19. Traditional Jazz

During the far-ranging jazz style experiments in the 1960s, jazz became more complex, more fragmented and in some ways more exclusive. Some longtime jazz fans, who were turned off by such artists as Albert Ayler and Cecil Taylor, said the new forms of jazz were creating an esoteric art reserved for only a few hip insiders, not the popular art form they had known in earlier years.

Buddy DeFranco, who was leading the Glenn Miller ghost band at the time, and was a highly regarded bop clarinetist, said, “The more harmonically developed you get, the further away from the audience you’re going to get and then, all of a sudden, you have just a select few.”

But there were some musicians and listeners who related the appreciation of jazz to the appreciation of classical music. They believed good music is timeless regardless of the latest fads. The experiments of the 1960s prompted some longtime jazz fans to revert to the roots of the music, just as others had done in the 1940s when the great popularity of the swing bands had transformed jazz from an off-beat novelty into a serious art form and research into the history of jazz began.

Broun’s search for the origins of jazz

Heywood Hale Broun, the 22-year-old son of a newspaperman whose column ran regularly in the Cleveland Press, suspected the records of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band were not really true reflections of the earliest forms of jazz. Broun went to New Orleans in August of 1940 hoping to record some of the early pioneers of jazz. He found trumpeter Kid Rena, clarinetists Alphonse Picou and Louis “Big Eye” Nelson, and trombonist Jim Robinson. They gathered August 14, 1940 in the home of guitarist Willie Santiago to play.

Writing in the September 1940 edition of HRS Society Rag, Broun recalled he wasn’t sure if the aging musicians could still play. “I said in a high nervous voice, ‘Let’s try ‘Panama.’ After about four bars, I worried about nothing. My seven veterans were getting a kick out of it.”

A week later, Broun took the musicians, ranging in age from 41 to 70, to a studio at New Orleans radio station WWL and recorded eight sides including “High Society,” “Panama,” “Clarinet Marmalade,” and “Gettysburg March.” The records, which did not sound much like the raucous Original Dixieland Jazz Band recordings, were released September 17 by Delta Records in an album of four 78 rpm records that sold for $6. The records caused a sensation and triggered new interest in early jazz and prompted further searches for the origins of the music.

Broun also found trumpeter Willie “Bunk” Johnson who had played in New Orleans at the turn of the century with the legendary Buddy Bolden and the Superior Brass Band. Broun also tried to record Johnson, but the trumpeter declined, saying he needed a decent trumpet and some new teeth before he could try to make some records in the old style.

Mary Karoley’s home recordings

Two years later (February, 1942), Mary Karoley, a friend of clarinetist and saxophonist Sidney Bechet, made another attempt to record the 62-year-old Johnson. She went to his home in New Iberia, Louisiana, knocked on the door, and found the pioneer trumpeter in his small living room, reading a newspaper. He was dressed in a cotton shirt, work trousers and blazing red suspenders. She later wrote, “His handshake was gentle, but the texture of his skin was very rough. I wondered...
what he was doing to earn his living.”

Within a few minutes, Mary Karoley persuaded Johnson to play for her. She got an inexpensive disc recording machine from her car, but discovered there was no electricity in Bunk’s home. A neighbor stretched a series of extension cords to Bunk’s living room. When everything was set up, the trumpeter looked at Karoley and asked, “What do you want me to play, Miss Mary?”

“Anything that comes to your head,” she said. He picked up his old, beat-up trumpet with sticky valves and started to play. He played “Shine” and she heard and recorded what no one else had heard in decades – jazz pioneer Bunk Johnson playing with obvious tone, rhythm and drive.

Johnson apologized for his terrible horn and asked Karoley to take a message to his old New Orleans friend Sidney Bechet. “Tell him I’m in need of a good trumpet and if there’s anything that he can do, I’d be mighty proud.”

After playing “Weary Blues,” Johnson told Karoley, “I’m about the only trumpet player living today of that age, of the old gang, and able to play.”

Bunk concluded his private concert in his home for the woman he called “Miss Mary” by playing a tune he had played with Buddy Bolden in 1895, “Pallet on the Floor.”

She took those crude home recordings, including her interview with Johnson, to New York and played them for her good friend, John Reid, who was working for RCA Victor Records. She also played them for Sidney Bechet. After listening, Bechet recorded a message for Johnson. He said he had received a letter from Oliver in 1929 confirming his claim. “That letter is in Cleveland,” said Johnson. “Miss Mary has that.”

The search for Mary Karoley
For several years, I attempted to confirm that Mary Karoley was from Cleveland. In New Orleans, I went to see George Buck, the man who was running American Music, the record company that released those early recordings of Johnson and Bechet made by Karoley. Buck said he didn’t know if she was a Cleveland, but he believed she married a man named John Reid.

Then Buck introduced me to Dick Allen, the former curator of the Tulane University Jazz Archive, who had done extensive research into early New Orleans jazz. Allen smiled and said Mary Karoley and John Reid were never married but had lived together for a long time.

We took the St. Charles Street trolley to Tulane University and went to the Jazz Archive and met the new curator, Bruce Raeburn, the son of bandleader Boyd Raeburn. He went through the files but could find very little about Mary Karoley.

