20. Resurgence in the 1980s and ‘90s

Interest in jazz in Cleveland was at a low ebb during the 1970s. There was very little live jazz being performed here by either national or local musicians, and very little recorded jazz being played on area radio stations.

Jazz flutist, saxophonist and textbook author Mark Gridley remembered, “It was so bad that I would have to drive to Pittsburgh, Cincinnati or Detroit just to hear Miles Davis or Chick Corea.” In 1971, Gridley, who was studying and teaching at Case Western Reserve University, organized a series of monthly jazz concerts featuring such local musicians as Bill Dobbins, Lamar Gaines and Val Kent. It was almost the only live jazz in town at the time.

But, by the end of the 1970s and early in the 1980s, four things happened to help trigger a resurgence of jazz in Greater Cleveland:

• The Northeast Ohio Jazz Society was formed in March of 1978,
• The Tri-C JazzFest was launched in April of 1980,
• The Cleveland Jazz Orchestra was formed in May of 1984,
• Public Radio Station WCPN began programming jazz in September of 1984.

The combination of these four developments in a fairly brief period ushered in a new era of jazz appreciation in Greater Cleveland.

Northeast Ohio Jazz Society

The Northeast Ohio Jazz Society, a volunteer group of jazz fans, was incorporated as a not-for-profit organization March 22, 1978 and began promoting a wider appreciation of jazz through a variety of concerts and projects.

The founder and first president of the society was Willard Jenkins who later became the executive director of the National Jazz Service Organization in Washington and a free lance writer for several national jazz publications.

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<th>NOJS Presidents</th>
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The late Allison Kaslow, a founder of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, was the Jazz Society’s first executive director in 1986 and ‘87. John Richmond served as the full-time, paid NOJS executive director from 1989 until 1999. Dr. Carlos Ramos became the executive director in 2002.

After presenting a number of well-attended jazz concerts and education and social events, the jazz society marked its tenth anniversary in 1988 with a gala dinner dance at the University Club and a concert at the Ohio Theatre featuring Ernestine Anderson, Terence Blanchard and Donald Harrison.

Also in the late 1980s, President Evan Morse and Treasurer Les Knowlton spearheaded a drive to secure major funding from the Cleveland Foundation and the George Gund Foundation to hire a full-time executive director and to open a jazz society office in the Heights Rockefeller Building at Mayfield and Lee in Cleveland Heights.

The Northeast Ohio Jazz Society presented dozens of live concerts each year, frequently with national artists, and offered a series of jazz education programs including a unique full week of jazz education programs at various area schools beginning in 1991. Jim Szabo,
one of the original members, launched the NOJS JazzLine in 1983 to provide telephone listings of jazz events in the area. The listings were extended to e-mail in the 1990s. The Jazz Society presented monthly jazz education seminars called “Jazz Klatches,” monthly “Pub Nights,” spotlighting area musicians and clubs that offered live jazz; published a monthly newsletter (which I edited for ten years); and initially presented my weekly Cleveland Jazz History radio broadcasts on WCPN.

Membership in the Jazz Society grew to about 900. During the summer of 1991, the NOJS was notified it had been selected as one of only 16 organizations in the U.S. to share a $3.4 million jazz grant from the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund. With money from the foundation the Jazz Society launched a series of major projects. It commissioned saxophonist David Murray to compose a new work, “The Picasso Suite,” which was presented in conjunction with the Cleveland Museum of Art’s exhibition of Pablo Picasso paintings. The world premiere of “The Picasso Suite” occurred March 11, 1992, at the art museum’s Gartner Auditorium. That concert led to a continuing series called Jazz on the Circle, presented in cooperation with the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Musical Arts Association and the Tri-C JazzFest.

Early in its history, shortly after presenting its first few concerts, the Northeast Ohio Jazz Society helped launch a new jazz festival at Cuyahoga Community College.

The Tri-C JazzFest

“It was a dream,” said Dr. Thomas Horning of Cuyahoga Community College, “but I thought it could work.”

Musician and educator Reginald Buckner, who was an artist-in-residence at Tri-C in 1979, suggested the school try to present a jazz festival. Horning asked leaders of the Northeast Jazz Society to help organize the first two-day event in the spring of 1980. The featured artists included drummer Buddy Rich, pianist McCoy Tyner, and pianist and bandleader Earl “Fatha” Hines.

