



Bill Le Sage Interview

History is a strange sort of kitchen, in which a multitude of people and events is boiled down into a few large lumps, which, in retrospect, assume almost sacred importance.

The jazz scene in the UK, although often (unjustly) maligned, has been, since the 1940s, the largest and most consistent source of creative jazz outside North America. We have produced much great music, and many great musicians. Our jazz scene is a vibrant community, filled with a multitude of individual voices, each with its own identity, each with its own sphere of influence.

Yet for people looking back from the future, if they only see the few 'important' figures which the media target for celebrity, it may not seem like this at all. A few more or less important musicians will have been given retrospective godhood, and the rest will have faded away into the shadows. As though they never played at all.

And why not? So the jazz solo, so the jazz musician. Now you hear them, now you don't! Isn't that part of the point?

Well, maybe it is, but someone, I feel, has to mention the musicians. Not to say how they did. Just that they were there.

Whence the beginnings of this oral history of jazz piano in the UK.

To find out about the early days of jazz piano in this country, I went to the Ealing home of the late Bill Le Sage, UK veteran of piano, vibes, composer's pencil, and, as it transpires, much else besides. I was fortunate to arrive before his death.....

Nick: Tell me about how you started playing, Bill.

Bill: My first instrument was the ukulele, believe it or not. Bought for me in 1935 by my aunt, for my eighth birthday. My uncles played a bit as well, you see; one played alto and trumpet, and the other one was pretty good on guitar. It was through them that I heard my first jazz. I was about three or four years old, and both my parents got Scarlet Fever and went into Isolation Hospital, so I was sent off to stay with my grandparents. My guitar uncle, who was unemployed, because of the slump, used to spend all day at home practising, so through him I heard a lot of music. Louis Armstrong's Hot Seven, Eddie Lang, the Earl Hines piano solos, Charlie Teagarden, oh he played a beautiful version of Farewell Blues, which I remember very well. Young Bennie Goodman. And of course, later on, 36,37,38, the Quintet of the Hot Club of France, with Django Reinhardt. I used to play along with it all, on the ukulele.

Nick: Any gigs?

Bill: When I was evacuated to the country, during the war, I did a few 'concert parties' with the Scouts. Me on ukulele and a geezer with brushes on a biscuit tin. Then when I came back to London in 1942, just turned 15, I played drums a bit myself as well. My Dad played, and he made me my first kit. The original bebop kit, it was, with a tiny bass drum, in the days when bass drums were enormous. I started on piano around this time. You couldn't really go out and do gigs on a ukulele, so I worked out how to transfer all those daft ukulele chords onto the piano, and started playing in the local pub. With my Dad on drums.

Nick: Any money?

Bill: Nah, but they used to line up drinks for me on the piano. Powdered grapefruit. Gallons of the stuff. Ugh!

Nick: And you were playing the melodies as well now, I suppose, now you were off the ukulele and on the piano?

Bill: Yes, badly.

Nick: What tunes?

Bill: The pop songs of the day. Which were all jazz really anyway. 'Tangerine', things like that. Anyway, I started knocking round with a drummer called Ginger. He was a friend of my Dad's who'd been sent home from the war after being wounded in Norway, and used to lig about all day playing. We managed to get a sit-in at a dance in Rye Lane, Peckham. We played 'Lady Be Good' in the interval. The band was Lake Spencer and his New Monarchs, and that's how I met Hank Shaw, the trumpeter. He was in the band.

Nick: Were there many places to sit in?

Bill: In those days there were things called Rhythm Clubs, which were small societies of jazz enthusiasts, who would meet regularly in the back room of a pub to listen to jazz records. They'd advertise in the Melody Maker, which was then called Melody Maker and Rhythm Magazine, and charge threepence or sixpence admission. They'd hire an expert with a wind-up gramophone to bring in his records and give a lecture on an aspect of jazz. Then, after the meeting, there'd be a jam session with local musicians. I started sitting in at the Rhythm Club at the Lord Alfred in Lewisham. After three weeks I got my first call 'Are you working Saturday?'. It was a wedding. All pop tunes. But it was all jazz anyway, so it was no hardship.

Nick: Was there a big distinction between jazz musicians and commercial musicians in those days?

Bill: Not really. Everyone was trying to play jazz. No one was setting out to be a danceband musician!

Nick: Who were you listening to?

