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Jazzletter

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Mail Bag

On a selfish note, I'm only fifty-one. What will I read now?

As a trumpet player, I miss the sounds of Gozzo, Klein, Snooky Young in modern lead players. Notice how the modern guys sound like machines?

Ed Kalney, Rockville Centre, New York

I can't say I look forward to your hanging them up, but it is understandable. Next year, I hope, you will reconsider.

— Charles Sweningsen, Edina, Minnesota

Chuck was the editor who bought a first article from me for Down Beat. *That was about 1949, and I was thrilled.*

Say it isn't so!

— Jules Chaikin, Studio City, California

So many people said this that I feel like Shoeless Joe Jackson.

I cannot imagine life without the *Jazzletter* to look forward to. Do I understand? You bet — as a writer, editor, musician, I know the joys of contribution to the stream of musical knowledge and the weariness that comes with meeting multiple deadlines. Blessings on you for your extraordinary achievements. If you must let the *Jazzletter* go at the end of twenty years, so be it. I'm happy to have been among the subscribers (since 1988) and treasure my collection of *Jazzletters*. No words can thank you enough.

— Sandra Hyslop, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Sandra has just written a play about Roland Hayes that will be hosted in March by the Detroit Public Library.

I'm not surprised you want to stop, but a lot of people will be sorry.

— James Lincoln Collier, New York City

I have every issue and will treasure them always. Hang on to the mailing list so you can tell your friends news of yourself and anything else you may write.

— Earl R. McCandless, Edmond, Oklahoma

If the *Jazzletter* cannot continue monthly, perhaps quarterly or some other arrangement might be considered. As long as I'm here, I'll be on the subscription list!

— Tracy Borst, Alhambra, California

Although we understand completely your reasons for wanting to call it quits, we (and thousands like us) devoutly hope that you won't. You are our hero, and we selfishly want you to continue brightening our lives.

— Eddie Higgins and Meredith d'Ambrosio, Wilton Manors, Florida

I am shocked that you are retiring the *Jazzletter* next year. Twenty-five is a better number. I'm having too much fun reading the issues. If you must, you must, but we would rather you poured out your soul on a monthly basis for jazz.

— David Klingman

Your recent *Jazzletter* mailing was most welcome, explaining why abstract painting and modern classical music leave me cold. Long ago, when I was a young man, I used to listen to classical music on Sunday morning. I knew nothing about it, but I enjoyed it. At some point, I abandoned the practice. Now I believe that it was the new music which drove me off. I look to music to engage me emotionally, and while not all jazz does this, now *only* jazz does.

You may recall that I threatened to have you knee-capped when last you announced an end to the *Jazzletter*. No such threat this time. Not that I will miss the *Jazzletter* any less, but twenty years and two million words may be enough. I noted, however, the waffling "I think". Whenever you quit, you'll leave a diverse body of fine work that will stand well as a knowledgeable testament for music, and for your attention to other subjects when passion demanded.

Not that I have always agreed with you, but I have always learned from the *Jazzletter*. I own the complete work, and intend to revisit it often. I discover something new at each reading. Your writing is heavy with content, but I'm sure you've heard that before. And, your free-association-like writing is not disconcerting, as I can usually follow your calculated literary meanderings.

If this year is to be your last, thank you. It has been one helluva ride. But surely you are not written out.

— Allen Hall, South Haven, Minnesota

I am in the middle of reading *Arranging the Score*. I finished Gerry Mulligan last night. As with Kenny Wheeler, Percy Faith, Robert Farnon, and Gil Evans, I am unwilling to go to the next subject until my emotions settle. I need a chance to digest the feeling these essays bring up. Once again you have touched me where I live; the intimate sharing of heart and soul with the music as the medium.

The love I have for some of the musicians I have played with, a few for almost thirty years, is a source of inspiration, motivation, and just plain feeling good. You have reminded me that this (usually unspoken) bond grows out of community purely and with like purpose. The bond is the purpose and the purpose is the bond. As I approach the fifty-year milestone, I have become aware that my blessings begin with life on and off the bandstand in relationships where the sum is greater than the parts. My family and making music exemplify the gift. Thank you for sharing *your* friendships in a way that makes me laugh with a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes.

— Bill Bryson, Brooklyn, New York

Sasha and Zamani

There have been many such letters, all of them moving. But you just don't get it. You owe me nothing; I owe you more than I can ever tell. You have given me freedom to think thoughts all the way through, taking as much time and space as they require. I have the luxury of extended research.

