The Birth of Jeru: Gerry Mulligan’s Early Composing/Arranging Career (1945-1953)

Abstract
Gerry Mulligan (1927-1996) is undoubtedly the most celebrated baritone saxophonist of all time. For decades, both popular and critics’ polls consistently recognized him as the best on his instrument. He took first place for forty-three consecutive years (1953-1995) in Downbeat’s Readers’ Poll for best baritone saxophonist, and his reviews by critics and fellow performers were, for the most part, laudatory. He performed with such jazz icons as Chet Baker, Dave Brubeck, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and Ben Webster. Perhaps as a consequence of this recognition as a performer, Gerry Mulligan’s contributions as a composer and arranger have been overshadowed and therefore less recognized. This is despite the importance of his writing and its influence on the history of modern jazz orchestration. It was as a composer/arranger that he first made his mark, and he would preoccupy himself with writing throughout most of his career. The purpose of this dissertation is to study the history of Gerry Mulligan’s composing/arranging career starting with his earliest professional writing projects as a teenager (ca 1945) and ending with the dissolution of his first pianoless quartet with Chet Baker (1953).

To date, despite the availability of a huge collection of primary sources that Franca Mulligan, Gerry’s widow, has donated to the Library of Congress, no scholarly study has been undertaken to examine this material, particularly in the context of Mulligan’s development as composer/arranger. A particularly invaluable source has been made available to me for this project through special permission by Mrs. Mulligan. In 1995, Gerry Mulligan recorded his oral history by way of a series of interviews. The memoirs address such topics as his childhood; his associations with Gil Evans, Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and Gene Krupa; his pianoless quartet with Chet Baker; his ideas about counterpoint; and his heroin addiction. The dissertation draws particular attention to Mulligan’s unique creative and intellectual processes, their context in his collaboration with other musicians, their effect on the evolution of his style throughout his early career, and their influence on other modern jazz composer/arrangers.

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http://hdl.handle.net/1903/11136
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