

## On Scott LaFaro

By Don Thompson

In the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, Jimmy Stewart gets to see the world as it might have been if he had never been born. This is something everyone thinks about now and then. We all like to think we will have made a difference in the world but nobody ever knows for sure.

In music there are people who are so important that it is impossible to imagine the world without them. Think about music without Bach, Mozart or Beethoven. Think about jazz without Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker or John Coltrane. In the history of jazz there have been only a handful of real innovators on each instrument. These people have shaped the way their instruments have come to be played. On the piano the list would include Art Tatum, Bud Powell, McCoy Tyner, Keith Jarrett and Bill Evans. On saxophone there would be Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane. On bass there would be Jimmy Blanton, Oscar Pettiford, Ray Brown, Red Mitchell and Scott LaFaro. Of that group of bass players, Ray Brown and Scott LaFaro stand out from the rest. Ray Brown personifies the bassist's role in a rhythm section. With his beautiful sound, amazing groove and Bach-like lines, Ray was the man everyone wanted to sound like. That is until Scott LaFaro came along.

The first time I heard Scotty play was on *Portrait in Jazz* with Bill Evans. I had been playing the bass for three or four years but was not really that interested in it. I was playing a lot of piano and vibes at the time, so playing the bass didn't really matter to me that much. But when I heard that track of *Autumn Leaves*, all that changed. There was a spirit of adventure and freedom I had never heard before and all of a sudden it became very important to me to really learn how to play the bass. Hearing Scotty play with Bill Evans had opened up a whole new world of music to me, and I wanted to be a part of it.

Everything about Scotty's playing killed me. His sound, his solos (which actually reminded me a bit of Red Mitchell)

And his time feel, which was amazing. But what really got to me was the interplay between him and Bill Evans. The idea of a musical conversation was not really that new but the combination of Bill Evans and Scott LaFaro proved to be a magical one and together they took that concept to a whole new place. Bill had provided the setting that gave Scotty the freedom to play the music however he happened to feel it.

Being free is one thing but along with that freedom comes a great responsibility and it takes a great musician to work in that setting and really succeed on all levels. Scotty had everything he needed to make it work. He had great time, extraordinary ears, a fantastic sense of form, and so much chops he could play pretty well anything that came into his head. He was also blessed with the gift of melody and counter-melody but most important of all he had a beautiful musicality and sensitivity that enabled him to respond and interact with the other players without playing all over them. He knew exactly what the music needed and no matter what he played, or how much he seemed to be playing, the music was always his first concern and he never let the music down.

What Scotty played was amazing then and is amazing still today. His solos were technically overwhelming but melodically breathtaking. The solo on *My Romance* is one of my favorites and the last eight bars, in particular, is pure melodic perfection.

Scott LaFaro is one of a small group of musicians who really changed the course of jazz. It's hard to imagine where he might have gone with music had he not been taken so early in his life. For me, and probably most of today's bass players, it's even harder to imagine the world of the bass without Scotty in it. He brought a brand new concept to the bass and in doing so he changed the way people would play it forever. Forty-five years later he is still probably the most powerful influence there is on the bass.

I regret never having known him but he will always be a part of my world and I will always be thankful for everything he contributed to it.

— Don Thompson, Toronto



# Engulf and Devour

You may not know who she is, but she is to my mind — and that of Doug Ramsey, Nat Hentoff, and Gary Giddins, among others — one of the most important business figures in the jazz world. Terri Hinte was, until she got dumped, the publicity and public relations director of Fantasy Records. But she is much more than that. Her dismissal by the Concord Fantasy Music Group troubles quite a number of us. Behind this lies a tale, and an ominous one.

Fantasy was founded in 1949 by the brothers Sol and Max Weiss with recordings by the Dave Brubeck Trio and Quartet, Vince Guaraldi, who had a big hit with *Cast Your Fate to the Wind*, and Cal Tjader. It pioneered recording comedians live with the innovative and influential nightclub performances of Lenny Bruce, and then turned to pop music with the group Creedence Clearwater Revival, which was so successful that the Fantasy building at Tenth and Parker in Berkeley, California, was known as the house that Creedence built. Saul Zaentz joined the company and then with a group of investors that included Ralph Kaffel bought out the Weiss brothers. Zaentz became chairman of the company, eventually become a major movie producer, making such films as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Amadeus*.

