

PROFILES

SUPER CHOPS

SOME lives pivot on paradox. Dave McKenna has been a jazz pianist thirty years, but it is almost impossible to get him to talk about music beyond, for example, the random observation that there is no such thing as the pure improvisation he constantly practices. He has lived on Cape Cod twelve years, but he has only been in the ocean once. In a society that defies the automobile, he does not drive. He is the hardest-swinging jazz pianist of all time, but he lives a quiet, unswinging middle-class life made up largely of eating, playing rumbustious Ping-Pong with his sons, Steven and Douglas, and watching sports on television—

particularly the Red Sox, who have been with him all his life. He plays the piano with supreme authority but considers himself a barroom or dance-band pianist. The amplified bass fiddle has become the dominant instrument in jazz during the past decade, but McKenna's left hand is so rhythmically powerful that it brushes the new bassists aside. He is, along with Tommy Flanagan and Jimmy Rowles and Ellis Larkins, among the best of the post-Tatum pianists, but he stays low: he is rarely in New York, and in order to hear him one must travel to Schenectady, the Cape, Rochester, Boston, Newport.

He spent two weeks at Bradley's last fall, and one night before work he had dinner at Antolotti's, on East Forty-ninth Street. He was dolled up in a three-piece tan corduroy suit, and he ate with his customary relish—a dozen clams on the half shell, two orders of gnocchi with marinara sauce, veal piccata, salad, and cheesecake, all washed down with a couple of Martinis, a white Corvo, a good Barolo, and espresso. He delivered this brief litany between Martinis: "I'm crazy about Italian cooking, and my ambition is to eat at every good Italian restaurant in



Dave McKenna

New York. There must be at least fifty of them. When I was at Bradley's last year, I went to Gino's, on Lexington at Sixtieth, and the Amalfi, which moved a while ago from West Forty-seventh to East Forty-eighth. Tony Bennett hangs out there when he's in town. I go to Patsy's, on Fifty-sixth back of Carnegie Hall. Ballato's, down on East Houston, is great, and Joe's, on Macdougall, is a down-home, peasant-type place. I come here a lot, and I guess Elston Howard does, too, because I've seen him twice. I haven't been to Vesuvio, on West Forty-eighth, for years, but it used to be fine. I've been to Romeo Salta, and I go to San Marco, on West Fifty-second. I went recently to San Marino with Zoot and Louise Sims. I tried Il Monello, at Seventy-sixth and Second, and Parioli, where Bill Buckley goes. Some guitarist from Boston told me that Parioli has the best chocolate cake he ever had, which is interesting, because I usually don't go to Italian restaurants for chocolate cake. I'd be willing to take gigs in New Haven just for the white pizza they have there. I guess I'd like to be a Craig Claiborne. That's my idea of putting your heart and your soul into your work."

He arrived replete at Bradley's, and during his first set, in which he built a medium head of steam, he fashioned one of his free-association songfests. He has said that stringing together songs with common themes helps pass the time when he is playing. (He also likes to speed up fast numbers, as if he were trying to get them over with as quickly as possible.) He warmed up with "Darn That Dream," "At Sundown," and "When Day Is Done"—which falsely presaged an essay on songs having to do with evening or night, for he abruptly veered into "Silk Stockings" and "Blue Skies." Then came "My Ship," and he had found his text: "Lost in a Fog" was followed by "Red Sails in the Sunset," "On Moonlight Bay," "How Deep Is the Ocean?," "The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea," "Wave," and "I Cover the Waterfront." He closed the set with a beautiful, rocking blues and Zoot Sims' "Red Door."

McKenna sat down at a table near the piano, a fine concert grand left to Bradley Cunningham by the late Paul Desmond. It is both a gift to the first-rate pianists who inhabit the club and a retroactive gibe at Cunningham, who, Desmond knew, should have long since replaced his venerable upright with a good piano. McKenna is a man-mountain, whose perfect proportions contain a massive eagle's head, a logger's forearms, and hot-dog fingers. He is well over six feet, and, possibly for streamlining, he wears his brown hair flat and straight back. When he is at the Cape, he likes to talk about New York and how much he'd love to live here again, and when he is in New York he likes to talk about the Cape. For a while, he spoke with some heat of why the Red Sox had blown the pennant, and when he was asked how the summer had been at the Cape he said, "Good. I like to be around salt water, but the ocean is overstated. Sand

is gritty and the ocean has waves. Last year, I went swimming in a freshwater pond, and if I lived near one I'd go in three or four times a day—or would have. Since I've gained weight, I'd never go to a public beach. I'd have to have a private pond."

