

MAILER

Good Form and Bad

BY RICHARD POIRIER

From the very beginning Norman Mailer has exhibited a literary ambition that can best be called imperialistic. He has wanted to translate his life into a literary career and then to translate that literary career into history. I say this not critically but descriptively. His is the kind of ambition, after all (regardless of whether one thinks he lives up to it), common to many of the great romantic writers: of Yeats, Conrad, Byron, Shelley, and Keats—of Coleridge, who lied about the actual dates of some of his writings so as to give his career and his life the dramatic development of a literary work.

Some years ago Gore Vidal made the point that Mailer is "a species of Bolingbroke," a usurper. Such an estimate, and it wasn't offered derogatorily, comes naturally enough to a writer who has no illusions, as Mailer does, about the differences between literary and, say, political careers. Committed to neoclassical ideas about the limits and proprieties of his own style and of the quite different demands made by each of the various forms in which he chooses to work, Vidal doesn't show in his writings or in his public manners those tremors of dissatisfaction that can be noted in whatever Mailer does. Unlike Mailer, Vidal does not confuse the rewards of writing with the rewards of winning public office, one kind of power with another kind. He would think it ludicrous to say, as Mailer has, that the power he exercises in managing the materials in a novel can be compared to the power of a general marshaling his forces in the field.

Some of these differences between Vidal and Mailer were displayed for everyone to see on Dick Cavett's show on the night of December 1, 1971, where they confronted one another in the company also of Janet Flanner, known for her sharply manicured reports from Paris to *The New Yorker*. It has been a bad memory for anyone who saw it. What is mostly remembered is Mailer's attack on Vidal and then on the audience, ending with a self-pitying, if blustering, public announcement that he was the only contender with the talent and the guts to become the literary champion of the world.

What is often forgotten is that the show was an embarrassment even before Mailer was introduced as the last guest. For one thing, Vidal's "inside" recollections about Eleanor Roosevelt (he once caught her storing flowers in the toilet bowl) exuded too much self-

satisfaction, especially since he had just recently publicized the same anecdotes in *The New York Review of Books*. And Miss Flanner—gracious, husky, even craggy, quite happy to be there with the fellows, though apparently unable to grasp that Vidal was trying to initiate a political as well as a social discussion—had induced him into the sort of badinage meant to suggest how high-class literary folk really carry on when nobody's looking. Millions, unfortunately, were, and the condescension could have pleased very few.

A late-night show is scarcely the ideal place to create an image of the literary life as something exclusive and privileged. But it is precisely that kind of illusion, the illusion that we are being allowed to peep through the tube into somebody's salon, that the Cavett show depends upon. Vidal and Miss Flanner were, if anything, too good at it. Vidal, who always exercises a patrician ease and skepticism on such occasions, seemed willing to accept an alliance with Flanner and Cavett, as if in some anticipation of Mailer's attack. There was an audible effort to set a prevailing tone before Mailer could introduce his own. The results were cloying, the more so for Cavett's deferential boyishness, like some feisty dog anxious for affection. He has that Yalie manner in the presence of celebrities, as if to say that if *he*, who is after all comfortable with such people, is made to feel just a little shy tonight, then *we* ought to feel at least grateful.

Let it be said, then, that Mailer had a lot going for him when he waddled out like some nervous but bullish boy walking into the middle of a neighborhood gang. It was time, one felt, for a challenge to the pecking order, the calling of a bluff or two. Time even for the voice of the American family man, since Mailer is the devoted father of seven children, even if he has been the husband of four wives. Speaking out of that experience, he would perforce be listened to more confidently by the great American public on the issue of the sexes than Miss Flanner or Vidal. For sexuality and the sexes were to be the inevitable subject of the show. Vidal had written a long piece about sex and women's liberation, again for *The New York Review of Books*, which was for the most part brilliantly sane and witty. But he had been highly critical of Mailer both for his sexual attitudes and for his allegedly related taste for violence. In the process he had linked Mailer (and Henry Miller) with Charles Manson. And it was to this article that Mailer was ready to take strong, bitter, and understandable—but not very articulate—objection.

