

The Courage of Your Tastes: Reflections on André Previn

I've known André Previn since 1959, which makes it one short of forty years. I met him in the fall of that year, when I had been editor of *Down Beat* for about six months and went out to California — for the first time in my life — to cover the Monterey Jazz Festival. But I had been hearing him for many years before that, since his recording career as a pianist began when he was sixteen. And of course I had heard many of his movie scores.

When he lived in California, I lived in New York. Now I live in California and he lives in New York. But we've maintained a casual contact.

One of his friends, playwright and lyricist Adolph Green (of Comden and Green) said, "André's sense of nonsense is as great as that of anyone I know. His is a Perlman-Benchley world. He's constantly amused at the absurdity of life, the foolishness of people's behavior. It's not easy to make him actually laugh, but it's a pleasure. He becomes absolutely crippled with laughter."

Another of André's friends, the playwright Tom Stoppard, said that André speaks in perfect syntax.

Both-men have it just right: André is one of the funniest cats I've ever met. Incredibly articulate, he can put a humorous twist on almost anything. He speaks in a soft voice with exquisite accent and enunciation. He was born German, of Russian Jewish ancestry, in Berlin on April 6, 1929 and as a child studied piano at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik.

A Nazi officer entered the office of his father, a lawyer and former judge. I got the story second hand, but André verified its essence when I asked him about it. The officer said something like this: "You don't remember me, do you? I came before you for a crime I didn't commit, and you believed me."

The officer advised him to take his family and leave Berlin as if he were going on vacation. Any substantial bank withdrawal would be noticed. And so André's father left for Paris with his wife, daughter, and two sons, abandoning paintings, piano, and other treasures. André was accepted at the Paris Conservatory by composer and organist Marcel Dupré, but Hitler was on the move and the Previns left for America, arriving when André was ten in California, home by now to a brilliant émigré community of writers and artists, among them Rachmaninoff, Stravinsky, Joseph Szigetti, Ernst Krenek, Arnold Schönberg, and Thomas Mann. (Mann's fictional composer Adrian Leverkühn in *Doctor Faustus* has always been said to be based on Schönberg, at least in terms of musical theory.) One of these expatriates was Italian composer

Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, which translates Newcastle-German. André studied composition with him. So did Henry Mancini and, it sometimes seems, just about every composer in Hollywood.

I once asked André if he'd retained his German. "Oh sure," he said. "I spoke German to my parents as long as they lived. And I always speak German to the Vienna Philharmonic. It makes them feel better."

His father, hampered by uncertain English, unable to pass the bar exams, taught piano to children, and André felt a compulsion to help his family. He had the mature skills to do it. Such a prodigy was André that he was writing arrangements for Georgie Stoll at MGM at sixteen and at eighteen was a musical director there. At the same time, he was recording jazz for RCA. At twenty, he was nominated for an Academy Award for his score to the Fred Astaire-Red Skelton movie *Three Little Words*.

In 1950, while he was in the army (along with Chet Baker) and stationed in San Francisco, André studied conducting with Pierre Monteux. He returned to Los Angeles and played with, among other groups, the Jazz at the Philharmonic All-Stars. His collaboration with drummer Shelly Manne on a jazz LP of music from *My Fair Lady* in 1956 set a fashion for such recordings based on Broadway musicals.

One of his albums, a lush recording of piano with orchestra and his arrangements, came to a crisis on the date: it was a few minutes short. André went off somewhere and wrote a string chart for some blues, went back into the studio, improvised a theme over it and got a huge hit on *Like Young*.

It was once fashionable, and may still be, to denigrate certain composers with enormous gifts of lyrical melody, in particular Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Edvard Grieg. Fritz Loewe (with whom André worked on the film *Gigi* — Loewe's tunes, André's orchestration and underscore — said Grieg was the most Scottish composer he'd ever heard. Grieg was Norwegian, but his father was British consul in Oslo, and the family was indeed Scottish: his grandfather had emigrated after the battle of Culloden.

When I was young, it was my secret shame that I adored those three composers, for we were in the age of Schönberg and serialism and a gelid intellectualism suffused the world of classical music. Unless the music was inaccessible to the masses, it could not possibly be good, right?

And so it was with a certain shyness that I once confessed to Bill Evans that I had a love of Grieg that I had sort of kept hidden. Bill said that he too had hidden a taste for Grieg.

Somewhat startled, I said, "I know what happened to me, but what happened to you?"

Bill said, "The intellectuals got to me."

Now I once played a trick on André. Well, not exactly a trick.

Bill and I were at Warren Bernhardt's apartment in New York. Warren had an exquisite old Steinway; his father had been a concert pianist, and Warren had played his first classical recital at twelve, just to put things in perspective. Bill was sitting on the piano bench, but we were merely talking. I noticed Warren's copy of the Chopin Preludes sitting on the piano. I opened it to the E-minor, and asked Bill to play it. I was interested in hearing him do so because he used something resembling its left-hand pattern in part of *Young and Foolish* on the *Everybody Digs Bill Evans* album. Knowing how thoroughly Bill knew the piano literature, I thought that something of that prelude got into that performance.

Bill read it down for me, playing it exquisitely. I have ever since thought that had he chosen another career direction, he would have been one of the master interpreters of Chopin.

