

Writing Samples

Kat Milner

verbology@gmail.com

513.231.7280

Music review 2
Book review 5
Juvenile nonfiction/biography 6
Narrative 9

Music review

WALKIN' OUR BABY BACK HOME

Some International Jazz Pianists

It's a lot like the girl you didn't really notice till some other guy got the hots for her. Jazz, our one & only, our true red white & blue art form, had to wander abroad to get some action.

So maybe we begin to notice. But hey, you gotta stay cool. So we put Duke on a postage stamp. That's okay, he's not around, it won't go to his head. In the meantime, the rest of the world is gettin' down, throwin' parties, puttin' OUT for our baby. The North Sea Jazz Festival sure beats any block party WE ever got a permit for, & in Japan they buy jazz videos like they had Jacko or Madonna on them. What gives? We been missing something?

Ah, but we're lucky devils. The music keeps coming back to us, & a little richer each time, too. Souvenirs. Bigger vocabulary. More ideas. Different stuff from other places.

Hermeto Pascoal, for instance, is bigger, more, different, & other than almost anybody. A Brazilian, he calls his music universal, since in his opinion jazz "has become stale, like bossa nova." He says there's no musical solution for jazz. It's closing itself off. The way out, he says, is to bring other things into the music, always to be "refreshing."

So he brings in other things. Like cows, pigs, chickens, sewing machines, toy trains, & tea kettles. A loopy tape of a soccer announcer. Other things you can't figure. Latin rhythms. Lilted melodies. Sonorous voicings. Exuberant improvisations. Allusions all over the place. Vocal intrusions--spoken, shouted, solo, ensemble, but not, you know, SUNG.

Pascoal says he became a musician on the day he was born, with his first infant cry. He started out on homemade reed flute, moved on to bamboo flute, then accordion, piano, flute flute, sax, clarinet, trumpet, synthesizer. No formal training. No inhibitions. The number of his compositions exceeds a thousand, is more than he could play "in this lifetime." He rehearses with his "grupo" 8 to 10 hours a day; his performances last 3 to 5 hours. He's cut a dozen albums. Doesn't cut his hair, an albino blizzard adrift down his back. Is liable to put his shoe in the piano or end a concert mid-measure. Says he doesn't care if people remember him. Says he wants them never to forget his music.

If this sounds like a man of contradiction & excess, note that this is precisely the point. Call it paradox & synthesis. It is the very source of creation, & it fascinates a lot of creative people. Pascoal has been praised by such as Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Miles Davis, John McLaughlin, Pat Metheny. His music has been recorded by Miles (LIVE-EVIL, '70), Gil Evans, & the Berlin Symphony Orchestra. His first appreciative audiences, before any record company would mess with his "too crazy" music, were elementary school children. His boundless, riotous, joyous flow of sound is like the unending invention of a mockingbird at sunup or maybe a whole treeful of warblers at dusk. Amazing. Stimulating. Fleeting.

Like Pascoal, Michel Camilo started early on the accordion. He found one when he was 4, & of course he right away figured out what to do with it. This was in Santo Domingo, & at 9 he entered the Dominican Republic's National Conservatory. At 16 he joined the National Symphony Orchestra. He went on to Juilliard in NY. He went on to club dates & studio gigs. He wrote some tunes; the Manhattan Transfer's recording of Camilo's "Why Not?" got a Grammy in '83. He went touring with Paquito D'Rivera for 3 years & 2 albums. He went to some major international jazz festivals, appearing all unknown & ending with standing ovations (North Sea '87) & effusive reviews (Billboard, Jazz Times: "the revelation of the festival"; Danish magazine MM: "number 2 Jazz Name of the Year," right behind Miles Davis). Then he got to make a record. MICHEL CAMILO came out in '88, all trio & all original tunes but one. ON FIRE followed in '89.

Unlike Pascoal, Camilo's formal training & focus on one instrument have made for a slick-surfaced music of showy technique & pretty conventional effects. The sound is pleasant, relentlessly upbeat, & ineffably commercial. But Camilo is at his best when he's digging his Caribbean roots ("Caribe," "Island Stomp") or somebody else's tunes ("Blue Bossa," "Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise").

Like Pascoal, he gets a kick from the odd gimmick. Flamenco boots can beat a fast & frenzied rhythm, all right, but there's not a lot of nuance to be got from a heel. "Hands & Feet" is fascinatin' the first time, but then, it's never as good as the first time. . . .