Linking Henry Miller with Manson makes so little sense as to suggest that

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After embracing an Establishment style—as if to join Dos Passos, Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald—he rebels, and creates the most original work of his time.

the whole formulation occurred to Vidal because his customary discrimination was overwhelmed by his wit. He perhaps could not resist the dictates of alliteration, and I suspect that we would have been spared the connection had Manson been named Samson. The attempt to connect Mailer's wounding of his third wife during a domestic quarrel with the fiendish, premeditated, systematic murders of a Manson was perhaps even more unfair than the guilt assigned to Miller by mere alliterative association.

Mailer, then, was from almost any point of view in a strong position for the confrontation with Vidal that he had elected to have. Why, then, did he proceed to botch his given opportunities? Why did he come off looking certainly no better, and to most viewers a lot worse, than the others?

One reason has to do with the format of a show such as Cavett's, with the form, that is, in which Mailer chose to express himself. It is a form that doesn't allow for any but the most trivial discussions, and it works best for people who are capable of putting their subtleties to one side for the occasion. Above all, such a show does not allow for the complex development of an idea or a position through that kind of dialectical interplay on which Mailer depends no matter where or how he is trying to explain his position on any subject.

To say that Vidal performs better than Mailer on a show of this kind does, indeed, say something about the marked differences between them as writers, the difference in the style by which each hopes to approximate in words and manner more or less what he thinks and how he feels. The difference is nicely clarified by something D. H. Lawrence once said about two painters, Albrecht Dürer and Antonio Correggio. "Dürer," he remarked, "starts with a sense of that which he does not know and would discover, Correggio with the sense of that which he has known and would re-create."

Mailer is obviously closer to Dürer, Vidal to Correggio. Which means that Vidal has a much sharper sense of the limits of literature, of its obligations to life-as-it-is, and of the extent to which the literary imagination is necessarily modified by forms that are independent of it. It means that Vidal is actively conscious of the circumscriptions and decorums of a literary career, especially in a world where other forms of expression are so much more conspicuously powerful. Television is one of those forms. If your inclinations are neoclassical like Vidal's—or even for that matter like Janet Flanner's—you know better than to expect a talk show to be easily hospitable to your impulses to self-expression, your needs to

vindicate yourself by elaborated and complex explanations.

And this brings up a still more important and telling difference between Mailer and the other guests on the show. If, that is, the others were literary in a patronizing and genteel way, like members of a guild, Mailer (in quite another way) was even more literary. He really thought his literary and personal powers could dominate the nonliterary medium in which he had agreed to express himself. He thought he could make himself clear in a medium designed primarily for the Correggios, which is not at all hospitable to anyone "with a sense of that which he does not know and would discover."

It is consistent with what I'm saying that Vidal so freely used material from *The New York Review of Books* as if he were not repeating himself, as if the audience for Dick Cavett's show were not the audience for a journal of a cosmopolitan and academic intellectual elite. By contrast, Mailer attacked Vidal for saying things about him in that journal as if the millions watching the show already knew what the article was all about. He assumed that any literary controversy involving him, even as long ago as last July, was still news, a part of history, a public event, whereas Vidal and Miss Flanner knew that the best thing for them to do was to re-create themselves, to adapt what was already known about them to television.

If Mailer could make very little sense on the Cavett show, except in the bare accusation that Vidal had sacrificed his intellectual responsibilities by linking him to Manson, if he could not deliver his mind within the conventions of a late-night show, he nonetheless chose to be there, knowing full well that he has almost never been any good at it. It is pointless to disapprove of him for getting himself into these situations, since it is now fairly clear that they are absolutely essential to him as a man and as a writer. So essential, in fact, that the form of his behavior on the Cavett show and on other such occasions can be seen to duplicate the form of some of his best writing and, indeed, the form he has given his literary career.

