The New Criterion

Features September 2022

Facing the music

by *Wallace S. Moyle*

On the decline of the WASP establishment.

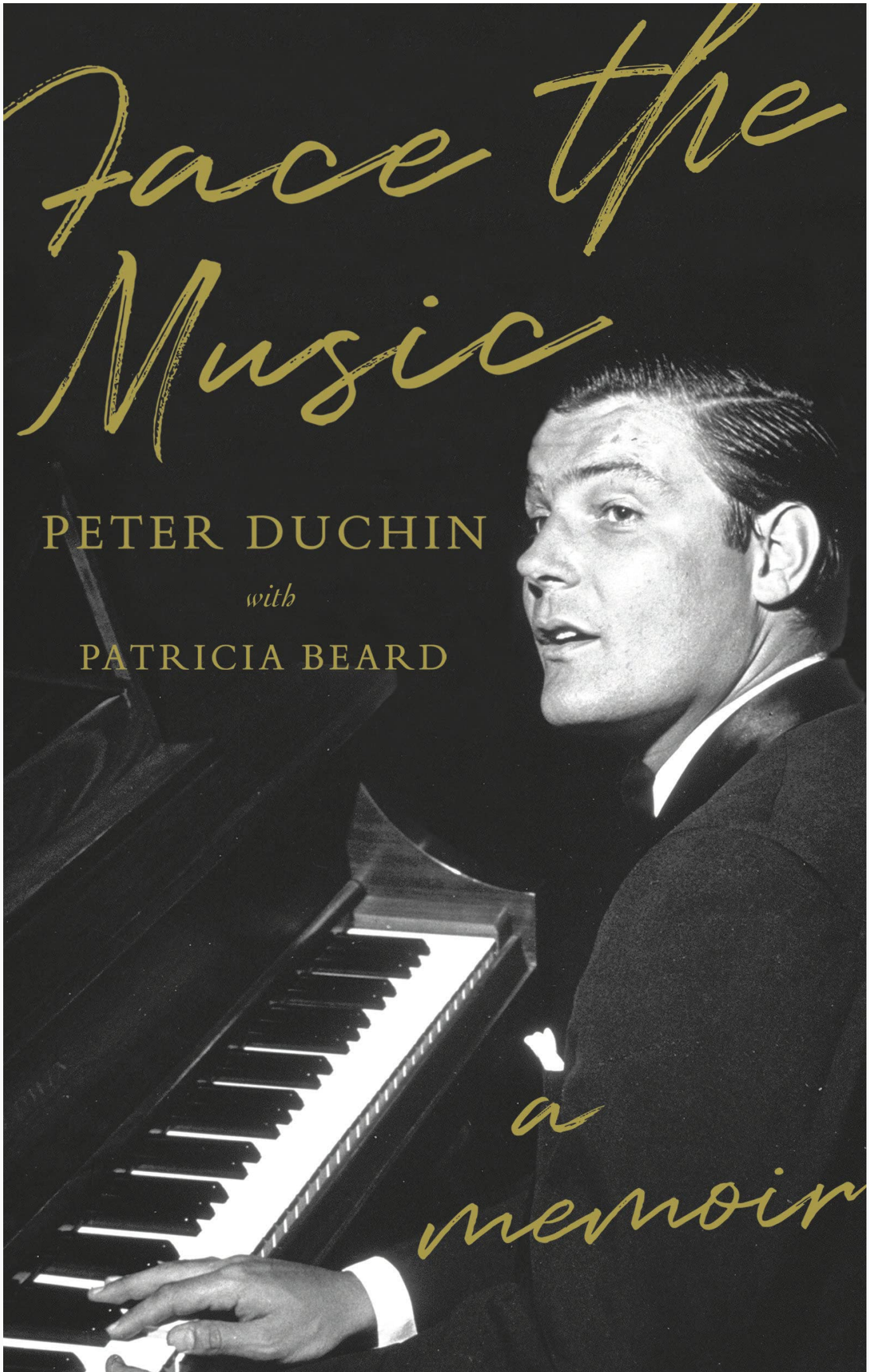
BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

Face the Music

PETER DUCHIN

with

PATRICIA BEARD



a memoir

Peter Duchin
Face the Music

Doubleday, 304 pages, $28.00

For generations now, without protest, as if it were an ineluctable law, every gala, from the poshest to the most downscale, whether the occasion be a wedding, a bar mitzvah, or a holiday ball, has climaxed in the same way: the dinner ends, the appointed ceremony is concluded, and then . . . oompah ooomp oomph oompah oomp. The subwoofer pounds, sending vibrations up the walls, through the furnishings, and into the intestines. Lights flash, the disc jockey exults into the microphone, and the women, young and middle-aged alike, rise, shriek, and gyrate their way onto the floor. Conversation ends, yielding to the cacophony. This execrable noise is what the world calls dance music.

