

JAZZ

Joe Bushkin

THE pianist and composer Joe Bushkin is the size of a bean pole, but he is highly detailed. He has a handsome, foxy face, a sharp nose, wavy black hair that is turning gray, and Lincoln eyes. His face, worn by the winds of music, is wrinkled. He has a guttural voice and the trace of a stutter. He becomes a dervish when he plays. Grimaces and expressions of exhilaration cross his face. He sways back and forth, as if he were rowing in thick weather, sometimes leaning back so far he disappears. His small feet dance intricately and furiously beneath the piano, and he marks successful arpeggios by shooting his right leg into the air. He is tireless. When he is not rowing, he weaves from side to side, and every few minutes he turns his head to the rear so fast it appears that it may go all the way around. No matter how long or how fast he plays (he cherishes up-tempo), he keeps his music on an ecstatic plane.

Bushkin has spent little time in New York since he moved to California, with his wife and children, some twenty years ago. He took a short gig at Michael's Pub in 1975, and a year later he accompanied Bing Crosby's troupe during a brief stay at the Uris Theatre. Last fall, he played three triumphant weeks at the Café Carlyle, and he is there again, with a quartet (Howard Alden on guitar, Milt Hinton on bass, Butch Miles on drums). He talked about himself recently in his midtown hotel suite. He had made the living room an extension of himself. A rented electric piano sat by the door. Three big pieces of poster paper, covered with telephone numbers, addresses, and appointments, were taped to the wall behind a small desk. On the desk were a cassette player, a cassette copier, and two telephones, one installed by him. He moved continuously while he talked—standing loosely in the middle of the room, stretching out for three or four minutes on a sofa, perching a foot on the edge of a chair. He can talk steadily for hours, in a sometimes impenetrable stream of consciousness. Almost constant expletives link his words.

A swatch of Bushkin talk might go like this: "Frank Yerby—you know, the writer—used to come into the Em-

bers every night in the early fifties, and I was embarrassed, because I was playing the same goddam library every night. One time, he said, 'Come over to my house in the South of France and hang out,' and I did. I got a note from Bing saying he was going to Paris. He had a compulsion about dictating notes. If you called and he was out and you left a message, you'd get a precise note telling you why he wasn't there—he was in Canada fishing, he was in New York on business, whatever. He always carried a Dictaphone and answered his mail on it the minute he read it. Leo,



his stand-in for thirty-five years, would transcribe the letter and sign Bing's name so that it looked just like Bing's Bing. I was going to go from France to Italy, I wanted to get some of that atmosphere. Yerby took me up some stinking mountain in the French Alps to ski. I had never skied in my life. I don't know why Yerby did this to me, I was a pretty good houseguest, but he took me up there and skied off. I panicked. So I sat down on my skis and went all the way down and up to this snack bar at the bottom of the mountain. Yerby was there, and he said, 'What are you doing here? You're supposed to be on the mountain with the instructor I sent.' Well, I was frozen into the position I was in, and I spent three days in bed that way. When I did loosen up, we went to a flea market in Nice, and there was this old painting. It was some king, and it looked just like Bob Hope. I wanted to give it to Bing as a gag. The dealer was asking five hundred dollars, but it wasn't a five-hundred-dollar gag. Yerby told me that the dealer didn't care about the painting—it was the frame. It was the kind of huge golden frame that if you were a dentist you'd repair it with putty and cotton wads and the glue dentists use. So I bought the picture and Yerby peeled it off the frame and rolled it up. I took it to Paris, and Spencer Tracy was there and he said it was a goddam good painting. Bing arrived and he cracked up. Now, I'm gone, I leave Europe, and I don't see Bing for a year or two, a stretch of time. I say, 'What did you do with the painting of Hope?' Bing said he had Paramount frame it, and he hung it in his dining room and

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asked Hope for dinner. Hope thought Bing had had it painted, and he refused it when Bing offered it to him. When Bing laid his steely-cold blues on someone, they generally thought it was a put-down, but he was just careful. People were always after him for something."