This form—of Mailer's public behavior, writing, and career—is shaped in roughly the following way: He finds himself as a participant in a situation, be it social, political, or literary that calls for conventional good manners. There follows an effort, sooner or later, to disassociate himself from other participants in the same enterprise. This act of disassociation very often requires of him a certain degree of intemperateness, or even obscenity. Then follows a period in which he angrily

justifies this differentiation of himself until finally, by argument and self-persuasion, he arrives at the pleasurable sense of minority status. At this point he makes his most direct appeal to an audience—that it should regard him as a kind of culture hero. He is able to claim that his minority status, as against the prevailing social, political, or literary establishment, is what makes him the best, most imaginative figure in whatever group he happens to have placed himself. For one must remember that he is still participating in some sort of corporate literary, social, or political enterprise. He sees himself as the best part of this enter-

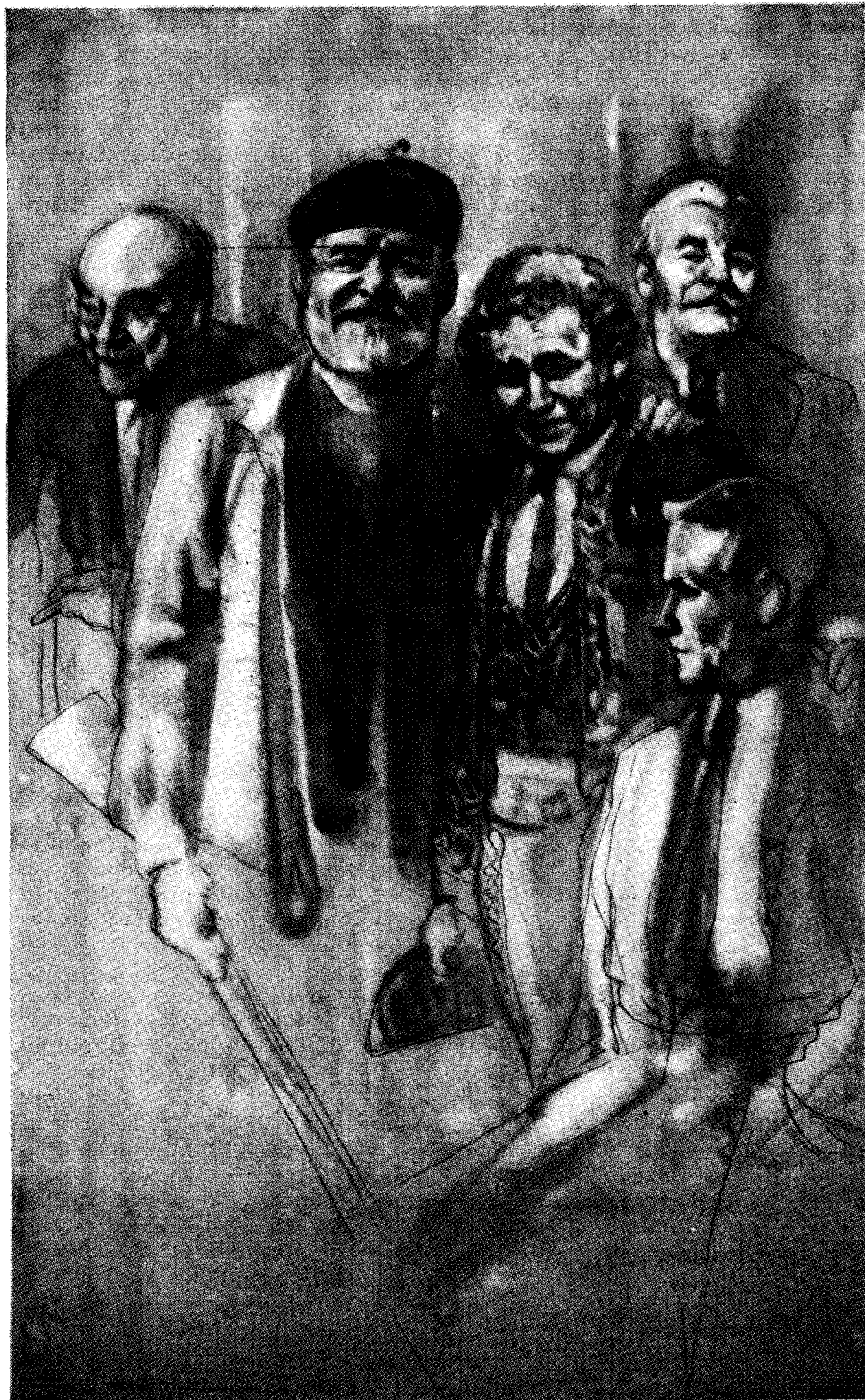
prise, the man who carries more of the burden of complication, more of the burden of imagination than anyone else. He becomes in effect the only man who deserves to be “the champ.”

