

## **STAN McDONALD**

### **Biographic Sketch**

#### **A BOSTON TRADITION**

Bean Town spawned those memorable Ellingtonians, Johnny Hodges and Harry Carney, Cornetist Ruby Braff and longtime Luis Russell alto saxophonist Charlie Homes are Bostonians. Valve trombonist Brad Gowans was born in nearby Billerica and was playing Original Dixieland Jazz Band tunes with Harvard undergraduate Jim Moynahan more than 60 years ago. And in the late Twenties and early Thirties Jelly Roll Morton's New England tours would usually include Boston on the agenda.

Jazz musicians need places to play, congenial clubs in which to display their wares, and on this score Boston has always been a generous host. Rooms such as the Savoy, Mahogany Hall, and Storyville achieved national renown. No less important in the perpetuation of the music have been such smaller suburban and downtown Boston clubs as the Outside Inn, the Brown Derby, the Domino, the Log Cabin, Lennie's, Connolly's, the Sticky-Wicket and Sandy's Jazz Revival.

This is the jazz ambience in which Stan McDonald has spent most of his musical career.

#### **EARLY DAYS**

Young Stan survived piano and alto saxophone lessons, turned an attentive ear in his early teens to traditional jazz on radio and record, and began his exposure to live jazz at the Log Cabin in Dedham, Massachusetts in 1952 when he was 17. A Harvard Ph.D., one Walt Miller, was handling trumpet duties with the resident band. Brad Gowans' sidekick from the twenties, Jim Moynahan, was on clarinet, and onetime Jelly Roll Morton sideman Tommy Benford was at the drums.

Stan often sat in with the Log Cabin band, and a lasting friendship with Benford and Miller took root. One night Tommy waxed prophetic. He told the neophyte alto player that his style reminded him of his old friend Sidney Bechet. Four decades later the consensus is that no living reedman plays so effectively in the Bechet manner -- full, rich tone, pronounced vibrato and long, lyrical melodic lines.

The summer after his Log Cabin baptism of fire, Stan ran into Moynahan again, out on Cape Cod, and the old-time dixielander taught an eager pupil the rudiments

of improvising on chord progressions. That fall -- 1953 -- Stan entered the freshman class at the University of Massachusetts, in Amherst, where he soon found a kindred jazz spirit in one Tony Pappas, a cornet player. He also discarded the alto for soprano saxophone and eventually settled down to master the clarinet, reversing the usual learning process.

### **THE JAZZ DOCTORS**

As an undergraduate, Stan got his first taste of band leading with a group he called his "New Orleans Six." With the discovery by Pappas of old-time banjo man Gil Roberts (working as a maintenance man at an Amherst fraternity), the band evolved into the "New Orleans Jazz Doctors," managed by Pappas, featuring McDonald on reeds, and rallying around the irrepressible banjo, vocals and showmanship of Roberts. College parties and concerts through New England and New York State were their stock-in-trade. Supporting this combination which persisted through 1962, were a nucleus of outstanding drummers (Eddy Marshall, Jimmy Parker -- later with Toshiko and Charlie Ventura; trombonists Gil Poyton, Cliff Carr, Stan Vincent; pianists Paul Waldron, Bob Pilsbury, and Robin Verdier.

Through Vincent, and the latter two pianists, the Jazz Doctors were drawing upon the Boston area (in which direction they would eventually evolve as rock invaded the fraternities) -- and Cape Cod where McDonald had first marveled at Dick Wetmore in Leroy Parkins' Excalibur Jazz Band, which included Tommy Benford, Pilsbury and trombonist Cas Brosky.

### **BEYOND BOSTON**

Week-end trips to New York supplemented Stan's healthy exposure to "name" bands visiting the Boston clubs, and he added Nicks, Condon's, Ryan's, the Metropole -- and the thrill of sitting in with Zutty Singleton -- to his fund of inspiration and his strong preferences about drummers. Graduating in 1958, Stan spent that summer studying French in Paris and hoping to catch up with Sidney Bechet, then on tour. As an ice breaker, he had a note to Bechet from Tommy Benford identifying Stan as "a very dear friend of mine" and urging Bechet to "treat him right." Stan met two of Sidney's cohorts: Mezz Mezzrow and Albert Nicholas -- the latter a major influence on Stan's playing -- but never his idol who died the following spring.