ONE afternoon a year or so before that, McKenna, who was stretched out on a beach chair in his back yard in South Yarmouth, talked about his house and his early life. The house is a gray-shingled bungalow and the back yard is largely macadam, from which sprout two basketball nets. A stone barbecue and a picnic table at one edge look unused. The surrounding landscape is scrub pine and sand.

McKenna had on a red-flowered sports shirt, worn outside khaki pants, and sneakers. His chair was surrounded by the sports pages of the *Boston Globe* and *Herald American*. "My wife, Frankie, got the house for ten thousand," McKenna said. "And we had to borrow a thousand for the down payment. It only has three small bedrooms. I could use a music room. It's still fresh air here, but the new houses are beginning to hem me in. When we moved, it was all woods. There was nothing next door, and there was nothing behind me. I figured no one would build across the street between me and Route 6, but they did. The beauty of being here was all that land to roam in. I'm used to that from the fields and

farms there were around Woonsocket, Rhode Island, where I was born. I was born there in 1930. My mother, Catherine Reilly, came from South Boston. She still plays piano. She studied violin with a member of the Boston Symphony. She played the top tunes of the time, but not too forcefully—'Lazybones' and 'Stormy Weather.' She's got good ears and knows all the chords and can transpose anything, and she reads better than I do. But I don't think she ever could have been a dedicated musician. She's got too much of a sense of humor. My father was from Woonsocket. He drove a parcel-post truck. He was a street drummer—that is, he played snare drum in military bands, like the Sons of Italy—and he also played drums in dance bands. He had a fantastic roll. His musical likes included brass bands and the 'William Tell Overture.' But there's nothing wrong with that. Sousa marches are really put together well, and I've always thought 'The Star-Spangled Banner' should never be sung but should be played by a good Sousa or Goldman band. A brass band makes it much more stirring. My father's father and grandfather had been drummers before him—his Grandfather McKenna played drums in the Civil War. I was the first non-drummer in three or four generations. I have a younger brother, Donald, and two sisters, Jean and Pat. Jean teaches school and lives with my parents, in Woonsocket, and she's a pretty good semi-pro singer. She's not a belt-er and she has good pitch. Pat lives in Barrington, Rhode Island, and is married to a schoolteacher. Woonsocket wasn't a bad place to grow up in. It was a family town, and it was mostly French-Canadian, like all the mill towns in New England. There was semi-professional baseball, and we used to go up to Boston to see the Braves and the Red Sox. I've been a Sox fan since I was seven. I was always more of a fan than a player, although I was in a kind of softball league for a while in New York in the fifties. I played in the outfield, and the team I was with included Zoot Sims and Carl Fontana and Al Cohn, and we played in



"It's a really good feeling. I was always 'Congressman Bothelder,' but now they've begun to call me 'the durable Congressman Bothelder.'"



"No, thanks—I don't do bubble gum."

Central Park. We didn't have a name, and once we beat Jimmy Dorsey's band, which showed up in uniforms. My mother didn't think it was right for her to teach me piano herself, so she sent me to the nuns in parochial school, and they taught me that in-between music with John Thompson music books, and I wasn't interested. But I listened every morning on the radio to 'The 9:20 Club' from Boston, and I heard records by Benny Goodman and Nat Cole and the boogie-woogie pianists. When I was twelve or thirteen, I started playing at showers and weddings, and I joined the musicians' union at fifteen. When I was sixteen, I played with Boots Mussulli around Milford, which was just over the border from us in Massachusetts. Milford was eighty per cent Italian and eighty per cent musicians. That's where I learned about Italian food. There were never any bass players, so I had to finagle around a lot with my left hand to make it sound full, which is why I have that guitar effect—that strumming thing in my left hand now.

"I joined Charlie Ventura's band in 1949. Jackie Cain and Roy Kral had just left, but he still had Ed Shaughnessy on drums and Red Mitchell on bass. I went with Woody Herman's band in 1950, and stayed until I was drafted, in 1951. That was the band that had Conte Candoli and Rolf Ericson and Doug Mettome and Don Fagerquist and Al Cohn and Sonny Igoe. I was