Such is the structure, for example, of a book like *The Armies of the Night* and also of the experiences, as he recounts them, that went into that book. The same might be said of *Of a Fire on the Moon*. Each book begins with an account of how he has accepted an invitation to a gathering, how he joined in some large enterprise, how his conduct then set him apart from the other participants, how his view of things emerged as both more inclusive and

more importantly complex than theirs, so that at the end his is therefore representative of the embattled Novelistic Imagination in a world that barely comprehends but has been obliged to tolerate him. In an elementary way this, too, is the outline of his career from his earliest work, with its heavy indebtedness to official, establishment literature that preceded him—as if he would join the company of Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Hemingway—to the crisis of alienation from literature, politics, and society as described in *Advertisements for Myself*, to his joining these various elements of American life but at a different degree of assimilation and intensity. All this leads to work—in *The Armies of the Night* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?*—that truly is at a much higher level of originality and integration than any he had achieved before and than any of his contemporaries has yet to achieve.

Of all American writers perhaps since Henry James, Mailer is the most committed to the romantic view of the artist, the novelist, the creator of imaginative forms that can serve as alternatives to social, political, and linguistic forms proposed by non-artists. At the same time his mind is possessed of an unrelieved anxiety that he might be confused with someone else, especially another writer of any approximate similarity of position, that he might not decisively enough even exist, that his revolutionary stance will not appear wholly original. A telling incident, roughly similar to what happened on the Cavett show, occurs at the outset of *The Armies of the Night* when Mailer describes a party in Washington, D.C., for some of the people who are to march on the Pentagon. At the party with Mailer is Paul Goodman, and the book reveals Mailer's concern lest this semblance of alliance be mistaken for an identity of views. His objection to Goodman's politics and especially to his sexual attitudes is of a piece, finally, with his criticism of Goodman's writing. Speaking of himself in the third person, he complains, “But, oh, the style! It set Mailer's teeth on edge to read it; he was inclined to think that the body of students who followed Goodman must have something de-animalized to put up with the style, or at least such was Mailer's bigoted view.”

What he means by “the style” is clarified somewhat later in a chapter called “In the Rhetoric” where, as in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, he reveals his distaste for the language of the American protest movement and of the young. As in his discussion of sex, his critique of language is ultimately a defense of neglected mysteries and visions of which liberal



Men who become boxing champions or presidents are probably much like Mailer. But, unlike him, they don't let us look into their heads.

rationality takes no sufficient notice. The most offensive language smells

like the storeroom of a pharmacology company's warehouse, doubtless productive of cancer over the long haul, but essential perhaps, perhaps! to a Left forever suffering from malnutrition. Mailer knew this attitude had nothing to do with reality—if names like SANE or Women Strike for Peace sounded like brand names, which could have been used as happily to sell aspirin, he could hardly think the same of SNCC or SDS or one or two of the others; now and again, remarkable young men sprang out of these alphabet soups. No, it was more that the Novelist begrudged the dimming of what was remarkable in the best of these young men because some part of their nervous system would have to attach vision and lust and dreams of power, glory, justice, sacrifice, and future purchases on heaven to these deadening letters.

Behind the ostensible subjects of politics, sex, language, and style is the central concern about where Mailer the Novelist fits into the revolutionary alliance. More aptly, he is searching for the ways in which Mailer the Novelist does *not* fit into an easy alliance. How could he be expected to fit, being a Novelist responsible for values no other kind of writer necessarily has to care about—the Imagination, dread, awe, wonder, mystery. Thinking in Mailer is the function of his desperate need to imagine himself the savior of the imagination and, inevitably, in any circumstance, a minority figure.

All too often Mailer's ideas derive from his will to differentiate the lone Novelist from the mass of fellow journalists (as in *Of a Fire on the Moon*) or to isolate the lone Left-conservative from revolutionary poseurs (as in *The Prisoner of Sex*). In *The Armies of the Night* he very willingly joins a protest march, joins other dissenters or revolutionaries, and all through it, even in jail, pictures himself as at odds with his compatriots. Much more instinctively, he feels compatible with those who are supposed to be his opponents: some of the U.S. marshals; the judge he is so anxious to impress when he is called before the bench; the badgered and exploited soldiers who guard the Pentagon, against which the whole

march of collegians, intellectuals, and the privileged is directed. He is in the eloquently patriotic situation of a man who feels the competing pulls of America in him, the worst in the best and the best in the worst.