And so it is a wistful relief to learn that Peter Duchin—the once-famed bandleader—not only lives at the age of eighty-five but, in a new memoir, *Face the Music*, has also reflected on the fate of popular music since his career began over sixty years ago.[1] Blessed with a handsome face and an immaculate pedigree, Duchin got his first break in 1959 when he appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. A few years later he was hired to play nightly at the St. Regis Hotel in New York. There the rich, the beautiful, and the powerful passed by his piano each night. What music did they expect? Why, the same music that Duchin's own father—himself a bandleader so famous that his life was celebrated in a Hollywood tearjerker, *The Eddy Duchin Story*—had played in the 1930s. Duchin calls it "society music." As an older mentor who had performed at Duchin's mother's debutante ball in the 1920s defined it, "society music" is simply popular music played *andante*. After all, he explains, rich people may not have rhythm, but they do know how to walk.

There the rich, the beautiful, and the powerful passed by his piano each night.

Perhaps, just before dinner, at one of New York's Christmas-season debutante balls—a surprisingly durable institution—one can still hear a band strike up an ambling rendition of "String of Pearls." But, otherwise, the era of "society music" ended sixty years ago. To be sure, live bands like Duchin's are still trotted out to dignify the more formal occasions. Hence, his business thrived as a musical throwback for decades after his 1960s heyday. Even so, he finds himself discarded like an unconsumed hors d'oeuvre. "My band plays during the first part of the evening," Duchin admits, "then, around the time dessert is served, a DJ takes over, the decibel levels soar, and the dancing becomes frantic and free-form." Indeed. "That's when I leave."

With stoic detachment, Duchin seeks to understand the cause of his displacement. He speaks to a musicologist, who explains that live music cannot "hit and vibrate you and force you to move." Electronic music, by contrast, is physical. It produces a euphoria that no band can match, the

musicologist argues. As surely as Hollywood has perfected the summer blockbuster (featuring flesh, explosions, and lurid spectacle), Procter & Gamble the size of the detergent cap (always too large for practical use, the faster to make you buy more), and smut-mongers the female form (wide hips and narrow waists), the music industry has discovered that a fast beat and ear-splitting amplification draw the crowds. Through a process of trial and error, we now know what music the people truly crave.

Duchin meekly accepts the theory of natural taste for the DJ. Yet his own memoirs provide evidence against it. In his earlier 1996 book, *Ghost of a Chance*, Duchin claimed that he played all tempos, from slow ballads and waltzes to sambas and rock and roll. "But the one that never fails to get them up on their feet," he wrote then, was the rhythm of the human heartbeat. The elderly Duchin has forgotten that partygoers once sought slower tempos and warmer sounds. Preferences in dance music are not natural but, as they say, socially constructed.

Duchin knows as well as anybody how tastes and manners not only change but can even be overthrown. His own mother, Marjorie Oelrichs, after being graduated from the fashionable Miss Spence's School for Girls, made a career as a cigarette-advertisement model and gossip-column favorite. Her family, after all, had commissioned from Stanford White the magnificent Rosecliff mansion in Newport, which was but one of the many follies by which they managed, with impressive ingenuity, to squander their entire share of the Comstock Lode silver fortune. In those days, society and celebrity went hand in hand.

Duchin meekly accepts the theory of natural taste for the DJ.

wasp society also furnished the country's leadership. Duchin literally grew up in their care. His mother died in childbirth, his father of cancer when Duchin was twelve years old. As an orphan, Duchin was raised to adulthood by none other than W. Averell Harriman, a veritable wasp *beau idéal*. The heir to an immense railroad fortune, a polo champion, and a Groton graduate, Harriman had been the first man in his class tapped for Yale's Skull and Bones society (an honor second only to being the last man slapped). By the time he broke the news to the younger Duchin of his father's death, Harriman had founded Brown Brothers Harriman, implemented Roosevelt's National Industrial Recovery Act, and served as the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union. Later, he was elected governor of New York and advised Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Carter.

Thanks to his upbringing and choice of profession, Duchin has befriended virtually every American of both status and influence, from Jacqueline Bouvier to Harold S. Vanderbilt, a yachting legend whose estate near Palm Beach was littered with pig motifs, just in case guests forgot that he was a member of the Porcellian final club at Harvard. The society in which Duchin was raised had its own distinct institutions, from boarding schools and cotillions to collegiate societies and summer colonies. It had its own mores, habits, and tastes, music included. It attracted the interest, envy, and sometimes the admiration of the public. And, finally, it sent its best men to rule.