Bill: One of my the first records I bought after starting my dayjob was Smooth One, by Benny Goodman. Good Enough to Keep on the other side. On Parlophone Rhythm Series, remember those? Blue Label. But you have to remember that records were scarce, because of the shellac shortage. You'd go down to the record shop on your day off and queue up to try and get something you wanted. If you were lucky. But there was live music. At cinemas, for example, they used to have a live band after the show. I remember hearing the Harry Parry sextet at the cinema. And Billy Cotton. And of course there

were the live Radio broadcasts. Bands like Lew Stone, Harry Roy, Jack Payne and his Orchestra. All Big Bands going round doing their gigs. And all working a lot.

Nick: Who were the piano players who impressed you?

Bill: Dave Kay and Ivor Morton, who used to do a double piano act. Very good it was too. Have you ever heard of Kay Cavendish? Oh, she was a great piano player. Very sophisticated cocktail jazz.. She had a lovely touch.

Nick: Were there any jazz clubs?

Bill: The main one I remember is the Feldman Club at 100 Oxford Street.

Nick: Oh, the 100 Club!

Bill: That's right, but it started as Mac's restaurant, and in those days it was a certified Air Shelter. Somewhere safe for people to go in the bombing raids. Then Old Man Feldman started up a Sunday nightclub there, mainly for his sons, Victor and his two brothers. Carlo Krahmer, who started the Esquire label later, was there on drums, and Tommy Bromley, on bass, I remember.

Nick: Pianists?

Bill: Well, George Shearing was there all the time. He wasn't doing his locked hands style yet, though. There's an old 78 of his from that time which I remember well. 'A pretty girl is like a melody'. Very nice record. Then there was Harold Hood. I never knew where he came from or what happened to him afterwards. But he was an excellent

player. And there was a guy called Jimmy Henney, who played a bit like Billy Kyle. His brother Johnnie played drums. He was another nutter. They lived in Camden Town. Really heavy mob. Irish Maltese. Norman Stenfalt was around then, another brilliant individual piano player. And Alan Clare, of course.

Nick: I remember hearing about a legendary figure called Denis Rose, who was one of the first to bring bebop over here.

Bill: Denis was a trumpet player. A fantastic writer, but very lazy, so he never really did what he could have done.

Nick: And he knew all the new bebop changes, did he, before everyone else over here?

Bill: Well, yes, but he didn't bring them over so much as begin developing them simultaneously. Tony Crombie, the drummer, who also played piano, was the same. They had hold of a bebop approach, but they weren't copyists. They were evolving a similar music at a similar time. As often happens. Look at Sonny Stitt, who was very unlucky really, because everyone wrote him off as A Charlie Parker copyist, when in fact he just came up with the same approach naturally.

Nick: Like there's something in the air at a particular time.

Bill: Exactly.

Nick: Tell me about Alan Clare. He was a monster solo pianist, wasn't he?

Bill: Oh yes. But towards the end of the war he was playing with Stephane Grappelli, at Hatchett's Restaurant in Picadilly. That's how

far those two went back. Which is why when Stephane came back years later, he hooked up with Alan again. Reunion.

Nick: What sort of style were you all playing in back then?

Bill: It was much fuller, with more left hand. Albert Ammons was a big influence. Stride and Boogie Woogie.

Nick: Great for solo piano!

Bill: Oh yes, you need a whole variety of styles to play in for solo piano. But there weren't many solo gigs around then.

Nick: You're kidding! I thought that cocktail piano jazz scene had been around forever.

Bill: Not at all. In the States, maybe, but not in this country, hardly at all. There might have been one solo gig, at the Chinese restaurant on the Edgware Road, but everywhere else was trios and bands. In fact I was terrified of playing solo for years. If I went to a party and someone said, 'oh you're a piano player, give us a tune', I'd go and puke. Or shit myself. Or both! Solo gigs only really started in the seventies. I remember the phone going back then, and it was Ronnie Scott's office. 'Are you working Saturday? Gig in Holland Park.' 'Who's on it?', I asked. 'Just you'. 'Hold on a minute', I lied, 'I'm working'.

Nick: But you had all the ability, didn't you, having started with more left hand. In that fuller style.

Bill: I know. I had all the technique, but I'd been playing for so long with a bloody rhythm section I didn't know where to start. I was

really in the cart. And there were suddenly all these private parties worth a fortune, and I kept turning them down.

Nick: You do a lot of solo now, though don't you? I've heard you many times, and it's fantastic. So how did that change?

Bill: I'd just finished at the Bulls Head, Barnes after seven years, three nights a week, and I'd started a trio gig at a new club in Hampstead, with Kenny Baldock on bass and Martin Drew on drums. Six nights a week, and we were booked for eight weeks, but it only lasted for three weeks before it folded. We were backing different people. I remember Bud Freeman came in, and Freddie Randall. I did a nerve in my shoulder and lost the use of my left arm. Thought I'd had a stroke. And I played the whole last night one-handed.

