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Vamp

In 1992, when *Jazz Lives* was published, my partner and collaborator, photographer John Reeves, suggested that the book launching be done not in a hotel room or some such limbo but in a nightclub, since it was about musicians. And, John said, I should sing a few songs. The right club, he suggested, would be Senator, which is at 249 Victoria Street in the heart of Toronto. It's one of the few nice jazz rooms left.

Sybil Walker, who manages and books the room, agreed. Then came a question of assembling a trio. I called Don Thompson, who said, "I'd love to do it. But I don't want to play bass. I want to play piano." And who did Don choose as bassist? Neal Swainson.

The evening was a considerable success. Sitting at the bar was Guido Basso, one of the greatest trumpet players I know and, with Clark Terry, one of my favorite fluegelhorn players in the world. Guido suggested at the end of that evening that we should do this as a gig in the near future. Later, he spoke to Sybil Walker, and booked it as Gene Lees and Friends. The friends were Guido on trumpet and fluegelhorn, Rick Wilkins on tenor, Don Thompson on piano, Neal Swainson on bass, and Barry Elmes on drums. We did a week there in 1993. The room was sold out for a week, two sets a night. We did it again in 1994, and again it was a sell-out.

And now we're going to do a week starting November 21. If you're in the vicinity, I hope you'll fall by. Rob McConnell has taken to calling it the Gene Lees band. Hah. I only wish.

Although Don Thompson is on many records, on Concord and other labels, few jazz admirers know much about him. I thought this might be a propitious time to tell you about

The Man from Powell River

One day in 1974, when I was living in Toronto, I got a call from Paul Grosney. Groz, as friends call him, is a veteran Toronto trumpet player. He also booked a number of hotels and clubs, including the whilom Bourbon Street. It was an Italian restaurant on Queen Street, and Paul brought good jazz into it.

He wanted to know if I thought Paul Desmond would play there. I said, "I doubt it. He hasn't played in about three years. But there's no reasons you can't ask him."

Groz asked if I'd give him Desmond's number. "Sure," I said, "but you could get it from the New York phone book. He's listed."

Groz remembers that he called Paul from my apartment. Then he gave the phone to me. Desmond asked what I thought of the idea. I said, "Do it. Come on up and hang out."

Paul reminded me how long it had been since he had left Dave Brubeck. I said, "So practice." Paul told one of our friends, Doug Ramsey, "I tried practicing for a few weeks, and ended up playing too fast." This may have been the period when he did it.

"What'll I do about a rhythm section?" Paul asked.

Knowing how he liked to work with Jim Hall, I said, "Ask for a guitar player named Ed Bickert."

"Oh I've heard about him," Paul said. "Jim Hall said he's the one guy who scares him when he walks into a room."

That being settled, I suggested he get a bass player named Don Thompson and, for drums, either Terry Clarke or Jerry Fuller.

And so Paul came up to Toronto in the fall of 1974 to work with Don Thompson and Terry Clarke. He would write of Don:

"Don of course is a walking miracle. Here are some things about him: he plays bass, somewhat reluctantly, if required. He plays piano in the manner of Keith Jarrett. He writes charts like an angel. (As a matter of fact, he looks a bit like a second cousin of Christ, and plays bass as if the family were a bit closer.) If you're into space music and feel like sitting on a B minor chord for forty-five minutes, he either swoops around the bottom register of the bass or flutters about like a giant butterfly trapped in a Stradivarius, whichever is most appropriate. And if you're an old curmudgeon like me and feel like playing some old standards, he plays all the *right* changes . . . . In all the above situations, his solos are dependably unbelievable."

Terry Clarke said, "One night the audience was so loud. Nobody was listening to us. Paul went up to the mike and said, 'Ladies and gentleman, I would just like to announce that World War Three has broken out and life as we know it has ended on this planet.' Nobody batted an eye. Nobody heard a damn thing he said. One of those nights at Bourbon Street where they didn't know anybody was onstage.

"I did the first gig and Jerry Fuller did the second. That's the *Live* record. Don brought his eight-track and recorded it. They put out a double album. Don has enough stuff for ten albums."

Paul would record three albums with Don. *Live* was a two-LP set on A&M, rcorded in 1975. Paul, in his liner notes, might have told the reader more about Don. Don does indeed play vibes, brilliantly, as he does everything. He used to play all the brass instruments.

And as for his work as a bassist, I once said to Roger Kellaway, who began his own professional career as a bassist before turning full-time to piano, "If somebody put a gun to my head and insisted I name the world's greatest bassist, I might say, 'Don Thompson.'

"Yyyyyeah," Roger said. "I can see that. But have you heard Neal Swainson yet?" I hadn't at the time.

Ray Brown once observed that nobody's best at everything. But Don Thompson is an uncanny bassist. He is one of the most amazing musicians I have ever encountered, and a good many musicians stand in awe of him. So do a good many laymen who have seen him in concerts with George Shearing.

Donald Winston Thompson was born in Powell River, British Columbia, the westernmost of Canada's ten provinces, on January 18, 1940, four and a half months after Canada entered World War II, when the will of Winston Churchill seemed to be the only thing

holding back the darkness.

