

# Doin' the Chameleon

by WILLIAM ZINSSER

*After a lifetime of virtuosic imitation of dozens of pianists,  
Dick Hyman is coming into his own*

**F**OR almost fifty years it has been common knowledge in the entertainment business that the person to call for whatever kind of music you need is the pianist-arranger-composer-organist Dick Hyman. Computerized in Hyman's brain, instantly transferable to his fingers, is every popular piano and organ style that has ever been played in America, historically correct to the year when it was in vogue. He can also replicate, note for note, the style of all the American giants of jazz piano in this century, from the intricate rags of Eubie Blake and the galloping stride of James P. Johnson to the jagged bebop of Bud Powell and the introspective lyricism of Bill Evans.

One result of this technical and scholarly breadth is that Hyman gets hired by such metabolic opposites as George Bush and Woody Allen. Bush could approve a Hyman engagement at the White House secure in the knowledge that if he felt a sudden yen for the society-band piano tinklings that he and Barbara danced to during his senior year at Yale, Hyman could oblige at a snap of the presidential fingers. Allen hired him no less confidently to provide the music that gave *Radio Days*, *Broadway Danny Rose*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, and *Zelig* so much of their period authenticity and charm. The story of Leonard Zelig, who keeps turning up in different guises at historical moments, found its perfect musical servant in Hyman, whose peppy Jazz Age score included a foxtrot called "Doin' the Chameleon."

The chameleon is what Hyman has been doin' for his entire career, which began in 1948. As a studio pianist and organist, he has made at least a thousand recordings. Some names he has recorded under besides his own are Ricky Alan, Peter Bennett, David Harkness, Richard Wayne, the Organ Masters, The Living Pianos, Rod Gregory & His So-

ciety Orchestra, and Stanley Sokol and the Polkateers. He has toured Europe with Benny Goodman, been the musical director of Arthur Godfrey's television show, orchestrated the Broadway musical *Sugar Babies*, played the piano on the soundtracks of *The Godfather*, *The Wiz*, and *The Night They Raided Minsky's*, composed the score for *Moonstruck*, arranged ballroom and nightclub sequences in *Billy Bathgate*, and served as the musical director of *Scott Joplin*, *King of Ragtime*—conducting, arranging, and playing the piano, meticulously fitting Joplin's music to the fingers of the actor Billy Dee Williams on the screen.

He has written arrangements for the Boston Pops and for singers as diverse as Jessye Norman and Perry Como. He has composed ballet scores for Twyla Tharp and for the Cleveland Ballet. He has published ten books of essays, musical compositions, and arrangements (*Dick Hyman's Professional Chord Changes and Substitutions for 100 Tunes Every Musician Should Know*). He has organized countless jazz programs of scholarly interest, employing the best musicians and backing them impeccably at the piano; he is a seven-time winner of the Most Valuable Player Award of the New York chapter of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. He has been involved in the reconstruction of legendary American concerts, including the 1928 Carnegie Hall program presented by W. C. Handy's Orchestra and Jubilee Singers. For that event Hyman impersonated James P. Johnson playing "Yamekraw" on the piano and Thomas "Fats" Waller playing Handy's "St. Louis Blues" on the organ, and wrote all the period orchestrations.