I designed the JL from the beginning to be a letter — not a magazine article, not a news story. A direct personal communication. This has permitted me the further luxury of seeming digression: to venture out into parallel terrain, find out what is there that is pertinent, and bring it back. I think that this is an influence of jazz on my writing. If the fun of it communicates to the reader, great!

The mail had all the more effect on me since I read a lot of it in a hospital. For some time I had felt my energy waning. I attributed this to the ravages of time. If I felt breathless after even a short walk, I attributed this to post-polio syndrome. (I am one of those who recovered from childhood polio only to discover that it often has late-in-life effects. It is an exclusive club to which I would just as soon not belong.) If my ankles were sometimes puffy, I thought it might be the chemicals in modern wines, so I gave them up. Doctors on the subscription list (and next to musicians, they are the largest group) are raising eyebrows as they read this. I went to my doctor, Richard Danson, in Santa Barbara. He ran an EKG, promptly picked up the telephone to call a cardiologist whose office was across the street.

The cardiologist, C. Alan Brown, gave me a test, and ordered me back for an echocardiogram. He looked at the results and said, "I want you in the hospital." Wondering when I could find the time for this, I said, "When?"

He said, "Now."

And forty-five minutes later I was in hospital in Santa Barbara. He ran more tests, and then I signed some paper that permitted bypass surgery, and next morning sank into oblivion under anesthetic. I didn't get the bypass, but I got something called a stent (I had never heard the term, and I can't find a root for it), a metal thingy inserted from the groin to the heart, where it is inflated into an open position and locked into place to press back the plaque in an artery. I have no memory of the procedure. But I was awake only minutes when I realized I could *breathe*.

One of the first persons to phone me in the hospital was Steve Allen, who had some time earlier undergone surgery to clear one of the carotid arteries. He said, "I was worried about your color at least a year ago."

I later told my doctor: "I think you and Dr. Brown saved my life."

With only a slight smile, he said, "Yes."

"How long did I have?"

"That's hard to say. But it was coming."

The change was astounding. I found my mind working differently. The weariness and enshrouding indifference were gone. A friend said, "Do you think this was the reason you decided to shut the *Jazzletter* down?"

I suspect so. But there are other things I want to do and I have by no means decided to continue it beyond 2001. There are non-musical subjects on which I want to write; and as it is, I have stretched the patience of those who want to read only about jazz. I must admit that I don't care to have such persons in the readership anyway.

Maybe I'll write a few songs; I haven't written songs in years. Or get back to writing fiction, though I don't even read it nowadays. I have limited interest in imaginary lives.

And I want to write a piece on the irrational U.S. drug laws. Steve Allen and I had been in consultation for months about this. He had accumulated a thick file on evidence for the legalization of marijuana, which even William F. Buckley favors. Steve sent me this file in a thick black three-ring binder, and I photocopied it. I believe that federal policy has only *increased* the epidemic of drug dependency. I became aware of the problem more than forty years ago, because of the use of heroin in jazz.

There are five hundred black binders on subjects Steve cared about in his office in Van Nuys, more at the house

I am doggedly interested in recent history that is now growing faint. *Lies Across America* by James A. Loewen, published in 1999 by the New Press in New York, examines

monuments and markers of America and tells the true stories behind the lies engraved thereon. One segment, on the statue to Chicago cops who participated in the Haymarket Riot of May, 1886, is funny because it has the distinction of being the most knocked-over and blown-up monument in American history. I intend to read Loewen's *Lies My Teachers Taught Me*. The one thing Henry Ford and Voltaire would have agreed on, had they met, was Ford's statement that history is bunk.

One of Loewen's passages is particularly illuminating. It explains why I find it urgent to set down, for example, Milt Hinton's memories of his grandmother who was born a slave, and for that matter my own memories of events. Loewen writes:

"I have found useful a distinction that societies make in east and central Africa. According to John Mbiti, Kiswahili speakers divide the deceased into two categories: sasha and zamani. The recently departed whose time on earth overlapped with people still here are the sasha, the living dead. They are not wholly dead, for they live on in the memories of the living, who can call them to mind, create their likeness in art, and bring them to life in anecdote. When the last person to know an ancestor dies, that ancestor leaves the sasha for the zamani, the dead . . . .

