Revenge of the Underground Jazz Composer

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In 1956 Chet Baker, the most famous jazz musician in the world at the time, introduced his fans to the man who composed seven of the eight pieces on his new record. Baker wrote, "The originality and freshness of Zieff's line and chordal structure is going to please a lot of people, I think—at least musicians and other serious listeners." The composer he was referring to was Robert L. Zieff, though the credit line that appeared in parentheses after the titles on the record identified him less formally as "Bob Zieff."

We now know, with almost 50 years of hindsight, that Baker was both right and wrong. Baker was right in praising Zieff's originality, and in his prediction that Zieff's music would be admired by serious listeners, especially musicians. In fact, the very compositions that Baker was talking about are so intricate in their harmonizations and so ingenious in their technical gimcrackery that they may represent, among literally hundreds of hours of recorded music by Chet Baker, his crowning achievement as a pure musician. (These recordings and all others are identified at the end in *Auspicious Recordings of the Compositions of Robert L. Zieff*.)

But Baker was wrong in suggesting that Zieff's music would find the larger audience that it deserved. Zieff's audience may have swelled slightly when Baker's recording came out, but because of licensing complications the record became, ironically, one of the few Chet Baker records to go out of print in the United States. Immediately before and after the Baker recording, Zieff found brilliant musicians to record some of his compositions, but they came out on a small label, Bethlehem, with limited distribution and no fanfare. And Baker's subsequent recordings of Zieff's compositions were either inconspicuous or infuriatingly withheld from release by their producers.

Composer by Vocation and Temperament

As a result, Zieff has spent most of his long career as the "Underground Jazz Composer," the epithet he applied to himself in a 1987 letter to me. Zieff's audience has been a cult, made up mainly of serious-minded musicians and scholarly listeners who take note of the composer credits in the fine print. In jazz, where improvising musicians are spontaneous composers, the bona fides of a real composer, in the classical sense of someone stewing over voicing of diminished seventh chords on staff paper at a keyboard, are suspect. Although Zieff studied trumpet in his youth and sometimes

played piano in his own ensembles, he is a composer by vocation and temperament, nothing more or less, an almost unheard-of specialty, especially in the era of small-band bop and cool jazz, Zieff's formative years.

Until five or ten years ago, it might have been risky to say that Zieff had any following at all, even a cult one. For more than ten years from the day in 1985 when I accidentally sat down beside Robert L. Zieff at a conference on Duke Ellington in Oldham, Lancashire, I thought of Bob as my own private link to his brilliant student Richard Twardzik, who had died tragically young in 1955 and whose story I was writing. It was only when I posted a piece about Twardzik on my website that I became aware of the global spread of Twardzik's audience and, much more surprising to me, of Zieff's audience as well. The story of the website posting is too long to tell here, but it is detailed in the Afterward of my book *Bouncin' with Bartok: The Incomplete Works of Richard Twardzik* (Berkeley Hills Books, 2004). Suffice it to say that I started getting e-mail on Twardzik from all over the world almost daily, and fairly often on Zieff, who was inextricably linked to Twardzik as his mentor, role model and friend.

Who knew? In Holland, Sweden, Norway, England, Germany, Japan, Canada and at least twenty states of the United States there are music lovers with the temerity to google the names of Twardzik and Zieff from time to time in hopes that some day someone might say something about them on the internet. I thank my lucky stars that by doing that they found me (including the surviving members of Twardzik's family). In the late 1990s, when Bob and I switched from infrequent air mail to more frequent e-mail, Bob told me that a Dutch rock band recently released a CD with a track called *Who the Hell is Bob Zieff*? "If you go to my name on Google or some such search engines you will see it," he wrote.

Who the hell is Bob Zieff?

Only then did it dawn on me that Bob's music was not my private passion, far from it. For years, I hoped my book on Twardzik, when I finally finished it, would move a few dozen fans to seek out the auspicious recordings of Zieff's compositions. Now I feel it is not too much to hope that the handful of his compositions that have been auspiciously recorded (as in the discography at the end) will be compiled onto a recording that might catch an international wave and bring Zieff the audience — discriminating, egghead, discerning — he deserves. It took Thelonious Monk almost 20 years to ascend from a minor cult figure to the jazz pinnacle. If it happens for Zieff, it will have taken more than twice that, but I'm sure he loves Monk enough to shrug it off.

Robert L. Zieff was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, about ten miles northeast of Boston, in 1927. His parents were Lithuanian refugees who passed down to their son a small feel for music and a large dose of attitude. Zieff's parents had developed a dogged independent spirit by living through two revolts against Russian domination (1905, 1917) and one German occupation (1913-17). Though their son was born after they emigrated, at what must have seemed a safe distance from foreign oppression, that dogged independence seemed to be part of young Robert's DNA inheritance. Zieff's father was orphaned in the 1905 revolt and grew up to become a circus acrobat, and then a barber in Russian army camps. Zieff's mother was a circus fortune-teller and a hotel chef, "between psychotic episodes," he says. Psychosis apparently ran in the family. One of his brothers was confined to the state mental asylum, and Zieff took his pupil and friend Twardzik to sit with him a couple of times.

