

Rockin' Chair Lady, Barrelhouse Gal

MILDRED Bailey was one of the greatest jazz singers, a legend in her own time, and a witty woman of taste, temperament, and keen appetites. Though her voice was little, she herself was big. Her weight was a burden and a humiliation over which she persistently triumphed.

To understand the artist, it is necessary to understand the woman. Her light, sweet voice was appropriate to the lovely, slender girl she had once been. It had the innocence and invulnerability of a youngster with ideals, and when this quality was brought to lyrics like those of "Squeeze Me," there was a curious but satisfying contradiction. No other singer has had a voice quite like hers. The nearest, that of Helen Humes, is richer and more vital, though it has a similar soaring quality.

Mildred wanted to be the person who went with the voice, regardless of the incompatibility of flesh and spirit. It wasn't success she looked for in the mirror, but the inner person she constantly projected as she sang. Nor was she vain about her small feet and ankles. She was just grateful for them, and she could dance like mad with the wit and mockery of Negro dancers in the 1930s. A compulsive eater, she remained more gourmet than gourmand. Yet, since she was frustrated to a considerable degree in her need for life and love, and in gaining recognition for herself, eating became an instinctive method of consolation. "What's troubling you?" is a question doctors often ask of those—even children—who overeat.

She was gay, however, and very good company. Her highly charged personality, like Dizzy Gillespie's or Louis Armstrong's, stimulated everyone. She had a fine, penetrating sense of the ridiculous, such as many jazzmen have, and her fast wit was often directed at those who stepped on her toes artistically. Always in the vanguard of those perceptive to jazz, she roused musicians and brought out the best in them. Her musical and critical tastes were highly developed and she encouraged what was good; but little that was bad escaped her, and her rages often stemmed from the poor musicianship of others.

She was born Mildred Rinker in Tekoa, Washington, where her mother, who was part Indian, saw to it that she was well acquainted with Indian songs.

In later years, she referred to this musical background, and the wide range it required, as being very valuable in her subsequent career. When the family moved to Spokane, she, her three brothers, and a neighbor, Bing Crosby, became very much involved with the jazz of that time and place. She married young, moved to Los Angeles, and was divorced there.

IN 1929, she was hired by Paul Whiteman, largely as a result of the enthusiasm of her brother Al and of Bing Crosby, who were part of Whiteman's vocal trio, the Rhythm Boys. The girl singer with the big jazz group was to become a commonplace in the next decade, but one with an unmistakable jazz sound in an orchestra like Whiteman's was then distinctly novel. Her version of one of Hoagy Carmichael's most famous songs soon won her the title of "Rockin' Chair Lady."

While with Whiteman, she met Red Norvo, a xylophone player. They left the band together and were married in 1934. Two years later, Norvo formed his own big band with Mildred as vocalist. Known as Mr. and Mrs. Swing, they were popular during the hectic years of the Swing Era, but from 1940 onward she worked chiefly as a solo act. Though eventually divorced, they remained good friends until her death in 1951.



Bailey—"a curious but satisfying contradiction."

Continuing the most estimable of jazz reissue programs to date, Columbia has now released a three-volume set of Mildred Bailey's "greatest performances, 1929-1946" (C3L 22). As produced by John Hammond and Frank Driggs, the records admirably illustrate her career and art. They include her first recording, with guitarist Eddie Lang ("What Kind o' Man Is You?"), and one of her last, with pianist Ellis Larkins ("Lover, Come Back to Me").

Some of the earlier material results from the popularity of Negro musical shows in the 1930s, when not a few white songwriters were engaged in composing songs appropriate to Negro singers performing before predominantly white audiences. If some of the lyrics sound inappropriate for Mildred Bailey, it should be remembered that to most recording executives of the period the issue was simple: these were lyrics of jazz songs and she was a jazz singer.

HER acceptance as a jazz singer was in fact, complete; yet she had the humility to refuse to sing at the same concert as Bessie Smith. Her attitude toward racial problems was always progressive. In her accompaniments, she normally used the best musicians available regardless of color. As early as 1935, she was recording with a thoroughly integrated group and singing at a benefit in aid of the Scottsboro Boys in Harlem's Savoy Ballroom. And musicians still recall with a grin the name of one of her 1939 recording combinations: Mildred Bailey and Her Oxford Greys.

The Oxford Greys were Mary Lou Williams (piano), Floyd Smith (guitar), John Williams (bass), and Eddie Dougherty (drums), and the spare accompaniment they provided was in the best of taste. They gave her the maximum in relaxed support without seeking to draw the limelight upon themselves, and she worked over old numbers like "There'll Be Some Changes Made," "Arkansas Blues," and "You Don't Know My Mind" with joyful craftsmanship.

