

JazzWax

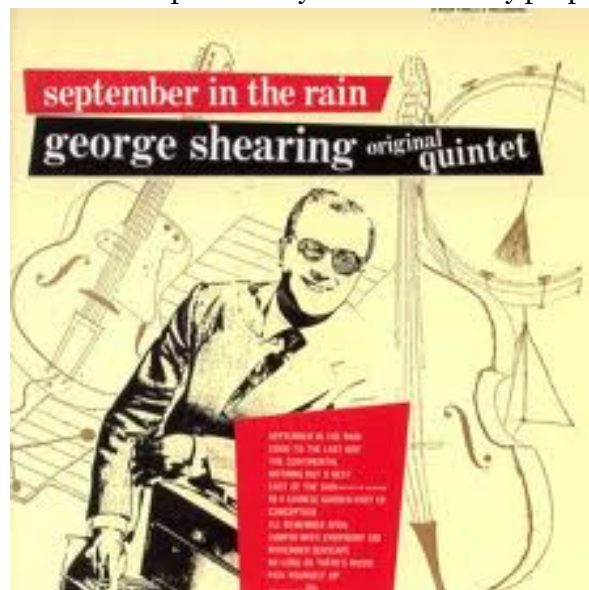
Marc Myers writes daily on jazz legends and legendary jazz recordings

February 17, 2011

Interview: Marjorie Hyams

The George Shearing Quintet's "sound" was hugely dependent on the musical hand-holding of the piano and vibes. All of the instruments in the late pianist's quintet were vital, of course. But it was the block chords of the piano tempered by the daintiness of the vibes that both excited and charmed listeners. In the original George Shearing Quintet of 1949, those vibes belonged to Marjorie Hyams.

Margie, as she likes to be called by friends, and bassist John Levy are the only surviving members of Shearing's first highly successful bop-over-easy ensemble. Many people aren't aware



that Margie, prior to joining Shearing, was a member of Woody Herman's First Herd

band for two years in the mid-'40s, recording with the orchestra and with Mary Lou Williams and Charlie Ventura before joining Shearing's famed group in late 1948. She also helped arrange much of the Shearing quintet's early material.

In a rare interview earlier this week, Margie, 90, spoke about growing up in New York, the mean trick Hermanites played on her,

recording in a pre-Shearing quintet with Mary Lou Williams, why Charlie Ventura's sound wasn't her cup of tea, and how she was able to arrange so much of the Shearing sound so quickly:

JazzWax: Where did you grow up?

Marjorie Hyams: In Jamaica, Queens. My brother Mark was a pianist who eventually played with quite a few big bands but never got the recognition he deserved. Probably the best-known band was Will Hudson's, starting in the mid-'30s. He also recorded with Spud Murphy's band in the late '30s. He married L'ana Webster, a famous female saxophonist and bandleader. Until Mark died a couple of years ago, we talked weekly to each other about music.

JW: When did you start playing piano?

MH: When I was 6. My brother was two years older than me and already playing and I followed in his footsteps. My father was a sometime trumpet player but he wasn't active. He was involved in some kind of band music at the time. I remember him practicing. I also had a sister, but she died very young.

JW: How did you come to jazz?



MH: I just loved it from the beginning. I also loved classical, but the turning point for me came when I heard Art Tatum. I had never heard anything like that. The other turning point was when I first heard Igor Stravinsky. His music was very exciting and inspirational. That was the sound I was looking for. I loved classical music but it



didn't give me the satisfaction that Tatum and Stravinsky did.

JW: When did you start playing piano professionally?

MH: In the early 1940s. I started with a quintet of young musicians that had a program on NBC radio. We did a lot of folk music, pop, college anthems—you name it. But they already had a great pianist, so they dragged in a vibraphone and asked me to play just background notes and arpeggios.

JW: Had you played the vibes before?

MH: No, never. All of my studies had been on the piano, and I didn't know how to play the vibes when I picked up the mallets that day. Unlike most vibraphonists, I didn't come to the instrument from the drums. I was a piano player. So I approached it as though I

was playing a keyboard. It just came to me. We toured mostly in East Coast clubs, from New Orleans to Boston.

JW: How did you meet Woody Herman?

MH: I was playing in Atlantic City on the boardwalk in 1944. Renault Wineries had a shop there that sold pink champagne. I had always worked at Frank Palumbo's Click Club in Philadelphia. In the summer, I worked in Atlantic City. Woody was playing the Steel Pier with his band. He came in to hear me at a nearby club where I was playing piano, vibes, singing and writing arrangements. He liked what he heard and kept coming back. Finally he





offered me a job.

