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Jazzletter

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Apology

My apologies for having fallen so far behind. In October I contracted a debilitating respiratory ailment. It lasted more than two months, going into pneumonia. It is apparently an epidemic illness. But it has waned, and I'm getting caught up on everything, including the Jazzletter.

To the Ladies

Here is the latest girl-singer joke.

Pianist calls for a rehearsal. Says to the girl singer, "I want to go over *Autumn Leaves*. We'll start in G-minor. At bar five, we'll modulate to B-flat major. You'll do three bars in five-four time, and the next bar we'll go to D-major." He continues these complex instructions until the girl protests:

"But you can't expect me to do all that!"

"Why not?" he says. "You did it last night."

Girl-singer jokes are like Polish jokes, Brazilian jokes about the Portuguese, and Canadian jokes about the Newfies. Sample:

"How many girl singers does it take to screw in a lightbulb?"

Answer: "Just one. She'll get the piano player to do it anyway."

Another: "Why does the girl singer knock at her own door?"

Answer: "She can't find her key."

I laugh at these jokes, like everyone else. But the discomfitting truth is that they reflect a deep hostility in the jazz world toward singers, and particularly from pianists, who often resent playing for singers. (This is because pianists are Great Artists and should not be forced into the subservient role of accompanist.) I call it the war between the singers and the pianists, and every singer knows what I mean. Among the exceptions: Mike Renzi, Eddie Higgins, and Lou Levy love to accompany *good* singers.

There's the rub. Why does every amateur sitting-in girl singer feel constrained to do *Lush Life*? Only a master should essay it. But the amateurs do it, to show off, I suppose, how good they are, or think they are. And then there are the Sarah Vaughan wannabes who deconstruct *My Funny Valentine.* Florence Foster Jenkins lived. So did Mrs. Miller.

The amateurs aside, the condescension to girl singers derives in part from an anomaly of the English language.

The terms "boy singer" and "girl singer" derive from the days of the big bands when, during ensemble and instrumental solo passages, the two would sit demurely on chairs in front the sax section, looking, I always thought, an uncomfortable cross between superfluous and hapless.

Because English has limited structural resources for identifying gender — mostly the -ess suffix to which the extreme element of the women's movement has taken umbrage — we don't know what else to call male and female singers. The French word for "sing" is *chanter*, and a singer is a *chanteur* or a *chanteuse.* There was for a time a gossip-column grafting into English of the word *chanteuse*, but it had about it a faint condescension and sarcasm, ending in the deliberate mispronunciation *shon-too-zee.* Nowadays actresses want to be called actors, and that seems reasonable. We do not refer to doctresses, after all. But the French aren't confronted by this problem. In French, all things have gender: the world is masculine, the sea is feminine. You never refer to anything as *it* but as *he* or *she.* French has no neuter pronouns.

We were stuck with boy singer and girl singer because we couldn't say singer and singess. The term *boy singer* has vanished; *girl singer* has not.

But the girl-singer jokes simply do not fit the reality. Not all of it, anyway. The good "girl singers" are very solidly skilled, and often highly trained.

Once America was blessed with any number of small nightclubs that featured excellent singers singing excellent songs, and even the big record companies were interested in recording them. Some of the best singers played piano ranging from the competent to — Blossom Dearie, for example — the excellent. Most of them were women, and there was a glamour about them, superb singers such as Betty Bennett, Irene Kral, Ethel Ennis, Marge Dodson, Lurlean Hunter, and "regional" singers such as Kiz Harp of Dallas. Many of them are forgotten; Shirley Horne has enjoyed a resurgence; in Chicago Audrey Morris is still singing subtly to her own lovely piano accompaniment; New York has Anita Gravine and Nancy Marano (who you might catch *writing* her scat solos in taxis), and Washington D.C. has Ronnie Wells.

These people were sometimes called jazz singers, although they were no such thing, or torch singers, a term I found demeaning, not to mention inaccurate. Male singers were with equal condescension from an ignorant lay press called crooners.

The songs they sang were drawn from that classic repertoire that grew up in the United States between roughly 1920 and the 1950s, and had any of us been equipped with foresight, we'd have known that the era was ending, doomed by *How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?* and *Papa Loves Mambo* and *Music Music Music* even before the rise of rock.

For a number of reasons, I have been thinking of late how many of those "girl singers" have been friends of mine over the years, and how skillful — aside from *gifted* — they have been. As for the joke about the girl singer who can't find her key, Mike Renzi told me this story:

Marilyn

He first encountered Marilyn Maye many years ago in a Boston club, where he led the house trio. At an afternoon rehearsal, she handed out her charts. She'd have the group run through eight or sixteen bars, then say, "Okay, you guys know that. Next tune." Mike said the whole rehearsal lasted about twenty minutes.

That night she arrived at the gig, she addressed the microphone and, without so much as an arpeggio, hit the first note of the first song flawlessly in tune.