A week or two later, I had to go out to Los Angeles to write some songs for a movie with Lalo Schiffrin. I think it was an astonishingly awful comedy called *Pussycat, Pussycat, I Love You*, a misguided attempt at a sort of sequel to *What's New, Pussycat?* It was so awful that when Lalo and I saw the working print, we wished we'd never signed the contract, but we had and we did our duty, and my lyrics were a put-on of the picture itself. I have managed to get through the years since then without ever seeing it again. It was so bad that it isn't even listed in Leonard Maltin's inclusive (and useful) *Movie and Video Guide*. So I can't tell you the date. Not that I care much.

In any event, I phoned André, who invited me to the house for a drink or two. It was on Stone Canyon Road. Aldous Huxley lived nearby. Later, one of the hideous canyon fires destroyed Huxley's home and all his papers. André's was spared.

And what did I see lying on his piano but the same Schirmer edition of the Chopin Preludes that had been on Warren's piano. With Bill's performance still in my mind's ear, I asked André to play the E-minor for me. It's a difficult piece to play, not that it's that complicated or hard to read. But the steady eighth-note chordal pattern in the left hand must be impeccably right, and the melody must float with lyrical freedom above it. It takes a superb pianist to control that piece. Jobim's *O Insensatez* has so much in common with it that Gerry Mulligan recorded the *E-minor Prelude* as a samba, a gentle put-on.

Graciously, though no doubt curious about the reason for my request, André played it. And I had in my head two performances by two master pianists. Bill's was warmer. André's was brisker, and perhaps even a little perfunctory. And that was in keeping with the "establishment" of jazz critics said of his jazz playing.

When I was young, and the classical music and drama critic of the Louisville Times, I had (and still have) a close friend named John Walsh, one of my fellow reporters. John said something about my writing that changed it forever. Changed it in one line. He said, "Your facility will always be your enemy." It electrified me; he had seen through me, and I knew this was a truth. I knew in my guts that I could paper over the cracks in a piece with adept writing, but I had never let my silent awareness of this rise to the surface of my mind. From that moment on, I was suspicious of my

own writing, and learned to use the facility of which John spoke not to get away with things but as a tool for digging. Norman Mailer said, "I write in order to find out what I think." Or something close to that. It brings about an ordering; but you must be rigorous in this process.

Tom Stoppard said, "Skill without imagination is craftsmanship and gives us many useful objects such as wickerwork, picnic baskets. Imagination without skill gives us modern art." Tom Wolfe's *The Painted Word* does for modern painting what Henry Pleasants did for classical music in *The Agony of Modern Music*.

Great art — *great*, not good — is always, no exceptions, the marriage of great talent with great skill. Velasquez, Franz Hals, Winslow Homer. A great artistic mind, musical, literary, graphic, cannot fulfill itself without extraordinary skill. But skill can help a mediocrity skate by, and one can name jazz musicians who illustrate the point. Even Bix Beiderbecke, Erroll Garner, and Wes Montgomery, by some sort of passionate dedication, achieved prodigious if unorthodox skill despite lack of structured training.

André had it all, and from the beginning. The composer Johnny (later John) Green, whom Hugo Friedhofer said was a legend in his own mind (a remark often swiped and applied to others), once was discussing André with me. He said, "If you have a score to a movie, and you don't want André to know about it, don't even pass him in the parking lot when you're carrying it. Not even in a closed briefcase."

My treasured late friend Hugo was the true dean of movie composers. Henry Mancini said of him, "One nod from the man is worth more than all the baubles this industry can bestow." And Elmer Bernstein, at Hugo's memorial service, said, "Hugo praised a score of mine once." Pause. "Once." Every composer there (and every film composer who was in town *was* there) roared with laughter. Hugo was the standard by which the best of them measured themselves. One of his wisecracks was famous. When someone called him "the real giant of film composers," Hugo said, "No. I'm a false giant among real pygmies."

Still, he was a gentle man, so much so that Dave Raksin said Hugo thought spiders were little people, and he said nothing publicly against any composer. But I knew privately what he thought of them all. He could sum up a career in a word. Of one composer he said, "Slick." And of another: "Chromium plated." But there were those he respected, particularly David Raksin and Jerry Goldsmith and, highest on his list, Erich Korngold (whom he idolized), Alex North and Bernard Herrmann. And André Previn. He thought very, very highly of André's work.

I heard a delightful story about André. A certain "composer" had "written" a film score. He hadn't written squat; somebody else had done it. He was one of the industry's flagrant phonies. He was "conducting" the recording of the score. In the glory days of great film scoring, the studio regulars could read the streamer cues on the projected work-print of a movie scene and follow the click-track rhythms in headphones as well as the conductor could. Such is that skill (Shelly Manne could do such things in his sleep) that one musician said to a conductor who had annoyed the orchestra, "If you're not careful, we'll *follow* you." Anyway, this other fraud,

conducting "his" score, came to a cue that was in 5/4. He couldn't handle that at all, and each attempt was a disaster. At that point André walked through the studio.

He took the "composer" aside and said, "If you want to come into the men's room, I can show how to conduct 5/4."

The composer said, "No, fuck it! I'll never write in five again!"

When I told this story back to André, he said, "But that's exactly the way it happened! Where did you hear that?"

I dunno. Musicians tell me stories.