a disgraceful, drunken kid, and Woody should have fired me. But the Army solved that. After I was drafted, I tried to connect with a service band, but it didn't work. I took basic training with the M.P.s and I did a lot of K.P., and then they sent me overseas—to Japan, where I went to cooking school, and on to Korea. The Koreans were not allowed to touch any of the food, so we had to do all the cooking. I learned how to bake a cake for a hundred men, and how to make pancakes, but my biscuits were like rocks. I remember the *bong* they made when they landed on the mess tray. I was over there a year and a half. We could hear the artillery all the time, and once we were strafed and I was the last guy left in the cook tent. It was a situation where you pressed yourself so close to the ground your belly button made an imprint. That same time, a fat mess sergeant fainted after he discovered that two .50-calibre bullets passed right through the place he always sat in the tent. There was a service band up the road in Korea, and a drummer from Providence who was in it tried to get me in, but the only opening was for accordion. I'd never played one, so this drummer and another guy borrowed one, and they pumped it while I tried to play, but I couldn't get the hang of it, and I didn't make the band.

"When I got home, Boots Mussulli said I sounded the same, even though

I'd hardly touched the piano since I'd been away—which is strange, because I've never had that many chops. My mother desperately begged me to use the G.I. Bill and go to college, but I rejoined Charlie Ventura. I spent the rest of the fifties with Ventura and Gene Krupa and with Stan Getz and a group that Zoot Sims and Al Cohn had. I was with Buddy Rich in 1960. I worked a lot in the sixties with Bobby Hackett and at Eddie Condon's place, in the East Fifties. New York was my headquarters, even though I never had an apartment and lived in hotels. Once in a while, I'd go back to Milford just to eat."

BETWEEN 1970 and 1977, McKenna's headquarters were at The Columns, in West Dennis.

Housed in a handsome mid-nineteenth-century clapboard building to which huge antebellum columns had been added, it was owned and operated by a gentle, self-effacing man named Warren Maddows, whose great delight was to join McKenna near closing time for a couple of Tony Bennett-inspired songs. (Maddows died in 1978, and The Columns closed.) At first, McKenna played on a bandstand in the small bar to the left of the front door. It was cluttered and noisy and cheerful, and musicians like Bobby Hackett and Dick Johnson frequently sat in. (Hackett said he considered McKenna "the greatest piano player in the world," and though he was often given to hyperbole, he meant it.) During the summer of 1971, Teddi King sang with McKenna for a month. Zoot Sims and Earl Hines and Teddy Wilson and Joe Venuti and Red Norvo spelled McKenna when he took his rare off-Cape jobs. Maddows never made any money from The Columns, but he often kept it open into the winter, and he gradually expanded it. By the summer of 1977, he had added a spacious yellow-and-white tent to the rear of the building, and late that August he hired Teddy Wilson to play duets with McKenna. One set in the middle of the first week went like this:

McKenna, gleaming in a blue shirt, white pants, and white shoes, sat at a low upright and played "Lover, Come

Back to Me," "Dixieland One-Step," "Misty," and "That's a Plenty," and retired. Wilson, in a conservative tie and jacket, effortlessly unreeling "Stompin' at the Savoy," "Tea for Two," "Basin Street Blues," "I Can't Get Started," "Moonglow," and an Ellington medley. McKenna, his face impassive and pleasant, listened to Wilson, and, when Wilson finished, talked about music. McKenna talks rapidly and without preamble. "There was a point in the mid-fifties when I got away from jazz and into listening to songs," he said. "Harold Arlen and Jerome Kern and Alec Wilder. Songwriters are my heroes, and I've always wanted to be one. Take Alec Wilder's 'I'll Be Around.' That's the greatest pop song ever written. I should be learning new songs every day. Instead, I'm playing a lot of the same tunes, and I don't like that. I miss Bobby Hackett; he taught me a lot of tunes. Some pianists can play entire scores, but I can't do that. I don't think I know *any* of 'My Fair Lady' or any Leonard Bernstein." When McKenna complains, which he does a lot, it means he's feeling fine. He said, "I'd have more fun if I could play just two nights a week. With six nights, you don't have the enthusiasm. It takes the heat off you when you play for dancing, which people are happier doing than just sitting around in their bodies listening. People are always after you to play hot, but I don't have super chops. I don't know if I play jazz. I don't know if I qualify as a bona-fide jazz guy. I play barroom piano. I like to stay close to the melody. When I play, I just tool along, and the only thing I think about is what I'm going to play next. But I like to sound even and professional, to keep everything on an even keel. Very few jazz musicians are complete improvisers. The greatest have little patterns they follow. I have my own patterns, my own licks. Sometimes I play in runs, because people like to hear those things. Also, I'm getting paid to do that, so I have to stick them in once in a while. But I like to de-emphasize them, I like to play more sparingly. I play so many single-note lines because I've listened more to horn players than to piano players. But I loved Nat Cole. He came the closest to bending notes on the piano, except maybe Oscar Peterson. I'd rather listen to Nat Cole than Art Tatum. Tatum makes you sweat too much. I'm more at home playing alone. I appreciate the coloration of a bassist, but I'd rather play alone or with a little band, I'd love to

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play in a Dixieland band like the one I worked in at Condon's. 'Whiskeyland jazz,' Hackett called it."

