

Merle Biggin's Musical Career

My father was a trumpet player who, in his late teens and early twenties, formed a band that traveled around the Midwest playing for dances almost every night of the week. Eventually he realized that traveling around the country playing the trumpet was not the best way to make a living. He settled on farming as his occupation and playing the trumpet on weekends. He insisted that all of his children take piano lessons and play in the high school band. So, I began my musical education with three years of piano lessons beginning at the age of nine and in the summer prior to high school, I started playing an ancient Helicon tuba, one of the many instruments my father kept in the house. While playing the sousaphone in high school, I had the privilege to play in the All Star Circus Band conducted by Merle Evans of the famous Ringling Bros., Barnum and Bailey Circus Band. In January of 1960 I participated in the University of Wisconsin Midwinter Music Clinic. At this clinic I played tuba in the All-State Band under the direction of Colonel George S. Howard, conductor U. S. Air Force Band.



Merle playing a concert with
The Rockville Concert Band

While attending the University of Wisconsin in Madison, I played tuba in the UW marching band and the UW concert band and subsequently had the unique opportunity to perform in the January 1, 1963 Rose Bowl as a member of the University of Wisconsin Marching Band sousaphone section.

In 1964, I moved to Washington, D.C., where I met my wife Nancy and played the sousaphone in the Washington Redskins Band for several years. Mr. Noble Barnes, director of the Redskins Band, recommended to George S. Howard, Director, Metropolitan

Police Band and former Director, U. S. Air Force Band, that I join the Metropolitan Police Band. I played a series of concerts in the Washington area with that band. After injuring my back, I quit playing for the Redskins Band and joined the Rockville Concert Band in 1967 and had the opportunity to go on two European concert tours with the Band. The first tour was in July 1989 and included concerts and site-seeing in Germany and Austria and ended up in Pinneberg, the sister city of Rockville, where we were royally entertained. The second was a two-week tour in July 1994, that included site seeing and six concerts in various cities in the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Austria, and Italy.

I also joined the Capital City Jazz band, which played traditional Dixieland music. This band evolved into the Phoenix Jazz Band, which was invited to perform at the Sixth Annual Central Ohio Dixieland Jazz Festival in 1990. This was a special treat for me, since the special guest at this festival was 83-year-old George James, who played alto saxophone with Louis Armstrong's first band in 1930. This event was especially memorable for me, since George was somewhat frail and had to be helped up the steps to get on stage. However, when he began playing his saxophone, it sounded as if he was a hale and hearty 20 year old. Eventually the Phoenix Jazz Band folded and I then joined the Village Jazz Band, which I continue to play for today.

I am a charter member of the Rockville Dixie Rascals, which was formed in 1997 to play a gig commemorating the Grand Opening of The New National Airport. The band is now known as the Dixie Rascals Jazz Band, under the direction of Dr. Rip Rice, and has occasional gigs at churches and retirement homes.



I am also a member of the Olney Concert Band, which performs in the Olney MD area. Looking for new musical challenges, I returned to the piano, after more than 50 years, when the Olney Big Band was formed in 2002. In July 2009, I played the keyboard for the Olney Big Band when it performed at the Montreux Jazz Fest in Montreux, Switzerland. Following this event Nancy and I went on a tour of Switzerland, Slovenia, Croatia, Italy, and Austria,

On February 2, 2010, I had the experience of a lifetime by playing tuba with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in a special event celebrating the fifth anniversary of Strathmore Hall, the second home of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in Rockville MD. This experience was subsequently repeated with the BSO at a similar event in September 2010 at the Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall in Baltimore MD. It was an exhilarating experi-

ence to perform along side of the BSO musicians

As a youngster, I did not like or appreciate having to take piano lessons and to practice scales and etudes. However, after terminating the piano lessons, due to a serious injury to my finger, playing the piano became more enjoyable when I could play the music that I liked. I was fortunate to have had solid, basic musical guidance by my father, which prepared me for expanding on my musical experience and giving me the opportunity to participate in the Rose Bowl and to travel to Europe.

As a footnote, my interest in traditional Dixieland Jazz was initiated during high school. I had injured the cartilage in my knee, during basketball practice, and was confined to my bed with my leg in traction for six weeks. This, of course, played havoc with my schedule. I was often awake late at night, when the airways were suitable for transmitting am radio signals great distances. It was during these occasions that I was able to receive broadcasts from the Blue Room of the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans, which featured Dixieland music. I have been hooked on it ever since.