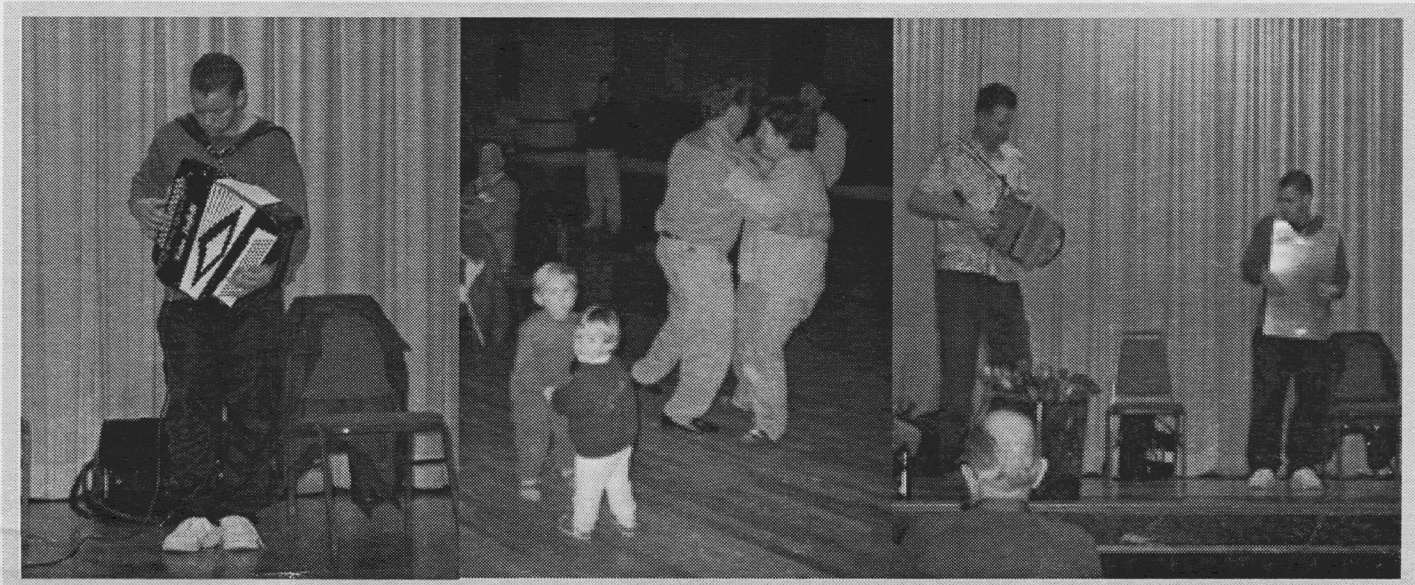


BAAAC PAGE

Dedicated to the accordion through fun, service & education

FEBRUARY 2001: WHAT A MONTH

By Robert K. Berta



While the February meeting only had a couple of featured artists they proved up to the task and provided some wonderful music. First, our Composer in Residence Valarie Morris joined Sharon Walters in duets of Valarie's compositions. Valarie is a master of many instruments so she took the opportunity to demonstrate her considerable skills on the accordion, flute and clarinet on several excerpts from a selection of her suites. The first selections were from her *What a Year Suite* with musical pictures of the various months. This was followed by selections from her *What a Week Suite* featuring days of the week as musical images. Hmm—I think I see a pattern here. Maybe the next suite would include *Dance of the Hours*—wait, isn't that one taken?

Seriously, we appreciated the various selections which were nicely played. Valarie has proven herself to be a formidable composer and we always enjoy hearing her wonderful creations. And Sharon, as always, is a fine musician—together, it was a double treat.

The next performer was a special concert performance by Cajun/Zydeco masters Billy Wilson from *Motor Dude Zydeco* and Andre Thiery from *Andre Thiery and Zydeco Magic*. Billy and Andre both played sans their normal band. Instead we were treated to solo accordion and the Cajun/Zydeco Rub Board.

Billy played a selection which included *Eunice Two Step*, a Cajun Waltz, *The Danny Pouillard Two Step*, *Zydeco Cha-Cha*, *Blue Zydeco*, and a couple of other Two Steps. Billy has become a very popular performer and we were delighted to hear him play.

Next, Billy introduced Andre Thiery. Andre is a 21 year old that we first heard perform at Cotati with Danny Pouillard's Cajun/Zydeco band about two years ago. Evidently Andre has been practicing—wow! What a natural talent! Andre switched between a one row Cajun box, a piano accordion

and a unique 3 row diatonic that was paired with a regular Stradella bass. It became obvious why Andre has become the talk of the Cajun/Zydeco crowd. He is an amazingly talented musician with excellent technique and a pervasive feeling for the music.



Andre played a series of Cajun/Zydeco tunes which caught the attention of club members Don and Susan Larson. Club members know Don and Susan (aka the *Flamin' Cajun*) as aficionados of folk dancing and Cajun/Zydeco music. They are both fine accordion players, but whenever a dance tune is struck you can count on them to be dancing up a storm. Evidently dancing is contagious in

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On Deck March 7th: Roberto Rosa, George Johnstone, Don Nurisso Duo!

February 2001: What a Month

(continued)

the Larson family as their two children, Christian and Ruth, are enthusiastic dancers also. It was delightful to watch the young brother and sister dance with each other like a couple of pros. Their joy sort of summed up the good feeling that everyone had and Billy and Andre got a well-deserved standing ovation.

If you want to hear Billy Wilson and his *Motor Dude Zydeco*

you can catch them at *Bobbies Backdoor* located in Richmond at McBride and San Pablo on the first Thursday of the month from 7:00pm - 10:30pm.

Andre Thiery and Zydeco Magic perform at the Eagles Hall in Alameda located at 2305 Alameda Ave. from 8:00pm to midnight. I didn't get the days that they perform. If you want to catch either group or confirm where and when they will be playing you can contact Billy at 510-652-3833. If you like great music, you'll be glad you did.

Teach Speak

By Steve Albini

How good of a musician do you want to be? What are the prerequisites for becoming a good musician?

- 1. Talent.** Talent has to do with what you hear with your ears, a sense of time and a sense of form.
- 2. Direction.** Where do you want to go with your music? When studying an instrument always have a goal in mind. Always keep your "eye" on an end! You do not practice for the sake of practicing but for the end result. [This can range from playing at Carnegie Hall to just knocking the socks off of everyone at a BAAC meeting.] If you get frustrated SLOW DOWN! Take it easy. You want to get to your goal but at the same time there is NO HURRY to get there.
- 3. Ambition.** Ambition goes along with direction. It is the desire, will and stamina to work hard and practice!
- 4. Education.** Obviously the best education you can get comes from private instruction. Find a qualified instructor and take advantage of his or her knowledge. Make sure your teacher not only spends time teaching you how to play your instrument but also teaches you about music! Music is much more than playing songs. A solid musical education includes a great deal of ear training and theory. Also be sure to listen carefully to the recordings of great musicians. Study their phrasing and technique. Listen to how these musicians play with feeling!
- 5. Good luck**—and practice hard!

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Letter from Beijing

I returned from USA some days ago. The whole concert tour was a very big success, with standing ovations all over. Perhaps I will visit USA for a concert trip again in April-May. I will let you know when I have more news about it. When I played a concert in San Francisco, I met Mr. Bob Berta. He is a wonderful person. I hope I can meet you in 2001. Keep in touch. Your friend,

Zhang Guoping—Beijing, China

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Squeezin' in Hawaii

By Valerie T. Kieser

The last thing I thought I would ever do was go to Hawaii to play my accordion! Well, that's not *exactly* how it happened, so I'll start at the beginning.