Bushkin is given to sayings that fall between maxims and one-liners:

I come from a large, poor family, and I never knew what it was to sleep alone until I got married.

I don't drop names; names drop on me.

There is no money in swing music.

I'm happy ninety-five per cent of the time, and the other five per cent I'm asleep.

Here is how Bushkin spoke of his life: "I was born in New York City on November 7, 1916. We lived on a Hundred and Third Street between Park and Madison, in a tough Jewish-Italian-Irish neighborhood. I have a brother, Arthur, who's two years older. He played violin but ended up a C.P.A. He's retired, and he and his wife, Mildred—she taught at Rutgers—live in Tucson. My father's name was Al, and he came over from Kiev to beat the Army rap—the conscription. My mother lived around the corner in Kiev, but they met in New York. He opened a two-chair barber-shop here. He had been a cellist, and he kept his cello and a music stand in the shop, and he'd play between customers. He was very particular, my father. He wouldn't take just anybody off the street, and he never had anyone work for him, because he said if a man was good enough to cut hair in his shop he was good enough to be in business for himself. In order to maintain his family in an apposite style, my father went along with the tide. He always had a Morris Plan loan out. He got income from slot machines that he kept in a room behind the shop, and from alcohol that he had stored in cans. He cut the hair of one of the big gangsters in the guy's apartment. People liked my father. He was a good loser and a good winner. My mother's name was Ruth Hirsch. She was a typical, plain Russian woman who cooked beautifully. She kept the house spotless and herself the same. No matter when any of the rest of us got up, she was up first, nicely dressed and every hair in place. She was totally subservient to my dad. He chose all her clothes, and I never remember her contradicting him. Of course, she knew his temper. Once, he threw a piano stool at me and just missed. My

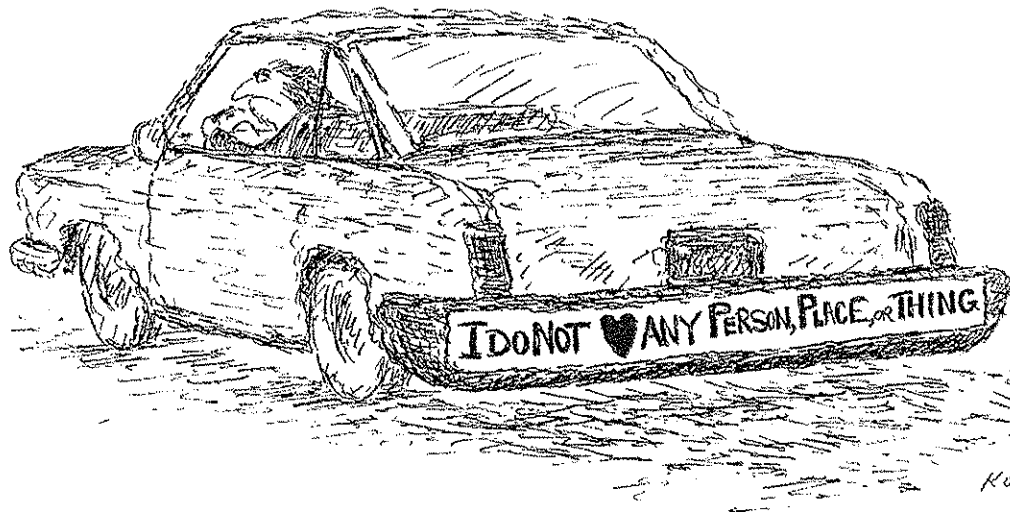
parents were the way they were because they were so damned glad to be in this country and because they wanted to be respected. My dad never lost his love of music. He would take Arthur and me—one one week, one the next—to the Sunday-morning concerts at the Capitol Theatre. Eugene Ormandy was the first violin in the orchestra. And he took us to Carnegie Hall to hear Percy Grainger and Brailowsky and Josef Hofmann. He told me Hofmann would get bigger and bigger as the concert went on, and he was right. Hofmann filled the place with so much music that he seemed huge when he had finished.

