

## One Bass Player to a Band

An old high school friend told me, a year or so ago, that I was always talking about one Ray Brown. I am astonished that at seventeen I had the brains to appreciate him.

Recently I heard some 1920s dance-band recordings, electronically enhanced. And the bass players were playing not even roots and fifths but only roots. Thump-thump-thump-thump, same note for a full bar at a time.

Jimmy Blanton, in his too-little-time with Duke Ellington — he died when he was only twenty-four — introduced a new flexibility to bass lines, especially in pizzicato solos. Others were contributing too, among them Walter Page and later, Oscar Pettiford and Red Mitchell. Charles Mingus showed what kind of facile rapidity could be achieved on the instrument.

Milt Hinton told me, “Bass has made more progress than any other instrument in the last fifty years . . . . The instrument hasn’t changed bodily, but the balance of strings has changed, the teaching has changed . . . .”

“The word *bass* means bottom. It means support. That’s the prime requisite of a bass player, support. Architecturally, it has to be the lowest part of the building, and it has to be strong, or the building will not stand . . . . We are like Atlas, standing in support.”

Oscar Peterson said to me once: “Bass players are very protective of each other. I would find it almost unbelievable if you told me you’d ever heard a bass player say something about another bass player that wasn’t good. If you look at the history of the instrument in jazz, you can see why. The public never used to notice bass players. They were always the guys who came into the group and were given one order, ‘Walk!’ Once in a while they’d be thrown a bone, like, ‘Walk — one chorus solo.’ Finally they managed to break away, because of the proficient bass players who came along.”

“It’s like family,” Milt said. “You might have nine or ten brothers and sisters, but your Mama is your Mama. We come one to a customer in jazz. There’s only one bass player in a

band. I’m the best bass player of any band I’m in.”

Always a mentor to young bass players, Milt said: “I’d invite the new young bass players to come to my home. Some of them stayed at our house. We’d make a big pot of chili. If there was a gig, I recommend them. I got Brian Torff his first job . . . . Scott LaFaro was fantastic. When he was killed, I finished a recording job with Stan Getz at Webster Hall for him. He was amazing!”

In the early 1970s, a remarkable advance in the uses of the instrument came into prominence: the work of Scott LaFaro, especially his performances in his all-too-few recordings with the Bill Evans Trio. Drummer Jack DeJohnette told me that when he had a trio in Chicago (he played piano then), he and the rest of the group would wait for the new Riverside albums by the Evans group, then sit up late into the night listening. He said, “Bill Evans changed not only the way jazz piano is played, he and Scott LaFaro changed the nature of trios.”

As widespread as Bill’s influence was on piano, so was LaFaro’s on probably every other young bassist who came up after him, including the brilliant Brian Torff, who rose to prominence during his three years with George Shearing in a duo as successor to Don Thompson. Don, who also plays piano, drums, and almost all the brass instruments, told me that it was LaFaro who really got him to dig into the deeper exploration of the bass.

Don said, “A lot of bass players have missed the message of Scott LaFaro. Too many guys hear the fact that he played real fast. Scotty had some chops. He figured out the top end of the bass. He could play fast arpeggios. Too many bass players, I think, play fast but they don’t hear the beauty of his melodies. They also don’t hear how supportive he was when he played behind Bill Evans. He played pretty busy sometimes, but I don’t think he ever seemed to get in the way or take the music away from Bill.”

And of course the last thing players like Torff and LaFaro do is to play roots and fifths. Essentially they play counterpoint duets with the front-line instrument, and I enormously respect them. The best of them are fascinating.

I have just had the pleasure of reading books about both men. The first of these, *Jade Visions*, named for one of LaFaro's compositions, has been written by his sister, Helene LaFaro Fernandez. The other is *In Love with Voices*, a free-ranging autobiography by Brian Torff. For the sake of fair disclosure, I must tell you that I have been involved in the *Jade Visions* book for some time. I functioned as an adviser on it and have done a certain amount of editing. Rather than one of the major New York publishers, the book is being published by the young North Texas University Press. It will be out this coming fall.

