

Jazzletter

PO Box 240, Ojai CA 93024-0240

June 2002

Vol. 21 No. 6

The Journey: Milt Bernhart

Part Two

"I never liked Lennie Tristano's playing," I told Milt. "In fact I intensely disliked it. I found it all icy intellect."

"I never thought about his playing," Milt said. "He was a teacher."

I said, "But I liked a lot of people who were influenced, directly or indirectly, by Tristano, such as Bill Evans. But Bill incorporated it into himself."

Milt said, "That's what happens — with the good ones. Who can imitate anybody? So many tried to imitate Bird that it became depressing. The business of wanting to be like someone else is hysterical and kind of tragic with the coming of Charlie Parker. The trumpet players tried to be Diz, but nobody ever successfully got close.

"Once in New York, on a night off, Dizzy was playing in a ballroom uptown. So a bunch of us from the Kenton band went up to see him. A buzz was around, Miles is going to be in tonight and he was going to sit in with the band. Naturally, that would be interesting. I was not taken with Miles from day one. He just didn't blow for me. Diz was in absolutely fantastic shape. It was the band with Ray Brown, and they were wailing. Miles had already begun to be noticed. He walked in with an entourage already. Diz maybe didn't decide to carve him to pieces before he got up on the stand, but he did. Diz played everything he could possibly play — perfectly. Miles stood there with his mouth open, and shortly after that he was gone.

"I got back to Chicago and took a lesson with Lennie. It was not going to go anywhere with Lennie. I couldn't even come close to reading changes as he wanted them. Mostly he would use pop tunes. The first tune he usually played with anybody was *I Can't Get Started*. It had enough changes in it that it wasn't going to be easy to get Lennie's appreciation. I knew that from the beginning. We had hardly said hello, and he said, 'Let's get started.' I heard his chording. His roots started on the ninths of the chords. I realized what he was doing. I just couldn't hear it, and I certainly wasn't going to be able to play those changes. He didn't have a lead sheet

anyway. You memorized the original chords. 'You come to me and we go from there.' Lee was doing that. He was buying piles of pop tunes, standards. Later they got bored with that and they started doing originals. And very few people playing instruments could get close to Lennie and do anything, and that's why so few players were ever part of his entourage in New York.

"I began to see Lee in New York, but he was a different person. It's hard to imagine him on a bandstand above a bar with a blonde buxom girl rocking and rolling while the rhythm section and Lee did *Ain't No One Here But Us Chickens*. And he did all of that — and pretty good, too. I thought that's where he was going, and I got him on Teddy Powell's band because of that. Now there were a few people in Chicago who were Lennie disciples that he never got excited about. One was Bill Russo. Bill took lessons from him, but Lennie never accepted him completely."

I said, "Bill had a mind of his own anyway, and still does."

"He was outspoken, always was. He came on Kenton's band eventually," Milt said.

"Phone rings one day in Chicago, and it was Kenton's manager, Bob Gioga. He also played baritone saxophone in the band. Very good. He could play and read. He was an old friend of Stan's. He took care of the payroll and Stan didn't have to worry about these things. So Stan was one of the few bandleaders who wasn't stolen from by the manager. That didn't stop Stan from becoming penniless before he died. Because after Gioga left, that's when the trouble started. Various people came in, and I know money disappeared in large amounts. And Stan would never go after anybody. Woody was taken from too."

"I had to take a train from Chicago to Detroit to audition. It was at Eastwood Gardens. Kai Winding was in the lead trombone chair. It was alternate lead that was being vacated, anything that wasn't jazz. There were still a lot of dance arrangements in the book. With four trombones, didn't have five at that time. Shelly Manne and his wife came over and introduced themselves. I felt good about it. Stan was very nice and said, 'I'll let you know.' I went back to Chicago. I was wondering if there were any other bands. In 1946, I didn't

have a lot of contacts. I'd begun to wonder if I shouldn't look for a job in a grocery store. The phone rang, and Bob Gioga wanted to know if I could join the band in Indianapolis in about two weeks. And that's when I joined.

"Winding was the soloist. He was the star. He hadn't really counted on me being in the band. Found out later he'd been pushing for a kid in New York City, a friend of his who was well known to be, if not a junky, a hop-head. Stan was dead against this, and especially then. The valve trombone player, Gene Roland, had been in and out with Stan, and when he was out, he was in jail. Stan was not going to let that happen if he could help it.

