



THOMAS E. KENNEDY AT COPENHAGEN'S COAL SQUARE (*KULTORVET*), SEATED WITH THE FIGURES OF THE BENCH-SCULPTURE BY HANNE VARMING ENTITLED 'ELDERBERRY MOTHER' (AFTER THE TALE BY HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN), 1990.

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Novels of Jazz, the Jazz of Novels

By Michael Lee

An Essay-Review on Kennedy's *Copenhagen Quartet*:

Kerrigan's Copenhagen, A Love Story, by Thomas E. Kennedy. Wynkin de Worde, 2002.

Bluett's Blue Hours, by Thomas E. Kennedy. Wynkin de Worde, 2003.

Greene's Summer, by Thomas E. Kennedy. Wynkin de Worde, 2004.

Danish Fall, by Thomas E. Kennedy. Wynkin de Worde, 2005.

I first learned a place like Copenhagen existed not from geography class but from a musician named Roland Kirk. In 1963, he cut an album called *Kirk in Copenhagen*, recorded at the famous Club Montmartre. I listened to that album so often, I knew its lines as well as did the sidemen in his band. The stylistic and sympathetic conjunctions that lead me to Thomas E. Kennedy's Copenhagen novels seem, now, to have started early on with Kirk and his music.

Three years after Kirk's recording, in the winter of 1966, I had one night left in the States before I shipped out to Vietnam. That night, I ventured into the forbidden Roxbury section of Boston to see Roland Kirk play in an old gin mill named Connolly's Stardust Room. I thought Kirk was a genius, but young men tend to pass the genius card around with great eagerness.

I was the whitest kid in a five-mile range, and under the drinking age of 21, but my money was green, and I was shown to a table next to the men's room. A few minutes before he was to go onstage, Kirk, blind since childhood, was led to the men's room by his drummer, Walter Perkins. I stood up, and with the fumbled grace inherent in new birds, interrupted his journey by announcing too loudly, "Mr. Kirk, I think your album *Kirk in Copenhagen* is the greatest recording ever made."

Perkins rolled his eyes. "The greatest?" said Kirk. "Man that's somethin'."

He asked me who else I listened to. I rattled off the roll call

of giants from those days: Miles Davis, of course; Coltrane, Eric Dolphy, Dexter Gordon, Bud Powell, Chet Baker. Walter Perkins bumped Kirk from behind to reset his course into the john, and I blurted, "It's my last night in town, and there's no other way I wanted to spend it than listening to you."

"Why, where you going?" he asked.

"Vietnam," I said to him.

He paused for a moment, and then said, "Man that's somethin'."

Halfway through his first set, two big guys came by my table and told me to follow them. I figured I was getting kicked out for being 18 and stupid. We weaved our way through the crowd to a table near the front of the small stage. They motioned for me to sit; a beer magically appeared in front of me. Then Kirk dedicated a song to me from the Copenhagen album, called "The Narrow Bolero."

He said, "This is for this white boy up here who I hope can chew all he bit."

It was one of those singular moments in which you remember every detail, down to the half-peeled label on the Schlitz beer, the initials T.Y. loves A.S. someone had engraved into the table, and most of all, each note of those quirky saxophones, two tenors and an alto, all three in his mouth at the same time, and Kirk, circular breathing through all three, holding the notes almost indefinitely. What a genius, I thought.

Reading Kennedy's *Copenhagen Quartet* is like experiencing jazz on a level that immediate, and that vivid. It has meter; it has a framework that can strain the boundaries of structure, as good improvisation can. The *Quartet* contains a definitive rhythm and, my God, does it have soul. In Ernest Hemingway's two-minute acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, which he read over Cuban radio, he said, "For a true writer each book should be a new beginning where he tries again for something that is beyond attainment. He should always try for something that has never been done or that others have tried and failed. Then sometimes, with great luck, he will succeed." I believe Kennedy took that path in

the books of *The Copenhagen Quartet*. These four books are a love song to Copenhagen and its inhabitants. As to their jazz influence, the concentration is more on the first two novels in *The Quartet: Kerrigan's Copenhagen, A Love Story* and *Bluett's Blue Hours*.