At one time, André was married to the outstanding singer Betty Bennett, who is now married to Mundell Lowe. She was performing for a week at Mr. Kelly's in Chicago some time probably in 1960. One day I was to have lunch with her. My wife called just as I was leaving the office. It seemed she had sent our son, then about three, to his room for some misdemeanor. Suddenly she heard him screaming. She rushed into his room and found it empty. He had apparently opened his window and fallen out. He had somehow grabbed the sill and was hanging by his fingers three floors above a cement sidewalk. She managed to stay calm, and slowly and carefully seized his wrists and pulled him in. She was a nervous wreck when she phoned; I asked if she wanted me to come home. She said there was nothing I could do. So I went on to Betty's hotel to pick her up. As I entered the room, André called. She asked him at the end of their conversation if he wanted to speak to me. She put me on the phone with him, and he said something to the effect, "You don't sound right." I told him what had happened. He said, "Now I'm rattled."

André really bothered the jazz establishment. He wrote *movie scores*! How degrading! And he dared to make *jazz albums*, including some with Shelly Manne that were among the best-selling in jazz history.

He was consistently trashed by the critics. The same thing happened to Phineas Newborn. There was an enormous suspicion in the jazz critical establishment of high skill. So vicious was this that, in Oscar Peterson's opinion, it drove Phineas Newborn mad. He said to Oscar, in tears, "Oscar, what am I doing *wrong*?" Nothing. He just had more technique as a pianist than the jazz critics, most of them, had as writers. And criticism is *always* an act of projected self-justification. Thus those writers who lacked facility in their own work made much of "soul" and operated on the fatuous premise that high skill precluded it. You will not encounter this attitude in those who really know music and can really write. It is too often overlooked that Charlie Parker and Bill Evans had electrifying technique. But both men were heroin addicts, which fact enables that covert self-congratulation that is an essential ingredient of pity — as opposed to the nobility of true compassion — and in turn permits a patronizing praise.

André, immensely successful, suffered from the judgment of jazz critics. The 1988 *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* concludes a shortish entry on him with: "Although he is not an innovator, Previn is a technically fluent and musical jazz pianist." That takes care of that. Dismissed. The entry also describes André as "influenced by Art Tatum." This egregious bit of stupidity almost

always recurs in discussions of jazz pianists with well-developed technique, no one more than Oscar Peterson. When I was working on my biography of Oscar, I said to André, "I don't hear much of Tatum in Oscar." André said, "I don't hear any."

Nor do I, nor did I ever, in André's work. He uses none of Tatum's runs, none of his licks, none of his methods. This sort of comment by jazz critics almost invariably is a manifestation of deep ignorance of classical piano training and literature, which demand utter fluency in scales and arpeggios. If you really want to hear the scope of André's piano technique, listen to his 1992 RCA recording with violinist Julie Rosenfeld and cellist Gary Hoffman of the diabolically difficult Ravel *Trio* and the Debussy *Trio No. 1 in G*. If you do, observe the difference in sonority he educes from the piano for these often-linked but disparate composers.

I think that the condescension of jazz critics hurt André. Vaguely in the back of my mind there is some conversation in which he said as much. And he hated Hollywood, for reasons delineated in his book *No Minor Chords: My Days in Hollywood* (Doubleday, 1991). It's a delicious read, laugh-out-loud funny, full of keen insights into the denizens of classical music and jazz, and a witheringly witty Cook's tour of the movie industry. The title comes from a memo to composers from Irving Thalberg. Thalberg, the putative genius of movies, not liking a sound in a film score and demanding to know what it was, was told that it was a minor chord. He issued a famous fiat: "From the above date onward, no music in an MGM film is to contain a minor chord." It was kept under glass and bolted to the wall of the music department. On leaving MGM, André, using a screwdriver, tried to steal it, but he couldn't spring it loose. It may still be there.

Excepting perhaps Blake Edwards, whose venom toward Hollywood infuses such of his films as *The Party* and *S.O.B.*, no veteran of the industry has ever, apparently, detested Hollywood as much as André — not only professionally, but also morally, intellectually, and physically. He once said that Hollywood looked like a movie set; you got the feeling that someday someone might call, "Strike it," and it would all vanish. But his respect for the musicianship in the industry, in a time when every studio had its own contract orchestra of seventy-five players, some of the best in the world, is unrestrained. In his 1991 book he wrote: "I remember that in the fifties, MGM had under contract fourteen composers, approximately ten orchestrators, and a room full of copyists permanently bent over desks, squinting under Dickensian eye shades. Now, at the time of this writing, no studio has any musician of any kind, writing or playing, under contract."

And so he left the worlds of jazz and movies behind and became a symphony conductor. Alas, he found that world to be no less phony than Hollywood. When he was conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, he left a board meeting one day in company with a member who was a wealthy and prominent lawyer, a generous supporter of the orchestra. He told me that as they proceeded down a corridor, the lawyer said, "I hear that Cleveland has a pretty good orchestra."

André said, "Uh, yeah."

And André proved no more capable of tolerating crap in his

new career than he had in the old. One musician who played under André in the L.A. Phil told me that the orchestra's manager wanted André to make a speech to some ladies' group for political reasons. André protested, then said, "All right, put it on my check."

One way or another, the L.A. Phil dumped André. He was simply incapable of the flattery, the game-playing, that have propelled lesser conductors such as Zubin Mehta to the pinnacle of careers. How good a conductor is André, in truth?

