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KRONOS QUARTET'S JOAN JENRENAUD

A CELLIST PREPARES

PLUS SOLOS BY EDDIE GOMEZ, HARRY LOOKOFSKY

by Jon Rose

Harry Lookofsky

On the Phone to a Jazz Legend

In 1958 the Atlantic Label in New York released an album called *Stringsville* that featured a relatively unknown violinist named Harry Lookofsky. Play this record for any violinist or a knowledgeable jazz fan and a smile will come over his face, followed by exclamations like "unbelievable" or "incredible." Lookofsky's playing has the sophistication and power of a classic bebop horn player—a Charlie Parker or an early Sonny Rollins. Yet this album is almost totally ignored by jazz history books. Why? As we will discover further, it was not a real jazz record played by a real jazzer.

Harry Lookofsky was born in Paducah, Kentucky, on October 1, 1913. He started to play the violin at the age of eight and received classical training in St. Louis. In his early teens, he played the southern vaudeville circuit with a jazz orchestra.

"I had as my model the violinist Joe Venuti. I used to listen to him all the time."

He stayed in St. Louis until 1938, having joined the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra in 1933.

"Then I came to New York and I joined Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra—that was something!"

Was *Stringsville* the first "jazz" album he made?

"No, the first record I made was for the Epic Label of Columbia—the name?—I'm having trouble remembering. I'll have to write you a letter! And there was this saxophone player, Leo Wright—used to play with Dizzy Gillespie; I made a record with him, too; I played on half of it. I'll send you that."

This record, in fact, came out on the Atlantic label after *Stringsville*—it was called *Blues Shout*. There are two solos from Lookofsky that are quite extraordinary. In terms of jazz history, these float stylistically in a state of ubiquity. Incorporating elements from Joe Venuti as a jumping-off point, these solos hint at the whole development of jazz up to (and including) bop—in terms of saxophone and trumpet phrasing (small repeated rhythmic units, slurs, and grace notes). On *Angel Eyes* the playing is spatial and hangs there in a vibrato-less line. *Indian Summer*, on the other hand, is full of condensed phrases that seem to come out of nowhere, accelerating through the bar lines. Toward the end of this solo comes a wonderful and continuous piece of bop phrasing—a superstructure of referential tonality over the rather pedestrian changes.

Harry Lookofsky.

Harry Lookofsky was the first (and perhaps only) violinist to sit down and spend a lot of time figuring out how to play bebop on an instrument which demands technically so much. In some ways he rediscovered "early music" techniques which are now so fashionable when dealing with Baroque performance, e.g., absence of vibrato, or, using vibrato as an effect, instead of continuously; e.g., using very light, fast bowing—similar to the *messa di voce* bow strokes of the Baroque period and before. (These two techniques are, of course, an integral part of the world music string tradition, but get lost in the western music education system in this and the last centuries.) The beautiful contradiction is that Lookofsky combines this with faultless intonation in all positions and sometimes at amazing speeds.

The music never sounds stiff—the usual complaint about classically trained violinists. Often the bowing is reversed, so the normally stronger down bow happens on the second and fourth beats of the bar (generally the weakest beats in Western classical music, but they are, of course, the swing beats in jazz). Some of the rhythmic phrases on *Stringsville* are extraordinary—crossing bars, metric subdivisions, slowing and speeding of tempo, colliding rhythmic ideas together in mid-phrase, etc.

"Why don't I write something down for you and send it over, I'll put the bowing marks through it—then you'll see the kind of thing that I did. Oh! I just remembered the name of that first album—it was called *Miracle with Strings*. It was different from *Stringsville*, it was a beginning. I made it in the time that Charlie Parker was popular, in the early 50s. Oscar Pettiford played bass and Charlie Swift played drums. I've been trying to find a copy of it; I don't have one.

There must be one somewhere.

"In those days, there were no multitrack tape recorders, only single track. So, Epic had me play each string part (three violins, two viola parts) on a separate tape while I listened to the rhythm track, which was itself on a separate tape: Then, lining up six single track Ampex machines, each with a part and all connected to a common "starter" box, they did their best to put it all together. After many starts and stops, together with splicing, they wound up with the album!"