Last November while we were visiting in Los Angeles, my cousin Sandie told us she wanted to have her 60th birthday party in Hawaii on January 13. She would invite only her closest friends and family, including John and me, and she hoped that with a lot of luck, we might be able to spend a day on Coconut Island in Kaneohe Bay off the island of Oahu. This was

especially exciting to me because I spent a month on Coconut Island with Sandie's family (the Harold Pauleys and the Edwin Pauleys) in the summer of 1947 and carried a lot of memories about that wonderful summer. Several members of the Pauley family plus a couple of other businessmen owned this tiny (approx. 20 acres) island. The Pauleys subsequently donated the island to the University of Hawaii as a marine biology research center, which it is today, and Sandie was not at all sure she would be able to secure the island for her party for this one day.

Well, through her Pauley cousins and a lot of telephoning and e-mailing, she did it!

So, how does the accordion fit in? It seems that, of all the people who knew Coconut Island in the '40's, I'm the only one who remembers the original Coconut Island song, which played endlessly through loudspeakers all day long (or so it seemed) on the island when I was there in 1947. Everyone who might have known the song was either dead or just didn't recall how it went. Sandie's great aunt had actually composed the song, but her daughter, who is still living, has been unreachable. She still might have that original song, but Sandie was unable to obtain it in time for this party.

Enter Val. I started practicing the song as I thought I remembered it, typed out the words as I recalled them, wrote out the music as best I could and made copies for everyone at the party (13 people). I suspect that what I recall may not be the complete song, but it was enough for the occasion.

Incidentally, it turns out that there is still another Coconut Island song that I knew nothing about, copyrighted 1961, and Sandie happened to have a copy of that one and faxed it to me. I immediately memorized it and made copies for everyone at the party. It is very different from the original song.

So now to the party on Coconut Island, Saturday, 12 January 2001: Sandie had hired a 3-piece Hawaiian band to play beautiful, authentic Hawaiian music (including that marvelous

male falsetto singing voice) for her birthday party, but of course none of the band members knew either of the two Coconut Island songs. When we arrived at Coconut Island yesterday (I'm writing this while still in Hawaii), the band and some researchers who live on the island were there to greet us with music and leis made of ti leaves—and I had the opportunity to tell the band and they were more than willing to play the songs with me on the accordion, while the guests sang along during our picnic

lunch. Surprise! Apparently, there is still *another* Coconut Island song that the band knew about! They did not play it, however, and so of course I could not get a copy of it.

Each guest at the party got a special T-shirt and each couple got a hand painted coconut (an old tradition for visitors to the island) to commemorate the event. Heaven knows how we'll ever squeeze those items into our overstuffed bags when we return home—but if we have to displace something else, that's OK with me!

One small anecdote: the caterers for the picnic lunch on Coconut Island never showed up, even though they had been specifically confirmed at 8:30 the night before—and to this moment, no one has been able to reach them to find out what went wrong. We are concerned that they might have had a mishap of some kind. Meanwhile, the student researchers on Coconut Island jumped into their little boat and rushed to the town of Kailua on Oahu and got us some deli items from Safeway, and saved the day! (Sandie's cake came from another source, so it was not affected by the absence of the caterers.)

What a day it was! The weather forecast had been for rain on and off, but it didn't rain until we were on the shuttle boat leaving Coconut Island at the end of the day, and that downpour lasted only five minutes—followed by a beautiful rainbow just as we chugged back to Oahu! What an ending to a perfect excursion, loaded with memories for me and Sandie.

By the way, the Coconut Island excursion on Saturday (January 13th) was only part of the whole celebration. Friday night there had been a welcome cocktail party; then last night after our return from Coconut Island and after a much needed rest, we had a superb dinner at Michel's, a fabulous Continental restaurant at the Colony Surf Hotel at Waikiki; then this morning (Sunday) most of the group got together for an exquisite brunch at the Outrigger Canoe Club, a private club, also at Waikiki,

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before saying our farewells in the afternoon.

None of us will ever forget this incredible experience. I wanted to write it down while it is all still fresh in my memory, and I hope you, too will find it interesting and amusing.

Gold in the Box

In a CD review of the Jeanette Dyremose Ensemble entitled *Sparkling Moments*, Henry Doktorski writing for the Classical Free Reed web site noted: Jeanette Dyremose is a talented and dedicated woman. The accordion was always her chosen instrument; the academies of music in Europe, however, did not offer—during her student years—educational opportunities for the instrument. As the organ was the closest instrument to her beloved accordion, she studied at the *Royal Danish Academy of Music* as an organist. Following her graduation, she studied accordion performance, pedagogy and ensemble instruction in Germany, Poland and the USA.

For a number of years she was employed as an accordionist at the *Royal Theatre of Denmark*. In 1977, she founded *The Danish Accordion Ensemble*; in 1978 she founded *The Danish Accordion Association*, as well as *The Accordion Center* in Copenhagen, the largest music school in Denmark specializing in the accordion.

The award-winning ensemble is truly a musical triumph and is proof of the superior teaching methods of Ms. Dyremose. (She has also written a book on playing the accordion, *The Life-Giving Bellows Play*.) Did I mention the new instrument Ms. Dyremose helped design? Listen to this:

A special chapter of the activities of Jeanette Dyremose is the development and improvement of the instrument's functioning via bellows. In addition to the exceptional rhythmic and dynamic qualities of the accordion, Jeanette Dyremose for years strived for an improved sound quality. To this end, she therefore last year, in cooperation with the Italian *Borsini* family of instrument builders, designed a new classical instrument to be produced especially for the members of her present ensemble. The sonorousness, great volume and dynamic span of the new completely black instruments is primarily due to the built-in *Super Star* reed set, produced by the most outstanding Italian reed maker of today. Furthermore, all metal parts of the instruments are made of gold, not only for visual reasons, but also to obtain supreme quality of sound.

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A bluegrass, mountain-tinged band highlighting singer-mandolin player, Evan Eustis's original songs. If you are familiar with local bands, The Vagabond Lovers the Fitzners and the Carbon Yard, you will recognize bassist Tom Hedrick, drummer Dan Lashkoff, guitarist Randy Strauss, **and Accordionist Emily Esner**. Enjoy their versions of the Eagles, John Prine and Led Zeppelin. Admission: \$4.00 Refreshments. 510/845-1429

President's Message

By Lou H. Soper

We had our first accordion workshop for the year 2001 on Saturday, February 3 at the Moose Club in Daly City. **Joe Smiell** did an outstanding job instructing articulation on the piano accordion. The 14 pages of music he prepared for the



class were enough exercises to last a lifetime. The class started at 10:30 A.M. and finished at 2:45 P.M. with 1/2 hour lunch break at noon. All who attended expressed their appreciation to Joe. BAAC provides these free workshops to all the members twice a year. Our next class will be in June. You will be notified in plenty of time so you can attend.

Val Kieser will represent BAAC at the Texas Accordion Convention next month.

Performers for our March 7th meeting will feature Roberto Rosa, George Johnstone and the Don Nurisso Duo. If you like swinging music, this program will excite you.

We still need volunteers to help our secretary, Val Kieser. It takes very little time to handle correspondence. If you have any computer experience the task is very easy. Val will help instruct any volunteer on what to do, so please give us a call. Val will retire in September 2001. She has done enough for BAAC the past 6 years. It is time for you to volunteer.

For our picnic this year, we have reserved Sunday, July 8th at the Nature's Friend Park in the Oakland hills. We will have great food, music, dancing and prizes. Mmark your calendar to save that Sunday.

