

folk whom—Philip Wylie once noted in an anti-Lincolnesque moment—God must have hated and that's why he made them so goddamn common.

Rafelson's anti-intellectual sage offers us Jeff Bridges as Craig Blake, scion of Southern aristocrats, orphaned while off on a game-hunting expedition and now, alone with the old retainer in the elegant family mansion, trying to find himself through crooked real-estate deals with a redneck-mafia syndicate in Birmingham. His job is to try to buy the property on which a gym is located—but one encounter with the gym folks and he knows who the “real” people are. These folks include the gargantuan Neanderthal proprietor, yclept Thor, who's training a mystery man for the Mr. Universe contest; the mystery man, an Austrian peculiarly named Joe Santo (played by an Austrian actor named Arnold Schwarzenegger), who has wow pectorals and other interesting muscles, a talent for playing country fiddle, and a laissez-faire approach to life; and the receptionist, Mary Tate, a semi-literate little sexpot who is as “real” as she is willing to bed both Joe and Craig. Craig soon learns that these folks are the salt of the earth and more fun than the country-club snobs or redneck-mafia types. After lots of fights and fiddling and snuggling, he dismantles the old mansion, double-crosses his business partners, and decides to go into the gym business. The idea, as Joe has told him, is to “stay hungry” and enjoy life—and from hunger it is indeed.

Bridges—in a role reminiscent of his brother Beau's in *The Landlord*—does little to further his career or stretch his apparent talents as the poor little rich boy in search of something or other. But he and Sally Field, attractive as the anybody's girl, do have sporadic moments of juvenile charm. Robert Englund does a nice bit as Thor's assistant, Fannie Flagg is properly stuffy as a broad-minded belle, and Helena Kallianiotes, as a karate teacher, reprises her delightful *Five Easy Pieces* spot as a zonked-out social thinker. But it's all to small purpose in a simplistic, superficial construction, based on the sort of sophomoric social approaches that even Jerry Rubin has outgrown.

GOOD INTENTIONS and good music are the hallmarks of *Leadbelly*, Gordon Parks's biography of the great folksinger. The film is intended as an inspiring story of a man who, confident of his artistry, found himself and his individuality in a

chain-gang world of savage injustice and eventually attained freedom to pass on a brilliant musical heritage before his death in 1949. As such, with an intelligent script by Ernest Kinoy based on what material is available, and with a handsome production saturated in the Louisiana-Texas locales, it details the picaresque young manhood and sobering maturity of the musician in engrossing terms. Better yet—with vocals provided by HiTide Harris for the on-screen Leadbelly, Roger E. Mosley, and with instrumental soloists David Cohen, Brownie McGhee, Dick Rosmini, and Sonny Terry contributing to the Fred Karlin score—the film is filled with music. The Leadbelly classics—“Green Corn,” “Fannin Street,” “Good Morning Blues,” “Cotton Fields at Home,” “Midnight Special,” “Old Riley,” and, in a questionable rendition, “Goodnight Irene”—pour forth in charm and glory.

The story is told in the context of the visit John Lomax, the musicologist and collector of folk songs, made to a Louisiana prison in 1933 to record for the Library of Congress the repertoire of a black man renowned for his back-country songs. Leadbelly, a graying man in chains, sings his songs and recalls his early life as a carefree youth given to girls and music, forced around 1905 to leave home one step ahead of the sheriff and a pregnant girlfriend's outraged father, and seeking out the high life on Shreveport's Fannin Street. A first-class womanizer, he becomes the lover of a madame who keeps him in style, and also the top guitar man in the local saloon, where he discovered the 12-string guitar that became his instrument. After a raid on the saloon, he heads for Texas, linking up with another musician, Blind Lemon Jefferson. A brawl leads to jail, then escape, a time with a quiet woman, and then a drunken brawl that lands him a 30-year chain-gang sentence for a stabbing. Eventually he's pardoned, but he finds a world where a black man who fights to survive, let alone for his rights, often winds up back in chains.

