

ONE KNIGHT AT BIRDLAND

Dean and I went to see Shearing at Birdland in the midst of the long, mad weekend. . . . Shearing began to play his chords; they rolled out of the piano in great rich showers. . . . They rolled and rolled like the sea. Folks yelled for him to "Go!" Dean was sweating; the sweat poured down his collar. "There he is! That's him! Old God! Old God Shearing! Yes! Yes! Yes!"

—Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

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hat scene in *On the Road* took place in 1949. Fifty-nine years later, George Shearing is still Going!, though Dean Moriarty would now have to refer to him as Old God Sir George. That's one way to measure a long life in the spotlight: how many jazz musicians—how many people—have been both name-checked by Kerouac and knighted by Queen Elizabeth? For Shearing, the divide's not so vast. Since arriving in New York from his native London in 1947 with classical training and a love of swing, he's been a bridge between worlds, picking up bebop when it was still a new language (he composed the great bop anthem "Lullaby of Birdland") and then, as a major star for Capitol Records in the 1950s and 60s, turning out some of the smoothest, most commercially successful light-jazz records ever made, accompanied by his famous quintet and, on occasion, oodles of pillowy strings. But in late middle age he began to feel he was on "automatic pilot," and so, over the last several decades, he's shaken off the satin, testing his rippling musicality in terser, more demanding settings: trios, duos, solo, and, in a long and remarkable partnership, as accompanist to the late Mel Tormé. Sad but true: artists don't often improve with age. Classify Shearing, nine months shy of his 90th birthday, as the rare young-old god.

—BRUCE HANDY

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRUCE WEBER



PIANO MAN

Sir George Shearing, who was born blind, photographed with his wife, Ellen, at their home in Los Angeles. As a performer, he took his "strongest suit" to playing bebop.