

FEATURE PAGE

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Adventures of a Jazz Pianist

The fingers flick at the keys like frightened spiders. They skitter from the bottom of the keyboard to the top, and back again. The sound that comes out is a Vienna waltz. It evokes romantic scenes of ladies in bouffant in the arms of tall, handsome officers. The pianist is George Feyer. He is playing in the Cafe Carlyle in New York.

Around the big dim room are 100 couples. They listen in varying attitudes of attention. Some stare at the talented fingers. Some glance at each other, and look away. Some hold hands under the tables. Some pout at a drink. Some do not see at all.

Mr. Feyer sits looking through the fly leaf. He is a short man with black curly hair, a bow tie, and a tired compassionate smile. He is 50. His hands have been doing what he tells them to do for 45 years. Across the room, a bartender stands in silhouette against indirect lighting and his stout stomach heaves with sentiment.

Mr. Feyer is the best popular pianist in America. His style is pure. When he plays Tea for Two, it sounds like Tea for Two. It is hummable. He does not smother the melody with conceited arpeggios and loud counterpoint. Connoisseurs of piano buy his long-playing records because of the ascetic simplicity of his music.

Began in Budapest

In the old Budapest, the Feyers were Fejer. George's father was an assistant manager of a bank. His mother was a piano teacher. It was she, of course, who taught him the original scales, the little Kohler Waltzes, the more ambitious creations too. The boy hated the piano. His mother tied his feet to the bench at practice time each evening.

By day he attended an academic school. Afterward, he attended the conservatory of music. Then he hurried home and practiced piano for an hour and a half. This went on for

14 years before George Feyer began to like the instrument.

After that, he spent four years studying composition and conducting orchestra. He worked under Zoltan Kodaly and Ernst von Dohnanyi. They were great men and they taught only great students. At 23, Feyer was a concert pianist in a city of fine pianists.

He got a job in the Magyar Szinhaz and had to learn, quickly, to get off the Brahms pedestal and play popular music for the masses. He knew nothing of jazz and this was a theater of musical comedy. He found himself playing Varsity Drag and When Day Is Done without understanding the American titles.

Evolved Own Style

Mr. Feyer liked jazz, but he didn't like cheap jazz. He wondered if he could become a bridge between the classicists and the syncopated hot cha groups. One night, at the Elysee Cafe, he sat at a piano with Tibor Adler and played jazz in four-hand style. The applause was so deafening that the manager asked Mr. Feyer to come back.

The young man inched away from the deep and sonorous classics, and the fingers flicked the keys in a new world of jazz. It wasn't hardboiled jazz. It is somewhere between The Student Prince and My Fair Lady. In this direction lay fame. And fame led to L'Imperatrice in Paris. There, Mr. Adler and Mr. Feyer played for the amusement of the Duke of Windsor, Arthur Rubenstein, Grace Moore, Franz Lehár and Norma Shearer.

Aided by Americans

To please the Duke of Windsor, Mr. Feyer learned to play an accordion. And, when war came, he served in the Hungarian Army with Tibor Adler. Mr. Feyer entertained the troops. Mr. Adler fought with a rifle. The team was broken when Mr. Adler, in an Army hospital, was burned to death with 200 others when a bomb hit.

After the war, the Americans

came to Budapest as part of the Allied Control Commission. The colonels and Mr. Feyer got along. He played the piano. They dreamed. He got American cigarettes and liquor and food. At a time when many Hungarians faced starvation, George Feyer was selling Leica cameras by day and playing Carousel, Brigadoon and Oklahoma at night. The protection of the Americans made such a difference in his life that he married Judith, one of the prettiest girls in the city.

Their son Robert was born in 1946. The Americans surprised the Feyers by furnishing the blue layettes, bottles, sterilizers, diapers—even a playpen. When the Americans left Budapest, the Communists came in. George Feyer took his little family and went to Switzerland.

In 1951, he came to America. His mother and brother, already here, met him at the dock. They kissed his wife, hugged his son.

Mr. and Mrs. Feyer took a cab across town to a small hotel. The cab driver listened to them speaking Hungarian. When they got out, he shook Mr. Feyer's hand. "Welcome," he said. "Welcome to your new country." Mr. Feyer tried to say thanks. His throat was too tight.

Today he plays at the Hotel Carlyle. He is the greatest High Hat Jazz pianist in the country.

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