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Jazzletter

P.O. Box 240
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June 1995 Vol. 14 No. 6

He Fell From a Star
Part One

He was a mysterious man, in many ways, as elusive and evanescent as his art. He could be maddeningly absent-minded. Yet he could be closely attentive and solicitous, and you never knew quite how much Gil Evans was noticing about you. His childhood is an enigma, and there is even a question about his real name. Tall, lank, professorial of mien, rather feminine in the very best sense of the word, he was kind, self-critical, and self-doubting, a man who in my opinion — and it is widely shared — didn't put enough value on his own music. Musicians worshipped him. I asked his son Noah what he was like during Noah's childhood. Noah said, "I didn't really know who he was. He was just a very nice father."

Shortly after the 1960 Miles Davis-Gil Evans album *Sketches of Spain* came out, I was talking to Gil on the telephone. The entire album was infused with a Spanish musical feeling and one track was an adaptation of a movement of Joaquin Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*, a concerto for guitar and orchestra.

Nat Hentoff, in vivid liner notes for the album, wrote: "What is most remarkable is the surprising authenticity of phrasing and timbre with which (Miles) plays. It is as if Miles had been born of Andalusian gypsies but, instead of picking up a guitar, had decided to make a trumpet the expression of his *canto hondo*. And Evans also indicates a thorough absorption of the Spanish musical temper which he has transmuted into his own uncompromisingly personal style."

People, I told Gil that day, were puzzled by the album, not knowing whether to call it classical music or jazz.

Gil said, "That's a merchandiser's problem, not mine. I write popular music."

This reply suggested that Gil refused to be trapped in categories. Many "jazz" musicians, including Duke Ellington and Miles Davis, have expressed discontent with the word "jazz", seeing it as constrictive and limiting. But Gil's comment also indicated the breadth of his musical interests. At one period of his life he wrote a great many arrangements for singers, including Helen Merrill and Lucy Reed. Some of the charts on the very first Johnny Mathis album, which George Avakian produced for Columbia Records, were Gil's. Later in his life, he would record an album of material by Jimi Hendrix. You can like that album or hate it, but Gil's musical interests were inclusive, hugely inclusive, not exclusive.

"I go along with the rhythm of the time," Gil told the Toronto jazz critic Mark Miller in 1984. "Jazz has always used the rhythm of the time, until it becomes formalized . . . Current jazz, now jazz, uses the rhythm of the time."

But for Gil Evans, a man whose music was never "popular" in the strict sense of the word — nothing he did on his own ever sold very well — the assertion that he wrote popular music borders on the inscrutable.

Creed Taylor, who produced a number of Gil's finest albums, says that he thinks he meant the popular idiom, not the extent of the sale. "And that was his concept," Creed said. Gil's music was idiosyncratic, often imitated but never equalled. No one wrote like him before him, and for all his general influence, no one has written like him since.

Gil told Nat Hentoff in 1957, "I have a kind of direction of my own . . . my interest in jazz, pop, and sound in various combinations, has dictated what I would do at various times. At different times, one of the three has been stronger."

Citing this, the British critic Max Harrison wrote in a superb analysis of Gil's work published in his book *A Jazz Retrospect* (New York, Crescendo, 1977), "Such an attitude would obviously prevent Evans from being a member of any self-conscious and organized movement in music for any length of time, and it may be added that he has never been overly concerned with the 'importance' of his writing, as a lot of it has been done not so much as personal expression as in pursuance of further knowledge through learning in a practical way."

Indeed. Gil threw a lot of the scores out. Others were kept by those who had commissioned them, including Miles Davis, and simply disappeared.

Max Harrison wrote:

"Despite their undoubted — if somewhat overrated — contribution to jazz, the swing bands, once established, stood in the way of further orchestral developments. These could only resume when the bands came off the road and orchestral jazz was created by ad hoc groups assembled mainly, if not exclusively, for recording purposes. Such conditions allowed far more varied instrumentation than hitherto, a wider choice of repertoire — which no longer had to be orientated to a dancing public — and the application of more diverse techniques of writing. Missing from much of this later music is that feeling of integration which can only be achieved when a group of men play the same repertoire together over a long period, but in compensation the studio players' superior executive skills allowed more adventurous scores to be attempted."

So did improved recording techniques. If you wanted to put classical guitar in front of a jazz orchestra — and Gil did exactly that in the Kenny Burrell album *Guitar Forms* — you could do it. These improved techniques permitted the use in jazz, even with big bands, of the flute.

Gil abandoned the standard jazz instrumentation of trumpets-trombones-saxes-and-rhythm section, using instead flutes, oboes, English horns (the classical woodwinds) along with French horns, tuba, and a few of the conventional jazz instruments. He enormously expanded the vocabulary of the jazz orchestra. Though Miles Davis is considered the sire of so-called Cool Jazz, on the testimony of almost everyone who was in on the late 1940s experiments that led to the album now called *The Birth of the Cool*, the central figure was Gil, and the music was a development of Gil's writing practices for the Claude Thornhill band.

