

accomplishes is to reduce them to a few sentences. These lives seem not so much little as small. Of one woman, for instance, we are told that the only notable thing she ever did was to go for Kosher meat every Friday. Whether she loved her husband, if she had children, was a good cook, whether she was talented in any way—all that he considers unimportant.

What Mr. Spyker considers of crucial importance are his speculations on whether someone was a homosexual or lesbian, the sexual proclivities of his subjects and whatever various perversions he can dig up. If the character is from the distant past and he can find no facts, or even rumors, he simply adds a few speculations of his own.

He seems to be trying to prove that New England, despite its reputation for hard-headed common sense, can rival the West Coast as a haven for weirdos. As he single-handedly destroys the myth of Yankee normalcy, he injects what's repulsive in sex to guarantee his place on the current literary market. Why anyone would consider a mission to hang out one little place's dirty linen for public inspection is a mystery. Perhaps Mr. Spyker himself can tell us: ". . . the Spuycker name, though celebrated locally, is not commonly associated with things of cultural variety," he writes in his book. (BK) □

## Nossiter's Veto

**Bernard D. Nossiter:** *Britain — A Future that Works*; Houghton Mifflin Company; Boston.

At a time when everybody who ever loved things British, from Chaucer to Wodehouse, and from the Garrick Club to Winnie-the-Pooh, returns from England with tearful eyes, Mr. Nossiter, a *Washington Post* London correspondent, thinks that everything is all right and under control. He believes that the visible and palpable ruin of Pall Mall and the transmogrification of Oxford

Street into a dilapidated oriental *shuk* are not ruin at all, but the demonstration of the new, laid-back British life style, the English version of the charms of life and civilization as they should be experienced in a post-industrial society that ought to see value in the relaxed pleasures of existence rather than in any strenuous effort.

Near the end of 1978, Anthony Burgess published a novel entitled *1985*, which portrayed Britain a year after Orwell's deadline. The laid-back stance is brought to its ultimate consequences and England is drowning in a limbo of indifference and inhumanity brought about by the labor unions' rule of both the society and human instincts. As firemen are on strike, and nihilism is the official social morality, the wife of Burgess' protagonist burns to death.

## Screen Serious Art

*The Deer Hunter*; Directed by Michael Cimino; Written by Deric Washburn; Universal Pictures & EMI Films.

by Eric Shapearo

Is *The Deer Hunter* an antiwar movie? The problem starts with the *Iliad*. Was the *Iliad* anti- or prowar? It certainly was against the perishing of the just and the cruelties of fate. It also was sort of pacifistic and internationalist because it evoked the beguiling virtues of serenity and the dignity of diverse origins. But it was also fiercely tribal, patriotic, chauvinistic, macho, and shamelessly in favor of competitiveness and bravery as virtues. It was literary art—perhaps the first to torment mankind with the vicissitudes and incertitudes of interpretation.

*The Deer Hunter* is the first serious art in two decades to emerge from the Hollywood film boutique. As war *per se*

This has been viewed by the leftist critics in the United States as the author's pure, if unsavory fantasy, when they reviewed his novel in November, 1978. Three months later, in real-life Britain, a giant strike of firemen, sanitation workers and hospital attendants, directed against the social democratic government of Mr. Callaghan, cost several human lives: idle, impassive firemen coldly watched people trying unsuccessfully to escape burning houses, patients died when doctors were forcibly prevented from entering hospitals whose employees were on strike. In the meantime, Mr. Nossiter's book appeared, and the *Progressive*, an American marxist journal, wrote that it ". . . is a stimulating book, and a useful antidote to the diet fed us by the press." If this is how Britain's future works, we prefer her dark, imperialist past. □

is evil, all art is somehow antiwar. But there are just wars, necessary wars, and wars whose nature and consequences we are unable to decipher during excruciatingly long stretches of history. There's war in *The Deer Hunter*, a war that one cannot dismiss simply with antiwar feelings. *This* war could and should have been won by us—the movie reluctantly conveys *this* message, at least to me. And, I hope, to all those who have already understood some bitter truths. Others who opposed *this* war, and never came to doubt their own righteousness, will only feel reinforced in their beliefs as they leave the theatre. These are the risks of true art.