His situation is less important, of itself, than the language that emanates from it. He objects to thinking separated from obscenity, sex separated from dreams of some ultimate "scream and pinch of orgasm," vision separated from lust, justice from love of power. In a quite laudable way he sets out in his writing to restore these missing or neglected or spurned qualities to what he considers their rightful and seductive place in the scheme of things. To attain what he considers the right balance, he must initially and inevitably throw himself as well as everyone else off-balance. This is notably true when his opposition to the prevailing mood (particularly if it is a nice and vegetarian or genteel mood) excites in him a distaste for those same qualities in himself, especially since he has from the outset been at such pains to disguise them. That "nice boy" whom Mailer remembers with some embarrassment was only redeemed, after all, by serving in an army quite unlike the one in which the Harvard graduate and distinguished author now finds himself obliged to march. In World War II Mailer served not in an army of liberals and "drug-vitiated, jargon-mired children," but in an army of mostly southern boys, average pals and buddies, "real" American teen-agers. They were fellows to be loved and admired with a proper wit. If the "army" marching on the Pentagon is mostly of a quite different sort, if it is dominated by "concepts," the earlier one was redolent of "obscenity," and Mailer, as he marches with one army against a later version of the other, still admits that he "never felt more like an American than when he was naturally obscene—all the gifts of the American language came out in the happy play of obscenity against concept, which enabled one to go back to concept again."

"Play" of this kind is often the effect of Mailer's own style, personal as well as literary. He provokes within himself some equivalent of the competing claims, the factionalisms of the whole country—the Brooklyn Jew, Harvard graduate, Army rifleman, novelist, dialectician, brawler, father, and, also, the husband who could write in 1968, "No, it could not be an altogether awful country because otherwise how would his wife, a southerner and an Army brat, have come out so subtle, so supple, so mysterious, so fine-skinned, so tender and wise."

It isn't too much to say that Mailer regards his achieved style (its mixture of "concept" and "obscenity," of in-

tellectual jargons and hip vocabularies) as an image of America as well as of himself. Hence his fury when the audience at the Cavett show seemed to side with Vidal rather than with him. But when has he ever let a public gathering identify with him?

A rather startling instance of Mailer's failure to capture an audience's sympathy, or rather of his determination to reject that sympathy, occurred at the kickoff for his mayoralty campaign early in the summer of 1969. Again, the form of this rally was nearly identical to that of the Cavett show performance. Having circulated amiably throughout the group, he then took the platform; and within ten minutes, sensing that the audience of socialite supporters and prep-schooled, ivy-leagued hippies were taking him too much for granted, were assuming a too easy alliance between him and them, he abused them for their anticipated laziness. Then, body pushed out in schoolyard pugnacity, he stood shouting "Fuck you" to a chorus back of the same.

What is one to conclude from this? Only in writing can Mailer exist in a form that embraces his contradictions; only in writing about a historical occasion after it is over can he give form to feelings that, expressed at the time, threaten to mutilate the form that he is searching for in the occasion. The time of his time probably has no historical equivalent, only a literary one. The form of history most tolerable to him is made of his own language existing in a kind of suspension, productive of a turmoil of meaning that public events are designed not to sustain but to ameliorate.

Men of great power and magnificent ambition, men who become presidents or champions of the world, are, if one could look into their heads, probably very much like Mailer. But they make a point of not letting us, as he does, look into their heads. They act more like Vidal. Their madness may be their motive, but it is not their image to the world. Mailer is fascinated by dialectical encounters in which hunger for power, fascination with mystery, and any kind of lust work to the possible destruction of opponents rather than the destruction of oneself. And yet it is he himself who gets hurt in public, and only in his writing can he arrive at anything like his true but still tense equilibrium. Dialectics are his hope of sanity. Existing uncomfortably as a mere person rather than what he calls a Being, a mere character—partial, moderated—his only alternative outside writing is to turn destructively on himself with scatology. Where Mailer is not, by virtue of the act of writing, able to control a situation, the hidden thrust of his energy is toward the sacrificial waste of himself. □