Gil's childhood is enigmatic. Little is known about his father, but according to Anita Evans, the mother's maiden was Margaret Julia McConnachy. "Gil said they were Scotch-Irish. She was one of many children, something like fourteen or seventeen children. That's why she left home at such an early age. Gil said she got on boats and visited South Africa and Australia. It must have been months going there."

According to Anita, Gil's mother told him that he had fallen from a star and she found him on a beach. "She told Gil he was her gift, from a star," Anita said. "Gil said that until he was eleven, he didn't know anything else."

He was in fact born in Toronto May 13, 1912. How a man perceives himself necessarily becomes part of his perception by others, and Miles Davis in his autobiography says that he met "a Canadian arranger" named Gil Evans. Miles certainly didn't invent that; so apparently Gil saw himself as a Canadian, even though his mother took him to Stockton, California, when he still was young.

The musician who knew Gil earliest and longest is the great lead trumpet player Jimmy Maxwell. Jimmy was born January 9, 1917, near Stockton, where Gil grew up, and played not only in the band Gil formed there in their youth but continued to work with Gil over the years, including the period when Gil and Claude Thornhill were both writing arrangements for the Skinnay Ennis band. That band had originally been Gil's. Gil met Thornhill through Ennis, thereby beginning an association that produced music as influential in the subsequent half century as that of Fletcher Henderson, Bill Challis, Duke Ellington, and Don Redman in the first half.

Gil told Ben Sidran that Don Redman "was one of my first teachers, you know?"

He said, "I lived in a little town in California where nothing like that ever happened. But a man from San Francisco would come up every week to a little record store there and brought all the latest releases. So I was really raised on Don Redman, Duke Ellington, the Wolverines, and McKinney's Cotton Pickers. The Casa Loma band . . . I heard them all. And the radio was a big thing then, in the early '30s. Every day you'd hear a band from New York. Duke would be playing from some supper club there, or something like that. And Don Redman had a great band, wow! He had a big band, but they were packed together tight. Three trombones, three trumpets, four saxophones, they're all bunched up together.

"Don Redman was the original arranger, big-band arranger, of jazz. And he used to broadcast from there all the time. He used to sing these songs in his funny little voice. And *Chant of the Weed* was his theme song."

Redman, born in Piedmont, West Virginia, on July 29, 1900, the son of a music educator, was a child prodigy who played all the double-reed instruments by the time he was twelve. He graduated with a degree in music from Storer College when he was only twenty, made a living as a saxophone player, then joined Fletcher Henderson's band, for which he wrote. He then joined, played, sang, and wrote for McKinney's Cotton Pickers; he was largely responsible for transforming the group into a major jazz band. He went on to premier his own band in October, 1931. It lasted until 1940.

Gil told Nat Hentoff: "It was the sound of Louis' horn, the people in Red Nichols' unit, the McKinney Cotton Pickers, Don Redman. Redman's Brunswick records ought to be reissued. The band swung, but the voicings also gave the band a compact sound. I also was interested in popular bands. Like the Casa Loma approach to ballads. Gene Gifford broke up the instrumentation more imaginatively than was usual at the time."

Like many composers and arrangers of his and for that matter later generations, Gil would slow up records on a hand-crank Victrola and write down what he heard. Where he learned to read and notate music remains unknown.

Remembering the days of that Stockton band, Jimmy Maxwell said, "He was very cool, very casual. I'll give you an example. We had a great opportunity to play at the University of California at Berkeley. We loaded into this big old Cadillac. We got the whole band in it and the instruments were in a trailer. Half way to Berkeley the trailer broke loose and fell upside down. The instruments were smashed and the music was blowing all over the countryside. Most of us got out and almost cried. Gil was standing beside the road having hysterics laughing. He thought it was the funniest thing he had ever seen. He had strange reactions like that."

"He was very trying to his friends," Gerry Mulligan said when he heard that story.

There is even a question about Gil's real name. The standard references say it was Ian Ernest Gilmore Green. Maxwell, who knew Gil's mother, says it was Gilmore Ian Rodriguez or Rodrigo Green. The reference books say he had Australian parentage, even that seems questionable.

On the evening of November 24, 1984, Gil, who was in Toronto to play a concert of his music with a Canadian band, had dinner with Mark Miller in a Chinese restaurant called the Shanghai. He told Mark:

"My mother carried a mandolin with her. She played folk music. I think they came from Calcutta. They were married in Australia. They moved to Jersey. Then they moved to Canada."

Gil's father, he said, "was a gambler — a horse gambler.

"My mother told me he'd rent a car and take everyone to the races, but the next week he'd be pawning her jewelry. She always told me never to be a gambler. Well, I've gambled on life."

Apparently his mother moved back to the United States. She must either have left his father or his father had died. Gil told Miller: "I came back here (to Toronto) after my first stepfather was killed. My mother moved back here for a little while when I was about four." Note the reference to a first stepfather. There must, then, have been at least two of them. His mother apparently had a residence visa for the United States, if she had been living in New

Jersey. But even if she had not, migration back and forth across the Canadian-American border was a lot more casual then than it is now.

