Gene Lees Ad Libitum &

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Prelude to a Revolution

Part II

Hugh Mercer sequestered himself on the farm of relatives near Aberdeen. In March of 1747, he was able to book passage on a ship bound for Philadelphia. As one of his descendants would write, "In a last gesture of defiance, he boarded the vessel — departing his homeland, his family, his past — wearing a rebel kilt. He disembarked in the breeches and stockings of an anonymous young physician. His manner was shy. His smooth round face conveyed a guileless, diligent character. Chastened by the bitter result of his adventure with Charles Stuart, Hugh spoke little and listened a great deal. He would choose his passions carefully in the future. And he would never forget the horror of Culloden."

George II died in 1760. The succession passed to his grandson, who became George III. Apathetic and dull, he did not learn to read properly until he was eleven.

In American fable, George III lost the American colonies, but it was not that simple. The Parliament believed that the American colonies should pay their share of the debt incurred in the war that had made them secure, including James Wolfe's capture of Quebec in 1759 and the expulsion of the French from a controlling role in North American evolution. It was for his support of the Parliament that George was hated in the New World, not for despotism.

Hugh Mercer lived near Greencastle, just north of the Maryland border, where he accepted command of the local militia, assembled in defense against the Indians. He carried on two professions, that of soldier and that of physician.

In 1755, General Edward Braddock set out to attack the French at Fort Duquesne. Serving as an aide to Braddock was a young Virginian named George Washington. The French and their Indian allies set an ambush and killed nearly three thousand British troops, including sixty-three of their eighty-six officers. After nightfall the French and Indian forces killed British stragglers and burned captives alive in camps near the French fort. Hugh Mercer, lying severely wounded, surely must have mused on the irony that he and Washington and Braddock were serving under the orders of the very Duke of Cumberland who had authored the slaughter at Culloden.

Mercer recovered from his wounds. He fought in the French and Indian wars for three more years, then resigned his commission and moved to Fredericksburg, Virginia, to resume his practice as a physician. One of his patients was Mary Washington. Her son George, Hugh's friend from the Fort Duquesne expedition, brought her to Hugh; he thought she was developing a drinking problem. Hugh discovered a cancer and ordered her brought every day to his pharmacy shop, where he gave her a toddy laced with an opiate, which, she told her son, improved her health "and her feeling of beatitude."

In the early 1770s, Mercer was an habitué of the Rising Sun tavern. Among its other clients were Spencer Monroe, father of the future president James Monroe, John Marshall, who would become chief justice of the United States, Patrick Henry, George Washington, and John Paul Jones, a fellow Scotsman whose past, rumor held, included piracy and murder.

The owner of the tavern was George Weedon, a colonel in the Continental Army. Hugh Mercer married Weedon's sister-in-law, Isabella Gordon, who bore him five children, among them in 1765 Ann Gordon Mercer and in 1775 or '76, the youngest of them, Hugh Tennant Weedon Mercer.

Among the regulars of the Rising Sun tavern was a man who was a wanted criminal in Scotland, with a price of five hundred pounds on his head. And so he took a name that was popular among Scots immigrants, Patton. Its meaning in Gaelic was king's pensioner, and so its use indicated that its bearer was loyal to the *true* king, Charles Stuart. The name had the advantage of being popular, and a code to the Scots who had fled here — or been transported as prisoners.

When the Revolutionary War came in 1745, Robert Patton took no part in it, continuing in his business as a tobacco exporter, maintaining a scrupulous neutrality, and associating with the rebelling patriots and the redcoats equally. One evening he got into an altercation with an English officer and threw a glass of wine in the man's face.

A duel with pistols across a table ensued and the officer was killed. Robert Patton fled, and through the rest of the Revolutionary War, his whereabouts were unknown.

As the Revolutionary War threatened, Virginians set up a committee of public safety, mustering three regiments, one of which was commanded by Patrick Henry, a second by Hugh Mercer. He had thus fought against the English with French support, with the English against the French, and now was preparing to fight the English again, this time with Colonial forces that included many Englishmen. "History," says Stephen Daedalus in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, "is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."

