

***Martial Solal will  
turn 80 in August,  
and he's France's  
greatest pianist.***

***Yet jazz fans still  
ask, "Qui est  
Monsieur Solal?"***

*Christopher Porter*

"I thank Mr. Hider," says a droll Martial Solal, a French-Algerian Jew and France's foremost jazz pianist. "Because of him I discover music. Without him, I wouldn't be here and neither would you."

Here is Juan-Les-Pins, a tiny swath of Mediterranean beachfront in the south of France that hosts the historic Festival de Jazz d'Antibes Juan-Les-Pins. We're in Hotel Le Meridien, sitting in Solal's seaside room. The vast blue panorama before us is the same one that inspired F. Scott Fitzgerald as he wrote *Tender Is the Night*, which was set in this once-sleepy fishing village that now lives up to the "constant carnival" appellation that the American expat writer bestowed upon it.

It's a long way from Algiers, Algeria, where Solal was born Aug. 23, 1927, to French parents. His mother played piano and sang opera; his father was Jewish, which is why young Martial was kicked out of school in 1942. With Hitler's Germany taking over France in 1940, the Vichy regime extended Nazi race law to French territories like Algeria. As with Jewish people in France, North African Jews were stripped of their citizenship and forbidden to work in certain professions or attend particular schools.

Solal had been playing piano since he was 7, so he took advantage of his newfound free time. He knew classical works by Debussy, Bach and Chopin, but Solal wanted to learn jazz, which he first encountered through the records of Fats Waller, Benny Goodman and Teddy Wilson. So Solal hooked up with Lucky Starwau a French multi-instrumentalist living in Algiers, and studied with him until it was rime to enter

military service, where he found a new instructor. "I study with a very, very good teacher: myself," he quips.

Solal continued to play while he was in the army, encountering the music of Erroll Garner, Art Tatum and Bud Powell. "I used to love Bud Powell," Solal told Martin Williams and Dick Katz in a 1963 interview for *Saturday Review*, "and I think I still have many things from him, maybe more than from anyone else except Tatum." You can hear Powell in the way Solal toys with time, his rhythmic melodies and his ability to twist familiar songs into almost unrecognizable shapes-until he brings them back to form in completely logical but wholly surprising ways.

Trumpeter Dave Douglas recorded last year's *Rue de Seine* (Cam Jazz) with Solal, and he got a taste of the pianist's ability to throw musical curveballs. "I was a little shocked playing standards with Martial. He's fearless," Douglas says. Out of the 10 tracks on *Rue de Seine*, the duo cut four tunes from the jazz canons: "Have You Miss Jones," "Body and Soul," "Here's That Rainy Day" and "All the Things You Are."

"I've seen standards torn apart and rebuilt lots of different ways, but I didn't expect it to be quite so scream-of-consciousness as it is in Martial's playing. He can go our there!" Douglas says. But he's always playing the form in his own way, and at the slightest hint, and sometimes without it, he's ready to extrapolate some incredibly sideways changes. He grew up playing standards, and I think that's why he can mess with them so thoroughly-it's calling on his deepest background in music.

"When he starts a standard, usually he won't tell us what it is," says bassist Francois Moutin, who has played with Solal since 1989, Moutin's twin brother, drummer Louis, joined the trio in 1993. "Usually we manage to know what he's playing pretty soon, but sometimes he changes in the middle: He could stay on the same song but change the key; he could add a part to it like a pedal for a minute or an interlude; or sometimes he could even change songs in The middle of the song."

In a March 1989 interview with Jerome Reese in *Musician*, Solal explained his take on approaching standards: "Freedom, for me, means being able to go as far as possible in a certain direction, established and prepared in advance. But I don't like the idea of 'anything goes.' That's why I play jazz standards, which give the audience something they can follow

more easily and which will perhaps entertain them while having to put up with my, shall we say, busy style." "He has a very versatile approach to harmony and rhythm," Moutin says. "But when he wants, he can really swing like nobody else I know." Jazz *moderne*, or any other sort, wasn't a career option in Algeria. Combine that with a postwar work shortage in nonmusical labors, and Solal knew he had to make a break for France. He left the service and Algiers in 1950, moving to Paris—where he knew nobody. During his first few months in the City of Lights, Solal claims he felt so isolated that he didn't speak to anybody. So he threw himself into improving his piano technique, setting up practice habits that remain with him to this day.