The story is filled with incident, with light moments and deeply emotional encounters, as we see the development of a man's character and pride. Mosley, at his best as the younger Leadbelly, gives a soft, hulking fecklessness to the character—a contrast to the strong image the Leadbelly recordings have created. But it is the story, rather than the personality, that takes over, and an interesting story it is. □

## Music to My Ears

### The Menuhin Traveling Birthday Party

Few public performers can measure a career in terms of half a century and still be only 60 years of age. One who could, did, when the Yehudi Menuhin Traveling Birthday Party occupied Carnegie Hall in mid-April. It was, in effect, what the English call a concert party. In addition to the party part, it was a concert on the heavenly heights of Beethoven's B flat (*Archduke*) trio, and the great C minor piano quartet of Gabriel Fauré.

The mere participation of Menuhin senior in such glories of the chamber-music repertory, with his son Jeremy (now in his mid-20s) as pianist, would have made the occasion noteworthy. What made it unforgettable was the presence of Mstislav Rostropovich as anchorman in the cello parts of both works. Profits from the concert were divided evenly between the Jerusalem Foundation and Menuhin's own school for young musicians at Stoke d'Abernon, Surrey. A pair of concerts have since followed in Paris and Monte Carlo with the two Menuhins, and a third before a monster audience in Royal Albert Hall, London, with Rostropovich again participating. The profits from all of these anniversary events were also distributed to charities.

As Rostropovich's commitment to any enterprise with which he chooses to identify himself could in no circumstances be conceived as “nominal,” it was assumed that he would, in Carnegie Hall, give of his art without stint. What could not have been presupposed was that he would give of himself with equal generosity. He entered, with a beaming smile, as a third to the two Menuhins in the Beethoven trio, disposing an inclusive kind of Russian warmth which—as a fellow attendant observed—suggested that he was presiding at the samovar. If the still-blond, robust violinist was a diffident guest-host for the thousands who filled the hall, Rostropovich was an expansive embodiment of host, guest, and fellow listener.

Once seated, what Rostropovich poured was far more stimulating than the brew of any samovar. It emanated

from the depths of his own vast musical nature, as a bridge over possibly troubled waters that might swirl around a legendary father, and a son anxious to prove his right to inclusion in such a collaboration. The rich sound of the Strad on which Rostropovich performs was a beam of warmth, as well as light.

The influence of the cellist did not end with the settling power of his presence on the sometimes unsettled young pianist. Given the opportunity, in those magical moments in which Beethoven leads the hymnal adagio into the rejoicing of the finale, Rostropovich bore the major responsibility for the transition in the deep, resonant low register of the cello. Moreover, when the audience erupted in applause, he managed to isolate the guest of honor from the other participants by building a small wall of chairs between them. Then, seating himself comfortably, he motioned imperiously to Menuhin with a gesture that unmistakably commanded: "Play!" The violinist's response was a performance of the prelude to Bach's E major (unaccompanied) partita that registered high on the scale of conviction he brings to nonmusical, as well as musical, matters.

For the Fauré, the basic trio was joined by Ernst Wallfisch, a master of the viola with many prior collaborations with Menuhin to his credit. The new member settled securely into the acoustical camaraderie that had matured as the *Archduke* proceeded. This was something that had to be forged in the heat of performance, for Menuhin's output of tone is currently less than it was earlier in his career, Rostropovich sings on his instrument with Caruso-like prodigality, and Jeremy Menuhin's piano sound is brightness personified. The inclusive artistry that was evoked in the Fauré made a celebration of sorts on behalf of a work whose pulsating, fervently imagined content seldom enjoys such prominence.

The same words could be applied to the young pianist, who doubtless loathed as well as relished the opportunity to be a part of the traveling birthday party. He met the challenge courageously in the Beethoven, the fulfillment of which (in the company of a Yehudi and Mstislav) calls for something more than a Jeremy, and with artistry as well as courage in the Fauré.



A "concert party" has its rewards—Yehudi Menuhin hands check for Jerusalem Foundation to Israeli Consul General Edud Avriel.

In the later *Aidas* of the Metropolitan Opera's season, New York made the acquaintance of a newish dramatic soprano from Yugoslavia named Ljiljana Molnar-Talajic. By "newish" is meant that she has previously appeared in this country in San Francisco (also in Philadelphia), and with several of Europe's leading opera companies. She is somewhat short and of stocky build, but there is no doubt that she is, truly, a dramatic soprano, with a bright, strong voice capable of piercing Verdi's brassiest instrumentation. She can also reduce it skillfully to the dimensions required for such phrases as "Numi, pieta" (in two different circumstances).

