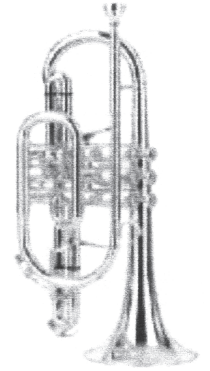


JAZZ SOUNDINGS

THE PUGET SOUND TRADITIONAL JAZZ SOCIETY



October 2023

Volume 48, Number 9

ON OCTOBER 15, ANDREW OLIVER'S BRIDGETOWN SEXTET PRESENTS AN AFTERNOON OF HOT 1920s JAZZ!

By John Ochs

"The Bridgetown Sextet [members] are masters of their craft. For the past 15 years, this incredible band of some of the finest hot jazz musicians anywhere has been gracing audiences in the Pacific Northwest with their scintillating sounds and peppery performances. From the arcane vaudeville blues foxtrots and esoteric rags of the early 1920s to the sounds of the swinging rent parties and exclusive club dates in Harlem, Bridgetown Sextet's repertoire is fun, hot, danceable, and a crash course in some seriously fine music."—*Colin Hancock, musician, historian, and past leader of the Original Cornell Syncopators.*

is familiar to many of you who have attended our concerts during the past two years. In June 2022, Andrew, back from a successful seven-year stint in London, assembled his "Buddies" to entertain us with a full program of Jelly Roll Morton compositions. Then in March of this year, he joined with Matt Weiner's Noonatics to play music calling to mind the style of Jimmie Noone's Apex Club Orchestra from the 1920s in Chicago.

(Continued on page 4)



L to R: Andrew Oliver—piano, bandleader; David Evans—clarinet, tenor sax; John Moak—trombone; Doug Sammons—guitar, banjo, vocals; Tyson Stubelek—drums; Eric Gruber—bass; (inset) Sam Dechenne—trumpet/cornet.

While the name **Bridgetown Sextet** might not be at the tip of everyone's tongue in our jazz club, the name of its pianist/band leader, **Andrew Oliver**,

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Nov 19: Black Swan Classic Jazz Band
Dec 17: Ray Skjelbred's Yeti Chasers
Jan. 21, 2024: The Ain't No Heaven Seven

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PREZ SEZ

By Terry Rogers

This October will mark the 40th anniversary of the start of our band, The Ain't No Heaven Seven. I thought that I would take this opportunity to say a few words about how it all began and what the first few years were about. Some of this information has been recorded in this publication previously, so indulge me if you have heard it before.



The first serious conversation about starting an all-physician band occurred on a sailboat, the Caduceus, owned by Dr. John Mazzarella. He and I were sailing to Friday Harbor to attend the annual traditional jazz festival. We knew of a couple of physician musicians and decided to reach out to them to see if there might be some interest in making this happen. In addition to John, who played the drums, we knew that cardiologist and trombonist Ward Kennedy was enthusiastic about the prospect, as was surgeon Karl May, who played banjo. We needed a trumpet player, a piano player, and a tuba or bass player.

Someone told me that neurosurgeon John Gibson played trumpet. The band had met twice by then and had asked another physician/trumpet player to give it a go, but it just didn't work out with him, so John somewhat warily brought his horn to a gathering and it was a go. Earlier that year, a gastroenterologist named David Gilbert had applied to join our practice at the Polyclinic. At his interview with me, he saw a poster of the New Black Eagles Jazz Band on the wall and asked if I played music.

When it came out that I did and that he played piano, his place at the Polyclinic was assured, as was his place in the band.

That left us with the need for a bass player. We tried a young physician who played string bass, but he was less excited about the music than we were, so he moved on. It was then that we approached Al Rustad to see if he might like to join the band. Although not a physician (mechanical engineer), he was married to a nurse, so we thought that was close enough.

We had no written charts to start with, and didn't for quite a long time. Instead, I adopted the process of recording tunes that I wanted the band to play from LPs of bands that I liked onto cassette tapes, then I duplicated the cassettes for every band member so that they could become familiar with the songs. At practice, I would play the tape for each song. We would listen to it, then start to play along with the tape. As we caught on, I would reach over, turn the tape off, and on we would go, playing without the training wheels. Eventually, our brains became overtaxed, and we resorted to using written charts or lead sheets, so we could play the song in the correct key and play the bridge the way it was meant to be played.