The opening track on *Stringsville* is an arrangement of the Monk classic, *'Round Midnight.* The theme is "place" rather than played—and "cool" is the right word. On the repeat, the violin takes off on a breathtaking flight at top speed—a complete contrast. This kind of extreme juxtaposition is typical of much of the playing on this album. In the middle eight, another element is introduced [a multitracked string section] of close parallel harmonic movement, sometimes an internal moving line. Again, this is very characteristic of the album—as if the whole Ellington band had turned up playing violin.

Moose the Mooche features a tenor saxophone solo. And that's the only way to describe it, played, I assume, on—tenor violin?

The next tune is *I Let a Song out of My Heart,* and has some beautifully played 'flat' notes on the E string, a great full horn section glissando (à la Ellington again), and a solo line that balances tonal ambiguity (predating, I suspect, the George Russell lydian chromatic concept, currently being regurgitated by almost every jazz student worldwide).

On *Little Willie Leaps,* a tune written by Miles Davis, the head is played in octaves (tenor and normal violin)—like many bop tunes, this doesn't fall very easily under the fingers on the violin. Lookofsky takes it flat out. The first solo break has some short motive figures that cross the pulse in a king of "no-time" land. The third break starts with nearly three octaves of fourths piled up on top of each other—quite a surprising way to start a bop phrase. For most of this tune,

there is an interchange between Bob Brookmeyer on trombone and Lookofsky. The other players on *Stringsville* are Hank Jones, piano; a pre-Coltrane Elvin Jones, drums; and Paul Chambers and Milt Hinton alternating on bass—all in excellent form.

Side two continues with one of the hottest versions of *Move* that these ears have heard—the violin powering through a blur of 16th notes.

Champagne Blues and *Give Me the Simple Life* are both medium tempo numbers, and the violin section work mimics the clichés of the 30s in the arrangements. Then there is a bizarre 'tag' on the end with a severe echo chamber treatment of the violin—almost like a soundtrack to a horror movie. The last track, *Dancing on the Grave,* uses straight out blues phrases against a background string section doing an ol' train 'a comin' soundscape routine. It avoids painting a complete picture of Deep South romance by injections of straight ahead material, kicked along by Elvin Jones.

On *Stringsville,* then, Harry Lookofsky plays violin, viola, and tenor violin—all with phenomenal technique, flare, and feeling. But what is a tenor violin?

"I read about this kind of violin in a New York magazine, and I went to Wurlitzer and asked the manager if he could get that instrument for me—and he did. They were in business with this firm; it was a German firm in Mittenwald. So they sent away and got it for me. It was like a viola but with much deeper sides, and the strings were tuned an octave lower than a violin. It had strings on it that didn't sound so well, so I went to a string maker and he made up a special set for me—they were very thick! I don't have it anymore—somebody stole that instrument from me."

Lookofsky has no trouble going from one instrument to another; the intonation remains unbelievably true.

"Oh yes, I use my ears! And I bend my fingers a little bit! It was also an unusually large viola. It was really too large for me to play."

There is evidently more than one Lookofsky on *Stringsville.* But had multitrack recording, then, already

arrived by 1958?

"I did this on the first multitrack recording machine that was commercially available—it was an Ampex 8 track. We put all the rhythm section down on one track, that left seven. So then I would record using six tracks and then transfer them over to the seventh. Then I would record on five and transfer them over to the sixth, and so on. Some of it was very deceptive, making each part start in a slightly different place, for example. But when you hear it, it sounds like one."

Who made the arrangements?

"Well, Hank Jones wrote some very nice things and also Bobby Brookmeyer. Those two did most of the writing. But a lot of things I had to work out myself—Bobby and Hank weren't string players. There was plenty of room to do what I wanted to do. The solo passages I worked out mainly with Hank. We tried things out—he would suggest phrases and I would see if they would work well on the violin or not."

This is definitely against the rules in jazz! Most of this record was arranged and played from written music, not "blown" as it appears. So is it authentic jazz? Living as we do now, in a world of sampling, "jazz educators," play-along records, video clips, and gigantic jazz festivals, it seems remarkable and pure.