As for Brian's book, he published it himself. There is no stigma in this, as there was in past years of so-called vanity publishing; Stephen Crane published *The Red Badge of Courage* himself. But now the major publishing companies have followed the record industry into irresponsibility and dishonor. Indeed, some of them in New York will tell an author in effect: "Publish it yourself. We'll see what the sales are, and then maybe we'll consider taking it on." And new technology makes self-publishing easy to execute, and comparatively inexpensive.

The value of any autobiography is in its portrayal of the events and individuals experienced by the author. A couple of decades ago, one commonly heard that jazz musicians were inarticulate. I never found them so, and both at *Down Beat* and later with my own publication, I have done all I could to encourage them to write, among them the drummer Don DeMicheal, who succeeded me as editor of *Down Beat*, bassist Gordon (Whitey) Mitchell, Red Mitchell's brother, who became a prominent television writer and producer, and another bassist, Bill Crow, who now has written several books. Yet another whom I started writing was the late composer and pianist Bobby Scott. In these and other cases I found that not only could they get it down on paper, but they had insights that only musicians could bring to bear.

Brian Torff not only writes well, he has what it takes to become a writer, should he ever choose to do so. His writing in this book reminds me somewhat of F. Scott Fitzgerald, in style and otherwise, particularly in descriptions of his family and upbringing. He is writing about the middle west, the area around Chicago where he was born, the son of a brilliant, prominent and liberal lawyer.

One of the jewels of the book is Brian's portrait of Stephane Grappelli, who has remained a somewhat shadowy figure says). Grappelli was truly an astonishing player, and with Brian's permission, I offer this excerpt from his outstanding book.

## Stephane Grappelli By Brian Torff

When fortune smiles it spreads like the sun. In 1975, during my second year of touring as a professional musician, I was invited by Cleo Laine's American promoter to attend the Carnegie Hall debut of the renowned French jazz violinist, Stephane Grappelli. My date was an attractive woman-friend who came from great wealth, lived on Park Avenue, and had no interest in me whatsoever. Normally this would bother one a little, but I was too moved by the stunning display of this masterful genius of jazz violin to care. I had never heard anything like it, and little did I know that soon I would be connected to the Hot Club swing style for most of my career.

At that point I wasn't all that familiar with the work of Stephane Grappelli or of his mythic associate, the legendary gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt, but after the concert I was intrigued. Grappelli was an elderly gentleman in his late 60's with a limitless charm and grace. He had a command of his instrument that recalled any great concert violinist, combined with an effortless sense of swing. His singing violin soared and danced in a way few instrumentalists could, and in addition to his imaginative and virtuoso improvisations, Grappelli could wring the poetic essence out of a melody, not unlike the interpretations of Frank Sinatra or Bill Evans. His very French style of playing came from an emotional well that was infectious to any audience and transcended the need to be hip.

I could scarcely believe my luck when the same promoters asked me if I would be interested in working with Grappelli during his next American extravaganza. Saving on the extra airfare from Europe, Grappelli's quartet, (violin, two guitars, and bass) generally picked up local bass players wherever they went. Once again, as I did before my last two tours, I returned to the record store and bought every Grappelli disc I could find in a desperate attempt to learn every tune ever written in musical history before *Meet the Beatles*. Needless to say, this was a daunting task. I have come to realize that a great deal of my record collection was purchased in pre-tour panic and less out of leisure or recreational listening. This is probably why I can't get rid of those musty-smelling LPs.

I was summoned to the first and only rehearsal I would ever have with Mr. Grappelli in his room at the somewhat

run-down Wellington Hotel in mid-town Manhattan. I arrived with bass in hand and was introduced to the two English guitarists, Diz Disley and Ike Issacs. You would have thought that someone in central casting had selected their names because they were as different as a Bronx accent and an English one. Ike was quiet and refined, a scholar of the guitar, and a meticulous player. Diz was a ruffian, devil-may-care, go-to-hell type character who listened to no one and played his own way. A colorful master of ceremonies for all of our concerts, with his thick Yorkshire accent he would introduce me as "Brian Torff, the phantom plucker of Greenwich Village." Diz approved of the fact that I played in his estimation a "real bass, not one of those amplified cricket bats."

