

July 13, 1973

*True jazz*

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Dear Howard:

I've finally got round to reading M. Brickman's article in the May 19, 1973 issue of the New Yorker on the "jazz legend Pootie LeFleur". It is a totally contrived and malicious satire in the worst taste. Thanks for calling it to my attention.

The term Trans-Ethnic Geselleschaft Recordings is a racist slur in the guise of satirising the small groups of (too?) serious scholars and recorders of Black culture and jazz.

The Geniture Series of records ridicules the contributions of aged pioneers who are still playing viable happy music -- to the great pleasure of wide audiences from Stanford U to the Lincoln Center, from preservation Hall to music halls in Europe and Japan.

The fictitious name of the "legend," "Pootie LeFleur," ridicules, for no other reason I can devine but perverse unkindliness, the amusing and intimate nicknames New Orleans musicians have long given to each other.

The "water-filled paper bags" story suggests a cantankerous, childlike senility of older Louisiana musicians, which is surely far more rare in that group than in most other cultures on Earth.

"Pootie's" babbling dialogue makes Uncle Remus read like Hamlet, and is blatantly racist.

The author goes on to perpetrate the popular and erroneous legend that New Orleans music was spawned in the storyville red-light culture, born of the "thighs" of a ragtime piano player and sired by a pimp. This part is atrocious humor and grossly distorted history.



Dr. Burchell

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The self-taught musicianship and expression of all primitive musical forms is held up to ridicule along with the "blues," one of the most profound artistic expressions and powerful and poetic manifestations of Negro sensitivities and experience.

"What vous say" is a silly reference to Creole and Cajun dialects which only an ignoramus would compose who neither understands French nor its American dialects, nor the colorful language of these musicians.

The phony footnoted anecdote attributed to Johnny St. Cyr brings real jazz characters just recently dead into the author's outlandish conspiracy; it may therefore not be libelous, only vulgar. A later fictitious reference to Nat Hentoff, who is an authentic and highly sophisticated jazz journalist will be dealt with, I hope, by Hentoff himself.

This scurrilous tale closes with the degenerate, down and out ending of a jazz career in a record-your-own-voice booth in a NYC bus terminal; bad satire on the poverty-ridden deaths of many musicians in our society too full of cynics like M. Brickman.

The idea for this article is worthwhile, to poke fun at those who take jazz history and scholarship too seriously and who write in a pedantic fashion about it. But, if Mr. Brickman really exists, he clearly has no knowledge of the origins of jazz, no feeling for the music itself or for the real people who were its originators and early performers. He has rather the most consummate bad taste, as does the usually thoughtful New Yorker for publishing it.

Regards,

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for each.

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## WHAT, ANOTHER LEGEND?

Trans-Ethnic Gesellschaft is pleased to announce the release of another album in its Geniture series of recordings devoted to giants in American jazz. These liner notes are by the noted jazz critic and historian Arthur Mice, whose efforts first brought Pootie LeFleur to public attention.

**P**OOTIE LEFLEUR, a legendary figure in the development of American jazz, was discovered—or rediscovered, rather—last summer placidly raking leaves on the courthouse lawn in Shibboleth, Louisiana. Although one hundred and twelve years old and in semiretirement (two days a week, he drops paper bags of water from his second-story window onto passersby below, for which he receives a small sum), Pootie has astonishing powers of recall, displaying the lucidity of a man easily fifteen years his junior. On a recent visit engendered by the production of this record, we got Pootie talking about the roots of the music he knows so well.

"Was there an ideal period when jazz was pure, untainted by any influence foreign to its African origins?" we asked.

"I spec' . . . um . . . *rebesac*, dey's a *flutterbug*, hee, hee, hee!" Pootie said, squinting very hard and making a popping sound with his teeth.

"And what of the blues? Don't the blues, with their so-called 'blue notes,' represent a significant deviation from standard European tonality?"

"T'se ketch a ravis, y'heah? A ravis, an' de *dawg*, he *all* onto a *runnin'* *boa'd*," replied the jazz great, leaning back in his chair expansively until his head touched the floor.

This album represents the distillation of over sixty hours of taped conversations with Pootie LeFleur (of which the above is but a fragment), plus all the significant available recorded performances by this authentic primitive genius, whose career spanned the entire jazz era, from Jelly Roll Morton

to John Coltrane—including a three-month hiatus in 1903, when nobody in New Orleans could seem to get in tune.

