

## RARE AIR

Dick Gibson sings at his own party—left to right, Bob Wilber, Dick Gibson, Bud Freeman, Yank Lawson, Bob Haggart (on bass), Billy Butterfield, Lou McGarity, Gus Johnson (on drums), and Carl Fontana.



by WILLIS CONOVER

There are ninety-one peaks in America higher than 14,000 feet. Fifty-five are in Colorado. The ski-resort town of Aspen levels off just above the halfway mark at 7,850. Still, as a Manhattan flatlander in Aspen, I lost my breath the first time I shook my aerosol can of shaving lather. At least three other guests independently coined the phrase "Gaspin' in Aspen."

For several years I'd been hearing about Dick Gibson's fabulous Aspen jazz parties. Bassist Jack Lesberg, a party regular, made a typical comment some months ago. "Gibson is unbelievable," Lesberg said. "Every year he brings thirty or forty musicians out to Colorado and pays them to play jazz for four straight days. And they can't spend a nickel. Gibson gives everyone a badge with a number on it and when you go into a restaurant or bar, they write your number down and send the tab to him."

"Which musicians?" I asked.

"Whoever he likes," Lesberg said, "plus a few non-musician friends. I'm glad he likes me; I've played Aspen six years now. You mean you haven't been there yet?"

I knew Dick Gibson only as the Denver industrialist who encouraged Yank Lawson and Bob Haggart, alumni of the 1930s Bob Crosby orchestra, to get together an all-star band that he then dubbed The World's Greatest Jazz Band, a title that throws some people off, including members of the band. I met Gibson last year in a New York recording studio when I interviewed Lawson and Haggart for a radio broad-

cast. He phoned later to invite me to a black-tie bash celebrating The World's Greatest's first performance at the Riverboat, a dance-and-dine room in the base of the Empire State Building. But I had no reason to think about Colorado, until a long-distance call came on Wednesday, September 10. It was Gibson.

"Willis, I want you to come to my party tomorrow," he said. "Your ticket will be at the counter at Kennedy Airport. The plane leaves at noon. Please say you'll come."

I usually need more time to revise my schedule, but how—and why—say no?

"What's the dress?" I asked.

"Black tie Saturday night. The rest of the time, completely casual. And if you bring a twenty-dollar bill with you you'll go back with a ten."

The Gibsons met us at Denver's airport Thursday afternoon: Dick, an affable six-footer of some 250 pounds, in his middle forties, his thinning hair more gray than black, somewhat ruddy, with the unexpected lightness a few large men such as Mostel and Gleason have; and his wife Maddie, a slim, attractive, Massachusetts-born brunette with a good, clean, ribald laugh, who could be cast as wife of State U's most popular young professor.

We took station wagons and taxis to a Denver suburb with green grass and sootless sky and sidewalks and porches, a tree-shaded neighborhood out of Ray Bradbury's nostalgia and my own dreams of long-ago homes. We climbed the front steps of the Gibson mansion carrying suit bags and instrument cases. Those of us still firm of breath (altitude, 5,000 feet) accepted drinks or headed for the table-tennis room or the pool table.

At 6 p.m. we crossed the street to Bob Flanigan's estate for buffet and socializing. It was country-club casual,

with the kind of guests who make the society page: oil magnates, the politically advantaged (including the governor's wife), newspaper columnists, and others who looked as though they had given up successful television careers. It could have been deadly but wasn't. Musicians carried chairs and instruments to the living-room piano and began jamming. Teddy Wilson, Jack Lesberg, Zoot Sims, Joe Venuti, Peanuts Hucko, Phil Woods, Matty Matlock, Gus Johnson, Toots Thielemans, Bobby Hackett, Vic Dickenson, Bob Wilber, and Ernie Caceres blew the blues, "Bye Bye Blackbird," and other standards. The guests loved it.

"There are nice squares and evil squares," a musician said afterward. "And these were nice squares. Only, they aren't so square. A lot of them have already paid their hundred bucks to come to the sessions in Aspen tomorrow."

