

Riding the Next Wave

He has played with Charlie Parker and Ornette Coleman. He's been called the man who led the palace revolution against bebop." So why isn't everyone listening to Paul Bley?

By David Hayes *Saturday Night* Published: Jan 20, 2001



PACKED TIGHTLY AROUND A COUPLE OF DOZEN TABLES IN NEW YORK'S Kaplan Penthouse, the crowd at the Jazz at Lincoln Center concert last February stared reverently at the tall, broad-shouldered, gray-haired man in his late sixties hunched over the keyboard of a Steinway grand. At one point he began a lyrical, Gershwin-like number but soon veered into a solo thick with dissonance, easing back into the pretty ballad for a dozen or so bars before reconfiguring the melody in an agitated torrent of notes.

Shadowed by the celebrated bassist Charlie Haden, the pianist, Paul Bley, occasionally moaning to himself, abruptly tossed a note high in the air where it hung weightless, like a conjuror's trick, then faded into a silence that he left unfilled for several long seconds before resuming his solo. Then, just when it seemed he'd dismantled the song for good, Bley recast the melody again as a very hummable bluesy hymn. Beside me, a jazz buff in town from San Francisco with whom I was sharing a table leaned over and whispered: "This is like seeing history."

Paul Bley has been a quiet and largely unheralded influence on jazz since the late 1950s. He performs infrequently and when he does, his audiences are filled with respectful critics and musical peers. Describing Bley's impact, jazz critic Francis Davis, writing in *The New York Times* last winter, observed that Bley "trimmed the outsized emotions of the jazz avant garde to fit the more intimate setting of the piano trio – a major contribution to jazz." Historians describe him as a pioneer of acoustic piano jazz after 1960, his influence most clearly heard in the work of the more widely known pianist, Keith Jarrett. Yet he was also among the first to experiment with electronic synthesizers in the late sixties. A few years later, just when it seemed that every pianist was playing electronic keyboards in bands that, often uncomfortably, wedded jazz and rock, Bley returned to the acoustic piano, making solo recordings as pristine, and unstylish at the time, as Mozart sonatas. In his own words, his career has been a search for "the next thing."

With the invitation to perform a Jazz at Lincoln Center concert this year, Bley finally received the recognition that has eluded him for so long: the imprimatur of the mainstream jazz establishment. The artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center is Wynton Marsalis, whose credentials include bona fide classical as well as jazz credits. Yet the leading lights of the free jazz movement, for whom Bley is an heroic figure, are often at war with the Lincoln Centre. They've complained that Marsalis has a narrowly conservative view of jazz, one that starts with Louis Armstrong in the 1920s and ends with Duke Ellington and those influenced by the bebop of Charlie Parker in the fifties. They've accused him, and his advisor, the black cultural critic Stanley Crouch, of ignoring avant-garde music and overlooking white musicians like Bley.

If free jazz has been under-represented in the Jazz at Lincoln Center program, however, it's because Marsalis and Crouch believe that many free jazz players haven't learned the rudiments of music nor mastered their instruments. They respect Bley because he fits their views of what makes a solid jazz background. Schooled in music at McGill University's conservatory and at the Julliard School of Music in New York, Bley has played with, and in some cases hired as sidemen, many of the giants of jazz that Marsalis and Crouch would include in their pantheon, among them Lester Young, Ben Webster, Charlie Parker, Coleman Hawkins, Charles Mingus, Chet Baker and Sonny Rollins.

"Paul's an odd guy," Crouch told me recently. "You can't figure him out. He's got his own way, he does what he wants to do. See, when Paul isn't noodling around and sounding like he's OD'd on some kind of European piano music, when he plays what he plays best, which is standards, he's *un-bee-lievable*. I think the music right now could truly use an improviser of his caliber up there, swinging and playing standards and showing how much territory is still available to someone who doesn't want to play in a clichéd manner."

When I was in New York last spring to visit him, I asked Bley his opinion of Marsalis and the Lincoln Center program. Bley, whose way of speaking contains its own sly winks and inverted commas, said: "Wynton is a classically trained musician, which is not the way you learn how to be a jazz player. He inherited Miles Davis' tone and he's keeping that genre alive and doing very good work with it." As for criticisms of the Jazz at Lincoln Center program, Bley said: "Institutions are like that, half a century behind. It's not surprising. Institutions aren't expected to be on the edge. But I'm only thinking of the *next* wave of the music. Things change. There is no constant, except aesthetics. Artists have to think in terms of the permanence of an aesthetic no matter how much change is around them."



