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By Greg Armbruster

**P**AUSING MIDWAY through the morning paper, I heard what sounded like an Art Tatum track coming from the family room. I wondered if my five-year-old daughter's musical tastes had mysteriously matured, but when I looked in, credits for a children's show were flying up the television screen, accompanied by a furiously cooking unseen jazz trio. I listened in amazement as piano, bass, and drums plunged headlong toward a final cadence and landed perfectly on the last note as the logo for *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* stopped in the middle of the screen. Who are these guys? Where did that piano player come from?

Musical director and pianist Johnny Costa, with the help of a bassist and drummer (most recently Carl McVicker and Robert Rawsthorne), supplies the *Neighborhood* with musical themes, backgrounds, and accompaniments. The demands of the gig are varied, ranging from the familiar "Won't You Be My Neighbor" theme to the imaginative celeste fantasies in the *Neighborhood* of Make-Believe, from short extemporized film soundtracks to carefully composed operettas, and from distinct puppet character leitmotifs to full symphonic concert performances. And although the televised segments are taped, the music is recorded live on the set as an interactive part of the show, setting moods and motivating characters as the action unfolds. Who cues all the music? Rogers? The director? "The director leaves me alone," chuckles Costa. "He says, 'You're the music, you handle it.' I watch Fred, and there must be some kind of telepathy that we're not aware of, because somehow I get the message to play or not to play. I'm sure that some of it has to do with working together all these years, but a lot of it is unexplainable."

Costa has been with Fred Rogers since the inception of the *Neighborhood* in 1965 (see page 60 for Costa's own reminiscences of his career). They started with some puppets, a piano, a \$5,000 musical budget, and a contract to produce 130 1/2-hour black-and-white shows over a year's time for Pittsburgh's WQED, the first community-supported public television station in the country. Today the series is the longest-running children's program on public television, broadcast by more than 250 PBS stations across the United States and Canada, and reaching more than 7 million families each week. And a large part of this success is due to the music written by Rogers and arranged, scored, conducted, and performed by Costa.

After the first block of 130 shows, Costa and Rogers settled into a routine of 60 to 65 programs each year for almost ten years. "We worked most of the year," Costa recalls, "except for two or three months during the summer when Fred would write the scripts for the oncoming year. The pace never stopped until 1975, when Fred realized his dream to have a library of programs for the coming generations of children. His idea was not to have to repeat a program for two

# JOHNNY COSTA

PLAYS LIVE JAZZ WITH

MISTER ROGERS



Costa views Mr. Rogers' *Neighborhood* over a grand piano and an ARP Pro Soloist, with a celeste to his right.

PHOTOS BY LILLO GUSTI

years." Rogers stopped taping in 1975 and then resumed in 1977 at the less breakneck rate of 15 shows per year. Currently, the *Neighborhood* library consists of 535 1/2-hour episodes; as new ones are added, older segments which may not be as relevant today are weeded out.

One important result of Costa's pianistic and arranging contributions to the *Neighborhood* has been the emergence of Rogers' songs as record and concert material. Four children's albums are now available which feature Costa's accompaniments to Rogers'

songs. Costa has also scored a one-hour concert program for piano, symphony orchestra, Rogers, and various characters who appear regularly on the show. And although he likes to perform from the piano at these events, Costa has also taken the baton and conducted the orchestra. These special concerts have been done with the orchestras of Pittsburgh, Florida, Chicago, Denver, Cleveland, Delaware, Buffalo, and most recently Seattle and Indianapolis.

With only three months of the year now devoted to the *Neighborhood*, Costa has





Relaxing on the set with Mr. Rogers, July '85.

time to pursue his career as a jazz pianist. He regularly appears with his trio at the William Penn Hotel in Pittsburgh, and still headlines at the Embers in New York. With Fred Rogers he has appeared on *Late Night With David Letterman*, *Hour Magazine*, and *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. Last year he wrote an arrangement of "A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square" for *Sheet Music* magazine. More recently he composed and performed the soundtrack for Disney Studios' new production of *Hansel And Gretel*, and kicked off this summer with a stint on the Queen Eliza-

beth II. "I guess at 63 I'm just starting to think about what I want to do with my career," he muses. It was in this reflective state of mind that The Amazing Johnny Costa sat down with us and talked about his twenty-year gig in the *Neighborhood*.

