other than that of musician — and he *was* a musician — did, in my opinion, more for jazz than any other comparable person in its history, John Hammond not overlooked.

Hammond made discoveries, to be sure, including that of Count Basie. Billie Holiday was on his claimed list of discoveries, although she did not like him and never so much as mentioned him in the autobiography she did with Bill Dufty. But he also contributed to the decline of music in America, with his "discoveries" of Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen. He was not above claiming credit that actually belonged to someone else, and indeed if credit is to be attributed for drawing Columbia's attention to Dylan, it

really belongs to Billy James, not Hammond.

Furthermore, Hammond hurt many careers, including those of Denny Zeitlin, Adam Makowicz, and Al Grey. Al won't talk about it for attribution, but Hammond gave Al's career a serious setback. There are other cases. Hammond helped music in America, to be sure; he also hurt it. Leonard never did it anything but good.

And his career as a producer was far more illustrious than Hammond's. He discovered more people, was first to record more people, recorded more people, advanced more careers. He was the first to record George Shearing. He recorded him first in England; later he recorded him in the United States. And incidentally, Leonard invented the guitar-vibes-piano instrumentation that became Shearing's hallmark.

He was the first to record Sarah Vaughan, the first to record Dinah Washington. The careers he launched or advanced are beyond counting. He and Barry Ulanov were, during their time with *Metronome*, the first writers to champion the new music that came to be known as bebop, thereby inspiring the ire of all sorts of other writers: Stanley Dance remains hostile to Leonard, and to bebop, to this day.

By the time I left *Down Beat* in September of 1961, it occurred to me that I had met and in many cases had come to know, sometimes well, most of the major jazz musicians who had ever lived, including Louis Armstrong, Harry Carney, Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, Earl Hines, George Wettling, and others of their generation, who were still around. But Leonard had known virtually *all* the major jazz musicians. I had touched history; Leonard *was* history. His life and the lives of those he admired were interwoven inextricably.

And if he was not the first jazz critic — that distinction belongs to Robertson Darrell, who was praising Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington in the late twenties and who was writing for *Stereo Review* when I was — he was one of the first.

Jazz critics on the whole have an aggressive sense of territoriality. As Grover Sales aptly put it once, "The average jazz critic would rather catch another jazz critic in an error than raise Bix from the dead." It's quite true. The first thing any one who takes on the responsibility of criticism needs to do is to excise jealousy from his or her bosom. Few critics do, particularly in jazz. Leonard was an exception.

"I don't think he had a jealous bone in his body," I said to Benny Carter, who was Leonard's friend for almost fifty years.

"I think you're absolutely right," Benny said.

It was one of the keys to Leonard's character.

His primary income did not come from writing criticism, although he was on retainer from the *Los Angeles Times* as its first-string jazz critic for the last two decades of his life. His main income came from his songs, for he was an accomplished songwriter, both as lyricist and composer, with a taste for writing the blues. A number of them became hits.

One afternoon in 1984, I was visiting Leonard and his wife Jane at their condominium in Sherman Oaks, California. On the wall was a giant poster of Duke Ellington; near the window was Leonard's excellent Yamaha baby grand piano.

It had occurred to me that Leonard was a man nobody knew. That overstates it somewhat — Peggy Lee and Benny Carter knew him very well. But by and large, few people in jazz understood the nature and scope of his career, and he was not inclined to proclaim his importance. So I asked him some questions.

He was born Leonard Geoffrey Feather in London, England, September 13, 1914, one of two children in a conventional Jewish family — he has a sister who looks amazingly like him. He attended St. Paul's School.

"My father, Nathan," he told me, "and his brother Morris were born in Leeds, Yorkshire. Their father came over from somewhere in Russia. My mother was born in London, and her father came from Poland. My father and his brother had a very successful clothing business, with a bunch of shops all over the country."

"Were your parents musical?" I asked.

"No," he said. "My father and mother played a very little piano, but had no great interest in music. But they did have me study piano with a private teacher. It was strictly classical music. There was no jazz. I picked up theory and harmony slowly over the next few years by being around musicians. I didn't know what a B-flat seventh was.

"The first jazz record I heard was one that played the same part in a lot of people's lives, Louis Armstrong's *West End Blues*. I was in a record shop with a friend of mine during lunch hour from school. My friend said, 'Listen to this,' and it was *West End Blues*. It struck a very responsive chord in me. What Louis did was beautiful. And Earl Hines had a marvelous solo. Between Louis and Earl, and the whole feeling of it, I got a great message. I might have heard that record as early as 1929, certainly no later than 1930.

"I started collecting records. There was a shop in the East End of London that imported records, unissued Ellingtons and the like. I saved up my pocket money and bought a lot of those records. A fair number of jazz records were being released in England on HMV, the equivalent of Victor. By 1930 or so I had a pretty sizeable collection. I think I bought Bix Beiderbecke records when Bix was still alive."

I once attended the Montreal Jazz Festival with Leonard and discovered, to my surprise, that he spoke fluent French. Later I learned that he also spoke German. How did that come about?

