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Knights of the London House Part I

After Oscar Peterson died on December 23, my telephone began ringing. The calls were from journalists and news organizations in several countries, for two reasons: I had written a biography of the man; and I had known him a long time — since May 4, 1951, to be exact. The reason I can specify the date is an unpleasant incident. A barber in Hamilton, Ontario, refused to cut his hair.

I was born in Hamilton, and at that time I was a few months into my first job as a newspaper reporter, working for the *Hamilton Spectator*. The city editor, a small kind man named Frank Keane, was aware for some reason that I knew a little about jazz, and I was assigned to the story, which appeared in the paper May 5. It would not have been news in the United States but in Canada it made headlines. Oscar said, "I didn't think it could happen here." I don't know why: he had experienced some abrasive incidents in Montreal, where he was born. He was three years older than I.

Oscar was appearing in duo format with bassist Ray Brown in an attractive little basement bar at a hotel called Fischer's. Bars were new in Hamilton. The last vestige of Prohibition had just vanished, the proscription against selling "mixed drinks" to the public. Fischer's hotel was one of the first to have a bar, and bars seemed quite glamorous.

I knew Oscar's playing only from the boogie-woogie records he had made for RCA Victor's Canadian division, and I was both astonished by them — his incredible speed — but not moved. They were examples of skill without content and not in fact representative of his playing at that time. Oscar later repudiated them.

In later years, when I knew Oscar and Ray well, they chuckled over the memory. They said that Ray had gone to the shop first, and when he got a good haircut he recommended the place to Oscar. And when Oscar entered it later that day, as he put it, "They must have thought, we're going to get all of *them*." The owner of the shop had been away when Oscar entered, and one of his barbers had given Oscar this rebuff. Nonetheless, the shop's owner barely escaped losing his business license: the city had a by-law, passed in May, 1947, granting a license to a barber shop only on the condition that there be no discrimination for race, color, or religion.

Oscar's career by that point was under the guidance of Jazz at the Philharmonic impresario Norman Granz, who had introduced him to the American audience at a concert, now seen as historic, in September 1949. Oscar idolized Norman Granz. It lasted through almost all his career. But late years of the twentieth century brought a change in Oscar's life: a break with Granz. This became conspicuous in a concert honoring Ella Fitzgerald, a benefit for the American Heart Foundation held February 12, 1990, at Lincoln Center. Producer Edith Kiggen hired me to write continuity for the event.

Not everyone was entranced by Granz, a tall and good-looking man with an affected manner of speech that caused some people to speculate that he was gay. Oscar said he was a ladies man. He paid his musicians well and treated them well.

Some musicians detested him. Count Basie went through a period of hostility toward Granz, which Oscar regretted, "in view of all that Norman did for him." Duke Ellington was another non-admirer. Through much of American history, a black man often sought out a white man to be his protector, and there were those who thought Granz used this reality to control the black members of Jazz at the Philharmonic. The late pianist and composer Bobby Scott, who at one time traveled with JATP as pianist with the Gene Krupa Quartet, was close to the saxophonist Lester Young, whom he idolized. Bobby told me that Lester called JATP a "flying plantation." But he did treat his artists well, and he did pay them well. And Granz deserves full credit for his effective opposition to racism.

Oscar would admit on occasion that his relationship with Granz had never been as free from friction as outsiders perceived. For all the charm he could manifest when he was seeking some end, Granz had a reputation both in and out of

JATP for mercurial transformation into a man both rude and mean. "He's a bully," said Eric Smith, Oscar's close friend. Eric often traveled with Oscar on JATP tours. "He can be very nasty. I've seen him do it to clerks, receptionists, headwaiters, anyone he considers beneath him."

Doreen Davey was Oscar's secretary of many years and vice president of his production company. One day Granz called, looking for Oscar. Doreen said she didn't know where he was. Granz didn't believe her and dressed her down in his most excoriating manner and hung up. Then he called her back and continued his tirade.

"She was in tears," Oscar told me. And Oscar was incensed. He said that when he finally spoke to Granz, expressing his anger, Granz said, "Maybe we should just end it, right here."

Oscar said, "Maybe we should."

It was not long after this incident that the concert for Ella Fitzgerald was held.