Mercer became a brigadier general under his friend George Washington, and was with him when Washington led his routed army across the Delaware River in November 1776. Someone suggested a counter-attack on the 1,200 Hessian mercenaries stationed at Trenton, New Jersey. General John Armstrong reported hearing a discussion of this plan between Washington and General Mercer. The idea may have been Mercer's. Whoever conceived it, the attack was a success, sending the morale of Washington's forces soaring in its aftermath. Washington then set out to take the British supply depot near Princeton. Mercer led a unit of four hundred men against a much larger unit of redcoats.

Mercer recounted, "I was on foot endeavoring to rally my men who had given way before the superior discipline of the enemy, when I was brought to the ground by a blow from a musket. At the same moment the enemy discovered my rank, exalted in having taken a rebel general, as they termed me, and bid me ask for quarter . . . . Without begging my life or making a reply, I lunged with my sword at the nearest man. They bayoneted me and left me."

Washington sent his nephew, George Lewis, under a flag of truce to see if anything could be done to help his friend. The doctors attending Hugh thought his head injuries were his most serious insults, but Hugh — a doctor himself — told Lewis to look under his left arm. "There discover the smallest of my wounds, but which will prove the most fatal. Yes, sir, that is the fellow that will very soon do my business." This bayonet wound had penetrated his lung. Hugh had seen this wound many times at Culloden thirty-one years before. He told Lewis, "My death is owing to myself." He said he was determined "to die as I had lived, an honored soldier in a just and righteous cause." He died in George Lewis's arms on January 12, 1877. Thirty thousand mourners attended his funeral in Philadelphia.

After his death, his friend and brother-in-law, George Weedon, became as a father to Hugh's five children. The youngest, Hugh Tennant Weedon Mercer, was educated without charge at Princeton University by act of Congress. Hugh never knew his father. His brother, William Mercer, was a deaf mute with a love of painting.

Robert Patton turns up again in historical record in 1793 as superintendent of the Fredericksburg Bank. In his late forties now, he married Hugh Mercer's eldest child, Ann Gordon Mercer, then twenty-eight. They had six children, among them John Mercer Patton, who married Peggy French Williams and set up a law practice. Well-fixed financially, and known as the grandson of General Hugh Mercer, he prospered in the community. His wife bore him twelve children. Nine lived to be adults, a daughter and eight sons. One son, John Patton, a Democrat, would be elected to the United States Congress. The other seven would fight for the Confederacy. John Patton's sons would all have military educations, at Annapolis, West Point, and Virginia Military Academy, from which the third living son, George Smith Patton, was graduated.

George Smith Patton married Susan Thornton Glassell, and became a partner in a small law firm in Charleston, Virginia. In 1856 his wife bore him a son whom they named George William (after her brother) Patton.

George Smith Patton became increasingly involved in one of the militias that were being formed throughout Virginia. Shortly after Abraham Lincoln's election as President of the United States, South Carolina announced its secession from the Union. Six other states followed, and when Virginia seceded and Robert E. Lee, who was in charge of all state forces, called on local volunteer companies, Captain Patton and his militia joined him. In 1861, George Smith Patton became a Colonel in the Confederate Army.

Hugh Mercer's daughter, Ann Gordon Mercer, was the matriarch of this line. Her brother, Hugh Tennant Weedon Mercer, married Louisa Griffin, who gave him a son, Hugh Weedon Mercer, born at Fredericksburg on November 27, 1908.

This Hugh Mercer — grandson of the veteran of Culloden whose name he bore — was appointed a cadet at West Point in 1824, when he was sixteen years old. One of his classmates was Jefferson Davis. Hugh was graduated in 1828, third in the senior class. Appointed a second lieutenant in the United States Army, he served in the artillery school, then was posted to Savannah, Georgia. He served with quiet distinction in the army, at one time as aide-de-camp to General Winfield Scott. He married Mary Stites Anderson in February, 1834, and resigned from the Army on April 30, taking up a career in banking in his wife's native city,

Savannah. He worked for his father-in-law, George Anderson, and when his wife gave birth to their first son in 1835, the baby was named George Anderson Mercer after him. Three more children were born to the Mercers, Mary S. in 1842, Robert L. in 1848, and Georgia C. in 1853.

When Georgia seceded from the union, Hugh Mercer joined a volunteer company at a meeting of the Savannah Artillery. He was elected a colonel, and promoted to Brigadier General on October 20, 1861. For most of the Civil War he was in command of Savannah. In 1864, he commanded a large brigade in the battles of Dalton and Kenesaw Mountain. But because of ill health, he was relieved of duty and sent back to Savannah.