Maxwell said, "Gil had a room in Stockton. He didn't live with his mother. She was a nursemaid for a family who built combines and all kinds of farm machinery." This was the Deere family.

"She was a very nice lady," Jimmy said. "With all Gil's names, his mother called him Buster." (Hence the name of Gil's 1942 chart for Thornhill, *Buster's Last Stand.*)

"I didn't know his step-father," Jimmy said. "No one knew him. He and the mother had separated long ago. He'd deserted her, I think. Gil was out of high school when I met him. He was out of junior college, for that matter. He went to Modesto Junior College."

"I wonder what he took there," I said.

"That's a good question," Jimmy said. "He was self-taught. I don't think they even had a music course."

Gil told Mark Miller: "I never heard any music until I came to Berkeley High. A high-school chum of mine had his father fix him a basement playroom with a piano, a record player, and a drum set. This was in 1927. So that's where I first heard Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Don Redman. I fell in love with the music. I'd never heard that music before. Only pop music. No classical music either. Where I came from, they'd never *heard* of classical music." This tells us that Gil was living in Berkeley, California, at the age of fifteen.

Miller asked him, "Were you set from the beginning on being a musician?"

"Soon's I heard Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington I was, yeah. From then on."

"To be a writer, an arranger?"

"Well, I didn't know what I was going to do," Gil said. "Finally I ended up copying records. I'd play 'em over and over again. I learned how to write some of those things down . . . the Casa Loma band. I started my own band in high school."

Leonard Feather's 1960 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Jazz* says Gil was "raised in British Columbia, state of Washington, and Stockton, Calif." One newspaper story says his father died when he was six months old, but it tells us nothing about who the father was or what he did.

Gil told me that he started listening to bands on the radio in Saskatchewan. None of the writing on Gil I have encountered mentions that period in Saskatchewan. I remember Gil smiling ruefully when he spoke of the bitter prairie winters.

Gil's mother apparently moved from Saskatchewan to British Columbia, then south to Spokane, Washington. If there is no mention of Saskatchewan in any writing about Gil that I have been able to find, neither is there mention of Montana. Yet when Mark Miller asked Gil about his schooling, Gil said:

"It changed every year. I went to local schools, always a little school. I used to ride a horse to school in Montana, and I haven't ridden a horse since."

His mother supported him by working as a cook. Gil told Miller: "She worked in farms and logging camps and mining camps. My mother was maybe five feet tall. She wore a four-and-a-half shoe. And yet she'd get up at three or four in the morning, in one of those mining towns, and fire up the stoves and feed all those men and get them off to work by six o'clock. Amazing."

Mark Miller thinks Gil was about ten when his mother took him to the United States. Anita thinks he may have been as young as seven. And Gil's mother moved about California as she had moved about Canada. Anita said:

"He attended Burbank High School in Burbank, California, and left there in 1928. But he also attended Berkeley High School. He was down in Burbank, then went up to Berkeley, then over to Stockton. He graduated from Stockton High School in June of 1930. This was the pattern of his mother's changing jobs. I remember him telling me he even went to Hollywood High. So he was a California guy with that Canadian ethic."

In terms of how he saw himself, there is a conversation I had recently with Noah, one of his two sons. Noah told me, "He always referred to himself as Canadian."

And Anita said: "It's true. Gil told me he always felt like a foreigner in the United States. He didn't even become a citizen voluntarily. When he was drafted during World War II, he was given American citizenship automatically." This was the practice whenever foreigners were drafted or volunteered for the U.S. armed forces. Anita chuckled and said, "He didn't even own a passport up till then."

Given that he was apparently resident in the United States from an early age, why did he persist in thinking of himself as Canadian?

"His mother programmed him that way," Anita said. "She'd refer to Americans as 'these people.'"

"His sister lived in Canada," Jimmy Maxwell said. "I remember a big event. He'd finally tracked down this sister he knew he had. And he was very excited about going up to meet her."

This reunion happened during Gil's first marriage, to Lillian. Anita said, "Gil had come late in his mother's life. She was past forty-five. And he found a sister who was a good deal older than he. He'd been raised like an only child. So this woman was maybe fifteen or twenty years older than Gil. I remember him saying that her name was Jean. She had married a salt millionaire. And so she was living the really good life up in Canada. He and Lillian went to see her. They made one visit to her. But the life was on such a different level that they didn't stay in touch.

"She had apparently not forgiven their mother. She said, 'She was an aimless wanderer.'

"But this little lady managed to get all over the world with her spunk. Her life is truly a film of another era. She was dead by the time I met Gil, but she lived to be ninetyish anyway."

She must have had an incredibly independent streak. Certainly the evidence is that she would take no nonsense from the men in

her life, and apparently there was a succession of them. Whether she married them all or not, nobody seems to know.

Anita said, "Gil told me the first name he remembers having was Gilmore Gustin. That stepfather was after he was seven years old and in the United States. Mr. Evans came after Mr. Gustin, and Gil took that name."

