

Gene Lees *Ad Libitum* &
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Knights of the London House Part II

I remembered the Peterson album *Motions and Emotions*, with arrangements by Claus Ogerman, whose work did not come cheap. A large orchestra was assembled in the studio. Oscar tried out the piano, said, "I don't like the box," and walked out, leaving all those musicians, who had to be paid under union contract, sitting there. Hans Georg Bruner-Schwer, who was producing the album for his MPS label, was stuck with the very considerable costs. Fortunately for him, he was able to record the orchestra and then overdub Peterson later in Germany. But Oscar was capable of such cruel caprices, and I remembered it. I also remembered Butch Watanabe saying, "Oscar changes his friends as often as he changes his phone number." Finally, Oscar was once more consulting Norman Granz, talking to him almost every day. I was always uncomfortable about the deceptions and treacheries of Norman Granz. And so I gave only the most conditional acceptance to participating in the tour.

The *Citizen* story said: "A permanent interactive exhibit of photographs and memorabilia — including music charts, his first synthesizer, and concert posters — from Mr. Peterson's career will be mounted in the National Gallery (of Canada) in the spring of 2000. A scaled-down version of the exhibit will travel across Canada."

In his cover story for *Down Beat*, published in September 1999, John McDonough said that Oscar told him about the tour with apparent enthusiasm. Oscar said, "There's a producer in Ottawa named Marni Fullerton, and she and her company, Almadon Productions, have suggested various ideas over the years." This is untrue: he and Fullerton had known each other only a few months.

McDonough asked Peterson what audience the tour would be targeting. "Everybody," Peterson replied. "I don't mean that literally. I mean everybody who's ever turned on the boob tube and heard any of those (neo-swing) presentations. I'd like to have all these people come and be confronted with a true

night of jazz and swing, of Basie and Duke.

"I want this music to connect with that audience and not just other musicians." And again he excoriated the new Swing Groups.

The tour was to be called Swing Magic. Almadon Productions printed brochures and set an itinerary. The tour was to begin September 16, after two days of rehearsal in Ottawa and a performance at the historic Chateau Laurier hotel. Then it would proceed to Toronto, Vancouver, San Francisco, Chicago, and New York, with all the performances taking place in historic hotels and ballrooms. An extra performance was eventually added to the New York schedule, with profits to go to a restoration fund for the Apollo Theater.

Newspapers continued to report on the formation of the tour with almost breathless anticipation. In *The Toronto Star*, Geoff Chapman wrote that "the event has the musical potential to make it the most talked-about jazz event since the legendary Massey Hall bebop concert of 1953." By now the personnel for the tour included James Moody, Stanley Turrentine, Clark Terry, and Marcus Belgrave. A toll-free line was established for ticket sales and widely publicized. It was 1-888-Oscar 99.

From February on, Oscar held three or four meetings at his home in Mississauga with Marni Fullerton and Rick Wilkins, by now at work on arrangements for the tour. On June 4, the *Ottawa Citizen* ran a story, quoting Fullerton: "The contracts are done, the planes are booked." On July 19, the *Montreal Gazette* printed a story on the tour, expressing hope that it would be extended to include Montreal.

On August 19, the *Toronto Star* ran a story saying: "A new work by the Canadian jazz pianist will be performed by Peterson's quartet plus a chamber orchestra conducted by Rick Wilkins. *Trail of Dreams* was inspired by the Trans-Canada Trail, a 16,000-kilometer, coast-to-coast recreation trail that opens in 2000."

Wilkins was to orchestrate the suite.

Plans for the tour continued to unfold. But, according to Fullerton, Oscar, or his invisible familiar, Norman Granz, kept adding conditions to the deal. Reportedly, he was to receive \$70,000 for every performance. At one point, his

representatives told Fullerton that Peterson was having health problems. On another occasion they said he was troubled by leg ulcerations. Before long, the tour had an on-again off-again status. Fullerton and her husband were frightened: they were responsible for deposits on the concert locations and airline bills for more than thirty people. Then the tour seemed definitely off. Within days Oscar told them it was on again, and even said he would go to New York to initiate a heavy publicity campaign at a press conference and party at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

The event was scheduled for Monday, August 23, less than two weeks before the tour was to begin. Musicians from the Harlem School of the Arts planned to perform *Happy Birthday* in honor of Oscar's seventy-fourth. Bill Cosby was to emcee, and performers set for the tour were to appear.

The headlines were immediate, large, and country-wide. "Peterson Tour Cancelled," the *Toronto Star* said in a three-column head at the top of the Thursday, August 26, entertainment section. "Oscar Peterson's Swing Magic Tour has been mysteriously called off," the story began.