\* \* \* \*

**A**FTER TWO DECADES of *Neighborhood* shows, has playing for children altered your piano style?

Not one iota. As a matter of fact, children like it no matter how involved it is. Of course

I have help from this wonderful man [Rogers] who writes all these beautiful songs. And the children know the main themes of the songs, so I'm able to improvise, especially at the end of the program. That's when they let me shine, but I have to be careful because I only have such a little time, and I can't pour everything in.

*How do you bring your improvisations to a halt at just the right moment?*

That's very hard to do. If Fred took too much time, I've got to get out of that song and into an ending fast. I've got to vary it, it has to be good, and it's done live; so, okay all you jazz lovers: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, out! The other musicians have to follow me, and I don't know how they do it. Sometimes I get a longer stretch and it makes me wish I could play more or do exactly what I want with no limits, but I do what I can.

*You obviously have a tremendous rapport with Rogers, but aren't there some set cues that he uses to signal you?*

I watch Fred's lips, and when he comes in and says, "What do you do?" the first chord is there, and that ain't easy. I've had a devil of a time with that sometimes, but I don't want it to be pat, so I take chances. There are times when I will play something and he'll say later, "How did you know to play that?" And I don't know; it's one of the things I really don't understand. But it's happened too many times for it to be coincidence.

*Other than time, what other limits are imposed on your playing?*

Well, we do so many programs that I always want to vary the main theme. I don't want people to hear the same thing, or I would have done it on tape and we'd have it the same way forever. I have to vary it, but that can be a problem, because Fred is singing and we want him to be heard. I can't be too showy, and I can't be too jazzy, so I have limits. Also, on our program nobody gets a musical introduction; I don't believe in introductions no matter what they sing. They listen to the noodling in the background and they take their key from that. It's so natural then, and the flow is just beautiful.

*What inspires your noodling? Are you reacting to the flow of conversation in a free association way?*

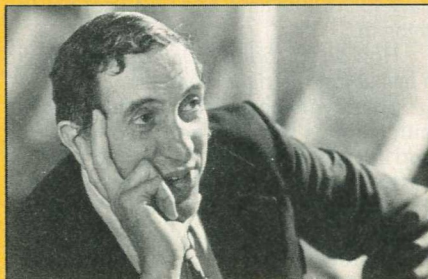
I'm obsessed by pictures—they inspire me. It's something from my childhood. When I went to school I had a teacher that read to us, and my imagination would run away with me. When I see a picture, I see such beauty in it and it comes out through my fingers. So if I sit down with some visual images, I know instinctively when to play and what to play. We've done some programs before the music has been put on and it just needs another life. And my years of work at the television studio helped me. When I was at KDKA, I would accompany films and all kinds of things. For example, we did a program on the assassination of Kennedy and I would have to play music for it. So when I did the soundtrack for *Hansel And Gretel* last year, I had a wealth of experience to be able to sit and watch the picture and make the



# JOHNNY COSTA

## Self-Portrait In Black & White

By Johnny Costa  
As Told To Greg Armbruster



**T**HERE WAS A MAN that came to our house in Pittsburgh when I was six or seven years old, and he was peddling violins. This was around 1928 or '29. My parents had come over from Italy—work was tough for them and there wasn't much money to be had, but my mother said, "I think maybe Johnny should be a musician." So I kept the violin for a week just to try it out. I'd never seen one before, so I plucked it like a guitar.

When I was ten years old, I started accordion lessons. A saxophonist who lived next door gave me popular songs and taught me a lot about music. I remember one day I was playing "Some Of These Days," and he said, "Well, today we're going to learn jazz. There's nothing to it. All you have to do is play the song the way you ordinarily would play it, only you jazz it up." And he put his hand on my right hand and showed me. I thought, "Is that all it is?"

