

KENNETH PATCHEN

READS WITH JAZZ IN CANADA

ALAN NEIL'S ACCOUNT OF THE SESSION

We got to the studio expecting to wail. Behind us we had a good half dozen performances with Patchen -- at colleges, couple of nightclubs, and on television; and today we could count on three hours rehearsal before doing the radio show. The band was in a mood to groove.

When Kenneth arrived he told us that in an hour he was due at a dental surgeon's to have a broken tooth attended to -- maybe an infection, he didn't go into detail, he was quite calm about it. We ran over some numbers but nothing much happened; no acts of love, no fires starting. It was all right, and it was nothing. At the end of the hour we broke off and, while the guys went for a beer, I walked over to the surgeon's office with Kenneth. Robert Patchell, who was in charge of the program for the C. B. C., looked pretty worried as we left. Bob is a fine, quiet, hip type of guy, and he had gone to a lot of trouble arranging the session -- without him there wouldn't have been any session. And now, right in the middle of rehearsal here we were off on an emergency trip to the dentist!

Well, Patchen had a major tooth surgery right on the spot as I waited. It was much more serious than any of us could have imagined. His jaw had to be chiselled away at, literally gouged out in an excruciatingly painful operation that took almost an hour. Finally he emerged into the waiting room, his face drained of color, and those great tired eyes more tired than I had ever seen them. His mouth was bleeding through big cotton plugs - still he smiled, and when the girl at the desk asked for his occupation he mumbled "Writer, self employed."

The guys were waiting for us at a cafeteria and we munched at hamburgers while Patchen chewed slowly on rare steak. In maybe ten minutes his face stopped being gray, and his eyes got back their straight look of seeing right through everything and everybody. Ordinarily this is a scary thing, but it wasn't for us just then! A strange and amazing man. Somehow -- but how? -- he had pulled out of it, was ready to get going. (In fact, Patchen did a midnight show with us at The Cellar that same night! Talk about separating the men from the boys -- well, that's not the only reason he'll get our votes!)

We went back to the station and got set up again. Kenneth sat at a little table maybe ten feet from us; his cheek was getting

puffed and he kept dabbing at his mouth with the cotton. Time to time in that run through I could see he was having trouble with his numbed lips on some syllables, so I guess it was lucky we had our own problem -- and a large one. Since he was speaking into the recording mike, we couldn't hear him; and we had to listen to that lead horn or we would just be going through the motions -- without the lead horn we were spooked.

Then somebody (Kenneth, I think) hit on the idea of each of us having earphones. We put them on -- and we had a scene! It was extremely exciting! Now we could aim our language, our feeling, at Patchen's -- the thing had come to life! The time we could stay in the studio was getting short -- who cared! We could make it, we could maybe blow a little! In a couple minutes I waved to the engineer to tape away.

We went through the numbers with one break (maybe 2 or 3 minutes) just before "Glory, Glory" -- Kenneth drew on a cigarette, stretched his legs, refused coffee, and nodded that he was set. And during that last number I don't think he looked down at the paper once. We had all been caught up in the reading from the start -- we knew that something was happening, that this was "something else" -- but now he really went out for it, he wailed! With our nerves, our hearts, we heard him coming on, ringing the changes, threading and pulling us in and out of the light - the King Cat making his scene! And on his face we could see that what we had to say back to him was making the same kind of "heart-sense". It was there.

Every jazz guy going on the stand wants it to happen -- call it wailing, swinging, what you like -- every night he goes on he wants it -- but it can't be made to happen. The jazz guy has to get in his own trance, feeling his feeling, really feeling it -- contacting the guy who lives inside him -- call it getting up his own blues, his own peace, his own anguish. And this is the ONE mystery of jazz. A mystery nobody, critic or musician, can explain; and which musicians usually have too much care about to try.

We had it that afternoon. The thing was there, it happened. But if you think I am talking about playing good -- or about anything like that -- well, I said it couldn't be explained. It is a mystery -- it really is.