There was much about Gil that I found Canadian. His perpetual, sometimes infuriating — it angered Jimmy Maxwell — self-doubt seems to me very Canadian. So is the meticulous perfection of his work.

In that Canadian uncertainty, a form of over-compensation seems to occur. Afraid of being found wanting, many Canadians — certainly in the arts, and doubtless in other fields — strive to achieve a technical command that reassures them, carrying them to the outer frontiers of skill. This is not to speak of art, only of craft, which may or may not be the tool with which great art is made. I have seen this quality of self-doubt in a goodly number of superb Canadian musicians. The only Canadian musician I know who *seems* to have overcome it is Oscar Peterson, and I am not entirely sure about even him. He once told me:

"When I went to the United States, I'd go into the studio to do radio shows or television shows, and I'd look and there wouldn't be any blacks in the orchestra, and I knew really that it was a clique thing, everyone had their pets, and they did what they did. This is why black musicians had to go the way of the jazz route. We had no other route to go. And I decided that if the only way I was going to make it happen was to frighten the hell out of everybody pianistically, then that's the way I was going to make it. If that's what it took to get the attention, then I was going to do my best to do it that way."

I have often quipped that every Canadian secretly suspects every other Canadian of being an amateur, which may explain the viciousness of criticism of Canadian artists in Canada. What I have only recently understood is that almost every Canadian suspects *himself* of being an amateur, which is crippling. Not that Canada doesn't have its fair share of arrogant idiots.

There is a major Canadian piano and music teacher named Phil Cohen. Many outstanding American musicians have studied with him. Phil once told me: "Synthesis is the American talent. Analysis is the Canadian talent." And there is, for all the warmth of their writing — Quincy Jones once said to me, "The Canadians write so warm" — a quality of the icily analytical in the work of Robert Farnon and Gil Evans, and, I would add, Rob McConnell. It is the *clarity* of the linear writing that strikes you. Kenny Wheeler's writing also has that quality of linear interest.

And so, on the basis of the testimony of his wife, of his son Noah, and of Miles Davis, and indeed my own experience with him, Gil, to be understood. must be perceived as he perceived himself: as a Canadian composer, for all the strong Spanish and western influences in his work, not to mention jazz itself, the most American of all artistic innovations.

Gil wrote very slowly. Nat Hentoff quoted Gil as saying, "I have more craft and speed than I sometimes want to admit. I want to avoid getting into a rut. I can't keep doing the same thing over and over. I'm not a craftsman in the same sense as a lot of writers I hear who do commercials and jazz work. They have a wonderful ability with the details of their craft. The details are all authentic but, when it's over, you realize that the whole is less than the sum of the parts."

Hentoff also cited a comment by Gerry Mulligan:

"Gil is the only arranger I've played who can really notate a thing the way a soloist would blow it . . . . For example, the down beats don't always fall on the down beats in a solo, and he makes a note of that. It makes for a more complicated notation but because what he writes is melodic and makes sense, it's not ha to play. The notation makes the parts look harder than they are, but Gil can work with a band, can sing to them what he wants, he gets it out of them."

This perfection of craft is evident in the classic Gil Evans scores. When the Miles-and-Gil *Porgy and Bess* album came out, Bill Mathieu, a young Chicago arranger who had been writing for Stan Kenton, wrote a review for *Down Beat* in which he said, "The mind reels at the intricacy of his orchestral and developmental techniques. His scores are so careful, so formally well-constructed, so mindful of tradition, that you feel the originals should be preserved under glass in a Florentine museum."

But Gil clearly had no sense of their value. Otherwise they wouldn't be lying in landfills. "I write popular music." But that thoroughness, that surpassing technical command, was in all of Gil's earlier writing; his late work requires further discussion. But he fiddled and fooled with scores, altering a jot here, a tittle there, a sixteenth note somewhere else, right to the last desperate minute. He often ran record dates over cost, losing money even f himself.

Gil's music reflects his affinity for things Hispanic. The Mexican influence is everywhere in California, in the tile roofs and yellow stucco walls, in the very air, in the cuisine, in the love of bright colors, and certainly in the music. Consider his writing in *Sketches of Spain*. Canadian in his own mind though he might be, there was never a more Californian composer than Gil Evans, and to get the real feel of what he was all about, it is helpful to know not just America but California. If the north is in Sibelius, the west is in Gil.

The terrain around Stockton in summer is a dry beige color, a baked land scattered with dark California oaks. It is lonely and vastly spacious country. And Gil spent his latter adolescence a scant thirty-five miles from Dave Brubeck, a native of that area.

"You're absolutely right," said Allyn Ferguson, former jazz pianist and arranger, former Stanford University composition teacher, now a prominent film composer, and a native of San Jose,

California. "Gil's writing was very western and very Californian."

This combination of characteristics — the Canadian and the Californian — prompted me to write that Gil's *Sketches of Spain* made me think of *A View of Toledo* as perceived not by El Greco but by Lawren Harris, a major Canadian painter.

"I'm from Tracy, California," Jimmy Maxwell said. "That's a town about twenty miles away from Stockton. I worked with Gil from 1932 to '36, when I left to go with Jimmy Dorsey.