By the time I was sixteen, I played the accordion very well and was playing local jobs. But pianos were everywhere, and you didn't have to carry them around, so I decided to learn how to play the piano. I was fortunate to study with Martin Miessler, an old German classical instructor who had taught Oscar Levant. I got into playing Bach and Chopin, but I had to completely build up my left hand. I would play at night with just one finger of the left hand at first, while my right hand was all over the place. People began to hire me as a pianist, which helped pay for my lessons, but my left hand had to get better, so I started listening to records.

I started to play like Art Tatum by listening to his records. I was born with perfect pitch so I was able to drop the needle on a 78 LP and get it down on the piano. I was still in high school when Tatum came to Pittsburgh and I got to meet him for the first time. Somebody brought me backstage and I played his recorded arrangement of "Yesterdays" for him. And even though he was almost blind, he pointed out a wrong fingering in a particular one-octave run. He said, "It's much easier if you do it this way." It was just like the sunlight coming in; how wonderful that he could point that out to me. And that's when I knew I had to develop my own style. As good as Tatum was, I didn't want to be a carbon copy.

After the Second World War, I attended Carnegie Mellon University in New York, where I studied with composer Nicolai Lopatnicoff, who really opened all the doors for me. And that's when I think my style started to come. It was a fusion of all the people that I admired and respected: Tatum, Erroll Garner, and even Carmen Cavallero. After I finished college, I went to work for a variety show at KDKA, Pittsburgh's first radio station, and stuck around for sixteen years.

Around 1955, I got on *The Tonight Show* when Steve Allen was the host. That got a good response and I started to play the Embers in New York twice a year. Then I got a manager and took a little sabbatical from my duties as music director at KDKA. I traveled to Chicago and Miami with a trio and made quite a bit of money, but I didn't like being on the road because I wanted to be with my family.

My first recording, *Introducing Johnny Costa*, was for Savoy Records, done by the same man who introduced Erroll Garner. A few years later when I started to play the Embers, they came out with *The Amazing Johnny Costa*. By then, Coral Records had heard me on Steve Allen's show and I did some albums for them, including *Johnny Costa Piano Solos*, *Johnny Costa Plays For The Most Beautiful Girl In The World*, and *A Gallery Of Gershwin*. In 1962 I did a tape for a WQED jazz series, which was later pressed and distributed by the station as a contribution gift called *Costa Living*. I also did an album for Dot Records, *In My Own Quiet Way*, and one for Voice Records in 1964 called *51 Greatest Broadway Favorites*. [Ed. Note: Unfortunately, none of these albums are still in print; however, Fred Rogers is currently producing a Johnny Costa solo piano album, which will combine the Neighborhood hits with Costa's exuberant style.]

I finally left KDKA in 1965. Fred Rogers, whom I had met several times before, invited me to lunch and revealed that he was going to create a series of programs for children. It would take a year and he had a \$5,000 music budget—would I help him? It just so happened that my oldest son's tuition was \$5,000, so I agreed. I had entertained children with my work at KDKA, but I wasn't sure about devoting all my time to a children's show. But Fred gave me the freedom to change the chord structures of his songs and put my touch on them. And I decided not to do what most musicians do with children, where they play dumb little nursery rhymes. Children have ears and they're people, and they can hear good music as well as anybody else. So I started right from the beginning playing for them as I would for any adult. The program has grown, and now I think it's the most important thing in the world. We don't know at this point, but in years to come a program such as this could really change the way that people will run this world. ■

music.

*Each of the puppets in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe seems to have his or her individual motif or melody. Were those ideas based on the way they looked?*

Not necessarily. When Mr. McFeely runs around, the music is almost like a Richard Strauss thing. When the King does his low voice, I use some polytonal chords that I studied in school. I use everything that I can to try and make the program what it is. For instance, the theme of the show starts off with those sixteenths—a four-note chord going up the keyboard—which I borrowed from Beethoven's rondo movement [*Allegro assai*] from the *Sonata In C* [Op.2, No. 3] and altered slightly. At the bridge of "Everyday," you'll hear the Tatum minor sevenths that he used in his "Tea For Two." And you know what? It's all right to be a product of everything we've learned.