If you have an RCA album she did called *The Second of Maye*, recorded live in a club, you can hear her do that on *It Never Entered My Mind.*

I met Marilyn early in the 1960s on a record date. Her producer, Joe Rene, had assigned to her a song I wrote with Antonio Carlos Jobim, *Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars*. It was new at the time, and since the original key is C and it has a small range that anyone can handle, Marilyn hadn't even seen it. Peter Matz wrote a wonderful arrangement on it. But the song was scheduled for the end of a three-hour session that ran from 7 to 10 p.m. The time ran out. It was about 10 minutes to 10. I figured I was going to lose this recording. Peter ran the orchestra down once on the tune. Joe asked her if she thought she could do it. She said she would try. Peter gave a down beat, and she began. She did it in a single take, magnificently; indeed it is one of only three recordings of the song I have ever liked. I love to play that track for people and point out to them that she's sight-reading. By the out-chorus, she's adding variations.

Marilyn has the most prodigious technique of any singer in "popular" music. For that matter I don't think too many opera singers can equal it. Marilyn can go from *forte* to *pianissimo* in a blink, and back again. Her high notes soar effortlessly. Her intonation is flawless, almost awesome. Her time is equally impressive. She has a wonderful command of tonal colors, and an exquisitely controlled vibrato. She tosses in effortless appoggiaturas in perfect taste. Her breath control is amazing: at the end of the second eight of *It Never Entered My Mind*, she sails into a soft start of the next phrase without pause.

None of this is to the purpose of showing off the singer; it is at the service of the song. She catches all the dramatic nuances of a lyric and brings the meaning of each line into relief.

There has long been a debate over what is and is not a jazz singer. Personally, I don't care; great singing is great singing. And it is instructive that Sarah Vaughan *objected* to being called a jazz singer. "I'm just a singer," she'd say. The problem with all categorization is that it doesn't work for those who exceed it, and Marilyn can sing anything.

If she's that good, and you've never heard her, what happened?

Marilyn made seven albums for RCA, all of which I have. But the Beatles and Bob Dylan and the folk movement and all that were icumen in, and the company did with her what it did to so many singers: tried to get her to embrace the new trash. In fairness to Joe Rene, her producer, I must say that he was privately disgusted. The accountants and lawyers were wresting control of the business from the creative people. Joe told me that the company had at one time allowed him three or four years to build the career of a new singer. But the accountants now wanted to see return on the investment in a year or less. Thus singers of the stature of Ethel Ennis (also on RCA) and Marge Dodson (on Columbia) were dropped, allowed to slip away into obscurity. Joe Rene eventually quit and went into making children's records.

Joe was an interesting man. He'd been a bandleader in Holland before the war, then, as a Jew, spent the Nazi occupation hiding in an attic with another man. The two played chess all through the war and Joe wrote a new book for his band. He claimed to be a demon at chess. I liked Joe, who was caught in a trap as the record business retooled to pour out garbage. He desperately wanted to make Marilyn the star she deserved to be, and in that effort had her record some pretty egregious stuff; I remember it well.

Marilyn made spectacular appearances on the Steve Allen and Johnny Carson shows, blowing away everyone who heard her. But nothing could save her from the rising tide of crap, and she went back to Kansas, where she still lives; and where I still talk to her on the telephone.

She told me recently, "In many cases I'm not mentioned as a jazz singer." She should count her blessings for that. "Hell, I never was there. And certainly some of the material in the act is commercial. I feel I must do the RCA hits, *Cabaret* and *Step to the Rear*, the march-around-the-breakfast-table songs that Joe Rene and RCA decided I would record. In those days, I didn't even *know* the meaning of, or that I was, the commitment singer. It interests me now when I reflect on my misguided career.

"Always when I've sung I've kept my eyes open most of the time. I do move in performance — I'm a pretty good dancer. I don't sit on a stool. I stand and I present it, always trying to entertain. The notes are as pure and in tune as I can make 'em. There are improvisations on the melodies, but not too far out, and I do love to communicate with the audience. I sing to them, not for them.

"To many jazz concert producers, all of this takes me out of their world. Usually, my asking price is a problem. It's higher than those who will perform with the existing group. I prefer to carry my own group, musicians who demand, and can get, top money. Then it means air fares, hotels, etc., for four of us. Even if the promoter is capable of hearing that most everything I do has a jazz feel, the fact that the audience laughs a lot, enjoys a lot, almost always gives me a standing ovation, baffles the promoters. So they go away thinking, 'Well, she's good, but she's commercial.'"

Aaaah yes, jazz is now an Art Form, and must be treated soberly. No pleasure, please.

Nonetheless, Marilyn stays remarkably busy through the prairie areas of the United States. "She's a star on Topeka," she quipped. It's her home town, and when she was eleven she sang there with Matt Betton's college swing band. And she sells out wherever she goes. *Without benefit of a current record contract.*

"I'm singing really well," she said. "Much lower, of course." That happens to every singer. With the passing of years, voices drop as much as a fourth.

"I *need* and *love* to sing," she said. "I certainly don't want to retire. I have great health, great energy, and when the energy runs low, I push a lot — the Aries sign helps. Fortitude, attitude, and the survival instinct are with me always."