Powell River is about eighty miles north of Vancouver, in some of the most splendid mountain country on earth. The setting is known as the Coast Range, and in many places its peaks, clad in awesome fir trees, seem to rise directly out of the Pacific Ocean.

"It's a paper-mill town," Don said, and, aware that I too had grown up around (and worked in) paper mills, "You know the smell." It is an unpleasant miasma, and if one is to live in such an area, it is advisable to find a place upwind of the mills. He said: "I lived in Powell River until I was twenty years old."

Then he moved to Vancouver. There is a very big contingent from Vancouver in the jazz world of Canada and beyond. Renee Rosnes, for one, grew up there. So did Ralph Grierson. Grierson is an amazing pianist. He went to the University of Southern California when he was very young. There he met a fellow student named Michael Tillson-Thomas. They found the original four-hand transcription of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemp*, which was considered unplayable. They recorded it for Angel, and shocked the classical music world. Ralph still lives in Los Angeles, where he plays every imaginable kind of music, including rock, ragtime, and jazz; he is particularly in demand for unreadable contemporary classical music.

"Did you know Ralph Grierson in those days?" I asked Don.

"I've known Ralph since he was about nineteen," Don said "We went to Lake Louise in 1962. He had a band of jazz musicians, if you can imagine; Jerry Fuller playing drums, and me, and a bunch of guys from Vancouver, a band of maniacs, and here was Ralph, twenty years old, being the bandleader of all these guys.

"You started playing professionally in Vancouver, right?"

"Well, I was in a high school band in Powell River," Don said. "It was a terrible band. I played cornet and French horn and all that stuff. We'd go to school dances and play all the Glenn Miller stocks and stuff, and finally one of the kids would come over and say, 'Can we put on the records now?' It was fun, just the same. I played all the brass instruments, fluegelhorn and trombone, and a little bit of vibes.

"I don't play the woodwinds. I wish I did, I just don't."

He wasn't even being ironic. But you never know with Don. He stands six foot one. His face is impassive. But he is one of the funniest people you'll meet. He just doesn't smile, and his laughter, when it comes, arrives in brief bursts, then hides again. He seems almost forbidding on one's early encounters, and, as pianist Mike Renzi, who has worked with him, points out, the first time he drops a sharp quip on you, you wonder if you heard right or the remark was an accident.

Paul Grosney and I like to think we had a little to do with Don's latter-day recognition, an aftermath of the Desmond gigs, but in reality he'd been discovered before and would be again, if only for his association with Rob McConnell's Boss Brass. He has recorded with Jay McShann, Jim Hall, the late Frank Rosolino, Davie Liebman, and John Handy, among others.

"Where did you study?" I asked.

"I didn't really study," Don said. "I have an older brother who plays. We had a piano and I just played it. I don't even remember starting piano. I've always played it.

"I took a few private lessons with a schoolteacher in Powell River when I was a kid. I didn't study at all after that. I took one bass lesson when I was about twenty, and I took another lesson when I was about thirty." He was laughing. "They were both on how to hold the bow. I never got it together either time. I finally went into playing German bow. It's a different shape. You even hold it differently. The French bow is very difficult for me. It hurt my hand. A lot of guys have the same problem and they're playing German bow now because it doesn't hurt your hand so much. For jazz guys, it's easier to get it together just enough to play the last note of a ballad or something.

"I borrowed a bass off a friend in Powell River. I moved to Vancouver when I was twenty years old. I bought a bass there and started playing it. I knew where the notes were before that."

"Then where did you learn to read?" I asked.

"Oh God," he said, "I'm not a good reader yet! I'm still learning to read. I wasn't taught how to read when I was a kid. I could hear things really easily. I learned Mozart sonatas and Beethoven concerto music just by listening to records. My teacher would play something for me. I could hear what he was playing, I just reproduced it. I can read fairly well on bass. On piano I'm not very strong.

"Red Mitchell was my first favorite bass player. I heard that solo on *I Remember You* with Hampton Hawes, when I was in high school. I can still play most of it. For pure melodies, it's hard to improve on Red Mitchell. Somebody was trying to hook up a gig where we'd both play piano and bass. It didn't happen. He had, Stravinsky would say, the gift of melody. It's pure melody. He never played licks. That's my complaint about most bass players, they play licks."

In Vancouver, Don encountered a pianist named Chris Gage. Born Christopher Giesinger in Regina, Saskatchewan, in 1927, he played piano in his brother's dance band when he was seven, led his own band at seventeen, and at twenty-two moved to Vancouver, becoming the city's leading pianist and turning down road offers from Louis Armstrong and Peggy Lee, among others. It is said that he had a technique to rival Oscar Peterson's, a point with which Oscar has publicly agreed, and his harmonic development was at least twenty years ahead of that of anyone else in jazz. (In view of the many superb musicians who were born or came up in British Columbia, including Ed Bickert, Desmond wrote, "They must be doing something terribly right there.")