"My father's business fell apart with the Depression," he said. "They decided they couldn't afford to send me to college. Instead, they did what English parents tended to do at that time: send me abroad to soak up some culture. They sent me to stay with some friends of the family in Berlin. I was fixed up with a job with a movie magazine called *Film Courier*.

"So oddly enough, the first byline I ever had anywhere was in a German magazine, in German, about movies. I'd had two years of German in school, but my German was still fairly limited.

"I was in Berlin the winter of '31-'32. While I was there, Hindenburg was re-elected. However, Hitler got 11,000,000 votes. He was rising fast. Four months later he took over. The Jewish family I was staying with later was completely wiped out.

"From Berlin I went to Paris and stayed with family friends, and the second byline I had was with *La Cinémographie Française*. It was a short piece about movies, in French. I had to have a lot of help with it. I was about seventeen."

"Do you still speak German?"

"Oh yes, I can get by in German. My French is fluent, and I understand Spanish, although I don't speak it. I like languages, and had Latin in school, which helps a great deal. I can pick up *Musica Jazz* and understand seventy-five percent of it from knowing the roots of the words but I can't write or speak Italian. So my first writing was not about jazz, it was about movies.

In Paris, in the summer of 1932, Leonard read that Louis Armstrong was to make an appearance at the London Palladium, and knew that he simply had to be there. He did something that was daring for the time. He flew to London in an aircraft he said was "probably a DC minus one."

"I got desperately airsick on that flight," he said. "I could barely make it to the Palladium. I don't think I met Louis at that time. I met him the next time he came in, a year or two later. But it was like seeing a vision come to life when the curtains opened and there was Louis with this raggle-taggle band of mostly assorted European black musicians that had been thrown together for him. But it was still a marvelous experience.

"The following year, Duke Ellington came to the Palladium.

"That's one advantage I had: growing up and listening to everything in chronological order, instead of growing up and listening to John Coltrane and then finding out about Coleman Hawkins."

I think we can account that a serious understatement. And it is one that no one else writing about jazz can make.

He said, "I wrote two letters to the *Melody Maker*, complaining that there were no female jazz fans, not that I could find. Naturally I got some angry letters from female jazz fans, a couple of whom turned out to be good friends later on. I also wrote a letter asking why there was not any jazz in three-four time. One hundred percent of jazz was in four. That also drew a lot of mail, but the editor put a footnote to one of the letters, saying, 'Asking for a jazz waltz is like asking for a blue piece of red chalk.' That shows you how progressive they were in those days.

"As a result of those letters to the *Melody Maker*, the controversy that they engendered, I was invited to meet the editor, Dan Ingman. I went up to the office and they asked me if I'd like to write a piece for them. So I started to write for them on an almost weekly basis for two pounds an article, which was about ten dollars."

One of his first assignments was an interview with Joe Venuti, then visiting London.

"At that time, I was working in a studio, British Lion Films, in Buckinghamshire, for a miserable salary, as an assistant assistant assistant producer. A nothing job. Very boring. I had no particular career direction. After I began writing for *Melody Maker*, I started writing for a couple of other magazines, and pretty soon I was making more than I was making at British Lion. So I went in to my boss. I was making two pounds ten shillings a week, which was like twelve dollars. He offered me a five-shilling raise, which I thought was the ultimate insult, so I told him in effect to shove it. And that's how I left British Lion and became a full time whatever-I-am.

"By that time, I'd learned quite a bit about music and had started writing music, a little bit."

He knew that Benny Carter was in Paris. He contacted the BBC and proposed that they bring Carter to London to broadcast.

"Then," he said, "I wrote to Benny asking if he'd be interested. I brought them together. When Benny got to London, I made some kind of a deal to have him do some recording, which we got permission to do from the British musicians' union. And one of the things we did was a jazz waltz, at my suggestion — *Waltzing the Blues*. As I recall, he played tenor, trumpet, and clarinet on those recordings.

"In the next ten or fifteen years, I wrote several waltzes. In 1938 in New York I put together a beautiful record with an all-star band called *Jammin' the Waltz*. It was a twenty-four-bar blues with Bobby Hackett, Pete Brown, Joe Marsala, Joe Bushkin, George Wettling, Artie Shapiro, and a guitar player named Ray Biondi. They fell into it with no problem at all. They enjoyed it. Bobby Hackett played beautifully. Still, nobody was interested.

"Eventually, by the mid-1950s, people began to take jazz waltzes seriously. It took a long time. I wrote a five-four piece recorded in an album by Dick Hyman three years before Paul Desmond wrote *Take Five*. It didn't even get lambasted. It was simply ignored.

"But that was all much later on.

"By 1935 I had decided I had to go to New York. It was my spiritual home, I guess you could say. A friend of mine, a pianist named Felix King, and I left together on the Normandy in June, 1935. Oddly enough, Timmy Rosenkrantz was on the ship." Rosenkrantz was a well-known Danish jazz admirer and sometime writer.

"Did you know Benny Weinstone in England?" I asked. Benny was a tenor player.

"Sure. I knew him there and I knew him over here. Benny Carter knew him in England."

"How good a musician was he?"

"Mediocre. But he was a great enthusiast. Marvelous."