Annie

Another "girl singer" friend is Annie Ross, who in 1957 — forty-one years ago; are you ready for that? — joined Dave Lambert and Jon Hendricks to form Lambert-Hendricks-Ross, one of the best vocal groups in jazz history, and the most adventurous.

Annie was born in Mitcham, England, on July 25, 1930, but spent her childhood in Los Angeles with her aunt and foster mother, the Scottish-born singer Ella Logan. Logan had toured Europe, performed in Broadway musicals (including *Finian's Rainbow*) and film, and recorded with Adrian Rollini and other bands. In California, Annie was a child movie actress. She moved to Europe in 1947 and sang all over the continent, returning to the United States in 1950. She wrote words to Wardell Gray's *Twisted* and recorded it, causing a sensation in jazz circles.

The pioneer of bop vocals was Dave Lambert, born in Boston on June 19, 1917. With Buddy Stewart, born in New Hampshire in 1922, he recorded *What's This?* with the Gene Krupa band in 1945 — the first recorded bebop vocal. (Stewart was also a superb ballad singer. I have always thought that if Clifford Brown had lived, Miles Davis would have had some serious competition for pre-eminence, and so too would Frank Sinatra, had Buddy Stewart lived. Like Clifford Brown, Buddy Stewart was killed in an automobile crash.)

Jon Hendricks was born in Newark, Ohio, on September 15, 1952. When he was fourteen he would sometimes sing with fellow Ohioan Art Tatum. He played drums while he was in college, studying literature and law, but was encouraged by Charlie Parker to make music his profession and moved to New York, where he met Dave Lambert, who became his room-mate. He and Lambert began planning an album that would eventually be called *Sing a Song of Basie*, to be recorded using ten top New York City studio singers.

They were introduced to Annie at record producer Bob Bach's apartment, and, because of her jazz background, particularly her recording of *Twisted* (and *Farmer's Market*), they asked her to come to their rehearsals and coach the singers for phrasing. She tried, but the singers just couldn't get the Basie feel, and producer Creed Taylor was growing frustrated. "Frankly," Annie said, "I was a little miffed that they hadn't asked me to do it in the first place." She would get her chance. It was evidently Creed Taylor's idea that they let the vocal group go, and that Jon and Dave, with Annie, overdub their voices up to the full orchestrations.

The album was a smash. It was followed by *The Swingers* (1959), *The Hottest New Group in Jazz* (1959), *Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross Sing Ellington* (1960), and *High Flying* (1961).

In 1962, Annie returned to England. She was replaced by Yolanda Bavanne. And in 1964, Dave Lambert left the group. He was replaced for a time by Don Chastain, and sometimes in later years Jon worked with his children.

None of it was quite the same. Dave Lambert, Jon Hendricks, and Annie Ross struck magical sparks, and anyone who never saw them in a club or on a stage such as that of the Monterey Jazz Festival has no idea how much excitement the three of them could generate, singing difficult ensemble passages or complex lyrics set to (by Annie and, even more, by Jon) famous jazz solos.

One night in October, 1966, Dave was returning to New York from a gig in Cape Cod. "He was always a good Samaritan," Jon said. "If anyone was in trouble on the road, he'd always stop and help." Near Westport, Connecticut, Dave saw a motorist with a flat tire. Dave pulled over to the side of the road and stopped. According to Jon, Dave was working on the lugs of the man's wheel when a big semi went roaring by. Jon said Dave was pulled under its wheels. Whatever the details, that was the end of any hope of reconstituting Lambert-Hendricks-Ross.

I would see Annie occasionally in London. She married actor Sean Lynch, whom I found to be a delightfully warm and friendly man. I remember meeting the late Marty Feldman at a party at their apartment. And I remember a letter Annie had received from a farm woman in Devon. Annie had sung my lyrics to Bill Evans' *Waltz for Debby* on her television show. The woman had written to tell her how touched she had been by that lyric, which expressed her feelings about her little girl, and asked for a copy of it, which Annie sent her. I don't even know the woman's name; but she gave me the best review I ever received.

Annie had her own nightclub, called Annie's room. It was a very pleasant club, in a basement, and I beat its slot machine all one evening. Annie had that club from October 1964 until the fall of 1965, and so when we talked recently I said, "My God, Annie, we haven't spoken in more than thirty years."

Jon and I were talking about Annie, and Sean's name came up. "He was such a lovely person," Jon said.

"I said, 'What do you mean, *was*?"

"Didn't anyone tell you?" Jon said. "He was killed in an automobile accident."

Another one.

In 1985, Annie returned to the U.S. and, like Jon Hendricks, lives in New York City. She can sing anything: the L-H-R years have left an impression that bop vocals are all she can do, but she is also an excellent ballad singer. So, by the way, is Jon Hendricks, although few people realize it.

It was inevitable that she and Jon would start thinking about reviving the L-H-R repertoire, and a few months ago they went into rehearsals. "It wasn't really that hard," Annie said, "although at the very beginning, I thought, 'Oh my God!'

"Then it became a matter of, 'Which of Dave's lines do I sing, which ones does Jon sing?'

"But then, after we got over the nervousness, the energy and the excitement were still there. It works, and it swings, and my voice is getting stronger. It's back to that hard swing. It's a workout, but it's worth it. Oh, it feels incredible!"

