

August 1988

Vol. 7 No. 8

The Sleeping Sage

by Gene DiNovi

In forty-eight years of sitting at the piano, I have listened to a lot of players of all the instruments. Each instrument seems to produce — or attract — people of particular character.

As humanists, I give first place to the drummers. They are at the heart of the music. Generally they listen better, perhaps because they deal first in feel. They can observe us all the better from their vantage point in a group. I'm sure this gives them the final necessity of any musician: a sense of humor. Drummers have given us all more laughs than all the rest of us put together. Mention Barrett Deems or Phil Seaman and you smile. Anyone who ever knew Alvin Stoller, Shelly Manne, Jo Jones, or Johnny Cresci is happy at the mere thought of each of them. Picture in your mind — if you have been lucky enough to have seen them — Dave Tough, Jim Chapin, Connie Kaye, or Sid Catlett in full swing and you have an image that is vividly romantic and intelligent.

Add exuberance: Kenny Clarke, Chick Webb and — yes, when he was playing drums — Victor Feldman.

Add sweetness of soul: Louis Bellson and Gene Krupa.
Warmth: Tiny Kahn and Irv Kluger.

Genius, veracity, and so much more: Buddy Rich.

Kindness: Cliff Leeman, Maurice Purtill, Ralph Collier, Jack Sperling.

Steadiness and reliability: Teddy Sommer, Irv Cottler.

Then there were Italian-American New York drummers of my youth whose names you might not know, such as Jimmy Dee and Casey Casino. But they gave me a lot of that New York time back when Italian kids could excel at musical endeavors but were not allowed to leave the family parlor.

And then there was the one who taught me, and so many more of us, so much, the sleeping drummer, the one I thought of and still think of as The Sage. Billy Exiner.

Except to musicians, and I fear not even all of them, his name means nothing. People confuse it with that of Billy Eckstine. This further clouded his due, though a drummer who refused to play solos was not doing much for his place in history in the first place. And Billy was subtle by anyone's standards, even back in a time when subtlety still had a place. Billy Exiner just didn't think in eight-by-ten glossy terms. He was the most Christ-like man I ever met. And, like Christ, he taught without writing it down. You either caught his one-liners or you didn't.

And he always had his disciples, particularly bass players. At one time it was Barney Speiler, who one day left New York and joined the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam, where he lived out his life and died. Joe Shulman was another of Billy's bass players. That was in his period with Gil Evans in the Claude Thornhill band. After Joe died, Billy's bass players included Russ Savakus and Hal Gaylor, both of whom were close to him.

I think Billy felt the bass player was the most essential musician in a band. So he always kept one near him.

Billy Exiner was born in Brooklyn, New York, November 22, 1910, a Jew of Russian descent who, for reasons I have never been able to determine, was adopted by an Irish Catholic family in Boston. An understanding of both cultures set in early and, I think, contributed to the breadth of Billy's feelings. There was so much love in him for all people, and so much knowledge of things foreign. He always looked for, and usually found, the good side of anything, and worked on it until whatever was negative disappeared.

It is generally held that to be a musician — or a dancer, or a juggler, or a front-rank baseball player, or anything that requires a high degree of physical co-ordination — you must begin early. And the weight of evidence supports this. But there are exceptions. Roussel didn't start studying music seriously until he was in his forties. But then, he was a composer, not a player. A conspicuous exception was Bill Harris. Another was Billy Exiner, who never held a set of drumsticks in his hands until he was twenty-four.

Billy had limited education in the formal sense, but a sense of the whole world. He shipped out as a merchant seaman when he was in his teens, and spent years on the ocean. Tony Bennett says that he was once out on a sailboat with Billy. Billy instinctively took over, and promptly had everything shipshape.

When Billy was home on shore leave, he went to a dance. A friend of his was playing drums in the band. There are two versions of what happened next. Some of Billy's friends remember that the drummer wanted to dance with a girl and asked Billy to take over. I remember that the drummer got a phone call, but whatever the reason, he asked Billy to sit in for him, a request that would have more consequences to American music than is realized. Billy protested that he didn't know anything about drums. The drummer said there was nothing to it, handed him a set of brushes, and told him to keep time for a while. Billy sat on the drum stool, never went back to sea, and kept beautiful time for the rest of his life. As far as I know, he never had any formal lessons on the instrument.

Copyright 1988 by Gene Lees

One of his first gigs was with a lady tenor player named Lana Webster — this, mind you, was in 1936 — at the Onyx Club in New York, opposite the Spirits of Rhythm, with Teddy Bunn, Stuff Smith, and John Kirby. It was the Kirby group that made him aware of trying for length in the beat and feel of a rhythm section. Billy Kyle was on piano. Billy felt this was the first small group to get the Basic approach in the rhythm section.

