

Presenting Red Mitchell

RED MITCHELL, *bass*; JAMES CLAY, *flute & tenor sax*; LORRAINE GELLER, *piano*; BILLY HIGGINS, *drums*.

KEITH "RED" MITCHELL is, I would think, a trial to the critics. I know he is for me. He is that rare musician whose work it is almost impossible to fault. The result is that reviewing him requires a continual shuffling of the more fanfarish adjectives. It is, alas, somehow easier to invent new verbal ways to underline deficiencies than it is to sound the timbals of praise. I would like, therefore, to repeat what I said about Red during a 1956 *Down Beat* review of one of his appearances, since I still feel exactly the same way:

"Red Mitchell has become not just one of the better young bassists, but one of the most creative bassists in all jazz. He is consistently impressive in his solos, building with flowing, horn-like phrasing that is never stale, and invariably reaching mature satisfying climaxes. His tone is full and firm and he is clearly aware of the expressive virtues of shading. As part of the section, Red plays with swinging authority and unshakeable taste."

The subject of these enthusiastic reflections was born September 20, 1927 in New York City. For two years the family lived in Brooklyn, moving then to Fairlawn, New Jersey, where Red was raised. He had decided to become an engineer, won a Cornell scholarship, and had been at the school for a year when he was drafted. Up to this point, his musical skills had been directed at the piano, an instrument he had explored more empirically than by rote from five to fourteen. He played piano in an Army band; but while in Germany, he traded fifteen cartons of cigarettes for a bass and his future was set. (Karma, apparently, can even take the guise of nicotine.) Whitey Mitchell, Red's younger brother, is, incidentally, still playing that bass.

Red became an industrious autodidact, working first on Bob Haggart and Simandl bass books. His initial post-Army experience was gained with a volunteer Gilbert and Sullivan camp meeting and a volunteer symphony. His first jazz gig was at the Onyx on 52nd Street for \$15 a week opposite Charlie Parker. (This happened before Red joined the union, lest 802 starts to scan the statute of limitations.) "It was just like going to school," recalls Red. "We used to sit there every intermission and just listen to the band." His first union gig was in the winter of 1948-49 with Jackie Paris in Milwaukee. He later worked with Mundell Lowe; played piano with the Chubby Jackson big band at the Royal Roost in 1949; then back to bass with Charlie Ventura; Woody Herman from 1949-51; and since 1952, he's been with Red Norvo, Gerry Mulligan, Hampton Hawes and other units, most recently heading the combo heard on this, its debut album.

SINCE RED IS THIRTY, old enough to have heard nearly all the major and minor modern bassists, his tracing of the influences on his work can also serve, in part, as the outline for a history of modern jazz bass. It should be noted first, however, that Red feels he has been influenced more by horn men than bassists, although members of the latter confraternity have certainly helped shape him. Among the horn players and pianists he is especially receptive to are: Sonny Rollins, Bill Harris, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Zoot Sims, Lester Young, Bobby Brookmeyer, Charlie Parker, Tony Fruscella, James Clay, Hampton Hawes, Al Cohn, Jim Hall, Jimmy Giuffre, Duke Jordan, Milt Jackson and John Lewis.

The early function of the jazz bass (and until the '30s, most bass men were able by necessity to double on tuba) was primarily as a rhythm section instrument. By the mid '30s, the functions of the rhythm section components had become clearer and more integrated, and the bass had begun to assume a more substantial role, although it still was very limited as a solo instrument. The paragon of flowing, swinging rhythm sections of that time was Count Basie's and Walter Page was the bassist. "I guess the first bass player that really thrilled me was Walter Page," Red recalls, "even though I didn't know his name at the time. The first jazz record that really lit the light bulb for me was a Count Basie record . . . when I was 16. And the rhythm section was the first thing I heard. I just fell right out."

But by the time Red had heard this Basie record in 1943, the radical liberation of the jazz bass begun by Jimmy Blanton in the late Thirties had already had hugely challenging, irrevocable effects on a phalanx of bassists a few years older than Red. "Blanton," as Leonard Feather notes in his excellent chapter on the bass in *The Book of Jazz*, "had simply shown that the bass was a melody instrument, that flowing harmonic patterns and melodic lines could be improvised on the four strings just as on a trumpet or saxophone and that with the genius born of painstaking practice it could be opened up to sixteenth and even to thirty-second notes."

As Red grew older, therefore, all the bassists after Page who influenced and impressed him were post-Blanton in their approach to the instrument. There were Oscar Pettiford ("I realized he was playing from very deep within himself and it was as real to him as expressing himself in words, if not more so"); Chubby Jackson ("I remember the excitement of that Herman band and Chubby"); Eddie Safranski ("I remember being gassed by his technique").