Jon said, "It's the first time we've sung together in thirty-six

years. Well, we did, once in that time, but this is a real reunion. The audiences are incredible. People who heard us in the old days are having tears of joy, and their children are jumping."

Much has been made of the space trip at seventy-seven of John Glenn, as an inspiration to older people. Try this one on: Jon Hendricks is also seventy-seven. And Annie is sixty-nine. And they are out there swinging.

Shirley

It was seventeen years ago — in 1982, as best we can remember. I met her in Vancouver, British Columbia. SOCAN, the Canadian performing rights society — in those days called CAPAC — sponsored a three-day round-table on songwriting. I was asked to be on some of the panels, including one on lyric writing. On that panel was a girl who seemed to me to be in her late teens; actually, she was twenty-eight.

"It was in a big ballroom," she said recently, "and there were four of us at the table, but I can't remember who the other two were." Neither can I. Her name was Shirley Eikhard, and she had had considerable success as a writer of songs, both music and lyrics, in the pop field. I felt rather out of place there. Most of the people at the conference were of, shall we say, the current pop persuasion, and my songwriting esthetics come from the era of Kern and Mercer and Rodgers and Hart, and in French, Charles Trenet, Charles Aznavour, and Gilbert Becaud.

Shirley's first hit was a song called *It Takes Time*, recorded by Anne Murray. Shirley wrote it when she was fourteen. Her songs have been recorded by Emmylou Harris, Alannah Myles, Chet Atkins, Ginette Reno, and the Pointer Sisters. One of her songs, *Let's Give Them Something to Talk About*, was a hit for Bonnie Raitt, reviving Raitt's career; it won a Grammy in 1979.

During those few days in Vancouver, I was impressed by Shirley's intelligence, eagerness, and openness. The years went by. I stayed vaguely in touch with her. She was living in Toronto, where we have mutual friends. A year ago, one of them called to say he wanted to send me a jazz album she'd recorded. I am not comfortable with pop and opera people who suddenly decide to do "jazz" and/or the great standards. But what could I say?

The CD arrived, Shirley on the cover, older now but still pretty. Called *Going Home*, it was about to come out on Blue Note. I let it sit for two or three weeks, then decided that it was my duty to grit my teeth and listen. I took it to the car, put it in the machine, and started to drive away. I turned it on, and within four bars hit the brake and pulled over to listen, hypnotized.

Shirley Eikhard is a striking singer. Beautiful intonation, beautiful time, a naturally rich voice a little on the dark side, musicianship. The musicians include Ed Bickert, guitar; Bob Erlendson, piano; Mark Kelso, drums and percussion; George Koller, bass; Marcus Printup, trumpet; and Mike Murley, tenor saxophone. Shirley arranged all the tunes, sang all the backup vocals, plays chromatic harmonica on one track — a little in the manner of Toots Thielemans — lays the synthesizer string pads on a couple more, wrote all the songs, and produced the record.

She writes like French songwriters: story songs. I was reminded of some of those of the late French novelist Boris Vian. One of the songs, *Crazy from the Heat*, is about a guy who gets into gambling debt with the Mafia and has to go on the run; he can never go home again. It reminds me of a Boris Vian song about a boy who steals a car in Paris, runs down an old man and kills him, and flees to Guatemala, where he weeps and yearns for home.

Another song, *Emily Remembers*, is about a woman with Alzheimer's. It's incredibly touching. Shirley told me she got the idea when a friend's father contracted the ailment. Shirley researched the disease for months, and then wrote this song. She thinks and works like a novelist. The results are startling, and one song is as unprecedented as the next.

Shirley comes from what in Canada is called Down East, the Maritime provinces of the Atlantic coast. She was born in Sackville, New Brunswick, on November 7, 1955.

"My mother was a country fiddler," she said, "and my father was a bass player. My brother played instruments. I remember seeing a photograph of me when I was three, holding a set of drumsticks. So music was always around.

"Originally, I didn't want to be a songwriter. I really wanted to be a painter or an astronomer.

"When I was twelve, my parents were playing a club in Prince Edward Island. I sang at a party. Some people from the *Singalong Jubilee* — " a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation network show " — heard me. It was the show on which Anne Murray was discovered. I was booked for the show, and Ann Murray heard one of my songs and got interested."

Today, with her success, Shirley lives on twenty-five acres near Orangeville, Ontario, with two dogs and six cats. She is actively writing and preparing a new album.

The first album got heavy promotion by EMI in Canada, and sold well there. But Blue note in the United States did little with it, and it sold poorly.

Shirley was baffled by the U.S. treatment of the album. The publicity and other people at Blue Note expressed great enthusiasm for the record, and so did those in other branches and departments of the company. (It is a subsidiary of EMI.)

"Why would a record company behave like that?" she asked.

I don't know, Shirley, but if you find out, we'd all like to know the answer to that question.

You should still be able to get the record, however, and singers who want to find fresh repertoire should look into this CD. So for that matter should anyone interested in superb (and unusual) songs.