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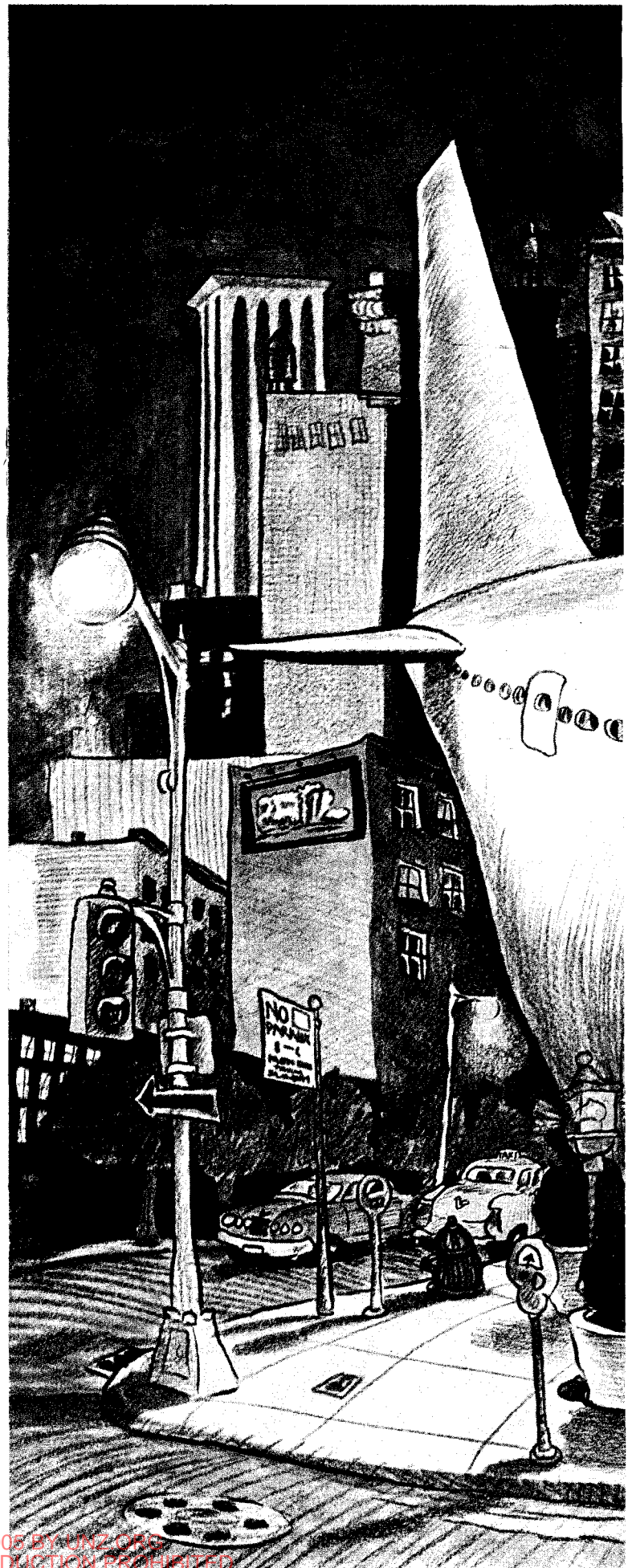
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