"I went to P.S. 171. It was on a Hundred and Third Street between Fifth and Madison, just across the way from the Academy of Medicine. The big joke in school was that they kept an ape in there and that one night he would escape and knock off the principal. I started piano when I was ten. I took lessons from Sarah Brodsky, who was eighteen and beautiful and lived above us, on the third floor. She charged fifty cents, and I studied with her six months. A nicely dressed old man named Kosoff owned our building, and he'd come around to collect the rent. Once, when he was sick, his son came. He was just back from Europe. He told me to go out of the room where our piano was, and he began picking out notes and asking me to identify them. I got them all. Then he did two notes and three, and I got them. I had perfect pitch. He told my father he wished to give me piano lessons. He lived on Riverside Drive, so every week my father shut his shop and took me over and waited—that's the way he was. The lessons were three dollars—about twelve haircuts, or five hours of work for him. Kosoff would tell me that I was not reading the notes—that I was faking—when I played for him. He said that I must learn to write music before I learned to read it. He'd make me copy pieces into a copybook and then play the piece from that. I took lessons from him until I was thirteen. Then I had a bicycle accident. I was doing the no-hands bit on a Hundred and Sixth Street and a truck hit

me, and I landed in broken glass. My right hand and the left side of my face were cut up, and I was taken to the hospital at Fifth Avenue and a Hundred and Sixth. When I got home, my father had no idea what had happened, and he was so upset he whacked me on the good side of my face. Later, he came to my room with a tray of food, kissed me on the forehead, and fed me dinner. But he never said a word about hitting me. I couldn't play the piano for a while. I had been crazy about learning the trumpet, so I added that to my musical arsenal. My father bought me one—a dollar a month, and lessons for a quarter. I was in the school band within three months. I loved the trumpet—just one note at a time. It's not like the piano—that hammer is out to land once you hit the key, and you practically have to beg it to come back.

"I went to DeWitt Clinton High, but it was too scholastic. They called my father in, and I ended up in a trade school on Eighteenth Street. I learned to paint signs and do posters and layout. I was very good, and if I weren't a musician I'd be a layout man. I was also doing club dates on the piano at three dollars a night for Benny Goodman's brother Irving, who had a band out on Long Island. Around this time, I went with my father to a cousin who was a dentist. His office was way up on Edgewood Avenue. We were the last patients, and when we were finished my cousin and my dad decided to have a drink. They walked through a billiard parlor at the end of a hall in his building and into a speakeasy. A black band was playing, and that music hit me like a cosmic fusion: I knew where I wanted to be the rest of my life. I found out later it was one of the bands that Elmer Snowden, the banjo player,

had around Harlem. My first real job on piano was in the summer and fall of 1932 with Frank LaMarr at the Roseland Ballroom in Brooklyn. Hey, it's not too late to celebrate my demi-centennial! Most of the twelve or so guys in the band were Italian, and they'd bring their own homemade wine. By midnight, there would only be four of us left on the stand. My next job was with Paul Tremaine and His Band from Lonely Acres. They were at a Chinese restaurant in the Forties. You could have lunch for thirty-five cents, music included. Then I got a job at the Prince George Hotel in Hoboken, which turned out to be a whorehouse. It was run by a marvellous woman named Nan. You didn't mess with her. Once, she waited until this drunk who was bugging me put his hand on me, then she knocked him across the room. It was a real 'Melancholy Baby' world. The band consisted of an alto-saxophone player and me, and when we weren't on the stand I accompanied the jukebox on my trumpet. I made forty dollars a night—9 P.M. to 5 A.M. I started buying thirty-dollar suits at Mervin S. Levine. My father couldn't believe I was making all that money, so one evening he pulled a 'Big Sleep' and followed me. When he saw where I was working, he took me out of there, and it broke Nan's heart. My dad still had his arms around me. After that, I heard that Lester Lanin was taking a group to Boca Raton for the winter. Lanin himself played drums at the audition, and he played so loud I didn't take the job. I wound up at the Famous Door—this was in 1935—playing intermission piano. I was home. Bunny Berigan had the band—Eddie Condon on guitar, Mort Stuhlmaker on bass, and George Zack on piano. Sometimes Dave Tough