Jeri

A few weeks ago I got a phone call from Kathryn King in New York. Kathryn is the daughter of Jeri Southern by Jeri's first husband, Robert King, a cellist. Kathryn is a pianist and recording engineer. After a period of negotiation, Kathryn got the rights to her mother's records. She selected, re-engineered, and produced the first extensive CD of Jeri's work, for GRP. It may be out by now;

certainly it will be a boon to all those admirers who for years have been trying to get their hands on Jeri Southern records.

(Jeri's second husband was the composer and arranger Bill Holman, with whom she stayed friends long after their divorce, and Kathryn remains close to him.)

She was born Genevieve Hering near Royal, Nebraska, on August 5, 1926, the baby in a family of two boys and three girls. Her grandfather had come from Germany in 1868, and in 1879 built a water-powered flour mill on Verdigris Creek. His sons and grandsons, including Jeri's father, worked there.

Jeri was always reluctant to be interviewed. We had wonderful conversations, often filled with laughter, but once, when I turned on a tape recorder, she froze, and I turned it off. So when Kathryn asked me to write the notes to the new CD, I called Jeri's sister, Helen Meuwissen, in Laingsburg, Michigan, for information. The experience was mildly disconcerting: her speaking voice is so much like Jeri's. Family vocal resemblances can be startling. Does anyone remember how much radio announcer Jim Ameche's voice resembled that of his actor brother, Don Ameche?

"She could play the piano by ear when she was three," Helen said. "She started studying at six. I don't think she ever quit taking lessons." (Jeri studied piano to the end of her life.)

"She went to Notre Dame High School in Omaha, and always credited the nuns there for her background. She took voice lessons in Omaha with Harry Cooper. It was her desire to be a classical singer."

Jeri once told me that each of us has two voices, one a larger voice usable in opera and "concert" music, the other a natural speaking voice. I protested this at first, and Jeri pointed out that the speaking voice of Sarah Vaughan was light and girlish; her singing voice, however, was a deep, resonant instrument of scope and dark colors and incredible range. I remembered then that when I was young, I was able to produce a credible operatic tenor. I simply lost interest in it under the naturalistic influence of Frank Sinatra, Peggy Lee, and, yes, Jeri Southern. Jeri's influence on other singers is far wider than is generally realized.

Jeri illustrated her point by tossing off a few bars of opera in a voice of enormous size and power, one that I never knew she had. Her sister Helen told me she *never* heard Jeri do that, and I heard it only that once.

Jeri began playing accompaniment piano after she was graduated from high school, and then moved to Chicago. Her agents told her she could make more money if she sang, a standard casting for women pianists in those days: women were not supposed to be instrumentalists, they were supposed to sing, or maybe play harp.

Jeri told me that she had achieved success as a singer when she began singing in her *speaking* voice, not her trained operatic voice. This was a smoky kind of voice, with a very soft enunciation and a haunting intimacy.

Her career blossomed in the early and middle 1950s. The first of her records that I heard was *You Better Go Now*. I remember hearing it for the first time in Montreal, when I was a reporter for the now-vanished *Montreal Star*. I was blown away by it: the simplicity, the exquisite lack of affectation or mannerism. It was recorded in late 1951, when she had just turned twenty-five. She turned out a whole series of superb performances through to the dates that produced *Nobody's Heart* and *You're Nearer*, both by Rodgers and Hart. They were recorded November 26, 1957. I met Jeri probably two years later, in 1959.

Jeri had three fatal flaws as a performer.

First, she was extremely shy. I remember her telling me once in Chicago that the first time she arrived at a nightclub and saw her name on the marquee, it terrified her: the sense of responsibility for drawing an audience, and then pleasing it. She feared the look of expectation in an audience's eyes.

There are performers who passionately crave the audience. They will climb over the footlights, climb over the tables, do anything they can to claim the audience's attention, and, I suppose love, or the illusion of love. Jeri wasn't like that. She simply loved the music. It was everything. That was the second fatal flaw. She was too much musician, a perfectionist. Her philosophy of performing was the antithesis of Carmen McRae's, who not only wouldn't do a song the same way twice but probably couldn't remember how she did it the last time. Jeri worked on interpretation until she got it "right", which is to say the way she wanted it. Then she fixed it and did it that way again. But that very process led her to boredom. Boredom, then, was her third fatal flaw.

Jerri 1990 Photo by John Reeves

I have noticed an interesting thing about those with the harmonic and instrumental skills to scat-sing. They often don't and won't do it. Nat Cole was a classic example of this fidelity to the original melody; so was Jeri.

When she got to be a big star, her handlers — the managers, agents, publicists, record-company executives — set out to glamorize her. Certainly with her Germanic beauty, she had the basic material for it. They dressed her in fancy gowns. They took her away from her beloved piano and stood her in front of a microphone, with someone else to play for her. Nothing could have been more diabolically designed to send her fleeing. And, like Jo Stafford (and Greta Garbo, Doris Day, Rossini, Sibelius, and Umberto Giordano, among others) she simply quit. She walked away from the business and the discomfort it brought her.

But the love of music was always there, and she took to teaching, both singers and pianists. She wrote at least two textbooks on piano.