After that Billy worked with the bands of Hudson-DeLange, Will Hudson, Mal Hallett, the Sunset Royal Sere-naders, and Jan Savitt. Then, in World War II, he was drafted into the army. He got into a marching band for a while.

At one point he was stationed in the South. He heard that Kenny Clarke was being held in what a later generations would call a tiger cage — a cage so shaped that you could neither stand nor sit. This was for being found with a roach in his pocket. Somehow Billy got Klook out of there. Billy never told Klook he had done the manipulating but some-body leaked the information and the story got around.

I do not know whether this was the reason Billy was removed from the marching band and sent overseas. What-ever happened, he got a back full of shrapnel somewhere, and it would affect him for the rest of his life. He was returned to civilian life, but because of his injuries he was able to sleep only in a chair or a bathtub: Billy never again slept in a bed. This caused some interesting things to hap-pen.

He worked for a while at Child's Paramount — across the street from the Paramount theater — in Henry Jerome's band. Originally it had been a Mickey Mouse band, but due to the hiring of some young beboppers to replace older mu-sicians who had gone into service, it took on a semi-bop quality. Among those who passed through it were myself, John Mandel, Al Cohn, Tiny Kahn (all of whom were writ-ing even then), Stan Levey, and Ray Turner, the great tenor player, who couldn't read.

Billy would be so exhausted from the previous night in a chair or a bathtub that he would fall asleep at the drums. But he would keep right on playing. The guys learned not to wake him during a tune. Only after the arrangement was finished would they nudge him. Sometimes, for the fun of it, they would let him continue on for eight bars or so after the end, then startle him by waking him. One night, how-ever, he fell straight over on the snare drum and slept — completely out. The pianist, meanwhile, was standing up and shaking hands with a visitor. This left poor Tubby Phillips, the bass player, thumping away on his own. Nate Peterson, the jazz alto player in the band, turned around, looked at Tubby, and said, "It ain't swingin'."

From there Billy, still thinking of a rhythm section "with length," went with the bands of Harry James and Geor-gie Auld. Then, by studied chance — and it seemed that was the way things worked in New York in those days — he met Joe Shulman and Barry Galbraith. Gil Evans became

aware of them and brought them into the Thornhill band, fusing this rhythm section of "length" with some of the most beautiful sounds ever created for a dance band.

The influence of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie ran through these "new" bands, including Georgia Auld, Boyd Raeburn, and Thornhill. The young bloods of the time came into the band, Lee Konitz and Gerry Mulligan to start with.

Claude possessed superb taste though (it seems to me) in a quiet way. Joe Shulman told this story to impress Claude's musicality on me:

When Lee Konitz joined the band, his first solo knocked the other musicians off their chairs. While they were laugh-ing and talking among themselves about it, Claude played his own chorus — perfectly in Lee's style.

Billy told me this:

When someone was playing out of tune, Claude would play the man's part along with him till he got the message and tuned. Mean and direct.

There was a oneness about that group that was, I think, singular in big-band history, and Billy looked on his time in it as the apex of his musical career.

Somewhere along the way, Billy played a New York theater with one of the bands. A friend introduced him to a small, lovely, Italian American girl named Marie, whom he immediately named Midge. They fell in love, married, and produced four wonderful children, young Bill and three girls, Hope, Star, and Joy.

Billy and Midge were interesting to watch together. They were opposites, and it worked. Billy much of the time thought in abstract terms, Midge was always pragmatic. The balance between them was an enormously satisfying thing to see and be around.

I got to know Billy in the late 1940s in New York City.

As a young pianist of the bebop persuasion, I used to roam around town, listening and playing wherever I could. One night, for some un-bebop reason, somebody took me to the bar at Condon's — still in the Village in those days. Maybe he wanted to show me there was life before Bird, which none of us of my generation believed.

I noticed a man getting off a bar stool and stretching his mocassined feet. He was intently observing Dave Tough, and his movements somehow proclaimed that he too was a drummer. The way he was listening to Dave was my fist deep lesson in how to listen. And observe. A few years later, I played with Dave with Joe Marsala at Loew's State, and though he was very sick by then, I knew why the man at the bar in Condon's thought he was so special. He was.

The listener at Condon's, of course, was Billy Exiner, whom I ran into from time to time after that, generally in the company of Joe Shulman.

In those days, I used to hang around in front of Nola's Studios on Broadway, to see if enough guys could be as-sembled to hire some space there and blow. On a good night guys like Tiny Kahn, Red Mitchell, and Al Cohn would

show.