That other young Michel, Petrucciani, decided awhile back to eschew the razzle-dazzle for the sake of the music. No more "foolish" flash. He would attract attention a bit more seriously by being himself. Himself having grown up in France with a jazz-guitarist dad, with stacks of classic jazz recordings up to his ears, with his own piano because at age 4 he saw Ellington on TV & said "Dad I want one." But with such an early lift-off, he seems to be in free-fall on this latest release, vaguely titled MUSIC. The 8 new tunes shift from form to form (bebop, bossa, ballad), each (but one) with the soporific sheen of synthesizers--odd instrumentation for one who seeks the singular voice. Still, the hand throttles down the machine; Michel still flexes his muscular technique for us; & there's sure muscle enough to power this music someplace. Someplace.

Place is important. Place is roots, & it's also direction. Abdullah Ibrahim left deep roots in South Africa in '62, traveled the world, got to NY in '76. On the way, he got the attention of Ellington, who sponsored his first trio recording, brought him to Newport in '65, hired Ibrahim to sub with his band--for Duke himself, you understand. So this must be enough well-built technique to heft some significant music & take it someplace.

MINDIF is the soundtrack for the '88 French film CHOCOLAT, takes place in Cameroon just before its independence. Ibrahim takes western instruments, takes African idioms, & makes jazz so vivid & evocative it breathes. AFRICAN RIVER, recorded in '89, has the same motive force without the maps & fences of a film plot. More room to stretch & swing. Ibrahim's excellent ensemble Ekaya knows its way around, & his music is a real vacation.

Back home, WILDERNESS is Bob Thompson's territory. Strange that the one American in this bunch is maybe the least known. But irony abounds here.

First, Thompson records for Intima, an Enigma label. Enigma's catalog sits heavy on the hard rock & metal music, groups like Dead Milkmen, Fear, Lizzy Borden, Bitch. Some fusion. Some company, huh? So Thompson, who's been around awhile, who

teaches jazz piano & improv, who claims the acoustic piano as his voice, Oscar Peterson & Ahmad Jamal, Clifford Brown & Lee Morgan as his influences, slides through synthesizer mud & climbs over percussion back-up so rock-monotonous he needs ropes & pitons: SAY WHAT YOU WANT, his third album.

So on into the WILDERNESS. Well, hey, it's a jungle out there. You gotta fight to hold your ground. This latest release, if it doesn't quite clear away the electronic underbrush, at least stakes a bit more territory. Thompson has said his '82 sojourn in Brazil was a major influence on his music, & some latin color does brighten up the landscape. But where does it end? There, on the penultimate track, we run smack into Prince's "Little Red Corvett," & after that Thompson's final cut, a solo acoustic cry in this wilderness, is the finest irony of all: "I Thought that I'd Be Free."

But that's what it's really all about, isn't it? Even the Soviets' love for our "dzhaz" is deep & heated. All along, even under the lid of repression, jazz has simmered in the USSR. All along, the Soviet government has watched the pot with bureaucratic hunger (unlike--isn't it ironic?--our own). All that individual expression, that democratic jam. . . .

Soviet musicians do know how to cook. One of the best was Vagif Mustafa-Zadeh. Won first prize for composition at Monaco's international jazz festival in '78. (Died only 2 years later.) With tough formal training & a hard base of bop, Mustafa-Zadeh thoroughly blended the folk idioms of his native Azerbaijan to concoct a steaming music, rich & dense.

Another recipe for when our baby cooks at home.

(discography omitted)

Book review

VICTIMS OF THE LATEST DANCE CRAZE

Poems by Cornelius Eady

"O Jazz has come from heaven," he says . . .

This book of poems is not, properly speaking, *about* jazz. It is, as the title suggests, about dance, and it's the fifth in a series called Dialogues on Dance published by Ommation Press. Even so, it is accurate to say it's about music in general and how music is the way we mind-rapt beings interact with the matter-wrapped world.

It is true, too, that Cornelius Eady uses a sort of verbal jazz to make his points. He improvises intricate and powerful syncopations and surprising image progressions, but he never strays far from the melody; his effects are not dissonant or exotic. The lyrics say we're all part of the music, whether we listen or try not to--the world moves, and we either dance or fall down. But the dance makes life possible.