The final love affair of her life was with the great film composer Hugo Friedhofer, always considered the dean of the profession by other composers. He and Jeri were fastidiously correct about this relationship. They lived in their own small apartments on the third floor and opposite sides of a courtyard in which there was a swimming pool in a building on Bronson Avenue, not far from central Hollywood. His was a bit of a mess of books and manuscripts; hers was decorated with exquisite feminine taste. Because Hugo was twenty-five years her senior, I asked her once if the relationship had been a romantic one. She said, "Oh yes!"

This was how much musician Jeri was: she orchestrated Hugo's last film score, a documentary called *A Walk in the Forest.*

When Hugo died, she was distraught. She stayed in her bedroom and saw no one. Jeri had overcome a drinking habit. When one of her students told me she was drunk, I said, "She's got a right. Let her do it." Jeri stayed out of it for days.

There was deep concern among composers that Hugo's scores might be lost. Indeed, the full scores in most cases had been lost, tossed out by the studios to make shelf space, but his detailed and complete six-line "sketches" were in his apartment: *One-Eyed Jacks, Seven Cities of Gold, The Best Years of Our Lives, Marco Polo.* All of them. Jeri had the key to that apartment. I got a big cart, entered Hugo's apartment, loaded all his scores, hustled them to Jeri's apartment, and dumped them in the middle of her living room. I phoned his daughter, Karyl, a cartographical librarian at Stanford University, who retrieved them and donated them to Brigham Young University, where they now repose.

Jeri regained her composure and good spirits, though she remained prone to periods of reclusive depression. She continued teaching, and some quite famous people went to her. Such was her fame in the memories of her older fans that she was offered considerable sums of money to emerge from her "retirement" for just one performance in Las Vegas. Her friends all tried to talk her into it. She wouldn't budge. She went one night to a club to hear Anita O'Day, who importuned her to sit in. Jeri squirmed, but such was the pressure that she finally sat down at the piano and sang. She did one song, and fled the bandstand. She told me later that the experience was entirely as painful as she remembered it.

With Hugo gone, I used to drop by to visit Jeri every now and then. And illustrating some point in a discussion of this song or that, she would go to the piano and play and sing for me. I was thus one of a very small group of people who got to hear Jeri sing late in her life. She got better throughout her life, and during these small private performances, I could only shake my head and think what the world was missing. Her piano playing in those last years was beautiful. It had grown richer harmonically, and the tone had evolved into a dark golden sound.

I told her that I could not, I simply could not, play piano and sing at the same time. She said, "I could have you doing it in a month." And so I was going to study with her. Steve Allen told me recently that he too planned to study with her, in his case to learn more about piano voicings.

She was working on a book of piano arrangements of songs by her friend Peggy Lee. One afternoon a few years ago, I telephoned Peggy. "How're you doing?" I began.

"I'm very sad," she said. "Jeri Southern died this morning."

Jeri succumbed to double pneumonia on August 4, 1991. The next day, August 5, she would have turned sixty-five.

Once she told me that during those Chicago years, she considered me her closest friend in the world. It is an honor I will not forget. I truly loved Jeri, not only the singer but the person inside who, through music, so diffidently allowed us glimpses into her all-too-sensitive soul.

At her memorial service, Rod McKuen quoted something whose source I have been unable to trace: "Whenever someone dies, a library burns."

It certainly did when Jeri died.

Swing Kids and Its Critics
by Grover Sales

When a clumsy journalist asked Dizzy Gillespie if he ever played any "serious" music, Dizzy grew serious indeed: "People have *died* for this music. You can't get more serious than that." Dizzy could have had in mind the plight of jazz fans in the Third Reich, where, if you were caught with records or magazines devoted to what Dr. Goebbels called "Americano nigger kike jungle music," you could be imprisoned — or even shot. This became the subject of the unique 1993 film *Swing Kids*, written by Jonathan Marc Feldman with obvious love and rare authenticity. Following disastrous reviews that revealed more about the critics than the film, it folded after a week in the theaters, but survives on video cassette and an occasional run on Cable TV.

Those of us who came of age in the 1930's to embrace big-band swing with religious intensity have no trouble accepting the premise of *Swing Kids*. But reviewers unfamiliar with Mike Zwerin's *La Tristesse de Saint Louis: Swing Under the Nazis* — or the careers of Alfred Lion and Francis Wolff who fled Hitler to found Blue Note Records — found it "silly" and "weird."

But the film's premise is rooted in fact. At the dawn of Nazi

hegemony in the early 1930's, a close-knit band of dissident teenagers, as portrayed in *Swing Kids,* loomed in open rebellion against the regime, united by their adoration of Basie, Ellington, Ella, Django and frenzied jitterbugging in the soon-to-become *verboten* dancehalls of Berlin.

