

# Oscar Peterson talks jazz in the Rockies

By Iris Fleming

How many people realise that Oscar Peterson is a Canadian? Born in Montreal, he now lives in Toronto. A few months ago he took time off from the international jazz scene to take part in a jazz workshop with students at the Banff School of Fine Arts in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta. Iris Fleming interviewed him there and wrote this in the Toronto Globe and Mail, which is reprinted with permission.

It wasn't easy prying Oscar Peterson away from the students at the jazz workshop he and the Phil Nimmons Quartet of Toronto were conducting at the Banff Centre School of Fine Arts, high in the Rockies.

They clamoured for his instruction morning, noon and night.

He wished he could give them more time, he said as we finally escaped to the faculty lounge — with his admirers still trailing in his wake.

He's a big man — 6 feet, 1 inch and about 225 pounds — trying to keep in shape by doing early-morning exercises. He needs only five or six hours' sleep. At home in Toronto he works out with weights.

Oscar Peterson is as comfortable as an old friend from the moment he shakes hands. He slips easily to a first-name basis. He discusses many subjects other than music. It's hard to believe he'd been described as shy and introspective, offhand and impatient.

"I think I do have a lot more patience now," he said. "I was always too demanding of myself and the musicians I worked with." He recalled a time when he'd been riding his group hard. They finally rebelled. "What do you want of us?" one of them yelled angrily. "Music!" Oscar snorted, and slammed out of the room.

He apologised to them later. ("No, I've never found it difficult to apologise," he said.) One of the musicians, still bewildered, said "We didn't know what you wanted. You weren't taking the trouble to get through to us." The lesson, Oscar said, was good for him.

He had to learn to control his temper, too. When he was younger he'd get mad at someone or something and hang around and say nothing. It would build up inside him. "Get mad more often," his mother



kept telling him. "Don't let it all come out at once." If he did this, she said, he'd be less inclined to get mad at all. The advice worked — eventually. He also gives credit to his wife's influence.

He's been married twice and has five grown-up children by his first marriage. He's grinningly proud about being a grandfather, especially of recently-arrived twins.

He has always had a phenomenal memory. It made school easy for him in Montreal, where he was born, and it meant he could get away with hardly any practicing when he was forced to take piano lessons. He could run through a piece once or twice and know it. His father would return after several days at his railway-porter job and praise his son for practicing well.

Oscar hated the piano for many years — he was 5 when he took his first lesson. Then something clicked and he knew it was for him. He quit high school to give it full time, though by then his father wanted him to become a lawyer.

The rest everyone knows. He became a master in the field of jazz. He plays all over the world. His scheduled appearance in the Soviet Union will be his first in that country.

After his week of teaching at the Banff Centre, he went fishing in the mountains for a few days. Fishing, photography and astronomy are his hobbies. And he likes to think he's a pretty good handyman around the house.

He never worries about hurting his famous hands. Other people do the worrying. Some of them persuaded him to insure his hands with Lloyds. "And that," he said, "started something. The day the policy became effective, I slammed the car door on my hand, and I had one accident after another after that. I cancelled the policy and I've had nothing happen to my hands since. How do you explain that?"

A shudder went through him when he was asked how he'd cope if an accident did put an end to his playing. "I don't like to even think about it," he said. "I suppose I could go on composing, but just the thought of not being able to play..." He shuddered again.

This doesn't mean that, although only 49, he isn't thinking of retiring. "Not tomorrow or the day after," he added, "but I have it in mind." He is cutting down on appearances, which have taken up 44 weeks of the year.

He talked happily about his new house just outside Toronto. And that led to talking happily about his dog. Oscar loves all animals, but most of all he loves his two-year-old Boxer named Sanford, who sounds as dumb as they come.

Sanford graduated from obedience school and Oscar still can't believe it.

"I went along with my wife to one of the classes," he said, "and it took that dog about 10 minutes before he knew my wife was trying to get his attention. And then he knocked down everything he was supposed to walk around. Everything went flying."

Oscar told more stories about loveable ol' stupid Sanford's awkwardness around the house and, as he did so, laughed so hard he could hardly speak.

Which mightn't go down too well with Mrs. Peterson. She was stuck with training loveable ol' stupid Sanford.