"Historical perspective does not always accrue from the passage from sasha to zamani. On the contrary, more accurate history — certainly more detailed history — can often be written while an event lies in the sasha. For then people on all sides still have firsthand knowledge of the event. Primary source material, on which historians rely, comes from the sasha. To assume that historians and sociologists can make better sense of it later in the zamani is merely chronological ethnocentrism."

Simon Schama, in the preface to his *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution,* writes:

"Historians have been overconfident about the wisdom to be gained by distance, believing it somehow confers objectivity, one of those unobtainable values in which they have placed so much faith. Perhaps there is something to be said for proximity. Lord Acton, who delivered the first, famous lectures on the French Revolution in the 1870s, was still able to hear firsthand, from a member of the Orleans dynasty, the man's recollections of 'Dumouriez gibbering on the streets of London when hearing the news of Waterloo.'"

As Loewen makes clear in the book, monuments embody the prejudices and convenience of their own time and of their builders. And this is true of history, not simply the erection of monuments. Thus the Haymarket statue bears the prejudices of the police who erected it, and does not tell you that it was not the protesters who rioted but the police. The monument makes killers into heroes.

Michel Legrand once joked that London depressed him, because so many of its places — Waterloo Station, Trafalgar Square — "were named after the battles *we* lost."

As it happens, I believe that the wrong side, a coalition of monarchies interested only in preserving the family enterprises, won the Napoleonic wars. I believe that had Napoleon won, there would have been a unified democratic Europe, the Franco-Prussian War and World Wars I and II would not have occurred, and Stalin's brand of "communism" would never have been installed. Other wars, of course, might have occurred instead. I am inclined to think some kind of pax Napoleonica would have prevailed. But then, had the Romans developed the steam engine one of their experimenters almost discovered, we would now be about two thousand years farther down the road of technology. History, one might say, is what happened. But it isn't so. It is what *we say* happened. One need only read French and British versions of their wars to see that. And as more than one person has noted, history is written by the victors, leaving the impression that the good guys always won since the winners always say they were the good guys.

In griping about Japan's not teaching its children about their country's World War II atrocities, the United States ignores its omission from history books of its record of "ethnic cleansing" of the Indians. My late friend Les Rout, the baritone saxophonist who became a historian and taught at Michigan State, said, "History is not taught in the United States to instill truth. It is taught to instill patriotism."

I said, "How is it different from any other country?"

History consists largely in boast, lament, accusation, and self-pity, mixed in varying proportions. There are estimable attempts to untangle the narratives, but you will wait a long time to read in California high-school texts about the Digger Indians, whom the "white" man in his mercy rendered as extinct as the pterodactyl.

Each of us is the product of dreams — dreams fulfilled, dreams failed, dreams forgotten, dreams abandoned — of triumphant elations and black disappointments, of paths taken and paths forsaken. And all our lives are intertwined into the vast and ultimately unknowable fabric of our time. Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* ponders what brought five people together to die in the collapse of the bridge. (I was disappointed in Lima, Peru, to find that the river is not a dramatic chasm but a shallow depression.) This mixing of lives has formed the theme of countless tales and dramas, *The Legend of Hell House, The House on Haunted Hill, Stage Coach, Hotel, The Poseidon Adventure, No Highway in the Sky, Bus Stop, Twelve Angry Men, Murder on the Orient Express, Ten Little Indians, Titanic, The*

Towering Inferno, Airport. Sundry people are brought together in a room, a hotel, a conveyance, and allowed to react with and to each other under stress. In the whodunit variant, the cast is assembled near the end as the Great Detective, by cunning reasoning, eliminates the innocent, leaving the guilty party exposed at last. Maybe the continuing appeal of such tales is that we are all in, or rather on, this conveyance together, the planet earth, in this time, and when the villain is exposed, he is the one we least expected. Robert De Niro, asked on *Inside the Actors Studio* what he would hope to hear God say on arrival at the Pearly Gates, responded not with what he would want to hear but what he would want to say: "You've got a lot to answer for."

I am always amazed, after a disaster of some kind, to see a survivor say to the microphone, "God was looking out for me." What did he have against the other poor bastards?

Technology has changed our perception of historical time. We know of the keyboard playing of Mozart only from descriptions. Had Liszt lived another couple of decades (he died in 1886) we would actually be able to listen to him. We *can* listen to Gershwin and Rachmaninoff, who made records. A computer disc device built into some modern pianos goes far beyond the old player pianos. What someone plays on such an instrument is recorded on a computer disc, and that later gives you not a record but the actual performance, to the subtlest nuance of phrasing and the slightest shades in dynamics.

