

PROFILES

A TROMBONE MOUTH

WHERE around New York can you hear the elusive master trombonist Jimmy Knepper? During the past couple of years, he appeared in most of the half-dozen concerts given by the American Jazz Orchestra at Cooper Union, but at each one he only took five or six choruses, some of them reshaping of transcribed solos by such earlier masters as Duke Ellington's Tricky Sam Nanton and Count Basie's Dicky Wells; he spent four nights at the West End Gate in a quintet put together by his friend and admirer the pianist Dick Katz; he led a trio for one night at Bradley's; he led the repertory group Mingus Dynasty for two six-night stints at the Village Vanguard; he turned up for several nights with Buck Clayton's swing band at Fat Tuesday's; and, for his own pleasure and to keep his lip and arm limber, he played occasional one-night stands at the Dock of the Bay, on Staten Island, not far from where he lives. The tenor saxophonist and pianist Loren Schoenberg played with him there, and he recently said of Knepper; "Jimmy is the most flexible of all the trombonists. He has built his own phraseology out of Charlie Parker's vocabulary. He's not trombonistic, and his style is self-effacing. The dazzling way he gets around the instrument, you couldn't play what he plays on any other instrument. He never loses coherence, and he never relies on devices. In fact, he has an abhorrence of clichés. Whenever the American Jazz Orchestra plays a warhorse, Jimmy goes at recreating whoever's old solo in eight different ways before he gets it right. He's always willing to let his music take full responsibility for itself. There is something calming about his playing, a repose. What he plays and what he is as a person form a whole, and that's very rare among musicians. Jimmy functions best in surroundings someone else creates. He's a better sideman—horrible word—than leader. You make a frame for him, and he'll make a beautiful picture to go in it. Jimmy is also a consummate musical copyist. His musical manuscripts are functional, neat, inspired, like his play-



ing. He is also a crossword-puzzle maven. When I go on the road, I like to take a crossword puzzle to bed at night. It relaxes me and keeps me company. Once, when Jimmy and I were on the road together, our puzzles got mixed up, and when I got into bed and picked up my puzzle, which I had been struggling with, I discovered I had Jimmy's. It was completely filled out, and I was devastated and couldn't get to sleep for a long time."

Dick Katz talked about Knepper several days before they worked together at the West End Gate: "Jimmy has a vocal way of playing that is matched to bebop lines. His intervals sound impossible, but he makes them. He lays way back rhythmically. He rarely plays on the beat, or in the pocket, as musicians say. He places his notes in the cracks—here, there, everywhere. He's a meticulous musician. He gets to every job early, and warms up with long tones. And he's a first-rate composer—very Ellingtonian. When he puts a group together for a gig, he has a hands-off policy; he lets things happen. He's an easygoing man, but he's not easy to know."

Knepper looks like what grocery clerks looked like when there were grocery clerks. He's tall and polelike and bespectacled, and when he starts to

sit down he bends in the middle as if he were hinged. Every time he appears somewhere, he seems to be thinner. "I lose a pound a year, and if I live long enough I'll just disappear," he said recently. He has a high forehead and Clark Gable ears, set low on his head, like stabilizers. His hair is puzzling: sometimes it looks fluffy, and sometimes it looks thin and pasted on. He wears heavy horn-rims that tend to slip down his nose, hiding his eyes. Smiles occasionally start at the edges of his face, then withdraw, but most of the time his face is expressionless. It's a mask that is not really a mask, though, because Knepper hides little when he talks. He talks easily and steadily and slowly, and he punctuates what he says by puffing on short cigarettes that he rolls as he speaks. They keep going out, and that makes them last a long time. He talked about his life not long ago, and here is some of what he said:

"I've been involved in landlordism in recent years. My wife, Maxine, and I live on Ward's Hill, in northern Staten Island. You can walk to the ferry in twenty minutes. We have a view of the city, of Brooklyn Bridge, even of the George Washington Bridge. We stumbled on the house in 1961, and buying it was one of the best moves we ever made. We own another house, with a five-room apartment in it and a ten-room apartment, and we rent both of them out. That house only cost nine thousand five hundred dollars, if you can believe it. Some years, it makes more money than I do. We also own a house with two apartments in Port Richmond, and we rent that out, too. And I inherited a house in Los Angeles from an aunt, and that's just started renting. All this real estate has kept me in the music business without me panicking and having to look for some other kind of work. In fact, the mortgages are all paid and we own everything outright, and that makes my declining years more relaxed.