The company continued to expand, buying up jazz, blues, and pop labels, including the catalogs of Riverside, Prestige, Milestone, Contemporary, and Pablo, becoming the largest independent jazz record label. This meant that Fantasy now controlled a larger body of work by major jazz artists, among them Miles Davis, Bill Evans, Cannonball Adderley, Sonny Rollins, and Oscar Peterson, than any company in the world.

A couple of years ago I wrote a two-part piece called *Ten Ton Truck*, in an attempt to delineate who owns what in the worlds not only of jazz but publishing and communications including newspapers, magazines, and television. It took me weeks to research, because the great conglomerates don't want you to know who owns what.

The broader significance of Karl Marx was not his proposal and espousal of communism but in his (for the time) revolutionary idea that history was determined not by kings and dictators and heroes but by economic forces. And one of Marx's contentions was that corporations would devour each other until they reached such a size that governments would take them over. Marx was wrong: *bien au contraire*: they have grown to such a size that governments aren't taking them over, they are taking over governments, as the recent history of Enron (George W. Bush's friends) and Halliburton, of which Vice President Dick Cheney is formerly (do you really

believe that?) an owner, can command the government to declare war on another sovereign nation to acquire its petroleum resources, at the cost of (thus far) some 3,000 young American lives, countless thousands of Iraqi civilian lives, the destruction not only of a nation but its history, reaching back into the dawn of western civilization in Mesopotamia. As I wrote in *Ten Ton Truck*:

You will recall those days when, aside from all the jazz and high-quality pop recording being done at Columbia, RCA, Decca, and Capitol, there were a number of small independent labels doing excellent work, such as Dick Bock's Pacific Jazz, Dial, Savoy, Prestige, Commodore, Riverside, and an upstart in San Francisco called Fantasy, whose first artist was Dave Brubeck . . . . In later years, Fantasy dwindled as a source of new music to become a buyer of catalogs, acquiring Contemporary, Debut, Milestone (the old Riverside Records catalog), Prestige, Pablo, and various labels devoted to rhythm and blues, rock, and pops. Creedence Clearwater . . . made Fantasy a major force. If Fantasy now does little to generate new music, it was an invaluable resource in keeping available classic records from the past, including those of Oscar Peterson on Pablo and Bill Evans on Riverside. And it did indeed record Bill Evan afresh in albums now available as boxed sets. The Fantasy catalog is a national treasure.

Far more active than Fantasy in recording new music was Concord, owned by a used-car dealer named Carl Jefferson who protested too much his honesty. Concord's catalog was limited to Jefferson's conventional tastes in jazz, which prompted one musician to say you were welcome on that label if you were born before the Civil War. Its catalog includes records by Ray Brown, Charlie Byrd, Herb Ellis, Stan Getz, Gene Harris, Robben Ford, Tito Puente, and Mel Tormé. It also has a line of homogenized pop performers (and one brilliant singer, Patti Austin).

At the end of 2004, Fantasy was sold at last to Concord, creating the Concord Music Group, which called itself "a new leader in independent, adult-focused music."

Concord had by then been purchased by Norman Lear and Hal Gaba, who entered a partnership with Tailwind Capital Partners. Tailwind defines itself as "a leading private equity firm focused on media and other growth sectors," saying it "provided new equity capital to the Concord Music Group." It owns companies,



ranging from orthopedic devices — ankle braces and the like — to Next Media, which, according to its own publicity, “has become a key player in the media business offering clients traditional outdoor ads in six of the top ten markets, indoor ads in 35 of the top 50 markets, and 60 radio stations in 15 mid-sized markets.”

It is hard to see how and where Concord-Fantasy will fit among its priorities. One can imagine it sailing off into the mists of some California sunset, leaving a slight glow like that from a distant Viking funeral ship.