Their hundred bucks?

A private bus was parked before the Gibson house Friday morning. At 10, the musicians, the Gibsons, the New York critics, and I boarded for the six-hour ride from Denver to Aspen. En route we traded favorite W. C. Fields lines, made up fanciful guest lists of people in the music business who could turn a party like this into an armed camp, and watched the spectacular mountain scenery. The bus driver was determined to prove his fearlessness on hairpin turns, a fearlessness we didn't reciprocate. Toots Thielemans stood in the aisle and did magic tricks for the four Gibson youngsters to keep our morale up. The pass was at 16,000 feet. Our voices lost their lower register, it was difficult whistling, and matches tended to sputter.

Aspen is an attractive blend of alpine resort and tidy mining town. The newer hotels resemble chalets. Our hotel, the Jerome, was built in the

NOTE: In addition to his internationally known jazz programs on "The Voice of America," Willis Conover was responsible for the recent White House tribute to Duke Ellington on his seventieth birthday.

1890s when Aspen was a mining town. Later in the year the streets and slopes are full of people. We arrived in the middle of a September rush hour: three automobiles in five minutes.

By the time I'd shaved and changed for the first session in the hotel's sunny ballroom, it was well underway. Every chair was filled. The paying guests were wearing green admission badges. Dick Gibson was busy assigning musicians into groups, telling each group when to begin playing and when to stop.

"Dick always decides which musicians are to play together," saxophonist Bob Wilber said at the ballroom entrance. "But he never tells them *what* to play. It works out very well."

"Who are all the people?" I asked Wilber.

"They're mostly people he knows in Denver. Dick and Maddie have a mailing list of about five hundred couples. The first two hundred couples who send in their hundred dollars are admitted, and that's it."

"The hundred dollars pays for . . . ?"

"Just the music," Wilber said. "They make their own hotel arrangements and buy their own food and drinks. And, of course, they have to get here and back. The three-day weekend can cost two hundred fifty dollars a couple. There are always more people who want to come but can't because they waited too long. By the way, The World's Greatest Jazz Band is a three-way partnership. Lawson, Haggart, and Gibson. But this party is all Gibson's."

Waitresses were weaving among the chairs taking drink orders. They were sweet young girls, rosy-cheeked, smiling, and pretty. After duty they might switch to whatever costume and role their bearded friends decreed. Now they gave the first genuinely courteous service I'd experienced since London, a phenomenon that extended to every restaurant and bar in town and included male attendants too. I ordered a drink, testing the tab-free status my special badge promised. It worked.

In fact it worked rather too well. The altitude, y' know. After dinner I thought I'd lie down a while before the evening concert. Unfortunately, the hotel bar was directly under my room. The three guitar chords that define the scope of Now music kept pounding up through the floor. I coasted through low-pressure delirium all night, missing the evening jazz session at The Red Onion club a few blocks away. With 450 guests and musicians in the club, I thought, no one will miss me. At breakfast next morning Gibson walked over and said, "Where were you last night? I didn't see you."

Saturday afternoon, slacks-and-shirts

jazz again in the ballroom. Saturday evening, black-tie jazz at The Red Onion.

Two men in uniform stood guard at the club entrance checking badge numbers against a list. I looked for a table with an empty chair. Somehow I found one. Though spacious, The Red Onion was packed. It was dark enough for comfort, but a small bright stage reflected enough light to show a low ceiling, a wide room, and wine-colored velvet draperies, all in contemporary, expensive good taste. The air conditioning worked, the piano was in tune, and the sound system was clear. At 10 Gibson introduced the first combo.

Many of the musicians were playing together for the first time, and there was a happy tension onstage as each musician sought to gauge—and maneuvered to fit—the others' styles and capabilities. Obviously, no new material was premiered. The repertoire was standard popular songs, the blues in various guises, and traditional numbers of the Dixieland, swing, and bop eras.