From the opening refrain, belonging to one Terrence Einhorn Kerrigan, easily one of the greatest tour guides of taverns and bars in modern literature, the music kicks in. With parts Donleavy, parts Joyce, and all things Kennedy, the jazz of *Kerrigan's Copenhagen* is mindful of the scattling of Ella Fitzgerald and the bittersweet moods of Stan Getz. We can hear the lusty gathering of McCoy Tyner's piano and the impossible energy of Elvin Jones' stick work—driving like a series of horses responding to the melodic whips of our author.

Kerrigan's Copenhagen is also a congregation of literacy—invoking names and novels, poets and passages that float off the page like song lyrics. It's a celebration of Kool-Aid acid tests, of Cavafy, and Nabokov, and the rapid realization of what one does in a 400-page pub crawl, or, as Kerrigan refers to it, a tavernological study—one drinks mightily.

This is about jazz with the taste of Stoli rolling on the tongue and, soon enough, within the incongruous trappings of Preben's sausage wagon, one of the so-called "cold foot cafés" in Copenhagen, we hear the sound of the peerless Billie Holiday underscored by Ben Webster's gentle tenor sax, rolling out "Gee Baby, Ain't I Good To You?" As if a sizzler has been placed over the cymbals, the sausages crack and sputter in syncopated time.

Back at the beloved Club Montmartre, Kerrigan reminds us of Stan Getz's three years in Copenhagen and some of the other artists who jammed at the club: Oscar Pettiford, Art Blakey, Lee Konitz, Kenny Clark, Gerry Mulligan, and Jim Hall, who looks more like an accountant than the brilliant guitarist he still is. We learn that this club, Montmartre, at one time arguably the most famous jazz club anywhere on the planet, was owned by Anders Dyrup, the son of a wealthy paint manufacturer whose product is found everywhere

throughout Denmark. Try that fact on the next guy hitting on your date at a pseudo-hip party when someone absently puts on a Roland Kirk album. Compliments of Kerrigan and Kennedy.

Kennedy shares a wonderful passage by the critic Alexander Walker, describing the 6-foot-6-inch tenor sax man Dexter Gordon, who lived in Copenhagen for almost 15 years: "Gordon has also an unsettling tension—you feel this big barrel might have gunpowder in him. His voice is like a great vintage full-bodied wine, glugging into the vessel of silence he seems to occupy. Gordon always looks like he's listening to sounds we cannot hear."

The scope of jazz influence in *The Copenhagen Quartet* is far too vast for the space available in an essay like this, but I do want to quote a passage from *Kerrigan's Copenhagen*, a liner note from one of Coltrane's CDs, *My Favorite Things*, found in the apartment of one of Kerrigan's lovers: "If you believe that the universe is composed of vibrations, Coltrane's music is the beginning of an understanding of universal structure."

There is much more to mine here, but let's move on to Patrick Bluett and *Bluett's Blue Hours*, the second installation in the quartet. The four parts of the novel are named after the four sections of Coltrane's classic work *A Love Supreme*. These sections are: Acknowledgment, Resolution, Pursuance, and Psalm. Here are where my words truly fail. *A Love Supreme* is the music of a man who has been to the mountain and returns with his report written in music. Thomas E. Kennedy in *Bluett's Blue Hours* gives it the respect it demands, beginning the novel with a quote from Coltrane: "Words, sounds, speech, men, memory, thoughts, fears and emotions—time—all related . . . all made from one . . . all made in one. . . . Thought waves—heat waves—all vibrations. . . ."

There's that term "vibration" again. We hear it throughout *The Copenhagen Quartet*. There are, of course, metaphysical theories that we are all just vibrations, but I believe Kennedy and Coltrane understand it in a different way. With characterizations that don't miss a beat, Kennedy does not allow his characters to stray beyond their humanity into chaos. That's what makes them so

satisfactory—that they are, I might say, the anti-metaphysical. They are improvisations pushed to their limit, yet always human.

Coltrane darts in and out of *Bluett's Blue Hours*. It opens with Bluett recognizing Coltrane's horn on a tape being played in a bar and ends with Coltrane "bringing us home" at the conclusion. Part of the final paragraph reads, "Down along the bank, a jogger bobs past in the shadow of the streetlamp; a pair of swans paddle across the lake, and Coltrane's tenor loosens the fist of his mind so it can move with the urgency of the notes to escape form, to find the source of cohesion, vibration. The music moves like a current inside him."

