

of current classical music—or jazz, for that matter.”

Reflecting on the current jazz scene, Desmond grew wistful.

“In the jazz world at the present moment, I get a funny listless feeling, like a graduate of a school that’s about to fold wandering around the halls,” he said. “Between the discotheques and the avant-garde and the folk scene, there isn’t much left. If jazz is really going to become increasingly a form of personal protest—which will make it difficult to listen to even for people who love jazz—then it’s hard to see how it’s going to be supported, besides as a sparetime hobby.”

But, he said, he is not at odds with all the goals of the avant-garde: “I don’t see any reason why jazz shouldn’t have a wider range of emotional expression. Charlie Mingus, for instance, covers a wide range. He can be fascinating and very moving to listen to, as well as really hitting you with something very difficult. But you can’t just do one thing and expect people to come out and pay to listen to it.”

DESMOND’S OWN listening preferences lean toward what must in the current spectrum be considered mainstream jazz. “I find myself listening to Al Cohn and Zoot Sims, Bill Evans, Miles Davis, Jim Hall,” he said. “A couple of more years of this, and I’ll have become an archconservative, the way things keep moving in jazz. But I don’t know what the alternatives are; you have to either reprogram yourself every six weeks, like Jimmy Giuffre (which I admire the spirit behind but certainly couldn’t do myself), or maybe John Lewis has the best solution—he’s always terribly involved in the avant-garde music, but it doesn’t change his own musical approach at all—he has the best of both worlds.”

The freewheeling and always swinging tenor-sax tandem of Cohn and Sims, Desmond said, “are still my favorite band to listen to. So many things you hear are like working—you feel dutifully that you should go and hear what the guys are doing, and you do, and you may enjoy parts of it or aspects of it. But after that, to go and hear Al and Zoot is like having your back rubbed. It’s pure self-indulgence, but I don’t see anything wrong with that at all. If somebody feels that way musically, that’s the way the music should be. They’re not sacrificing their integrity or doing anything they don’t want to do. . . . They enjoy it and you enjoy it, and that’s where I think it should be at.”

Desmond, however, said he sympathizes with the young players.

“It’s really incredibly difficult for anybody starting out today,” he commented. “I’m glad it’s not me. To become acceptable to the contemporary musicians—if you are a kid—you have to more or less do what they’re doing; so it’s almost compulsory that you have to be a ‘new thing’ player, or else go to Eddie Condon’s, which is practically no choice. That’s not really a good state of affairs, but I have no idea what can be done about it.”

Such matters evidently are a genuine concern to Desmond, but there are aspects of the “new thing” that his sense of the absurd responds to:

“I remember seeing a TV ‘happening’ with Don Ellis—guys on ladders and guys waving sheets and hitting the piano, and I took a look and there was Eddie Shaughnessy, and there was Lalo Shifrin, and I said to myself: ‘My God . . . they can’t be serious, running around waving sheets and climbing ladders. I’d like to do something like that with Al and Zoot and Bobby Brookmeyer, three or four guys like that, but everybody would get totally drunk first. That way there would be some justification. But if you don’t have that kind of rationale for a thing like that, you’re in terrible trouble.’”

The spectacle of discotheques also stirs the sardonic side of the Desmond wit.

“It’s almost compulsory; every party in New York for the past four years has been a gradual progression from the past to the discotheque,” he said. “It’s one of the smaller steps of the century. There are all kinds of enforced techniques of communication, when conversation is required. It’s like one-way radio communication with Mars. You get somebody’s ear in your mouth and you give your signal, and then over and out and change position.”

“It discourages small talk, because few things are worth such a massive effort to communicate—except ‘Will you come home with me?’, or something like that, but not ‘It’s certainly hot in here.’ If it edits American social conversation, the discotheque may have performed some small function.”

“I still think it might be possible to have a discotheque with all the feverish animation and social mystique and yet with some kind of music that wouldn’t be all that painful: Muddy Waters, Count Basie, Mose Allison—all kinds of straight-ahead, no-problem-to-dance-to funky music. In a way, the current idiocy is part of it, but it can’t last—that quality of having your mind obliterated—because it doesn’t work like that if you have any reaction to music . . . it doesn’t banish thought; it’s more like constant fingernails on the blackboard. If anything, it makes you think too much. There must be a large number of people who just put up with it because it’s the only game in town.”

The dancing, too, leaves much to be desired, according to Desmond:

“It really seems nostalgic now to think about the days when bands were playing really beautiful arrangements, and kids were doing very fantastic and intricate dances and were totally happy with their dancing, which, God knows, was a different thing from the frug and all that. And they were enjoying the music at the same time. We didn’t realize it then, but I guess that was one of the last outposts of the vanishing elegance of this world.”

DESMOND, WHO HIMSELF could be described as one of the outposts of vanishing elegance in the jazz world, still has no plans to form his own group, though he said he feels that changes are forthcoming.

“Sometimes I get the urge,” he said about forming a group, “but in exchange for the few minor problems I have with the quartet now, I would probably inherit some very comparable ones, plus a whole raft of others I don’t have to worry about now. With the jazz scene the way it is, to start out all over again, playing clubs and going through that whole in-between period, seems pointless—though it would be fun in some ways.”

“I would imagine, though, that the quartet will grind to a majestic halt in about 1½ years. . . . I’m not sure; I’ve been saying things like that since 1954, so you can’t really put too much faith in it. But it’s getting along toward that time. I could be wrong; it might go on for centuries, but I think Dave will probably want to stay home and write and do other things. I’ll pretty definitely be leaving, whether the quartet continues or not, unless some horrible disaster takes place between now and then.”

Desmond, too, wants to do other things:

“I’m working on a play (it’s too formless yet to say anything about it much) and a couple of magazine pieces, things like that. I have this great reputation as a writer, primarily because I haven’t written anything, and it almost seems a shame to spoil it, but sooner or later I’ll have to make a move. I’m interested in making people laugh, which seems like a worthy cause. Not that I’m