How Many of You Are There in the Quartet?

by Paul Desmond

Dawn. A station wagon pulls up to the office of an obscure motel in New Jersey. Three men enter - pasty-faced, grim-eyed, silent (for those are their names). Perfect opening shot, before credits, for a really lousy bank-robbery movie? Wrong. The Dave Brubeck Quartet, some years ago, starting our day's work.

Today we have a contract (an offer we should have refused) for two concerts at the Orange County State Fair in Middletown. 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Brubeck likes to get to the job early.

So we pull up behind this hay truck around noon, finally locating the guy who had signed the contract. Stout, red-necked, gruff and harried (from the old New Jersey law firm of the same name), and clearly more comfortable judging cattle than booking jazz groups, he peers into the station wagon, which contains four musicians, bass, drums, and assorted baggage, and for the first and only time in our seventeen years of wandering around the world, we get this question: "Where's the piano?"

So, leaving Brubeck to cope with the situation, we head into town for sandwiches and browsing. Since the sandwiches take more time than the browsing, I pick up a copy of the Middletown Record and things become a bit more clear. "Teenager's Day at the Orange County State Fair", says the headline across the two center pages (heavy move, in that the paper only has four pages). Those poor folk, especially the cattle-judge type (who has probably lumbered into heading the entertainment committee), thought we were this red-hot teenage attraction, which, Lord knows we've never been. Our basic audience begins with creaking elderly types of twenty-three and above.

Nevertheless, here we are, splashed all over this ad, along with the other attractions of the day-judo exhibition, fire-fighting demonstration, Wild West show, and Animaloraa (which may have been merely misspelled). And right at the top, first two columns on the left, is the this picture of Brubeck's teeth and much of his face, along with the following text, which I'm paraphrasing only slightly. "Hear the music teenagers everywhere thrill to", it began. "Hear the music that rocked Newport Rhode Island (an unfortunate reference in that only a few weeks earlier the Newport Jazz Festival had undergone its first riot). "Hear Dave Brubeck sing and play his famous hits, including 'Jazz Goes to College', 'Jazz in Europe', and 'Tangerine'.

So, now realizing - in Brubeck's piquant ranch phrase - which way the hole slopes, we head back to the fairgrounds where the scene is roughly as follows: there is a smallish, almost transistorized, oval race track. (I'm not exactly sure how long a furlong is, but it seems not too many of them are actually present.) On one side of the oval is the grandstand, built to accommodate 2,000 or so, occupied at the moment by eight or nine elderly folk who clearly paid their money to sit in the shade and fan themselves, as opposed to any burning desire to hear the music their teenage grandchildren everywhere thrill to.

Directly across the track from them is our bandstand - a wooden platform, about ten feet high and immense. Evidently no piano has been located in Orange County, since the only props on stage are a vintage electric organ and one mike. Behind us is a fair-sized tent containing about two hundred people, in which a horse show for young teenagers is currently in progress -

scheduled, we soon discover, to continue throughout our concert. This is hazardous mainly because their sound system is vastly superior to ours.

So we begin our desperation opener, "St. Louis Blues." Brubeck, who has never spent more than ten minutes of his life at an electric organ, much less the one he is now at, is producing sounds like an early Atwater-Kent Synthesizer. (Later he makes a few major breakthroughs, like locating the volume control pedal and figuring out how to wiggle his right hand, achieving a tremolo effect similar to Jimmy Smith with a terminal hangover, but doesn't help much.) Eugene Wright, our noble bass player, and me take turns schlepping the mike back and forth between us and playing grouchy, doomed choruses, but the only sound we can hear comes from our friendly neighborhood horse show.

"LOPE," it roars. "CANTER...TROT...AND THE WINNER IN THE TWELVE-YEAR OLD CLASS IS...JACQUELINE HIGGS!"

As always in difficult situations such as these, we turn to our main man, primo virtuoso of the group, the Maria Callas of the drums, Joe Morello, who has rescued us from disaster from Grand Forks to Rajkot, India.

"You got it," we said, "stretch out," which ordinarily is like issuing an air travel card to a hijacker. And, to his external credit, Morello outdoes himself. All cymbals sizzling, all feet working. (Morello has several. Not many people know this.) Now he's into triplets around the tom-toms, which has shifted foundations from the Odeon Hammersmith to Free Trade Hall and turned Buddy Rich greener than usual with envy.

The horse show is suddenly silent. Fanning in the stands has subsided slightly.

Suddenly a figure emerges from the horse tent, hurtles to the side of the stage, and yells at Brubeck, "For Chrissakes, could you tell the drummer not to play so loud? He's terrifying the horses."

Never a group to accept defeat gracelessly, we play a sort of Muzak for a suitable period and split.

When we return at eight, all is different. A piano has been found, the stands are packed with our geriatric following of twenty-five and above, and we play a fairly respectable concert.

Even so, we're upstaged by the grand finale of the fair - the fire-fighting demonstration. A group of local residents has been bandaged and made up to appear as if they've just leapt from the Hindenburg and their last rites are imminent. But instead of remaining discreetly behind the scenes until their big moment, they mingle casually with friends and neighbors in the audience during the evening, sipping beer, munching popcorn, casting an eerie, Fellini-like quality over the gathering, and considerably diminishing the impact of their ultimate appearance.

After their pageant come the main events of the fair, which have clearly been planned for months: a flaming auto wreck, followed by a flaming plane wreck, each to be dealt with instantly and efficiently by the Middletown Fire Dept. At one end of the oval is a precariously balanced car; at the other end, a truly impressive skeletal mock-up of a single-engine plane, tail

up. Midway, at ground zero, is the Middletown Fire Truck, bristling with ladders and hoses and overflowing volunteers.

A hush falls over the stands. At a signal given by the fire chief, the car is ignited. The truck reaches it in two or three seconds, by which time the fire is roughly equivalent to that created by dropping a cigarette on the backseat for two or three seconds. It is extinguished by many men with several hoses.

A murmur falls over the stands. The fire chief, painfully aware that his moment of the year is at hand, signals for the plane to be ignited, also instructing the truck to take it easy, so that the fire should be blazing briskly when it arrives. The truck starts, at about the pace of a cab looking for a fare. The plane goes WHOOSH!, like a flashbulb, and by the time the leisurely truck arrives, has shrunk to a lovely camp-fire, just large enough for roasting marshmallows.

Later, four pasty-faced, grim-eyed men pile into a station wagon and drive away. It may not be bank robbery, but it's a living.