Eady already had an impressive list of credentials when this, his second, book of poems was published in 1985 and became that year's Lamont Poetry Selection, the prestigious annual recognition by the Academy of American Poets. He has hosted a monthly poetry program on WBAI radio in New York City; worked as a Poet-in-the-Schools in New York, Vermont, and Virginia; served as Margaret Banister Writer-in-Residence at Sweet Briar College; and won fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ragdale Foundation, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

Clearly Eady must know something about this dance of language. His poetry moves with assurance and grace, and like good jazz, it shows us, for a moment, the secret the "Jazz Dancer" sees:

When I leap,
I briefly see the world as it is
And as it should be

And the street where I grew up,
The saxophones,
Kisses
And mysteries among the houses

And my sister, dressing in front of the mirror,
A secret weapon of sound and motion,
A missionary
In the war against
The obvious.

Victims of the Latest Dance Craze
by Cornelius Eady
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Reviewed by Kathryn Milner in
Marge Hofacre's NoName Jazzletter

Juvenile nonfiction/biography

INKY PINKY

You'd be mad, too! Imagine: The newspaper has just declared that you must spend your whole life at home scrubbing floors. Why? Because you're a girl. And *that*, said the Pittsburgh *Dispatch*, is "What Girls Are Good For"!

Pinky Cochrane was furious. She was seventeen years old, her dad was dead, and she had to work to support herself and her mom. But in 1885, the only jobs she could find were in dark factories where the doors were locked during working hours (eleven a day, six days a week) and workers earned less than four cents an hour. Now the newspaper said that girls weren't fit to work for even those few pennies!

Worse, most people agreed with the newspaper. Pinky was different. She wanted to be a writer. She wanted to be a writer. She wanted to see the world. And she didn't see why she shouldn't.

As a child, she looked fragile and was small for her age. Her mother made her so many dresses of doll-pink gingham that her father nicknamed her "Pinky." But he also told her that she could excel at anything she truly wanted to do. Elizabeth "Pinky" Cochrane was tough. She had five older brothers who teased her relentlessly, and she took all their challenges. She rode horses, climbed trees, ran races, swam, and skated, even though she wore petticoats and skirts to her ankles.

She studied hard. She read everything she could: French poetry, classic literature, her dad's law books. She wrote stories, dozens of them, about haunted castles, battles with dragons, and--always--a victorious heroine. She dreamed of having her own adventures.

So Pinky sharpened her pen and wrote a passionate letter to the editor of the *Dispatch*, telling him exactly what was wrong with his thinking. Impressed, he offered her a chance to prove her ideas as a reporter. But he insisted that she use a pseudonym (fake name), because most people in 1885 thought it improper for a woman to do such work. Together, Pinky and the editor chose a name from the title of a popular song, and "Nellie Bly" was born.

The new Nellie was determined to rock the world. First, she shocked readers with a series of articles about divorce, a subject seldom even whispered about. This led to articles exposing dangerous conditions, cruel treatment, and starvation wages of women and children forced to work in factories and live in crowded slums.

Newspaper circulation soared, and the people of Pittsburgh demanded reforms. But when business owners threatened to stop advertising in the *Dispatch*, Nellie's editors restricted her to writing about flower shows and fashion--on the "women's" page. No good for Nellie. She convinced the paper to send her to Mexico--a daring adventure for a young woman alone. She spent six months dispatching reports about the

poverty and political corruption she found, before the Mexican government discovered what she had written and had police escort her home.

Again she was stuck on the society page. Frustrated and restless, she packed up her pens and ink and took her big ideas to New York. This time, she needed an idea even more shocking than divorce to get a hearing. Finally Joseph Pulitzer, famous publisher of the *New York World*, agreed to listen.

Nellie's idea was to pretend to be insane, to be committed to the Women's Lunatic Asylum. Her vivid descriptions of beatings, icy baths, and spoiled food resulted in major reforms in the treatment of the mentally ill.

It was a tough act to follow. Nellie was pioneering a new kind of writing-- investigative journalism. She launched a series of articles exposing corrupt politicians, dishonest businessmen, greedy lawyers, and anyone else that abused the poor and helpless. Often she wore a disguise and pretended to be poor and helpless herself, in order to get the facts. Her reports were always fair, however: when she found honesty and good treatment, she wrote about that, too.

Other writers, perhaps less determined or daring than Nellie, called it "stunt" reporting. She certainly took many risks to get her stories, and she was only 22 years old. What could she possibly do next?

Have you seen the movie *Around the World in Eighty Days* ? It was based on a popular novel by Jules Verne, published in 1873, in which the hero bets he can circle the earth in an impossibly short period of time. Even 27 years after the book was written, there were few railroads; most overland travel was by horse over rutted, muddy roads. No airplanes flew across the oceans; steam-powered ships took a week or two to struggle through the waves and weather. No telephones to call home, either; snail-slow cablegrams would have to do. It was a rough journey, more than 25,000 miles. Surely Verne's book was a fairy tale!