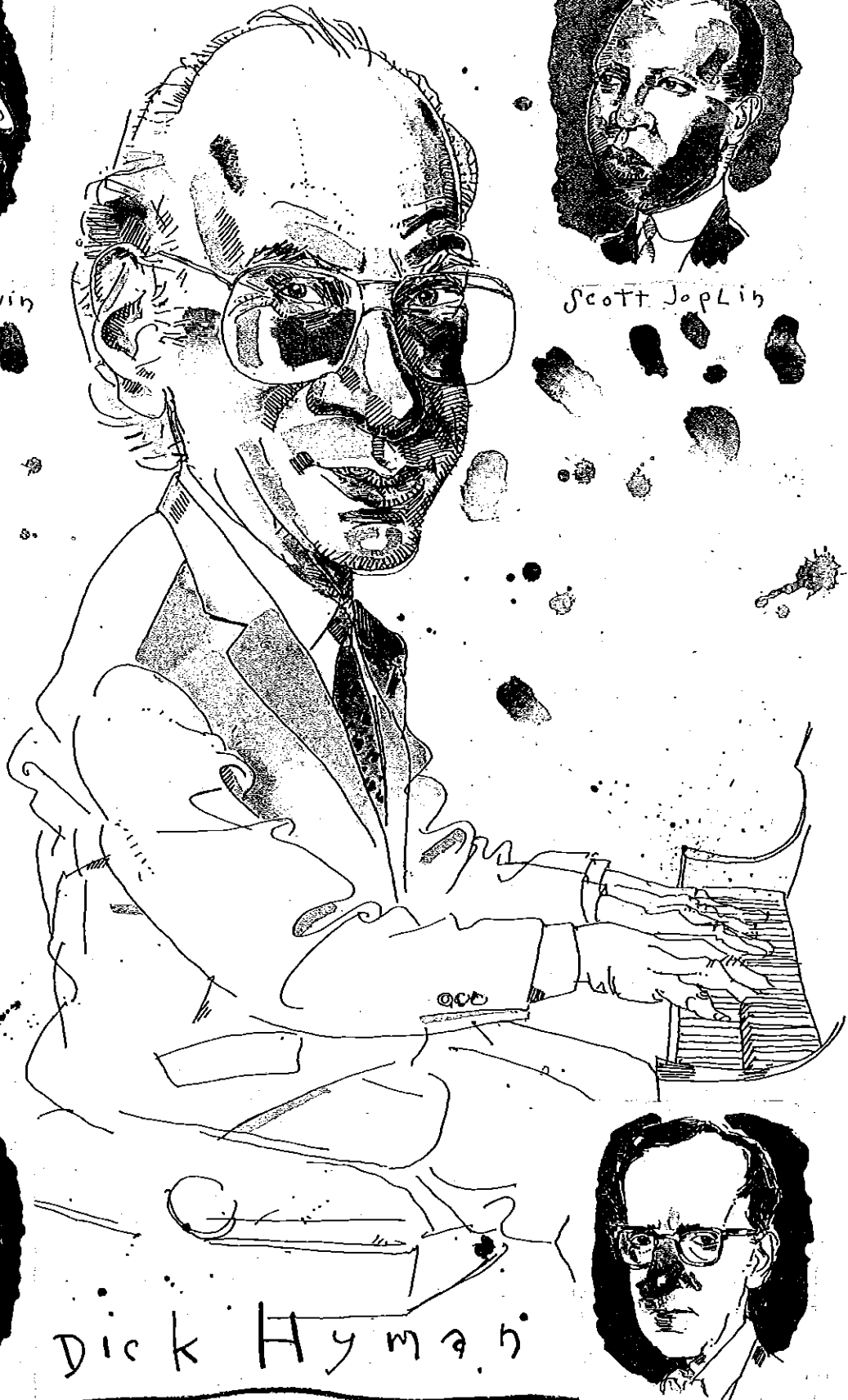
Much of this I've long been aware of; the name Dick Hyman has been part of my consciousness forever. Zelig-like, he is everywhere and nowhere. Sometimes I would catch sight of him on television, giving an interview, so at least I knew what he looked like: a slender man with a thin face and serious eyes behind large metal-rimmed glasses, bald on



George Gershwin



Scott Joplin



Dick Hyman



James P. Johnson



Woody Allen

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top but slightly long-haired in back—the only evidence of an artistic temperament. His manner was professorial, revealing little. I was still left with the question Who is Dick Hyman?

A few years ago I decided to find out. I began by attending concerts at New York's 92nd Street Y, Hyman's home base, where he often performs, particularly at a two-week jazz festival that he runs there every July. One thing I soon noticed was that his programs were always sold out. They also had an element of fun: Hyman organized them around some theme that amused him, often a historical link between American popular music and American popular culture, and he obviously enjoyed presenting his findings to the audiences at the Y, who just as obviously appreciated all the work he had put into the evening. In the role of host and resident star he began to lose his diffidence. The veils of anonymity were dropping off.