A touch of madness was considered a boon to creativity in the Beat Zeitgeist in which Zieff grew up. Seymour Krim summed it up in "The Insanity Bit" (1959), one of the Beat Generation testaments, when he proclaimed: "We live in what for the imaginative person are truly hallucinated times, because there is more life on every side—and the possibility of conceiving this surplus in a dizzying multitude of ways—than our inheritance and equipment enables us to deal with." These were the most frigid days of the Cold War, when burnt shadows in Hiroshima and mutant babies made the news, and grey-flannel vets in the newly-minted suburbs stockpiled backyard bomb-shelters with canned beans. Suburbanites stood on guard for Un-American Activities, defined as any hint of pinko-Commie-fellow traveling. Fluorinating the water system might fight tooth decay but a noisy minority argued that it was really a Bolshevik plot to make citizens into zombies. Alcohol and tobacco consumption reached all-time highs, and in the arts and entertainment communities hard drugs like heroin were pedaled under Formica tabletops, supplied by a Mafia pipeline that also targeted the so-called Black ghettoes. As a fringe art with African-American roots, jazz got a double dose. "The actual living through of much of what is called insanity is

almost an emotional necessity for every truly feeling, reacting, totally human person in America at this time," Krim declared.

Growing Up Autonomous

There is no hint that Zieff's singular vision was abetted by a touch of madness, but there can be no doubt that it was a direct result of a mule-like independence. If his Lithuanian legacy, replete with revolt and exile, was not enough, in young Robert Zieff it was yoked to old-fashioned Yankee self-reliance. "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist," Emerson declared (in "Self -Reliance"). "Insist on yourself; never imitate," he shouted. Whether he knows it or not, Bob Zieff is a latter-day transcendental Emersonian.

Zieff was 18 when the Second War ended, so that he barely missed active service. He enlisted for his obligatory military stint right out of high school, and his timing proved propitious. Soon after he returned to Lynn in mufti, American draftees were being shipped off to the Korean conflict. Zieff enrolled in the Faculty of Music at Boston University. He studied trumpet and composition, and graduated with a Bachelor of Music. Of his professors, Zieff says, with typical diffidence, "Not many were good." Little wonder. Zieff's credo, right from the start, seems to have been to push the harmonic edges of music and challenge conventional voicing by clustering unfamiliar instruments. No one was teaching the lessons he wanted to learn.

Boston and environs, in the early 1950s, was suddenly a hub of jazz activity, and Zieff found plenty of excitement outside the classroom. Berklee College of Music transmogrified out of Schillinger House, one of Boston's small music schools, to become the very first jazz conservatory, attracting hip young music students from around the world. The New England Conservatory ramped up its interest in improvisation and advanced harmonies to keep up. Older Bostonians, Serge Chaloff and Boots Mussulli, were star soloists with the orchestras of Woody Herman and Stan Kenton, respectively, and both would come home to stay in 1951. Two clubs regularly imported front-line jazz talent, the Hi Hat and Storyville, the latter run by an ambitious young piano player named George Wein, who would literally invent the concept of the jazz festival in nearby Newport, Rhode Island, in the middle of the decade. Another club, the Stable, provided playing space for local talent. So did the Melody Lounge in Lynn, where Zieff hung out.

The post-War breed of jazzers was young and well-tutored and curious. The bebop revolution of the 1940s had hardened into formula, a soloists' music featuring sixteenth-note runs with flatted fifths at breakneck tempos. Signs of unrest were audible in Miles Davis's nonet ("the birth of the cool") and Lennie Tristano's disciples in New York, and Dave Brubeck's octet in San Francisco —purveyors of ensemble music with spare solos, French horns and tubas among the saxes and trumpets, redolent of Ravel and Debussy as well as Lester Young and Charlie Parker. If Zieff was too far-out for the core, he was recognized as a prized resource by the more adventurous. Richard Twardzik was one of them. A piano prodigy, he became Zieff's student and then his friend and advocate. He was four years younger than Zieff but admired beyond his years in the Boston music community for his unbridled inventiveness and imagination. His precocious talent, anointed by Serge Chaloff when he recruited him in his teens, reflected well on the reluctant performer Zieff. Another of Zieff's advocates was Dick Wetmore, jazz chameleon with professional skills on both trumpet and violin, and equally at home playing Dixieland or bebop or cool jazz. One year younger than Zieff, Wetmore (b. 1928) organized two rehearsal bands in 1953 and 1954 in hopes of winning recording contracts and breaking out of Boston. One was a conventional quintet with trumpet, saxophone and rhythm trio, and the other was an experimental quartet with Wetmore on violin and Twardzik on piano, given free rein, as well as bass and drums. Both bands used Zieff's arrangements. Ironically the quintet never got beyond the rehearsal room, but the quartet gave rise to two recordings. Those recordings might have been expected, in the normal course of events, to provide the foundation for Zieff's career. The way it worked out, they stand as consummations in the public works of the underground jazz composer.