He did produce an old newspaper article about Reid. It said he was a native of New Jersey who worked for RCA, later owned an electronics company in Little Rock, Arkansas, and had a collection of about 5,000 jazz records. The article also said Reid died at the age of 65 in 1974 in Little Rock. The article also said Reid had the jazz notes of Mary Karoley. While reading this, I wondered if those notes included that letter from King Oliver to Bunk Johnson, the letter that, according to Johnson, “Miss Mary has in Cleveland.”

I later learned that Reid’s collection of records and notes had been contributed to the Arkansas Arts Center in Little Rock. When I tried to get access to the collection, librarian Patrice O’Donoghue told me the collection was not accessible because it was in storage.

I later discovered in a 1942 Cleveland City Directory Bunk’s first recording session
Four months’ after Mary Karoley’s home recordings of Bunk Johnson playing, in June of 1942, three jazz researchers – Bill Russell, David Stuart and Gene Williams – beat RCA Victor to the punch. They went to New Orleans and made a series of records with Johnson playing in a band that included clarinetist George Lewis and trombonist Jim Robinson. The recordings included “Panama,” “Down by the Riverside,” “Storyville Blues,” “Ballin’ the Jack,” “Pallet on the Floor,” “Weary Blues,” “Moose March,” “Bunk’s Blues” and “Yes, Lord, I’m Crippled.”

After recording the music, which echoed the earliest forms of jazz, the researchers also interviewed Johnson. He claimed he had taught Louis Armstrong to play the trumpet. Armstrong later denied Johnson’s claim but confirmed that as a child he had followed Johnson during New Orleans street parades. Johnson also said he had taught Joe “King” Oliver, Armstrong’s early mentor. He said he had received a letter from Oliver in 1929 confirming his claim. “That letter is in Cleveland,” said Johnson. “Miss Mary has that.”
that there was a Mary Karoley living on Lorain Avenue. I also learned that a year and a half after her first meeting with Bunk Johnson, Karoley was living in Mount Healthy, Ohio, just outside of Cincinnati.

After those historic Bunk Johnson records, made by the three jazz researchers, were released on the Jazz Man label, Johnson and Lewis became national jazz celebrities and toured the country, setting off a revival of early jazz.

The Hot Club of Cleveland

Even before those historic recordings by Bunk Johnson, there was a traditional jazz group here called "The Hot Club of Cleveland." It was started in 1940 by 29-year-old newspaperman Julian Krawcheck.

He told me, "I had come to Cleveland in 1937 to work at the old Cleveland News, and there was a fellow there named Paul Myhre, who was a great friend of some of the musicians in the Bob Crosby band," which played at the Great Lakes Exposition in Cleveland in 1937.

The newspapermen loved the style of jazz based on New Orleans dixieland and wanted to hear more of it. To do that, Krawcheck said he and others decided to form a jazz club. There was a famous club in France which presented concerts by gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt and violinist Stephane Grappelli. That club was called "The Hot Club of France." Krawcheck said the Clevelanders decided to model their club after the French organization and call it "The Hot Club of Cleveland."

Krawcheck began organizing traditional jazz sessions every other week at various places around Cleveland. "A favorite place," said Krawcheck, "was the old Artists Club in the 80s between Euclid and Carnegie. A number of the jam sessions were at the Cabin Club, beneath Diamond's Delicatessen on the south side of Euclid Avenue between East 105th and East 107th. "That was quite a place," remembered Krawcheck. "People would go down there to listen to the music, but they also danced." They also had jam sessions at the Jade Room of the old Fenwick Hotel.

The Hot Club of Cleveland did not pay the musicians. They wanted to come and play just for the fun of it. In fact, Krawcheck laughed, "Those musicians had to pay $2 monthly dues in order to come down and play for nothing."

Krawcheck got married shortly before one of the Hot Club sessions. He remembered, "When we got back from our honeymoon, they played when I came in (Freddie Slack's) 'Beat Me, Daddy, Eight To the Bar.' I blushed like hell."

Krawcheck's wife Marie said her new husband spent most of his nights going around town scouting jazz musicians for the Hot Club sessions. "Somebody would tell me of a good trombone player," remembered Krawcheck, "and I would go alone on the street car and listen to him. If I thought he was good, I would ask him to come down to the next session."

Among the young musicians who took part in the bi-weekly Hot Club jam sessions was singer Frankie Laine, who at the time was working in a defense plant in Cleveland and singing at the Wade Tavern on Wade Park Avenue. Krawcheck said he believed Laine was a better singer at the Hot Club sessions than he was later when he became nationally famous and sang such songs as "Shrimp Boats Are Coming."

"Another one," recalled the retired editor and columnist, "was Morey Feld, who I always thought played too loud." Feld later recorded with the Benny Goodman Sextet and Orchestra.

"There were all kinds of odd guys," said Krawcheck. "There was a trombone player named Bob Freeberger. He was marvelous. He was a Jack Teagarden-type trombonist but he was a little crazy. He stayed in a rented room on Payne Avenue. I went up to his room one time and he had pasted up over his bed little reminders to do things, such as 'Remember to write Mama Friday night!'"