It is surely no coincidence that "society music" fell out of favor at the same time as wasp social and political influence collapsed. By now, a whole literature has chronicled the decline of the wasp; the elegy for the wasp is indeed a favorite genre of writer's writers from Richard Brookhiser and Michael Kinsley to David Brooks and Ross Douthat. Generally, they express nostalgia for a ruling class that could rule wisely, if uncontroversially. E. Digby Baltzell, the preeminent exponent of the "Protestant Establishment" and the coiner of the term "wasp," lamented in the early 1980s that the United States no longer boasted patricians with the moral authority to keep down the McCarthyite rabble, then newly ascendant, in Baltzell's depressingly conventional opinion, in the figure of Ronald Reagan.

Harriman at the same time deplored Reagan as much as Baltzell did. In 1983, at the age of ninety-one, he traveled to Moscow just to reassure Communist Party General Secretary Yuri Andropov that not all Americans saw the Soviet Union as an "Evil Empire." Before Reagan emerged, Harriman's *bête noire* was Richard Nixon, whose success in exposing communists in the U.S. government was unforgiveable. Mercifully for their poor, quivering souls, neither Baltzell nor Harriman lived long enough to witness the rise of Donald Trump.

It attracted the interest, envy, and sometimes the admiration of the public.

Say its apologists, the wasp episcopacy had virtues that the present-day elites lack. Indeed, one cannot help but admire Harriman, a man so comfortable with his money that he never carried any with him, left it to others to pay the restaurant bill, and walked out of museums whenever they charged admission. (Duchin reports that Harriman also wore his suits to shreds.) Harriman remained loyal to the end to the institutions that shaped him. He died in the arms of Pamela Digby Churchill, a British adventuress whose final grace was to succor Harriman's late-flowering ardor. Yet he never would, she reports, reveal to her the secrets of the Skull and Bones society that tapped him for membership sixty years before their marriage.

Exactly what Harriman and his brethren stood for politically is not easy to discern. Harriman's politics shifted throughout his life. He voted for Harding in 1920. It was only at the urging of his fashionably *engagée* sister that he even entered the Roosevelt administration. Harriman went from Cold War hawk in 1946 and champion of George Kennan's long telegram to dove in the aftermath of Vietnam. Unable to identify what principles wasp leaders stood for, their defenders frequently praise their dedication to what they call "service." According to Duchin, Harriman did remark vaguely that, to be regarded as a gentleman, one must "give back." He sniffed at men who "didn't do a damn thing." "Service," "giving back," and "doing things": these of course are polite euphemisms for exercising power. If power had to be wielded at all, America's mid-twentieth-century Wise Men reasoned, it naturally ought to be in their hands.

“Service,” “giving back,” and “doing things”: these of course are polite euphemisms for exercising power.

Their upbringing made that an easy assumption. By the early twentieth century, the American upper class had constructed a *cursus honorum* as rigid as that faced by any Roman senator’s son. Harriman and his friend Bob Lovett were both members of the Knickerbocker Greys, a military troupe for upper-class boys. (Henry Sloane Coffin, Nelson Rockefeller, and John Lindsay were also members.) From there they went on to Groton and The Hill School, respectively. Finally, they matriculated at Yale, where students strove to bring glory to Old Blue. Those that succeeded were inducted into Bones or one of its rival lesser societies. Those that failed, on Yale’s Tap Day, were left out in cold, to face a lifetime of humiliation.

The system was designed to produce custodians rather than leaders. In Owen Johnson’s classic *Stover at Yale*, published a year before Harriman graduated, the hero, Dink Stover, a dull but earnest lad, is rewarded with the coveted last tap for Bones, while his witty friend Brockhurst—intellectually and morally his classmates’ superior—is passed over entirely. Harriman and Lovett won the same prize (a Bones tap) as Stover. Other Wise Men earned similar honors: Dean Acheson was a member of Yale’s Scroll and Key, while Chip Bohlen (like Harriman before him, an ambassador to the Soviet Union) belonged to Harvard’s Porcellian Club.

Having thrived in a system that rewarded conformity, the final generation of wasp leaders lacked what George H.W. Bush, the acknowledged last of their breed, called “the vision thing.” That is to say, they could not articulate any reasons that their leadership should continue. Duchin claims in *Ghost of a Chance* that he rejected membership in Bones, as he “didn’t believe in the elitism of such organizations.” Harriman had no answer to his adoptive son, but still he refused to talk to Duchin for months. When in the mid-1960s a guest expressed support for Vietnam protestors, Harriman denounced her as a traitor. Just a few years later, he was joining them.