A second upright had been placed akimbo to the first, and after the intermission Wilson sat down at the piano that he and McKenna had used and McKenna took the second one. The two pianists faced one another, and McKenna, looking as if he were about to play in his first recital, immediately deferred to Wilson, who selected the tunes and set the tempos. (At the start of the gig, McKenna, in typical knock-himself-down fashion, had expressed fear that he would not be able to keep up with the fast tempos he knew Wilson would set.) The first number, "How High the Moon," was fast, and a pattern was set: Wilson played the first chorus, McKenna soloed for two choruses, Wilson soloed, and the two exchanged four-bar breaks before playing the last chorus together. Neither pianist betrays much emotion when he plays. Wilson, his back straight and his head tipped slightly forward, occasionally shuts his eyes briefly and presses his lips together, and McKenna, bent over the keyboard like a tall person stooping to talk to a child, wrinkles his brow and evinces a slight gathering of cheek muscles below his right ear. In recent years, Wilson, perhaps weary at last of perfecting his exquisite miniaturistic solos, has relied more and more on his patterns, and his playing has taken on an automatic gentility. McKenna, who once resembled a controlled Tatum with dashes of Nat Cole and Wilson, has been going in the opposite direction. His rhythmic power, spelled out by his ingenious left hand—an avalanche of guitar chords, ground figures, sharp offbeats, and pouring single-note melodic lines—has become unfettered. The rock-rock, rock-rock, rock-rock of his time becomes irresistible: it is hypnotic, ecstatic. Nothing remains still before it. And his right hand has grown more and more startling. He places his notes so that they jar and sharpen the beat. He likes to emphasize the first note of a phrase and then, unexpectedly, the fifth or sixth. He likes to shake up the listener's rhythmic expectations. He also likes to insert madcap arpeggios and double-time phrases. It is a joyous, triumphant, foraging style, and by the end of Wilson and McKenna's second number it was clear that McKenna was helplessly blowing Wilson out of the water. Wilson would effect an almost transparent pointillistic chorus, and then McKenna, his left hand rolling and rumbling, would roar into his chorus, and all

memory of what Wilson had just played would be gone. A fast "Who's Sorry Now?" went by, and the two settled into a long medium blues. Wilson approaches the blues as if he were nibbling grapes, but McKenna shoulders his way in, scattering boogie-woogie basses, wild stop-time choruses, and thumping low-register explosions in both hands. Wilson remained unperturbed, and the last number, a short, driving "I'll Remember April," was anticlimactic.

WHEN The Columns failed to reopen in 1978, McKenna went into the Lobster Boat, several miles down Route 28 toward Hyannis. It has a huge white mock ship's prow that points into a parking lot running along the highway. Behind the prow are a lozenge-shaped lounge and a big, boxy dining room. The lounge has a bar and a small bandstand opposite, which holds an upright piano. The wall back of the bandstand is curved and contains a couple of dozen portholes, each of them fitted out with a hanging plant. The piano bench is flanked by carriage lamps fastened to the wall, and there are candlesticks on the piano and a glass chandelier over it. The ceiling is beamed and decorated with signal flags and ship's wheels, and the patrons sit below in a comfortable rummage shop furnished with sofas, director's chairs, captain's chairs, overstuffed chairs, side tables, and standing lamps. It is three New England parlors placed end to end. A color television set behind the bar was showing a Red Sox-Yankees game, and when McKenna arrived, at eight-twenty, he plunked himself at the bar and watched. Frankie McKenna had driven him over, and she sat at a table next to the piano with a good local Billie Holiday singer named Shirley Carroll. At a quarter to nine, McKenna tore himself away from the television and went into his first set. He had had dinner in Yarmouth Port, in an Italian restaurant called La Cipollina, and had put away a small pizza, chicken piccata, linguine with red clam sauce, a salad, half of Frankie McKenna's shrimps with sweet peppers, and a mocha pudding with whipped cream. He was in a benevolent mood. He began with "Don't Take Your Love from Me," and went on through "The Moon of Manakoora," "Sleepy Lagoon," "Isn't It Romantic," "My Romance," and "My Funny Valentine," ending with a blues, three songs in which Shirley Carroll sat in, and a medium bebop tune. He swung quietly but hard.