I met Benny Weinstone late in his life. Pianist and composer Gene Di Novi had moved to Toronto, and he found Benny working

as a switchboard operator at a sleazy hotel on Jarvis Street, famous for decades as a whorehouse. At one point, Benny had been on the edge of death from alcohol. Dizzy Gillespie found him in a gutter — I am told that this was literally the case — and put him in a hospital and helped nurse him back to health. Gene took me to meet Benny, and thereafter he and I used to go down and pull up two chairs and listen to Benny's reminiscences as he plugged in calls to the hookers in their rooms. He had begun playing on ships on Atlantic crossings immediately following World War I. He changed with the times, his admiration ranging through all the eras from the recordings of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band to Charlie Parker and John Coltrane. He lived in Toronto because he could not get a residence visa to the United States; Toronto was as close as he could get to the heartland of the music he loved. One year in the early 1970s, I took Benny, who was alone in the world, home with me at Christmas for dinner. What do you feed a Scottish Jew at Christmas? My wife made a shepherd's pie, and Benny chatted with my father, who had played violin in British music hall in the 1920s. It was fascinating. They're both dead now.

Leonard was surprised that I knew Benny.

"I loved hearing him talk," I said, "that weird mixture of bebop slang and Yiddish with a thick Scottish accent."

"It was wonderful," Leonard said, laughing. "I really loved Benny." Most people did.

"You first visited New York in 1935, then?" I said.

"Yeah. I stayed eleven or twelve days. John Hammond, who had met me on a visit to London, sent me a cable on the Normandy saying, 'Will meet you at the boat.' I've still got the cable in a scrap-book downstairs. I've kept everything I've ever written." "Downstairs" meant his garage; all his records, all his files, all his memorabilia, were stored there.

"I've been pretty careful to keep all that stuff. It's all downstairs. So John met me at the boat, and I think the very first night we went to the Savoy or the Apollo or maybe both. I think I saw Teddy Hill's band with Roy Eldridge and Chu Berry.

"Then I went down to 52nd Street and saw Wingy Manone who had Joe Marsala with him. I heard Teddy Wilson and a whole bunch of others, all in that eleven days. I went somewhere else every night. The Irving Mills office was very receptive. A cousin of Irving's named Al Brackman, a very nice young fellow, became my guide and friend. Between him and John Hammond, I was in good hands.

"I went to the top of the Empire State Building with Alex Hill, a very talented arranger who wrote mostly for Fats Waller. He showed me around. I also went to the offices of the *Amsterdam News* and arranged to become their London correspondent without pay. So the first American paper I ever wrote for was the *Amsterdam News*. I'm sure I was the first and maybe the only white writer they had.

"From London I used to send news not just about jazz but about all that was happening in the pubs, where Paul Robeson and people like that might be seen. I did that for the best part of a year, I guess. And I did a little writing for a couple of American publications like *Down Beat* and *Metronome*.

"I came back to New York on visits and started recording in London and New York. I started recording Benny Carter in London right after he arrived in the spring of '36. That was my indoctrination as a producer — Benny Carter's first date in London, for Vocalion Records. And the very first tune on the session was a beautiful ballad called *Night Crawl*, the first record he ever made on tenor. We made several sessions over the next year or so.

"I produced an album with him in the summer of '37 with a wonderful international interracial band that he had in Holla[illegible] Coleman Hawkins was on four tunes out of the eight.

"Over that period, in the late '30s, I became active in various areas. You couldn't make a living as a jazz critic: there was no place to write. It's incomparably easier now. There's a thousand newspapers that have articles about jazz. There was not one in the entire world in those days. Even the *Melody Maker paid* two pounds an article. What could I do with that?

"I had to put that together with an article somewhere else, writing a few songs, doing a radio show. I did a show on BBC for a while, and also one from Radio Normandy, which was beamed from France to England, in English. Just whatever I could do. With the combination of all these things, I managed to scape together some kind of a living.

"Eventually I decided I wanted to move to New York. I went to Chicago to see the editor of *Down Beat*, who was Ned Williams. And also Carl Cons. They gave me a vague assurance that I could have a job as New York correspondent. At that time it was just a Chicago magazine. They didn't even have a New York writer.

"That was in 1938. I also got a very big boost as a songwr[illegible] because the first thing I ever had recorded in the United States was recorded by Duke Ellington. Talk about starting at the top! That was *Mighty Like the Blues*. That was kind of encouraging, and I thought, 'Well, one way or another, I'll be able to get by in America.'

"I went on vacation on the Continent in the summer of '39. I went to see some friends in Paris and ran into Django and Stephane Grappelli and hung out with various people. I ran into some people who were going up to Holland. I was really at loose ends. I decided to see Niels Hellstrom, who I'd started writing for at *Estrad* in Stockholm. It was a very good jazz magazine. I hung out with Niels a few days. I asked him where was a nice seaside place. He suggested I go to Helsingor. So I went down to Helsingor in the southern part of Sweden. While I was there the Nazi-Soviet pact was signed. Things started getting very grim.

"One morning a girl I had met came to my door and held up the newspaper and said, 'Look, it is war.' There was this big headline saying **Krieg**."

(To be continued)