Motif #1: A Contrary Man

The heart of Bley's aesthetic is change, which in jazz is embodied in the art of improvisation. Bley describes it as "trying to never do what has been done before." It translates into an obsession with spontaneity, and accounts for the unpredictable character of his music. It's there when he's playing hide-and-go-seek with the melody, or challenging an accompanist to follow him as he apparently abandons conventional musical touchstones such as tempo, meter, harmony, chord progressions, even the key signature, since in free jazz it's possible to play simultaneously in two or more of them. (If I were to approximate this on the page, it would look like a Jackson Pollock drip painting.)

Last April, I attended another event contributing to Bley's growing public recognition. He was scheduled to tape a segment of Marian McPartland's long-running National Public Radio program, "Piano Jazz." As we arrive at Manhattan Beach Studios in midtown New York, he's thinking about how to subvert the show's format of conversations with McPartland punctuated by playing tunes, both alone and in duet with McPartland.

At eighty, McPartland is a handsome, diminutive woman wearing powder blue slacks and a navy blue jacket. Her piano style blends pre-war swing and post-war bebop and she still performs regularly. In the studio, two Baldwin pianos sit side by side. Bley, who is tall and heavy-set, dwarves McPartland as they share a piano bench. While a photographer prepares to take pictures in case the session is used for one of the series of "Piano Jazz" CDs, Bley tells stories and reminisces with McPartland about when they first met in New York in the fifties

When the photographer leaves, the show's producer, Shari Hutchinson, enters the studio. She is trim and petite, carrying about her the long-suffering air of someone who endures the vagaries and inefficiencies of others. She tells McPartland she'll need a log of the numbers they will be playing and returns to the control room. Bley, who dislikes sound checks and will refuse to so much as touch a piano before a performance, begins an elaborate and deliberately evasive dance with McPartland that will last throughout the three-hour session.

“Should I give anything a name,” McPartland tentatively asks, her pen poised over a notepad, “or will you tell me what it is afterwards?”

“I think afterwards,” says Bley. “That’s much more fun.”

“In other words, I’ll just say you’re going to play something, God knows what...?”

“God Knows What,” says Bley. “That could be the name of one of them.”

“Okay, I’m going to put down ‘Paul Solo.’ I mean, I know all this stuff is supposed to be improvised, but for our duet will you do anything like a standard? I need to make a list for our noble producer. Can we decide on a song?”

Bley smiles, telling her that when they’re about to play he’ll give her a title. Turning toward the control room window, he says: “If it’s okay with you, Shari.”

Turning on the talkback, Hutchinson says without enthusiasm: “Um, yes, that’s fine. Thank you.”

After Bley has performed two lovely, impressionistic numbers which he describes as “motifs” and which McPartland names ‘Motif Number One’ and ‘Motif Number Two,’ they discuss two principles of free jazz: polytonality, in which musicians play in more than one key, and microtonality, the use of intervals smaller than semitones.

“The idea of polytonality goes back a long way,” says Bley, referring to the fact that classical composers like Igor Stravinsky have used it since the early part of the twentieth century. “[In the evolution of jazz] we’re now into microtonality.”

“You can’t do that if you’re playing on a piano, can you?” asks McPartland. “It’s like playing between the cracks.” She frowns. “Perhaps somebody out there might understand that, but I myself don’t know how one would do that. Is it possible that you and I could play different notes at the same time and it would constitute microtonality?”

“I think so, yes, if the intention is there.”

Bley strikes several notes and holds them. McPartland follows suit. The notes roll and tumble ominously in the air, like a foreboding moment on a horror movie soundtrack. Bley and McPartland then plays a series of middle register chords that slide back and forth over each other like the shifting of tectonic plates. Finally, through what appears to be telepathy, they simultaneously stop, leaving several colliding notes to ring for seven or eight long seconds.

During the rest of the taping, Bley plays two more solos and a couple of duets with McPartland, and then finally agrees, at her insistent request, to play a standard – *Sweet and Lovely*. Nonetheless, they almost entirely improvise, referring only tangentially to the melody. McPartland adapts well to Bley and appears delighted at their free-form creation. Later, after the session, Bley told me: “You know, I was going to play *Struttin’ With Some Barbecue* to open, to take Marian off-guard, because she wouldn’t expect me to pick a tune from the 1920s. But only at the last minute I realized that if I played free for the whole show, that would be a first. I’ve never heard of Marian playing when she didn’t know what the song was.

