

Guitar by Charlie Christian

CHARLIE CHRISTIAN was not, as some commentators have contended, the first important jazz guitar soloist. Anyone who has heard Lonnie Johnson, with Louis Armstrong or with Duke Ellington or on his own, will know that he was not. Then there was Eddie Lang, an influence and object of respect in the 1920s and early 1930s, but whose work does not, in my opinion, survive its time. And there was—astonishing cultural development!—the Belgian-French gypsy, Django Reinhardt. Christian even had a predecessor on amplified guitar in Eddie Durham, who was otherwise a well-known trombonist and composer-arranger.

But Christian was, in his brief career, not a major guitarist; he was *the* major guitarist and a major soloist regardless of instrument. Was and still is, for we have had several first-rate jazz guitarists since Christian, but none, I think, his equal. Anyone interested in jazz, the guitar, or the real achievements of American music should know his recordings.

Christian found a special style and special role for his special instrument, the amplified guitar. He knew the work of his predecessors, to be sure, but his major influences were the horn men, more specifically the saxophonists, and most specifically Lester Young. He translated their influence into a single-string melodic technique—despite his rhythmic sureness and superb swing, he was not much of a chord-and-rhythm man, and, indeed, his best accompaniments were buoyant riffs of which he seemed to have an unending supply. His guitar style was, however, far from being merely imitative of a saxophone style, and his sound was a careful amplification of a personal guitar sound.

Christian was (according to a cliché of jazz history) a transitional figure between the jazz of the 1930s and the innovations of the 1940s. True, he was more harmonically exact and sophisticated than Lester Young, but, like Young, he remained as much a linear melodist. He was a great soloist by any standard; and in his short time before the public (Christian joined the Benny Goodman Sextet in late 1939 as an unknown, and died a mere eighteen months later), he left a rich recorded heritage, not merely of excellent playing but of exceptional solos.

The typical Christian solo is organized in contrasts of brief, tight, riff figures and long, flowing bursts of lyric melody; and in his best improvisations these elements not only contrast effectively but also, paradoxically, lead one to another.

Christian's recorded heritage is not ideally served on current LP. About eleven years ago, Columbia reissued

some of the Goodman performances (mono only, CL 652), which in a couple of cases were expanded by splicing in Christian solos from alternate, unused "takes." The Schwann catalogue still lists the album, so perhaps one can find it. One of Christian's masterpieces with Goodman, "I've Found a New Baby," has never been on LP in the United States, but it is available on a CBS-Disque Christian album issued in Europe, *Solo Flight* (62-581), which is worth obtaining. There are still available the invaluable jam sessions recordings, the only ones we have (Archive of Folk and Jazz Music 219), which feature Christian's chorus-after-chorus inventiveness on several pieces.

The foregoing words are prompted by the appearance of a Blue Note album, *Celestial Express* (B-6505), which reissues two sessions from the 1940s led by clarinetist Edmond Hall.

The second comes from 1944 and is, in a sense, an ersatz Goodman small-group date, with generally good work from Red Norvo, a very good solo by Teddy Wilson on "Smooth Sailing," and, on the slow "Blue Interval," excellent work by Wilson and two superb improvisations by Hall.

The earlier session represented on *Celestial Express* comes from 1941 and is a quartet with an unusual instrumentation, in which Hall's clarinet is joined by Meade "Lux" Lewis on celeste, Charlie Christian on unamplified guitar, and Israel Crosby on bass for a program of blues at various tempos.

Individually, the players do well. However, on the faster pieces, the instrumentation itself risks a kind of thumping, stringed heaviness in the rhythm section which the high, belled tones of the celeste could not temper as a piano would. Still, Christian has a good solo on "Jammin' in Four," and the take-your-turn, solo-and-accompaniment counterpoint of Lewis and Hall on "Edmond Hall Blues" is very good.

However, everything — instrumentation, sonorities, style, players—comes together on "Profoundly Blue." It opens with three superb Christian choruses, with Crosby in a true counter-melody behind him, and with a few gently rendered comments from Lewis as well. It is a performance of such exceptional musical and emotional quality as to produce a sense of sustained wonder, both the first time one hears it and the hundredth. There is even a second "take" of "Profoundly Blue" included, but its excellences only serve to dramatize the magic quality of the first.

Happily, the LP transfer of this Blue Note reissue has been done without phony electronic stereo, but there is a bit of surface noise that was not audible on an early 10-inch LP issue of some of this material. —MARTIN WILLIAMS.