In early September of 1864, Union troops under William Tecumseh Sherman entered Atlanta, the major railway hub of the Southeast. Sherman burned most of the city before beginning his March to the Sea. The burning was hardly without precedent. American forces had burned York, now Toronto, during the war of 1812; unfortunately they did it in winter and left themselves no shelter and so had to retreat from their conquest. The British burned Washington in retaliation.

The March to the Sea began on November 15. Like the forces of Cumberland after Culloden, Sherman's men burned everything in sight, slaughtered the livestock they could not eat, and left the people to forage for food as best they could. The Union forces left a swath of raped land, two hundred and fifty miles long and forty miles wide, ten thousand square miles, from Atlanta to the edge of Savannah. A classic, a jewel of a city, Savannah was indefensible and its citizens surrendered it, and Sherman entered, his men marching across cobbled streets made of ballast stones from British ships, like those on which the Highland prisoners had lain and suffered after Culloden. Charles Green, a wealthy cotton merchant and one of Savannah's most eminent citizens, offered his mansion to Sherman as a headquarters, and the city was saved.

At the end of the war, General Hugh Mercer was arrested by Union soldiers and charged with the murder of seven Federal prisoners of war. He was officially notified of his acquittal on January 28, 1866. Savannah celebrated.

In the years that followed, he rose to heights in Savannah business and banking. He had been widowed since February 3, 1855, and now, suddenly, surprising his friends, he gave up his position in Savannah society and business to marry Bessie Cuyler in New York City in December, 1868. The couple moved to Baltimore, where he was a commission merchant between 1869 and 1872. Apparently for reasons of ill health — his wife's and his own — the couple moved to Baden Baden, Germany, where he died of stomach and liver cancer at 3:30 a.m. on June 9, 1877. He is buried in Bonaventure Cemetery in Savannah.

Mercer's son, George Anderson Mercer, was graduated from Princeton in 1856. He went to the law school of the University of Virginia, visited Europe, and on his return to Savannah in 1859 was admitted to the bar.

On October 31, 1861 — a little over seven months after the start of the Civil War — Mercer married Ann Maury Herndon, daughter of Dr. Brodie Herndon of Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Mercer was a member of the Republican Blues of Georgia, and eventually served on the staff of his father, General Hugh Mercer — the second Hugh Mercer. George Mercer took part in the actions at Dalton, Resaca, Kenesaw Mountain, New Hope Church, Peachtree Creek, Atlanta, Jonesboro, and Lovejoy Station, and after the fall of Atlanta, he served in the army of General Hood. He was captured at Macon on April 21, 1865, after Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House, but he was paroled to Savannah, where he resumed his law career. He was active in Savannah's political life, serving as president of the city and county school boards for seventeen years and as president of the Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences. He represented Chatham County for one term in the state legislature.

George Anderson Mercer's distant cousin, Colonel George Smith Patton, also a lawyer, saw his first combat of the Civil War at Scary Creek, not far from Charleston. He commanded nine hundred men against two Federal infantry regiments. On July 16, he and his opposing commander, Colonel Jesse Norton, met at a farmhouse over drinks and cigars to postpone the battle until local residents could be removed to safety. Fifty-eight persons, including eighteen slaves, were evacuated that night. The battle broke the next day, and sputtered into indeterminacy. As Colonel Patton tried to rally his fleeing men, a minié ball, an ounce of lead a half inch wide, hit his right shoulder, knocking him off his horse and shattering the bone of his upper arm, which then hung limp. He was carried off the field and advised that the arm would have to be amputated. Training a pistol on the surgeon, he told the man that if he tried to remove it, he would kill him. A medical student saved the arm.

Though the Confederate troops won the battle of Scary Creek, union forces swept around them, capturing and burning Charleston. Colonel Patton, too injured to be moved, was captured.

Eventually he was paroled to join his family. By the rules recognized by both sides, he could not join any military unit

until he could be exchanged for an enemy prisoner of comparable rank. Colonel Patton's son remembered him picking bone splinters from the festering wound in his arm with his wife's knitting needles. In time he rejoined his unit, the Twenty-second Virginia Infantry. He was wounded again, but a ten-dollar gold piece his wife had given him impeded the bullet, and the wound was minor. He developed blood poisoning, and was again sent back to his wife. His brother John was a Colonel under Stonewall Jackson. His brother James was a lieutenant in George's own infantry unit, and his brother Tazewell was with Longstreet, defending Richmond. Wounded at Second Manassas, Tazewell returned home to recover, and was elected to the Virginia Senate, which position would have exempted him from further combat. Instead, he went back to the Army, to be assigned to the division of General George Pickett in Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. George Patton eventually rejoined his regiment at Lewisburg.