Getting Heard

Word spread that Zieff's music for the experimental quartet was "advanced," and rehearsals became public events in the Boston jazz community. Sometimes the rehearsals took place afternoons at the Stable, where Twardzik was working nightly as intermission pianist. Other times they took place at 905 Boylston St., a rooming house around the corner from Berklee that had been taken over by jazz musicians. For two or three years, 905 Boylston was a legendary commune. One musician told me

they had a saying: "When you get to the top floor at 905," he said, "you know you're getting high." There, under a potted tree growing upside-down from the ceiling and chickens pecking in the halls, Wetmore and his sidemen worked through the intricacies of the charts under Zieff's watchful eye. His tunes "Rondette" and "Re-Search" move briskly over the scales, and "Mid-Forte" and "Piece Caprice" include rapid exercise-like sequences with occasional octave leaps. The moods are brooding on "Sad Walk," "Just Duo" and "Brash," and winsome with minor drags on "Rondette," "Sad Walk" and "Pomp." There is no sense in Zieff's writing for the ensemble that some instruments belong in the foreground and others in the background. Roles shift, and Zieff's conception of the string bass is especially flexible, sometimes playing arco counterpoint with the horns and other times providing the basic walking rhythm. The ensemble writing is almost idealistically democratic.

For all its technical complexity, the main impression of the music is elegance. "Although some of the compositions do not fall into the familiar four, eight, twelve or sixteen-bar patterns, and none adhere to any commonly-used harmonic structure," says the author of the liner note on the Bethlehem recording that was eventually issued under Wetmore's name, "there is no noticeable effect on the manner in which the quartet swings together." Each note seems to be placed exactly where it has to be, and the musicians obviously relish the parts Zieff has assigned to them in the four-part invention.

By the time the musicians had mastered the compositions to Zieff's satisfaction, the group had changed. "The quartet we put together was a fabulous group," Wetmore recalled with a sigh. "It really was an excellent group, but those things change as people move around." The original bassist, Jimmy Woode, accepted an offer to join the Duke Ellington orchestra, and Richard Twardzik had to leave Boston to avoid heat from narcotics officers. Only the principals involved can possibly know how much better the recording might have been with the original band members, but the recording that resulted, substitutes and all, was (and is) wonderful enough. Musically, it deserved a better fate, but the producers at Bethlehem were leery about its lack of commercial potential and held onto it for over a year before releasing it, almost apologetically, without publicity or promotion. To be fair to the producers, it fit no convenient niche. There were only 35 minutes of music, eight tracks of three to five minutes each, just enough for a 10" LP. It quickly went out of print and was not reissued for 45 years, when Japanese Toshiba brought it out in a kind of boutique virgin vinyl facsimile.

Richard Twardzik, having missed the chance to make the record, was full of regrets, but he found an ingenious way of making up for it. In fall 1955, he was invited to join Chet Baker's quartet for a tour of Europe, and even though he was almost completely unknown outside Boston he had the temerity to tell Baker that if he joined he expected the band to play something more challenging than ballads and jazz standards. A few months earlier, Twardzik had tried to persuade his previous bandleader, Serge Chaloff, to get hold of some Zieff scores. Chaloff was interested, but the only pay-off for Zieff was an oblique compliment. "Serge said I must be good because Dick [Twardzik] didn't seem to like anything," Zieff told me, and then he laughed and said, "This surprised me because I found Dick much more open to things than I was!" Twardzik found Baker more receptive. He told Twardzik he would welcome some original music, and Twardzik turned immediately to Zieff and got him to re-arrange the Wetmore charts for Baker.

Zieff had moved to New York in 1955, where he was living in the Alvin Hotel, a musicians' hostel, and Twardzik got a chance to go over the revamped charts with him on his way to the harbor where he would embark for Europe on the Ile de France. Thus it happened that Zieff's compositions, at the very moment when they were finally being released by Bethlehem in the United States, were being recorded anew by Twardzik with Baker in Paris. Baker's quartet required two recording sessions, but the wonder is that they took no longer given the gem-like perfection of the results.

Twardzik, of course, was well-versed in the intricacies of Zieff's compositions from having rehearsed all but one of them with Wetmore. (Zieff wrote one new piece for Baker, "Mid-Forte," and left out one of the pieces Wetmore recorded, "Shiftful.") His feeling for Zieff's music was understandable from their close association, but Baker too seemed to develop an instant rapport with Zieff, and that was a bit surprising. Baker's reputation from the start was as a kind of primal lyricist, a man who could spin melodies spontaneously and intuitively, with an instinct that communicated feeling in a very direct way. He transfixed a generation of young lovers playing romantic variations on "My Funny Valentine," "Let's Get Lost," and other classic ballads of the American songbook. Amazingly, he played Zieff's complex charts with no less

feeling, bringing warmth and charm to the harmonic puzzles and intricate interplay. Twardzik was a perfect foil for him, seeming to toy with the harmonies, playing trills and grace notes, aloof and bemused. He played staccato to Baker's legato, brains to his heart, thought to his feeling, and the sum was greater than the disparate parts. Together, they brought into being a small body of music that carries fresh surprises with each careful listening. The finest irony, when we compare Wetmore's recordings of Zieff's compositions to Baker's, is the discovery that they are soul-mates. They are the same in texture, feeling, mood and nuance. What I did not realize until I put the chronology together for Twardzik's biography is that those similarities have nothing to do with imitation. Because of the delay in the release of the Wetmore recording, Twardzik never heard it. None of Baker's musicians knew anything about Wetmore's interpretations when they were reading the music in the Paris studio. The musical integrity of the two recordings, obviously, emanated from the composer. So articulate were his charts, so individualistic and personal, that they came out the same at the hands of two quartets an ocean apart, different in instrumentation, reputation, ambition and aspiration.