“When I was with Sonny Rollins,” he went on, “my idea was that we should play standards in such a way that you wouldn’t be able to tell which standards we were playing.” Referring to a familiar Gershwin song, he asked: Did you know which one was *I Can’t Get Started*? I played it as one of my solos and Marian didn’t know, even though she was standing right over my shoulder. She didn’t understand that when I play a standard I keep the integrity of the structure. That’s the challenge for me, to be able to completely disguise it. Chuckling, he added: “I guess I was born an iconoclast.”



Motif #2: A Restless Soul

Paul Bley now lives in Cherry Valley, a bucolic village near Woodstock, in upstate New York, far from the free-form rhythm of city life -- car horns blaring, truck engines downshifting, wolf whistles, the clatter of subway trains and storefront gratings. And far from Montreal, where Bley was born in 1932. Fiercely individualistic and rebellious even as a child, he was raised by his overbearing mother, Betty, his father, Joe, a prosperous businessman, and his beloved French-Canadian nanny, Lucie. Informed at five that he’d been adopted, Bley recalls feeling emotionally devastated. Two years later, when his parents divorced and his mother remarried an old flame, Bley felt further alienated from his family and determined to forge his own identity. “It felt like my family identify had been erased,” he says. “Abandonment is the major feeling I have from my childhood. I was just waiting to turn the page on the calendar to the day I could leave home.” (As he

tells it in his recently published memoir, *Stopping Time: Paul Bley and the Transformation of Jazz*, more than fifty years later a chance meeting with a distant relative led to the discovery that Lucie, with whom his father had had an affair, was his birth mother.

Art became Bley's outlet. Musically gifted, he gave violin recitals at age six and was playing piano a year later. One vivid early memory was studying for his Bar Mitzvah: he was required to sing a text in Hebrew and when he asked about the melody, the Rabbi told him he was supposed to make it up. "The Bar Mitzvah freed me by giving me permission to create spontaneous music in front of an audience," Bley wrote in *Stopping Time*. He studied at McGill University's Conservatory of Music and by the time he was fourteen he was leading his own bands using the name "Buzzy Bley." In 1949, at seventeen, he was so well-known in Montreal's music circles that he was asked by Oscar Peterson, whose career was taking him to the U.S., to replace him at the Alberta Lounge in the old Alberta Hotel across from the Windsor train station – now tk? – in downtown Montreal.

Bley had the good fortune to grow up in Montreal during its heyday as a jazz mecca. John Gilmore, in his book, *Swinging in Paradise: The Story of Jazz in Montreal*, wrote that "Montreal's jazz community was healthier and more cohesive in the ten or fifteen years after the end of the Second World War than at any other time in the city's history." Jazz thrived around St. Catherine and The Main, and more particularly at The Corner – located at the intersection of St. Antoine and Mountain Streets – where Café St. Michel and Rockhead's Paradise featured top local and international talent. The most celebrated local group was Louis Metcalfe's International Band at Café St. Michel. Metcalfe was an American trumpeter who had worked with Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson. By the late forties, his was the first band in Montreal to play bebop – then a revolutionary new style of jazz incubated in New York – and he had recruited some of the most impressive musicians playing in Montreal. Regulars in the audience included Oscar Peterson and visiting U.S. performers such as saxophonists Sonny Rollins and Art Pepper, trumpeter Fats Navarro, bassist Ray Brown and Metcalfe's former employer, Duke Ellington, many of whom would sit in with the band.

“Montreal was a liberal, poly-cultural city where blacks were welcomed,” Bley explains. “There was relatively little prejudice. French women loved black jazz musicians, so a lot of them were married and living in French neighborhoods in Montreal and in the Laurentians.”

In 1950 Bley went to New York to attend the Julliard School of Music and he began to immerse himself in the jazz scene there – at one time becoming president of the New Jazz Society – although he frequently returned to Montreal to perform. In 1952, he and several fellow musicians founded the Montreal Jazz Workshop, a nonprofit organization that rented space where musicians could meet, rehearse and jam and staged concerts featuring U.S. jazz artists backed by Workshop members. In 1953, Bley brought bebop pioneer Charlie Parker to perform in a local club and on a CBC TV music program.