A key figure in jazz history, Hines was the man who set the stage for the important educational element of JazzFest. Horning said, “Earl came over and met with our students and worked with them. It was a sign of what was to come for us.”

The modest festival struggled for the first few years, but gradually grew in general popularity. By 1984, the festival was extended to ten days including its first standing-room-only crowd for a concert by saxophonist Sonny Rollins. The Tri-C JazzFest was becoming a major annual community event in Cleveland.

1984 was also the first year that a well-known jazz musician served as the JazzFest artist-in-residence. The first was guitarist Mundell Lowe. He was followed by trumpeter Clark Terry. “We think of Clark as the father of our educational programs,” said Horning. “He spent ten days here in 1985. We went from school to school throughout Cuyahoga County, visiting dozens of school bands. He was so energetic, but he collapsed after the ten days. We ran him ragged.” Jazz icon Terry continued to serve as the honorary chairman of JazzFest. Other artists-in-residences have included Billy Taylor, Ellis Marsalis, Gary Burton, Rufus Reid, James Williams, Marcus Belgrave, Bobby Watson and Joe Lovano.

During the 1980s the International Association of Jazz Educators called the Tri-C JazzFest “the nation’s premier educational jazz festival.”

The long list of concert performers over the years included: Woody Herman, Milt Hinton, Max Roach, Betty Carter, George Shearing, Louie Bellson, Ray Brown, Dizzy Gillespie, Joe Williams, Wynton Marsalis, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Carmen McRae, Oscar Peterson, the Count Basie Orchestra and Ella Fitzgerald.

Horning recalled, “It was wonderful getting Ella to come here. She was not well at the time, but sang like Ella of earlier years. It wasn’t very long after that she passed on. I think that was her last big jazz concert.”

In the mid-1980s, when Cleveland and other cities across the country were attempting to attract a planned rock ‘n roll hall of fame, Horning and the Tri-C JazzFest played a key role in Cleveland’s bid. With little or no fanfare, they put together a proposal for an educational component for the museum, a National Center for American Music. Richard Celeste, who was the governor of Ohio at the time, said the Tri-C proposal was the decisive element in attracting the rock hall to Cleveland. As the 20th century ended, Cuyahoga Community College was planning to build a $20 million center on Woodland Avenue to serve as “a home for jazz, rhythm and blues, rock ‘n roll, country, blues and big band music.”

In 1999, the Tri-C JazzFest attracted international attention by spearheading the world’s most extensive
celebration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Duke Ellington, a year-long series of concerts, lectures and educational events.

JazzFest’s major concerts brought important artists to Cleveland, but, more importantly, helped finance the festival’s primary focus—education. Thousands of young musicians got the opportunity to work with the best jazz musicians in the world.

One of those young musicians was pianist LaFayette Carthon who was a student at the Cleveland School of the Arts. Carthon remembered, “It started when Clark Terry was the artist-in-residence, then Billy Taylor, Wynton Marsalis and Ellis Marsalis.” Horning said, “It’s great when a young artist can be inspired by the people who have come here.”

Another of the young musicians was Dominick Farinacci, a Solon High School student who was named to the Grammy Awards High School Jazz Band for two years and who was invited by Wynton Marsalis, whom he met at JazzFest, to solo on national television with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra in New York in December of 2000. Horning said, “That’s one of the things I’m most proud of, that our students in our jazz studies program are playing on a national level.”

Looking back, Horning said, “In terms of cultural events, JazzFest has evolved into one of the major events of the city of Cleveland and we’re very pleased that it has.” Horning was once shown a videotape of children playing in Africa. One of the African kids was wearing a Tri-C JazzFest T-shirt. There is no doubt that the annual jazz festival has put Cleveland’s little Cuyahoga Community College on the cultural map. Somebody once said, “The JazzFest is to Tri-C as football is to Notre Dame.” Horning said, “I like that analogy because I went to Notre Dame too.”

The child in Africa probably knew nothing about Notre Dame football.

