



Midsummer Melange

MUCH of the terminology of jazz music is abrupt and harsh. It is brief and meaningful to the musicians, but it lends itself to easy humor, and it would certainly affright the patrons of Mr. Bagby's Morning Musicales. Consider, for instance, the term "hard bop." To a modern jazz musician, this at once conveys at least two things: the music under discussion involves rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic extensions of the sort which came into jazz very largely with the post-1940 broadening of the jazz vocabulary known as "be-bop"; and, second, the word "hard" implies not only vigor of conception and statement, but also a kind of athletic suppleness and agility. "Hard bop" is a development of small and musically muscular bands. Big combinations do not have the desirable flexibility. Perhaps the best way to suggest all this to the layman is to say that the "hard bop" bands are, generally speaking, the modern jazz descendants of the small, oldtime hot combinations.

The term "hard bop" has, by and large, had Eastern connotations, the Pacific Coast having been more conspicuous for glossier kinds of jazz. A fine Western quintet now makes its disc debut, with Red Mitchell, bass; Harold Land, tenor sax; Carmell Jones, trumpet; Frank Strazzeri, piano; and Leon Petties, drums (Atlantic 1376). All but the drummer Petties contribute original themes. Harold Land has for some years been one of the most warmly assured of tenors, but this is strong and varied music making all around.

In the department of advanced saxophone work, there is no one more exploratory and more frequently poetic than John Coltrane, master of both the tenor and the soprano. And another soprano saxophonist of resolute devotion to his own winning musical ideas is Steve Lacy. Both these men have new LPs. Coltrane plays six blues-inspired numbers, of wide variety (two on the soprano), with the rich counterplay of McCoy Tyner, piano; Elvin Jones, drums; and Steve Davis, bass (Atlantic 1382). Coltrane's opening blues is classic in outline if highly personal in nuance; thereafter he moves into several musical areas where he seems perfectly at home—Eastern, African, West Indian. Steve Lacy is a shaper of fascinating musical arabesques, with more delicacies of

sonority than I remember hearing from any other soprano saxophonist. He engages in delightful dialogues with Charles Davis, a baritone saxophonist obviously after Lacy's own heart; John Orr and Roy Haynes are at the bass and drums. The six themes are modern jazz staples by Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk and Cecil Taylor (Candid 8007).

In an extended article in these pages, Martin Williams recently announced that the distinguished Modern Jazz Quartet will hereafter be together for only half of each year. At the moment, we have a new LP in which Messrs. Lewis, Jackson, Heath, and Kay are in dulcet and fastidious form, with six numbers by their pianist-director John Lewis.

Now for the older modes. Some months ago I hailed what I feel to be one of the very finest of veteran jazz performances: Alberta Hunter's "Downhearted Blues," in which the sixty-five-year-old singer (now a nurse at New York's Welfare Island) is ac-

companied by the seventy-four-year-old Lovie Austin and Her Blues Sere-naders, with the leader at the piano; Jimmy Archey, trombone; Darnell Howard, clarinet; Pops Foster, bass; and Jasper Taylor, drums. This historic blues, composed by Hunter-Austin, was originally recorded by the two women for Paramount in 1923. Clearly, as the wording of the song suggests, they still have the world in a jug and the stopper in their hands, and I hoped that Riverside Records had caught more of this extraordinary company. It is a pleasure to report that there is an entire LP containing, among others, "St. Louis Blues," "Moanin' Low," "Sweet Georgia Brown," "Streets Paved with Gold," and a second master of "Downhearted Blues." The disc is everything I could have wished and is, I think, one of the treasures of the language (Riverside RLP 418).

There is also a bonanza for the countless admirers of the late James P. Johnson, benign prince of Harlem "stride" pianists. Of sixteen performances, ten recorded in 1939 have never before been issued in the U.S. ("un-commercial") and five of these include a small band with Henry Allen, trumpet; J. C. Higginbotham, trombone; Gene Cedric, tenor sax; and Sidney Catlett, drums. —WILDER HOBSON.

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Bird

Continued from page 49

changes, I could play the thing I'd been hearing. I came alive.

From then on he reigns as a recognized master, creating, recording, inspiring others, finding fame, beginning a family. Then comes his waning, suffering, disintegration, and death.