"Stan was not drinking. Not so you'd notice. He was starting to get some recognition. He was determined to make it happen for himself. He had a routine that was punishing. We were doing mostly one nighters. Stan after the job jumped into a car — the band was in a bus — and drove all night to the next city. A long lonely drive all night. He knew enough not to take a swig out of a bottle. He looked great, and he was in pretty good shape. Arriving in the next town, he'd make the rounds to the radio stations and record stores on behalf of Capitol Records. They were very good to him. Some of Capitol didn't want him there in the first place.

"When I joined, Pete Rugolo had just started writing for the band. Stan was still trying to accommodate General Artists Corporation, who could only book him in dance halls. But Stan had always dreamed of concerts — like Artie Shaw. I don't think Duke cared that much. Duke would play his music anywhere, and it was Duke Ellington. I've given that some thought."

"Well," I said, "when I was going to hear bands, there were two groups in the audience. One group would stand close to the bandstand to listen."

"If there was anything to listen to," Milt said.

"And the other group would be out on the floor near the rear, dancing."

"Unfortunately," Milt said, "quite a few good bands of that period made records that were intentionally commercial. You know, Glenn Miller did have a swing band. He had players that were capable, for instance Billy May, Johnny Best, and Willie Schwartz. The rhythm section, never. The rhythm sections were there to play klop klop for the dancers."

"But the Miller Air Force band," I said, "didn't have to play for dancers, it played a lot for broadcasts in England, and Ray McKinley, who played drums in it, as you know, told me it was the best band ever to play popular music in American history."

"And that's interesting about Glenn Miller," Milt said. "It's what he really wanted. It's curious to try to consider what might have happened if he had come back. There were things that would have got in his way. Television, for one. And the bands were going out of business. There were a number of contributing factors. The kind of music was going to change. To say we weren't going to come to a fork in the road is just dreaming. Today, it's nostalgia for the Old Days. Nobody cares about the music, with very few exceptions. If you do, you're in the minority."

"The primary clients of my travel agency are jazz musicians. Lawrence Welk was also a client. We were sitting somewhere, when I had had the agency for about a year. Lawrence was Mr. Cheap. On this occasion, he said, 'The boys tell me that you were a musician.' Very sincere. Brainless. I said, 'That's right, Lawrence.' He said, 'What did you play?' I said, 'Trombone.' I could see a couple of the guys behind him covering their mouths. He said, 'Who did you play with?' I said, 'Well, Stan Kenton.' He stood up straight and he said, 'You know something? I never could understand what he was doing.' And I said, 'A lot of people couldn't.' He looked pleased. He said, 'I wanted to. Once we came into a town in North Dakota, which is my territory. The Kenton band was there that night. We had the night off. We went to the ballroom. The band was playing, and the people were standing around the bandstand. I could never figure that out, to this day. Why were the people not dancing?"

"I said, 'The music was intended to be concert music.' And a little look of perhaps understanding showed in his face, not much. I said, 'Actually, you noted that everything was played in a steady tempo from beginning to end, and could be danced to.' He said, 'Nobody was dancing.' I said, 'That was Stan's undoing. Because you made your money playing for dancers, didn't you.' And Lawrence looked quite satisfied and said, 'It's nice meeting you,' and that was that."

I mentioned to Milt that there was a legend about the Kenton band. Somebody supposedly went up to one of the musicians and said, "When are you going to play something we can dance to?" and the musician said, "When are you going to dance something we can play to?"

"Could have been Stan," Milt said. "The guys in the band wouldn't have said anything. Stan really ran in that direction, probably from the first day, although if you listen to the Balboa Beach opening, it was certainly a dance band. Very heavy time. The band came first, never accommodated the dancers. Even Benny Goodman picked that up. Artie Shaw said to me, 'I tried that, but I had a lot of trouble from the

booking agents and the ballroom operators and some people on the dance floor. They were always in my ear.'

"I think it was Benny playing swing when it was not being heard by white bands that they began to find ways to dance to it. All those white kids didn't go up to Harlem to learn what they were doing. So how did they get it and start dancing in the aisles? Or was that set up?