Our very first time playing in public was at a party at Karl May's house, December 1983. I still remember the reaction from the crowd when we played our first song, "When You and I Were Young, Maggie."

We have played a short reprise of that song at the end of every gig for the past 40 years in a nod to that very first night.

A lot has transpired since that time. We have played at many places and for many audiences. We have lost four of our original members: Ward Kennedy, Karl May, John Gibson, and John Mazzerella.

We have been fortunate to have added other fine musicians over the years: Bert Bertram, Gene Silberberg, George Oelrich, and Zane Smith. Many other local musicians have been kind enough to sit in when replacements or additions were in order. For that, we are very grateful.

To commemorate the passage of 40 years, we will be playing at the Royal Room in Columbia City on Saturday, November 4, from 4 to 6 p.m. Bert is coming up from California for the gig, and, of course, everyone's favorite vocalist, Ron Rustad, will be featured. I do hope that you can make it. If you are inclined to attend, I would suggest that you make a reservation, as our previous gigs there have been very well attended. Come and celebrate with us and have an early dinner. You won't be disappointed.

Thanks for your support, and for your continued support of this society.



ANDREW OLIVER'S BRIDGEPORT SEXTET (Continued from page 1)

This season, Oliver returns with the band he co-founded in Portland more than 15 years ago, when he first shared his love of early-jazz bands with modern audiences. According to the band's website, we can expect to hear a "sound evoking Creole New Orleans, the stomp of prohibition-era Chicago, raucous and wild 1920s Memphis and Kansas City, fast-paced Harlem stride piano, and the tight swing of depression-era Manhattan." In particular, the band performs "music by such early jazz icons as Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, Clarence Williams, and Bix Beiderbecke, as well as lesser-known musical stylists, territory bands, and innovators such as Bennie Moten, Alex Hill, and Jabbo Smith."

Andrew brings with him the best and most versatile jazz musicians Portland has to offer. Since this is the first time the band has played for us, some biographical notes seem appropriate. We've heard **David Evans** previously in 2022 as the reed player with Andrew's "Buddies." Originally from Alabama, David moved in 1984 to New Orleans where he attended Loyola University and served as the musical director on the National Historic Landmark steamboat Delta Queen while maintaining a busy schedule of playing, recording, and arranging with a veritable pantheon of famous artists. He relocated to the Northwest in 1994 and has become one of Portland's most in-demand musicians because of his singular ability to play convincingly across many styles of jazz.

Trumpeter/cornetist **Sam Dechene** recently returned home to Portland after living in Boston for many years. He has performed and toured the world with a variety of ensembles as sideman, bandleader, and arranger. Notable venues at which he has played include the Madagascar Jazz Festival, Istanbul Jazz Festival, Boston Opera House, Fenway Park, CBS Morning Show, and the Kennedy Center. He's also released multiple albums of original music and has played in countless recording sessions. The addition of Sam to the band's lineup actually makes it a septet instead of a sextet, but the change has not yet caught up with the band's publicity releases, so until we hear that Andrew has made it official, we are sticking with the name Bridgetown Sextet.

Trombonist **John Moak** has more than three decades of experience performing in symphony orchestras, Broadway musicals, big bands, jazz ensembles, and recording studios. A short list of artists with whom he has worked includes Dave Brubeck, Nat Adderly, Diane Schuur, Branford Marsalis, Slide Hampton,

Doc Severinsen, Herbie Mann, James Moody, Ken Peplowski, Louie Bellson, Clark Terry, Aretha Franklin, and Johnny Mathis. A winner of numerous International Trombone Association competitions, John taught at the University of North Florida and the University of Central Oklahoma (his native state) before moving in 2006 to Portland, where he has become an integral part of the Northwest music scene.

A NYC taxicab driver and rock guitarist in his youth, **Doug Sammons** moved to Portland in the 1990s and became involved in a variety of projects, most notably the bluegrass band Sam Hill and the vintage swing/Hawaiian band the Midnight Serenaders. More recently, he and his wife, singer Dee Settlemier, formed a seven-piece swing band called the Hot Lovin' Jazz Babies. Now retired from a career of teaching kindergarten and first grade, Doug specializes in authentic 1920s and '30s rhythm guitar and tenor banjo, as well as unique vocal blendings of old-time country and jazz singing styles.

