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August, 1949 25c

**LENNIE TRISTANO**  
Master in the Making



## master in the making

IT WAS a hot August day in 1946. The tall windows of the classroom facing Grant's Tomb were open to catch what little breeze would stray from time to time from Riverside Drive into our academic precincts. I was winding up my summer session course at Juilliard in the Development and Theory of Jazz. After a few preliminary remarks, just as I was about to mark coda to the course with what I hoped would be a very firm dominant, the door burst open and Chubby Jackson blew in. The meeting had been arranged, but Chubby's arrival, as always, was a loud and pleasant surprise. After him came Billy Bauer, looking diffidently about him, carrying his guitar and amplifier. Then followed Arnold Fishkin, trudging along behind his bass, and behind him Judy and Lennie Tristano.

A hurried, whispered conversation with Chubby established some routine and the concert which concluded my lecture series was on. There, in a room consecrated to a very different tradition, the elementary jazz education of my students ended and my tutelage in the art began.

I didn't know it had begun then. I didn't realize the full impact of this music and this musician until that following winter when, after three-and-a-half months in California I met Lennie at Leonard Feather's house in a brief verbal bout, and then a few weeks later encountered his music most forcibly on his first released record, *I Can't Get Started* and *Out on a Limb*. When I heard those two sides, I knew that the first notes in a bright new era of jazz had been struck. Here were the long lines side by side, the calculated but not contrived continuity, the improvised counterpoint crackling with suggestions of atonality, all strung together with a toe-snapping beat. Here was a full, fresh demonstration that jazz could parallel the development of classical music in the twentieth century without actually deriving from it.

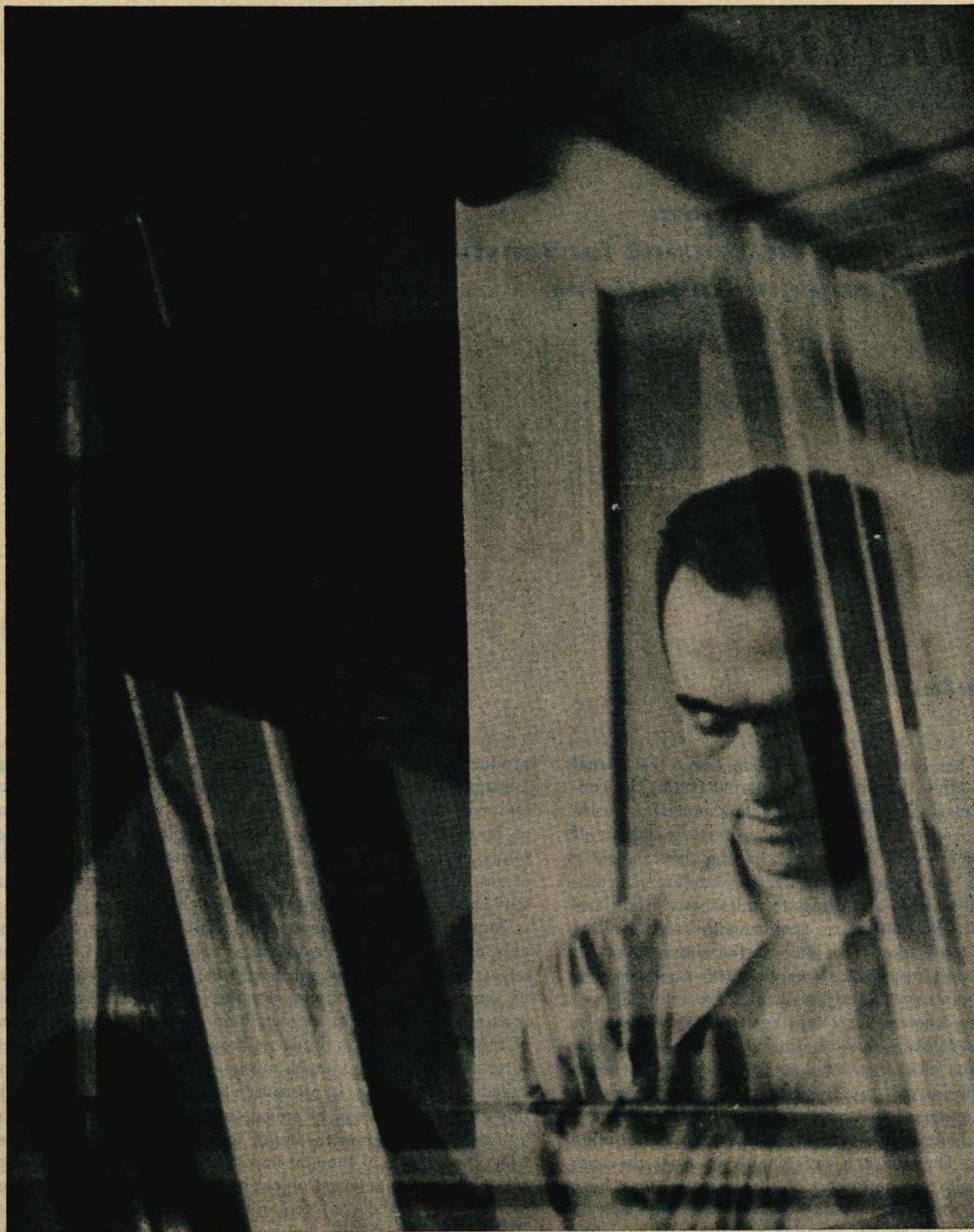
Soon after that, Lennie and his wife came down to my house and we started to discuss his music and my work, the background and the foreground of jazz and jazz musicians, the futility of current musical fashions and the fecundity of those we hoped we could make current. A collaboration of sorts began, in the course of which, after countless comparings of notes and notings of comparisons, we covered an astonishing amount of human knowledge and endeavor. It became apparent that Lennie's was not only an inquiring mind but an instructed one, that in the realms of literature and philosophy, as in music, he was not content merely to feel something, that he had to explore ideas, to experience them, to think them