Nick: I've been doing that for years!

Bill: We noticed. Anyway, after that gig folded, I got a call asking if I had a pupil who wanted a gig in Switzerland, and I said 'Bugger that, I'll do it myself!' It was a hard gig though. 4 hours with a Trad band followed by 2 hours solo piano. Seven nights a week. 5 minute break every hour. Hard. But I thought I could use it to get my solo playing together. The first night was a struggle. The second night was a bit better, and the third night the place was chock full of piano players, all asking me questions. How do you do this, what's this chord, this tune, what do you do with your left hand, and so on. I'm still trying to find out! I always remember that we had a very strict beer allowance, but that night the manageress came up to me with a tumbler full of Chivas Regal. 'What's that for', I asked. 'You've been a good boy', she said. Anyway, that's how I started.

Nick: With the Chivas Regal?

Bill: Haha! Not half. And with the solo piano. I enjoy it a lot now.

Nick: Me too. But they are dangerous gigs, aren't they? If you do too many, you can slip out of the way of playing with people. Get too elastic with the time and so on. You hear a few players like that.

Bill: Yes, that's true. You have to stay disciplined. Keep the time going.

Nick: Even if there's no one there to hear you drop a beat.

Bill: I always watch peoples' feet. If they're tapping, I know I'm on the right track.

Nick: Back to the war...

Bill: The war. I remember coming home from the Feldman club on the bus one night. 1943 or 44, I think. I lived down the Old Kent Road at the time. The bus stopped, and the conductor turfed us all off on the wrong side of the Canal Bridge. There was an unexploded bomb on the bridge, and the bus couldn't get across. 'How am I going to get home?', I asked. 'Fucking walk', the conductor told me. So I had to walk past this bloody bomb ticking away! In 1945, as the war was ending, I went into the Army.

Nick: Did you meet any musicians there?

Bill: Yeah! Bobby Pratt, Les Simons, Ted Taylor.

Nick: Ted Taylor who started Porcupine Studios?

Bill: Exactly. He was the first person I met in the Army. What happened was that the week before I went in, my band was in a contest at Porchester Hall, and I won the Individual award. Sort of Man of the Match, but on piano. So my name had been in Melody Maker. And I've just gone in the Army, reported down to Maidstone for my training, and I'm walking through the gates, suitcase in hand, and when my name gets called out, there's this little guy in uniform standing there. Ted Taylor. 'There can't be two of you', he says. 'Are you the Bill Le Sage who plays piano?...Oh thank Christ for that. I've been stranded here for 6 months without a weekend pass because I can't find a dep for my Army Band gig.' So I was in the band before I'd even got my uniform. Had two gigs that weekend. Dances. The first thing I told my new sergeant was that I would be going off on band duty. He hated that. 'Oh we've got one of those, have we? Go on, then', he said 'Piss off!'. Anyway, the next weekend, as a reward for doing the gigs, I got a weekend pass. Normally, once you're in for your training, that's it, no leave for the first 6 weeks. The sergeant went off his head, but he couldn't do anything. I hadn't been in the house five minutes when the phone rang. 'Are you working Saturday?' It was Johnny Dankworth. 'I 'm not, as it happens', I said. 'How did you know I was home?'. 'Why?' said John 'Where have you been?' 'In the fucking Army', I explained. 'You know there's been a war on'.

Nick: Didn't he go in too?

Bill: Just for a bit. But he pleaded insanity and they sent him home. They weren't wrong really. So that Saturday, home from the Army, I ended up with John at Rainbow Corner on Piccadilly. The American Services Club. Good band. Stan Davis on guitar. Bloody marvellous. I

still see his brother Reg every time I play at the Goat in Berkhamstead. Roy Stevens, who was a very good drummer. The regular pianist was a guy called Norman Knappet. Very good player. He used to work for the Bevs, the Beverley Sisters. I always remember that gig, because John had just got an alto saxophone. When I got there Roy asked me 'Have you heard him play alto?'. 'No', I said. 'Well you don't want to either', he said, 'It's the most hideous sound. I know, let's fucking hide it.' So we hid his alto and he had to play clarinet all night. We still laugh about it now. I always ask John when I see him, if he remembers the night we hid his alto. 'Yes', he says 'You bastards!'

Nick: You've had a long association with John Dankworth, haven't you?

Bill: Over the years, yes. I joined the Seven in March 1950.

Nick: Back to the Army...did I hear you say the name Les Simons? Is he the same one I know who runs a band over in Bexley?