I had a conversation about this with Gene Kelly, an early and staunch supporter of the *Jazzletter*. (His widow tells me he kept every copy. She says I can have them. They bear his scrupulous hand-written marginal notes. Can you imagine how I will treasure them?)

We were discussing how recording devices, including motion pictures, had altered our perceptions of the past. One can see actual images of the Civil War in the photographs of Matthew Brady. And we have grim motion-picture mementoes of World War I. I said, "We know about the work of Nijinsky and Pavlova from descriptions. Dance students will be watching *you* long after we're both gone."

Technology is extending the time of the sasha. There's a television commercial in which a model turns into Marilyn Monroe and back again. How soon will technology permit the casting of, say, George Arliss in a new movie? This raises a legal issue. Tape-recorded evidence is dubious, since tape is easily edited. When will the courts conclude that photographic and even motion-picture evidence should be inadmissible?

The idea of the sasha and zamani is one I find haunting. I think of all the people I have met and known in my lifetime, my elders who are gone, such as Louis Armstrong and Will Bradley. They are still in the sasha for me and others of my generation, though many of us too now are gone: Gerry Mulligan, Zoot Sims, Miles Davis, are in the sasha, for I (and many of my friends, such as Phil Woods) remember them and tell stories about them. Bix Beiderbecke lingers in the sasha, because there are living persons who still have personal memory of him. But he is fading into the zamani, even though I remember things Artie Shaw told me about him. Scott Joplin is now in the zamani.

We need to record more of the history that resides in the memory of those, such as Clark Terry, for whom the figures of that era are still in the sasha. I have managed to record some of the memories of many persons in jazz who will probably never have their full biographies written; but the younger writers coming up are *already writing from writings* or reminiscences of others for whom pivotal figures were still in the sasha. These writers will, and they are already doing so, impose their biases on the material — like those inscribing monuments to battles long gone — and as elder witnesses pass into the zamani, jazz history will become (and in part already is) what Voltaire, more elegantly than Henry Ford, said it was, a fiction that has been agreed upon.

English Not Spoken Here

One of the things Steve Allen and I would discuss was the deterioration of usages in English. While I was lying around in the hospital, watching far too much television, I began to make notes on the current use of all sorts of terms by newscasters, talking heads, anchorthings, actors, politicians, a list of neologisms that could hopefully (there's one of the worst of them) be posted in news rooms and other places where it would, you can be sure, do no good whatsoever. Not all of these terms are even recent, but they're still trite and stupid. John F. Kennedy used the dangling adverb "hopefully." Who extended the precedent to "thankfully"?

These things quickly infect movies, distracting anachronisms from writers with neither idea of nor interest in what vocabulary was in use before their time, as in "check it out" in a western and "knowledgeable" in *The Lion in Winter*. My suspension of disbelief got suspended during the World War I film *Zeppelin* when a British officer says to Michael York, "Hopefully, you'll be able to . . . ." In *Ed Wood*, the title character says, in a scene set in 1955, "Hopefully, very soon." In *Snow Falling on Cedars*, set about 1948, one of the characters says, "No problem." "No problem" also crops up in *Ed Wood*.

Here's my list, in no particular sequence:

