

RADIO ORCHESTRAS OF SAN FRANCISCO

By Jack Bethards

Growing up in the late 1940s and early 1950s, my musical heroes were the sidemen and leaders of Local 6, who performed live on the air every day from San Francisco's big network stations. San Francisco was the West Coast network production center until the mid-1930s when radio got rolling in a big way in Hollywood. However, the momentum that started at radio's birth kept San Francisco operating as a network origination point until live radio capitulated to television in the early 1960s.

I was an all-out radio fan and begged my parents to get me into studios wherever we went. It was thrilling to see radio productions in New York and Hollywood, but my favorite memory is of my father arranging to get me out of school to go with him to The City where he would drop me off at KFRC in the Don Lee Cadillac building at 6:45 am to watch Lyle Bardo's band play the Breakfast Gang show from 7:15 to 7:45. I would hang around KFRC watching the various programs including Mel Venter's Tell-O-Test and then walk down to the Owl Rexall Drug Store on Market Street to see Dean Maddox do his sidewalk reporter remote. Then it was time to head over to CBS at the Palace Hotel for the Bill Weaver Show with Ray Hackett and his orchestra. From there it was just a few blocks up to the "Radio City of the West" at Taylor and O'Farrell for the Les Malloy Show with Phil Bovero and his band. When dad finished up at his office we would head home despite my pleas to stay for Albert White's Masters of Melody. Enough was enough! This was a fairly regular routine and I still have autographs gathered from some of the leaders and musicians who amazed me with their ability to play perfectly with hardly any rehearsal and to bring in a show precisely on time.

Raised in Santa Rosa (and later a member of Local 292), I remember the awe in which we held musicians of Local 6. It was the big time! (My music teacher achieved real status when he revealed that he had actually worked with KFRC's Lyle Bardo!) Watching the radio professionals at work certainly reinforced that impression on an 11-year old. I remember that all the musicians wore business suits to work and seemed serious about what they were doing despite the on-air characterization of members of the band being happy-go-lucky characters — the subject of numerous jibes from the program hosts.

For me, there has never been anything in show business to replace the excitement of a live radio broadcast. I count myself as very lucky to have been able to get a glimpse of that wonderful era. This article is a tribute to the members of Local 6 who provided great entertain-

ment to so many people who listened in the Bay Area, over the Pacific chains, and on transcontinental hook-ups. I've talked to many musicians who worked in radio and they all say it was the height of their careers. The following is a chronicle of the personnel at the four network studios of 50 years ago, presented with the hope that it will bring you some pleasant memories. It comes from my notes, publications collected over the years, as well as recent interviews with remaining members of the staff orchestras. There's no doubt that some names have been left out. If anybody has additional information, no matter how scant, please forward it to me.

Here, then, are the radio musicians who were the stars of my youth. Personnel changed from time to time and there were a few regular substitutes. All of these are listed; the orchestras were not as big as shown here!

MUTUAL DON LEE (KFRC), Don Lee Cadillac Building, 1000 Van Ness Avenue, Lyle Bardo, music director.

Just before I came on the scene, Lyle Bardo had a marvelously swinging string and woodwind orchestra that played the 15-minute Merv Griffin Show Monday through Friday on the Don Lee Network announced by Lou Pfeifer. Harrison Carlisle did many of the arrangements along with Lyle. The instrumentation was three violins; viola; flute; clarinet; bass clarinet; tenor sax; piano; bass; and harp. I don't have a complete personnel list, but here are a few: Carlton Ackley, Larry Cappelli, Al Cicerone, Jimmy Davis, Tex Langston, Paul Rosen and Harold Zollman.

Later Lyle had more standard instrumentation for the period (5 saxs, 3 trumpets, 2 trombones, piano, bass, drums) playing the half-hour Don Lee Breakfast Gang show starring Mel Venter with vocalists Polly Lawrence and later Julie Mason. He also played the noontime show, The Spice of Your Life with Marjorie King. Lyle did all of the arranging and kept every man in the band playing full time to get a really big sound. Sidemen, who used the same book on dance jobs, complained that it was a killer to get through three hours, let alone four or five! Lyle was a master of timing. Themes, signatures, fanfares, buttons, and tags were cued instantly. There was never any dead air with Lyle. His knack for full scoring paid off over the years as budget reduced the personnel. When I last heard them, the band was down to eight men with Lyle doubling as leader and second trumpet. As amazing as it seems, it was hard to tell how much the band had shrunk because his writing became more-and-more intense. That little band of alto, tenor,

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two trumpets, trombone, and rhythm had an unbelievably powerful sound over the air.

Reeds: Carlton Ackley, Al Cicerone, "Rockin" Jones, Paul Rosen, Sumner "Smoke" Warner.
Trumpets: Dick Lotter, Norvelle Price, Bill Parrish.
Trombones: Wilson "Sandy" Sanford, Willard Spencer.
Piano: Harold "Zolly" Zollman.
Bass: Tex Langston.
Drums: Jimmy Callon, Billy Shuart.

The station had a staff organist, Elbert La Chelle, who played other shows and pianist Howard Eastwood who played the Marin Dell Amateur Hour on Saturday evenings.

COLUMBIA BROADCASTING SYSTEM KQW (later KCBS), Jesse Street at New Montgomery (Palace Hotel), Ray Hackett, music director.