"There were a couple of brothers in the group, Art and Dick Cutlip. Dick played the bass and his older brother played the piano. He was wonderful, but he couldn't stand Freeberger. They just didn't get along. In arranging these sessions, and getting together different musicians, I had to learn who liked whom and that sort of thing and try to keep them apart so they wouldn't get in fights."

Other musicians included trumpeter Wiz Rosenberg, Jasper Wood, Ray Rayson, Lanny Scott, and Caesar Dameron. Krawcheck said he believed Caesar was a much better musician than his younger brother, Tadd, who became a respected bop pioneer.

"One of the regulars," said Krawcheck, "was Johnny Huntington, from a society family. He would come down with some of his society friends and play a tenor saxophone very much like Bud Freeman."

Some of the musicians who played at the Hot Club jam sessions formed a band they called the Dixie Dandies. Included were clarinetist Sam Finger, pianist George Quittner, guitarist Freddy Sharp, trombonist Kenny Emerson, and drummer Orly May.

May attracted the attention of a national band leader. Krawcheck remembered taking Red Nichols to Fleet's Inn at East 9th and Lakeside to hear singer June Hart, but Nichols was so impressed with drummer May that he ignored the singer and offered May a job.

Veteran Cleveland jazz saxophonist Hank Geer remembered he was only 15 when he sat in with Krawcheck's Hot Club group. One night, Geer said
band leader Charlie Spivak, who was leading the house band at the Trianon Ballroom, showed up at a Hot Club session and liked Geer’s playing. He offered the schoolboy a job with his band.

Another well-known musician who sat in during the club sessions was pianist Cow Cow Davenport.

The Hot Club of Cleveland continued for three years, until 1943, when Krawcheck left his newspaper job for military service.

“I hate to say it,” recalled the courtly Krawcheck, who grew up in the South, “but it fell apart when I went into the Army. I suppose I would have to say that I was the prime mover in the thing and seemed to hold it together.”

Krawcheck also remembered there was a short-lived Cleveland Jazz Society here in the early 1950s.

Sam Finger

An alumnus of those Hot Club sessions, Sanford “Sam” Finger, became for many people the personification of dixieland jazz in Cleveland. He continued playing traditional jazz for more than half a century, including many performances at Cleveland Indians baseball games.

Born in Cleveland in 1915 and raised in Elyria, Finger studied clarinet at Glenville High School, the Oberlin Conservatory and Ohio State University where he got a music degree in 1941. While playing at those Hot Club jam sessions, Finger was one of the organizers of the Dixie Dandies. By the early 1950s, they recorded four tunes on 78 rpm records and received some national attention.

Finger died in 1999 the day before his 84th birthday.

Another revival in the 1950s

By the early 1950s, the almost fanatical popularity of the swing era was fading. Most big bands were folding mainly for economic reasons. It was simply too expensive to take 18-piece jazz bands around the country. It was the era just before rock ‘n roll and the record company executives, apparently not understanding what the bopsters were doing, shied away from jazz. They began pushing singers and novelty tunes.

But another thing was happening in the early 1950s. Many jazz fans, particularly college students, who had grown up listening to the big bands, discovered dixieland (or traditional) jazz. It was not unusual on college campuses in the early ‘50s to have several top-flight traditional jazz bands playing at fraternity parties almost every weekend. Dixieland jazz was again becoming popular, particularly in college towns around the country.

In Cleveland, Trevor Guy, who billed his band as “Trevor Guys’ Guys and a Doll,” was playing frequently for college parties. The band included such players as trumpeter Kenny Emerson, drummer (and Case Tech professor) Bob Slaymaker, pianist Dr. John Budd, clarinetist Dr. Charles Angelotta and the “doll,” singer Betsy Griffiths. Guy, a graduate of East High School and Western Reserve University, where he led the marching bands, was an architect who played dixieland jazz in Cleveland for half a century. His band recorded three albums.

Guy died at the age of 88 August 8, 1998 in Shaker Heights.

George Lewis in Ohio

During the winter of 1954, an Ohio State University graduate student named Bill Jaynes wanted to do something more than simply hire a local dixieland band. He wanted to promote a concert at Ohio State by one of the legendary New Orleans pioneers, clarinetist George Lewis, who had played with Bunk Johnson on those historic 1942 records.

Jaynes went to Frederick Stecker, the manager of the then-new Ohio Union and proposed the concert. “He accepted the idea,” said Jaynes, “and we began to make the arrangements.

To promote the concert, Jaynes got Columbus radio stations to play George Lewis records and persuaded a local newspaper to publish stories and pictures of Lewis and his group. Despite all the advance publicity, advance ticket sales were disappointing.

On the day of the concert, Jaynes’ first job was to host the band members. He took trumpeter Kid Howard and trombonist Jim Robinson to a state liquor store where they purchased a bottle of bourbon before retiring to their rooms. Jaynes took pianist Alton Purnell and Joe Watkins to a fraternity house where there was a piano to play. Purnell wanted to open the concert with the Ohio State football song, “Across the Field,” but the band struggled with the song and decided to open instead with “Beautiful Ohio.”