"We moved to Staten Island from a cold-water flat on East Twenty-fifth Street in 1959. One day, when our two kids were little and Maxine was sick, I took the real-estate section of the paper

and a map and went to Staten Island. I figured Staten Island would have some trees and some room. I found a little house on the road to the Verrazano Bridge. Then we moved to the house we're in. We have a boy and a girl. Robin is thirty-six, and she lives in Matamoras, Pennsylvania. She has three little boys, and she's a social worker. Our son is Timothy Jay—both children were named after birds—and he lives in the house in Los Angeles. I sent him out there three years ago to fix it up, but nothing happened, and we had to go out and light a fire under him. He's thirty-four and he used to drive a cab in New York at night, carrying a knife and a crowbar for self-protection. I didn't think much of that, so I sent him to Los Angeles to stir up his life and give him some responsibility.

"Los Angeles is where I was born—on November 22, 1927. I have a brother, Robert, who's a year and a half older. He's a librarian in L.A. He's a family person, and he keeps sending me copies of death certificates of people vaguely related to us. My mother was a nurse and my father a cop. She divorced him when I was three, because he'd got in the habit of knocking her down. I only saw him three or four times. My brother looked up my father's career later on, and found out that he killed his third or fourth wife, and that he was an alcoholic. My mother, who was just a little over five feet, spent her whole life nursing. When I was four, she put my brother and me in Page's Military Academy, on Cochran Avenue. We boarded, and went home on weekends. When I was seven, the bandmaster gave me an alto horn to play, then a baritone. When I was nine, he gave me a trombone. He said I had a trombone mouth. We also went to a Catholic military school, even though we were non-Catholic, and I finally graduated from a public high school in 1944."

JAZZ musicians were nomads when Knepper came up. Most of them were in big bands, which still travelled up and down the country to play at theatres and in ballrooms and hotels and night clubs. But the big bands, beset by economic problems, were dwindling, and Knepper was one of the last graduates. (The on-the-job training they offered has never been re-

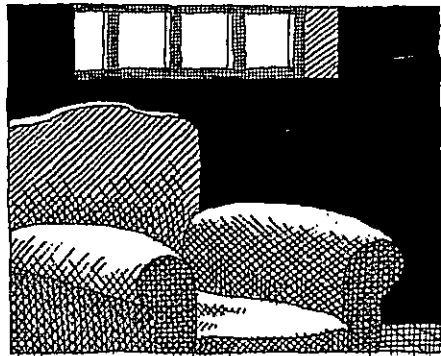
placed.) After teen-age stints on the West Coast with the bands of Frank Morehead and Chuck Cascales, he went on the road with Tommy Reynolds, quit, and returned to Los Angeles to work with his friend Dean Benedetti. In 1948, Knepper joined Freddie Slack's band at the Sherman Hotel, in Chicago. ("I started taking goofballs and was fired. A youthful indiscretion.") Later that year, Knepper hitched across the country with Benedetti and helped him to record Charlie Parker on Fifty-second Street. (These legendary on-the-spot recordings have been issued in full by Mosaic.) Between 1950 and 1951, he was with Charlie Spivak and Charlie Barnett. He also worked for a stunning week with Charlie Parker at the Showboat in Philadelphia, with Al Haig on piano, Tommy Potter on bass, and Roy Haynes on drums. "The first night, Parker kept lurching to his right, and I thought he had some sort of tic," Knepper said. "But the spring on his concert F-sharp key was broken, and he had to lean sharply to the right to make it open. Parker was astonishing. I could hear every kind of music in his solos—bits of Wagner, a Rudy Wiedoeft phrase, Stravinsky, Bartók. Musicians are technique-minded now and they can play a thousand notes a chorus, but I have never known anyone who played more cleanly. He articulated each note. Parker must have done his woodshedding"—practicing—"when he was very young, because he didn't practice. Someone like John Coltrane never stopped. He'd practice in his dressing room, on the bus, and at home. Drinking didn't seem to affect Parker's playing. He'd accept drink after drink during intermission and put away maybe a pint of whiskey. They'd lean him against the wall when he got back on the stand, and off he'd go. Parker gave the impression he knew

everything. Architects thought he must have had architectural training, poets thought he was a poet, painters thought he was a painter. You could never catch Bird out."

