

‘Riverwalk Jazz’ Personified

By TOM NOLAN
Tuesday October 6, 2009

This season the weekly "Riverwalk Jazz" radio program and its centerpiece Jim Cullum Jazz Band celebrate their 20th year of broadcasts, heard in some 200 cities via Public Radio International. The anniversary events culminate on Oct. 7 with a trio of Cullum Band concerts in San Antonio's Pearl Stable, to be recorded for airing in October and November.

It seemed almost inevitable that Mr. Cullum would make a career of jazz. The son of a man who played



clarinet and tenor-saxophone in such orchestras as Jack Teagarden's, Mr. Cullum's earliest memories are of middle-of-the-night jam sessions at his family home in Dallas, with such players as Teagarden, Bobby Hackett and Adrian Rollini.

"Adrian Rollini at this point was playing vibes and chimes and had a big band," Mr. Cullum, now 67, said by telephone from San Antonio. "He was not playing bass saxophone anymore," an instrument Mr. Rollini had favored in the 1920s when

he recorded with Bix Beiderbecke. "But my father had a bass saxophone which he'd bought for \$50 as sort of a novelty; it was stored behind the sofa. So some guys were there playin', and Rollini played the thing. They put on the Bix records, and he played along with the records. It was a kick!"

Many jazz roads lead back to Beiderbecke, that lyrical horn-player who died in 1931 at age 28. "Teagarden thought Bix was the greatest artist that had ever played, period," says Mr. Cullum.

No surprise, perhaps, that after immersing himself for months in his father's collection of old Bix 78s, a teenage Mr. Cullum would choose to learn Beiderbecke's horn, the cornet. "I formed a little group in high school," he says. "My father acted as our coach sometimes. The first job that we had was playing at the Dairy Queen, after school," in San Antonio, where the Cullums had moved.

The young Mr. Cullum was also fascinated with Louis Armstrong, whose original instrument had also been the cornet. Mr. Cullum first met Armstrong around 1955, the day his sister interviewed Armstrong for the San Antonio Express-News.

About five years later, just after Mr. Cullum graduated from college, "a friend of mine was in charge of bringing different people in to play at Trinity University," he says, "and Louis was one of them. The guy said, 'Hey listen, help me figure out a way to promote this thing with Armstrong.' So I said, 'I'll take my band and play by the side of the plane as he gets off, and we'll have the press come out.'

"And Armstrong came down, and he looked at me—I'd gotten to where I played pretty good, and we're . . . swingin' pretty hard—and he came over. He was supposed to go over and meet the mayor—and he just didn't go over there. He said, 'Well, I have a limousine here. Why don't you ride downtown?' . . . Then I went up to his room and he showed me his gold-plated Selmer trumpets and said, 'Try one of 'em.' I tried one of his trumpets, a few notes. It was really quite an honor."

Around this time, the young cornetist formed a group with his father. Soon an opportunity presented itself on the Riverwalk, San Antonio's historic waterfront area then being developed by civic leaders. In 1963, Mr. Cullum and his father, along with 20 others, invested in the Landing jazz club. "We were the first club down there."

To promote this venture, the seven-piece Cullum house band did a weekly 30-minute broadcast on a local FM station. "Then within about six months, we went on WOAI, a 50,000-watt clear-channel AM station."

After the death of Mr. Cullum's father, and the Landing's move to another site on the river, the club brought in many well-known artists as guest performers. A quarter-century ago, the Landing moved to its current location in the Riverwalk's Hyatt Regency, where the Cullum band, when not touring, still plays five nights a week.

In 1988, Mr. Cullum saw the chance for an ambitious national program that would inform and educate as well as entertain, in the course of telling "the story of jazz before World War II." He convinced "Prairie Home Companion" founding producer Margaret Moos Pick to help develop and launch the series. "She's been my partner for 20 years, and she has been a big part of making this work."

"Riverwalk Jazz" debuted in 1989 with three hour-long holiday specials produced by Pacific Vista Productions for Texas Public Radio. "Those things were on 60 stations the first year; I thought it was fabulous. Then it became a 13-week [season], and gradually it got built up over the years." In 1999, the program became a 52-week series.

"Riverwalk" episodes, narrated by David Holt, combine live music and documentary techniques to focus on an individual artist, an ensemble, a style of playing or a city—reflective of Mr. Cullum's fascination with jazz history. "Teagarden, I was hangin' around him when I was a kid, and he told all these interesting stories of goin' to West Texas: He played at a place that had 49 hostesses that you could dance with; oil-well workers would come in, roughnecks—put 10 cents on the bar, and then they'd dance. A lotta great, interesting stories; I been hearin' 'em all my life."

"Riverwalk Jazz" has now aired close to 500 episodes, taped before enthusiastic audiences. There have been memorable programs with jazz masters Harry "Sweets" Edison, Clark Terry, Benny Carter, Lionel Hampton and Milt Hinton. Actor-singer William Warfield recited from the poignant letters of Armstrong's mentor King Oliver. Pianist Dick Hyman re-created the playing of a host of keyboard artists. Vernel Bagneris brought the legend of Jelly Roll Morton to life.

In addition to being heard on public radio, Riverwalk Jazz can also be found on Sirius XM satellite radio and the Internet (see www.riverwalkjazz.org). The show has fans as far away as Siberia, as Mr. Cullum learned a few years ago during his band's sold out 10-city tour of Russia.

"We really never expected it to last this long," Mr. Cullum says, "but now we feel like we're in the key years. We're doing the greatest shows."

It all puts one in mind of a handwritten testament from Louis Armstrong that Mr. Cullum long ago framed and hung on a wall of the Landing: "Jazz is played from the heart. You can even live by it. Always love it."

—Mr. Nolan writes about jazz for the Journal.