Red had arrived at the time when he first began to hear Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis—and Ray Brown whom he listened to while Ray was with Dizzy's small combo and then his

Side 1

SCRAPPLE FROM THE APPLE by Charlie Parker. (Time: 5.27.)

RAINY NIGHT by Red Mitchell. (© 1957 Composers Music. ASCAP. Time: 5.20.)

I THOUGHT OF YOU by Red Mitchell. (© 1957 Composers Music. ASCAP. Time: 5.17.)

OUT OF THE BLUE by Miles Davis. (Prestige Music. BMI. Time: 6.15.)

Side 2

PAUL'S PAL by Sonny Rollins. (Prestige Music. BMI. Time: 6.55.)

SANDU by Clifford Brown. (Brent Music Corp. BMI. Time: 5.31.)

CHEEK TO CHEEK by Irving Berlin. (Irving Berlin Music Corp. ASCAP. Time: 8.06.)

Recorded the night of March 26, 1957 at Contemporary's studio in Los Angeles. Produced by Lester Koenig. Sound by Roy DuNann.

TECHNICAL DATA: 30-15,000 cycles. Multiple microphone technique featuring AKG C-12 condenser microphones. Ampex tape recorder. Mastering on specially designed, electronically controlled, variable pitch lathe. Westrex feedback cutting head, heated stylus, inner diameter quality equalization. RIAA playback curve.

big band. "Ray got a real inspired swing with the groups he was with, and he also could solo; and in his solos, I heard the new music, the new phrasing . . . he just turned me inside out." Red also heard Al McKibbin's big sound, and Charlie Mingus sitting in at Minton's scared him. "I actually got frightened watching him play because I remember the way he went up to the top of the fiddle, and it wasn't even his own fiddle. It was Al's. And then he went across the strings, played all kinds of nice things. He was just walking; he wasn't actually playing a solo, although everybody was listening to him. Well, it was a walking solo. And he just played all kinds of good melodies way up there at the top of the fiddle where I very seldom even thought of venturing."

Among the others who walked into Red's musical consciousness were Nelson Boyd; the remarkably underrated Keter Betts ("another one of the exceptional guys because he could both solo and play rhythm"); Curly Russell ("great big sound and real good swing . . . one of the new bass players who could really lay down such a strong beat that no matter how experimental the horn players got, things never fell apart, it was always swinging"); Tommy Potter, whom he heard in Bird's band with Miles Davis and Duke Jordan in 1948 ("Tommy laid down some real beautiful simple bass lines that said a whole lot"); Red Callender ("his sound and his walking"). In 1948, Red met Red Kelly whom he's admired ever since ("He's with Kenton's band now and he's doing for Kenton what he's done for every band I've ever heard him with. He's just getting underneath the band and making it get up and walk.").

When Red went to Milwaukee in the winter of 1948-49 with Jackie Paris for his first pro gig, he met one bass player who, even before Blanton, had been a searcher into and liberator of the instrument. "We played opposite Cab Calloway and I got to meet Milt Hinton. I remember being given a great big boost of encouragement by Milt, and in many ways, just knowing the guy and knowing that someone could play that well in all ways was encouraging. Milt is very exceptional in that he can do everything and do it well. He can bow, he can read, he can walk, he can play solos. He's really my idea of the kind of bass player I'd like to be, an all-around player." In 1949, Red heard another complete professional, the superb George Duvivier, whom most of the critics through the years have inexplicably largely ignored. ("George just scared me to death. He was getting that real big sound and executing all kinds of fantastic things.") As Red traveled and listened more, he heard Bob Carter, Teddy Kotick ("one of the first guys in our age group to start getting a real secure swinging time feeling"); Joe Carmen (now principal bass with the Dallas Symphony); Percy Heath ("every time I've heard Percy whether it's sitting in or working on a job or on record, somehow the feeling was always good . . . it always came out making you want to get up and dance"); Dante Martucci; Kenny O'Brien; Bill Goodall; Arnold Fishkind ("his solidity of time, and I think too, he's the only guy I've ever heard really make very successful use of a three-finger plucking technique"); John Simmons ("a very relaxed, swinging rhythm feeling"); the late Joe Shulman; Clyde Lombardi; Art Phipps; Russ Saunders; Chet Amsterdam; Slam Stewart; Doug Warkins; Bull Reuther; Gene Ramey; and Paul Chambers ("underrated as a rhythm player, also the best of the new guys solo-wise").