During the afternoon of the concert, the band assembled in the lounge of the Ohio Union to play a preview of the music, hoping to boost ticket sales. When the aging New Orleans jazzmen began playing, people streamed into the lounge and applauded enthusiastically after each number.
That night, despite the poor advance sale, there were long lines of people waiting to buy tickets. During a funeral music sequence, Lewis, Howard and Robinson, the front line, circled the auditorium. When the band played "Ice Cream," the crowd joined in the singing and some began dancing in the aisles.

The concert was so successful that Bob Clark, the owner of a Columbus record store, booked the band to return to town for a two-week engagement at the Club Riviera on the outskirts of Columbus. Opening night brought in an all-star band and a group called the Dixieland Rhythm Kings from Dayton. The battle of the bands attracted about 500 people. That was only about one-third of the seating capacity.

Jaynes later said, "Everything seemed to indicate that while the Ohio State concert had been very successful, and record store owner Bob Clark had high hopes, nothing comparable to the earlier breakthrough of Benny Goodman or the later triumphs of the Beatles was in the offing."

Forgotten pioneer Larry Conley

A former jazz trombonist and composer named Larry Conley came to Cleveland in the summer of 1953 and composed a series of songs with Cleveland drummer Art Cook. From June until September, they wrote such songs as "It Can't Be True," "Sing a Song of Long Ago," "Somebody Took You Out of My Arms," and "When the Reign of Love Begins."

Veteran saxophonist Hank Geer recalled Cook was a graduate of Cleveland's West Tech High School, a good-looking guy who worked at a Cleveland radio station. His brother Norbert played with a number of jazz bands in Cleveland and performed with the pit orchestra at the Palace Theatre. Art Cook later moved to San Francisco.

Who was Larry Conley? His name is probably unfamiliar to most jazz fans, but he was a very important pioneering figure in jazz history.

Conley's daughter, Hope Conley Lang of Port Jefferson, New York, said he was born in Keithsburg, Illinois, November 29, 1895. In 1923, he went to Chicago with the Gene Rodemich Orchestra and made about 50 records for Brunswick. Conley was the trombone soloist on the band's June, 1923 recording of Jelly Roll Morton's "Wolverine Blues."

Six months after Conley made his record, a group of young musicians formed a band called the Wolverine Orchestra which played a number of college, dance hall and theatre dates around Indiana and Ohio. The young cornetist with the Wolverine Orchestra was the now-legendary Bix Beiderbecke. The band made its first record in Richmond, Indiana, near Dayton, in February of 1924, a year after Conley's recordings.

While Beiderbecke and the Wolverines were apparently copying his stuff, Conley, eight years older than Beiderbecke, continued to play and record with the Rodemich band. He was also composing songs. In June of 1924, the Rodemich band recorded Conley's composition, "Tia Juana." The song featured a Conley solo. There is little doubt that Beiderbecke and the Wolverines were aware of Conley and the Rodemich Orchestra. Four months after Conley's recording, Bix and the Wolverines recorded their own version of Conley's "Tia Juana."

Beiderbecke's recording of "Tia Juana" is cited as one of the classic examples of early jazz despite the fact that the composer's solo was framed in an obviously better arrangement than Beiderbecke's. It now appears clear that Beiderbecke's solo was influenced by Conley's.

Another song composed and recorded by Conley in 1924 was "Shanghai Shuffle." Shortly after this recording, the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra made a recording of Conley's tune. The soloist was Louis Armstrong. Other artists on that record included Rex Stewart, Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter and Buster Bailey. Bunny Berigan also recorded Conley's "Shanghai Shuffle."

Many musicians have said Conley's trombone style on those early recordings was a strong influence on yet another immortal jazz giant, Jack Teagarden, who also recorded "Wolverine Blues."

Conley eventually settled in St. Louis and formed a local band called the Conley-Silverman Orchestra. His daughter said her father stopped playing trombone following an auto accident in the late 1930s, but he continued to compose. He went to New York and wrote for Pathé Films and was responsible for a song that became a pop and jazz standard, "A Cottage for Sale." It was recorded more than 100 times by such artists as Frank Sinatra, Nat Cole, Tony Bennett, Dinah Washington and Mel Tormé. The Billy Eckstine version of the song sold over a million copies in 1945. There were also jazz versions recorded by Erroll Garner, Earl Hines and Buddy Montgomery and later recordings of it by Roberta Flack and Etta James.

Conley, who spent the summer of 1953 quietly composing in Cleveland with Art Cook, was an unheralded jazz pioneer who should certainly be more widely recognized in jazz history.

Henry "Hot Lips" Levine

An internationally known traditional jazz musician spent much of the 1950s leading the studio band at radio station WTAM in Cleveland.
Henry "Hot Lips" Levine

Henry "Hot Lips" Levine was only 19 years old in the 1920s when he replaced Nick LaRocca in the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. In the late 1920s, Levine played trumpet in an English big band led by Bert Ambrose. Another member of that band was a young trombonist named Ted Heath who would later lead Great Britain’s most popular big band.