Under Pickett, Colonel Tazewell Patton's Seventh Virginia was at Cemetery Ridge at Gettysburg. During the hot humid morning, Tazewell told one of his subordinates that he expected to die this day. His brother, Hugh Patton, had recently been transferred to another unit. In the early afternoon an artillery duel began. The Seventh Virginia lost fifteen percent of its men to artillery before even raising their rifles, rather like Bonnie Prince Charlie's men at Culloden. Then the Confederate troops charged and, again like the Highlanders at Culloden, were decimated by grapeshot as they crossed the open field. As at Culloden, the men reached the enemy line and breached it, only to find themselves too weak to hold the position, and, after twenty minutes of hand-to-hand fighting, they fell back. By evening, the field was littered with bodies, haunted by the groans of wounded men crying for water, as at Culloden.

In the middle of August, Peggy Patton received two letters, one from Tazewell, written at College Hospital near Gettysburg but not in her son's hand. It said in part, "To be at The Meadows, at Spring Farm, or in Richmond, with all the family around, would have the highest delight I could experience. I must however put it off for some time. As soon as I am able to travel, I will hurry homeward . . . I am very affectionately your son, W.T. Patton."

The second letter was in the same hand, that of Isaac W. Smith, Tazewell's cousin. It old her that Tazewell had died of wounds on July 21. He had just turned twenty-eight.

Colonel George Patton learned of his brother's death two days after his victory at dry creek. He was desolated.

In a battle at Winchester in northern Virginia, General Jubal Early's 14,000 men were crumbling before Brigadier General Philip Sheridan's 40,000. Early lost a third of his army, Patton lost half his brigade, including all its officers above the rank of captain. He was standing up in his stirrups, trying to rally his men, who were in retreat before a cavalry force led by General George Armstrong Custer, when a fragment from an artillery shell caught him in the hip. Patton's brother James was a lieutenant in the Twenty-second Infantry, which fell back before the Union onslaught.

Colonel Patton, taken to a house in Winchester, was told his leg would have to be amputated. As at Scary creek, he set a pistol before him and told the surgeon that he would not permit the removal of his leg. For a time he seemed to recover but then the wound turned gangrenous. He died September 25 and was buried at Winchester.

Sue Patton's brother, Willie Glassell, who had served in the Confederate navy, arrived at The Meadows and helped Patton's widow, Sue, and their four children, load the family belongings in an old Confederate ambulance drawn by two horses. They drove to Madison County, Virginia, where they occupied a gutted colonial plantation known as Woodberry Forest. Their descendant, Robert H. Patton, would write: "There they found the corpses of two Yankee Soldiers, one in the front hall, the other wedged in a second-floor window, 'wedged' because it was so swollen with putrifaction that it was necessary to pry it through the window with a crowbar. It was Peter and George William's task to haul the bodies to an outlying field and bury them. Peter dug the trench as George stripped the bodies of clothing, which he then burned. Should rains ever wash out the grave and expose the bodies, the family might be accused of murdering Yankees. Naked, the bodies could never be identified."

George William Patton was nine years old.

The Pattons, including Hugh Patton, badly wounded in the war, lived at Woodberry Forest plantation for eighteen months, like so many southerners struggling to wrest a living from the land. When Willie Glassell, in the fall of 1866, received $600 from their brother Andrew in California, who urged him to move there, he gave it immediately to Sue. In November 1866, the family sailed from New York aboard the Arizona. In Los Angeles, they lived in two rooms in the home of Andrew Glassell, then trying to build a law practice after having been disbarred for refusing to sign the oath of allegiance to the Union. Sue Patton cleaned rooms and did laundry and gave sewing lessons, and, desperate to be independent, opened a small girls' school. Soon she was able to take a small adobe house of her own. And, distrustful of the public school system, she had George William grow his

hair long and disguise himself as a girl so that she might educate him at her own school.

Not long after his eleventh birthday, George William asked permission to change his name. He wanted to be called George Smith Patton, after his father, whose memory he worshipped. When his mother consented, the boy said, "I only hope I may be worthy of it."

