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HITS AND MISSES

From the Golden Gate to the Bayous

IN THE best circles, modern jazz has become a fascinating play of musical ideas backed by stunning technical facility. In other words, the situation suggests that of modern music in general. Everywhere you bend your ear, beguiling sounds are to be heard.

I have, for example, some guitar music, full of pulse and nuance, from Laurindo Almeida, a Brazilian performing on the Spanish concert guitar (fingers, no electricity) with the assistance of California friends: Bud Shank, a first-class modern alto saxophonist; Harry Babasin, bass; and Roy Harte, drums (Pacific Jazz PJ LP-7). This LP represents a six-number fusion of Brazilian and U.S. strains which is chamber jazz at a high level. The saxophonist Shank is also a fine rhythmic flutist and appears with the flute in support of the excellent electric guitarist Barney Kessel, a disciple of the late Charlie Christian. Both may be forgiven the electric gadgetry. True musicianship makes up for practically anything. As against Almeida's Latin seductions, Kessel makes charming domestic music, including Duke Ellington's "I Let a Song Go out of My Heart," Vernon Duke's "What Is There to Say" and George Shearing's "Lullaby of Birdland" (Contemporary C2508).

The modern California school further provides the gifted little Gerry Mulligan Quartet with the alto saxophonist Lee Konitz as an added starter (Pacific Jazz EP4-11). This is poised, delicate invention with sensitive voicing of the trumpet, two saxophones, string bass, and drums. If this playing sometimes smells of the laboratory, I can only say that I always enjoy watching experts at their experiments. For the most part, there is lovely, light polyphony over buoyant rhythm. And there are vigorous piano excursions by Russ Freeman, with the elegant Shelley Manne on the drums and a bassist bearing the wonderful name of Joe Mondragon (Pacific Jazz PJLP-8).

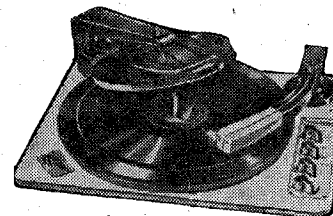
In the solid middle ground of jazz I have received a savory twelve-inch LP called "Ballad Medley" which exhibits some of the ablest talents in the business. Without pause, the following play solos as follows: alto saxophonist Willie Smith ("Indian Summer"), tenor saxophonist Stan

Getz ("Willow Weep for Me"), trumpeter Harry Edison ("If I Had You"), tenor saxophonist Wardell Gray ("Ghost of a Chance"), pianist Arnold Ross ("Love Walked In"), bassist John Simmons ("Body and

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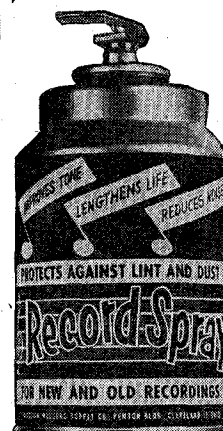
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Soul"), clarinetist Buddy de Franco ("Nancy"), and alto saxophonist Benny Carter ("I Hadn't Anyone Till You"). Add in the fact that Buddy Rich is at the drums, and that the other side is a fast blues jamboree with substantially the same cast and Count Basie at the piano, and the result is a definite lure (Clef Jam Session No. 3).

ALSO inviting are two ten-inch LP's by the Vic Dickenson Septet. Dickenson is one of our best all-around trombonists, with a rich command of the New Orleans tail-gate style, interspersed with droll, snorting effects, and alternating with a delicate, legato manner. Here he is surrounded by the warmly impeccable Edmond Hall on the clarinet, a graceful Bostonian trumpeter named Ruby Braff, and a strong rhythm section headed by a pianist described as Sir Charles Thompson, who has much of the engaging simplicity of Count Basie. They offer four long improvisations on "Russian Lullaby," "Jeepers Creepers," "I Cover the Waterfront," and "Keepin' Out of Mischief Now," as well as a piano specialty by Thompson (Vanguard VRS 8001 and 8002). My only complaint is of a certain monotony from the rhythm section. To be sure, it has a kind of hypnotic regularity. But when John Hammond, who apparently put this worthy recording band together, likens the section to Count Basie's historic group (Basie, Joe Jones, Freddie Green, Walter Page) he must be momentarily forgetting the incredibly light and electric variety with which that quartet sparked his own favorite band.

Bedrock values are offered this month for the New Orleans Protective Association. Still on the Coast is Kid Ory, the sixty-seven-year-old trombonist who holds the Crescent City Challenge Cup and who considerably antedates his most famous former trumpeter, Louis Armstrong. From his new Pacific home, Ory issues an LP of irresistible sock and nostalgia (Good Time Jazz L21). The band includes, among others, cornetist Teddy Buckner, clarinetist Pud Brown, pianist Don Ewell, and those New Orleans perennials, bassist Ed Garland and drummer Minor Hall. Ory proceeds to remind us that the flaring poetry and jubilation of the old jazz music, to say nothing of its more dulcet agitations, is not dead—not so long as these men of heart and memory are here to serve us. The tunes are all classics, from "Milneberg" to "Bill Bailey." This is where a great many oldsters came in, and where we have no intention of going out.