The concert was organized by producer Edith Kiggen. The soloists included Lena Horne, Tommy Flanagan, Bobby McFerrin, Melissa Manchester, Joe Williams, and seemingly improbably, violinist Itzhak Perlman. (Actually, Perlman had recorded a "jazz" album with André Previn.) The orchestra for the occasion, conducted by Benny Carter, included Red Rodney, Dizzy Gillespie, Clark Terry, Joe Wilder, Jon Faddis, Urbie Green, Benny Powell, Slide Hampton, Phil Woods, David Sanborn, Stan Getz, James Moody, Jimmy Heath, Hank Jones, Herb Ellis, Ray Brown, and Louis Bellson.

Oscar had been adamant that he would not attend. He thought Norman Granz would be present, and he had ceased all communication with hin. Kiggen told me Granz would *not* be present. I urged Ray Brown and Eric Smith to call Oscar. They did, assuring him that Granz would not be there, and Oscar agreed to take part in the concert for Fitzgerald's sake. John Kiggen, Edith's son, flew up to Toronto and escorted him to New York.

If the most dramatic aspect of that evening was the intractability of Oscar's estrangement from Granz, the most interesting backstage moment for me was Oscar's meeting with the violinist Perlman.

The cavil of Oscar's detractors was that he was "merely" a derivative of Art Tatum calls to mind an incident in the career of the late alto saxophonist Gene Quill. To a listener who said that Quill was only imitating Charlie Parker, Quill, unhooking his saxophone from the neck strap and holding it out to this man, said, "Here — you imitate Charlie Parker."

On that February evening, I heard Oscar deliberately imitate Tatum. There are tracks on some of his recordings in which he does this, as Stan Getz used to pay tribute to his idol Lester Young, and Peggy Lee would do an imitation of Billie Holiday so eerily accurate that Oscar and Count Basie found it unsettling.

Backstage, as the performers milled about, Perlman told me he had always wanted to play with Oscar Peterson. Oscar arrived, casting his massive presence among the musicians backstage. After his exuberant exchange of greetings with old friends, I introduced him to Perlman and told him of Perlman's secret ambition. Oscar said, "Let's do it!"

Kiggen asked me to take them up in the elevator to the Green Room, where they would have a piano. Perlman, on his hand crutches — his legs withered by childhood polio — said to me, "Will you carry my fiddle?"

"What is it?"I asked, having made a guess.

He said, "A Strad."

I said, "*You* carry it!" I of course carried it, very carefully.

In the so-called Green Room, Perlman sat down near the treble end of the keyboard and tuned his violin as Oscar tested the piano. Then Perlman played a Tatum run on his fiddle. Oscar laughed and replicated it. For several minutes, they traded Tatum figures, laughing. After that, they settled down to selecting two or three tunes and setting keys for them. That night they played together. It was a creditable performance. They later recorded an album together, for the Telarc label. Perlman did not shake the security of Stuff Smith, Joe Kennedy, John Frigo, or Stéphane Grappelli in the history of jazz violin, but he did acquit himself well.

A month after the Lincoln Center appearance, Peterson was back in New York for an engagement at the Blue Note. The old trio, with Ray Brown and Herb Ellis, sold the place out, and on March 17, 1990, recorded an album that would be titled *The Legendary Oscar Peterson Trio Live at the Blue Note.* It would not be released until August 26, 1991, but in the meantime, Telarc — which previously had recorded classical music — released an album by the same trio titled *Saturday Night at the Blue Note.* It would win two Grammy awards — one for best jazz group, the other for Oscar as best jazz pianist.

These recordings were followed by *Last Call at the Blue Note* (1992) and *Encore at the Blue Note.* The Blue Note in New York was becoming to Peterson what the London House had once been in Chicago, a *pied à terre.* By this time there were four Blue Notes, including three in Japan. Few jazz clubs in America could afford the prices Oscar could now demand and charge the customers enough money to make a return on the investment. Oscar's night-club work was now limited to the Blue Note chain.

But in early June 1991, Oscar played a week's engagement with his quartet at a Toronto club called the Bermuda

Onion. The *Toronto Star* said it was his first club date in town in twenty years. With other attractions, the club's owners normally were happy to get an advance sale of five percent; the Peterson engagement was seventy-five percent sold out two weeks before the opening. Then, a few days before the engagement, Peterson made bigger news in Toronto. In 1982, he had received an honorary doctorate of letters from York University, and since 1986,he had been teaching there intermittently with the title adjunct professor of music. York — with 40,000 students and 1,200 teachers and the third largest university in Canada — now announced that Peterson would become its chancellor.