What is even more rare, or unheard-of, in the annals of movies about the Nazis, *Swing Kids* explores the varied appeal of the Hitler Youth. Peter (Robert Sean Leonard), a middle class idealist, despises the Nazis but reluctantly gives way to peer pressure. His upper-class swing buddy Thomas, (Christian Bale), is at first lured merely by the perks of the Hitler Youth — better food, resplendent uniforms, a sense of belonging, access to motor bikes and the more desirable girls — but gradually succumbs to relentless lectures and films about the "Jewish menace" to evolve into a fanatical believer, causing an irrevocable split with Peter. When Thomas hears his father criticizing the Nazis, he reports him to the Gestapo, not an uncommon practice in the Third Reich. Their guitarist friend Arvid, ineligible for the Hitler Youth due to a badly crippled leg, is the most jazz knowledgeable of the Swing Kids and the most openly defiant. He gives his name as "Django Reinhardt" when rousted by Storm Troopers who break his jazz records and smash his left hand with a rifle butt, rendering him truly Django-like, with two useless fingers. The jitterbugging scenes in the cavernous Berlin dance halls are stunningly staged, evoking the unbridled joy and jubilation characteristic of this imperiled Germanic jazz tribe. In a brilliant unbilled performance, Kenneth Branagh plays a quietly unctuous Nazi plainclothes official attracted to Peter's mother (Barbara Hershey) and determined to keep her rebellious son out of trouble.

Swing Kids explores a phenomenon that befuddled its unknowing reviewers — jazz music, or rather the jazz life, as a talismanic outcropping of youth protest against totalitarianism, a situation not unique to Nazi Germany: it recurred in Czechoslovakia under the Soviets confronted with a huge youth-cult "that liked syncopation more than their Government," as put by Josef Skvorecky, the Prague jazzman-writer whose novella *The Bass Saxophone* remains one of the few attempts at jazz fiction that can qualify as literature. Skvorecky, who now teaches at the University of Toronto, said the main organizing thrust behind Charter 77, the historic 1977 manifesto of Czech intellectuals and artists demanding that the Government honor the Czech Constitution, was the Jazz Section of the Musicians Union. A clear forerunner of Czech liberation, Charter 77 was the direct result of the jailing of the rock group The Plastic People of the Universe for "creating public disturbances and singing indecent songs." Unlike their predecessors in the Third Reich, the Czech Communist Party faced a more dire and numerical threat to public order than did the Nazis with *La Tristesse de Saint Louis.* In an extraordinary ten-page article with the exquisite title "Hipness at Noon," (*The New Republic*, Dec. 17, 1984), Skvorecky wrote: "If a football stadium is filled with raving youngsters, it signals danger. If it fills only a smokey jazz club with nostalgic middle-aged men, it is just a nuisance. Thus jazz was under fire only until Elvis Presley and hip gyrations reached the first proletarian dance halls, then the upper-New Class ballrooms. At that point the ideological gunmen switched their sights from the saxophone to the electric guitar. The Nazis and the Communists were deadly competitors for the leading role in combating a common enemy — Western democracy and the fruits of its culture. Jazz was to both of them the degenerate outpouring of minds belonging to either a wrong race or a wrong class, or both. The anti-jazz exhortations of Dr. Goebbels do not differ in tone, knowledge, or argument from the effusions of Gorodinsky's *Music of Spiritual Poverty,* that bible of the Stalinist anti-sax squads."

Under the nose of the Soviets in 1958, Skvorecky published a story *I Won't Take Back One Word* in Czechoslovakia's first jazz almanac that included the following posted edict of Nazi regulations "binding for all dance orchestras":

"1. Pieces in foxtrot rhythm (so-called swing) are not to exceed 20 percent of the repertoires of light orchestras and dance bands;

2. in this so-called jazz type repertoire, preference is to be given to compositions in a major key and to lyrics expressing joy in life rather than Jewishly gloomy lyrics;

3. as to tempo, preference is also to be given to brisk compositions over slow ones (so-called blues); however, the pace must not exceed a certain degree of allegro, commensurate with the Aryan sense of discipline and moderation. On no account will Negroid excesses in tempo (so-called hot jazz) or in solo performances (so-called breaks) be tolerated;

4. so-called jazz compositions may contain at most 10 percent syncopation; the remainder must consist of a natural legato movement devoid of the hysterical rhythmic reverses characteristic of the music of the barbarian races and conducive to dark instincts alien to the German people (so-called riffs);

5. strictly prohibited is the use of instruments alien to the German spirit (so-called cowbells, flexatone brushes, etc.) as well as all mutes which turn the noble sound of wind and brass instruments into a Jewish-Freemasonic yowl (so-called wa-wa, hat, etc);

6. also prohibited are so-called drum breaks longer than half a bar in four-quarter beat (except in stylized military marches);

7. the double bass must be played solely with the bow in so-called jazz compositions;

8. plucking of the strings is prohibited, since it is damaging to the instrument and detrimental to Aryan musicality; if a so-called pizzicato effect is absolutely desirable for the character of the composition, strict care must be taken lest the string be allowed to patter on the sordine, which is henceforth forbidden;

9. musicians are likewise forbidden to make vocal improvisations (so-called scat);

10. all light orchestras and dance bands are advised to restrict the use of saxophones and to substitute for them the violoncello, the viola or possibly a suitable folk instrument."