through carefully, thoroughly, logically until he could fully grasp them and then hold on to them. He took possession of Tolstoi's *War and Peace* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* as delightedly as a child seizes a new toy; he took them apart as eagerly as a young boy separates the parts of a clock; he speculated about them as seriously as a Ph.D. candidate examines his thesis.

Over endless cups of coffee in his railroad tenement on East 73rd Street, where the Tristanos lived until last year they found a dwelling in Flushing, Lennie listened and thought and talked. Padding about the apartment in slippers, his stocky, muscular frame clothed in pajamas (unless he was expecting to go out and had reluctantly donned street dress), he carried his conversations from his hack practice room through his bedroom into his combination kitchen and parlor. They usually began then, in 1937 and 1948, as they do now, at one or two in the afternoon, and often carried into the hours he has found most fertile for his activities, those from midnight until six, seven, eight or even later in the morning. And as the conversations continued and the friendship grew, as I got to hear him play with Charlie Ventura's band at the Three Deuces, with his own trio at the same place, with his quintet at the Royal Roost and his sextet at the Clique, I pieced together the story of his life. Examine it and you find order in chaos, art in affliction and the growth of mind and spirit which must lead to achievement, as indeed they did for Lennie Tristano.

LENNIE was born thirty years ago, at the height of the paralyzing flu epidemic that followed the first world war, second son of four of a second-generation Italian family solidly ensconced in the great Italian section of Chicago. True to Italian family form, he went to a parochial school at the age of four, and spent a year and a half in the first grade after the nominal kindergarten period. "They just didn't think I learned easily. And I just didn't think I wanted to stay in the first grade forever. So I moved to another school." For three or four years, he went from school to school, his progress marked by increasing physical difficulty and growing mental ease. At six, he suffered a serious attack of the measles. His sight, weakened at birth, grew dimmer. When he landed in his last public school in Chicago, at eight, he was placed in a class for handicapped children—one room holding all forms of disability, all grades from the first of elementary school to the last of high. At

(Continued on page 32)



***the remarkable life of lennie tristano  
who wrested order out of chaos  
and art out of affliction***

***by barry ulanov***

AUGUST, 1949

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(Continued from page 14)

ten, his sight was just about gone, but any difficulty that his long term in the first grade might have suggested was gone too. He was able to do long and complicated mathematical problems in his head. He was, as a matter of fact, quite a boy. Since his fourth year, he'd been able to sit down at the piano and work out simple tunes, such enduring items as *The Stars and Stripes Forever*. By his tenth year, after a brief and not very satisfying foray with a private piano teacher, Lennie became very adept in the ways and wiles of popular songs. He became, with mixed tricks and an appealing young personality, a pert parlor performer.