But what I mainly noticed was that he was an amazing pianist. His technique was prodigious, but his touch was wonderfully light. His harmonies were rich, his improvisations fleet and graceful. Best of all, he kept getting better. His solos became the high point of every program for me, no matter how many other illustrious jazzmen he had recruited. I learned that I was not alone in watching over the emergence of Zelig from his cocoon; today he is increasingly booked as a soloist. At sixty-eight Dick Hyman is in imminent danger of coming into his own.

**T**O observe the specimen in its purest form, I recently accompanied Hyman to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, where he was giving a lecture-recital at Wilkes University called "The History of Jazz Piano From Ragtime to the Avant-garde." The audience was more town than gown, old jazz fans materializing out of the night. Hyman, pedagogically perched on the piano bench, explained that all the pianists whose style he was about to demonstrate had been his models. He began his evening's journey in 1863, by playing Louis Gottschalk's "Pasquinade," an engaging piece in which Gottschalk combined a ragtime beat with Latin and African rhythms he had heard played by black musicians in New Orleans.

Proceeding to Scott Joplin's turn-of-the-century "Maple

Leaf Rag," Hyman explained that Joplin took its form from military marches and the dance music of the day: polkas, quadrilles, and waltzes. "But what was attractive about Joplin was his syncopation—setting one rhythm off against another." Hyman demonstrated by playing a steady military beat with his left hand ("You can't overemphasize the influence of those marches on ragtime") and then adding the playful rhythms on top, which were mostly Spanish or Portuguese in origin.

Next came Eubie Blake's "Charleston Rag," which Blake claimed he wrote in 1899, when he was only sixteen. It's a complex piece, the left hand voyaging forth in an early suggestion of boogie-woogie, the right hand moving at arpeggio speed and forcing the fingers into positions I had never seen a pianist use before. "Eubie once asked me if I played it in the key of G-flat," Hyman said, "and I assured him that I did. The piece has one effect that can only be achieved by sliding back and forth between the black keys and the white keys on both the thumb and the fifth finger, and it wouldn't work in any other key."

Hyman moved on to "novelty," a catchall category for the flashy pieces, among them "Ragging the Scale," that were a national craze in the 1920s and early 1930s. "Their trickiness was what appealed to the ear and to the pianist," Hyman told the audience, "be-

cause they fit the hands in funny ways and required you to do funny things to make them work. Zez Confrey was the master. He liked to use several rhythms at once; he *really* syncopated when he composed 'Coaxing the Piano' and 'Nickel in the Slot.' Not only are your two hands playing in different rhythms; in the right hand your thumb and first finger are playing in a different rhythm from the other three fingers." Hyman demonstrated this feat of motor coordination—an antic, likable sound. He then played "Kitten on the Keys" as Confrey used to play it.

The huge sales of novelty sheet music in the 1920s presumed that there were people at home who could play very well, Hyman said. "The piano-playing skill of the American public was remarkable. If people could play Confrey's 'Dizzy Fingers,' which was the staple for amateur hours on the radio—how fast can you play 'Dizzy Fingers'?—they could



Thomas "Fats" Waller

play almost anything." Hyman ran off sixteen amateur-hour-winning bars. "The young George Gershwin was an essential part of this whole school," he went on, demonstrating some progressions in Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and Concerto in F that echoed devices that Confrey used, especially in a Grieg-like piece called "Three Little Oddities."

Next came stride piano. "Unlike ragtime, where the left hand was compressed into a span of an octave and a half and the harmonies were relatively simple," Hyman said, "in stride the distance covered by the left hand was greater, and what it played was often a separate melody. The harmony would also change more frequently, using four-note chords instead of three." Hyman struck up a stride bass with tremendous momentum. "Back in the twenties that left hand could supply the rhythm section for a whole room of dancing people. The right hand was in a swinging triple meter, with all kinds of tricky figures."

