

Gene Lees *Ad Libitum*

Jazzletter

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Update

Five years ago I wrote a piece about a young violinist from China, Yue Deng. The first name is two syllables, You-eh, the second like the e in bet with the t omitted. She had a bachelor's degree from Oberlin, where she'd studied under Taras Gabora. I have seen a video of a performance done when she was twelve on Chinese television, and she already had amazing technique, intonation, and control.

She went on to take a master's degree under the renowned Dorothy Delay at Juilliard. On Yue's final recital, Robert Mann, the first violinist with the old Juilliard String Quartet, gave her an A-plus, the only one he had ever given anyone, and wrote on the voting form, "She's superb. I love her!"

She returned to California where Roger Kellaway had already discovered that she could play jazz, and make it swing. Their album, *Both Sides Now*, is available on Roger's Kellaway Lightworks label. When various composers and arrangers heard it, they were ecstatic. Johnny Mandel said, "She could be the concert master of any orchestra in the world!" and began to use her on albums. She has recorded with Barbra Streisand, Barry Manilow, Dionne Warwick, and more. For two summers she was concert master and soloist with the orchestra of the Henry Mancini Institute.

Claus Ogerman, who had given up his enormously successful career as an arranger in New York to concentrate on his own compositions, called me. We had worked together in the past on Antonio Carlos Jobim albums. He wanted to record an album of his pieces for violin and piano with Yue and the French concert pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet for the Decca label in England, and he asked that Ettore Strata and I be coproducers. My role in the proceedings consisted in getting her ready for the sessions, two of them, which took place at Capitol Records studio B in Hollywood. In the studio Ettore did almost all the work, and did it superbly with the noted British engineer John Richards.

Thibaudet is one of the most prominent pianists in the world today. A few years ago, he made an album entitled *Conversations with Bill Evans*, entirely of material written by Bill or associated with him, and transcribed. It is quite remarkable.

The affinity between Yue and Jean-Yves was instant and obvious, and in the studio John Richards captured the sound of each instrument (the piano was a Hamburg Steinway) with especial vibrancy. At Ettore's insistence and mine, there is no one's music in the album but Claus's: the *Sarabande-Fantasia*, *Duo Lirico*, *Preludio and Chant*, and *Nightwings*, the last originally written for Joe Venuti. His fame as an arranger has overshadowed the reputation Claus deserves as a brilliant, lyrical, and highly individual composer.

In reviewing the album for AllMusic, Dave Lewis writes: "Though Deng is . . . the star of the show, there is not a word about her in the booklet; in brief, she is a discovery of the songwriting team of Gene Lees and Roger Kellaway . . . and she is quite a find . . . *Ogerman: Works for Violin and Piano* is . . . uncompromising in a certain sense but sufficiently contemporary and communicative. A good part of that success can be attributed to the fine work of its soloist."

Kevin Sutton in MusicWeb International says of Claus: "He seems to be one of those composers that although recognized, has not gained nor seemingly sought the limelight." Of Yue he says, "Ms. Deng is a friend to this music, blending a lovely and warm tone with Ella Fitzgerald's sensitivity to the subtleties of moods and melodies . . . Boy wonder turned mature artist Jean-Yves Thibaudet is completely in his element. He is a real partner to Ms. Deng, never overshadowing the solo lines, but at the same time adding his own abundantly colorful tone and deep understanding of nuance and shading of the mixture."

Jay Nordlinger wrote in the *New York Sun*, "She sings her way beautifully through these pieces — and her partner is a famously singing-minded pianist. Both administer tender loving care . . . This music grew on me.

The album (is that word still in use?) can be obtained through Borders, Barnes and Noble, and Amazon, and it is also available through iTunes.

I can hardly pretend to be an objective observer of the project, having been so involved in it, but if you want to pursue it, I think you will find that this album provides a warm, rich, and very fresh musical experience.

— G.L.

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Mail Bag

The last Jazzletters, as usual, tell me things I hadn't known, not a common contribution of most of the periodicals I read.