Bill: That's right. I met Les when I was sent up to Scarborough to join the Royal Corps of Signals. Bobby Pratt, the trumpet player, was up there as well. Bobby was one of the greatest lead players we've ever had. He was known all over the world. In fact when he arrived in LA with the Heath Band, he was met at the airport by a crowd of the top session players in the States, who feted him. They thought he was the guv'nor. It worried him, though, all the pressure, and he drank himself to death.

Nick: A lot of lead trumpets go that way, don't they? It's tough up there at the top.

Bill: That's right. Anyway, when I arrived in Scarborough I went to audition for the Big Band they had up there. I didn't fancy my chances much, because my reading was pretty dreadful, being a self-taught idiot, and there were four other piano players who were quite good readers. I was having a cup of tea in the Naffi afterwards, and Bobby Pratt came in. 'I won't get this' I told him. 'Those others can read' 'Yes' he said 'Unfortunately they can't fucking play. I've told the Sergeant to get you in!' So I got that gig, two nights a week, and as well we went out with a small group, with Les Simons. There were so many gigs up there we never had a night off. That's as well as all the Army training in the day.

Nick: What about the reading, Bill? It's a bastard on piano, isn't it? So many notes at once.

Bill: You're telling me. It's very hard if you're self taught, and come to the reading late. You never really catch up. You have to be used to it right from the beginning.

Nick: I agree. You can improve so much, and do enough for most gigs, sure, but you can't get real fluency without that early start. But not all the great players are great readers, are they?

Bill: Not at all. I remember talking to Victor Feldman. He wasn't a good reader. In fact he was bloody awful. We were talking about the ordeal of the Sunday Concert, when as well as a jazz performance, there'd be some act or another to back, with lots of reading. I used to dread those. Sundays I was always sick. Sick with worry. Victor told me he felt the same but he'd found the answer to his anxiety. He

used to do the jazz and then pay someone else out of his own pocket to come in and do the reading for him!

Nick: But you always did lots of session work, with all the reading, didn't you?

Bill: Oh yeah. I could cope with most of it. Especially as a lot of it was jazz anyway. But I used to do a lot on percussion, because my reading on piano wasn't good enough. If they rang me for piano, I'd tell 'em I was a lousy reader. I always warned them first, so they knew what they were getting! Some of the film sessions on piano were horrendous. I did a lot of film work myself. I spent 2 years as MD at Danziger Studios. Lots of writing, which I love. As much as playing.

Nick: There were some good British players who ended up in the States, weren't there? George Shearing, for one.

Bill: George, yes. He went in about 47 or 48. When I was still in the Army. And Derek Smith. He went to the States and did all right. He ended up on television as MD on Spot That Tune, I think. Made a lot of bread. I've got him on a record with me when I'm playing accordion!

Nick: I knew about the vibes and the drums but I didn't know about the accordion.

Bill: I played that for a long while. It was a case of necessity. One of the first gigs I had, in 1949, was at a Holiday Camp up near Great Yarmouth. One of our jobs was to march round the camp playing. And since it's a bit hard to march with a piano.....also we'd do cabaret

nights, on Fridays, where we'd put on the best two or three punters from the talent show the night before. But if we were short we'd have to do a spot ourselves. I played accordion, and sang.

Nick: Singing as well!

Bill: Oh yes. I used to sing with Cleo on broadcasts. I've done everything. Washed the kitchen sink, scrubbed the kitchen floor.

Nick: What about the vibes?

Bill: I started playing them at the end of my time with the Dankworth Seven, in about 53. Going back to the pianists who went to the States. Marian Macpartland is British, but I don't know what playing she did over here before going to the States. There was Ralph Sharon, of course, who has spent years off and on with Tony Bennett. When he was still here he used to win all the Melody Maker Polls. In fact everyone seemed to win them except me. All the other members of the Dankworth Seven used to win. Eddie Harvey on trombone, Jimmy Deuchar on trumpet, Tony Kinsey on drums. I never got a look-in on piano. Ralph used to ring me up every year to commiserate. Victor Feldman, whom we've said, of course went to the States and made all those amazing records, and then did very well in the Studios. I remember doing a Jazz Club broadcast with Victor. Two vibraphones. We're doing fours and eights and it's like one continuous solo. You can't tell us apart. We pissed ourselves laughing when we heard it back.

Nick: You had a lot in common, with the piano, drums and vibes.

Bill: Yes, and we had lots of harmonic things in common, too, we found. We'd meet and one of us would say 'Oh I've just worked out these chords for such and such a tune' and the other one would say 'Shit, so have I!'