What she cannot, at present, do is keep all the vowels in Italian from sounding like *e*. This gives her verbal enunciation a somewhat exotic character amid the more correct practices of what happened to be an all-North American cast.

There is, however, not only a reasonable but a demonstrable hope for Molnar-Talajic's improvement. When Zinka Milanov (who was sitting nearby on the evening of the performance I attended) first appeared in America, in the late Thirties, she too had a verbal problem. The reason, one subsequently learned, was that it was customary in Yugoslavia (the country also of her birth) to perform Italian operas in Croatian; it took some time for any singer so trained to master correct Italian.

Two works new to New York have been added to the long list to which Leonard Bernstein has given distinguished sponsorship with the Philharmonic Orchestra. One, also new to the United States, was *Suite on English Folk Tunes*, with which Benjamin Britten retuned his master's lyre in the period of

recovery that followed his heart surgery in 1972. It begins with a scherzo on "Cakes and Ale" and ends with a slow movement on "Lord Melbourne." The sections in between are devoted to "The Bitter Withy," "Hankin Booby," and "Hunt the Squirrel," all treated simply, eloquently, economically, in Britten's personally poetic manner. The smallish orchestra (winds in pairs) provides a delicate palette for the most resourceful kind of tonal draftsmanship. The *vingt vignettes* give every promise of long service.

William Schuman's *Concerto on Old English Rounds* is twice as long, four times as big in sound, and six or seven times as difficult to comprehend. The work brings together a large orchestra, a female orchestra, and a solo viola player (Donald McInnes, who commissioned Schuman to compose a work for him as a result of a Ford Foundation grant). Some of the problems it poses are stylistic (audibility of the sung texts, which were, alas, not printed in the program) and some are acoustical (audibility of the viola amid the blanketing sound of chorus and orchestra).

The concerto embodies a considerable creative impulse, a good deal of richly textured tonal tapestry, a sensitivity to the basic substance not unrelated to Schuman's *New England Triptych*, and a degree of elaboration that made 40 minutes' length more than a little excessive. The concept will take a little getting used to, and may very well find its true métier in such an electronic medium as a recording. McInnes, now a member of the faculty at the University of Washington, produces a superb sound on his instrument, in a performance dignified not only by the Camerata Singers but also by Bernstein himself. □

## On Knowing Mr. Lear

*How pleasant to know Mr. Lear!*

*Who has written such volumes of stuff!*

*Some think him ill-mannered and queer,*

*But a few think him pleasant enough.*

—EDWARD LEAR (1871)

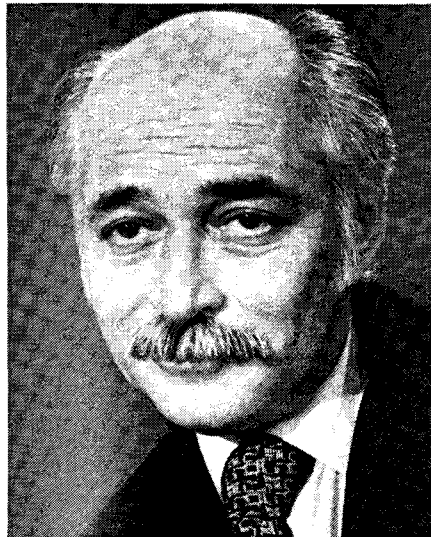
An apt quatrain for our own Mr. Lear, the most popular master of nonsense on the most ungratefully fickle of media. When Norman Lear created "All in the Family," in 1971, the received wisdom was that it was ill-mannered and queer to treat a network audience as more or less grown-up. CBS took a chance, and now Mr. Lear has eight shows on the air with a total weekly audience of 140 million, which suggests that a few find him pleasant enough.