At the time, Bley was essentially a bop pianist who played in a complex, percussive style reminiscent of Bud Powell and Horace Silver. The same year, bassist and composer Charles Mingus, with whom Bley had jammed in New York, hired him to conduct an orchestra recording some complicated new arrangements Mingus had written. Mingus then offered to record Bley’s first album on his own label. The result was *Introducing Paul Bley*, featuring Mingus on bass and the legendary Art Blakey on drums, which was released in 1954. (Knowing that Blakey’s style was to start playing quietly and gradually get louder, Bley was afraid his piano would be drowned out. So he scheduled the session for 10 a.m., early in the day for jazz musicians. In *Stopping Time*, Bley wrote: “He was so sleepy that he played very quietly, keeping beautiful time.”) There were hints of the free improvisations that were to come, but for the most part it was a conventional bop-influenced recording of the era. According to a 1955 *Downbeat* magazine article, however, Bley was already thinking about the future. “Bley...thinks jazz is now coming close to the end of its post-bop period [and is] ready for a new revolution,” Robert Fulford wrote. “How will the change come? Bley doesn’t know.”

Bley relocated to Los Angeles to play with trumpeter Chet Baker in 1955, and two years later began playing at the Hillcrest Club, in the heart of L.A.’s black district, with a trio consisting of drummer Billy Higgins and bassist Charlie Haden. By this time Bley was struggling with ideas of pure improvisation and how to incorporate into jazz the works of turn-of-the-century composers such as Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern and

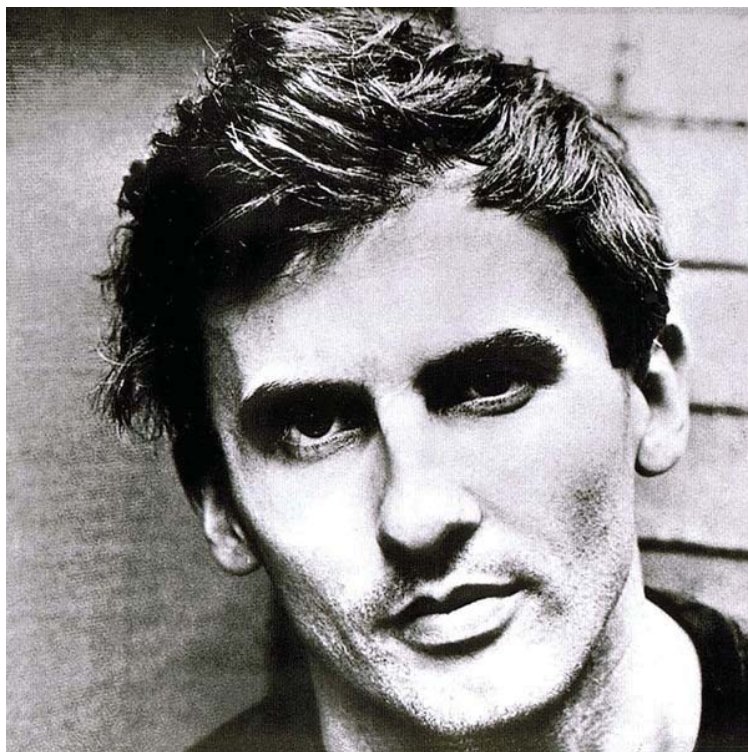
Igor Stravinsky, all of whom had broken classical tradition and were to music what Joyce was to modern literature. Looking back, Bley says: “I couldn’t understand why the freedom that existed at the beginning of the century in European classical music hadn’t been incorporated into jazz.”

One night at the Hillcrest in 1957, Don Cherry, a trumpeter, showed up with a tall, black Texan who played a plastic alto saxophone. The Texan was Ornette Coleman, whose musical ideas would revolutionize jazz. To many listeners, what happened when Coleman and Cherry sat in with Bley’s trio was simply cacophony, a chaotic mishmash, apparently in different keys, punctuated by Coleman’s frequent honks and shrieks. In *Stopping Time*, Bley wrote: “...you could always tell if the band was on the bandstand or not. If the street was full of the audience [members] holding drinks in front of the club, the band was playing. If the audience was in the club, it was intermission.”

To the compilers of the *Penguin Guide to Jazz*, however, it was an historic moment. Bley, it said, was “the man who led the palace coup that overthrew bebop.” For Bley, it was as though Coleman had cracked the code. “The music was very exciting,” he recalls. “The logic of it was obvious, and as soon as I heard it I realized that from now on, this

was the only way to play with a rhythm section.”