One summer evening I stood there for a long time, but no one showed up. So I went up to the second floor of Nola's and opened the door of one of the long studios. And there I found a rhythm section, doing nothing but playing time. The players were Barry Galbraith on guitar, Joe Shulman on bass, Gil Evans on piano, and Billy Exiner on drums. It was the Claude Thornhill rhythm section, plus Gil, the band's chief arranger whose influence on American music we all know. Or maybe we don't all know. In any case, there were no horns. Just those four people playing time, perfecting that rhythm section.

And they were playing together so closely that you got the feeling that if one of them died, the rest would commit suicide. Gil graciously asked me to play. Being your basic nervy kid from Brooklyn, I said, "Sure. What do you want to play?" As I recall, somebody said, "*All the Things You Are*." We started. Not until long afterward did it occur to me that that was the first time I was truly *accompanied*. They were listening to me and expected me to listen to them — what Gil called "inter-related playing." It was also the first time I had the unique pleasure of playing with Billy Exiner. I've never forgotten it.

They apparently liked what I did. But my most vivid memory of the incident is seeing Gil with his ear *in the piano*. My second lesson in listening.

On other nights Miles Davis, Stan Getz, Brew Moore, Tony Fruscella, John Carisi, and other young Turks would show up. If the Thornhill band was in town, that rhythm section would be at Nola's in the evening. Afterwards we'd go back to Gil's apartment on 55th Street and listen to more music. The conversations — particularly the exchanges between Gil and Billy Exiner — expanded a lot of minds. And it was in that apartment, of course, that what became known as "the cool" was born (we never used the term, indeed never even heard it).

Many of us went back to that apartment of Gil's as often as we could. You might see Bud Powell at the piano, playing a Bach invention in his own way. One night Charlie Parker came to the door and asked for five dollars for his cab fare. He listened to Prokofiev's *Scythian Suite* on the phonograph and said, "I don't even scratch the surface." Then he left.

Or Dave Lambert would be there, writing an arrangement. Gerry Mulligan and I would go out for something to eat, continuing the conversation begun in the apartment. Wonderful tenacious Johnny Carisi would keep everybody's minds alert.

And Billy Exiner, somehow, was father to all of this, though Gil's was the musical mind we minded.

It was a beautiful time and I believed what Duke Ellington said: "New York is the hub around which the world turns."

In retrospect it seems to me — though I am not the only one to make this observation — that whenever Claude

Thornhill's band started to do well, he would break it up. After one of these breakups, the rhythm section decided they wanted to stay together. So they took an ad in *Down Beat*: rhythm section for hire.

Peggy Lee and her husband, the fine guitarist Dave Barbour, saw a good thing already packaged and hired them. They picked up Danny Polo on clarinet as well. They worked theaters and clubs for a while, and then Dave and Peggy broke up and so did the rhythm section. Billy and Joe continued to work for Peggy. Eventually they needed a piano player. Billy and Joe remembered the kid from Brooklyn at Nola's and called him to play for Peggy at the Baltimore Theater. I was twenty-one. This was my second baptism of fire. (The first was playing for Bird the very first time I heard him.)

Billy and Peg would get into some deep conversations. I would listen, tennis-match style, and learn. There was obviously a lot of love between them, because some of the conversations got very personal, yet friendship survived. I remember once they were discussing why people coughed during performances. Billy managed to get her smiling again about it by having her find a drawing — made with a bar of soap — of a bottle of Pertussin on her dressing-room door.

Another time, Peggy and the rest of us were in a Washington D.C. seafood restaurant. Somebody said, "Isn't it wonderful how nature saw to it that a fish has bones so we'll eat slowly?"

Billy said, "I thought it was more for the fish."

The gig with Peggy, like all gigs, came to an end, as much as we loved her. When you make a singer happy, another will hear about it, and you're likely to get a call. We'd come back to New York to work at Birdland or the Royal Roost or any of the jazz clubs of the time. Tony Bennett, who has always had an ear out for good players, called Billy to work with him. Then they called me.

Everybody knew about Billy's sleeping on the job. It amused Tony deeply. He and bassist Hal Gaylor both knew that the only way you could make Billy drop the time was to wake him up. They would laugh helplessly at this strange habit of Billy's, but members of the audience never knew that the drummer who was playing so beautifully was sound asleep.

It was around this time that Billy contracted Berger's disease, a circulatory disorder that attacked the extremities and in time led to the amputation of half his left foot. We all did our best to care for him, but he insisted he wanted to go on working. He shaped a piece of wood to fill out his left shoe, tried his hi-hat, and said, "Let's get a gig." We'd play in my house in Brooklyn — shades of Nola's! — with Carisi, Fruscella, Red Mitchell, Warne Marsh, Junior Collins, whoever came in.

Time passed. I went with Lena Horne, staying from 1955 to about 1962. I tried to get Billy to work with us, but he never did. By the late 1960s his condition forced him into semi-retirement. His job with Tony had lasted longer

than any other in his life, eleven years, from 1954 to 1965.