This movie is a powerful reminder that only art is capable of putting the foolishness of nations into a proper scope. In America of the '70s, a movie on Vietnam was necessary to bare the benighted franticality of the '60s defeatism without showing a single, drug-stoned war protester. When a commu-

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nist henchman in a Vietcong uniform tosses a grenade into a primitive ground shelter full of screaming Vietnamese peasants, a new perspective opens. The Vietnamese ordeal of communist making suddenly becomes a reality, no less compelling than My Lai. The linkage with the current suffering of the boat people immediately becomes obvious, regardless of the manipulations of American TV, an antiwar medium. And in one's post-show reflections, no one should have any difficulty in crediting these calamities to all the Chomskys and Fondas of this land. The myth of angelic anti-imperialism bursts into an ignoble, technicolor explosion; the panic-stricken howls of children slaughtered by communists fill our ears for a long time.

And it is a true-born prole from Pennsylvania, a working-class Beowulf of Ukranian-Russian origin (to make things more overwhelmingly American) who's busy on screen slaying the Asian-marxist dragon. He is an epic hero with some of Lord Jim's sensitivities, different in nature from the latter's torment, and quite inarticulate to boot, but determining his own id, his commitments, his courage. Here, the mystique of the American melting pot gets its most idiosyncratic display: an Italian-American director in search of a non-conformist, unfashionable revival of forgotten substances, turns to the Ukranian-American community for raw models and value stimulation. An actor of Italian-American descent succeeds in expressing the convoluted reverences for man, life and faith that suffuse the Russian-Orthodox religion and folkloric heritage.

Every bitter controversy in history produces fools. *The Deer Hunter* makes this mercilessly clear. The self-righteous friends of humanness and peace who refused to go to Vietnam, and instead spent their youth listening to fiery speakers with noble idiocy in their eyes, look quite pitiable today—perhaps even to themselves. Michael, the protagonist who went to war and went through hell,

comes home with his self-respect intact and his humanness enriched. He's neither a fool nor a victim—which real fools so rabidly want him to be.

Michael is played by Robert DeNiro, the only actor in today's America who can endow primitiveness and inarticulateness, the most common and painful human limitations, with dignity and depth. He transforms a simplistic, but coherent, vision of existence into a code of honor and a sense of value; he's pedestrian, but rich in the endless shades of man's sensibility. We rarely write in these pages about contemporary film actors, for whom we feel an utter contempt: the Redfords, Hoffmans and Nicholsons of today sell the plastic mimicry of ear wiggling as art form; they've lost the sentimental magic of the screen presence of the Gables, Coopers and Bogarts, and they try to make up for it with the trashy mannerism of a "pro," and with an off-screen "conscience." DeNiro is an exception, he still tries to construct the immanence of a person, to portray a person's authenticity not at the expense of his autonomy. This is why he was refused an Oscar this year, Hollywood obviously preferring cloddishness over reticence. This is also why critics devoted to the modish gospel have so stupidly demolished the image he created in *The Deer Hunter*: in most reviews, his character is intimated to be homosexual just because he loves a friend and is reluctant to go to bed with a girl he knows his friend loves. Today's critics do not know how to explain the meanings of emotions other than as sexual disorder. *The New Yorker* went so far as to ask us not to identify ourselves with DeNiro's Michael. Why? Because he is loyal and sane, and does not lose his fundamental wholeness in the face of the worst crucible? DeNiro plows through Michael's low-brow ego with all the inevitable grunts and platitudes of an actor's effort to structure a realistic character, and winds up with a rendition of a superb man. He'll never be forgiven for

that by the radical-chic ideologists and movie gurus.

The last scene is a masterpiece of subdued effectiveness, the most poignant message of the picture. The survivors, and those whom they deem friends and relatives, sing an American anthem. It's logical and natural in its lack of affectation. When grief and loss befall people, they huddle around the simplest sense of existence: family, one's own place in the incomprehensibly cruel world, and the country—the last rampart against the riddles of destiny. A cluster of people in mourning clothes sing "God Bless America." There's no bravado in their voices, no triumph, just a resolve to stick to what's dearest to them—familiarity of faces, houses, the heavy steel-mill town's sky. This is the only beloved niche of their being, the simplest of patriotisms. There's no bombast in their singing, just distress and a cry for consolation. But to one Robert Hatch, film critic of *Nation*, once an honorable journal, this sounds different:

"The scene that really shocked me came at the end, when a small group of the survivors gathered in a neighborhood tavern and raised their voices in 'God Bless America.' Despite all they have seen and suffered they are still true believers, good patriots."

