



First trombonist Brandon Mathew appears hemmed in by horns

Aptos HS jazz group sounds high note on road to Europe

By BILL AKERS

That big, jazzy sound that booms out of the music room at Aptos High School will, if things go right, cause some finger-snapping and head-bobbing in places like London and Paris this summer.

The sounds are made by the Aptos High Jazz Band, an aggregation that's already made a name for itself in its home county and is a perennial winner at jazz festivals elsewhere.

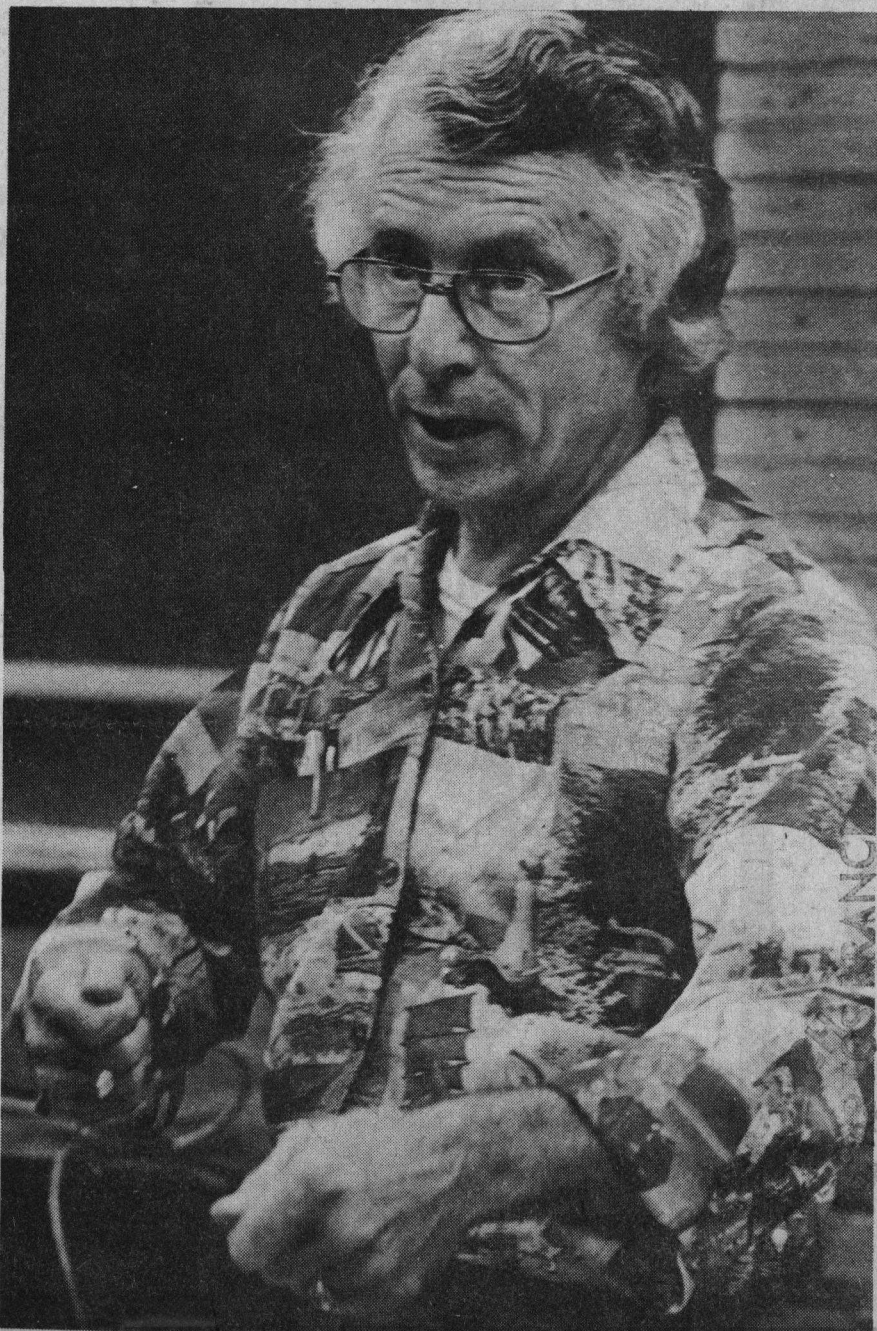
Now, the 17 players in the band have their sights set on a 22-day tour of Europe, calling for concerts in Antwerp, Amsterdam and Luxembourg as well as London and Paris, and winding up with an appearance at the prestigious jazz festival in Montreux, Switzerland.