"That's you, my friend, the common bond," I told Zieff years later. "That's your soul." Bob Zieff is not one to take a compliment without a disclaimer. "I felt the soloing was worlds apart between the Wetmore and Baker dates," he said, "Amazing how fine the interpretation is on the Chet date." And of course he was right. Baker's reading of Zieff is as good as jazz gets in many ways. Wetmore's is not that, but it is, at the very least, beautifully crafted, and it stands as one of the most obscure great records in modern jazz.

Slightly Above Moderate

With this flurry of activity in 1954-55, it must have seemed that the 28-year-old composer was on the verge of a breakthrough into the top ranks. Although he lost an advocate in Richard Twardzik, who died tragically in his Paris hotel room 11 days after recording Zieff's compositions, he gained a more conspicuous one in Chet Baker. I suspect that Zieff would never have entrusted his music to Baker if Twardzik had not been in his band, but having proved his mettle Zieff had no qualms about giving him more. Baker's first recording back in the United States in July 1956 featured two new Zieff compositions, "Slightly Above Moderate" and "Medium Rock." Once again, Zieff appears to have been conciliatory, because he scored the tunes for standard jazz instrumentation rather than the brass and woodwind combination that he preferred. "Medium Rock" is a notably cheerful melody, almost childlike in the A sections (as played by Baker; the bridge, played by Phil Urso on tenor saxophone, is strangely undistinguished). The A sections are hummable, and probably for that reason the tune was given pride of place as the last track on the record. "Slightly Above Moderate" is, in fact, both below and above moderate. It opens as a modal dirge, with trumpet, saxophone and arco bass playing a thick chordal line for eight motionless bars, and then it breaks into a bright rhythm for the next eight bars, and repeats the sequence (A A' A A'). The contrast of the two moods is lost, however, because the players improvise only on the uptempo (A') sections. Zieff surely intended the contrast to be sustained in the solos as well as in the composed framework, and he may have had some mild regrets on hearing the record and discovering that Baker and the others had settled for an easier pattern.

Chet Baker and Crew, the record on which these compositions appeared, was popular, but unfortunately there was no mention of Zieff or any of the other composers (Gerry Mulligan, Al Cohn and Hal Leonard among them) in the notes. It came out soon after Baker's Paris recordings with Twardzik where Zieff did get a mention in the notes, but that record had made a relatively brief American appearance as Chet Baker in Europe, coupled on the second side with tracks by Baker with several unknown European musicians. The actual recordings were the legal property of a French label called Barclay and were only leased by World Pacific, Baker's American label. With such a short shelf life, it did little to raise Zieff's profile. Listeners to *Chet Baker and Crew* who noticed the composer credit, "B. Zieff," in the small print on two of the eight tracks might momentarily have wondered who he was, but there was no easy way of finding the answer.

There could have been more. "There was a film score in the works for me to write and for Chet to be on the soundtrack," Zieff says. Baker's manager, Joe Napoli, approached Zieff about composing the soundtrack for *Compulsion*, based on Meyer Levin's best-selling novelization of a thrill-killing by two college students with Übermensch delusions. The film adaptation was a great success in 1959, with Dean Stockwell and Bradford Dillman as the murderers and Orson Welles as the attorney

who saves them from hanging. It is easy to imagine Baker's moody trumpet accompanying the action, and Zieff's orchestrations providing subtle dramatic contexts for it, but it was not to be. "Joe Napoli had no idea of my thinking of course," Zieff says, "I don't know that I would have done it if it had come through."

Brass and Woodwinds

Zieff may have already been worrying about the artistic compromises he found himself making for the sake of getting a hearing for his music. Whether or not he was, *Chet Baker and Crew* marked an end-point for him— never again would his music be recorded with conventional jazz instrumentation. From here on, it would be brass and woodwinds in uniquely Zieffian configurations.

A few months after Baker recorded the two Zieff tunes in Hollywood, Anthony Ortega recorded five more in New York. Ortega was a versatile and technically gifted reed player who came to prominence as a member of Lionel Hampton's orchestra in 1953, an aggregation of exciting musicians a generation younger than Hampton, including Clifford Brown, Art Farmer, Quincy Jones, Jimmy Cleveland, Gigi Gryce and Alan Dawson. For his first recording as a leader, for the same Bethlehem label that Wetmore's record was on (but featuring "Bethlehem's new 'Micro Cosmic Sound'," according to the cover blurb) Ortega cooked up the concept of presenting himself playing what he calls "straight-forward Jazz" on one side and "a form of chamber-music-styled Jazz" on the other. The former had arrangements for a mid-sized jazz band by Nat Pierce, Woody Herman's arranger. The flip side featured an "orchestra arranged and conducted by Robert Zieff," made up of Ortega on alto saxophone, clarinet or flute with violin (Dick Wetmore), trumpet (Art Farmer) and three low-pitched wind instruments (French horn, bass clarinet and bassoon), all relatively rare in jazz, and string bass.