JW: What did your club band think?

MH: I had a conference with my men and asked if they would be mad if I left. They were all local guys who knew they would pick up work pretty fast. They encouraged me to take the job.

JW: What did you think?

MH: I was so excited. This was during the war, when bands were losing a lot of guys to the draft, so guys like Woody were constantly looking for people to take over the empty chairs. I just loved Woody. He was a great, sweet guy. He was extremely open-minded. He had no preconceived notions about anything.



JW: How did the band treat you?

MH: Well, that was a different matter [laughs]. It wasn't all terrific with Woody. He gave people free reign, so he didn't really know there was sort of sexism going on. There were guys in the band who really helped me and were supportive and wanted me to succeed. But there were others who went out of their way to make things hard.

JW: Like what?



MH: Guys would do mean things, petty things, that would impinge upon my ability to perform. For example, they'd move my vibes to a place on the stage that wasn't easily accessible or where I wouldn't be seen. Really dumb stuff. That now seems so silly.

JW: Did you leave Herman in 1946 to join Mary Lou Williams?

MH: No, I recorded with her while I was with Woody. I've always arranged for quartets or singing groups, putting together hooks. Leonard Feather suggested we record those sides. Mary Lou was wonderful. We had a lot of fun and respect for each other. She had a terrific sense of humor and camaraderie. As a female jazz musician, it was good to play with women who knew what you were about.

JW: Did Williams have a strong personality?

MH: Yes. She always commanded a lot of power. She already led a couple of major bands, so she didn't have as much trouble as I did with the guys. At that point in time, I was making my way and she had already made it. She also was very important as an artist. She was very well respected.



JW: Whose idea was it to use piano, vibes, guitar, bass and drums?

MH: That was Leonard's doing. He had this thing about a sound he heard in his head. He thought that by using that quintet set up, he'd get a big band sound on a budget.

JW: Feather isn't really given enough credit.

MH: That's true. He was really something else. He always had great ideas and he was very generous with me. I lived

in Greenwich Village at the time and he lived there as well with his wife Jane. So I was over their place often. He never held me back when I wanted to do something else, and he was always there when I wanted to do something and add an idea.

JW: He played an important role in the development of bebop.

MH: Yes, he did. He was always looking at ways to promote it, create new sounds using it as a base, and raising the music's visibility. When I



first moved out to California when my husband died, I was tired of the cold Chicago

weather. I got together with Leonard and went to dinner at his house. I remember bringing records and telling him who he should be listening to. Can you imagine, I was telling Leonard who to listen to? My favorite at the time was vibist Bobby Hutcherson. Sure enough, in one of his columns, he gave Bobby a nice review. He really listened to me.

JW: In 1946 and 1947, you were with Charlie Ventura. How was that?

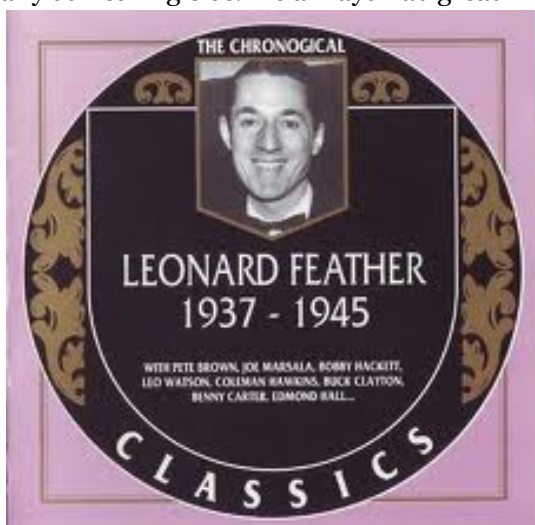
MH: It was OK. Neal Hefti and I wrote the book for the Ventura band. As good as Charlie was, I never liked his sound much.

JW: Why not?

MH: It was too big and didn't float. It was cumbersome. I didn't really have a happy time in that band. He was an odd guy. I think he was beholden to some people. I don't think he had free reign to do what he wished. Those people had an agenda for him. I don't think he was his own man for a while and I don't think he was happy about that.

JW: How did you wind up in the original George Shearing Quintet?

MH: By 1948, no recording was being done because of the second musicians' ban. I was playing solo piano and





singing at a club in the Village. I can't remember the club's name. I wasn't making it the way I had wanted to, probably because I didn't have a gimmick that would attract people. I didn't wear ball gowns,

cocktail dresses and other costumes female jazz artists wore then. I was silly enough to think that the music was enough. I guess I was kind of arrogant to think that I could make it just on the music.



JW: What kind of music were you playing?