Don said, "I met Chris Gage and Dave Robbins and Doug Parker and started playing with them. Dave Robbins was the first one to hire me. Dave Robbins is one of the greatest musicians in Canada. He's a trombone player and arranger and composer. He lives in Vancouver. He played in the Harry James band. In the

early '60s, he had the Vancouver Jazz Workshop Band. He hired me to play in that band in 1962. It was my first big break. I played vibes, actually."

It was during this period that Don formed one of the closest associations of his life: that with the remarkable drummer Terry Clarke. At various periods, their careers developed in tandem.

"I've known Terry since 1962," Don said, "maybe 1961, when he was about seventeen. Dave Robbins was hiring Terry when he was that young for CBC broadcasts. Terry would come in and read perfectly and play better than any of the guys around, when he was about eighteen. I've got tapes of that. He was scarey. He still is. He doesn't make mistakes. If he does, it's really a shock to me."

Terry has a slighlty variant memory of their first encounters.

"It was 1960 or '61," Terry said. Born in Vancouver August 20, 1944, Terry is six years Don's junior. "I was in high school. I used to go down and hear him play. He was part of the downtown scene. He played a club called the Cellar. My drum teacher found out about a gig that might be happening in Paris, and I needed to send an audition tape. So he suggested that I call up Don. I didn't even know him. I came home from school one day and called up the great Don Thompson and asked him if he wanted to do this little demo session.

"It was a trio. Don played piano and vibes on it. That's the only way I was going to get to play with him. He would never have hired me. So I hired him. That way he got to hear me play.

"We got to be fairly good friends. He didn't really use me that much. He was working a lot with Jerry Fuller. He was the hot young drummer. So then we started playing more often. And then we ended up doing a lot of jazz things. Don and I had a half-hour jazz CBC TV show every week."

I said, "Don said you played better than anybody on the scene, even in high school."

"Well he didn't let on," Terry said.

"He *doesn't* let on."

"I didn't know him, so I couldn't read him that well. He was very quiet. He was Don. Every apartment of his, the curtains were always drawn and everything was always dark. He always wore black, hung out all night and slept all day, a real jazzer."

"He's not like that now."

"No, things have changed considerably. Anyway, we ended up doing this television show about 1965. We used to have guest artists. We'd have singers, and we did one show with Stan Getz and his quartet at the time, with Gary Burton, Gene Cherico, and Joe Hunt. We did a double quartet, because Don was playing vibes on the show.

"We had Chris Gage as one of the guests. Chris was a real legendary guy in Vancouver. When I was in elementary school, my mother used to take me to a show at the Orpheum Theater called the Eaton's Good Deed Club, sponsored by the Eaton's department store. We used to go down at nine o'clock in the morning and watch cartoons and a stage show, and Chris Gage was the piano player. That's the first time I ever heard him play.

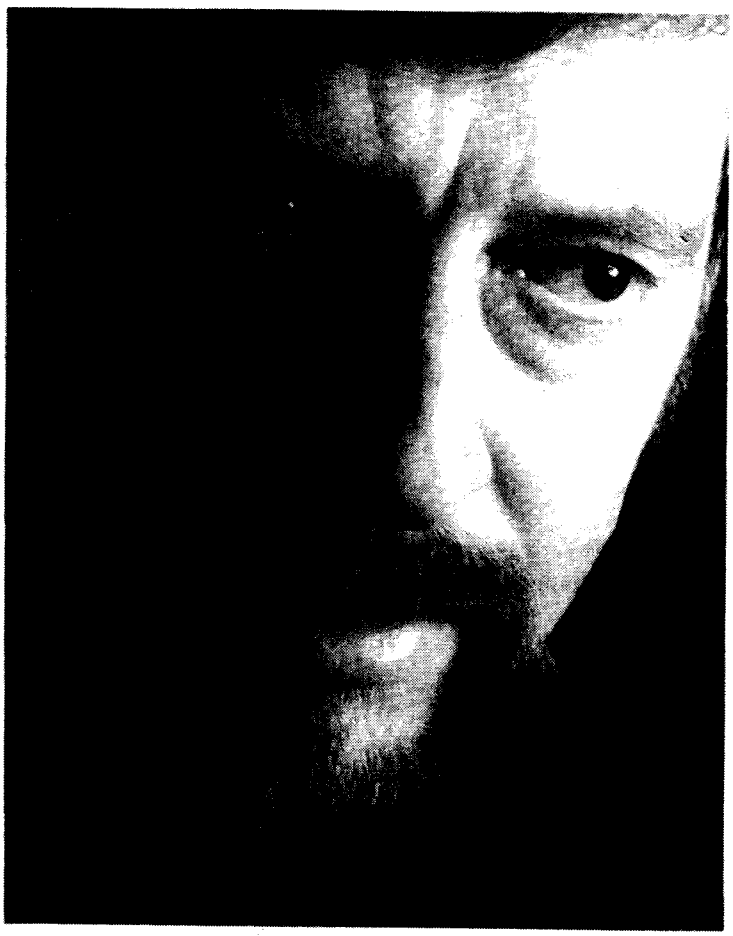
"When I started playing drums, every concert put on by the Vancouver Jazz Society always featured Chris Gage. He was a phenomenal piano player. To me, playing with Chris was like playing with Bill Evans. He had a weekly radio show.