Eddie Thompson was another one who spent a long time over there. And Dill Jones, the Welshman. Dilwyn Jones. I met him in 1945 doing a Summer Season dep down in Hilsea, for that brilliant blind piano player Bill Cole. There was a bungalow we had the use of, theoretically for a rehearsal room, but in fact we all used to take birds there. That's where all the parties were. One night we got back and there was a pissed sailor in there singing the blues and playing the arse off the piano. That was Dill Jones.

Nick: Did you go to the States yourself?

Bill: Oh yes. I was going over regularly in 1949-50, working in the band on the Queen Mary. Peter Ind was on bass. Ivor Raymond was in the band, on accordion, and Keith Barr on tenor. Mike Asher on trumpet. Sammy Prager on drums. Frank Abbott was the bandleader, he played alto and clarinet. Everyone in the band was working at it, trying to get better. Everyone was studying with someone. There were no books. I studied with Lennie Tristano for 6 months. He had an incredible reputation. They were all going to him to study. George Shearing, Stan Getz, Peter Ind, Bud Freeman. Everyone on the New York scene. I did well to last 6 months because he was a hard teacher. To stay with him you have to work hard yourself. Otherwise he slings you out. His idea was to get you to play more melodically, and to avoid what he called 'musical diarrhoea'. Technique for technique's sake. He was great at teaching you how to grow with new

musical ideas. Ones which you couldn't understand at first, but which could make sense eventually, as your ears grew bigger. Also how to learn to discard what you don't like, and more quickly. I'm still working with all that now.

Nick: I can certainly hear all that melodic strength in your playing, Bill, and in Peter Ind's playing, so Lennie's teaching must have worked. I love that quality in it. A lot of younger players have all the rhythm and harmony happening but it sounds like they've had a melody bypass!

Bill: Exactly.

Nick: Who were some of the other piano players around in the late forties and fifties?

Bill: Ken Mole was around. And Jack Honeybourne. Did he play with the original Kenny Graham's Afro-Cubists? I can't remember. Norman Stenfalt, of course, who went with the Dozen when I left in 1954. Terry Shannon, who worked with Tubby Hayes. And Damian Robinson. He used to be with Don Rendell, and then went with Ray Ellington. Stan Jones, who went to South Africa. He was with Allan Ganley's band.

Nick: What about Brian Lemon? He's a great player.

Bill: He was a bit later. And don't forget he was more on the Trad side, while I was a modernist. The two scenes were completely separate. On the Trad side I know there was Fred Hunt with Alex Welsh, and Brian, and later on Stan Greig. On the modern side, Stan Tracey, of course, was around, doing the same sort of gigs as everyone. He

was playing accordion when I first met him. Then he made his mind up he wasn't going to do anything but play jazz. He was lucky, because he got the residency at Ronnie Scott's thrust in front of him, so he didn't have to worry about money. It wasn't a fortune, but it was some sort of security. I didn't have that. I was doing all sorts, sessions, writing, anything really. Alan Branscombe was a marvellous player. Then there was Gordon Beck, who is a great player. He took over from me with Tony Kinsey's band, at Annie's Room, Annie Ross's place, when I went with Ronnie Ross. Gordon, I think, came from Hounslow way, like drummer Bill Eyden. There was a team of them from the West. Like the team from the East. Dankworth and his mob, Norman Knappet and the Beverley Sisters, were all from Woodford way.

Nick: What about out of town? Or was all the jazz in London?

Bill: There were some good Scottish players. Bill McGuffie springs to mind. He had a lovely touch. And later on there was Pat Smythe. Great player. There was a wonderful player in Glasgow as well. Pawnbroker. Complete crook. We always used to make a pilgrimage to see him. And I remember a school teacher in York who played everything. Vibes, bass, piano. And so well you wanted to shoot him. I don't really mean that. And of course I still always enjoy going to Norwich to play with Mike Capucci. We do these duets. Great fun.

Nick: **Bill,** thank you very much for sharing all these personal memories with us. I've just two more questions. One, what's your favourite piano trio?

Bill: I love the Billy Taylor Trio, with Charles Mingus.

Nick: Last of all, what are your current projects?

Bill: I'm very excited at the moment about my 10 piece band, which I'm busy writing for. I've got some incredible players in the band, so it's a challenge. Alan Barnes, Andy Panayi and Art Themen on saxes, Steve Sidwell and Steve Waterman on trumpets, Mark Nightingale on trombone, Phil Lee on guitar, Laurence Cottle on bass guitar, and Ian Thomas on drums. We call ourselves the Genetically Modified Quintet, and we've just put out a new CD, recorded live at the Ealing Festival. The playing is out of this world.

Nick: I've heard it myself, Bill, and I can vouch for that. The writing is very fine as well. Once more, Bill, thanks for this interview, and thanks for your music.

Bill: It's been my pleasure.