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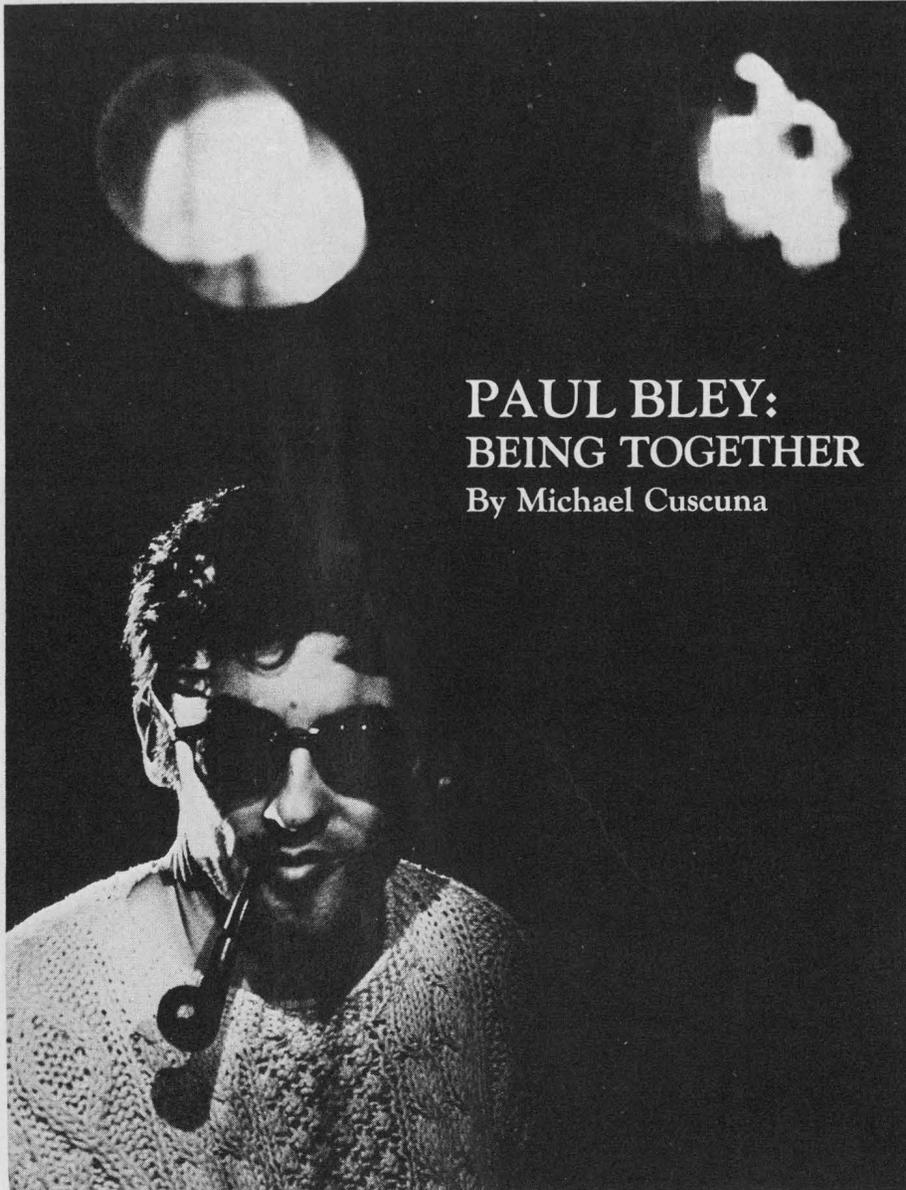
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PAUL BLEY: BEING TOGETHER

By Michael Cuscuna

FEW PEOPLE KNOW that the legendary original Ornette Coleman Quartet began as four-fifths of the Paul Bley Quintet. That, of course, says nothing about Bley the man or the musician; but it does show that the pianist was a pretty good talent scout.

Though Bley is mainly concerned with the present, and requested that this interview deal only with his post-1965 career, a few preliminary remarks seem in order.

The pianist, now 35, has been in jazz professionally for some 20 years, and his career has been a changing and fluctuating one. It is likely that each reader will come to this article with a particular image of Bley: the young man upon whom Charles Mingus lavished so much praise in 1953, or the young California combo leader who in 1958 recorded a very popular version of *Porgy*, or the pianist in Jimmy Giuffrè's revolutionary trio of the early '60s. Or perhaps the rebel quintet leader in the short-lived Jazz Composers Guild. Or the current avant garde trio leader whose stage presentations and appearance are as bizarre as Monk's or Charles Lloyd's.

The fact is that Bley is all these people, though it may be somewhat startling

to contemplate that one man could be into so many different things. Since 1948, the pianist has shared the bandstand, as leader or sideman, with Charles Mingus, Charlie Parker, Art Blakey, Chet Baker, Sweets Edison, Elvin Jones, Jimmy Giuffrè, Sonny Rollins, Coleman Hawkins, Ornette Coleman, Oliver Nelson, Don Ellis, Bobby Hutcherson, Don Cherry, Marion Brown, Gary Peacock, Eric Dolphy, Lee Konitz, Archie Shepp, Steve Lacy, Robin Kenyatta, Bill Evans, Steve Swallow, George Russell, David Izenzon, et al.; in other words, many of the major jazz figures of the past 20 years and a majority of the young talent of today.

