



2 New York, 1946–1950

Lennie and Judy Tristano arrived in Freeport, Long Island, in the summer of 1946,¹ where they stayed with Chubby Jackson and his mother before moving to New York City later that year. Freeport, Jackson's hometown, was populated by many vaudevillians, and Jackson retained his interest in vaudeville throughout his career as a jazz musician. He described the circumstances of Tristano's arrival: "Freeport was the home of all vaudevillians. Many years ago, my mother was in vaudeville for forty-two years. . . . I brought him [Tristano] out there and Mom played piano. . . . There was a piano in her living room and naturally Lennie went to the piano before he went to the bathroom. . . . And he impressed Mom very much." Jackson played an important role in Tristano's budding career in New York by making arrangements to assemble the members of a trio. They decided on the format of piano trio composed of piano, bass, and guitar, which had gained popularity with successful trios led by Clarence Profit, Art Tatum, and Nat Cole.²

The Lennie Tristano Trio

Jackson, he recalls, contacted Arnold Fishkin, a bassist and his childhood friend, and said about Tristano, "You have to hear this guy." The reason why Jackson himself did not play in the group, according to Fishkin, was that Jackson intended to keep Tristano's group separate from his own on a tour featuring the winners of the *Esquire* magazine jazz poll.³ For the guitar, Jackson asked Billy Bauer, who was in New York, having left Herman in August 1946. He had already seen Tristano in Chicago, but their meeting did not take place until later in

Freeport. Bauer recalled: "When I came to New York, I was going to pack up and quit everything for a while, because I'd been on the road for three years. . . . In the meantime the phone rings and Chubby Jackson says, 'Look, I got the guy coming from Chicago and I want you and him and Arnold Fishkin to open at this place in Freeport.' . . . It was quite a steady job. It was a little restaurant."⁴ Jackson says the restaurant was Al B. White's, owned by an ex-vaudevillian friend of Jackson's. According to Fishkin, the trio was very successful despite the lack of publicity: "[T]here was hardly any advertisement. I think there was one ad in the local paper, and that place was packed every night. It was just amazing, from mouth to mouth, and the thing just took off. It was just one of those things that happened maybe once in your whole lifetime. Playing with Lennie was like a dream. . . . And it lasted about . . . a month or two."⁵

During the engagements at the restaurant Bauer observed something unusual about the pianist. Tristano wanted to bypass the statement of the tune and rather start improvising right away on its harmonic progressions. He also preferred the comping style on the guitar rather than the rhythm guitar, the latter involving playing chords on all four beats as was typical of the swing style. Bauer described his surprises: "We walked in and I didn't know what to expect. . . . So he says, 'Here's what we'd do. No rhythm guitar. No melody. So let's play.' . . . Now, I'm not supposed to play the melody, I'm not supposed to play rhythm. So he says, 'Just play anything.'" Following Tristano's instruction not to "play the melody or straight rhythm," Bauer "either had to play counter harmonies, counter melodies, or what today they call 'compin,'" which "[n]ot many people were doing," especially in a trio setting.⁶ He was frustrated about his new role, which entailed much more freedom than he was used to, and later recalled, "I fell flat on my face every night."⁷ Fishkin explained that Tristano considered playing the melody too commercial.⁸

Another novel aspect of Tristano's playing was his advanced concept of superimposed harmonies. This also frustrated Bauer at first: "[W]e started and he picked 'Moon Looks Down and Laughs' or something like that. And we played and no matter what I did, like if I thought he did something and I'd go and grab it, he'd immediately go away from me and play something else, and I couldn't catch him and that went on for the whole night." Bauer, however, realized that it allowed harmonic freedom: "So I got used to this thing and I was very

free after a while, because you could almost do anything, because he'd cover you up. Now, if you hit a couple of bad notes, he'd make that a harmonic structure. He . . . had a great ear, really." Bauer further explained: "No matter what I'd do, it would seem like he was playing in another key. Later on I realized he was playing extensions and substitutions. I went along with it because no matter how mixed up I'd get, I'd fall into some kind of counterpoint."⁹ Fishkin, as a bass player, had a different role, but attested to the same sense of freedom, as Tristano's approach built complex harmonic superstructures on the basic framework provided by the bass. Fishkin recalled, "What Lennie said to me was . . . 'Just don't have any fears about where you are going. Just keep your ears open.' Just bearing that in mind, it was quite free, because I wasn't leading, but he was playing off of me. So it was really quite comfortable."¹⁰

Another outcome of Tristano's association with Jackson was meeting with Barry Ulanov, a jazz critic and coeditor of *Metronome*, who promoted the music of the "modern" jazz musicians of the 1940s. Recognizing Tristano as the most original voice in contemporary jazz, Ulanov wrote prolifically about him with extreme enthusiasm, thus playing a great role in promoting his music, until retiring from jazz criticism in 1955 to pursue an academic career.¹¹ Arranged by Jackson, their first meeting took place in August 1946 when Ulanov was teaching a summer class at the Juilliard School of Music. Ulanov reminisced: "[T]he door burst open and Chubby Jackson blew in. . . . After him came Billy Bauer. . . . Then followed Arnold Fishkind . . . and behind him Judy and Lennie Tristano. . . . I didn't realize the full impact of this music and this musician until that following winter when . . . I . . . encountered his music most forcibly on his first released record, *I Can't Get Started* and *Out on a Limb*."¹² Later in 1946 Ulanov, with Ruth Hamalainen, wrote a feature article on Tristano, which affirmed his belief in the inevitable progress in jazz and declared Tristano to be at the front of the avant-garde in jazz.¹³ In this article they noted, "Lennie believes that jazz is a complete art unto itself" and "thinks that modern jazz is a brilliant musical form which has not yet reached its maturity": "Lennie has put himself in the position of a leader, not a follower. . . . Lennie feels that music is unlimited in its possibilities and in the technique with which to express them." Interestingly, they anticipated the criticism of Tristano's music as being "devoid of feeling" or "mechanical," which was occasionally voiced

in later record reviews: "As always with different ideas, it will be some time before the staid public will accept music of this kind, and there will be objections . . . there will be those who say that Lennie's music is devoid of feeling. But there can be no music without feeling; it's just a question of what the feeling is, and in Lennie's case, it is highly original, beautiful and subtle."

Unfortunately, the tour planned by Jackson was cancelled and the trio broke up, with Fishkin leaving for California around September to join the Charlie Barnet band.¹⁴ In any case, Tristano's aspiration was to perform in New York City. According to Bauer, the owner of Al B. White's guaranteed consistent work, even telling them to come back after other engagements, but Tristano did not intend to stay in Freeport. Bauer recalled, "Lennie wanted to get into Manhattan."¹⁵ In the absence of Fishkin, a quartet was formed with Jackson, Tristano, Bauer, and a drummer, Stan Levey, which played for a short engagement at the Downbeat Club on Fifty-second Street.¹⁶ A review from October 1946 indicated that the poor reception was due to the advanced, that is, "too hip," nature of the music: "Goateed, hefty Chubby Jackson . . . opened and closed so fast late last month on 52nd street's Downbeat club that the Lane's curious as well as many of Jackson's followers didn't get so much as a peek of the big fellow's arrival and departure let alone a listen to his 'new stuff.'"¹⁷ Then the review quoted the "club mentors": "This is supposed to be the most hip street in the world . . . but Chubby's stuff was a little too hip for any of us—so, we let him go. When Chubby was playing, nothing happened for the masses and we can't make our tab playing only to the super-hipped."

In the quartet Jackson encountered problems playing with Tristano, both personal and musical. First, their approaches to music differed vastly; Jackson, coming from his vaudeville background, was inclined toward theatrical presentations, which Tristano must have considered "commercial." Jackson reminisced: "I have a certain other type of feelings not only about playing but also presentation . . . I have extra certain ways of visually [performing] and what not, and like to do some happy things and I like to have perfect control, which always looked like it was a total ad lib because that was part of our training . . . but really very, very well prepared." Part of the problem arose from the conflict between two strong musical personalities, with Tristano taking over the direction of the quartet. Jackson recalled that he

“was looking to have a very musical thing that was labeled Chubby Jackson and His Quartet. However, I immediately found myself playing in Lennie’s group, which, of course, wasn’t bad at all musically, because it was wilder by the evening. There were some extremities that we went through that I don’t think I’ll ever forget.”¹⁸ He continued, describing himself as “a very adamant person”: “I, all of a sudden, musically, and this is not socially, found that I was locking horns with a giant. And I realized this within the first week that I had no longer any charge of the group at all. . . . And I had to go what direction he wanted and whatever tempo he wished, or whatever level of emotional sound, or no matter what it was, it was Lennie’s dictate.” For example, Tristano did not agree with Jackson’s choice of tempo, as Jackson recounted a frustrating incident: “I’d call out a certain tune that we did the night before and it was a certain tempo and a certain melodic line on top . . . and it would get a big hand, then I would get to the microphone and go through my theatrical faces and what not, and the next night I’d call out [the same tune].” Jackson then described how Tristano imposed his own tempo for the sake of spontaneous improvisation: “While I beat it up, ‘One, two, one two three four,’ and the group would come in . . . like a peg or two underneath, or the night after that, a peg or two above what I had. In other words, he . . . didn’t ever hear the direction that somebody else was dropping on him.”

Tristano’s clash with Jackson seems partly due to Tristano’s wish to avoid commercialism. Even though Jackson played an important role in introducing Tristano to the New York jazz scene, they subsequently followed separate paths, performing together only occasionally on club dates.¹⁹ Even though Jackson planned a Swedish tour in the fall of 1947, which was intended to include Tristano along with Conte Candoli, Frankie Socolow, Bauer, Tony Aless, and Art Mardigan,²⁰ Tristano did not go with him. After the dissolution of the quartet, Tristano went back to the trio format with Bauer on the guitar and a series of different bassists.

Keynote Sessions

In August 1946 Tristano’s trio with Leonard Gaskin on bass made a V-disc, one of a series of “Victory” discs for the armed forces, with “I Can’t Get Started” and “A Night in Tunisia.”²¹ Then on October 8,

1946, the trio, with Clyde Lombardi on bass, recorded for Keynote. Produced by Harry Lim, who was very interested in Tristano's music, the session resulted in an unusually large number of recordings, fifteen altogether, composed of multiple takes of four tunes and an untitled blues.²² Two of them, the third take of "Out on a Limb" and the second take of "I Can't Get Started," were released in 1947 on the first commercially available record of the trio (K647); Tristano's use of counterpoint, chromaticism, and polyrhythm in the former is examined in chapter 5.

Contemporary reviews clearly indicate the novel nature of the trio in the contrapuntal interaction between piano and guitar and the innovative harmonic approach reminiscent of the early twentieth-century composers. Michael Levin of *Down Beat*, while criticizing some passages as contrived and "almost self-consciously arty," insightfully pointed out aspects of polyphony, polyrhythm, and advanced harmonies: "Tristano has some of the freshest pianistic approaches to conventional small group playing. . . . [H]e uses constant intermixed figures with Bauer, and a melodic and harmonic line that depend on linear development rather than repeated riffs. . . . Granted that there are places on both sides, where the group doesn't 'swing' as we conventionally use the term."²³ Then Levin defended Tristano: "But on the other hand, there is no reason to limit jazz to 2/4 and 4/4 for the rest of its existence. A lot can happen in 3/8 and 5/2 too. . . . [T]his record also represents the attempt of three musicians to take jazz as they have heard it, combine it with a developing classical tradition and still keep it freely improvisatory in nature." Levin also commented, "I'd like to hear a little more melodic quality, restraint and more careful use of polyphony." The reviewers of *Metronome*, especially Ulanov, evaluated the record highly, pointing out "a linear construction and dissonances out of Hindemith," and selecting the trio as one of the month's best small groups.²⁴ In the same issue, Ulanov justified his enthusiasm for Tristano by reporting positive reactions to the record from musicians he met on the West Coast, including Sonny Burke, André Previn, Les Brown, Babe Russin, and Mel Tormé.²⁵ Other musicians who praised the record include Mel Powell, Fats Navarro, and Billy Eckstine.²⁶ It is also interesting that Schillinger House, later Berklee School of Music, presented "Out on a Limb" as one of the piano solos for students to analyze during their regular

courses; in addition, in the students' poll Tristano placed third in the instrumentalist category.²⁷

The Keynote record had a particularly strong impact on Bud Freeman, who considered Tristano "one of the great jazz musicians" and called him for lessons. Ulanov found it striking that Freeman, who is representative of an older school of jazz, sought guidance from Tristano, an epitome of "the new, the modern, the progressive": "The facts are that Bud Freeman heard . . . *Out on a Limb*, and went hurriedly in search of Lennie's phone number the next day. . . . He'd heard that Lennie took on pupils in general jazz theory and harmony; was it true? Why, yes, Lennie assured him. . . . At this point, Bud has been studying with Lennie for 3 months."²⁸ Ulanov also reported that Freeman "had trouble getting back into form" after returning from Rio de Janeiro, and quoted him on his study with Tristano: "I never knew how much freer I would feel getting down to the basic principles. . . . I thought it would be instructive to study with a great musician like Lennie; I didn't know it would be so much fun." Freeman further remarked on Tristano's encouragement: "In one month he had my confidence back, and one day when I started to get this big sound he said, 'That's great!'"²⁹

Tristano closed his first year in New York with a short engagement at the Three Deuces. Bauer, who had to miss the last day, recommended Ray Turner, a tenor saxophonist, as a substitute: "I think he was hoping we'd be held over another week. He finally said 'Get me a horn. There'll be less conflict with the harmonies.' I recommended a sax player. When I got back I asked Lennie how it went. He said 'I knew every riff he played. After the first set, to make the night interesting, I played harmony to him.' I thought that was funny."³⁰ The poor reception Tristano experienced during his early club engagements in New York must have been disappointing. As he put it, he "bombed" on Fifty-second Street.³¹

In 1947 Tristano appeared in the all-star polls in both *Metronome* and *Down Beat*. In *Metronome* he placed seventeenth as pianist with 31 votes, and twenty-fourth as arranger with 7 votes; Nat Cole was the winning pianist with 299 votes.³² In *Down Beat* he was ranked thirtieth as pianist with 35 votes; Mel Powell won first place with 1,249 votes.³³ In March Tristano made his first concert appearance in New York at Town Hall; presented by Lim, it featured other musicians

signed to Keynote.³⁴ Levin reported that “Tristano’s piano, solo and with a group, was a pleasure to hear,” and an audience member, highly impressed, considered Tristano the “future for the art of jazz.”³⁵

On May 5, Tristano performed at Carnegie Hall as one of the guest performers for the Jazz At The Philharmonic series, including Coleman Hawkins, Harry Carney, Billy Strayhorn, Oscar Pettiford, Charlie Parker, and Kai Winding, among others.³⁶ Levin complemented Tristano’s playing, but considered it too advanced for the audience: “Lennie Tristano came in for a group of three solo numbers which sorely puzzled the house, it not even being able to guess the tunes, let alone follow the ideas. Musically his was the most fertile playing of the evening, even if emotionally a shade over-cerebrative in spots.”³⁷ Levin’s reference to the intellectual aspect of Tristano’s music is significant, as it echoes later criticisms.

The second Keynote session took place under John Hammond’s supervision on May 23, 1947, with Bob Leininger on bass; there are four extant recordings, “Blue Boy,” “Atonement,” and two takes of “Coolin’ Off With Ulanov.” Later that year Keynote released an album of three 78-rpm records containing six selections, three from each of the two sessions (K147). This album drew a great deal of attention and thus played a significant role in the reception of Tristano’s music. For example, reviewers of *Metronome* chose it among “the month’s best” in August 1947, noting Tristano’s “striking originality and rich equipment.”³⁸ Levin also wrote a favorable review in which he praised Tristano’s playing as “loaded with ideas and possessed of considerable technical skill,” dubbing him “one of the best young musicians in the country, minor complaints notwithstanding”; his complaint was that “certain ideas are deliberately superimposed in the whole pattern of what he is playing for the ‘shock’ effect.”³⁹ *Down Beat*, stating that “the album is one of the outstanding contributions to modern music,” paid special attention to it by commissioning Lou Stein, a jazz pianist, on an additional review for the purpose of “an unprejudiced and complete analysis of Tristano’s work.”⁴⁰ In his lengthy and glowing review, Stein praised Tristano as a “prophetic figure” who had “musically broken his bonds to explore the undiscovered,” and as a “courageous fellow” who consistently refused “exploiting himself” for commercial success.⁴¹ Noting Tristano’s “unquestioning and instinctive need to express himself honestly,”

Stein keenly pointed out the use of counterpoint, dissonances, block chords, extended harmony of “augmented 11ths against major 9ths,” and polyrhythm achieved by “playing 5/4, 3/4, 6/4 etc. against the basic 4/4 of the bassist and guitarist.”

Other musicians had differing opinions. Nat Cole, on Leonard Feather’s blindfold test, spoke about “Blue Boy” in a disapproving tone. Mistaking Tristano for Previn, perhaps perceiving the classical background, he remarked: “That guitar and the piano—if one would give the other a chance to play, they’d sound better; they’re both trying to play solos. . . . Piano nice in spots.”⁴² Considering that “Blue Boy” contains intense contrapuntal interactions and exchanges of ideas between the two instruments, Cole’s observation is reasonable.

Teddy Wilson, upon listening to “I Can’t Get Started,” also on a blindfold test, commented on the ambiguous nature of the harmonies: “They have everything but the kitchen sink in here—splashing weird chords around; they seem to enjoy it. Use of all that harmony is indiscriminate, not significant. They must have had their ears glued to Delius and Ravel . . . sounded like really free improvisation, and they did run into some very good things at times.”⁴³ Although not too complementary, Wilson’s comment about free improvisation is significant; the trio recordings give an inkling of Tristano’s later free improvisations based on group interaction.

The recording of “I Can’t Get Started,” a ballad by Vernon Duke and Ira Gershwin (1935), is interesting in that Bauer states only the first two measures of the melody, while Tristano accompanies with thick and seemingly unrelated chords. Tristano took advantage of the slow tempo to construct a complicated harmonic superstructure over the standard chords and to manipulate rhythmic values and pacing. The extraordinary and adventurous harmonic concept prompted the jazz historian Gunther Schuller to consider it sitting “on the cusp of tonality and atonality”: “The original song is the merest pretext for a whole new concept of jazz in which tonality and atonality, harmony and counterpoint, meet on common ground, in brand new functions. . . . Tristano builds a remarkable improvised superstructure of great harmonic, melodic, and even to some extent rhythmic invention.”⁴⁴ Taking note of “criss-crossing counterpoints, metric cross-rhythms, and alternately dense and lightweight textures,” Schuller also pointed out that the chromatic harmonies were extensions of the basic chord progression: “As ‘far out’ as Tristano’s chordal blocks may be if

taken separately, they are always anchored in the song's root progressions. . . . Technically, many of these harmonic constructions might be called 'bitonal,' while others are so near the border of atonality that a clear distinction is no longer possible." Then Schuller perceptively described the recording as "an achievement that in 1946 could only be accomplished by a harmonic ear of genius calibre." The use of such complicated harmonic structures without clear functional references is an important factor in understanding Tristano's daring use of harmonies. On the emotional level, it effectively reflects on the sentiment of the lyrics, that is, unrequited love, by evoking a brooding mood.

The trio recordings are early examples of Tristano's polymetric and polytonal inclinations, as well as of remarkable virtuosity in his playing of block chords and rapid runs; the block chords remained in his vocabulary, later to become much more complicated and dense in their harmonic content. In his later recordings Tristano intensified aspects of linearity, chromatic harmony, and polyrhythm, and continued to explore the spontaneous and dense contrapuntal activity in the context of group interaction.

"What's Wrong with the Beboppers" and "What's Right with the Beboppers"

In the summer of 1947 Tristano penned another criticism of jazz, now focusing on bebop; by then he had had firsthand experiences with the newer style of jazz. In two articles published in *Metronome*, he again exhibited his historical awareness and unfailing conviction with adamant forthrightness. Reflecting the teleological tendency in contemporary jazz criticism, he expounded keenly on jazz history and the course that jazz should take in order to transcend bebop.

Tristano opened his first article, "What's Wrong with the Beboppers," by asserting that bebop is an advanced form of jazz:

Bebop is a definite step forward in the art of jazz. As with any art form, this progress has met with multiple and varied opposition. Jazz has not yet found acceptance with the American public; and bebop, an advanced and complex outgrowth of that jazz, exists precariously above the uncomprehending ears of the average person. But it is the musicians themselves, the vendors of jazz, who in many cases make their own lives difficult. The protago-

nists of Dixieland regard bebop as a war-time fad. However, the supercilious attitude and lack of originality of the young hipsters constitute no less a menace to the existence of bebop.⁴⁵

In this context he charged “most boppers,” whom he called “little monkey-men,” with slavishly imitating Dizzy Gillespie, “the master of the new idiom”; Tristano recommended instead “studying and analyzing modern jazz with the aim of contributing something original to it.”

Explaining the nature of bebop based on the criteria of “harmonic structure, unique inflections, and phraseology,” Tristano cited “lightness, fleetness, and facility” as the “attributes of modern jazz”; these were to “be integrated with originality and knowledge to form an expression which may be similar in style but different according to individual personalities.” He also contrasted bebop with earlier styles of jazz, and criticized the phenomenon of labeling; it is ironic that he later became a victim of what he called “pigeon-holing,” that is, as a “cool” jazz musician:

A fashion of present-day crudition is the procedure of pigeon-holing. . . . Accordingly, this idiom had to be labeled. It was tagged “bebop.” . . . It must be understood that bebop is diametrically opposed to the jazz that preceded it (swing as applied to large groups, and Dixieland as applied to small ones). Swing was hot, heavy, and loud. Bebop is cool, light, and soft. The former bumped and chugged along like a beat locomotive; this was known in some quarters as drive. The latter has a more subtle beat which becomes more pronounced by implication. At this low volume level many interesting and complex accents may be introduced effectively. The phraseology is next in importance because every note is governed by the underlying beat. This was not true of swing; for example, the long arpeggios which were executed with no sense of time, the prolonged tremolos, and the sustained scream notes.⁴⁶

The rhythmic dimension of bebop, which Tristano characterized as enabling “many interesting and complex accents,” is an area that he extended to a level far exceeding bebop. Interestingly, he perceived bebop as “cool” and “soft” at a “low volume level”; he was not alone on this view. In 1949 Feather regarded bebop as “cool” jazz, stating that “[a] main characteristic of bebop rhythmically . . . is the change

from 'hot jazz' to 'cool jazz,'” and that Lester Young “was a radical in that he symbolized the gradual evolution from hot jazz to ‘cool’ jazz.”⁴⁷

Determined to take part in “the battle to educate the public,” Tristano, with a strong sense of mission, as if on a crusade, singled out obstacles to “combat”:

There are many people who refuse to let jazz grow beyond their capacity to hear and understand it. There are others whose response to jazz is so completely emotional that they are unwilling to concede the aesthetic and intellectual progress that is demonstrated in bebop. There is a group of critics whose inability to understand and discuss bebop forces them to cling violently to the old familiar patterns. . . . The musicians who refuse to yield to the new are a little less objectionable since a feeling of security forms such an important part of any man's existence. On the other hand, if these same musicians deny the validity and the necessity for progress, then they must be ruthlessly disregarded.⁴⁸

He then reasserted his view of jazz as an art form and projected his optimism in the acceptance of jazz as such: “Jazz will eventually become an art form which will be taken seriously by those hitherto unappreciative of it. It will not be held back by the dancing public, profaned by the deified critics, or restricted in its growth by its poor imitators, even when they imitate jazz at its best.”

In the second article, “What's Right with the Beboppers,” Tristano highlighted the merits of bebop against the shortcomings of Dixieland. For example, declaring that “[t]he music of Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker constitutes the first major break with Dixieland,” he dismissed Dixieland's harmonic simplicity and lack of a good melodic line.⁴⁹ Even though he acknowledged “a single and crude form of counterpoint” and collective improvisation in Dixieland, he criticized it because “its contrapuntal development ends in a blind alley” and because “[a]nything that requires a degree of *intelligent* comprehension is ruled out.”

In discussing the characteristics of bebop, Tristano first stated that it had “made several contributions to the evolution of the single line.” His recognition of the importance of linearity is significant, as this was

a crucial element in his own music. Second, he described the rhythm section as using “a system of chordal punctuation,” whereby “the soloist is able to hear the chord without having it shoved down his throat. He can think as he plays.”⁵⁰ Third, Tristano pointed out that “[a] chorus of bebop may consist of any number of phrases which vary in length” and that a phrase “may contain one or several ideas.” Fourth, he discussed the rhythmic characteristics of bebop: “Given a long series of eighth notes, the Fig would play them as dotted eighths and sixteenths, which effects an underlying shuffle beat. A bopper would accept [*sic*] every up-beat, producing a line which pulsates with a modern, a more exciting feeling. This type of accenting also prevents the soloist from stumbling into a boogie groove, a musical booby-trap.” Embracing bebop wholeheartedly, Tristano argued that it “is a valiant attempt to raise jazz to a thoughtful level, and to replace emotion with meaning,” and that it was “successfully combatting the putrefying effect of commercialism.” Tristano also defended bebop from criticisms that it was “mechanical, ‘over-cerebrative,’ sloppy, technical, and immoral.”

In explaining the lack of understanding and acceptance of bebop, Tristano first blamed the younger musicians for having “gone overboard in attempting to emulate their idols,” and then “the so-called giants of jazz,” who had “absolutely refused to be influenced”: “The feeling of security which comes from playing in a well-worn and worn-out groove, and an unwillingness to admit that jazz has advanced beyond their personally-generated auras suggest an imminent degeneration.”⁵¹ He ended the article on a high note, calling for support from the society: “And here society has a real obligation. It must foster the arts and encourage the artists even if understanding is not immediate. Bebop, one of the more mature levels of jazz, must be listened to, scrutinized, supported. That way it will assure progress and all the inevitable maturation of jazz will be one large step further along.”⁵²

There are several underlying concepts in these articles. First, Tristano believed in the inevitable progress in jazz, and even envisioned the “the next step after bebop”: “The boppers discarded collective improvisation and placed all emphasis on the single line. This is not unfortunate, since the highest development of both would probably not occur simultaneously. Perhaps the next step after bebop will be collective improvisation on a much higher plane because the individ-

ual lines will be more complex.”⁵³ His emphasis on combining linearity and collective improvisation foreshadows his later endeavor with the sextet. Second, he articulately spelled out his aesthetics of jazz as an art form and his antagonism toward commercialism: “Jazz is not a form of popular entertainment; it is art for its own sake. Its popularity or unpopularity is coincidental. The man who plays to entertain is not as objectionable as the man who plays to entertain and at the same time protests that he is playing jazz.”⁵⁴ Third, Tristano considered Gillespie “the master of the new idiom.” This may reflect the general tendency of the contemporary media, which treated Gillespie as the main spokesman of the style. Tristano soon revised his view, regarding Charlie Parker as the progenitor and main force of bebop.⁵⁵

These articles mark Tristano’s final foray into jazz criticism. In comparison with his 1945 article, “What’s Wrong with Chicago Jazz,” his discussion of bebop concentrates more on the music and musicians than criticism of the music industry, exhibiting his acute understanding of bebop as a new phenomenon. Tristano is more optimistic in his 1947 articles, assured of further progress in jazz and its acceptance. However, the tone of unswerving authority and his fierce conviction of the validity of his arguments remained the same in all his writings, along with his evocation of moral obligation on the part of the society and the need to educate the audience.

Meeting Charlie Parker

In 1947 Tristano met Parker and felt strong empathy with him, as Tristano appreciated not only his music but also his caring personality, which had a profound impact on Tristano, who formed a lifelong allegiance to Parker. Tristano remembered how they met at the Three Deuces, where his group was playing opposite Parker’s quintet:

Bird was sitting on the side listening. So he very casually walked up to the piano. . . . He told me how much he enjoyed my music and while he’s doing that, he kind of puts his arm around me, and we’re walking off the stand together. So he’s doing both things. He’s telling me how much he enjoyed my music, but he’s making sure I’m not gonna break my neck, either. And he was so hip in doing it . . . if I hadn’t been around a long time, I would

not have known that's what he was up to, which to me is completely beautiful. Because, in my experience, musicians rarely show that much compassion. That's my experience.⁵⁶

In September 1947 Tristano had opportunities to play with Parker on two radio shows of “musical battle” in which the “moderns” were pitted against the “moldy figs,” that is, Dixieland musicians. The septet, called Barry Ulanov's All Star Modern Jazz Musicians, comprised Tristano, Parker, Gillespie, John LaPorta, Bauer, Ray Brown, and Max Roach. According to Ulanov, “It was my privilege to gather the modern clan which battled the fixed personnel of Rudi Blesh's *This Is Jazz* show on Larry Dorn's *Bands for Bonds* program on successive Saturday afternoons.”⁵⁷ It is only fitting that Ulanov selected Tristano and his coterie, Bauer and LaPorta, the latter a Tristano student, considering both his enthusiasm for Tristano and Tristano's critical view of Dixieland. Tristano, on the contrary, gave a different recount of the event, stating that Parker was the one who selected him:

[T]hey put this battle of the bands together, and Bird included *me*. Now, I said to him, “What you really should do is use *Bud* [Powell].” . . . There were two things happening at the time. Bird and everybody who copied him, and what I was trying to do through my playing and through my teaching, which I'm not saying I was anywhere *nearly* as great as Bird. But it *wasn't* copying Bird. Right? So he thought it would be a good idea to mix the two. And some of it came out pretty good. In fact, I think on some of the takes Bird plays his ass off.⁵⁸

After the two shows aired on September 13 and 20, listeners were invited to vote for their preference, and “the results were overwhelmingly in favor of the modernists.”⁵⁹ This led to another radio show on November 8, 1947, which featured the winners, Parker, Tristano, Bauer, and LaPorta from the first session, along with Fats Navarro, Allen Eager, Buddy Rich, Tommy Potter, and Sarah Vaughan. On the first show Ulanov featured Tristano in a quartet with Bauer, Ray Brown, and Max Roach in “I Surrender Dear”; here Tristano again performed in a small setting, a trio this time, with Bauer and Potter, playing “Don't Blame me.”⁶⁰

Significantly, Tristano strongly identified with Parker, considering

42 LENNIE TRISTANO

his own harmonic style more compatible with Parker's playing than with other musicians on the show: "I was sitting at the piano, playing something. He started playing with me, and he played his ass off. He wasn't used to the chords I played. I play sort of my own chords. In a lot of ways, they were different. . . . [W]hatever I did, he was right on top of the chords, like we had rehearsed."⁶¹ Tristano explained that Parker had "always been limited by the people he played with. . . . The right chord structure is not behind him. Most of the kids who played piano for Bird and played in his style, they always used the same chord progression." Tristano certainly took a great pride in that Parker liked his playing, suggesting that Parker appreciated his originality: "I was never a copier. That's not to say what I came out with was great, but I was not a copier. And I think that's one of the things that Bird enjoyed about listening to me. . . . I really do believe, and this is just my own belief, that Bird enjoyed playing with me. Because I was not imitating him and *everybody in the world was*."⁶² Tristano further explained: "See, if you went down the Street and walked into a club and heard a ten-piece band, everybody stood up and took about 50 choruses of Bird's licks. And it stayed that way until, say maybe the middle fifties. And it finally caught up to Bird. It really bugged the shit out of him. Because he told me so." In fact, there was mutual respect for each other, as Parker remarked: "As for Lennie Tristano, I'd like to go on record as saying I endorse his work in every particular. They say he's cold. They're wrong. He has a big heart and it's in his music. Obviously, he also has tremendous technical ability and you know, he can play anywhere with anybody. He's a tremendous musician. I call him the great acclimatizer."⁶³

More Recordings and the Return of Fishkin

During the latter part of 1947 Tristano had a few recording sessions. On September 23 he made solo piano recordings for RCA Victor, including "Ghost of a Chance," "Spontaneous Combustion," and "Just Judy." When the record company later tried to issue some of these in the early 1950s, Tristano withheld his approval. Joe Muranyi, who "used to work at RCA in the early 1950s," told Tristano about the company's plan to issue his recordings: "But he said, 'What? They what? No.' And he did take a stance, because two weeks later another

paper came around and said the issue had been cancelled due to technical problems. And then it was issued without the two Lennie sides. . . . [H]e said they hadn't cleared with him, or he didn't want them to issue it."⁶⁴ One of the recordings, "Ghost of a Chance," was released in 1952 on *Modern Jazz Piano*, a compilation record of various jazz pianists (Victor LPT31). While Ulanov singled out Tristano as the best,⁶⁵ Ralph Burns, who recognized Tristano upon hearing the recording in a blindfold test, stated that it sounded "like Lennie Tristano on a bad day, when he didn't have too many ideas."⁶⁶ However, Burns acknowledged Tristano's originality: "[I]t's original, though there are a lot of things I don't agree with—sometimes he keeps going on the same chord or the same idea, in a whole-tone thing; but I like it, because it's something to make you pick up your ears and listen. It's a change from listening to things that you've heard so many people do every day."

A month later, on October 23, 1947, Tristano's trio with Bauer on guitar and John Levy on bass recorded "On a Planet," "Air Pocket," "Celestia," and two takes of "Supersonic" for Majestic. Singer Mildred Bailey was to record with the group, but only trio recordings were made, issued later in 1954 on Savoy (XP 8084). Hentoff wrote a warm review, defending Tristano from accusations of "cerebration" and dubbing the record "a delightfully meditative collection": "All four extensions of standards are quite absorbing, not only as harbingers of later Tristano but as swinging excursions into the farther side of the probable. The rapport between Bauer and Tristano leads to close relistening. . . . It should also be added, in view of the loose talk about cerebration from non-cerebrators, that all this is relaxed and relaxing."⁶⁷

Since Fishkin's departure, Tristano had hired a series of bassists, but considered Fishkin his ideal bass player. He asked Fishkin to come back to New York in two letters, both dictated to Judy Tristano. At the time of the first letter, dated November 11, 1946, Tristano was not in a good position to convince Fishkin, since he had been out of work after the quartet with Chubby Jackson broke up. His second letter, from November 15, 1947, was more coaxing; in it Tristano assured Fishkin that he was the only one that fit his group. Tristano also stated he was now confident and optimistic about his success, referring to the improving prospect of job opportunities and his ascendancy in the poll results. Interestingly, Tristano proudly mentioned that he flatly turned

44 LENNIE TRISTANO

down the request of Irving Alexander, owner of the Three Deuces, for his trio to perform at the club again; he thought Fishkin would find this amusing, for some reason. This letter actually prompted Fishkin to drive back to New York later that November.⁶⁸

Fishkin recalled that the first engagement of the original trio took place at the Bohemia, where the tap dancer Steve Condos sat in.⁶⁹ A review in *Down Beat* noted that the group “closed five days later after spotty business,” attributing the lack of success to poor publicity and “the split crowd drawn”: “The established trade at the spot was utterly bewildered by Tristano, while the musicians attracted by his rep were intensely annoyed by the slightly square antics of the audience. The trio . . . is dickering with several clubs for a January opening.”⁷⁰

The reunited trio recorded for Disc on December 31, 1947,⁷¹ including some quartet tracks with John LaPorta on clarinet, who had misgivings about the session.⁷² One of the trio recordings, “The Blues,” was released on Folkways in 1953 on an anthology album featuring various jazz pianists.⁷³ It also became part of a 1954 album intended to introduce different jazz styles, with Langston Hughes’s narration; it presented Tristano’s group as one of the postwar small combos, which played “a cool kind of jazz termed modern or progressive jazz,” influenced “most directly by bop.”⁷⁴ The quartet tracks, “Speculation” and “Through These Portals,” were issued earlier, in 1948 (Disc 5500). A favorable review in *Metronome* pointed out “a delicate contrapuntal exchange” among the members on the latter, praising the recordings as “the most remarkable sounds in the jazz world.”⁷⁵

The Tristano Residence

When the Tristanos moved to New York City in 1946, they lived in the St. James Hotel for a year before moving to an apartment at 313 East Seventy-third Street. Judy Tristano described the apartment as “bed-buggy, cockroachy place, full of mice”: “[Y]ou could count like eleven of them at a time, running around in this crummy little place. Ah, housing in New York was very difficult to find. . . . The bathtub was in the kitchen, with a wooden cover over, and the holes in the walls . . . in one tiny little room. So we had that room and we slept in kind of an alcove of the kitchen. . . . So the kitchen was the largest and

brightest room.” While there, they made acquaintance with Bud Freeman and Ulanov, as she further reminisced: “Bud Freeman was one of his first students at that place. He and Lennie would have a great old time talking. I think we met Barry Ulanov at that point. He used to come there. He and Lennie were pretty tight for a while. Leonard Feather, Lennie never got tight with.” She also recalled, “Fifty-second Street was in full swing” at that time, and they would “go and hear Dizzy and Bird, Allen Eager, Zoot Sims, Billie Holiday.” After the apartment, they moved to a flat in a fourplex in Flushing, Long Island. She described the hardship of finding a larger place to live while Tristano continued working on his music: “I would take Lennie to the Lighthouse for the Blind, where he could practice on a piano, and I would go out and walk on the streets, answering ads in newspapers to try to find us a place to live. Oh, it was rough.” She remembered that the flat, with seven rooms, was very comfortable: “[It] was quite large and nice. And that’s where we bought a Baldwin baby grand, a lovely piano, and that was in our living room and Lennie taught there. . . . My mother paid for the Baldwin, a belated wedding gift for \$1,500.” It was in Flushing that the Tristanos socialized with the Shearings. Judy Tristano recalled that Tristano and Shearing had a close friendship and shared funny stories about their blindness, especially the way people treated blind people, but Shearing “had to compromise, commercialize, and he and Lennie just drifted apart.”

There was a period when the Tristanos lived temporarily with the Fishkins at their Levittown house on Long Island, during which time Fishkin observed many interesting aspects of Tristano’s personality, especially concerning blindness.⁷⁶ For example, Tristano asked Fishkin to walk him through the house and show him where every object was, and then not to move anything. Fishkin also remarked on Tristano’s highly sensitive hearing and his ability to solve difficult mathematic problems in his head, as well as the fact that he had memorized much music. In addition, Fishkin noted Tristano’s fascination with psychotherapy, especially writings by Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud.

1948

The year 1948 marked the beginning of a crucial period in Tristano’s career in terms of public recognition. He received continuing support

from *Metronome*, especially through Ulanov's enthusiastic reviews and editorials. Ulanov, who shared with Tristano a belief in the progress of jazz as art music, considered his music the most important event in the recent development of jazz. Most notably, *Metronome* nominated Tristano as the "Musician of the Year" in January 1948.⁷⁷ The editors, George Simon and Ulanov, noted, "1947 will go down in jazz history as the year Lennie Tristano's remarkable formulations were released on records," and selected all Keynote recordings except "Blue Boy" among the best albums of the year.⁷⁸ In the magazine's all-star poll Tristano placed second as pianist and thirteenth as arranger.⁷⁹ However, reports of his public appearances dwindled throughout the year.⁸⁰ It may have been due to Tristano's antagonism toward club owners, which, Fishkin noted, provoked Tristano to alienate himself from the night club scene.⁸¹ If Tristano was inactive as performer, he was consistently active in teaching. For example, it was reported in 1947 that he was spending most of his time teaching,⁸² and in 1948 that he was planning a recital of his students.⁸³

A significant development in 1948 was the expansion of Tristano's group to a quintet by adding an alto saxophonist, Lee Konitz, and a drummer; it eventually grew to a sextet in 1949. Konitz, who had studied with Tristano in Chicago, moved to New York via his work with the Claude Thornhill band: "I left Chicago with that band with the intentions of getting to New York where Tristano was in '47. And it took me ten months to get to New York. I could have gotten there faster on a covered wagon."⁸⁴ Upon arriving in New York in the summer of 1948, Konitz not only took up his study with Tristano again, but also began rehearsing with him as a member of the quintet.⁸⁵ One of the first engagements of the newly formed quintet occurred late in 1948 at the Royal Roost with Mel Zelnick on drums.⁸⁶ The change in the makeup of the ensemble and the work entailed in forging its style may explain the infrequency of Tristano's public appearances during 1948.

1949: Quintet and Sextet

In 1949 *Metronome* continued to promote Tristano, citing him as a fixture of the New York jazz scene and as one of the "Influences of the Year" along with Lester Young and Sarah Vaughan.⁸⁷ On the *Metronome* All Star Poll he again ranked second among pianists to

Nat Cole, and became a member of the Metronome All Star Band.⁸⁸ On January 3, 1949, the band recorded two pieces for RCA Victor, Pete Rugolo's "Overtime" and Tristano's "Victory Ball," the latter scored for a small ensemble comprising Gillespie, Winding, DeFranco, Parker, Ventura, Bauer, Safranski, and Manne.⁸⁹ *Metronome* reported that Tristano, Bauer, and Parker rehearsed separately "to work out their intricate passage in *Victory Ball*."⁹⁰

On January 11, 1949, Tristano's quintet with Shelly Manne on drums recorded for New Jazz; it was the first session for the group and for the label that later became Prestige. According to Konitz, the session was originally for trumpeter Tony Fruscella: "Bob Weinstock suggested that Tony and I get together. . . . Tony didn't want to do it, so Bob asked me if I would. I asked Lennie to take the date. I just wanted to do it as a sideman."⁹¹

The addition of a saxophone and a full rhythm section created a marked departure from the trio in timbre and texture. They also had their own repertoire of tunes, fixed lines constructed on the harmonic progressions of standards. Although a common practice in jazz, the intricate nature of the melodic writing of the Tristano group is unprecedented. For example, "Subconscious-Lee," a Konitz line based on "What Is This Thing Called Love?" is distinguished by its sophisticated character and chromaticism. Tristano later explained that the written line "sets the scene in a definite way; it tells what's going to come."⁹² Many such lines by his students were actually assignments for their lessons, as Tristano encouraged them to write solos on the harmonies of standard tunes.

When "Subconscious-Lee" and "Judy," the latter written by Tristano over the harmonies of "Don't Blame Me," were issued a few months later, several favorable reviews appeared, most of which noted their contrapuntal nature. *Metronome* pointed out "the Tristano group's polyphonic penchant,"⁹³ and Tom Herrick of *Down Beat* mentioned "the fabulous contrapuntal interweavings" between Tristano and Bauer.⁹⁴ Edgar Jackson, who praised the record as among "the finest examples of small combo jazz in the modern manner," made a similar observation by singling out the "unusually ingenious exploitation of the art of contrapuntality."⁹⁵ Contrapuntal interplay was indeed the most essential element that Tristano's group retained from the trio years.

Four of the quintet recordings were issued in 1950 on an LP, along with later recordings by Konitz (New Jazz NJLP 101). Levin acknowl-

edged Tristano's originality, while suggesting that the music was cerebral, self-conscious, and "too cool"; this is one of the first instances of the term specifically applied to Tristano's music.⁹⁶ Oscar Peterson, on hearing "Tautology" in a blindfold test, recognized Tristano and Konitz and described them as his favorites, but made a clear distinction between musical and commercial values, indicating that the music was not commercially viable: "Musically it's a fine record. Commercially I don't think it holds much value; the public isn't up to that standard in music."⁹⁷

Tristano's group soon became a sextet with the addition of another student, the tenor saxophonist Warne Marsh (1927–1987). Born in Los Angeles, Marsh first heard about Tristano from the trumpet student Don Ferrara, and his first study with Tristano took place in 1947 for about nine months while he was in the army, stationed in New Jersey: "By this time, I had heard Charlie Parker and Lester Young, and been completely turned around. I spent every spare minute in New York, listening to Parker and studying with Lennie Tristano."⁹⁸ After a short return to Los Angeles, Marsh went back to New York in October 1948 at the end of "a three-month cross-country road trip with Buddy Rich's first big band," and resumed his study with Tristano.⁹⁹ He was to remain one of Tristano's most faithful students.¹⁰⁰ Another member of the sextet was a drum student, Harold Granowsky, who participated in one of the Capitol sessions and left the group shortly afterward. According to Marsh, the sextet members worked hard: "We worked our butts off. Lennie was strong on competence in individuals and groups. Discipline. So a lot of work went into those Capitol dates. About four months . . . Billy Bauer, Arnold Fishkin and I."¹⁰¹ Curiously Marsh left out Konitz, a vital part of the ensemble, considering that the two saxophonists often performed together with immaculate accuracy and rapport, while Bauer and Fishkin, whom he mentioned, did not remember rehearsing much.¹⁰² The first reported engagement for the sextet was at the Clique in New York City in January 1949, where they reappeared later in March.¹⁰³

Capitol Recordings

On March 4, March 14, and May 16, 1949, Tristano's group recorded for Capitol, with Granowsky on the drums for the first session and

Denzil Best for the last. These recordings are historically significant, and exerted a long-lasting impact on listeners. They belong to two categories. First, along the same line as the New Jazz recordings, Tristano's sextet recorded original tunes based on preexisting harmonic progressions, such as "Wow" (Tristano), "Crosscurrent" (Tristano), "Marionette" (Bauer), and "Sax of a Kind" (Konitz and Marsh). Second, "Intuition" and "Digression" are the first recorded examples of free jazz performed by an ensemble, comprising the members of the sextet without the drummer.¹⁰⁴ In addition, Tristano recorded Jerome Kern's "Yesterdays" with his original trio members during the second session, harking back to the earlier trio recordings.

"Wow" and "Crosscurrent," recorded on March 4, were the first to be released in 1949 (Capitol 57-60003). A favorable review in *Metronome* selected them as the best small-group recordings, noting the use of polyrhythm.¹⁰⁵ According to Ralph Sharon, a British jazz pianist and arranger, the record marked a drastic departure from Tristano's earlier trio recordings. As for the latter, for example, "I Can't Get Started," he expressed amazement that "a pianist could play with so little feeling and be apparently unaware of what the guitarist was playing," and wondered "how any pianist could be so completely uninfluenced by what was going on around him musically in the States."¹⁰⁶ In contrast, Tristano's recordings with the sextet and with the *Metronome* All Stars impressed Sharon greatly, who considered Tristano "a young man who is going to make his mark on modern jazz": "Tristano has a completely original conception of modern music. . . . Here is a pianist who makes a much fuller use of the piano key-board than most of the other bop men. . . . I don't class Tristano as a true bop pianist. His style is vastly different . . . in that he extends his melodic line much further." Then Sharon made an interesting observation, reflecting on the fact that Tristano often prioritized linearity and that his concept of time differed from the conventional jazz idiom: "Sometimes, in fact, he extends it to the detriment of the 'beat,' which is not really a good idea, because if music doesn't swing, then . . . it ceases to be jazz. But when he isn't too unconventional, Lennie has 'beat' enough." Sharon also stated, "He is a brilliant technician of the Tatum school. Listening to his almost endless double tempo phrases, I get the impression that this is music of the brain rather than of the heart. But there is a certain tension about his playing which also gives an impression of terrific concentration." Sharon concluded:

"[H]is music has already made a deep impression on progressive musicians, for, like Miles Davis, he can be counted as an intellectual of the jazz world."

The second Capitol record contained "Sax of a Kind" and "Marionette" from the second session, which earned enthusiastic reviews from both *Metronome* and *Down Beat* (Capitol 57-60013).¹⁰⁷ Greatly impressed, Levin stated, "Many of the objections to Tristano's work I've had on previous records go right out the window on this record," and that "Marionette," in particular, was played with "ease and relaxation" and "a quality of warmth that it has heretofore lacked on records."¹⁰⁸ Although Levin had often emphasized the lack of emotional warmth on Tristano's earlier records, citing "the technical celerity or cerebration" and the lack of "feeling of communicative enthusiasm,"¹⁰⁹ he regarded the Capitol recordings highly, selecting "Marionette" and "Subconscious-Lee" among his best picks of 1949.¹¹⁰

"Intuition" and "Digression"

"Intuition" and "Digression," the first recordings of free group improvisations, were recorded on May 16, 1949. They represent the most pioneering and innovative approach of the group as fascinating manifestations of contrapuntal interaction. It was in a way a fulfillment of Tristano's 1947 statement about "the next step after bebop" being "collective improvisation on a much higher plane."¹¹¹ Although the trio already displayed considerable interplay between Tristano and Bauer, these free improvisations demonstrate a further development in dispensing with any preexistent material as the basis. Tristano's interest in free improvisation can be actually traced back to his childhood experience: "When I was seven we got a phonograph. I would listen to the old jazz records and then just sit at the piano and play anything—no particular tune. You might say that this was the start of those Capitol sides . . . which were intuitive music—no tunes, no chord progressions, no time. This you might call the start of free form. I wouldn't like to be definite on the subject."¹¹²

It was on the last day of the Capitol sessions that Tristano decided to record free improvisations. In the absence of a prescribed harmonic or formal framework, the contrapuntal interaction between the musi-

cians functions as the structural principle. According to Marsh, Tristano told them that they “were going to improvise strictly from what we heard one another doing” and, prior to recording, discussed the order of, and durations of playing between, entrances: “The only thing that was set was the order of entrances, with Lennie starting off—setting the tempo and the mood—that and the fact that we’d play for three minutes, because we were making 78s. So we would give each other approximately 15 or 20 seconds and then come in.”¹¹³ Tristano reminisced about the circumstance, mentioning that “some significant things happened” during the session: “After we did the conventional part of the date, we did the two free sides. . . . As soon as we began playing the engineer threw up his hands and left his machine. The A & R man and the management thought I was such an idiot that they refused to pay me for the sides and to release them.”¹¹⁴ He then explained, “Free form means playing without a fixed chord progression; without a time signature; without a specified tempo. I had been working with my men in this context for several years so that the music which resulted was not haphazard or hit and miss.”

Konitz confirms that members of the group, including Tristano, Marsh, Bauer, and himself, played free improvisations prior to the recording; he was not sure whether Fishkin was present during rehearsals. Konitz recalled: “[W]e had had some experience in playing intuitively. At that date, Barry Ulanov was in the studio, functioning in some capacity . . . and Pete Rugolo [composer and Capitol producer] was in the booth. After we had played a couple of tunes, Lennie said, ‘Just let the tapes roll for three minutes,’ and we played this intuitive thing.”¹¹⁵ Konitz then noted that they recorded four free improvisations: “Barry was to signal one of us at the end of two minutes approximately. We did four takes, and in each one we stopped at approximately about three minutes. I don’t know *what* it means, except we did do that kind of playing, and it was a great feeling. We did it once at a concert in Boston, and it was very exciting.” Marsh also noted that selected members of the group had experimented with the procedure before the recording session: “This was normal for us. We had practiced it some and done it in clubs, and this was our second date together for Capitol, so we were ready. When I listen to those sides now, I’m amazed at how far ahead Lennie was, at what great music he was playing. And it’s *free* improvising—free, right straight off the top of his head.”¹¹⁶ According to Bauer, “Lennie would say

'You start it! Play anything you want to play.' No key, no tempo, no nothing! Whoever felt like comin' in or droppin' out; spontaneous, not premeditated sounds; no arrangement."¹¹⁷

Ulanov called the recordings "the most audacious experiment yet attempted in jazz," but reported that Capitol erased two of the four sides: "Capitol was bewildered by and uncertain about what it heard. As a result, two of the sides were erased from the recording tape, and the remaining two, those chosen as the best of the four, were put aside, with their date indefinitely postponed."¹¹⁸ Capitol finally issued "Intuition" in late 1950, then "Digression" in 1954. Tristano credited Symphony Sid for their release: "Several months after that Capitol date, Symphony Sid, who was a prominent disc jockey during that period, managed to grab a copy of those two free form sides. He played them three or four times a week on his nightly show over a period of several years. Through that, Capitol records received enough requests for those two sides to warrant releasing them. And, of course, they did pay me for them."¹¹⁹ Tristano then referred to the historical significance of the recordings: "In view of the fact that 15 years later a main part of the jazz scene turned into free form, I think this incident is very significant. These two sides were completely spontaneously improvised. A lot of people who heard them thought they were compositions. To my knowledge Miles Davis is the only noted musician who acknowledged in print the real nature of the music on those sides."¹²⁰

Ulanov was also instrumental in informing the audience of Tristano's free improvisations before their release. In September 1949, he published an eloquent praise: "[T]hese adventures in jazz intuition may very well be the high point of all of jazz until now, possibly the breaking point which will send jazz far away from its too well tested paths and far along the speculative road which every art form has had to follow to achieve greatness."¹²¹ Again affirming his belief in the progress in jazz, Ulanov stated, "*Intuition*, both the record and the procedure which it names, is the inevitable development of Lennie Tristano's last three or four years of laboratory, living-room and lounging-pajama experiment. . . . It marks a strong parallel to the development of the twelve-tone structure in classical music in the twentieth century, a parallel but not an imitation." Then he concluded: "Here jazz comes of age. Lennie labored at his music under many difficulties. . . . Whether or not Capitol has the courage and the

enlightenment to issue these brilliant sides, Lennie Tristano has made the first break. This is the way jazz must go, not necessarily with these sounds, but certainly with these means.”

When Capitol issued “Intuition” along with “Yesterdays” in 1950 (Capitol 7–1224), Ulanov, ecstatic, wrote that “the contrapuntal form which underlies the great years most clearly identified by and with the music of Johann Sebastian Bach has been revived.”¹²² A review in *Metronome* by Hodgkins, Simon, and Ulanov echoed that sentiment: “In reaction to both sides, Barry’s joy knows only alphabetical bounds. . . . To Barry, it [“Intuition”] is the peak of modern jazz, in which the solos of Lennie, Lee Konitz, Warne Marsh and Billy Bauer match their contrapuntal setting in subtlety of form and breadth of musical resource used intuitively.”¹²³ Levin’s review, on the other hand, did not fully acknowledge the significance of “Intuition,” rather pointing out the “cool” aspect: “*Intuition* is a series of parallel running lines, well integrated. Once again, this is cool, reflective, limpidly-expressed jazz, backed by some extraordinary musicianship on the part of Tristano.”¹²⁴

“Digression” was not released until 1954 on a 45-rpm record containing three other recordings from the Capitol sessions, “Crosscurrent,” “Intuition,” and “Sax of a Kind” (Capitol EP EAP 1–491). Nat Hentoff, an important jazz critic at the time, wrote an enthusiastic review: “The newly issued side, *Digression*, is a fascinating study in presumably ad lib counterpoint along the principle of *Intuition*. . . . The more involved the web becomes, the more emotionally as well as cerebrally rewarding the performance grows. These sides point up the gap in present-day jazz recording due to the prolonged absence of Tristano.”¹²⁵ A supporter of Tristano, Hentoff began to write prolifically for *Down Beat* in the early 1950s. Like Tristano and Ulanov he believed in the progress of jazz and recognized Tristano’s contribution to it.

Charlie Parker’s reaction to Tristano’s free playing was documented in a 1953 interview, in response to the interviewer’s difficulty in understanding the “collective improvisation with no theme, no chorus . . . no chord changes”: “[I]f you listen close enough, you can find the melody traveling along with . . . any series of chord structures. . . . [R]ather than to make the melody predominant . . . in the style of music that Lennie and them present, it’s more or less heard or felt.”¹²⁶

Aaron Copland was deeply impressed by Tristano’s group impro-

visations, proudly considering them a uniquely American development: "When American musicians improvise thus freely . . . the European musician is the first to agree that something has been developed here that has no duplication abroad."¹²⁷ Later, however, he commented on Tristano's music as compositions, praising Tristano's "sense of harmonic freedom and his ability to write a piece on one expressive thing without being dull"; he also acknowledged that Tristano "knows how to unify a piece. He sticks to the point. . . . It seems like real composition to me, not happenstance."¹²⁸

Tristano's group performed free improvisations at club engagements. According to Bauer, they played free jazz at Birdland almost every night, pieces that "ran about ten minutes," sometimes to unappreciative patrons.¹²⁹ Konitz described it as a difficult experience: "It was difficult for us to do it in a club, as it was even to just play tunes, so that we didn't play together any more for quite a few years. We really goofed. We had a lot of things going."¹³⁰ Instead, Konitz recalled, Tristano incorporated free playing into the process of improvising on standards: "At some point Tristano didn't want to do that any more. What he wanted to do was . . . get into the groove of the tune as far as possible and open up at any point in the tune. So the tune could just go free at any point for a spell and then back into the tune. That was also very interesting and somehow, more logical." Konitz further explained: "At some point, maybe during the counterpoint playing, we just have a feeling of leaving the tune and just improvising freely . . . for some period of time and then someone would bring it back. Usually Lennie, I think, would state the melody, fragment, or something. . . . Whoever had to lead, we'd all go in that direction. . . . until another voice sticks out and everybody follows that." Marsh, recounting that the group regularly performed free for two years, suggested, "[T]he first times were perhaps the best. They were so spontaneous; they were unbelievable, man, just three lines going."¹³¹ He felt that it became "more difficult," possibly implying that the improvisations became predictable, or lacked inspiration: "Lennie, Lee and I experimented with playing free music and I think our first attempts were the most successful. In order to play that way we felt that the musicianship had to be OK and the results had to be valid music. But we stopped playing free music, the more we played, the more difficult it seemed to be—and today we don't take chances like that when we play."¹³² In fact, he stated, "by the time we did the album we were beginning to get shaky with it."¹³³

It is worth noting another facet of free improvisation: stimulation through the use of marijuana, which, Konitz said, put the musicians “in that kind of receptivity to try this particular way of playing together”: “I must say in all honesty . . . we used to get stoned frequently at the rehearsals and do the things that we prepared to do, and this one time . . . Lennie suggested . . . to just try to play. . . . Immediately it was meaningful to everybody, just the act of doing it, and then we did it a few times and, of course, each time it was another revelation.” Noting that they “made the record without any knowledge that he was going to do that,” Konitz also mentioned that “I attribute some of what we did to that influence, because you’re really into a very impressionistic kind of world in that condition, and also very stimulating, to say the least”: “It was always a trip, but getting stoned had something to do with that area of functioning, I think. . . . It can relax you and somehow bypass all of your immediate neuroses and concerns and you get right to the point, so to speak. . . . [I]t felt like it opened the door for me, and things were more acute.” However, he indicated that the impact of playing was so strong that it caused anxiety: “The effect was profound, sometimes quite shocking to me, the reality of this music coming together so strongly. It was scary to me. And that’s another reason why we had to stop. . . . It was too serious. . . . I never knew what condition everybody else was in, but within that context that usually we were in, it was marijuana, as far as I was involved.”

It is difficult to assess how directly Tristano’s free improvisations influenced developments in free jazz in the 1960s. One thing that is clear, at least, is that Tristano was not content with the general notion that free jazz was a new phenomenon of the 1960s; he felt overlooked. In particular, he had misgivings about the fact that “a lot of people thought free form began with Ornette Coleman,” and noted that his accomplishment was appreciated more in Japan and Europe than in America.¹³⁴ Tristano’s view on 1960s free jazz is discussed in chapter 3.

Reception of the Capitol Recordings

Jazz critic Leonard Feather, who considered Tristano to be “20 years ahead of the beboppers,”¹³⁵ was intrigued by the Capitol recordings, and frequently sought musicians’ reactions to them in his blindfold tests. Interestingly, those who could not identify the musicians categorized the music as bebop, as with Lionel Hampton on “Wow” and Bil-

lie Holiday on "Sax of a Kind."¹³⁶ Louis Armstrong was particularly puzzled upon hearing "Marionette": "This sounds like they took a bunch of solos, put them together and made a tune out of it. . . . It's close to the bop category. . . . They made a lot of runs. It's on paper; I know they rehearsed it long enough."¹³⁷ Marian McPartland, on the other hand, recognized Tristano and praised the Capitol recordings as "wonderfully played," and Ralph Burns was fond of "Wow," including it as the third among five records he chose for Christmas gift items.¹³⁸

An important element in the criticism of Tristano's music was that it was considered too advanced even for jazz musicians. Tadd Dameron complained: "Miles is the farthest advanced musician of his day, and *Boplicity* is one of the best small-group sounds I've heard. Tristano is so far advanced that it's hard to get with it and understand what he's playing."¹³⁹ Oscar Peterson concurred with Dameron, after listening to "Intuition" and "Yesterdays": "They're too weird for me. I don't know what he's saying, but I wish I did. That's too advanced for me."¹⁴⁰ Al Haig, one of the most representative bebop pianists, made a similar remark: "I guess I'm kind of reactionary. I like what I've been used to hearing. I can't always understand what the Tristano group is doing."¹⁴¹

The trio recording of "Yesterdays," in particular, invoked negative responses from pianists ranging from Earl Hines and Joe Bushkin to Dave Brubeck. Hines stated: "I've got two sides on that. As to the general public . . . it's too far-fetched. Speaking from the public's viewpoint, I don't like the record. As a musician, I think he's got some wonderful ideas. . . . It's not actually from the soul, but more from the mechanical side of it. It's trying to knock the musicians out."¹⁴² Bushkin, while acknowledging "the harmonic development and nice playing," commented on the impressionistic harmony and the absence of conventional features of jazz: "I am as bewildered as the pianist who plays this. . . . This is getting away from the whole premise of popular music. . . . If this sort of thing keeps up, Debussy is going to win the annual jazz polls!"¹⁴³ Brubeck, on the other hand, criticized the accidental nature of contrapuntal interplay: "Tristano could never have played that bad, could he?. . . . You've got to be more careful than that with counterpoint. You can't have clashes that go against the grain of hundreds of years of what's right and what's wrong."¹⁴⁴

Another element of criticism was that Tristano's music was

“cold,” a notion closely related to the view that it lacked comprehensibility and accessibility. Nat Cole flatly declared that “Tristano is cold” at a 1949 panel discussion with Woody Herman, Mel Tormé, and June Christy.¹⁴⁵ Tormé considered coldness a matter of the musicians’ disregard for the public, making a distinction between artistic merit and public acceptance, the latter, of course, an essential element of commercial success.¹⁴⁶ Cole and Herman largely agreed, advocating showmanship and making concessions, respectively. The discussion concerned a dilemma for many musicians, the dichotomy between musical and commercial values; the panel expressed a position diametrically opposed to Tristano’s, a staunch believer in the aesthetics of art for art’s sake.

Teddy Wilson showed a similar viewpoint to the panel’s, pointing out what he saw as a problem in Tristano’s case, that is, the need to appeal to “the mass of listeners”: “I admire his musicianship; but for me, he lacks an emotional impact. It is true, as Dizzy Gillespie said, that Tristano hasn’t the kind of jazz beat one could dance to, but I think he’s abstracted that deliberately. . . . I don’t believe jazz is ready yet to cut itself off from the mass of listeners. As of now only musicians can understand Tristano.”¹⁴⁷

Stan Kenton, who created a controversy by promoting his brand of “progressive” jazz, also openly criticized Tristano: “He’s a good musician, but very cold and utterly lacking in emotional communication.”¹⁴⁸ Kenton also stated, “In modern and progressive jazz and bebop there is such an urge today for new harmonic sounds . . . that the music has suffered greatly from the lack of rhythmic assertion and the lack of real emotional character. . . . That’s what’s wrong both in the jazz world and in the contemporary world of the classics.”¹⁴⁹ In particular, he argued that Tristano failed to communicate with the public: “You can criticize Tristano for the same thing for which you can criticize Schönberg. Music is created because of the people and *for* the people. And there’s too much of an attitude today that the masses are peasants, and there’s too much of a feeling of wanting to shut yourself away in an ivory tower, and create, because you were born a hundred years too far ahead.” Kenton, however, had made a contradictory statement earlier: “Public likes and dislikes have nothing to do with the progress of modern music.”¹⁵⁰ The lack of appreciation was mutual, as Tristano criticized Kenton’s music: “Stan’s writers generally don’t write things that swing—and by that I don’t mean they have

to be in 4/4. There's just no inherent pulsation. Stan is supposed to be a very sincere person, but I wonder if he's really with the music, enjoys it himself. Personally, even when I enjoy his things I still don't think they're jazz."¹⁵¹ Tristano also charged Kenton with placing too much emphasis on writing, neglecting improvising: "Primarily, Kenton's perspective is that of a composer throughout, and my feeling is that all the great jazz will come from improvising, not writing." Kenton, however, shared Tristano's view in pointing out the forces of music business as a serious obstacle in the development of jazz as an art form, mentioning "men who make money from music. The bookers, the promoters, the dance hall owners who try to make everything conform to rule and rote, and try to keep musicians from making jazz progress as an art."¹⁵²

It should be noted that Tristano's personality was partly a factor in the negative reception of his music. In his writings and interviews he expressed strong convictions, exhibiting a character that was forthright and even dogmatic, which may have evoked antagonism from other musicians. Becker offered a sociological explanation: "Now I'm just guessing, a sociologist guessing. If Lennie was right, a lot of people were wrong. If that was the way it was going, then what a lot of people knew how to do was going to be worthless. And they resented it. . . . Whenever there is some major innovation, what it does essentially is devalue the skills that are already around. Lennie's harmonic ideas were way ahead of what people were doing. Still are." Tristano was also known for his outspoken criticism of many musicians, which Chubby Jackson considered tactless: "I think he owns as little tact as any human I've ever met in my life. . . . He wouldn't bother to . . . have to worry that he was upsetting somebody or insulting them or making them feel inadequate."¹⁵³ Jackson illustrated his point with a radio show where Feather asked Jackson, Herman, Ellington, and Tristano to comment on records: "The dynamite came from Lennie, because in almost nine out of ten records that were played, Lennie would in essence say that they all stunk, that that was the lowest, that they're not doing this right, they're not doing that right, and this is what they should have been doing. . . . So the whole thing ended up like a total critical viewpoint just coming from Lennie."

This factor of his personality, in combination with the close circle of students evoking suspicions of cultism, played a significant role in

the reception of Tristano's music. Despite criticism, the sextet recordings marked an important accomplishment for the Tristano group and as such elicited considerable interest, negative and positive, among musicians and critics.

Birdland and Other Engagements

When Birdland, the jazz club named in honor of Charlie Parker, was scheduled to open on September 8, 1949, it was to feature several musicians, including the Tristano sextet, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Stan Getz, and Harry Belafonte, and the owner Monte Kay's policy was to "encompass only 'cool' jazz; no blues artists, no swing, nothing but the relaxed music typified by Charlie Parker."¹⁵⁴ However, complications in attaining a liquor license delayed the opening, and Kay instead presented the Tristano sextet, Powell, and Belafonte at the Orchid Room.¹⁵⁵ In a favorable review, John Wilson stated that the Tristano sextet was "greatly improved," and even though "[m]any of their experimental pieces" were "so far out in left field they fall harshly on the ears of the average listener," they were "offset by some very polished and provocative numbers with a lovely lyric quality."¹⁵⁶ He also commented that the group had "stuck doggedly together despite lack of work."

Birdland finally opened on December 15, 1949, with "A Journey through Jazz," a show intended to illustrate different styles in jazz history by "presenting Maxie Kaminsky, Lips Page, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Harry Belafonte, Stan Getz and Lennie Tristano, in that order."¹⁵⁷ The club now adopted a broader policy "to try a little of everything in an effort to lure as many patrons of diverse tastes as possible."¹⁵⁸ Significantly, the historical overview ended with Tristano, representing the most modern stage. Tristano recalled, "That was a wonderful show": "For the first few nights I was very happy. Before we opened I was afraid that some of the Dixie fans might boo Parker or the boppers might put down Max, but everybody was very happy. Nobody on the stand or in the audience put anybody down and everybody seemed glad to get together. I had some very good talks with Max and with George Wettling during those nights."¹⁵⁹ Tristano indeed appreciated the opening show, as Wilson reported: "The ideal way to present jazz to the public, according to Lennie, is to follow the

format of the opening show at Birdland last winter. That show exhibited the major elements of jazz and included Max Kaminsky's Dixie group, blues shouting a la Hot Lips Page, Lester Young's combo as a bow to the swing era, Charlie Parker's bop outfit and Lennie and his tristanos."¹⁶⁰

Tristano's sextet, composed of Konitz, Marsh, Bauer, Joe Shulman, replacing Fishkin on bass, and Jeff Morton on drums, performed at Birdland for five weeks.¹⁶¹ In a review of the sextet's performance, Wilson commented that it "pulled off the greatest surprise of the evening," considering that it had "not been particularly successful audience-wise," because their music had "been too far gone to hit the average listener's ear with any appreciative comprehension."¹⁶² He attributed the success to Morton, a Tristano student, in making "a vast difference in the receptability of the sounds they put out."¹⁶³

During the extended stay at Birdland, according to Bauer, the group performed in a relaxed atmosphere, sometimes switching instruments or band members: "At Birdland we used to switch instruments. . . . Lennie played the saxophone good. Sometimes played the drums. . . . [W]e also mixed the bands. Charlie [Parker] would come up and play with us or sometimes it was none of the band you were with." It is noteworthy that Tristano's group went beyond the boundaries of conventional jazz performances, playing not only free improvisations but also Bach's contrapuntal pieces. Ronnie Ball, Tristano's piano student, sketched a night at Birdland, sharply contrasting the nervous and indifferent "boppers" with the attentive and serious Tristano group: "'Bird' was playing, and though he himself was in pretty good form, some of the other guys were playing loud, frantic stuff. . . . Amid the noise of the crowd, the Parker boys finished and left the stand, and Lennie sent Warne Marsh and Lee Konitz up there."¹⁶⁴ Interestingly, Ball made a psychological explanation: "[E]veryone was chattering louder than before. Then, through the confusion, came the mellow strains of one of Bach's two-part inventions—melodic, precise. And in a few minutes the crowd was hushed. . . . Then Lennie went on with the rest of the boys and with a definite psychological advantage over the stilled crowd." Then Ball described the free improvisation, "in which the boys start with no set chord formation; no key-signature—and use just their own imagination and creativeness. Either Lee or Warne will start off on his own, play a few bars; then the others joined in. It's a kind of musical telepathy. And right through the ses-

sion, while not playing, the musicians sit listening intently to everything their colleagues play. The whole time they want to learn.”

Tristano remarked later on playing Bach with jazz feeling: “Another thing we used to do in those days, 1949, Warne Marsh and Lee Konitz and Billy Bauer used to play Bach fugues. And it sounded beautiful; with a good strong jazz feeling.”¹⁶⁵ With Tristano’s background in classical music, Bach was probably the main source of inspiration for his interest in linearity and counterpoint.

In the fall and winter of 1949 the Tristano sextet made a few other appearances. On October 9, 1949, it performed at a concert in Boston, which also featured Mary Lou Williams’s trio. Ulanov, functioning at the concert as a commentator along with Hentoff, praised Tristano’s group, whose performance closed with free improvisation, generically titled “Intuition.”¹⁶⁶ In November the sextet toured in the Midwest, traveling to Chicago for a two-week engagement at the Club Silhouette with Shulman, again replacing Fishkin, and Mickey Simonetta, a Chicago drummer. Becker went to hear the group led by his former teacher, and recalled that the performance of Bach’s inventions left an indelible memory on him: “[T]he thing I remember . . . vividly, because it was so exciting, was he had Lee and Warne play a Bach two-part invention as a duet, and then Bauer would join them and play some of the three-part inventions, which was pretty wild to hear in a bar on Howard Street. . . . And the sound was fabulous because they played them beautifully.”

Pat Harris of *Down Beat* wrote an enthusiastic review of the event, while reporting that there was no publicity and noting the negative reaction to the music: “Tristano and his band . . . combine to form the most cohesive and purposeful unit we’ve ever heard. . . . [I]t is meaningful and significant music. The popular reaction to Lennie and his work appears to be more than apathy—a bitter and hostile revulsion. . . . We frankly were frightened at the prospect of hearing Tristano for the first time.”¹⁶⁷ Harris also referred to the phenomenon of cult: “A number of musicians have made him an esoteric cult, a closed group it seems too difficult to bypass. But Lennie says he prefers listeners who do not analyze too minutely, who do not make mental notes of everything that is going on, trying to compare it to the works of various classical composers.” In this review Harris quoted Tristano discussing why other musicians disliked his music, which offered an interesting explanation: “My technique is a means to an end . . . just

as a printing press is a means toward an end. I play what I feel. And it's for the majority of the people as well as for musicians. . . . Most musicians like to play the melody. They listen to what we do and know they are unable to duplicate it, so they begin to dislike us."

After Chicago the sextet went to Milwaukee for a two-week engagement at the Continental for the remainder of November.¹⁶⁸ On December 10, 1949, *New York Amsterdam News* advertised the sextet's performances at Soldier Meyer's in Brooklyn.¹⁶⁹ Then on December 25, the group appeared in a concert at Carnegie Hall, which also featured Charlie Parker's quintet and Bud Powell's trio, among others. Composed of Tristano, Konitz, Marsh, Bauer, Shulman, and Morton, the group performed "You Go to My Head" and "Sax of a Kind."¹⁷⁰

During this period there are references in the jazz press to the lack of work for the sextet. Ulanov attributed it to external factors such as "[p]oor pianos, the envy of other musicians, the tin ears of many night club owners," which kept Tristano "from working under the right conditions or from working at all."¹⁷¹ Ulanov, however, forecast that "that long series of obstacles seems almost out of the way now." His optimism, unfortunately, did not turn out to be well founded; Marsh noted that the sextet "really worked very little."¹⁷² It was the paucity of work that led to the change of the sextet's personnel. Fishkin was the first to leave, opting for steady studio work in order to support his family. He attributed the group's infrequent performances to the decline of the jazz club scene on Fifty-second Street and Tristano's mistrust of club owners.¹⁷³

1950

In 1950 Tristano marked the top of the piano category in the *Metronome* All Star Poll; as arranger he placed third, which suggests a favorable reception of his writing for the All Star Band's recording, "Victory Ball."¹⁷⁴ A short article accompanying the poll result summarized his achievements, describing Tristano as "dean of an always growing musical school and prophet of what may be jazz's atonal future": "Lennie Tristano . . . last year was second to Nat Cole, this year edged out George Shearing in a battle of considerable intensity between two men who have all but dominated the keyboard in the past year."¹⁷⁵ This statement may be an exaggeration, considering the

repeated remarks on the lack of understanding of Tristano's music. Interestingly, the article also pointed out Tristano's teaching activity, recognizing him as the father figure of his students: "[H]e is also engaged in a heavy teaching schedule, and adds to that function one as advisor and confidant of the large brood of youngsters which nestles under his wing." As a result of the poll, Tristano became part of the Metronome All Stars band again in January 1950, composed of Dizzy Gillespie, Kai Winding, Buddy DeFranco, Konitz, Stan Getz, Serge Chaloff, Bauer, Eddie Safranski, and Max Roach, which recorded Rugolo's "Double Date" and Tristano's "No Figs" for Columbia (1-557).¹⁷⁶

In the spring of 1950 *Down Beat* mentioned a "European tour with dates in nine countries being lined up for Lennie Tristano and his group."¹⁷⁷ This, however, did not materialize, and there appears to be no further reference to it. On March 19, 1950, the sextet performed again in Chicago, this time at Orchestra Hall, where Erroll Garner's trio was also featured.¹⁷⁸ Jack Tracy of *Down Beat* was assured that Tristano's performance was far superior to Garner's: "Erroll Garner should sue somebody. Namely the guy who even booked him . . . with the Lennie Tristano sextet, let alone trying to spot him following Lennie. Not that Garner *was* really boring, he just sounded that way compared to the offerings put down by the sextet. Lee Konitz and Tristano himself were standouts."¹⁷⁹ Tracy also noted that "Intuition," that is, free improvisation, was the closing piece: "Konitz contributed several fabulous bits, including . . . some spine-chilling work on the eerie *Intuition*, which closed the concert. Lennie played precisely, cleanly, magnificently throughout the whole concert, totally lacking in any of the 'coldness' for which he too often has been criticized." An audience member also wrote enthusiastically, describing Tristano's music as "the most inspiring music I have ever heard."¹⁸⁰

A major venue for Tristano's sextet in 1950 was Birdland. Ulanov wrote an uncharacteristically mixed review about the sextet's performance there: "Lennie Tristano jumped into Birdland last month with both feet, a variety of drummers and a much freer attitude toward the organization of his sets and solos. As a result of the last, he, Lee Konitz, Warne Marsh and Billy Bauer took as many solos as they felt like blowing, instead of the customary two between opening and closing lines."¹⁸¹ Then he suggested that the sextet had become perhaps rigid in their presentation of the music, and wished for more commu-

nication with listeners: "As a further result, their solos were better developed, more swinging, reaching, at times, peaks of jazz intensity. . . . Perhaps this and a warmer contact with the audience will come on the next appearance of this brilliant group." Later in December critic Barbara Hodgkins echoed Ulanov's comments in a review of a different night, a more successful one: "Lennie Tristano's sextet . . . worked itself up to a pitch it has seldom displayed on any bandstand in the last year or two. Under a curious arrangement whereby each musician acts as 'leader' for a set—picking tunes, setting tempos, indicating solos—it achieved a pacing which held listeners' interest as it often has failed to do in the past."¹⁸² She then indicated that a relaxed and less structured approach would be conducive to a better reception: "The pleased expressions on the faces of the 'Children of Paradise' in the bleachers were often mirrored by those of the musicians on the stand, an unusual state of affairs for this usually solemn sextet, indicating their pleasure in each other's work." Hodgkins concluded: "With less emphasis on carefully worked out ensemble, more on relaxed and lengthy solos . . . the group came close to what has long been recommended as a solution to the indifferent attention sometimes paid a group that may seem to be over the heads of the audiences but that, without losing its musical integrity, doesn't have to be."

On "Commercial" Jazz

The Chicago concert that featured Tristano and Garner brought out the contrast between them. It was not only in their musical styles but also in their views on the role of jazz musicians, which reflected differing attitudes toward accessibility. Garner spoke in 1950, emphasizing the priority of delivering the melody in order to please the crowd: "I play a lot of melody; that's what I feel. . . . I play the tune for the melody, not to see how far away from it I can get. People feel more relaxed when they hear something they can understand."¹⁸³ Later in 1951 he reinforced his position: "Why should I disguise the melody? Musicians today, lots of them, just aren't getting along with the people."¹⁸⁴

Garner's view, of course, was diametrically opposed to Tristano's. Tristano considered improvisation the essence of jazz to the extent of avoiding the statement of melodies altogether in his trio recordings.

Furthermore, his aesthetics entailed a moralistic mission to educate the public and to further the advance of music. In a 1950 interview with John Wilson he criticized the tendency toward commercialization of jazz and professed his uncompromising purist stance, attacking the excessive emphasis on the melody as a way of appealing to the general public. He cited Shearing, Garner, and the Parker recordings with strings as examples of “watered-down bop,” and drew a sharp dichotomy between jazz as an art form and commercialized jazz, stressing the latter’s degenerating effect on the music, as Wilson reported: “The efforts of such groups as the Shearing quintet and the Bird-with-strings combo to wean the public to bop by offering it in a commercialized form is producing exactly the opposite effect, according to Lennie Tristano. Lennie, one of jazz’s most adamant iconoclasts, says such efforts are killing off the potential jazz audience and lousing up the musicians involved.”¹⁸⁵ Wilson quoted Tristano: “If you give watered-down bop to the public . . . they’d rather hear that than the real thing. Has George Shearing helped jazz by making his bop a filling inside a sandwich of familiar melody? Obviously not, because there are fewer places where jazz can be played today than there were when George and his quintet started out.”

Although Tristano thought he was marginalized by what he considered commercial jazz, he vowed to play only what he felt instead of compromising. Wilson stated, “It is for this reason that Lennie has consistently turned a deaf ear to suggestions that he temper his esoteric style, that he play more in a manner that the public can understand in order to build a wider audience for the things he wants to play.” Tristano told Wilson, “It would be useless for me to play something I don’t feel. . . . I wouldn’t be doing anything. If I played something that I’d have to impose on myself, I wouldn’t be playing anything good.” Despite Tristano’s admiration of Parker, he saw Parker’s records with strings as a commercial venture, reflecting a sentiment similar to other jazz musicians’: “Look what happened to Charlie Parker. He made some records, featuring the melody and they sold and he got to be a big thing with the general public. So they brought him into Birdland with strings to play the same things. And he played badly. Why? Because the psychological strain of playing in a vein which didn’t interest him was too much for him.” Tristano added, “Things like that don’t help Bird and they don’t help jazz.” Parker himself, however, welcomed the occasion as an opportunity for a different performing

situation: “[S]ome of my friends said, ‘Oh, Bird is getting commercial.’ That wasn’t it at all. I was looking for new ways of saying things musically. New sound combinations.”¹⁸⁶

Shearing was a British jazz pianist who gained popularity in America in the late 1940s. Even though he had an approach to jazz different from Tristano’s, favoring greater accessibility through using “bop in moderation,” he was respectful of Tristano, as he stated in 1949: “The next thing after bop is Lennie Tristano. Right now Lennie sounds so unconventional few people understand him. But, when people get to know Lennie’s conventions, he’ll be appreciated.”¹⁸⁷ Interestingly, Shearing expressed a view strikingly similar to Garner’s, emphasizing the importance of melody as a way to “sell it to the public”: “Bop . . . must be incorporated rather than imposed. Its lack of melodic quality, not from the musicians’ but from the public’s point of view, hinders its appeal for the general public. After all, melody is the public’s cue to listen. People like to hear the melody . . . so why should the public be denied such pleasures?”¹⁸⁸ Later that year Shearing admitted compromising, dubbing Tristano a purist: “He is evolutionizing bop . . . is a pioneer you might say. Lennie would never be happy compromising as I’m doing.”¹⁸⁹ In 1951 Tristano in turn called Shearing “one of the great commercial artists today,” commenting on his recording “For You”: “[H]e’s found out what the people want and knows just how to give it to them. As schmaltzy as it is, a lot of musicians enjoy the way he milks the melody. . . . Sometimes he doesn’t seem to have good time; he tends to exaggerate the emotional content. . . . George found a formula on a lower level than I like to listen to.”¹⁹⁰

Nat Cole’s approach to bebop was similar to Shearing’s. A jazz pianist who turned to singing, he had clearly set his goal in gaining public favor, as Wilson reported: “Nat Cole has elected himself national advance man for the boppers. He’s going to do the selling job which, he says, the bop purists are neglecting because they’re too engrossed in examining their own flatted fifths.”¹⁹¹ Cole accounted for his position: “You can’t just call people square because they don’t dig bop. . . . Bop has to be explained to them. The public is confused about bop now. . . . It’s wonderful music, but it’s got to be ironed out to get the public hip. . . . I’m a musician at heart and I know I’m not really a singer. . . . But I sing because the public buys it.”¹⁹² In a later interview Cole declared flatly that he was “in the music business for one pur-

pose—to make money,” and defended Shearing and Parker for their efforts to “broaden” their public.¹⁹³

Tristano’s purist stance was completely opposed to Cole’s view. According to Wilson, it resulted in “a very limited market” for his music, but Tristano was able to live up to it and “stick to what he wants to do” by pursuing a teaching career.¹⁹⁴ Tristano attributed the situation to “the psychological atmosphere in which we are living,” saying, “Everybody in this country is very neurotic now”: “They’re afraid to experience an intense emotion . . . for instance, that’s brought on by good jazz. There’s more vitality in jazz than in any other art form today. Vitality arises from an emotion that is free. But the people, being neurotic, are afraid of being affected by a free emotion and that’s why they put down jazz.” It is not surprising that he brought psychology into his discussion, considering his deep interest in Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich.¹⁹⁵ Tristano further accounted for the condition of the public’s psyche: “Since the last war we’ve been overwhelmed by a feeling of insecurity. To try to offset that insecurity, people are reaching back toward happier times and we’re in an era of nostalgia. . . . Nostalgia brings on anticipation because you know what’s going to happen next. When people start to anticipate, they become intense, waiting for what they know is going to happen.”¹⁹⁶ Tristano explained that “this tension feeds their neuroses,” which led to “such a small audience for what I’m doing”: “What I play is so unorthodox that when you first hear you don’t try to anticipate. You just sit there. You have to be very relaxed to start with. . . . Consequently people don’t want to hear my sides as often as, say, Garner’s, because as a rule they won’t be in a mood that’s receptive to what I play.”¹⁹⁷ Interestingly, Tristano felt that the public was more responsive to nostalgic or accessible music at a time when there was much discussion in the jazz press about progress and modernity. Recognizing neurosis as the obstacle, he foresaw as much as a decade of emotional tension that would keep jazz from gaining public acceptance.

The New Jazz Society

In his 1950 interview with Wilson, Tristano pleaded for support from both musicians and the public to keep jazz alive, and asserted the need

to eliminate the tendency toward cliques, specifically the “stupid gap between Dixie and bop,” which limited opportunities for jazz and misled jazz fans. In this context he voiced his opposition to groups such as the New Jazz Society (NJS), for they “merely continue and stress the cliquishness that is killing jazz today,” and rather advocated “one organization for all jazz fans.”¹⁹⁸ Tristano, however, later retracted the criticism, claiming that he was misquoted: “During that part of the conversation John Wilson and I had at the club, Dizzy’s band was on and John probably didn’t hear me. This is what I said: I dislike the general run of jazz organizations because they are fanatical and because they are supervised by people who are moved more by their prejudices than by jazz.”¹⁹⁹ Noting that the NJS was an exception, he encouraged “everyone interested in jazz” to join: “[O]ur interest in modern jazz is so strong because it is this phase of jazz which as yet has not been brought to the attention of the public in general. Basically, we are interested in all phases of jazz. This correction is of importance to me inasmuch as I am a member of the board of directors of NJS!”

The New Jazz Society, founded in 1950 for the cause of promoting jazz, especially “modern” jazz, was an ambitious enterprise sponsored by Ulanov in conjunction with *Metronome*. Its executive board, according to the prospectus published in February 1950, consisted of experts representing various areas of jazz, including Lennie Tristano as “Musician” and Barry Ulanov as “Critic,” among others, with Ulanov officiating as “General Director of the Society.”²⁰⁰ It announced a number of projects, many of which aimed at educating the public and stimulating their interest in jazz. Of particular significance was a plan to establish “the Committee-at-Large, which the whole membership of NJS will constitute, to make suggestions to manufacturers, publishers, producers, musicians and others for new records, concerts, publications, etc.” The intention was to form a grassroots organization and empower the members to become active participants in the decisions made in the music industry.

Stan Kenton, one of the prominent musicians to join the society, was concerned that it might become monopolized by Ulanov’s interest, and thus make a priority of promoting Tristano. He told Ulanov: “Lennie is respected, admired; his music has aroused passionate interest among many. But Lennie is only one modern musician. Nevertheless, for you he’s been *the* modern jazz musician. A lot of potential Jazz Society members want to be sure that he’ll be only one of the

modern jazz musicians the Society will fight for and through.”²⁰¹ Ulanov responded that although “Lennie is the most distinguished of the modern jazzmen,” the society was “to discover fresh talent and encourage every jazz experiment of size.”

Among its proposed projects, the NJS carried out publications of lecture notes, a discography-biography devoted to Charlie Parker, and a bibliography of books on jazz. In addition, several local chapters were established in the United States, Canada, and Britain, some of which sponsored concerts, meetings, or jam sessions. The Newark chapter, for example, held a concert in 1951 in which Tristano and Konitz performed, and even gained the recognition of a “Modern Jazz Day.”²⁰² The Toronto chapter was particularly active in promoting jazz concerts. In 1952 it invited the Tristano quintet and in 1953 sponsored the historic Massey Hall concert by the group led by Parker and Gillespie.²⁰³ Also notable is the Manhattan chapter, led by Paul Bley, which involved Parker as a teacher at Sunday afternoon meetings.²⁰⁴ All its constructive intentions notwithstanding, the NJS did not last long. The formation of the “Committee-at-Large” never materialized, and the national organization dissolved. The reports of the chapter meetings began to dwindle around 1952 and gradually disappeared.