Riveting (very big with movie and TV reviewers), layered (as in "a layered performance"; formerly popular with critics, now apparently fading, or perhaps I should say now thankfully fading), angst, firestorm, sea change, time frame, leading edge, cutting edge (worst use I've heard: Charles Gibson on *Good Morning America* interviewing a doctor about treatments for kidney stones: "What is the most cutting edge?"), learning experience, learning curve, peace process, light at the end of the tunnel (yes, it's still in use), on the table, bring to the table, full plate, world-class, major-league, big-time, end game, main thrust, defining moment, hot button, buzz word, slam dunk, mind set, comfort zone, loose cannon, rogue nation, slippery slope, happy camper, golden parachute, glass ceiling, quality time, in-depth, bean counters, warm and fuzzy, talking as a transitive verb (as in "we're talking money here," instead of "we're talking about money"), window of opportunity, off (or under) the radar, in (or out of) the loop, step up to the plate, the right thing to do (the gift to the language of Martha Stewart), viable (a lost cause), singular (for single), disinterested (which means detached, fair) for uninterested, most for almost (once a hillbillyism, now virtually standard usage), lay instead of lie, overarching (fairly new; makes journalists sound literate, as if they might have read Macaulay or somebody), basically, draw a line in the sand, no brainer, hold (someone's) feet to the fire, spin, sending a signal, sending a message, in your face, literally (I heard a TV reporter say of someone's fear, "He was literally petrified"), in a heartbeat, in a New York minute, heart-wrenching instead of heart-rending and, even worse, heart-rendering, very unique, somewhat unique etc., level playing field, level the playing field, win-win (or no-win) situation, bottom line, FebYOUary, if you will, arguable, arguably, unarguably, been there done that, like a deer caught in the headlights, pushing the envelope, fire in the belly, on the same page, hit the ground running, even as we speak, any time soon, at this or that point in time (what ever happened to soon, now, and then?), rain showers, snow showers (what ever happened to snow flurries, snowfall, blizzard, and just plain snow, as well as drizzle, scattered showers, downpour, cloudburst, and just plain rain?), up close and personal, resonate/has resonance with, and venue. Venue means the place of a crime and subsequent court trial, being the past participle of the French verb venir, which came into English jurisprudence after the Norman conquest. It does *not* mean a concert hall, nightclub, magazine, book publisher, Hyde Park soap box, or the Oprah Winfrey show. And tweak? I still don't know what tweak means. And there's heads up, as in "Give me a heads up on that." I have no notion what that means, either. Nor the verb to morph. Oh yes, gravitas is now big with TV pundits, whom the British term the chattering class and Sander Vanocur called "the Sunday morning gasbags." Hubris is good, too. Shows you're up on your *Oedipus*.

A particularly odious practice is the use of "absent" as a preposition, replacing "in the absence of." Absent is and *only* is an adjective, as in "He was absent that day." But now we are getting "Absent evidence to the contrary" and "Absent adequate funding . . . ." I suspect we owe this one to the legal profession.

Max Roach objects to the phrase, beloved of newspaper headline writers, "all that jazz," which he correctly points out connotes *all that crap.*

I got caught on one. I said something was almost destroyed. I was informed that "destroyed," like "unique," is an absolute. "Destroyed" means *totally* obliterated. I looked it up, and it does.

With both cops and TV reporters, there are the ever-popular "gentleman" and "individual", as in:

"Four police officers wrestled him to the ground, disarmed him, and put the gentleman under arrest on charges of sexual assault and attempted murder."And: "Drenching himself in gasoline, the individual set himself on fire."

One might wish that *everyone* would discontinue using "rocket scientist" as a paradigm of intelligence — particularly after those two bungled Martian lander shots. The official explanation was that someone was operating in miles, feet, and inches while somebody else was using the metric system. If you believe that, there is, as they say, a nice bridge in Brooklyn for sale. Science has operated on the metric system for a long time. *All* science. Anyway, out with "rocket scientist." And in any case, a rocket scientist was never anything but an engineer with a computer.

Doug Ramsey, ex-newspaperman, television reporter and anchor, gets disturbed by the vapid remarks TV anchorthings inject after news reports. "Indeed" has become very popular. Doug says, "Some idiot decided that this all-purpose response made him sound erudite, thoughtful, and possibly British, and it caught on, to wit:

"'A tragic situation for all concerned.'

"'Indeed.'

"'Farmers say it is the worst drought in twenty years.'

"'Indeed.'

"All of it isn't on television," Doug added. "Jack Hart of the *Oregonian* came up with this item, which actually moved on the Cox News Service wire on July 24. It gets an award for the most clichés per line."

> Thurmont, MD — With Mideast peace talks teetering somewhere between triumph and disaster, President Clinton plunged into the heart and soul of

statecraft on Monday, rolling up his sleeves for around-the-clock talks centering on nuts-and-bolts diplomacy.

Just off a 15-hour flight from Japan, Clinton dove into hand-to-hand negotiations that stretched until 5 a.m. (ET) Monday at nearby Camp David. He caught five hours of sleep and spent the rest of the day trying to shepherd the talks through what appeared to be a make-or-break moment.

With Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat at loggerheads over the fate of Jerusalem — pen and notebook in hand — he held extended, detail-oriented negotiations with working-level officials from both lands.