I met the great Grappelli straight out of the shower, only wearing a towel and a smile, sporting a light, high, raspy voice that lifted a charming French accent. In great spirits as he anticipated the tour, he pulled out his violin a few minutes later and we launched into *I Can't Give You Anything but Love*, the song that Grappelli would always play to open his concerts and had been made famous by Louis Armstrong. With Ike and Diz on guitars, we ran through a few more songs but like a child with a short attention span, Stephane soon had had enough. I quite expected a lengthy two to three hour rehearsal where we would carefully go over all the tunes for our upcoming tour, but to my astonishment, Stephane put his violin away after the first fifteen minutes declaring, "I do not like to rehearse, just play for the public!" I thought to myself, "Well, that's fine for you, you're a world-renowned master of your instrument, but I am a twenty-one year old kid who has no idea what the hell he is doing. I can play *Gloria*, *Louie Louie*, and *Knock On Wood*, and *Autumn Leaves* (finally), but I don't think that is going to work for me here." I was starting to get used to spending the early part of my young musical life in the deep end by being forced musically to keep swimming or risk the alternative.

By this time I had moved into a spacious 2,000 square foot loft at 53 Mercer Street in Soho. I yearned for some space and got plenty, you could have staged a basketball game in the living room. I was on the second floor that got very little light, but the brick walls and wood floors made up for it. Those were the days when Soho was affordable for the artists who had pioneered what had once been a warehouse, textile, shipping area, and the location of numerous turn-of-the-century sweatshops in lower Manhattan. My rent started at \$350 per month with my landlord being a figurative artist

who made these huge, larger than life casts of nude women in his first floor studio. Walking into his loft to pay my rent past those eight feet tall, naked Amazon ladies was something to behold. My loft would later be a great rehearsal space for Grappelli, Marian McPartland, George Shearing and many other musicians who would come by. I would occasionally find empty spools of thread in remote corners that no doubt harkened back to the early 1900's and the immigrant workers who toiled in this building.

The next day I was up at 5 a.m., to play with Stephane Grappelli on the NBC *Today Show*, in anticipation of his return engagement at Carnegie Hall. The limousine picked me up around 5:30 a.m. and driving through the misty dawn as the fruit stands were just opening up, I felt as if I was in a dream. New York was a tough town that took a lot out of you, but it could give so much back, more than any other place I have known. I never forgot my origins so there was always a sense of amazement, as if I had snuck into an exclusive party and was about to be found out as an imposter at any minute.

Grappelli's repertoire consisted of classic standard tunes mixed with a few of the things he had played with Django Reinhardt. It was a very limited list of approximately twenty songs mainly because Stephane, who could play or sight-read anything, did not trust his memory on stage. He had a real fear of forgetting a melody that I'm sure his loving fans would have hardly noticed. His presence and demeanor were so captivating that you could feel he had charmed his audience before the first note; they really loved him. I was always amazed by the range in age and the diversity of the people who came to see the group. Jazz, folk, blues and even Grateful Dead followers flocked to see him in admiration and respect. "Bree-on," he once explained to me, "ze public is like a lemon, you must squeeze them."

Later in life when I visited France for the first time, Stephane's life in sound made all the more sense to me as I wandered through the Parisian streets. The feeling I got was that despite all the troubles in the world, the French lived by the idea of "we must live." Stephane Grappelli was the epitome of that infectious idea and he communicated that through his music.

It was the beginning of a musical friendship that ranks as one of the highlights of my life. Wherever we traveled, from the club Rosie's in New Orleans and Royce Hall at UCLA in Los Angeles (for my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday), to small clubs in the Midwest, touring with Stephane had all the spirit and energy of being in a rock band. Though he was

nearing seventy years of age, his youthful spirit and love of life were transmitted through every note he played. His melodies could be both poignantly sad, yet at the same time whimsical and filled with hope. There was much laughter on our tours, and it was incredible to stand next to a musical giant every night onstage. I was just a lucky guy who was once again in the enviable position to learn first hand from a master.