"The first sign of uncertainty came Monday, when the jazz legend didn't show up for a New York appearance to promote the tour. He was supposed to play Cole Porter's grand piano on the terrace of the Waldor-Astoria hotel . . .

"The promoters say one of Peterson's representatives called late Sunday night to tell them the pianist would be unavailable to perform on the tour, without explaining why.

"Peterson's camp says the opposite happened: that the promoters called Sunday night and told Peterson they were cancelling the tour. Peterson's office said yesterday he is in good health."

A very good source within the controversy told me that after Fullerton and her husband had agreed to one added condition after another, Oscar's representatives demanded at the last minute that he be given complete and absolute control over the documentary film — a request that Don Young, as a professional movie-maker, could not grant.

Many of the musicians, who had passed up three weeks of work to make the tour, were furious. In Canada, the anger was directed at Oscar, whom they clearly held responsible. Rob McConnell estimated that he had lost twenty or thirty thousand dollars of potential income. One musician, telling me that he had planned to make a down-payment on a new house with the money from the tour, said he would like to put a bomb under Oscar's house.

Rick Wilkins said, "I've got twenty thousand dollars worth of arrangements sitting in my basement, which will never be played and for which I'll never be paid."

In addition, Wilkins' wife, Carolyn, had put in three

months of work clearing the musicians U.S. visas and work permits.

The newspapers reported that Michel Legrand would be hired to arrange and conduct the *Trail of Dreams* suite. Wilkins said, "I think O.P. showed an unconscionable lack of consideration for his supporting artists, and because of that my association with him has come to an end."

Several other musicians echoed his sentiments. Jon Hendricks told me that he could not fill in the lost time with other engagements.

In early October, Almadon went bankrupt and its office in Ottawa was closed. Financially, Fullerton and her husband were ruined and they were divorced.

It is probable that the full story will never be known. Oscar, however, was apparently unperturbed. He was soon aboard the Queen Elizabeth II for the 17th Annual Floating Jazz Festival, sailing out of Miami for Europe.

On Saturday, November 6, Peterson, his guitarist Ulf Wakenius, Clark Terry and the late singer Shirley Horn participated in one of the Meet-the-Stars events common to such festivals. This gathering was videotaped.

A member of the audience asked about Oscar's physical condition. He replies, "I don't think I'll ever be a hundred percent, because I am now seventy-four. So I'd need a little help from above to do that. But I think I was able to surmount the initial attack, and, through the love and understanding of my wife and my little girl and some very dedicated friends I was able to face the piano again."

Clark Terry adds: "Barry Harris called Oscar, and he'd had a similar problem, and he said, 'Now that you've had this problem with your left hand, you're *almost* as normal a piano player as the rest of us.'"

Oscar mentions the cancelled tour. He says, "I was very busy at the time, and by the time I looked at my contract, after calling Clark and Joe Williams and several others to be on it with me, I called up the promoters, who said, 'Have you signed it?' And I said, 'No, because it doesn't tell me what seat in the bottom of the boat and what oar am I going to be using to row back to Africa.'"

The implication of course is that he was being treated like an African slave. Never before had I known Oscar to play the racial card. The analogy is historically silly, of course: Roman galleys used oars; the slave ships from Africa did not: the captives were stacked in tiers like cord wood. His slave treatment included, besides the \$70,000 fee per concert, first-class ground and air transportation and hotel suites running to \$1,600 a night.

He continued to the shipboard audience:

"Because I wouldn't sell out my musical integrity and

wouldn't endanger my love and friendship with guys like Clark, the tour didn't take place. They said that I cancelled it. I didn't cancel the tour. They cancelled it. And this is what I'm saying. You have to have some personal integrity You can make a good living without selling out your integrity."

The contradictions are bizarre. On the one hand he cancelled the tour because he would not sacrifice his integrity — in what way he was asked to do so, he did not say. On the other hand he said he didn't cancel the tour: they did.

The tour had been more than a year in the development and planning. Oscar had been consulting with Rick Wilkins since February. He had personally recruited friends and colleagues and had approved the pending press conference at the Waldorf-Astoria. It is hard to believe that he had not seen the terms of his contract, impossible in view of his alterations of them. Since he had averred that he was consulting Norman Granz, it is inconceivable that Granz would not know the terms of the contract.