Zieff provided orchestral settings for two ballads, "I Can't Get Started" and "Ghost of a Chance," and three original compositions, "Four to Four," "Cinderella's Curfew" and "Patting." Essentially, he assigns melodies to the alto saxophone and trumpet, and he writes densely textured chords for the ensemble as a kind of cushion for the melody. In Ortega and Farmer, he is blessed with fluid, light-toned lead voices who can supply swing even when the ensemble occasionally grows static. One of Zieff's special gifts as composer is his use of the string bass as an ensemble voice, but sometimes in these recordings the bassist seems to drag the beat. When I questioned Zieff about it, he told me that the bassist was supposed to be Oscar Pettiford, one of the great players of the day, but Pettiford had a "big argument" with Ortega and was replaced. Zieff was "quite apprehensive" about his replacement, and "he messed up where he was in the pieces — as you may note if you focus on him a bit." So he does, and so apparently does the bassoon on "Four to Four," with dense, swirling chords underneath and a complex interplay of trumpet and saxophone on top. As the most ambitious arrangement, "Four to Four" is easy to admire, but the other two originals are more fully realized examples of Zieff's vision. "Cinderella's Curfew" is smart and witty, opening with 12 bleats from the ensemble (a surreal midnight curfew) and showcasing Ortega's bright flute at the start and in the closing cadenza. "Patting" features a lyrical line that naturally gets a rise from Farmer and Ortega, and it also brings out the best in Wetmore on violin.

Zieff's activities were attracting attention, but his music appears to have been somewhat outré for the prevailing tastes. Leonard Feather allotted him a column inch in *The New Yearbook of Jazz*, forerunner of his jazz encyclopedias, but the entry, sparse as it was, gave space to a non sequitur—

> **ZIEFF, Robert Lawrence**, *composer-arranger*; b. Lynn, Mass 6/4/27. Stud. music at Boston U. Has written for Chet Baker, Bill Harris and others, but favors the Viennese school of composers . . . .

In spite of the radical shift from swing to bebop in the 1940s, the jazz mainstream remained basically diatonic in the 1950s, at least until the last years of the decade, and its instrumentation drew on a short list. In that setting, Bob Zieff's music was hard to peg.

With Friends Like Chet…

There was more to come. In December 1957, Dick Bock, producer of Pacific Jazz, decided to rent New York studio time for a recording that would unite Gerry Mulligan with Chet Baker, the combination that had established his record label internationally in 1952. Bock then decided to turn his trip into a two-week recording spree, and he asked both Mulligan and Baker to organize music and musicians that would amount to several albums in various settings. Besides his record with Baker (*Reunion*), Mulligan would make three

others (*Sing a Song of Mulligan* with Annie Ross, *The Mulligan Song Book* with four other saxophonists, and an album with the Vinnie Burke String Quartet that included Dick Wetmore). Baker would make two, one with minimal accompaniment, guitar and bass, playing standards, and the other, recorded on the same day, with what might be called maximal accompaniment, a small chamber orchestra organized, arranged and conducted by Bob Zieff.

Zieff's music for Baker, intentionally or not, is more difficult than for Tony Ortega. It is also more exquisitely played, with an ensemble blend that seems finely calibrated, and lead voices (principally Baker's trumpet, but also French horn, bass clarinet, or cello) that rise out of the blend in subtle, almost imperceptible shifts. Mood dominates, as in all Zieff's music. "A Minor Benign" is propelled by a restless counterpoint that never quite becomes cheery. "X" is dominated by thick, funereal chords until the mid-point, when Baker initiates a paradoxical sequence of improvised solos over upbeat walking bass. "Twenties Late," so structurally complex that it surprises the listener at different points on each listening, mixes moods and voices between sudden, seemingly unpredictable stops. "Ponder," musing and doleful for the most part, attains a contrasting romantic feel when Baker's trumpet ascends as the lead voice. Throughout, Baker demonstrates his feel for Zieff's music. His bandmates, hand-picked by Zieff, negotiate the complexities of the music deftly if not easily, but Baker does that and still manages to light up the atmosphere with warmth and swing.

The record company might have hoped that Zieff would provide lush settings for showcasing Baker's trumpet, as his friend Gil Evans had recently done for Miles Davis on *Miles Ahead* (May 1957, Columbia). Zieff obviously had no intention of doing that. Baker is the principal voice, all right, but other voices get their say. (On "X," Baker is not heard at all for the first minute and a half.) It is remarkable to think that these complex charts came into being amidst what Zieff called "wild goings-on." Baker was worried about the music he was going to face. "Chet hadn't played in a couple of days, as I recall," Zieff says, "He was very late for the date. I think he was warming up somewhere else before coming to the date." Gerry Mulligan was in the booth, mocking the players and hooting at the difficulty of the charts. Herbie Mann, a rising jazz star, showed up with his flute in hand at Bock's bidding. "I happily told him that there was no flute," Zieff says, but Mann too hung around and joined in the mockery.

