The Silver Leaf Jazz Band at Korenowsky's

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The Yonge-and-Bloor area in Toronto does not have a typical "neighbourhood atmosphere," in the way that other Toronto neighbourhoods do. Most of the buildings in the area are large stores or banks, with a few high-rise apartment buildings stuck in between. If there is a distinct social group that lives in the area then it is perhaps best characterized by the residents of the Manu-Life Center, a posh apartment building located at the corner of Charles and Bay. Without going into any details about this group--members can be observed shopping in the Dominion food market in the basement of the Manu-Life Center--it is sufficient to note that they make up but a small part of the wide variety of people found in the area's various "watering holes." Most of the people who can be found in these establishments come from other parts of town.

During the 1960s, Korenowsky's, located at 30 Hayden St., was one of the main drinking spots of the Yonge-and-Bloor area; other taverns, cafes, restaurants, and nightclubs were centered around the Yorkville area. In the 1970s many new establishments came and went, a great many of them catering to the "nouveau riche," that is, young people with high(ly)

disposable incomes, but Korenowsky's remained, catering to a crowd whose ages range from 19 to 65.

When I moved to the Yonge-and Bloor area about four years ago, I "discovered" Korenowsky's en route to the subway and began dropping in every once in a while since it seemed to be the only establishment in the area that had a "neighbourhood atmosphere." I was aware of the Dixieland band which played there on Saturdays but did not go out of my way to come and hear them until having been exposed more thoroughly to the early Armstrong/Oliver recordings, which helped break the idiomatic barrier which prevents one from enjoying different kinds of music. So my interest in doing this project stems from a curiosity about the tavern and its patrons, a curiosity that came from having passed the place every day en route to the subway, and a curiosity about the musicians that played there every Saturday afternoon; and, of course, their music.

In collecting data for this project I have shied away from the methodical, rigorous, or, for that matter--dare I say it--thorough kinds of approaches that one would be expected to employ in a situation like this. As a result, it has turned into a rather personal account in which the conclusions are perhaps a little less critical than they should be. But studying "live" human beings inevitably leads to developing some sort of relationship with them--in this case a friendly relationship--and I faltered in my role as an observer and moved towards the role of participant. When asked by one of the patrons, a man in his late twenties who frequented the tavern, what qualified

me to be able to judge the people and the place, I attempted to explain to him that I was not interested in judging but in merely describing. But he wanted to know whether it was a description of the good or the bad parts and I replied that I wanted to strive towards an objective description, preferably steering away from such notions as "good" and "bad" as much as was possible. This did not sit well with him and I confess that it does not sit well with me either. So here are the good parts...

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Korenowsky's is divided into two rooms, one upstairs, in which the SLJB plays on Saturdays (there being other bands during the week), and one downstairs, which sometimes functions as a kind of piano lounge. On Saturday afternoons the upstairs room is full and the downstairs room is empty since nobody plays there at that time. The people who come to Korenowsky's on Saturday afternoons come there to hear the music and to take part in the bustling atmosphere. There are a number of regulars who come every week--probably between 10-15% of the audience--some of whom are attentive listeners and participants who sit near the band, and others, preferring the stand-up area around the bar at the opposite end of the room, a place that offers a fair view of the whole room, who divide their attention between the band and the bartender.

The seating arrangements in the room are unusual in that there are different levels present: the center has regular-height tables, the band's floor-level stage is flanked by two fenced-in podiums with tables, and the walls plus one room divider have

higher than normal seating arrangements which are built-in niches. The effect is that of a maze, in which certain seats provide a good view and good sound while others may have less of one or the other.

In general, the single men congregate around the stand-up area of the bar and as the room fills up, this area becomes the most active, with people walking back and forth, either to play a game of pin-ball at one end of the bar or to talk to someone at the other end (not everyone does this, of course). The older couples, some of them in their late fifties and early sixties, generally sit near the band and some of them move their heads along with the music, occasionally clapping on the beat. There are also some younger people who sit up front and participate, the most notable example being one girl who sits in the same spot every week and, knowing the lyrics of the songs as well as the particular nuances that the singer usually employs, sings along with him whenever she can. These are a few examples of the kinds of people and types of activity that can be observed on Saturday afternoons. In addition, there is a fairly large proportion of the audience, probably about one third, who come in groups of between five and eight persons. These are usually middle-aged or older people who, judging from having talked to a few of them, live in the suburbs. Judging from their reactions to certain well-known tunes such as "Dippermouth Blues," it seems to me that they are generally more aware of the musical genre than some of their younger counterparts--a fairly reasonable assumption, I would think.

