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Décès du collectionneur de jazz Francis Paudras

Francis Paudras (1935 – 1997) avait inspiré au cinéma le personnage de Francis dans le film de Bertrand Tavernier « Autour de minuit ». Le film retraçait l'histoire du musicien de jazz Bud Powell qu'une grande amitié liait à Francis Paudras. Ce dernier était l'un des meilleurs connaisseurs en France de l'histoire du jazz. Il possédait une extraordinaire collection d'archives filmées et photographiques régulièrement exploitée. Il avait notamment publié l'imposant « La Danse des infidèles » dédié à Bud Powell et « To Bird With Love », un ouvrage sur le saxophoniste Charlie Parker, réalisé avec sa veuve, Chan Parker.

Autour de Minuit de Bertrand Tavernier

Inspiré de la rencontre entre le légendaire pianiste Bud Powell, qui vécut de nombreuses années à Paris à la fin des années cinquante, et Francis Paudras, le journaliste qui l'avait recueilli, ce film raconte la vie d'un saxophoniste américain, interprété par le grand Dexter Gordon. François Cluzet prête ses traits à Francis Paudras. Un tandem très émouvant pour un film incontournable.

## A Friend To Bud

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The Scotsman, 1998

Francis Paudras became a familiar name to jazz fans around the world through his association with the American pianist Bud Powell, a relationship portrayed in fictional form in Bertrand Tavernier's film Round Midnight in 1986. Paudras was played by the actor Francois Cluzet in the film, with saxophonist Dexter Gordon cast as a fictional combination of Powell and Lester Young.

Many American jazz musicians settled in Paris in the late-50s and early-60s, where their music was greeted with a respect they felt was not always apparent back home, while racism was regarded as less overt and institutionalised in Europe. Bud Powell made the move to the city in 1958 with his common-law wife, Altevia Edwards, known as Butterfly. He was a brilliant pianist and improviser who had established the quintessential bebop piano style in the late-40s, but was also a deeply troubled individual with a long history of mental illness, alcoholism and declining powers.

At the time of his association with Powell, Paudras was a designer living on a modest income (he eventually had his own company), and spent much of it on his passion for jazz. His relationship with the pianist went beyond that of artist and devoted fan, however, and Paudras became his effective guardian and unofficial manager for a period in 1962-64.

Paudras was a reasonable amateur jazz pianist in his own right, but was obsessed with Powell's genius, and devastated by seeing his hero in the shambling and distressed state of this period, when his own mental frailties were augmented by the stupefying effects of large doses of sedative routinely administered by his wife.

Paudras intervened in 1962, initially becoming friendly with the pianist. He devoted much of his time to ensuring that Powell received hospital treatment for tuberculosis in 1963, in which aim he was helped by another expatriate jazz musician, saxophonist Johnny Griffin, and then nursed him back to what passed for health by that stage. Powell even lived in Paudras's apartment with his wife and small daughter for a time, and eventually Paudras accompanied him on his return to New York in 1964.

The Frenchman returned alone, however, and Powell, who had initially agreed to return to Paris, but had chosen to stay in New York at the last moment, gradually slipped into terminal decline, dying in 1966. Paudras later wrote a book about his experiences with the pianist, *La Danse des Infidels* (named after one of Powell's compositions, "Dance of the Infidels"), which was published in the same year as *Round Midnight* was released (an English translation has now been published).

Paudras had also collected a large number of unreleased recordings of Powell's performances, spanning the years 1944-1964. He eventually passed the archive of tapes to the pianist's niece in 1979, who authorised their release on ten fascinating but very uneven CDs on the Mythic Sound label.

After Powell's death, Paudras retained his interest in jazz, and befriended several more musicians, usually piano players, as well as compiling a huge collection of jazz materials in the form of records, films and memorabilia. The collection subsequently provided much of the materials for a second book, *To Bird With Love*, a tribute to Charlie Parker prepared in collaboration with the saxophonist's widow, Chan Parker.

His son, Stephane, also took up piano, and introduced his father to the young French pianist Jacky Terrasson, a fellow student at the Lycee Lamartine in Paris. It was at the designer's suggestion that Terrasson enrolled in Berklee College in Boston, a step which helped to launch the pianist's career in America. He recalled the encouraging atmosphere which greeted his introduction into Paudras's circle in the mid-80s.