In an August 29 *Toronto Star* story by Geoff Chapman, who was closely following developments, Don Young is quoted as saying, "We anticipated no problems." On August 19, four days before the scheduled New York press conference, Young said, "I was at Oscar's home in Mississauga, and we discussed all aspects of the film. I even brought the cameraman along. The film was to be called *Take No Prisoners: The Life and Times of Oscar Peterson*. We also discussed the New York press conference that was to take place late Monday We even had ordered a cake in the shape of a grand piano.

"Then last weekend we were asked to renegotiate the deal. Oscar said he wasn't going on the tour unless he had 100 percent veto on the documentary, things like who's in it, what would be said, what would be shot.

"I recognize that Oscar knows more about piano playing than anyone on the planet, but he's not a film-maker. I realize that he was not entirely happy about the documentary *In the Key of Oscar* that was filmed by his niece, Sylvia Sweeney.

"But I said that as an artist myself, he couldn't ask me to do this. I suggested all sorts of compromises, but he was adamant.

"We did nothing wrong, we acted in good faith. A lot of other artists have been hurt by this."

Clark Terry tells the Meet-the-Stars audience: "I'd have made more money on that tour than I made any time in my entire life. I'd spent the money already. But when I talked to him and found out what the whole deal was, my hat was off to him, and I'm very happy that he did cancel it, in spite of the fact that we didn't make the bread."

Oscar again attacks the New Swing groups.

"The clubs went from jazz to the strippers — or the walkers, as we used to call them," he says. "They went through the so-called Swing Era, which didn't work either, because they took a bunch of rock groups and found a guy that could hold a tenor sax and bought him a pork pie hat and a double-breasted suit and a stupid look and figured they were going to have another Count Basie. It didn't happen, and it won't happen, because you need talent."

This is an aberrant view of jazz history. The strippers did not evict jazz; when the club audiences declined, the club owners turned, often reluctantly, to strippers and folk singers. Max Roach, one of its great masters, insisted that jazz had been from its earliest days into the present a minority music. It became a *popular* music in the swing-band format, and when the era ended, for social and economic reasons, including the rise of television, the musicians with the bigger names, such as Zoot Sims, Dizzy Gillespie, Stan Getz and others, went into nightclubs, where the audiences who had admired them in their big-band days, followed. The money was earned on liquor sales. But since young people were not allowed entree to such places, a new young audience did not develop. Some clubs, such as Birdland in New York, even set up bleachers areas where young people could sit without ordering liquor. And the London House in Chicago did not turn to strippers when Oscar's and other jazz groups could no longer draw large audiences. It became a Burger King.

As for the New Swing groups, there were only a few of them, and some of them, incidentally, were fairly good. They were a brief fad, one already gone. They were hardly worth the energy of his denunciations.

Oscar returns to his favorite *bête noire*, the critics.

". . . . as listeners and people that hopefully enjoy what some of us are trying to do, you have a responsibility also. You have to speak up when you're taken advantage of. And I think you're taken advantage of every time a *stupid critic*, or a bigoted critic, writes a stupid review. You have to answer." His voice reaches pitches of anger. Someone calls out "Right on!" and the audience applauds.

Oscar continues: "Because you're being taken for granted. Y'know, if somebody plays a concert and you go to the concert, and you're all I think fairly literate, and you enjoy it, and you go home happy, why should you pick up the paper next day and read, 'Well they didn't do this and they don't know anything about you.' Have you ever checked on any of the critics' credentials? Well they sure can't play.

"I've been waiting for one of them to come up and challenge *me*."

But a critic doesn't attend concerts, any more than the lay audience, to hear someone do what he can do; one goes to hear someone do what one *can't* do. That is true also, of course, for the audience for athletics, for ballet and gymnastics and classical music concerts. Why should a critic challenge Oscar? Even most pianists wouldn't do it.

And jazz achieved its pre-eminence largely through the efforts of writers and critics, from Carl Engels and Robertson Darrell (the first to write favorably of Duke Ellington) through John Hammond, Leonard Feather, John S. Wilson, Barry Ulanov, George Simon, Nat Hentoff, and others who *forced* their way into newspapers and magazines when editors had little interest in the subject. And none of them made a living from it: they did it as a labor of love.

Who in the world could challenge Peterson at the keyboard? Critics have always had a response for the kind of jeremiad Oscar unleashed at "the critics". It is: you don't have to be a cow to know if the steak is tough. A better one would be: you don't have to be a chef to know when a meal is tasteless or superb. The process of criticism is inherently and always subjective, no more nor less so than all the other acts of judgment by which we live and progress. A French aphorism has it that taste is the consequence of a thousand distastes. Oscar was no more unbiased in his judgments than anyone else, and in his attacks he was essentially rejecting freedom of thought and expression.