SOME POSTERS OF PATCHEN
READING WITH JAZZ

As for my own notion of poetry reading with jazz, it's something I have been kicking around ever since I heard tapes brought up here in the summer of 1956 -- and by the way, this was long before the big picture magazines "discovered" it down in the Frisco area. These were tapes of Patchen reading to jazz records; and Bob Patchell got them programmed on the C. B. C. network that autumn. Anyway, one of the ideas I have about it is that the band has to be free to play jazz; it must be spontaneous or where is the jazz? It can't be muddled up by literal or arty "interpretations" of verbal meanings -- that would do for musical comedy numbers. The feeling the poet releases through his reading must be met by the jazz guys with some type of honest paralleling in their own speech, in the idiom of jazz -- the thing has to be honest: then even when it isn't very good (and God knows most of the attempts have been pretty awful), nobody will get hurt.

But when the attempts are both dishonest -- on both sides -- and bad, it's not just a cheap scene; it's a vicious, hurtful farce. Which brings me to the fact that most jazz musicians don't dig poetry anyway; and this type of thing will really close the book on it. The jazz guys are bugged by what they read and see of the "beat" -- this is false, weird:

it's not a real scene, it only pretends to be. And behind all the trappings of the "beat", behind the falseface, there is something real: the world of the jazz guy. The world the critics are pretending doesn't exist -- the critics who are trying to "elevate" jazz from its place at the foot of the social ladder, who would forget all that unpleasant "early" history and get it all safely settled in the university classrooms and concert halls. Hallowed or not, jazz has its own the bordellos and twist-gut dives; and it

goes on, much as the bad, money-whoring novels about jazz musicians paint it, and no amount of lecturing before women's clubs and critics' forums at the new jazz music colleges will blur the real picture -- the real, guts-level world of jazz where pot and heroin and casual sex are not just easy words in a fast-buck book.

To the jazz guy the "beat" thing goes right along with the job of fouling up, of falsification, that the high pressure, Johnny-Come-Never critics have been doing. He knows the score -- and it isn't "All's right with the world" either. But I better get back to what I was saying.

Patchen was the one exception. I've heard of many jazzmen who have been digging him

all along. Myself, it's been ten years. (On this, I should say that it pleased me a lot when Dale Hillary and Bill Boyle went round quoting big hunks of his poetry for weeks after Kenneth left here. They probably dug him more as a man than as a poet, but they did dig him. And these two would never know they were on a desert island if they had their instruments and a good supply of records along.)

Patchen has called the "beat" business a lot of harsh names. "A freakshow worth every Madison Ave. penny of the three-dollar-bill admission," is one of the things he said about it. Yet it couldn't miss that the biggest name on the scene -- and the one all the "beats" tried to imitate -- would get swept into it.



And from this distance it all seems pretty unimportant. The sow's ear purses don't hold up for long, and the people who like spending bad money won't lose much time finding new ones to carry it in. Anybody who cared enough to look at the thing could see that what Patchen didn't like about the "beat" was the same faking of the genuine article that the jazz guys saw in it. For Patchen is a real rebel, a nonconformist from far back, all the way to *FIRST WILL & TESTAMENT* (1939); he's been genuinely beatific and all the rest of it claimed for the "beats" -- if you can scare up a copy, read his *ALBION MOONLIGHT* published in 1941; *SLEEPERS AWAKE*, 1946 -- these are real swingers, books which Henry Miller called "works of genius" -- (prose books). Why aren't these books around? Why do the critics pretend they never existed? I don't know -- maybe for the same reason Lester Young died without rent money. "It's dark out, Jack."

But with all this, with this type of scene, I still think nobody who listens to Patchen read will give a hoot about what has been said or not said about "poetry and jazz" -- I think the experience of hearing this man read will just wash all that out! This is something else. So you haven't and you likely won't dig other poets reading with jazz -- what does that prove?

Well, for one big thing it should prove that you can't lump someone like Patchen with other people just because there's a handy tag for what they are doing -- right here these general tags make no sense. (Like pepper and salt are both tagged condiments, we don't get mixed up about knowing that they are pretty different.) Any given time you can figure about one to a customer -- they had Whitman -- we have Patchen. I say that little stuff, the confusions, they aren't important.



Anyway, on this session we all felt a special kind of identity and love for him. For the reasons I described at the beginning, and also because somehow Kenneth's dignity -- so easy and natural -- his bigness and deep honesty, these things came through to us with added force that day. As I said, something happened.