The degree of attentiveness and participation that the

audience exhibits fluctuates and is dependent on several circumstances, one of which is the frequency with which people enter or leave the room and the other being the mood of the band. During the first break and the first twenty minutes or so of the second set (between 4 and 5 p.m.) the room fills up so that those who come in late are relegated to the stand-up area around the bar, which by then has become so crowded that there are two to three layers of people surrounding the bar. The noise level of the crowd increases considerably during this period. Usually the band responds to this commotion by playing louder, playing tunes which have theatrical elements added to them, or playing standards which instigate the more knowledgable members of the audience to clap loudly or express approval through other means such as shouting and whistling. A good example is "Tiger Rag": the trombonist stands on his chair and the other members of the band kneel around him, shouting "hold that tiger" at the appropriate breaks in the tune and clowning with their instruments at the same time. Sometimes the band is not that concerned with getting the audience's attention. One week, for instance, during the busiest period, the musicians took turns playing duets with each other while the non-playing members slipped off to the bar or went to make a phone call. It was obvious that they were more interested in playing music--they played, among other things, "Body and Soul," which is a challenging tune to improvise on--than in entertaining the crowd.

There is a sense of casualness, expressed through both behaviour and appearance, on both the audience's part and the

band's part, which encourages or is the cause of a high level of interaction between audience and band. Since there are no strict codes of behaviour or limited sets of expectations consistently present, the ~~amount~~ number of options available to each group is considerable. If both audience and band were continually expected to demonstrate enthusiasm and excellence, as for instance in a concert-hall situation, the limitations in choice of response would necessitate a certain degree of premeditation and a confinement to a set of expectations. In other words: the interaction between audience and band would be minimal. At Korenowsky's this is not the case. The band's physical position, being on the floor level, plus its moderate sound volume which does not overpower the audience but competes with it, furthermore encourage a high level of interaction. This interaction is one of the principal features of the Saturday afternoon performances.

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> When traditional jazz moved up the river from New Orleans in the twenties, it didn't stop in Chicago, as history has mistakenly recorded, but merely lingered there for a few decades of rest before it travelled on via the Great Lakes and the Humber River, to its true and flourishing home in Toronto. (Jack Batten, Globe and Mail, Nov. 30, 1976)

The Encyclopedia of Music in Canada (Kallmann, et al, editors, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), from which the above quote was culled (p. 469), has a two-page article written by Mark Miller on jazz of which a few paragraphs are devoted to the mentioning of some of the bands that were and are involved in Traditional, Dixieland, or New Orleans

jazz. We do know, however, that Traditional jazz did not travel up the Humber River, but rather, that it moved to Europe first, and in particular, Britain, before it came to Toronto to settle down permanently. In fact, the majority of Traditional jazz players in Toronto are from the English Isles, and as has been suggested by Professor Robert Witmer of York University, one might wish to consider Traditional jazz as a kind of "immigrant" music in Canada.

Dennis Elder, the leader/drummer of the SLJB, however, is a Torontonian, having been born and raised in Cabbagetown, but his interest in Traditional jazz was kindled by an Englishman named Cliff Bastien (a cornet/trumpet player) who brought Elder over to his house and played him some George Lewis records. (George Lewis was a member of Bunk Johnson's band in the 1940s and played an important role in the Dixieland revival that followed the re-discovery of early New Orleans jazz players in the 1940s.) Elder was 19 or 20 when this happened but he had previously, around the age of 12 or 13, been engaged in what he calls "pseudo-Dixieland" music, i.e., high-school band music that was played at football games in which everybody played "loud and fast, in unison." When he met Bastien he had been playing in rock-and-roll bands. Elder subsequently joined Bastien's band and played with them at the Maison d'Or on Church St. for about three or four years. After that, he played with Bastien at Grossman's tavern (on Spadina Ave.) for 18 months, with a blues band for a while after that. He went to New Orleans as part of a city-sponsored

delegation of Canadian jazz groups for a jazz festival that was being held there. In 1974, Elder gathered some musicians together, one of whom was Don Chapman, whom he had known from the Maison d'Or and who is the current trumpet player and singer of the SLJB, and formed a band. They started playing at Korenowsky's in October 1974. For the first six months they had a trombonist named Hugh Watts, an Englishman who had been exposed to a great deal of Traditional jazz, and who was living in Quebec City. Elder liked his playing so much that he payed out $110 each weekend to have him flown in and out of Toronto, even though the whole band was only getting paid $90.

Don Chapman was born and raised in England and came to Canada in 1966 at the age of thirty, already having had experience as player of "Trad-jazz" in England. At the age of 12, some decorators were fixing up the pub that his parents owned and in return for going out and getting them a copy of Bing Crosby's "White Christmas," they gave him some money to but a record for himself. Having become intrigued by pictures of Louis Armstrong holding his horn, Chapman bought a record by Armstrong. The record made a deep impression on him and spurred him to get a horn and start playing. Later he was exposed to the music of George Lewis, at first being aggravated by the out-of-tune playing and the rough sound, but eventually coming to understand the music on its own terms. Upon arriving in Toronto, he formed his own band and made a record ("Goin' Home", Allied 14, 1969; before that he had made a record in England). The band played at the Maison d'Or for a few years,

through which he came into contact with Elder, and Chapman eventually joined the SLJB after his own band broke up.