Carlyle Adolph Bouguereau "Pootie" LeFleur was born into the fertile musical atmosphere of postbellum New Orleans. His mother had favorably impressed Scott Joplin by playing ragtime piano with her thighs, and his father was a sometime entrepreneur, who once owned the lucrative ad-lib franchise for all of Storyville and the north delta; for years, no New Orleans musician could shout "Yeh, daddy!" during or after a solo without paying Rebus LeFleur a royalty. The young boy taught himself to play the piano with some help from his uncle, the legendary "Blind" (Deaf) Wilbur MacVout, for two decades a trombonist with Elbert Hubbard, although Hubbard was an author and had no real need for a trombonist. When Pootie was five, he was given his own piano but misplaced it, requiring him to practice thereafter on the dining-room table.<sup>1</sup>

When Pootie was six, the LeFleur home was razed to make way for a bayou, and Pootie's father made the decision to relocate the family in St. Louis. Here Pootie tried his hand at composition. "The Most Exceedin' Interestin' Rag," the first effort which we have in manuscript, is clearly an immature conception; only two measures long, it contains a curious key signature indicated by a very large sharp accidental over the treble clef, and a flat and a half-moon drawn in the bass. The piece is melodically sparse (the entire tune consists of one whole note, with a smiling face drawn in it), but it does anticipate Pootie's characteristic economy by at least a decade. The material from this period (some of which is also available on "Pre-Teen Pootie," 12" Trans-Ethnic Gesellschaft TD 203) reveals a profusion of styles and influences. "Spinoza's Joy" has a definite Spanish, if not Sephardic, flavor, while "What Vous Say?" shows a hint of the Creole.

According to Dr. Ernst Freitag and Gustav Altschuler's encyclopedic Dictionary of Jazz and Home Wiring Simplified (Miffin Verlag, 1942), the

<sup>1</sup> Johnny St. Cyr recalled an anecdote about Pootie's habit of playing out scales and figures on the table. One night in 1938, Pootie, Kid Ory, Baby Dodds, and Tiny Grimes were at Small's Paradise having a late supper of miniature gherkins, and Pootie was occupied as usual tapping out a riff with his right hand. It finally became too much for Ory, and the famous tail-gater put down his fork. "Stop that, Pootie," said the Kid. "It's annoying." Although attributed to many others, including Fletcher Henderson and Dorothy Parker, the remark was in fact made by Ory.



Model

"Will you be wanting your check now? We're running into Happy Hour."



next few years were ones of extreme financial deprivation for the LeFleurs. Pootie's father had squandered the family savings by investing in a feckless enterprise called Fin-Ray Cola, a tuna-flavored soft drink, and in an attempt to bring in some money Pootie invented a new note, located between F and F sharp, which he named "Reep," and tried peddling it door to door. Despite early bad luck, Pootie never lost faith in "my fine new note," as he called it, and some time later he hired a hall in Sedalia to test public reaction and attract financial backing. The playing of the note apparently made no impression on the casual Missourians, most of whom arrived too late to hear it.

IT was about this time that LeFleur played for James P. Johnson, who urged him to go to New York or any other city a thousand miles away. The story of that trip is probably the most fascinating in the entire history of jazz, but unfortunately Pootie claims to have forgotten it. By now a leader and innovator in his own right, Pootie organized himself and three other musicians into what Nat Hentoff has called a "quartet," and secured an engagement at Buxtehude's, a speakeasy in the heart of Manhattan's swinging Flemish district. His first wife, singer Rubella Cloudberry, evokes those exciting years in her autobiography, "A Side of Fries" (Snead House, Boston, 1951):

