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# One Sweet Letter

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## MORE ABOUT LES

Pursuant to Derek Ansell's excellent piece on Les Koenig (only Lester for legal purposes) last issue (August 2010) and the unsung Roy DuNann, a recording engineer without equal, I can add some personal information on Koenig.

Son of a New York judge, he graduated from Dartmouth College where he became friendly with Budd Schulberg and afterwards spent one year at Yale University Law School. It was Schulberg who brought him to Hollywood in 1939. During World War II he was assigned to a unit that produced training films where he met the director William Wyler whom Koenig joined as an assistant on films including *The Best Years Of Our Lives* which won an Academy Award in 1946.

He started Good Time Jazz in 1952, operating from a small office across from the Paramount Studios gate where he could tend to label business while on lunch breaks. Forced to move, he relocated to Melrose Place in West Hollywood where he began Contemporary Records. It was only a few minutes walk from my home; unfortunately I never had the good fortune to be there in the evening when the shipping department became the recording studio.

I must take exception to Derek's reference to the recording of 'My Fair Lady' by the Shelly Manne Trio. The quality of that release was not up to Koenig's standards. Howard Holzer, an assistant engineer, accidentally laid a cutting knife across the recording head, thus demagnetizing the tape. Les almost had a stroke. It was the backup that was issued. Only years later in digital did the quality finally come out, the most recent remastered in 24-bit being quite good. It sold over 100,000 in vinyl – huge for a jazz recording at that time.

The story about Art Pepper playing on a dried-out horn and with a broken cork which he hastily repaired is not supported by the facts. He played the night before (!) on KABC-TV's *Stars Of Jazz*, hosted by Bobby Troup, with a rhythm section featuring pianist Carl Perkins. Five days before he was at Radio Recorders with Russ Freeman, Ben Tucker and Chuck Flores for the Intro label. The Lord discography confirms same.

Les knew what he wanted and was not easy to work for, but his product in all respects was the best each and everytime. He was enamoured with Hampton Hawes. When the Lighthouse All-Stars were recording in the studio he was not pleased with Claude Williamson's solos because they were not in the same vein, this despite the fact that Claude was a great player. After one particular take Les stormed out of the booth going directly to Claude and shouting: 'When you play this piano, I want to hear it shake!' Claude's response was: 'Well, then you had better come out and shake it yourself.' Les never said another word to him.

Les Koenig died of a heart attack in Los Angeles on 20 November 1977, 13 days before his 60th birthday. He was married to the singer Joy Bryan and the father of four children.

The Bernie Grundman mentioned in the article is the *nonpareil* of mastering engineers (70 next year) who has done some of the biggest and most successful recordings, including, if you will excuse the expression, 'Michael Jackson' and his album 'Thriller'. Bernie learned under Roy DuNann and was the mastering engineer at A&M Records for 14 years. By his own admission he is an 'old bebopper' and owned a jazz club in Phoenix (Chez Jazz) right out of high school. He very kindly says the things he masters for me are a welcome relief from the Fleetwood Macs (three months on one of their albums) and the likes.

Dick Bank, Los Angeles

*Thanks, Dick – I think we will excuse MJ and 'Thriller' because it contains some superb arrangements under the hand of Quincy Jones which brought the power of jazz harmony to R&B and took the genre to a creative peak never repeated. – MG*

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## LES ABOUT TRAD

It was a pity that the article on Lester Koenig (JJ, August 2010) concentrated on his modern jazz activities at the expense of his traditional jazz contributions. He had three elements to his traditional jazz activities. He obtained the rights to the Jazz Man, the Crescent and the West Coast labels and reissued their material on Good Time Jazz. He purchased privately recorded material of Bunk Johnson and Benny Strickler both

with the Yerba Buena Jazz Band and released it on GTJ. Finally he recorded a vast number of artists such as Bob Scobey, Turk Murphy, Kid Ory and George Lewis and a host of others for GTJ. These were often full seven or eight piece bands that would never have fitted into his packing room studio. He recorded some of these artists in stereo as well. If anything, his contribution to traditional jazz was at least equal to, if not greater than that to modern jazz.

George Hulme, Old Basing, Hants

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## BRUBECK AND BEATLES

Richard Palmer's Brubeck articles have sent me back to several of the Brubeck records I hadn't played for ages, and I enjoyed them in spite of some very heavy-handed piano solos. But I also enjoy lots of Archie Shepp's records as well.

Three points arise from part two (JJ, August 2010). Firstly, my copy of the Carnegie Hall concert only has one version of *Blue Rondo*. Is there a revised version of the CD in circulation? Secondly, it was good to see a warm appreciation of 'Time In', which has been my favourite Brubeck album for 40 years or so. This record presents such a well balanced programme and also one of Brubeck's best compositions, *Softly William Softly*, which fails to get mentioned at all in Mr Palmer's assessment. Thirdly, just before the *All My Loving* allusion on *Kathy's Waltz*, there is a phrase which seems to pre-echo the 'send all my loving to you' line at the end of the tune. Desmond also plays a similarly suggestive phrase at about 1.40 in his solo. I wonder whether Lennon and McCartney, or perhaps George Martin, had a copy of 'Time Out'?

Before I log off I would like to echo Derek Ansell's praise of Lester Koenig (JJ, August 2010). His Contemporary label also recorded the often neglected Curtis Counce Group, which had no big-name stars but at its best could give the bands of Miles Davis and Clifford Brown/Max Roach a close run for their money. In my opinion its pianists – initially Carl Perkins, then Elmo Hope – were far more interesting than Messrs Garland and Powell, and all in well produced stereo sound.

Paul Dinnage, Sidcup