Knepper married Maxine Fields in 1954, in Tucson. She had played trumpet with the International Sweethearts of Rhythm and with Ina Ray Hutton. She was born in Elkhart, Indiana, and her father had been a trombone player. Knepper's nomadism continued. In 1956, he got a job with Ralph Marterie in Chicago, and Maxine joined him, their year-old daughter in tow. Knepper had converted Maxine into a drummer, and while they were in Chicago she sometimes worked with a pianist in Sault Sainte Marie. They "milled around" Chicago, living in a hotel that had a Murphy bed in the kitchen. They bought a car, and Knepper quit Marterie and they drove to New York, arriving on Halloween in a terrible rainstorm. Knepper soon ran into the alto saxophonist Gene Quill, and Quill got him a job with Claude Thornhill. They toured Air Force bases in North Africa, Germany, and France. Knepper had started writing arrangements, and he did two Elvis Presley tunes for Thornhill. When he got back to New York, the trombonist Willie Dennis told Knepper that he was leaving Charlie Mingus's band, and Mingus, remembering Knepper from a one-night gig in Los Angeles ten years before, called him.

THE epochal part of Knepper's life began. Mingus, who died in 1979, was a brilliant bassist, an unruly if highly original composer, and an eccentric, tyrannical bandleader, who fired musicians on the stand and lectured his audiences. Working for Mingus either made you or broke you: whatever happened, it was an ineradicable experience. Knepper lasted, off and on, for four years.

"The first Mingus rehearsal I went to was in his apartment, on Fifty-third Street," Knepper said. "I discovered he had a prejudice against writing his pieces down. Instead, he'd hum a few bars and say, 'All right. You got that?' Then he'd hum another few bars. It took hours and hours to learn anything, but there was an advantage to Mingus's method. When you see a bunch of triplets and dotted eighths and sixteenths on paper, you tend to read



Le-Tan



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them mechanically, without getting the right emphasis and smoothness. Mingus gave you all that in his hums. I made my first record date with him, and I think we did 'The Clown,' then 'Reincarnation of a Love Bird' and the 'Haitian Fight Song.' We worked at the Vanguard and the Half Note, but jobs were spotty. We also recorded for Atlantic and Columbia. In 1960, Mingus got work in San Francisco, and we made a nightmare trip to the Coast. Roland Kirk and Doug Watkins and Dannie Richmond were in the band, and we went in three cars—a Buick convertible that Mingus wanted to sell on the Coast, because he thought he'd get more money for it out there; a Cadillac limo; and a Peugeot. Dannie Richmond drove by himself in the Buick, Mingus and I were in the Cadillac, and the rest in the Peugeot. When we got to the Holland Tunnel, Mingus asked the guy in the toll booth, 'How do you get to San Francisco?' The tollman said, 'Take the New Jersey Turnpike until it ends, the Pennsylvania Turnpike until it ends, the Ohio Turnpike until it ends, and the Indiana

Turnpike until it ends. Then ask someone how to go from there.' When we got outside the city, Mingus said, 'Jim, you drive. I don't have a license,' and I drove most of the rest of the way. Right off, we lost touch with the other cars, and Mingus, accusing me of losing them on purpose, started saying things like, 'It probably makes you nervous driving in a caravan with a bunch of niggers.' But it went in one ear and out the other. If there is one thing I've never been hung up about, it's color. The trip took four days, and we only had three proper meals. The rest of the time we ate fried chicken and candy bars. We did two weeks in San Francisco and a week in L.A., and I quit.

"Except for a record date in 1961, I didn't see Mingus again until 1962, just before the disastrous concert he gave in Town Hall with that huge, thirty-piece band. He called me and said he needed help—would I copy some music for him? After I started, he said he also wanted me to write background figures, but I told him it was his music and he should do it, it should

be his composition, and suddenly he called me a white faggot and punched me. I thought I'd better fall down in case he decided to hit me again, and I did. There was no blood, or anything, but he broke off a capped tooth in front and exposed a nerve, and of course I couldn't play. People told me I should do something, so I got hold of a musicians' lawyer, Max Cohen, and sued Mingus, and he was found guilty of criminal assault and put on probation. My teeth problems are still going on. For a long time, I had a removable steel bridge that hooked on to four top teeth. Now I have dentures on top and a fixed bridge on the bottom. I can push notes out, but I have trouble with slurs. And it's hard to play with a plunger mute, which puts pressure right up in your face. I didn't play with Mingus again until the late seventies, when he put together a group for the Newport Festival. I saw him for the last time not long before he died. He was confined to a wheelchair, and I learned later that he had told someone that I had more understanding of his music than anyone who had ever worked with him.