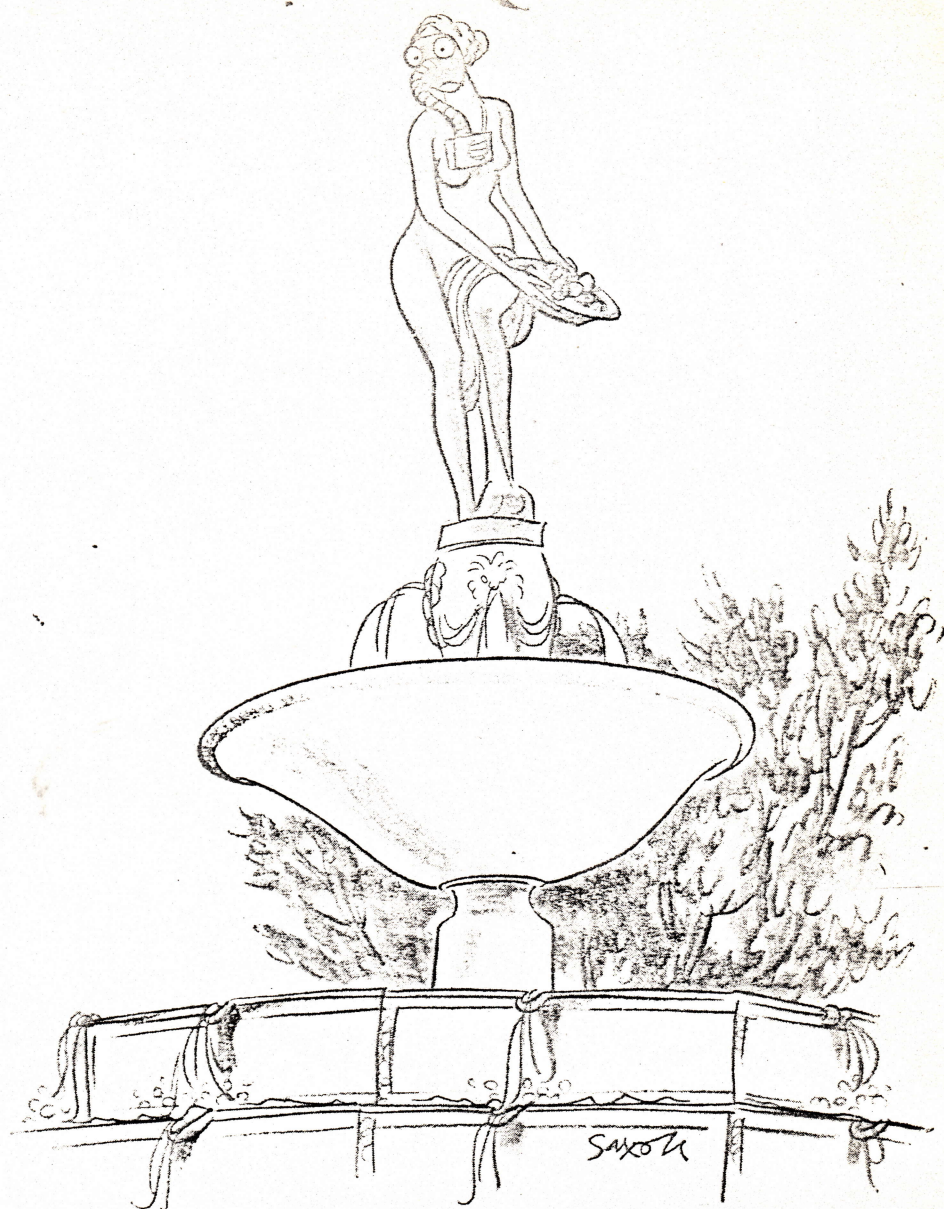
Well, don't you know, Pootie come in one night and say, "Pack up, woman, we goin' to the Big Apple!" And I say, "Hunh?" And so he say, "Pack up, woman, we goin' to the Big Apple!" And I say, "The big what?" So we stayed in Chicago.<sup>2</sup>

The stimulating, rough-and-tumble atmosphere of Prohibition sparked LeFleur's group (the Mocha Jokers) and others to marvellous feats of improvisation, typified by the moment during one dinner show at Tony Pastor's when Bix Beiderbecke blew a brilliant version of "Dardanella" on a roast chicken.<sup>3</sup>

LeFleur's classical period begins with the reflective "Boogie for the Third Sunday After Epiphany" and ends with the tender and haunting "Toad" Nocturne. "Toad" opens with a simple piano motif in G, which is reworked into C, F, F minor, and B, finally retiring to E flat to freshen up. At the very

<sup>2</sup> Of course, when LeFleur did make it to New York it was without his saxophonist, Crazy Earl Bibbler. Two days before the trip, Bibbler, an alcoholic, sold his lips to a pawnshop for twenty dollars.

<sup>3</sup> As retold by Miff Mole.



## NEW YORK LANDMARKS UPDATED

end, following a tradition as old as the blues, everybody stops playing.

One of the hallmarks of LeFleur's career was his constant effort to adapt his style to contemporary trends—with the result that he was habitually accused of plagiarism. When the New Orleans style (or "Chicago style," as it was then called) waned, Pootie was eclipsed, but he reappears in 1939 as a member of the historic Savoy Sextet sessions, featuring Bird, Diz, Monk, Prez, and Mrs. Hannah Weintraub on vibes.<sup>4</sup> With a penchant for overstatement typical of the period, Pootie tried augmenting the sextet, changing it first into a septet, then an octet, then a nonet, a dectet, an undectet, and so on,

<sup>4</sup> Hear especially the second take of "Schizoroonia on Hannah Banana—The Flip Side of Mrs. Weintraub" (Ulysses 906) for a remarkable polytonal chord cluster achieved when her necklace broke.

ending up with the cumbersome "hundred-tet," which could only be booked into meadows. A major influence on him at this time was his attendance at a tradition-breaking rent-party jam session, during which nineteen consecutive choruses of "How High the Moon" were played in twelve seconds by "Notes" Gonzales—the brilliant and erratic disciple of Charlie Parker—who was later killed when his car crashed into the tower of the Empire State Building.

The next album in this series will cover Pootie's modern period, including the prophetic Stockholm concert, with Ornette Coleman on vinyl sax and Swedish reedman Bo Ek on Dacron flute, plus some very recent sides cut by Pootie at his own expense in the Record-Your-Voice booth at the West Side bus terminal in New York City.

—MARSHALL BRICKMAN