

This is the third 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.

Dickie Mills

A long-time favorite of the Reno big band scene is trumpeter Dickie Mills. You've probably heard his work in the Reno Jazz Orchestra, the Bob Barnes Big Band, the John Carleton Orchestra, and (if you go way back) the Eddie Fitzpatrick Band and the Jack Melick Orchestra. Since he arrived in Reno in 1959 Dickie has been a part of some of our most swingin' bands.

Dickie was born in San Francisco. His mom was a pianist who loved ragtime and his dad played alto sax. They joined a couple of friends to form "The Haywire Orchestra" and, according to Dickie, it really was Haywire! "My father made a bass out of an orange crate. You know, a two by four with a couple of strings. That was the band." Dickie started piano lessons at the age of seven, but says, "I didn't play very well. I was the typical kid who wanted to play baseball." Later, Dickie says, he was grateful for the piano lessons because they "were a good base, a kind of visual knowledge of notes on the keyboard that you don't really learn on the horn."

The horn was a trumpet, or as Dickie says, "a beat up piece of brass" inherited at age 11 from his older brother who was bound for the Navy. Dickie took his first lessons from Fayette Noblet, at James Denman Junior High. Noblet was impressed with his talent and recommended Dickie to Victor Kress, trumpeter with the San Francisco Symphony. Dickie studied with Kress for four years and ended up playing with the San Francisco Junior Symphony all through high school. Then it was off to San Francisco State in 1946. According to Dickie, "They had a fine

jazz-thing happening. Which was kind of unheard of in the bay area. They turned out some pretty good players."

It was at San Francisco State that Dickie first heard his jazz hero, Charlie Parker. A friend from L. A., trombonist Glen Roland, was in town for a concert band gig and at the break he put on some Charlie Parker. "That was the beginning and the end of heroes," says Dickie. "It changed my life. I went straight up and turned left. It was amazing." Dickie would first see Parker in person a couple of years later. In 1948 he left college to pursue the dream of playing jazz. Dickie says, "I felt that I had gone as far into the classical-legitimate aspect of playing as I could. I really felt I wasn't going to fit in very well so it was no big thing to say goodbye." So, Dickie headed east, and it was during a stop in Chicago that he saw his idol at the Trianon Ballroom. "He was playing with a terrible guitar player." remembers Dickie. "He had his amp turned way up and you could tell it was really bugging Bird. You could see Parker was not too happy with what was happening but he still overcame all odds. To see and hear your hero in the flesh--it was amazing." Dickie spent the next two years in Chicago, working a lot of day jobs and playing whenever he could. 1950 brought him back to San Francisco, where he played casual jobs and landed gigs at some of the best jazz clubs, including The Jazz Workshop, Inside at the Outside, and The Jazz Cellar.

In 1953 Dickie married Betty and in two years they scraped together \$1,000 and headed to Europe with Kimree, Betty's eight year old daughter. They lived in Paris at the Hotel Crystal, which was across the street from a jazz club. There Dickie saw some of the jazz greats, including Miles Davis, Lester Young and the Modern Jazz Quartet. Dickie landed his own gigs as well, playing at club called, "Le Chameleon" and taking jobs in Belgium and Holland. He says it was an exciting time, "That was a crazy scene, Europe in 1955. France was still recovering from the war and American musicians were really welcomed nicely. I worked all kinds of gigs--jazz gigs--little dance gigs with the French cats. It was all high points, a wonderful experience."

You can hear some of Dickie's work in France on the CD, "Jazz on the Left Bank," released in 1957.

The Mills family headed back to San Francisco just in time for Dickie to join the Brew Moore Quintet and play at the first Monterey Jazz Festival in 1958. John Marabuto was the pianist with John Mosey on bass, drummer Gus Gustofson, and Brew on tenor. The quintet also played at the Jazz Cellar and the Blackhawk.

It was at this point that Dickie became part of beat poet history. He was in the house band at the Jazz Cellar with Bill Weisjahns (piano), Jerry Goode (bass), Bob Lewis (bass), Sonny Wayne (drums) and leader Bruce Lippincott (tenor sax), when one of the first attempts to fuse improvised jazz and poetry was recorded. "Poetry Readings from the Cellar," recorded in 1957, featured the Jazz Cellar Quintet and poetry read by Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti (owner of the famous City Lights Bookstore). This wasn't just poetry with a jazz band in the background but true improvisation from both the poets and the players. If you come across the CD, check out Dickie's outstanding improv on "Junkman's Obbligato," read by Ferlinghetti.

In 1959 Dickie moved to Reno for a "real job." His friend, trumpeter Rudy Salvini, was working with the Jack Melick Orchestra in the Sky Room at the Mapes. Rudy also taught music and needed to return to school in the fall, so he asked Dickie to take the gig. Dickie's first job was backing Sammy Davis Jr. performing as the tap dancing Will Maston Trio, (Sammy Davis, Jr. Sammy Davis, Sr. and Will Maston). "Davis was a wonderful guy to work for," remembers Dickie. "He would hang out in the dressing room with the guys and always throw a big party after the run."

Across the street, the Riverside was featuring the Eddy Fitzpatrick Band. When the Mapes gig ended, Dickie joined Fitzpatrick and stayed with the band for a year. Then it was off to Lake Tahoe for a gig at Harrah's with the Leighton Noble band. In the mid 1960s, Dickie would open the new Circus Room

at John Ascuaga's Nugget as part of the Foster Edwards Band.

In 1965, wanderlust struck the Mills family again and, now joined by son Parker, they took off for Europe, spending two years in Copenhagen, Denmark. When Dickie returned to Reno, work was easy to find. "Every joint in town had a 12-15 piece big band," he says. "There was the Riverside, Mapes, Golden Nugget, Primadonna, Cal Neva, Nevada Lodge, Harrah's--plus each club had a 24 hour lounge featuring musical acts. It was a party every night!" Dickie went on to work for many years with the John Carlton Orchestra at Harrah's Reno.

In addition to all the work available at casinos, players could rely on For the Love of Jazz to provide opportunities to improvise and jam. Dickie's been a member since day one. He still has his original membership card from 1974 and remembers FTLOJ founder Jack Evans fondly: "We called him the 'Lone Arranger' because he did everything! The players didn't have to arrange anything; just show up and play." From Sunday afternoon concerts to after hours jam sessions, FTLOJ gave players a chance to play the type of music they wanted to play and to see what other musicians in the area were doing. Dickie calls it wonderful "exposure time" a chance to stretch your skills in a competitive but supportive atmosphere. Not necessarily cutthroat, says Dickie, but "The throat often played a role."

FTLOJ events also gave established players the chance to work with young jazz artists. Something Dickie considers invaluable. From holding workshops at UNR to teaching students at home you can still find this Reno favorite sharing his talent with other artists and, occasionally, with happy audiences as well.