Bluett is a seeker of the truth, but as with all great hunters—of man, animal, or truth—when that moment of confrontation occurs, so, too, can a profound hesitation. So it is for some of us on our first journey with Coltrane. This truth, these moments of acknowledgment, resolution, pursuance, and psalm are not always easy. Sometimes the truth has to be whispered in your ear over and over. Sometimes it needs to be shouted. Anyone who has listened, even in passing, to Coltrane's work will come to understand what his life and his music came to be about, culminating in the 1964 release of the album *A Love Supreme*. Kennedy not only gets it but is the first writer I've read who can not only handle the truth of it but serve it back to others in dramatic fashion. Kennedy is Coltrane with a typewriter.

In the epic and complex *Greene's Summer*, Kennedy addresses a deep interest of his: the insidious nature of torture in its many forms, and, most important, in its victims. The novel is named after Barnardo Greene, whom we come to know as Nardo, a survivor of torture from Chile. Other characters include Michela, also the survivor of a different kind of torture, an all too common one that occurs within marriage. There is the Danish lawyer Voss Andersen, the psychiatrist Thorkild Kristensen, and the medically condemned Mikhail Ibsen and his wife, Lise.

In the convergence of these lives, Kennedy's abilities become apparent. Each character seems to be a dish spun on a stick on the old *Ed Sullivan Show*. First the guy would spin a couple, then add a

couple more and then more, until, finally, there were a dozen dishes, all spinning at various speeds. He would run from one to the other, giving them more rotation until it seemed as though every dish could spin for eternity. That is what *Greene's Summer* seems like, except for one important point—I cared about each and every one of those dishes as though it belonged to my great grandmother's exclusive collection.

Kennedy introduces Miles Davis' classic "So What" about a quarter of the way into the novel, a tune Davis wrote that was included in *Kind of Blue*, the biggest selling jazz album of all time. Those of us familiar with the tune can usually rattle off its sidemen as well—Cannonball Adderley on alto sax, the ubiquitous John Coltrane on tenor, Bill Evans' incomparably harmonic piano, Paul Chambers on bass, and Jimmy Cobb, the only man still alive today from this amazing group, on drums. It is Evans and Chambers who set the tone not only for the introduction of "So What" but for the scene of Kennedy's lovers who are listening on the couch. If a novel could have a theme song, a reader could hear the relentless march and spin of "So What" throughout *Greene's Summer*.

In the fourth novel of *The Copenhagen Quartet*, *Danish Fall*, jazz is not the common denominator of the narrative, and the styles of music that provide backdrop for the wonderful characters of Fred Braithwaite, Harald Jaegar, Adam Kampman, and an amalgam of family and sexually blossoming women is an eclectic celebration from Miles Davis to blues, to the reggae of Bob Marley, Bob Dylan, and even a nod to the group Smashing Pumpkins. There is a personal and sexual exuberance to *Danish Fall* that is, at its fundament, the orchestra of Kennedy's creativity. Without laboring the metaphor, *Danish Fall* is an extended jazz homage to men and women that only writers of Kennedy's talents could create.

Listen to Kennedy's view of music, jazz in particular, from his essay "A Rumor of Jazz":

I cannot explain the music's composition, have only the most rudimentary knowledge of its history, know nothing of its experiments with time, say, or the significance of its

improvisational riffing, or of what Tram meant for Prez or Prez for Bird or Bird for Trane, and so on. I wouldn't know a modal implication if it bebopped me on the nose, and polytonality might as well be the name of an island in the South Pacific. Half the time I have to listen twice for the difference between an alto horn and a soprano if I even think to wonder what instrument is creating the effect entrancing and unlacing me: The pounding, lilting, screaming lyrical streams of sound-feeling that lead you out onto thin ice of emotions that might any second break and let your ego drop. I am pure audience. A passive appreciator who places himself in the charge of the music.

To read *The Copenhagen Quartet* is, for me, to travel back in time to that night at Connolly's Star Dust Room. Only now, 40 some years later, I have a better seat for the action; I'm now on the bandstand. But it makes little difference. I knew then I wasn't hasty in crowning Kirk as a genius. As time went along, I knew, too, that Coltrane was even more so. Kirk and Coltrane, and how easily the name Kennedy flows into that same sentence. Kirk, Coltrane, and Kennedy. They roll on the tongue like a chilled Stoli will do, and it feels awfully good.