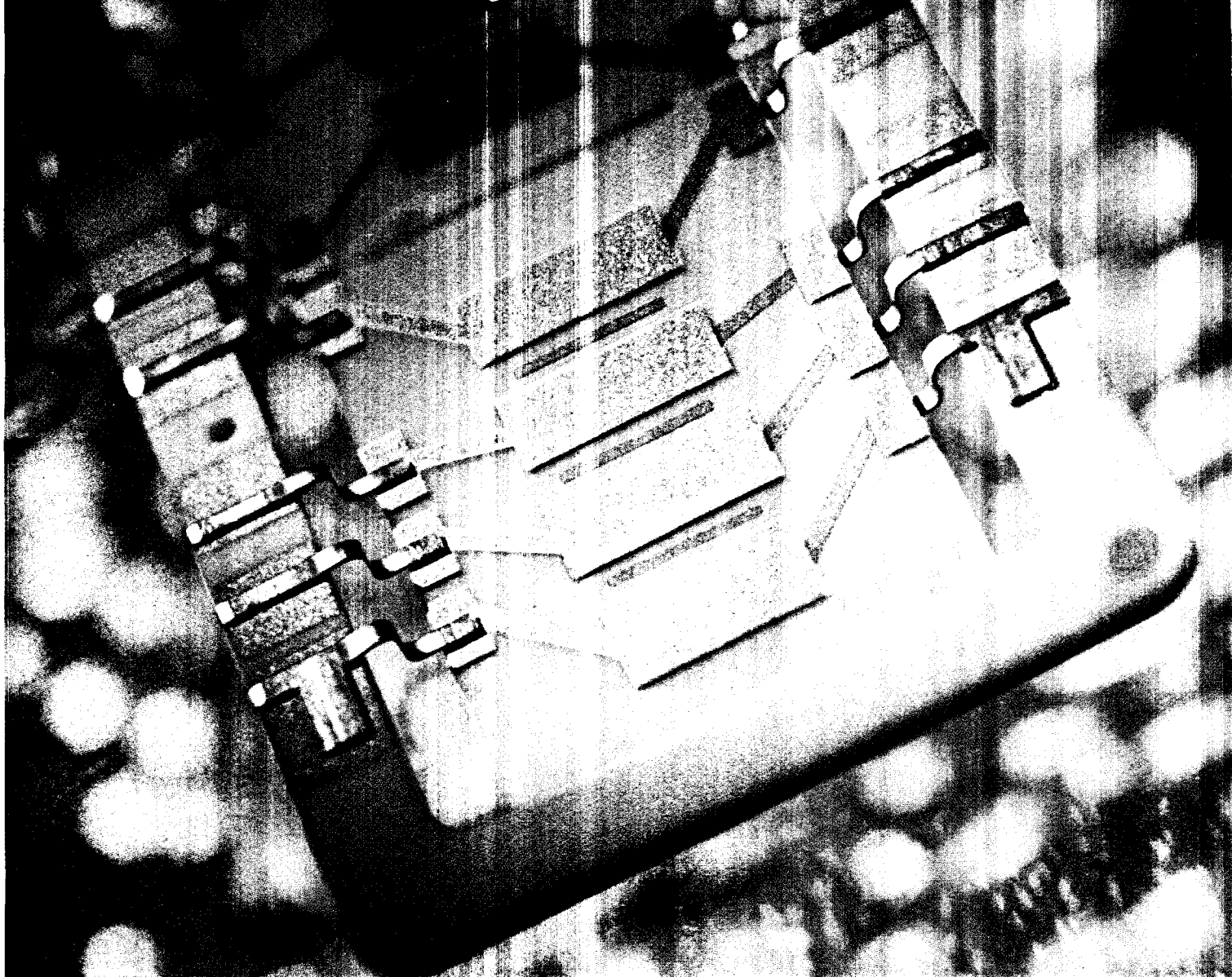
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JAZZ REPORT