Leonard Maltin, the broadcaster, writer, and movie scholar, wrote me:

"Nothing gets me more upset than the phrase 'impacted on.' What ever happened to the perfectly useful 'affected'?

"I've resigned myself to the verb 'access'. I don't think there's any turning back from that one, though it used to make me cringe.

"Another pet peeve: the disappearance of the words 'fewer' and 'as.' 'Less' is now misused instead of 'fewer' on a regular basis. 'Like' has completely replaced 'as.'

"I almost forgot *funner* and *funnest*. Their use is taking on epidemic proportions.

"But having a fourteen-year-old daughter, I hear all kinds of stuff."

John Walsh, my colleague as far back as our *Louisville Times* days, said, "If you were able to enforce that list, you'd silence half the newsrooms in America."

Some coinages persist long enough to become part of the language. "Sidetrack" and "derail" began as railway terms and now one would be hard-pressed (see what I mean?) to find alternatives. And one wouldn't turn a hair (see what I mean?) on hearing that something didn't pan out — a term probably from the California gold rush. I would presume that "right off the bat" comes from baseball.

As for "Have a nice day," long mocked as a Californiaism, is there a difference between that and "good afternoon"? I heard a Russian journalist say that one of the warmest expressions he had learned in the English language is the gently solicitous "Take care" on parting. He said he knew of no equivalent in any other language.

"Have a good one," however, irritates me.

"Cool" as used in Internet argot is now so widespread that it has passed into French. It is common to hear, "C'est très cool."

No way, Jose, to coin a phrase.

A Blues for Steve

Five weeks after I had that surgery, Steve Allen entered the sasha. He is vibrantly alive in the memory of millions of Americans and Canadians who knew him from television and more so among those who knew him personally.

I can't believe that he is gone and I am still here.

One of the newspaper reporters who called me on Halloween, the day after his death, asked inevitably what he was like. My first thought: "He was one of the two funniest men I've ever met."

The reporter asked, "Who was the other one?"

I said, "Larry Gelbart."

Larry was one of many persons who said to me, "Has anybody ever told you that you talk like Steve Allen?"

"Only about once a month," I said. Even some of his office staff thought so. I couldn't hear it, and neither could Steve. I did radio shows and some TV with Steve. Listening to them, I hear no resemblance. Steve and I went with Les Brown to a big birthday bash for Butch Stone. We ran into Larry, who said, "Now I've got you in stereo."

Steve's mind was incredibly quick. On a cruise of the S.S. Norway, he did a performance with Terry Gibbs. Before they played, he took questions from the audience. One woman asked, "What do you think about sex over sixty?"

He paused only a fraction of a second and said, "I'm in favor of it. But I'd suggest slowing up to forty, and better still, pull over to the side of the road."

Another woman asked, "Mr. Allen, what is your favorite of all the songs you've written?"

He said, "Well, it might be one of the more obscure ones, like *If You Were the Only Girl in the World, You Could Name Your Own Price.*"

That was about as close to "dirty" as Steve's humor got, in private or in public. He deplored the slide into the violent and vulgar in movies, television, and popular music. Not that he was puritanical. (He was one of the early champions of Lenny Bruce, whom he put on TV. That took guts.) We agreed that "profanity" has its place in humor and drama. But only if it makes a point, not for its own sake. He loathed the garbage mouths of Howard Stern and Andrew Dice Clay.

I made the point to Steve that the "loosening" of prohibitions in speech made possible the impeachment of Bill Clinton. In my young days as a reporter, the word "rape" was barred from most newspapers; "assault" was the operative euphemism. L'affaire Lewinsky could not have been discussed in print, thus could not have become a national issue, and the Republican campaign to destroy Clinton could never have been initiated or executed.

Steve had just completed a new book about the brutality

and obscenity in entertainment, entitled *Vulgarians at the Gate*. I for one will be watching for it.

I was about to say that vulgarity is not necessary to humor, but that is true if you have talent. Steve dripped talent. It mystified me. There seemed to be some lack of inhibition, which permitted him direct extemporaneous expression in anything he did, whether it was tossing humor back and forth with an audience or playing the piano or making up tunes.

There is in his living room a bust of Skitch Henderson, surprisingly good. Steve had a sculptor on his show back when Henderson was his bandleader. The sculptor set Steve up with some clay, he began the portrait, he finished it at home, and he never did another one.