"Gil copied Casa Loma almost exclusively, either off their records or their radio broadcasts. That whole band was based on Casa Loma. We even had uniforms like theirs. The guys had to double, and we played cornets instead of trumpets. We used to take off from rehearsing to listen to the broadcasts. And we would each be assigned sixteen bars to copy off as quick as we could, if it was a tune that wasn't recorded. And so his arranging at that time was entirely a copy of Casa Loma.

"We kept trying to get ahead. In 1934, we went to Lake Tahoe and played there for the summer. We got a break going to Sacramento and then the union stepped in and said, 'You're not members of the Sacramento local, so you can't play here.' So then we went back to playing casual dates in Stockton. We got a job in the local ballroom, playing five nights a week. And when summer came, we went to Capitola Beach. We were financed pretty much by a friend of Gil's who took us down there. We all worked renovating the ballroom, scraping the wax off the floor and all that stuff, getting it ready. That was kind of a fiasco. The guy lost money. Eventually Gil paid it back to him out of our salaries.

"Then we had a chance to audition down at Balboa Beach, and fill in the last two weeks of the summer if we made good. So we all drove down to Balboa Beach in this one car with a trailer, everybody sitting on each other's laps for 450 miles. And we auditioned that afternoon, and the guy said, 'Okay, you can finish out the last two weeks of the season.' And then he said, 'Well you can stay here through the winter, but it only pays twelve dollars a week.' Everybody in the band agreed. I lived on it, I took cornet lessons from Herbert Clarke, and sent money home, two dollars to my mother and two dollars to Mr. Clarke, who normally charged twenty-five. When I told him I made twelve dollars, he said, 'Well, I'll charge you two.' I did my own cooking. You know, you could get a dinner for twenty-five cents." Herbert L. Clarke, a featured soloist with the Sousa band, was a technician of such power that he was the standard against which trumpet players were measured. He wrote one of the two required trumpet methods; the other is the Arbans Method.

"The band just hung on at Balboa Beach," Jimmy said, "or maybe they made more in the winter, after I left. Gil fired me, in reality. He told me something about the wives in the band complained about me, that I was leading their husbands into trouble — having a good time.

"All the bands used to come down to see us. Benny Goodman came down, and all the guys from his band. The Casa Loma band came down to hear us. By that time, we were copying Benny Goodman. As soon as Benny made *Sometimes I'm Happy* and *King Porter Stomp*, Gil copied them off. Some of the other guys copied some arrangements. I copied some Ellington and Lunceford arrangements. *Dream of You* was one I copied. *Solitude*. Gil copied one of Ellington's, *Sweet Dreams of Love*.

"After I was fired, I was zipping around the country. I got a wire from Gil to come back with the band. I went back to Balboa Beach for a while, and nothing was happening there. I left the band because I got a job in Los Angeles. I was playing around town.

"Benny had fixed us up with Music Corporation of America. We used to go in every week and talk to Norman Doyle, who was our representative. We'd say, 'When are you going to get us a really good hotel spot?' And Norman Doyle would say, 'Are you guys really ready?' And Gil would say, 'I don't know, we could be a little more polished.' We could have killed him. Norman didn't know anything. If we had told him, 'Yes,' he'd have put us in.

"I used to get into some pretty bad arguments with Gil sometimes because I didn't think he was pushing enough. But Gil was like that. He was terrible about finishing arrangements. When he first came to New York, I was doing pretty well, and I got him several assignments, people who were thrilled at the idea of him writing for them. Patti Page for one. I was on the staff orchestra at Columbia Broadcasting System. He'd take a job to write an arrangement and he'd never show up. They'd have a specific date to broadcast that tune, and they'd say, 'Where's your friend Gil?' I'd call him up, and he'd say, 'Oh Jesus, you know, I forgot all about that.'

"He screwed himself like that.

"Getting back to the thing with Norman Doyle. It kept going on. Finally, Skinnay Ennis left Hal Kemp's orchestra and he was out in Hollywood, going to start a band." Skinnay Ennis was a drummer and an odd, kind of corny, singer with Kemp.

Jimmy continued, "Music Corporation told Skinnay, 'Listen, we've got a band ready-made for you, if they're interested in doing it. We've got this band down at Balboa Beach.' I wasn't in the band then. Skinnay liked the band and he said he'd take it over.

"As far as I know, Gil gave him the entire book and didn't charge him anything. He just wanted to see the guys work. But four or five of the guys didn't belong to the L.A. local and couldn't work. For six months they could hang on until they could get a card and then they were taken back into the band but a couple of them gave up and went home. That's how Skinnay got hold of the band. Gil gave it to him."

Gil's band had lasted from 1933 until 1938, when he was twenty-six.

"When Skinnay took the band over," Maxwell continued, "he brought Claude Thornhill to write the vocal arrangements for him. The band went to the Bob Hope radio show. Manny Klein played in it the first year, but then the next year he wasn't there and I

played first on it. We went on tour during the summer of '39. Benny Goodman was in the Victor Hugo, where we'd been playing with Skinnay — a very fancy restaurant in Beverly Hills, on Rodeo Drive a block above Wilshire. It was a place all the movie stars came to. It was a restaurant with very good food and dancing till one o'clock. That's where we played the whole winter and did the Bob Hope show. I did that for two years.