*Is that how you would describe your particular style?*

I don't really know how to describe it; popular music, maybe. But it's not jazz, because, first of all, I'm not black, and second, I don't believe in playing a comp left hand. I'm proud of the fact that I'm a two-handed piano player, and lots of times I do contrapuntal things. I think Oscar Peterson thinks the same way; he wants his left hand to move around.

*How would you analyze your left-hand technique?*

Well, it's a combination of Tatum and some of the work that I did in school. I'll be happy to use any part of a Chopin prelude in a jazz standard; it's just marvelous the way it fits in. There's no reason why the "Revolutionary Etude" can't fit into something like "I Can't Get Started." It all depends on what you want to do. The left hand has to have almost a life of its own, even though it has to be subservient to the right hand. It cannot play like the right hand because it has the depth of the lower strings. And particularly these days, nothing is done without a bass. It used to drive me crazy when I was a kid to play without a bass. Duo and trio things are exciting, but if your left hand can cover it, there's nothing like the clarity of a solo piano.

*You started with just the piano on the Neighborhood in 1965. When did you add the other musicians?*

I think the trio came around '69 or so. I thought, "Well, since we're network now, maybe we ought to have some depth." I added a bass at first and then drums. Fred really loved just the piano by itself, but I had to experiment; I had to grow. Little by little, Fred got used to the idea. Then we started to make records for the *Neighborhood*, and I said, "Hey, if I've gone to school to study composition, it makes no sense if I'm not going to have some strings." So I talked Fred into having these records done with strings. And even though the budget only stood for two violins, a cello, and a flute, I enjoyed what we did with them. And now with a little help, I've scored some of Fred's songs for full symphony orchestra for our live concerts—it's wonderful music. I sketched all the arrangements so that they would sound the way they do when you hear them on the show. I wanted the orchestra to sound like an



augmented piano.

*Who conducts the orchestras for the concerts?*

Well, I do. And I learned the same way that they used to teach a boy how to swim—throw him in the water and he'll swim! We were doing a program for Mister Rogers in Denver with the Denver orchestra and there was a lack of communications. After the opening piece, the conductor gave me the baton. Now, I've never conducted in my life, okay? And he said, "Here you are, Mr. Costa." And I said, "Aren't you going to conduct the orchestra?" "No, I didn't prepare for it. I thought you were going to do it." And he walked off the stage. So here I am with the baton in my hand and the orchestra in front of me. I said, "I know this music, because I helped write it. But I don't know the [conducting] movements very well. If you'll understand that and help me, then we'll get through this." And of course the orchestra couldn't have been better; they really helped me. My God, they played their hearts out for me. There was a time during the show when I wanted to speed them up. Well, what did I know? My movements became frantic and I still couldn't get them to go faster. Afterwards, the concert master said, "If you'll make your strokes shorter, you can move us. We can still see the tempo, and you can go as fast as you like. If you make big frantic movements, you can't go very fast, and we won't either." That was my first lesson in conducting, and now I do it quite well, but I feel more comfortable at the piano.

*What's a Mister Rogers concert like?*

First of all, I'll come out and play a medley of Rogers' songs at the piano, starting with a march. It's like a ten-minute overture with just the piano. Next we introduce David Newell, who plays Mr. McFeely [and is also the director of public relations for the *Neighborhood*] and then Betty Aberlin, who plays Lady Aberlin, King Friday's niece. She sings a couple of songs, including one you don't usually hear on the show called "It's A Perfectly Beautiful Day." She introduces Francois Clemens, an operatic tenor from New York, who sings a medley of Rogers' songs that I've arranged. Now normally, I conduct the orchestra while seated at the piano, which is right where the conductor's podium would be; but for Francois, since the music is so full and completely orchestrated, I'll stand up and concentrate on my conducting. Then David brings on another character from the show, the panda, and we'll do another march called "Tomorrow." The children in the audience can get up and march around, which gives them a chance to burn some energy. This first half of the show takes about 30 or 35 minutes. Then when everyone quiets down after the march, Betty introduces Mister Rogers. I do his intro on the piano exactly as you hear it on television, only with full orchestra accompanying me. Fred sings "Won't You Be My Neighbor" and invites the children to join in if they'd like. Next he will do "It's You I Like," then he'll introduce some puppets. After that he sings "What Do You Do With The Mad That You Feel," and then teaches the audience to sing "Tree, Tree, Tree." Before the last song, Fred