When Bley returned to New York in 1960, change was everywhere. Coleman, having decided that free jazz was encumbered by a piano, had, for several months, been playing with the remaining members of Bley’s Hillcrest band at a seedy club called the Five Spot, an engagement now recorded in every history of jazz as the moment when musicians in New



York, the epicenter of jazz, were introduced to *the next thing*. In the ensuing years, Bley searched to find a place for the piano in free improvisational music, undertaking many creative experiments with musicians like Bill Evans, whose hugely influential trios defined the use of piano in jazz at that time, and clarinetist Jimmy Giuffre's free-form band. In 1963 he joined Sonny Rollins' band and inspired the great tenor saxophonist's first foray into free jazz. Later he performed with saxophonist Albert Ayler and drummer Sonny Murray, fellow free jazz pioneers, as they experimented with discarding tempo. He was also a leading figure in the Jazz Composers' Guild, a musician-run cooperative whose members included avant-garde pianists Cecil Taylor and Sun Ra and saxophonist Archie Shepp. An October, 1964 series of free jazz concerts featuring Guild members, including Bley, is still referred to by avant-garde jazz buffs as the "October Revolution."

The rise of free jazz in the 1960s paralleled the increasing politicization of black America, led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and other, more radical, leaders, many of whom were involved with the Black Panther movement. Free jazz, with its braying horns and crashing drums, the raw, emotional collage of sound, was a soundtrack to the uprisings on college campuses and riots in black ghettos. Explaining why Bley's profile isn't greater today, jazz critic Francis Davis has observed that "[Bley's] music was uncommonly quiet for free jazz, and being white put him at risk of being drummed out of a movement whose black majority was becoming increasingly separatist."



Motif #3: A Quixotic Path

At eleven-thirty on the evening after the McPartland taping, Bley and I are strolling west along Greenwich Avenue from 7th Street. He's revisiting his old haunts in the Village, his stomping ground from the early sixties until the eighties. He stops at The Village Den, a restaurant that he frequented with musician friends, pointing out that a replica of it was built on a Hollywood sound stage and used as the diner on the sitcom *Seinfeld*. Later we walk into a packed neighborhood pub he used to frequent, where Bley happily absorbed the noise and the smell of beer and bar food. Outside, he says: "This was where we'd get a hamburger late at night. Everything looks exactly the same. Nothing's changed..."

Walking through the Village today, you have to imagine the revolutionary excitement of the sixties when the fiercely romantic Bley was a member of the vanguard, one of the young turks of jazz. Now he looks his age, especially as he limps along West 3rd Street, his bad hip giving him trouble. As we walk past The Blue Note, the legendary jazz club where Bley often performed, a couple of girls in their early twenties, a brunette and a blonde, both a little tipsy, approach him. They say they're looking for somewhere to hear jazz and have been told Small's is a good club. "Do you know where Grove Street is?" asks the brunette.

Brightening, Bley says: "Yes, I think I can find it." He explains that we're just walking around the Village and will take them there. Pulling a small Psion computer organizer from his pocket, he looks up the address for the club. In his organizer, Bley has documented every city and venue he's played all over the world, complete with notes on hotels, restaurants and bars. I've heard from friends about Bley's charmingly roguish personality as a handsome young musician in the fifties and sixties. As he leads the way through the maze of Village streets toward Small's, good-naturedly bantering with the girls, he becomes more animated, his step more youthful, his eyes twinkling.

As befits an adventurous artist dedicated to going outside the jazz mainstream, Bley's personal life is sometimes complicated. His career has been intertwined with the women in his life. He's been married three times, each time to talented women for whom he served as a musical mentor. He met his first wife, Carla, when she was working as a cigarette girl at Birdland in the summer of 1956. Established today as a gifted composer and arranger in her own right, Carla Bley was for a time her husband's principle songwriter. With his second wife, Annette Peacock, who had been married to one of Bley's friends and regular bassists, Gary Peacock, Bley began working with electronic keyboards, eventually performing with Annette on a variety of early synthesizers that allowed him to sustain notes much longer than is possible on a piano and produce a vast array of special sound effects. (Bley is credited with having made the first public performance of a music synthesizer in December, 1969 at Philharmonic Hall in the Lincoln Center.) Later Bley met and married experimental video artist Carol Goss (they have two grown children) and, in 1974, they founded Improvising Artists Inc., an artist-

run music-and-video recording company dedicated to free-style playing and improvised video art.

By all accounts Bley had a volatile temperament. Bassist Steve Swallow, who with Bley were two-thirds of the ground-breaking Jimmy Guiffre trio in the early sixties, remembers ferocious arguments as the musicians tested the limits of accepted conventions in music. “Over the years he’s become more genial,” says Swallow, who, in a turn of events worthy of a soap opera, eventually married Carla Bley. “He had a relentless edge. He was extremely opinionated but he was very receptive to challenges to his own opinions and would revise them if he felt the challenge was correct. He was consumed with arriving at a thorough redefinition of what was possible in improvised music. He’s considerably more relaxed now than he used to be. But it was appropriate for him not to be relaxed in the sixties because there was a sense that there was a lot of urgent work that needed to be done.”