Acknowledging his blindness, his parents sent Lennie away for the pivotal ten years of his life—from nine to nineteen—to a state institution for the sightless in a little Illinois town some 200 miles away from Chicago. "The place," says Lennie, "does one of two things to a student—either it makes an idiot out of him, or a person. I was lucky enough to fall into the second group." In the first were all manner of blind children, babblers, the feeble-minded, the imbecilic and idiotic. The only qualification for entrance was blindness, and the result was a shambles of a school population, rigorously disciplined in its conduct, girls strictly separated from boys for all activities except an occasional, heavily chaperoned party. The sexual tensions developing in the adolescent boys were treated as monstrous growths to be shunned, somehow to be shaken off. The surroundings were prison-like, the education sparse, the brighter boys were treated like well-esteemed trustees. And yet Lennie flourished. He studied piano, saxophone, clarinet and cello. He led his own bands from his second year at the institution. His groups played occasional dates at local taverns. Some of the intellectual disciplines were well taught and he became a better than average logician, a skilled mathematician, a highly facile student. There were opportunities to play most of the team sports, and these he engaged in with distinction. By the time he was ready for college, his musical talent was sufficiently obvious so that his music teacher took him to his Chicago alma mater, the American Conservatory, and warned the school to pay particular attention to this boy, because he's going to do everything faster than you're used to."

Lennie sped through the conservatory. If they had permitted him to maintain his own rate of development, he might have completed the four-year course in less than two; as it was, with every possible restriction, he got his Bachelor of Music degree in three, and had completed all the requirements for an M.A. except the final exams, when he decided to skip the \$500 or so necessary to sign up for the graduate degree and to make his way as at least a part-time jazz musician. At the conservatory he had run through a huge selection of the orthodox repertory, had composed in all the required forms and had even had a string quartet performed at one of the school's concerts. "It was a jazzy piece, but jazz was so far from that faculty's experience that they didn't hear it in the quartet. They simply thought it sounded fresh."

Lennie gigged around Chicago more seriously than he had in his school years. He played the leading role in a small rhumba band, played it so successfully that the band's leader took him aside and offered to make him "the King of the Rhumba." With very little effort, Lennie was able to refuse the gracious offer and to get on with the piano he had begun to take seriously after playing most of his jobs on tenor sax.

As a tenorman, Lennie says, "I was somewhat influenced by Chu Berry, but didn't imitate him. As a pianist, in 1944, I had reached the point where I could rifle off anything of Tatum's—and with scandalous efficiency."

The remaining Chicago years were lightened for Lennie by his meeting with Judy Moore, a beautiful product of Racine, Wisconsin, who sang with him at the Zanzibar for several months in 1945, and whom he married that July. The years were made heavy by the infrequent work and by the increasing puzzlement with which his music was greeted as he shook off influences and conventions and shaped his own striking style. On one date, which was scheduled to run three days, the manager came up to him after his little band had played for a couple of hours and said to him, "I don't want you to think this is anything personal, but everybody in the place thinks you stink. So I'll be glad to pay you for the three days now, if you'll quit immediately." He says he drove another manager to a nervous breakdown. "He just got out on the middle of the floor, pulled some hair out and screamed when he heard us play some things in three keys at once." A couple of other places at which he played went into bankruptcy. "Voluntary, I'm sure, after hearing us," Lennie muses.

Chubby Jackson thought differently from the Chicago club managers. He was planning a "monster" tour when the Woody Herman band stopped off in Chicago in the late spring of 1946, and he prevailed on Lennie to come East that summer to join him. The tour never materialized. But a job in Freeport with Arnold Fishkin and Billy Bauer did. Another brief spot on 52nd Street followed. Lennie became a New York fixture, setting up shop as the brightest of the new jazz musicians, playing occasional engagements with his own groups, taking on an imposing list of pupils—Lee Konitz (who had worked with him earlier in Chicago), Warne Marsh, John LaPorta, Bud Freeman, Billy Bauer, Arnold Fishkin (who left California to rejoin him in late 1947), and lots of youngsters whose future may very well be the future of all of significant jazz.

This is not the place to attempt a serious evaluation of Lennie's music. I will be content if some outline of Lennie's sometimes rough, sometimes serene life may be apparent through the sentences and paragraphs, clauses and phrases, of this narrative. Because this man's creative imagination holds so much for American music, it is vital to understand its shaping forces, to make some telling appreciation of its breadth and its brilliance. With this understanding, it should be possible to make more sense of his music, which, after all, makes a sense all its own when listened to, a sense which no words can adequately convey. One particular aspect of his personality remains to be described, an aspect tightly contained in a controversial pair of sides still to be released by Capitol. These I will leave, along with the rest of his achievement on records, for fuller discussion next month.

see next month's METRONOME  
for the results  
of the first  
all time all star jazz poll

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