

# The Happy Pals -- New Orleans Jazz in Toronto

## The day the music didn't die

Beloved Toronto trumpeter credited with helping preserve a unique form of New Orleans jazz

By SARAH LAMBERT

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TORONTO -- The tightly knit world of New Orleans traditional jazz has lost one of its greats with the death, last month, of Cliff (Kid) Bastien, leader of Toronto's treasured Happy Pals.

The trumpeter is credited as having nothing less than single-handedly kept alive the unique, raw, New Orleans style of jazz, through his leadership and mentorship of hundreds of musicians.

Saddened fans and musicians filed into the city's Grossman's Tavern all week last month to pay tribute to Mr. Bastien at the long-time home of the Happy Pals, where the walls are lined with photos of his fans and musicians. It was a send-off worthy of New Orleans, birthplace of the kind of jazz Mr. Bastien played with his seven-piece bands, the Camelia Jazz Band and later the Happy Pals, during the 30 or so years he played at the Toronto landmark.

"He was never late. Never, never ever," said Christine Louie, whose family inherited Mr. Bastien's Saturday-afternoon gig when Al Grossman sold the bar in 1975.

So it was with sinking hearts on Feb. 8 that his loyal audience and band members watched the minute hand tick past 4 o'clock, waiting for him to arrive, brass trumpet in hand.

When he was found later that afternoon still sitting in his armchair, apparently looking up a new song in his hymn book, the Happy Pals played on and raised a glass in tribute to their leader who died as he lived, surrounded by music. He was 65 years old.

Noonie Shears, a long-time friend and leader of the traditional impromptu parade that would inevitably snake through Grossman's as Saturday afternoon wound down, said she thought Mr. Bastien was looking up I'll Fly Away, the old gospel song recently dusted off in the movie O Brother, Where Art Thou?

The band played it for the first time at Mr. Bastien's official memorial at Grossman's the Saturday following his death.

Born in 1937 in London's East End, Mr. Bastien emigrated to Canada in 1962 after a stint in New Orleans. It was there that he heard trumpeter (Kid) Thomas Valentine play and, experiencing a kind of epiphany, Mr. Bastien followed him from club to club and studied his style. It ultimately inspired a lifelong ambition to keep alive New Orleans-style traditional jazz.

A purist who drew a distinction between his chosen genre of music and the more popularized Dixieland Jazz, Mr. Bastien once said: "Had I never heard that music, I wouldn't have become a musician. I wouldn't play anything else."

I Like Bananas, Caledonia, All of Me and La Vie en Rose were just a few of his standards. But, as Happy Pals' trombonist Roberta Tevlin explained, Mr. Bastien wasn't content to simply recycle the old chestnuts.

"Cliff kept adding songs. I've probably played 1,000 different tunes with him. He was particularly notorious for finding songs outside the standard jazz list," said Ms. Tevlin, who joined the band 20 years ago, along with her saxophonist husband, Patrick.

Bob Dylan, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Western Swing numbers, Nigerian folk songs and Dean Martin could all tumble out during a set, said drummer Chuck Clarke.

Mr. Bastien's friends and peers point out that he was known for three primary qualities: His love of music, his scorn for fame or publicity and his mentoring of local musicians.

During the memorial at Grossman's, Downchild Blues Band headman Donny Walsh arrived from Florida to sit in with his harmonica, as he had done regularly with Mr. Bastien in the 1970s. Juno-nominated bluesman Michael Pickett was there, as well as jazz singer Laura Hubert, formerly of the Leslie Spit Treeo, pianist Peter Hill, The Nationals and many more.

From the worldwide New Orleans jazz community, among those who came to pay their respects were saxophonist Jean-Pierre Alessi of France, trumpeter Roger (Kid Dutch) Uithoven of Orlando, Fla., clarinetist Kjeld Brandt from Denmark and Toronto's Brian Towers, Jan Shaw and Joe van Rossem.

"I cannot imagine the Toronto traditional jazz scene without Cliff Bastien and his raw, emotional New Orleans-style jazz," Mr. Towers wrote in a notice posted on the Internet shortly after he learned of the death of his friend.

"He was probably the most popular and influential figure on the Toronto traditional jazz scene. He taught many others to play their instruments in the style and introduced thousands to the joys of New Orleans traditional jazz.

"We went to Grossman's after our own gig and Jan and I played some hymns with the Happy Pals. A sadder and more emotional scene I have rarely seen."

Toronto musician Joanne Mackell, leader of the Paradise Rangers, wonders how things might have been if she had not met Mr. Bastien when she was just starting out.

"Though I was young and inexperienced, Kid would always invite me up to sing," Ms. Mackell said, recalling how the band took her under its wing when she discovered them in the early 1970s.

"Kid didn't care about money or popular opinion. He filled Grossman's Tavern every Saturday for some 30 years because he played great music with honesty and integrity and he inspired me to try and do the same."

Until just last year, Mr. Bastien, who feared flying, avoided the lure of the road, taking only an annual sojourn to New Orleans for the French Quarter Festival. Finally, in the fall of 2002, he accepted an invitation to tour Scandinavia with the Danish/Swedish band New Orleans Delight, playing with George Berry on tenor sax. A new CD is due to be released this spring.

His official recordings are few, numbering about a dozen, as Mr. Bastien preferred to play to an audience. Though, as Ms. Tevlin pointed out: "There are bootleg tapes all over the place."

His legacy, the band says, is keeping the New Orleans style of jazz alive.

"Kid Thomas Valentine was one of the greats, and when he was gone, Kid Bastien carried on. Kid Bastien was one of the greats, and now Kid's gone. So who's going to carry the music on now? We will," said saxophonist Mr. Tevlin on behalf of the Happy Pals, who intend to continue the Saturday-afternoon tradition at Grossman's.

In another side to his life, Mr. Bastien was an accomplished commercial artist whose hand-crafted signs, woodwork and acid-etched glass can be seen in many local pubs, including Toronto's Wheat Sheaf Tavern. His work can be found across Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia and California, as well as in Europe.

Mr. Bastien's wish was to be buried in New Orleans.

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