

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

1950s jazz trio's instruments to be reunited

Tracy Conrad Special to
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Writing for the album liner notes, famous music critic Nat Hentoff explained the magic of improvisational jazz.

"One mark of continually creative artists, however long they have been professionals, is that they remain amateurs in the sense that the French use the word of one who has a love, a taste for a particularly art, a love that ignites an interest in everything connected with the art and/or instrument."

In a testament to that kind of continued creativity and devotion to their art and instruments, Barney Kessel, Shelly Manne and Ray Brown stepped into a recording studio in March 1957 to have a musical conversation.

Kessel, Manne and Brown had each topped the reader's poll for the best players in the world conducted by *DownBeat*, *Metronome* and *Playboy* magazines in 1956.

Kessel was known for his exuberant, athletic



From left: Bruce Forman, Jeff Hamilton and John Clayton will perform with the historic instruments of their mentors, Barney Kessel's guitar, Shelly Manne's drums and Ray Brown's bass. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

guitar style. His knowledge of chords and inversions and chord-based melodies was distinctive. In the early 1940s, he moved to Los Angeles, where he appeared in the film "Jammin' the Blues" featuring saxophonist Lester Young. Kessel's hands were heavily made-up, and his face

turned away from the camera as he was white and playing with Black performers. His prowess was soon noticed by the biggest bands of the day. He worked days as a studio musician and at night played clubs, recording with Charlie Parker and Oscar Peterson.

His famous introduction to "Cry Me a River" sung by Julie London in 1955 sold 1 million copies and turned into an iconic guitar lick. Kessel was rated the No. 1 guitarist in *Esquire*, *DownBeat* and *Playboy* every year between 1947 and 1960.

During the 1960s, Kessel was one of the session musicians known as The Wrecking Crew which played on countless rock anthems and movie scores. The Wrecking Crew musicians would

grams.

Ray Brown was considered the best bass player in the world and was sought after by everyone on the jazz scene. Dizzy Gillespie hired Brown on his arrival in New York at age 20. Soon Brown was playing with Art Tatum and Charlie Parker and composing. (Brown's swinging tune "Gravy Waltz" won him his first Grammy. Sarah Vaughn's version should be part of every playlist. The recording of the tune with Manne on Marc Hemmeler's album "Walking in LA" features incomparable Brown playing and is worth a listen.) Brown married Ella Fitzgerald and was the bass player for the Oscar Peterson Trio from 1951 to 1965, where he would work with Kessel.

The readers of *DownBeat*, *Metronome* and *Playboy* magazines knew greatness when they heard it in choosing Kessel, Manne and Brown as the standout rhythm section players in 1956 at the apogee of jazz in the middle of the 20th century.

Perhaps amused by the readers' selection, the three master musicians decided to drop into the studio at Contemporary Records in Los Angeles and see what happened. They were at the height of their powers and profession. No rehearsal was needed. They knew countless tunes by heart and could play them in any key. They were just going to have some fun listening to each other play; and in that back and

forth of musical ideas see what happened. And record it. Cheekily, the named the album "The Poll Winners."

Hentoff summed it all up. "The music in this set is primarily conversational, and it is conversation between three spirits with much in common in terms of life view and way of living as well as music. It is a conversation between experts whose knowledge has gone so far that they can never now regard themselves as experts, knowing not what they'll discover next time they talk. And it is a conversation essentially for kicks, the kicks that come best and most frequently when you talk with your peers and are thereby in no need to worry whether your quick allusion will be picked up or whether you'll goof a spiral reference. It's not often that we amateurs, literally as well as French-figuratively, have a chance to hear this much of this kind of talk."

Kessel, Manne and Brown were exceptional in terms of sheer ability, but they were also generous, inventive and in sync. They made magic together. "The Poll Winners" album would go to the top of the charts, followed by another three albums between 1957 and 1960, and a reunion album in 1975.

Lester Koenig explained for their second album, "The Poll Winners

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Ride Again,” “there were no written arrangements for this album. The three men arrived at Contemporary the evening of August 19, 1958 and in the most informal way, began looking over a new blues Barney had written, ‘Be Deedle Dee Do.’ Since Barney has the main melody voice, a large share of conceiving the performance fell to him. But Shelly and Ray are among the most inventive musicians in jazz today, and with all three coming up with ideas, a general routine evolved quickly. This approach, one of *total* improvisation was used for each selection; with only three players, each

man’s musical personality is given room for the fullest expression.” (“Be Deedle Dee Do” is a joyous romp on the second disc that is not to be missed. Find it on Spotify.)

With the ascendancy of rock-n-roll in the late 1950s, not everyone knew Kessel, Manne and Brown, but everyone had heard them. The three worked regularly in the studio playing for movie soundtracks, rock albums, popular TV shows, countless commercials and behind the most famous singers of the age.

In addition to anonymous studio work, each man had students who sought out the consummate teacher for their instrument. In a time-honored tradition they would pass along their knowledge to the next generation.

Amazingly, Kessel’s guitar, Manne’s drums and

Brown’s bass were also passed along.

Those instruments are coming to Palm Springs for Modernism Week and will be played together again, reunited for a historic concert at the Palm Springs Art Museum on Feb. 21, by Bruce Forman, Jeff Hamilton and John Clayton. These three contemporary jazz masters, playing the actual instruments of their predecessors, will revisit that musical legacy of “The Poll Winners,” and we amateurs have a chance to be in the room and hear the magic.

Tickets are available at <https://go.modtix.com/f/f23/the-poll-winners?date=2023-02-21>

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