From the beginning of his career, Bley has been an undeniably original musician. Even those who do not care for his music must admit that. "I find that I am my own influence," he says. "I have always affected the people that I have played with. I started very young and had a great deal of experience, so that I had already been into the areas in which these musicians were playing."

From straight swing and ballads to dissonant funk and jagged, threatening freedom, the repertoire of Bley's trio contains great variety, a quality lacking in too many

working groups today. He doesn't feel, however, that there is "variety" in his music. "I feel that it is always an expression of myself, I feel that one can recognize me whatever I play."

That brings us to the inevitable question: does he consider himself a free player and a part of the new music? "Free is a relative thing," he answered. "On the first album I did with Art Blakey and Charles Mingus in 1953, there were totally free sections with no preconceived ideas. It must have been natural, because that is the way I felt it. I've always been interested in challenges in playing. When I was 15, I played with a magnificent musician who himself was a work of art, who carried a culture around in himself. That was Charlie Parker. When I was first exposed to those kind of vibrations, I realized that what everyone talks about most people know nothing about. In the presence of a great jazz musician, i.e. his musical presence while playing with him, you are in the presence of a very wonderful thing. And I have found that to get that kind of strength, I have to use the freshest material available, what I consider valid and useful to everyone. So if that puts me in the new movement, then fine."

The tall, lanky ex-Canadian is virtually an expert at the art of existence and co-existence. He has spent the better part of his life absorbing and evaluating every experience, discovering and making peace with all the givens of our society. He is quiet, soft-spoken and a man of few words; yet his presence can be felt in the noisiest, most crowded of rooms. Above all, he is aware of his position, his potential and his relationships with this world.

To attain such awareness one must be egocentric, a trait which is often misconstrued as conceit. This egocentricity has given Bley confidence, peace, and the ability to live with himself while maintaining a creative existence. He is a walking definition of the state known as "being together."

For example, he insists that "to be a complete human being, one must understand one's childhood, what he came out of, how he reacted to it, and, when on his 18th birthday he received the license to adulthood, what exactly his inheritance was, because there are things to keep and things to avoid. One must be aware of one's entire output."

Bley is "together" in many areas. On one occasion, he quickly produced for me a list of the leading car-rental agencies in Manhattan, their rates, and their respective advantages and disadvantages. He can do the same with promoters, record producers, tailors, photographers, critics, and auto mechanics. Yet he rarely uses this talent to gain advantages in the business side of the music world. Although he is not bitter, the pianist has become almost indifferent to the fast-moving and often mercenary music business.

Aside from his fruitful European tours of 1965 and 1966, and several well-spaced concerts in the United States and Canada, he does not work or seek work. If the people want to hear the Paul Bley Trio, he maintains, they will see to it that he

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appears in public.

Like classical pianist Glenn Gould, composer George Rochberg and many other artists, he feels that his work will be preserved (in his case on records) and he continues his artistic development with little regard for fads, images and compromise. "In the first place, I work for money. And if the piano is not beautiful in some personal way, if it's a poor instrument, and if the conditions are not suited for playing, I prefer not to play. You can conceivably make more money doing several concerts per year than working 365 nights in night clubs."

This does not mean that the trio refuses to appear in clubs, for the leader claims that some of their greatest musical moments occur in the club atmosphere, if conditions are right. Like so many jazz artists, young and old, the pianist finds his most receptive and largest audience in Europe.

"Believe me, I think it's about time that the American public began paying for their artists. In some European countries, each citizen has to pay a \$15 licensing fee for his enjoyment of television and radio programs. Most of that money is channeled to the performing artists. In this country, the artist is the last person to get paid and the one who gets the least. We were discussing Charlie Parker before—he is a good indication of America's listening taste. They listen to all the watered-down versions, but hardly listen to Bird, the originator of that certain way of playing. You never hear Bird on the radio," he states.

Realistically understanding the level of acceptance of artistic accomplishment in a society controlled by mass media, Bley peacefully contends that "I make music primarily for myself, so that I can listen to it and enjoy it. My main purpose in playing is to make the music that I hear, that I enjoy listening to. For an artist to claim that it is his great duty to expose to the public his wonderful work is to take a rather presumptuous position. Why do you do something? It's obvious, and other artists have said it. Because you want it; you like it."

Bley's musical evolution has been a natural expression of his artistic drive. Such extraneous elements as acceptance, criticism and trends obviously have an effect on the pianist, but they do not act as motivating forces which alter his style or change his goals and direction.

"When you're talking about the future, an artist cannot see beyond the future of his own music. This takes care of influences and predictions. If one considers his own work to be the only music in the world, then one looks for the implications in the music past to determine what will come next in one's playing."

The pianist considers music to be a very special form of individual artistic expression. "All that music really is is communication between two people. You are dealing directly with emotion and the intellect in music. You just bypass certain things of the material world," he states.