Hope you had a very nice Valentine's day and hope to see you on Wednesday, March 7th at the Patio Español

Don Haas is ill

A benefit concert was held at the Longfellow School Auditorium, Berkeley, California on February 4th for Don Haas, who has been diagnosed with liver and lung cancer. Don is an accordion teacher and a respected educator and performer. Performers included members of the *Mike Vax Big Band* and special guests who played classic arrangements of *When Sunny Gets Blue* and *Stompin' at the Savoy*. The full house also enjoyed many testimonials delivered by some of Don's students and fellow musicians. Don was too weak to attend the concert, but the event was recorded for him to watch at home. Don is undergoing chemotherapy treatments and remains hopeful that he will be able to return to teaching his dedicated students in his home studio. A fund was set up by Mike Vax and the friends of Big Band Jazz. If you would like to make a donation please email Mike Vax: vaxtrpts@aol.com—Jon Hammond

What's Right With Our Instrument

By Willard A. Palmer

(1917-1996)

[This article was reprinted from the February 1947 issue of *Accordion World* (New York). A web page has been created as a memorial to the late Dr. Willard A. Palmer, music educator, editor, author and loving father and husband by his sons Willard A. Palmer, III and Thomas M. Palmer—we invite our readers to check it out: www.willardpalmer.org. We're indebted to The Classical Free Reed website for archiving the article and direct our readers to the site as well: <http://trfn.clpgh.org/free-reed>.

Willard Palmer was known and respected all over the world as an expert on baroque ornamentation and an expert on keyboard theory and teaching. He originated the Masterworks series for Alfred Publishing Co. One of the key

documents that led to the development of the Alfred Masterworks Series was *Das Klavierbüchlein vor Wilhem Friedemann Bach*, which Bill's son found for him at an opportune time and in an unusual manner—which is another story. The Bach manuscript is the only source of Baroque ornamentation extant and was written by J.S. Bach himself. Willard A. Palmer was also half of the famous Palmer-Hughes authors of instruction books for the accordion.]

"What a pity that such talent is wasted on an accordion! What a pity the accordion has no worthwhile musical literature!"

Don't remarks like these just make you boil over? Such things were often heard a few years ago, but they are becoming rare, thanks to the rapid rise of the accordion in popularity with the public and their growing place in the esteem of the best musicians everywhere. Our instrument is on the verge of becoming at last a truly recognized member of the great family of accredited musical instruments of orchestras, conservatories, colleges, and schools all over the world. It is now the responsibility of every accordionist to get behind our favorite instrument and give it as great a boost as possible in the last important steps necessary for full recognition. All of our best arguments must be mustered, and we must personally endeavor to set the best of examples in our own teaching and playing to show the true values of the accordion to the world of music.

We need never apologize to anyone for the few limitations of the accordion. I'm proud to call myself an accordionist, because I am proud of the instrument I've chosen! The fact that our instrument is a newcomer to the world of serious music offers us a challenge to be real pioneers in providing for it a needed library of solos, concertos, etc., probing the secrets of new techniques, and demanding improvements in the construction of the instrument. We are the people who must guarantee that its development be as rapid as possible, and who must see to it that it is properly and quickly recognized by the best of musicians as an instrument worthy the best of music.

Never be discouraged by the hesitancy of some few to accept the accordion. Our progress has been amazingly rapid. We often envy the place attained by the violin as the *prima donna* of the Symphony Orchestra. We needn't. We are

new, and our progress is streamlined when we compare it with the slow evolution of that instrument, which required centuries for development and recognition.

Starting as a peculiar looking bowed instrument known as the *rebec* (popular in the thirteenth century), it was not even fully recognized in the days of its greatest makers, Amati, Stradivarius, and Guarneri, some five hundred years later.

Monteverdi first introduced the violin into the orchestra in 1624, and then he gave it a very secondary part. He gave far more important parts to three portable organs. It is my guess that he would have gladly parted with all three in exchange for an instrument of the range and tone of

a multi-shift accordion of our day. That range is something to brag about. Did you every stop to consider that the range of a modern accordion, in the treble keyboard alone, extends from the lowest pitch possible with a bass clarinet to well above the highest range of the flute?

Organists marvel at the music that J. S. Bach composed for the inferior organs of his day, yet he laid the very foundations of modern organ composition in a time when good organ literature must have been more scarce than good accordion compositions are now. No instrument in all history has evolved as rapidly as the accordion has in the past forty years. It has been like a child growing rapidly to full maturity. Once it was a glorified harmonica. Now it is a small orchestra within itself, with advantages possessed by no other single orchestra instrument.

We must recognize our limitations, of course. All instruments have these. Perhaps a violin can do things that an accordion cannot, but on the other hand the accordion can produce effects that would require half a dozen instruments of the violin family. We pity the poor violinist, who must always play with other instruments to produce satisfying music.

A certain class of "long haired Musicians" objects to the fact that we must use a tempered keyboard. "Why, certainly, we can never use your instrument in a Symphony," one of these characters said to me "until you have some means of playing all tones with accurate pitch. F sharp and G flat, you know, are actually different in pitch. It is possible for the violin to play them accurately, but not an accordion, which has only one black key tuned so as to produce a sound that is between the two."

He's right in one respect. He knows that we do like Bach's "well tempered clavichord," and that we are using it for our treble keyboard. But how many other instruments now in use in the Symphonies suffer the same limitation?

When the flute was first adopted as an orchestral instrument, and even as late as the nineteenth century, it was impossible to even play a C major scale on that instrument in tune, let alone differentiate between F sharp and G flat. Rossini remarked that "the only thing worse than one flute is two flutes."

The piano, harp, and organ, as well as scores of wind instruments have suffered very little from lack of recognition,

(Continued Page 6)

**I'm proud to call myself
an accordionist, because
I am proud of the instrument
I have chosen!**

What's wrong (continued)

and they all have limitations resulting from temperament.

What are our limitations? What are our possibilities? Our disadvantages? Our advantages? Let us familiarize ourselves with them all, so that we can present convincing arguments to those who want to argue the issue with us.

Can an organ get the speed, the response, the sudden accents, the delicate shading that we can? Can a piano sustain tones, make a melody sing and breathe with life?

***Can a piano sustain tones,
make a melody sing
and breathe with life?***

This article could run on to book-length if we were to take up each instrument separately. It is not our purpose to show what is wrong with any instrument, but rather to call attention to what's right with the accordion.

The point of the story is this: Let us stop being sorry that our history had a late beginning, and let us be proud that all of us have an important part in building worthy traditions for the accordion, not as an instrument

of yesterday, but as the instrument of today with great days coming.

The Accordion as an Icon of Italian Culture

This was found on The Classical Free Reed Web Site, but it suggests a theme & a program some of our members might pursue.

Henry Doktorski will perform at the City University of New York on Friday, March 23rd, 2001 in a recital, sponsored by *The Center for the Study of Free-Reed Instruments* and *The John D. Calandra Italian American Institute*. Mr. Doktorski will perform compositions by two great Italian-American accordionists of the first half of the 20th century: Guido Deiro and Pietro Frosini.

Guido Deiro was born in Salta, Italy in 1886; as a young man he played at beer gardens and cafes in Italy and Germany. After he immigrated to the United States shortly after the turn of the century, he became famous as a vaudeville star, international recording artist, composer and teacher. He and his brother Pietro were among the highest paid performers on the circuit. He began teaching when the "moving pictures" forced many vaudeville shows to close. Guido dated the famous actress Mae West and is mentioned in her biography. He died in 1950.

Pietro Frosini was born in Catania, Sicily, in 1885 and began to play the accordion at the age of six. In 1905 he immigrated to San Francisco and was discovered by a talent scout for the Orpheum Vaudeville Circuit. Soon after, he met and became friends with Guido Deiro. Frosini made one of the first accordion recordings on a cylinder record for Edison in 1907 and made his first Victor recording in 1908. He traveled extensively on the vaudeville circuit in America and abroad and even performed for the King of England.