He continues: "In Montreal, just recently at the University of Concordia, they named their concert hall after me. It took a lot of space up in the newspapers. They brought in some idiot critic, and he wrote several things about it — negative, of course. The first thing he wrote is that Oscar Peterson came to the states in the fifties, and he finally got lucky and won a *Down Beat* award. And also that he has never composed anything of any import. Concordia calls a world press conference. They had letters from all over the world, because they wanted some publicity on the opening of the hall. And I posed the question, and I said, 'Well, this particular person has written that I finally got lucky and won the *Down Beat* award. What do I do with the other eleven? I'm very proud of the *Hymn to Freedom* that was part of the civil rights movement. And the *Canadiana Suite*. And so on and on.' I've written over four hundred tunes. Now where has he been?"

"One of the writers at *Down Beat* once told me, "I envy you, because what you played tonight is remembered for a long time, but what I write is forgotten the next day."

Many anthologies of Whitney Balliett's writings have been published and read as literature for the sheer beauty and evocative imagery of his prose. And it was a *Down Beat* review that launched Oscar's international career: Mike

Levin's ecstatic review of that first Carnegie Hall concert. And when Dizzy Gillespie became ecstatic on hearing Oscar for the first time, he immediately called a critic, Leonard Feather, to tell him.

Oscar says: "When you see performers onstage . . . they're giving everything they have inside them, and they're taking that risk, to please you. You have to back them. So do it."

As a champion of civil liberties, Oscar would be the first to declare his support of free speech and freedom of the press. Yet here he exhorts an audience to take collective action for censorship. Despite the almost fawning respect he has received from a majority of critics, he condemns them all, and then hides behind naming no names.

He continues: "I just returned from Japan . . . I just received the artistic end of the Nobel Prize for music, which is called the Praemium Imperiale, and I flew over to Japan for it. They had a banquet. And I was sitting with this lady at the table, and she started talking to me about a CD I had made. And I've made a few CDs. I couldn't remember which one she was talking about. And she said, 'I love this particular song that you open the CD with.' She named it, I can't remember what it was — I'm getting old too. I said, 'I remember doing that song.' She said, 'But I like Number Three even better.' Then she named that tune. She said, 'I think as it goes on and on, it just gets better and better.' She named Number Four, Number Five, Number Six, Number Seven. I was just sitting there like an idiot, looking into space. It was Princess Hitachi of Japan. She said, 'In my house, we play a lot of jazz, and that's my favorite CD.'

"I had a great rewarding experience several years ago. I was awarded the Glenn Gould prize. Now that's a classical prize. And that's a big winner for me. People have always said, 'What do you do for a living?' And you say, 'I'm a classical pianist.' And they say, 'Oh really.' Then they run home and put on a tuxedo. You say, 'I'm a jazz pianist,' and immediately they head for a bar.

"My one wish was to bring jazz to the same level or status as classical music. And I was really enthralled when they called me and said, 'Would you accept the Glenn Gould prize?' I said, 'Yes, I will.' And to cap it off, they informed me that of the various prizes they had given over the years for Gould — they have people voting from various countries — mine was the only one that was unanimous throughout the world. So jazz *does* mean something. Don't play it cheap. Treasure it."

Asked about his early influences, he says: "I was sequestered in Montreal, and sat there and just wallowed in all this wonderful music from people like Teddy Wilson, who

floored me. I heard Teddy playing with the Benny Goodman Quartet. I used to sneak down into the living room at night, when my mom and dad were in bed. We had one of those old-fashioned radios that stood on the floor, and my father took about three months' salary to pay for that thing, and I'd turn it on and put my ear right next to the speaker and listen to Teddy and Duke and everybody else.

"Then later on I had the opportunity of listening to Nat King Cole. As soon as I heard Nat, I said, 'That's it. That's the kind of group I want.'

"Then I had . . . the good fortune in one sense and the misfortune in the other sense of hearing Art Tatum. My dad . . . said, 'Hey, I want you to hear something. Come here, Oscar.' And he put on this record, and I said, 'Hey, that's pretty. Who are these guys?' He said, 'It's not guys, it's one man.' I said, 'You're kiddin' me, Pop.' He said, 'No, I'm not. It's one man.'

"I didn't play the piano for about a month. I swear to God, it's the truth. I was so frightened. I wouldn't go near it for one month."