In 1962, Bley settled in New York and organized a trio with bassist Steve Swal-

low and drummer Pete LaRoca. With the exception of a brief tenure in the Jazz Composers Guild leading a rather boring quintet, and a period in 1964 when he teamed with bassist David Izenzon in a duo, Bley has maintained the trio format for the past six years.

"I like playing in all size groups, but a trio seems to be the best way to clarify my ideas," he says. Since that first trio, which recorded for Savoy, the bass chair has been occupied by Gary Peacock, Kent Carter, and most recently, Mark Levenson. Levenson, a Boston-based musician, is a Bley discovery who has studied with both Peacock and Carter.

The pianist says: "I think anyone with a few years on his instrument has the ability to play anything. The trouble is their minds. They can't hear. In the '60s, there are certain prerequisites that are mandatory for a player. As soon as an instrument is expanded in some way by some figure, then this expansion becomes required for anyone else on that instrument. It seems to me that a bass player should have the tone of Steve Swallow, the technique of Gary Peacock, and the percussiveness of Wilbur Ware. These advances have already been made. This should be a starting point. Now, if someone chooses not to use these things and to express himself in some unique way, that is fine. There are many good models of what a drummer should be. From the standpoint of tone alone you have the great Roy Haynes, Tony Williams, Art Blakey and Philly Joe Jones. They have the ability to strike a drum and make a sound that's clear in definition or muddy depending on how they choose to play. Among the new music drummers, unfortunately, there's not much tone around. But it's asking a lot of a musician to be an innovator and still play well."

LaRoca, Paul Motian and Barry Altschul have been the major drummers in the trios. Most recently, Bley has been working with a young Bostonian, Billy Elgart. As implied concert master of the rhythm section, or as leader of a trio, it is the jazz pianist who has been most discerning in the selection of bassists and drummers.

The leader—the true leader—of a musical group is not the man who happened to get the gig or record date. The true leader must be an individual innovator on his instrument, must offer original material, must create a certain group sound that no one else can achieve, and must be a talent scout who takes in young musicians and helps them to develop in every way. That narrows the list to a handful, which must include Miles Davis, Randy Weston, Monk, Coltrane, Ellington and Bley. (In Bley's case, original material was contributed by Carla Bley and, Ornette Coleman; and currently, Annette Peacock.)

The trio's first recording with Steve Swallow and Pete LaRoca was entitled *Footloose* (Savoy 12182). In 1965, Bley, with Swallow and Altschul, taped a session which was ultimately released as *Closer* (ESP-Disk S-1021). On a European tour that same year, the trio (with Kent Carter now on bass) recorded a

somewhat freer album called *Touching* (European Fontana). In 1966, Bley, Altschul and Mark Levenson made another European tour which resulted in as yet unreleased sessions for Deutsche Grammophon, RCA Italiano and I.T.A. The one released record from that tour is *Blood* (Fontana 883911), which the pianist considers a summation of all his musical past. The album includes tunes by Annette Peacock, Carla Bley, Coleman, and Bley himself. The tracks are short and cover a variety of approaches from ballads to funk to frantic free pieces and the unique Bley Latin tunes.

While playing concerts on the West Coast this spring, Bley, Peacock and Elgart re-recorded most of that album; it will be released at year's end by Mercury's Limelight label under the title *Mister Joy*. In the near future, the trio, with Carter and Elgart, will do a date for Orrin Keepnews' Milestone label.

Another project which the pianist is quite thrilled about involves double albums consisting of four tunes each which he is producing independently.

"The last record we made in Europe was the one on Deutsche Grammophon which was a tape of a live concert and had long tracks," Bley says. "Annette suggested that she'd like to hear more long pieces. If something is good, I like to stay with it for a while. We have finished one double album which has Barry Altschul on drums and, on three tracks, Mark Levenson. The last tune, *Ending*, was done last summer with Barry and Gary Peacock when he came East for a short time. One album will be ballads and the other will be Latin tunes." The pianist is also listening to tapes of his 1957 group with Don Cherry, Bobby Hutcherson, Charlie Haden and Billy Higgins as well as some quartet tapes from the early '60s for possible release on a small independent label.

The future holds continued work and creation and, hopefully, wider acceptance and acknowledgement for Paul Bley. As for the shaky and much discussed future of the music known as jazz, "the present is marked with individualists. The future will hopefully continue in the same way. But I've never worried about the future of music. It seems an irrevocable factor because the changes that happen do happen in spite of any one person. And they are always the best changes that could happen. If they weren't, they would be rejected by the large body of musicians. Art forms evolve. Lesser forms just change style. So the evolution of an art form is inherent in the givens of its past and present. What happens to jazz in the next 20 years will be a wider exposition of a half-dozen leading people. There've been a lot of changes made in the last few years, but little music made so far. The next 10 years will show a lot of music being made by the individualists who are around now, and by a whole school of people who are going to hope that there is enough freshness left so that they can contribute. Time will separate the stylists from the innovators."

For the rest of Paul Bley's 1968 story, I suggest you listen to his music. 