Don Shelton mentioned Western Michigan University, where I teach. He was referring in part to the Gold Company, the group run by Professor Steve Zegree. They're clearly inspired by the Singers Unlimited, and they continually win prizes here and abroad, although the six undergraduates are constantly replaced as they move through the university. Broadway star Marin Mazzie and Don Shelton's daughter are alumni. Bonnie Herman sometimes performs with them, and Gene Puerling has donated some charts.

We were great admirers of Dick Marx and John Frigo, and fondly remember Kelly's and the Maryland. We've had tapes of their LPs in the cars for decades. I've come to know John personally since his return, but I hadn't known about Dick's death. [John too died recently. Ed.]

I have one story. When Paul Robeson sang at the University of Chicago in 1955, Dick accompanied him. There was much merriment over the combination of Marx and Robeson. I was unable to attend, thus missing what turned out to be my only chance to hear the great man in person.

— Art Hilgart, Kalamazoo, Michigan

Your book about Johnny Mercer made me think of a story.

Sometime in the late 1970s I decided I wanted to fill in the gaps in my Four Freshman collection and own all of their Capitol LPs. I think there were 24 altogether, beginning with *Voices in Rhythm*. There was no internet then, so I wrote to people who ran classified ads in the back of *Saturday Review* offering to find out-of-print records. Eventually I obtained all of them, but I was surprised to learn that the hardest to find was their very last Capitol LP, *Got That Feeling*. Asking around, I was told that dealers had returned all of their copies to the manufacturer in response to Capitol's urgent request. Capitol wanted to melt them down because they needed the

vinyl to make Beatles records.

Of course I can't verify that story, but if it is true, it is a pretty good illustration of Capitol's dramatic change in direction.

— Harold Muir, Chelsea, Michigan

Wow, what a book!!!! I'm totally enthralled in every way. Your passion for the subject comes across in this beautifully written journey of Mercer's life. My goodness, his love for words (and yours) comes across throughout and Mercer's lifelong love of Savannah as well. You take the reader through the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, allowing us to *feel* Americana and every train ride Mercer was on. Since August I have probably read 50-60 books, including a stunning biography of Dmitri Mitropolous, but nothing compares to this. I have read at least six of your previous books, each well documented, thorough, and enlightening in numerous ways, but this is way up there with the very best of *anything* I have *ever* read, so congrats to you. And I mean this most sincerely.

— Robert Levy, Lawrence University, Wisconsin

I greatly enjoyed your *Georges et Maurice* and was especially interested in the Kay Swift/Boston twist at the end. I have a little more to add to the pot.

I'm not sure you met Kay Swift. You might have met Gladys Troupin, the "queen of the piano bar," who played locally for forty years until her death in 1979 at 82. She spent the last ten of those years at Diamond Jim's in the Lennox Hotel, a short two blocks away from the Copley Plaza. A New England Conservatory graduate who taught piano by day at Radcliffe, she was known for her hats, her '30s attire, and her endless repertoire of Tin Pan Alley songs. Troupin maintained she knew George Gershwin very well, that in fact they were engaged, but she broke it off and married a dentist instead.

Engaged to Gershwin? I doubt it — we'd know. Involved? Perhaps, but I leave that to someone with more

knowledge of Gershwin than I. She isn't mentioned in the limited Gershwin material I have at hand, so how much truth there is to Troupin's tale, I can't tell. But there is plenty of evidence that she was a popular performer in Boston, and she sure knew her Gershwin.

Thank you for all your good work.

— Richard Vacca, Boston

I'm sure you're right! The reference to Radcliffe did it. And the hat, too. Swift lived her last years in Connecticut, not that far from Boston. Thank you for your letter. I like to get errors corrected before the stuff gets passed along and ends up being quoted. We are perpetually confronted by Voltaire's admonition that history is a fiction that has been agreed upon.

I have just spent a hugely pleasant time reading *Portrait of Johnny*, and my main reason for contacting you is to thank you for a book that really needed writing. I was beginning to despair of anybody producing a book about Mercer. Sadly I am not a writer and did no more than cherish the thought that I might one day retire and write one myself. *Whispering Sideways* might have been a good title! Anyhow, you've saved me a job. Having finished reading the book, the picture that you paint is of a "lovely man, but a lousy drunk."

I do agree with your critique of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* but would take issue about the lyric of *Spring Spring Spring*. I think that there are some great Harburgian rhymes in the song and you gotta hand it to a guy who can come up with "How busy can a bumble bee?"