"Jazz people," he observed, "don't usually move in those circles." In his speech at the installation ceremony, he played a familiar chord: "I've always wanted to feel wanted at home. I've always wanted to feel respected at home. I've always wanted to feel honored at home."

Oscar told Mark Miller of the *Globe and Mail* that he had cut his travel and recording schedule to a minimum, perhaps eight weeks a year, to allow time for composition. During the Bermuda Onion engagement, with Herb Ellis, Ray Brown, and Jeff Hamilton on drums, Oscar was interviewed by a writer for *New* magazine. His hostility to the jazz *avant-garde* suffused his comments:

"(Ours is) music which is not pretentious or esoteric. We just make statements about how we feel on that particular night. It's nothing more than that."

It was, of course, much more than that.

"Some people try to get very philosophical and cerebral about what they're trying to do with jazz. You don't need any prologues, you just play. If you have something to say of any worth, then people will listen to you.

"There's a reason why our group plays sold-out shows wherever we go. We're not compromising. People want honesty in their music. The people who got involved with this concept of 'higher level of thinking' music drove them away from jazz. If you pick up a science book and you can't understand a word that's written in it, you can't say, 'That's a good book,' because you don't know what you're talking about.

"If you listen to a song and say, 'Wow, I like that,' then you understand something about that music. If instead you say, 'What the hell was that?' we're back to the science book."

Of his own contribution to jazz, he said, "Before, the piano was in a very conciliatory role. 'We'll have an eight-bar solo here,' or whatever. I think I helped bring the piano to the level of being accepted as a fully complementary star of its own. In doing so, people realized that piano was a much broader instrument.

"You could sit down at a piano and hold people's attention for two hours. A piano could be more than just heard at intervals. Depending on how it was played, it could be a high-impact instrument like drums or horns. That's all I ever wanted to do with piano.

"Art Tatum made great strides to that end, but unfortunately people didn't know much about what Tatum was doing then. People tried to pass him off in the same way they tried to pass me off, saying he was just a technician. Art *was* a great player, but his advancements were the harmonic sequencing and clusters he used to play on. The critics at the time didn't realize that though."

That year, 1991, Oscar had a revelation. His sister Daisy's son, Kenneth Sweeney, discovered that he had a living uncle. Oscar had a half-brother.

During his long absences on railway runs, Oscar's father had had a relationship in Western Canada was another woman. She bore him a son, whom they named Philip. As soon as Oscar learned of this, he arranged to meet him. He did so in Vancouver, and told Daisy's daughter, Sylvia Sweeney, that when Phil walked into the room, it was like seeing his father again.

A tall, elegant, striking woman who had twice played on Canada's Olympic basketball team, Sylvia had become a sportscaster on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. She had also formed her own TV production company in 1986. Now, she asked Oscar if he would let her make a documentary about him. He agreed. She arranged a train trip from Toronto to Montreal with members of his family, including the newly-discovered Phil. She and co-director Bill Cunningham leased two private cars for $8,000 and had them attached to a regular passenger run. The trip was a metaphor, since just before the train pulls into Montreal's Windsor Station, out of which Oscar's father worked on his long train trips, it passes through St. Henri, where Oscar was born. Sweeney filmed the trip, and intercut the footage with incidents from Oscar's life, including a sequence in which he accompanies his piano idol Nat Cole as the latter sings.

The two-hour film, *In the Key of Oscar*, was shown on CBC on November 1, 1991. It's a good film made with almost painfully intimate candor. Oscar had been estranged from his daughter Lynn for eight years. During the filming, one of her children asked if he might go to the next railway car to have a look at his famous grandfather: he had seen him only on television. The reconciliation with Lynn occurs on camera. It's an excruciating moment to watch. Oscar says in the film, "When you hear a child say, 'Where were you when

I needed you?' it's pretty hard."

By this time Oscar's lifelong arthritis, love of food and consequent considerable overweight, had produced health problems. He had to be taken through airports in a wheelchair, and he got around with the aid of a walker. His sister Daisy had always complained about his weight, and now some of his friends worried about the possibility of stroke.

In November 1982, Oscar underwent hip replacement surgery. Even in this extremity, his sensitivity about recognition at home came to the fore. He told a writer for *Maclean's* magazine that one of the nurses was all aflutter after seeing ballplayer Joe Carter of the Toronto Blue Jays, who had come to the hospital to visit a friend. Oscar teased her: "I guess I don't count for much around here any more." The young nurse said "No, Oscar, we still love you. But you have to understand. Joe Carter is *really* famous.

