



Tributes and Tributaries

AS THE hagiology of jazz grows—with a companion increase in the need for new album ideas—occasional “tributes” to distinguished jazz creators are being recorded by admiring contemporaries. There is, for example, “A Salute to Louis Armstrong” by Teddy Buckner and His Dixieland Band (Dixieland Jubilee DJ-505) on which ten songs, either written by or long associated with Armstrong, are played by Buckner, a forty-eight-year-old trumpet player who is a disciple and friend of Armstrong. Buckner’s career, in fact, has been unique in that after several years in swing era bands like those of Lionel Hampton and Benny Carter, his tastes moved back in time and he joined (at Armstrong’s suggestion) traditionalist Kid Ory in the late Forties. Ever since, Buckner has played a contemporary adaptation of the early classic jazz developed in part by New Orleans emigrants to the Midwest in the Twenties. He and his colleagues, however, have not been untouched rhythmically and in melodic conception by the swing period and do not, therefore, try to make their performances unbearably “authentic” in the manner of some younger traditionalist groups. Buckner’s associates in this set are not uniformly luminous, but they project a relaxed, collective savor in their celebrations; and there is particularly the strong, singing, economically expressive trumpet of the leader.

Even more intriguing an addition to recent recorded tribute literature is “For Lady” (Prestige 7106). Lady Day is the sobriquet of Billie Holiday among some musicians, and this album collects four songs fiercely identified with her (“Strange Fruit” and “God Bless the Child” among them); one she recorded with Teddy Wilson in 1937; and an original, “The Lady,” by the leader of the date, 25-year-old trumpeter Webster Young. The salute is entirely instrumental, and the two horns present are rather intriguingly matched. Young is a brooding, modern lyrical player much influenced by Miles Davis. Tenor Paul Quinichette, a Count Basie alumnus, is of the swing era but with a message that is also primarily lyrical. Quinichette, who had been in limbo for a time, has regained and in fact, added to his former warmth and fullness of tone; and while he remains inescapably reminiscent of Lester Young, he can on occasion be

quite personally satisfying. There is an admirably afloat rhythm section of Ed Thigpen, drums; Earl May, bass; Joe Puma, guitar; and Billie Holiday’s regular accompanist, Mal Waldron, a pianist-composer of unusually disciplined and moving sensitivity.

Waldron is also distinctively consistent in “Earthy” (Prestige 7102), an “all-star” seminar involving Al Cohn, tenor; Art Farmer, trumpet; Hal McKusick, alto; Kenny Burrell, guitar; Teddy Kotick, bass; Ed Thigpen, drums; and Waldron. The title selection is in rather self-conscious (I mean the title, not the music) acknowledgment of that quality of deep-rootedness in the jazz loam (“funk” is the more common synonym) to which an increasing number of young modernists aspire. An essential membership requirement is the ability to feel and play the blues. All those present are aptly of the earth; and unlike many another “all-star” hopscotch game, there is a cohesiveness of line and spirit in this album. In addition, most of the various originals, while slight, are more arresting and thoughtfully drawn than is usually the case. The final fourteen-minute “Dayee,” however, might have benefited, as often happens at Prestige, by an extra take or three and by more writing to frame the monologues.

Earthy without even minimal self-consciousness concerning the subject are the four blues-born pianists, ranging from fifty-one to sixty-five, contained in “Primitive Piano” (Tone Records 1, 7114 Freret, New Orleans, Louisiana). The recordings were made over a period of three years by a New Orleans high school teacher and Tulane student, Erwin Helfer, who simply felt these people had better be recorded while time remained. “Speckled Red” (Rufus Perryman), the best known, hasn’t recorded for perhaps more than fifteen years. He’s now a porter and sometime pianist in St. Louis. Billie Pierce is in New Orleans and has been recorded previously by William Russell on his invaluable American Music label. James “Bat the Hummingbird” Robinson made some records in the Thirties, spent his last years in St. Louis, and died of tuberculosis. Doug Suggs, a rent party regular in the Chicago of the twenties, is a porter by trade these decades in the same city. Most of the material in the set is rather

limited in scope; but if the album is absorbed in sections from time to time, “Primitive Pianists” can serve as a direct, unsweetened introduction to the urban descendants of the itinerant blues pianists-singers of the last quarter of the nineteenth and the initial decades of this century. Like their country predecessors, Speckled Red and the others in this collection are taking from—and giving to—the rolling autobiographies that have become the collective body of the blues.

A roughly moving blues-wanderer and quite an influential singer-guitarist (Leadbelly and T-Bone Walker were among those who learned from him) was the late Blind Lemon Jefferson. Twelve of his 1926-29 recordings, seven of them not previously released on the Riverside label are now available in “Blind Lemon: Classic Folk-Blues” (Riverside 12-125). As the notes admit, “. . . Blind Lemon’s blues are not easy for the present-day listener to understand; the harsh, nasal voice and the heavy layer of dialect that leave few verses totally decipherable . . .” But if you’re at all drawn to this kind of dusty, prickly blues, the effort is rewarding, sometimes startlingly so. It is unfortunate, however, that Riverside does not provide for a set like this a separate booklet of texts as Elektra does in the folk field. It would admittedly be a difficult project, but something of the sort would have been a particularly instructive complement to this album.

—NAT HENTOFF.



Billie Holliday—“fiercely identified.”



