

The Chameleon Days of Dick Hyman

By JOHN McDONOUGH

If jazz history is ruled by its creators, it's been pianist Dick Hyman's special calling to be its re-creator. For 60 years, the scholarly Mr. Hyman has worked under no apparent constraints of technique or typecasting, playing everything from ragtime and stride to Keith Jarrett and McCoy Tyner with a penetrating understanding. Accordingly, he has popped up, Zelig-like, over the years in the company of such diverse companions as Eubie Blake, Charlie Parker, Teddy Wilson, Art Blakey, Benny Goodman, Arthur Godfrey, Sonny Stitt, Igor Stravinsky—and, oh yes, even Leonard Zelig, the fictional hero of the Woody Allen film for which Mr. Hyman wrote the music and lyrics to "Doin' the Chameleon," "Chameleon Days" and "You May Be Six People (But I Love You)."

Mr. Hyman is something of a chameleon himself, slipping effortlessly in and out of other pianists' identities like a great character actor. I once asked this master of so many styles, "But do you have a style?" He was not offended. "To me I do," he said. "Naturally it's a compendium of everything else and a few other things. But if you're asking whether my facility in dealing with other styles has caused people to think that's all I can do, that's probably a correct statement. But I don't worry about that. I do it my own way."

His mother and uncle were accomplished pianists, while his older brother was a dedicated record collector—a combination that produced a brilliant musician with a sense of history. Mr. Hyman, born in 1927, came of age in the early bebop era of the late 1940s but found its scope professionally

limiting. So he prospered in the studios of NBC and CBS while maintaining his profile on the New York jazz scene. His horizons spread in all directions, making him a supremely versatile pianist and a deeply knowledgeable scholar of American popular music.

But his magnum opus may well be his most recent project, "Dick Hyman's Century of Jazz Piano" (Arbors Records). In it he tackles nearly all the major piano innovators, distilling their essence with an uncanny accuracy and elucidating their

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relationships in the perspective of history. Most of the performances were recorded about 12 years ago on a Yamaha Disklavier, a reproducing piano not unlike the old player piano, but with sensitive digital codes instead of mechanical paper rolls. For the current CD set, the computer discs were fed into a Yamaha piano and the music recorded under studio conditions. Mr. Hyman also re-did several pieces, adding other musicians, and appears in a companion DVD demonstrating specific players' techniques.

"I worked from some published manuscripts" of composers such as Scott Joplin, George Gershwin, and James P. Johnson, he says. "But as the project developed I came to see it was as much about my playing, take it or leave it, and how I'd like these things to sound. On some I'm perfectly authentic; on others, more interpretive." He spells all this out in

his program notes, which specify "minimal" to "substantial" to "freely in the manner of."

So who among the nearly 100 virtuosos that Mr. Hyman caricatures with such affectionate precision—Joplin, Fats Waller, Erroll Garner, Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, Dave Brubeck, Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, Oscar Peterson, and more—is the "greatest"?

"Certainly in my time growing up," he says, "Art Tatum was the greatest. [But] the more I got into this project, the more I realized how subjective and personal that is." When dealing with George Shearing in the DVD, for instance, he comes close to declaring him the greatest. "Yes, I did say that," he admits. "In a way I'm shifting the focus of greatness from speed to touch when I talk about Shearing, which is why such judgments are so subjective. There is such a thing as touch in the way you handle the keys. Jelly Roll Morton was very tough on the keys. He had no sense of that at all. Neither did Bud Powell. But Tatum does it exquisitely and so does Shearing, I think."

Mr. Hyman makes it clear that there are many paths to greatness for a jazz pianist, and not all of them are through the keyboard. Take Monk, for example. "I don't like the way he plays," Mr. Hyman says. "I never did. But I like the way he composes. I don't care for the way in which he treats the instrument. And I don't really like his casual improvisations. They seem in pieces and sloppy when he'd play a few notes together, a lot of finger slipping." Jazz is full of harmonic ambiguities, he notes, and he loves players who can get in the center of such places. "If Monk played better, I might say the same thing about him. That's

why I prefer not to hear his own recordings of his tunes."

There is one nonpianist in Mr. Hyman's survey—John Coltrane, whom he represents with an uncommonly patient "Giant Steps." "That piece is an ingenious harmonic conception," he says, "that demanded different patterns of thinking than anybody was used to [in 1960] and that many people are still not used to. That's why I took it in an unlikely place, like a waltz. He had great influence over all instrumentalists, of course, and 'Giant Steps' is a kind of marker in jazz evolution."

Out of Coltrane came new ways of conceptualizing jazz: Messrs. Jarrett and Tyner, and Evans, whom Mr. Hyman considers perhaps the last widely influential piano stylist. After Evans, he notes, "the choice became to swing like Oscar [Peterson] or be ethereal like Bill. My interest in Evans is not his swing but his harmonics, which have produced many offshoots."

Though he's been on the scene since 1955, Cecil Taylor still represents to many the untamed outback of abstraction in jazz. So Mr. Hyman more or less concludes with "Corkscrews," an original that captures in broad, somewhat perfunctory strokes Mr. Taylor's stew of spidery runs and colliding dissonances. "I used Cecil as an extreme," he says. "I don't know how to evaluate him. He is outside musicology—more into philosophy."

But he's not outside the reach of Mr. Hyman's unique gift for musical caricature, which has made him to the piano what Al Hirschfeld was to the pen.

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