I was continually struck by the French *joie de vivre* that emanated from Steph. He wanted to go everywhere, see everything, and taste everything. I looked forward to our long walks that we would take in virtually every town. If there wasn't much to do, he was gloomy; "I would rather be assassinated on the streets of New York than stay here; even the umbrellas don't open on Sunday," he would grumble. Stephane often complained about the hard travel and when we played a small club, such as The Arc in Ann Arbor, Michigan, he would lament, "Why we must come here?" His attitude would turn around the next moment when they brought him, what was in his words, "an amusing little soup." It didn't take that much to make Stephane Grappelli happy.

With his usual effervescent sense of joy, you would have never known how much hardship he had had in his life.

Grappelli was born in 1908, and after losing his mother at the age of four, he was then temporarily placed in an orphanage by his father, who was unable to take care of him due to his commitment to France during the first World War. Later on his father, a studious man, gave him a violin at age 12 with an accompanying method book, and young Stephane soon started busking on the streets of Paris, playing in courtyards where people would throw down spare change in appreciation. He was a musical natural who taught himself how to play the piano, often accompanying vocalists, and he also learned the saxophone so he could perform with dance orchestras. He did what he needed to do to survive.

As a young man, Grappelli soon was caught under the spell of the American jazz icons Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, as had his soon-to-be partner, the Belgian gypsy guitarist, Django Reinhardt. The unique and original Quintet of the Hot Club of France were not merely imitators of jazz, Grappelli and Reinhardt would transform the American style by blending it with French music mixed with gypsy elements. They would become the first important European jazz musicians of their day by blazing an original trail for string instruments in jazz, a genre that

had been dominated by brass instruments up to that point. Django, who died in the early 1950's, is seen by many as the genius who pioneered a unique conception for guitar improvisation, and he has a profound influence on the instrument to this day. Django and Stephane showed the unlimited potential that their authentic instrumental voices had to offer.

When Germany invaded France in 1939, the Hot Club broke up and Stephane Grappelli fled to England. In London, he united with blind jazz pianist George Shearing, and they performed in the city virtually every night, often at great risk to their lives. While German bombs fell over the city during the blitzkrieg, it was not unusual when danger landed nearby for patrons to get under their tables while Shearing and Grappelli would take cover beneath the piano until the terrifying noise subsided. There would be a blackout due to the bombing and after their job was over, it was usually Shearing, who knew the streets of London as only a blind man could, who would lead Grappelli back home. Grappelli's tune *Jive Bomber* is a recollection of those days and a reminder that no matter how trying the world becomes, people still need the hope that music can bring to their lives.

The union of Reinhardt and Grappelli was rather brief, around eight years or so, but they created a form that is now so popular around the world it seems that every major city's music scene has a Hot Club string group and Django festivals abound. Returning to France after World War II, Stephane, ever the practical man, went into obscurity playing for wealthy patrons in chic Parisian hotels as they dined and clattered silverware to his music. Modern jazz of the 1950's reigned and the public, with ever a short memory, forgot about the great jazz violinist. As the legend of Django grew, Stephane Grappelli's visibility faded into the distance until Diz Disley sought him out to perform at the 1973 Cambridge Folk Festival. It was the first time in many years that Grappelli had played in a Hot Club style format, and he was apprehensive and quite incredulous at the overwhelming response he received from a young audience that had been raised on Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones. He was born again.

Despite his mercurial demeanor, it was Diz Disley who really pushed Grappelli into returning to concert performances and must be credited as the force behind his comeback. Diz always had something cooking, and when he got an idea in his head, that was it. For years he told me of his great, get-rich-quick scheme; he would buy a used

Rolls-Royce in England, bring it over to America, drive it all over the country on a holiday until he got to the West Coast, and then “flog it” (sell it). I thought he was crazy and never thought he would do it, but a few years later he actually fulfilled his dream. After buying the car and making all the arrangements to ship it to America, he drove the Rolls Royce all over the south, east, and Midwest, ending up in San Francisco where he soon found a willing buyer. The day before he was to deliver the auto, he went sightseeing and parked the car at a high, scenic hilltop point, overlooking the San Francisco Bay. Only one little problem occurred here, he forgot to put on the emergency parking brake. When this happens, it can really ruin your whole day.