He told yet again the story of his first encounter with Art Tatum — by now he had told it hundreds of times — and the evolution of their friendship, with appropriate pauses for laughs. He said: "One night he took me, and he said, 'I wanna talk to you.' I said, 'What is it?' He said, 'I know I can play the piano, and you know you can play the piano.' He said, 'I wanna make one thing clear to you. This is my time. When I'm finished — you got it.'"

When Tatum died, he said, "They asked me to write a column for a Canadian magazine. It's a memory that stays with me, even today. I remember . . . sitting in his living room with his wife, and it was very tough for me, because there was a Steinway rolled up in the corner, and covered up, and I still think about that. Every time I play.

"But that's the kind of jazz history that should never be forgotten. It should be written. It should be read by youngsters, and should be inspirational to them."

He talked about the young pianists he admired, who groaned about him as he did when Tatum walked on. And he recounted yet again the story of his desire to quit high school and enter upon a career as a musician. He first approached his mother, who told him he would have to talk to his father.

Oscar loved to act. He was an enthusiastic raconteur, and when he told a story, he animated it with gestures and approximations of the voices and inflections of the *dramatis personae*.

He says, "I went to my mother first, and said, 'Mom, you know, this is a waste of money in high school.' We had to pay for high school in Canada — or at least in Quebec. And she

said, 'What's the matter?' I said, 'I'm not interested.' She said, 'You know you'll have to talk to your father.' So I said, 'Okay.'"

This is an intriguing passage. Oscar made the assumption (and an accurate one) that a mostly American audience would know little or nothing about Canada. And he told them a lie. Public education in Canada has always been free up to and through high school. I went to high school in two provinces, Ontario and British Columbia. There were no fees. And it was always my impression that high school was free in Quebec as well. To be certain, I called Martin Siegeman, a retired investment banker who had been in Oscar's class at Montreal High School, trumpeter Maynard Ferguson, bassist Hal Gaylor, and trombonist Butch Watanabe, all of whom attended Montreal High when he did." Gaylor said, "Montreal High was really a prep school for McGill University, which was right across the street." I asked the four men whether there ever was a tuition fee at Montreal High and all said emphatically that there was not.

Oscar continues with the story of his leaving Montreal High.

"So I went into the living room, and he was sittin' there. He used to play solitaire when he was off from the railway. He dealt the cards. I said, 'Dad.'

"He said, 'Yes?'

"I said, 'I . . . uh . . . uh . . . I want to leave . . . school.'"

The "boy's" voice is terrified, quaking, in the dramatization.

The father's voice says, in this imitation, "Mm-hmmm."

"I said, 'I . . . wanna . . . I wanna be a . . . jazz piano player.'

"He didn't even look at me. He just said, 'Mm-mm.'"

The audience on the video laughs loudly at this. I remember Lou Braithwaite, Oscar's friend of that period in his life, saying the kids of the neighborhood were afraid of Oscar's father.

"He said, 'You're gonna be a jazz piano player?' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Mm-mm.' I figured, 'Well, that's a lost war.'

"He said, 'I'm gonna tell you something. If you think I've been paying these fees for fun all these months, and you look at my face now, I'm gonna tell you if you want to leave high school to be a jazz piano player, the answer is no. But if you tell me you would leave high school to be the *best* piano player, you got it.'

"I was so desperate I came home with an average at the end of the years of ninety-some-odd points, something, and he said, 'Okay, go ahead,' and that's how I got out. Today, I'm wondering. Sometimes I wonder. Especially when I read

critics.”

Again the critics.

Obviously Oscar believed he attained the height his father charged him with seeking and that he was the heir to Art Tatum’s mantle. He believed he *was* the best, and a great many pianists agreed. If he was not the greatest jazz pianist in jazz history, he certainly was among them. Bill Evans must be kept in mind. So must Nat Cole (an imitated but ultimately inimitable originator), Teddy Wilson, Art Tatum, and Earl Hines. Many pianists include Bud Powell in that pantheon.

If Peterson was not an originating artist, like these others, he was an astonishing summational artist.

Clearly, time weighed heavily on Oscar Peterson, as it does on everyone who attains a certain age and is aware of the actuarial tables. He surely knew that he would never see Celine reach maturity.

Mike Renzi, the superb pianist (accompanist to Peggy Lee and Frank Sinatra, record producer and musical director of *Sesame Street*) and I went on a cruise from May 28 to June 4, 1995, a tribute to Oscar aboard the Majesty of the Seas. We went primarily to see him. He gave one performance in the ship’s Theater. I was disturbed by the impairment of his left hand. I remembered, among other things, all the evenings spent with him and the Brown-Thigpen trio at the London House in Chicago. I felt much as I had the first time I visited the Louvre and saw the winged Victory at the top of her staircase, her glorious beauty marred, the head and arms gone. She remained overwhelming, like Oscar’s playing even now.