Whether the change of name was responsible, a boy who had been "sickly, weepy, insecure", grew tall and strong, excelled in his studies, and helped his mother run her school. She struggled to make her living, and suffered depressions, the worst on the anniversary of the battle of Winchester. "This is the saddest time of year for me," she wrote, "and I feel like a stricken broken down woman when I remember the fell blow that came upon me . . . blotting out the light of my life for me, and sending me and mine forth into the world homeless wanderers." She looked much older than her thirty-two years. She began to drink a little — whisky — which improved her spirits.

When her husband, George Smith Patton, had courted her, his best friend and rival for her hand was his own cousin, George Hugh Smith. Smith, a Virginia lawyer, arrived in California and went to work for her brother's law firm, in which he was shortly offered a partnership. He was an immense comfort to her, reminding her of home. He had told his cousin George that he would never marry until he met someone like her. He married her in 1870.

The Patton children thought the world of George Smith. He tried to keep alive the memory of their father, his dead cousin, and he filled the children with a sense of their military heritage. His new stepson George announced that he would like to attend Virginia Military Academy like his father before him, with the intention of becoming a career soldier.

One can only wonder what stripping and burying a bloated and rotting corpse would do to a nine-year-old boy. Now another horror came to George Smith Patton. The family decided to remove the body of his Uncle Tazewell from a vault in Baltimore to the new Confederate military cemetery at Winchester. In his gray VMI cadet uniform, George accompanied his uncle, seated on the casket in a baggage car, feeling desperately alone.

A group of men stood on the station platform when the train stopped. George was frightened. If the body's transfer had not been given Federal clearance, he could be arrested. The men stepped forward. One of them opened his poncho. George saw in the lantern light the dress uniform of a Confederate officer, the wearing of which was in itself a criminal offense. Silently the men removed Tazewell Patton's casket and under a steady rain, moved it on a wagon to the cemetery. An old veteran of the war carried the outlawed Confederate flag. A trench had been excavated beside George Smith Patton's grave, so that Tazewell could lie with his brother, young George's adored father.

With a shovel in his hands, George descended into the grave. In the lantern-shine he discovered that the wooden planks at the side of his father's coffin had rotted away, and he could see his father's body, ten years in the ground. He said later that his father's beard was long, that he was still in uniform, that he had gold brocade at his throat, and that he had a "noble brow". He would tell his children and grandchildren that Colonel George Smith Patton looked exactly as he had remembered him.

George Smith Patton's children adjusted to the post-bellum world, all except Robert, who died of his drinking in 1876. Isaac Patton became mayor of New Orleans. Hugh became a clerk in the Virginia Senate, but like his brother, and to his mother's dismay, he drank. James became a judge in the West Virginia Supreme Court, and died young. William was a professor of engineering, first at Virginia Military Institute and then at Virginia Polytechnic.

George's ambition to be a soldier fell away. He taught French at Virginia Military Institute, then returned to California to become an attorney. He always questioned himself, the caution that had caused him to make this choice, and wondered if he had failed himself. For years afterwards he thought of seeking an officer's commission. He became for a time District Attorney of Los Angeles and was active in Democrat politics, passionately opposed to the Republicans and the railways that held powerful control over that party.

George married Ruth Wilson, the daughter of Benjamin Davis Wilson, once a poor Mississippi orphan. Wilson had grown wealthy as a California vintner and cattleman. He lived on a two-thousand-acre ranch near San Gabriel that he called Lake Vineyard. It was there that Ruth Patton gave birth to a son on November 11, 1885. The parents named him for his grandfather, and he was George Smith Patton, or George S. Patton III, as he would be known to history. It seems to give pause to Patton's chroniclers that he spoke fluent and unaccented French. It is usually forgotten that his father taught French.

George Anderson Mercer's wife, Ann Maury Herndon of Fredericksburg, bore him seven children, five of whom survived, including a boy named after himself.

This George Anderson Mercer in turn married Mary Walter, who gave him three sons, George Mercer Jr., Walter — for her family name — and Hugh. The name Hugh keeps

turning up in the Mercer family, as it does in the Patton family. Mary Walter Mercer died, giving birth to Hugh, in 1900. After a time as a widower, George Anderson Mercer married his secretary, Lillian Ciucevich. The name is Czech; the family had been in the south for generations.