After almost three hours of recording, "Bock and Mulligan went into a huddle— and the rest of the recording sessions were canceled," Zieff says. They had about half an album (19 minutes). It would have been possible to release the music with less ambitious fare, using something akin to Ortega's concept, but Bock chose simply to ignore it. Baker said, "The album was never released... because the record company decided that it just wasn't commercial enough." Finally in 1994, six years after Baker's death, 37 years after the recording session, the four tracks were tacked on at the end of a 4-CD box called *Chet Baker: The Pacific Jazz Years*. (The album of ballads that Baker made that same day was also held for 37 years, and half of Mulligan's album with the string quartet, recorded two days earlier, was released 38 years later in 1995 with the rest still to come.) Baker's name alone would have guaranteed reasonable sales at that time, but Baker was too cool or too preoccupied to push for its release.

When Zieff played the studio dubs for Gil Evans, he said, "They should have put these right out. It would have helped us all." Zieff and Evans belonged to a coterie of writers and arrangers, including John Lewis, George Russell, J.J. Johnson, Gunther Schuller, and a few others, who were looking to expand the harmonic resources of jazz, and Zieff's music, as Evans said, would have added weight to the movement. But suppressing the music had the direst consequences for the two principals. Effectively, it meant that Baker would be restricted to a musical diet of ballads and jazz standards for the rest of his days. And, of course, it played a key role in keeping Zieff underground.

Randall's Island

Baker and Zieff were probably still holding out hope for a timely release of the music when Zieff made his most conspicuous performances as an instrumentalist. In 1958, at Randall's Island Jazz Festival, New York City's annual festival before the Newport Festival moved there, Baker's regular piano player, Bobby Timmons, fell ill, and Baker prevailed on Zieff to sit in for him. The quartet played, among other things, Zieff's "Slightly Above Moderate" and "Medium Rock" from *Chet Baker and Crew*. "This made quite a stir," Zieff said, "Mingus and Mulligan came up at the end and were congratulating Chet—on the adventuresomeness among other things."

Around this time, Mulligan commissioned

Zieff to write the book for a quintet he was hoping to form with Lee Konitz, Dick Wetmore, bassist Henry Grimes and drummer Dave Bailey. Zieff wrote the music, but the band never worked. Zieff also worked as personnel coordinator for Gil Evans's first working band in New York, the 19-piece orchestra that would culminate its erratic history by recording *Out of the Cool* (November-December 1960, on Impulse!), one of the seminal documents of post-bop jazz. Zieff was co-producer of the album, but unattributed, and beyond the small circle of New York arrangers, unheralded.

In 1959, the year after Zieff played with Baker at the Randall's Island Festival, he was given his own spot. He conducted a band made up of woodwinds, brass and string bass in several of his compositions. Band members included Phil Sunkel, co-leader and trumpet, Tom Stewart, trumpet, Steve Lacy, soprano saxophone, Harvey Phillips, reeds, Dick Meldonian, alto and tenor saxophones, Gene Allen, bass clarinet, and Bill Takas, bass.

Zieff's activities now rated two column inches in the first comprehensive edition of the *Encyclopedia of Jazz* (Feather 1960). The increased length was mainly made up by the statement: "First appearance as leader, playing all originals, at Randall's Island Festival Aug. '59, using unusual instrumentation with six woodwinds and brass." It is impossible to know if the encyclopedist Leonard Feather, himself a composer, cited the instruments out of admiration or befuddlement. With the addition of string bass as the one and only rhythm instrument, it is still, as it was then, a distinctly Zieffian deployment of resources. It is not hard to imagine, in the narrow jazz world of the time, the pressures on Zieff to conform, and it is also not hard to imagine the composer's resolve to compose music for the configuration that actualized the music he heard in his head.

Going Underground

Not long after his debut at Randall's Island, Zieff moved to Los Angeles, where he worked on educational music programming for the Pacifica network. His professional life became focused on education and teaching. He had been recognized as a gifted teacher from his earliest days in Boston, profoundly aware of structural secrets and capable of communicating them. His New York ambitions, for each momentary triumph, had been frustrated by recordings that went unheard, work that went uncredited, and promises that went unfilled. Staying the course, Zieff must have known, exposed him to pressures, constant and nagging, to make compromises and fall into line. That was not Zieff's way. He chose another route. Soon after he arrived in LA, Gil Evans wrote asking him to come back and form a band with him, but, Zieff says, "I wasn't for turning around after I got myself away from New York so recently." Over the years, he went where his teaching took him, and at one time or another he taught for the LA School District, UCLA, Shippensburg State College, Temple, and several other institutions. He has received grants for composing and teaching from the National Endowment of the Arts, the Ford Foundation, the National Endowment of the Humanities, the Pennsylvania Arts Council, and other bodies. He has reviewed music books and lectured on improvisation, jazz critics, radio and television, jazz education, and other topics. And through it all, he has composed music on his own terms.

Finding Bob Zieff

Bob Zieff was hardly a recluse, but he became hard to find. After 1960, his entry in the *Encyclopedia of Jazz* was dropped in all supplements and revisions. When I accidentally sat down beside him at the Duke Ellington Conference in England in 1985, he had just presented a lecture called *An Ellington Quintych: Works Interrelated by Harmony and Architectonics*, and the program identified him as Robert L. Zieff.

"Are you Bob Zieff?" I asked. He looked at me a while and then he said, "Of course," as if the question was stupid. But it had been almost 30 years since I had first noticed the name in fine print under five titles on one side of a Chet Baker LP. I had never seen his name in print since.