"He played like nobody I ever heard. He played like himself. He was a whole orchestra. He was a little short guy. He just used to pound it out. He was unique. I remember the power that he played with, the huge orchestral feeling."

Don said, "I worked a lot with Chris Gage. He took too many sleeping pills and killed himself."

"On purpose?" I asked.

"That's what they say. He'd tried a couple of times before that. Guys found him and rescued him, but this time they didn't catch him in time. There were lots of rumors. He'd had a bad split-up with his wife, and stuff like that. I've got some tapes of him, and Fraser MacPherson had piles of tapes. Fraser worked with him a lot. Chris was wonderful."



Thompson

photo by John Reeves

Terry said, "Finally we had a trio with Chris and Don and me, a five-night a week gig. It was short-lived. It was Christmas of 1964. He killed himself in the middle of that gig. It was horrible. He'd played on our TV show. For a couple of weeks after he died, they ran the shows with him that they had in the can. It was eerie.

"Don and I were playing at a club called the Flat Five on a regular basis. They brought in John Handy for a week. I had never played so hard in my life and I began to wonder if I was cut out to be a jazz drummer. It was really exhausting — but exhilarating at the same time.

"They booked him back the following year, but this time he brought a piano player named Freddy Redd and a violinist named Michael White. We did a week. John was so knocked out with us that he invited us to come down to San Francisco. I was previously supposed to go down with Vince Guaraldi, who found out that I was only nineteen and couldn't work in bars, so he cancelled that. But John was playing a coffee house called the Both/And at Divisadero and Oak. So I could legally do it. He petitioned to get us H-1 permits, the temporary permits. That took three or four months of red tape. We moved into John's house, where he still lives. It was about three blocks from the club.

"Ralph Gleason got wind of us. He completedly flipped over us and gave a review in the San Francisco Chronicle of this new band and these mysterious Canadian guys, and all of a sudden the club was packed every night and we were the hottest band in San Francisco."

The bassist John Heard, who was just out of the Air Force, was then in San Francisco. John remembered:

"I used to play at the Half Note. George Duke was in the conservatory then, just out of high school. He copped the gig. And Al Jarreau was the vocalist. Al was a social worker at the time, moonlighting as a singer. Pete Magadini was playing drums, a hell of a drummer. We played Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays . . . . I was learning bass by watching everybody play. I just had gotten married . . . . We lived in a boarding house with John Handy's rhythm section — Don Thompson on bass and Terry Clarke on drums . . . . I used to listen to those guys all the time, and Don and I used to hang out every night. Don is one of my biggest influences."

He and Don would play bass duets in their off hours.

"One time," Don said, "Terry and I were walking around North Beach. There was a music store. So we went in. There was a set of drums set up. Some kid was sitting there playing . . . . " Don sang the pattern. "The latest rock and roll." Don sang several more of the drum patterns. "Finally the kid got up and Terry sat down and started playing. Just simple time. Ding ding-a-ding. Then he started with the bass drum. And he sped it up until it was an absolute blur. It was blinding. Then he slowed it right back down until it was just quarter notes again. The time on the cymbal and the high hat never stopped. The kid stood there in a state of absolute shock. I did too. I didn't think anybody could do that."

Terry said: "We used to go down the street and hear George Duke, John Heard, and Pete Magadini. Pete later moved to Toronto and he's now in Montreal.

"This was June of 1965. The Monterey Festival was already booked that year. But the band's fans got up a petition and talked to Jimmy Lyons and actually got us on the festival."

John Heard said: "They were hot. They blew the Monterey Festival away that year."

Terry said, "We went on and we had six thousand people on their feet, stomping and cheering. We played two tunes in half an hour, *Spanish Lady* and *If Only We Knew*. It was recorded. John Hammond signed us up after that. He signed George Benson, Denny Zeitlin, and John Handy. It was the first time Columbia had released a record with only two tunes on it, one on one side and the other on the other side.

"That kind of put us on the map. The next year Don and I both showed up in the *Down Beat* polls. We nearly got the Album of the Year, but Ornette Coleman's *Live at the Golden Circle* got it by about four votes.

"John Hammond brought us to New York to play that *Spirituals to Swing* concert at Carnegie Hall, featuring all the people he had discovered, including Basie, Big Joe Turner, George Benson, and the John Handy group. That was '67. By that time we had changed personnel, and Sonny Greenwich was playing guitar. We played the Half Note for about a month, then went back to California and played Shelly's Manne Hole in Los Angeles.

"Our work permits ran out and we had to get an extension. After that we'd have to get green cards. But if we did, we'd be drafted. So in April of '67, we went back to Vancouver. Don went to Montreal to play with Sonny Greenwich. I was supposed to be with that band, but I got the gig with the Fifth Dimension, which I think really pissed Don off, because we had really wanted to do a quartet with Sonny. Sonny was a remarkable player. Sonny just blew us away when we first heard him. Don and Sonny struck up a relationship. To this day they are very close friends. They've done a lot of records together.

"But I went on the road with the Fifth Dimension for two-and-a-half years. I got sick and tired of that, and Don wrote me a letter saying there was a lot of jazz in Toronto. So I moved there.

