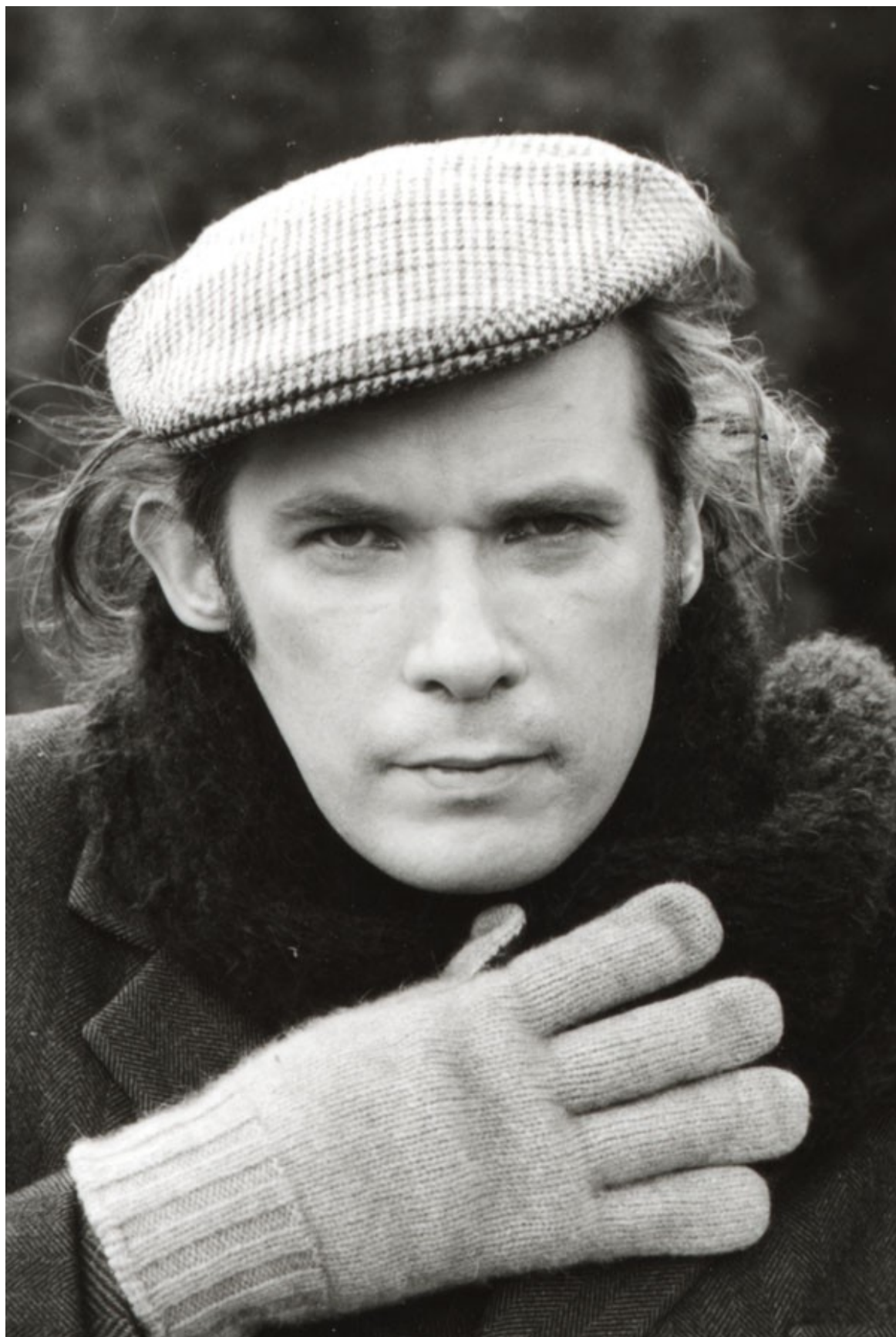


# Touch



Glenn Gould, by Don Hunstein (used with permission)

September 1963

**Thursday it was. Two weeks** after my twelfth birthday. A heat wave gripping Toronto, temperatures had been breaking sixty-year-old records according to the radio announcer my father and I were listening to as we ate breakfast.