"Mingus talked a lot of nonsense about whites, but he married three white women, and he had great respect for white musicians like John LaPorta and Gil Evans and Lennie Tristano. People who knew Mingus for forty years said he was no good, but I liked him. He had trouble with black and white, and he was childish and all the rest, but he had exuberance and warmth. I have mixed feelings about Mingus's music. Some of the pieces, like 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat,' are good, but a lot of the others are bullshit. He told me once that all he wrote was ditties. He said that Duke Ellington wrote compositions but he wrote ditties, and I think that—and his inability to complete many of the things he wrote—bothered him most of his life."

TWO more musicians talk about Knepper. The first is the alto saxophonist Lee Konitz, who came up just after Charlie Parker: "Jimmy is still searching for ways to do better what he does. He was in my nine-piece band in the seventies, but I've had occasion to play with him one to one with just a rhythm section, and he was ready to mix it up and play counterpoint, or whatever. He was very adventurous. We rode together recently on

the subway—it was after the memorial service for Mel Lewis—and he wanted to know how to play free, without any underlying structure. He thought I had found a way to do that. I told him he was a moldy fig, and he laughed.”

The second is John Lewis, who, in addition to being the leader of the Modern Jazz Quartet, is the musical director of the American Jazz Orchestra: “Jimmy is one of the most meticulous musical people I know. His range of expression is wide, wide, wide. The wonderful notes he plays are not necessarily picked out of the chords. Chords are secondary to his musical ideas. We do a lot of repertory work in the orchestra, and when I give him a transcribed solo from an Ellington or Lunceford record he takes that solo and absorbs it and turns it into something new and beautiful.”

THE West Coast reedman Gary Foster once said of his friend Warne Marsh, “His sound on the tenor is completely untenorlike, just as Jimmy Knepper’s sound on the trombone is completely untrombonelike. Both men seem to use their instruments simply as vessels to contain their notes. They could be playing any instrument.” The slide trombone is a bully, because of both its wayward tone and the constant challenge of finding the right notes with the slide, and it has dominated many of its players. Fighting back, they have cracked frenzied jokes on the instrument, making rude noises and elephantine slurs. Or they have attempted to tame it by making it sound limpid and honeylike (Tommy Dorsey, Lawrence Brown, Bobby Byrne). But Knepper, using little vibrato and no funny noises, sings on his instrument. He has an endless, uncontainable melodic river in his head, and it pours out through his trombone. He likes long phrases, some of them more than eight bars and made up of an intricate mixture of triplets and eighth notes, generally arranged comfortably behind the beat. These phrases often start in odd places and end in odd places, and this oddness is hypnotic. The notes he chooses are almost always surprising; they may be outside the chords of a tune or beyond its melody. Knepper’s solos are delivered whole and at one volume and seemingly in one breath. He has never played a melodramatic solo in his life. Knepper talks about his playing the