"Don introduced me to everybody. He booked a gig with Sonny, who came in from Montreal, and we started a quartet in Toronto. Everybody got wind of that. Don was playing piano. I had applied for a green card, and I was waiting six months before moving to New York. Don got me involved with so much work. I started getting calls for studio work, which I couldn't really figure out because, since I had come off the road with the Fifth Dimension, I think they thought I was a rock drummer."

I said, "A lot of people made that mistake, including me."

Terry said, "I did the Fifth Dimension to learn how to play R&B and pop, just to kind of round out my playing. It was great money. I had saved a lot, so I was able to come to Toronto with a pretty good bank account to relax and just play jazz for six

months, then move to New York and play jazz. They knew I could play a back beat and I was doing jingles and television and the Ray Stevens summer show and Barbara McNair. Ray Stevens was from Nashville. He was the summer replacement for the NBC Andy Williams show, but they shot it in Toronto.

"Don and I got to be known as the redoubtable rhythm section of Toronto, because we'd show up everywhere, playing jazz, playing anything.

"At that time, Don actually prided himself on being one of Toronto's best drummers. He was working jazz gigs with Lenny Breau and playing drums with Freddy Stone's big band. He claims I took all his drum work away from him."

Clarke Greenwich

photos by John Reeves

For two summers during that period, Don and his brother made extensive bicycle tours: "Two different summers, he and I rode from Toronto to Vancouver on bicycles — " that's two-thirds the way across the North American continent " — then from Quebec City to Newfoundland and all around Newfoundland and back to Quebec City. It took us seven or eight weeks both times. It was very peaceful. All you need is time. If you've got time, you can do pretty well anything." (Don still rides a bicycle around Toronto, if he's on his way to a piano gig and doesn't have to carry his bass.)

"Terry took off with the Fifth Dimension and I went to Montreal. I'd hooked up with Sonny Greenwich. With Sonny I always played piano."

Sonny Greenwich was born on New Year's Day of 1936 in Hamilton, Ontario, which, as it happens, is where tenor saxophonist and arranger Rick Wilkins and I were also born. Greenwich remains a somewhat mysterious figure. He once told an interviewer, "I'm not a working musician. When I play, I play to awake people spiritually — that's the only reason." After working with Don and Terry in the John Handy group, he toured briefly with Hank Mobley, then for a while in 1968 led a group that included Jimmy Garrison on bass and Jack DeJohnette on drums, and, briefly in 1969, played with Miles Davis. He turned down offers from Elvin Jones and Gary Burton and returned to Canada, settling in Montreal. During his time in Toronto, he said, he would take his guitar into one of the city's many parks late at night. "I'd go out there and play toward the stars."

A meeting with John Coltrane in Buffalo fortified his spiritual inclinations and affected his style, which, he says, has influences as far apart as Sonny Rollins and Maria Callas.

On one occasion he said, "I feel that the space between my hands is God, that everything is God, and I've been trying to get closer and closer to this idea of unity, people and love, and this is the basis for all my music."

"We have an amazing thing when we play together," Don said. "It's like one person playing two instruments. We can play anything at all. If I had to describe Sonny, I would have to say that if Coltrane played the guitar, that's what it would sound like and that's what it would feel like. It's not just the sound, it's that peaceful spiritual feeling of John Coltrane. That's exactly where Sonny is. He's totally at peace. He plays just the most beautiful thing. Every time. It's not the hippest thing, it's not the fastest thing, it's just the most beautiful thing. He's one of a kind, like Kenny Wheeler, an absolute original. He plays one note, and you say, 'That's Sonny.'

"And I went to Montreal to play with him. I was in Montreal about six months. Then I went back to Vancouver, then I came to Toronto. I'd only been here three or four nights, I think, and Haygood Hardy called me about Rob McConnell and the Boss Brass. Right at the end of May, 1969. I went down and played vibes with Rob's band. I kept doing the Boss Brass almost since then, except for those fives years when I was with Shearing.

"I did a lot of studio work for eight or ten years, and then I just couldn't deal with it any more. I didn't like the idea that I was a robot or whatever it was they wanted me to be in the studio. Some guys actually were interested in whether you could play or not, or what you thought about music. But nine times out of ten, the only important issue was: Don't go overtime, don't make any mistakes, just play exactly what's written, and don't even think about the music. I finally quit."

In 1982, Don went on the road with George Shearing. Don said, "Shearing's timing was perfect. I was on a gig one night with Sonny Greenwich, in Bourbon Street, and we were playing probably some of the strongest music we'd ever played. I mean, it was *fantastic*. About midnight, just before we were going on for the last set, I got a call about doing a television show at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. I went down and did the show. And this was, like, after one of the best gigs I'd ever played.

"All I have to do is play one tune on the show. And it's the *William Tell Overture*. This sixteen-year-old kid comes in. He's just won the cross-Canada banjo championship. He's got on this blue-jean suit with studs all over it and he's got this banjo all covered in rhinestones, and sparkly. And he sits down, and, like, that's what I have to do at ten o'clock in the morning. I was really

tired, and kind of grouchy. I've got my electric bass. And he goes . . . " Don sang the Rossini theme associated with the old *Lone Ranger* radio show. "On a banjo, yet! And about half-way through, the kid stops and says, 'Can you give me more punch on the bass?'