Oscar told the story with a chuckle. But he *did* tell it. Alas, most Canadians would not know his name even to this day unless they were firm jazz lovers, a minuscule minority in any country. Nor was Joe Carter famous to those who did not follow baseball.

In early May 1993, Oscar was performing at the Blue Note in New York. Part way through the evening, he felt a strangeness in his left arm. He said to Ray Brown, "Look at my left hand. I can't use my left hand, it doesn't react."

Later he told fellow pianist Billy Taylor in an interview for the CBS *Sunday Morning* TV show, "I didn't know *what* was happening to me. I knew I felt a little heady at times. I'd go to my dressing room and things would go sort of in and out of focus for a moment. I just thought it was stress."

But he was determined to finish the set and the entire engagement. Only then did he learn from a doctor that he had suffered a stroke.

On May 13, Doreen Davey told the press that Peterson had suffered a mild stroke and was resting at home in Mississauga under doctor's care. He had cancelled a European summer tour. But the stroke was not mild. It had ruined one of the best left hands in the history of jazz and, for that matter, music. The days of the high-speed stride jumps and the incredibly fluent and flowing double-octaves were over. This time his iron discipline betrayed him: it is now known that if a stroke victim can get immediate medical attention, most or even all the damage of stroke can be alleviated. But he had gone on to finish the set and the engagement.

Oscar had been scheduled to appear at Carnegie Hall on December 1, 1993. McCoy Tyner, Ahmad Jamal, and Dave Brubeck appeared in his place. He told Billy Taylor: "I had my down period when it really hit me. I guess I just didn't care any more. I just said, 'If that's the way it's going to end, so that's the way it's going to end."

But Oscar did not give up. He worked at the physiotherapy assigned to him, at his writing, evolving as a composer, and at the synthesizers in his basement studio.

Narrating the *Sunday Morning* show, Taylor says: "Recovering at his home in Toronto, Oscar looked back at his fifty-year career and began regretting some of the choices he had made. The hundreds of recordings, the applause, the constant travel, had all been incredibly exhilarating but it was murder on a family."

Cut to Oscar: "How destructive was it for me? Almost four divorces. You know you have this overwhelming specter, and it's always there. The Road. The *Road*! You've gotta go out on The Road. You've gotta go out and back up the records."

Oscar's fourth wife, Kelly Green, an American three decades his junior, had been the manager of a restaurant when he met her. They had one child, a daughter, whom they named Celine.

Oscar eased into playing again with performances in soft situations — his daughter Celine's elementary school class, for example. A few months later, he was playing for the public again. To substitute for the harmonic function of the left hand, he had begun to use a guitarist, at first the outstanding young Canadian Lorne Lofsky, later the Swedish Ulf Wakenius. On August 7, 1994, eight days short of his sixty-ninth birthday and fourteen months after the stroke, he performed at the Ravinia Festival near Chicago.

John McDonough, a contributor to *Down Beat* and *Jazz Times* and one of Oscar's partisans, wrote a piece about him for the *Wall Street Journal* of January 11, 1995. "Pianist Oscar Peterson just may be the last one left," he mused. He noted that the Ravinia organizers had found it necessary to book two or three jazz artists for an evening in order to draw crowds, and at that, "the pavilion rarely seemed more than seventy-five percent full." But Peterson alone, he noted, filled the 3,500 seat pavilion and "carpeted the lawns with thousands more."

"I can think," he wrote, "of more than a dozen artists who could have done that thirty years ago. Today I can think of only one."

He continued, "Jazz in the '90s may have a wealth of young talent insuring its future. But it has a dearth of veteran star power holding a broad audience now. What's the problem?"

"Critics," Oscar told him. It was his perpetual malediction. The fact that most people didn't read critics, and those who did paid minimal obeisance to them, went as always

unobserved.

McDonough wrote that while Ravinia would not discuss Peterson's fee, an informal estimate set it at $70,000.

McDonough wrote: "Prolific, prosperous; yet for all that, Peterson has remained remarkably pristine. Between his first trio records for Victor and his CDs for Telarc lies a body of work nobly uncorrupted by pandering. His success has evolved slowly but on his own terms, steered for decades by the sagacious management of his producer and friend Norman Granz."

