

Jazz great comes to York

The stature and reputation of York's Music Department has recently received a significant boost from world renowned jazz pianist Oscar Peterson. The Canadian jazz musician will soon be conducting master classes for York music students and will also be performing a concert at Roy Thomson Hall on February 15 to fund a York music scholarship. Excilibur's Gary Barwin and Bob Mojkut recently spoke to Peterson about his involvement with York, and his experiences as a young performer.

Q. What brought you to York and what will you be doing here?

A. Well, I'll start with what brought me here. First of all, Jim McKay, Chairman of the Music Department and David Bell, Dean of Graduate Studies, were instrumental in bringing me here. They approached me about conducting classes—sort of a series of master classes, so to speak, at York. I have always been interested in the educational end of modern music, because the amount of written work available to students as in the classical music field. There hasn't been the amount of teachers there as in the students of modern jazz as there has been in the classical field, all over the world. The other thing, of course, is that I have done reasonably well in the profession and I feel that with this problem existing in the educational field jazz-wise, I felt that that was one end that I could help fill in. It's nothing unusual because people like Billy Taylor have at one time or another conducted master classes. Stan Getz, I believe, is in residence at certain times of the year at Stanford, as a professor in modern music.

Talking it over with David and Jim, Jim suggested that I should probably be made an adjunct professor, here at York, and then come in and carry on a form of master class. What I'm going to be doing is a varied operation, because everyone needs something a little different. The main underlying problems are the same musically but, as jazz is a very personal art form, there are very personal problems that we have to approach for each individual. As a result of this, I will be doing some holding master classes, wherever possible, because sometimes, as you can well realize, some students will sit in the classroom taking a lecture, and still not totally have a full grasp of what the innards of it was all about. Those will be the things I will be going over with them. I will be setting up various musical situations for the students to fulfill, hopefully. It's a bit cramped this particular time because I'm sort of feeling my way schedule wise.

Q. In addition to teaching at York, you are also giving a benefit concert for us, at Roy Thomson Hall.

A. The concert is really to aid the university in establishing a scholarship. It will be awarded annually to a deserving student and the concert will be held on February 15th. The Trio will be coming in, which is Niels Henning Orsted Pedersen from Denmark on bass and Martin Drew on drums from London.

Q. So the proceeds go to establishing the Oscar Peterson Scholarship for Jazz Studies. Could you tell us about the project for the CBC TV on February 14th?

A. Well the CBC's going to come in and film what I think is going to be called "Master Class", which means that they will come in and sit as an auditor for what we do in the class. We're trying to keep that as normal as possible. I must add that nothing is going to be 'set up'.

Q. Like, "play these notes here and I'll tell you to play these notes?"

A. If you get your lumps on the air, you get your lumps on the air. I think it's a good thing because it will serve to certainly spotlight the aggressiveness that York Music's taken in this particular area of music studies, and hopefully it will be an example and an encouragement for a lot of other students to continue in their studies and to think of coming to a university like York, whether it be here or to whatever other university they feel they want to go to. And to let them know that this sort of study is available to them. It's not done as a huge commercial but it's done as a realistic thing.

Q. I'd like to ask you a very Downbeat magazine-sounding question: The debate in jazz education circles over two different approaches to learning jazz still goes on. Should a student find a model and aim to play like that performer or should he rather try to seek their own voice right from the start?

A. It has been done that way, but both these avenues can turn out to be very dangerous and also very nonproductive and frustrating in the end result. Because if you model yourself totally after some performing artist, it's very hard to break that mold further down along the line. Every day you become a little more embedded in that particular procedure, don't you? By the same token, if

you work by yourself I think that the hazard there is that you will probably accrue a group of bad moves and bad habits that the student will find very difficult to break. I think that the best way to approach all of this is to avail yourself of what you have. I always teach the opposite way round—I say, listen to every-thing. The one thing I don't want to happen here, particularly with the piano stu-dents, is to have a bunch of little Oscar Peter-dents, running around—that we don't need. What I want to do is to put the students in situations musically that I have faced and that other performers have faced and let them over-come those hazards here. So that when they meet them out there in the performing world, they won't become quite the hassle that they can be.

Q. I guess then that you can look at different styles as repertoire.

A. Right. Everyone's influenced; I'm influ-enced. As long as it doesn't become an affliction—that's what you have to be careful of, where you cross that line.