"I think that was the last time I ever did that television show."

Don already knew George Shearing. Shearing had once come to play a benefit for a friend. Don sat in with him on bass.

"Shearing and I had met briefly about ten years before that," Don said. "We sort of said hello. We played for a couple of hours. In 1982, Brian Torff left Shearing. George called me and asked me if I wanted to do the gig.

"It was perfect timing, because I was out of the studios. I was doing some things with Jim Hall. That was the only sad thing about going with George: I haven't played with Jim Hall much since, except a Town Hall concert."

Don played a lot of piano duets with Shearing. He said, "If they had two pianos, about half the gig would be piano duets."

At times they would play quartet, with Don on vibes, Neal Swainson on bass, and Grady Tate on drums.

"Shearing is the greatest," Don said. "You couldn't ask for a better guy to work with. He's absolutely the greatest. He's so concerned. His priorities . . . If there's anything going on that isn't perfect for me, he straightens it out before we set up or rehearse or even play a note. I'd fly to the gig from here, he'd fly in from New York. The first thing he'd say is, 'How was the flight?' The next thing he would say is, 'How's the hotel? Is your room all right? Was the limo on time?' All that sort of thing. Then we'd set up and have a sound check. And, musically, naturally, the cat's a genius, so what can you say? As a bandleader, he's just fantastic."

"Who have been your inspirations?" I asked.

"Coltrane was my first obsession in jazz music," Don said. "I listened to a lot of people, but I never became obsessed with anyone the way I did Coltrane, although I must say I listened to Bill Evans a lot. And that was a bit of an obsession too, I suppose, because I tried to figure out what Bill was playing and what Scott LaFaro was playing. When I heard Coltrane, that took over my whole listening and playing and practicing. I just couldn't listen to anything else for a long time. And then I went backwards and listened to Charlie Parker and I had the same kind of obsession with Charlie Parker. And Sonny Greenwich. Sonny is probably the biggest influence I have. More than any other person, Sonny influenced my bass playing.

"Sonny told me he didn't begin playing music till he was twenty. Then he heard a Sonny Rollins record. He wanted to play like that. He got a guitar and tried to make it sound like Sonny Rollins! And Miles Davis. He doesn't play at all like a guitarist. At first listen, people take it for some kind of a saxophone. There's no one in the world like Sonny Greenwich. He's the most beautiful player. He seems to be able to take any melody and figure out, Why is this melody beautiful? And that's what you hear. Like, you hear what's beautiful. If there's a note in the chord that makes it special, when he plays you'll hear that note. If there are passing notes that make the chord really fantastic, like, you'll hear that in the solos. It's not trying to out-hip anybody or out-flash anybody. It's, like: How beautiful can we make this music? I don't know anybody else who thinks like that all the time. Sometimes it's really sophisticated harmony, sometimes it's really simple harmony. Things that are so basic that you wouldn't think of them, because they're so obvious. And he'll find a way of doing that. It'll just make you cry, it's so great.

"That's the way Sonny is. I don't know anybody who's like that. Except Kenny Wheeler! They're so similar it's amazing."

Kenny Wheeler and Don for many years have been teaching during the summers at the Banff School of Fine Arts in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta. To Canadians, images of Banff and the Bow River, running green in the sun, are as much a part of the national idea as the Eiffel Tower to the French or the Empire State Building and Golden Gate Bridge are to Americans. If you remember the movie *Swingtime in the Rockies*, it was shot there: or at least the backdrops against which the process shots were done were shot there. It had the usual Hollywood quota of gratuitous Mounties. Better for imagery was *River of No Return* with Robert Mitchum and Marilyn Monroe. That really was shot on the Bow River, and gives a good idea of what that gorgeous country looks like, although only the 180-degree-and-more vision of one's own eyes will import the full grandeur of that country.

"Oscar and Phil Nimmons started the jazz program at Banff," Don said. Phil Nimmons is an outstanding Canadian arranger and composer, unknown in the United States, and one of Oscar Peterson's close associates for many years. "Dave Holland then took over and he got me and Kenny Wheeler, and John Abercrombie teaching guitar. John and I have done two records together. In 1982 Lee Konitz and Albert Mangelsdorff were on the faculty.

"That was the first time I was in Banff, 1982. We had to do a faculty concert. Kenny Wheeler, Dave Holland, and I were the only faculty there the first week. We went out and played an hour set with trumpet, piano, bass. I couldn't imagine what that combination was going to sound like. And then I just couldn't believe Kenny's sound, this huge trumpet and fluegel sound."

I said, "Kenny's tone is almost like a saxophone. It has a different texture than most trumpet sound."

"Oh, it really has," Don said. "And it changes. Right in the middle of a chorus or a phrase. And all of a sudden it sounds different. I can't describe that, either. It's the strangest thing, it's amazing, it's beautiful.