### Tri-C JazzFest Artists-in-Residence

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Mundell Lowe</td>
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<td>1985</td>
<td>Clark Terry</td>
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<td>1986</td>
<td>Dr. Billy Taylor</td>
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<td>1987</td>
<td>Ellis Marsalis</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td>Gary Burton</td>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>Rufus Reid</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>James Williams</td>
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<td>1991</td>
<td>Marcus Belgrave</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Bobby Waterson</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Geri Allen</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Kenny Burrell and Marvin Stamm</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Joe Lovano</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>Benny Golson and Steve Coleman</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>JoAnne Brackeen and Cyrus Chestnut</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Rufus Reid</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>James Newton</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>Cecil Bridgewater</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>Christian McBride</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>John and Jeff Clayton</td>
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### The Cleveland Jazz Orchestra

Big band jazz, which had a long and rich tradition in Cleveland, had all but died here by 1983 when Gary Scott and several other musicians got together to play some big band charts just for fun. Scott said, “Some of the better professional musicians in town created a rehearsal band called the North Coast Jazz Orchestra. We rehearsed at Lithuanian Hall in Collinwood and played a few concerts here and there. Then in 1984, a guitar player friend of mine and I decided to go ahead and start a concert band. We presented our first concert May 20, 1984 and since that time we have been the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra.”

In 1987, Roland Paolucci of the University of Akron was hired as music director of the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra. “If the tradition of the big bands is going to be maintained,” said Paolucci, “we’re going to dip back to the days of the late ’20s and early ’30s with territory bands. I think the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra is just that now, a territory band.”

The CJO played a subscription series of two performances of at least six concerts each year plus a number of special performances and a number of free outdoor summer concerts in various communities throughout Northeast Ohio.

Unlike the big swing bands of the ‘30s and ‘40s, which depended on distinctive sounds and styles for success, the CJO was playing big band jazz from a variety of periods and in a variety of styles. “We’re a repertory big band,” said Paolucci. “We try to play repertoire, not just exclusively ours, but the music of people like Stan Kenton whose band is no longer in existence.”

The Cleveland Jazz Orchestra played concerts saluting the bands of Benny Goodman, Count Basie, Duke Ellington and others and featured such guest soloists as Lew Soloff, Paquito D’Rivera, Ken Peplowski, Louie Bellson, Art Farmer, Sarah Vaughan and Jiggs Whigham, Terry Gibbs, Tommy Flanagan, Joe Lovano, Milt Hinton, Clark Terry and Arturo Sandoval. Guest conductors have included such composers and arrangers as Bill Holman, Sammy Nestico, Bill Finegan, Bob Florence, Clare Fischer, Gerald Wilson, Frank
Foster and Maria Schneider.

Members of the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra also organized a big band for teenagers called OJOY, the Ohio Jazz Orchestra for Youth. Directed by CJO trombonist Paul Ferguson, OJOY later became the Settlement Jazz Orchestra and was operated in cooperation with the Cleveland Music School Settlement.

In the 1990s, the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra was attracting good crowds to its series of big band concerts. The biggest crowd was for a concert with former Glenn Miller saxophonist and singer Tex Beneke.

Buddy Sullivan

A featured saxophonist with the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra during its first decade looked like a respected accountant and sounded like a veteran of the big band era. Buddy Sullivan was both.

Born and raised on a farm in Minnesota, Sullivan said he learned to play the sax at home. "The cows," he said, "listened to me over the fence."

In 1941, after high school, Sullivan was good enough to play with several territory bands. He recalled, "It was a lark for a young kid. But looking back on it, I wonder how we all survived because it was a terrible existence. I was paid $5 a night."

Eventually Sullivan joined a band from Hollywood led by Al Graham. "We played at hotels in the Midwest," said Sullivan, "and that's where I met my wife. She was a singer on the band." They were married six months later.

After playing in an Air Force band during World War II, Sullivan in 1946 joined the big band of Cleveland native Alvino Rey. "We played one-nighters through the Midwest and he wanted me to go to the West Coast with the band, but the pay was $75 a week and I couldn't figure out any way to support a wife and kids. I decided to go to school and study accounting."