When the performance ended, Mike and I rose. He was crying.

Not long after that, Oscar told me he was thinking of writing an autobiography. A biography, I told him, is meant to be objective and detached; an autobiography is inevitably subjective and personal and should be. Oscar said he would need a collaborator and asked for my opinion of the British jazz critic and writer Richard Palmer. “You couldn’t get anyone better,” I said.

I’m sure that this only confirmed what Oscar already thought, but in any case he and Dr. Palmer began work on the book. Much later, I asked Richard what happened to it. He wrote to me:

I worked on the autobiography, tentatively titled *A Jazz Odyssey*, from 1990 to 1994. Oscar handsomely paid for me to go to Canada twice that year, and the manuscript was completed on October 26. And then, nothing. I have no idea why. I know that he and his entourage

were very happy with the results. In addition to their wonderful hospitality, I was generously paid, and at once.

My private guess, no more than that, is that he was (understandably) more anxious to pursue the present and future, musically and with his new family, especially as that would involve all sorts of media stuff once the book was out. Naturally I was very disappointed that it did not appear, mainly because it is quite superb, and I say that with no vanity. I was editor and consultant — the work is his.

There has been a heartwarming partial development in the form of *Oscar Peterson: Multimedia CD-Rom*. It’s marketed by PG Music Inc., 29 Cadillac Avenue, Victoria B.C., Canada, with web page pgmusic.com. It has many treasures, and contains 100 pages of the book. The package is quite exceptional.

Over the years we worked on the book, I got to know Oscar pretty well, especially during the time I spent in Canada. In addition to everything else about him, all of it good, I was just stunned by his *will*. The word formed part of the title of your book, but it wasn’t until after he had been afflicted that I realized how appropriate that noun is. The first post-stroke concert I caught in The Hague in 1990 distressed me. The left hand was notional, and while that inimitable swing survived, the old command was gone. It was a deeply moving experience, but not in the main a celebratory one.

However, the passing years have seen a near-miraculous restitution. While he is not yet the player he was in, say, the Salle Pleyel concert with Joe Pass in ’75 or at the London House with Ray and Ed . . . both power and touch are remarkable. He’s done it all out of sheer bloody-mindedness — refusal to be beaten. Plus, I suspect, his profound happiness with Kelly and Celine.

One of the most telling moments in your book is that revelation that he thought he’d be dead by the age of sixty, and it seems to me that the desire to use those “extra” years to the full has been responsible for the quite awesome renaissance.

Oscar first met the late Eric Smith during World War II, when Eric, then a young bombardier in the Royal Canadian Air Force, came into the Alberta Lounge in Montreal. After the war Eric became an automobile dealer in Toronto and then retired to live first in Los Angeles and later in Las Vegas. In these latter years, he suffered from diabetic

neuropathy, which causes a gradual deterioration of the nerves in the legs. He became impaired and even a walker was not of much help. All those years, he and Oscar remained very close friends.

About a week after Christmas, 1999, there was a knock on Eric's door. His wife, Lucille, answered. Eric said, "There was a cartage delivery man with two huge cartons. Lucille and I had no idea what they contained. There wasn't even a note with them, only a bill of lading. It said, 'O. Peterson.'

"We were flabbergasted. It was an elite model, top-of-the-line, electric scooter.

"It has changed my life. Nobody who hasn't been through it can understand what that kind of immobility is like. It becomes so discouraging. Now I have an electric hoist for the scooter on the back of the car. I can go anywhere. It lets me appreciate things again. When I called him, he did his usual thing when he's caught in an act of generosity. He said, 'No, no, that's all right, you don't have to thank me. I know what it's like.' And he does, from the stroke.

"It was an awesome gift."

I first met Eric during one of Oscar's London House engagements.

