

Bob Barnes Article

This is the second in a series of articles based on FTLOJ's Jazz Oral History Project, a joint project with For the Love of Jazz and the University of Nevada, Reno's Oral History Program. The Jazz Oral History Project is sponsored by members of FTLOJ and the City of Reno Arts and Culture Commission. This interview was conducted by Danna O'Connor.

If you enjoyed live music at Harrah's Reno during the late sixties through early nineties, chances are you were listening to the arrangements and woodwinds of Reno's own Bob Barnes. Bob has been one of the first-call players and arrangers in the Reno area since coming here in 1966. Throughout his career he has played with greats like Gene Krupa, Buddy Morrow, Tommy Dorsey and Terry Gibbs.

Bob was raised in Texas and grew up surrounded by music. His mom was a concert pianist and his dad played trumpet and bought

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him a clarinet when he was nine. Bob studied while in the public school system and switched to saxophone at 11 years old. He formed his first dance band in high school and he says it didn't take long before he was working gigs. "My first professional job was in 1941, I was 14. All the older guys had gone into the service so there wasn't anyone left but real old guys and real young guys, so I was offered a job in downtown Fort Worth." Bob says access to these experienced players was an excellent way to learn. "I remember when I first started to teach myself to write; I was always calling the older guys up and picking their brains. One of the guys was Leon Breeden, who founded the University of North Texas Jazz program and the famous One O'clock Lab Band. He helped me quite a bit and was the band director when I went to Texas Christian University."

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Bob spent two years at TCU, interrupted by his service in the Navy aboard the USS Lexington. "I was in the band but we didn't do much playing while the war was going on. They slapped the musicians on other jobs like stretcher bearer or radar watchers or stuff like that. Once the war was over we started playing again." Bob got out of the Navy in the spring of '46 but was called back for the Korean Conflict and stationed in San Diego where he performed in the COMCRUDESPEC (Commander, Cruisers Destroyers Pacific) band.

Life in San Diego was good while the economy was booming with plenty of work for musicians. But when the Navy and aircraft industry began to move their operations to Long Beach (1962-63) the economy and work for players dried up. Bob got by with teaching up to 60 students a week but says "I didn't want to teach, I wanted to play."

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In 1966, Bob and friend baritone saxophonist Ken Boldi took a trip to Las Vegas to check out the job scene and ran into pianist Dick Rice. Rice had just gotten a job at the Golden in Reno and asked both Bob and Ken to join him. Work at the Golden was three one-hour shows per night. The first show started at 8:00pm and the last at 12:30pm. "The shows were produced by Barry Ashton, they were girlie shows with a chorus line of dancers, a comedian and some kind of act." It was fun work but not especially challenging, says Bob. One year later when Bill Harrah bought the Golden and closed it for remodeling Dick Rice took over the "relief band" and both Bob and Ken joined him in that band. In those days there were seven hotel/casinos with their own bands running seven nights a week. The musicians worked six nights per week and the relief band covered their one night off. This required the relief band to

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play a different show every night, a demanding job requiring highly skilled players.

After the Golden reopened as Harrah's, pianist George Hernandez was brought in to lead the Harrah's house band and Bob soon joined that group. About one year later, in 1968, John Carleton took over as leader of the Harrah's band. Bob would stay at Harrah's with the Carleton Band until 1993, a total of 26 years. He says it was an unusually long and enjoyable run. "It was a steady job and a very good job. John was a good guy, the band was good and it was a nice place to work. We played with all the best stars in the country." Bob says he has no complaints about his time at Harrah's. "I consider myself very lucky because an awful lot of good musicians in the country never had a chance at a good, steady job like that. I think it was an excellent job. Coming up here was a very wise move for me."

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What was missing was a place to play big band jazz. Work in the show bands was mostly popular music with very little jazz. There were a few small places around Reno to play jazz. Bob remembers jam sessions at the "B-flat" club on Lake Street, the "Cellar" on Second Street and "The Mandarin" on Wells Avenue. But he wanted to play jazz in a big band so in 1966 he formed the Bob Barnes Big Band, which performed in the area until 1985. It was an occasional, after-hours kicks band where players could improvise and play the music they liked. What they liked was big band jazz and swing. Charts by Woody Herman and Stan Kenton, things you didn't hear at casino shows. Bob says, "You got tired of playing shows all the time, so you had to have some outlet for jazz." George Graham, Buzzy Mills and Dickie Mills were in Bob's trumpet section. (Buzzy and Dickie were not related but called "The Mills Brothers" just the

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same.) The band would rehearse during the day and then play gigs after their casino jobs wrapped up for the night. One date was at "The Lemon Tree" on Glendale Avenue from 3-6am. Musicians performing at the casinos would often stop by to sit in; saxophonist Sam Butera was a frequent guest. The audience consisted mostly of other musicians and late nighters in the community. Bob says the band generally played for free and was there to improvise and play the music they liked. "We were starved, I mean really starved to play the music we wanted to play." The Bob Barnes Big Band remained an outlet for players wanting to improvise until 1985 and smaller incarnations of the band still play today.

After surgery in 1993 Bob decided it was time to slow down and focus on playing the music he wanted to play. "I said, I think it's time to finish this up by doing exactly what I want

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to do. Playing what I want to play." So he retired from Harrah's to focus on getting work with his 10 piece band, taking sub work, and doing only the gigs he wants to do. Lucky for us he continues to play here in Reno. A sound we've been enjoying since 1966.