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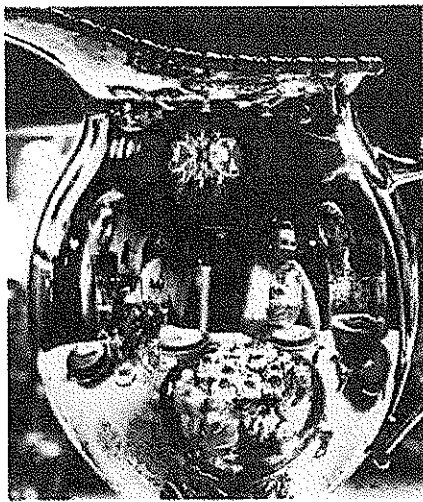
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HOMEWARES

would sit in, along with a good tenor player named Forrest Crawford. One night, George Zack passed out and they asked me to fill in. I played all the bridges wrong, and I guess what made me nervous was the beauty of Berigan's playing and being exposed to the clarity of the guitar and bass. Condon had a marvellous chord sense. I learned from him how to keep chord patterns simple and colorful. In fact, Condon sketched out the chords for the opening and middle sections of Berigan's recording of 'I Can't Get Started.' The Famous Door was in the bottom of a narrow town house. It had a bar and about fourteen tables, and the piano was near a window that looked out on Fifty-second Street. It got its name from a fake door covered with signatures of famous people which was set up on a little stage near the bar. I guess the place had some trouble, because the sheriff shut it in 1936. Berigan used to play behind me when I sang, and he let me do duets with him on trumpet. It was beautiful. I joined Joe Marsala at the Hickory House, farther west on Fifty-second Street. He had Red Allen on trumpet, Artie Shapiro on bass, and Danny Alvin on drums. Marty Marsala, Joe's brother, replaced Red, and Buddy Rich came in. He was a great improvement on Alvin's boom-boom-boom bass drum—until he started playing too loud behind my solos. Also, Joe had hired Adele Girard on harp. Sometimes I felt like I needed an ear treatment at Bellevue after work. So I called Bunny Berigan, who had his own big band, and asked when I could go back with him."

BUSHKIN came up when Earl Hines, Teddy Wilson, and Art Tatum were kings, and when Clyde Hart and Billy Kyle were brilliant apprentices. A little of all these pianists is in his playing, but his style—primitive, elegant, flashy, swinging—is his own. It is hornlike rather than pianistic. The listener is conscious not of notes being struck so much as of a singing, non-stop single-note melodic line that demolishes bar lines and ends only when it runs out of breath. At high tempos, this melodic line hums and hurries, pushing the air before it. Bushkin's notes fall between the center and the front of each beat. He pushes his time as hard as it will go without racing. His improvisations are fashioned of long, descending arpeggios that whip and curl down the keyboard,

and curious sideways ascending figures that have a two-steps-forward, one-step-back effect. Occasionally, he passes his melodic lines through bell-ing octave chords, through tremolos, and through loose Jess Stacy passages. Some of the ecstasy in his playing falls away when he works in slower tempos, but his light touch and easy sense of dynamics take up the slack. Bushkin talks about his playing this way: "There are a lot of songs that don't lay well on the piano, that don't improvise. 'Melancholy Baby' is one. When I play, I empty my mind, so that I can put something new in it. What the drums and guitar are doing guides me. The bass player, though, has to follow my thoughts. I don't pay any attention to the chords, which are automatic. The melody is my framework. I don't tell my fingers where to go—I try to have the patience not to tell them where to go. But if they mess up I take them back to where they messed up, so that the error becomes a part of the improvisation. I see a kaleidoscope in my mind when I play. I look for holes in it to jump in and out of. But you can't get too carried away—you might jump in one and never get back."