In 1940, Levine became a staff musician for NBC in New York and led a dixieland band on a network radio program called The Chamber Music Society of Lower Basin Street. Guest soloists with Levine’s group, which he called “The Barefooted Dixieland Philharmonic,” included soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet and singers Dinah Shore and Lena Horne. The program was so popular at the time that RCA Victor issued several albums of the band’s recordings. Levine also recorded with Jelly Roll Morton.

In the 1950s, as the music director of NBC’s radio station in Cleveland, Levine led the studio band playing live every morning on The Morning Bandwagon with host Johnny Andrews.

Bud Ford, the producer of that program, gave me some recordings of those broadcasts. The band played all sorts of music on the morning drive-time program and occasionally played some flat-out dixieland. The morning of May 15, 1954, Andrews opened his broadcast by introducing “Henry ‘Hot Lips’ Levine and his golden trumpet.” Said Andrews, “If you like dixieland music, boy, we’ve got it coming! You can’t top ‘Muskat Ramble!’”

After they played the dixieland classic, Andrews asked Levine if the tune was called “Muskat Ramble” or “Muskrat Ramble.” Levine admitted he didn’t know. Andrews claimed it was “Muskat” because the name derived from Muscatel wine. One band member said that New Orleans musicians, when they were thirsty, would call for “Muskat Ramble,” finish the tune, and run to the saloon next door for some wine.

Levine’s recording of the song was listed on the RCA Victor label as “Muskrat Ramble.”

Levine remained at the Cleveland radio station until 1956 when NBC sold WTAM and its Cleveland television station to Westinghouse. That ended live music on the station. Ford said part of the deal was a buy-out of the station’s musicians’ union contract. According to Ford, the $500,000 buy-out was used to build the musicians union building at East 22nd and Carnegie.

After leaving Cleveland, Levine returned to New York and recorded an album called Dixieland Jazz Band. The liner notes were written by Cleveland Plain Dealer columnist George Condon. Ironically, one of the songs on the album, composed by Levine, was “The Cleveland Press,” in honor of Cleveland’s competing afternoon newspaper. Another Levine composition was “Indian Uprising,” a salute to the 1954 American League champion Cleveland Indians baseball team.

After living and playing in Miami Beach and Las Vegas, “Hot Lips” Levine, a frequently forgotten jazz pioneer who was part of Cleveland jazz history, died in 1989 at age 82.

Louis Armstrong in Cleveland

The most influential artist in jazz history made many appearances in Cleveland. One of the most memorable was Sunday night, September 8, 1960 at Public Hall.

Performing with his All-Stars, the 58-year-old Armstrong proved in Cleveland that he could still blow
his trumpet and still sing.

Unlike many jazz artists who followed him, Armstrong was an outstanding showman, entertaining people simultaneously on different levels. While avid jazz afficionados marveled at his amazing trumpet work and vocal phrasing, completely tone deaf members of the audience, who wouldn’t know Duke Ellington from the Duke of Edinburgh, could also enjoy his entertaining performances. During that concert in Cleveland, Armstrong told the crowd, “You gotta have fun, daddy. That’s the only way!”

Satchmo played almost non-stop that night. With him in his band were clarinetist Barney Bigard, trombonist Trummy Young, pianist Billy Kyle, drummer Danny Barcelona, bassist Mort Herbert and singer Velma Middleton. Among the numbers he sang was “Mack the Knife,” the big hit he had recorded four years earlier.

Armstrong was unique by remaining very popular for more than 62 years. His first hit record, “Muskrat Ramble” with the Hot Five, was recorded in 1926. Sixty-two years later, in 1988, 17 years after his death, Armstrong’s recording of “What a Wonderful World,” featured in the movie Good Morning, Vietnam, was also on the record popularity charts. No other performer – in any form of music – ever came close to such long-running popularity.

During the 1960 concert at Public Hall, Armstrong was honored by the City of Cleveland. City Council President Jack Russell stepped on stage and presented to Armstrong a council resolution praising him as a musician and as a goodwill ambassador. Armstrong replied by saying to the politician, “Yeah, man. That’s nice. Thanks.” He placed the resolution on the piano and started playing again for the delighted Cleveland crowd.

Kid Sheik in Cleveland

Kid Sheik and his Storyville Ramblers, one of the few authentic New Orleans jazz bands that ventured north, came to Cleveland and played for a month beginning September 16, 1961 at the Tudor Arms Hotel at East 107th and Carnegie.

Lee Osborne, the promotion manager of the Tudor Arms, had heard Kid Sheik’s band in New Orleans at Preservation Hall. Osborne persuaded his boss, Tudor Arms Hotel Manager Sam Gerstner, to book the band to play six nights a week from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. in the hotel’s Empress Room. Posters for the booking said, “Now Opened, Empress Room of the Hotel Tudor Arms, presenting for the first time, direct from New Orleans, Kid Sheik and his New Storyville Ramblers.”

The band arrived in Cleveland from New Orleans September 14. The next day the hotel threw a birthday party and press reception for the leader, trumpeter Kid Sheik, whose given name was George Cola, and who had played with the historic Eureka Brass Band in New Orleans.