"Stan loved dancers when they looked nice. He liked everybody. But he didn't have a band to be potted palms in the ballroom.

"I had a very good experience with Stan. He was always very accommodating. He let us play the way we thought the music should be played on a given piece. He had certain ideas, but he rarely started in about the interpretation. He really figured, 'These people are doing better than I could ever begin to.' I got that feeling, and he transmitted it. On one occasion — and I was with the band five years — he approached me as we were going into a ballroom in Salt Lake City. I can still see it. We'd just gotten off the bus. He said, 'Milt, can I talk to you?' He said, 'There's something I've got to tell you about your playing. When you play a ballad —' which is what I was doing, what I was allowed '— play it jazz style, not straight melodic.' Before that he had mostly Tommy Dorsey trombone players. I was somewhere in the middle. 'When you play the melody, don't interpolate funny songs, nursery rhymes.' You'll remember that Bird did that a lot. Most bebop trumpet players were doing it. And I was influenced by them. Stan didn't want it. It made me mad at that moment. But I didn't do it after that. Stan was an authentic person. That's the way we looked at it. He exuded authenticity.

"The trombone solos, with very few exceptions, were Winding, playing the way he felt, and on any given night it could be different from the previous night. I had supposedly the lead book. There wasn't any reason for anyone to know it. I had a solo on the bridge of *World on a String* that was supposed to be straight melody. But mostly not. And I listened to Winding. When we added another trombone at the Paramount Theater a couple of months after I joined the band, we had five, and we started to get more ensemble trombones.

"Kai Winding always took the first part. He couldn't always play. He didn't have that kind of chops. This was a band where none of the trumpet players dreamed of one guy playing all the lead parts. Three of them at least. Yet Winding for quite a while made it very clear that he was going to play all the lead trombone parts. We got so we weren't speaking. Besides, he didn't want me on the band and rarely said

anything friendly. We didn't get to know each other till many years later, when I was in business out here in California. I was still doing some studio calls. Kai migrated to the West Coast. Now he's Ky Winding. Pete Rugolo had a record date and he had both of us on it. And on this occasion, they put the lead part on his chair, and Winding said, 'I can't play this. Take it.' And we talked about it. I said, 'There was a time, Kai . . .' He said, 'Was there?' He really didn't remember.

"He'd been smoking a lot of something. He'd been living in a crowd of up and coming beboppers. Bill Harris was the guy he was trying to play like. He could bebop. Bill couldn't. Bill played like Bill Harris. He played like nobody. But every young trombone player who was trying to be a jazz player was trying to play like Bill Harris. Then one day, at the Paramount — we were there for three months in 1946 with the King Cole Trio and June Christy — Kai came into the dressing room and said, 'I've gotta tell you. I heard a trombone player last night at the Famous Door.'

"I said, 'Do I know him?' He said, 'No, he just arrived. He was sitting in with Charlie Parker. J.J. Johnson.' I said, 'Good?' He said, 'I'm speechless.'

"And from that moment on, Jay became the absolute idol to Kai, and they found each other, and it worked out very well. Kai wasn't the kind of guy who could play studio calls. If you had a chase scene, he was not your guy. He didn't read that well either. He was trained. It's just that his sound was pure Kai Winding. Pretty wide vibrato. If we had to play like French horns, he couldn't do it. So he hardly ever played studio work in New York, which is where he'd settled. He got to be a producer of records and he wrote jingles and he did okay. But he's rarely mentioned today. He was certainly as pure a jazz player as I knew and a good one. And he drew crowds at Birdland."

"And," I said, "the group he had with J.J., Jay and Kai, was immensely successful."

"They fitted each other's style. J.J. was pretty pure. The playing was so accurate. He wasn't trying to jazz it up at all. He was playing notes. He could do more than that, but what really caught me was the accuracy of his note selection and how fast he could play. He really was a ground-breaker for trombone. Kai never really tried to imitate him. He knew better. Pretty smart. I hear the records and for two guys and a rhythm section, they made a lot of music."

"Where does that kind of facile, high-speed trombone start?" I asked.

"Arthur Pryor," Milt said.