The idea of playing written out solos on a jazz album would not have been a very "hip" thing to suggest in the 50s. So no mention was ever made about this on the record jacket. Indeed, Leonard Feather keeps the jazz myth intact by writing: "The ex-symphony man who stopped in mid-career to develop a technique and style as a jazz violinist." Lookofsky was all the time playing with Toscanini and the NBC; he never stopped to become a "jazz man." Leonard Feather, however, has an interest in making sure that jazz history runs how it is supposed to run.

Anyone listening to this record can hear that no matter what kind of process is involved, it is completely clear that Harry Lookofsky has total empathy, respect, and love for jazz. But he was an outsider who arrived in jazz history, made an extraordinary

contribution, then disappeared almost unnoticed. Were there any other motives for making this record? The original sleeve notes quote Lookofsky as saying, "To me it seemed to be a problem of communication. As a violinist, I had to find a way to talk to jazz musicians—and in their language. I knew that if I could, I could make them accept the violin in a jazz group, as another 'horn,' not just part of the background."

How long did it take to record?

"Well, we put down the rhythm section material in two sessions. It was a very small studio; I remember everyone had to walk sideways to get around the piano and drums. I came just twice to put all the strings down. I knew what I was going to do. There was only one 'second take.' I had to re-record the start of one of the overdubs. You know the equipment was very primitive—each track on the Ampex leaked over into the next one. Apart from that, I don't remember having to do anything over again. We sailed right through it."

So the *Stringsville* album was made. Having created this achievement, hadn't Lookofsky also wanted to fulfill the American dream and become famous, if not rich, as well?

"No. First of all, I was playing with Toscanini throughout this whole period and I really loved to do that—I didn't want to stop. And I wanted to keep studying; I kept practicing all along. I got up this morning and practiced. I'm really just a violinist. All that traveling, jazz life—well, it really didn't interest me; though I knew the scene quite intimately. I used to get together with Quincy Jones, and we would go down to Birdland and check out all the players. So I knew the musicians very well and I knew the kind of life they had to put up with, and that did not appeal to me. When Toscanini retired, I also quit the NBC and went over to the ABC as concertmaster of their orchestra. I was with them for a long time, and then there were economic cutbacks and they got rid of all the strings. In the last 10 years, I've been doing television jingles—that kind of thing, and playing golf—yes, I like that a lot!

"You know, after the last time we

spoke, I was looking through some old stuff and I came across a tune that Clifford Brown wrote for me. I don't believe anybody else has it because he wrote it for me. Would you like to see it? I can send a copy of it to you. I knew Clifford Brown and felt crushed by the news of his death [June 26, 1956, in Chicago]. A sweeter person never lived, and of course, we all know his playing greatness. When I asked him to write something for me, he graciously said he would, and invited me to his hotel room on Broadway and 53rd Street, New York City. I brought some manuscript paper from ABC, where, at that time, I was working as a staff musician. (At that time, also on the staff, among others, were Billy Butterfield, Bobby Hackett, Peanuts Hucko, and Ruggiero Ricci!) When I entered Clifford's room, he was in his underwear and, while still in that state of dress, sitting on the bed, he dashed off this composition—with a solo on the second page."

In more recent times, Harry Lookofsky has extended the idea of "jazz transcription" on the violin to include a gospel production. Quincy Jones asked him if it was possible to imitate the sound of a gospel singer on violin for a film soundtrack. Aretha Franklin singing *Amazing Grace* was selected. Lookofsky made a version dubbing 29 times the exact contours of the original voice improvisation. It's precise playing, but done with a completely relaxed and free feeling. To jazz purists (if they still exist) this process of making music must seem perverse—a kind of "serious" parody. For me, the inherent sense of conviction and commitment to this "non-classical" music is self-evident. It physically could not be played if the case was otherwise.