By all accounts, the New Orleans band was a big hit in Cleveland. The Plain Dealer called the band members “Six patriarchs of jazz, still going strong.” Other newspapers praised the New Orleans musicians, some of whom had played with the early legends of New Orleans jazz.

Among them was clarinetist Captain John Handy, 61 at the time, who had played with such New Orleans pioneers as Kid Rena and Kid Howard and with his own group at his own dance hall in New Orleans. He became an internationally-known jazz soloist who performed with such artists as Johnny Hodges and Sidney Bechet. He later played at the 1970 Newport Jazz Festival, where his stomping, timeless style created a sensation.

Playing drums with that traditional band at the Tudor Arms was Josiah Frazier who had recorded with trombonist Jim Robinson and others during the revival of New Orleans jazz in the 1940s and 1950s.

Recordings of Kid Sheik’s Storyville Ramblers playing in Cleveland were first released by Golden Sunset Records. The cover of the album showed Kid Sheik, dressed in a white dinner jacket, standing in front of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument on Cleveland’s Public Square. The album notes said the enthusiastic crowds that went to the Tudor Arms to hear the Storyville Ramblers were not necessarily avid jazz fans. Newspaper articles said the band attracted crowds on their personality as much as their musicianship.

While the month-long gig by the Storyville Ramblers in Cleveland is probably forgotten by most, it was historically significant because it was one of the very few instances of an actual New Orleans jazz band venturing to Cleveland to play.

The unusual extended engagement by Kid Sheik in Cleveland prompted yet another revival of dixieland jazz here.
Ralph Grugel

A huge man with a huge sense of humor and love for what he termed "authentic early American music," trombonist Ralph Grugel began playing with his traditional jazz band at Fagan's in 1962. At the time, it was the only nightclub in the Cleveland Flats with live entertainment. Grugel recalled, "We were at Fagan's for nine years. Harry Fagan, the owner, named us 'The Bourbon Street Bums.' He used to advertise 'Find us and have fun at Fagan's' and 'New Year's Eve every Saturday night.'" As the crowds grew, the band's gig was extended to three nights a week.

Clarinetist Doug Hopkins remembered that when a garbage barge was towed past Fagan's on the Cuyahoga River late at night and the skipper blew the tug's horn, the band would respond with a chord that sounded exactly like the boat horn (the ultimate call-and-response jazz?). Hopkins also recalled catching pianist George Quittner reading when the band was playing. He asked him, "George, what in the world are you reading?" Quittner responded, "It's the basic structure of the ionosphere."

Touring musicians would stop at Fagan's to sit in with Grugel's band. Hopkins remembered a drummer from the Jackie Gleason Orchestra came one night and failed to get through one song. "He couldn't keep up with the band," said Hopkins, "it was swinging so hard!"

It was the beginning of what later became the live entertainment center of Cleveland. Other clubs opened in the Flats and began attracting good crowds with dixieland jazz. Clarinetist Ted Witt remembered, "Grugel's band started everything down in the Flats."

Eventually rock bands took over the entertainment spots in the Flats. But Grugel continued playing traditional jazz for decades with his Eagle Jazz Band. At times, his was the only dixieland band performing in Greater Cleveland. He played long-term engagements at the Market Street Exchange on the West Side and at the Cleaveland Crate and Trucking Company in the Flats.

Other trombonists were amazed when they discovered the fun-loving Grugel used Lemon Pledge as his slide lubricant.

Grugel also made a number of recordings with his Eagle Jazz Band and had a loyal following wherever he appeared. By the end of the 20th Century, he was the acknowledged patriarch of traditional jazz in Cleveland. During a tribute by the EARLYJAS society, Bert Smith, who played piano with Grugel for years, said, "No one in Northeast Ohio has contributed as much, or even come close to contributing as much, to dixieland and traditional jazz music."

Clarinetist Ted Witt

Ted Witt, who had studied classical clarinet at the University of Missouri, was working at General Electric's Nela Park. He recalled, "Several engineers there had some musical talent and we began getting together in each other's basements on Friday nights." By 1964, they got out of the basement and formed a band called the Forest City Stompers. They got a job playing at Diamond Jim's in the Flats. "We were there every Friday and Saturday night for four years," said Witt.

He and other members of the band were serious about the roots of jazz. They researched the music, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, and learned all the tunes the ODJB had recorded. Witt made several trips to New Orleans. "I remember marching down Canal Street with the Delta Queen Jazz Band in the big parade," he said. "I met Danny Barker and George Lewis shortly before they died. Kid Ory was back for one of those affairs."

Later, Witt played with the Forest City Jazz Band at the Walnut Manor on Mayfield Road and at Hank Geer's Euclid Shore Club on Lakeshore Boulevard. In the 1970s and '80s he frequently played clarinet with Grugel's Eagle Jazz Band and became a member of the long-running Earlville Jazz Band that played regularly at the Rusty Nail restaurant in Twin Lakes just north of Kent.

Witt said the music of what he called "The Jazz Age" (1917-1935) is a rich American art heritage that should not be forgotten. He admitted "Jazz has certainly evolved, but that doesn't necessarily mean that everything that has come later is better. And much of it is not, in my humble opinion." Witt added, "We have hardly scratched the surface of what was done during those years. Granted there has been a tremendous amount of great music since then, but I've found that to be such a rich heritage that I have a hard time even doing justice to that period, much less any other."

