

Chet Jaeger is still making sweet music with his Jazzmen

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There are some who are under the impression that life ends with retirement. Those people are clearly not acquainted with Claremonter Chet Jaeger, a former teacher whose post-retirement life has included travel, recognition and fun, all in the name of jazz.

Mr. Jaeger served as a mathematics instructor at Chaffey High School in Ontario for 33 years. Long before he bid goodbye to the classroom, however, he was leading a double life. An accomplished cornet player, Mr. Jaeger is the longstanding leader of the Night Blooming Jazzmen, an eight-member ensemble devoted to keeping traditional jazz or Dixieland alive and swinging.

His band is a perennial favorite during Claremont's summertime Concerts in the Park, but the Night Blooming Jazzmen (NBJ) are not just a local act. They have made appearances across the United States, including Hawaii and Alaska, and play regularly at the jazz-drenched Sacramento Music Festival. In fact, Mr. Jaeger, 88, has been crowned Emperor of the 2014 Sacramento Music Festival, an honor given each year to someone who has made a lasting and significant contribution to the preservation of traditional jazz.

The NBJ have also traversed the globe on international cruises and land trips, bringing their brand of Hot Jazz to China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean, the Panama Canal, the Amazon and the Mediterranean, among other European locales.

Mr. Jaeger came by his teaching acumen honestly. His father was a professor who taught at the University of Missouri and at Tulane University in New Orleans before being asked to become head of the Pomona College mathematics department in 1931. After his family moved to Claremont, Mr. Jaeger attended the Claremont Elementary School (now Sycamore) followed by Claremont High School, then taught in the Old School House.

Music was also a huge part of Mr. Jaeger's upbringing. His dad and Uncle Roy had been a vaudeville team. While World War I put an end to their act, the elder Mr. Jaeger continued to play banjo and piano. Mr. Jaeger's mother was also a fine pianist, who taught at various schools in the region and would continue giving piano lessons until she was 92. She insisted that her son take lessons, too, but the piano just wasn't his instrument. Luckily, fate intervened.

One day, when young Chet was playing amid Claremont's citrus groves, he and some friends found a bugle. The other kids had little luck with the instrument, but Mr. Jaeger was able to coax three notes from it. Convinced he was a natural, his parents let him take up the trumpet. By 1937, he was primarily playing the cornet and had begun a lifelong love affair with jazz. He participated in high school bands and was a particular fan of the Dixieland sound of Muggsy Spanier, a Chicago-based cornet and trumpet player who led his Ragtime Band to great heights.

Mr. Jaeger graduated from Claremont High School in 1942 and joined the Army Air Corps in February of 1943. He spent his first year being trained at Pomona College. Then, after brief stints as a weather station observer at air bases in Idaho and Washington, he was sent to Asheville, North Carolina for three months, learning to encode weather data and transmit it via Morse code. Mr. Jaeger was at a USO hall, playing his horn with an impromptu jazz trio, when he met a pretty USO hostess named Eileen. A week later, they were engaged.

Eileen waited for Mr. Jaeger while he was deployed overseas for 14 months, serving at a wilderness weather station in China for 10 months and briefly at a weather station in India. His job entailed studying the clouds and thermometers and transmitting the conditions to a nearby air base. Much of his time was spent blowing his horn, Mr. Jaeger admitted.

"I played for hours and hours, just making up tunes, and the other two guys were so bored, they would just sit and listen," he recalled.

After a treacherous, month-long crossing of the Atlantic, Mr. Jaeger returned to North Carolina where he and Eileen were married in January of 1946.

"We've been married 67, almost 68 years. We think it's going to work out," he joked.

The newlyweds bought "an old wreck of a car" and spent their honeymoon driving back west from North Carolina.

With the help of the GI bill, Mr. Jaeger earned a math degree from Pomona College, during which time he played in a couple of jazz bands featuring faculty and students from the college.

After earning a master's degree from the Claremont Graduate School, Mr. Jaeger took his first job teaching at Citrus High School, which consisted of 10th through 12th grades plus two years of junior college, all taught at what is now Citrus Community College. That position was followed by a move to Chaffey High School, from which he retired in 1985.

With the help of a loan through the California Veteran's Association, the Jaegers moved to Green Street in Claremont and had five children in eight years. When their youngest child went to kindergarten, Mrs. Jaeger went back to school, to earn her teaching credential. She took a job teaching at Mountain View Elementary School in Claremont, staying there for 24 years before retiring in 1986.

Around 1952, Mr. Jaeger was playing cornet with a pretty good jazz outfit, accompanied by a drummer, clarinet player and pianist. The musicians were at the piano player's house, leaving for a gig, when they were hit by a pungent aroma. When they asked about the source of the smell, the pianist said, "That's my night blooming jasmine."

"The drummer said, 'Man, what a great name for a band,'" Mr. Jaeger recalled.

Mr. Jaeger has used the name for all of his music groups ever since.

In 1964, the Jaegers bought a half-acre on Alamosa Drive in Claremont where they built the home in which they still live today. Mr. Jaeger did the wiring and plumbing and they hired a contractor from Indiana who was well versed in concrete and framing, paying him on the cheap and by the hour because he was still getting his California license in order.

In 1960, Mr. Jaeger became one of the founding members of the San Gabriel Valley-based Society for the Preservation of Dixieland Jazz (SPDJ). In 1976, Mr. Jaeger put together an ad hoc band to represent the SPDJ at the fledgling Sacramento Music Festival. Naturally, the group was called the Night Blooming Jazzmen. The makeup of the band has changed over the years; Mr. Jaeger is the only member of the original Sacramento delegation still alive. What hasn't changed is the group's dedication.

"We're all just trying to preserve the music," Mr. Jaeger said. "Lord knows we're not getting rich. We're not getting paid as much as someone with a guitar screaming obscenities."

Mr. Jaeger retired at age 60. He would have hung on a bit longer had all of his classes been upper-level courses like calculus and trigonometry. Mr. Jaeger remembers the day he decided it was time to get out of teaching. He was helming a remedial-level class and wrote a problem on the board, complete with its answer, announcing that it would be on the next day's test. Eighty percent of the students just sat there, not writing down the problem. Naturally, only 20 percent of the kids got the problem right on the test.

Mr. Jaeger said he had an absolute ball during the first 10 years of retirement. Accompanied by his beloved Eileen, he toured the world with his Night Blooming Jazzmen, including 25 cruises and four or five land trips.

“It’s been a great ride, but we’re tapering off,” said Mr. Jaeger who, along with his wife, now boasts 14 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren, with another on the way.

His idea of slowing down is a little different from that of your average retiree. Mr. Jaeger now performs 75 or 80 days a year with his Night Blooming Jazzmen.

“It keeps us off the streets,” he quipped.

For information on Mr. Jaeger and his Night Blooming Jazzmen, visit www.nightbloomingjazzmen.com.

The above profile was written in honor of Retired Teachers Week, which runs November 3 through 9. The commemoration is being celebrated by the California Retired Teachers Association, of which Mr. Jaeger is a member, as well as by education boosters everywhere.

—**Sarah Torribio**

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