Incidentally, do you know Ella Fitzgerald's rendering of *This Time the Dream's on Me*? I know of no finer interpretation of a Mercer lyric, and the icing on top is a jaw-dropping solo from Benny Carter.

Finally you make no mention of Ellington's *Satin Doll*. The words may seem a little dated, if class can ever be said to date, but it's still a great song. Do you know how it came to be written? Was it just one of those tunes that he heard on the radio, or was he commissioned to write it?

Once again, thank for a most informative and obviously affectionate book about the man, his life, and his work. All best wishes,

— Stuart Freed

Among the better bits of advice on writing are these two aphorisms:

As soon as you write a line you like, strike it out.

Kill your darlings.

Writers often get hung up on cute lines or phrases, which tend to distort the whole. When my father was a young man in England, studying painting and violin, his art teacher criticized a portrait he had just done. He defended it, saying, "Look at the detail in the eye!" The teacher said, "You're not painting an eye, you're painting a face."

It is sometimes advisable to write bland lines in order to set up the important lines to stand out.

As for "Kill your darlings," it means to get rid of your pet phrases. One of the reasons I dislike The Alexandria Quartet, as that Lawrence Durrell doesn't kill his darlings.

One of the best things I ever read about writing is: The greatest style is no style at all.

Had I written "How busy can a bumble bee?" the first thing I would have done was to strike it out. But then I never would have written it in the first place.

Gene: Just finishing Woody's biography. I read chunks with morning coffee and you are really fucking up my mornings. I have to tear myself away to get a day started. Also have *Cats of Any Color* to read.

I too loved Woody and it ends with a heartbreak, all too usual for this country.

So, many thanks for such a lovely flow and for bringing back some dear memories. Hope you are well, thriving and writing.

— Bob Brookmeyer, New Hampshire

New York Musings

Brookmeyer undoubtedly has no idea what an important place he holds in my life. My admiration for him as a trombonist and pianist and, particularly, arranger and composer, knows no bounds.

Not long after I became editor of *Down Beat* in the spring of 1959, I wrote a column about Robert Farnon. At that time the editors of *Jazz Review* were Nat Hentoff and Hsio Wen Shih. Hentoff (who had worked there) had an abiding contempt for *Down Beat* which, in due course, I came to share. Hsio Wen Shih wrote a piece attacking me for writing about Farnon, saying that I seemed to be unduly impressed by arrangers. Anyone with ears is impressed by the good ones, and in my pantheon at that time were Sy Oliver, Paul Weston, Ralph Burns, Ernie Wilkins (oh the exquisite detail of his writing!), Frank Comstock, Eddie Sauter, Bill Finegan, Billy May, Billy Byers, Gerry Mulligan, Ralph Burns, Pete

Rugulo, Buck Clayton, Neal Hefti, Mel Powell, and quite a few more. I find myself wondering if Hsio Wen Shi was incapable of hearing multiple lines. Or he may well have thought that one should only write about jazz in *Down Beat* and Farnon's glorious writing for large orchestra wasn't jazz. The fact was that a lot of jazz soloists, including J.J. Johnson and Oscar Peterson, wanted to and eventually did record with Farnon, and every jazz arranger I've ever known acknowledges debts to Farnon, whom André Previn called "the world's greatest string writer."

Jazz solos, excepting that of keyboard players and to a lesser extent guitarists, are largely a matter of single lines, one-note-at-a-time. For harmony and counterpoint, you need two or more instruments, and the good arrangers did indeed impress me, for they were able to utilize these resources, and the best of them beautifully. Bill Evans coined the terms *contemplative composition* for written music, and *spontaneous composition* for any kind of improvised music, not limiting the term to jazz. (Brookmeyer and Bill made a fascinating two-piano album called *The Ivory Hunters*.) Bill also said that any music that was not in some way in touch with the process of improvisation was likely to be sterile. What, I asked, about the composer sitting writing on a piece of score paper? Bill said, "He may well be improvising."