Although that tour is several months and \$20,000 away, the young musicians are honing their skills with extra practice, appearances at festivals and a big jazz concert at the school in December.

The band is three years old and Don Keller, the music director, calls this year's the strongest version yet and "the best band I've ever had" in his years of teaching. He's high on the kids, too, calling them "a real great bunch" and anxious to explain how hard they work at this.

Keller is chairman of the performing arts department and coordinator of instrumental music for the Pajaro Valley school district. His duties include being director of the Aptos High band and teaching beginners in the elementary schools. He came to the school three years ago from San Joaquin County where he did much the same thing for the county office of education. He's no stranger to jazz, having played professionally and in the service. His instrument is the trumpet, but, like most music directors, he plays several others. He has been involved in jazz in education for many years, having organized an elementary school jazz band as long ago as 1960.

Jazz in schools is mushrooming, he says. An example is the Reno jazz festival, at which the Aptos band has played for three years and each year was a finalist. This year the band was runnerup in its division.



Don Keller: "We have a lot of sounds."

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When the Reno festival started 15 years ago, it was very small, Keller says. Now, it draws school bands from all over the US, from Europe and the Far East. For three days the bands play at four locations, a new band every 20 minutes. It has become so big that the vocal groups had to be separated out for a festival of their own.

Winning at a festival like that puts a stamp of quality on a band.

The band is structured like the old dance bands, Keller explains. In the sax section are Brian Emmons and Michelle Hinton on tenors, Kim Keller and Sherry Harlan on altos, and Julie Nordgren on baritone. Trombonists are Linda Oleson, Brandon Mathew, Linda Oleson and Jeff Wendt. Rounding out the brass on trumpets are Jacinto Diego, Rebecca Franks, Jenny Stoik, and Mark Finn.

In the rhythm section are Jeff Howells on bass; Bob Bassham and Doug Sakae, drums, Vic Milianti guitar and Keith Wilson, vibes and piano.

"We're a dance band," he says, "but the name has kind of evolved into jazz ensemble."

The band has no distinctive sound it stays with. "We have a lot of sounds. We try to experiment with as many styles of jazz as possible," Keller says. "But we get into Glenn Miller, too, and Les Brown, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Stan Kenton . . ."

For festivals, the band plays the more modern style of jazz that the big bands have taken to, described by Keller as a kind of jazz-rock. If the band has a characteristic style, Keller describes it as being influenced by "bebop, like Basie, a straight-ahead kind of thing."

How do kids, raised on rock, take to jazz? "The kids love it," Keller declares, adding words that would gladden most older adults hearts, "I think it shows a swing away from rock."

He admits that "you have to de-rock some kids," but for the most part, "they come here wanting to play jazz."

The players in the jazz band are picked by audition. They also play in the school's orchestra, symphonic and marching bands and some of them play in the county youth symphony.

They're together for one 50-minute period each school day, but manage to work in extra rehearsals whenever they can.

"They wanted another rehearsal tonight after school," Keller said, because they wanted to sharpen up for a performance at the Sonoma Jazz festival the following Saturday, at which they would compete against 58 other high school jazz groups.

"They organize their own sectional rehearsals, too. This noon the sax section was in there rehearsing. They're great. They're an eager bunch of kids."