Getting out of his beloved chariot, Diz was looking out over Alcatraz and the beautiful view of the bay when the car slowly began groaning and sliding downhill. He ran after the Rolls as it picked up speed but it was too late. By the time it reached the bottom of the hill, it had hit everything in its path and resembled a stunt car at the end of a demolition derby, sans the Rolls charm. After he told me this story, all I could say in utter disbelief was, “Diz, what happened?” In his typically dry, English manner, he matter-of-factly answered.

“Gravity, my dear boy, gravity.”

In music, you are what you play. Even before the first note, the very presence of the performer sets up what will happen next. Stephane Grappelli had that presence because of who he was and what he had lived. He had modern ideas but preferred a jazz that was based on past values. Though he loved and admired young musicians, he had trouble with the modern jazz idea of cool detachment and lack of emotion. “What can you do about that?” he once asked. “Jazz is not a study but a feeling. It is a thing of the heart.”

The tours were like a celebration of life that had certain accompanying rituals. Before every concert, we would gather backstage and drink a toast (usually Chivas Regal) to music, life, and the joy of making a living doing something we adored. We would then take our instruments out of their cases and informally launch into a few random tunes in the dressing room to get the night started. This was important for literally setting the tone for the evening. When we walked out on stage the feeling between the audience and the band was electric, even before the first note began. Grappelli was deeply loved and had a particularly strong following in San Francisco where our performances at the

Great American Music Hall were some of our finest moments.

One night, a prominent musician brought some rather potent marijuana back to the dressing room. Perhaps we celebrated life a bit too much on that occasion, because when we got to the stage some of us were flying like a 747, and being in San Francisco, I suspected that select members of the audience might have been on the same plane. After a few numbers Stephane went into a solo cadenza at the end of one song that went on and on for several minutes, each idea more brilliant than the one that had preceded it. As his solo reached a burning climax, he stopped. There was a dead silence and time stopped with a thud. He turned, looked at me and asked, “What we are playing?” He had forgotten what the song had originally been and so had I, but we recovered eventually.

Stephane wore rather odd pink-colored paisley shirts with velvet pants and I can only hope that the remnants of my own 70’s stage wardrobe, complete with multi-patterned polyester shirts, are long gone from this earth. Diz sported the popular, baby blue ‘leisure suit’ of which he was quite fond, though he would often state, “I can’t wait to get back to my hotel room, take off my pants and watch *The Price is Right*.” He was indeed a man of simple pleasures, but the reality was our concerts were an audio feast and a visual nightmare.

The band always consisted of excellent players such as Martin Taylor, an extraordinary Scottish guitarist, and from England, the jazz-rock influenced John Etheridge. They added the drive and energy that helped to modernize the Hot Club concept, something that Grappelli felt was important. Never a purist, Stephane was drawn to young players for their excitement, energy, and the new ideas that they brought to the music. He was often bored and rather dismayed by the fundamentalist Django fanatics, who virtually insisted that the Hot Club music should be played note for note like the recordings, as if it were written down for a string quartet performance. Both Grappelli and Reinhardt were forward-thinking, modern musicians, and I’m sure even Django would have found this cult, who are still following their earlier work as if they are stalkers, to be rather silly indeed.

Stephane could be a rascal with temper tantrums that would result in his breaking out into an angry jig, sometimes in the middle of an airport. He knew when to leave a restaurant just before the bill arrived to “arrange my affairs,” but you could not help loving this special character. He was an inspirational role model for scores of

young violinists (Jean-Luc Ponty, Didier Lockwood, Darol Anger, Randy Sabien, Nigel Kennedy, and Richard Greene, among others) who would come backstage to meet this great man. He was always gracious, supportive and interested in their work. I have noticed this with most of the older musicians with whom I have played. You felt that they cared about your development and always saw the greater humanity in life and music.