I think it right to say a few words in praise of Mr. Lear as an otherwise disappointing television season comes to a close. With the exception of a few specials like "Eleanor and Franklin," the gains in programming quality on the networks have been in the domain of comedy. The most promising series have been either those contrived by Mr. Lear or those following in the paths he has opened. The inept cops in ABC's "Barney Miller," for example, come out of Archie Bunker's pocket. (The same is true of the excellent ABC show "Welcome Back, Kotter.") More than anyone else, Mr. Lear has made it commercially profitable for Americans to laugh at themselves.

The nature of that laughter deserves analysis. The comic center is invariably the nuclear family, notwithstanding forecasts by counterculture prophets that the family is an obsolescent fossil. The essential core of every Lear comedy is the biting backchat of husband, wife, children, and in-laws. This is the case on "The Jeffersons," "Sanford and Son," "Maude," "The Dumplings," and "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman." Typical of the byplay is the exchange between Archie Bunker's daughter Gloria, who is pregnant, and her husband Mike, who is squeamish about being at the bedside during delivery. "Can't I mind being in the room when you deliver?" protests Mike. Replies Gloria: "You didn't mind being in the room when you placed the order."

A second common motif is the open ventilation of ethnic humor. Mr. Lear has made it possible for comic series to show that the American consensus is not so fragile that the melting pot will crack if its existence is acknowledged. Thus, in the same program about Gloria's pregnancy, Mike asks his father-in-law Archie when the baby within his wife will begin to kick. "When he finds his father is a Polack," ripostes Bunker. This is followed by a purgative dialogue on the maliciousness of Polish jokes.

There is, finally, a Charles Addams streak in Norman Lear's wit. This is most apparent in "Mary Hartman," a five-day-a-week parody on soap operas so impudent the big networks wouldn't



Norman Lear—"Master of nonsense."

touch it—it has been sold to individual stations and has won an audience huge enough to assure its future (the *New York Post* runs a daily summary of Mary's travails, a singular tribute to the program's success). What may have been the single funniest scene on television this season was an episode of surpassing outrageousness in which a high school sports coach drowns in a bowl of chicken soup, burbling his last while Mary Hartman and the coach's wife discuss human relations.

Mr. Lear, in short, owes more to Addams and to Ring Lardner than he does to the one-liners of Bob Hope. He has minced sacred cows with an expeditiousness matched only by McDonald's

in producing hamburgers. Still, it strikes me that Norman Lear has left two realms of humor relatively untouched—politics and television itself.

It has been something of a breakthrough that NBC took a chance on "Saturday Night," a three-a-month variety show broadcast at the cautious hour of 11:30 P.M. The high point of the show is "Weekend Update," the bogus news report of a young and talented comedian whose signature line is "I'm Chevy Chase, and you're not." Mr. Chase has made a favored target of President Ford, who, on the mock newscasts, is continually stabbing himself with plastic salad forks. Though I am not as overwhelmed as other television critics by Mr. Chase's abilities, his popular success indicates that we can make freer fun of politics without the Republic crumbling. Indeed, the White House has taken the program seriously enough to dispatch press secretary Ron Nessen for a not-so-funny guest appearance.

But can we also make more fun of television itself? That is the \$64 million question, to which the networks have provided only the most inscrutable answer. I would cite as an example "Monty Python's Flying Circus," the BBC series that proved to be the single most popular program of its kind ever aired on public television, despite fears that its humor was too special, and too British, to appeal to an American audience. A stock figure in the "Python" programs is the pompous BBC announcer, who makes inane announcements while the screen jiggles with surreal images.

(So popular was "Monty Python" that ABC took a flier and bought some programs for its "Wide World of Entertainment" series. But the program's English creators promptly sued ABC for excising segments and expurgating the shows, the result being a legal imbroglio hilariously described in a *New Yorker* article, "Naughty Bits," by Hendrik Hertzberg. The article, which appeared in the March 29 issue, was the best report I have seen on television all year.)

So far as the networks are concerned, the fun stops at the program executive's desk. Mr. Lear has a final challenge facing him. Why not a series on television itself—the ultimate in audacity? How about a series, set on Madison Avenue, dealing with the people who make the commercials that intrude degradingly into everything we see? A truly wild idea, I'm sure, but I have abiding faith in the comic genius of our own Mr. Lear. □