

I Remember When.... Madrona Black History—Al Larkins

By Mark Fleury

Quick! Which Seattle jazz musician's name is attached to a local civic landmark?

Quincy Jones? Ray Charles? Ernestine Anderson? Diane Schuur? Kenny G?

Good guesses--but all wrong.

On a quiet spot in Madrona--at the corner of East Pike St. and 35th Avenue--lies a lovely green expanse of gentle slopes and curving paths landscaped with maple, pine, and fir trees. It's named after Al Larkins, a Madrona jazz musician. Al played bass and tuba in many local groups, including the Rainy City Jazz Band, one of the city's most popular and long-lived, jazz ensembles of the late 1940s. Larkins also was a civic leader--a social teacher at Franklin High School, choir director at Madrona Presbyterian Church, and PTA member at Madrona School.

Al lived for many years on 30th Avenue and his daughter, Emilee attended Madrona School. Emilee and her husband John Capps still live in Madrona on ??? Avenue. In 1968, Al and his wife Ginny moved into a home on 37th Avenue that Ginny still calls home today.

Born July 15, 1924, in Baltimore, Larkins came from a musical family. His older brother Ellis became Ella Fitzgerald's piano accompanist. Al played tuba in the Baltimore Park and National Guard bands before graduating from Douglass High School. He then joined the Navy as a musician and was stationed at the Sand Point Naval Air Station. In 1943 he played in legendary Seattle band the Jive Bombers. A jump band in the style of Louis Jordan, the Bombers performed jive vocals and got the crowd up dancing. They sometimes played civilian gigs around town, in uniform, and after the war, the band continued as a civilian group.

"He was a phenomenal bass player," recalled Buddy Catlett, who played bass with Louis Armstrong for years. "Al 'blew' the bass like it was part of his arm."

Like many Seattle musicians of his era, Larkins was a part-time musician. After graduating from the University of Washington, he started his teaching career at Woodrow Wilson Junior High School. He spent his last nine years in the classroom at Franklin High School he taught social studies. He also taught music at the juvenile detention school at Echo Glen.

Al was often called by local and touring musicians to sit in on gigs. He performed with Maurice Chevalier, Jack Benny, and Sarah Vaughn. He was a big fan of Duke Ellington and often took his daughter with him to see Duke and other jazz greats like Father Earl Hines. While Duke once offered him a job, Al preferred to remain with his family in Seattle. He played professionally and for fun with many other Madrona musicians, including Melody Jones and Ralph Davis. He was best known to the public as the bassist in the Rainy City Jazz Band. Formed in 1947 on the crest of the Dixieland Revival, by 1948 Rainy City was a fixture at the Club New Orleans. Larkins joined the band in 1950 and played in it until his death in 1977.

The revival of New Orleans jazz, which expressed a desire to return to the rootsy fire of early jazz, began in San Francisco as a reaction to the commercialization of swing music. Although the movement paved the way for a Louis Armstrong renaissance, most revivalist musicians were white. Black musicians, by contrast, considered New Orleans and the pejorative name “Dixieland” nasty reminders of the false, pastoral “Old South” portrayed by minstrel shows.

But on the Seattle music scene, such racial lines were never as dramatically drawn. Larkins and Seattle clarinetist Joe Darensbourg, a black Creole who became one of the revival’s most important figures, both played Dixieland. Still, tensions occasionally surfaced, particularly over the reprehensible lyrics of a tune like “When It’s Sleepy Time South,” ironically, an Armstrong favorite. The late pianist Johnny Wittwer once recalled, “I remember playing with Al once in the Rainy City Jazz Band. We were waiting to hear what tune to play and Gordy says, 'South' and Al says, 'Never.’”

Larkins, who sometimes hummed as he played, was highly respected as a musician and played in a variety of groups over the years. He performed at a legendary 1949 concert at the old Trianon Ballroom, Seattle's swing-era dance palace, on the same bill with Ray Charles and the great saxophonist Gerald Brashear. In the '50s, Larkins was a favorite with vibraphonist Elmer Gill's trio at the popular Ebony night club. He was the first black member of the World's Fair Marching Band and played with his brother Ellis at the first Bumbershoot Festival, in 1972. Ralph Davis, who played with the Al Larkins Trio along with pianist Ernie Hatfield at the Seattle Tennis Club, said "Al was one of a half a dozen or so musicians around here who could have made the big-time."

The "big time's" loss was Madrona's gain. Al was one of the first African-Americans in the neighborhood, and served as co-chair of the Madrona School PTA. At Christmas he liked to join his Madrona neighbors building bon fires at Madrona Beach and performing with other local musicians when the Christmas ships came.

It's fitting that the city has honored his memory in such a beautiful spot in Madrona. The city purchased the lot in 1973 after fire destroyed structures that stood there. The city wanted to subdivide the lot and develop it for housing. However, the community and the Madrona Community Council opposed the development and negotiated use of the lot as a park, which was completed in 1975. In 1979, with the blessing of Larkins' Madrona family members, the park was named in his honor. Today it is a favorite with Madrona residents and the occasional musician who stops by to pay respects to Mr. Alvin Larkins.