

# JAZZ STRAINS

*After taking the music world by storm 20 years ago, why did Craig Hundley turn his back on it?*

By Erica Chase

It is summer 1968. In the world of jazz, the buzz is a 15-year-old freckle-faced redhead named Craig Hundley, a precocious child genius, with an IQ of 184. After having played classical piano for six years, Hundley has switched to jazz and has met with more than a modicum of success. The Craig Hundley Trio has played various clubs in Los Angeles, and a recent album, immodestly titled *Arrival of a Young Giant*, has some listeners predicting a bright future for the youngster who plays with an ability that belies his years.

This evening, the trio is competing in the Battle of the Bands at the Hollywood Bowl. By night's end, the group has wowed the audience. The judges go on to vote the trio the best combo. And after hearing them perform, jazz critic Leonard Feather—one of the judges—remarks on how extraordinarily talented and mature the teenagers were. Hundley, writes Feather in the *Los Angeles Times*, showed "a sensitivity that men thrice his age would envy." He predicts great success for Hundley by the time the kid is old enough to shave.

In jazzspeak, Hundley is sitting in the catbird seat. From the success at the Bowl, the group goes on to play at the Monterey Jazz Festival, where once again rave reviews pour in. Not only does he go on to play such L.A. clubs as Shelly's Manne-Hole and Donte's, but Hundley's star has just begun its ascension. In one spectacular day in July, he manages to appear on three national television shows: *Today*, the short-lived *Showcase '68* and *The Tonight Show*. A two-page profile of



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Hundley and his trio appears within the pages of *Life* magazine, and *Time* calls him "the most sophisticated jazz artist now playing on the West Coast."

By the end of the year, Hundley has earned well over \$200,000 and owns an apartment house in Sherman Oaks. But the 15-year-old is still living with his family in Van Nuys and is attending the 10th grade at Grant High School. Things are moving so fast for the wunderkind that his father gives up his job as an insurance agent to manage his son's career. Before long, a second album—with Hundley playing solo—is released, and Hundley and company are whisked off to tour the Midwest with Johnny Mathis.

Feather's prediction of success seems right on the mark. By the time Hundley

notices the first gleam of a mustache, he does indeed occupy an auspicious place in the jazz world.

That is, until he turns 17. At the peak of a promising career, Hundley turns his back on the music industry, going into virtual isolation.

It is winter 1987. Time has changed the man who used to be Craig Hundley. To begin with, he's now Craig Huxley, renamed after Aldous Huxley, the writer he much admires. Craig has also steered his career toward a new direction. Now an accomplished film composer, music producer and entrepreneur, he is content to work behind the scenes. His Audio Affects studio-gear design-and-rental company supplies recording studios with the

absolute latest in musical technology. His fledgling Sonic Atmospheres record label prides itself in presenting New Age music—taking you to a place where “no ear has gone before.” Huxley’s latest venture is the Enterprise, his new digital recording studio in Burbank. (For those of you who notice a *Star Trek* theme, you might as well know that Huxley has a particular affinity for the series, having as a youngster acted in episodes and as an adult composed music for various *Star Trek* movies.)

On this day he is conducting a tour of the recording facility for record producer Robert Kraft and engineer Daniel Lazerus, who will be producing *Moonlighting* costar Bruce Willis’ debut album. Kraft and Lazerus are considering the studio for the album. They are extremely particular, but Huxley seems unworried. With its style and substance, the Enterprise rarely fails to impress.

The \$3-million complex was designed in distinctive Memphis postmodern, with many custom furnishings. Technologically, it’s as state of the art as recording studios can get. Performers who have used the studio in recent months include Martha Davis and the Motels, the Bangles, Paul Simon, Stewart Copeland, Adam Ant and Ravi Shankar. Quite appropriately, William Shatner opened the main room when he recorded a film narration there in February. Upon completing their tour of the Enterprise, Kraft and Lazerus decide to do some recording and mixing for the Willis album there and use some of Huxley’s instruments.

Later that day, Huxley dines with his wife, Derra, at Prego in Beverly Hills. He places a few Sonic Atmospheres albums on the banquette next to him—LPs that immediately catch the eye of a young musician seated at the next table.

He engages Huxley in conversation, and Huxley mentions the names of a few artists with whom he’s collaborated; Huxley’s conversation is not comprehensive. He tends not to talk about things until the subject is brought up. And then, as if memory kicks in, he waxes animatedly about past projects and experiences.

Though he expresses himself in music and works in the music industry, he apparently doesn’t preoccupy himself with memories of either. “Even the greatest night of playing isn’t necessarily the most important experience,” he says, referring to the heyday of the Craig Hundley Trio. “Today I think more about books I’ve read than about being on the Johnny Carson show . . . If I do think about the past, I want to think about what ideas in the past

have meaning for me in the future.”

What happened to Craig Hundley? Why did he put aside such a promising early career? By most estimations, Craig encountered “the midlife crisis” that eventually strikes nearly everyone, including prodigies who must also deal with the pressure of being unusually gifted. Whiz kids often find themselves making difficult choices that will affect their career paths—sometimes playing hooky from the established course of their past achievements.

“Ennui,” says Huxley today. “I was changing, and my interests changed. I discovered hard rock, and for the first time I was able to identify with my own generation instead of being identified with the progressives of the previous generation . . . I got involved in songwriting and folk music and tried to blend my jazz with rock . . . I sort of took myself out of vogue by going ahead with my interests and not staying within the slot that I had succeeded in. I learned that when you make a change you lose some of your following—all of a sudden, the business machinery built up around you very quickly disintegrates.”

After the Craig Hundley Trio disbanded, Craig receded into a period of contemplation and lived on fruit and nuts. Instead of going on to college, he opted for independent study with an old French professor of philosophy who taught at UCLA and USC. He studied epistemology, mathematics and “flexitones” in music. In his studies, he came across the essays and novels of Aldous Huxley, and like the philosopher Craig wanted to “know everything worth knowing . . . see everything worth seeing” and “do everything worth doing.”

His tutor coached him not to express his ideas in words, thus echoing Aldous Huxley’s sentiment that “music ‘says’ things about the world, but in specifically musical terms. Any attempt to reproduce these musical statements ‘in our own words’ is necessarily doomed to failure.” Inevitably, Aldous Huxley felt, any rendering of meaning that has its original expression in terms of music or any visual art would be inadequate at best.

The intellectual indulgence lasted for about three years. Broke and directionless, Craig became a session player. His agility at the synthesizer and fluency with the latest musical technology quickly attracted composers who wanted to collaborate with him on albums and film scores.

Hundley realized that he need only change a few letters of his name to claim as an intellectual ancestor his patron saint