Born in St. Joseph, Missouri, on September 2, 1870, Pryor

was taught the trombone by his bandmaster father and made his solo debut in Kansas City in 1888. He joined the band of John Philip Sousa in 1891, and was soloist and assistant director until 1903. His band for many years made appearances at Atlantic City and Asbury Park, and he even made some early radio broadcasts.

Milt said, "Prior to Pryor, nobody had been able to get anything like speed out of the trombone. It lived up to the nature of its construction. You move the slide, and it takes a little time to go from one note to another, whereas with the trumpet and all other winds and the violins, they move their fingers, and they get notes. But with the trombone, you don't get anything with your fingers. You've got to make the slide go. If you're going to play fast, you try to stay within two positions of your mouthpiece. You've got to move it, man, and at best the instrument is sluggish."

"Pryor developed some tonguing, just on his own. The European players of the trombone, prior to about 1912, played . . ." And he sang a glissando figure. "They smeared, even on a melody. You listen to the old Warner Bros and Paramount movies, the guy's smearing between all the notes. And that was considered, for a long time, the best thing about the trombone. It was sexy."

"Pryor started to write compositions for himself, played with the Sousa band, including *Theme and Variations on The Bluebells of Scotland*. There are old recordings of him. And one of the variations goes:" And Milt sang an extended rapid figure. "Nobody had ever heard anything like it. And he became such a famous man of that period that he started his own concert band. There was no other kind of band to start. But before he left Sousa, he had told him about a new kind of black music called ragtime. The first ragtime arrangements for an orchestra were written by Pryor for Sousa. He arranged *Maple Leaf Rag* for Sousa.

"His concert band, which was a big one, played for years in Central Park in New York. He had the house band in Central Park. And they came for miles to hear him play. Sometimes he featured a trumpet player named Herbert L. Clarke."

Though he was born in Woburn, Massachusetts, on September 12, 1867, Clarke spent much of his career in Toronto, where his father was organist and choirmaster at Jarvis Street Baptist Church. There is a certain irony in that. To those who have lived in Toronto, Jarvis has always been known as a street of whore houses.

Herbert Clarke learned violin and viola, but he taught himself to play cornet and at fourteen was a member of the

twelve-man cornet section in the Queen's Own Rifles Band. He rapidly became known as a virtuoso and played with the Sousa and Pryor bands, as well as the orchestra of Victor Herbert. He became an enormous influence in music, including jazz, composed more than fifty marches and ten overtures for band, and wrote three volumes of studies for the cornet.

"Can you imagine what it was like?" Milt said. "Sousa ran the show. And when these people started to leave, there must have been hell to pay. Pryor's son, Roger Pryor, got to be a bandleader in the late twenties and into the thirties, and then went to Hollywood and became a rather prominent actor.

"It was Arthur Pryor that everybody listened to. I can assure you, Tommy Dorsey went to him. I never heard anybody say that they actually studied with him, but they certainly listened to him. Everybody, when I started the trombone, always mentioned him first. He was still in New York in the early thirties, not playing very much. One of the people he influenced was Miff Mole, who played with Paul Whiteman, and could get around the horn unbelievably."

"Dorsey never wanted to play jazz. He could play Dixieland. He had a small group called the Clambake Seven. He found out that if you move the slide in the other direction from you, there will be a click. The air chamber inside the slide does things that depend on what direction you are moving the slide. If you move it down, you're going lower, and the air goes with it. If you move the slide toward you, the air that's in there — that you've been blowing into the horn — moves in the other direction and doesn't want to smear. It comes to a certain place where it goes click. If you want to play a melody, and play it cleanly, you find out where the notes, the intervals, are going to be where those clicks will occur. And trombone, once you get above the lower register, has many positions to play a given note."

I told Milt a story. Once, in the London House in Chicago, I got into a conversation with Jack Teagarden about the nature of the horn. Jack got his horn from the bandstand and, very quietly, sitting across the table from me in a booth, played a major scale in closed position. He said the embouchure was everything; the slide only served to make it easier to make the notes. Legend has it that Jack learned all the "false" positions because when as a small boy he started playing the horn, his arm wasn't long enough to reach the extended positions.

"By the way, Milt," I asked, "did you know Jack?"

"I never met him, but I talked to him on the phone. I got his number and called him. He was a remarkable musician. I was speechless."

"To do what he showed you, the scale would have to be beyond the staff. As the notes get higher, you don't have to move the slide that far to get them. What an unbelievable device that had to be overcome."