My mother and brothers still asleep, at 6:45 I packed my music satchel, said goodbye to my father then headed to Mrs. Mae King's house two blocks down the street for my seven o'clock piano lesson. *Mae with an E* she had pointed out at my first lesson three years earlier. *Call me Mae. Everyone does.*

Once a concert pianist, Mae had been forced to stop performing in her mid-thirties. Arthritis in her fingers, so she explained at one of my early lessons. Genetic as far as doctors could tell. But, like Beethoven, who did some of his best work in his thirties when he was going deaf, Mae determined to put her affliction to good use and turned her talents to teaching. In no time she became one of the most popular and respected music teachers in the Beach. She was unorthodox. She had her idiosyncrasies to be sure, but they only endeared her to her students all the more. We revered her.

I don't know if she did so with her other students, but with me Mae would hum along to whatever piece I was playing. This was one of her eccentricities. She hummed every note I played, singing really, just a touch softer and without words, pitch-perfect, at tempo. Lost in the music, she might break off suddenly, run up to the piano—she liked to move around the studio as she hummed—stop me with a gentle hand on my shoulder, the signal for me to stand up and let her sit down to demonstrate how she wanted me to play a certain passage, humming it as she did so.

Back at the keyboard, I would repeat the passage the way I thought she wanted me to, and without realizing it I would

sometimes find myself humming along with the music too. Mae seemed not to mind. There we were, the two of us humming away to Chopin, Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Mae calling out behind me:

–*Feel* the notes! Don't just *play* them! Remember your touch! *Allegro! Legato! Crescendo! Diminuendo!*

–Morning, young man! Mae's affable husband Clare, slightly older than Mae, called out cheerily when I stepped in the side door.

–Morning, Mr. King, I replied, waiting for him to descend the four steps from the kitchen to the landing, where he handed me the steaming mug of Nescafé instant coffee (double-double) I was to take to Mae. He ruffled my curly hair as usual then told me not to let him hold me up. Downstairs I went with the coffee.

Mae usually sitting in her studio reading the morning newspaper when I arrived, that day she was standing at the door to her studio talking to a tall man with a pale thin face, a gentle smile, ears that stuck out noticeably from under a peaked cap, woollen scarf, buttoned-up winter overcoat and brown leather gloves on his hands. He looked to be in his early thirties, though it was hard to say for sure because he was so bundled up. Mae didn't have air conditioning. With the temperature outside already in the low eighties, her basement was sweltering, yet the man looked cool as a cucumber.

–Paul, Mae said as I handed her the coffee, this is my friend Glenn.

Looking down, the man cast me a warm smile.

–Paul has the most *beautiful* touch, Glenn!

–Well, isn't that nice to hear, he said, his smile widening. He removed his right glove, put out his hand and we shook.

Pleased to meet you, Paul.

It was the strangest thing. I hadn't shaken too many hands at that point in my young life, but I knew in the moments during which his soft slender fingers touched mine and the friendly-firm manner in which he shook my hand, that it was a moment I would remember, an intimate one that I felt more than I actually understood. Mae's effusive praise for my touch (she had never complimented me like that before) seemed a clue to the special strangeness of the situation—a code of some sort between the two of them that it was all right for this thirty year-old man to let his guard down with twelve year-old me. I would learn later that Glenn was an obsessive germophobe and a hypochondriac whose two worst fears were of being touched and being cold, the latter instilled in him as a boy by his mother who warned him anytime he went outside to dress warmly or he might catch his death of cold.

—Well, Glenn smiled at Mae putting his glove back on. Perhaps you'll let me hear Paul play sometime. He looked down at me. I'm an early riser, he kidded.

Mae laughed, throwing me a wink.

—He just doesn't go to bed!

Glenn chuckled.

—I'll be off then. He stepped over to the stairs and went up.

I followed Mae into the studio, closing the door behind me.

Back home to pick up my lunch before heading to school, I mentioned to my mother that I'd met a friend of Mrs. King's named Glenn. I described the incongruous clothes he'd been wearing despite the tropical temperatures we were having.

—That would be Glenn Gould, she said smiling. Famous Canadian pianist. He's quite the eccentric. I could see Mae King knowing him. She has her eccentric side. Your Aunt Mary was in

his class at Malvern (the high school I'd be attending the following year). He dropped out after eleventh grade to be a concert pianist. He hums when he plays.

—Hums? I thought of Mae, wondering at the coincidence.

—Apparently. Hums along with the notes while he's playing. Nobody knows why. He's supposed to be a genius. I guess that's why he has the reputation of being eccentric. He grew up in a house on Southwood Drive. You probably pass it on your way to school.

Before I left I went upstairs, grabbed the phone book, went into the bathroom and closed the door. I found the *G* listings, located *Gould*, several numbers, one with an address on Southwood Drive.