Chapman's role in the band is essential and determines a large part of the character of the band. As Elder says: "If the trumpet player can play the tune and we've got the chords, then we can play the tune...everybody plays off the trumpet line." Chapman is also the focus of attention in the band in most of its entertainment-oriented routines: he does almost all the vocals, in a guttural style reminiscent of Armstrong or sometimes in the style of a blues shouter, and sings with many animated gestures, particularly in the tunes in which a story is being told. When I listened to a recording of the band ("The SLJB Live at the Ports", HLP 1002, 1977), I noticed that their version of "Goin' Home" was more subdued and shorter than the versions I had heard at Korenowsky's. Elder explained that Chapman had, over the years, developed a raunchier style of singing and that some of the tunes that were played frequently had undergone considerable changes. In Elder's opinion, the band is constantly evolving, both in terms of style and change in repertory.

Chapman's own views about being an entertainer are somewhat linked to his having become cynical about North America after having visited New Orleans for the second time in 1968: "It was like seeing a beautiful lady become a whore...the place had become scully." Over the years, Chapman has become more conscious of being an entertainer and, linking notions of entertainment with those of commercialism, does

 Did they play any tunes on more than one occasion when you observed them?

not feel entirely comfortable about it.

The repertory of the band consists of some 700-800 tunes, some of which have chord charts written out for them, but the majority of which are memorized. The types of tunes range anywhere from dance tunes and popular songs (mostly older songs) to blues and classic New Orleans tunes. Whatever the tune, it is always, as Elder puts it,"a jazz version of the tune." When the band rehearses a new tune, they do it by rote, preferring to "do it without the dots, because then you get too structured [Elder]."

The instrumentation of the SLJB--trumpet, trombone, clarinet (and sometimes, tenor sax), piano, bass, banjo, and drums--is consistent with the standard instrumentation of th early New Orleans bands except for the replacement of the tuba by the bass, a change that stems from the revival in the 1940s. Elder considers the tuba "too sluggish...doesn't drive at all" and Chapman likens the experience of playing with a tuba to "wearing big army-boots." Elder also emphasizes the presence of percussive effects with the bass, namely the "slapping" of the strings against the fingerboard, as being important to the overall sound that they are striving for with the band. He expresses a similar concern with reference to the use of the banjo instead of the guitar: "...it [the guitar] desn't have that punch that you need...it's far too mellow a sound...you want that sort of cacophony that lifts the whole tonality of it up..." By chosing the term "cacophony" and elsewhere mentioning the use of "discords for effect," Elder

is expressing concerns about a distinct sound ideal that is separate, and in a certain sense, diametrically opposed to the mainstream of musical thought; or more specifically: Dixieland bands whose main influences are white players and whose "unison" playing is too tight and organized. He adds: "I don't own a Bix [Beiderbecke] record at all." Chapman thinks along the same lines: "The influence that is exciting [in jazz and popular music] is black."

For Elder, the most important part of the music is the element of group interaction: "Jazz is thinking what the other guy is going to play or what he has played...and answering that...the piano player might do a little something and I might not answer him that chorus but the next chorus I'll do sort of the same thing back at him, he'll catch it, and we'll go into the next chorus and do it together." And Chapman: "If I ever play anything that's good, and it's not just playing the tune, then it's not from me...if it's real jazz, the ego takes a second place...if you're going to flow and say something, you can't be involved with yourself."

As is the case with most Dixieland/New Orleans jazz players in Toronto, Elder and Chapman have other jobs to support themselves and they play New Orleans jazz only because they like to. Judging from the crowd that shows up every Saturday at Korenowsky's to listen to the band, there are quite a few people who like listening to their music as well.

Notes

The main sources of information for this project were two interviews which I had with Dennis Elder on March 31, 1984 and Don Chapman on April 7, 1984. In addition, I gained some information from casual conversations with patrons of the bar, waiters, and some of the other musicians from the band. There exists, to my knowledge, no relevant bibliographic or descriptive material other than Litchfield's discography, which contains only recording data on the records discussed. Additional recordings to be found in Litchfield and which are related to the project are:

"Echoes of New Orleans", The Silver Leaf Jazzmen, HLP 1001, 1975

"Kid Bastien's Camelia Jazz Band", 1972

Litchfield, Jack, The Canadian Jazz Discography 1916-1980 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982)