

John Knurr, Bonist to Tubist

by Richard Regent

John Knurr, Jazz Unlimited member and professional musician, was born in Milwaukee and raised in Bay View. His musical career began while attending Bay View High School, learning to play the piano. It is impossible to imagine that at one point in his incredible musical life John did not know how to play the piano. Also, it wasn't until his Junior year that he joined the school band to play the trombone.

John next formed the Dixieland group *Beer City Six* in Bay View that won the Humboldt Park Talent Contest. The group at various times included **Don Nedobeck**, clarinet and trumpet (who still plays in Wisconsin and Florida); **Don Erdman**, clarinet (now with the *Hotlanta Dixieland Jazz* of Atlanta, Georgia); and **Gary Lavann**, trumpet (now with John in the *Dixie Doodlers*). John continued his musical studies at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts in Music. John says, "Around 1964 when Barry Goldwater was running for President our band got a big musical break by being asked to substitute for trumpeter **Dick Ruedebush's** *Underprivileged Five* at the *Tunnel Inn* on Front Street in Milwaukee. It was a five-hour gig and we ran out of tunes halfway through and started over. It was a great experience."

John moved to California to teach instrumental music at the Sacramento schools from 4th grade through high school, which he did for eight years. At his high school he started the *Bell Street House Wreckers Band* from which **Mike Pittsley** became featured trombonist and who went on to play many years with **The Jim Cullum Jazz Band** on PBS television from *The Riverwalk* in San Antonio. Eventually John met **Bob Ringwald**, banjoist and pianist, at the *Al Capone's Chicago Tea Room and Pizza Joint*, but was quickly told they had no use for a trombone but did need a tuba. So John practiced long hours on an old tuba. On John's first night with the group, Bob (being the musical prankster that he was) purposely changed keys on standard tunes to improve John's listening skills. John vividly recalls, "They played the theme from *Exodus*, after announcing that I was to be featured on *Fidgety Feet*, all while adding wild transpositions and laughing as I tried to keep up on the tuba." There are fond memories of playing music in the band with Bob's daughter **Molly Ringwald**, the famous 3-1/2-year old girl singer. At this cute age she stood on a big chair singing tunes like *Cake Walkin' Babies*. By the mature age of five she sang *I Wanna Be Loved By You* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. Molly didn't know what some of the words meant, but John remembers that she always thrilled and pleased the audience. Molly recently completed a run on Broadway as the lead in the musical *Cabaret*.

John's studies continued and he achieved the Master of Art degree from the California State University at Sacramento. While there, he became the envy of most Jazz historians by attending the first meetings of the *Sacramento Traditional Jazz Society*. This gathering of talent, ideas and plans for the foundation of Jazz was a unique opportunity. Nowadays, the Sacramento Jazz Jubilee (held every Memorial Day weekend) is the world's largest jazz festival with 38 concert sites and over 130 bands. John says "Jazz lovers should go there at least once in their lives."

Returning to Milwaukee in 1974 John recalls "The early music industry was fun but tough at times. One night at the Red Mill the legendary late great Wild Bill Davison sat in with us. He wanted to play Tishomingo Blues, so we gave the downbeat and started as we normally did in Ab. Bill, who was called Wild Bill for good reasons, stopped playing after two measures. He stopped the band, grabbed the microphone and hollered a few epithets as only he could deliver. Bill said it was always played in G and asked what kind of musicians are we anyway!" John carefully points out "We play it in G to this day! Finally, things calmed down. We had a great session and later did some concerts together at Milwaukee's Performing Arts Center." Those were the years!

Travel and teaching continued with two recent European musical tours with *Steamboat Willies New Orleans Jazz Band* through Switzerland, France, Spain and Germany. John particularly enjoyed playing with bands

on seven colorful Caribbean cruises. In Wisconsin he plays the tuba, trombone or piano in groups like the *Don Nedobeck's North Water Street Tavern Band* at *The Red Mill* for 11 years, with the late *Jack Consoer's New Rampert Street Paraders* at *Bartlett's* for 9 years, and currently heard with the *Parader's* at the *Organ Piper Music Palace* on Wednesdays from 6:30 to 10:00 p.m. If you get around quick enough you might see him playing in three different Fourth-of-July parades each year. For the past three years he has been sharing his wealth of knowledge to help keep Dixieland music alive through the *Dixie Doodlers*, a fine new band featuring a mix of older musicians and three teenage talents. Listen to John who simultaneously plays melody on the piano and harmony on a kazoo or sings the lyrics. He knows what version each band plays, can correct a chord to the authentic version, tell a story for every tune or composer and share his enthusiasm, encouragement and positive compliments. Yet, he has patience, understanding, care and is careful not to specifically compare the abilities of musicians or groups.

Greg Kalkhoff, a Milwaukee tubist friend, thinks of John as Mr. Holland from the movie titled *Mr. Holland's Opus*. Like the movie's tag line says "*It's not about the direction you take. It's about the direction you give.*" John is such a dedicated and likable music teacher. The kids in his classes, the music lovers in his audiences, and those who pass on John's wisdom through their music and teaching are vast. Mr. Knurr taught music at Williams Bay, Wisconsin, schools for 23 years and retired in Delavan since 1996. Versatile music man John now teaches any instrument at Kashmir Music in Mukwonago, "Except strings, I have never mastered them and really respect those who have," he politely adds.

Anyway, 400 years ago **Don Quixote** said, "Where there's music there can be no evil." Apparently Quixote never met John and definitely was not a tubist himself. So to keep out of further trouble John works part time for Aflac Insurance (the one with the duck commercials) to assist folks seeking supplemental home or life insurance coverage. John gives one of his famous sideways looks and says, "Quack, quack."