One of the most remarkable things Steve ever did was a one-hour series for PBS that is now being used in some schools. Called *Meeting of Minds*, it presented imaginary round-table conversations between major historical figures, with Steve as the moderator. Jayne Meadows, his wife, played many of the female roles, including Margaret Sanger and Katherine the Great. One program put Sanger together with Adam Smith and Mohandas Gandhi. Astonishing stuff, and incredibly informative.

But Steve didn't only participate in and produce these shows. He was the writer, or co-writer, of all of them. (Jayne took part in some of the writing.) Thus he had to have thoroughly studied each of these personages (as the French say), in order to write dialogue for these encounters.

He was dismissive of his own piano playing. Okay. How many other comedians or talk-show hosts play piano as well as Steve did? And, incidentally, *all* of the hosts are professional descendants of Steve Allen, who damn near invented television. The quality of talk shows has been falling ever since. So has the intellectual median of America. Really? Yeah, really. Steve called it the dumbing of America, and it's real. When he was at the height of his TV popularity, a chain of high-school newspapers did a national survey to determine who was the favorite entertainer of adolescents. Steve won. Imagine who such a survey today would annoint. Emanem?

Steve wrote songs, and here, too, he was self-deprecating. The problem with Steve is that he did so many things well that the world failed to notice that he did some of them very well indeed. He taped tunes (he couldn't read music) constantly. Given the sheer quantity of them it is hardly surprising that some of them were mediocre, as were some of Gershwin's unpublished numbers. But *This Could Be the Start of Something Big, Impossible*, and *I Love You Today* are songs any writer could be proud of. And Steve did words *and* music.

That cruise we did on the Norway taught me a lot about him. He played duets on vibes with Terry Gibbs, and he was an amazingly good vibes player. As for his piano, Frank Tate, who played bass with him, said, "I wouldn't be ashamed to go anywhere with Steve. He's good. And we can only imagine what he might be if he'd spent his life at the piano, instead of all the other things he does."

Including writing novels. He learned that the cruise lines were having financial problems. He went home and wrote a mystery called *Murder on the High Seas,* with a jazz cruise setting and that economic background.

Steve wrote himself and his wife Jayne Meadows into his mystery novels: they are the investigating couple, rather like Nick and Nora Charles in the Thin Man series of the 1930s. He also wrote his friends into them. He sent me the novel at its publication date. Imagine my surprise to find that I am one of the characters in the book. He is having on deck a conversation with me that never occurred. It was funny — and fun — to read that passage. (The villain, or rather villainess, turns out to be a rock star suspiciously resembling Madonna.) But what struck me most was the way Steve had assimilated information and used it while seeming to do nothing more than have a good time on the ship.

He acted in several movies and a number of plays. He played the lead in *The Benny Goodman Story*, a movie of great dumbth (his coinage) whose greatest challenge, he told me, was trying to get a little warmth into the character. Benny came onto the set a few times, called him "Pops", and didn't seem to know who he was.

As much as he hated things — the filth of Andrew Dice Clay, for example — I don't think Steve ever really hated any*body*. He was friends even with columnist Cal Thomas. Thomas wrote a surprisingly sensitive eulogy to Steve. I say "surprisingly" because the political right is rarely sensitive, and never empathetic, which is why it tends to produce mahogany actors such as Charlton Heston and Kevin Kostner. Thomas wrote: "I have a file full of articles, letters, and pass-along material — all underlined, asterisked, and exclamation-pointed — that [Steve] sent to me about all sorts of subjects, from the death penalty to violations of human rights and hypocrisy on all sides."

I too have such a file; I have no idea how many people were on Steve's show-to list.

Steve and I sent each other streams of newspaper clippings, as well as books we'd just read on subjects such as astronomy and physics. Steve looked up through the sky into the incomprehensible depths. If he had a religion, that was it. Yet he was supportive of charitable religious causes, including the Salvation Army. At least ten years ago, he warned me of the seditious tunneling of the Christian Right whose intention was to infiltrate political offices at the local level, including city councils and school boards, advance

their agenda, and then expand. They now have partial control of the Republican party; Steve foresaw this.