The main program was the Bill Weaver afternoon variety show featuring, at different times, vocalists Ree Brunell, Bob Callahan, Ellen Connor, Ardene DeCamp, and Stan Noonan. It was an audience participation show in the large auditorium studio — a local answer to Arthur Godfrey Time, which was fed from the network in the morning. As I remember, the orchestra (4 saxs, 3 trumpets, trombone, piano, bass, drums, guitar, and, at times, vibraphone, harp and Hammond organ) used some stocks but most arrangements were written by Leon Radsliff with some by Ray.

Reeds: Rex Baker, Henry Buettner, Harry DuPraw, Ed Gorman, Gene Merlino, Leon Radsliff, Dick Wynne.
Trumpets: Larry "Cap" Heisinger, Bill Parrish, Frank Snow, Billy Wagner, Dave Wyckoff.
Trombones: Wally Boswell, Wilbur Sudmeier.
Piano: Frank Denke, Ray Hackett.
Bass: Hal Edelstein, Phil Karp.
Drums: Roy Scramaglia.
Guitar: Eddie Duran.
Vibraphone: Leon Radsliff.
Harp: Jack Nebergall.
Hammond Organ: Eunice Steele.

As time went on, budgets caught up with CBS, too, and the orchestra was reduced — first to 2 saxs, 2 trumpets, trombone, piano, guitar, bass, drums and later to a combo with Leon Radsliff as leader (also playing clarinet and vibraphone); the other players were Eunice Steele - organ, Frank Denke - piano and, Phil Karp - bass. Floyd Wright, the other staff organist, backed up Stan Noonan on an afternoon program called Young Man With A Song and also provided the music for an evening quiz show.

AMERICAN BROADCASTING COMPANY (KGO), 420 Taylor Street, (later 277 Golden Gate Avenue) Phil Bovero, music director.

The main show I remember here was the afternoon Les Malloy Show. The musicians on this job (4 saxs, 3

trumpets, 2 trombones, piano, bass, drums, guitar, accordion) were quite lucky. This was the only network station that had a television outlet under the same management, so many of the musicians stayed on through the early years of television on the Tennessee Ernie Ford Show, Don Sherwood Show, and others. As with the other stations, budgets got tighter and orchestras got smaller over the years. Leaders of the smaller groups at various times (usually 4 players) were Phil Bovero, George Cerruti, and Otto Clare.

Reeds: Howard Dudune, George Elliott, George Hall, Lenny Heinz, Mark Teel.
Trumpets: Marv Nelson, Earl Penney, Everett "Red" Wright.
Trombones: Rudy Pierce, Jimmy Price, Wilbur Sudmeier, Willard Spencer.
Piano: Otto Clare.
Bass: John Darning, Glen Kerr.
Drums: John Markham, Willy Treadwell.
Guitar: Paul Miller.
Accordion (and piano): George Cerruti.

NATIONAL BROADCASTING COMPANY KNBC (earlier KPO, now KNBR), 420 Taylor Street, Albert White, music director.

Albert White and his Masters of Melody was a radio tradition for eleven years presented by the Morris Plan Company of California on a special network hook-up covering their marketing area. All other San Francisco radio music was connected with variety shows, but the star of this program was the orchestra itself. The format was dinner music — salon pieces collected mainly from the light classical and operetta repertoire. It was billed as "music without interruption" — except there was a commercial right in the middle of the show! This show was immensely popular and is the only one of those I've mentioned that had a single sponsor — and the same one — through its entire run.

Violin: Harry Moulin, Lennard Petersen, Frances Wiener.
Cello: Otto King.
Bass: Phil Karp.
Flute: Walter Subke.
Clarinet: Frank Barbaria.
Piano: Frank Denke.
Harp: Barbara Merkley.
Hammond Organ: Eunice Steele.

When the staff orchestra contract at NBC was concluded, the Masters of Melody moved to CBS to complete that network's contract after the Bill Weaver Show went off the air. Also, NBC used its pipe organ on a Saturday afternoon program with Eloise Rowan at the console and Budd Heyde announcing.

OTHER MEMBERS ON AND OFF THE AIR.

We should not forget the participation on radio of non-

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staff musicians. Most of these were heard on the hotel and ballroom remote broadcasts by dance orchestras. Also, members of the San Francisco Symphony and Opera orchestras were engaged to play on the famous and venerable Standard Hour and Standard School broadcasts. Stations also employed staff organists. Don Lee and NBC both had pipe organs. Lots of Local 6 musicians served in musical preparation as arrangers and librarians. Amy Lawrence, who many of us remember so well from the Local 6 office, was the librarian at KFRC for many years.

PIONEER RADIO AND TELEVISION

A subject for further research is the tremendous presence of live music on radio during the war and before, especially in the late 20s and early 30s when San Francisco was the key production center of the West. At one time NBC, which was then headquartered at 111 Sutter Street and had two networks — the Blue and Red — employed 108 staff musicians. (The Blue network later became ABC.) CBS and Mutual Don Lee had large staffs as well. In those days even many of the independent stations had live music. Again, if any reader has information about these earlier days of the golden age of radio, I'd appreciate hearing from them.

Finally, I have left out, except for a brief mention of KGO, the whole subject of live music on television. When television took over I couldn't work up much enthusiasm for it. The mystery of the unseen with radio was far more exciting!

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