MH: Show tunes, pop tunes. I sang a lot of American songbook things but I went beyond that. I liked to find songs that were a little esoteric and that people didn't know about.

JW: What changed?

MH: One night, on one of my breaks, Leonard came up to me. We chatted and he said, "How would you like to go with George Shearing?" I said, "Let me think about it..." [laughs]. No I didn't. I jumped at the chance right away. Wow, George Shearing. Leonard knew I could play vibes.

JW: Did you already know Shearing?

MH: Yes. When he first came over from England in 1946, I was playing on 52nd Street at the Three Deuces. George would make the rounds to the various clubs. He was living with pianist Lennie Tristano for a while. Lennie was a good friend of my brother and our paths crossed.

JW: Did Shearing handpick the group?

MH: I don't think so. He knew me and had been playing with John [Levy] and Denzil [Best]. We all had big ears. George had the best ears of all, though.

JW: How good was Shearing's hearing?

MH: Oh, amazing. I was playing at the Hickory House in 1946 or 1947 with a trio—Mundell Lowe was on guitar, I was on vibes and there was a bass player. Leonard brought George in. When they arrived, we were playing an original boppish song that was fairly intricate and nice. Leonard asked if George could sit in. I said sure and asked George what he wanted to play.

JW: What did he say?



MH: George said let's play that song you just played. I asked him if he was sure. George said, "Absolutely." So we did it. After hearing that song just once, George did it. We were all blown away.

JW: When the quintet started rehearsing in late '48, how did it work?

MH: Fortunately I had Buddy DeFranco's book of songs to start with and transposed his arrangements. What a gorgeous player Buddy was. George and Buddy and John and Denzil had all been playing together



just before the quintet was formed. Buddy had written out the charts to the songs they had played while they gigged and had given them to George when he left the group. George gave the book to me. Then going forward, whenever George came in with a song, we'd work on it as a group to give it the same sound. When I left George in 1951, I wrote a whole book of arrangements of our songs and passed it on to Don Elliott, who replaced me.



JW: Did members of the George Shearing Quintet realize how good you sounded right away?

MH: Oh yes. George may have had a plan for that group and we fell in with it. But I remember we'd talk about what octave I should play and where Chuck [Wayne] should be. It sort of just came collaboratively. It wasn't something that was carefully planned out. That's what George liked about us. We felt it and got it right.

JW: Did you have a hard time on the road in an interracial group that also featured a woman?

MH: People would constantly make me aware of that. What really got people is when George played solo piano and I sat down on Denzil's



[pictured] drum case with him. People would say, "How can you do that?" Those kinds of comments were disgusting.



JW: Did George ever talk about the racial tension?

MH: George and I talked about it a few times. The group used to kid George and tell him he was black. He'd pick up on that and tell people he had three black guys in the group, a white guy and a woman. George loved our humor.

JW: Where did you play on the road?

MH: Most of the clubs were simpatico with interracial groups. Most

jazz clubs were used to seeing black and white musicians playing together. The extra ingredient was a white woman.

JW: What did you think?

MH: I always viewed myself as a musician. I never had the sense that I had to seem like a seductress. I was allowed to be me. That was the nicest part of everything. I didn't have to play a part. I was just one of the musicians. Being blind, George had no conception of anything beyond the music. Nothing else mattered. Of course, he was aware of what was going on and how unjust it was. In his group, it didn't matter.

JW: Did you enjoy playing the quintet's book?

MH: Yes, we looked forward to playing every night.

JW: All of the songs?

MH: Well, we did get a little bored with *September in the Rain*. But it was one of the biggest selling singles of 1949.



Do you know, we recorded that in one take and it sold 1 million copies. One take, can you imagine?

JW: How did it feel to be a jazz star?

MH: I don't know that I'd go that far. But I did meet a lot of great musicians through George.

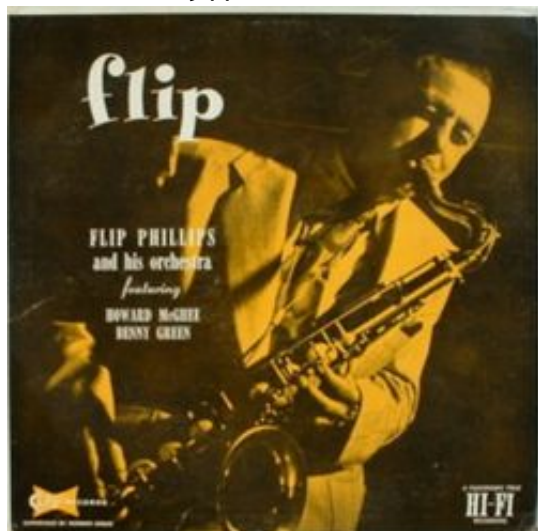
JW: Like who?