Sullivan became a certified public accountant in the late 1940s but continued playing jazz with a leading jazz group in Toledo. "We played with numerous good players," remembered Sullivan, "like Shorty Rogers, Frank Rosolino, Art Pepper, Lee Konitz and Zoot Sims. I remember one time, the whole Woody Herman band descended on us. Al Cohn, Zoot Sims, Serge Chaloff, Bill Harris and Don Lamond sat in with us and Mel Tormé, who was singing with the Herman show, sat in on drums."

Sullivan moved to Cleveland in 1968 to take an accounting job. Buddy and his wife, Florence, raised eight children.

In 1983, he got together with some other Cleveland musicians to play some old big band charts. "We rehearsed at Case Western Reserve and later at the Lithuanian Hall on East 185th Street. At first, we called it 'the North Coast Jazz Orchestra.' It gradually evolved into the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra.

Jack Schantz

Jack Schantz, who had toured for three years with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra led by Buddy Morrow, became a featured trumpet soloist with the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra in 1988 and was named music director in 1993. He assembled a core group of musicians, many of whom had also played with the Morrow band. They included lead trumpeter Lou Pisani, lead trombonist Paul Ferguson, lead saxophonist Kent Engelhardt, plus saxophonists John Klayman and Rich Shanklin.

Shortly after becoming the music director of the CJO, Schantz said the band includes "the absolute cream of the crop of Cleveland musicians. We have world-class players in the lead chairs." He called Ferguson "a ridiculous trombone player who plays principal trumpet in the Canton Symphony and then, at the drop of a hat, plays burning jazz solos."

Schantz said he believed the role of the CJO is to both "recreate some of the more important artists and music of this genre and to try to develop something new and unique from Cleveland. And the only way you can do that in a big band," he said, "is by the writing. It’s the writers and the soloists who give a band its personality."

Unlike many other big bands, the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra has had several excellent composers and arrangers contributing regularly to the book. They include Ferguson, Shanklin and bassist Dave Morgan.

Schantz admitted that it is not always easy trying to balance the roles of a repertory band and a creative contemporary band. "It’s really a hard thing to do," he said, "to get the right mix of what people want to hear, what people are willing to pay money for, and what is satisfying artistically for us. The hard mix for me is to find programming that is going to be interesting and
Resurgence in the 1980s and '90s

commercial at the same time because, after all, we’re making a product and we want people to come and see us.”

In the spring of 1992 the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra released a recording, a cassette entitled Cleveland Jazz Orchestra - Greatest Hits - Live! It was a compilation of recordings from various performances during its 1990-91 concert season and included such classics as Duke Ellington’s “Merry Go Round” and Jelly Roll Morton’s “Black Bottom Stomp,” as well as originals by CJO members, including Ferguson’s “Blue Highways” and Chas Baker’s “The Wayback Machine.”

There was a flurry of recordings by the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra in 1998 and 1999. A videotape of a May 1998 CJO concert with the Four Freshmen was distributed worldwide by the Four Freshmen Society. A live recording of a 1998 CJO concert with former Count Basie arranger Sammy Nestico was packaged into a compact disc entitled Swingin’ Together. And in June of 1999, the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra recorded in a studio for the first time, producing a compact disc entitled Traditions, a salute to Cleveland’s colorful big band history. The CD included a 28-page booklet I wrote tracing Cleveland’s many big band traditions.

In the summer of 1999, as part of the Everything Ellington celebration in Greater Cleveland, the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra performed a joint concert of Duke Ellington music with the Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom Music Center.

In 2001, the CJO recorded another CD, Night and Day, with its frequent singer Barbara Knight. Included were arrangements of standards by CJO members.

In 2002, Al Couch, who had played trumpet with the Cleveland Orchestra for 30 years, joined the trumpet section of the CJO.

Other Cleveland big bands

Appropriately, as the 20th Century ended, Cleveland was one of very few cities with several working big bands. In addition to the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra, two other professional big jazz bands were playing regularly.