*Continued on page 62*

# FRED ROGERS

## The Grown-up Art Of Making Music For Children

By Fred Rogers  
As Told To Greg Armbuster

*Fred McFeely Rogers was born in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, in 1928. He started playing the piano and composing when he was five years old. He studied classical piano with concert pianist Lydia Hoffmann-Behrendt at Dartmouth College and graduated from Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, in 1951 with a degree in music composition. Rogers then joined NBC-TV in New York as an assistant producer for The Voice Of Firestone and the NBC Television Opera Theater. Among other programs, he supervised Your Lucky Strike Hit Parade and The Kate Smith Hour. In 1953, he joined the staff of Pittsburgh's WQED-TV and set up the station's programming schedule. His first show for children, Children's Corner, was aired in 1954 and ran for seven years. In 1963, Rogers was ordained as a minister in the United Presbyterian Church. Mister Rogers' Neighborhood evolved from a program called Misterogers, which was a 15-minute daily show with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. In 1965, he incorporated these segments into the first 130 1/2-hour Neighborhood programs. Rogers has written all the songs he sings on the show as well as several operettas, and has had many musical guests on the program, including cellist Yo-Yo Ma, vocalist Tony Bennett, Broadway director and composer Tom O'Horgan (Hair), Jesus Christ Superstar, and pianist Van Cliburn.*

\* \* \* \*

**MUSIC IS ROCK BOTTOM** for Johnny and me, and we communicate on an intuitive substratum that would not be possible if we didn't have a feel for music. It's true that there are no cues. When I get into a song, it's as if he knows when I'm going to start. We have a rundown, of course, for the program, and he knows my teleprompter copy. But when I'm working with a craft or something, invariably he'll come in and underline an important issue. In most other programs a lot of that is added in post-dub, but a great deal of what we do is done live.

When I say that there is an intuitive way that we work together, that doesn't mean we don't work at our collaboration or that it's perfect. I don't like people to think that you don't have to work at art—that it all just flows. There are some wonderful moments when it happens just the way we want it, but there are other times when we have to work it over, because we want it to be as good as we can possibly make it. Take silences, for instance; I believe there should be silences—there should be rests in every composition. There

have been times when I've said to Johnny, "You know that certain place where you come in? If we have the chance to tape it again, I think it would be wise to leave that part empty." Sometimes children need to look at something very carefully, and music could distract them.

There are also times when music can underline something, and it's more subtle than simply making what I say more lively. For instance, I might be talking about how a shot at the doctor's office might hurt, like a pinch, but the hurt goes away after awhile. And all of a sudden, I will hear strains of "It's Good To Talk" or "I Like To Be Told." These are songs that are in the repertoire of the *Neighborhood*, and Johnny will weave them in. It's almost a subliminal kind of thing, because the words that go with the melody of "I Like To Be Told" have been heard by the children in earlier programs. The child might not be conscious of what's going on, but when Johnny weaves that melody with the talk that I'm giving, it enhances what I'm saying. That's how he underscores it.

And it's all so natural for Johnny; he doesn't seem to work hard at it at all. When I give him one of my songs, we'll sit down and work together. I put my own chords in, but they're never as fabulous as Johnny's. And my songs would be very different if someone else played them. Of course, they're all on tape, and we have all the videotapes of all the programs. But it would be very different to have somebody come in and have to have every note that was to be played down on paper. I wonder if people know just how spontaneous a lot of our music is. Johnny and Dr. Margaret McFarland, our psychological consultant, are the two people that it would be the most difficult to go on without, but there is nobody who could just step in and take Johnny's place. It would be just as hard for somebody to step in and take my place.