Frosini gave up vaudeville in 1932 when the "talkies" closed most vaudeville companies; he then became a staff accordionist for WOR radio in New York, a position he held until his death in 1951. Throughout his career, he performed, taught, composed and arranged music for the accordion. He wrote more than 200 original compositions for the instrument.

During the CUNY recital, Doktorski will perform two works by Guido Deiro: the waltz *My Florence* (1918) and the fantasia *Egypto* (1923), and four pieces by Frosini: the swing novelty *Rag in D Minor* (1916), the waltz *Florette* (1934), the overture *Omaggio a Pietro* (1918), and *Rhapsody No. 2 in C Minor* (1939).

The recital is part of a larger event sponsored by CSFRI entitled *The Accordion as an Icon of Italian American Culture*.

AD Info

A member may place one four-line ad for one month free of charge; after that the charge is \$5.00 per issue; a business-card-size ad will cost \$5.00 per issue or \$50.00 per year; a quarter-page ad will cost \$10.00; a half-page ad will cost \$20.00, and a full-page ad will cost \$35.00. The cost for ads placed by non-members will be twice the above-quoted prices.

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Rick Corrigan took up piano accordion shortly after receiving his Bachelor's in music from San Francisco State University in 1993. He has played in everything from touring rock groups to experimental electronic music ensembles—and composed music for films. In 1998, he formed the pickPocket Ensemble, which performs original compositions inspired by European folk music. He has released two CDs. Rick Corrigan's students benefit from his extensive musical background, prolific creativity and open mind. His approach is fresh and spontaneous—his interest in his students genuine.

Joe Smiell: A Life Rich in Music

By Steve Mobia

When Joe Smiell's father and other coal miners would come home covered with sweat and black coal dust from a hard day's work, they would sing to cheer themselves up. Their simple folk tunes had an amazing power to pull them out of their fatigue and ease thoughts about their predicament—if only momentarily. This was in the early 1900s before unions gained a foothold and mining companies imported workers and kept them under guard in company villages called "patches." As indentured slaves, they were forbidden to leave. If a parent died, the child had to take the parent's place in the mine under horrible conditions. At age 52, Joe Smiell's father died of black lung disease, but not before seeing his son escape a grim future as a coal miner. Joe did so by winning a scholarship to the Peabody Conservatory. And though he later studied classical music, Joe never forgot the songs of the miners and the power of simple tunes to raise the spirit, which led to his all-encompassing love of folk music.

Both Joe's parents were from what was then called the Austro-Hungarian Empire, though they met in Pennsylvania. His father was from what is now Poland and his mother from Slovakia. Joe was the third child of a family of five and he's the lone survivor of the first Smiells in America. The family was very musical. Joe's father played a button box, but he steered his son to the piano accordion (which he considered superior) and bought him an instruction book written by Pietro Deiro. Joe learned quickly and soon he (on accordion) and a younger brother on violin would play at weddings for money. Other instruments followed. Young Joe took up the violin and clarinet as well as the bassoon with which he won his Peabody scholarship.

With no money, Joe and a friend took a bus to the Peabody auditions and though facing stiff competition both won scholarships. At the time Joe had little knowledge of the classical repertoire, so he played a polka on his bassoon and his articulation impressed the judges.

The accordion also proved to be an asset at the conservatory. A teacher of his, Mario Lert, enjoyed giving parties at which Joe played German folk songs—which became his great love. Lert taught him a curious system of remembering what chord goes where, using family relationships: "You have a favorite uncle. This chord is your uncle. You can bring this chord into your house only when your mother



is home"; the mother was the tonic, the father the dominant and other chords were relations or friends. Lert introduced Joe to the world of opera (he was Toscanini's opera director) and had Joe arrange the works of Mozart and Beethoven, still his favorite composers. Joe played bassoon with the school orchestra and later with the Baltimore Symphony—all while still a student at Peabody.

The Second World War sent Joe from Peabody into the 11th Airborne Division where he served as a paratrooper in the Philippines. Most drafted musicians were assigned to radio detail in the Signal Corps, listening to dots and dashes. Joe preferred something "more interesting." At the conclusion of the war, he ended up in Northern Japan where he arranged music and helped develop a military band. During this time he played the clarinet (no bassoons were available).



Moving to San Francisco from Japan, he was stationed at the Presidio and thinking that world tensions would remain quiet for awhile he reenlisted with the military and subsequently met his wife to be, Lucy. As fate would have it, soon after their marriage in 1950, the Korean War broke out and he was sent to Korea as a Platoon Sergeant in the infantry. Joe's uncle who was also serving in Korea told Lucy not to expect her husband to return; the Chinese had cut off Joe's troops in the northern territory. The only way he could survive would be if he sneaked back south and the uncle said this was impossible. To Lucy's surprise and relief, after eighteen months, Joe returned from Korea. None of the men under

his command were killed though many including Joe were sick with parasitic infestation.

Military connections led to his involvement with a concert band at the Presidio as well as the first bagpipe band. Coincidentally, when the Presidio was turned over for civilian use and the concert band was disbanding, Joe was commissioned to write and conduct a suite of Russian tunes for a gathering of foreign dignitaries commemorating



(Continued on page 8)

Smiell continued

the end of World War Two. At the conclusion of Joe's performance, Mikhail Gorbachev who was in attendance was seen jumping to his feet and applauding.

After his military life, teaching and performing thoroughly occupied Joe. He taught music and a variety of subjects at Bay Area high schools and middle schools for 35 years. At first, he concentrated on music instruction, but because beginning students so often lacked accuracy Joe's own pitch discrimination began to suffer; so he quit teaching music for a while. Instead, at Francisco Junior High he was responsible for a program directed toward failing students. Using ideas from his music background (and conversations with his wife) he got the kids to pay attention through some novel innovations. He would have them wear blindfolds and completely focus on listening to specific sounds around them and write about what they heard. Also, he had students look in mirrors and draw the lines or figures in reverse. The game-like aspects of these and other exercises appealed to the kids and the class was very successful in reviving their interest in learning as their reading and math scores later showed.

Because he was a valued instructor, the school administrators were flexible about letting him take leave to give performances, as long as he returned to teach. Of course, when the summer months freed him from the classroom, he traveled from one orchestra to another, playing bassoon, clarinet or accordion—he's one of the few orchestral musicians capable of performing at a concert level on more than one instrument.

One of the first public shows at the Houston Space Center featured a solo performance by Joe on accordion. And during the late 70s he was a guest soloist touring Canada, playing his own multi-movement piece for accordion and orchestra. Another of his works was performed with the Denver symphony. He arranged and conducted ethnic music for the 1988 Olympic games in Seoul Korea. For three years in a row in the early 80s, Joe directed and choreographed the East/West college football halftime shows which were broadcast on CBS. And because he was so proficient at sight-reading, he was often called upon at the last minute to play the accordion parts in works by American composers such as Paul Creston and Virgil Thompson.

After World War Two, the army requested that something be done to help German orphans. In 1953, Joe started the first "Oktoberfest" in the United States to help raise money for the orphanages. The result was so successful that he started an organization called, "Oktoberfest USA" and formed a "big band" under his name with up to 35 musicians. Taking his inspiration from a Bavarian wedding party of 1810, Oktoberfest USA, a festival of music, beer drinking and dancing, traveled from one fairground to another with Joe

and company decked out in lederhosen. Today, Joe still travels to Japan with a 10-piece band to play Oktoberfests in Yokosuka and Iwakuni. His five piece group (including Joe Jr. on clarinet, Joe Sr. conducting and on accordion) plays regularly at restaurants, charities and the Nature Friends Center in Marin. They have nearly completed a CD of European folk music.



