

MUSIC

By Karen Feld

A pianist nonpareil: John Eaton

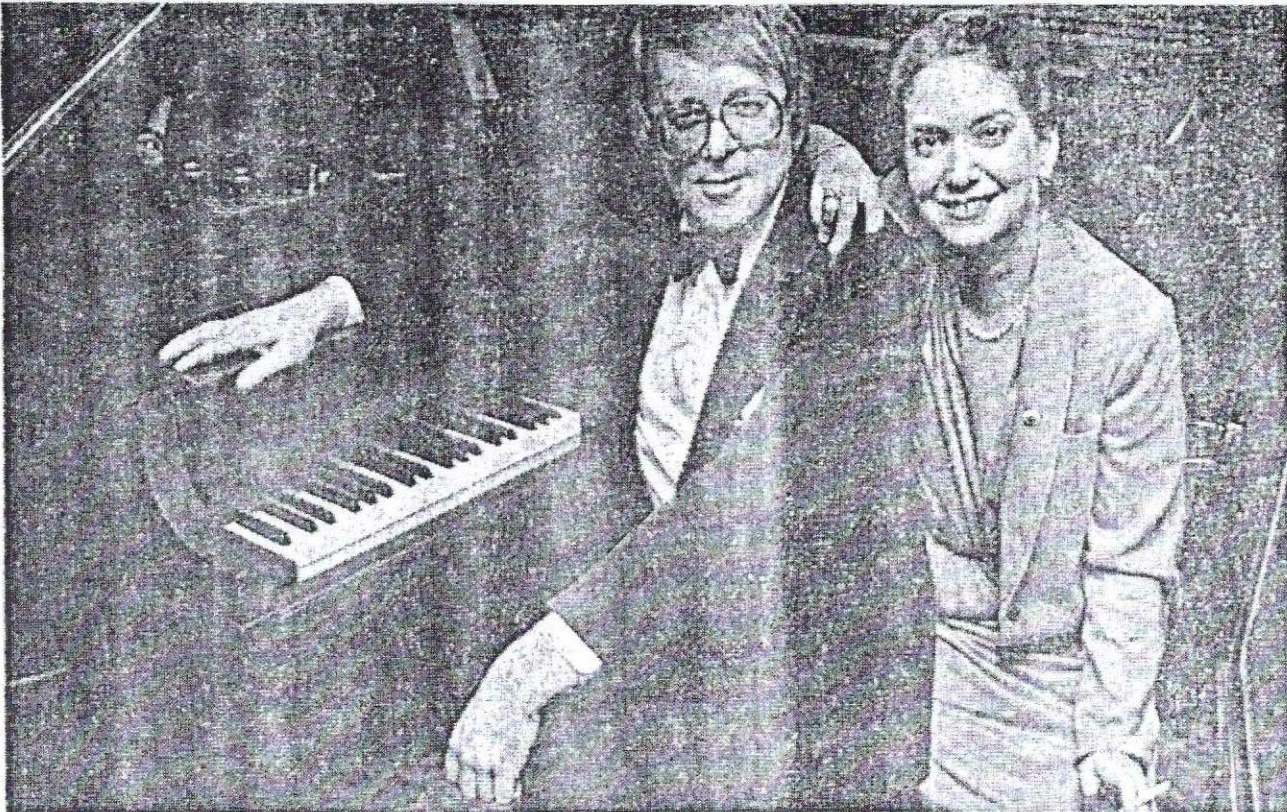
John Eaton has been called the best pianist in Washington by no less a light than George Shearing. Washington is a city of lawyers, and Eaton, who looks like a lawyer with his conservative dress, straight hair and tortoise-shell glasses, is Washington's answer to Bobby Short.

When Eaton begins his night's work at 9 in the lounge of the Fairfax Hotel, the "before-dinner" crowd is still lingering over its last cocktails. The room, which seats about 50, is not yet full, and it is often lonely for Eaton. He seems somewhat shy until the evening progresses; then a transformation occurs as the room fills up with many familiar faces among the "after-dinner" crowd.

"You never quite get used to an almost empty room," admits Eaton. "But then, some nights you come in, and you're just as happy there isn't anybody here — until you feel better. My mood in playing depends on the audience. Music is communication. It isn't just playing for yourself."

He includes in his first set material familiar to most listeners — "Send in the Clowns," a Beatles medley, some Marvin Hamlisch tunes, a little Scott Joplin.

"In the early sets of the evening, people respond not only to familiarity, but also to what it is that you would like to do," he says. "You can't do things you don't believe in. That's why I eliminate a lot of the contemporary repertoire. I don't identify with it."



John Eaton and his wife Penny at the Fairfax Hotel.

The Washington Star / Brig Cabe

One device Eaton uses is asking for requests. "It's a way of finding out what people want," he explains. "It's not to intrude or embarrass people." A gentleman, obviously a regular, requests a Cole Porter medley. "That'll tide us over 'til midnight," says Eaton, sipping his Coke and putting his fingers to the keys.

Eaton plays what he terms "polite jazz" and what he considers the good contemporary tunes. He attributes his early jazz inspiration to the piano of Fats Waller and Art Tatum.

"What determines a good tune is not what the musicians think is a good tune," he says. "It's what the public thinks." He adds new tunes as a courtesy but drops them after a few months if he doesn't get requests for them.

Each set and each evening are different. "You have to play according to mood," explains Eaton, who generally includes a selection of tunes by great popular composers like George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers and Cole Porter. "A selection of those in some combination will always find a response," he says.

Eaton, a 46-year-old Washington native, began playing the piano at age 6 and has performed professionally since he was 24. His first job was at the Bayou with Bill Whalen's band. But he hadn't planned a career in music, graduating from Yale in 1956 as an English major with the intention of teaching. After a stint at Georgetown University graduate school, he decided to become a professional jazz pianist.

He has been performing at the Fairfax since early March when his contract expired at the Atrium in the Embassy Row Hotel. He has a

group of loyal followers who have trekked from club to club to hear him play. They span a wide spectrum of ages, and he knows most on a first-name basis.

"I think they love music — that's the common factor," he says, encouraged that recent audiences have included more younger people. "They come in not only out of curiosity, but they really like the music, and they like to hear it recreated. They don't like the things they're told they like."

"It's a great injustice that everybody assumes people who like Richard Rodgers and George Gershwin are at least over 40. There's a much calmer feeling about music now than there was 10 years ago, when everybody was jumping on the youth bandwagon."

Ten years ago was a disturbing time for Eaton. He appeared briefly at the Holiday Inn at Tyson's Corner. "You played body and soul, and people in their 40s and 50s would be offended. That was a rather grim period," he says.

The piano lounge at the Fairfax, an annex to the main bar, was originally intended for private parties. Paneled in pine, it is furnished with comfortable wingback leather chairs and cocktail tables. One problem is the pillars, which block the view of the piano from certain angles. The lighting leaves a lot to be desired, but the acoustics are excellent, which benefits Eaton and his Steinway.