"In 1976, Alfred and his company were swallowed up by a conglomerate, and we haven't seen him since."

He returned immediately to the game, and Frankie McKenna talked about herself and her life with McKenna. She is short and has shingled gray hair and a soft Carolina accent. She is a pretty woman, with a long-suffering face and a smile that closes her eyes. (McKenna has a tempestuous side, and if he doesn't work it out through his playing or in several banging games of Ping-Pong it is apt to spill over on his family.) "I was born an only child and grew up in North and South Carolina," she said in a gentle voice. "My parents were divorced when I was sixteen. My father, Jimmy Wiggins, was a salesman who could charm the bark off a tree. He was medium-sized and dark-haired and well-mannered—a Southern gentleman. His mother was a McQueen, and derived descent from Mary Queen of Scots. He died several years ago. My mother had long since remarried. She's an attractive lady and a champion bridge player. I went to the University of South Carolina two years on scholarship, and, because I was very poor, took practical courses—secretarial courses. Then I went to New York and lived with a group of Carolina girls who had a large apartment on Riverside Drive. I worked first as a secretary to a sales manager of a lingerie company, but come sum-

mer I'd take a leave of absence and go home. I liked being Southern in the North and having an accent, and all that. I also worked for a public-relations outfit and as a secretary at ABC Records. I took little night jobs, too—at Downey's Steak House and Basin Street. I met Dave in 1959 in Junior's Bar & Lounge, a musicians' hangout, and we were married three months later. My mother came up on the plane practically carrying the whole wedding—flowers and all—in her arms. I had a two-room apartment across from London Terrace, on Twenty-fourth, and when Steve, who's eighteen now, was born, it was awful. We moved to a fourth-floor walkup at Ninth and Twenty-first, and Douglas, who's fourteen, was born. I had everything pretty well organized. Summers, I got a portable swimming pool and put it on the roof and filled it from a hose I'd attached to my kitchen sink. Our dog Midge chased a beach ball around the roof and the kids chased her and the people from next door threw pennies in the pool. We came up here the first time in the mid-sixties, and each year we'd buy a junk car and at the end of the summer park it in front of our building and let it die. In the fall of 1966, we decided to move up. It was too much in New York with two small children and Dave's

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hours and the stairs to walk up. I got to do the moving, because Dave was working, and a man named McCarthy, who lived over us and had offered to help in a weak moment, drove me up in his station wagon. We moved into this house in April of 1967.

"Dave is a complex person. He's honest and he's moral. He doesn't put people down, and he's never squandered money. He's a good father, even though he doesn't take the boys fishing, and all that, and he prefers not to be the disciplinarian. But he's very good in a quiet way when someone gets out of hand. He loves his roots, and he loves house and home. He's the most unmechanical person I've ever seen. I can't stand to watch him when he has a screwdriver in his hand. I have to walk away. But it doesn't matter, because I'm a fixit. That's my therapy. Dave was very, very shy when we were married. His mother told me that he could never accept any kind of compliment when he was growing up. It got him all flustered, and he'd pretend he hadn't heard. But he's getting better, and I think he's beginning to admit to himself that he might be a good piano player."

The Red Sox were leading the Yankees by three runs, and McKenna's second set was effervescent. He played a string of "baby" songs—"Baby Won't You Please Come Home?," "Baby Face," "Melancholy Baby," "Gee, Baby, Ain't I Good to You?," "Oh, Baby," and a stinging, very fast "I Found a New Baby." When he finished, he headed back to the bar, commenting first on how hot it was up on the bandstand and how he wished he could go home and watch the rest of the game in peace.

—WHITNEY BALLIETT

Peasants who for generations had been proud of their vital role in European society now learned that their countrymen were being fed by "The American Middle West—Breadbasket of the World," and palates once soothed by the finest wines from the choicest grapes were being washed by a cheap brown fluid called Coca-Cola—the notorious "Coke," now in the late 1940s selling 50 million bottles a day, enough to float a light cruiser.

—"The Glory and the Dream," by William Manchester, page 444.

In Bangkok the prime minister was the Coca-Cola concessionaire and the police chief had the Pepsi-Cola franchise; Adlai Stevenson called their rivalry "the ice cold war." Coke was ahead there and everywhere else. The sun never set on it. Every day people abroad consumed fifty billion bottles of it, enough Coke to float a light cruiser.—Page 825.

She still in dry dock?