I practically ran to school, hurtled down Southwood Drive, crossed at Glen Ames and stopped in front of #32 on the west side of the street. The two-story brick house looked almost identical to my own. Without knowing it I had been walking past it every day for two years.

Snapping out of my reverie, I realized I was going to be late. I raced back around the corner and tore through the schoolyard to the rear doors humming all the way, humming as I charged up the stairs, humming as I streaked along the hall and dashed into Mr. Maher's home room class as *O Canada* started to play over the P.A. system.

I studied with Mae King for the next year. Glenn never put in another appearance, not that I was expecting him to. To be honest, the few times I thought about it I felt nothing but relief. Even with my so-called beautiful touch, playing for the world-renowned Glenn Gould would have been a terrifying experience in which I'd probably have played more wrong notes than right and humiliated myself.

Mae never mentioned Glenn again, and I never asked. There were

several times when I thought I might just have missed him as I noticed two mugs on the coffee table across from the piano where normally there was only the one.

One morning when I arrived, Mae was in the washroom. I set the fresh cup of Nescafé down next to a copy of *Holiday* magazine, open at an article called "The Zany Genius of Glenn Gould." Mae appeared, saw me looking at the magazine.

—How do you like that? she laughed with unveiled sarcasm as I went to the piano. *Zany genius*. Is there any other kind?

I began my warm up exercises. It was the second time I'd heard Glenn referred to as a genius. It wouldn't be the last.

That Christmas at my Aunt Mary's house we talked about Glenn. He had just shocked the music world by retiring from the concert stage at the ripe young age of thirty-two, at the height of a stellar international career. I mentioned to Mary my encounter with Glenn at Mrs. King's before my piano lesson, adding that he had shaken my hand, and that he had been very friendly.

Mary's eyebrows shot up.

—Glenn shaking hands? Wow. You should call the newspaper. It would make the headlines, she said, only half-kidding.

In my first year of high school I suffered an athletic injury to the middle finger of my left hand. The coach had told me it was only a sprain, however it turned out I'd broken the finger. After the swelling went down and the pain went away, I discovered that when I went to play the piano the finger wouldn't go down straight. It shifted slightly to the left against my fourth finger, and there was apparently nothing I could do about it.

The accident had happened at a track meet the day of a recital into which Mrs. King had entered me at the Eaton Auditorium on

Yonge Street. It was a prestigious and important recital in that teachers from the Royal Conservatory of Music would be in attendance scouting for scholarship students. I was to play Chopin's Polonaise in A-flat major, a demanding piece even without the finger injury. I had no choice but to cancel.

Though I could still play the piano and worked hard to compensate for the injury, my left-veering third finger continued to hit wrong notes, too many for the demands of classical piano-playing, which requires ten always reliable fingers. According to my doctor the wayward one would stay that way. By mutual agreement I stopped taking lessons with Mae.

I missed them a fair bit at first, however I quickly came to prefer playing sports and being with my friends after school more than sitting at the piano practicing for an hour, my mother with her penchant for perfection scolding me from wherever she happened to be in the house any time I hit a wrong note. *Wrong notes don't matter*, I would have ended up telling her, precipitating a fight. *Touch is the thing that really counts. Glenn Gould says so!*

In high school during the 1960s, sonatas, nocturnes and intermezzos were not what teenagers had in mind when they asked me to play something. They wanted the Beatles, the Beach Boys, the Carpenters, the Supremes, the kind of music they were listening to on the radio.

The music being rudimentary compared with what I was used to playing, I picked it up quickly and made the songs my own, gave them my personal take. I developed a solid repertoire that ranged from old favourites to Broadway show tunes, movie themes, rock and pop songs that I played in a style people responded to, I think because I worked to give them what Mae had instilled in me for four years: *Feel the notes, Paul, don't just play them!*

During university I was the accompanist at two ballet schools, classical excerpts from well known ballets mostly, though improvisation was encouraged for warm-ups and step practise. The teachers for whom I played remarked on the fact that I put feeling into the music rather than just methodically banging out prescribed pieces from the Royal Academy syllabus as other accompanists tended to do. *It's so nice to see someone who marches to the beat of his own drummer.*

I told them I couldn't take all the credit; that I owed a considerable amount to my teacher Mae King and her friend the pianist Glenn Gould, both of whom marched to their own drums. It was the first and only time I ever referred to Glenn, for better or for worse, as having had an influence on my playing. To be honest, I felt a bit guilty. I'd only met the man once for a few minutes many years before. He'd never heard me play and wouldn't remember our chance seven a.m. meeting in Mae King's basement.