When I joined *Down Beat* in that May of 1959, I realized that I would be dealing with people whom I had long admired from a distance. I was not intimidated as such — I do not intimidate easily — but wary. I asked one of my predecessors as editor, Jack Tracy, who might prove difficult. Without hesitation he said, "Miles Davis, Buddy Rich, and Gerry Mulligan." As events unfolded, I became friends with all three, particularly Mulligan. It was Brookmeyer who introduced me to Mulligan.

I was in New York on business for the magazine. Someone took me to Charlie's Tavern, one of the hangouts of jazz musicians, and I ran into Jimmy Raney. I knew Jimmy from my days as music and drama critic of the *Louisville Times*. Jimmy was a native of Louisville, along with Lionel Hampton. I met him during one of his trips home to visit family.

Jimmy was sitting at the bar with Bob Brookmeyer, having a few drinks. He asked me to join them. Brookmeyer had just driven non-stop from his home town, Kansas City, Missouri, in a small car he had at that time — a Morris Minor, if memory serves me. I spent that evening with Bob and Jimmy. I remember his graciousness to me. Years later, I reminded him of it, saying that on joining *Down Beat* I was a little scared. He said, with a smile, "Well, the least we could do

was to make you comfortable."

I had known Brookmeyer's playing through the Gerry Mulligan Quartet after he replaced Art Farmer. He was with the group from 1954 to 1957. Brookmeyer and Mulligan both had a taste for counterpoint. The quartet was often referred to as pianoless, as if this were a strange aberration of instrumentation. But the string quartet doesn't use piano, and there is a certain logic to it. The piano uses the tempered scale, which entails a slight falsification of tones to permit playing in various keys. The tones in this "equal temperament" system are subtly not "pure". Get rid of the piano, and you can make true pitch. Both Mulligan and Brookmeyer were pianists as well as horn players.

Mulligan told me that he formed the Gerry Mulligan Concert Jazz Band to have an instrument to write for, but he found himself so caught up in the workaday duties of business that he had little time to write. The writing duties fell to Brookmeyer, who in essence was the straw boss of that orchestra, effectually its concert master.

I first heard the band at the Newport Jazz Festival in July 1960. Night had fallen, and it was raining. I was chatting with Dizzy Gillespie in the band tent behind the stage when the Mulligan band was announced. It was, if I recall, its premiere performance, and Dizzy said, "I have to hear this," and went out. I followed. The Voice of America was filming the festival that year, and their crew had set up a shed stage left. It protected their equipment from the rain. The band played what has been called *Django's Castle* in America. In France, it is called *Manoir de mes rêves*, Manor of My Dreams, a lovely title. The chart is Brookmeyer's, one of the most beautiful pieces of ballad writing in the history of jazz. The experience that night was almost surrealistic, because I could see what the camera was seeing on the TV monitors, and see the reality almost at eye level. The camera panned across the crowds of black umbrellas with raindrops bouncing off them, and then just at the point when Mulligan began an obligato passage, it came to rest on a puddle on the stage in which was reflected, upside down, Mulligan's image. When, quite a while later, I told Gerry about this experience, he said that even the description of it gave him chills. "It made the hair stand up on my arm," he said.

After that Newport performance, Mulligan came to Chicago — location of the *Down Beat* office — to play a week at the Sutherland Hotel on the South Side. It was in a black neighborhood in a time when Chicago was much more segregated than it is now. I talked to Brookmeyer, and at an intermission, he invited me to the "band room" on the second

floor for a drink. It was actually a suite comprising a large living room and a bedroom. Mulligan was in the bedroom in the middle of a row with one of the musicians over a rhythmic question. When they came out of that room, he took one look at me and said, "Who the hell are you?" I told him and he said, "That's all I need right now — the press."

I said, "You don't think I'd write anything about this, do you?" And he simmered down.

Mulligan was especially cranky during that engagement, for a reason Brookmeyer told me about. Gerry was very much involved with actress Judy Holiday. She was in hospital in New York for a mastectomy: she had dropped out of a play for that reason. The despicable gossip columnist Dorothy Kilgallen had written that it was amazing what a story a certain actress would concoct to get out of a play she didn't like. During that Sutherland engagement, Mulligan would finish the gig each night and catch a red-eye flight to New York to be with Judy and reassure her, then fly back to Chicago late in the day in time for the gig. I am to this day amazed that he held up that week.