What I wrote is already obsolete, because the carnivorous takeovers have continued, reminding one of the motion picture company in the 1976 Mel Brooks picture *Silent Movie*. It was called Engulf and Devour. It’s a very funny movie, done in the manner of the silent-film era, with subtitles. It’s also a cogent one. Brooks stars himself as a once-famous comedy director hoping to make a comeback in Hollywood. Sid Caesar plays a producer who is willing to give him a chance. The crooked executives of the Engulf and Devour conglomerate — an obvious play on Gulf and Western — want the new film to fail, lest Caesar’s company become so successful that he won’t be interested in selling out to them. So they set out to sabotage the picture.

If there was ever a man who saw what was coming, it was Mel Brooks. And that picture was thirty-one years ago.

A few years back, I was in the Fantasy building in Berkeley, talking to Ralph Kaffel, then the president of the company, in his office. I expressed my concern that Fantasy and its glorious catalog would fall into the hands of one of the conglomerates. He assured me it wouldn’t.

A day or two earlier, I had been in Carl Jefferson’s office at Concord Records in Concord, California. Jefferson was a successful automobile dealer who in 1969 organized the Concord Jazz Festival. He established the Concord label in 1972, which went into recordings by “mainstream” jazz performers including Scott Hamilton, Warren Vache, Dave McKenna, and George Shearing. Jefferson *imposed* his tastes on the performers signed to the label. You have no idea what an original, inventive, and brilliant guitarist Emily Remler was unless you heard her in person rather than on her Concord recordings. But Jefferson produced more than 500 sessions for his company, and Concord’s is a large and quite good catalog. Jefferson died in 1995.

Then came this press release from Concord, reading in part:

Beverly Hills CA — December 1, 2004 — Concord Records, Inc., and Fantasy, Inc., today announced that

Concord has completed its acquisition and has merged the two companies to form a new entity called the Concord Music Group, Inc. Concord Records is a prominent 31-year-old, active record label focused on jazz, traditional pop and adult contemporary formats that is currently enjoying considerable success with the multi-platform release of Ray Charles’ final recording, *Genius Loves Company* (in association with Starbucks Hear Music). Fantasy owns one of the world’s largest and most prestigious catalogs of jazz, blues, R&B and rock music, including certain music publishing assets and legendary recordings of John Coltrane, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Miles Davis, Bill Evans, Ella Fitzgerald, Vince Guaraldi, Isaacs Hayes, Little Richard, Albert King, Thelonious Monk, Joe Pass, Art Pepper, Otis Redding, Sonny Rollins, and numerous others. Fantasy also owns and operates the world-class Fantasy Recording Studios in Berkeley, California. Following the merger, the Concert Music Group will be one of the foremost adult-focused music companies in the world.

As part of the transaction, Tailwind Capital Partners, a leading private equity investment firm focused on media and other growth sectors of the economy, provided new equity capital to the Concord Music Group. The existing owners of Concert Records, Norman Lear and Hal Gaba, remain substantial shareholders in the combined entity. Concord management will also have a share of the new company.

Ralph Kaffel, president of Fantasy, said, “During the negotiations and due diligence process, we got to know the principals and key employees of Concord quite well, which re-affirmed the correctness of our initial judgment that Concord is the proper home for our catalogs. Having spent fifty years in the record business, 33 of them at Fantasy building up the catalogs, my primary concern as well as that of the other principals, was that the acquiring entity should have the proper understanding and respect for the treasures we are turning over to them, and be willing to perpetuate the historical legacy these catalogs represent. With Norman, Hal, Glen Barros, and all the other talented people now at the helm at the Concord Music Group, my colleagues and I are convinced the Fantasy catalog is in very good hands.”

Glen Barros, president and CEO at Concord, and now president and chief executive officer of the Concord Music Group, said, “I am incredibly honored to be in a position to help carry the Fantasy legacy into



the future. I am so enthusiastic about this merger, about working with the talented professionals involved from both sides, and the great opportunities for the combined companies going forward.”

The first thing you have to do on reading that is fight back a mild nausea inspired by this minuet. Then you have to translate some of it into English, if you can. What does “multi-platform release” mean?