BY STANLEY DANCE

Sidney Bechet, Dizzy Gillespie, Henri Renaud, and Charlie Parker: *Murmur of the Heart*. Bechet, soprano saxophone, with septet; Gillespie, trumpet, with quartet; Renaud, piano, with quintet; Parker, alto saxophone, with trio, quartet, and quintet. Roulette stereo, SR-3006, \$4.98.

Most of these excerpts from the sound track of the French film *Le Souffle au Coeur* were originally recorded in Paris between 1949 and 1953. Four titles under Parker's name were made here for Dial in 1947, and on them he is accompanied by such musicians as Erroll Garner, Miles Davis, and J. J. Johnson. Johnson is also on the Renaud session with Milt Jackson and Al Cohn. The "cool" or "modern" idioms make an amusing contrast with the boisterous flights of Bechet in company with a French "New Orleans" band. The stereo is nominal, of course.

Jim Hall: *Where Would I Be?* Hall, guitar; Benny Aronov, piano; Malcolm Cecil, bass; Aírto Moreira, drums. Milestone stereo, MSP-9037, \$5.98.

Playwright Jack Richardson, who serves as annotator to this album, refers to "the combination of lucidity and passion that makes Jim [Hall] unique among guitarists." Although the passion tends to be intellectual, there is considerable variety in the music, which ranges from the delicate, ballad mood on the unaccompanied "I Should Care" to the driving blues vein of "Careful." What is remarkable—and enjoyable—is Hall's consistent lucidity of expression. The long "Minotaur," where Aronov switches to electric piano, is the one track on which the listener may at first feel baffled, but return visits will make penetration of the maze easier.

Earl Hines and Maxine Sullivan: *Live at the Overseas Press Club*. Hines, piano; Maxine Sullivan, vocal. Chiaroscuro stereo, CR-107, \$5.98.

This is a souvenir that preserves the attractive spontaneity of a happy occasion last year. The qualities of joy and

relaxation Maxine Sullivan brings to most songs are in striking evidence, and Hines backs her with authority and sensitivity. His great gifts as an accompanist have not always been acknowledged, but it is impossible not to recognize them here. He plays alone on five tracks, reworking with customary brilliance such standards as "If I Had You" and "Am I Blue?" There is also an imaginative exploration of the melodic and harmonic potential in "Along the Santa Fe Trail," and he concludes with a version of "Confessin'" that makes possible a fascinating comparison with another in his recently issued *Tribute to Louis Armstrong* on Audiophile AP-111.

The JPJ Quartet: *Montreux '71*. Budd Johnson, soprano and tenor saxophones; Dill Jones, piano; Bill Pemberton, bass; Oliver Jackson, drums. Master Jazz stereo, MJR-8111. \$5.50. (Postpaid from Master Jazz Recordings, Box 579, Lenox Hill Station, New York, N.Y. 10021.)

Because the JPJ Quartet is one of the best small groups in the country, it is a little ironic that it should have had to go to Montreux to get itself recorded. Performance and material here are excellent alike, and the live recording, fortunately, is nothing short of superb. Johnson has long been regarded within the profession as one of the giants of the tenor saxophone, but during the past year or so he has attained such mastery of the soprano, and expresses himself with such individuality on it, that today he is probably the instrument's supreme exponent. The rhythm section backs him surely, and pianist Dill Jones, who had the distinctly unenviable task of taking Earl Hines's place in the group, plays with notable verve and invention.

Charles Mingus: *Mingus*. Mingus, bass, with quartet. Prestige mono, 24010, \$6.98 (two discs). *Better Get It in Your Soul*. Mingus, bass, with septet, octet, and nonet. Columbia stereo, G-30628, \$5.98 (two discs). *The Candid Recordings*. Mingus, bass, with trio, septet,

and nonet. Barnaby stereo, K2-31034, \$4.98.

These three reissues, from 1955, 1959, and 1960, respectively, give a good idea of the range of Mingus's art, although the compositional heights of his *Black Saint and Sinner Lady* were still several years in the future. The first record in the Prestige set, where he is assisted by Mal Waldron (piano), Eddie Bert (trombone), and George Barrow (tenor saxophone), has a loose, almost innocent character that is in sharp contrast with the self-conscious complexity and ferocity of some of his later work. Mingus's admirers tend to focus their attention on his ability as a composer-arranger, but his drive and great technique make him even more formidable as a performing bassist.

McKinley Morganfield: *A.K.A. Muddy Waters*. Waters, guitar and vocal, with various small groups. Chess stereo, 2CH-60006, \$5.98 (two discs). **John Lee Hooker:** *Mad Man Blues*. Hooker, guitar and vocal, alone and with small groups. Chess stereo, 2CH-60011, \$5.98 (two discs).

The first of these stirring collections derives from 1948-1964, the second from 1951-1966, and they handsomely illustrate the careers and styles of these two immensely influential blues men. At his best, each is a musician of deeply satisfying and convincing authenticity. In fact, anyone unhappy with the course jazz has taken in recent years can probably find what he is missing in performances like Muddy Waters's "I'm Ready," where the integrity of mood and tempo is instantly impressive. Proof that both men are still going strong is also available in *Muddy Waters "Live"* (Chess 50012) and *Never Get Out of These Blues Alive* (ABC X-736). On the latter, Hooker effectively dominates a bunch of younger musicians, among whom organist Robert Hooker and violinist Michael White are noteworthy. His contemporary Memphis Slim is less successful on *Blue Memphis* (Warner Bros. 1899), where overelaboration in the Hollywood manner defeats him and a large contingent of young British blues aspirants. □