

THE COMPOSER

There was once a jazz piano room in the west fifties in New York City called The Composer. The owner was Sy Barron, who had owned and managed jazz clubs at other spots around town. Sy liked jazz, and jazz musicians and treated his players with respect; by no means the norm with club owners. Although he mostly featured piano, he sometimes used guitar or vibraphone, and once in awhile a horn, as long as the music didn't get too loud.

I first went there in the middle fifties to hear guitarist Tal Farlow. Sy managed to cajole him out of retirement once or twice a year, and it was always a big event for us Tal Farlow addicts. It was on one of these occasions that I first heard Bill Evans. Bill was the intermission pianist, and relatively unknown. He didn't remain unknown for long. The club changed the main attraction every week or two, but sometimes kept the same intermission pianist for longer periods. It wasn't long before the room was jammed with people who had come to hear Bill, but would leave and go to a little bar around the corner while the main group was playing. Needless to say, this didn't go unnoticed by Sy Barron, who began to book Bill's trio as the attraction, and as the cliché goes: "The rest is history."

I went there another time to hear Tal. This time the intermission pianist was John Mehegan. John was a Julliard graduate and a well trained musician. A pedagogue, he had published a scholarly three volume set for jazz instruction. As a performer, however, he had some problems. The most serious was his time. He rushed. A lot. He was using a bass player named Vinnie Burke. Vinnie had a problem too. He had a hot temper and a short fuse. He was famous for

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blowing his top, telling off the bandleader, and getting fired as a result. I wanted to talk to Tal about it, as he knew both of them and their quirks. I found Tal, jerked my thumb toward the bandstand, and said, "How long can this last?"

"Not very long", he said.

I stopped in a few days later, and sure enough, Vinnie was gone. I spoke to Tal and asked him what happened. He told me this story:

Vinnie lasted a day or two before his short supply of patience ran out. Instead of losing his temper as he usually did, he had come upon a novel solution. He decided to out Mehegan Mehegan. When John would get too far ahead, instead of trying to hold him back--a hard job without drums--he simply moved ahead of him. John would catch up, move ahead, and Vinnie would pass him up again. It didn't take long before this little game of leap-frog had nearly doubled the tempo, so that even John was aware of it. He looked at Vinnie and said, "You're rushing, Vinnie."

Vinnie bent down and looked him in the eye, and said, "I know, how do you like it?"

Mehegan's face turned red, and he announced, "I'll take you to the Union!"

Vinnie smiled, and said, "What for, rushing?"

I played at the club only one time, and this was with Bob Brookmeyer. As it was mostly a piano room, Bob played piano instead of his usual instrument, valve trombone. I remember one incident that occurred during our stay.

Sy had a custom; whenever there was a girl pianist, he placed a small vase containing two flowers on the piano. The intermission pianist at the time was a Japanese girl.

On our opening night, Brookmeyer sat down and played a few notes to try out the piano. Suddenly he stopped--his eyes fixed on the small flower vase. His face took on a distasteful expression; he picked it up, as if he were holding a dead rat by the tail, set it on a nearby empty table, and we started the first tune.

The next night he did the same thing. On the third night, just as we were about to mount the bandstand, the manager said to Bob, "Mr. Barron has left strict orders that the flowers are not to be removed from the piano."

Bob said nothing, and we played the first set, flowers and all. At the end of the set Bobby altered his standard announcement. He said, "Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of Jimmy Raney on guitar, Teddy Kotick on bass and yours truly, Bob Brookmeyer on piano, we would like to thank you for your attention and applause...piano by Steinway, flowers by Sy Barron."

He made the same announcement after every set that evening and the next. On the fifth night the flowers were gone, never to reappear.

Jimmy Raney

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