Discussing the reissue of *Oscar Peterson at the Concertgebouw* on Verve, McDonough says, "There is nothing more mesmerizing in jazz than the precision mechanisms of a cohesive ensemble at full throttle. But the controlling force for which all coherence and swing generate is time. And Oscar Peterson has the chronographic precision of an atomic clock . . . ."

He might have encountered dissent from Ed Thigpen, one of the most exquisite time-keepers of all the drummers. Oscar said to me once, "Ray Brown rushes." Accelerating a tempo is a cardinal sin in jazz, although not so serious as letting one fall. I quoted Oscar to Thigpen. Ed said tartly, "They *both* rush."

McDonough continued: "On the current *Side by Side* (Telarc), violinist Itzhak Perlman sits in with Peterson, Ellis, and Brown for a recital of unexpected conjunction. Although the date put no great strain on anyone's skills, it reminds us in a quiet way that in virtuosity there is brotherhood.

"Paradoxically, though, it has been Peterson's altitudinous technique that has brought him the most grief from jazz critics. Only in jazz, whose roots are in folk art but whose dreams are in the high-art clouds, could such an intellectual inversion occur." That is very perceptive. "But there is something in this music that is profoundly suspicious of technique without rough edges, something that regards precision as the enemy of freedom, and craftsmanship as camouflage."

Oscar told McDonough: "I have exact peeves with certain jazz writers, no names. I believe they pose as self-appointed discoverers who want more than anything to say they saw the next new wave coming before anyone else. So they patrol the fringes. They don't regard any music as having value unless it's removed and utterly esoteric. Then they write and people get curious. But audiences aren't dumb. No amount of publicity can force audiences to accept music they don't like."

In consequence, he said, audiences for jazz have diminished steadily for the past three decades.

"There's been a disconnect between jazz critics and the audience. Frankly, I blame the critics for building false idols. In the long run those idols either have failed to hold a major audience or have become so merged with pop music they can't be extricated. This has had a devastating effect on jazz."

McDonough checked into this matter by examining the readers' and critics' polls through back issues of *Down Beat*.

"And bingo! There it is, the smoking gun. Year after year, without exception, the critics have collectively dismissed the hard-swinging Peterson and embraced instead the enigmatic Cecil Taylor, whose cryptic, atonal marathons have bewitched the *avant-garde* for nearly forty years. Not once did the arithmetic of the critics' poll rank Peterson ahead of this perpetual experimenter. Turn to the readers' poll, however, and you get a mirror image of the critics' survey. Here Peterson is No. 1 for five of the last ten years. Taylor never comes close to outranking him. And significantly, when Peterson was outranked, it was by artists whose work lies within the same common body of musical law as his own."

This brings us to a dilemma. As the editor of *Down Beat*, I ran the magazine's polls between May 1959 and September 1961. I came to a jaundiced view of polls in all the arts. The oversights of the Academy Awards offer a case in point. The *Down Beat* critics' poll was founded to counterbalance the readers' poll after the latter consistently slighted the achievements of major musicians while glorifying lesser but more popular players. Leonard Feather and others repeatedly deplored the injustice of these votes. One year Alvino Rey won over Charlie Christian in the guitar category and even Alvino was indignant. Harry James was similarly perturbed upon winning the 1937 *Metronome* poll, saying, "How can they possibly vote for me when Louis (Armstrong) is in the same contest?"

The theory behind the *Down Beat* critics poll was that critics knew more about jazz, listened more regularly, and would render better judgments. But no critic — in jazz or any other kind of music — has ever had the power to force audiences to "accept music they don't like," as Oscar put it. And as for the claim that the critics have effectually driven away the audience, McDonough's examination of the *Down Beat* polls tends to *disprove* the argument. It shows clearly that audiences never paid much attention to the critics. Many of them ruthlessly excoriated the Dave Brubeck Quartet and others praised Cecil Taylor and the even more impenetrable Ornette Coleman. But Brubeck made the cover of *Time* and remained one of the most durable and beloved figures in jazz, while Taylor and Coleman have been largely ignored. What is more, the primary praise for Coleman came not from a critic but a musician, that man of a thousand poses, Leonard Bernstein.

In 1961, I edited Volume V of the annual collection of *Down Beat*'s record reviews. It contains example after example of records that received bad reviews and yet sold well. *The Cannonball Adderley Quintet in San Francisco* got two-and-a-half stars and a bad review; it sold about 30,000 copies, and was a major hit. Brubeck's *Time Out* got two stars and a resounding drubbing. It was not only an excellent album, it was a pioneering one. This was the work that at last broke jazz free of four-four — at one time jazz musicians couldn't even play in three comfortably — and entered it into compound time signatures. And it became one of the best-selling albums in jazz history. At the same time, the book contains a lot of four- and five-star albums that sank swiftly from sight.