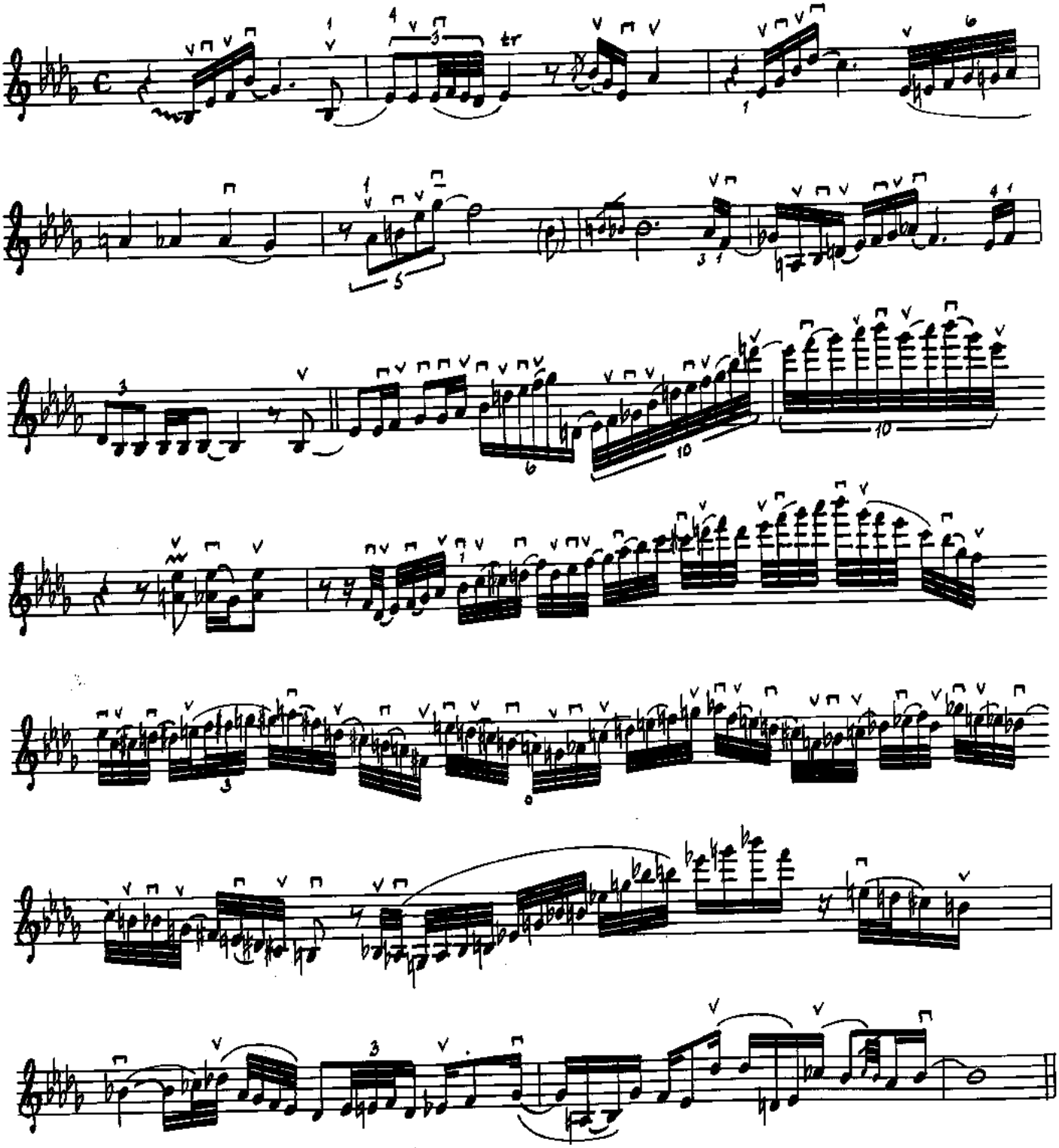
We are now in a post-modern era—particularly where stylistically identifiable jazz is concerned, it has run its full length of history. The work of Harry Lookofsky points its finger at, indeed puts its finger *on* the processes, the structures, the historical framework, and the fundamental meanings of a musical language.

The archaeology of jazz is the record album; the myths and the everyday working realities of this

music are stored in that medium. In some ways, Lookofsky made a beautifully crafted "fake"—it was an analysis, a jazz album about jazz albums. *Stringsville* was post-modern before its time.

"I'm sorry I can't make it to your 'Relative Violin Festival,' but what could I do? I don't think I could really add to what I already did back then. Also Berlin in January—I don't think I'm up to it. I want to go to Florida and play golf." ✻

'Round Midnight Solo by Harry Lookofsky



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