Another session, made for the British Parlophone company by John Hammond in 1935, was of classic perfection. Her four accompanying "Alley Cats" were Johnny Hodges, Bunny Berigan, Teddy Wilson, and bassist Grachan Moncur. The warmth and rapport in the four performances—"Someday Sweetheart," "Squeeze Me," "Honeysuckle

Rose," and "Downhearted Blues"—were of a kind seldom attained. The musicians were all clearly inspired; yet she held her own with Hodges, the most lyrical of all jazz soloists.

Many other attractive recordings made with small studio groups are in the collection, among her accompanists being Coleman Hawkins, Chu Berry, Benny Goodman, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, Artie Shaw, Buck Clayton, Roy Eldridge, Herschel Evans, Jo Jones, and Jimmie Crawford. On some numbers, she was accompanied by John Kirby's little band, a group often regarded at the time as too precise and too severely disciplined, but it emerges swinging and fresh-sounding here. Dave Tough's drums underline a marvelous, lightly flowing version of "From the Land of the Sky-Blue Water," a song which may well have had a special significance for her. Also intriguing is "Hold On," a performance on which Alec Wilder serves as arranger and director and Mitch Miller plays English horn.

A dozen or more numbers are with big bands. The recording of "Rockin' Chair" included here was made with the orchestra led by her husband, Red Norvo. Underrated by most jazz historians, this was one of the more rewarding combinations of its time. Besides Norvo's sensitive and imaginative xylophone solos, it featured subtly voiced arrangements by one of the trumpet players—Eddie Sauter. Humorous songs like "Arthur Murray Taught Me Dancing" and "Week End of a Private Secretary" illustrate her verve and versatility as well as public taste two decades ago.

Mildred Bailey and her musical personality were inimitable, and her death was a loss jazz could ill afford. From the public, she never wholly gained the recognition that was her due, but the note by Bing Crosby in the booklet accompanying the records reveals the affectionate esteem she commanded in her profession. However caustically she might speak of the world in which she lived, she had the spirit to rise above it and sing gaily up there like a skylark. Her bitterness, her burden, her cross—they were personal, and everyone in the audience had his own of one kind or another. She recognized the importance of not taking oneself too seriously, and she didn't falter when necessity compelled her to sing some absurd popular song. Though lyrics and melody might be of indisguisable banality, she would still phrase like the true jazz artist she was—and swing.

An epitaph from George Wettling, at one time the drummer in Red Norvo's band, would probably have satisfied her as well as any: "She was a barrelhouse gal, and she had a hell of a beat!"

—STANLEY DANCE.

Paul Desmond

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is paid to do and no more, but after the concert Brubeck advanced another theory. "Paul was fighting to say something all night," he said, "but in that one place, when Joe started that conga rhythm, he let it stop him. Every once in a while, though, when he gets stopped, he gets mad, and sort of says, 'I'm Paul Desmond, and the hell with you.' That's when he plays best. He's achieved so much, even if he'd never done anything but not play like Parker, but he's capable of so much more. He could be a composer, he could be a lyricist, he could be a writer, but he doesn't seem to have the ambition."

Unconcern is, at the moment, Desmond's concern. Of his new RCA Victor LP, he says, "There is a hard core of 324 people who will buy any album I put out, and maybe they'll like it." He is resigned to being unfashionable, and seems not to care. At the same time, he has given up other things that once interested him deeply. An excellent amateur photographer, Desmond and his camera were inseparable at one time, and he used to amuse himself at jazz festivals by taking pictures of the people who were taking pictures of him. But he has given that up. "It happens," he says. "You see a guy, and he always has a camera around his neck, and then one day he just shows up without the camera." At one time, he wanted to be a writer—that was his major at San Francisco State College—but that, too, has apparently gone by the boards. "You can't say I gave that up, because I never started it." His standard reason for not pursuing a literary career, which his conversation and letters indicate might have been a considerable one, is that "I could only write at the beach, and I kept getting sand in my typewriter." His only professed ambition is to make a record on which he would play successive choruses like Johnny Hodges, Charlie Parker, Cannonball Adderley, and Ornette Coleman.

So, perhaps Desmond will continue to be the "illustrious sideman," as he puts it sardonically, living the urbane bachelor's life that suits him so well, keeping a distance between himself and whatever he might actually feel about his musical and personal situation, and making the music that comes so easily to him. "I will become the Mantovani of 55th Street," he says. "I will make a series of lush string albums and retire into fashionable obscurity." But perhaps he only says that because, as he wrote in the notes for his first Fantasy album, "the uncrafty approach doesn't always get it these days."