So, Orwell comes to mind, when he wrote that the Royal Navy in 1940 was the only savior of all those British radical dolts who, for two centuries, had debased it as the epitome of evil and had clamored for its destruction. Sad as it sounds, if Americans go to war again, sooner or later, millions of Michaels from mill towns will die to preserve Mr. Hatch's malodorous "right" to feel shocked when he hears "God Bless America" sung by people he disapproves of. And it won't ever occur to Mr. Hatch's framed mind that they will have died for him. And that he's alive and able to scribble his scurrilous diatribes because there still are "true believers" and "good patriots" of this country. Does it make any sense? □

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## Music

# The Delicate Giant of the Clarinet

Tom Bethell: *George Lewis: A Jazzman from New Orleans*; University of California Press; Berkeley, California, New York, London.

by Craig Wyatt

This is not the first biography of New Orleans clarinetist George Lewis (1900-68), surpassed perhaps only by Louis Armstrong in prominence as a focus of interest in the great endemic music which evolved in New Orleans. Author Bethell defers to Dorothy Tait, who under the pseudonym Ann Fairbairn, wrote *Call Him George*, and even weaves her into his own narrative. But for the most part he keeps to his own purpose, distinct from Miss Tait's: an attempt at a scholarly, rather than subjective, biography and analysis of the music George Lewis and his contemporaries played.

The scholarly detail is a strength of the book, yet also a weakness. Thus we have not only a definitive discography, but entire texts of interviews, by the author and others, and of letters and documents, published and unpublished. We have addresses of houses where Lewis lived as well as played in New Orleans, dates and details of when he played or recorded with this or that musician or band. Some of the selection seems arbitrary and of questionable value. But some of it is illuminating and precious. Thus, Lewis' mother, interviewed two years before her death at age 96:

“. . . it was Kirby's where he got that little ten-cent flute, and that's where he start. He got that music from that little ten-cent flute, and I never gave

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him a clarinet. Ten cents, that's all I ever spent for his music . . . Sometimes he drive me crazy. But I wanted him to play because he wanted to be a musicianer . . .”

And Lewis, describing his life during the Depression:

“I would play till 3 o'clock in the morning at the Kingfish, and then I come home and go to bed; get up at six, and get myself ready to catch the truck to go to work on the WPA. And I work till 2 o'clock every day, or 2:30, and I would get home round three, sometimes I got home later. Then I would eat, and lie down and go to sleep till 6:30, and get ready to go to work. Because at that time dog et dog, and you had to be on your Ps and Qs. If you didn't your job was gone, even though they was only paying a dollar with tips.”

By this method the people, the place—New Orleans—and the epoch are evoked. So is the music; one of the joyous surprises here is the discovery of how articulate these musicians were about their art. A long interview with Lewis, particularly enlightening about the music, is included as an appendix. Other material throughout the book thoroughly illuminates the technical and aesthetic content of the New Orleans jazz and, indeed, can guide one's listening to it. An extended commentary by cornetist Johnny Wiggs, who heard the Lewis band play in the mid-40s, not only fixes the character of the music the band played, but the main characteristics of the whole genre: bass player Alcide “Slow Drag” Pavageau's dislike of pianists who played “dischords,” the “thick, wide tone” of banjoist Lawrence Marrero, and Jim Robinson's well-wrought solos, which are “nothing but background music. He

comes from an era when solos were not used.”

Wiggs points out the uniqueness of Lewis, “which is a great thing considering how many clarinet players copy each other.” He mentions his “bends, his big, peculiar tone, his curlicues, the very big low register tone he used to get when he was younger—a giant volume as powerful as a cornet—the runs he would play when he didn't know the chord (or it could have been the chord he heard) . . .” This reviewer would only add Lewis' strong sense of tonal as well as melodic counterpoint, his skill in knowing when to weave a line with the cornet in the high register and when to drop to the low register in contrast with the cornet's line.

Bethell has also judiciously included commentaries on the social and philosophical context of what was played by Lewis and his New Orleans compatriots. He correctly sees it as music woven into the fabric of life in the town, with bands accompanying draftees to the train, funeral corteges, playing for holiday parades, dances, and other festive occasions; it was not an abstract or remote art form. It had its roots in European forms and culture abroad in New Orleans' unique melting-pot: its evolution followed the path of declining fortunes for blacks from Reconstruction, through the turn of the century, and into the era when Lewis flourished. Here is one of Bethell's most convincing syntheses: his “revisionist” argument that the music which evolved among New Orleans blacks was not a direct well-spring from the musicians' African cultural milieu, but rather a “liberation” from the European forms. This “liberation” ironically was a corollary of blacks no longer having access to that culture through education and social contact. The music