"I guess I was about about 14 when I met his son, and I used to love going to their place. He had all these records, and a collection of movies that was quite impressive. It was Francis who really got me hip to Bud Powell, and there were often musicians around his place, and we would stay up late and talk about music and hear all his fantastic stories. It was a great way for me to get exposed to some of the older musicians who weren't around any more, but also to hear some of the present people that you really didn't get much chance to hear in Paris."

In a darkly ironic twist, the lively, outgoing Paudras's own later years were clouded by personal problems and periods of extreme depression, and he was reported to have committed suicide at his chateau in Antigny.

## **Francis Paudras 1935 - 1997**

**by Jacques Ponzio**

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Francis Paudras is well known among the society of modern jazz lovers for the links he wove and maintained with Bud Powell, Bill Evans, and other jazz greats.

Everybody has heard about the film 'Round Midnight, directed by Bertrand Tavernier and based upon Paudras' book *La Danse des Infidels* (*Dance of the Infidels: A Portrait of Bud Powell*), which tells the story of a complex relationship between a young Frenchman fond of jazz and an ex-star of bebop Dale Turner. Francois Cluzet portrayed the former and Dexter Gordon the latter. This story is emblematic of the fascination Bud Powell had for Francis Paudras. And there is no doubt that he liked the image of him that was shown in the movie. The

reality is certainly a more complex one, as the relationships he had with the French jazz milieu were not always as benign as they could have been if it had only been a story of fascination.

Born in a middle-class family established near Paris in Chilly-Mazarin, Essonne on January 21, 1935, Francis Paudras received a good classical piano training in his childhood. After completing school, he began to learn applied arts at the Ecole Estienne, an institution famous in France. He then went into the army and, returning to Paris in 1958, he discovered jazz.

Pianist Michel Sardaby remembers: "We met in the Ecole Estienne and became friends, as we had developed a similar interest in artistic approach. He had a workshop where he did the designs for some album sleeves, including some of my records, such as Michel Sardaby New York, 1972, and Gail, 1974. He was pretty good at that.

"Otherwise, as he had fair skills as a pianist, he used to spend whole Sundays playing at our home in Paris, trying to catch the breathing of swing, which is certainly the great mystery of jazz. He had a rather intellectual approach to that, and figured he could capture its internal essence by means of the study of harmonics more than by the sensuality of sound. That young man lived only for music at that time." (quoted by Felix Sportis, Jazz Hot, February 1998)

He was really fond of piano, not only jazz piano (Bud Powell, Erroll Garner, Bill Evans), but also classical piano, for example, Ravel, Debussy, and Rachmaninoff, and he had a special admiration for Glenn Gould.

In 1959, he first met Bud Powell and became his champion and, moreover, became passionately involved in Bud's everyday life. This relationship was to last three years until Bud's return to the U.S., where he was to die, and had a profound effect upon Paudras. It is difficult to assert if it was true friendship, but Bud certainly was aware of the efforts Paudras made on his behalf when he (Bud) was treated for tuberculosis.

Having been caught by the virus of jazz, Paudras transformed his apartment into a sort of recording studio, soundproofed with lead sheets. The place became famous among jazz musicians traveling to Paris. They knew they could always get some food and have a roof over their heads at Paudras' home.

Then he met Bill Evans, the second pianist of his jazz-fan life, and began to record, photograph, and film his musician friends, collecting and saving every document from them. Such efforts gave way to a huge quantity of recorded and visual material and Francis Paudras used it to explain, show, and teach in festivals and in schools, together with public appearances of his musician friends Jacky Terrasson and Maurice Vander. For that purpose he founded a society, Jazz memories. But some lack of carefulness or self-control in the use of his documents resulted in creating dispute and even some serious ennui for him. As a result, his person and some of his actions have been more or less questioned.

In the 1960s he bought a historic mansion, a commandery that belonged to the Templars in the Middle Ages, in Antigny (Vienne, Poitou Region, west-central France), and he restored it and established a sort of jazz shrine. In the fall of the 1970s he decided to live there and the place became famous among some of the greatest jazz musicians, for example, Gil Evans and Herbie Hancock.

On November 27, 1997, in his big house, he ended his life. Whether his suicide is linked with his ennui or with a sense of personal failure we do not know and it does not really matter. During the funeral service at the Saint-Savin church, Maurice Vander, Jacky Terrasson, and Bernard Maury played some of his favorite tunes. He leaves invaluable archives of jazz documentation, *To Bird With Love* (his homage book to Charlie Parker, written with Chan Parker), and, of course, *La Danse des Infidles*.

Maybe you were not perfect - and who is? - but you did some good works.

Salut l'artiste!