I never heard Grappelli play one note out of tune in all the years I was with him — in tune with music, in tune with life. Whatever musical ideas came to him, he executed them flawlessly without strain, ego, or purpose. He appeared to be a self-taught musician, but the truth is that he had studied the French classical music tradition and approached the violin from that perspective. His solo piano playing, which conjured up Teddy Wilson, Fats Waller and Art Tatum, was also remarkable. I know from working with him that Grappelli was such a musical natural that while he never practiced either violin or piano, he played them both effortlessly.

It was Stephane Grappelli who taught me a few things about grace. With the attitude and energy of youth combined with the wisdom of a seasoned-musician, he offered an important lesson to all. One warm, Indian Summer day in Victoria, British Columbia, Steph and I went for a walk. Stopping in a nearby park, we sat down on a bench, took off our shirts and basked in the afternoon sun. Around us were elderly people, many of whom were using canes, walkers, and wheel chairs. "My God," remarked Stephane, "it is sad that they are so old." After a moment, it hit me that many of these people were his age, maybe even younger. The very source of Stephane Grappelli's passion for life and music had kept him youthful, alive, and on the road.

I toured with him from 1976-1979, and went back again in 1984. One of my personal highlights was performing at the London's Royal Albert Hall in 1978 for Grappelli's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. Many years passed and I went on to other things, but we stayed in touch through letters. The last time I saw Stephane he was in his mid-80's and he had returned again to Carnegie Hall. This time I was back in the audience with my daughter, Hilary, a young violinist. All the heavyweight jazz, classical, and country fiddlers were there to see the master play from his chair, still sounding brilliant and youthful. Hil and I went backstage and though Stephane was very tired and had a very long line of well wishers waiting for him, his eyes lit up when he saw me, not unlike

the first day I met him, some twenty years before. His body had aged, yet his indomitable spirit remained the same.

The timeless ability of the artist is the mark they leave behind. There are those who are merely popular and famous for a given moment, but their work does not move or resonate past that point. The classic artists are more than noteworthy; they create a form that can be used as a springboard for inspirational ideas, providing a starting point for the conception of others. The legacy of Django and Stephane has resulted in a worldwide Hot Club musical scene, and the New York producers Pat Philips and Ettore Stratta have seen great success in presenting outstanding European musicians such as the guitarists Bireli Lagrene, Angelo De Barre, Dorado and Samson Schmidt, violinists Florin Niculescu and Pierre Blanchard, and the accordionist Ludovic Beier.

For many years I have had the opportunity to play with these musicians, and I have to say that while there are many fine Hot Club groups in America, I do not feel that they play this music on as high a standard as do these French musicians. It is a question of environment and context. Americans generally coming from a blues, rock, folk and bluegrass context, do not have the advantage of growing up in the French-gypsy culture. This is a deep musical tradition that is learned in caravan life from a very young age, and is passed on through the oral tradition. Whatever music you want to play in life, you must go to the source and spend a great deal of time in the immersion of that culture. It can take many years, if not a lifetime, to begin understanding the essence of an art form.

There is a light that shines from some people and like a beacon, it beams right into those who are lucky enough to come in contact with this force. I still play and love the music of Reinhardt and Grappelli, yet it concerns me that as Django's legend increasingly grows over time, Stephane Grappelli's career is too often overlooked. This is wrong. It was Grappelli who had the long career that evolved and shaped a large body of work, so beautifully portrayed in the BBC documentary, *Stephane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*. I really believe his artistry is no less important than his partner. While Django was the irascible gypsy soul and an eccentric character which makes for great stories, Grappelli was the consummate professional who showed up on time while doing the best possible job, and that never makes for as much colorful press.