He demonstrated the style of four masters of stride, starting with James P. Johnson's "Carolina Shout," which was "the earliest stride we've got on any kind of reproduction—a

1918 piano roll." It was an exuberant piece, and as Hyman settled into it, I felt that he was James P. Johnson. Next he became Johnson's student, Fats Waller, first observing—and then illustrating with Waller's "Handful of Keys"—that as a pianist Waller had "a wonderful light dexterity." Hyman's feathery touch in the upper octaves was anchored by a contrapuntal stride in the bass. This was followed by a lightning-fast piece called "Finger Buster," by Willie "The Lion" Smith, which somehow left Hyman's fingers unbusted.

"Finally, Art Tatum took all this as a scaffold," Hyman continued, not even slightly winded, "and erected a great edifice of technical virtuosity, with fantastic runs and techniques that were beyond anyone's grasp at that time; they were out of the grand-piano literature. But it wasn't only the flashiness that was overwhelming; it was his harmonic conception—Tatum's harmonies were so gorgeously chromatic. Still, despite all that ingenuity, when he gets into it, he's playing stride piano." He played Tatum's dazzling arrangement of Vincent Youmans's "Tea for Two."

The next category was "orchestral piano," which included pianists like Jelly Roll Morton, Earl Hines, and Teddy Wil-

## AS FROM A QUIVER OF ARROWS

What do we do with the body, do we  
burn it, do we set it in dirt or in  
stone, do we wrap it in balm, honey,  
oil, and then gauze and tip it onto  
and trust it to a raft and to water?

What will happen to the memory of his  
body, if one of us doesn't hurry now  
and write it down fast? Will it be  
salt or late light that it melts like?  
Floss, rubber gloves, a chewed cap

to a pen elsewhere—how are we to  
regard his effects, do we throw them  
or use them away, do we say they are  
relics and so treat them like relics?  
Does his soiled linen count? If so,

would we be wrong, then, to wash it?  
There are no instructions whether it  
should go to where are those with no  
linen, or whether by night we should  
memorially wear it ourselves, by day

reflect upon it folded, shelved, empty.  
Here, on the floor behind his bed, is  
a bent photo—why? Were the two of  
them lovers? Does it mean, where we  
found it, that he forgot it or lost it

or intended a safekeeping? Should we  
attempt to make contact? What if this  
other man too is dead? Or alive, but  
doesn't want to remember, is human?  
Is it okay to be human, and fall away

from oblation and memory, if we forget,  
and can't sometimes help it and sometimes  
it is all that we want? How long, in  
dawns or new cocks, does that take?  
What if it is rest and nothing else that

we want? Is it a findable thing, small?  
In what hole is it hidden? Is it, maybe,  
a country? Will a guide be required who  
will say to us how? Do we fly? Do we  
swim? What will I do now, with my hands?

—CARL PHILLIPS

son, who didn't think only in terms of the piano; they were also inspired by other instruments. "In Morton's 'The Pearls' you can hear a tuba, a clarinet, and a piccolo," Hyman pointed out, proceeding to play the piece in Morton's orchestral style. "Later Earl Hines did the piano equivalent of what Louis Armstrong does on a trumpet," Hyman went on, turning into Hines playing "Monday Date" à la Armstrong—which brought him to Teddy Wilson. "I've always thought Teddy was playing clarinet. He was a disciple of Hines, but calmer, less frantic, even Mozartean. He played with very little dynamic range, but his playing expressed his gentle personality." Hyman slipped into that personality and played "I've Got the World on a String" with respectful delicacy. "To me, Teddy's things have the charm of monochrome; they're line drawings, uncluttered."