As for Kaffel’s “perpetuate the historical legacy these catalogs represent” and Barros’ unctuous “carry the Fantasy legacy into the future,” one of the early acts of the new company was to drop that beautiful blue-boxed multiple CD collection of *The Complete Riverside Recordings* of Bill Evans. And as for Barros’ remark about “working with the talented professionals involved from both sides,” one of the next acts was the firing of Terri Hinte by Nohman, as Lear is obsequiously addressed by some of the sycophants around him, and/or his associates

Terri Hinte is a quite remarkable woman. She studied French, German, and linguistics at Washington Square College of NYU, Portuguese at the Berlitz School in Oakland prior to extensive travels in Brazil, did private study of Czech before going to Prague, as well as basic Italian, had considerable writing and editing experience at magazines in New York, and was appointed Arts and Culture Commissioner of the city of Richmond by Mayor Irma Anderson. Over the years she has worked with and done publicity for just about every major jazz artist you can think of.

Publicists are a mixed breed. There have been a number of them in record companies over the years who have done their work decently and well, including Sol Handwerger at MGM and Herb Helman and Elliot Horne at RCA Victor. There are others who are hustlers, aggressive and unpleasant. Terri is among the best, and high in the hierarchy of that group. No one ever contacted her for information on Fantasy’s catalog or about individual artists or, for that matter, anything else, without getting a prompt and efficient response, usually providing you all that you needed. She also commissioned and edited the liner notes for the company. *There is no one alive who knows that Fantasy catalog better than she does.* It’s what you can’t buy: knowledge in the head.

Imagine the shock, then, when she got sacked. *Billboard* on July 1, 2006, ran an article under a six-column headline: **Fantasy Diminished by Hinte’s Departure.** Dan Ouellette wrote: “It was disconcerting to hear that Terri Hinte, a Fantasy employee for 33 years and director of publicity for 28 years, was laid off May 31, with three business days’ notice. Jazz at Fantasy lost one of its true advocates.

“It’s ironic that the Jazz Journalists Association had already planned to celebrate her. At its 10<sup>th</sup> annual jazz awards show at New York’s B.B. King Blues Club and Grill, Hinte received one of its behind-the-scenes A-team honors, inscribed as ‘De Facto Curator of Fantasy Records.’

“While Hinte has been reluctant to talk about her dismissal, esteemed journalists have been weighing in on her behalf.

“Grammy Award-winning liner notes scribe Bob Blumenthal calls her, ‘hands down, the best,’ while author Gary Giddins praises her for her ‘personableness, intelligence, and humor.’ He wonders how safe Fantasy’s catalog really is. ‘The new owners seem to have no idea what to do with this stuff, how to treat it or market it,’ Giddins says. ‘And now they’ve let go the one person in the company who did.’

“Concord president Glen Barros counters: ‘We’re committed to jazz and the jazz catalog we’ve invested in.’ He adds that he has ‘tremendous respect’ for Hinte as ‘a great caretaker, proponent and spokesperson’ for jazz. ‘However, when companies merge, there are unfortunate consequences. ‘But I don’t think Terri’s departure means that we have any less respect for the Fantasy catalog.’”

With that kind of gift for double-speak, Barros could have a solid career as a writer of political speeches

The repercussion didn’t stop there. Doug Ramsey wrote in his *Riffnotes*:

“Terri Hinte has been fired by Concord Records. Her name will not mean a thing to most of you, but her work has indirectly benefitted serious jazz listeners for decades. The news of her dismissal is of intense interest to many writers because Ms. Hinte is the very model of what a record company publicist should be—deeply knowledgeable about the music and its players, intelligent, responsive, resourceful, helpful in countless substantive ways . . . .

“Far from simply sending out review copies and news releases, as many companies do, Terri Hinte made it her business to know the extensive and varied catalog inside and out and to understand the importance of the hundreds of artists who recorded for its labels over more than five decades. Her newsletter and advisories were light years beyond the puffery that passes for publicity in too many precincts of the music business. They contained news that writers about the music, and those who broadcast it, could and did use, resulting in better informed listeners. Her phone calls often brought writers valuable story ideas. The catalogs she produced are reference works packed with information.