To make matters more complicated, a great many reviews in that book proved not only perceptive but prescient. *Oscar Peterson at the Stratford Shakespearean Festival* got five stars; *Oscar Peterson at the Concertgebouw* got four-and-a-half. Taken as a whole, the reviews in *Down Beat*, read nearly fifty years later, were substantially sound. All of which proves that the relationship between the body of critical evaluation and popularity is obscure. Reviews, good or bad, seem to have had no influence on public acceptance.

It is most unlikely that criticism has had any effect whatever on the evolution of jazz. Other and more powerful forces have been at work. One is that jazz is rarely heard on the radio in North America except on scattered public broadcasting stations with straitened budgets and limited range. In the mid-1940s, more than forty-five radio stations played at least some jazz in Los Angeles alone. Now there is only one, and that one is at Long Beach.

Another, often overlooked, factor was pointed out by John Lewis, who argued that jazz had developed in a kind of symbiosis with an excellent body of popular music, that of Kern, Gershwin, Warren, Schwartz, Rodgers, Porter, and others of stature and considerable cultivation. This gave jazz a body of excellent material — material the public already knew and liked — on which to improvise. This gradually was replaced by rock-and-roll, music harmonically so empty and melodically impoverished that it was useless for development in intelligent improvisations. The potential audiences, the young persons coming up, had no familiarity with that great treasury of songs that had gone before, and so the musicians, who themselves did now know that repertoire, began writing their own "originals". But few if any among them had the well-developed compositional abilities of Gerry Mulligan, Horace Silver, Dave Brubeck, and John Lewis, among others. This led to the development of some extremely dull albums, and critics, when they encounter CDs all of whose tunes were written by the young leaders, knowing the gruel would probably be pretty thin, pass them by without listening to them.

Jazz musicians of earlier generations were largely autodidactic, learning by experiment and imitation. But as jazz gained respectability and concert-hall status, it began to be taught in high schools, colleges, and universities. As the big-band era came to an end in the late 1940s, its players found employment in the Hollywood movie studios, in small-group performances in night clubs, and in teaching. To teach any subject, you must codify it, and this produced a sameness in younger players in contrast to the idiosyncratic work of Roy Eldridge, Bill Evans, Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Art Farmer, J.J. Johnson, and Clark Terry. A survey of musicians and writers conducted by *Down Beat* for its January 2000 issue, asking what characterized the jazz of the 1990s, elicited from Doug Ramsey the response: "Homogenization — the continued, accelerated disappearance of individuality."

The institutionalization of jazz in repertoire orchestras indicates that it is now a music looking backward, not forward. And jazz, though it demanded serious craftsmanship and discipline, was supposed to be fun, as Woody Herman used to say.

Forms of music — and for that matter all the arts — are rooted in their time. We don't make Frank Capra comedies any more, or Broadway musicals in the style of the 1930s. Baroque music was of its period, and any music created in its manner has a quality of nostalgia, not contemporary pertinence. Thus too sonata-form symphonic music and Italian grand opera. The music made during a given era continues to find an audience, but its imitations do not.

Maybe jazz is a music whose period of vitality is ending. To put the blame for this on "the critics" as Oscar did interminably, is simplistic and uninformed. He was bitter toward the late and lethal Patrick Scott, of whom one of Oscar's friends said, "Pat Scott would fly to Frozen Lung, Saskatchewan, to catch Oscar in a one-nighter so he could give him a bad write-up." In the *Globe and Mail* of September 23, 1964, Scott wrote: "I keep going back to hear Peterson for the same naive reason I keep getting his records: a childlike hope that one night he will lose the key to his automatic piano and be forced to play it by hand again."

In 1962, Martin Williams wrote, "One might almost say that Peterson's melodic vocabulary is a stockpile of clichés, that he seems to know every stock riff and lick in the history of jazz. His improvisations frequently just string them together. One has the feeling that Peterson will eventually work every one of them into every piece he plays, regardless

of tempo, mood or any other consideration; it will simply be a matter of his going on long enough to get them all in."