The band has another festival date at Foothill College on Dec. 5, and on Dec. 9, will play its first home concert at the Aptos High gym at 8 p.m.

They also play four or five local dances a year, "mostly for people our age looking for the big band sound."

Keller points out these dates are for local organizations and fund raisers. "We stay away from the commercial things. We don't want to interfere with the union players."

The band's "book" contains several hundred pieces, many of which Keller has collected in his years of playing. Some of them come from professional jazz musicians, friends of his, "who give me their charts . . . stuff I couldn't afford."

The book contains most of the big band classics such as One O'Clock Jump, Opus One and all the other numbers big bands have been playing for decades. "The kids like to play ballads, too," he adds. "That's strange for high school kids."

Keller obviously likes his work. "It's a treat to listen to the kids. I wake up in the morning and I'm anxious to get down here and go to work."

Professional jazz musicians show up from time to time to work with the kids, too, Keller says, players from such bands as Bill Berry's Big Band from Los Angeles and Mort Lindsay's band from the Merv Griffen Show. "They call this band their farm team," Keller said proudly.

Keller thinks big bands are coming back, news that falls sweetly on the ears of the Geritol set. "Woody Herman is touring. Stan Kenton's still playing. Maynard Ferguson . . . the Ellington band . . . Count Basie . . . the Dorsey bands, Jimmy and Tommy, they're going out again with new leaders . . ."

The rock scene, Keller says, "is mellowing out," although it has left its mark on jazz music. As far as the young musicians are concerned, they like playing jazz. "A rock musician can get by all night on three chords. Jazz is more challenging, more sophisticated."

An easy-going mood prevailed at the after-school session just before the Sonoma festival. "We'll warm up with 'Yes Sir' and then tune up," Keller told the group.

Although the mood was easy-going, the kids worked like professionals. They slid into a smooth, slow version of "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby" which ended up with a big, brassy flourish. It sounded great.

"We'll come back and work on that sax bit," Keller said, looking over the score.

Then they went to work on "Angel Eyes," which is in the modern, cool vein. Wilson on vibes and Howells on bass opened it, then Mathew (trombone) and Kim Keller (sax) came in with short solo runs, and Jenny Stoik came to the front of the band for a long trumpet solo. The big room was filled with the sound, and a couple of students working on the other side of the room were bobbing their heads and snapping their fingers.

Then Keller had them pull out "This One's for Neal," a piece given him by a musician in the Mort Lindsay band. It starts out on a jumping, driving beat, giving every player a chance to go all out. After a long solo by Wilson on the vibes, Jenny Stoik called out from the trumpet section, "You're good, Keith." Jacinto Diego had a horn solo, and Milianti on the guitar and Emmon on the tenor sax had their turns, too.

Then the piece breaks into a sudden shift to half-time, with the vibes picking up and working the beat back to full tempo.

The piece builds back to a driving finish, which sent Keller into a head-wagging shuffle as he listened. When she saw this, daughter Kim Keller broke into a wide grin. "Awright . . ." she crowed.

The tempo break gave the band some problems, so they worked it over and over, talking to each other in the peculiar language only musicians understand.

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But in the end, they got it right and they were ready for Sonoma.

If the band is to go to Europe, it must raise \$20,000. Each player has to come up with about \$155, and his parents, \$285. That leaves an average of \$712 per player to raise, or over \$12,000. John Hinton, at Cabrillo College, is the

adult in charge of the fund-raising drive.

The money will be raised by playing dances and concerts, car washes, cake sales or any other means that will raise the necessary funds. The band will no

doubt accept contributions, too.

The quality of the playing you hear from this band confirms Keller's statement that these kids work hard at their music. It makes his statement that "this is the best band I've ever had"

thoroughly believable. You understand why he's eager to get to work in the morning.

Hearing them, you know they'll be a smash in Europe where jazz enjoyed respectability long before it did here.



Director calls it "best band I've ever had."

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