I am happy too about this record because a lot of people will be able to hear Dale Hillary at the start of a career that with any type of break should take him all the way. Dale, from a little town in the backwoods section of Canada, was eighteen at the time of the session; and he's now taken his alto and his talent down to the States -- and along with them the best loving wishes of the jazz guys up here!

Now a last thing. The other day I learned that Charlie Parker, the originator of modern jazz, used to carry Patchen's books about with him, and knew many of his poems by heart, and would often be saying the poems when he was working up something for his music. So I'm happy, very happy, though it was just a coincidence, that the opening blues on this record was written by the late, great Charlie Parker.

Alan Neil
Vancouver, B.C.
August 26, 1959.



About the band:

Bill Boyle (drums) is twenty-one; digs Philly Joe Jones the most; plays rock and roll for bread and jazz for love.

Lionel Chambers (bass) teaches math in school; digs all modern jazz -- much respected for his great natural talent for "keeping the beat moving loose but tight".

Alan Neil (piano) works at the post office; digs jazz, writing (especially poetry), and modern painting; one of the founders of The Cellar.

Dale Hillary (alto sax) is eighteen years old; has won two scholarships to the Lennox School of Music; digs Sonny Rollins and Charlie Parker; spends all his spare time making arrangements and on his own compositions.

Vancouver's famous jazz night club, The Cellar, is a co-operative venture of some twenty musicians. Since its opening three

years ago it has presented -- along with the regular weekend sessions of the members -- such jazz attractions as the Paul Bley Quartet, the Harold Land Quartet, Lou Levy, Carl Fontana, Bill Perkins, Art Pepper, and so on.

Another activity of the club -- and one believed unique for such operations -- has been a monthly drama presentation. Among those given so far this year have been plays by Ionesco, Saroyan, and Beckett.

(It was at The Cellar that the photographs of Patchen and the Alan Neil Quartet were taken.)

Program was recorded at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's studio in Vancouver on February 17, 1959 -- under supervision of Robert Patchell; and given network airing from Montreal on October 14, 1959

OTHER RECORDINGS BY KENNETH PATCHEN

FL9717 SELECTED POEMS BY KENNETH PATCHEN, Read by the Author. A crosssection of poems by a distinguished American contemporary. And What with the Blunders, The Origin of Baseball, The Wolf of Winger, The Fox, Nice Day for a Lynching, 23rd Street Runs Into Heaven, The Lions of Fire Shall Have Their Hunting, Red Wine and Yellow Hair, The Orange Bears, So Be It, The Everlasting Contenders, In Order To, The Man with the Golden Adam's Apple, The Reason for Skylarks, Pastoral, he State of the Nation, 'Be Music, Night', Show Time (Soon it Will Be) and Where Shall We Walk. Text.
1-12" 33-1/3 rpm longplay record

FL9718 KENNETH PATCHEN READS WITH JAZZ. Recorded in Canada with the Alan Neil Quartet. The distinguished poet reads from his own works to musical compositions of Charlie Parker, George Wallington, etc. Four Blue Poems: There's a Place, They Won't Let You In There, A Sigh is Little Altered and The Lonesome Boy Blues; Four Song Poems: The Everlasting Contenders, Do I Not Deal with Angels, The Sea Is Awash with Roses and Not Many Kingdoms Left. Also includes As I Opened the Window and Glory, Glory. Text.
1-12" 33-1/3 rpm longplay record

FL9719 KENNETH PATCHEN READS HIS LOVE POEMS. Includes 23 poems of love read by a distinguished American contemporary. Little Birds Sit on Your Shoulders, As Beautiful as the Hands of a Winter Tree, While the Sun Still Spends His Fabulous Money, O Now the Drenched Land Wakes, The Great Birds, Do I Not Deal with Angels, O She is a Lovely-Often, O My Darling Troubles Heaven, We Go Out Together, From My High Love, A Lament for the Unlasting Joys, Fall of the Evening Star, She Had Concealed Him, O My Love the Pretty Towns, Creation, The Character of Love Seen as a Search for the Lost, Religion is That I Love You, 23rd Street Runs Into Heaven, The Sea is Awash with Roses, As Frothing Wounds of Roses, For Losing Her Love, The Snow is Deep on the Ground and As We Are so Wonderfully Done with Each Other. Text.
1-12" 33-1/3 rpm longplay record