

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



STAN KENTON

[This is the fourteenth 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.]

In Western music, *dissonance* is the quality of sounds that seems unstable and begs to resolve to a more stable consonance which is then pleasing to most ears. Born in Wichita, KS on December 15, 1911, Stanley Newcombe Kenton was the acknowledged master of using dissonance effectively in his big band sounds. To best demonstrate how beautiful “dissonance used well” can be, go to any web-based radio like Pandora or Spotify and give a listen to *Here's That Rainy Day*. That tune exemplifies Kenton's ballad style; loud and brash, but dreamy.

He learned to play piano at age 10 on his mother's old upright, took jazz lessons from a local theater organist, and by age 14 nothing else mattered to him but music. After high school, throughout the 30s, he took gigs at speakeasies and gambling halls in Las Vegas and San Diego, often earning just \$5 a night. During that time, he developed a reputation as a skilled arranger. He formed his first band, the “Artistry In Rhythm Orchestra,” in 1941 and soon became a mainstay on the jazz music touring and radio scene.



Stan composed *Eager Beaver*, one of his first big hits, a song that became his band's theme song. Additional hits for him that proved to be huge were *And Her Tears Flowed Like Wine* (Anita O'Day vocal), *Across The Alley From The Alamo* and *Tampico*, both June Christy vocals). The two afore-mentioned singers plus Chris Connor each, in turn, gave Kenton the variety his band needed as an alternative to his “wall of brass.” Instrumentalists that signed on with his band, through the next 20 years, included tenor saxophonist Stan Getz (age 16), Kai Winding (trombone), Maynard Ferguson and Shorty Rogers (trumpets), drummer Shelly

Manne, Art Pepper (alto sax), guitarist Laurindo Almeida, among many others that landed in the “Who's Who” of jazz. Kenton had an ear for young, emerging talent, and put it to good use.

Throughout his career, Stan always tinkered with his big band format, dissolving one band and reforming a new one, attempting to set new musical standards in the jazz world. The typical big band of that era had 16 members: 5 saxes, 4 trumpets, 4 trombones, piano, bass and drums. Not good enough for Kenton. In the 50s, he introduced a 43-piece band! He called it his “Innovations

In Modern Music” orchestra. That was followed by a 23-piece band using mellophoniums (if you could cobble together a trumpet and a french horn, you’d end up with a mellophonium). The instrument produced a warm, mellow tone, used previously in only symphony orchestras. As to mellow, however, my absolute favorite Kenton piece is his *Opus In Pastels*, composed and arranged by Stan for 5 saxes plus piano, guitar, bass and drums. No Trumpets, no trombones. The sound flowed like tasty maple syrup, and demonstrated Kenton’s mastery of extracting the best from his orchestrations. (Can you tell I favor the saxophone as my musical weapon of choice?)

Kenton expanded his career in the late 50s when he founded his “jazz clinics” at Indiana University and Michigan State University. These clinics caught on and Stan helped several other colleges to set up the curriculum. Later, in the 70s, he was conducting over 100 clinics a year. However, his health declined in the middle 70s, and he succumbed to a stroke in 1979. What he left was a legacy of musical polarization: you either loved his innovative concepts or, like many of his critics, you hated his deviations from the accepted (read: polite) musical standards of the day. In my considered opinion, Kenton was a genius of sorts, pushing the envelope of jazz, as a talented composer, arranger, pianist, bandleader, mentor and, most of all, one who loved bringing his innovations to new generations of audiences.

My favorite album? Kenton ’76 on the Creative World label, available on Amazon as ASIN B000001P36. My favorite reading: Carol Easton’s *Straight Ahead: The Story of Stan Kenton*, also available on Amazon: ISBN-10: 0306801523 or ISBN-13: 978-0306801525.

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. See them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic