

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



[This is the twenty-third article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

GERRY MULLIGAN

The baritone saxophone was created in 1846, as one of seven instruments in the line, in Belgium by (who else?) Adolphe Sax. The saxophones ranged from the soprano at the high end down to the contrabass at the low. You can recognize the "bari" from a characteristic loop in the neck, designed to reduce the instrument to a practical height. Thank God! [I played the bari in high school, and it was darned near big as I was, and almost as heavy! I don't think I'd have the wind-power today to even eke out a single note].

But one guy could. One Gerald Joseph Mulligan, born in The Queens, NYC, on April 6, 1927. By age seven, he was playing the piano, then the clarinet, then the alto and tenor saxes, and finally the Baritone Sax. (The Jazz world rejoices that he didn't stop with the piano). Gerry went on to become a world class instrumentalist, composer, arranger and conductor. Like so many, Mulligan dropped out of high school during his senior year to pursue work with a touring band, probably a wise move. Although Gerry would have preferred to play, Tommy Tucker hired him as an arranger for his band, at \$100/week, a gig that lasted all of three months.

After that Mulligan joined the arranging staff on Gene Krupa's band, scoring several notable arrangements such as *Birdhouse*, *Disc Jockey Jump* and *How High the Moon*. But then Gerry struck it rich.

In 1948, Miles Davis put together a nine-piece band that showcased many of Mulligan's arrangements, with Davis playing trumpet and Mulligan on baritone sax, and included other notable musicians. The band went on to compile an album titled *Birth of the Cool*, for which Gerry became one of the superstars. That Davis nonet has been accorded by many as one of the most influential jazz groups in music history, creating a unique sound that became known as West Coast Jazz, or Cool Jazz, which the media was fond of calling it!

In late 1951, Mulligan's first recorded album under his own name, *Mulligan Plays Mulligan*, allowed him to demonstrate his own mellow, cool and innovative style for which he was known throughout his career.

Around this time, Mulligan at only age 25 formed a quartet with the great Chet Baker (known as Jazz's Dark Angel) on trumpet, but the group startled critics because it used trumpet, Gerry on bari, plus bass and drums, but (gasp!) no piano. Music critics were quick to point out that the piano was always considered essential, for harmony and to tie all the instruments together. But Gerry didn't buy it. He now had the sound he had sought after, due largely in part to the musical bond between Baker and Mulligan. Michael Cuscuna wrote in the liner notes for a CD reissue called *The Best of Gerry Mulligan with Chet Baker*, "... Mulligan stretched his limits and came upon a sound that was not only new and stimulating, but also incredibly fascinating and accessible to the general public". You can own that wonderful 1991 CD (available from Amazon, Label: Blue Note Records, ASIN: B000005HGI).

Baker was a heroin addict and so was Mulligan. Baker would never break free of the demon, but Mulligan did. And he enjoyed a long, fruitful career, playing and recording with all the top stars in Jazz. His awards and accolades were numerous, but one telling stat is that he won a record twenty-nine consecutive *Down Beat* Magazine's Readers' Poll awards. At the end, although suffering with liver cancer, it was complications from knee surgery that took him from us, on January 20, 1996, at age 68.



My favorite Mulligan quote is "a life without ethics is meaningless." He was a gentle and sensitive man, shown by his love of his good friend Gene Lees' lyrics to *I Hear the Shadows Dancing*, which Gerry co-wrote. It's about the demise of the big bands:

***A ferris wheel abandoned,
a silent roller coaster,
a peeling carousel
whose painted horses revolve no more.***

***Within a grove of willows,
in shadows made by moonlight,
a dance pavilion dreams,
its shutters fastened, the music gone.***

***It dreams of bygone dancers
Who filled the floor with motion
And fell in love to songs
that almost no one remembers now.***

***The ferris wheel reverses,
the carousel runs backwards.
The horses start to prance,
the roller coaster begins to roar.***

***Then softly from a distance
the blended sound of trumpets,
and saxophones and drums.
A wondrous music returns and then
I hear the shadows dancing once again.***

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com.