But that was the circumstance in which Brookmeyer introduced me to Mulligan. And Mulligan and I became friends and in due course very close friends. The friendship lasted until the end of his life.

Brookmeyer and Mulligan were among the habitués of Jim and Andy's, one of four bars in New York patronized by jazz musicians. Jim and Andy's was by far the favorite, and a lot of us used to hang out there. At the end of an afternoon, when the recording studio sessions ended, the place would fill it up with famous names, Zoot Sims, Al Cohn, Ben Webster, Phil Woods, Clark Terry, Lockjaw Davis, Will Bradley, Eddie Safranski and many more. It seemed our lives revolved around that place.

In October, 1962, during the two weeks of the Cuban missile crisis, everyone thought that New York City would be the primary target in what seemed the certainty of an atomic war, and there was absolutely nothing one could do about it. Every afternoon, I'd sit in one of the booths with Brookmeyer, drinking — with gallows humor — Moscow mules.

At one point, I got a call from Mulligan from somewhere on the road. He said that Judy had had a recurrence of symptoms and was waiting for the results of the latest tests. He said he couldn't be there, and she was frightened, and asked if I could go over to her apartment and keep her company. She lived a few blocks from me in the Dakota, that venerable castle on 72nd Street facing Central Park. I adored Judy, and so did everyone who knew her. She came to

national prominence with her performance as Billie Dawn in the film version of *Born Yesterday* opposite Broderick Crawford. That part came to haunt her, because producers and others were always after her to reprise that performance in other projects. But she was anything but the dumb blonde of that story. She had played that part in the stage version of the show too after Jean Arthur dropped out. She wasn't even the understudy. Legend had it that she memorized the part in forty-eight hours and went on to perform it impeccably and brilliantly. The legend was true. She had an I.Q. of 178.

She almost didn't get the part in the movie version. Harry Cohn, head of the of Columbia Pictures, tested everyone in sight for it. He said Judy was "too Jewish." But in the end he had to surrender. Cohn was famous for treating every girl he signed to pictures as part of his private Harem. He threatened to destroy the career of Evelyn Keyes, and if he didn't succeed in that, he certainly damaged it. Another girl signed to Columbia was a British actress named Valerie French, who became a close friend of mine when she did a publicity tour for the western *Jubal*, in which she played opposite Glenn Ford and Ernest Borgnine. She wrote me a letter saying that Harry Cohn had finally hit on her. She turned him down, and she wrote, "I guess my career in Hollywood is over." It was. She went back to the stage in New York.

Judy knew Cohn's reputation. After signing the contract for *Born Yesterday*, she told me, she went for her first meeting with him in his office. He tried to grope her. She pushed him away — and Judy was physically quite strong. He fell into a typist's chair, which rolled across the floor. During those seconds, she thought, "There goes my movie career." The chair hit the wall, dumping Cohn on the floor. He looked at her in rage, and then started to laugh. Why, she did not know. But her movie career flourished, and she made some superb pictures, such as *The Solid Gold Cadillac*, all of which I find too painful to watch.

She had a warm and generous heart, and, like so many people gifted at comedy, a deeply melancholy nature. She told Willis Conover that she'd spent her childhood pulling her mother's head out of a gas oven. She once told an interviewer that she hardly remembered her childhood. She was incredibly sensitive to people, right down to reading the timbre of the voice. Once, in a mood bordering on the despondent, I called Mulligan, looking for companionship, but he didn't answer, so I called Judy, thinking he might be with her. She said he was out of town, and then asked, "What's the matter?" Nothing, I said. She said, "It doesn't sound like it. You sound as if you need a little body warmth."

Why don't you come over?" I made it over to her place in the Dakota in, probably, ten minutes, and spent another evening with her, talking about all sorts of things. I think every man who knew her was in some dimension in love with her.

Gerry and Judy both loved the playing of Zoot Sims, who was Irish. Mulligan told me that one night he and Judy went to hear Zoot and Al Cohn, and as Zoot played a descending figure, she said, "There he goes — playing that Barry Fitzgerald tenor again." And she imitated Fitzgerald's ah-ha descending laugh.