Other leaders of the Protestant Establishment joined forces with the Left. The Bonesperson (as we now say) William Sloane Coffin, as the chaplain of Yale, was a vocal New Left activist. His predecessor, Harriman’s classmate Sidney Lovett (like Coffin, a Bones tap), praised Coffin’s agitation. The Yale president Kingman Brewster, whose Yale classmates in early 1940s referred to him simply as “stud,” set New Haven ablaze in 1970 when he expressed doubt that the Black Panthers, a few of whom were on trial for the torture and a murder of a comrade, could achieve a fair trial anywhere in the United States. Baltzell relates in 1964’s The Protestant Establishment that one nineteenth-century Yale benefactor, inspired by the writings of Yale’s eminent sociologist William Graham Sumner, an ardent proponent of laissez-faire, wrote that “Yale college is a good and safe place for the keeping and use of property and the sustaining of civilization when endangered by ignorance, rascality, demagogues, repudiationists, rebels, copperheads, communists, butlers, strikers, protectionists, and fanatics of sundry roots and sizes.” A century later, lacking Sumner’s ideological defense, Yale succumbed to the fanatics.

From time to time, outsiders would plead with the Protestant Establishment to recover some moral fortitude. In *God and Man at Yale*, William F. Buckley Jr., a Catholic, warned that Yale was not only failing to uphold what Buckley called "individualism" (i.e., the free-enterprise system) and Christianity, but was also actively undermining them. For his trouble, Yale's leaders denounced him as a reactionary bigot. McGeorge Bundy—yet another Bonesperson—called the book "dishonest in its use of facts, false in its theory, and a discredit to its author." As a national security advisor in the Vietnam era, Bundy would go on to become literally the textbook example of policy failure. Later in life, he defended the spread of affirmative action.

From time to time, outsiders would plead with the Protestant Establishment to recover some moral fortitude.

Even in his own field, Duchin cannot help but surrender. In both of his memoirs, Duchin confesses to highbrow snobbery. He listens to Bach and Beethoven, translates Horace, and admires the films of Jean Renoir. Yet by the time he writes *Facing the Music*, he is bragging that he enjoys the rock band Led Zeppelin as much as Bach's Mass in B Minor. But Duchin has not given up altogether on high culture: on the contrary, he gives jazz music the full Matthew Arnold treatment. Bebop—a genre as impenetrably abstract as the Schoenberg twelve-tone scheme—Duchin ranks as among the best devised by man. Thanks to Duchin and his fellow jazz evangelists, the layman is now expected to enter a jazz club with the same reverence and trepidation as a Bayreuth festival or the Leipzig church where Bach and Mendelssohn once played. That jazz music—whose very name is an unmentionable vulgarity—should be sacralized as High Art is one of the most curious cultural developments of the past century. Perhaps it was inevitable that progressive whites like Duchin would find reasons to genuflect before music pioneered by black Americans.

He listens to Bach and Beethoven, translates Horace, and admires the films of Jean Renoir.

As Duchin exemplifies, possibly the most important, if overlooked, trait of wasp leaders is that they all had good faces. In almost all times and places (except, perhaps, our own, when the ugly, sick, and mentally ill demand obeisance), looks are an advantage. But the wasps seemed to have erected institutions that uniquely selected for men who, as baseball scouts used to say, looked good in a uniform. Harriman may have earned middling grades and may not have been able to speak a single foreign language, but from adolescence on he looked the part of an ambassador. Harriman thus rose to the top of his Yale class. Thirty years later, he was negotiating with Stalin on behalf of the United States.

The 1960s generation is often blamed for contemporary woes. But it was the last generation of wasp s that set in motion the forces that, as Buckley predicted, would lead the United States to ruin. Affi rmative action, the tolerance of vagrancy (redubbed "homelessness" in the Lindsay era), the

dishonoring of Christianity in public life, living constitutionalism in law, the ever-spreading blight of modern architecture, and the sacking of our cities by criminals: all of these features of the American regime were instituted by wasp patricians. America may have won the Cold War against communism, but within a generation it has fallen to a woke Marxian regime of its own making.

The wasp's ancestors created the freest, most prosperous nation in history. By the time of the Protestant Establishment's fading, its luminaries had left a nation ugly, depraved, and enthralled. They received a goodly heritage and squandered it. Their apologists praise them for their dignified surrender. The rest of us can only conclude that their snobbish mediocrity was a moral failing. Mediocrity is a greater sin than malice. Should some son of Agamemnon ever return to cleanse America of moral pestilence, let his followers consider the effects of Groton, Saint Paul's, Bones, and Porcellian, and remind themselves that if they ever wish to keep liberty, they should not educate their own sons in that way again.

1. _ *Face the Music: A Memoir*, by Peter Duchin with Patricia Beard; Doubleday, 304 pages, $28.

Wallace S. Moyle is a professional living in the East Harlem neighborhood of New York.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 41 Number 1 , on page 13

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2022/9/facing-the-music