Weekend with Rostropovich

IT'S a rare occasion when a world-renowned cellist brings forth two American premieres in a single recital, and rarer still when he accompanies his equally famous and accomplished wife less than forty-eight hours later in still a third U.S. first performance. But such was a recent weekend with the Rostropoviches—Mstislav R. and Galina Vishnevskaya—at Carnegie Hall, when they introduced works of Britten, Debussy, and Shostakovich.

In the cellist's Friday evening recital, Benjamin Britten's Suite No. 2, Opus 80, for solo cello indulged the technically dazzling instrumentalist (to whom it is dedicated) in the full range of cello sounds and effects; but, except for one extended movement, the five-section piece emerged a dry, even somewhat withdrawn, airing of all these tricks. The single magical instance was the *Andante lento* that has the Eastern feeling the composer currently has been pouring into his church parables, typified by plucked strings over a delicately etched melodic line. Since Britten plays to all of Rostropovich's considerable strengths, his performance of the Suite must be placed in the definitive category.

Later came the U.S. premiere of an unpublished Debussy piece, Nocturne-Scherzo, written originally (according to Lockspieser) for violin-piano and played by Theiberg and Debussy on May 12, 1882. Considered within the Debussy canon, it is of extremely slight significance and nothing more than salon music. For the more traditionally minded, Rostropovich opened with a raw-boned reading of the Beethoven Sonata No. 2 in D major, Opus 102, and settled down for a richly romantic reading of the early Richard Strauss Sonata in F major.

On Sunday afternoon, Rostropovich the cellist—he also served as a flawless pianist for the remainder of the recital—joined his wife, Mme. Vishnevskaya (with pianist Julien Musafia and violinist Jaime Laredo), in the American premiere of Dmitri Shostakovich's Seven Romances, dedicated to the soprano and introduced at the Aldeburgh Festival by the couple on June 24, 1968. A composer little identified with song, Shostakovich has taken the mystical words of the early twentieth-century poet, Alexander Blok, and created an atmospheric, highly evocative sequence that ranges from a song for Ophelia to songs of the city, love, and death. Instead of treating the voice as the sole melodic line riding above the accompaniment, each of the assisting instruments participates actively, with its own melodies and rhythms interweaving with the voice. This is a valuable new addition to the song literature, and the artists were eloquent spokesmen on behalf of it. —ROBERT JACOBSON.