Lillian Ciucevich Mercer gave him two more children, a daughter and boy they named John Herndon Mercer, the middle name the maiden name of his grandmother, Ann Maury Herndon of Fredericksburg. Johnny Mercer, as he would be known to the world, was born November 18, 1909, one week after George S. Patton III turned fourteen. This is the hundred anniversary of his birth.

Both boys could hear directly from family, Patton from his father and mother, Mercer from his grandfather, horror tales of the Civil War, and the brutal treatment of the south, where most of the death and destruction had occurred. The North never knew anything like Sherman's March to the Sea. Its farms and cities were not razed. Memory of the Civil War lingered long, through the Spanish-American War and World War I, well into the Great Depression, well into World War II, even into the Korean War and up to the eve of the war in Vietnam: its last veteran did not die until 1959.

Woodberry Forest Estate, the farm near Orange, Virginia, founded by James Madison's brother William, became Woodberry Forest School, which Johnny Mercer's farther and older brother both attended. It is still an all-male boys college, with an enrolment of about 400. Inevitably, John too went to Woodberry Forest. One of its alumni — he attended the school with John's brother — was the actor Randolph Scott.

Another was Bosley Crowther, for many years the movie critic of *The New York Times*. Another was Marvin P. Bush, youngest brother of the President George W. Bush.

I have no idea whether John knew of the ordeal of Peter and George William Patton in dragging the two dead Yankee bodies from a window at Woodberry Forest Estate. If he did, he never shared that bit of family lore with me or, for that matter, did he ever mention Randolph Scott.

John was a mediocre student, studying American and European history and the classics. But it was during his sojourn there that he wrote his first songs, which, naive and not very good though they were, constituted rehearsal for one of the greatest body of lyrics in the English language, and for that alone it holds a significant place in the American culture.

When I was researching the Mercer book, I made inquiries of the school about the two bodies buried by the Patton brothers. One woman told me that there were persistent rumors that there were bodies buried on the school grounds, but no one had ever found them, which is not surprising since they occupy an area of 1,200 acres. And the boys apparently buried them well.

One cannot but wonder if George S. Patton III, as he trained his troops in the California desert or led them in North Africa and then in Normandy and at Battle of the Bulge in Belgium, ever knew that songs his soldiers sang or heard on the radio and jukeboxes, songs such as *Goody Goody, I'm an Old Cowhand, Too Marvelous for Words, You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby, And the Angels Sing, Blues in the Night, Tangerine, Dearly Beloved*, and that most poignant of all World War II going-away songs, *My Shining Hour*, were written by a man who shared his ancestry, his descent from Hugh Mercer, surgeon and soldier, of Aberdeen.

One wonders too if my late friend John Herndon Mercer knew that the greatest of Allied military commanders in World War II was his distant cousin.

There is no way to know. There is no one left to ask.

Mail Bag

I hope you're still planning to emulate King Canute. It seems daunting. We're about to get the bill for eight years of an almost unimaginable mixture of stupidity, greed, incompetence, and the worst case of governmental testosterone poisoning ever seen in the U.S. And yet I've still got hope — I think in part because so many of us heard one another's sigh of relief after the election. Maybe that bodes well for holding back the tide, or at least not letting it wash away the things that matter.

Our youngest son unwittingly offered some hope a while back. This is a twelve-year-old whose idea of great music usually centers on traits like "fast," "loud," and "distorted." In the car a while back, with a CD playing, he suddenly asked, "Is this Miles Davis?" It was *Sketches of Spain*. Then he said, I think I like his sound better than Louis Armstrong." A week later, I slipped *Louis Armstong Meets Oscar Peterson* into the car CD player to see if he actually heard the difference or if (as I suspected) his older trumpet-playing brother had just put thoughts into his head. He picked out Satchmo right away. The thought that he'll always carry that knowledge with him thrills me; as to his take on Satchmo's sound, someday he'll understand.

One other thought: as kids, many of us looked at celebrities — movie stars, athletes, and so on — as heroes, without knowing anything about who they really were as people. Over time the *Jazzletter* confirmed that some great jazz artists are all too deeply flawed while others you

brought to light (Dave Brubeck, Jo Stafford, Clark Terry, Gene Krupa) were somehow every bit as heroic as we imagined them to be when we were much younger. For an Iowa kid like me, whose childhood exposure to this art was almost entirely through my dad's hi-fi, it's impossible to tell how much this knowledge has enhanced my love of jazz, and how thrilling it has been to learn that the art has so many extraordinary human beings in it. That you've done this for twenty-five years is every bit as extraordinary — you "just don't know any better." Indeed.