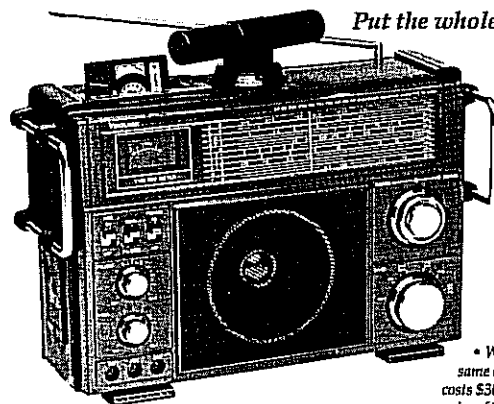
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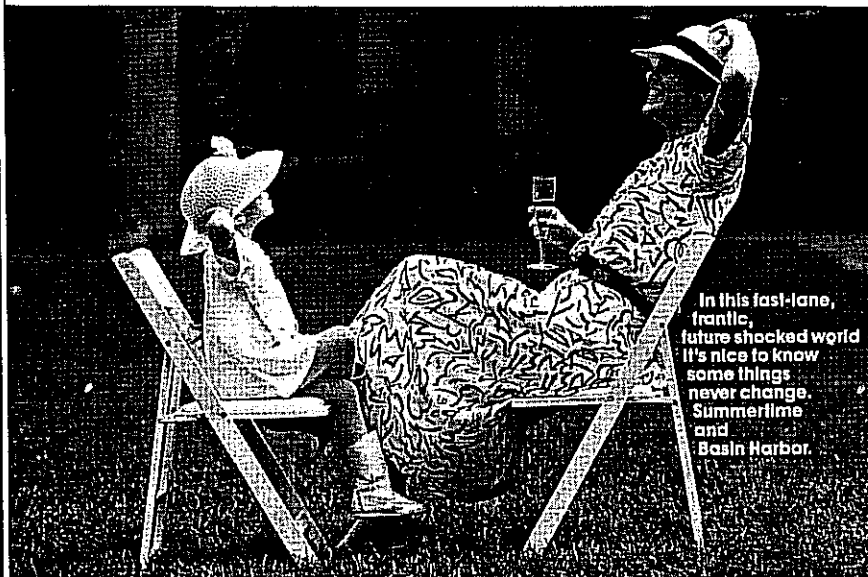
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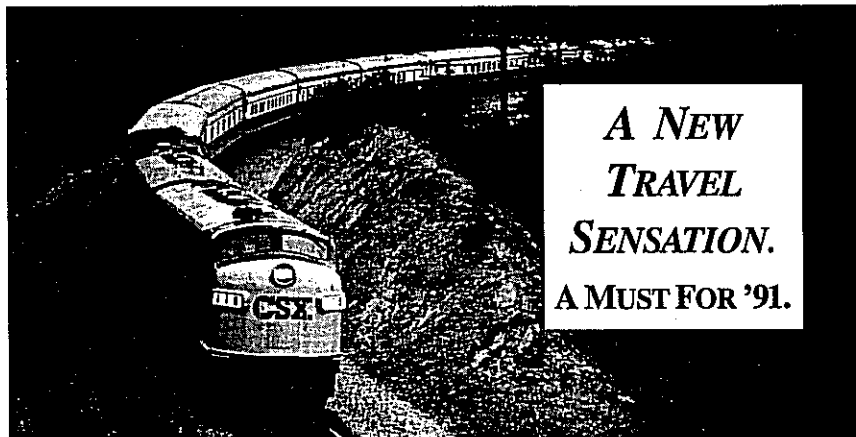
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way he talks about everything—laconically and as a matter of fact. "I have never been ambitious or goal-oriented," he said. "I've never beaten my own drum, or gone at the business of being rich and famous, or even just famous. I tend to work when I get called. Actually, the longest jobs I have had have been outside of jazz, in Broadway shows. I did about thirteen hundred performances of 'Funny Girl,' or three years and three months, and I did a year and three months in the revival of 'On Your Toes.' Getting that check every week was a pleasure.

"Improvisation is a great mystery. You play something, and you play an answer to it. Then you play something to wrap it up. Nothing is going through your mind; you're not thinking of anything. Every now and then, you surprise yourself. Where did *that* come from? So many musicians have told me that they learn the lyrics of the tunes they play, and the lyrics go through their minds when they improvise. I can't understand that. Lyrics would just get in my way. And I try not to think about the chords. I learn them, then I forget them. When I was coming up, I listened to Ray Nance and Sweets Edison and Buck Clayton. And to Lester Young and Charlie Parker, and to that monster technician Lawrence Brown. I used to transcribe Bird's solos and try and play them on my trombone. Lately, I've been working on a system of alternative positions on my slide. I play a harmonic-overtone series. Every note on the trombone is available in two or three places on the slide. If you're moving your slide out, it makes sense to keep going instead of pulling the slide back, then going out and in, out and in. Your playing is much smoother using the alternative positions. Of course, this system is chancy. Some of the notes in the alternative positions are slightly out of place, and there is always the possibility you will miss one. I'm a pretty good teacher, but I don't like doing it. Anyway, I can tell somebody everything I know in fifteen minutes.

"Musicians of my generation either are keeling over or have lost the spark. But I'll never retire. Last year, I appeared in public maybe forty days out of three hundred and sixty-five. You could say I'm in semi-retirement, but I'm a musician, so I've been semi-retired for the last forty years."

—WHITNEY BALLIETT