THE AMEN CORNER

The Christmas List

THIS is the ninth Christmas I have approached in this column, and I do so with thankfulness for the many pleasures I have had while working in it, for the musical lessons I have been taught by the gentlemen who make the records, and for the constant contact with the lively art of jazz which seems to me to be in a very healthy state. Nine years ago I did not recognize the best of the new developments when I heard them. It was necessary, as it always is, to do a great deal of listening; the column has obliged me to do that, and it has been to my continuous satisfaction. I don't know any way to appreciate new and unfamiliar musical directions other than to expose oneself to them with patient and inquisitive ears (even going deliberately against the grain, if that is what it seems to be). I have sometimes suggested to friends, addicts of the older jazz, that in order to arrive at a liking for Charlie Parker or Thelonious Monk or Sonny Rollins they should repeatedly play the records of these men while filling out questionnaires or reading Toynbee or otherwise occupying the mental centers—letting the music seep in, as it were. With increasing seepage, I think, the listener is apt to discover that he begins to understand and relish the new idiom. If he is at all like myself, he will then enjoy both the old and the new. And so to the Christmas list.

For the man who likes Dixieland. There is an excellent new LP "Direct From San Francisco!" by Bob Scobey's Frisco Band, with the invaluable gala voice of Clancy Hayes (Good Time Jazz L-12023). I pause to give a special salute to the band's easy master of the traditional slide trombone, Jack Buck, and for once I am moved to list the entire roster of tunes; they will stir many men of my age bracket as they stir me: "Ostrich Walk," "Indiana," "Sobbin' Blues," "Curse of an Aching Heart," "Michigan Water Blues," "Sensation," "Doctor Jazz," "Jazz Me Blues," "Travelin' Shoes," "A Closer Walk With Thee," "Jada" and "San."

For the devotee of delicate, but authoritative, chamber jazz. A choice piece of gossamer proceeds from the guitarist Barney Kessel with Shelley Manne at the drums and Ray Brown on bass (Contemporary C-3535). This trio has been winning all sorts of jazz polls;



they play together with subtlety, versatility and warm feeling. I have also been delighted by the well-known pianist-leader of the Modern Jazz Quartet, John Lewis, in "An Afternoon in Paris" with two modern French experts, guitarist Sacha Distel and tenor saxophonist Barney Wilen, plus rhythm (Atlantic 1267). Lewis is a ruminative, atmospheric pianist and his jazz has sometimes threatened to pass off as a vapor, but here his colleagues assist him in a steady process of condensation. The Frenchmen are eloquent proof, if any more were needed, that the modern jazz idiom has become international.

For those who would like to hear some of the new men work on old material. Several of us who write in this field have been anxious to have the more gifted modern jazz talents pay a lot more attention to the huge repertory of traditional American popular music. It seems paradoxical, although there is strictly no reason why it should be so, that young players now in their twenties or early thirties should have little or no idea of the wealth of popular composition which was produced before World War II. The valve trombonist Bob Brookmeyer, who has an acute sense of the past, has assembled a crack group for a venture called "Traditionalism Revisited" (World Pacific PJ-1233), the other men being Jimmy Giuffre, clarinet, baritone and tenor saxes; Jim Hall, guitar; Dave Bailey, drums; and Joe Benjamin or Ralph Pena, bass. They present, among other numbers, "Louisiana," "Truckin'," "Jada," "Don't Be That Way" and "Honey-suckle Rose." Their approach to these tunes should offer no difficulty what-

soever to traditionally adjusted ears; it is inventive, refined, thoroughly winning music. But if revisitation of the old order is on the program, I prefer the trenchant work of the tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins with such themes as "Toot, Toot, Tootsie" and Jule Styne's elegant "Just In Time," which is really a new tune in the old spirit (Riverside RLP 12-241).

For the modern ear. The combination of Thelonious Monk on the piano and Gerry Mulligan on the baritone saxophone brings together two of the outstanding figures in modern jazz (Riverside RLP 12-247)—with Wilbur Ware, bass, and Shadow Wilson, drums. Between Monk's poignant, exploring, dissonant piano and Mulligan's robust richness on his horn, a great deal of musical excitement takes place, including the finest performance I recall of Monk's own "'Round Midnight." And Thelonious is leader on another extraordinary disc in which he is joined by five modernists and the grand old man of the tenor saxophone—over fifty at least—Coleman Hawkins (Riverside RLP 12-242). Some of the flavor of this record may perhaps be suggested when I say that the ensemble begins with one chorus of "Abide With Me," played as that hymn deserves to be played (it was written as it happens by one William H. Monk) and then rolls on to five Thelonious originals including "Epistrophy," in which Hawkins takes a solo after the young saxophonists Gigi Gryce and John Coltrane and clearly indicates that no barnacles have grown on the master who adorned the Fletcher Henderson band in 1927-1928. I should hate to have had the task of following him; thirty years seem only to have increased his earthy power and fluidity. This is jazz playing in the grand manner, so highly charged, spontaneous and personal that the idea of attempting to analyze it would be virtually irrelevant.

For the nightcap. I move out of the jazz area to remark that there is now a two-disc LP offering twenty-eight songs by the eminent café singer Mabel Mercer (Atlantic 2-602). Ever since her appearance at Bricktop's in Paris in the early Thirties she has been one of the outstanding late-hour entertainers in the musical field. She is a sentimentalist with a very rare combination of horsepower and discretion. Sometimes the horsepower is too much, and the discretion too little, for the flimsy tune she is driving. But when she has a sturdy number, such as Cole Porter's "Just One of Those Things" or Alec Wilder's "Did You Ever Cross Over to Sneed's," she can be truly thrilling on the musical turns. —WILDER HOBSON.