Judy was deeply musical. She sang well; she had been doing it since she was four; and she was learning to play flute from Julius Baker of the New York Philharmonic. She was also — her childhood ambition had been to be a writer or a director — an excellent lyricist. She and Mulligan wrote a full score for a musical based on the Anita Loos play *Happy Birthday*. She and Gerry performed it for me. It has never been performed on the stage, although some of the songs are found in an LP she and Mulligan made together. The story is Irish. Hal Prince turned the project down, saying, "Jews go to theater. The Irish go to bars."

Her circle of friends included Willis Conover, whose jazz broadcasts under the name *Music USA*, in my opinion (and I am not alone) did more to bring down the Iron Curtain than all the military bluster and threatening presidents the western world could muster, composer Alec Wilder, Paul Desmond, Brookmeyer, and myself. They were all very verbal people. One of Judy's memorable remarks concerned the line of ferns in boxes at the windows overlooking 72nd Street: "With fronds like these, who needs anemones?" And when Brookmeyer was asked that frequent tedious question, "Where is jazz going?" he said, "Down 48th Street to Jim and Andy's" Gary McFarland spent an evening with some of them at Judy's apartment. He said, "It was like getting caught in an acrostic."

The last time I saw Judy was at the bottom of the stairs at Birdland: Mulligan was great at pub-crawling to listen to other musicians. I knew she had been through another test, and I put my arms around her and said, "How're you feeling, m'darling?" She said, "Rotten, but at least I know I'm not going to die." I was in Paris for a while to write adaptations of some of Charles Aznavour's songs for his one-man show on Broadway. When I got home there was a taxi strike under way. I took the subway to get to Jim and Andy's, planning to pick up my luggage later. When I came up from underground on Sixth Avenue I saw a stack of newspapers, the *New York Post*, with a big front-page headline: *Judy Holiday Dies*.

Shaken, I entered Jim and Andy's, where no doubt I encountered a lot of the regulars, including Brookmeyer.

Mulligan was so devastated that informally Willis Conover, the novelist Joseph Heller, and I took up a round-the-clock vigil to see that he was not alone. Judy's funeral was limited to family and friends. I was one of those invited. I could not sleep the night before. I stayed awake, and when the morning came I simply couldn't bring myself to attend. When I next ran into Brookmeyer, I learned that he too had stayed away.

Brookmeyer's singular characteristic as a soloist is the compositional nature of his playing. There are various ways to play jazz. You can learn the scales and know which scales go with which chords and use them in whole or in part. Other devices may be incorporated into the work. But Bob's playing was especially notable for his way of taking a musical idea and *developing* it in the course of a solo, almost as if he were at the desk writing it on paper. Roger Kellaway does this. He told me once that he got it from Brookmeyer, especially during the period when he played piano with the quartet led by Brookmeyer and Clark Terry, one of the inspired pairings in all jazz because they were so different but so compatible. The group's home base was the old Blue Note on Houston Street in the warehouse district of the lower Village in that part of New York old enough that the streets were still paved with the original bricks.

If you remember the place, run by the Canterino family, you will recall the bandstand between the bar and the dining room. Roger said that the piano was so placed that he couldn't see Clark and Bob: his back was to them. He listened with full, undistracted concentration. And he absorbed a lot of Brookmeyer's compositional approach.

I mentioned this to Bob once. And he said that *he* got it from Jimmy Raney. Jimmy was a gentle, highly intelligent man who in his later days returned to Louisville, where a cruel fat gradually rendered him deaf, and his years of drinking finally, deprived him of life.

Bob was a founding member of and arranger for the Mel Lewis-Thad Jones band, then moved to Holland where he wrote for several years. Musicians are cognizant of his abilities, but I don't think he has ever had the recognition by the public or, for that matter, the press, that he deserves.

Of the crowd that populated Jim and Andy's, Brookmeyer is one of the few who are still left. This may be sad, but it is inevitable. Generations come and go. But I am especially glad that Bob is still here, and perhaps you'll see why his letter had special meaning to me.

Mangled Language

Unless you have been hiding incommunicado for two or three years, you cannot but be aware of the antics of what have aptly been called the pop tarts of Hollywood. The quantity of coverage given to them in television “news” broadcasts is the measure of the decline and decay of TV journalism. They look as interchangeable as the parts in a Chevrolet.