"I wanted John Hammond to bring me to New York. I heard Mezz Mezzrow was going to start a mixed band. I didn't have the nerve to go on my own. John said to come around to the studio and audition — not just sit in — with Benny Goodman, so he could hear me. I went with Benny.

"Gil stayed writing for Skinnay. Skitch Henderson came in as the piano player. Gil wasn't that much of a commercial piano player. When Skinnay brought in Claude Thornhill, he and Gil hit it off right away. They had great admiration for each other. According to Gil, he learned a lot from Thornhill. I don't think Gil had any formal or classical training on writing, though he certainly knew more about writing than anybody who went to college. He would copy things off Debussy records. Casa Loma did that; they had something from Cesar Franck as an introduction to something. Casa Loma was doing that in the early 1930s. Duke Ellington had a lot of that French influence, which he got through Willie the Lion Smith, whom he said he owed so much to. Willie knew all that stuff. I used to talk to him in the bar at the Forrest Hotel, where all the musicians used to stay. That was a big hang-out. We'd have jam sessions every night. Charlie Christian used to come there.

"Gil learned a lot from Claude in the sense of 'Do a little of this, do a little of that. Don't overdo this or that.' That kind of thing. Not actual writing, because by that time, harmonically and structurally, Gil knew what he was doing. He wouldn't write difficult fingerings for saxophones, for trumpets. That's why it took him so long. He always labored over every inch of it. He wasn't one of those guys who would just sit down and say, 'Well this is a C seventh chord, I'll write such and such.'"

"Did any of that quality of Gil's writing start creeping into the band on the Bob Hope show?" I asked. (The Hope show was sponsored by Ipana tooth paste, which was purported to contain a magical protectant called irium. The laws on advertising were less strict in those days. Signature themes emphasizing the sponsor's name or product were part of most radio network shows and so it was with the Hope show. Every week the show featured a vocal group singing "Poor Miriam, poor Miriam, neglected using irium . . . " Few people realize that Johnny Mercer wrote that, his only known commercial.)

"Oh yes! It did creep into it," Jimmy said. "But I think most of the stuff we did on the Hope show Claude wrote."

Gil wasn't writing only for the Skinnay Ennis band on the Bob Hope show during this period. He also wrote for the Chesterfield Supper Club and the orchestra conducted by Paul Weston.

Paul remembers:

"We did five shows a week with Johnny Mercer and Jo (Stafford, later Paul's wife) and the Pied Pipers. It involved a hell of a lot of arrangements — five fifteen-minute shows a week. Gil did some work for me then.

"We both lived in the same apartment, Casa Argyle, on Argyle Street north of Hollywood Boulevard. Argyle is two blocks west of Vine Street. Skitch Henderson, Axel Stordahl, Sammy Cahn, and a bunch of guys lived there."

"How was he about delivering charts on time?"

"He was all right," Paul said. "He knew when we went on the air. It's like Billy May. Billy would sometimes be on the conductor's stand writing the fourth chart for a session that was already in progress. Every arranger does everything he can think of, go to the bathroom, sharpen pencils, walk around the room, go out in the yard, anything but start the head-hurting creative process. And Gil just waited longer than some others. But of course Billy always got it done and Gil always got it done.

"Gil had a *great* sense of humor. He was very quiet with a sly, cute sense of humor. We would get laughs out of the same kind of jokes and musicians' talk. We spent some time, as everybody did in those days, Gil and Axel and all the guys, socially.

"With Skinnay's band he couldn't write what he wanted to write. And even with me, he had to conform to what the sponsor wanted. I don't think he was as comfortable as he was later when he got with Claude Thornhill. Even then, when he was writing for me and Skinnay Ennis, I think he wanted to go beyond the five saxophones, six or seven brass custom of the way everybody wrote in those days, and get into different kinds of unisons and combinations of instruments that were easier to work with in the context of jazz orchestration than in commercial orchestration. I don't think he was ever terribly comfortable with commercial orchestration such as we had to do for records and radio at that time. He was looking further than that.

"And I don't think at that time he had much sense of his own worth.

"Then he got the call to go to New York with Thornhill."

"And," I said, "I was told that you had to lend him the money to get there."

"Where did you hear that?"

"I don't know," I said. "Probably from Maxwell."

"Ah," said Paul, who is the kindest of men, "don't put that in there."

"Why not?" I said. "Gil was notorious for being casual with money, including the money he lent people and forgot. Maybe that's why he was so often broke."

"Well, okay," Paul said. "You know, I never saw him again after he left California."

Thornhill formed his band in 1939. Gil, who knew the owner of the ballroom at Balboa, recommended the Thornhill band to play there. He told Nat Hentoff in 1957, "Claude had a unique way with a dance band. He'd use the trombones, for example, with the

woodwinds in a way that gave them a horn sound." Pointing out that Thornhill had the band play without vibrato, except for expressive purposes, Gil said: "I think he was the first among the pop or jazz bands to evolve that sound . . . .