A quick dip into blues and boogie-woogie carried Hyman to intermission, after which came "Swing and the Rhythm Section." Until now, he said, the piano had been self-sufficient. "Then came swing, which changed everything. Suddenly it was felt that the piano was best accompanied by a rhythm section—that was what made things swing. Count Basie set the standard; his piano was a masterpiece of minimalism." Hyman played "One O'Clock Jump," Basie-style, with so few notes in his right hand that it sounded thin until he added a rhythm section with his left hand, asking us to imagine that we were hearing what Basie was hearing: Jo Jones's drums, Freddie Green's guitar, and Walter Page's bass. "That development would revolutionize music. It gave birth to the big-band style of the thirties and forties, except for the 'sweet bands' of Guy Lombardo and Hal Kemp, who were obstinate; they wouldn't swing, no matter what." Hyman then played some Duke Ellington to show how the Duke, who started as a stride pianist, "came to use the whole orchestra as his instrument."

Moving on to bebop, Hyman explained that "Bud Powell played in the patterns of Charlie Parker, exploring the new hip chords in single-note lines." He played "All God's Chillun Got Rhythm" as Powell played it, his right hand stabbing at the keys, and then showed how Oscar Peterson, George Shearing, and Thelonious Monk incorporated the bebop vocabulary, each in his own fashion. Carrying his seminar to the present, Hyman played in the styles of Erroll Garner, Dave Brubeck, Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett, Herbie Hancock, and Chick Corea, concluding with a piece in the propulsive style of McCoy Tyner—a pyrotechnical finish that brought the audience to its feet.

The whole journey had lasted two hours and appeared to have taken nothing out of Hyman. After the concert he was as cool as a banker home from the bank. I asked him where I could catch up with him next. He said that in the weeks ahead he would be giving an organ recital and also accompanying a Harold Lloyd silent film at the Paramount Theatre in Seattle; performing at the Gilmore International Keyboard Festival, in Kalamazoo; recording a CD called *The Age of Swing*; and

taking a Mediterranean cruise, on which Les Ballets Jazz de Montreal would be dancing to his score *Ivory Strides*.

My impression was of a methodical man: only someone highly disciplined could have brought off a career so varied and productive. Even his playing style is efficient: Hyman sits at the piano as still and as straight as Vladimir Horowitz, conserving energy for his racing hands. The one imperfection that might be found in his playing is that it is too perfect. It lacks the emotional coloring of a Bill Evans; it is not particularly personal. I wondered whether in serving so many masters Hyman had neglected to serve himself. We made a date for me to visit him when he next came to roost at his home in Venice, Florida, where he and his wife of forty-seven years, Julia Hyman, lifelong New Yorkers, recently settled. There, in a studio with two Baldwin grand pianos and a museum's worth of old records and tapes, all neatly catalogued, he looked back over his life.

**D**ICK Hyman was born in 1927 in New York and grew up in suburban Mount Vernon. He was adept at the piano at an early age and also played the clarinet, imbibing much of his musical education from the early 78-rpm jazz records that his older brother Arthur reverently brought home. He began playing gigs during his high school years, and when he went on to college at Columbia, he composed a varsity-show score. One day he heard of a jazz-piano contest that was being sponsored by radio station WOV; the winner would get twelve free lessons from Teddy Wilson, and the runner-up would get twelve from Mary Lou Williams, both of whom were to be among the judges. Turning up at the studio on the night of the contest, which was broadcast live, Hyman played Irving Berlin's "Always" and finished first. "My mother had tuned in our Zenith radio for the big moment," Hyman said, "and when I got home, she asked me what it was I had played. When I told her, she expressed astonishment. Melody was not a big thing with me in those days."

In his lessons from Teddy Wilson, Hyman said, "I learned the Wilsonian runs that would be borrowed by a generation of jazz pianists, some of which Wilson had learned from Art Tatum, and the chord substitutions that jazz players were then applying to standard songs." He also studied with his mother's brother, the classical pianist Anton Rovinsky. "He was my most important teacher," Hyman said. "I learned touch from him and a certain amount of repertoire, especially Beethoven. On my own I pursued Chopin. I loved his ability to take a melody and embellish it in different arbitrary ways, which is exactly what we do in jazz. Chopin would have been a terrific jazz pianist. His waltzes are in my improvising to this day."