This was a challenge Nellie couldn't resist. For a year she argued and cajoled the editors to back her. She threatened to write the story for a rival paper. Finally, she got her way. In December 1898, she set off from New Jersey, promising to be back in the *World* office in only 75 days.

By steamship through howling storms, by horse-drawn carriage, mail train, burro, sampan, and rickshaw, Nellie made her way across England, France, Italy, Malaya, China, Japan, and back to the US. By the time she stepped ashore in San Francisco, she was famous. Crowds cheered at every stop as Nellie's train chugged across the country, slowing only for snowdrifts or cattle that blocked the tracks. When she finally set foot again in New Jersey, she had done the impossible: Nellie Bly had traveled around the world in 72 days, 6 hours, 11 minutes, and 14 seconds.

The mayor of Jersey City addressed the celebrating mob. "The American girl can no longer be misunderstood!" he shouted. "She will be recognized as pushing, determined, independent, able to take care of herself wherever she may go!

"People the world over have been taught that they are not as far apart as they imagined. You have set the whole world to thinking about it and so have brought mankind closer together.

"Welcome home, Nellie Bly!"

Nellie spent a year lecturing about her adventures. But she missed her pen and ink. She returned to writing probing articles for the newspaper, always trying to find

solutions for the problems she described. She interviewed controversial people, investigated unemployment, labor strikes, and a killing drought out West. When World War I started in Europe, she became the first woman to describe a war from the front lines. Later, she used her newspaper column to find homes for abandoned children.

When she died in 1922, the *New York Evening Journal* printed a tribute Nellie Bly would have treasured: "She was considered," it said, "the best reporter in America."

(bibliography omitted)

Narrative

TO HURRICANE PASS

The sky was hot blue. Weathered boards cross-stepped through barbed-wire grass and lattice-trunked palms to the crumbling seawall. I kicked my rubber sandals under the old wood stairs and dug my feet into soft sand.

Beyond humped and hunkered dunes, nodding sea oats, and a clear stretch of salt-white beach, the Gulf of Mexico glittered like splintered glass. Sunshine stuck to my hair and bare shoulders as I headed north, keeping to the packed sand between the tide-line of matted seaweed and the drift of shells nearer the water.

Chattering waves rushed ahead of the breeze, grabbing the shore, sliding back. After each swipe, the wet sand bubbled like a boiling pot, as heaps of exposed coquinas burrowed under. I scooped up the soupy sand to catch a handful of the tiny wing-shaped shells, all sunrise colors.

Last night's storm had left casualties: pale moon jellyfish, three feet across; domed horseshoe crabs with sharp-spike tails; sea stars and sand dollars. Farther along, a worn beam painted with oriental characters blocked the way. Lumps of sponge torn from the sea floor and cone-shaped shells with pointed crowns, stunned animals still inside, littered the sand.

Above the beach, shuttered houses gave way to feathery pines, and those gave up as the water squeezed in. Here, years ago, a furious storm had chewed the island in two, and the muscular current that rushed between the halves cut the channel deep. This was Hurricane Pass.

The bay was flat calm, though a jillion leaping mullet slapped the surface like giant raindrops. A brown pelican, sailing high on a warm updraft, folded its wings and plummeted into the water. Bottle-nosed dolphins, too, picnicked in the dancing fish: one and then another broke the surface with a wet snort from its blow-hole.

Across the pass, snowy egrets roosting in the dark mangroves watched a motorboat ease toward a narrow crescent of beach and cut its chugging engine. On this side, tide-exposed flats, stinking like rotten eggs, spread a buffet for stilt-legged willets and one tall blue heron. I mucked through the sticky, sucking mud toward bushy mangroves poised on tiptoe roots above the water. The sandy margin was alive with fiddler crabs, neon purple and pink on their backs. Each male crouched in the mouth of his burrow, inviting every scuttling female with his super-sized left claw.

I turned back. The beach was no longer deserted; blankets and blaring radios were everywhere. People dozed in the sun or splashed in the sequined water. Some, smelling of coconut oil, were gold as orange-blossom honey; others, pale as sand or pink as sunsets. One lady, in floppy hat and gold chains, was dark and dry as an autumn leaf.

Wet sand squeaked as I jabbed my feet in. I waded into the bath-warm water and pushed into the waves, letting them lift me as wind currents lifted the gulls. Far above, almost too high to see, the elegant black **W** of a frigate bird floated through the golden light of the lowering sun.