“Concord bought Fantasy eighteen months ago, fueling speculation among jazz professionals and listeners about



what would happen to the invaluable recordings in the Fantasy archives. The dismissal of Ms. Hinte has only increased nervousness concerning the future of those treasures.”

One of Doug’s readers wrote: “Jazz fans probably ought to hurry to purchase titles from Fantasy’s vast catalog before Concord deletes them wholesale as they did with their own label a few years back.

“I’m sure that Terri Hinte will do well as an independent publicist and writer, but her unjust termination is one more sign that Concord’s management doesn’t really give a damn about jazz.”

I have *never* seen anything like the hue and cry set up by the unceremonious dumping of Terri Hinte, or such a consistency in outrage. One of the most illuminating pieces on the subject was written by Nat Hentoff for his *Final Chorus* column in *JazzTimes*. Nat wrote:

“When I heard, in November 2005, that Concord Records had bought Fantasy Records, I called Concord’s owner, Norman Lear (creator of *All in the Family* and other television breakthroughs). Since we’re both civil libertarians, Lear and I had spoken before in connection with People for the American Way (which he founded) and his tour of the nation a few years ago with a very rare contemporary copy of the Declaration of Independence.

“This time I called to urge Lear to keep the Fantasy catalog intact, with its extensive catalog of timeless jazz recordings on Riverside, Prestige, Milestone, Norman Granz’s Pablo, Les Koenig’s Contemporary, Charles Mingus’s Debut, et al. The music, I told him, embodied the very spirit of the Declaration of Independence.”

Clearly Nat’s exhortation on Terri’s behalf fell on indifferent ears. But then, I’ve always seen Norman Lear as a conquering hypocrite.

Since the merger of Fantasy and Concord, the new company has acquired Telarc, which has a distinguished catalog of jazz and classical music. We’ll see what happens to it, but those familiar with its recent issues and those projected for next year say the dumbing down of the label has already begun.

Engulf and Devour marches on.

## Noble Effort

And another bit of news for those who think, like Dr. Pangloss, that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds (Voltaire was satirizing Leibniz):

The Henry Mancini Institute and with it the HMI orchestra have ceased to exist. As its press release put it:

LOS ANGELES — After ten years of providing fully funded annual scholarships to over 800 professional young musicians and hands-on instructional and live-performance music education programs to over 30,000 students in Los Angeles-area schools, the Henry Mancini Institute (HMI) will officially close its headquarters and cease its operations effective December 31, 2006, it was announced today by Ginny Mancini, president of the board of directors and widow of the legendary composer.

According to Mrs. Mancini, “After ten years of nurturing, mentoring, and introducing hundreds of emerging young musicians to the world, our board of directors took a hard look at the future, and the ominous landscape of funding for the arts. The decision to close was difficult, yet realistic in assessing the rising costs and our commitment to maintain the level of excellence and integrity this organization was founded on.”

She added, “I’m thankful to find comfort and a sense of closure in that Henry Mancini’s legacy lives on in over 800 alumni who have realized this effect.”

The institute is currently in discussions with other organizations in the hopes of continuing its very successful in-school and after-school music-education programs scheduled for the current academic year in nearly 40 schools. Teachers and mentors of that program, along with dozens of other HMI personnel living in the Los Angeles area, remain available for professional performances.

That should jolt any persons who go trudging along telling themselves that the conditions of music in America are healthy and even improving. But it won’t perturb them, for such people remain hermetically sealed from reality. Or to put it in the phrase of a friend of mine many years ago, they’re leaving head prints in the sands of time.

The Mancini Institute orchestra gave some wonderful programs. The orchestra was not really made of undergraduates, but of musicians at the graduate level or beyond, just entering on the professional life. Ginny Mancini was incredibly generous to them. They were housed (in the summer months) in various residences of UCLA, fed, and even given credit cards for some of the restaurants in the Westwood area.

The Mancini Institute was a noble counter force to the gradual destruction of music in America: you need only listen to the “music” in television commercials, commissioned and written by people who grew up on rock and rap



and know nothing else, or to the current movie scores, to know what is happening. Now the Institute and all that it was accomplishing are swept away.