I once put that question to the late Mel Powell, long since become a noted composer of prickly and difficult "classical" music. Mel said, "There are quite a number of us," meaning of course contemporary symphonic composers, "who think André is our greatest living conductor. I can hear the L.A. Philharmonic on the radio and if André's conducting, I can tell it."

I heard that when rehearsing a symphony, André would never stop the orchestra at any point in a movement to correct a mistake or shape a phrase. He would wait until the end, and then correct every error from memory. I asked him if the story were true. He replied, almost shyly,

"Well it's just a matter of being polite."

It is? Well, okay. If you say so, André. But show me five other guys who can do it.

When André became conductor of the self-governed London Symphony Orchestra (where he remained for an unprecedented eleven-and-a-half years), he found that the press repeatedly referred to him as "former jazz musician André Previn," prompting a great quip from him: "Is there a statute of limitations on this?"

At one point he was conducting in Germany. He opened a book on Great German Musicians and found his picture there. His thought, he told me later, was "How quickly they forget." His family, after all, but for that Nazi officer, might have become smoke.

André has been music director of the Houston Symphony (1967-70), the London Symphony Orchestra (1969-79), the Pittsburgh Symphony (1967-84), and the Los Angeles Philharmonic (1985-89), and regularly conducts the Vienna Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, and New York Philharmonic. At one point when he was touring Japan with the Vienna, he took a few days' break to play jazz at the Blue Note in Tokyo. Presumably some of the classical establishment found this kind of thing as unsettling as the jazz establishment had found his albums. He was for all practical purposes fired from the Pittsburgh. I visited Pittsburgh with Henry Mancini a year or so after his departure. The musicians were still seething at his dismissal for, once again, refusing to play the political game. I think one of his problems may be that, so gigantic and far-ranging are his talent and skills, subconsciously he always knows the location of the fire exit. Block his career as a conductor, and he'll go play jazz. Block his career as a jazz musician and he'll go conduct a symphony. Or write one. I am ashamed to say that I know almost nothing of his work as a "classical" composer; it is an oversight I intend to correct. Or he could always write film scores. The problem is that, as noted, he hates Hollywood more than any other room in the mansion of the world's cultural phoniness. But anyway, you can't block him. He is infinite, he is protean, he is beyond merely remarkable, I know of no one living

like him.

Some time after the Blue Note gig in Tokyo, André began playing jazz more than before. He played with a trio that included Ray Brown and Mundell Lowe. Then I got a call from the Santa Fe Music Festival. It seemed that André had recommended me to lecture during their season. So I went to New Mexico. But André also asked that I write the liner notes for his new album, to be titled *What Headphones?* on the Angel label. I wrote them in Santa Fe since the record company, as always, wanted it yesterday. (Hugo used to say of movie executives and film scores, "They don't want it good, they want it Thursday.")

I hadn't heard André play in a long time as I sat there in New Mexico listening to the tape. He used a small band that included Ray Brown on bass, Mundell Lowe on guitar, Grady Tate on drums, Warren Vaché on cornet, Richard Todd on French horn, and Jim Pugh on trombone; and, on some tracks, the Antioch Baptist Choir, a New York State gospel group he admired. André wrote two of the tunes (including the well-known *You're Gonna Hear from Me*) and did all the arranging, demonstrating (should one be surprised?) that he writes as well for small jazz group as he does everything else. I hope you will hear what he does with Strayhorn's *Take the A Train* and Ellington's *A Portrait of Bert Williams*, *Warm Valley* and *I'm Beginning to See the Light*. The performance of *You're Gonna Hear from Me* takes my breath away. The beauty of his tone is one of the factors. He doesn't sound like Bill Evans, he doesn't sound like Oscar Peterson, he doesn't sound like anybody else in the world. He sounds like André Previn. In the opening chorus, played solo, you'll hear the exquisite balance of the voices within the chords; what incredible manual control. And he has that classically trained pianist's ability to make the top note ring just a little more than the lower voices. The album was produced by Phil Ramone, a child prodigy (like André) on violin and one of the finest recording engineers in the world.

But what struck me most was the growth in André's playing. It was as if my friend John Walsh had said to André what he'd said to me. And André's facility was no longer his enemy. He was using his remarkable skills as a pianist *to dig in*. His playing was far more reflective and certainly more emotional than in the years of his early prominence. It was deeper, darker than I had ever heard it; and yet at the same time the quicksilver tone had become more scintillant than ever. And oh! has he got chops. All kinds of chops: phenomenal speed, an exquisite illusion of legato in slow chordal passages, balance, and more. He has a subtle control of dynamics that at least equals that of Bill Evans. Bill's dynamics, however, were — deliberately; it was an element of his style — within a comparatively small range. Bill rarely took a whacking good thump at the piano, and André does. In this, then, his dynamic scope is broader than Bill's.

I realize with something of a start that a man who is (if Mel Powell was right) our greatest symphony conductor was also one of our greatest jazz pianists. What? Yeah. And how at home he is playing for that Gospel choir on the album *What Headphones?*

André told me at that time that he was thinking of making a

solo piano album, all ballads. I told him I hoped that he would, and forgot about it. Then Alan Bergman, the great (with his wife, Marilyn) lyricist, told me on the phone that I just had to hear an album by André simply called *Ballads*. I ordered it through my favorite rock-and-roll record store.