Drummer Barry Altschul, who met Bley in the early sixties, remembers him as “a moody, intellectual beatnik artiste.” Playing with Bley was often a challenge. He would begin familiar standards in the middle of the bridge without first establishing the melody, leaving Altschul to tell befuddled bassists which song they were playing. At a concert in Berlin, Altschul took a long solo during which Bley and the bassist left the stage. As he felt his creative energies begin to flag, Altschul glanced at Bley, which was usually enough for Bley to return to the piano. He didn’t, so Altschul continued playing for several more minutes before again catching Bley’s eye and nodding toward the piano. Grinning, Bley yelled: “Don’t look at me for help, *muthafuckah!*”

Laughing, Altschul says: “He was either enjoying my solo or didn’t feel like playing at that moment. So I had to find another piece of creativity to continue.” Today an adjunct professor of music at Sarah Lawrence College, Altschul acknowledges that Bley was probably challenging him. “Yeah, that was part of it, too. Sure. Extend yourself. Find something else to play.”

Today’s more genial Bley still pushes boundaries. Soprano saxophonist Jane Bunnett, the Toronto-based free jazz artist, remembers how excited she was when Bley, one of her musical heroes, asked her to record a duet CD with him in 1993. As the recording date approached, she tried to find out what songs he intended to play but, as

McPartland discovered during the taping of her radio show, Bley can be maddeningly elusive. On the day of the session, Bunnett recalls him saying: “‘You go in the studio and warm up. If I like what I hear I’ll come in.’ So I was in the studio for twenty minutes warming up by myself and I thought, this guy is really trying to psyche me out. He’s pulling a mind-fuck on me. But he’s at the top of his form, and I didn’t realize that he was trying to make me relax and get comfortable, break through those hang-ups we musicians often have in the studio.”

Partly because of Bley’s relentless experimentation, rarely making even minor compromises that other artists have, and partly because free jazz is, even today, a fringe genre, Bley continues to fly below the radar. In North America, there is little payoff for operating outside the mainstream, although in Europe, where avant-garde music is more widely respected, Bley is a star.

“I think Paul Bley’s influence is a two-rail shot,” says Stanley Crouch. “Bley learned something from Ornette Coleman which he then combined with his own talent in exactly the way that Bud Powell combined with his own talent what he heard Charlie Parker doing. What he learned from Coleman and how he applied it to piano is really one of the major achievements of the last forty years of jazz piano playing. But his influence on the scene comes through Keith Jarrett, who was influenced by him and is far more popular with the public, rather than through himself.”

Critics and colleagues note that Bley, who records prolifically for several European labels, produces two distinct types of albums, what critic Francis Davis calls “speculative and impressionistic” recordings as well as those that “tend to be more straightforward and lyrical, often including Mr. Bley’s angled interpretations of jazz and pop standards.” In the music business, this can be a source of confusion.

To Bley, the question is entirely artistic, but he’s no longer the uncompromising iconoclast he was as a young man. A few years ago, he was playing with Charlie Haden at Iridium, a jazz club in the basement of the Empire Hotel on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. Both Crouch and Francis Davis, who were there that night, remember that the audience for the second show was made up almost entirely of conventioners with little interest in jazz. Rather than drive them out by playing what he may have wanted to play, Bley performed a series of standards that turned a potentially disastrous evening into a

success. “The people really responded to Paul’s willingness to meet the audience more than half way,” Davis recalls. Bley is equally savvy when it comes to his recordings. Individual record companies – especially the smaller independents – tend to reflect the tastes of their owners. By working in a variety of styles for several labels, Bley is able to indulge in the widest possible range of improvisational possibilities. But the world is full of artists who follow quixotic paths that lead them away from, rather than toward, their strengths.

“The thing about jazz critics is that they all have a period when they believe that jazz ended,” says Bley, nimbly sidestepping the issue when I ask him about Crouch’s observations. “In Stanley’s case, he thinks that Ornette Coleman was the last thing in jazz. But there’s always a *next* thing.

“You know the joke, don’t you?” he asks. “How do you know what’s coming next, what’s truly modern? The joke is, you’ll know it’s the next thing because you won’t like it.”