The *New Yorker* critic Whitney Balliett wrote in a 1966 piece, "Peterson's playing continues to be a pudding made from the leavings of Art Tatum, Nat Cole, and Teddy Wilson. That he stirs it so vigorously fools most of the people most of the time." And, after a 1977 performance, "The 'virtuoso' sign flashed incessantly, and it hid the fact that the chief content of his solos was packed into their first eight or ten bars; what came after was largely ornamentation and hyperbole."

John S. Wilson in the *New York Times*, reviewing a Carnegie Hall concert by Oscar, Ella Fitzgerald, and Roy Eldridge, referred to the trio's "monotonously driving beat."

On September 4, 1969, the Paris magazine *Le Jazz Hot* carried a review saying, "He is known throughout the world and each of his concerts draws thousands of ecstatic and overwhelmed fans . . . .

"That being said, I swear that I was bored to death and that I was able to stay right to the end of his performance only by superhuman effort . . . .

"Oscar Peterson has all the requisites of one of the great jazz musicians — dazzling technique . . . definite musicality, percussing sonority, a sense of nuance, independence of hands, richness of the harmonic system, it's true . . . save the essential . . . . Save that *élan*, that poesy, that unexpected, that folly, that Dyonesian temperament, that profound sense of the blues, all that is difficult to define but makes the grandeur of an Armstrong, a Tatum, a Bud Powell, a Parker, a Coltrane, or a Cecil Taylor."

Miles Davis said, "Oscar Peterson had to *learn* to play the blues." So of course did Miles.

A Paris critic said Oscar's was "music for Pavlov's dogs."

But Oscar had experienced, after all, more than a fair share of intemperate praise — from older writers such as John A. Tynan in *Down Beat*, the late Leonard Feather and Ralph J. Gleason, younger writers such as Richard Palmer and John McDonough, and still younger writers such as Peter Watrous of the *New York Times*. After Oscar played the JVC Jazz Festival in June 1995, Watrous wrote:

"Oscar Peterson's concert at Carnegie Hall on Tuesday night could have been laced with sadness. The 69-year-old pianist is suffering from the side effects of a recent stroke. He was brought to the stage in a wheelchair, and for much of his brief concert his left hand was only barely functional, occasionally marking time with a few soft notes. But Mr. Peterson, who plays more with his right hand than most pianists play with two, still put on a show . . . .

"He still plays with an imperturbable sense of time, placing his phrases just so. And the way his notes maintained their relationship to the rest was always marvelous and swinging. His sense of rhythm makes people feel good, and his touch, the way he draws sound from the piano, is gorgeous, producing tight, round sound that helped make his lines articulate.

"But it was his improvising, especially during the second half, that was often stunning, with high-speed phrases running through the harmony of a piece with elegant clarity. He is a master of internal rhythms in which notes within a phrase are accented at different times, giving his playing an irregularity that makes a listener pay attention."

On Tuesday, October 1, 1996, Oscar participated in his own tribute concert at Town Hall in New York. The guest performers included Tony Bennett, Shirley Horn, Stanley Turrentine, and Roy Hargrove. Benny Green, a fine thirty-three-year-old pianist whom Oscar had made his heir designate, played in duet with him.

"Slow and unsure," Bruce W. Culp wrote in Toronto's *Globe and Mail*, "Oscar Peterson lurched across the stage of Manhattan's Town Hall and paused before the Boesendorfer grand piano. As the audience leaped from its seats to offer a standing ovation, Peterson seemed to blush, as if to acknowledge shyly that, when all is said and done, he still feels more comfortable before a piano . . .

"Launching into *Anything Goes*, Peterson soon filled every corner of the 1,500 seat hall with that fearless mastery of rhythm and pearly-toned sound that distinguishes him as one of the last living legends of jazz."

Notably, none of the reviewers who marveled at the dexterity of Oscar's playing with the right hand displayed the slightest awareness of the works written by various composers for only the left hand, ordinarily considered the less facile. Paul Wittgenstein, an Austrian pianist who lost his right arm in World War I, instead of abandoning his career, wrote left-hand adaptations of various pieces, and, commissioned works from Benjamin Britten, Paul Hindemith, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Sergei Prokofiev, and Richard Strauss. The most famous of his commissions was Ravel's *Concerto for the Left Hand*. In writing it, Ravel studied earlier works for the left hand by Saint-Saens, Godowsky, Czerny, and Scriabin. Other pianists who played the Wittgenstein commissions after losing the use of the right arm included Leon Fleisher. Wittgenstein premiered the Ravel concerto in Vienna in January 1932, and recordings of it by other pianists have shown how the skilled use of the pedal, including the middle pedal — which sustains notes and chords in the lower register — disguise limitations imposed on the piece. In the mid-1990s, Canadian pianist André Laplante was knocked down in New York by a

bicycle-delivery rider and broke his arm. Until he recovered, he fulfilled contracts by performing the Ravel concerto.