Yet Steph always had a good sense of humor about this and his love/hate relationship with Django, whom he would often have to fetch from a bar or pool hall just as it

was time to perform. Sometimes on stage he would announce to the audience, "Ladies and gentleman, we would like to play a composition by my dear late partner, Django Reinhardt, *Nuages*." Then this charming, dear and grandfatherly elder man would lean over to me with a smile on his face and whisper in a voice only I could hear. "*That cunt.*"

Every night I was featured on one song and as I put forth my best effort, Stephane would stand close by offering words of encouragement. "*Allez, go baby, go.*" He seemed pleased and proud while I came to see him as a grandfather figure in my musical life. Musicians have a unique career in that the very nature of our artistic interactions often forge deep human bonds that go beyond the usual, more conventional working environments. At our best, jazz musicians pull together, support and encourage one another, building what my French musician friends refer to as *mon frère*, my brother. Anything less than this is merely a job, and I am grateful to have experienced this special camaraderie so many times in my career.

Ten years after his death, I went to Paris and took the Metro to find where Stephane Grappelli once had lived. It was the last day of January and a cold wind blew through the Pigalle area as I walked past a commercial district of sex shops, discount clothing stores, cafes, and souvenir shops complete with plastic figurines of the Eiffel Tower. I continued down narrow streets in search of 9, rue de Dunkerque, the address where I had directed all my letters.

I finally reached the Hotel Picardy, just down the road from the Gare du Nord, and I was disappointed to find an old, run down and yellowed building on a corner. The lobby was small, cramped, and anything but elegant. I had heard Stephane had a very fashionable apartment, yet I found it hard to believe that it could exist in such a building. The few chairs in the cramped lobby were covered by sheets and bags of laundry were sitting by the front door, ready for pick up. The young man at the front desk had never heard of Stephane Grappelli, whose life had been recently commemorated in a sold-out concert at the Salle Pleyel, just a few weeks before my arrival in Paris. He seemed bored when I told him that he was a famous French jazz musician who had lived there for a long time.

I know Stephane never got over the desperate poverty he faced as a child, and that the orphanage he lived in, which had been run by the famous dancer Isadora Duncan, was too painful an experience for him to relay to others. Certainly the location of his apartment was a lower rent area than the

chic Paris we all know from the movies, but it seemed sad to me that ten years after his death, such an important artist did not even have a plaque on the building to honor his memory at the location where he had once lived. Perhaps more time and distance is needed before this is done.

The most famous cemetery in Paris is Père Lachaise. It is a haunting place where visitors gaze at a map that leads them through ornate and impressively high tombstones to the graves of the famous. Here lie Oscar Wilde, Colette, Molière, Proust, Ravel, Gertrude Stein, and Edith Piaf, with the late French jazz pianist, Michel Petrucciani, fittingly buried almost right next to Frédéric Chopin. Teenagers with their reverence for rock and roll history, bring their guitars and flock to the grave of Jim Morrison, the lizard king of Doors fame. His grave is a modest sight compared to most plots, stuck in between other more ornate stones and seems more like an afterthought, especially when one considers the fact that his legend is probably bigger in death than he was in life. Unlike the surrounding, neatly kept gravesites, it is strewn with poems, lyrics, flowers, cigarette butts, and photos of people who have visited and wish to be noticed. Can the dead ever rest?

Upon leaving the cemetery on a gray February afternoon, I pull the map out of my pocket one last time, listing the most well known inhabitants of Pere Lachaise, and I spot, Grappelli, S, violoniste (jazz). I climb the long, inclined, cobblestone road to the crematorium, to find the location where his ashes are interred. On the black marble stone number 417, bearing his name alongside his father's, there are three faint traces of red lipstick kisses, a loving tribute left in the afternoon light.

Shaken after saying good-bye, I wander into a café across the street from the cemetery. Though Steph has been gone for ten years, the dramatic impact of this day surprises me. I order *un café*, and on the bistro sound system I hear Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grappelli playing *Tea for Two*. I pay the bill, taking the Metro back home with Parisians who are returning from a day's work. My eyes fill with tears while a few people stare.

Seasons change and the time passes with them, but the important people that come into your life never really leave you. In the quiet moments when I am backstage in the dressing room before a concert, I occasionally get a vision of dressing room lights, the way they shine when they bounce off a bottle of Chivas Regal.

— Brian Torff

## *En Passant*

Ed McMahon got stiffed.

