The epiphany came early. Until middle school, Malcolm Campbell ’10 had been, well, another highly accomplished young pianist—he began learning the instrument at six and received solid classical training. But as a tween, Campbell happened upon three jazz piano recordings that changed his life: Oscar Peterson’s Night Train, Portrait in Jazz by Bill Evans, and Duke Ellington’s Piano Reflections. “Those three albums are the reason I’m playing jazz today,” Campbell says.

In fact, he’s playing a lot of jazz today, and playing it rather well. The Malcolm Campbell Quartet performs frequently in the Boston area and recently recorded its first CD, including four original compositions by Campbell. He has played with a joint Harvard-NEC program: next year, he expects to earn his A.B. in chemistry and physics from Harvard and the year after, a master’s in music degree from NEC.

Those who play with him, like saxophonist Marcus G. Miller ’08, relish his keyboard stylings; Miller likes to describe Campbell as “the baddest man in America.” Jazz singer Dana Lauren, a Berklee College of Music student, sang with the young pianist last summer at the Aspen Jazz Festival. “From the first time we rehearsed together I was in awe,” she says. “I had been playing with guitarists because I couldn’t find a pianist I felt a connection with—some-
As commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, David A. Kessler, M.D. ’77, sought to regulate tobacco. His new passion is the interaction of appetite and food marketing in the current obesity epidemic. This excerpt comes from his recent book, The End of Overeating: Taking Control of the Insatiable American Appetite (Rodale, $25.95).

Not long ago I flew to London to talk with top executives of one of the world’s largest global food companies. They were taking a beating from the British press about the industry’s role in the obesity epidemic. Some members of Parliament were exploring their regulatory options, such as revising food labeling requirements. The company invited me, along with European colleagues who had government experience with food regulation, to help them think about their responsibilities.

…I opened my set of PowerPoint slides to the one that showed a circle with the names of deadly diseases listed around its perimeter. At the center of the circle I’d written “obesity.” After outlining obesity’s role in stroke, hypertension, high cholesterol, and diabetes, I provided some numbers documenting the tremendous rise in the incidence of obesity and explained the flaws in the commonly held notion that our weight is set by way of biology.

By way of analogy, I described the way nicotine gains the power to provoke desire....The sight of the packaging, the crinkling sound of the wrapper, the tactile sensation as you light a cigarette and hold it between your fingers, and the sensory characteristics of the first puff all bolster the reinforcement....

Shifting back to food, I told my audience that the brain is wired to focus on the most salient stimuli. “The more potent and multisensory you make your products, the greater the reward and the greater the consumption,” I said bluntly.

As we continue to replace what we used to call ‘food’ with processed products, our natural barriers against overconsumption are lost. We have taken the properties of sugar, fat, and salt, especially in combination, and told them that they could see the executives’ facial expressions begin to change. They understood that I was going to the heart of their business model. I described the stimulating qualities of sugar, fat, and salt, especially in combination, and told them that

industry tactics and social norms bolster the reinforcing properties of sugar, fat, and salt in much the same way—through their appeal to the senses, the power of advertising, ready availability, and cultural patterns that allow us to eat all the time.

Put it all together, I said, and “You end up with a highly reinforcing product that provokes conditioned and driven behavior.”

For a moment there was complete silence in the room. Then one executive spoke up. “Everything that has made us successful as a company is the problem,” he said.

And then, to their credit, they began to rethink their strategies about labeling and portion size.

one who had the chops and emotional connection to the music. Malcolm never ceased to amaze me. Each time was a completely different experience and he never turned his ear away from what I was singing, which made some really powerful music.” Campbell agrees, noting that in jazz, “Your energy level is influenced by the person [soloist] who came before you.”

He draws on a classical-music analogy to explain that “a jazz trio, quartet, or quintet is like a small chamber group, and I’m enjoying the kind of interaction you get.” Even so, “I’ve never heard a classical pianist who sounded good in jazz,” he says. “With jazz, the rhythm is so important—getting it into your soul. It’s an insult to a jazz musician to say, ‘Your rhythm sounds like a classical musician trying to play jazz.’”

Indeed, rhythm powerfully drives Campbell’s approach. For him, nirvana is “playing with a really ridiculous bass and drummer who have the most solid swinging rhythm. The ecstasy you can get from a combo like that—they just light a fire in the room.”

Campbell continues to play classical works, partly because “Classical training addresses things that jazz training doesn’t address, like attention to tone quality and the subtlety of phrasing. You can pay attention to these things more easily when the notes are all written out. With jazz, there’s so much else to deal with—improvising is mostly about knowing what to play, rather than how you play it. But the best jazz musicians know what to play and how to play it.”

In his own jazz compositions, Campbell works at the most fundamental level of what to play. For example, the silky surface texture of “Snow” moves over shifting rhythmic cadences that segue from an unusual 7/4 meter into and out of other rhythms, all nuanced by Campbell’s characteristic syncopated accents. In the piece, “There are three sections that people solo over,” he explains. “Each has its own space and harmony.”

The Harvard-NEC program was the deciding factor in convincing Campbell to attend Harvard. “I needed to find a way of doing music seriously,” he says. “It keeps me in the Boston music scene, and I wouldn’t have met a lot of the people I play with otherwise. Plus, the teachers are at such a high level.” (Campbell has

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There was a time when Bill Scheft ’79 wrote fiction from 10 a.m. until noon in a windowless, five-by-five closet inside his spacious midtown Manhattan apartment. Then he’d walk a few blocks to the offices of the Late Show with David Letterman, where, since 1991, he has been a comedy writer, specializing in monologue jokes and Top Ten lists. One day his wife, Adrianne Tolsch, warned Scheft to wait longer before emerging onto the street: “You’re going to get hit by a cab,” she said. Scheft admits that writing fiction makes him “a little lightheaded. You sit down and try to get yourself into this state of mind—you are maneuvering in this world. You’ve got to sit there in the silence and let the answers come into the silence. You’ve got to stare into the abyss. It’s the antithesis of joke writing.”

Not that Scheft’s novels—the last three have been published—aren’t funny. After all, he was a standup comedian for 13 years, touring the United States, Canada, and Australia (“I was a good act, not a great act—Jews, sports, and weather”). His newest fictional effort, Everything Hurts, explores the world of mind-body medicine with Phil Camp, a protagonist so hobbled by lower-limb pain that he becomes a virtual agoraphobe and writes his wildly successful, nationally syndicated advice column flat on his back on a pad in his New York apartment. “To walk and sit and run and bend like any other neurotic forty-six-year-old had become his full-time job,” Scheft writes. “Phil’s part-time job was urinating. Fifteen times a day.”

Phil does leave his apartment and becomes a patient of a mind-body doctor whose hit book on pain is called The Power of Ow! The protagonist’s ordeal parallels certain experiences of the author. “I dragged a foot, limping, in constant pain, for four years,” Scheft relates. “I was told there was nothing wrong with me, it was psychogenic. I wrote this book to ‘art’ myself out of the pain. The guy in the book got better before I did. Ten days after I sold the book, I went to see another doctor, who took one look at my most recent x-rays and said, ‘You need a hip replacement.’ And that was it. But I do believe in psychosomatic theories; the pain is real, but the root of the pain is in the brain. I’m a big fan of the examined life—I’m in my third decade of psychotherapy.”

Letters & Letterman

Bill Scheft writes comic monologues and fictional dialogue.

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