Reflective and soft, harmonically urbane, it became instantly one of my favorite albums, one that I will listen to often over the years. It comprises all standards, except for two tunes by André, *In Our Little Boat* and *Dance of Life*. The latter is one he wrote for a show he did with Johnny Mercer in London, *The Good Companions*. These two tunes, along with one that is in the *What Headphones?* album, titled *Outside the Cafe*, would convince a statue of General Grant of André's brilliance as a composer.

André's keen critical sense applies even to himself. For example, of *Coco*, the Broadway musical he wrote with Alan Jay Lerner, he told me in March of 1990:

"Alan was terribly nice and he was awfully good to work with. The show I wrote with him, *Coco*, was not very good. In fact I disliked it a lot.

"What was wrong with it was, first of all, that I didn't do a very good job. I had no confidence in those days, and I had no clout, and I just went along with everything that was done in that show. I didn't have the bottle, as they say in England, to say, 'Well, wait a minute, this isn't what we were talking about.' I never asserted myself. And that's what was wrong with Michael Bennett's direction. Sometimes Michael would come to me and say, 'Can we gang up on Alan and ask him if we couldn't do such-and-such?' And Alan had, I have to say, a stock answer: 'We didn't have to do that on *My Fair Lady*.'

"Alan got very angry at Michael because Michael wasn't in the proper awe of Alan's previous accomplishments. And Michael kept saying, 'I am, I am, but we've got to change things now.' And Alan wouldn't.

"I really liked Alan a lot. It was always kind of adventurous working for him. I think what went wrong with *Coco* is that we got away from the original conception. I thought of it in terms of a very French show with *chansons*. I said to him, very early on, 'Maybe we can, say, have a five-piece orchestra in one of the stage boxes.' By the time we were through, we had turntable stages, and Cecil Beaton, and five thousand people on stage, and the whole thing was as un-French as possible. I didn't have the guts to say, 'We're getting farther and farther away from the reason we were going to do this.'

"I used to say to him, 'Talk to me like to an idiot. Tell me: What is this show about?' He'd say, 'A woman's struggle to feel that . . .'

"I'd say, 'No, no, no. Tell me how Act One ends. What happens?'

"Well there was no story. And he wouldn't face that. Now, with perfect hindsight and a lot of experience under my belt, I would say, 'This is impossible. We haven't got a plot.' But in those days, I thought, 'What am I doing? This guy wrote *My Fair Lady* and all those other marvelous things. Leave it alone.'

"And so the show sank."

He worked with Lerner and Fritz Loewe on the films *Gigi* and *My Fair Lady*, both of which won him Academy Awards. He said:

"Fritz was the single most conceited man I ever knew. Well, I don't know whether that is the right word. Perhaps vain is a better word.

"I knew Alan first. I did not meet Fritz until I arrived in Paris to work on *Gigi*. We were going into pre-recording." He referred to the fact that it is the usual procedure in musical movies to record the songs first, and have the actors lip-sync to the sound track. "I adored the score to *Gigi*. I thought it was wonderful. I had enormous admiration and respect for Fritz.

"When Fritz and I had worked together and I had listened to the score, I said, 'I must ask you a question. When you give me the piano parts of these songs, and I have to orchestrate them, is it okay with you if I occasionally change a voicing or a spelling or a thing here and there, lighten it up and put things on the top that were on the bottom, to make it more orchestral? Would you mind that? Or are you conversant with orchestration, and want to go through it with me, like someone giving me a sketch?'

"And he said, 'You went to conservatory?'

"I said, 'Yes.'

"He said, 'Did they give you orchestration problems?'

"I said, 'Yeah.'

"He said, 'When you were given a piano piece by Brahms to orchestrate, did you change it?'

"I said to myself, 'Right! Oh-*kay*.' And I went back to my hotel room and did what I would normally do, I made arrangements to suit the orchestra. He never said anything. In fact he was very complimentary. But the equation with Brahms was extraordinary. Absolutely extraordinary.

"Another man who orchestrated on the show, Conrad Salinger, a sensational musician and a lovely man, also asked Fritz whether he was very conversant with orchestration, as Kurt Weill was. Fritz really bridled and said to Connie, 'Do you know how much money I made last year?' It was an extraordinary answer.

"Fritz once asked me what I thought was technically the most difficult piano concerto of the standard repertoire, and I said, 'Brahms Two.'

"He said, 'I played that, you know.'

"I said, 'In public?'

"He said, 'Yes.'

"I said, 'My goodness, that's highly impressive. Can you still play it?'

"He said, 'No, no, no. It would take me a month to get it back up.'

"And I thought, 'A month?'

"Fritz was given to those things."

Among my favorite "classical" recordings are André's recordings of Rachmaninoff, including (with the London Symphony Orchestra) the Second Symphony and (on another album) *Symphonic Dances, Vocalise*, and particularly *The Isle of the Dead*.

Listening closely to the *Ballads* album, one learns something about his work as a symphony conductor. André has an uncanny

control of dynamics in his solo piano. He can go loud-soft more suddenly and subtly than anyone I know. And his rubato is always true rubato: the time that is “robbed” (which is what the word means) here is replaced there. And no matter how slow the tempo, if you find the center of it and start tapping your foot you will find that his time is immovably *there*. And this is true of his conducting. He uses, indeed, both of these abilities. And now, having listened so closely to the *Ballads* album, and then revisiting some of my favorites among his symphonic albums, I am beginning to see what Mel Powell meant; I think I am reaching the point where I might be able to spot a Previn recording of a symphony just by its sound, for he uses dynamics and rubato like no conductor I have ever heard. What André is, then, is a shaper of time, a sculptor of sound. Listening again to Rachmaninoff’s glorious *Symphonic Dances*, I find myself in awe of what this man can do with an orchestra.

