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Jazz at Newport: 1955

By WHITNEY BALLIETT

THE second annual Newport Jazz Festival, which was held over the mid-weekend of July in Freebody Park, a spacious sports field adjacent to the Newport Casino, was, like the army of Darius the Persian, an elephantine and onswearing thing. It lit the air with music. It ran off the walls, and presumably the skins, of the Newport rich. It blew off, finally, on its third day, a fingery, leaden overcast. In all probability, in fact, so much jazz—good and bad—has never been offered by so many to so many in one place and at one time in its history. Something under 200 musicians, whose styles ranged from the spaghetted sounds of Pee Wee Russell to the partly defined modernisms of Charlie Mingus, played for some thirteen or fourteen hours to an estimated total of 26,000 people.

In comparison with the first Festival, which consisted of just two concerts and one panel discussion, the second Festival included three concerts and two panel discussions (both with music). In addition, the contents were bolder, more imaginative, and yielded, principally because of the larger quantities on hand, a superior proportion of good jazz. One remembers, for example, in trying to sort out the Mississippi of sounds the sprout and power of the Woody Herman band, the rococo enthusiasm of Errol Garner, the belling quality developed by the Marian McPartland trio augmented by Jimmy McPartland, the sliding intensity of Dave Brubeck and his quartet, the warm horizontal-vertical structurings of the Modern Jazz Quartet, the wind that took the lid off Freebody Park when Jo Jones, Count Basie, Lester Young, and Ruby Braff arrived, the high-water poignancy of "Now's the Time," propounded by Miles Davis, Gerry Mulligan, Zoot Sims, and Thelonius Monk, and the massive yet always light-footed blockings of the incomparable Count Basie band.

The Festival was opened under a dim sky by Senator Theodore Green of Rhode Island, who spoke almost inaudibly (there was continual difficulty this year with microphones and loudspeakers: all the vocalists, with the exception of Louis Armstrong, sounded froggy) about jazz being a revolution. John McClellan, a Boston jazz disc jockey, then introduced

Woody Herman as master of ceremonies for the first night, and Herman, who did his job without distinction, introduced Stan Rubin and the Tiger-town Five, who, in their turn, provided some Shakespearean, curtain-raising loud talk while the large audience splayed itself into its seats. Teddi King, an attractive, carved brunette, whose singing style is best suited for intimate situations, followed, and was immediately lost beneath the microphones and too-heavy accompaniment. Errol Garner, abetted by drums and bass, brought the evening to its feet, and to a mood that was carried on by Woody Herman's Third Herd, in which Dick Collins, a moving, dark-toned trumpeter, especially shone. Roy Eldridge, Coleman Hawkins, and Jo Jones (who demonstrated consistently throughout the Festival his matchlessness as a drummer) appeared next. And, because of the harmfully unobjective programming of the concerts (some musicians were introduced as "great," others were not even named), which allowed them little time, and because Eldridge was fooling around with a mellophone, they came nowhere near illustrating their positions as foundation jazzmen, except, perhaps, as accompanists for Joe Turner, who rocked and rolled with the ease of an ocean liner. Louis Armstrong, who now tends to be a caricature of himself, closed the first concert in company with Trummy Young, Barrett Deems, Billy Kyle, Barney Bigard, Arvell Shaw, and Velma Middleton the singer, who did her usual tasteless and unnecessary 200-pound Jello dance.

BECAUSE of further unfortunate programming, the second concert (a misty, clammy night) was, for the most part, like listening to an aggressive monotone with a pitcher of martinis under his belt. Max Roach and Clifford Brown, who are two of the most powerfully individualized operators today in the musical tradition begun some fifteen years ago as bebop, opened the concert, which was introduced throughout the evening by John McClellan, an articulate but not forceful enough master of ceremonies. They were shaded off coolly into a group composed of Warne Marsh, Lee Konitz, Russ Freeman, and Buzzy Drootin. The pulse of the evening went up somewhat after this when Dinah Washington, a big, angular-



Louis Armstrong with Mrs. Lorillard, wife of the Newport Jazz Festival's president.

voiced singer, came on stage. It sagged again, however, with the appearance of Chet Baker, who worked uncertainly and variously with the excellent Bobby Brookmeyer, Al Cohn, and Gerry Mulligan. (Mulligan appeared on stage, usually unannounced, sporadically throughout the Festival, like some sort of genial, one-man Greek chorus.) Suddenly, following this, the monotone was broken by Marian and Jimmy McPartland, who ran his Bixian gold up and down the Park as comfortably as old friends sitting down to talk. Wild Bill Davidson, Pee Wee Russell, Vic Dickenson, Bud Freeman, Milt Hinton, Drootin, and George Wein (a small, indefatigable, ball-shaped man, who as the producer of the festival has become one of the best friends jazz has) followed, put joy and blast into their jazz, and gave way to Dave Brubeck and his quartet.