Saxophonist Ernie Krivda, who had developed a national reputation as a small group soloist and recording artist while working from his base in Cleveland, said, “No matter what I’ve pursued artistically throughout my life in music, big bands have always engendered strong feelings in me.” In the 1990s, he formed his own Fat Tuesday Big Band which began almost immediately playing regular gigs and recording. Krivda made it clear from the beginning that it would not be a nostalgia big band. His Fat Tuesday Big Band played charts by Quincy Jones, Bill Holman, Bob Florence, Ernie Wilkins and one-time Clevelandian Chuck Israel.

Krivda gathered such musicians as guitarist Lee Bush, trumpeter Steve Enos, trombonists Garney Hicks and Chris Anderson, and saxophonists Dave Sterner and Bernie Pelsmajer to form the nucleus of the Fat Tuesday Band and released two compact discs, Perdido (1998) and The Band That Swings (1999).

The Jazz Heritage Orchestra, formed in 1998 under the sponsorship of the Cleveland State University Black Studies Program, also began making significant contributions to big band jazz in Cleveland. Directed by Dennis Reynolds, who had been the lead trumpeter of the Count Basie Orchestra directed by Frank Foster and the Clark Terry Big Band, the Jazz Heritage Orchestra included a number of outstanding performers. Among them were trumpeter Marcus Belgrave, former Duke Ellington saxophonist Vince York and bassist Marian Hayden, as well as a group of young Cleveland musicians.

Dr. Howard Mims, the director of Black Studies at CSU and the driving force behind the Jazz Heritage Orchestra, said the major missions of the band were to preserve and perpetuate the musical heritage of the great African American jazz masters and to take big band jazz to young African American students with clinics and workshops.

The band’s first performance was September 18, 1998 during an Arts Midwest conference in Cleveland. As part of the Tri-C JazzFest’s Everything Ellington celebration in 1999, the Jazz Heritage Orchestra performed the sacred music of Duke Ellington at the Allen Theatre.

Another big band playing frequently in Cleveland was led by trumpeter Rudy Scaffidi, who had graduated from Collinwood High School and played with a series of studio orchestras in New York and such big bands as the Dorsey Brothers, Bob Crosby, Ray Anthony, Buddy
Morrow and Billy Butterfield. In the 1980s, Scaffidi began leading the Billy May Orchestra. From his base in Cleveland, Scaffidi continued leading the May band to 2000.

Other big bands performing regularly in Cleveland included the Dan Zola Orchestra, Night Coach, the Townsmen and the Hermit Club Big Band.

The Hermit Club Big Band

Formed in the late 1950s, the Hermit Club Band consisted of former professional musicians who had become successful businessmen and young, aspiring players. Some of the band members over the years had toured with Buddy Morrow, Tommy Dorsey, Ray Anthony, Tex Beneke, Johnny Long and others. Younger players went from the Hermit Club Big Band to other bands. They included Chuck Finley who later played with Buddy Rich, Gary Brown who went with Stan Kenton, Rick Keifer who played with the Kurt Edelhagen band in Europe, and Jiggs Whigham who played with Kenton.

The Hermit Club Band, led for years by vibraphonist Bud Wattles, a veteran of the Woody Herman Orchestra, seldom performed publicly. Its regular concerts were for members of the performing arts club located in a colorful Tudor building off Chester Avenue behind the Playhouse Square complex. Pianist, arranger and businessman Dick Lezius said, “This band gives me an opportunity to do something I can’t get anywhere else. This band swings!”

WCPN

Cleveland had not had a jazz radio station for years when WCPN signed on the air in September of 1984. There was only a smattering of jazz programs on several stations.

The new public radio station immediately began programming jazz shows during much of its broadcast day and carrying national jazz programs from its networks, including Marian McPartland’s Piano Jazz, on weekends. The original schedule included 57 hours of jazz per week.

Leading the original push for jazz programming on WCPN was longtime jazz writer and broadcaster Chris Colombi who was the station’s original nighttime jazz host. The other original jazz DJs at WCPN were Mike Love, who came to Cleveland from Detroit, and Jennifer Stephens. When Colombi left the station in 1987, he was replaced by former John Carroll University radio station jazz host Dan Polletta. It was Polletta who began running my Cleveland Jazz History radio features on his program in September of 1988.