He visited Hal Gaylor, who was living at Greenwood Lake, in the mountains sixty or seventh miles north of New York City. Billy bought a house, at Monroe, not far from Hal, and moved there with Midge and the children.

He had learned a great deal about his disease. It was one of those ailments particular to an ethnic group, such as sickle-cell anemia and Tay-Sachs disease. Berger's disease attacked Russian Jews, and specifically those from an area called Exine. Billy's name attested that that's where his people came from. None of us knows the details, but Tony Bennett helped him out financially.

When Billy was dying, he called me in Toronto, where I had been living since 1972. He wanted me to come to Monroe, which I did. As we sat and talked, I realized that this would be my last learning experience with Billy Exiner.

While I was there, John Carisi called, to tell Billy of his love and concern for him. He asked Billy, "What do you do when you know you're going to die?"

"You don't buy any new clothes," Billy said, and the three of us — Billy and I in the room and Carisi at the other end of the telephone line in New York — laughed as if we were back at Nola's and it was 1947 and Gil's ear was in the piano and Barry and Joe and Billy were keeping time for all the rest of us.

— Gene DiNovi

Boston Dave

by Bill Crow

Dave Lambert became well-known to jazz listeners twice during his life: first during the mid-'40s when he and Buddy Stewart recorded *What's This?*, a hit bebop vocal, with Gene Krupa's band, and again in the late '40 when he and Jon Hendricks developed Lambert, Hendricks and Ross. Between those peaks, Dave did a lot of scuffling.

I met him in 1950. I was new in town, a valve trombone player unaware that I was about to learn the string bass. The drummer who brought me to New York introduced me to John Benson Brooks, the songwriter and arranger. I met Dave in John's apartment and we became instant friends.

Dave introduced me to a lot of other musicians and showed me where all the musical fun was going on in town. I followed him around to sessions and to people's apartments, where there always seemed to be a party going on. If there wasn't, Dave started one.

I could sing parts, and I spent a few evenings with Dave and a couple of other singers reading through a collection of his arrangements. Sometimes when he had a date for five voices, he'd let me sing fifth. We recorded two tunes with Mary Lou Williams and did a couple of advertising

jingles. If you're old enough to remember groups like the Merry Macs, the Modernaires, and the Meltones, you'll have some idea of the way he wrote.

He was also the vocal arranger on the Verve date Charlie Parker did with Gil Evans and chorus. I remember how excited he was about doing that date, since Gil and Bird were old friends of his. Afterwards he was crushed. The studio was evidently not user-friendly. The singers hadn't been able to hear each other well, the mike placement gave them a harsh aggressive sound rather than the blend Dave wanted, and the mix they had heard on the playbacks had sounded like music on short-wave radio coming in from Bulgaria. Dave, Gil, and Bird offered to do the date over again for nothing, if they could go to another studio, but Verve released the date the way it was, I guess because Bird's solos were great, and the background was considered less important.

In recent remastering of that album, Phil Schaap found that the original tapes had better sound than the mix that was released on Verve. He played some of them on the WKCR

I have tunes in my head for every war I've been to, and indeed for every critical or exciting phase of my life.

Winston Churchill

Gil Evans memorial broadcast in March, and the sound was certainly improved. Phil was able to correct the poor balance between the rhythm section, the orchestra, and the voices, and Bird's solos sound clearer. Of course, there wasn't anything he could do about the poor vocal blend created by the original miking of the singers.

Buddy Stewart had become Dave's closest friend while they were singing together with Gene Krupa. Buddy also recorded solo vocals with Krupa, such as *Can't Ya, Won't Ya Hurry Home* and Gershwin's posthumously-published *Aren't You Kind of Glad We Did?* Krupa reduced the size of his band, cutting out the vocal group, but Dave and Buddy remained very close. Buddy's sister Beverly was also a good singer, and a dear friend of Dave's. She became Stan Getz's first wife. Buddy was considered to be an enormously promising singer and his death in an automobile accident in 1949 was a terrible blow to Dave.

Dave signed with Capitol Records and made a couple of sides for them, but the company decided bop was not going to be the next novelty craze and didn't renew his contract.

In early 1945, while he was still with Krupa, Dave married Hortense Geist, a young lady from Paterson, New Jersey. They had a daughter, Dee, in October of that year. The Krupa job ended and they came into some very lean times, living on West 106th Street. In 1946 and 1947 Dave

led a vocal quartet in a Broadway show, *Are You With It?* The regular salary got him out of debt and into a better apartment, but he found the repetitiveness of the job maddening and was glad when the show closed, even though it meant he was broke again.