In the late 1960s, after injuring his *right* arm — he hit a nerve with a heroin needle — Bill Evans played a week at New York's Village Vanguard, using only his left hand. Pianists filled the club every night to observe this wonder. Such was Evans' use of the pedals, one could hardly notice that anything unusual was going on.

None of the reviews of Oscar's performances that I read so much as mentioned this history of one-handed piano.

In the *Toronto Star* on Wednesday, February 10, 1999, Geoff Chapman, another critic whose admiration for Peterson is unbounded, wrote:

"All you folks who think the swing revival is for real — *watch out*.

"Oscar Peterson, Canada's greatest jazz pianist and assuredly one of our leading artistic exports, intends to show you what swing is all about."

Chapman quotes Oscar from an interview held the previous day: "There are too many people out there who wear zoot suits, pork pie hats like Lester Young and play what they think is swing. It isn't.

"It's like the part of the jazz community that's lost its innocence, which has become involved with rock entities and innocuous singers in the hope of making a great impression. They have demeaned their worth and the impresarios and presenters have taken over.

"I've stopped performing at jazz festivals where there isn't any jazz, like Montreux, and I pick my appearances very carefully. I won't have any part of the subterfuges.

"And as for the people who think they're playing swing, well, I'm embarrassed. It's like seeing me as a parody of Mick Jagger. Playing to the marketplace takes away from the music?"

To be sure, Oscar's first recordings were boogie-woogie performances that he later repudiated; he was getting into the business, any way he could. And later he made the album *Night Train* and the assembly-line songbook albums that Granz ground out in Chicago in day-after-day sessions, including nine LPs in one year. In later years, he could choose his appearances and repertoire.

"It angers me to hear and see it," he told Chapman. "Look how much Count Basie could do with a nod of his head. His bands really did swing. But it's like the awards that are handed out these days — they don't mean a thing, although they used to be handed out for a lifetime of achievements."

The provenance of this pique can be traced to Oscar's seventy-third birthday in August 1998. Fulminating over the "new swing" to Marni Fullerton, a television and documentary-film producer based in Ottawa, Oscar said, "Ah, I'd like to get my guys together and show these kids how to really swing."

Fullerton said, "Yeah, what a great idea — why don't you really do it?"

Oscar was immediately enthusiastic. Fullerton told the press that there was "an incredible connection" between her and Oscar: "I can't explain it — we just clicked. He trusted me and thought I could pull this off." Oscar never challenged or refuted that statement.

Plans were made for a seven-city tour with a big band and soloists of Oscar's selection. Oscar called arranger Rick Wilkins to do the orchestral writing for the tour and conduct the band, whose members were essentially Rob McConnell's Boss Brass, McConnell among them.

John McDonough reported in *Down Beat* that Peterson tested the idea on Norman Granz. Their friendship had been restored, and they were in constant telephone communication. McDonough wrote, "What does he think? Peterson chuckles at the question. 'Well, you know Norman,' he says, referring to his friend's skepticism toward anything but his own view of the world. 'Actually, his reaction seemed to be favorable because he knows who we have in the lineup.'"

In a story published on April 15, 1999, the *Ottawa Citizen* reported that "Over the next six months . . . Ms. Fullerton got together with Mr. Peterson a dozen times to work out the logistics — what musicians, where to play, what to include, which sponsors to go after. 'I was determined this was going to happen,' Ms. Fullerton says. 'I encouraged Oscar to call the names we came up with. Then I'd follow up with their agents and negotiate fees and schedules.'"

Oscar called various friends, including Clark Terry, Stanley Turrentine, Ernestine Anderson, and Joe Williams. When Williams died, Oscar arranged for Jon Hendricks to take his place on the tour. Fullerton's husband, Don Young, would shoot and direct a full-length documentary on the tour. A book of still pictures by Toronto photographer John Reeves was planned. John told me later that he was hesitant to make a commitment. And I didn't wonder why.

Marni and her husband came to California to ask me to accompany the tour and write the text for John's book and possibly the narrative for the movie.

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