Many of the bare facts of Parker's life are presented in the useful chronology, but it is the individual commentators' embellishments on the facts which create the mythic dimension. Bird was a most gifted innovator and evidently a most ingratiating and difficult man—one whose friends had no need for an enemy, and whose enemies had no difficulty in justifying their hate. According to his witnesses he stretched the limits of human contradiction beyond belief. He was lovable and hateful, considerate and callous; he stole from friends and benefactors and borrowed without conscience, often without repaying, and yet was generous to absurdity. He could be most kind to younger musicians or utterly crushing in his contempt for their ineptitude. He was passive and yet quick to pull a knife and pick a fight. He knew the difficulties which are often the lot of jazz musicians, but as a leader he tried to con his sidemen out of their wages. He evidently loved the idea of having a family and being a good father and provider but found it as difficult as being a good son to his devoted mother. He was given to extremes of sadism and masochism, capable of the most staggering excesses and the most exacting physical discipline and assertion of will. Indeed, one gets the image of such a character as Stavrogin in Dostoevsky's "The Possessed," who while many things to many people seemed essentially devoid of a human center—except, and an important exception indeed, Parker was an artist who found his moments of sustained and meaningful integration through the reed and keys of the alto saxophone. It is the recordings of his flights of music which remain, and it is these which form the true substance of his myth.

Which brings us, finally, to a few words about Parker's style: For all its velocity, brilliance, and imagination there is in it a great deal of loneliness, self-deprecation and self-pity. With this there is a quality which seems to issue from its vibratoless tone: a sound of amateurish ineffectuality, as though he could never quite make it. It is this amateurish-sounding aspect which promises so much to the members of a do-it-yourself culture: it sounds with an assurance that you too can create

your own do-it-yourself jazz. Dream stuff, of course, but there is a relationship between the Parker *sound* and the impossible genre of teen-age music which has developed since his death. Nevertheless, he captured something of the discordancies, the yearning, romance, and cunning of the age and ordered it into a haunting art. He was not the god they see in him but for once the beatniks are correct: Bird lives—perhaps because his tradition and his art blew him to the meaningful center of things.

But what kind of bird was Parker? Back during the Thirties members of the old Blue Devils orchestra celebrated a certain robin by playing a lugubrious little tune called "They Picked Poor Robin." It was a jazz community joke, musically an extended "signifying riff" or melodic naming of a recurring human situation, and was played to satirize some betrayal of faith or loss of love observed from the bandstand. Sometimes it was played as the purple-fezzed musicians returned from the burial of an Elk, whereupon reaching the Negro business and entertainment district the late Walter Page would announce the melody dolefully on his tuba; then poor robin would transport the mourners from their somber mood to the spirit-lifting beat of "Oh, didn't he ramble" or some other happy tune. Parker, who studied with Buster Smith and jammed with other members of the disbanded Devils in Kansas City, might well have known the verse which Walter Page supplied to the tune:

Oh they picked poor robin clean
(repeat)

They tied poor robin to a stump
Lord, they picked all the feathers
Round from robin's rump

Oh they picked poor robin clean.

Poor robin was picked again and again and his pluckers were ever unnamed and mysterious. Yet the tune was inevitably productive of laughter—even when we ourselves were its object. For each of us recognized that his fate was somehow our own. Our defeats and failures—even our final defeat by death—were loaded upon his back and given ironic significance and thus made more bearable. Perhaps Charlie was poor robin come to New York and here to be sacrificed to the need for entertainment and for the creation of a new jazz style and awaits even now in death a meaning-making plucking by preceptive critics. The effectiveness of any sacrifice depends upon our identification with the agony of the hero-victim: to those who would still insist that Charlie was a mere yardbird, our reply can only be, "Aint nobody *here* but us chickens, boss!"

Sweelinck by Biggs

THROUGH the years, the pipe organ has been the victim of much tinkering and experimentation in the hope of improving the breed; not all of it has been successful. In many cases the results were disastrous, most notably in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when organ builders became obsessed with the idea of imitating instruments of the orchestra. Reduced to bare essentials, the organ is a collection of whistles and horns—tin and wooden whistles and Halloween horns—one for each pitch, and a complete set, or rank, for each tone color. The shape of the whistles and the cut of their mouths give them their characteristic timbre.