Recently André conducted the New York Philharmonic in some Debussy. How I wish I could have been there. My son Phil was. He is a pianist and composer, mostly electronics. He grew up in Paris and lives in New York. The outstanding composer Kenny Ascher, whom I have known since he was pianist and arranger in the Woody Herman band and a graduate student at Columbia University, invited Phil to attend that concert. I insisted that they go backstage after the concert and introduce themselves. Kenny said later that he was almost speechless at meeting André Previn.

My son, the kid who hung out of the window by his fingertips so long ago, now six-feet-two, told André who he was, eliciting from him an “Oh, for Christ’s sake!”

And that other kid, the one who was writing arrangements for MGM when he was still in high school, is now sixty-nine. And he works a schedule that would kill a far younger man, conducting all over the world, recording jazz albums, writing, writing in just about any idiom you can think, except maybe Hawaiian sliding-guitar groups, rock-and-roll, and Paraguayan harp bands. He has just composed an opera based on *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It will have its premiere September 19 with the San Francisco Opera. André will conduct, and the performance will be recorded live.

At Monterey in '59, just after I met André, I rounded up a small group of musicians to photograph them for a *Down Beat* cover. I took them out by that wind-blown coastal pine famous from Chamber of Commerce photos. They included Charlie Byrd, Urbie Green, Conte Candoli, and Zoot Sims. You will perhaps remember that the critics were busy flagellating the Dukes of Dixieland. Zoot said he liked the group. One of the other musicians, maybe all of them, expressed horror at his opinion. Zoot said:

“Well, you know me, man. I got no taste.”

That stopped everyone cold.

He and Bill Evans and Henry Pleasants gave me the courage to trust my own taste.

No one’s going to talk me out of Grieg, Tchaikovsky, or Rachmaninoff.

Or André Previn.

A genius, a word I never use lightly, is itinerant among us. ■

The Storyteller

by Julius La Rosa

In the beginning he was called The Voice, and what a voice it was. But he never let it get in the way of the message. It set him apart, and he established a standard for interpreting lyrics, giving life to the words on the lead sheet in a way never before considered. Songs were no longer melodies to be danced to. They were stories to be listened to.

Before Sinatra, the lyrics were given at most a casual attention. Why did we start listening? The newspapers wrote about him as if only the girls loved what he was doing. I was one of those who loved what he was doing, and I wasn’t a girl. They wrote about us as if we were crazy. We weren’t crazy. Whether or not we could put into words what he was doing, we sensed it.

What made us stop dancing and crowd up close to the bandstand to listen? He was making sense of the words. He was telling a story, honoring the American songbook in a way that had never been done, the poems-to-music of Johnny Mercer, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Lorenz Hart, Sammy Cahn, Oscar Hammerstein, Yip Harburg, Johnny Burke, and other giants. I hope the publisher of the *Jazzletter* will not delete my personal view of his own contribution to the poetry of the popular song in lines like “Out of doorways, black umbrellas came to pursue me. Faceless people, as they passed, were looking through me, no one knew me.”

Jolson was dynamic, his personality and showmanship foremost. But I don’t think anyone ever got drunk listening to him. Bing Crosby, who was to Sinatra what Sinatra was to me, was relaxed, casual, the everyman of singers. But he never projected the emotional values of the lyric, never gave us a sense of what the words meant to him.

Along came Sinatra, the new boy with the Harry James band, and soon after that with Tommy Dorsey. And despite the restrictions of tempo — the people had to dance, didn’t they? — he told the story, and we stopped dancing to listen, and Dorsey noticed this. He was *phrasing*. Until Sinatra, the song was sung: “I’ve gaaaahht yooooo UNDER my skin.” The song is written that way, with the accent on the second syllable of *under*. (You could look it up!) Sinatra (I refer to his later career) chopped it into its component pieces and sang: “I’ve got . . . you . . .” Brief pause. “UN-der my skin.” And that’s the way everyone has sung that song ever since.

Cole Porter is said to have wired Sinatra: “If you don’t like my songs the way I write them, don’t sing them.” Sinatra, reportedly, wired back, “If you don’t like the royalties, send them back.” The story may be apocryphal but it sounds very much in character for both of them.

Porter’s mistake lay in not accepting the *style* of singing Sinatra introduced. An argument could be made, of course, that Porter was concerned for the musical values of the song. But Sinatra went after the lyrical content. As a rule, Sinatra was true to a songwriter’s intentions in the first chorus, taking his liberties in the second chorus — and he took considerable liberties in the later years.

Toscanini, too, apparently was not enamored by the liberties

taken by soloists, vocal or instrumental. Yet he was big enough to recognize a performer's contribution to interpretation of a master's work. During a rehearsal, a trumpet player took a liberty with the phrasing of a solo in some symphonic work or other. The other musicians waited for the maestro to explode, and his temper was famous. To everyone's surprise, he didn't. After the rehearsal, Toscanini encountered the trumpet player at the elevator. He said, "If you promise to play it that way again, I will conduct it that way." He recognized the contribution.