Bushkin rejoined Bunny Berigan in April of 1938. "In the summer of 1939, we played the Panther Room in the Hotel Sherman in Chicago, and Muggsy Spanier had the other group," Bushkin said. "Business matters were beyond Bunny. MCA booked the band, and they were supposed to take fifteen per cent of what he made, but they seemed to be taking everything, because he owed them so much money. We didn't get paid for five weeks. I was sending home for money, and a lot of the guys were borrowing from a saloonkeeper across the street. We finally met in Bunny's hotel room one night. You never saw him without a cigarette burning in the right side of his mouth, and you never saw him without his whiskey and his cool. He was lying on his bed smoking, his glass of whiskey on the bedside table. He said, 'Go see Petrillo at the union and tell him you haven't been paid in five weeks. It's the only way you're going to get any money.' Nobody wanted to go, so we all marched over next morning like an army. We were taken into a big room with a long table, and there was Petrillo—James C. himself—seated like Napoleon at the head of it. 'All right, what's the problem, fellas?' he said. Then he



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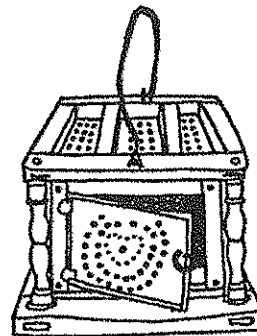
said, 'Boy, Bunny Berigan, he's some trumpet player, that guy.' Petrillo played a little trumpet himself. Each of us had to tell what we were paid, which was embarrassing, because the salaries were so mixed up. The third trombone was getting maybe eighty-five a week, while the first was only getting sixty. Petrillo called MCA and told them he'd shut down music in Chicago if our money wasn't there by two o'clock that afternoon. It was, and when we went back to the hotel we each gave Bunny some money, because he was broke, too, and we loved him.

"Bunny's band went bankrupt not long after, and I joined Muggsy Spanier. We worked with Fats Waller in a show that had a singer, a tap dancer, and two guys who danced on roller skates. I'd met Fats three or four years before, and I knew he hated the road. When he saw me, he hugged me and said, 'Boy, I can smell that Eastern soil!' The show was supposed to be a battle of music, and we sat back to back on our piano benches. He'd get off a beautiful run and say just loud enough for me to hear, 'It's so easy when you know how.' Then Muggsy's band broke up, and pretty soon I was down to no eating money. I became intermission pianist at Kelly's Stable, in New York. Benny Goodman was at the Waldorf, and the one thing I wanted was to be in the Goodman band. Jess Stacy and Teddy Wilson had left, and he had Fletcher Henderson on piano. Fletcher was a wonderful arranger, but he wasn't much of a piano player. Benny also had Charlie Christian and Dave Tough and Lionel Hampton, and they'd stop by at Kelly's Stable almost every night. Finally, they took me to audition for Goodman. I knew Benny, I knew his book.

I knew he kept his overhead low and his music complicated. I auditioned, but I didn't get the job—Johnny Guarnieri did—and it broke my heart. I stayed at the Stable four months. Then Bunny Berigan, who had gone with Tommy Dorsey, told me Tommy was looking for a piano player. I went out to Frank Dailey's Meadowbrook, in New Jersey, and sat in with the band for a set. We played some blues and everything went all right. I didn't hear anything for twelve days. Then I was told to report at the Paramount

Theatre for the first show the next morning—no rehearsals, no discussion of salary, no word from Dorsey himself. It was rough, but Berigan was my first-base coach, and Sy Oliver, Tommy's arranger, taught me how to get through the arrangements. I joined in January, 1940, and stayed two years. I wrote "Oh! Look at Me Now," and the band recorded it with Frank Sinatra, and we had a kind of hit. I liked Tommy, because he liked me. He was hard on his technical musicians—his lead men—but if you were an improviser, like me, you could do no wrong, because improvising was the missing link in his playing.

