

SIPPIN' AT MILES' OR A PRESS CONFERENCE IN REVERSE

BY DAN MORGENSTERN

The phone rang. "This is Pete Long," said a familiar voice at the other end. "Can you and Dave come to a press conference at Miles Davis' house next Monday?" We'd be

delighted. "It's going to be a little different. The musicians are going to ask the critics some questions for a change." Monday evening rolled around, and we rolled up to the West Seventies where Miles dwells. Dwells mighty nicely, too; the place made one feel warm in spite of the somewhat strained early-stage cocktail party atmosphere. (We were on time—ready to go on—even to be put on.) The Rolls-Royce outside didn't belong to Miles, but to a press agent who rents it, with chauffeur, when he really goes to town. He was there. So were some of our notable critics. Nobody quite seemed to know whether this was going to be a party or an inquisition, and one's first impulse was to get a drink. There was a nice little bar, with a nice young man behind it—he, too didn't quite seem to know whether to be friendly or formal. We managed to be both. Our hosts' good scotch, mingled with previous fortification, soon broke the strain. As new faces would arrive, each entrance was duly observed by all; some greetings seemed warm regardless of side. The smiling face of Horace Silver appeared. We joined a conversation about the Apollo, where Horace had just appeared on a bill with a lady singer who hasn't seemed happy with her audiences of late. We got off the lady, and soon discovered that we both dig the Apollo.

Time went on. The spread was tasty—and plentiful. It soon seemed as if we were at Newport; nowhere else have so many names in the trade gathered socially in recent times. There was shop talk, occasionally interrupted by gradually less nervous queries as to what was going to happen, and when. In front, in the spacious sunken living-room, some close friends of the house chatted to soft background music. Was this to be just a cocktail party after all—and a very swinging one? Not quite. Pete Long's voice, asking for attention, sent some of the precautionary drinkers to the bar for to get ready. They needn't have. All musicians and "critics" (catchcall phrase for several reporters, some jazz journalists, a publicist, three record-company owners, a few editors and maybe a couple of jazz critics) were asked to step forward. Pete Long called the roll, somewhat in the manner of a ring announcer introducing visiting celebrities, but there were a couple of laughs and everybody seemed relaxed in spite of themselves. Action? Not yet. The mike and tape had to be made ready before the meeting adjourned to the front and slowly came to order. We were going to be grilled in shifts by a jury of four musicians. Cannonball was the foreman, Gerry Mulligan played both sets, and the alternates were J. J. Johnson, Horace Silver, Billy Taylor and Gil Evans. Philly Joe Jones was the unofficial Bronx-cheer leader, and Miles, who had suddenly materialized somewhat earlier, confined his participation in the two half-hour discussions to three comments from the sidelines.

Pete's first handpicked team of "critics" shaped up well: Nat Hentoff, the dean; Ira Gitler, the cat; John Wilson, the man from the *New York Times*, and our own Dave Solomon: two beards flanking two shining pates. The critics had chairs—the musicians, facing them, were at home on the couch. Pete Long was the moderator. Cannonball kicked off—benevolent but stern. He briefly explained the purpose of the gathering, which seemed about as clear to him as to anyone else. And then—since no other man on his team volunteered to fire first—the leading question. A ques-

tion, Cannon said, often asked of musicians. "What is Jazz?" (That's the one even the dictionary can't answer.) Nat carried the ball for the defense. It was, inevitably in this situation, sincere, conciliatory and feeble—taking the question at face value, attempting a definition, leading into other things. Let's get back to the question, says the moderator, What is Jazz? (I'm dying to answer. Answers come easier on the sidelines.) Miles, listening in the back, suddenly says—not softly, not loudly—"Oh, Jesus Christ," and walks off. Raised hands in the audience go unrecognized. Mutters are heard. (*I want to answer that question like this: Jazz is my favorite music, the most beautiful music of our time, and America's gift to the world. To hell with scientific definitions, semantics—words, talking at each other instead of to and with.*)

A good moment comes when Cannonball catches Nat, who finds "some jazz criticism very disturbing." What jazz criticism, Cannonball wants to know. Name names, please. You always ask us what we think of other players. Whom of your colleagues don't you dig?

Martin Williams and Stanley Dance have been called in as substitutes for Dave Solomon and John Wilson. The "critics" walk around the broth. Martin Williams plunges in. Not everyone who writes about jazz, he says, is a critic. There aren't many real critics—and not nearly all writing about jazz is "criticism." A good point. Cannonball narrows it down. What and who is a real critic? What are his qualifications? Musical knowledge? Yes. Other things. Name names, already. Nat leaps. There are a number of European critics. Here, there are few. Maybe, off hand, only three: Martin Williams, Lou Gottlieb and Gunther Schuller. Here Miles comes in a second time. "Nat" Miles calls out, in that voice which ranks with Louis' and Erroll Garner's among the unique speaking voices in jazz, "Now Nat, when did he become a critic? Remember, J J—We gave him his first gig?" But the chair does not recognize remarks from the sidelines. Miles shakes his head. "You're in my own house and you're ignoring me," he states, half laughingly, and gives up.