Portland native **Tyson Stubelek** began playing music at age three under the guidance of his father, also a drummer. After studying with local legends Alan Jones and Mel Brown, Tyson moved to Boston in 2005 to study at the New England Conservatory, where he earned several graduate degrees before migrating to New York to work as a musician. In 2013, Tyson returned home, where he performs in a variety of stylistically diverse projects and teaches, both privately and at the University of Portland.

Bassist **Eric Gruber** began his music career as a teenager playing bluegrass in California and teaching himself jazz from Ray Brown records. After studying

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at universities in Colorado, Washington, and Portland, he toured the U.S., Europe, and Africa in 2007 as a Jazz Ambassador under the joint auspices of the U.S. State Department and Jazz at Lincoln Center. Currently, he performs with various Northwest musicians, including Darrell Grant, Devin Phillips, Marilyn Keller, and the folk group Skybound Blue.

There you have it. If the Bridgetown Sextet lives up to the description of music on its website, we are in for a rare treat. Not since the halcyon days of the Evergreen Classic and Uptown Lowdown jazz bands have Seattle music-goers been treated to such a richly diverse tapestry of 1920s jazz played by a band boasting a complete traditional front line backed by a fully outfitted rhythm section. So, rather than booking yourself a hotel room and spending a week or more tracking down these world-class musicians at individual appearances in Portland, save yourself time, energy, and money by seeing them play together at our PSTJS concert on October 15. And please, bring a friend or two. Remember, those under 21 are admitted free when accompanied by a person paying admission

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RAY SKJELBRED

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Errata

(Summer 2023 *Jazz Soundings*): On page 3, the caption under the first photo should be changed to read “1982 Sacramento Jazz Jubilee.” On page 5, the reference to Bob Barnard’s U.S. tour should be changed to read, “...Bob’s first U.S. tour in 1978. The band was booked to play at the **Bix Beiderbecke Jazz Festival in Davenport, Iowa**, and Seattle was its first stop along the way.” Also on page 5, the reference to the year of Simon Stribling’s prior appearance at one of our concerts should be changed from 2004 to 2003.

Reflections of Ray Skjelbred

By Bill Hoffman

Reprinted from *The Syncopated Times*, June 2023,
with permission from the editor

At the West Coast Ragtime Festival last November, I met for the first time Ray Skjelbred (pronounced SHELL-bred, in case you haven't heard it before), pianist, poet, and teacher, who should be familiar to this paper's readers. He has been the leader or participant on over 50 CDs. He was featured about three years ago in a two-part article, and he has been on the scene—mostly on the West Coast—for over 50 years as a musician. Not recalling what had been written about him before in these pages, I asked if he would consent to an interview. When he reminded me of the ink he had previously received, I was not discouraged. Because of his history, I knew he had much interesting information to impart, so I asked him to suggest a topic.

He did not recall talking about his film in the earlier pieces, and he was interested in talking about the young musicians he likes. So those will be the topics of this treatise. Ray graciously sent me the following report/reminiscence, leaving nothing for me to add to enhance the piece. I am deeply grateful to Ray for, again, sharing his formidable knowledge, experiences and love and respect for this music and the people, past and present, who are performing and preserving it.

BH: Let's talk first about your film. Your website has no mention of it.

RS: A couple of years ago, with the support of my friend and producer John Ochs, we made a film about my development as a piano player and my focus on Chicago style, which is dear to my heart. And if I think a little more about what was going on in my head during that film, it's really easy to connect thoughts I have about learning to play jazz with some of the younger musicians I have seen perform in the last few years. It all seems to go together. I can see the same important elements in their lives.

In my jazz beginning I was 19, living in Seattle, and I knew I wanted to learn to play piano and play jazz as I was hearing it then. And I was very lucky, in many ways. First, I bumped into some other musicians my age who became jazz explorers with me. Mike Duffy on bass and Bob Jackson on cornet were two partners in music. We played records and experimented playing music and hoped for the best. But we also met older jazz friends who knew the territory and led us to musicians, bands, records, songs and styles of playing that we listened to very carefully. We were intense and it became obvious that if we were going to play

as we dreamed of, we had to plunge in fully to develop the "self" and at the same time, remove the "self" from the learning experience. We had to listen to others—words and music. Learning from others was most important.