A series of duets stood out. Jack Lesberg, happily rocking with the music, played a bass duet on "You Make Me Feel So Young" with Bob Haggart, the Gentle Executive through whose teeth "Big Noise from Winnetka" was first whistled. They were succeeded by bassists Larry Ridley, obviously enchanted by his first Aspen party, and veteran Milt Hinton, who never stopped smiling a sort of surprised appreciation for what other musicians played. The Ridley-Hinton choice was "Fascinatin' Rhythm," a challenge even when it's slower than they played it.

Kai Winding, who vies with Bobby Haggart for the Gentleman Riverboat Gambler part, played a two-trombone set with Carl Fontana, a don't-mess-with-me type at peace with the world. In their most attractive number, the Jobim bossa nova song "Meditation," Winding and Fontana laid a quiet trombone platform under a Tiffany's-window piano solo by Dick Hyman. Joe Venuti was joined, if not matched, by Lou McGarity, usually a trombonist, who became a violinist for their charming duet.

Four pianists each played a number: Lou Stein, straddling Basie blues and Earl Hines flash and power; Dave McKenna, reaffirming his ownership of a rare left hand as well as a right; Dick Hyman, impassively watching the piano play him; and Ralph Sutton, soloing a straight performance of Bix Beiderbecke's "In the Dark."

Perhaps the greatest explosion of the weekend was Saturday night's "I Found a New Baby" by Joe Venuti and tenor saxophonist Zoot Sims. It was

just a healthy swinger when it began. Then Milt Hinton played an affectionately irreverent slap-bass solo and suddenly the musicians tapped a new reservoir of power and almost literally blew the place down, or up.

In addition to Venuti, Sims, Winding, Fontana, McGarity, Sutton, Stein, McKenna, Hyman, Ridley, Haggart, Hinton, and Lesberg, the evening's performers were vibraharpist Red Norvo; guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli; guitarist and harmonica player Toots Thielemans; trumpeters Clark Terry, Yank Lawson, Billy Butterfield, and Bobby Haggart; trombonist Vic Dickenson; pianist Teddy Wilson; drummers Cliff Leeman, Sol Gubin, Gus Johnson, and Morey Feld; clarinetists Peanuts Hucko and Matty Matlock; and saxophonists Bob Wilber (doubling clarinet), Bud Freeman, Al Cohn, Ernie Caceres, and Phil Woods, who was flown from Paris for the party. Thirty-three musicians, mixed or matched as in the rousing set by the nine-man World's Greatest Jazz Band.

Excepting the dinner break, we'd had jazz from 12:45 p.m. till 2:30 in the morning. Gibson's Benevolent Brainwash, I thought; I've had it for the weekend.

Wrong. Sunday afternoon's session was back at The Red Onion, and I was eager to listen. Everyone else showed up, too. They recognized and applauded individual musicians approaching the stage. By now the musicians themselves had blown all the foam out of whatever they were brewing and got down to full-bodied basics. Any signs of strain were hidden, as well as indicated, by a marked increase in the wearing of sunglasses. Sunday afternoon's highlights:

Yank Lawson, resembling an actor who used to play campus hero in the 1940s, with an unaccompanied plunger-mute trumpet solo on "Beale Street Blues" that nearly drew blood.

Teddy Wilson's piano, raining crystal drops and occasional hailstones.

Vic Dickenson's sweet vinegar in a set with Bobby Haggart; lazy rocking-chair trombone smears in the slow verse of "Oh, By Jingo" and Tricky Sam Nanton's plungered wails in the up-tempo chorus.

Trumpeter Clark Terry (you could hear the audience whispering "*The Tonight Show!* The Johnny Carson Show!") dueting with Billy Butterfield in "Brotherhood of Man."

Dick Gibson's surprise: singing "After You've Gone" with The World's Greatest, etc., with roots in—though stronger and clearer than—Red McKenzie and Clancy Hayes, which he indignantly denies out of respect for McKenzie and Hayes.