Gil Evans lived in a basement apartment at the Gotham Hotel on West 55th Street, behind a Chinese laundry. He befriended Dave and Horty as well as several other scuffling musicians. The Lambert family, Miles Davis, Gerry Mulligan, Charlie Parker, and pianist Sylvia Gardner all stayed at Gil's when they had no place else to live, taking turns sleeping in his bed. Gil's nurturing attracted many other musicians to that apartment, where the rich musical atmosphere developed the co-operative effort that resulted in the Miles Davis nonet records and nightclub gigs around 1949.

Dave told me he was so poor in those days that he had to steal food from the supermarket to survive. Horty described to me his MO: he would put his old army jacket on little Dee and put her in a shopping cart and wheel up and down the aisles, filling her pockets with various foodstuffs. He'd pay for a couple of items at the checkout counter and wheel her outside. She would be so loaded down with purloined canned goods that she could barely stand when he lifted her out of the cart. Recalling those days, Dave told me, "I just realized, I was feeling so poor then that I always stole oleomargarine! It never occurred to me to steal butter!"

Horty once told me that Dave was the only person she knew who had dreams with punchlines. One morning he woke up laughing, and told her this dream:

A high-school class is putting on a Christmas play, the Nativity scene. On a simple auditorium stage a few flats indicate the stable and a wooden manager holds a doll representing the infant. Students stand about in the costumes of Mary, Joseph, and the three wise men. As Mary kneels to look adoringly at the child, there is a terrific commotion backstage. Loud noises and thumps are followed by the collapse of one of the stage flats. The young actress portraying Mary looks up with annoyance and says, "Jesus Christ!"

Horty was working in a publisher's office in the Brill Building when she met Dave. Someone told her there was a guy sitting at one of the office pianos, making weird noises. Horty went to look. There was Dave, poking out chords on the piano and whistling lines between his teeth as he wrote them down. She didn't think he was anything special until some time later, when she overheard her boss asking Dave to write an arrangement of a song titled *Salt Walter Cowboy*. Dave said, "I'd be happy to write it for you, but I've gotta call it *My Darling Nellie Gray*," which is what the song resembled. She was impressed with the straight way he dealt with the situation, and told him so. Later, when she went to California, a friend took her to visit the Krupa band and she renewed her acquaintance with Dave. They were married soon afterward.

Horty remembered an interview Dave had with Stan Kenton, who thought he might have Dave form a vocal group

for him. Dave stopped by Stan's dressing room at the Paramount theater, and they talked it over.

"Of course you'd have to shave your beard," said Stan, pointing to the small Vandyke Dave wore at the time.

"I couldn't do that," replied Dave.

They agreed to disagree, and joked a bit about the possibility of Dave wearing a removable Vandyke like a toupee. As Dave rose to leave, Stan also stood up. The difference in their heights was remarkable, and Dave's parting shot as he stared into Stan's shirt-front was: "Well, I'm sorry we can't see eye to eye."

Dave was born in Boston in 1917, and I seem to remember him saying he attended grade school in Malden. He had a teacher with a drinking problem. Every now and then the kids would find him at his desk in the morning looking terrible, unshaven, rumpled, hung over and maybe even asleep. The kids would take care of him. One would shave him, one would run his suit down to the cleaner and have it pressed, one would get him coffee, and the rest would keep an eye out for the principal. Dave said they wanted to save him from being fired because they liked him. He reciprocated their kindnesses by not demanding too much in their school work.

Dave had an older brother, Henry, whom I never met because he lived, I think, in Australia. Dave told me a story about a time when he and Henry still lived in Boston. Dave was walking down the street with a girlfriend and met Henry. He started to introduce the girl to him but couldn't think of his brother's name! Dave said Henry left the house one night, saying he was going to get a ginger ale, and never came back. They got a card from him a few weeks later from Barbados. He'd met someone who was off to see the world, and had just tagged along. He never did return home, though Dave heard from him once in a great while.

Dave studied the drums for a year when he was ten, but had no other formal musical education. He played a few summers with a pianist named Hughie McGinnis, who gave him a lot of practical experience. Dave said Hughie always chewed an unlit cigar, with only an inch of it protruding from his mouth. When he would sing, he'd pull this wet beavertail of chewed cigar out of his mouth and whack it on the front of the upright piano, where it would stick. His song sung, Hughie would peel the cigar off the piano and stuff it back in his mouth. The front of the piano had a large crusty brown stain that had built up over the summer.

Dave spent a year in the Civilian Conservation Corps, worked as a tree surgeon in Westchester for a while, and then joined the Army in 1940. He trained as a paratrooper and saw some active duty, details of which I do not know. It was in the army that he fell in love with group singing, listening to records of the Modernaires and other popular groups of the day. After his discharge in 1943 he got John Benson Brooks to show him how to write out the vocal parts he heard. He sang with Johnny Long's band for a year and then joined a group called Hi, Lo, Jack and the Dame. He

teamed up with Buddy Stewart in the Krupa band in 1944.