I think Nat Hentoff, one more guy for whom 2008 was an anis horribilis, was on to something in his recent suggestion. Kudos and congratulations on what I trust has been a great labor of love, and best wishes for 2009.

— Dave Becker

Alas, I too prefer Miles' sound to Armstrong's. It is perhaps because I like restraint in art, and Armstrong's very fat vibrato bothers me. In singers I like those with cool vibrato as in the work of Bonnie Herman, Jo Stafford, and Elis Regina. I have no taste for what I call the veins-standing-out-on-the-forehead school of singing. Most people — Julius La Rosa and I have often talked of this — are unaware of how good Perry Como was because he made it sound so easy. He could land pianissimo on a high note like a bird settling on a branch without disturbing it. The fact that he recorded a lot of dumb songs takes nothing away from the level of his performing. Before I had to record an album in Toronto, I spent probably a week trying to figure out how he hit an E-flat so softly. Some trick.

I once heard a performance by Eugene Istomin and the Louisville Orchestra of one of the Mozart piano concertos. It was so tempered, so restrained, that it reduced me to tears. Our tastes are consistent, I've found, and so I like Lester Young more than most tenor players, although Ben Webster and Coleman Hawkins loom large in my pantheon. What one likes or doesn't like tells more about the person than about the arist: the art is a sort of Rorschak test of its audience.

As for jazz musicians, I went straight from being surrounded by journalists to being surrounded by jazz musicians, and so these two groups have furnished the bulk of my friendships. Since I don't write about persons I don't like, I am not an objective measure of the character of jazz musicians. They are, as it were, pre-selected.

Jazz musicians, like journalists, are people who DO something, as opposed to those whose lives are devoted to making money or acquiring power, which is, I suppose, why after a couple of years of covering politics and such, I began moving away from politicians. It isn't so much that I avoid such people as that they do not enter my ken. Paradoxically, I am an addicted follower of politics and history. After all, those people affect our lives, and need to be carefully and skeptically scrutinized. It's a matter of know thine enemy.

As for holding back the tide, listen to the music now used in television and films. If you are an insomniac news junky, you no doubt tune in during the night or (in New York) early hours to the MSNBC program called Morning Joe, *ambiguous reference to, it would seem, breakfast coffee and the show's supercilious host, the Neocon Republican former Congressman. His co-host is Mika Brzinzki, whose father, Zbigniew Brzinzki, is former national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter and holder of many other key positions under several presidents. He has an analytical mind and, since his father was a Polish diplomat posted to Germany during the rise of Hitler and in Moscow under Stalin, he has a keen appreciation of the character of tyranny, on which subject he has written. Because of his daughter's position, one would presume, he has several times been a guest on* Morning Joe . *During one of these visits, after listening to one of Scarborough's political screeds, he told Scarborough to his face — and to his daughter's evident embarrassment — that he was "stunningly superficial."*

Which he surely is.

It is no coincidence that Scarborough has played in a rock band, as has that other glib moron Mike Huckabee, and the late Lee Atwater, head of the Republican National Committee who led his own rock band and engineered the Willie Horton television ads against Michael Dukakis. It is hardly surprising that Republicans should show such an affinity for rock, with its brainless marching-in-place lock step, and none whatever for jazz, which is the very emblem of spontaneous and inventive free thought. Two or three years ago a rock guitarist applied for and got medical aid from the government for the carpal tunnel syndrome he had contracted from two decades of playing the same three chords.

During her tour of Asia, Hillary Clinton met with a group of schoolgirls, who asked about her tastes in music in her earlier days. She said they ran to the usual, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. So much for the former First Lady as an inspiration to American taste.

She was quoted to that effect on the Scarborough program. Mike Barnicle, the infamous plagiarist of the Boston Globe, *immediately offered affirmation, saying it was the greatest era of American music "ever," and he*

emphasized "ever." I guess he's never heard of Kern, Ellington, Berlin, Gershwin . . . but you know the drill.

