

JAZZ

# Pier 23's Exciting New Trio Is a Platform for a Fine But Neglected Clarinetist

By Richard Hadlock

**A**LTHOUGH HE has been severely neglected by his native San Francisco lately, Vince Cattolica is still a familiar name to most outstanding jazz clarinetists in this country. From Pee Wee Russell and Peanuts Hucko to Benny Goodman and Buddy de Franco, they all know about Vince, easily the most impressive clarinet player to develop in the Bay area over the past dozen years.

What these celebrated musicians probably don't know, though, is that for more than two years now Cattolica, who is 41, has been living on unemployment and Social Security benefits. There simply haven't been any jobs.

Pier 23, the Embarcadero watering place for traditional and "mainstream" jazz folk, recently made a move to help correct this situation by putting Vince to work every Wednesday evening with pianist Burt Bales and drummer Cus Cousineau. The three jazzmen are old friends and, given enough playing time

together, should produce a superb trio.

Like Bales and Cousineau, Cattolica has often been linked to Dixieland, despite his wide range of musical interests and his ability to play whatever way he pleases.

"I have been listening to modern jazz on FM radio for some time now," Vince told me recently. "Hearing John Coltrane for the first time a few years ago was as exciting as hearing Benny Goodman the first time back in the '30s."

"The good modern players today, like Coltrane, really know what they're doing and they play with all the drive and push that the best swing players had. It's not all that different.

### Holding Back

"It's too bad there haven't been any really great clarinet players since Goodman and Artie Shaw. I think what's got to be done on clarinet today is to get a very strong, boisterous sound — to play it like Sonny Stitt plays tenor. Most clarinetists are holding back.

"I'll get around to these modern things. But I'd still

rather swing than just play a whole lot of notes."

San Franciscans who have heard Vince know that he plays hard and swings hard, whether one judges by the standards of 1940 or 1964.

"Actually," Vince remembers, "I was making the transition to modern jazz in 1945 with everyone else. I played in Los Angeles for a while at that time and met Stan Getz, who was with Jimmy Dorsey's band. Stan was experimenting too."

### Club Obituary

"But in 1949 I started getting Dixieland jobs and that's the way it's been ever since — when there was any work at all."

A list of clubs where Vince has played here over the years reads like an obituary of Bay area night spots, underscoring the precariousness of attempting to operate in this field for profit.

Some of the names still remembered are the Down Beat, the Crystal Bowl, the Chinese Cellar, the Say When, the 316 Club, the Italian Village ("we played there for eleven nights, and then it burned down"), the Tin Angel, the Jazz Showcase and the Kewpie Doll.

Cattolica is as pure a San Franciscan as anyone in this culturally variegated city can be. His father came here from Palermo and worked as a "bow man" in the fishing fleet. Vince was born in 1923, handicapped by congenital eye cataracts. He retained some sight for his first 18 years.

### No Advantage

"People seem to think blindness gives you some kind of hearing advantage," Vince points out, "but I don't hear any better than other



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musicians. All jazz musicians play by ear and use their own mental catalog system to remember music. Same with me. Some tunes, such as certain involved Cole Porter songs, are tougher than others to keep straight, but his applies to sighted musicians as well.

"I've heard blind musicians say they're glad they can't see and I think they are either lying or kidding themselves.

"We can develop our sense of what's around us, but blind people don't have radar. I stumble, bang my head, swear and go on about my business, and most blind people do the same.

"Getting back to music, I've always admired Benny

Goodman tremendously, and I suppose you can hear some of that in my playing. Benny advanced the clarinet in jazz a long way. But Benny, as great as he was, isn't with it today, and I'm not going to wait for him. As far as I'm concerned, it's bye-bye Benny, hello John Coltrane."

The Burt Bales trio at Pier 23 isn't likely to break into Coltrane tunes or "free" jazz, but it will reflect some 75 years or so of combined playing experience — from Bunk Johnson to Charlie Parker — in three men who have always kept their ears wide open. Best of all, it will provide a platform for one of the most exciting — and overlooked — clarinetists in jazz today.