When this Nazi edict was reprinted in Czechoslovakia's first jazz almanac in 1958, "the censors of an entirely different dictatorship," wrote Skvorecky, "confiscated the entire edition. The workers in the print shop salvaged only a few copies, one of which got into the hands of Milos Forman, then a young graduate of the Film Academy."

Noted German critic and record producer Joachim-Ernst Berendt told Mike Zwerin: "People like Goebbels and Stalin knew exactly how strongly jazz implies freedom. Maybe it was only instinctive, but they knew they were being threatened. It can be no accident that totalitarian regimes are all against jazz. You improvise, you make your own decisions, you do not sound like anyone else. Spontaneity means freedom."

As a Czech conductor, a friend of Rudolf Friml, told Gene Lees: "I've had my nose broken twice, once by the Nazis and once by the Communists. It felt the same both times."

Jazz, perhaps the most idiosyncratic of the arts, lends itself least to governmental control, but by no means stands alone among the independent non-politicized arts as the mutual enemy of all totalitarian regimes, as witness Red China, and closer to home, the *gauleiters* of Fascism American Style like Jesse Helms, Dick Armey and Tom DeLay, determined to eliminate our miserably under-funded National Endowment of the Arts.

The reactions of film reviewers who helped to ruin *Swing Kids'* chances for wide distribution seem akin to the notorious attacks on Ellington's 1943 Carnegie Hall premiere of *Black, Brown & Beige* by established music critics languishing in ignorance of the jazz experience. And Benny Goodman's epochal 1938 Carnegie Hall concert goaded the *New York Times'* first-string music critic Olin Downes to write: "hard, shrill, noisy, monotonous . . . swing of this kind will quickly be a thing of the past."

Of the film, Janet Maslin in the *New York Times* wrote: "Swing Heil is the battle cry of the swing kids, long-haired big-band-loving teenage rebels in Nazi Germany. You may want to read that sentence slowly, just to make sure it does not describe some missing chapters of 'Wayne's World' or simply seem too nutty for words." It escaped Maslin that Swing Kids wore long hair, wide English-style trousers, and gaudy ties to signify a dramatic break with the military.

New York Magazine's David Denby, from whom we might expect better, said: "What the naïve filmmakers don't seem to understand is that totalitarianism made rebellion meaningless. No one even noticed." This amazing argument flies in the face of history: the Nazis did much more than merely "notice" this musical threat to their ideology.

In the *Los Angeles Times*, Kenneth Turan found the film "unsatisfactory from just about every point of view. Awkward, hollow and emotionally heavy-handed, it transforms a sea of movie cliches onto those unfamiliar German shores." Leah Rozen in *People Weekly* wrote: "If you are fifteen, it may be deeply meaningful, but to anyone older it will seem like a simplistic historical drama, tarted up with a heavy dose of teen angst."

Similar was the consensus in the standard video guides. *Video Hound said*: "There is something disturbingly silly about the entire production." Martin and Porter's guide said, "Nazi-era drama can't quite figure out what it wants to be . . . undercut by *Hogan's Heroes* style cartoon Nazis . . . pretty slipshod."

Mike Zwerin's carefully researched *Jazz Under the Nazis* includes a wealth of material that unfrocks these reviewers as unqualified to comment on *Swing Kids*. He quotes Horst Lippman who formed the Hot Club of Frankfurt in 1941: "There were gang fights with the Hitler Youth. Club members served occasional jail sentences for delinquency. Everybody knew the Nazis did not like jazz and wanted to suppress it. That made us love it even more. We always felt that only people opposed to the Nazi regime could like this music." In the midst of World War Two, Luftwaffe Oberleutnant Dietrich Schulz-Koehn published an illegal jazz letter. He told Zwerin, "If we had been caught, it could have meant big trouble. But we were young and foolish, and we all loved the music so much." After the War, when scavengers were looking for spoils in bombed-out Berlin, they found records by Goodman, Hawkins and Bechet pasted over with phony labels of German marching songs.

Jazz critics appalled — with good reason — by *The Benny Goodman Story, The Gene Krupa Story, Paris Blues, Young Man with a Horn, Lady Sings the Blues*, and *'Round Midnight* — tended to be high on *Swing Kids*. These included Leonard Feather, who served as a consultant to the film. Leonard lived in Berlin during the rise of Hitler, fled to Paris, wrote there about both films and jazz, and then made a trip to the United States, where he finally settled. His advice to the film-makers, then, came out of first-hand observation and experience.

If you find this film in your video-rental store, I strongly recommend it.

It's a shame that Pauline Kael retired, since she's one of the few — very few — professional film critics with enough knowledge of jazz and its history to make informed comment.

The hostile reception of *Swing Kids* illuminates the difficulty of financing and promoting that extreme rarity, an aesthetically sound and authentic film about the jazz experience. And not least of all, it brings into relief the sorry level of critical reviewing in the United States.

(The writer is indebted to Mike Zwerin for his La Tristesse de Saint Louis: Jazz Under the Nazis; *Josef Skvorecky for* The Bass Saxophone *and* Hipness at Noon; *and Maurice O'Flynn for researching the critical response to Swing Kids.)*

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