As for the news, the blonde straight-haired anchorthings looking as if they were made by Mattel, reading their monitors with fixed if not glazed eyes, are features of the decline of journalism generally but TV journalism particularly. And as for *what* is covered, the sheer triviality of it is appalling. We get the last days of Anna Nicole Smith and the battle over the custody of her baby. And when the TV news people can’t find anything else to put on, we get the rehabilitation of Lindsey Lohan, the latest resurrection of the last days of Princess Diana, and the current love affair of Prince William.

Britney Spears had a bodyguard whom she fired when he didn’t instantly pick up something from the floor when she issued an order. But I wondered at her hiring him in the first place, a massive, fat, bearded hulk with a head almost shaved, who admitted she hired him because he scared people. When he sat still for an interviewer who asked how he knew she was stoned, he described her nervous manner and added, “And she did not conversate well.”

If you saw the Ken Burns documentaries on the Civil War, you were no doubt impressed by the literacy and even poetry in the letters written home by soldiers. Letters from World War II also have this quality. The decline came with the rise of rock and roll. The previous generation had grown up memorizing the lyrics of Cole Porter, Dorothy Fields, Howard Dietz, Yip Harburg, Frank Loesser, and others of that stature — Mitchell Parish’s lyric for *Stardust* is one of the most magnificent pieces of writing in the English language; so is Cole Porter’s *In the Still of the Night* — those who entered adolescence in the 1950s grew up on the declining literacy of rock-and-roll. The generation that does the television news came from that generation. The Elvis Presley fans of 1955 are in their sixties. Some of them are now in Congress. Mike Huckabee is a huge fan of Jimmi Hendrix. That is the measure of his evolution.

And of course the generations that came after them are even less literate.

The use of clichés by journalists, lawyers, politicians, and others is appalling. *Absent* is an adjective, not a preposition,

but its use as the latter has become almost universal, as in *absent a floor motion* . . . Similarly *venue* means the place of a court trial, not a nightclub or sports arena or book publisher. We are inundated with *in your face*, *skinny*, *kick start*, *jump start*, *at that point in time* (instead of *then*), and even worse *at that particular point in time*. *Sunk* has replaced *sank*, and the once-playful *snuck* has become the ubiquitous replacement of *sneaked*. *Less* has replaced *fewer*, *amount* has replaced *number*. We hear newscasters throwing in *if you will* in what seems like every third paragraph, I suppose because it sounds British and Victorian and therefore classy. Then there is *basically*. *Fulsom*, which really means *smelly*, *stinking*, is used for *plentiful*. And then there’s *unique*. Something can’t be somewhat *unique*. It is an absolute. It means one-of-a-kind, and something can’t be very one-of-a-kind or slightly one-of-a-kind. A neo-horror is *at the end of the day*, which apparently came into use five or ten years ago and simply spread. *Heart-wrenching*, which makes no sense, has replaced *heart-rending*, which did.

Sometimes these fad words rise and soar for a while, like flying fish, and then disappear back into the water. *Robust* came into use and then (at least I hope so) fell silent. It was bad enough when journalists were *embedded* with troops, but then they became *embeds*. The ignorant *woken* has pretty much replaced *awakened*.

Have resonance with and *slippery slope* are particular horrors. Then there is *went missing*, which you’ll hear even in kidnap cases, as if the person disappeared voluntarily.

We have the ever-popular *mind set*. And *Level playing field*. *Plethora*, which a lot of TV people seem to think means *plentiful*, means *excess*.

And there is the wanton use of the word *gentleman*. What happened to the word *man*? A bank robber, a child molester, each is referred to in news broadcasts as a *gentleman*. Recently there was a stand-off between the Santa Barbara police and a man brandishing what turned out to be an air pistol. All through the hour the TV reporter referred to the man as *the gentleman*.

Disinterested, which really means without a personal interest, detached, and therefore fair, is being used as *uninterested*.

One of the most peculiar neologisms is the construction *I wish they (you, we, he or she) would have* instead of the correct and simpler *I wish they had*. You’ll hear it not only from newscasters but at high levels of government. Scarey.

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