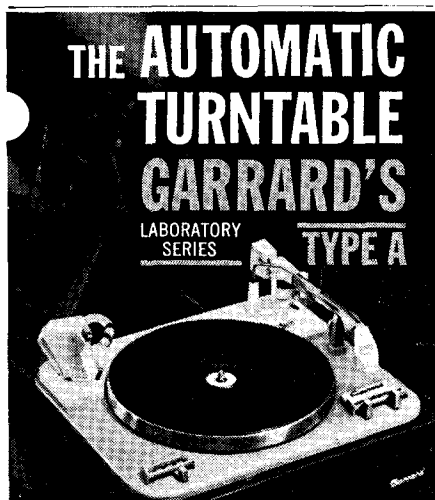
The pendulum began to swing back toward "classic" design in the Thirties and gained momentum after World War II, and the appearance of the long-playing record helped immeasurably in increasing awareness of good organ sound.

And then there was E. Power Biggs. For years Mr. Biggs played for early Sunday morning radio listeners, mostly on a small instrument in the Busch-Reisinger Museum of Harvard University. To thousands who have never heard another organist, he is Mr. Organ himself. He is a proselytizer as well a performer, a man dedicated to encouraging an interest in organ music, and doing it with good grace and a delightful dry humor.

"Variations on Popular Songs" is Mr. Biggs's latest; Sweelinck is the composer. The songs were popular in the early years of the seventeenth century, when Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck was organist of an Amsterdam church and the Separatists from England were gathering nearby before their pilgrimage in the *Mayflower*. There are six songs in all—love songs, a bit from the ballet, a drinking song—and they were new in Sweelinck's day. On this record (Columbia ML 5737, \$4.98; MS 6337, \$5.98), we stand a good chance of hearing them as they sounded to the Amsterdam Dutch of 1620, for Mr. Biggs plays them on an organ built in Holland by Flentrop in the late Fifties. It is beautifully voiced, with a particularly appealing sixteen-foot pedal reed. It is a modern organ in its materials and construction, a classic organ in its tonal design.

The "popular" songs will never hit a "My Fair Lady" jingle on the cash register, but they radiate charm none the less. This is a fine record to add to a collection lacking organ music, and a splendid example of how good a collection of pipes can sound.

—DAVID HEBB.



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LETTERS TO THE RECORDINGS EDITOR

BASSES AND STRINGS

AS A BASS PLAYER I was pleased by your respectful treatment of this instrument in your review of Gary Karr's album [SR, Mar. 31]. The dignity and peculiar beauty of the bass has always been subject to gentle ridicule with such terms as "grandfather of the orchestra" and "dog-house" and remarks about its size and ability to produce sounds even remotely resembling music. You corrected many misconceptions about the double bass, but, however, included one erroneous impression: that the orchestral bass has five strings. To my knowledge, five-string basses were used for a time in jazz, but the four-string arrangement is now predominate in jazz and in the classical field, where I doubt that the five-string bass ever gained entrance. Most four-string orchestral basses are equipped with a machine which when released deepens the lowest string, E, to a C and produces the sounds between.

HENRIETTA CHASANOV.

Homewood, Ill.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The five-stringed bass is still preferred in several European orchestras, and the Chicago Symphony has four in its bass section, by preference of its conductor Fritz Reiner.*

STRETTA, STRETTO?

IN THE ARTICLE on Meyerbeer's "Les Huguenots" [SR, June 16], the writer says, "The act ends with a very powerful *stretta* that truly justifies Heinrich Heine's description of Meyerbeer as a 'breathless genius.'"

The dictionaries give *stretto*.

And to think of an Italian writer ending the word with *a*!

IRVING SCHWERKE.

Appleton, Wis.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Even a non-Italian knows what a *stretto* is: but only an Italian*



crunch

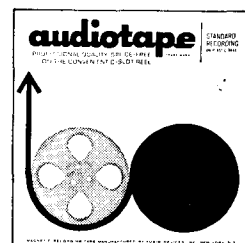
Apples taste better when you're six years old. What's more they sound better. Those crunching noises reverberating through your head are exciting. You keep wondering if they can be heard on the "outside." Remember?

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