His man-in-the-street interviews were jewels. One of the regulars on *The Steve Allen Show* (1959-60) was Don Knotts, whose character was almost fatally nervous; Bill Dana was the distracted Hispanic astronaut who more or less wrote "My name Jose Jimenez" into the language; Pat Harrington was the Italian golfer Guido Panzini, and Louis Nye was an effete Madison advertising type named Gordon Hathaway. It was he who hung the name Steverino on Steve, and it stuck. Gordon would say in a grinning breathy voice things like, "Hi ho, Steverino, my name is Gordon Hathaway, I'm a musician, and I play ice." The ice bit was one of their funniest Steve asks him what led him to a career playing ice. Gordon says he began small with ice cubs and worked his way up. "Next month," he says proudly, "I'm conducting a glacier in Alaska." Crazy stuff. I fell out, as we used to say. And this, too:

A feisty hip-talking little old lady sometimes turned up on the show. Once Steve asked her if she'd heard any interesting new music. She said, in an aging slightly cracked voice, "I haven't heard anything interesting since *Dizzy*."

He was born in New York City the day after Christmas in 1921, and given the very Irish name Stephen Valentine Patrick William Allen. His parents were vaudevillians. His father died when he was a toddler, but his mother kept working. He was raised in Chicago by her stoutly Catholic relatives, whom he once described as "sarcastic, volatile, sometimes disparaging, but very, very funny." Steve yearned to leave with his mother for life on the road. He wrote a play about it, which he took me to see. A very good play. Why it has not gone to Broadway, I have no idea.

The hip old lady who dug Dizzy was Steve's real-life mother. On one of his shows, they did the act she had done with his father, who worked under the name Billy Allen. Steve showed me a videotape of it. Steve was the straight man. She was a superbly dippy comedienne. Whether Steve's artesian well of humor was a matter of genes or conditioning is beyond speculation.

I got to know Steve shortly after I became editor of *Down Beat* in 1959. He made an LP as the legendary jazz pianist Buck Hammer, who of course didn't exist. The *Down Beat* reviewer gave the record an underwhelmed two-star review, but didn't notice that Buck had three hands. He was furious when he found out he'd been had. I found the incident funny, and Steve and I struck up a correspondence.

Steve played piano in a band while he was attending Highland Park High School in Chicago. On his TV show in later years, he would make references to someone named Niles Lishness, and for all I knew he was as mythological as Buck Hammer. He wasn't. Steve eventually introduced me to him, a trumpet player with whom he had shared a friendship since high school. I don't think Steve ever made a friend he didn't still have.

He tried Drake University in Iowa, then Arizona State Teachers College. He played in a band in Arizona. He told me a wild story about a wind coming up during an outdoor gig, the music flying about, the musicians and audience gathering and reassembling it, and the band trying to play from mixed-up parts. "It didn't matter to me," he said, "since I couldn't read it anyway."

He gravitated to Los Angeles, got his own disc jockey show on KNX, and proved so funny as an interviewer and talker that this became part of the format, along with his piano noodlings. This turned into a television show in 1950 and then he was called to New York to become the founding host of the *Tonight* show. Every show of its kind, and its host, owes everything to him. So does a lot of other talent. Steve Lawrence, one of his discoveries, was almost in tears during a TV interview the day after Steve's death. The comics Steve discovered or whose careers he advanced included Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Don Knotts, Jonathan Winters, Bill Dana, Louis Nye, Bill Maher, and many more. Without a jealous bone in his body, he was the world's greatest audience for other comics. Mention his name to everyone over a certain age and you will hear, "I was in college (or high school) at the time, and I would sit up late to watch Steve Allen." He booked a great many of the jazz artists he admired. NBC burned a lot of those shows to make shelf space a few years ago; lost was irreplaceable footage of Erroll Garner (whom he idolized) and Charlie Parker.

Steve was married twice, first to Dorothy Goodman, then for forty-six years to Jayne Meadows. He had three sons by the first marriage, including Steve Jr., now a physician in New York City. The son he had with Jayne, Bill, lived near them in Encino. Steve went to Bill's house to carve jack-o-lanterns with his adored grandchildren the evening of October 30. He lay down for a nap before going home and never woke up. Just about everybody who knew him said, "That's the way to go."

Marilyn Maye (one of the singers he discovered) called me two days after he died. She said, "I wanted to hear your voice, because you sound so much like him, and I know you miss him as much as I do."

Marilyn told the newspapers, "He was a perfect, classic, and classical, gentleman."

Disraeli said, "A gentleman is never seen to be working." Steve embodied the dictum. He was just having fun.

He died the way he did everything: effortlessly. Full of years and adventures and achievement and honors and decency. So long, my friend.