In the meantime, there has been a break—the tape has run out. There is rewinding and re-refreshing. Among the new troops called into battle are Maely Dufty and Bob Reisner. And now, what was to be the evenings' final topic. Gerry Mulligan extracts from his pocket a clipping from the *Sunday Herald Tribune*. It's a column by Stanley Dance; about the *Playboy* Jazz Poll. The contention of said column is that it still helps to be of Caucasian origin when it comes to winning jazz polls. It is a dubious contention, and though Stanley fights valiantly, that claim is soon overwhelmingly decided against. But Gerry isn't satisfied. He was one of the column's examples, and the relative merits of himself and Harry Carney were brought up in print. Chet Atkins, of all people, was another Caucasian winner. (Stan Getz was Dance's third man, but Gerry derives no succor from this fact.) Neither man will give an inch. And that's where it's still at when the second tape runs out.

The formal gathering breaks up. Retreating to the bar, we encounter Gerry and Stan still at it. By now, it's almost a friendly argument—it's the old question of taste. And, perhaps, of the English and Irish. In our mind sticks a question asked during the debate by J. J. Johnson. "Isn't it true," he'd asked Stan, "that people in Europe still listen seriously to Roy Eldridge and Coleman Hawkins?" What could he have meant? (And why, come to think of it, was the older generation not represented on the jury?) Did he mean it the way it sounded, that one couldn't or shouldn't listen seriously to the masters? Well, no. Of course they still have something to say. (Still and forever.) But other things are happening. And does that mean that

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standing of that broad range of music is almost legendary. The Lomax travels across the continent with tape recorder and notebook through the auspices of the Library of Congress and various foundation grants, bore fruit in the discovery of such giants of folklore as the late guitarist-singer Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter, and an amazing repository of American Negro and general folk music documented exhaustively on Library of Congress recordings and *Folkways* LPs.

This book is another indication (as was Lomax's *Mister Jelly Roll*, the biography of Jelly Roll Morton) of tremendous research and loving dedication to details and backgrounds. This work's range is much broader than most in this vein (e.g. *Folk Blues* by Jerry Silverman, MacMillan, 1958), and covers the life and song of West Virginia miners, New England sailors, North Woods lumberjacks, Texas cowboys, Goldrush migrants, and Negro workers all over the country. The social implications of

the songs are candidly yet objectively presented in the accompanying commentaries.

Several versions of many songs are given, indicating their evolution, and in some cases hinting at present day Rock-'N-Roll distortions such as "Stagger Lee" (with overtones of "Mozelto" yet!) alias "Stagolee," "Stack O'Lee Blues," etc.

Chords for guitar accompaniment are included over the annotation of each song, and a short guitar-banjo playing guide is supplied by Lomax and folk-singer Peggy Seeger. There is a handy index of both song titles and first lines, and a substantial discography which pointedly includes Odetta, but excludes Belafonte.

This is the kind of book (all 600 pages) which is a timely entertainment guide for the general public, yet a substantial research tool which will stand up as a classic of its kind for many many years.

—AL CLOSE

SIPPIN' AT MILES (continued)

15 years from now a young musician could legitimately ask the same in reference to you, to Miles, to Sonny? Of course not. All the question really meant was that modern jazz is less popular in Europe (or rather, England) than here. We talk about J. J.'s latest album (the mood thing, *Trombone and Voices*, on Columbia). It's a nice album, and we learn that the voices (instead of strings) were J. J.'s idea. One more for the road. We say goodnight to our kind host and charming hostess, remembering a night several years ago when we stood next to them at the bar at the *Metropole*, all digging Roy Eldridge and Coleman Hawkins—seriously.

Was anything accomplished that Monday night? Nothing world-shaking, to be sure. With a different cast of characters, there might have been more aggressive questioning and less defensive answers. Some might say that the whole thing was pretty silly. But they'd be wrong. Some of us managed to get better acquainted with each other; no villains were unmasked, and nobody got nasty. There could be more get-togethers of this kind, with people from other branches of the jazz world as well. Who knows—we might even do each other some good, and knock a few chips off each others' shoulders. Next time, let's have a picnic.

By the way, what is jazz? And what is a critic?

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE CLUBS

(continued)

ported beers and a de-emphasis on hard liquor—or better "limited license." No bar whatsoever. Waiters, or at least fully clothed, wellmannered waitresses . . . that you have to call to get served. In other words—no pushing at all. Put the nut on the door. Floor show, if necessary, to match the quality of the jazz. There's plenty of this stuff now—Dick Gregory, Les Freres Jacques, Greco, Montero, Severin Dardan and that group that played the *Second City* recently—imagine a prestidigitator who took rabbits out of people's ears babbling along like Mort Sahl the while.

Imagine a Negro girl singing songs like those of Apollinaire, Queneau, Prevert, MacOrlan, Carco, that made Greco famous. Why don't American poets write songs like that? Of course blues singers, too. But a bill that automatically confines the audience to the kind of people the best jazz is for anyway. John Coltrane is not for drunks. Of course there already are a few clubs like that—most of them. significantly not in New York—*The Crystal Palace* in St. Louis, *the hungry i* in San Francisco (there are several more in San Francisco) the *Second City* in Chicago. They