"You know who I thought of when I first heard Kenny play? Booker Little. It's the same kind of really lonesome feeling. Kenny told me he that Booker Little was the one that made him think he could play after all. He'd pretty well decided, after hearing Dizzy and all that, that that was not the way he wanted to play. And Booker Little apparently was the one who gave him the suggestion

that there was another way to play the trumpet. And he wrote a whole bunch of music for Booker. He wrote *Little Suite*. Kenny's titles are always a little twisted."

Don also teaches in Toronto, both privately and at York University. At one point he said: "I have a pianist, a bassist, a cellist, a harpist, writers, various horn players. I'm teaching music. I don't teach instruments, because I don't know that I'm qualified to do that. Piano technique, I would never presume to teach anybody that. Or vibes. I know about basic things, but not that much. They're all working professionals already, and it's just a matter of how do you get through these chords, that kind of concept. They come back, so I guess it's okay."

What does this instrumental versatility do to one's mind?

Don said, "Like, to me, it's a matter of music. It's how do I play this music, not how do I play this instrument. I didn't have trouble figuring out fingerings on brass instruments. If I have a problem, it's usually not a technical problem, it's a musical problem. How do I play the tune, how do I play the changes, how do I play this time? Getting technique together isn't that hard for me. I never think about what instrument I'm playing."

I was reminded of something Bill Evans once said. He said he had no particular interest in the piano — he also played flute and had played violin. "It's just a gateway to music," Bill said.

Don is quietly proud — one cannot imagine Don doing or being anything in any way but quietly — of the professioal jazz musicians Banff has turned out. They include trumpeter Kevin Turcott, pianist Renee Rosnes, tenor and soprano saxophonist Mike Murley, John Ballantyne, whom Don describes as one of the best young pianists in Canada, and tenor saxophonist and pianist Phil Dwyer. "The best young jazz musicians in Canada came through Banff," Don said "And Dave Holland and Kenny are two of the most important influences. Dave Liebman was on our faculty in Banff. I'll bet 75 percent of the guys who are doing something in Canada went through Banff.

"Phil Dwyer has been working with me. And you know where he comes from? Qualicum Beach, Vancouver Island. Qualicum Beach is about the size of this room. I mean, I rode through it on my ten-speed. It took me about a minute and a half. And he is really brilliant. He plays piano about as well as he plays tenor.

"Diana Krall is from Qualicum Beach. The bass player in my band, Pat Collins, he's twenty-four years old and he and Phil Dwyer grew up together. He's from Qualicum Beach."

"What happened in Qualicum Beach?" I asked. "Did someone drop a jazz record from an airplane?"

"There's one teacher there," Don said. "Pat Collins, the bass player, his father is a teacher. He taught Phil. Phil's parents are really into it, and all of a sudden there are three really good young jazz players from Qualicum Beach. It really is improbable, if you could see the place. Phil is really scarey."

"One of the things that amazes me," I said, "is the advancement in jazz bass playing."

"Basses have gotten easier to play," Don said. "The advent of metal strings. You can set them lower. You can get more sound without having to set them real high, and they play faster. And then of course everybody has amplifiers now and you can set them really low, closer to the fingerboard. You can lower the bridge and get the action lower, so that it's easier to play, and just crank up the amplifier. Too many guys do that, actually.

"Dave Holland doesn't. Dave actually plays really strong. He's got a phenomenal sound. He plays really hard. And he's got that facility too. I think Dave Holland is a real standout."

"I've always understood," I said, "that if you lower the action, you lose volume."

"You lose volume but you gain sustain," Don said. "The lower the strings are, for some reason, they sustain longer. But Dave is one of the really good compromisers. His action is a little bit higher than mine. His hands are really strong, and fast, and he can play fast as anything and still get that real Ray Brown type power.

"I did a record in New York with Dave. We were all set up in the studio. Dave was over in the corner behind baffles, practicing, and I was thinking to myself, 'He's going to have to turn that amplifier down, because he's going to leak into every mike in the room.' I went over to say something to him, and he didn't have an amp. He just picks up the bass, and bam! he has this amazing power.

"Dave is the greatest bass player I know. I don't know anybody who can play like him. He's a very important person.

"Because they've got the amplifier, guys lower the strings, lower the action, and then they can play real fast. And they get all that stuff going for them. But, unfortunately, what you lose in a lot of cases is that actual sound. Because when you hear guys play live now, you're not hearing the bass, you're hearing the amplifier. A bass doesn't sound like a bass any more. You're hearing pre-amps and speakers and effects and every other darn thing.

"Scott LaFaro had a beautiful sound. But there were no pickups in those days. It was a real bass sound. Charlie Haden's sound on those old Ornette Coleman records, that's a real bass sound. Ray Brown on the Oscar Peterson records, you were hearing the bass. Now you hardly ever do. It's turned into something different. I don't like it as much.