MH: Miles Davis. Miles was amazing. He was younger than I was and as sweet as they come. As eccentric as he was as he

got older, he was that sweet when he was younger.

JW: Give me an example?

MH: Back in 1944 I had recorded in a small group that Woody had with



musicians from the band—Flip Phillips' Fliptet. I had an 8-bar solo on one of the records. Well, when I met Miles, he told me how much he enjoyed my line and sang it for me. I couldn't believe he had remembered it. We formed a friendship from then on.



JW: Did you see him in later years?

MH: Yes. When he was being difficult in his later years, my husband and I in Chicago wanted to go down to The Sutherland Lounge to hear him and John Coltrane. Musician friends warned me not to expect

much and said he doesn't talk much.

JW: Did you go?

MH: Yes. As we were making our way to our table, the bar was jammed. As we passed the bar, I got very close to Miles to get to our table. I whispered in his ear, "Does the name Margie Hyams mean anything?"

JW: What happened?

MH: His whole face lit up. He kissed me and hugged my husband, and we talked for some time. John Coltrane was my favorite of all, though. And Bill Evans. I met Bill when he was playing in Evanston, Illinois, in the early '50s [while stationed in the Army]. On his break, I went in the back to talk to him. it wasn't as warm a meeting as I would have liked.

JW: What happened?

MH: I just wanted to tell him what I thought of him. He knew who I was but was a little cold. I did amuse him, though. I had



had an old turntable and used to transcribe music off it. When I first heard *Waltz for Debby*, I really loved it. But I didn't realize how off my turntable was. I told him I had gotten the song down and that it was in the key of E. He corrected me: it's in the key of F [laughs].

JW: Why did you leave the George Shearing Quintet in '51?

MH: I got married, and my husband lived in Chicago. George was going to go on a world tour and I didn't want to go. My daughter recently said to me that I gave up a lot by leaving the group, but I don't

think so. I always used to kid Leonard. He used to say in print that I had retired after I married. But that wasn't true. From 1951 to until 1970 I played and taught and arranged in Chicago. I said to him, "Boy you're strict. If I'm not playing with George, then I must be retired" [laughs].

JazzWax tracks: To sample Margie Hyams with the Flip Phillips Fliptet, a small group within Woody Herman's band, go [here](#) and click on *1-2-3-4 Jump*. You can also hear her with Herman's band on *Woody Herman: V-Disc Years 1 & 2 (1944-46)* [here](#). She's also featured on Mosaic's *Complete Columbia Recordings of Woody Herman* box [here](#).

Margie's recordings with Charlie Ventura (*Either It's Love, Please Be Kind, Misirlou* and *How High the Moon*) can be found on Charlie Ventura: 1946-1947 [here](#).





The best George Shearing set of his early works (1939-1951), including the original quintet recordings, is *George Shearing: From Battersea to Broadway* (Proper Box) [here](#).

JazzWax clips: [Here's](#) the original George Shearing Quintet with Margie Hyams on vibes playing *The Continental*. Dig Margie's tender solo...



Posted by [Marc Myers](#) at 12:10 AM | [Permalink](#)

Technorati Tags: [Charlie Ventura](#), [Chuck Wayne](#), [Denzil Best](#), [George Shearing](#), [John Levy](#), [Leonard Feather](#), [Marjorie Hyams](#), [Mary Lou Williams](#), [Woody Herman](#)

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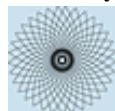
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Lovely interview with a lovely person. I though Hyams might be gone -- great to discover that she's not. The Miles stories are especially nice.

Posted by: Larry Kart | [February 17, 2011 at 09:42 AM](#)



Wow. Quite the interview with the classy lady. Thanks for sharing!

-Deborah E

scatnstyle.com

Posted by: [Deborah E](#) | [February 17, 2011 at 12:57 PM](#)



Talk about good vibes... Marc-man, that was perfect.

Posted by: [Ed Leimbacher](#) | [February 17, 2011 at 01:31 PM](#)



Very interesting how the rhythm section keeps the time in the out chorus of the Continental, while the melody instruments all displace it together.

Posted by: [Steve Provizer](#) | [February 17, 2011 at 03:37 PM](#)



Thx! That was fast. What should I wish for next? More interviews with Jazz women of the era or Jazz writers or Jazz producers.

Posted by: [John P. Cooper](#) | [February 17, 2011 at 09:00 PM](#)



Interesting that John Cltrane was her favorite of all.