He died at 86 on June 23, 2009. The TV news and other broadcasts immediately launched the unctuous paeans that usually follow the deaths of celebrities, although McMahon was not someone who'd found the vaccine for polio or developed open-heart surgery. He was a television announcer and pitchman, best known as the sidekick and second banana to Johnny Carson, made a lot of money, and was by accounts a nice guy. He hardly justified the hour-after-hour coverage he received.

But it wasn't drawn out to the depletion customary on such occasions. Michael Jackson usurped the attention by dying two days later, on June 25, and such was the coverage of *his* demise, the suspicious circumstances surrounding it, summaries of his career and exotic peculiarities, that poor Ed was dropped and forgotten. And he was not alone. A few hours before Jackson's death, the admirable and beautiful Farah Fawcett, who had cooperated in the making of a documentary on cancer's effects on her, slipped away like a whisper or a snowflake.

But the mewling over Michael Jackson went on and on and on. At one point, looking for some real news, I counted eleven TV channels covering his departure.

Show business has always been known for hooey, hyperbole and hype. But in the Jackson case it surpassed anything it had ever achieved before. That dubious sociology professor and "talk show host" Michael Eric Dyson referred to "the genius of this man." Never have the words "icon" and "iconic" been so lavishly misused.

Madonna referred to Jackson as "the greatest artist in history." So much for Bach, Michelangelo, Schubert, whoever made the Winged Victory that stands in the Louvre, and all the rest of the true geniuses mankind has produced. He was just a pop singer, and not a very good one. He had a thin papyrus voice that hung somewhere between a twelve-year-old and Marilyn Monroe, apparently consciously and deliberately pitched there, because, as he repeated ad tedium, he didn't want to grow up and thought himself to be Peter Pan. And he didn't have very good time as compared to Henri Salvador, Frank Sinatra, Bobby Darren, Peggy Lee, and especially the magnificent Nat Cole. Madonna of course may not know much about singing, *bel canto* or otherwise, but over the years she has established herself as a connoisseur of crotches and

lubricity, and she was presumably thrilled by his way of reaching down and grabbing a fistful of gonads. Both of them seemed fixated on their orifices and appendages.

As for his great "dancing" it comprised a number of street moves, none of them very impressive. He was something of a one-trick pony, his *tour de force* being a counter-clockwise spin (never the reverse, as far as I have seen) ending in a sudden stop. It didn't begin to compare to what modern figure skaters do routinely and superbly. He wasn't in a class with Sammy Davis Jr., when he was still just a boy; and certainly not with the Nicholas Brothers, both in their childhood and later. Certainly he didn't compare to Donald O'Connor (again, when O'Connor was still a boy and later as an adult). Not to mention Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly.

Then there was his much-touted moon walk. Three days after it was first seen on television, kids all over America were doing it. And when he died, prisoners in the Philippines did it *en masse* in their exercise yard. Such was the "choreography" that his company and he resembled nothing so much as the North Korean and Turkish armies.

There were no great songs, no distinguished melodies and lifting harmonies or electrifying lyrics. As for his having sold more records than anyone in history, so what? That's like saying there are more cars on the road than there were in 1935. When I was growing up only a few kids owned "phonographs." TV was only a glimmer in the eye of the folks at RCA and CBS. As for his being the man who broke the racial barriers, has everyone forgotten Nat Cole and Billy Eckstine, who did it when it was *hard*?

There was much talk of how he changed popular music, of his "legacy." His legacy is Justin Timberlake, the latest advance in the putrefaction of American popular music.

But all the usual black suspects got their faces on television, including the unctuous and inescapable Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. The one black celebrity who got it right was Eugene Robinson, the *Washington Post* columnist who on television called Jackson "creepy."

One of the most brilliant men it has been my pleasure to know is Larry Gelbart, the screenplay and comedy writer. Given all the wallowing over the death of Princess Di, the periodic excursions into the deaths of John F. Kennedy, and the others one can name, Larry said, "We need a new television network whose motto is "All Death All Day".

I reminded him of that a few weeks back, and he said, "We need still another one: Celebrity Criminals."

Enter Bernie Madoff, exit Michael Jackson.

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