In the Dorsey days, Sinatra was constrained by dance tempos. But he turned them to his advantage. It must have been about this time that Sinatra became friendly with Alec Wilder. His recording of Wilder's *I'll Be Around* is the definitive version. In 1945, by which time Sinatra had left Dorsey and become what we now call a superstar (*star* was good enough in the old days), he picked up a baton to conduct a suite of Wilder's orchestral pieces. Since Sinatra was known to be unable to read music, Gene Lees once asked Alec Wilder if Sinatra really had conducted those pieces. (You can get them now on CD.) "Yes," Wilder said, "and he did them better than anyone else has ever done them, because he understood something most conductors don't: dance tempos."

And within the restrictions of those tempos, even back in the Dorsey days, Sinatra could shift the accents in a song to get the story out. *This Love of Mine* was actually in my arms, but we stopped dancing to elbow our way close to the bandstand to gaze up at the skinny guy holding onto the mike stand. He hadn't yet decided what to do with his hands. Oh! how many singers know *that* problem. We looked up and listened to the story. Hell, it was my story. It was "our" story. Mine and Sue's. Or was it Marianne?

And he told the stories in the same voice he spoke with, a natural quality few singers achieve. It made us all think we could do that too. The technical term for that is *placement*. Whether in his high or low register, the voice was the same. All the way up. It is far more remarkable than is generally realized. There was no "break" in his voice. Listen some time to the way an opera singer who has come down from Olympus to honor us with a pop song comes to the high note and goes from chest tone to head tone, which is why it's called, justifiably, *false* *falsetto*. It's an artificial sound. The only time I ever heard Sinatra go into falsetto was on the last note of his Bluebird recording (with Axel Stordahl) of *The Song Is You*, one of the first four sides he made as a soloist. One night early in my own career, I did a falsetto, eliciting from my accompanist: "Who do you think you are? Deanna Durbin?"

Well Sinatra didn't use artificial sounds, except on that one note of *The Song Is You*. Why did he do it? Maybe it was to show some people something, that he could do that trick. One is reminded of a story told about Segovia. After a performance, so the story goes, someone asked him why he'd played a certain piece so fast. "Because I can," Segovia replied. Well Sinatra could sing those falsetto tones. He didn't choose to, and in all the recordings from then until his death, I never heard him do it again.

Sinatra was also experimenting with enunciation. Even in the Harry James days, he always sang so that you could hear the words. But there is something a little affected about it. By the

Dorsey days, he was finding a clear but natural kind of enunciation. One of my high-school English teachers suggested that we listen to Sinatra for his enunciation. Later, after he had achieved world renown, Sinatra began revealing, if not actually flaunting, his Hoboken, New Jersey, beginnings. I think it was a not too subtle assertion of his genesis.

With Harry James, and soon after that with Dorsey, the simplicity of Sinatra's singing was deceptive. It seemed so effortless. His intonation was almost flawless. Curiously, where most good singers will sometimes sing flat, Sinatra would be sharp. This has been attributed to Dorsey's influence on him. For reasons beyond my knowledge of instruments, trombone players are more likely to be sharp than flat.

During those Dorsey days, and then those four Bluebird sides and finally the brilliant body of work for Columbia with exquisitely lush Axel Stordahl arrangements, the emphasis in Sinatra's career was on ballads, for the obvious reason that he did them as no one ever had before. Some of us still remember his first "album", four 78 rpm records in four sleeves bound with a hard cover, and in that collection, the songs began to seem very much like art music. They were Sinatra's definitive interpretations of *I Concentrate on You*, *These Foolish Things*, *Ghost of a Chance*, *Try a Little Tenderness*, *You Go to My Head*, *She's Funny That Way*, and *Someone to Watch Over Me*.

Back then Sinatra sang a lot like the way Dorsey played trombone, long lines often carried past the end of an eight bar phrase. You can really hear it in his recording with Dorsey of *Without a Song*. At the end of the release, Sinatra hits the word "soul" quite big, and without a breath sails *diminuendo* into the start of the next eight, "I'll never know" Anyone who doubts Dorsey's influence on him should give that record a listen, not that anyone does.

In a time when most performers didn't publicize aspects of their personal lives, Sinatra sang a sweet song about Nancy, his daughter. We all heard those "mission bells ringing" and got "the very same glow".

I remember his performances at the first spectacular and historic Paramount Theater appearance. Yes, I was there, one of those thousands of "crazy" kids waiting in a line along West 43rd Street. At last we got in, and there he was. One of the lines in *Nancy* is: "Sorry for you, she has no sister." But in that performance he sang: "Just give me time, she'll have a sister." And the bobby-soxers really did go a little crazy. The screaming was deafening.

Nor was Sinatra politically passive. In 1943, when it was considered unwise for an entertainer to voice preferences, he came out for Roosevelt's unprecedented run for a third term. And in 1945, he recorded *The House I Live In* and made a film short about racial tolerance that was built around it. It earned him a special Academy Award. The song expressed his feelings about America.

With Dorsey, however, Sinatra's rhythmic sense had never been fully explored. Yes, he did several medium "up" tunes such as *Snoopy Little Cutie*, *Oh Look at Me Now* (remember "Jack, I'm ready!"), *I'll Take Tallulah* among them, but Dorsey used him

mostly for ballads.

