

Friday, August 7, 1981

Accent

Chet Baker is back in there.

A question was posed. The telephone receiver remained silent for long, pregnant moments. Then Chet Baker's voice emerged, time-worn yet soft.

The voice carried weariness and animosity, suggesting his seemingly endless climb with the combined weights of drug addiction and society's consequent impositions.

"Listen, I don't think anybody knows from one day to the next what's going to happen," Baker said from his home in New York. "You can be taken out for any reason at any time. We're all here for too short a time."

The jazz trumpeter, who performs at the Jazz Gallery Tuesday and Wednesday nights, now

seems to be on level ground. Far too experienced to dream idealistically, nevertheless, Baker hopes his only remaining climbing is purely musical.

After a long pause, he continued.

"Yeah, I've had a lot of drug problems. That was over a long time ago, but people still ask me the same stupid questions after all these years. I'm 51 years old, and I'm still here, so I must have had some good sense somewhere."

Those years included glorious ones as the leading trumpeter in the '50s cool-jazz style. He is best remembered for the famous pianoles quartet he led with saxophonist Gerry Mulligan.

The years also include jail sentences for drug convictions in the United States and Europe. Unlike many similarly afflicted jazz musicians of his generation, Baker survived. And overlaying the vestiges of his scarred life is a new skin in which he's grown.

"I think quite a bit positive came out of the experience," Baker said. "I learned a lot. To speak fluent Italian for one thing, out of necessity.

"It doesn't hurt to have a few bad experiences in one's life. If one goes through one's whole life skipping and laughing gaily, maybe he might miss out on some feelings — those of a person who suffers, is taken away from his loved ones and locked up, given a number, treated like an animal. I don't know if that helps your music or not. I know in my case it didn't hurt."

Baker's road back was detoured by thugs who severely beat him for drug money one night in 1968. That cost him his teeth. Believing himself unable to play the trumpet, Baker retired to a life of uncertainty.

Did he ever get the feeling life had dealt him an unfair hand?

"No, not really" he said. "I dealt with my fate. I was always open with my dealings. When you behave that way, sooner or later somebody's going to take advantage of it and try to put another