When I met Dave, he and Horty and Dee were living in a cold-water flat on Monroe Street, on the lower East Side. That block on Monroe Street was deleted by a housing development in later years. I fell in love with all three Lamberts, and spent a lot of time there. They moved to Ellenville, New York, one summer while Dave worked as a disc jockey on a local station, occasionally adding interviews with entertainers from the surrounding Borscht Belt hotels. He and Horty separated after that, and Dave found a basement apartment in the Village on West Tenth Street behind Jerry Francis' typewriter store. He needed some help with the rent, and since I was living in a rooming house I couldn't afford, I gladly accepted his offer to share the place. He found an old box spring and mattress for himself and a couch that became a bed for me. The place had been a coal room before the building switched to oil heat. Several steps below street level, it was lighted only and dimly from an air-shaft window.

Dave installed a small rented upright piano in one corner and found a semicircular restaurant banquette upholstered in red plastic that he put next to it. It had been left on the sidewalk for the junk man by the Mexican restaurant across the street. A vocal group could sit there comfortably and sing. From another junk pile Dave salvaged the top of a large round poker table covered with green felt, which he installed in front of the banquette, using milk crates for legs. This became our dining table and music rack, and also served as Dave's orchestrating desk.

To cheer the place up a bit we bought a bolt of cheap green burlap and covered the stone walls with it. In one corner, behind Dave's bed, we hung a discarded venetian blind, and draped burlap around it to look like a valence and curtains. The slats were kept closed, and Dave put behind them a shadeless bridge lamp holding a daylight two-hundred-watt bulb that was always kept lit. It looked like a window with the blind closed against the afternoon sun. As a result, people lost track of time down there. Hours would go by, songs would be sung, music played, food and drink consumed, and guests would be shocked to discover on leaving that it was four a.m.

We always managed to pay the rent, thought sometimes we chose to buy food instead of paying the electric bill. When Con Edison would shut off the juice, we'd turn it back on again at the meter. Then they removed the fuse, and we replaced it. Then they removed the meter. By this time the bill was substantial, and we couldn't get our hands on that kind of money. So we ran some zip cord into Jerry Francis' typewriter store and borrowed electricity from him. When we got an extra five bucks, we'd lay it on Jerry for his electric bill. He was always very understanding.

People would drop in at all hours to party, sing songs, jam, or watch the giant TV set that a young Greek singer named George Vetsis had grabbed as it was being discarded from the lobby of the Roxy Theater. Since it wouldn't fit in

his furnished room, he hauled it down to Dave's and got it working again. I remember falling asleep on the couch one night while Dave and our friends had gone somewhere, and when I woke up the TV was being watched by a bunch of people I hadn't met.

Dave and George and I had sort of a work co-operative going. Dave called us the Three Gnomes, which he pronounced Ga-NO-meas. We let it be known around town that we were handy and willing, and to pay the bills we took any odd jobs that turned up. We painted apartments, moved furniture, built shelves, repaired appliances and TV sets, baby sat, and minded cars for a couple of people who lived midtown. We also decorated a nightclub and repainted the front of Charlie's Tavern between musical jobs.

George was a great finder. He brought us the guts from an old juke box to use as a record player. And one day he came up with a 1941 Cadillac Fleetwood limousine, the kind with fenders and running boards and a convertible top over the chauffeur's seat in front. A glass panel rolled up between the chauffeur and the back seat, which was upholstered in soft black leather and had folding jump seats and a microphone for communicating with the driver. The car had once belonged to disc jockey Art Ford, but had been registered in his manager's name for tax reasons. To collect some money he felt Ford owed him, his manager sold the car to a Greek friend of George's, who promptly fell asleep at the wheel while driving a customer to the Catskills. The resulting accident had only put a small dent in the limo's heavy fender as it clipped off a light pole but the owner was afraid to drive it again and sold it to George for a hundred dollars. George didn't have a hundred dollars but he promised to pay the man as soon as he earned some money with the car. The man trusted George because George spoke Greek.

We would drive the car up to Charlie's Tavern and park out in front. It attracted a lot of attention and would soon be full of musicians. Dave would take up a collection, fill the tank with gas, and give everyone a scenic tour around Central Park and back to Charlie's. That would leave us with enough fuel to get through the next day or two. The back seat was so big, we'd pull out the cushions and use it as a truck to move refrigerators and dressers for people. I drove it to a club date at the Pierre once, arriving in a better car than many of the guests. (A bass fit beautifully into the back seat.) George finally sold the car because he was afraid it would develop mechanical problems he couldn't afford. He sold it for a hundred dollars and paid the man he'd bought it from. We'd had a luxury car for six months free of charge.