Travel remains very much a part of Joe's life. He regularly tours as Music Director for Russian Folk Ballet troupes, arranging their music and helping with the choreography (he loves dancing). He and his wife Lucy take many trips overseas both together and on their own.

His dad tried to dissuade Joe from the button box, but in 1983 Joe delved into it. The button box (or diatonic accordion) has a unique quality that's wonderful when playing folk songs or compositions for which it was intended. Several trips to Austria cemented this love for the instrument. Joe has led an annual button box camp for seven years now and he has made two solo recordings.

Though he never formally studied composition, Joe has been writing music since his early days of playing at weddings where he would jot tunes on the back of mining company stationary. At Peabody, Mario Lert told him the best way to learn to compose was to write variations. Joe still enjoys writing variations of classical pieces for groups of instruments and has been very successful in getting them performed abroad even by symphony orchestras. He's also done many arrangements for concert bands. His inner ear is so good that he can write out parts

before writing the master score and do it often without using an instrument to check the harmonies. Even though he has written hundreds of arrangements and many compositions of his own, he's never pushed to get his works published. "It's just too much of a hassle," he says.

His two sons also have their father's gift for music. Ed Smiell plays classical guitar while Joe Junior, like his father, is proficient on both the clarinet and accordion. Their mother Lucy is a talented sculptor and examples of her work abound in their Oakland home.

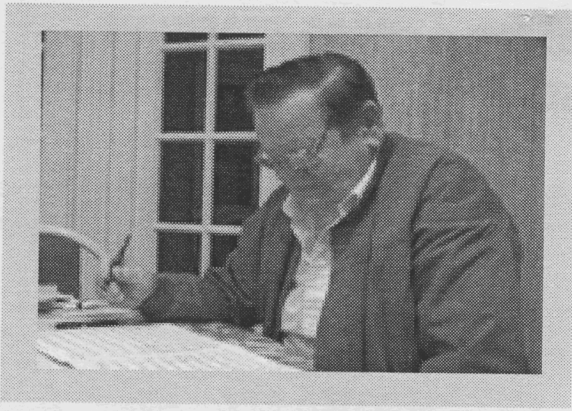
Joe observes that many accordion players are great technicians but not very good musicians—they never allow their playing to breathe. He's even had to walk out of accordion concerts when performers never pause in their phrasing—it's just



too claustrophobic and suffocating for him to bear. But Joe loves the accordion and thinks it's a great instrument; he thinks Beethoven and Mozart would have loved it because it's capable of great subtlety when played correctly. He feels that the variety of sounds produced by MIDI accordions is impressive, but that the results are too often flat and without nuance.

Joe Smiell is truly a treasured presence at the Bay Area Accordion Club. He leads two of our ensembles, as well as performing for us from time to time. He offers workshops,

(Continued on Page 9)



leads a button box camp and every year teaches a clinic at Galla-Rini's accordion camp in Southern California. His wealth of experience and talent as an arranger can be heard by the way he orchestrates a group of accordions—getting subtlety, expressiveness and great variety from every player and every part. Emulating his own teachers, Joe freely offers advice and instruction to any and all who are interested. He said he remembers reading about the original San Francisco Accordion Club when he was very young and he is proud to be a part of this one. We're proud to have him.

A Breath of Fresh Air

By Richard S. Schiller

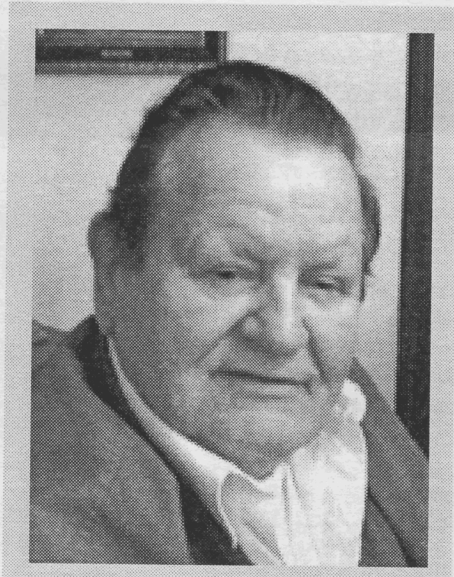
On Saturday February 3, fifteen very lucky BAAC accordionists were treated to a very pleasurable and intense session on the articulation of playing music. I think few are unaware of the stature of our own Joe Smiell. His unassuming quiet nature belies the fire that this man has inside for music. Along with his stellar background, artistry and patience, he has a deep love for our club and a sincere and abiding desire to teach us. The countless hours he puts in not only writing and conducting for our club, but traveling throughout the world has made him a legend in music circles. And what he does for us he does from affection and dedication and without reimbursement. What a gift!

I, for example, did not know that all notes written with the same time signature (i.e., quarter notes, half notes, etc.) are not necessarily played the same; there is a way to start a note, to end a note—along with many other notations that we too often pass over in just trying to play the written notes with our fingers (and not a lot else).

But in reality there is far more to making music come alive the way it was intended by the composer. "You play music just like you talk or sing; you must *breathe* at certain points in the piece." And Joe's style of teaching is one of direct example and leadership, "No, it's played *Deeah, deeah*; play it with me," he says with a booming voice. Was he a drill sergeant in the army? Yet, with absolute patience and kindness he guided us through 12 pieces of his own composition and gave us many variations to practice and consider.

Joe's insights and teaching afforded a much needed wakeup call for many of us poor souls, because what we were struggling to learn was something that should

have been included in our very first music lesson. And to help us Joe demonstrated, sang, told stories, cajoled, demanded, and complimented. About the only thing he didn't do was dance, but I bet he'd do that too with flair and talent if it was necessary to make a point about how to play music better.



Well, after 5 hours of profound, eye-opening instruction, along with some great German hot dogs, Joe had nearly recreated us into a Saturday afternoon version of his famed Ensemble. We were (to our happy surprise) playing notes and phrases like comparative masters. I truly believe everyone present discovered a deeper sense of the real beauty of music and the newfound confidence to look at music in a way that makes it come alive—and breathe; that's the Joe Smiell way (and Joe would humbly add Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and all great musicians to the list). Thank you, and a heartfelt bravo, Maestro!

Here are a couple of excited quotes I overheard: "Joe's workshop was excellent. There were numerous fine examples ranging from the elementary to advanced.... Even those of us who have worked under Joe's direction for years learned something.... I really enjoyed the workshop and was very impressed with Joe's ability to teach at all levels in a non-threatening way.... This workshop would benefit all musicians regardless of instrument... I really liked the way he treated everyone equally regardless of experience and talent... I appreciated his way of managing the class with a casual firmness.... He is an excellent teacher and I would love to have him do more.... I loved his hands-on approach and personal feedback."

Calendar

(On Going)

BAAC Ensemble rehearsals, 2nd & 4th Weds. of the month @ 7pm. Moose Lodge, Daly City. Call Frank Montoro (650) 574-4757 to confirm.

BAAC "Fun Band" rehearsals, 3rd Weds of the month @ 7pm, Moose Lodge Daly City. Call Val Kieser (510) 531-4836 to confirm.

South Bay Jam meets every first Sunday of the month at 2PM on—at the 7th Day Adventist Church off Camden and Kooser. Potluck on March 4th.

(March)

7—Bay Area Accordion Club

7:30 pm. Patio Español, 2850 Alemany Blvd. San Francisco.
Info: 510.792.8765 <http://www.baaccordionclub.org>

8—East Bay Accordion Circle.

7:30pm. 1542 Grant St. Berkeley In the cottage behind the main house. Bring Your Accordion! Info: (510) 548-2822

12—ACR Fun Band Practice. 7-9pm.