—WILDER HOBSON.

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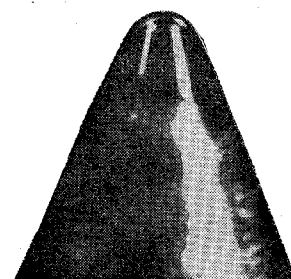
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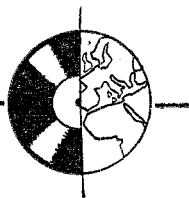
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THE OTHER SIDE

(IMPORTED RECORDINGS)



LATEST NEWS from the record companies suggests that 45 rpm is about to descend upon us to far greater purpose than hitherto. Up to the present its impact has been negligible, due largely to the half-hearted manner of its introduction by EMI—the restricted repertoire so far available and the disappointing quality of many of the discs. Now it appears that Decca has decided to take the plunge, while EMI are at last thinking in terms of Extended Play 45's. Even more interesting, however, is the rumor that the major record companies of America and Europe have been talking turkey about recording characteristics and have reached agreement about a curve to which all will adhere in the future. Should this indeed be true, it would be a tremendous step in the right direction: our music lover may be able once again to play his records without invoking the aid of spells such as NAB, AES, FFRR, or Orthophonic!

For the present, however, the letters FFRR still denote FFinest RRecordings to the British LP enthusiast, despite the increasing challenge of much-improved EMI discs and some outstanding Westminster recordings issued by Nixa. Among the latest examples of Decca's skill there is a work much esteemed in hi-fi circles: Ravel's masterly adaptation of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition." Ansermet and the Suisse Romande take a cool, objective, and not unduly sensational view of the score, while the engineers eschew close-ups of cymbal clashes. The net result is a disc of real distinction, full of musical and sonic subtleties, instead of a mere "nine days' wonder." Despite the conductor's comparatively leisurely tempi, Decca has found room for a substantial "fill-up": "La Valse," for which Ansermet directs the Paris Conservatoire Orchestra. Two further Geneva issues find Ansermet and the Suisse Romande in support of the American pianist Julius Katchen and

the French cellist Maurice Gendron. The latter's ultra-refined style makes Schumann's romantic A minor Concerto seem unduly emasculated, but he shows remarkable aplomb in Tchaikovsky's "Rococo Variations." Katchen is the soloist in the Third Concertos of Prokofiev and Bartók, each of which is performed and recorded with real distinction.

Like Ansermet, Josef Krips is this month featured on three discs with two different orchestras. Under his direction the London Symphony Orchestra always gives of its best, and the playing in a pairing Mendelssohn's "Italian" and Schumann's D minor Symphonies, as well as in two Mozart concertos, K.488 and K.491, is of a very high quality. Krips's other orchestra is the Amsterdam Concertgebouw; their joint achievement is a suave and lively Beethoven Fourth, beautifully recorded but, on two twelve-inch sides, rather uneconomical by current American (i.e. RCA Victor-Toscanini) standards. Under its regular conductor, Van Beinum, the Concertgebouw has given us a superb Britten coupling consisting of the Sea Interludes and Passacaglia from "Peter Grimes" and the delightful "Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra."

Nor has Decca neglected chamber music. As in Columbia's December list, the Quartetto Italiano currently has no fewer than three LP's to its credit—two of them devoted to Schubert (Opus 29 in A minor and Opus 168, No 1 in B flat) and one to Mozart (K.590 in F and K.155 in D). Playing of such technical excellence cannot but evoke our admiration, but I must confess that I find their performances so mannered as to be almost unbearable. More enjoyable by far are two piano quintets by Boccherini, No. 1 in A and No. 4 in D minor, which are enchantingly presented by the Quintetto Chigiano, while the Vegh Quartet gives a distinguished account of the fine Quartet No. 2, Opus 10, by Kodály coupled with a rather cool performance of Smetana's familiar E minor Quartet ("From my life").

I was glad to see that Decca (alias London) has begun to distribute Oiseau-Lyre records in the USA, for the fine products of this French company deserve to be more widely known than hitherto. Current releases in this country include Bach's "St. John Passion" directed by Kurt Thomas (unfortunately the soloists here are not quite as good as those in OL's "Christmas Oratorio"), a collection of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French harpsichord music played by Isabelle Nef, Couperin's "Troisième Concert Royal" for two harpsichords in which Mme.

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