Q. In terms of music and style, what are you intending to work with your students on?

A. I usually leave it up to them, because I've learned one thing a long time ago—it's better to let them pick their own disease. Let them choose for themselves for that way they can't say that you laid it on them. So I usually come in and say "what would you like to play?", same as I do in the group. That way it gives them a certain amount of comfort and then if anything goes wrong you say "well, this was your choice, it wasn't mine." Incidentally, going back to the stylistic thing, there's one thing I always recommend and I will always do this, I seldom ever take a stand on someone's style, certainly not publicly. I have my likes and dislikes but I like them to remain pretty personal. What I do recommend, as I said earlier, was that I encourage all my students to listen. One of the things that I want to encourage them to do is to go to the library and borrow a record and listen to specific records of people that have preceded all of us, just as you do to start playing classical music. They should be doing the same for jazz.

Q. How do you perceive your style to have changed over the years?

A. I answer that the same way I've been answering it—hopefully it's matured. It's very difficult to equate to what's happening in many cases because it's happening to you, or in this case, me. You know you play your own matter how well you play with the instrument, that personal scuffles, even though they may be other listeners, may not even be aware of. And at some point you start to overcome even those. I think that at that point, that's where the maturity possibly begins and when you're mature, the maturity curiosity starts within you. Some of the things that I've been looking at in what I've done more recently and I've been evaluating what I've been writing and I think that really a lot of things that I've been writing have come as a surprise to me, because years ago I'm sure I didn't have that kind of depth. And I've questioned why I would go certain ways even in writing and the only way I can answer it is to say that hopefully it's maturity, and I see it reflected in my playing. Again, one end refreshes the other; the writing seems to refresh my playing, and the playing seems to refresh the writing. In the last five years I encourage the writing. In the last five years I have probably written more than I have in my entire life. And I have to say this again, without getting into this totally—some of this is a result of my getting involved with the electronic instruments, and some of the sounds that I've heard them producing inspired me to take certain avenues compositionally.

Q. What is the Africa Suite exactly? I've heard of this large piece you've been working on.

A. Ahh, if it ever gets finished...

Q. What is the exact title?

A. It's called 'A Suite Called Africa.' It's sort of theory because I haven't been to that many parts of Africa, as I imagine they would look to me and the way they feel to me from what I've seen when I was there, obviously. Contrary to what was said recently in an article, it is not a piece centred on South Africa. There are a couple of tunes from the Suite, one was written for Nelson Mandela, already banned in South Africa (laughs) but anyway that isn't the focus of the Suite. It's written from my impressions of the various places—much like the Cana-dian Suite. When I wrote that, there were cer-tain parts of Canada that I'd never seen.

Q. Have you incorporated African Musical ideas into it?

A. No, not necessarily. Just the way it affected me. Parts of it are for solo keyboard, parts of it electronic. The problem is having enough time to get it finished.

Q. You mentioned somewhere regarding teaching here that you felt it was 'time to give some back now'...

A. You know, I've been very fortunate. My dear friend and personal manager, Norman Granz said, "You know, I really can't explain you," adding, "there's no reason for your existence" and he was going through this sort of banter. And I understand what he is saying. He said "in today's world there's no reason—I can't explain really if you press me, I can't explain why you're so successful." He said his evaluation is that possibly my dedication in which I haven't "sold out." And I realize what my musical presence means in various places around the world. I'm very successful all over the world and that's a great honour to me—I'm very pleased about it. But you can't always take, you have to put something back in. One of the problems in the jazz field—years ago when we had jazz clubs and we had various environments that players could play in, those clubs don't exist anymore. And when they had come in with a budding artist, and with enough appearances, with big names, those groups would gradually gain enough public acclaim that they would be able to come back on their own. That's the way I remember it in Chicago where I got started—I appeared first with the Duke Ellington Orchestra. It was "Duke Ellington" and the second attraction was Oscar Peterson, whatever that meant, and I shared the bill with Duke and was honoured to do it. The next time was with Woody Herman but it was equal billing. And the next time, I came in by myself, my group came in by itself. I don't see that anymore because these places don't quite exist, the whole spectrum of jazz performance has changed: there's now jazz on television, jazz festivals, and jazz specials on the small music halls like they used to have so we could have some of the small groups like a MJQ (Modern Jazz Quartet) perform in a limited space. Today everybody is thinking, you know, Madison Square Garden and the Gardens here, which is no good for our medium. But nevertheless, because those avenues where a player can gain experience are not available, there's been a drop in the repro-duction of jazz artists. And also, because I've been lucky enough that I can go out on stage in Munich, Germany and have people stand up and applaud me, well, if that's the case then I can help someone else get through then that's the name of the game, I have no other axe to grind. I want to retain an interest—I'm vitally inter-ested in what goes on in modern music and in what I do, I love what I do, and music is my hobby. When I'm off, I'm in my studio. So it's some-thing that fills my life.