McDowell Elementary School. 421 South McDowell Blvd. Petaluma. Info: Gwyn Lister (415) 924-3202

13—Golden State Accordion Club.

Pietro's #2. 679 Merchant. Vacaville. Info: (707) 864-2359

14—Good Time Accordion Club

General Meeting. Escalon Community Center. 7:00pm. 1055 Escalon Ave. Escalon, CA. Info: (209) 545-3603

19—ACR General Meeting.

7:30pm Herman Sons Hall. 860 Western. Petaluma. Info. contact Harry Cannata (707) 838-2859

2001 National Accordion Convention

March 8-10 Featuring

The Convention Orchestra in Concert—Jimenez, Jr.—Professor John Dujka—Dr. George Ramphrey—Debra Peters—Nick Ballarini—Jim Rommel—John Hodgins—Gordon Kohl—K Trio—Rita Davidson—John Simkus—Plus: Jam Sessions/Dealer's Showcase/Accordion Swap Meet.

At the Holiday Inn Convention Center, Plano Texas. (\$58/night. Located in NE Dallas. Call: (972) 881-1881 700 East Central Parkway (Hwy 75 between Park & Parker)

E-mail: TAA President, Norman Seaton, nns5522@dccd.edu

Convention fee \$75/person, including 4 meals!!!
Accordion-playing young people under 20 admitted free!
Make your reservations today & we can book the entire hotel.

More! Friday Evening Concert/Folk Music Night/
Saturday Concert/Accordion Extravaganza w/50
accordionists/Folk Music Workshops in Tex-Mex/
Italian/Cajun/Zydeco/Czech/German/Celtic/Country.
Perform with Gary Daverne!

BAAC TEACHERS

San Francisco

Peter Di Bono

Theory/Technique/Performance
415 621-1502

Sharon Walters

All levels 415 621-8284

North Bay

Steve Albini

Private Lessons
415 897-4131

Bart Beninco

Accordion & Piano
Petaluma 707 769-8744

East Bay

Valarie Morris

Self-expression/Technique
Theory—All Levels & Ages
510 222-8442

Lou Jacklich

Private Lessons: Technique
Arranging & Chords
510 317-9510

South Bay

Mike Zampiceni

Beginner to Advanced
BA & MA in Music
408 734-1565

Lynn Ewing

All Levels & Ages
650 365-1700

Peninsula

Lou Soper

Every Tuesday 3-6:30
Moose Club, Colma
510 792-8765

Correspondence

Gary Dahl

All Levels
Technique & Musicianship
Mel Bay Arranger/Author
253 770-9492 Phone/Fax

Accordions al dente

By Tom Torriglia



Dennis Stoscher and I each own Castelfidardo-made Victoria accordions. Last month, we had the pleasure of having dinner with the head of Victoria, Riccardo Brescia while he was visiting in San Francisco. He was here for 24 hours after flying up from the NAMM convention in L. A. When I went to meet him, he showed me a new instrument that Victoria is producing. It's called the Vibrandoneon. One person referred to it as "something of a cross between a melodica and an accordion." It's a chromatic button accordion (piano-model soon?). You blow into an S-shaped tube and play the notes on the button keyboard. Victoria has the exclusive rights to this unusual instrument. That's it in the photo with Riccardo. I may have to get one of these. It sounded great and I have never seen anything like it.

For the last couple of months, I have been in a good mood. Well, I am pleased to announce that for this month, I am back to my whining self. So, here goes... What's with the attendance at the BAAC meetings? Last month, Billy and Andre played (they were both excellent) and there were hardly any people there. The attendance was terrible and seems to be getting worse. I keep asking why? Is it a general lack of interest? A lack in quality entertainment? The location? Hmmm. It seems that the attendance was great at the Verdi club and there was no parking. Here at Español there's plenty of parking but no patrons. I think something needs to be done. If this issue is not being addressed by the board, it should be. And what about new blood? Is there any effort—or for that matter has there ever been any effort—to do outreach to try to get new members into the club. To my knowledge, no.

Today, I spoke with a local guitar wizard who is doing some slack key guitar work with a Hawaiian duo. He said that last month he went to a slack key convention kinda thing in San Francisco and there were over 300 people there—and they had to pay \$17.00 to go. He said he was just blown away that such a small niche musical instrument would attract such a large crowd. Why isn't the accordion club attracting 300 people to its meetings? Apathy?

Has anybody seen the billboards for the new Chris Isaak TV show? They are billing him as the rock star next door. For us he is. He lives out by Playland. How many of you know that Chris plays the accordion? Raise your hands. Has Chris ever come out and played for us? Lucy Liu plays the accordion. Has anyone asked her to come up and play? You want attendance at a meeting? Get Lucy or Chris out to play for us. You'll get attendance. Hey everyone, think outside the (squeeze) box.

As you know, there was a big to-do over the Cotati accordion festival last year. Has the debate begun whether or not the BAAC is going to participate at the Cotati festival yet? Why was the festival free in the beginning, but now they charge? Has anyone explored a Petaluma or Novato Accordion festival? Maybe, the time to do that is before us. But then again—apathy.

Vocalist Monica Menchini and I made the 11:00 p.m. news on Valentine's Day night (KPIX). I faxed the station to tell them we were going to be out doing our Station of Love in North Beach and they sent a cameraman out. Sometimes, that's all it takes. "And tonight in North Beach, the sound of love filled the air..." cut to the accordionist and the singer. I looked great.

OK, whining's over. See you next month.

Beauties of the Night

*[William L. Shirer, a pioneer radio correspondent for CBS, was stationed in Berlin from the early thirties until 1940. He saw the rise of Hitler and in later years had to run through a hail of falling anti-aircraft shrapnel during British air raids to file his reports. The radio reports were heavily censored, but he learned ways to hint and suggest things—even with supposedly American-wise translators looking over his shoulder. It was a hectic life during the time when France and Poland fell and England stood alone. The British hadn't mounted the heavy, devastating air raids that later took place when America entered the war; then two thousand planes at a time flew over German cities and reduced them to rubble. These were moments when people went to movies and concerts. After the war Shirer published his classic *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, as well as *Berlin Diary*. I thought our readers might be interested in this passage from the *Diary*, dated November 5, 1940. He was leaving Germany.]*

“The very prospect takes a terrible load off your heart and mind. I feel swell. It will be my first Christmas at home in sixteen years, my other brief visits having all been during the summer or fall. Went to a Philharmonic concert this evening. A Bach concerto for three pianos and orchestra, with the conductor, Furtwängler, and Wilhelm Kemp and some other noted pianists at the pianos, was very good indeed. Afterwards played my accordion—a sacrilege after the Philharmonic and Bach—but a gruff-voiced man occupying the next room did not appreciate my efforts and knocked on the wall until I betook myself, with accordion, to the bathroom. He is probably one of those Rhineland industrialists who come up here to get some sleep, since in western Germany they are visited by the RAF nearly every night. The hotel is full of them and they are very cranky.”

[If more Germans had only listened to Bach and accordions instead of Hitler, the world would have been a better place. Maybe all those who don't hear the beauty of the accordion are as benighted as Mr. Shirer's critic of 1940.]

ALL THAT JAZZ

(Reflections on Jazz, Ken Burns' 10 Part Film)

By Paul A. Magistretti

(By now many of us have seen Ken Burns' latest documentary, *Jazz*; the film and its by-products are everywhere—so perhaps it's time to consider it. More than just a PBS film, it's an industry with a related 5 CD package, a companion book and the entire nineteen hours on 10 VHS tapes or DVDs—Costco has it for \$90 and \$140. I recommend it for anyone interested in jazz and music, but with a caution—much of its beauty has to be seen through a glass darkly.)