"I'd presume the slide instrument comes before trumpet."

Milt said, "The first Roman trumpets, that they played in the Coliseum, had slides. First it was fixed, and could only play so many notes. But with a slide, they could play more notes. A lot of time passed before valves were thrown in, in Germany."

Having made the point that when you draw the slide toward you, you are pushing the column of air back to your mouth, whereas when you move the slide away, you are creating a partial vacuum, Milt said, "Now the player, if he had to deal with that, wouldn't know what to do. Nobody ever taught anybody, 'You're going to blow some air in there, and the notes that you're able to play now, which are low notes, are going to be moving away from you as you move the slide.' So you can put more air into it in the lower register. The horn can take it. But as you're moving toward yourself, the slide cannot accommodate blowing harder. Arthur Pryor first understood this. If I'm playing in the upper register — which Dorsey did mostly — then I'm wasting air. And they started using almost no air at all. To play without taking a breath was Tommy's style, and it came from Arthur Pryor. You're playing that melody, you don't need that air. If you fill your lungs full of air, you're going to run into this jam-up, especially if it's a pretty melody but the notes move."

I said, "What I still admire about Dorsey's playing is how clean it was."

"But he was slurring. You can only do that clean cut to the next sound if the slide is coming toward you. You know who told me that, because I'd never noticed? Ray Noble. I played with his band at one point. Most of the players teach themselves that part, from instinctive feel."

"J.J. Johnson was using that particular method. I don't think anybody showed him. I don't think he ever once thought, 'There's a suction when it's going down. So I've got to accommodate that. How do I do that? Well, I don't play those notes as often. If I play a low B-flat, I don't come from B-natural, which is seventh position to first position. It's gonna sound terrible.' Billy May recited all that to me. He knew. I'll bet you most writers who came from another instrument would look at you as if you were insane. I've run into certain arrangers who would write fast notes in the lower register, coming from extended positions to first positions. One arranger I know was always writing that kind of figure. I

never wanted to hurt his feelings, so I never said anything, but his stuff was very hard to play."

"You know, Milt," I said, "I have a vivid memory of your period with Kenton.

"I was nineteen in 1947, and my first writing job was for a Toronto magazine devoted to the radio industry, *The Canadian Broadcaster*. There was some sort of hassle about broadcasting. The union wouldn't let Stan broadcast, as I recall, and I was sent to interview him and get his side of the story. I was a big fan of the band. I called and made an appointment and I knocked on his door at the Ford Hotel. He answered. He had just come out of the shower, and he wore only a big bath towel around his waist."

"And there was a lot of Stan," Milt said.

"Yeah, about six-foot-five of him. Anyway, he was very cordial to me, and I did my interview and went away."

Milt said, "I was there, I'm sure."

"Well," I told Milt, "something like twelve years went by, and I became editor of *Down Beat*. And I had some occasion to go and see the band, and, so help me God, without a hesitation, Stan said, 'Hello, Gene, how've you been?' I only met one other person with a memory like that for names, and that was Liberace."

Milt said, "Jerry Lewis too. Jerry's got it photographic. I worked for him for a while. He shouted my social security number across a waiting room in an airport."

"How did you come to leave Kenton and join Boyd Raeburn again?"

Milt said, "Stan was still traveling on his own, in a car, and who knew how long he had been doing it? One night about a year after I joined the band in '47, we were in Alabama, he got in front of the band one night, looking whipped. He said, 'Boys, this is our last night till further notice. We'll give you train tickets back home, wherever you've got to go, but I can't continue.' He could barely say it. A local doctor had looked him over and said, 'You're gonna be a goner if you don't stop.' He was having heart palpitations. So we played our last night there, and everybody went their way. I got back to Chicago and immediately the phone rang.

"It was Wes Hensel. He said, 'I'm with Boyd Raeburn's band in New York.' Boyd had left Chicago, and had that experimental band. He was going into the Paramount. He was elated, because he hadn't been working. George Handy and Johnny Richards were writing for him. It was some book. It was so hard to read. David Allyn was with the band. A beautiful singer. I'm a great admirer of his. He sang *I Only*

Have Eyes for You with an arrangement by George Handy. George Handy was some sort of writer, but who's George Handy any more? Johnny Mandel came a little later.