At that period, the early 1960s, the following were all active and under thirty-five years of age; those whose names are italicized are dead:

Pepper Adams, Nat and Cannonball Adderley, Gene Ammons, Benny Bailey, Dave Bailey, Chet Baker, Kenny Baron, Gene Bertoncini, Keter Betts, Ruby Braff, Bob Brookmeyer, Ray Bryant, Monty Budwig, Larry Bunker, Kenny Burrell, Frank Butler, Donald Byrd, Conte Candoli, Pete Candoli, Frank Capp, Ron Carter, Paul Chambers, Sonny Clarke, Jimmy Cleveland, Jimmy Cobb, Al Cohn, John Coltrane, Junior Cook, Bob Cranshaw, Bill Crow, Kenny Davern, Arthur Davis, Miles Davis, Richard Davis, Allen Dawson, Willie Dennis, Paul Desmond, Gene DiNovi, Eric Dolphy, Lou Donaldson, Kenny Drew, Allen Eager, Jon Eardley, Don Ellis, Booker Ervin, Bill Evans, Art and Addison Farmer, Jo Farrell, Victor Feldman, Maynard Ferguson, Clare Fischer, Tommy Flanagan, Bob Florence, Chuck Flores, Med Flory, Carl Fontana, Vernel Fournier, Russ Freeman, Dave Frishberg, Curtis Fuller, Stan Getz, Benny Golson, Urbie Green, Gigi Gryce, Jim Hall, Slide Hampton, Herbie Hancock, Jake Hanna, Roland Hanna, Barry Harris, Eddie Harris, Hampton Hawes, Louis Hayes, Jimmy and Tootie Heath, Percy Heath, Billy Higgins, Milt Hinton, Bill Holman, Paul Horn, Freddie Hubbard, Dick Hyman, Frank Isola, Chuck Israels, Ahmad Jamal, Clifford Jordan, Richie Kamuca, Connie Kay, Wynton Kelly, Jimmy Knepper, Lee Konitz, Teddy Kotick, Steve Kuhn, Steve Lacy, Scott LaFaro,

Pete La Roca, Lou Levy, Mel Lewis, Melba Liston, Booker Little, Dave McKenna, Jackie McLean, Mike Mainieri, Junior Mance, Herbie Mann, Warne Marsh, Billy Mitchell, Blue Mitchell, Dwike Mitchell, Grover Mitchell, Red Mitchell, Hank Mobley, Grachan Moncur III, J.R. Monterose, Buddy Montgomery, Jack Montrose, Joe Morello, Lee Morgan, Sam Most, Paul Motian, Gerry Mulligan, Dick Nash, Oliver Nelson, Jack Nimitz, Sal Nistico, Marty Paich, Horace Parlan, Sonny Payne, Gary Peacock, Duke Pearson, Ralph Peña, Art Pepper, Walter Perkins, Charlie Persip, Nat Pierce, Al Porcino, Bill Potts, Benny Powell, Seldon Powell, André Previn, Joe Puma, Gene Quill, Jimmy Raney, Frank Rehak, Dannie Richmond, Larry Ridley, Ben Riley, Red Rodney, Mickey Roker, Sonny Rollins, Frank Rosolino, Roswell Rudd, Willie Ruff, Bill Russo, Bobby Scott, Don Sebesky, Bud Shank, Jack Sheldon, Sahib Shihab, Wayne Shorter, Horace Silver, Andy Simpkins, Zoot Sims, Jack Six, Jimmy Smith, Victor Sproules, Alvin Stoller, Frank Strazzeri, Ira Sullivan, Grady Tate, Arthur Taylor, Toots Thielemans, Bobby Timmons, Cal Tjader, Ross Tompkins, Cy Touff, Nick Travis, Stanley Turrentine, Wilbur Ware, Randy Weston, Bob Wilber, Phil Wilson, Jimmy Woode, Phil Woods, Reggie Workman, Eugene Wright, and Leo Wright.

Max Roach, Sonny Stitt, Terry Gibbs, Sarah Vaughan, Paul Desmond, and Shorty Rogers were thirty-six, and others, such as *Dave Brubeck, Milt Jackson and John Lewis* were under forty. If you add to the list those under forty who were at the peak of their powers, factor in those who were not well-known to a national public, add all the regional jazz players, then recall that almost all the pioneering figures — *Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Kenny Clarke, Don Byas, Don Redman, Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, Don Redman, Benny Carter, and Earl Hines* among them — were alive, you see that the depth of jazz in America in that period was astounding. We took this for granted, however, and made the false assumption that genius was commonplace. It isn't. An astonishing artistic flowering had occurred.

In comparison, the jazz revival at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first has been shallow. The facile players who did come up were uninspiring for the most part, with nothing of the inventive vitality of their role models.

Gerry Mulligan told me that once, he and John Lewis had just left the apartment of Gil Evans where the so-called cool jazz movement had gestated. John said, "You know, when our generation is gone, this music will be finished." Oscar later expressed a similar sentiment.

It may well be that jazz was, as many scholars (and yes, critics) have believed the true music of the twentieth century.

