

The Underdogs of Jazz Piano

by Gary Giddins

THE PIANO HAS BEEN UBIQUITOUS IN JAZZ IN THE NEARLY EIGHTY YEARS SINCE JELLY ROLL MORTON HIT THE ROAD, AND YOU COULD APPROXIMATE A JAZZ HISTORY SIMPLY BY ASSEMBLING A FEW RECORDINGS BY THE KEY PIANISTS. CONSIDER, FOR

example, the stylistic diversity of Earl Hines, Fats Waller, Art Tatum, Teddy Wilson, Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, Erroll Garner, Bill Evans, Cecil Taylor, and McCoy Tyner. But don't stop with them. The music of the innovators provided the jumping-off points for countless disciples, the best of whom became stylists in their own right. These lesser lights, though not widely known and invariably ranked by critics as B-level, have their own virtues. Recent albums by some gifted yet perennially underrated pianists suggest in part the ways in which prominent jazz piano styles are being extended. You can see in them something of a subhistory of jazz, but though they are preserving styles of playing, they are not mere archivists. They elaborate and embellish the work of the masters, occasionally combining two or more classic styles as a new synthesis.

IN THE 1920s, JAMES P. JOHNSON and Fats Waller spearheaded the Harlem stride style named for the striding lateral movement of the pianist's left hand. Although Waller achieved enormous popular success at the time with his irreverent treatments of pop songs, his piano solos were relatively little known. Happily, he had several disciples who persevered with his techniques when few people wanted to hear them, and one of the best of these, Ralph Sutton, is still going strong. Sutton made his New York debut in 1947 and impressed the traditionalists with his implacable left hand, a living metronome icily marking the beat while his right hand dashingy embellished the melody. The recent reissue of his 1950 performances, **Bix Beiderbecke Suite and Piano Portraits** (Commodore XFL 16570), proves that he is one of the liveliest custodians of a difficult style and that he can apply it to music that Waller would not have played—specifically, the four Debussyan piano pieces by the legendary cornetist Bix Beiderbecke.

And yet, modernists of Sutton's time

dismissed him as an archivist; young pianists and listeners were justifiably more excited by the new sounds of bop, and especially by its foremost keyboard practitioner, Bud Powell. In a way, Powell took the approach opposite to that of Waller, reducing his left-hand figures to a spare pattern of chords while the right hand improvised as freely as a saxophonist. Powell's manic energy was a revelation to numberless pianists, including Hank Jones, Barry Harris, and Tommy Flanagan.

Jazz wars have a way of reversing themselves, though; by the mid-Fifties, jazz enthusiasts were searching again for something new. As a result, Flanagan, one of the most dynamic of the second-generation bop pianists, found himself more in demand as an accompanist to singers (Ella Fitzgerald, Tony Bennett) than as a solo recording artist. But now, in this period of benign eclecticism, a first-rate bop pianist is as hard to find as a first-rate stride stylist, and Flanagan has made up for the lost time with more than twenty albums in the past decade. The most recent, and one of the best, is a trio session called **Giant Steps** (Enja 4022), an incisive homage to John Coltrane; he originally recorded four of the album's selections with Coltrane on the saxophonist's seminal 1959 album of the same name. Flanagan weaves fleet, involuted right-hand phrases against elliptical bass-clef chords and shows how adaptable Bud Powell's vision is. **So does a relative newcomer to jazz named Larry Vuckovich, whose *City Sounds, Village Voices* (Palo Alto PA 8012) brings bop voicings and rhythms to bear on the folk music of his native Yugoslavia. Using blues chords and rhythmic vamps, Vuckovich leads a hard-driving sextet through a program of originals, bop classics, and pop standards, revitalizing a shopworn idiom with unaffected pleasure.**

By the late Fifties the seeds of a new jazz war were planted by a generation of modernists whose music was tagged as avant-garde. Although Cecil Taylor was one of its prime movers, the new music often seemed inhospitable to the piano—few pianists could figure out how not to

play the chordal textures that the wind players were trying to avoid. The most admired pianists of the period included Taylor, whose thundering note clusters suggested the possibility of atonality, and McCoy Tyner. But there was another interesting pianist who got lost in the shuffle after recording a couple of cult-building albums. Don Pullen was wrongly characterized as a Taylor follower; he was up to something quite different. Pullen's clusters and sweeping arpeggios may seem chaotic, yet they are rigidly defined by the harmonies and rhythms of his compositions. On his new album, **Life Line** (Timeless SJP 154), which he leads with saxophonist George Adams, he uses a seemingly slapdash modernist attack to enliven fairly conventional settings (bop, the blues, calypso), as if to prove that one man's chaos can be another's high-wire formalism.

HOWEVER BLIGHTED THE RECORD industry may be, jazz piano records proliferate year after year, mainly because they are relatively inexpensive to make. A good pianist should be able to knock out a satisfying album in an afternoon; even a so-called B-level pianist, then, has a good shot at a record date.

One advantage of not being an innovator is that you can treat everyone else's innovations with democratic ardor. The B pianists are valuable precisely because they aren't intransigent; they can afford a certain playfulness in their work that doesn't come as easily to the musician who is forever expected to make significant statements about the art. On the other hand, the playfulness itself bespeaks a kind of innovation. **Not only do Sutton's expansion of the stride repertoire, Flanagan's and Vuckovich's application of bebop principles to the music of Coltrane and of Eastern Europe, and Pullen's steamrolling virtuosity suggest reconsiderations of classic jazz styles; they put in perspective the temporal feuds that obscured one school at the expense of another. When they play as well as they do on these records, their mastery needs no apology.**

GARY GIDDINS's *Riding on a Blue Note: Jazz and American Pop* (Oxford) is now in paperback.