During this time Dave was getting some calls to write for the jingles field, but styles were changing and vocal groups with a mellow sound were being used less and less. He made the rounds midtown, drumming up whatever work he could find. He knew a couple of songwriters who couldn't notate music and would make a few bucks turning out lead sheets for them, cleaning up their harmony and scansion as

he did so. That was in the days when chords in popular music resolved logically and extra beats in certain measures were allowable in only the most ignorant cowboy music.

Dave found five lovely adolescent girls that he coached, wrote for, and rehearsed, and called The Honeybees. They might have been successful except for the father of one girl, who smelled big dough and wanted Dave to give him guarantees before the girls were even ready to sing in public, and was angling for control of the group. Dave dumped the group rather than fight him, and that was the end of them. Dave wrote unsuccessful songs with Harry Belafonte while Harry was running a hamburger stand off Sheridan Square.

Dave began to run into the Catch 22 of poverty. He couldn't afford new clothes, and his old ones were so worn that he couldn't make a good impression when applying for the kind of work he did well. At one point he so despaired of the music business that he got a card in the cement worker's union and took a construction job in order to keep himself alive. Gene Lees remembers Dave telling him about one job he was on, using a jackhammer to break up a monolithic mass of concrete in the basement of a building that was being wrecked. He said the welders were cutting up reinforcement bars, the place was full of smoke and dust, sparks from the arcs were raining down and the noise was unimaginable. It was, Dave said, like Dante's Inferno. "How awful," said Gene. "I kinda dug it," Dave said.

Dave was small but very wiry and strong. I was amazed the day we finished painting the front of Charlie's Tavern, when Charlie paid us and bought us each a beer. Dave, facing the bar, gripped the raised wooden edge at the front of it and rolled his body forward until he was balanced over his hands. Then he pressed up into a full handstand, still gripping the edge of the bar, picked up his glass with his teeth, tilted it up and drank the beer, upside down. Then he set the glass down and flipped down to land on his feet, right where he had started. Of course he got a big hand from the regulars.

My wife remembers a party where Dave danced all night long on his hands. He loved parties, and was the life of most of those he attended. During the days when he was having the most trouble making ends meet he received an invitation to a masquerade party. He wanted to go but couldn't afford to rent a costume. He cut a large pair of fig-leaf shapes out of an old green plastic place mat and glued them together to form a pouch, which he slipped over his genitals. He fastened the top of the front leaf just below his navel with rubber cement, put on his overcoat, and went to the party as Adam. He had a wonderful time, although he shocked some of the guests.

King Pleasure had made the first successful records of lyrics written to famous jazz solos, as in his *Moody's Mood for Love*. Some say he got the idea from Eddie Jefferson. Pleasure got Dave to work on a project with him around 1957, and somewhere along the way Dave met Jon Hen-

dricks who, emulating King Pleasure, had written very funny lyrics to Woody Herman's *Four Brothers*.

Dave scored *Brothers* for vocal group and sold the idea to a record producer. On the date he discovered that, sung up to tempo, the lyrics were unintelligible. The lyrics were the whole point, so they sang them again at a slower tempo and put the session out on two sides of a 78 rpm record. (Even though the words on the bridge teased Woody for being less modern than his sax section, Woody loved the record when he heard it.)

The record wasn't a hit, but it gave Dave and Jon the idea of doing an album of Count Basie tunes with Jon's lyrics. They worked for weeks, choosing the tunes, getting the lyrics finished and the rights straightened out, and selling the idea to a record company. They recorded the material with a large group of singers and Basie's rhythm section.

Dave was disappointed with the result. He hadn't been able to get the singers to phrase like the Basie band on the original records. The solos were fine, having being handled

How cruelly sweet are
The echoes that start
When memory plays an old
Tune on the heart.

-- Eliza Cook

by himself, Jon, and Annie Ross, but he said the ensembles sounded like "Walter Schumann Sings Count Basie". Les Paul's pioneer work in multiple-track recording had brought four-track machines to most studios by then, and Dave decided to take advantage of the new technology. "Let's do the whole thing over," he said, "with just the three of us. Annie can overdub all the high parts, and Jon and I the low ones." They did it, and the hours of overdubbing paid off. *Sing a Song of Basie* was a hit.

Opportunities for personal appearances followed the success of the record, and Dave had to write charts for three voices that would emulate the multi-voice album. Annie's great range made that easier than it might otherwise have been, but to get the voicings he wanted, he had to write himself uncomfortably high, and as a result did not enjoy performing as much as he had with earlier groups. He did enjoy making money again.