During that month, WCPN’s jazz programming increased to 80 hours a week. But six years later, in 1994, shortly before hiring Bobby Jackson as music director, the station began cutting back on daytime jazz and airing more NPR network talk shows. By the end of the 1990s, there was no weekday jazz programming on WCPN before 9 p.m. Polletta, however, continued to broadcast excellent jazz from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. and an overnight jazz program was added.

Jazz advocate Chris Colombi

There was a loud gasp of shock at the Cuyahoga Community College Metro Auditorium during a concert by the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra November 1, 1991 when Gary Scott announced from the stage that Chris Colombi had died few hours earlier. He died of cancer at the age of 49.

Colombi was Cleveland’s most visible and enthusiastic supporter of jazz for more than a quarter of a century. He was a jazz host on a series of radio stations including WUCY (in the 1960s), WCLV and WCPN. He wrote a weekly jazz column for The Plain Dealer from 1969 to 1987, served as the Cleveland correspondent for DownBeat magazine for 18 years, taught jazz courses at Cleveland State University for 17 years, and served on the advisory board of the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra. Colombi frequently lectured on jazz and narrated a series of multi-media jazz presentations for Cuyahoga Community College.

Before he died, Colombi said he wanted a memorial, not a funeral. He said he wanted a jazz concert. In a letter to his wife Barbara, he wrote, “Celebrate that this old f - - - passed this way and hopefully made things happy. I want a party that you and Jess (their daughter) can remember.”

That party was held Sunday evening, July 26, 1992, at Cain Park in Cleveland Heights. Chris specified the artists he wanted to perform: saxophonist Howie Smith, trumpeter Kenny Davis, pianist Neal Creque, flutist Mark Gridley and the full Cleveland Jazz Orchestra. He also said he wanted television anchorman Leon Bibb and me to participate. It was a joyous evening, celebrating a man who had done so much to bring jazz back to life in Cleveland.
The resurgence of jazz was also reflected in a growing number of excellent college bands in Northeast Ohio. One of the best, year after year, was the Youngstown State University Jazz Ensemble directed by Tony Leonardi, an alumnus of the Woody Herman, Stan Kenton, Buddy Rich and Chuck Mangione bands. The jazz program at Youngstown State, started in 1970, produced such performers as pianist Harold Danko, Glenn Wilson and Dennis Reynolds. Leonardi died at the age of 62 July 11, 2001.

The University of Akron Jazz Ensemble was led by Roland Paolucci who had started at the university in 1975 after teaching piano at his parents' music store and after working as director of the Akron Jazz Workshop Big Band. Paolucci remembered the University of Akron band had been an unofficial group organized simply because the students wanted it. The director at the time took a year's leave of absence and suggested that Paolucci run the jazz band in his absence. "He took me aside," said Paolucci, "and said, 'I hope you do a good job because I don't have much expertise in this. When I come back, I'd like to recommend they keep you on.'"

That's what happened. Paolucci continued leading the University of Akron Jazz Ensemble for 25 years until his retirement in 2000.

By 1978, he was organizing festivals at the university several years before the Tri-C JazzFest began in Cleveland. Each year, he would bring in name musicians to work with his jazz students. Among them were Phil Woods, Slide Hampton, Eddie Daniels, Tom Harrell, Bob Brookmeyer and Bill Dobbins.

In the summer of 1980, the University of Akron Jazz Ensemble made a trip to Europe to perform at several jazz festivals including the prestigious Montreux Jazz Festival.

"We flew to Geneva," said Paolucci, "and then we bussed to Montreux where we had two official performances. At the Montreux Casino, Paolucci's band had a recording made of its live performance.

Members of the saxophone section at the time included John Orsini, who later became a staff musician at Disney World, and Mark Lopeman, who later toured with the Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Buddy Rich and Dizzy Gillespie bands.

From Montreux, the Akron Jazz Ensemble traveled south into France, to Nice on the French Riviera to play at the Nice version of the Newport Jazz Festival. Dizzy Gillespie was also there and so was Lee Konitz who recognized one of the bill Holman charts the Akron band was playing, an arrangement he had played with Holman in the 1950s. "It caught his attention," recalled Paolucci, "and he came by and stuck through the whole performance. He came up to me and said, 'Gee, I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your band.' I said, 'Lee, I appreciate this, but please step over here and tell the guys because they're the ones who would really, really appreciate it.'"

