

Helm in a Changing Tradition

By Richard Hadlock

PAROCHIALISM — The tendency to reject as meaningless all but one's own special interests — is a strong and discordant force in the jazz realm.

There are traditionalists who distinguish between "real" jazz and bop and there are modernists who speak of jazz and Dixieland as if the two had nothing at all in common. The other guy's music somehow never quite qualifies as authentic stuff.

I thought about this while talking recently to one of the most consistently imaginative jazzmen in the Bay area. He happens to work in a traditional setting, and is therefore almost automatically unknown to modern jazz fans. His name is Bob Helm, and I'll wager not one in 20 Miles Davis devotees have even heard of him.

Helm plays clarinet in Turk Murphy's band at Earthquake McGoon's, a club most modernists would consider strictly off limits.

One point should be cleared up right away: Helm is no mere "revivalist." ("Revivalist" is a word used by some, often disparagingly, to identify musicians playing forms of traditional jazz which predate their own musical generation.)

This jazzman played his first professional job (on tenor saxophone) in 1925, when he was 11 years old. In that same year, Louis Armstrong left Fletcher Henderson and began re-recording with his Hot Five.

Although it was some time before he got around to the music of the Hot Five, Jelly Roll Morton and King Oliver, the young clarinetist was impressed by what he heard in ballrooms and radio broadcasts during the '20s and '30s. He was particularly fond of Omer Simeon's long-lined clarinet solos, which were featured often on Earl Hines shows.

Helm attended Modesto Junior College with Gil Evans, who was then copying Casa Loma band arrangements, note for note, from recordings.

After meeting Turk Murphy in 1933, Helm began studying the New Orleans approach to collective improvisation. He finally concluded that clarinetist Johnny Dodds represented, for him, the ideal combination of solo and ensemble skill. He borrowed from Dodds but did not copy him.

"The Chicago guys devel-



CLARINETIST BOB HELM

New approaches in an old framework

oped from the same New Orleans players, but they lost a lot of the quality of good ensemble playing," Helm feels. "There is just as much pleasure in good collective improvising as in soloing.

"I liked Frank Teschemacher and Pee Wee Russell at their best, but most of the Eddie Condon crowd overlook the fine points in the ensembles."

During the depressed '30s, Helm and Murphy earned their daily bread in various California dance bands, where there was little opportunity to try their own ideas about jazz.

Since 1939, except for stints in the Armed Forces, both men have devoted their professional lives to New Orleans-based jazz in the bands of Lu Watters and in Murphy's own groups.

Unlike many older jazzmen, who often coast on handy clichés and familiar cadences, Helm continues to search for new approaches and fresh ideas within the old framework. He is completely serious about his music.

"The solo should present a new slant on the tune itself," he believes. "If the tune is not good enough, don't play it at all.

"I have listened carefully to Charlie Parker and other modern players, but their solos seem to me like the things we used to play in the '30s—just showing off

rather than developing the original melody.

"It was considered fun to break the boredom of old tunes by purposely playing as far out as possible. We would alter and extend the chords, change the melody around and try most of the things modern musicians do now. Musically, it didn't amount to much.

"However," he added thoughtfully, "I respect Parker for some of the sensible melodic lines he composed."

Like many contemporary jazzmen, Helm is a student of folk music. He is especially fond of East Indian, Hungarian, Greek and African music and has worked with Irish bands in the Mission District.

Some of these folk forms occasionally find their way into his unorthodox solos at Earthquake McGoon's.

As I was about to leave his Grant Ave. apartment, Helm picked up a pre-Columbian Mexican flute he acquired recently and improvised a melody on the pentatonic scale. It was an intriguing, spidery little arabesque, not unlike some of the choruses I have heard him play on the job.

I couldn't help thinking how appropriate that melody would sound alongside the current creations of John Coltrane or Ornette Coleman.

Music, after all, is never parochial. Only people are.