The entire Phil Woods-Kai Winding

# Recordings Reports

## Jazz LPs

### Data

**Charlie Barnet:** *Charlie Barnet*, Vol. II. Barnet, soprano, alto and tenor saxophones, with bands of fifteen and sixteen pieces. RCA mono, LPV-567, \$4.98.

**Count Basie:** *Standing Ovation*. Basie, piano, with seventeen-piece band. Dot stereo, DLP-25938, \$4.98.

**Albert Collins:** *Trash Talkin'*. Collins, guitar and vocal, with organ, bass, and drums. Imperial stereo, 12438, \$4.98. **Earl Hooker:** *Two Bugs and a Roach*. Hooker, guitar and vocal, with quartet and quintet. Arhoolie stereo, F-1044, \$4.98. **Eddie Boyd:** *I'll Dust My Broom*. Boyd, piano and vocal, with quartet, quintet, and nonet. London stereo PS-554, \$4.98.

**Ella Fitzgerald:** *Sunshine of Your Love*. Ella Fitzgerald, vocal; Tommy Flanagan, piano; Frank de la Rosa, bass; Ed Thigpen, drums; on the first side, a band is added. Prestige stereo, 7685, \$4.98. *Ella*. Ella Fitzgerald, vocal, with band; Richard Perry, arranger. Reprise stereo, 6354, \$4.98.

**Eddie Harris:** *High Voltage*. Harris, tenor saxophone; Jodie Christian, piano; Melvin Jackson, bass; Billy Hart, drums. Atlantic stereo, SD-1529, \$5.98.

**Illinois Jacquet:** *The Soul Explosion*. Jacquet, tenor saxophone; Joe Newman, Ernie Royal, Russell Jacquet, trumpets; Matthew Gee, trombone; Frank Foster, tenor saxophone; Cecil Payne, baritone saxophone; Milt Buckner, piano and organ; Wally Richardson, guitar; Al Lucas, bass; Al Foster, drums. Prestige stereo, 7629, \$4.98.

**Piano Roll Hall of Fame:** Jelly Roll Morton, Clarence Williams, Cow Cow Davenport, Fats Waller, Richard M. Jones, James P. Johnson, Clarence Johnson, Sam Williams, Teddy Weatherford, Clarence M. Jones, Steve Lewis, Jimmy Blythe, piano. Sounds stereo, 1202, \$5. (Postpaid Sound Records, 1349 Carmen Drive, Glendale, California 91207.) **The New Orleans Ragtime Orchestra:** *Orchestra Folio*. Lars Edegran, piano, with sextet. Pearl compatible stereo, T-7, \$5. (Postpaid Pearl Records, P.O. Box 1411, Salisbury, North Carolina 28144.)

**Gerald Wilson:** *Eternal Equinox*. Wilson, arranger and conductor, with bands of fourteen and twenty pieces. World Pacific Jazz stereo, ST-20160, \$5.98.

### Report

Although Bobby Barnet's trumpet often impresses, as it did in Volume I, the major interest lies in the arrangements. "Wild Mab of the Fish Pond" by Bud Estes and "Spanish Kick" by Billy Moore have a verity of their own, but the Ellington imitations inevitably suffer in

Recorded live in Las Vegas, this is a happy recapitulation of instrumentals originally recorded by Basie between 1956 and 1958. The recording is excellent, the band plays with accuracy and enthusiasm, and the leader himself stretches out vigorously on the fast "Kid from Red Bank." Lockjaw Davis and Harry Edison, both in commanding form, are

Blues artists like these are understandably growing in favor with young people who find much of jazz too esoteric or too deliberately eccentric. Collins is an exhilarating guitarist whose playing appears to have been influenced by both T-Bone Walker and B.B. King. He swings with easy assurance, and his little group backs him well, but he is handicapped on the last four tracks by a sickening serenade to the cash register from predictable, unison horns. Born in 1930 like Collins, Hooker is another satisfying guitarist, although stylistically he does not