On the West Coast, where Red has settled since December, 1954, he's been moved by, among others, Joe Mondragon; Bob Whitlock

("he always got a beautiful sound and he always played bass lines that said a whole lot"); Carson Smith ("for his swinging, good long sound and ability to unite maybe an otherwise divergent rhythm section and make everybody come together and swing"); Ralph Pena; Monty Budwig; Dave Bryant; Ben Tucker; Scott LaFaro ("I believe he's going to be recognized as one of the best in a very short time"); Curtis Counce; Eugene Wright; Max Bennett; Buddy Clark; and Leroy Vinnegar ("one of the best rhythm feelings of any bass player I have ever heard; one of my top few favorite bass players").

Coasts aside, there have also been Wendell Marshall; and, of course, Wendell's cousin, Jimmy Blanton ("whom I hadn't heard until I'd been playing a few years, which I think was very fortunate for me because I probably would have given up bass if I'd heard him when I first started. Jimmy, I think, is the greatest bass player of all time. And I say 'is' because even though he died, I still think he really covered the instrument more completely than anyone else has since").

The Mitchell-view of modern jazz bass history also includes his younger brother, Whitey, with whom he may finally do an album in 1958 and about whom New York musicians agree with Red that "he's a good strong rhythm player, gets one of the biggest sounds of anybody, can play very good solos," and is characterized overall "by a happy, swinging feeling."

THE CIRCLE HAVING CLOSED for this survey of modern bass on Blanton and a younger Mitchell, there is the subject of Red's quartet on this album. One of the consensus policy agreements the unit reached at the beginning was to include in their book a number of the "good jazz tunes written by jazz musicians that have only been recorded once and some that haven't even been recorded, and these we would use as the basis of our library." And originals from within the unit were added. A "unanimity of group spirit" was the basic goal, allied to (and it's not all paradoxical) "freedom of expression." "If," notes Red, "one of the members of the group wanted to do a certain tune, we'd do it. And we tried to feature each member as a soloist as often as possible on job."

"We also," continues Red, "had some ideas about different ways of using the instruments. For instance, little counterpoint things between the flute and the bass (c.f. *Rainy Night* and *Paul's Pal*). And we found in the club that it was very effective if we played tenor and bass in unison on the first chorus which we do on *Scrapple from the Apple*. And we tried some things with drums and bass. We tried in two places on the album, *Scrapple from the Apple* and *Out of the Blue*, giving the drums an eight bar solo but with the bass walking. This has been tried before, I'm sure, but we had a lot of fun doing it."

About his associates, Red begins: "Billy Higgins, I think, is really destined to be recognized as one of the great drummers in the country. He's still very young and already he's shown that he has a real fiery swing. He has great imagination and is a wonderful group player as well as being able to solo. Lorraine on piano is, I feel, very underrated. She's a whole lot of fun to work with; and one of her great qualities is her overall spirit and good feeling, which goes beyond her playing. This in her music means that when she's playing behind a soloist or with the group, she's very good at getting that unanimous feeling and not playing so much as to inhibit anybody, but playing the right amount to just really get the thing going. In addition, she's a very fine soloist. As for James Clay, I think he could well end up laying the foundation for maybe the next step in jazz. He's already mastered at an early age the things that the rest of us seem to be wallowing around trying to get. He's able to express himself beautifully and fluently and his time feeling is very good. This goes for both his tenor and flute playing. To me, James is the best jazz flute player. He somehow gets more of a tenor feeling on flute. I really can't say what it is except it's a real strong jazz swing on flute. It's not at all pallid; it's just as strong as anybody on any instrument."

As of this writing, this Mitchell quartet is disbanded with Lorraine newly a mother; James Clay called to Dallas to take an induction physical; and Red surveying the current economic situation for his kind of group in Los Angeles. Red feels, however, that the Los Angeles club situation is improving; and "I'm going to try to get together either this same group, as much of it as possible, or a group like it and try to follow up this album with in-person appearances."

Whatever unit he has will have to first fulfill Red's basic jazz criteria; it will have, individually and collectively, "to say something . . . because to me this is the most important thing. This goes beyond experimentalism, funk or any other single aspect of playing. To me the most important thing is what you say. How you say it is very important too, but I don't think it's quite as important as what you say."

By NAT HENTOFF
December 2, 1957

Mr. Hentoff, one of the most widely read and respected of jazz critics, is also co-editor of *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya* and *The Jazz Makers*, both books published by Rinehart.

Cover photo of Red Mitchell by Hal Adams
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