Yet I was wrong.

In the autumn of 1981 I started teaching at a high school on Avenue Road north of St. Clair. Though I usually ate in the dining room with the students and other teachers, at least once a week I would walk over to St. Clair and Yonge for lunch with friends who worked in the area. One day as we were paying our bills at Fran's Diner, an uptown fixture since the 1950s (and still serving bland 1950s fare according to food critics) a man sitting alone at a table toward the rear of the restaurant caught my eye. His back to me, he had on a peaked cap and a dark overcoat.

I knew Glenn lived just along the street from Fran's. I'd seen him several times from a distance walking east along St. Clair, probably to Fran's. Another time I passed him standing outside the restaurant in lively conversation with a woman of about his age who was laughing at something he had just said.



Handing the money for my bill to one of my friends, I deliberated uncertainly for a moment until I summoned up the nerve to speak to the man. Asking myself finally what was the worst that could happen—*Sorry to have bothered you, sir, I thought you were someone else*—off I went.

I walked a few steps past his table, slowed and turned. It was Glenn, a grilled cheese sandwich and a bowl of steaming soup on the table in front of him.

—Mr. Gould, I said. Sorry to disturb you. I'm Paul Illidge. You won't remember me, but we met early one morning many years ago at Mae King's.

His face brightening, he smiled up at me recollecting.

—With the beautiful touch! Yes, I do remember. He put out his hand, I took it and we shook. How are you? Are you still playing?

—Here and there. Nothing serious.

—That's good. A lesson I think I learned too late in life.

—I noticed you and thought I'd say hello.

—I'm glad you did. Nice to see you.

He put out his hand and we shook again briefly, exchanging smiles.

I stood for a moment that seemed longer to me than it probably was. There was something I wanted to say, something important but which I couldn't put into words until I walked away to rejoin my friends who were waiting for me.

*You let me touch you, Glenn. I feel honoured that you did. It's made all the difference to my life, more than you could know.*

A year later to the day, October 4th, 1982, Glenn died of a

massive stroke just a week after his fiftieth birthday. News of his death shocked the international music world. Tributes poured in.

*A celebrated pianist and prolific broadcaster, Glenn Gould was one of Canada's most important cultural figures, and remains one of the world's most admired and studied musicians. Gould's distinctive piano style, idiosyncratic interpretations, unusual stage mannerisms and independent vision marked him as a maverick and an eccentric.*

His recordings were played on classical music stations day and night, television documentaries he had made were rerun, newspaper and magazine articles told the story of his genius and stature on the world's most important stages.

The funeral was held at St. Paul's Bloor Street, the city's largest cathedral, on October 12th. Thirty-five hundred people were expected, the service to be broadcast on CBC radio and television.

I couldn't attend, and probably wouldn't have even if I had been able to. Funerals of such a size that they become public spectacles weren't my thing, especially when in this case the public spectacle was for a man who had been obsessively private.

I caught the last part of the funeral on the radio as I drove north on Highway 48 to Mount Albert, a village forty-five minutes northeast of Toronto, where I was meeting a friend. The rain that had been falling all day let up as I approached a series of hills and hollows that took me through farm country north of the town of Markham: sweeping fields and forests to the west as far as you could see under a cloudy sky that had begun to break up. A horizon-to-horizon rainbow began to materialize in the brightening blue sky through a late-afternoon sun shower just as I ascended Mount Albert hill.

—As we conclude this service for Glenn Gould, the voice of the

CBC announcer intoned on the radio, we leave you with the words of a benediction from St. Augustine that Glenn loved: *God grant each of us that peace which the world cannot offer.* Warren Davis for CBC Radio, good afternoon.

Shivering with the serendipity, I pulled over onto the gravel shoulder, skidded to a stop and jumped out of the car leaving the engine running. The shivers subsiding, I gazed up at the rainbow, at the golden October light streaming across the harvest fields, the opening notes of Glenn's *Goldberg Variations* playing quietly on the radio behind me.

That touch, that touch . . .

## [Table of Contents](#)

**Paul Illidge** is the author of *The Bleaks* (ECW Press), a Globe & Mail Best Book of 2014, and *Shakespeare for the E-generation: The Page, the Stage, the Digital Age*. His work appears regularly on Mental Health Talk.info

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