The trio side of the Prestige album is very good indeed. As an accompanist, Flanagan is all that Norman Granz says he is in the notes. The whole set was recorded live in San Francisco, and it reveals the singer's emotional, technical, and repertorial range as few others. She sings well on the Reprise, but her choice

These live recordings partially explain the mystery of Harris's great popularity. The first side contains two long performances at eminently danceable tempos by a rhythmically well-integrated group, whose use of "Echoplex" presumably makes it sound bigger than it is. The leader's electronically amplified sax-

Although the arrangements by Milt Buckner and Jimmy Mundy deserved additional rehearsal time in the studio, the performances have a hungry, raging spirit that is often more than a stirring substitute for polish. Most of this stems from the leader and Buckner, a couple of jazz indomitables—the one ever inciting his forces to arson, the other always

These two albums recreate the sound of a past that was often lost on early acoustic records. The selection from piano rolls on the first has been so intelligently chosen that the painfully mechanical characteristics of the player piano are largely avoided. Providing a real extension of our knowledge of both obscure and well-known pianists, it ends with "If I Could Be with You" played as a duet by James P. Johnson and Fats Waller, who are also each represented by a solo performance. The Pearl set derives from a visit to Tulane University in New Or-

The variety of soloists employed adds much to the attraction of this set, which is dominated by Wilson's customary sonorous ensembles. George Duke, a twenty-one-year-old pianist, comes through impressively on the fleet, exciting "Blues-nee" and fits agreeably into the warm mood of "You, Me, and Now." The brass

comparison with the originals. Another release in the Vintage Series by Leo Reisman (LPV-565) is, incidentally, of interest in that Ellington's first great trumpet player and collaborator, Bubber Miley, is to be heard on the opening track of each side.

the stars, but there are good solos from Sonny Cohn, Richard Boone, and Eric Dixon, the last acquitting himself with special distinction in Lester Young's spot on "Broadway." Harold Jones, the young drummer, sounds somewhat tentative on the older, less familiar (to him) numbers, but leaves no doubt of his ability on "Cherry Point" and "Corner Pocket."

resemble his famous cousin, John Lee (Hooker). The notes suggest more eclecticism than the album has room to demonstrate, but it remains an entertaining collection with three different singers on display. Born in 1914, Boyd is a veteran whose singing and barrel-house piano playing have an obvious relationship with those of his friend Memphis Slim. Although the set was made in London with young English musicians, its surprising authenticity is not entirely due to Boyd's manifest authority.

of material and mode of interpretation indicate a lowering of sights to accommodate contemporary juvenile tastes. It could be claimed that this is as defensible—or indefensible—as "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" was in 1938.

ophone, and the dialogues with himself it makes possible, are obviously an acquired taste, but his inherent musicianship is inescapable in "Is There a Place for Us?"—a knowledgeable and sensitive tribute to the tenor saxophonists of the Coleman Hawkins era.

ready to stoke such fires as they light. A long ballad interpretation on the second side offers a change of pace in a program that otherwise consists of the kind of tough, uncompromising jazz all too seldom recorded nowadays.

leans by a young Swedish pianist. When he came upon the ragtime orchestrations that once belonged to bandleader John Robichaux, he and some friends got together to play and record them, with illuminating results. The violin lead, with clarinet, cornet, and trombone in support, gives the ensembles a fragrant quality appropriate to the elegant compositions of Scott Joplin, James Scott, and others. Greater familiarity with the music would probably have led to more feeling, if not abandon, in these interpretations.

is used to splendid effect on John Coltrane's "Equinox," where Groove Holmes (organ) and Harold Land (tenor saxophone) make evocative solo statements. "Scorpio Rising" is an exciting vehicle for Jean-Luc Ponty's lightning violin, and Anthony Ortega (alto saxophone) shines on "Pisces."

—STANLEY DANCE.