"What's there to say about the war? I went in in 1942 and got out a master sergeant when it was over. I played in a couple of Army Air Forces bands, I was one of the musical directors of Moss Hart's 'Winged Victory,' which played on Broadway for six months, and I was sent to the South Pacific, where I checked the Armed Forces radio stations to make sure they were playing V-Discs when all they had to play was V-Discs. I was glad when it was over. I came back to New York and hustled for five years. I did studio work for NBC. I studied with Stefan Wolpe. I was with Benny Goodman for a short time, but we didn't see eye to eye. I did radio jingles and made every kind of record you can think of. I wrote a song for Louis Jordan. I



DLG

toured South America with Bud Freeman. I took the part of a band-leader in Garson Kanin's play 'The Rat Race.' I was still a stutterer, and Garson wanted me to stutter, but on opening night I was so scared I didn't stutter at all. I didn't stop stuttering for another ten years. I went to a great psychiatrist named Morty Hartman, who told me that first I had to get rid of my father, then my mother, then him, and when I'd done all that I'd be Joe Bushkin and stop stuttering, and that's what happened. Until then, I was an introvert outwardly and an extrovert inwardly. I opened at Billy Reed's Little Club on the night that 'The Rat Race' opened, and around two o'clock Georgie Auld came in and whispered in my ear, 'Joey, you better hang on to this gig. I just read the reviews.' I went into the Embers when it opened, in 1951, and I was there off and on

many years, generally with Milt Hinton and Buck Clayton and Jo Jones. When I started, Art Tatum was the other attraction, but it didn't bother me. It was like I was a lawyer and he was in medicine—like we were in two different professions. The best thing that happened to me at that time was I married my Fran. Her name is Francice Oliver Netcher, and she's of Dutch and English extraction. She comes from a well-to-do family, and she's a queenly woman. We met in Chicago during the war, and we didn't take to each other at all, but by the time I went overseas we were getting along, and she wrote me every day. One of her faults is that she refuses to lie or have anyone tell her a lie. I can tell her anything as long as it's the truth. It's when I don't that I get in trouble. She was going to the Art Students League when we were married, and she had an apartment in River House, which we still have. We have four great daughters—Nina, Maria, Tippy, and Chrissy. Two are still at home, which is a twenty-four-acre horse farm in Santa Barbara. We raise thoroughbreds. We bought the place in 1971, after living three years in Hawaii. Before that, we lived near San Francisco, and, before that, in Los Angeles, which we moved to in 1960. The girls grew up on horses, and they used to compete at Madison Square Garden every year. Chrissy was on the U.S. Junior Olympic Team in France, competing against eleven other countries. And she won the Junior Working Hunter Championship at the Garden when she was twelve. I love the ranch, but I get feeling penned up. Do you know why I'm out playing again? Too many people have come up to me and said, 'Didn't you use to be Joe Bushkin?' " —WHITNEY BALLIETT

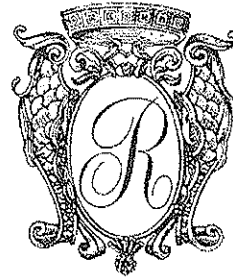
CONSTABULARY NOTES FROM ALL
OVER

[From the police log in the Denton (Texas)
Record-Chronicle]

101 S. LOCUST—An employee of First State Bank told police a blueberry pie was placed in the bank's night depository over the weekend. Blueberry pie smears were found around the envelope slot, a police report said.

In 1816, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and her husband, Percy Blythe Shelley, were visiting with Lord Byron in Switzerland.—Program note for a production of "Frankenstein" by the North Fork Community Theatre, of Mattituck, N.Y.

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