Then I met Johnny Wittwer, a major jazz pianist on the West Coast who was just beginning to give lessons. We approached piano from many directions: direct traditional lessons, harmonic adventures, sheet music, duets, and thinking, "What would Joe Sullivan do now?" It went back and forth, with me often asking, "How do you do this?" Or, "What's he doing there?" as we played records of piano players. The first-hand connection with a piano master was crucial. And, of course, this story is in the film.

From a visit to San Francisco around that same time, I met the great pianist Burt Bales, and for many years thereafter, I listened and we talked. Eventually I was able to listen, talk, and learn from great masters like Joe Sullivan, Jess Stacy, Art Hodes, and Earl Hines—watching, listening, talking all the time. And it wasn't just piano. I was lucky to know and learn how to accompany blues singers like Victoria Spivey and Barbara Dane. And all the others, people like clarinet legend Darnell Howard and all the musicians I knew on many instruments in San Francisco who played music, connected with me, taught me how to fit in, what was good taste and ensemble musicianship—people like Bob Mielke, Bob Helm, Bill Napier, Richard Hadlock, Jack Minger, and so many others. It was a tribal connection of learning and support, a connection that would keep teaching forever. All of this—this is the force that made my film.

Our friend Bob Morgan did the music sound for the film, which was called *Piano Jazz: Chicago Style*. I know it is available for viewing by typing in that title plus my name and "YouTube." It is also available as a YouTube attached to the online Puget Sound Traditional Jazz Society newsletter, and on Michael Steinman's blog, if you click on my name when you get there. Ochs wanted to create a film with narrative and music that would show how my playing developed through a blend of talk and piano samples. I had had experience with a similar idea when the great Chicago pianist Art Hodes published his book, *Selections from the Gutter*, with University of California Press. Richard Hadlock and I were co-hosting "Annals of Jazz" on KQED radio in San Francisco at the time and UC press thought it would be a good idea for Hodes to come to my house and be recorded while sitting at the piano, playing some songs, and talking about his life in music as a way to introduce his book. I also remember a good film with Earl Hines in a night

club, sitting at piano and playing and talking about his music. So we had some guides. My film goes through the connections that I mentioned earlier—the personal desire, meeting helpful friends and musicians, listening to records, advice from elders, and the general sense of a lifetime of conversation with a variety of thoughtful people. It would be a mix of stories and musical examples.

My favorite story from the film comes from the night my three friends Jim Goodwin, Dan Barrett, and John Smith spontaneously decided to drive to Jess Stacy's house and pay their respects. They knew he and I were friends, so they thought that would make it OK. Well, Jess came to the door in his pajamas and three big guys he doesn't know are standing there, and he invites them in, gets them drinks, and plays records for them. To me that was a real tribal exchange of trust, warmth, and connecting! The next day, Jess called me and said, "Those nice boys came to see me last night. Those friends of yours." He was a sweet guy and all parties involved had the right instinct.

The film goes on with piano examples and stories about Johnny Wittwer, Burt Bales, Joe Sullivan, Art Hodes, Earl Hines, and others. And the film won the 2018 New York Jazz Film Festival award for documentary/history.

So where does this lead me? I want to consider the tribal connections with some young musicians I know, who in their own way have discovered some true things about music, who have been intense in pursuing the art of music, and who have listened outside of themselves in conversation with others who have absorbed records, research, and peer community. It involves a sense of direction that combines the inner self and the outer world. When these two things happen simultaneously, there is a spirit of cooperation that comes from a trust in others and a spirit of personal responsibility that comes from a trust in yourself.

I think of Ramona Baker, who has support from both parents. Clint and Alisa are musicians, they know jazz history, they provide clues about what to listen to, and they create a world of good taste in music. She has had the good example of elders and with her connections with other young pianists in ragtime, she also has had the support of a community of peers in a very particular field. Ramona's involvement in early syncopated music is not slight. She is completely absorbed in it, she has the knowledge of it, and she can display it in her piano playing. She has listened well and she knows others listen to her.