Sinatra's work on Columbia — there are 72 songs in the four-CD boxed set — is a remarkable celebration of the American song. But the experience there went sour when a-and-r head Mitch Miller forced on Sinatra some dreadful songs, including a monstrosity called *Mama Will Bark* and a duet with of all people the now-forgotten Dagmar. It still seems to some of those who were close to the situation that Mitch Miller was out to destroy Sinatra. And for a time he did seem destroyed. It was known in the business that he was having serious throat problems. We can never know whether they were caused by nervous tension. And finally, Columbia dropped him. The Columbia period had lasted from 1943 to 1952.

He said that he entered a period of despair when the phone no longer rang. He was desperately short of money, and his career seemed ended.

I don't know this with certainty, but I suspect that Johnny Mercer was the force in the restoration of Sinatra's career. In addition to being a great lyricist — some think he was our greatest of all — Mercer was an astute gentleman. He was also president of Capitol records, which he had founded with fellow songwriter Buddy De Sylva. Mercer was one record-company head who really knew what he was hearing.

And I think Mercer recognized Sinatra's as-yet untapped . . . genius. I don't think the word is an exaggeration. What John Gielgud was to Shakespeare, Sinatra was to the American song. We discovered him with Dorsey, he proved we were right about him at Columbia, and from his very first recordings for Capitol we realized, if we hadn't done so already, that we had a giant on our hands. Nelson Riddle recognized it. *Songs for Young Lovers* is still my favorite album. Riddle is credited rightly for recognizing the depth of Sinatra's musical instincts. He appreciated Sinatra's intelligence and, I guess, understood his temperament. His arrangements for those early Capitol albums are masterpieces, one after another. And the mature Sinatra was revealed. The ballads are touching, heartbreaking even, and the sense of identification is incomparable. In the reprise of *My Funny Valentine* when he sings "But donnnnn't change a hair for me . . ." oh, the pain. And rhythm songs now were fun. "I get a kick . . . mmmm, you give me a boot!" Cole Porter may not (I would assume) have liked the interpolation, but everyone else did.

By now we knew what he was: a performing poet. And by now he had influenced a whole generation of singers, Vic Damone and me (both of us from Brooklyn) among them. But he created a dilemma for us, too. If you phrased the way he did, you were bound to sound at least a little like him. But on the other hand, as Gene Lees wrote, "Once you had heard him do it, what was a singer to do? *Not* phrase for the meaning of the lyrics?"

Anthony Quinn said, "Until I speak them, they are just words on a piece of paper." Sinatra could have said, "Until I sing them, nobody knows what they mean." Mr. Quinn once came to see me in Las Vegas. After my performance he came back to say hello. And he said, "Boy! You sound like Frank Sinatra." I had an urge to say, "And you remind of me of Paul Muni." I suppressed it.

But it was true though that until Sinatra sang, "You may not know it, but buddy, I'm a kind of poet," you didn't realize to just what an extent Johnny Mercer really was a poet. Sinatra put blood into the words of that and countless other songs.

When others sang what used to be called torch songs, one could shrug and say, "Who cares? I've got problems of my own." But when Sinatra sang (in another Mercer song) "A woman's a two-face, a worrisome thing who'll leave you to sing the Blues in the Night," you were likely to stare into your drink and think, "I know how the poor son of a bitch feels."

A long-time friend of mine, the great arranger Marion Evans, has a wonderful expression. When someone records a definitive version of a song, Marion says, "It's been fixed." Sinatra fixed scores of songs. Remember his performance of (another Mercer lyric) *Come Rain or Come Shine* with that marvelous Don Costa chart and those insisting French horns? And tell me about the low E in *What Is This Thing Called Love*. I've always suspected that he'd been out late and recorded it early in the morning. He was awake, but his voice was still asleep. A low E indeed! How dare he! And that high G on *All of Me*. His range, for all its seeming *naturalness*, was over two octaves. No one should ever underestimate Sinatra's chops.

Though the catalogue of his best work is just this side of unending and it is hard to pick a favorite, I have a great liking for an underplayed album called *Watertown* on Reprise. I would refer you to particular cuts, *Elizabeth* and *What a Funny Girl (You Used to Be)*. Enchanting. Sinatra at his most conscientious. He wanted these to be good, and they are.

William Gibson, author of *Two for the Seasaw*, commenting on Anne Bancroft's portrayal of Gittle Mosca, the character he created, said she "transcended the lines with a humor and poignancy I had not suspected in them." Sinatra endowed lyrics with the same sense of truth.

He once said, "Don't get mad, get even." All the sycophants who loved him when he was up took a hike when he was down, and did he get even! From that time on, there is a visible toughness in him, an incredible assurance. Most of the adjectives applied to him were accurate to some degree. If you liked him, he was being true to himself. If you didn't, he was a bastard. Why not? He had "all the elements so mixed in him that nature could stand up and say to all the world, 'This was a man.'"

I fell in love with songs because of him. I fell in love with the way he sang them. Very timidly, I thought, "Hey, I think I could do that." So I joined a choir. And I tried.

I wonder what would have happened to me if Francis Albert Sinatra had not been born. Maybe I'd have stayed in the Navy. Or maybe I'd have left the Navy to go into my father's radio-repair business in Brooklyn. I would be retired by now.

But it didn't work out that way.

Because of Frank Sinatra I've had a hell of a life.

And to me he'll always be

. . . shining, shining, shining . . .
everywhere.

— Julius La Rosa ■