I would have a very hard time doing what I do in a setting that had no music. Now that sounds selfish, but I think that people who give a lot have to be nourished. I feel that I give a lot through television, and one of the purposes of the music on the *Neighborhood* is to nourish me. And because it's so nourishing to me, and so natural for both Johnny and me, it can't help but be nourishing for the children and the adults who watch. Music is something that's eternally deep within us. To be able to give what comes from the deepest recesses of our personality as honestly as we know how is a gift—and music is an enormous gift. ■



## JOHNNY COSTA

does a little speech with a string background, and finally we bring everybody out and end with "It's Such A Good Feeling." The whole program takes about an hour.

*You play more instruments than just the piano for the Neighborhood shows, don't you? For example, you switch to the celeste for the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.*

Yes, I thought it was nice to play the celeste, not because I wanted it to sound down to children, but because it was a way of expressing certain fantasies. And I could achieve that without using an electronic organ. I never wanted to get into electronics, but years ago some peddler came along and said, "Hey, you ought to try this ARP Pro Soloist." I said, "Those things never work; don't bother me." But I tried it and the flute sounded good, the woodwinds—bass clarinet, oboe, bassoon—sounded very nice, so I use it for those sounds. I don't want to get much beyond that. There are many things I could use, beautiful instruments that are built today, but my nature and the nature of the program wants to keep it pure. I just love the sound of the piano.

*How do you and Rogers work together to write and arrange a new song?*

Fred writes the songs and operettas and then gives them to me to arrange. Sometimes he indicates a chord or two, but mainly he writes the melody and the words. And where he might have a C chord, I might put in an *Abrmaj7* or something. It's a good marriage between Fred and me because my touch is a soft touch; my favorite composers are the

Impressionists.

*Have you written out any of your arrangements of Rogers' songs or the character motifs? Could someone sit in for you and play the show from your written notes?*

No, you'd have to sit down and listen to the cassettes and films. I have written down the main themes, but they're sketchy. I just never thought that anybody else would do the program; nobody else ever has. I think that's why Fred said that if I die, he's going to quit. Some of Fred's music is available, but it's scaled down so that it's not difficult. If I wrote them the way that I play them, they would be difficult. But I've told Fred that before I die he'd better get my arrangements of his songs down on wax. And now he's decided to sponsor an album with my piano arrangements of his songs. I want to do it for the people who write in and say, "We want you to do more, because all we hear are the jazzy closing measures at the end of the show." Actually, I think adults will love this album more than kids. But it's an enormous task, because I would like to satisfy Fred, who is giving me the opportunity to play his songs in a way that would be best suited for him. On the other hand, I want it to be a record that I can do in a jazz way, which means not too much of his melodies and more of what I'm doing. [Ed. Note: Many of Rogers' songs are included in the book *Mister Rogers Talks With Parents*, published by Berkley and available directly from Family Communications, 4802 Fifth Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15213. Richard Bradley has also published a selection of Rogers' songs in two beginning books, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* and *Mister Rogers'*

*Songbook.*]

*When you tape a program, do you usually run it straight down in order to capture spontaneity, or do you rely on retakes to perfect the interplay between you and Rogers?*

That's one of the hardest things about tape: It's good and it's bad. Sometimes when I've done my best work and think to myself, "My God, I could never do that again in a million years," someone will say, "Okay, let's do it again." When we have to do it ten times, I'm not going to get that first-time freshness ever again. But because we do so many shows, I have an opportunity to get some of those magic moments on tape. Of course, sometimes I look back on the things I've done and I wish I could do them over again, or I wish I hadn't played so much. Fred has suggested I record the playing I do at the William Penn Hotel in Pittsburgh; I shouldn't waste all the things that I play there. But I never do that. There have been times when everything was just right and what I played knocked me out; and then it's gone. But I don't care, because it's like a well. I know I can go to the well too many times, but maybe it's a good well.