Graduating from college in 1948, Hyman got a job at Wells Music Bar, in Harlem, and he seems never to have missed a day's work since. "One night," he said, "my whole family came up to hear me. They marveled that I could be making that much money doing that kind of thing in Har-

lem"—\$115 a week. Later that year he did a stint at Café Society, and when Birdland opened, he became the house pianist. He played with the society bandleaders Lester Lanin and Emil Coleman, performing at parties and weddings. "Club-date players are admirable—they can satisfy any dance requirement," Hyman said. "I learned a million songs from them. It was continuous playing from nine to two. In the first hour you're playing this ditsy Carmen Cavallaro music and you think, 'Isn't this fun?' In the second hour the fun begins to pall, the third hour is like a dance marathon, and by the fourth hour you don't give a damn."

In 1951 Hyman reversed the clock and became a daytime staff pianist and organist with radio station WMCA, and the following year went to NBC, where one of his duties was to show up for a program that started at 7:05 A.M. "We were on call eight hours a day, five days a week. I became known as the guy who would try to play anything that was needed. Usually it came out right. When they discovered that I could also play the organ and was willing to play the organ—most

guys didn't like the sound or the feel of it—I was in great demand, especially for quiz shows and for the soap opera *Front Page Farrell*."

Far from wanting to forget what others might consider the indignities of his radio and television and freelance years, Hyman remembers them with great affection. He has tapes of everything he ever did, and he played me a succession of snippets, most of them from freelance jobs, which he fondly identified as they came along.

"This was under my Hawaiian nom de plume—the Sons of Paradise. I played a Lowrey organ that had a glide pedal so that I could sound like a Hawaiian guitar."

"This was a television show called *The Canine Hall of Fame*. I played a keyboard that we fixed up to reproduce tuned dog barks."

"This was David McDowell and His Society Orchestra. I made a lot of stuff like that. The record business in those days was such that you could have a lot of fun. You could be anybody. David McDowell's style was also how I played on club dates for Lester Lanin. It was the accepted all-purpose style."

"This was an exercise record from the nonaerobic era, before people like Jane Fonda demanded more energy from you. Today it's hard to imagine such a genteel tempo on an exercise record."

"This was Stanley Sokol and the Polkateers, on one of many albums I made for the Reader's Digest. We recorded one whole week of polkas. After the Polish polkas we switched to German polkas, and I became Max Munschausen and the Polka Barons, with vocals by the Pretzel Benders. I played the organ, conducted, and wrote all the arrangements."

"This was an album called *Sixty Songs That Say I Love You*. I made nine albums of sixty songs each, all in this Carmen Cavallaro style, one chorus of each, for M-G-M, under my own name. It would be nice to say that I did most of my fooling around under another name, but I have to confess: I sinned under my own name as well. People still bring these things up to me for my autograph. They don't know the difference."

"This was Dick Hyman and the Pepper Sisters doing a piece I wrote called 'Ya Ya,' which got to be an Italian hit. Everybody wanted to get a hit—by any means. For years we'd go from one recording session to another, all day and even all night long, and it was wonderful."

"This was my big hit of 1956—one of the first commercial recordings of 'Mack the Knife,' which made the top ten on the



charts. That's me whistling. I became an AFTRA member as a whistler; the scale was higher than it was for piano players."

"This was honky-tonk piano. In the fifties there was a sudden vogue for honky-tonk, launched by a German record by a man called Crazy Otto. We all jumped on the bandwagon and played this Gay Nineties stuff. Every studio had one piano that was deliberately kept out of tune, with thumbtacks stuck into the hammers to make it sound even more antique. Whatever name a record company wanted to give me was okay with me; some of them were Knuckles O'Toole and Slugger Ryan and Puddinhead Smith. Those tongue-in-cheek albums introduced many people to what they think is real ragtime. I've since made a lot of ragtime records that *are* authentic, including the complete piano works of Scott Joplin. But people still come up to me with tears in their eyes and say, 'I first heard ragtime when you were Knuckles O'Toole.'"