"Claude's band was always very popular with players. The Benny Goodman band style was beginning to pall and had gotten to be commercial. I haunted Claude until he hired me as an arranger in 1941. I enjoyed it all, as did the men.

"The sound of the band didn't necessarily restrict the soloists. Most of his soloists had an individual style. The sound of the band may have calmed down the over-all mood, but that made everything feel very relaxed.

"Even before Claude added the French horns, the band began to sound like a French horn band. The trombones and trumpets began to take on that character, began to play in derby hats without a vibrato.

"Claude added the French horns in 1941. He had written an obbligato for them to (an Irving) Fazola solo to surprise (him). Fazola got up to play; Claude signaled the French horns at the other end of the room to come up to the bandstand; and that was the first time Fazola knew they were to be added to the band.

"Claude was the first leader to use French horns as a functioning part of a dance band. That distant, haunting, no-vibrato sound with the reed and brass sections in various combinations.,

"Claude deserves credit for the sound. My influence, such as it has been, was really through him. His orchestra served as my instrument to work with. That's where my influence and his join, so to speak.

"In essence, at first, the sound of the band was almost a reduction to an inactivity of music, to a stillness. Everything — melody, harmony, rhythm — was moving at minimum speed. The melody was very slow, static; the rhythm was nothing much faster than quarter notes and a minimum of syncopation. Everything was lowered to create a sound, and nothing was to be used to distract from that sound. The sound hung like a cloud."

"This kind of sound," I asked Jimmy Maxwsell, "that floating Thornhill sound," I said. "Do you have any opinion or thought on who originated that? Was it Gil or was it . . ?"

"Gil! One hundred percent."

"He originated that sound?"

"Absolutely! Jimmy said. "No question of it."

"The whole French floating sound?

"Absolutely. It was Gil. He wrote some beautiful things. *Blues for Texas* or *Texas Blues*. It was a record Jack Teagarden had made with the Charleston Chasers, Benny Goodman and Teagarden. Gil did an arrangement on it. He had the sound of coyotes on the French horns."

Duke Ellington said of Thornhill, "I wonder if the world will ever know how much it had in this beautiful man."

Thornhill was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, on August 10, 1909, and thus was five years Gil's senior. Like most jazz pianists — Earl Hines, James P. Johnson, Willie the Lion Smith, Teddy Wilson, Art Tatum, Oscar Peterson, Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett, and on and on — Thornhill had a solid grounding in classical music. He studied piano at the Cincinnati Conservatory and the Curtis Institute, then recorded with Bud Freeman and Billie Holiday and played with Benny Goodman. He wrote arrangements for various bands, including that of Benny Goodman. He first recorded as a leader in 1937, and in 1940 formed a band that lasted until 1942. Gil wrote for that band.

The war interrupted both careers. Gil spent three years in the army and Thornhill played piano in the Artie Shaw navy band that performed under cruel conditions in the South Pacific. Thornhill reformed his band in 1946 and immediately hired Gil to write for it.

"I always considered Gil my best friend," Jimmy Maxwell said. "I even gave my son his middle name after Gil. When my son was born, Gil had just got out of the Army. He came and lived with us three or four months. We had an apartment on London Terrace in New York. Unfortunately it was a two-room apartment. It was impossible. My wife and I slept in the living room and Gil stayed in the room with the baby. He played piano all night, and sometimes I stayed up all night and played records with him. My wife was at the limit of her endurance. After three months, I had to ask him to get his own place.

"Gil was very charming and very sophisticated-seeming. Compared to the rest of us, you'd say he was an intellectual. He read. He had two or three favorite books. He had a book called *Genius*, and he was a great admirer of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by T.E. Lawrence. Another favorite was a mystery story called *The Cadaver of Gideon Wick*. Another was *A Generation of Vipers*, which had just come out, the first put-down book."

I saw the Thornhill band a year after it was formed, in 1947, at a roller rink in Hamilton, Ontario. Its personnel included the fresh young trumpeter Red Rodney. I remember standing in the crowd at the front of the dance floor — the impression is so vivid that I can see the texture of the hardwood flooring — listening in a state of astonishment to the sounds emanating from that orchestra. No recording ever captured the panoramic colorations of that band's sound.

Leonard Feather wrote in the 1960 edition of his *Encyclopedia of Jazz* that Gil's arrangements for Thornhill "showed more originality in their variety of tonal texture than anything else that was then being created in either the dance band or the jazz field; nevertheless he was completely ignored by the critics and unknown to the public."

Gerry Mulligan said, "Claude wrote *Snowfall, Adios, Portrait of a Guinea Farm*. Claude had great humor in his writing. He was very funny, for being such a shy man. Bill Borden wrote deceptively simple charts for that band. The bulk of the book that is known and identified as being by Claude Thornhill was by Bill Borden. And as I say, those arrangements were deceptively simple.