Her brother Riley is also an amazing young man and musician. And maybe the most wonderful thing is



Ray Skjelbred (photo courtesy of Seattle Artists)

how Ramona, Riley, and Clint all go somewhat different directions with the musical ideas they have chosen to develop. When I first knew Riley, he was becoming a serious musician, he was playing the tuba, but then he added drums and I played one festival with him. And he added string bass, then he added trombone. Like his father, he seems to be able to pick up any instrument and it becomes his—with intense work and listening and discovering good models of good taste and bandsmanship. It is a deep commitment. When I heard a trombone arrangement Riley had written, I asked him if he had heard the trombone choir arrangements that trombonist Benny Morton had done. Of course he had. His thinking grew into something because he grew from something.

And I think of Nathan Tokunaga, a remarkable high-school-age musician who has committed himself to playing clarinet in a sensitive, knowledgeable, and skilled manner. Nathan has listened attentively to records by jazz masters, he plays with other musicians his age, and he also has thoughtfully and attentively listened to Clint Baker and many other wonderful musicians in the Bay Area who now count Nathan as one of them. He has studied clarinet part playing, learned how to develop a beautiful tone, and he is an excellent listener on the bandstand, where the miracle of spontaneity never stops.

And I think of Will Perkins, an enormously talented pianist who has listened thoughtfully to an ever-growing variety of pianists who came before him. He has been influenced by Dick Wellstood, a major pianist who is partly forgotten these days. And I was thrilled to hear him play Joe Sullivan's "My Little Pride and Joy." He is extending his thinking in new directions all the time. Of course he has learned from sheet music, but the sensitive way he touches the keys is partly something innate and partly something that came from listening to others. Will is also part of a world

(Continued on page 9)

A LOOK AT THE PSTJS SCRAPBOOK, APRIL 1981: Remembering the Late Max Morath and his Concert at the PSTJS

Original layout courtesy of Diane Fehring



One of the more memorable PSTJS concerts was the appearance of famous ragtime pianist and raconteur Max Morath at the Mountaineers Club in 1981. The first half of the concert featured a solo concert with Max's usual erudite commentary placing the music in the context of its time. In the second half, he sat in on piano with the Rainier Jazz Band. Sadly, Max passed away this summer at age 96.

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RAY SKJELBRED (Continued from page 7)

of other young piano players who have been enthusiastic in their support of each other.

And that includes Vincent Johnson, whose piano skill is solid but whose knowledge of music comes from those same elements of listening to those who came before, studying records, and talking with his friends about how to approach the act of playing music. Vincent knows about the artistry and eccentricities of the marvelous pianist Arthur Schutt, a listening knowledge that helps shape his playing. Finding out about Schutt is not something you discover on the surface of music. You have to dig in. It has to be part of the center of who Vincent is.

At the 2022 West Coast Ragtime Festival, I met Eve Elliott for the first time. She is a solid piano player, a person and musician of great wit and energy. I have heard her play Jelly Roll Morton's "The Pearls" and can sense everything about her playing and thinking as she shows a careful consideration of how the composition unfolds but at the same she charges in with her own variations and a combination of power and sensitivity. Eve has listened well and is now part of the community of young, intense musicians.

Of course there are more. John Reed-Torres is a fine pianist with a sensitive touch and he is an important

part of that musical tribal community. And others too, but I won't go on more. The creative musical world these musicians inhabit came about for many reasons, but trusting others and trusting yourself is at the heart of it. Of course I am now old enough that almost any other jazz musician is a "younger" musician, as I once was. And all the older but younger players who have creatively developed their true selves as musicians have been intense in finding that inner self and good listeners and tribal members of a sensitive and knowledgeable musical community. And my good fortune is that I can always learn from them. We learn back and forth, younger and older. I always have something to learn from Clint Baker, Katie Cavera, Jeff Hamilton, Jacob Zimmerman, and all the other wonderful people I have known. My hands on piano keys can only reach so far, but I hope my mind keeps stretching as far as it can. And that is the excitement.

BH: Thank you so much, Ray. I wasn't wrong in my introduction (written before I received your account) that I would have nothing to add.

Visit Ray Skjelbred online at www.rayskjelbred.com.

See the film about Ray by following this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=roCybrl_S1o&t=1860s.

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