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SACRAMENTO JUBILEE MOURNS BILL BORCHER

Bill Borchert

Death Comes To Founder Of Sac Jazz Jubilee

by Cam Miller

Bill Borchert, who is credited with giving birth to a jazz festival in Sacramento that became the role model for hundreds of jubilees that followed, is dead at the age of 83. His death April 6 in Coos Bay, Oregon is said to have been caused by complications resulting from a stroke.

Although Borchert had been in declining health in recent years, he continued to lead his Oregon Jazz Band as well as sing with the band even though he no longer played trumpet in the ensemble that he formed in Coos Bay 56 years ago.

Borchert is considered founder of the Sacramento Jazz Jubilee (nee Sacramento Dixieland Jazz Jubilee) and was executive director of the event from its inception in 1974 until leaving the post 14 years later.

The lanky Borchert, named jubilee emperor 10 years ago on the festival's 20th anniversary, is being honored a second time this year. The jubilee is being dedicated to him.

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"It's the very least we can do," said Roger Krum, who succeeded Borchert as the jubilee's executive director. "For years he was the heart and soul of the jubilee. I am not saying there never would have been a Sacramento Jazz Jubilee without him, but it certainly wouldn't have grown into the largest of its kind as quickly nor taken the direction it did without his enthusiasm, innovative ideas and guiding hand.

"When we learned of his death, we were able to include a page in our jubilee program citing his accomplishments even though we had all but put the publication to bed. Again, it was something we felt should be done."

Fittingly, the Oregon Jazz Band will perform as it always has in the next at this year's jubilee, scheduled for May 23-26. "It won't seem quite the same without Bill there to lead his band, but I'm sure he would have wanted it to continue what has become an annual tradition," said Krum. "The Oregon Jazz Band is one of the very few bands that has played at every festival."

Although the Sacramento Traditional Jazz Society had existed since 1968, the idea for staging a jazz festival didn't surface until five years later when Borchert suggested it to the organization's board of directors and agreed to head a committee to study the possibility. The committee report came back positive, Borchert and cohorts Jack Weaver and Hank Lawson got the city to OK a festival, and the jazz society named Borchert festival director.

The first festival, headquartered in a West Sacramento hotel (the El Rancho) featured 19 bands - most of which represented jazz societies from throughout the state - and lost money. But the response to the jubilee was encouraging enough for the jazz society to offer a second edition. And the rest is history.

Chuck Mason, retired jubilee business manager who worked for Borchert for 20 years, said Borchert was able to get things done because he led by example.

"Bill never asked anyone to do anything he wouldn't be willing to do himself. That's one of the reasons he was able to persuade people to work as jubilee volunteers. And he would listen to others' ideas and then pick the ones that would work," said Mason. "Bill used to say you couldn't run a jubilee as though it were a

democracy, but if you had an idea better than his, he'd go for it."

"And when he saw something he didn't like, he'd do something about it," continued Mason. "I can remember his inspecting a tented venue on the El Rancho grounds and finding the stage in the wrong place. And though told by the site manager nothing could be done about it because the piano, microphones and drum set were already in place, Bill wouldn't buy that at all. So, he returned to Old Sac, asked the construction chief to round up 'eight or nine big ones' and once they had gathered at the misplaced stage, they crawled beneath it and moved the thing six feet."

"Bill ran a tight ship, make no mistake about that. But he wasn't above having fun and believe me, he knew every joint between here and Oregon that served the coldest beers."

Borchert's contributions to the jazz festival scene are legion and legendary. In addition to founding SacJazz, he was instrumental in founding jazz festivals in Seaside, Oregon and San Diego, California as well as serving as principal consultant for 40-something other jubilees.

And, according to Krum, the very format along which most traditional jazz festivals are modeled is Borchert's invention, including rotating bands from one venue to the next, having bands play more than one set per-day, and putting so-called novelty bands on an equal footing with the more serious jazz bands.

"Bill was always looking for ways to present jazz in new ways," said Krum. "As a result, he began offering pianoramas (short sets featuring festival pianists going it alone), red hot mama sets featuring female jubilee vocalists, banjo and tuba concerts, Sunday gospels—anything he felt would draw bigger crowds and entertain them more."

Borchert also began a Sacramento tradition of offering the music of foreign bands when in 1975, he bagged Max Collie's Rhythm Aces that were touring the U.S.

"Since then we've always had foreign bands, although we don't offer as many now as we did in the '70s and '80s," said Krum. "At first all you had to do was say a band was from a foreign country and it attracted huge crowds. But in time jazz fans recognized bands were bands regardless of where they came from and realized some of the foreign bands were no better and in some cases inferior to those



Bill Borchert
Sacramento Jubilee Founder

from the U.S. So, these days we make sure any foreign band we hire is top of the line and as a result, we're inviting fewer of them."

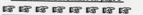
Another Borchert innovation: the '80s to choose all-star bands from each section of the country. But that's one that had a short life because, despite the fact fans liked the idea, musicians didn't like the competitive nature of the beast.

"At least Bill was smart enough to junk the concept because the last thing he needed was for musicians to stage a rebellion," joked Krum. "He was a musician, himself, so he understood where they were coming from."

Mason recalls that during the early years of the festival, Borchert beat a steady path between his home in Oregon and Sacramento.

"He came to Sacramento once a month for 11 months and then stayed here during the month of May," Mason explained. "But that posed no problem because Bill was so well organized."

Although most jazz fans may think of Borchert as a musician or festival director only, sports fans know otherwise. In fact, in Oregon, his prowess as a basketball player and coach may be remembered as much if not more than his musical [see BILL BORCHERT on page 5](#).



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