The final concert, performed under a lucent sky, was conducted by Duke Ellington, who can suspend more graciousness from an English sentence than anyone alive. It was started, inadvisedly, by the Modern Jazz Quartet, whose intricacies, Bach-like and otherwise, demand quiet, at least, to be properly appreciated. The group consisting of Basie, Jones, Young, and Braff followed, and, emotionally, at any rate, the Festival began. Jimmy Rushing, unimpeachably round, made a surprise appearance with the group, and was as blue and syllabic as ever.

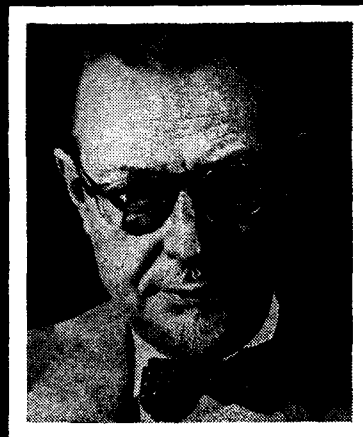
The Miles Davis aggregation came next, with its leader, a shy trumpeter who plays in a motionless, timid crouch, giving his gentle, curved utterances such definition and beauty that the crowd was held quiet as a mouse. Dave Brubeck reappeared for a more satisfactory display than that of the previous evening. After this

a lively miscellany, in varying combinations of trios, quartets, and together, was carried on by Jo Jones, Bobby Hackett, J. J. Johnson, Kai Winding, Billy Taylor, Ben Webster (who proved as statuesque as ever), Peanuts Hucko, Dick Katz, and Bud Shank (whose considerable talents were completely trod under by the circumstances). The evening—all in all the most exciting and satisfying of the three—was closed by the Basie band, which, though manifesting little of the sensuousness and inner swing of its earlier versions, tore at its jazz so hard one felt as though he had been literally banged in the chest. So the Festival ended, as it should have, with the spirit of jazz as a hot, creative, and inescapable force, banked, it seemed, against the very heavens.

THE two panel discussions held on Saturday and Sunday afternoons at Belcourt, an Italian Renaissance structure about a mile from Freebody Park, were, due to the smaller, more harmonious audiences, the high quality of the "demonstrational" music played by The Six and by a nine-piece group led by Charlie Mingus, and the general thoughtfulness of the speakers (Wilder Hobson, Father Norman O'Connor, Marshall Stearns, Gerry Mulligan, Dave Brubeck, and Eric Larrabee were a few) as successful, on the whole, as anything presented at the Festival. In fact, the organization of these afternoon meetings indicated a direction future festivals may have to take if they are not to be swamped by their own heftiness. As a celebration of American jazz, nevertheless, the second Newport Festival was a happy, successful occasion. And, like last year, the sea-air, the trees, the grass, and the circling sky gave the music an added and proper magic.

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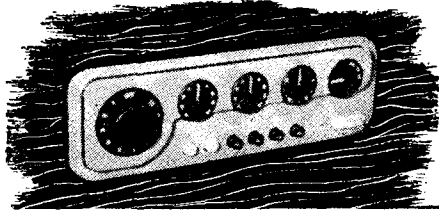
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Recordings in Review

Continued from page 41

flective rondo which balances the long first movement (there is no slow movement *per se*) is "out of character" with what precedes—is one of notable attractions now. For it expresses the character of the concerto as an organic entity rather than a carbon copy of the conventional three-movement work of nineteenth-century pattern. It will take several hearings for a complete judgment to be possible, but it is clear that Menuhin has added a score of major interest to the repertory. Wöldike does his work in exemplary fashion, and the recording is excellent. Three short pieces—Debussy's "Girl with the Flaxen Hair," Ravel's "Kaddish," and the "Spanish Dance" from Falla's "Vida Breve"—fill out the second side.

A London Special

BIZET: *Symphony in C, "Patrie Overture."* Ernest Ansermet conducting the *Suisse Romande Orchestra*. London LL-1186, \$3.98.

LONDON SO steadily produces records of a high aural consistency (taking that word to mean texture as well as regularity) that the unusual one should hardly be taken for granted. What there is about this recording of the Bizet symphony that gives uncommon pleasure is not easy to state: it is not louder than the average, more insistent in its claim on the attention, or marked by outstanding features. But it has a singular evenness of character from low bass through to treble that might be likened to the sheen on a well-polished piece of wood.

As for the performances, they are meticulous in the manner we have come to expect from Ansermet and his fine orchestra (which, if the Swiss are export-minded, would certainly be welcomed here as performing tourists). I think of the first and last movements as somewhat more youthfully exuberant than Ansermet permits them to be, but the two between are all they should be. In sum, it is qualitatively of the same order as the Stokowski, with the plus that goes with the distinguished sound.