In the corner of Solal's hotel room is a piano that he will warm up on for his concert this evening. But he won't engage in one of his marathon practices, which means scales, octaves and arpeggios for hours on end—which he balances out by reading a novel as he pounds the keys. "I read some big books—sometimes a 600-page book," Solal says, though he's quick to clarify that it's only during memorized exercises, not improvisations, that he can do dual things at once. "I was strictly practicing like a machine, your mind can do double but not triple."

Solal's workload started to pick up, as he felt more at home in Paris and started to meet other players. In 1953, he made his first sides as a leader, which can be heard on the first volume of the three-disc *The Complete Vogue Recordings*. The month before Solal cut his May 16, 1953 debut, he recorded with Django Reinhardt in the guitarist's final session ("I played very bad on it," Solal told *Saturday Review*).

As Solal settled into the Parisian scene, he frequently found himself to be the house pianist at the Left Bank's famous Club Saint-Germain, backing visiting and expat Americans such as Lucky Thompson, Don Byas and Kenny Clarke. He sometimes recorded with them as well, and in 1957 Solal made an unlikely recording with New Orleans legend Sidney Bechet, who was a superstar in France. Their collaboration worked because of Bechet's regard for Solal (it was at the saxophonist/clarinetist's request that they teamed up) and because Solal wanted to prove that any style of jazz could be played with any other," he told *Saturday Review*. "It was very

exciting to make this album. The session went so fast and easy for us, one tune after the other."

Word spread of this Frenchman's skills, and American legends would sometimes stop in to hear for themselves. The June 7, 1963, issue of *Time* reported, "Oscar Peterson went to France and gave up a tour of Provence to spend six smoky nights in the Club Sc. Germain listening to Solal. Duke Ellington heard him in Paris and immediately pronounced him a soul brother."

This buzz continued to grow until, in 1963, George Wein invited Solal to play in the U.S. He was supposed to do two weeks at the Hickory House in New York City, capped off by an appearance at the Newport Jazz Festival. But the response was so positive that the Hickory House gig lasted 10 weeks, and the Newport appearance spawned the album *At Newport '63* (RCA). The LP includes Bill Evans' rhythm section at the time, drummer Paul Motian and bassist Teddy Kotick, documenting seven cuts—some recorded live and some studio tracks that were treated with applause to make for natural home listening," according to producer George Avakian's liner notes.

The Newport album cover blared the headline "Europe's Greatest Jazz Pianist!" and sported laudatory quotes from Dizzy Gillespie as well as from Solal's soul brother No. 1, Ellington, who said: "Martial Solal has, in abundance, those indispensables of the musicians' craft: sensitivity, creativity, and a prodigious technique. Most of all, he sparkles with refreshment—and for a jazz musician to sound refreshing in 1963 is no ordinary thing."

Solal was happily caught up in the U.S. love-fest, and was ready to make a move to the country that birthed the music he loved. "I was supposed to become an American citizen, everything was ready for it," Solal says. "The first week I was in New York I was handled by Joe Glaser, who was the most famous agent. He took me by the hand, took me to Local 802 [the musicians' union]."

Solal thought it would take six months for everything to get sorted out, but Glaser, a heavy character who managed Louis Armstrong, threw his weight around. "In six days I had everything, including a Social Security card, a Cabaret Card," Solal recalls. "Mr. Glaser, believe me, he was a big man. It was so fast and so easy. He promised me many engagements," the pianist continues. In addition, he says, "I

have a good engagement for you in the London House in Chicago, where all the great pianists play-Oscar Peterson---so I say, 'OK.' But when I came back to Paris, I never returned [to the U.S.], and he was very angry about that. "I was not ready to move," Solal says. "It was a difficult time in my private life. I was divorced, and I had a small boy. Everything was difficult, so I didn't return.