The years of barely getting by had worn him a bit thin. But by the time Annie Ross left the group to be replaced by Yolanda Bavan, I could see that Dave was getting to look grim. There had been some mismanagement of the group, which was essentially a co-op, and he felt he wasn't getting a fair shake. I got the impression that there was some bitterness surrounding the dissolution of the group. Dave went back to writing. He was a disc jockey on WBAI for a while.

Back in the early fifties, after I moved out of Dave's

basement on Tenth Street and lived for a while at the Prescott Hotel off Columbus Circle, I found a low-rent apartment at 22 Cornelia Street in the Village. Dave, liking the location and the price, found a vacancy next door at 24 Cornelia, on the top floor, and moved in. The roof doors of both our buildings were always open, so we traveled back and forth to visit by climbing over the rooftops. Our back windows overlooked the back of the Waverly theater and our own back yard, which contained a lovely silver maple tree among the clotheslines. We were neighbors there for many years.

Dave was a warm, fun-loving man, and carried his worst years of poverty with a style that kept many of his friends from realizing how hard things were going for him. He taught me the rules of successful scuffling.

Be scrupulous about keeping track of what you owe and repay as soon as you can.

If you borrow anything — a car, a tool, an article of clothing, an instrument — always return it when you promised and in the same or better condition than you got it, so the lender will be happy to lend it to you again. (We always returned a borrowed car washed, vacuumed, and gassed up. Tools were sharpened before returning. A borrowed tux went to the cleaner before being returned to the owner.)

Give fair exchange to anyone who feeds you. Make a party for them however you can: Make music, tell jokes and stories, sing songs, let the good times roll.

I remember riding in a car with Dave to a party in Long Island City. While driving — a borrowed car — Davey suggested to his three passengers that it would be nice if we walked in singing. He taught our parts by rote, two bars at a time. We ran the whole song down again as he parked the car, and we walked in, singing in modern harmony. With that kind of attitude, everyone was always happy to see Davey coming.

One of the funniest jobs Dave undertook during those years was an assignment from Jerry Capp, cartoonist Al Capp's brother, who managed Capp Enterprises, the marketing arm associated with Al's comic strip *Li'l Abner*. Al had several running musical gags in the strip. The worst torture that a villain could threaten was to force his victim to listen repeatedly to a recording of Nelson Eddy singing *S'ortnin' Bread*. At one point one of his characters had written the world's worst song. After several weeks of reference to it, Capp came up with the lyric, which had everyone in Dogpatch throwing up:

I'm lonesome and disgusted
When I think of you
Because you really don't exist
Except in my dreams of blue.

I'm lonesome when I'm away from you
And disgusted when you're near me,
But the thing that makes me oh so blue
Is that you're not real, so nat'rally you can't hear me.

Lonesome every day,
Disgusted every night,
Because you're only in my dreams
and that is far from right, Oh,

Girl of my dreams,
You are sweeter than any,
You can't throw me over for some
Tom, Dick or Benny.

Jerry Capp wanted a record to use for promotion of the strip and the peripheral products it generated. He asked Dave to write the world's worst melody to fit the lyric, and to think of an appropriately vile way to record it. Dave wrote a repeated four-note melody that seemed pretty banal at the time. (He would laugh to hear what passes for popular song today.) For the recording, Dave hired Leo De Lyon, a comedian, arranger, and pianist he knew from the Paramount Theater. Leo had a funny and very musical act. He sang opera in many voices and closed by whistling *Humoresque* while humming *Swanee River* at the same time. Leo provided just the right kind of nuttiness to make the record wonderfully awful. Dave provided a constipated-sounding vocal-group background. There had to be something for the other side of the record, so Davey arranged *For Me and My Gal* with Leo singing in several voices. I still have a 78 rpm acetate copy of the date, done at the old Associated Recording Studios on Seventh Avenue.

One night in 1966 Dave was on his way back to New York from a gig in New England. At Westport, Connecticut, he saw a motorist stranded by the highway, changing a tire. Dave stopped to help him. They were behind the disabled car. A truck wandered off the road and slammed into them, crushing them between the two vehicles and killing them instantly.

Dave was my first real New York friend. At his funeral Zoot Sims played one chorus of *Pennies from Heaven*, a favorite of Dave's. It seemed to distill Dave's sunny spirit. That chorus still sings sweetly in my memory.

— Bill Crow

Notice

The *Jazzletter* is published 12 times a year at Ojai, California, 93023, and distributed by first class mail. Subscriptions are \$40 a year or \$70 for two years in U.S. currency for the United States and Canada, \$50 a year to other countries or \$90 for two years. Subscribers can purchase gift subscriptions at \$30 a year for the United States, \$40 to other countries. Subscriptions are on a year-to-year January-to-December basis in order that all subscriptions fall due at the end of the year.