Ken Burns' *The Civil War* covered our nation's greatest calamity with authority and a fine use of sound, music, character voices, narration and scholarly interviews. There were voice-over recreations via documents, which were presented by actors and scored—some moments were powerful and heartbreaking; it was PBS' greatest critical and commercial success. After *The Civil War* Mr. Burns did smaller works before tackling *Baseball*, a ten hour exploration of our national pastime: a hundred years of bats and balls. He used the same techniques he utilized in *The Civil War* synthesizing visuals, narration, interviews and was able to add historical motion pictures to the mix.

Mr. Burns claims that *The Civil War* and *Baseball* are two parts of an American trilogy that ends with *Jazz*—which seems a bit of a reach. However, a common theme that might link the three projects is that the Civil War was fought to undo slavery, but the results were imperfectly realized as evidenced by our society and reflected in baseball and the world of jazz. Racism is a legitimate motif, but if it is made the major topic to propagate the concept of a trilogy, then there's a risk that the stated subject (jazz) can become just background material for racial problems and deal more with sociology than art.

Jazz originated from many early sources, social conditions and historical influences; but no little part was played by the explosion of life after the First World War. Prohibition and America's natural desire to subvert authority were important, as was the liberation of women as an underclass via suffrage—a complex breaking down of social barriers led to an increasingly mobile society for blacks and whites, so consequently many societal influences were changed. If society before the war was fed by waltzes, Sousa marches and the Fox Trot (circa 1912), afterwards it slowed the Fox Trot down to the Blues and speeded it up into Swing. Jazz captured and was caught by the tempo of the times. African Americans gave tremendous impetus to jazz, but Bach swings and some of the finest jazz musicians, black and white, were classically trained, knowledgeable and sophisticated—it wasn't all brothels and speakeasies; performers and patrons of the demimonde alike got their taste from the world at large, not vice versa. Jazz ultimately took its spirit from the times which no one owned, just as Bach's social climate, influences and Vivaldi's music shaped him and others were subsequently influenced; musicians take to their hearts what falls upon their ears and touches their souls—genius happens and ignites others, but music has a life of its own. All the great jazz musicians (and if jazz had an extra-aesthetic theme this was it) gave little credence to race in any direction, even if society tried to

insist. Jazz was bigger than ignorance. It combined elements of African and Latin rhythm with American (and other) folk music; subsumed the historical, collective experience of African Americans, including their strong oral traditions—and above all reflected the new spirit that was afoot in America. Jazz became the angel of a spirit moving through the land and not a sociological message—to misunderstand that fact is just plain wrong. Jazz artists and fans found each other across society's barriers, because there were no barriers for them; that was the art of it.

It's not coincidental that black performers rose to prominence in the teens and twenties through the spread of colorblind media like records and radio—for music unfettered by visual prejudice had a chance to speak to people's hearts. Thus, a lot of the racial editorializing by the commentators in *Jazz* (I thought) belabored the obvious and diminished the moving direct testimony of the artists who lived it. Without denigrating the well-intentioned editorial content of the film, in every art there is a tremendous cross fertilization of people and forms; in jazz there were many personalities and styles, giving the music tremendous vigor—no one kind of jazz was better, purer or truer than another, just different, just as people and skin colors are different and none are better.

If you don't make mistakes you're not playing at the limits of your ability and that's what jazz is all about....

The historical stills and recreated motion picture footage Mr. Burns used in *The Civil War* and *Baseball* lent themselves to his well established approach of *show & tell*; that is, he shows some visual material

and has the narration and/or an interviewee tell about it. In this way the events of a war or a sport can be suggested by gathered visuals and fillers with comments carrying the story. Every documentary about an historical subject is comprised of footage from archives, newsreels, etc., with some re-creations and fills (a hand writing with a quill, etc.), plus narration—the resultant films are often like illustrated radio shows (e.g., over a picture of Lincoln we're told that he went to Ford's Theater, then we hear a gunshot). It's not disparaging to say that war and baseball (or any game) are a series of repetitive actions like cogs in wheels with flashes of dramatic surprise and tension—the actions are organized by filmmakers chronologically into some kind of beginning, middle and end. If we see shots of tanks along a road, they can (or not) be Patton's entering Bastogne in telling *that* story—they might just be generic shots of tanks on a road somewhere; commentary will make them specific to the story. So, Henry Aaron swings a bat and we can pretty much cut away at the crack—point made—a voice will make things specific (i.e., it's the record-breaking homer off Al Downing). Once we're not watching a live event in real time with the outcome undetermined, images are essentially abstract—who will know when a certain catch was made, whether the tanks are Patton's; if that Stuka is diving on Belgium or Russia? The historical movie clips in *Baseball* were mostly short snippets, which permitted Mr. Burns to cut in and out—to abridge

(continued on pages 14 & 15)

and define them—their duration was up to him, because the shots had no inherent beginning, middle and end like a piece of music. He was free to edit and impose his story. There was no conflict on the audio level either, because none of it had an insistent life of its own like a song: the crack of a bat, street noise, crowds, incidental music, interviews and narration—all his to edit. So, the first two films were visual assemblages with narrators and talking heads supplying the big and little picture. The basic unit in *The Civil War* and *Baseball* was a thematic chapter heading, after which we were shown images while someone talked over, under and/or throughout the image's duration.

Maybe Mr. Burns should have avoided his usual technique when dealing with a complex and vital subject like jazz, because unlike the events of war or the elements of a game, music exists in *time* and is filled with moments of connected sentient power and evocative expression—music has a life of its own and its life cycle is captured on records and in movies. Jazz as a topic might have been better served by the method of the great documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty (*Nanook of the North*, *Louisiana Story*, *Man of Aran*). Flaherty used to say, that he approached his subjects through “non-preconception”; he discovered the shape, form and meaning of a film during the process of making it. He used the anecdote of seeing an Eskimo carve a piece of ivory and saying over and over, “What is in you, what can I find?” The native people in the act of creation sought form, meaning and function *within the creative process*—an aesthetic approach exactly like playing jazz. Burns' best approach might have been one that let the artists be seen and heard in a way that needed little commentary. After all, motion pictures and recordings let the artists live again and they themselves make the best case for jazz. Through magic of film and recordings artists can reach across time and space and let us experience greatness directly. Of course, Mr. Burns would have had to soften his fixed idea about a trilogy, but that would have been all to the good in my opinion.

In *Jazz* the producer rarely let the camera stay on a performance for more than a few bars—before a talking head, narrator, or voice-over comments intruded. Someone was forever telling me *something* without allowing me to listen and reflect. We usually enjoy critics before or after a performance, but Ken Burns insisted on having critiques during. Billie Holiday was singing *A Fine Romance* and without a chance to take it in we were told ten things: “Hear the blues, but she's insouciant, too; here, she's youthful; later, her voice would be in tatters—she was fiercely independent and had lovers of both sexes.” It's not a problem if someone talks while Babe Ruth swings a bat, or while we observe a still picture of Gettysburg—there aren't multi-layers of sentient material to absorb; in fact the narrator or interviewee can supply the necessary perspective that permits understanding and emotional impact. But musical performances are full of complex, sense information that must be seen, heard and savored. Time and again the film cut away (or did voice-overs) to tell us what we might have experienced—given a chance. Louis Armstrong singing *Black and Blue* was a more powerful indictment of racism than any of the editorializing done by the

talking heads—but he was talked over so much that the commentators ended up destroying both the meaning and emotional impact of the song—to my mind a tremendous loss to the cause of racial tolerance.