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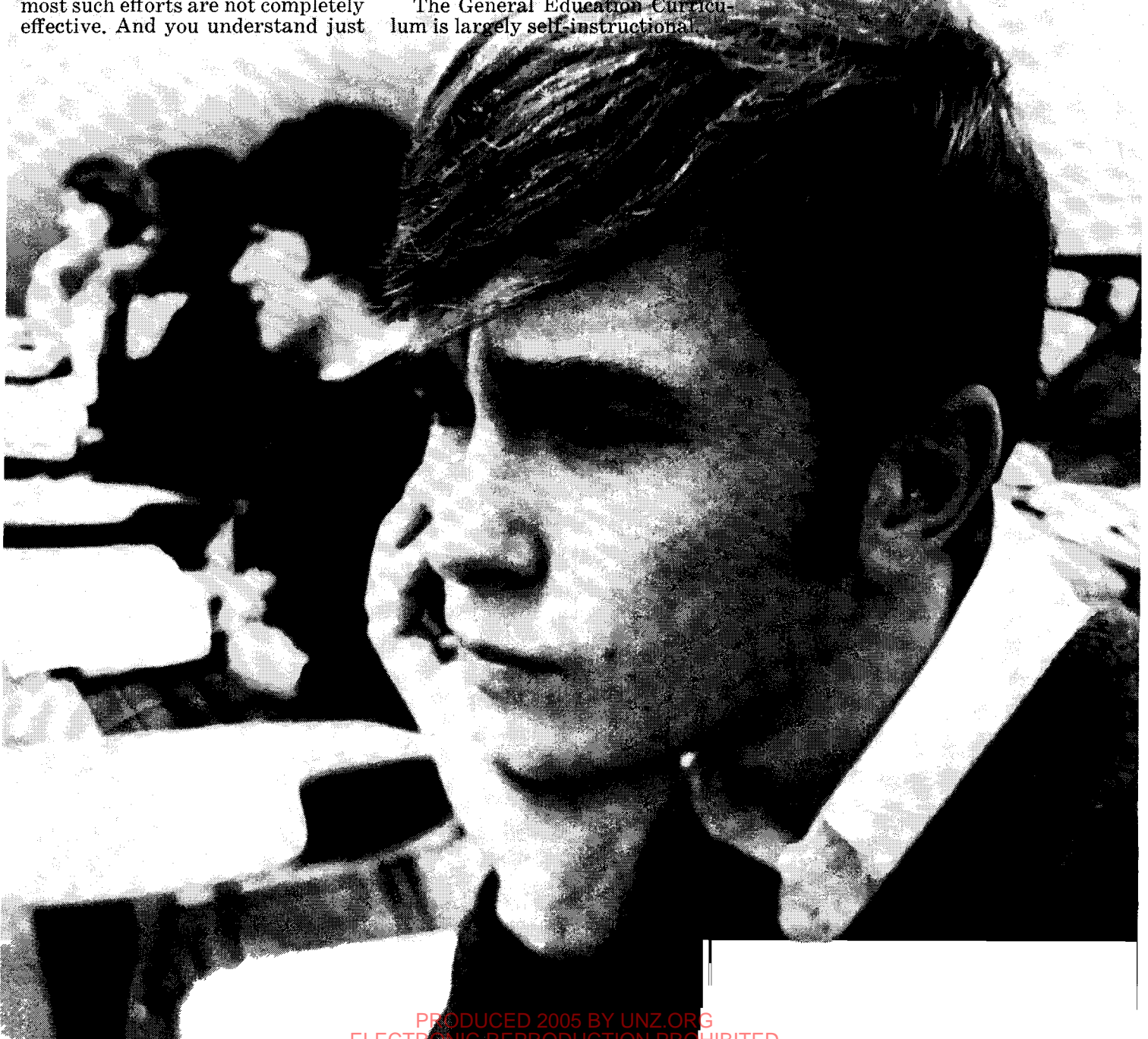
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Race and Intelligence

AN impressive study of the nature of intelligence, its sources, and its implications for school and society was published last month in the winter issue of the *Harvard Educational Review* (HER). The author, Arthur R. Jensen of the University of California, Berkeley, brings to his task substantial scholarly competence in the fields of psychology and genetics, as well as education. His findings, most starkly stated, are: Whites are more intelligent than Negroes; intelligence is overwhelmingly the result of genetic inheritance rather than environmental influences; this is why compensatory education programs for the disadvantaged have failed; therefore, different kinds of education programs should be designed for children of different abilities—meaning, primarily, whites and blacks.

Manifestly, Dr. Jensen's subject is emotion-laden, and his politically explosive conclusions are morally and socially unacceptable to large numbers of Americans, both white and black. It is also clear that attempts will be made to use his study to document the validity of racial prejudice in all its many ugly forms. (Reportedly, attempts have already been made to introduce it as evidence in court cases designed to block desegregation of the schools.) It was for this reason, at least in part, that nearly two years ago the National Academy of Sciences issued a statement declining to advocate research specifically focused on the relative importance of heredity and environment as causes of racial differences. In a prelude to the statement, as published in the November 17, 1967, issue of *Science*, the editors noted that the vigorous advocacy of such research by William Shockley of Stanford, Nobel Laureate in Physics, had been "a matter of some discomfort to the Academy, which finds itself situated between its traditional belief in free inquiry and its realization that the formulation of heredity versus environment adds up to a loaded question that might be destructively exploited by racists if the Academy even ratified it as the right question."

In the statement itself, the Academy endorsed continuing genetic research, but noted that:

The problem of disentangling hereditary and environmental factors for complex intellectual and emotional traits where many genes may participate, where measurements are often not reproducible, where it is not certain what is being measured, and where subtle environmental factors are involved is extremely difficult. It is unrealistic to expect much progress unless new methods appear.

There seems little reason to doubt that the need for caution, stated by the National Academy, still endures. But since Dr. Jensen and the HER have had the temerity to raise the issue so openly, it should be faced with the sober consideration it deserves. Any intelligent layman can follow Dr. Jensen's lucid argument (barring some of the more complex statistical analysis), but it remains for his professional peers to subject his study to the critical scrutiny it demands. To that end, SR presents on page 73 an analysis by Gilbert Voyat, a former student and colleague of Jean