Other members of that University of Akron band that toured Europe in the summer of 1980 included trumpeter Jack Schantz and drummer Mark Gonder, both of whom later toured with the Dorsey and Miller bands.

In later years, the Akron band included trombonist Paul Ferguson, pianist Chip Stephens, trumpeter Doug Huey, drummer Joe Brigandi, bassist Gary Aprile, and trombonist Dan McCarthy.

Saxophonist Howie Smith became the coordinator of jazz studies at Cleveland State University in 1979. In 1985 Smith was the first jazz musician to win the Cleveland Arts Prize for Music. He won Ohio Arts Council artist fellowships in 1986, 1988 and 1990 and performed concerts and conducted jazz workshops throughout the United States, in Canada, South America, Europe and Australia.

Smith always enjoyed doing something different. During one of his Concert in Progress presentations in 1986, he offered what he called "a saxophone duet." The "duet" quickly grew. The startled audience eventually saw and heard a chorus of 60 saxophonists on stage serenading together!

Trombonist and arranger Paul Ferguson, who toured with the Miller and Dorsey bands and was the principal trombonist with the Canton Symphony Orchestra and the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra, led the Case Western Reserve University Jazz Ensemble.

Lakeland Community College developed an excellent jazz program and an orchestra led by Kent State University and Akron graduate Dan McCarthy.

The Kent State jazz program, headed by trombonist Howie Smith.
Chas Baker, produced trumpeter Reggie Pittman who later toured with Lionel Hampton.

The Oberlin College Jazz Ensemble, founded in 1973 by saxophonist Wendell Logan, toured Brazil in 1985. Such performers and educators as Donald Byrd, J.J. Johnson and Jimmy Owens served as artists-in-residence at Oberlin.

**Summer jazz festivals at Blossom**

Beginning in 1984, with the renewed interest in jazz, Blossom Music Center, the summer home of the Cleveland Orchestra, began staging annual summer jazz festivals. The center brought some of the biggest names in jazz to the Greater Cleveland area.

There were some problems, including continuing sponsorship. The first year, it was called “the Kool Jazz Festival.” Then, in 1985, “the JVC Jazz Festival,” and in 1986 “the Blossom Jazz Festival.” In 1987 and 1988, it was “the Ohio Bell Jazz Festival.”

Each year, the *Musical Arts Association*, in an effort to expand public appeal for the jazz festival, began booking more and more artists who were not considered part of mainstream jazz. In 1988, Lionel Hampton walked out when he objected strongly to being on the same bill with groups like the Fabulous Thunderbirds. That ended the summer jazz festivals at Blossom.

Since then, Blossom has booked a few jazz acts from time to time, but the festival never reappeared.

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**Leo Coach’s unusual gigs**

One of Cleveland’s leading jazz artists during the resurgence of the 1980s was pianist, leader, composer and recording artist Leo Coach. Many jazz fans who heard Coach and his Contemporary Music Coalition playing in a variety of Cleveland clubs and on records did not realize that Coach was also involved in some of the strangest jazz gigs of all time. In the summer of 1991, when the Soviet bloc was beginning to come apart at the seams, Coach, his drummer, Alan Nemeth, and his bass player, Rick Kodramaz, planned a six-concert overseas tour, beginning with a performance at a prestigious arts festival.

“We were in Slovenia during their independence,” said Coach. “The old former Soviet bloc was still pretty much intact and Slovenia was really one of the first break-away countries. And we got stuck in the middle of a civil war.”

They arrived the same day that Slovenia declared its independence from Yugoslavia. They performed in what quickly became an independence festival, with more than 100,000 people crowding the streets.

The next day, Communist tanks rumbled into the city and Yugoslav attack helicopters streaked overhead. The three touring jazz musicians from Cleveland found themselves in the middle of a war.

“There were, all of a sudden, a lot of soldiers and armored vehicles on the street,” said Coach. “The city is ringed by mountains and to get from one side of town to the other, there are tunnels. An anti-tank gun was positioned right at the mouth of the tunnel and there was maybe an 18 or 19 year old kid sitting there with his feet up on the gun and his finger on the trigger. I caught his eye. The kid looked back as if to say, ‘What the hell am I doing here?’”