"But the year after, in 1964, [Glaser] said, 'I have another engagement for you - he was less mad. He brought me to a club in San Francisco and the Monterey Jazz Festival. He had many offers for the future, too, but I was not ready to leave Paris. So, I forgot the U.S. for a certain number of years.'  
And the U.S. all but forgot Martial Solal.

In 1960 Jean-Luc Godard made *A Bout de Souffle (Breathless)*, one of the shining moments of French New Wave cinema. A young gangster named Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo), who fancies himself a Humphrey Bogart tough guy, kills a policeman and goes on the lamb with an innocent American girl, Patricia Franchini (Jean Seberg). The plot was a simple homage to the gritty Hollywood movies that Godard adored, but the filmmaking was anything but Tinseltown. The flick revealed in then-new, now-standard postmodern techniques such as sudden jump cuts and extended scenes that reveled in copious dialogue

This new sort of movie needed new music. But the sounds also had to be as self-referential and self-aware as the film they were accompanying. Solal was pegged for the job. In the DVD commentary for *Breathless*, film critic David Sterritt makes multiple mentions of the self-conscious "Hollywood jazz" that appears on the screen, supposedly mimicking such wink-wink, nudge-nudge scenes as when the thug Poiccard admires and emulates a Bogart movie poster.

When I mention the commentary to Solal, the pianist doesn't dispute Sterritt's simplistic claim so much as undercut it: "Hollywood jazz can be good jazz." And good jazz it is, even if Godard never told Solal what he thought of the soundtrack, which, until recent years, received little recognition for its contribution to the landmark movie. "It's been 40-plus years since that film, and every week I do an interview about this film," Solal says, "Now, people are starting to like the music. Takes time. They're deaf. They have big problems," he jokes, before admitting,

"The movie was important without the music."  
*Breathless* can seem old-fashioned today because its once-unique filmic language has been absorbed by the mainstream. But in 1960, Solal says, "I received it as something very new, very unusual. I can't believe it had so sad an end. I thought, '[Godard's] crazy; nobody will accept this end. To me, it was completely new, extraordinary; but it was hard to believe it would become a classic.'

Since the two primary characters are so different-one a ruthless criminal, the other a "feckless female student-Solal captured their personalities in music by using a very simple technique. The way the two melodies are done, it's interesting," he says. "They are both five notes: one is coming from the low note to the high note; the other is exactly the contrary, using almost the same notes, with different, contrary figures, giving the opposite feeling. One makes you anxious; the other is romantic."

Solal went on to compose numerous other movie soundtracks, including Orson Welles' version of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Jean Cocteau's *Testament d'Orpheus (The Testament of Orpheus)*,

This written side of jazz holds special appeal for Solal, who is a self-taught composer and arranger ("I'm a very strict teacher toward myself."). In *Musician*, Solal declared, "I persist in believing that the future of jazz lies in written music, in longer and longer written sequences, which does not exclude improvisation, of course, I also believe that once one has a very definite style, the only way to evolve is through composing." Dave Douglas says, "I don't know of anyone who writes quire like [Solal]; stop-and-start tunes, almost completely free of key centers, incredibly intricate rhythmically, but with the looseness of swing. On the duo record with [Johnny Griffin], *[In or Out (Dreyfus, 2000)]*, the execution sounded so nonchalant it made me wonder how the music was notated. I came to find out that it is almost AI written out-but the way it's written just swings, and it leaves open a sense of freedom in the interpretation."

Solal is a great admirer of Thelonious Monk's compositions, and his own arrangements rake on a similar independent streak, rarely pausing for listeners' ears to catch up before a new element is introduced or reduced. But as with Monk, there's much humor in Solal's super-intelligent work; he's not racing around to confuse listeners so much as entertain them like the Marx Brothers.

*On Dodecaband Plays Ellington*

(Dreyfus, 2000). For instance, Sold takes music associated with Duke- "Satin Doll," "Caravan," etc.-and puts it through his big band's ringer to create dense, tricky takes on overly familiar compositions. In the liner notes, Sold writes, "The Dodecaband's somewhat slighter lineup

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allows, at times, more complex musical treatments. The choice of Ellington, beyond my own interest in his music, was predicated by my desire to show, by means of well-known pieces, that the job of the arranger is actually a compositional task."