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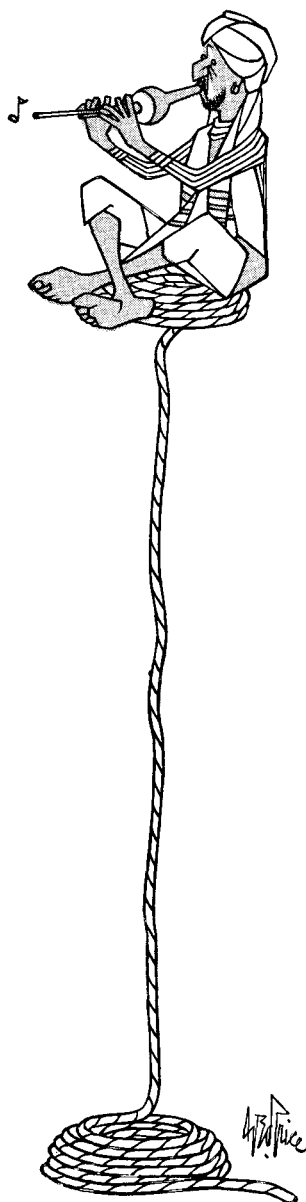
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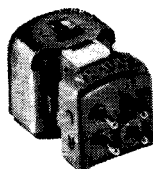
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I RECENTLY attended a jam session by a group of young jazz musicians. A saxophonist, who entered late and wanted to join in was forced to ask, "What are you playing?" "Somebody Loves Me," was the reply. It wasn't that the saxophonist was incompetent and could not recognize the structure of so simple and long enduring a piece as "Somebody Loves Me." He is, in fact, a highly accomplished and reputable player. It was simply that, to these young musicians, improvising in a conventional manner strictly to the melody or the chord sequence of "Somebody Loves Me," or almost any other comparable piece, has largely lost its challenge. And by the time the saxophonist arrived they were making their variations, quite ingeniously delightful variations, around a fragment of melody which the first soloist, an able young trumpeter, had come up with during his second chorus, and had then begun to use as his only point of departure.

The same trumpeter often protests that he and his fellow players abandon conventional forms like chorus lengths and strict harmonic patterns "to keep those damn beboppers out of our sessions." What he means, of course, is not that he thinks that he and his fellow players are better than Dizzy Gillespie. The stature and musical message of Gillespie remain intact. But after nearly twenty years, his basic ideas have passed into general use, and its immediate implications have been explored. By now, almost anyone can "run the changes" in a modernist manner. The real challenge now for the youngest players is somehow to expand the basic language—as Gillespie himself had expanded it, and as Louis Armstrong had before.

This post-modernist jazz, fortunately or unfortunately called "the new thing" (but is "the new thing" a more unfortunate term than was "bebop"?), has been in the air for sometime—most of us first heard it as many as five years ago in the startling manner of pianist Cecil Taylor. The striking thing at the moment is that, although it inevitably remains "controversial" in the fan and trade press, and largely unheard by a wider public, the new-thing message is spreading swiftly among the players. "Man, are you kidding? That kind of music is standard at all the sessions nowadays," a teen-age trum-

peter told a journalist recently, to the latter's alarm.

Recorded evidence of the spread is "Young Ideas" (Riverside 424/9424), by a Washington group called the "J.F.K. Quintet" (yes, named for him). The major influences are obvious enough. The talented young composer-alto saxophonist Andy White, for instance, shows a witty apprehension of Eric Dolphy's facility, and of John Coltrane's scalar and modal explorations. He has also encountered the basic challenge of Ornette Coleman—hear particularly "S.D.D.S." There are some flaws which come from inexperience, from unsteady record-date nerves, from overexuberance, and, on a piece like "Nikki Poo" (a Miles Davis pastiche), a still derivative debt to older players. But these are obviously young men of spirited and authentic talent—and let's readily admit that, as this new thing demands freedom, it also seems to invite faking.

The sound emotional basis of such expansions of the tradition can be heard on "Awakening!" (Contemporary M 3605), with two quintets led by alto saxophonist Jimmy Woods. At key moments Woods's improvised lines cross the usual boundaries of intonation and harmonics to describe strongly inner-dictated melodic curves of their own. "Not Yet," "Love for Sale," "Anticipation," and "A New Twist" are effective examples. And "Roma" and "Little Jim" are structured so that they command the soloist to find his own way. "Not Yet" also has an interlude with the exceptionally promising bassist Gary Peacock.

An almost opposite, at least more academic, approach is represented on "New Sounds . . . Old World" (RCA Victor LPM/LSP 2557) by the American Jazz Ensemble, wherein a relatively schooled quintet takes a deliberately "experimental" approach. The results sound like the engaging dabbling of players who are enjoying themselves but who have no really authentic feel for the jazz idiom. For a similar, more adventurous, authentic, and successful recital, with similar personnel, there is the new Jimmy Giuffre "3" (pianist Paul Bley and bassist Steve Swallow) on "Thesis" (Verve V/V6-8402). (I dare not say more for I wrote the liner notes to that LP and an unwritten law somehow forbids me to review it.)

—MARTIN WILLIAMS.