Witt also played for years at Night Town in Cleveland Heights and was a founder of the Night Owls, a 1920s-style dance band.
Yet another revival of traditional jazz

Through the 1970s and ‘80s, there were only a few dixieland bands playing regularly in Northeast Ohio, but in 1986, when there was another revival of interest in the roots of jazz, a group of traditional jazz fans, led by Jean and Paul Huling (“Sister Jean, the Ragtime Queen and Laundry Fat”) formed a club called EARL JAS (The Earlville Association of Ragtime Lovers Yearning for Jazz Advancement and Socialization). They held monthly “meetings” (concerts and parties) Sunday afternoons at the Rusty Nail in Twin Lakes. About 200 traditional jazz fans showed up each month.

In May of 1990, EARLYJAS teamed up with the Northeast Ohio Jazz Society and the American Cancer Society to stage A Tribute to Turk Murphy, a two-day festival at the Tangier Restaurant in Akron. Capacity crowds turned out for the three sessions and the event raised about $2,000 for the Cancer Society. The festival featured three bands from Northeast Ohio — Grugel’s Eagle Jazz Band, the Earlville Jazz Band and the New Orleans Stompers — plus the Cakewalkin’ Jass Band from Toledo, the Blue Chip Jazz Band from Cincinnati, the Classic Jazz Stompers from Dayton, and the West End Jazz Band from Chicago.

The 1990 benefit festival was so successful that EARLYJAS decided to stage an annual three-day dixieland jazz festival. The first was held in September of 1992 at the Holiday Inn in Kent. Nobody really knew what to expect. Would there be enough interest in the earliest forms of jazz to make the event worthwhile? The answer was a resounding yes. Bob Engle, the festival director, said, “The turnout that we got for it was more than I expected.” There was standing room only for the Friday night, Saturday afternoon, Saturday night, and Sunday morning sessions. Many fans traveled for miles and stayed in the hotel for the full weekend to hear five dixieland bands play almost wall-to-wall traditional jazz.

In addition to the local Eagle and Earlville Jazz Bands, Engle brought in the Original Salty Dogs from Chicago, the St. Louis Rivermen, and Ray Heitger’s Cakewalkin’ Jass Band from Toledo. I was asked to emcee the Saturday night session.

The following year (1993), the Fall Jazz Festival was again held at the Kent Holiday Inn, but Engle said, “We knew that we had totally outgrown the capacity of the hotel and its ballroom facilities.”

In 1994, the festival moved to the larger Holiday Inn in Strongsville, at the intersection of I-71 and Route 82. Each year, there was a parade of outstanding traditional jazz bands from around the country coming to the Cleveland area for the annual three-day event. The crowds of dixieland lovers ranged from 1,200 to 1,500. Mississippi Rag, a national publication devoted to traditional jazz, called the Cleveland area event “one of the best jazz festivals in the Midwest.”

Engle said, “We get people from all over the country, from Canada, and even people from overseas. We’ve had people from England and South Africa.” Engle estimated that 75 to 80% of the people attending the traditional jazz festival each year were out-of-towners.

Bandleader Grugel said the local festival attracted most of the leading traditional jazz bands in the world. “It’s a good thing for Cleveland,” said Grugel. “It’s like the old days when Cleveland was on the map as a major stop for the big bands.” But, with a characteristic smile, Grugel added, “If you ask for a Neil Simon song, they’ll throw you out!”

Cleveland Links in New Orleans

In New Orleans, we walked into Preservation Hall, the world-famous citadel of traditional jazz in the French Quarter. We spotted a familiar face playing bass with the band that included ageless trumpeter Percy Humphrey, his clarinetist brother Willie, and banjo player Narvin Kimble.

It was Ben Jaffe, who had played some very modern jazz in Northeast Ohio with a group called No Evidence when he was a student at Oberlin College.

Ben graduated from Oberlin and returned to New Orleans where his father, the late Alan Jaffe, had founded Preservation Hall in 1961. Alan died in 1987 at the age of 51. During our visit, Ben said he and his mother, Sandra, were running Preservation Hall.

“We’re trying to get things back to the way they were when my father was still alive,” said the young Jaffe.
“Nothing had changed here in the past 30 years and people’s attitude was diminishing a little because there wasn’t the direction that there was under my father.”

Ben was spending most of the day at the 200-year-old former stable on St. Peter Street, just off Bourbon, doing the bookkeeping, booking the musicians, and opening every night at 8 and closing at 12. “Of course, I sit in with the band,” Ben said. “I’m not the regular bass player, but I frequently fill in and I’m happy about that.”

It was certainly not the style of jazz that Ben was playing at Rhythms and other Cleveland clubs. “I was playing more modern and more avant garde music in Cleveland,” said Jaffe. “I still play that here in New Orleans. In fact, I also teach at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts and perform with the Jason Marsalis Quartet and play more modern music, but I think musicians of today need to be versatile and that’s what I was thankful and grateful for in Cleveland, to get the experience to concentrate on playing more mainstream jazz.”

