

# ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



## PETE FOUNTAIN

[This is the eleventh article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

For someone who would grow up to become a pre-eminent Dixieland musician, he couldn't have had a better start than to be born in a French Creole frame house right in the heart of New Orleans. Pierre Dewey LaFontaine, Jr. was born on July 3, 1930 and followed in his father's footsteps by later changing his name to Peter Dewey Fountain.

His father, a beer delivery truck driver, could ill-afford rounds of expensive medication, prescribed to help young Pete battle several lung infections. A neighborhood doctor, after examining the lad, recommended a very unorthodox treatment to Dad: buy him a musical wind instrument, requiring him to blow into it, thereby exercising his weakened lungs. On the way home, they stopped at a music store where Pete spotted a drum set, but his father prevailed, buying Pete his first clarinet. Discouraged at first not being able to produce even a tiny sound from the instrument, he worked at it until eventually he produced not only sounds but pretty good music. He studied the recordings of jazz greats like Benny Goodman and Irving Fazola, and as he became more able to imitate their styles and solos, his lung health improved greatly.



Pete grew up playing jazz with the likes of Monk Hazel and trumpeter Al Hirt, who Pete called "Jumbo." He formed his own Dixieland band, the Basin Street Six, in 1950 but soon after, "Bebop" caught on. His band folded in 1954. In his autobiography, *A Closer Walk: The Pete Fountain Story*, Pete recounted that he returned to New Orleans after failed attempts to make his mark in Memphis and Chicago. Then, implausibly, he heard from an entertainer known for his "a-one-a, a-two-a," the late Lawrence Welk, eager to jazz-up his TV orchestra. He was a featured soloist from 1956 on Welk's ABC show for a couple of years, but reportedly left the band after an argument with Welk over the way Pete wanted to play a Christmas Carol. In his afore-mentioned autobiography, he stated "champagne and bourbon don't mix." But during those "champagne and bourbon" years, Pete Fountain became a household name.

He returned to New Orleans in 1959, played with the famous Dukes of Dixieland, and in 1960 opened his own jazz club, "The French Quarter Inn." Over the next decade, he hosted Sinatra, Goulet, Keely Smith, Brenda Lee, among others, who would sit in and perform with Pete -- even Benny Goodman (but sans clarinet).

Pete's Half-Fast Walking Club shortly became a Mardi Gras "happening." Early in the morning on Mardi Gras day, men dressed in decorated suits walk (more likely – stagger) and strut their way downtown. Pete started the club as the Half-Assed Walking Club but changed its name to meet parade organizers' approval. For more information on this legendary 50-year-old association, see <http://www.wvltv.com/news/Pete-Fountains-50th-Half-Fast-Walk-84506107.html>.

Fountain's trademark sound is a sweet, fluid tone, to me (also a clarinetist) very reminiscent of Benny Goodman's ability to let his fingers just fly over the keys and still produce that pure, wonderful sound. Part of the secret to his tone is his use of a crystal mouthpiece, instead of hard rubber, plastic or wood. Believe me, it's a difficult mouthpiece to play, a tribute to his greatly-strengthened lung power.

During Pete's long career, he has recorded over 50 albums and has been a featured performer on nearly 50 more. Three of Pete's albums have gone gold, including "Pete Fountain's New Orleans," (the one I recommend, available from Amazon, ASIN: B000002NWQ, MCA label). The CD contains his smash hit *A Closer Walk With Thee*. His 59 appearances on Johnny Carson's "The Tonight Show" helped drive six-figure sales of his albums.

Pete Fountain and his wife, Beverly, married for more than 60 years, have three children and five grandchildren. A recent bout with pneumonia has slowed him down quite a bit, but he spends his days divided between his family, various charitable organizations and his favorite fishing hole.

*Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at [www.JustMeLiveMusic.com](http://www.JustMeLiveMusic.com). See them on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic](http://www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic)*