*Why didn't you make your solo album sooner or push your piano career outside the Neighborhood?*

I don't know. I never wanted to put the money out to produce a record of myself, and say, "Look, here's my record. Buy it." And because of Fred Rogers and the program, I never wanted to leave. That reminds me of a guy called Peck Kelly, who was supposed to be a great pianist, but the only way you could hear him was to go to this little bar

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## JOHNNY COSTA

in this little town in Texas. Nobody could hear him unless they went to Texas. I guess I'm kind of like that. I always wanted to stay in one place, and not travel and be a big name. I believe that if someone's got talent and hides it under a bush, somebody is going to kick that bush over someday; you just can't hide talent.

*What advice would you give to players who want to learn to improvise?*

Well, not everybody can adapt themselves to improvisation. I know great pianists that can't play "My Country 'Tis Of Thee" unless the music is there, even though they would like to be able to improvise. But for the ones that can adapt, I think they must build their hands. Technique is a tool and you need it. And I believe that playing classical music is a great way to build technique. It doesn't have to be Bach, it could be anything. But it's a discipline, and even with jazz I think you have to be disciplined—nothing is free.

*Once you've got some classical technique, how do you practice jazz?*

The way I do it is I'll take whatever song, riff, or melody I'm working on and do as many things as I can with it. Some will be good and some bad. For example, if I'm working on "I Got Rhythm," I'll play it in many different tempos. I'll change the key. I'll play it in two different keys just for a moment. The idea is to do something that is your own, that pleases you. I don't like to stray too far from the melody. I mean, if you're playing "I Got Rhythm" then somewhere along the line somebody ought to

know it's "I Got Rhythm." Now free jazz is something else, and I think it's fine as long as it doesn't get overburdened. Maybe my attitudes come from my classical training. I mean, I can play in different tempi, but I don't dare put an extra bar in there if I'm not supposed to.

*Are there ways to develop your ear in order to improve your improvisations?*

This is very important. I have perfect pitch, so no matter what anybody plays, I know exactly what the notes are. But if a musician would look at the music like a medical student might look at the body, that would help develop the ear. For instance, I would take the "Revolutionary Etude" by Chopin and see what chords he used. Not only does it make it easier to memorize, but you also begin to understand the progression of sounds, and I think that helps. You can adapt this kind of reasoning to whatever you're trying to play. When I play "My Funny Valentine," I imagine that I'm Ravel sitting there, and it becomes like that. You see, improvisation is making things up. When I was a child, if I made a mudpie, that was improvisation. When I got tired of making the same old mudpie, I'd try to make it differently. But it's hard to teach improvisation; I don't know if it can be taught. And if it is taught, there is a danger that the student will begin to sound just like the teacher.

*Do you feel that this is a problem with jazz today? That everyone sounds similar?*

I'm concerned about jazz because it's a wonderful music and it's ours, but I'm afraid that it gets tiresome. During the '50s, from Dizzy Gillespie on, whatever one artist would

do, another would do also. When each player would take a chorus, every instrument would sound the same—the piano improvisation would sound like the saxophone improvisation. I heard someone on Marian McPartland's radio show who played like Bill Evans. And even Marian played that way too. It's a modern style with some fourths in it, but it seems as though if one plays that way, everybody has to sound that way, and I don't understand that. The other day I saw a pianist on television doing some things with his left hand that were very interesting. And I said to myself, "How great that he thought to do that." His individuality was coming out. But I think you can't do something different just for the sake of being different. If you're different because it pleases you or because you thought about it and it's part of you, then I think it's great. We all want to be different; we all want to stand out. I think I have something unique to give to people. And I'm glad that Fred has allowed me, through him, to be able to give something special to children—that's the greatest feeling in the world.

### FOR FURTHER READING

Many of the artists mentioned in this article have been interviewed or discussed in previous issues of *Keyboard*: Steve Allen (Feb. '78), J. S. Bach (Mar. '85), Van Cliburn (Apr. '78), Bill Evans (Mar. '77, June '80), Earl Hines (Nov. '77, Apr. '82), Marian McPartland (Jan./Feb. '76, Feb. '81), Oscar Peterson (Mar. '78, Dec. '80, Oct. '83), and Art Tatum (Oct. '81). ■



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