They just sounded so logical and so simple, but they were very, very tastefully done, and perfect for the band.

"Gil wrote *Anthropology*, *Donna Lee*, and *Yardbird Suite* for Thornhill. My favorite was *Lover Man*. Another ballad he did — and later he did another version for the nonet — was *Moon Dreams*. But my favorite was *Lover Man*. It included about ten sharps, I think! But it was so beautiful."

(*Anthropology*, *Donna Lee*, and *Yardbird Suite*, three Charlie Parker tunes, as well as Gil's own *Buster's Last Stand*, can be found on a 1990 Columbia CD.)

Mulligan said, "There was always at least one clarinet going, and in some things they used two clarinets. You know, in the original band, Claude had four saxes and two clarinets: Danny Polo and Irving Fazola. You can't beat that for sound. Fazola had the most beautiful sound in the world and Danny was right next to him. Early on it was three trumpets, two 'bones, and either one or two horns. Two, I think. Even in the early band it was two horns and two clarinets. It changed."

Ira Gitler quotes Lee Konitz in his 1985 book *Swing to Bop* (Oxford University Press):

"The thing about that band that is most important, I suppose, in this whole transitional period, is that Gil was, in fact, teaching the men how to play bebop . . . . Although I thought of Claude's band as basically a ballad band. That was its forte . . . . "

Thornhill was an enigmatic man with a quirky sense of humor and a drinking habit. Konitz said: "He was a shy guy. His wife traveled with him quite a bit of the time. So they were off by themselves. Gil conducted the rehearsals."

Gil said of Thornhill, "He could play the piano with no vibrato, and that's what the band did. He could make the piano tone fit into the arrangement."

That is a typically inscrutable Gil Evans remark. The piano, of course, *has* no vibrato. And yet anyone who ever heard Thornhill's cool, detached, quite lovely piano sound knows what he means. And Brew Moore said, "He was some kind of freak genius. He could take the worst out-of-tune piano and make it sound in tune."

Gitler quotes Thornhill:

"Perfect intonation in the sections and balance of the overall sound of the orchestra were emphasized. With the exception of certain pieces in our arrangements, the orchestra played almost without vibrato. Vibrato was used to heighten expressiveness. Even before we added French horns to the band, the feeling and sound were there; the trumpets and trombones, often in hats, imitated the sound, and did it quite well."

Thornhill added tuba to the band around the end of 1947. He hired Bill Barber; that sound, with a tuba bottom, would be in almost everything Gil wrote for rest of his career, and the tuba player he used was often Barber.

Gerry Mulligan said:

"I didn't play with the band that much. I was arranging for Claude. And then at one point I went on the road with him for a few months. I think that was 1947."

"And I'm pretty sure you were in the band when I saw it," I said. "And that was '47. I'm sure Lee Konitz was in the band and I guess the drummer was Billy Exiner. I was in absolute awe of the sound that band was putting out."

"Yeah," Gerry said. "People don't know what we're talking about when we say that. They say, 'Yeah, well, mm-hmm.' But the band was orchestral. It wasn't a band.

"I met Gil probably when I was arranging for the Krupa band. I knew about his writing before that. I used to visit Gil with Claude's band when I was working for other bands. One time I came back to New York after leaving one of the bands; it might have been when I left Tommy Tucker. And I stayed at the Edison Hotel. My room was on an air shaft on the west side of [redacted] building. And every morning about ten o'clock, the band started to rehearse, because Claude was just back from the service and they were reorganizing. I would sit hanging out the window, listening to the rehearsals. A friend of mine, a guitar player from Texas, would come by, and we'd listen to the rehearsals.

"I went back to Philadelphia, to write for Elliot Lawrence's band. And I lived there for a while. I got a postcard from Gil saying, 'What are you doing living in Philadelphia? Everything's happening in New York. Come back.' So I did. I stayed in a succession of rooms. Finally Gil said, 'Stay here.'"

Gil said: "Claude was a complex arranger. After the war he never really got writing again. He leaned on me, and he didn't want to. I let him because I wanted the experience. He liked the modern jazz, but it wasn't what he wanted to play. He wanted the old *Where or When*, *Snowfall*, style. He liked things to float and hang — clarinets moving very quickly over a sustained background."

Gil said the instrumentation after the war was three trumpets, two trombones, two French horns, a tuba, two alto saxophones, [redacted] tenors, baritone, and a separate flute section. The French horns had been Thornhill's idea, but Gil added the tuba and flutes. The band's vibratoless sound, Gil said, made it compatible with bebop, and in turn made it attractive to the boppers, who were also interested in Gil's harmonic practices, including the use of minor ninths.

Gil told Ben Sidran: "Up until that time, with the swing bands, mostly the harmony had been from Fletcher Henderson, really. Where you harmonize everything with the major sixth chords and passing tones with a diminished chord, you know. So that was how things changed with bebop."

(To be continued)

The Jazzletter is published 12 times a year, PO Box 240, at Ojai, California 93024-0240. Subscriptions for the calendar year, January to December, are $60 for the U.S. and Canada, other countries $70, $80 air mail.