Back from Europe, Stan began an association with the Boston area's first New Orleans revivalist band, the Historic Jazz Band, which was no sooner begun than interrupted by a two year army stint that began with Stan getting clarinet lessons in Washington, D. C. (Where he played on the side with trombonist "Slide" Harris in

Tony Haggart's band and took in Willie the Lion, Stuff Smith, Danny Barker, and Bob Wilbur, under the tutelage of drummer Beale Riddle).

For the following year and a half Stan languished in Hawaii, playing solo clarinet in the 25th Infantry Division Band and keeping in shape by sitting in at piano bars in Waikiki.

### **THE HISTORIC JAZZ BAND**

Returning to Boston in November 1960, Stan rejoined cornetist Tony Pappas, and the Jazz Doctors were themselves again -- for a while. But the Boston orientation and the Historic Jazz Band prevailed -- playing more varied and challenging jazz than any Stan had tackled before -- Morton, Oliver and Ellington compositions plus original rags by the pianist whose Mortonesque style had fitted both bands so well: Robin Verdier. And on trumpet was Stan's old pal from Log Cabin days, Walt Miller. They played the college circuit, but also, and more importantly, dug themselves in for 31 gigs at Boston's Red Garter (1963-64) and solid stands at the Domino (Dedham), the Brown Derby (Boston), as well as private parties and concerts.

The Historic Jazz Band prospered until 1966 when the stalwart, Walt Miller, was compelled to retire from the band under the competing pressures of his day job. Although Pappas returned on cornet, gigs were infrequent and the name adopted by what now was a highly variable group of players -- the Exit Jazz Band -- proved prophetic.

From 1969 to 1971 Stan played with or pulled together temporary combinations. Work was sporadic. Joe Fine, the brilliant trombonist, drove a laundry truck; Pappas' enthusiasm waned. However, the collaboration of English cornetist Tony Pringle presaged the organization of a band whose reputation would not only dominate New England but much of the world.

### **THE LONGEST GIG**

In 1971, the game of musical chairs was ended and the New Black Eagle Jazz Band took definitive form. But, for Stan at least, that is also history: 10 years, 10 record albums, countless club, concert, TV, radio and festival appearances

throughout the US and Europe, and 400 or more nights at the Sticky wicket Pub in Hopkinton, Mass. World-wide recognition and acclaim came to the Eagles -- and to Stan, who was compared to the master, Bechet, and described by John S. Wilson of the *New York Times* as “a jewel on either clarinet or soprano saxophone.”

During those years, the challenge of being both player and leader occasionally fell to Stan, but it is in the Blue Horizon Jazz Band that he has clearly merged the two roles in a way that frees his own expressive power no less than it is able to draw out the individual and collective expressions of the other players.

### **THE BLUE HORIZON - THE LONGEST GIG**

With the dedicated managerial support of his lovely wife and fan, Ellen, the evolution of Stan's combinations has also been blessed by the staunch enthusiasm of long-time friend and admirer, Sandy Berman, jazz entrepreneur, *bon vivant*, and proprietor of *Sandy's Jazz Revival* in Beverly (Boston's North Shore). [Sandy and his club have passed away.] Founded by Sandy's parents, as a restaurant, the club boasted superb acoustics, an intimate atmosphere, and a large portrait of Sidney Bechet. It carried on a jazz (and swing and blues) policy dating back to the end of prohibition.

In this relaxed ambience, starting in 1981 the Blue Horizon Jazz Band was nurtured into existence. It was here at *Sandy's* that the band's first record album, DAWN OF THE BLUE HORIZON JAZZ BAND was recorded. The album featured Stan with many of his former jazz companions including Tommy Benford, Dick Wetmore, Robin Verdier, and Walt Miller whom he lured out of musical retirement for the next thirteen years.

*Much of the above was abstracted from liner notes of DAWN OF THE BLUE HORIZON JAZZ BAND written by jazz critic Alan C. Webber in 1983.*

“ . . . when I first heard the sound of Stan McDonald I got so carried away I wrote in *The Second Line*: ‘ . . . the clarinet and soprano saxophone work of Stan McDonald is so good it's frightening.’ ” -- Alan C. Webber