It doesn't matter if performers are on film or records, it's rude to talk while they perform—*Jazz* was rude. Burns seemed determined to never let us get carried away. But the whole point of jazz is that it's Dionysian, irresistible; it carries you away. Burns never permitted it. Performances were consistently tossed into the background after a few bars for the sake of a voice or talking head commenting about what we were experiencing—the interruptions usually offered little beyond the speaker's personal taste. Ken Burns failed to understand the power and beauty of jazz; he didn't trust it. He acted at times as if jazz existed in hieroglyphics and needed continual translation and annotation. At times I wished he had just thrown nineteen hours of unedited, raw material on the screen; it would have been a more intimate experience—and intimacy and emotion are the messages of jazz which unlike a *Civil War* need no interpretation.

Gary Giddens was the main talking head—he's a critic and eventually loomed like the ghost of Siskel & Ebert; he talked during almost every performance. Also, he seemed to be a captive of the book he's written about Louis Armstrong (yes, Armstrong was important), but Giddens insisted without relief that everything was Armstrong. Ironically, in spite of Armstrong's importance only one of his records was played without interruption—*West End Blues*, a fine piece. It was accompanied by period shots that cried out for the montage artistry of *The Civil War*—but was absent. We did hear *West End Blues* uninterrupted; however, afterwards Giddens oversold it. Of course, he frequently gushed and labeled someone or something “the greatest” this or that until things seemed less like a discussion of art than an episode of *Antiques Roadshow*. He introduced *West End Blues* by saying he had first listened to the reverse side of the record for six months in near fatal bliss never suspecting what lay in store for him. When he turned the record over and listened to *West End Blues* he died and went to heaven—way too much. Years later, he played the same record for an unnamed “professor of music” and the man listened repeatedly and proclaimed it, “The most perfect three minutes of music I ever heard.” Well, I don't know how much music the man heard and I won't disparage *West End Blues*, but Giddens' hyperbole was often as annoying as the nudge-nudge routines of Monty Python. Apart from Giddens, Burns used a number of fans. Ossie Davis is a fine man and a great actor, but are his youthful memories better than putting the music itself off the screen? Memorializing jazz implies it's dead and needs embalming, but if the material just played no memorials or hype would be necessary.

Let me share my pain about what was wrong by depicting the worst example: towards the end, the ninth or tenth episode, Louis Armstrong was celebrated at the Newport Jazz Festival. He was too ill to do his whole act, but he was determined to sing what he called his theme, his favorite song, the song of his life, *When It's Sleepy Time*

Down South. George Wein the producer of the Festival had only wanted a trumpeter to play and for Louis to walk on and wave to the crowd, but Armstrong said there was no way he wouldn't sing. To illustrate his feeling for the song there was an interview where he sang some of *Sleepy Time* a capella directly to the camera—you could see what it meant to him. He did about six bars and they cut away to the big night. Well, okay—they're building to the big moment, so foreshortening the lead-in is okay. Musicians who were there that night said that when Armstrong performed he virtually glowed and his singing was luminous—this certainly set the stage as powerfully as a great drama. Cut: we're on stage, the trumpet plays a six bar intro and Louis walks out of the wings to the roar of the crowd. Then, the music fades under to accompany him and he begins to sing. He's glowing and luminous like everyone said—it's one of the most moving performances I've seen. After eight bars, they **cut**—we see a still of him—and we're told he died a few months later. I was dumbstruck. If the nineteen hours of film had a star and if jazz had a singular giant, it was Armstrong—the film stated that fact over and over *ad nauseum* and it was evident when he was given a chance to perform. Then, when we arrive at perhaps his greatest moment months before he died, they didn't let the song play—they didn't let him perform, speak for himself, have the last word—they didn't let us have a full and intimate moment with him. It was like a red neck sheriff pulling down the curtain; eight bars & cut—to what? They showed a still of Louis sitting in a chair with his trumpet and cut to funeral footage—*Sleepy Time* was over, done, left dangling—aesthetically lynched. Could anyone who had any sense of music, drama or jazz do such a thing? As for the funeral (silent footage and stills) a trumpet played *Deep River* beautifully—almost a full chorus—but I swear to God, just as whoever was playing reached for the top note taking the melody up towards the ending tonic note an octave higher: they cut. Cut the song before the tonic note sounded! That's how Leopold got little Mozart out of bed; he played an unresolved diminished seventh and the tyke just had to come downstairs and play the tonic, a benign form of abuse then, but not so benign in *Jazz*. They ended this episode with a lead-in to the credits by showing thirties footage of Armstrong singing *Dinah*. Again, it was great—he sang a chorus and the bridge, then they cut to one of his band members playing the trumpet. But! Suddenly with a jump cut they showed Armstrong playing his trumpet and quickly ended the song. It was obvious that here was a complete clip of Armstrong doing an entire song as he did in the thirties—he sang, a band member did a chorus, Armstrong sang a little more, then did his own trumpet solo. What an experience that would have been—we were cheated of it. They took up the time with talking heads sometimes telling us how important Armstrong was (but mostly discussing their own taste)—but they wouldn't let the man finish his songs. He wasn't alone, either; it was the same with dozens of others. Burns gave us pieces—a beginning here, a middle there, an end somewhere else—but the natural flow of the performances and songs was almost always

corrupted and we were never transported by the music. In the nineteen hours of film there should have been many moments of sheer ecstasy; instead, there was mostly a relentless showing and telling with few extended, complete performances.

Wynton Marsalis as a talking head had time to scat sing sections of a record we were about to hear—even play bits on his trumpet (more than eight bars)—although he never got a whole song. But I don't find it illuminating to have someone *dum-dee-dee-dum-dum-dadda-dadda* to illustrate a point when the performer is about to sing it. Why do it? Giddens did it, too—badly. When Ella Fitzgerald scatted, it was wonderful, but Marsalis and Giddens? Also, Wynton was repeatedly used to talk over the music—I know he had no control of how he was used (he wouldn't be that rude), but that was the effect. I liked Wynton Marsalis and some of what he had to say, but not the way he upstaged others and pontificated.

There was a very strange moment: a "critic" was popped in for a one and only appearance in nineteen hours to say that Cecil Taylor (an avant garde jazz pianist) may be good, but he didn't like him. Now, why would a critic be included just to disparage an artist with a completely subjective (maybe even dumb) remark? I had liked (and not fully made up my mind about) what I just heard—but jumping in with a crass subjective opinion seemed like a very crude thing for Burns to do. Would a talking head in the *Civil War* say, "Lincoln was a fine politician, but I didn't like him?"

The best commentary came from still living jazz artists—Artie Shaw was especially good. He said he appreciated Glenn Miller, but what Glenn played wasn't real jazz, "Because he never made a mistake. He was perfect. If you don't make mistakes you're not playing at the limits of your ability and that's what jazz is all about, constantly pushing and striving to play at your limits." It was one of the best comments in the entire nineteen hours.

The companion book also has a quote by Armstrong in which he says that whenever he played he saw an image, focused on something somewhere—then, he took flight in his imagination and gave the music a context in space and time—it was a brilliant insight. The beauty of jazz lies in just such a spontaneous leap of imagination—and revelations emerge from the heart. The quote wasn't in the film.

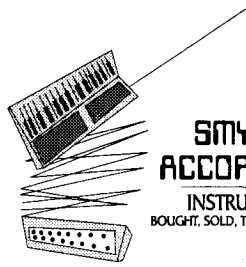
I recommend the film, because it's on tape and DVDs and the ads promise more footage than was shown on PBS—I'm hoping for treasure. Also, on tape or DVDs you can replay some of the great moments that escaped Ken Burns' deadly trilogy grasp and musical ineptness; they make it worthwhile. It's tragic that Ken didn't wonder, "What is in you, jazz?" And let the answer develop as he went along and consequently made a stand-alone great film.



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