In 1982, three years before I ran into Zieff, I asked Chet Baker about him between sets at a Toronto jazz club called Bourbon Street. One of my questions was why Zieff was not better known when he was so obviously talented, and Baker, behind hooded eyes, opined, "Some people don't much want to give real talent a break." I am not certain whether Zieff shares that sentiment but I suspect he does. If so, that would make it the one thing Baker told me that night that was almost true.

Chet Baker, notwithstanding his affection for Zieff's music, was not much help to him over the years. At that same interview, Baker told me that he met Zieff when Zieff was working at a Los Angeles radio station. I later learned that they never met in California, and their first face-to-face

meeting was in the New York recording studio at the aborted chamber music session. Baker meant no harm by his misleading answer. By the time I asked him that question, he hardly knew where he was, let alone Zieff. But looking for Zieff in California was, for me, a trip down the garden path.

Baker carried Zieff's compositions with him whenever he could, but his life became peripatetic and zany, beset with drug convictions and physical problems of various kinds. Keeping track of his book of arrangements was beyond him. I asked Zieff what happened to his charts for the chamber ensemble, and he said, with an audible shrug, "Chet left the music in a taxi and could never track them." Because the charts had a way of slipping through Baker's fingers, Zieff's music got little play. There is a fine performance recording of "Brash" from Stuttgart immediately after the Paris recording, and several performances of "Sad Walk" ranging from good to perfunctory (as indicated in the list at the end). Zieff remembers Baker playing "Ponder" in concerts, adapted apparently for quartet, but so far no live performances of it have shown up, or of any others. "At one time there were a number of my pieces that he did that were never recorded," Zieff says, "I would guess they were lost."

It was not always Baker's fault. "Chet wrote me about recording some of the things of mine with strings in Italy—in the 1970s I think," Zieff said, "But he was going to have an arranger over there do it. So I nixed it."

Zieff shows no hard feelings and no remorse. Baker didn't cry about it. Why should Zieff?

The Best Revenge

Besides, going underground did not mean that he was buried. Zieff has never stopped composing for long. Since leaving New York in his early thirties, his public life has been circumscribed and his audiences have been local. After several moves, he settled in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, home of Dickinson College. Since 1987, he has led the Bob Zieff Concert Jazz Band as opportunities arose. The Zieff configuration remains resolutely intact. Instrumentation is trumpet, trombone, tuba, soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, bass clarinet and string bass. Best of all, his standards remain intact. He started the band because, he says, "I finally found some good players in the area."

In the grand scheme, Zieff survived with complete integrity. Neither survival nor integrity were probabilities in Zieff's jazz generation. Zieff's star pupil, Richard Twardzik, was dead at 24. Zieff's champion, Chet Baker, was dead at 58, with a couple of decades of artistic skidding. As for integrity, some of the toughest minds among Zieff's contemporaries wilted and ended up pandering to pop tastes, most notably Miles Davis but also Donald Byrd, Freddie Hubbard, Herbie Hancock and numerous others, even Gil Evans. Zieff escaped all that, and the price he paid, though he may not consider it a price at all, was to live a quiet, scholarly life, feeling the affection of his students and the admiration of the part-timers —doctors, salesmen, and mostly (like him) teachers — he recruited to play his uncompromising music.

To the larger world, he became inconspicuous, not only dropping out of the spotlight but vacating the stage altogether. His glory years— and, again, there is no hint that Zieff thinks of them that way — came to his mind mainly when people like me tracked him down, and then it was not always about him in the first instance but about Richard Twardzik or about Chet Baker. The reason I might think of those as his glory years, and the reason I might think that his underground years exacted a price, is because Bob Zieff had a singular vision, an apprehension of the way music can be, a unique way of hearing harmonies, and he got to put those on display for about six years, from age 24 to 30, almost 50 years ago, and after that he nurtured the vision/apprehension/harmonic sense out of the public view, underground.

There can be no regrets. As I said, if he had done things differently he might have ended up overdosed like Twardzik or defenestrated like Baker or — and this is surely Zieff's worst nightmare — fusioneering jazz and rock 'n' roll, or synthesizing caterwauls for divas and divos. He did nothing of the kind, and that, in the end, is the best revenge.

Swan on a Pond

Who the hell is Bob Zieff? As he approaches his eighties, we can hazard an answer. He is an American composer and arranger, a Yankee original, who held out against the prevailing orthodoxies and managed to get a little more than two hours of his music recorded under studio conditions by top-rank professional musicians by the time he was 30. After that, he protected his music from the compromises and dilutions which he despised by going underground and writing music for which he himself has so far been the main audience. Whether above-ground or underground, his music is the same, a projection of a unique sensibility,

characterized always by a tense interplay of harmonies that somehow resolve into fresh, surprising melody. Like a swan on a pond, his music is busy underneath and graceful on top.

The world is finally ready, it seems, for Bob Zieff. Bob Zieff has been ready for a long time, of course, as long as the world would take him on his own terms. It is time to gather Zieff's auspiciously recorded works from their disparate sources and put them together where they belong. It is time to ransack Zieff's private stockpile of compositions and beg him to conduct them in concerts. It has taken a long time, but the music world, it seems, has finally caught up.