Reeently Scarborough referred to the "cheesy music you hear in elevators", meaning of course anything with any melodic contour and harmonic texture. That's how thick and ignorant his ear is. Along with the gang he features endlessly on his Fascist Light television show.

Artie Revisited

If anything could remind us how much our popular music has declined since the 1930s-50s — indeed, sliding down a slimy slope into the Dark Ages of the taste of Joe Scarborough and his ilk — it is a new two-CD package from the brave little Hep label, based in Edinburgh, Scotland, and operated as a labor of love by Alastair Robertson. The two CDs contain a complete set of Artie Shaw*Spotlight Bands* broadcasts of 1945, sponsored by the Coca-Cola company. This was to my mind the best band Shaw every had, the 1949 band with Zoot Sims and Jimmy Raney notwithstanding. The '45 band contained Stan Fishelson and Bernie Glow in the trumpets, Jon Walton and Herbie Steward on tenors, Barney Kessel on guitar, and above all Roy Eldridge, to this day one of the greatest of all jazz trumpeters. No wonder Dizzy Gillespie revered him. The band had other virtues, too, including the magnificent arrangements of Ray Conniff and the playing of the twenty-year-old Dodo Marmarosa, one of the early bebop pianists. And of course it had unflaggingly brilliant, liquid, endlessly inventive solos by Shaw himself.

Some years back, a group of non-professional musicians here in Ventura County wanted to do a concert of Shaw arrangements. Artie obtained them — they're in the archives of Boston University — and asked me to accompany him to the first rehearsal. He conducted from memory, not even glancing at charts he hadn't seen in more than thirty years. Afterwards he asked me what I thought. I told him I loved it all, in part because for the first time I could hear the bottom of the band. On the old RCA records you couldn't.

The postwar arrangements are scored for five saxes rather than four — the baritone adds depth and darkness — and four trombones. And the rhythm section, with Kessel, Morris Rayman, bass, Lou Fromm, drums, and Marmarosa, is better than those of the bands Shaw had before the war.

By the time of these performances, recording had improved and these tracks were taken from radio broadcasts, for which the miking was much better. So the sound is superior to that on the original RCA recordings. So is the playing. I remember Artie saying that radio "air checks" gave you much more relaxed performances than studio recordings. All these virtues are evident in these CDs, which I think are the best big-band records Artie ever made, and except for the 1954 Gramercy Five records with which he closed out his recording career, the best of any kind that he made.

I could never get enough of Dodo Marmarosa; there's plenty of him on these CDs, both in the band and in the Gramercy Five tracks. And of course there are those marvelous Ray Conniff charts on Gershwin's *'Swonderful* and his own *Jumpin' on the Merry-Go-Round* (and Jimmy Mundy's *Lady Day*). When they came out on the original 78-rpm singles, I went bananas, playing them over and over and over; I was in high school then. There is marvelous use of the trombone quartet, including a haunting ostinato on *'Swonderful*. That was a characteristic of Nelson Riddle's writing too. Conniff and Riddle were both trombone players.

One night in a club, Artie called up *Frenesi* at the start of a set. Dodo said they'd already played it twice; if he had to play it again, he'd quit. Artie did call it up, Dodo walked off the bandstand, drove home to Pittsburgh, and largely disappeared. In 1961, my predecessor as editor of *Down Beat*, Jack Tracy, then a producer for Argo Records, phoned me. If he recorded Dodo, would I do a major story on him in the magazine to help relaunch a deserving career? Jack did, and I did, but Dodo's mental problems loomed again and he largely disappeared. He gave up playing, except for occasional performances for fellow patients in a Veterans' Administration hospital. But we all have observed the depths of filth and corruption U.S. military hospitals achieved under George W. Bush, and Marmarosa died five years ago, two years ahead of Artie. He was seventy-seven.

With Kessel, Eldridge, and Marmarosa in the personnel, the Gramercy Five performances on these CDs are the best by the Shaw groups that bore that name, equal to the 1954 recordings. (Shaw's small-group recordings were named for the prefixes to New York City telephone exchanges.) All these performances, small group and big band, were made during a series of concerts for personnel and patients at military hospitals and bases up and down California, from September 12, 1945, through November 7.

I don't know whether you'll have trouble finding this CD package, but if you do, I've arranged with Alastair Robertson to buy them for you. Since we have to get them from England and repackage and remail them here, the price is $35 for the double set. I'll order them as we receive your letters.