Q. What you were saying, it reminds me of a jazz memoir I read, especially around the '40s, sitting with bands, especially around the '40s, hopping from one club to the other, sitting in moving round. In that way the apprentice thing happens—I guess York is setting that up artificially. Normally a 'jazz name' wouldn't let you sit in...

A. In a club like Birdland or Bourbon Street you can envision it, can't you?

Q. Yes, but I haven't seen it happen.

A. Oh I have many times. Because we used to call those roasting sessions. If you stuck your head in you either came up with it or you got roasted. And that's where the players evolved from. The beautiful part about that—it was almost like the famous gunfighter syndrome, somebody would tap you on the shoulder and say, "Can I sit in?" and if you didn't know the person, there's a good chance you could have gotten hurt. Because it would be the local hotshot and somebody says "can I sit in?", you say "yeah" out of ego, and you suddenly look up and you're getting wasted. Not too funny... But they used and you're getting the same degree. They used to have piano parties, too. I attended one in that doesn't exist to know Art Tatum, and I to do name you 5 well known piano players, L.A. when I first got to know Art Tatum, and I could name you 5 well known piano players, that were there. Most of them are dead now, and once Art walked in, no one wanted to go to the piano. That kind of environment is what can happen here, as players progress, they will

gain a certain confidence. Often, as far as young artists were concerned, approaching professional artists, it was a closed shop. I remember (there were a couple of other pianists in Montreal at the time) going to them and asking, "How do you do, so and so?" and getting brushed aside. You know—"Later kid, haven't got the time..." A couple were very

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cooperative—there was one gentleman that I felt was a great pianist in Montreal and he used to say, "Come get your training" and he was playing in a club where they had a show, a chorus line and at that time I guess they had package shows—they'd send in 6 people in the chorus line and then the MC and a comedian and a main act or something. And so I'd come in and he'd say, "Come on," and I'd go up and see and he'd leave. I'd go play the show and everything else and play with the band, and he'd come back a couple hours later and say "OK kid, go home..." Other times he'd have me sit and listen to him, and I'd say, "Can I sit in?" and he'd say, "No, learn." He was one of those, that was the training then. There was no York to go to... It was interesting part of it, because I wasn't in New York, I wasn't down where 'it' was all happening. And when I showed up on the scene in New York, well, I got a pretty cold reception from a lot of the guys. Some were glad to see me, some weren't, but you need that competitive edge. I think that you need it—if you're a football player you don't want to be always play high school football; sooner or later you're going to fade, whatever the epitome is whether it be the Ti-Cats or the Miami Dolphins or whoever it is you're going to face. And I think that did me a lot of good.

Q. You mentioned earlier that you were a bit of a renegade. Was just being a jazz player at that time considered in that way?

A. I think that I have a great retentive sense and as a result I learn very quickly and so I was impatient and to be very frank with you, I don't think I was a drag in class, I wasn't one of those. But I found it very difficult, it was like dragging my feet, because I was studying privately anyway. I had commitments that I had to meet privately and then I'd come to the classroom and I'd say OK, sleeping through it, but you have to move at whatever pace the class moves at.

Q. Was jazz considered by your parents or your peers an unrespectable thing to do?

A. No, I can't say that it was. My parents certainly didn't think it was. My dad's only comment, when I went to him and said that I wanted to quit school, to be—he said, "What do you want to be?"—a doctor or something. I do you want to be a jazz pianist. His me being a lawyer, or a doctor or something. He told him that I wanted to be the best. If you're going to leave, leave on one condition, you be the best. You're not going to be another piano player around town." And he kept reminding me about that. Jazz at that time I don't think was taken as seriously as it later was, and is now. I think it's ironic that I can go in and play a benefit concert for the San Diego Symphony Orchestra. I don't think that it's ironic that I can be the only artist other than a pure classical artist on one of the largest classical schedules in Europe. So obviously it is a serious music—somewhere.