"This was a record I made for the Hartz Mountain people—accompanying canaries on the organ with Strauss waltzes to train other canaries to sing."

One by-product of all those hours at a studio organ was that Hyman became a student of the instrument, and today he gives concerts on the great pipe organs that survive from the golden age of America's movie palaces. "Pipe organs differ profoundly in their psychology from electronic ones," Hyman writes in his book *Dick Hyman: Piano Pro*.

They seem to want to play a different sort of music. . . . When I prepare for the occasional concerts I now play on the pipes, I have the distinct impression that the organ is teaching me what it wants to do. . . . The tonal colors of a pipe organ are its great glory. I love the rustling string sounds and the spatial character of the various solo elements, which are separate and not electronically compressed into the confines of an audio speaker. Above all, I'm stimulated by being able to orchestrate on the spot.

Orchestration is another skill that Hyman learned "just by being there" as a pianist in a studio ensemble. "I might be playing with anything from André Kostelanetz to a rhythm-and-blues band. If you're a pianist who extemporizes, you end up as the arranger, and being the arranger leads to being the conductor. I got to be a television conductor because I had learned how to deal with directors and floor managers and singers and every kind of act. NBC's executives always pushed me to the next responsible level, even though I didn't have the experience. I guess they thought I could cope with it."

"Dick is musically fearless," Julia Hyman told me. "He never said 'I can't do that' or 'I won't do that.' He figured you should know it all. He went from show to show and he loved every minute. He played the organ on *Beat the Clock* and he thought *that* was fun. He relished the dreck. He was lucky to have been young when television was young and

needed so much live music. He learned by having people throw new things at him."

THE two days I spent with Dick Hyman confirmed his wife's portrait of a workaholic totally in love with his work. His personality is businesslike. He thrives on detail, making his own concert and recording and travel arrangements, staying in touch with a vast network of musicians by phone and fax and mail. The citizenship of music is his natural element. When he and I dropped in on some Sarasota jazz spots, he listened as generously to the amateurs as he did to the old pros, finding something good to say about them all. "I continue to do jazz parties—weekends of loosely organized jamming—because it puts me in touch with other players," he said, "just as all my organizing of concerts is a means to an end. It enables me to present my ideas in the company of people I enjoy playing with.

"But I think I play at my best as a soloist. You become aware that the clock is ticking and that you can't do everything forever. You have to pull back and do what you do best. For me, my best is playing the piano and, I hope, composing. The composing comes out of the playing, but of course it reflects everything I've ever played and heard and continue to hear. One of my priorities now is to complete several unfinished compositions and get some of my existing concert works into the repertory, such as my Concerto for Piano and Orchestra; Ragtime Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra, Sonata for Violin and Piano, and Sextet for Piano, Clarinet, and Strings.

"As for the piano, I'm doing more and more playing in classical venues for nonjazz audiences—people who aren't all that knowledgeable about jazz but who enjoy my kind of piano. I no longer make a big deal about the fact that I can play in various styles. What I can do most effectively is to improvise on American songs by composers like Gershwin, Harold Arlen, Cole Porter, and Irving Berlin, calling on all the strands from my past. It's frankly virtuosic presentation. I enjoy being on stage now. When I was younger, I was comparatively withdrawn. I preferred playing in a recording studio to doing it in front of people, and when I did perform, people got annoyed because I didn't smile. I've learned to smile; I've become more outgoing. I'm also playing better than ever before, and my playing is more emotional. You reach a point where you don't have to display everything that's in your command. People know you can play fast. There are other values to be pursued: feeling, swinging, directness, harmonic exploration."

A chameleon's skin, however, is not easily shed. I knew that one of the Hymans' three children, Judy Hyman, is also a musician, and I asked Hyman about her career. He said that she is an old-time country-music violinist. "Well," I said, "at least that's one style you don't play." Hyman bridled. "I love that music," he said. "Judy and I play together as often as we can." ☪