

Ira B. Liss,

AS BAND DIRECTOR,
AND HAVING RECEIVED
ENCOURAGEMENT FROM THE
WORDS OF THE GREAT STAN
KENTON, SINCE 1979 HAS
HELPED KEEP ALIVE THE
TRADITIONS OF THE BIG BAND
JAZZ ORCHESTRA.

BY RICK MELODY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHAINA HOUSE

True that your career began at Patrick Henry High School?
That is true.

What does a drum major/saxophonist do upon graduation?
Graduated high school in 1972 and entered San Diego State. I chose to major in cultural geography intending to broaden my musical horizons and held a music minor, playing baritone saxophone in the school jazz program as well as with several groups.

What led you to jazz?
My first exposure to big bands was as a freshman in high school. I heard an album by Don Ellis titled *Autumn*. As soon as I listened to that album, I was hooked. While my classmates were listening to the Beatles, Rolling Stones, and The Who, I was listening to Count Bassie, Duke Ellington, and Don Ellis.

Was there family influence that led you to music and particularly jazz?
I was the first member of the family to delve deeply into music. It actually began in grammar school when I joined the music program. The music teacher decided for me that I was to play saxophone and there it began. I truly enjoyed it and I give credit to two of my band leaders for the encouragement they gave me. They truly lit the fire under me early on.



You formed an 18-piece jazz band at what age?
I was 24 at the time. It was in 1979. I had graduated college and was working at a music store in Escondido handling the educational accounts with many of the local schools. The initial idea was to supplement the summer program at the schools by forming a jazz band. It was an unofficial gathering of interested students who came from several schools and was supported by a number of the local school band leaders, who also allowed us to practice in their band rooms.

What venues were open to you at the start?
We began as a youth band the first several years and as we became better known, older musicians came forward and asked to join, which I welcomed and funneled them in to play beside the students, all the while becoming more of a

community band. They were great mentors to the younger players and it proved highly successful. At its inception, we would play in the parks, at shopping centers and other such venues throughout the summers. Once it became more of a community band with older musicians, we began playing in restaurants and nightclubs with the full size band.

Is there a magical number of musicians for an orchestra?

A big band or jazz orchestra is composed of 5 on saxophone, 4 trombones, 4 trumpets, a piano, bass, drums and at times a vocalist.

Isn't jazz mostly played as a combo or quartet?

A band is like a quartet expanded; consider it a large ensemble. It most often comes down to the size of the venue, the acoustics, and the theme for the performance

Most often with or without vocal accompaniment?

I have always believed that the human voice is as much an instrument as any other. In fact, the human voice was the very first instrument, ever. Through time and innovation came the musical instruments. A singer adds a great deal of variety and showmanship to any performance. It's just another color added to the palette of what jazz is all about. Janet Hammer is our lead vocalist who has been with us for 25 years, and her talent has added great dimension to each performance.

You have met, and or played with some of the greatest over the years. One ever-lasting memory?

The most famous individual who had a major influence on my thoughts of being a band leader was Stan Kenton. He would hold clinics each year and I attended one in the early 70's. I met a lot of great musicians at the clinic and it so happened that I caught him alone while on a lunch break and had a conversation with him. I remember his words to this day when he said ~ "Your attitude and enthusiasm is impressive. It's going take guys like you when guys like me are no longer here to carry on the tradition." He was my hero and those words rekindled the fire and six years later I formed the band.

At 6' 7 inches, would players feel intimidated by the band director?

Especially if they get my ire. I can tell when someone is off key or when things aren't right. Not often and never fatal. During a performance, you just continue on, understanding that all of it should have been ironed out during rehearsals. Deal with it later off stage and again at the next rehearsal. That's where you put the time in to insure a great performance.

Fast forward 40 years, how many records or albums?

Six CD's and we plan more, one of which will be highlighting many of Janet Hammer's top selections. We are now recognized globally and I am amazed at where our music is being played,

with Japan being the second largest audience. We have also been invited to Taiwan for their annual Jazz Festival in October.

How has your music evolved over the years?

I take more musical excursions these days. While we are fortunate enough to have such a great tradition with the historically talented people that came before us, and as we continue to honor that tradition, it is my vision to move things forward in a creative sense. We might take a swing tune and do it as a funk tune or a jazz rock tune. On our latest album, *Mazel Tov Cocktail*, we actually feature the bass player, who seldom gets featured while in a big band. Nathan East, one of our guest artists, is highlighted playing *Bass, The Final Frontier*. He has been on some 4,000 albums and has played for all the great entertainers. It so happened that we were both at high school at the same time, albeit cross town rivals.



Will this creativity cross over into different genres?

It will and we are beginning work on a new album that will bring in different players from various genres into the big band. Music is music, and I feel that a collaborative effort bringing in talent from classical, rock & roll, jazz, etc., can produce something quite extraordinary.

Surely a passionate avocation; what is your real job?

Realtor for the past 17 years, and property management 37 years before that.

Where does the roadmap lead?

More recording projects, doing more concerts, galas, and private events locally, and performing at some of the great jazz festivals globally with Taiwan as the first stepping stone.