## Forgotten Singer

I made a discovery recently that quite surprised me.

In writings about jazz, there is a preoccupation with who copied what from whom that at times becomes quite destructive. Nobody makes much fuss about the debt Bizet's *Symphony in C* owes to Beethoven. But in jazz it's all Miles-got-it-from-Dizzy-who-got-it-from-Roy-who-got-it-from-Louis and Getz-got-it-from-Lester-who-got-it-from-Trumbauer, and so forth, which passes for musicology but isn't. Stravinsky rightly said that all music comes out of the tradition, and the fact is that every artist begins as an imitator. In earlier times, particularly in painting, imitation was used as a teaching tool.

In American singing — I'm talking about *singing*, not what goes on in rock-and-roll and its abysmal successors — it's always that Peggy Lee got it from Billie (she didn't, as you know if you ever heard her do her deliberate uncanny imitation of Billie Holiday), Sinatra got it from Billie. Or Mabel Mercer. Actually, whatever influences he absorbed, Frank was an absolute original, although I think that he, along with Doris Day and many others, owed much to Mildred Bailey, particularly in the phrasing.

When I was a kid, you heard a lot from a man named Gene Austin, a singer, pianist, guitarist and songwriter now forgotten. I listened to him very early in my life, and liked him, although by the time I heard him his career was in decline. I recently looked up his history and found that Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, and Russ Colombo all cited him as a major source of the American style.

He was an interesting man. Born Eugene Lucas on June 24, 1900, in Gainesville, Texas, he acquired the other name when his mother married her second husband, Jim Austin, a blacksmith. From him Gene learned to shoe horses. He grew up in Louisiana and joined the Army when he was seventeen. Stationed for a time in New Orleans, he played piano in the red light district. Because of his knowledge of horses, he went to Mexico with the cavalry under General Black Jack Pershing who, as one historian put it, might still have been wandering around Mexico looking for Pancho Villa had he not been recalled to head the American Expeditionary Force and was sent to France, where he almost lost a war the exhausted French, British, and their allies had pretty much won. Gene Austin went to France with the AEF.

Home from the war, he studied geology and dentistry in Baltimore, meanwhile singing in bars and other places. Someone at Victor records heard him and signed him. In the 1920s, he told 86,000,000 records, with hits on *When My Sugar Walks Down the Street*, *How Come You Do Me Like You Do?* and *Lonesome Road*, all of which he wrote, and others that he introduced, including *My Melancholy Baby*, *Girl of My Dreams*, *Ramona* and *Carolina Moon*. Other hits included *Yes Sir That's My Baby*, *Sleepy Time Gal*, *Five Foot Two Eyes of Blue*, *Bye Bye Blackbird*, *Thinking of You*, *Someday Sweetheart*, and *I Can't Give You Anything but Love*. All of these were in five years, from 1925 to 1930. His *My Blue Heaven* sold more than twelve million copies, the biggest single-record sale until Crosby's *White Christmas*.

Austin had a spontaneous, improvisational style which is probably the reason some of his admirers said he was essentially a jazz musician.

Electric recording came into use and Austin, it would seem, immediately understood the possibilities. You didn't have to shout or "belt" to be heard: recording, he apparently saw, was an intimate medium, to which his light tenor voice was particularly suitable. He thus became known as a crooner, the first to be saddled with this condescending designation.

I read somewhere once that he quit the business in disappointment when his sales of records *fell* to five million or some such, but I think this is unlikely. He continued to tour and make movies, appearing in the W.C. Fields *My Little Chickadee* in 1940 at the request of his friend May West.

But quit he eventually did, and retired in the late 1950s with his fifth wife to Palm Springs, California, where he was able to live comfortably on his song and recording royalties. He died there on January 24, 1972, of lung cancer, which adds to my curiosity about the incidence of the disease among those who work in the smoke of nightclubs.

You can get his records still, and you can look him up on the internet and find short samples of his singing. That's where I found the revelation. Do you know who sings remarkably like him, even down to the little appoggiaturas?

Fred Astaire.

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