

down beat

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BYRD LETS FLY AT TOUR

Guitarist Charlie Byrd flew into New York after a 12-week U. S. information agency tour of South America: 48 plane rides, 50,000 miles, and 16 countries. He flew in, with concepts and comments, which were musical, organizational, and social.

Byrd and his trio (Keter Betts, bass, and Buddy Deppenschmidt, drums) enjoyed the "very musical people. Everyone seems to play the guitar." Betts and Byrd said they found the climate particularly hard on their instruments. "They're both in the hospital now, and they may never be the same," Byrd said. "There were times when we dropped thousands of feet in altitude between concerts, and there were several times when you couldn't get in tune, no matter what you did."

The trio's outstanding musical kicks came in Paraguay and Brazil. In the former, where the musicians union requires that each musical program must consist of one-half Paraguayan music ("we hired a local group for half the program"), Byrd rediscovered works by composer Augustin Barrios, "a fantastic composer. I'll record some of his music soon."

For future tourers, Byrd made some suggestions. He said he believes that State Department and USIA officials are excited about jazz ambassadorship, "especially the USIA people we met in the field—they like jazz and want more of it." But few are fully prepared for the needs of any kind of traveling group. Byrd noted, or able to cope with the one-nighter concept with which most tours operate. For example:

The trio, plus Mrs. Ginny Byrd, tour manager and vocalist, had 28 pieces of luggage to be fought in and out of customs. It was nearly always a fight. Byrd suggested that a USIA or some government official should be on hand at each stop.

Language problems should be considered. No one in the group really spoke Spanish well; all of them were language-barriered in Portuguese-speaking Brazil:

"Keter ordered a sandwich and beer and got soap," Byrd said. "I asked for ice and got watermelon—like, the dictionary we had didn't really make it." Sometimes they would spend 12 to 16

hours waiting for a plane. "There we'd be at the airport," Byrd related. "In some cases, we'd have no way to call into the city or the next city; no way to let anyone know that we were stuck. No way, either, to buy anything. Lots of times you couldn't change your currency. All you could do was to sit and starve."

Each stop brought a new situation. Some of the concerts were free, some had paid admission. "We never did figure how they decided which it would be," the guitarist said. "But many times the tickets were much too expensive. We discovered that the best concerts were those which were free but with admission only by invitation."

As most touring jazz stars also have complained, Byrd & Co. criticized some U. S. embassy officials who felt that the trio was available for embassy parties, beyond its job of communicating with foreign residents.

Ginny Byrd successfully stopped most of that ("although sometimes it made sense, and we did it"), but there were many examples of official ignorance, sometimes arrogance, which interfered with the special purpose of the trip. For example, though the Mexican National Jazz Festival had been planned so that it would fall on dates during which Byrd would be in Mexico City, the embassy there was not aware of the festival, or, if it was, had made no allowance for Byrd's presence during the performances—had planned other engagements instead.

Nevertheless, all felt that the tour had been a success. Byrd said he believes that the U. S. government has too static a view and should drop its one-nighter concept of tours, substituting for it more in-depth visits.

"We had only brief musical encounters with the people," he said, "and very little other chance of communication. Only because we moved so fast. Think what could be accomplished if they sent some college jazz band, say from North Texas State, for a month to one of those cities. Think of the good you could do that way."

Asked if there was any reaction to the freedom riders, Betts replied, "Nobody asked me any questions about the Negro problem. I found that most of the people were interested in Castro and what we were doing in Cuba."

"Castro has a lot of friends there," Deppenschmidt added.

"Check," Byrd said. "Can I tell them about the little places, Keter? You see, in some of the little places, the kids had never seen anyone like Keter (who is Negro) before. They followed him around like he was the pied piper. It would get to be a parade, then he'd turn around and yell, 'Boo,' and they'd disappear for a while. But they came back."

"It sure was the damndest thing," Betts said.

BIG CHANGES AT MERCURY

Rumors of a change at Mercury records had circulated for so long that, like rumors of the return of the big-band era, they were beginning to be taken with a grain of salt.

Then in mid-June came an announcement: Phillips of Holland, one of the largest electrical manufacturing firms in the world and a major European record manufacturer, had purchased the label.

A few days later, reports circulated that Jack Tracy, formerly with Mercury, and jazz artists and repertoire director for Argo records, had resigned from Argo and would return to Mercury—and that Quincy Jones would also join Mercury as an a&r man to work in close collaboration with Tracy.

The full implications of the change at Mercury are not yet known, but extensive revamping can be expected. The label had fallen into a lethargy not as profound as but comparable to that of Decca, with much of its product of indifferent quality, and jazz virtually unrepresented in its current catalog.

The jazz picture is to be changed forthwith: Tracy and Jones will work in pops as well as jazz, but they plan to get immediately into production on a new and invigorated jazz catalog.

Tracy said he thinks their relationship will be unique: as a team, they will represent at the best level both musical and business thinking.

Tracy's powers and activities will be much broader than during his previous sojourn at Mercury. He will also work in special recording projects such as documentary recordings and spoken word discs. He will also have some responsibilities in the merchandising and promotion of the jazz catalog.