"A lot of bass players are missing the message of Scott LaFaro. Too many guys hear the fact that he played real fast. Scotty had

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some chops. He figured out the top end of the bass. He could play fast arpeggios. He could play amazingly fast. Too many bass players, I think, just play fast. But they don't hear the beauty of his melodies. They also don't hear how supportive he was when he played behind Bill Evans. He played pretty busy sometimes, but I don't think he ever seemed to get in the way or take the music away from Bill. Some other people, when you listen, you wonder: Who's playing here, is it bass or piano or what? With some guys the bass is actually distracting from the music. You can't really tell what's going on in the music because the bass is either too loud or too busy or playing too hard. The guy's not playing what the music needs, he's just playing what he wants to play. The music needs something from the bass, and if you don't play that, it doesn't matter what else you play, you've screwed it all up.

"Scotty managed to play the foundation and play a bunch of other stuff too and he never got in Bill Evans' way at all.

"Gary Peacock is really good, I think. He can play a lot of stuff. He's real supportive, he plays beautiful time, and has an exciting spirit. He sounds really good on the Keith Jarrett records.

"Steve Swallow is one of my all-time favorite bass players. There's a guy who really plays exactly what the music needs. He no longer plays string bass. He's a fantastic electric bass player. When he was with Chick Corea, it was awesome.

"John Heard puts himself down to the extent where it's ridiculous. He's one of the best bass players I've ever heard. Who's got a feel like that? The only person who doesn't know it is John."

I said, "John thought Oscar Peterson had a low opinion of him. I had to tell John that when his name came up, Oscar Peterson said, 'John Heard is one of the watershed bass players.'"

"I think it's because he's a self-taught bass player," Don said. "When you're self-taught on the bass . . . . I always think to myself, 'If I was a real bass player, I'd be able to pick up my bow and go down and play with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra."

"You mean you don't think you're a real bass player?"

"I don't think of myself as a bass player at all. Not like Dave Holland. He could play in the symphony. He can play anything. And John Clayton's another one. Forget it!" (John Clayton did in fact play in the Concertgebouw Orchestra.)

"Those kind of guys — George Mraz is another one — they're real bass players, to my mind. I know I can do some things, but I know there are other areas where I'm really lacking on the bass. Joel Quarrington is one of the greatest classical bassists in the world. He lives here in Toronto. There are maybe a dozen guys in the world on his level, and maybe not that many. So in tune and with so much power. He's like Rostrapovitch. Clayton is sort of like that."

I said, "Ray Brown said to me once that a bass player's life is a constant battle of intonation."

"Oh it is!" Don said. "I don't know any bass player who ever thinks he's in tune. They always worry about it. You're always just hoping you're in tune. You play differently depending on what key you're in. The electric bass used to drive me up the wall, because it's in tune or it isn't. You hit it, and it's out of tune? Too bad.

"Ed Bickert has solved the problem of intonation on guitar somehow. I don't know how, but he's solved it. He's in tune. Lenny Breau was too. They are the in-tunest cats! I've never heard Ed play out of tune; he's unbelievable."

In fact, the Boss Brass, I've been told, tunes up to Ed Bickert.

The problem is that in most designs, the electric bass, like the guitar, is a fretted instrument. Once you tune it — whether on the open strings or the fifth fret or by the harmonics or however you do it — you're stuck with the sound it makes on any given fret. Early bowed instruments had frets, but some genius decided they should be removed, and so violins, violas, cellos, and contrabass are without frets. This permits the players to make their own pitch, adjusting instantly and reflexively to any perceived variant. It was this question that Don was discussing.

Terry Clarke has for some time now been living in New York — his apartment is on Roosevelt Island. He is married to Leslie Mitchell. Her father is Gordon (Whitey) Mitchell, television and movie writer and producer and erstwhile bassist. Thus the late Red Mitchell was her uncle. Terry and Leslie have one son and one cat.

Don lives in a modest brick home in the northern part of Toronto. He practices and writes in a small but well-equipped studio in the basement, which you reach by a narrow and steep flight of steps. How they got his grand piano into that basement is a mystery to me.

Don and his wife Norma — they have no children and, like Terry, they have one cat — were married in 1966.

"Norma," Don said, "is a professional highland bag-piper. She's a really good piper, excellent. Her family is all Scottish. Her name was Nicholson. She used to win all the competitions. She went Scotland and played the Highland Games and won them all and was pipe major in bands that took trophies out of Scotland that had never left the country before. She's from Vancouver. I'm English. My parents came from England, but Norma's Scottish."

"I've never seen a girl or a woman bag-piper," I said.

"Oh, there are lots of 'em," Don said. "Norma's as good as anybody. She does films and jingles and all that stuff. She's getting to be a pretty good jazz drummer too. She plays in a trio with a couple of other women. I did a gig with them on vibes and they were a very nice rhythm section. She plays kinda like Jimmy Cobb. She's got time that is absolutely perfect. She knows all the tunes and never screws up. She doesn't have a ton of chops, but she's got that kind of Jimmy Cobb groove that never stops."

Don Thompson is now fifty-five and at the peak of his powers. The end is not in sight. The motivation is not instruments, as his comments suggest: it is the deep and sustained love of music.

He said, "Most of the time I don't feel like I'm working. Everybody says, Gee, you're doing this and you're that. But it doesn't seem like work to me. I've often thought that if I ever retired, I'd just go out and play anyhow."