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Auspicious Recordings of the Compositions of Robert L. Zieff

Wetmore Plays Zieff. Coastal Studios, NYC. September or October 1954. Dick Wetmore, violin; Ray Santisi, piano; Bill Nordstrom, bass; Jimmy Zitano, drums; Bob Zieff, composer, arranger and conductor.

Piece Caprice (5:02)
Just Duo (4:55)
Pomp (4:00)
Sad Walk (5:19)
Brash (3:53)
Re-Search (4:44)
Shiftful (3:46)
Rondette (2:54)

Dick Wetmore. Bethlehem BCP-1035 (10" LP, 1955); virgin vinyl facsimile Toshiba-EMI TOJJ-1035 (Japan 2000)

Chet Baker in Paris. Studio Pathé-Magellan, Paris. 11 October 1955. Chet Baker, trumpet; Richard Twardzik, piano; Jimmy Bond, bass; Peter Littman, drums.

Rondette (2:09)
Mid-Forte (3:06)
Sad Walk (4:13)
Re-Search (4:57)
Just Duo (4:10)

Same personnel and place. 14 October 1955

Piece Caprice (5:08)
Pomp (4:39)
Brash (5:53)

Remaining title, "The Girl From Greenland," composed by Richard Twardzik, not Zieff. EmArcy 837 474-2 [France 1988]. Originally Barclay Records [France]. First released in the United States on *Chet Baker in Europe*, World-Pacific 1218 [1956].

Lars Gullin and the Chet Baker Quartet. Stuttgart. 15 October 1955. Chet Baker, trumpet; Richard Twardzik, piano; Jimmy Bond, bass; Peter Littman, drums.

Brash (4:36)

Other titles, not by Zieff, include Lars Gullin, baritone saxophone. Produced by Lars Westin. *Lars Gullin*, Vol. 2. Dragon DRCD 224 [Sweden 1992].

Chet Baker and Crew. Forum Theater, Los Angeles, CA. 24, 25 or 31 July 1956. Chet Baker, trumpet; Phil Urso, tenor saxophone; Bobby Timmins, piano; Jimmy Bond, bass; Peter Littman, drums.

Slightly Above Moderate (6:59)
Medium Rock (5:30)

Other titles not composed by Zieff. *Chet Baker and Crew.* Pacific Jazz 81205 [1993]. Produced by Richard Bock. Originally Pacific Jazz 1224/ST 1004.

Anthony Ortega. New York City, November 1956. Art Farmer, trumpet; Jim Buffington, French horn; Dick Hafer, bass clarinet; Bob Tricarico, bassoon; Dick Wetmore, violin; Abdul A. Malik, bass; Robert Zieff, composer (except as noted), arranger and conductor.

Four to Four (3:12)
I Can't Get Started (2:53 V. Duke - I. Gershwin, arr. Zieff)
Cinderella's Curfew (5:55)
Ghost of a Chance (3:30 Young - Washington - Crosby, arr. Zieff)
Patting (5:38)

Ortega, Jazz for Young Moderns. Bethlehem BCP-79. Reissue Toshiba-EMI TOCJ-62073 (Japan 2000). Anthony Ortega, *Earth Dance*. Fresh Sound 325 (Spain 2001).

Chet Baker with Bob Zieff. New York City, 9 December 1957. Chet Baker, trumpet; Jimmy Buffington, French horn; Gene Allen, bass clarinet; Bob Tricarico, bassoon; Seymour Barab, cello; Ross Savakus (aka Saunders), bass; Bob Zieff, composer, arranger and conductor.

Twenties Late (5:38)
A Minor Benign (4:17)
Ponder (4:34)
X (4:35)

First release on CD-4 of Chet Baker, *The Pacific Jazz Years*. 0777 (4-CD 1994).

Chet Baker Sextet. Milan, Italy, March 1977. Chet Baker, trumpet; Jacques Pelzer, soprano saxophone, flute; Gianni Basso, tenor saxophone; Bruce Thomas, piano; Lucio Terzano, bass; Giancarlo Pillot, drums.

Sad Walk (4:46)

The Incredible Chet Baker Plays and Sings. Carosello CD 9022 (Italy, n.d.)

Chet Baker Trio. Jazzhus Montmartre, Copenhagen, 4 October 1979. Chet Baker, trumpet; Doug Raney, guitar; Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen, bass.

Sad Walk (10:05)

Chet Baker, *Daybreak*. SteepleChase SCCD 31142.

Chet Baker Trio. Jazz Festival, Münster, West Germany, June 1985. Baker, trumpet; Philipe Catherine, guitar; Jean Louis Rassinfosse, bass.

Sad Walk (9:58)

Chet Baker, *Strollin'*. ENJA 5005 (Germany 1986)

Chet Baker Quartet Featuring Dick Twardzik: Reissue of the

1955 recordings of Bob Zieff's Compositions. Universal Music S.A.S. CD Code 980 986 - 2, LC 00699 (France 2004). Chet Baker, trumpet; Dick Twardzik, piano; Jimmy Bond, bass; Peter Littman, drums

Sad Walk (4:14)
Just Do (4:12)
Brash (5:56)
Rondette (2:10)
Piece Caprice (5:10)
Mid-Forte (3:07)
Re-Search (4:59)
Pomp (4:41)