The age of the form is open to discussion. Some scholars date it from the start of the twentieth century, others from the first recordings, made during World War I, by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, others from the work of Jelly Roll Morton in the 1920s, still others — if the art is defined as that of the improvising soloist — from the rise of Louis Armstrong in the 1920s. Born in 1925, Oscar lived through most of it, and contributed inestimably to it.

One musician who knew him early in his life said, “Oscar was always very high and mighty. A lot of anger built up in him, and he has never resolved it. He’s a very powerful person. You can hear it in his playing. He walks on people if he has to, because he thinks people want to use him.”

In the November 1991 issue of *Toronto Life* magazine, Martin Knelman wrote, after seeing Sylvia Sweeney’s film:

“Long after the old man’s death, the son still seems to be trying to please his father and maybe that’s why even after getting a Toronto Arts Award and being named Chancellor of York University, Peterson still hungers for recognition. He keeps saying how important it is to him to be honored in his own country.” And maybe, he adds, “Oscar Peterson was so successful as a child prodigy that he was able to postpone becoming a grown-up.”

As the last years of the twentieth century expired, Oscar’s honors continued to accumulate. He was inducted into the International Jazz Hall of Fame, maintained at the University of Pittsburgh. He won eleven Grammy awards. One of his motion picture scores, for *Silent Partners* in 1978, garnered a Canadian film award. He also accumulated ten honorary doctorates from American and Canadian universities. He began signing his letters Dr. Oscar Peterson, C.C. He was inducted into the order of Canada. Canada Post issued a fifty-cent postage stamp in his honor. In early June 1999, the newspapers reported that Peterson would shortly receive the Praemium World Art Award of the Japan Art Association, which carried a \$121,000 (U.S) prize. Peterson’s award was in the music division; other awards went to a German painter, an American sculptor, a Japanese architect, and a German Theater and film director. In October, he flew to Tokyo for the award ceremony. He seemed pleased at his inclusion in the International Jazz Hall of Fame. He overlooked apparently that it is awarded on the votes of, you guessed it, critics.

In mid-August of 1999, Montreal’s Concordia University — which already had given him an honorary doctorate and the Loyola Medal, its highest award — renamed its concert auditorium the Oscar Peterson Concert Hall. And the list of his honors in the appendix to my biography filled two pages.

Despite all these honors, he never ceased to complain, indeed whining, about his condition. He wasn’t like that when

he was young. Perhaps the stroke explains this behavior. Indeed, during the latter years, he suffered a series of strokes. He had the blessing of the care of his fourth wife, Kelly Green. He died of kidney failure on December 23, 2007, at the age of eighty-two, leaving Kelly and his six children by earlier marriages. Granz by then was gone. He died November 22, 2001, in Switzerland, where he had lived for many years.

Oscar’s neighbors told the press that he was a modest, self-effacing, and humble man. They apparently didn’t know him very well. It is easy to be courtly and kind to people you consider inconsequential. He had the largest ego of any man I ever knew. He was similar in many ways to another giant whose lifetime he shared in part: Ernest Hemingway. Each of them had a relentlessly competitive nature, each was unfailingly macho, each of them believed without hesitation that he was the greatest practitioner of his craft in the world.

Egotism is hardly unusual in artists: it is almost a part of the job description. It is premised on the assumption that what one has to say or do is of significance and interest to large groups of people. Indeed, ego is implicit in all animals, from the narwhal to the smallest insect: it is the drive to individual survival.

But Oscar bore the burden of his greatness much more graciously when he was young, and the later complaints only diminished and demeaned him.

I too heard performances when he seemed to be phoning it in, playing what lies under the fingers, as pianists put it. But I heard other performances, particularly some of those late at night in the London House, when most of the audience had gone home, when he played ballads with pensive beauty to the empty tables. These were magnificent. Oscar often had me write liner notes to his albums, including the *Canadiana Suite*, and some of the albums he made for Bruner-Schwer’s MPS label. The MPS albums captured some of that profundity of playing I heard late at London House. I told him, after hearing one of them, “That’s the way you really play,” and he named the album *The Way I Really Play*.

It is axiomatic that an artist has a right to be judged by his best work. And Oscar’s best work was one of the towering achievements of this magnificent art.

I found myself thinking of cities in which we spent time together, Milan, Detroit, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Toronto, and of course Chicago. I had a lot of fun with the three of them, Ray, Ed, and Oscar, and Ed Thigpen is still one of my best friends. But best of all were those nights at the London House.

The memories burn only the brighter now that he is gone.

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