Posted by: [Jim Cameron](#) | [February 18, 2011 at 02:26 PM](#)



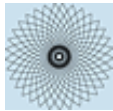
Margie Hyams was a delight in the first Herman Herd, 1945-46. They had a Saturday night radio show for Wildroot that I saw several weeks in row -- I'd get in to the dress rehearsal, than out for a sandwich, then in for the broadcast.(I knew a girl who knew another girl who knew Bill Harris.) I think Margie took solos with the big band and also the Fliptet, which morphed into the Woodchoppers. It was a powerful rhythm section with (I think I have this right)Ralph Burns, Billy Bauer, Chubby Jackson, and Don Lamond. She was integral,tasteful in that setting.

Posted by: [Charlton Price](#) | [February 20, 2011 at 12:35 PM](#)



That would have been when Bill Evans was stationed at Fort Sheridan, about 35 miles north of Chicago.

Posted by: [Larry Kart](#) | [February 20, 2011 at 12:43 PM](#)



No,Ms.Deborah, thanks for Shearing...

And, Mr.Myers, would you be so kind as to disclose to me the e-mail of Ms.Hyams? I would like very much to thank her for so many delightful recordings and solos, beginning with the original "Conception",of course.

Anyway, congratulations for re-establishing the greatness and the utmost value of so many people devoured by nowadays' meaninglessness.

Posted by: [Ruy Mauricio de Lima e Silva Neto](#) | [February 27, 2011 at 05:07 PM](#)



would someone be able to give marjorie hayams e mail address or phone number. As a young visual artist marj and her husband bill gave me and my friends a place to stay in there house in the 60s in evanston illinois. I would like to reach her.

Posted by: William nichols | [April 17, 2011 at 06:53 PM](#)



What a pleasure to hear news from Margie Hyams and to know that, after the time with Shearing, she stayed so active in music. I too had believed Leonard Feather's statement that post-Shearing she had 'retired'. Also great (but not really surprising) to learn just how much she contributed to the success of Shearing's first quintet. Her 'November Seascape' composition recorded by that group but very rarely reissued shows just what an adventurous musician she could be. I too would love to be able to contact her and thank her for so much lovely music. Is that possible?

Posted by: Roger Cotterrell | [June 13, 2011 at 10:39 AM](#)



I met Margie when she was married to the President of American National Bank in Chicago. I was Pres.of a small bank in N.W.Illinois and we met at a convention in Miami. I couldn't believe my luck that she was the famous vibe player that I had heard so much when I was growing up. She said her husband (The Pres.of American Bank) was also a bass player. It didn't dawn on me that the Pete Peterson might be the long time basist with Red Norvo and was now President of a major bank in Chicago. Does Margie have an e-mail address that I could renew my contact with her after many years?

Posted by: Ben Ryan | [September 08, 2011 at 01:15 PM](#)



While in the Air Force and on leave in Chicago in 1954, George Shearing was playing at a downtown club, and I went every night to see the group. Margie came in to sit in on a couple of nights, and her playing was fantastic. I wish to thank her for all the good music she's given to jazz fans like me.

Ray Sharpless

Posted by: Ray Sharpless | [September 20, 2011 at 03:13 PM](#)



Thank you for this amazing interview! What a great musician. I have posted a link to this interview on my blog, Jazz Virtuosa, which celebrates women musicians in jazz. Just as an inside, Marc, thank you for this blog. I read it regularly and consider it on my most important go-to resources for jazz history information. I look forward reading your upcoming book. All the best! - Nicole Williams Sitaraman

Posted by: [Nicole Williams Sitaraman](#) | [November 03, 2011 at 12:02 PM](#)



Aloha,

In 1948 I was an 18 year old GI stationed at Camp Kilmer, in NJ. On a trip to New York City I was looking for Jazz and ended up at Bop City which was on 52d Street if my memory serves me. I bought a Coca Cola for \$1.00 and sat in the upper seats. I was amazed and pleased to see Black and White people sitting together and even though I was a young sprout I could appreciate how love of music bridged racial gaps. When George Shearing came on stage led by Margie, I was treated to a brand new musical sound. The mating of George's piano and Margie's vibes opened an whole new world for me. Thanks for such wonderful music memories that you and George gifted me with.

Posted by: Lester Brandt | [April 04, 2012 at 01:36 PM](#)



June 16, 2012

John Levy left us in January, and now Margie.

They lived long lives and were well respected.

I am saddened by the losses.

RIP, Margie.

Posted by: Mel Narunsky | [June 16, 2012 at 03:11 AM](#)

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