With a civil war underway and the jazz festival called off, Coach and his group fled. They managed to get the last train out of Slovenia and headed toward the safety of the Austrian border. They were unwilling eyewitnesses to the beginning of the historic fall of the Communist bloc.

They returned the next two years and played a series of concerts in newly-independent states.

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**Hank Geer’s tragic accident**

The dean of Cleveland jazz performers during the 1980s was Hank Geer, the saxophonist who for years had traveled and played with the bands of Ray Anthony, Tommy Dorsey and others. He performed with symphony orchestras, ran his own popular jazz nightclub, and, beginning in 1980, led the jazz group at Sammy’s restaurant in the Cleveland Flats. Perhaps as much as anything, it was the playing of Geer and his group that gave Sammy’s its special appeal as a restaurant. Among Cleveland jazz musicians, Geer
personified the professional, the man who played jazz well almost every night for more than half a century.

In July of 1991, Geer was taking a break between sets on a little porch outside Sammy's. A drunk in a car came barreling down the street, careening into the parking lot, and crashing into the deck. Geer was thrown over the rail, down a steep hill onto railroad tracks below.

He suffered multiple broken ribs, a fractured pelvis, and a horribly mangled left arm and hand. He was rushed to Metro General Hospital where he told a doctor, “Man, I need this hand to play. If you can’t fix it right, please find me the cat who can!”

Geer had a whole platoon of doctors and therapists. Some of them were frustrated musicians themselves and appreciated the special musical talents of their patient, the importance of his playing, and how necessary his hand was in playing the saxophone. They did everything possible for Hank through a series of operations.

He said, “I had three doctors when I was in Metro Hospital. This hand surgeon said, ‘This is what we gotta do.’ He said they had to take that bone out because it was out of line and it was becoming what they called ‘sugar-combed’ at the end, like a honey comb, and it was losing its density. The doctor said, ‘We gotta cut that out.’

“I said, ‘How are you gonna do that?’

“He said, ‘We gotta cut it out and make it like a “V” in there.’

“I said, ‘Where’re you gonna get the other bone?’

“And he said, ‘We’ll take it out of your hip.’

“I said, ‘Man, I gotta butcher on 185th Street. Can’t I bring in one of those bones?’

“He laughed and said, ‘We have to graft it in there. You’ll have a plate in there.’

“That’s why (demonstrating) this is raised like this. There’s a metal plate in there now. It’s all healed up, but there is still stiffness in there. When I play keyboard, man, I cramp up in here.”

After a series of operations, Hank had to use a special brace to train his fingers to do what a saxophonist’s fingers have to do. Demonstrating, he said, “I put this stupid thing on here, put these straps around it and it pulls my fingers apart. I have to leave it there for about 40 minutes.”

Without the special device, Geer’s fingers refused to do what fingers normally do. “It’s like a rubber band,” said Geer. “You take that thing off, and boom, they go back like that.”

During his therapy, Geer said it was a little easier to play the saxophone than the piano. “With the sax, I couple my hand around the horn. It’s already coupled. I can’t get it out, so it’s just a matter of bending it around. But I do have a tough time with the high notes because you gotta get that action in here. I couldn’t even reach that cluster down here on the lower notes with this. I couldn’t move my little finger.”

But Geer worked hard at regaining the use of his left hand and his doctors gave him the green light to begin playing again. The doctor said, “If you can sit in, do it as much as you can.”

It was a long, difficult battle. “It’s just a matter of practice and therapy,” said Geer. “I’m working out and gettin’ my chops back. Just working at it every day.”

Philosophical about the accident, Geer said, “I didn’t have any choice. I could have been killed. I had good people working with me and giving me encouragement. Most people say, ‘Man, you’re the hardest working guy we’ve ever seen!’”

Geer’s courage and perseverance won him more respect than even his extraordinary playing.

After finally making his comeback and playing again at Sammy’s, Geer again suffered major medical problems. He died in late 2000 at the age of 78.

His determined rebound from near death seemed to personify the resurgence of jazz in Northeast Ohio in the 1980s and ‘90s.