The "Patrie" overture has never been a particular favorite of mine—I defy anyone not acquainted with the composer's name to find much that is characteristically Bizet in it—but it is hard to resist when so well played as it is here. It is, in addition, another postgraduate exercise in the art of recording.

—I. K.

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Letters to the *RECORDINGS* Editor

WAGNER AND AMERICA

IS IT NOT HIGH time there was a "Wagner Society" in this country? Perhaps so many of our readers who are violently opposed to Wagner and his music fail to remember that not only did his daring and originality cause opera (and music in general) to advance beyond the static state into which it had lapsed previous to his arrival upon the musical scene, but also that the greatest modern innovators who have taken every opportunity to slander him are eternally in his debt. After Wagner combined good theatre with good music music finally grew up. Moreover, it is especially interesting to note that Wagner's interest in America was perhaps greater than any other European composer's. Is it perhaps not typical that we should have societies dedicated to every other European composer with the exception of one that honored us?

R. D. Boyd.

Tucson, Ariz.

RESURRECTED "RING"

AS EVIDENCED BY LETTERS to you during the past few months, there is a substantial interest in complete recordings of Wagner's "Ring." This interest is usually squelched by the critics with explanations of cost and vocal talent. Why hasn't anyone thought of the partial although simple solution to these two problems. That is the resurrection of the great performances on Victor of the almost complete "Siegfried," the extensive "Walküre," and the "Rheingold" finale by Leiden, Schorr, and Melchior.

DANIEL WAXLER.

Dover, N. J.

"RING" FOR THE REMOTE

IF THE GREAT RECORDING companies would take note of the increasing demand of music-lovers for a complete well-recorded "Ring" they would make immediate plans for the enterprise. Such an undertaking would be of great help to those thousands of Wagner admirers who cannot go either to the Metropolitan or Bayreuth.

WALTER H. MURRAY.

Caparra Heights, P. R.

BEEHOVEN NOT SO BAD

IN HIS REVIEW of our book "Beethoven and His Nephew", Mr. George Simpson contends that we overlooked three most important facts: The first one is that Beethoven contracted syphilis. To which we have to quote from our book "... Newman attempts to explain the negative traits in Beethoven's character—which he presents in a tone of polemic disapproval—as the reaction to syphilis acquired in his youth. Such a hypothesis contributes nothing essential to the interpretation of the peculiar characteristics of Beethoven's personal relationships;

these can be better understood, without any forcing, from the inner conflict he had undergone from early childhood." Besides, it cannot be definitely established that Beethoven acquired syphilis.

The second fact supposedly overlooked by us is that his deafness can be viewed as psychogenic. From the course of his auditory disorder and from the autopsy there can be hardly any doubt that Beethoven suffered from otosclerosis which affected both *nervi acustici*. These appeared degenerated at the autopsy. The organic origin of this affliction is unquestionable.

The third fact is that Beethoven was an alcoholic. This statement depends on the definition of "alcoholism." Beethoven drank wine, but not to any excess. We have not a single report that he was ever observed in an intoxicated state. His liver, however, might have been particularly susceptible to the consequences of alcoholic beverages. But he cannot be considered an "alcoholic" in the sense of mental pathology.

DRS. RICHARD and EDITHA STERBA.

Grosse Pointe, Mich.

MUSIC OR MADNESS

IT WOULD SEEM, from the Simpson review of "Beethoven and His Nephew," that Beethoven's chief contribution to "our cultural world" was a king-sized "Oedipus complex." Simpson's suggestion that psychoanalysis is a useful tool in music appreciation is, to me, the nadir of music appreciation. Either we listen to Beethoven the musician or we listen to Beethoven the psychopath. We cannot listen to both at the same time. The fact that

Beethoven the man might have been a psychopathic musician has no bearing on the music I hear.

PAUL YAGER.

Elkins Park, Pa.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Sometimes knowing the artist can help us to know his art.*

STONEWALL AT BAY

WHILE I AM loath to take issue with as distinguished an historian as former President Harry S. Truman, a phrase in his article [SR Mar. 26] warrants comment. While he may be right in his statement that he can see "General Jackson riding down the Plank Road" at Chancellorsville (in his attack on the Union's Eleventh Corps) all evidence points to the contrary, and no standard work suggests that he ever rode down the (Orange) Plank Road.

His corps crossed it, while on the Brock Road, and went on northwesterly to the Turnpike; there it formed in line of divisions and attacked up the Turnpike. Jackson followed his men; later sought to re-form them, and it seems certain that he was wounded while reconnoitering the Union position—still on the Turnpike. (It is a fact, however, that all maps show that the Plank Road turns into the Turnpike at Dowdall's Tavern, but east of there carries the name of the latter.)

FRANKLIN SNOW.

Philadelphia, Pa.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The question would seem to be, did our distinguished contributor "see" General Jackson riding down the Plank Road before or after it was given the name of Turnpike? There seems a legitimate area of doubt here, plus a minute cause for quibble.*

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