"I could hardly wait. I got on the next train to New York. There were some friends on the band. Pete Candoli. Conte Candoli came on the band and, later, Buddy De Franco, featured heavily. Very good players. One of the Petrillo record bans was on when I joined. As soon as the ban was over, we rushed into the recording studio. These were commercial recordings. Ginnie Powell was the singer, Boyd's wife. I took a long walk the other day, listening to a tape of that band, and I was speechless.

"The band was a ball to play with. Very unusual instrumentation. Two French horns, tuba, six brass, a lot of woodwinds, including an oboe player and a bassoon player and a harpist. Every day was a musical experience. I came closest to being in a symphony orchestra I ever could. The bassoon player had been with John Phillip Sousa for a number of years, an older man who told us great Sousa stories.

"When we finished the Paramount, a three weeks run in the summer of '47, we went on an extensive break. He was supposed to be paying me. Then we did a week at Atlantic City, and I expected some back pay. I didn't get it, and at the end of the first week I gave my notice. Boyd cried and said, 'I'll do my best.' But nothing happened, and I caught a train back to Chicago, and almost immediately I got a call from Bob Gioga.

"Stan was reorganizing, and he had a new idea, Progressive Jazz. Stan was going to hold out for concerts. I asked 'What about Winding?' I didn't want to be in the band if he was always going to be the soloist and we weren't going to be friends. He said Kai was doing the Perry Como show and couldn't make it. So I showed up in Hollywood at the appointed time. They put me on the lead chair. Eddie Bert came into the band. Several of the older people came back. Art Pepper, who had been elsewhere. Pretty much the same trumpet section. Buddy Childers. Shorty Rogers had come off Woody's band. Ray Wetzel. Chico Alvarez from the first band. Shelly, Eddie Safranski. It wasn't a swing band. From that point on, the music was semi-symphonic."

I said, "You know, there was a certain amount of tension between Woody and Stan. I tried to reconcile them, without success, because I liked Stan a lot."

"Sure," Milt said, "and Woody too."

"You know what Red Kelly said about them: 'Woody didn't trust anything that didn't swing and Stan didn't trust

anything that did.'"

Milt said, "Stan's early jazz pleasure was Lunceford and Earl Hines. He adored both. His first band was sort of Lunceford. He was looking to have a swing band, but not of the Basie variety. But Pete Rugolo came into the picture. With his background of studying with Darius Milhaud, he had a lot to show Stan. And once Stan, who had not had a lot of exposure to the classics, became conversant, he decided that the sound of a symphony orchestra was what he wanted. He could listen to Beethoven and Brahms, but he got bored. And he heard Stravinsky and Hindemith and Copland, and he knew that if he could get anywhere near that, he would be a happy man. So he was going to turn what was being sold by General Artists Corporation as a dance band into the kind of band it became.

"We played dance jobs, with Stan telling people that after the first break, we're going to do a concert. Not many ballroom owners liked it, and I saw him get into vehement arguments, and once or twice we packed up. We limped along, and then they booked the first concerts, starting with Carnegie Hall. That was in '48. And that drew crowds. Stan was light-headed with exhilaration. He had just been hoping. We played the Civic Opera in Chicago. They had a Sunday open. A big big crowd showed up from all over the middle west. Stan had almost nothing but new, heavy, heavy music on the concert. And, God knows why, it was accepted with large ovations. The crowd yelled and made us play a couple of encores. I can never forget that. I was expecting to get booed off the stage. Maybe we did one or two numbers from the original book. Vido Musso was on the band and did *Back to Sorrento*. Stan was determined that this was the kind of music we were going to do. It started with the first band, *Concerto to End All Concertos*, which a lot of people thought was tongue in cheek. And maybe it was. I heard him play it for the first time when I was in high school, sitting next to Lee Konitz. We went and stayed two shows. It was Stan and the way the band acted on stage. It was unlike any other band. And we'd seen them all. It had a personality that came from Stan. Something about the man."

"I've never understood," I said, "how bandleaders could impose their personalities on the band."

"Stan could do it," Milt said, "and so could Woody. Woody bowed to the desires of the band. It didn't make him as rich as the King of Prussia, but it made him as happy as he ever was in his life."

To be continued

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