

Herb's Bio

Back in the early World War II days I was violinist in my grade school orchestra in the Chicago area. One day while going through the generally painful experience of playing and listening to a group of half interested twelve and thirteen years olds play the *Marines Hymn* something very special happened. A new kid named Howard Caro had moved into the area and when I heard him play the *Marines' Hymn* on his clarinet little Herb Holt's life changed dramatically. I knew two things immediately. He was a very good clarinet player and he "swung". That is an expression in the music business that, as Louis Armstrong so succinctly said is a word that if you have to ask what it means you probably ain't got it.

At any rate I had to know this new kid and wanted to start a band that included him and a couple of other guys that "swung" but none of us played the piano, which would be like trying to build a rock band in today's market without a guitar player. Since it was my band I had to be the piano player and I had little time to learn, but luckily there was a method available in the forties to learn without a teacher - phonograph records. By using phonograph records of my favorite jazz pianists when they had recorded Boogie Woogie including James P. Johnson, Mary Lou Williams, and Albert Ammons I became the non-reading piano player in my band. By the time I got to high school I got to know an excellent drummer named Andy Andrews, a wonderful guy named Jerry Peterson who played trumpet and Dick Meddaugh an enthusiastic if not very good bass player who along with our all-star clarinet player, Howard Caro, made up a very crude sounding jazz quintet. In the years 1942-46 many of the professional musicians were in the armed forces so the five of us played for dance schools, high school and college dances, and even local bars and night clubs. I will always remember my very naïve mother on the phone convincing the mothers of the other guys in our group what a nice clean group of boys we were and that they did not have to worry about our moral behavior.

I was and still am what I would refer to as a creative jazz musician. I have never played any song the same way twice and hope that I never will.

There are two points for my bringing my past to light. Like Ellington's buddies in Washington my group played together constantly for four years so that by the time we were to graduate and go our separate ways we knew each other so well that we knew what to expect in every tune we played together. We used no music unless a new song would be requested that no one knew. We were jazz musicians

who played by the seat of our pants without music to interfere with our interpretation of the songs we used.

When Look Magazine ran a contest looking for the best young Jazz musicians in the country we applied and were successful up the semi-finals in Orchestra Hall in Chicago. Using an Andy Kirk tune called *Little Joe Form Chicago* as our swinging finish the probably bored young crowd went wild with applause but their wild enthusiasm did not help us win. We came in second to a polished group of real musicians from Peoria, Illinois and then needed the help of the Wurlitzer Company who provided each one of us with one lesson apiece, changed our name to Herb Holt and the Wurlitzer Dixielanders, a mistake on their part as our real expertise was Boogie Woogie, and sent us to play as guest artists at the finals at Carnegie Hall in New York. We played three tunes and received a two and a half foot tall trophy - the Nat King Cole award for Outstanding Performance.

Unfortunately our All-star clarinet player Howard Caro left the band and joined NBC in New York which would have been the equivalent of Benny Goodman's Sextet Losing Benny Goodman, Andy graduated from Amherst College and joined the CIA, Jerry went to Purdue and became an engineer in the oil business and Dick joined the Louis Prima Band. I went on to school playing in a group of bands at Champaign, Illinois and winding up at Millikin University where they have a fine Music Conservatory. My major was violin but I earned most of my spending money as a piano player in the bars of Decatur, Illinois. My point in this narrative is not that we did anything spectacular, but that we were able to perform and entertain in front of thousands because we had worked together as a group for so many hours and so many years that we played together almost instinctively.

I can only wish that I had used such an intense interest and focus on my studies in school. Why is it that there are students in every class that pay attention and know what is going on enough to actually learn something and others' like me are off in never never land while the teacher is trying to get a point across? I am sure that most of us have experienced that horrible moment when the algebra teacher asks "if Y equals 7 what does X equal Mr. Holt?" Mr. Holt is mentally nowhere near that classroom. He is maybe in next Saturday's football game imagining being called off the bench to star in the final moments of close game with our biggest rival, or trying to imagine what it would be like to date that cute coed in row two.