From Preservation Hall, we went down Bourbon Street to the Can Can Jazz Café in the Royal Sonesta Hotel and got another surprise. Sitting in with Chris Tyle’s Silver Leaf Jazz Band was cornetist Jim Cullum, the leader of the Jim Cullum Jazz Band which had played a concert the previous summer at Cain Park in Cleveland Heights. Cullum said he was spending a couple of days in New Orleans during a break in the production of his nationally-syndicated radio programs.

We followed Cullum through the throng on Bourbon Street, which, on any given night, makes the Cleveland Flats seem like a Sunday school picnic. We went to Fritzel’s where Cullum sat in with former Dukes of Dixieland clarinetist Jack Maheu. Playing with Maheu’s group was John Royen, a pianist who had recorded with Northeast Ohio’s Jamie Wight and Ted Witt. We had met Royen when he was playing at Night Town in Cleveland Heights.

Royen said Wight, who moved permanently from Port Clinton to New Orleans the previous summer, had been very busy playing traditional jazz in New Orleans.

**Jamie Wight**

A couple of days later, we got together with Wight. He explained he had been coming to New Orleans for about ten years (since 1984) and loved it, but was reluctant to pull up stakes in Northeast Ohio because of his children. He said it was Royen who introduced him to the small community of Mandeville, just across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans. “We found good schools and a laid-back community very much like what I was used to up in Port Clinton. My wife pushed me into it. We just quit and came down.”

For Wight, the move to New Orleans was not the same as a bop musician going to New York to be near the center of the jazz action. “It’s more than that,” he said. “You don’t come to New Orleans just to play music; you come to live in New Orleans, to work with the musicians of New Orleans, to eat the food they prepare here. It’s a way of life.”

Wight was playing a lot in New Orleans. As we chatted, Wight was preparing to leave on a 12-day jazz cruise to Jamaica, Grand Cayman, through the Panama Canal, Costa Rica, and Acapulco. “It’s a rough way to make a living,” laughed Wight, “but what can I say, somebody’s got to do it.”

Wight became a member of the famous Dukes of Dixie, played with Andrew Hall’s Society Jazz Band of New Orleans, Chris Tyle’s Silver Leaf Jazz Band and led the house band at Fritzel’s European Jazz Pub on Bourbon Street. He also recorded with a number of New Orleans bands.

We also stopped in to see George Buck, the owner of Jazzology Records and a lot of other labels. He told us he was releasing an album by Jamie Wight and his New Orleans Joymakers. The album, *Spreading Joy*, included Cleveland’s Ted Witt. Buck also introduced us to Dick Allen, the former curator of the Jazz Archive at Tulane University, who recalled such obscure facts as Artie Shaw leaving Cleveland in 1931 to join Irving Aaronson’s Commanders. Allen also suggested some ideas for the *Cleveland Jazz History* radio series.
We found a few more ideas when we took the St. Charles Avenue trolley to the Tulane Jazz Archive and met the current curator, Bruce Raeburn. He brought files to us in a room where we were seated in front of a desk that had been salvaged from Lulu White’s Mahogany Hall in Storyville and a mantlepiece that was once part of the Storyville establishment where Jelly Roll Morton played piano.

Bruce was interested in the local history work we’ve been doing in Cleveland and requested a copy of the *Cleveland Jazz History* book to include in the Tulane Jazz Archive.

We found other Northeast Ohio links in New Orleans. Don Marquis, the curator of the New Orleans Jazz Collection, a museum in the old U.S. Mint building, is a former Cleveland. The museum’s collection includes the trombone of George Brunis, a key member of the historic New Orleans Rhythm Kings. The instrument was made by the H.N. White Company at East 53rd and Superior in Cleveland before the firm moved to Eastlake and became the King Musical Instruments Company.

On our first full day in New Orleans we found ourselves at the French Market listening to the Olympia Brass Band, New Orleans’ most famous marching band. The band was playing for tips along the street and attracted a large crowd of tourists, many of whom joined in, singing, dancing and cheering as the band played familiar traditional tunes.

We also found veteran trumpeter Wallace Davenport playing some excellent traditional swing, with Dizzy Gillespie overtones, at Maison Bourbon, and Danny Barker’s Jazz Band playing for a dinner crowd at George and Nina Buck’s Palm Court Jazz Café. The Palm Court was one of the few places in New Orleans that featured both good food and good jazz.

Music is everywhere in New Orleans. One of the better instrumentalists was a street musician we found at the edge of Jackson Park, playing “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans” on his soprano saxophone. The strangest was a percussionist who was walking down Royal Street with an odd collection of one-man band devices attached to a large carrying rig that he had strapped around his shoulders. He stopped to play a tune with two other street musicians who were sitting in the middle of the street. They all had to scramble when fire engines roared by.

Then, when we returned to Cleveland from New Orleans, we got another surprise. We learned that Preservation Hall musician Willie Humphrey’s grandson, Dr. Jeff Lapeyrolerie, lived a few blocks from us in Cleveland Heights. Dr. Lapeyrolerie’s mother was Humphrey’s only daughter.