

The Federal Focus Jazz Band Story

Traditional jazz – a.k.a. "New Orleans jazz", "dixieland jazz", or "classic jazz" – is stronger today than it has been in many years. And yet it is in grave danger.

Sound contradictory? Look around you. Traditional jazz festivals and cruises are everywhere; the one in Sacramento is California's fourth largest tourism event. There are over a hundred societies in this country devoting themselves to the furtherance of traditional jazz, some with thousands of members. And traditional jazz recordings -- new sessions and reissues -- are being released at a prodigious rate.

But wait, something's wrong here. The society members, the festival goers, the musicians themselves -- they're... they're... **gray haired**. Goodness knows this art form needs the wisdom, experience, knowledge and means of mature adults -- but where are the young players and listeners who will keep the heritage alive?

Jazz -- formally recognized by Congress as the "national treasure" -- is America's unique contribution to world music. Like most music, jazz has undergone considerable change. Each of its styles contributes an important part of the nation's cultural fabric. Yet the traditional styles of jazz face a bleak future. While contemporary jazz enjoys sufficient youth participation, youth awareness of traditional jazz is at an all-time low. Few Americans youngsters have heard the exciting sound of collective improvisation, or are familiar with the work of Armstrong, Morton, Beiderbecke, Bechet, Teagarden and other jazz pioneers.

Enter Dr. Jim Tozzi, a former career government official, now director of Multinational Business Services, Inc., a Washington, D.C. - based regulatory and trade consulting firm. Dr. Tozzi came to love New Orleans jazz, while a resident of the Crescent City, and hit upon a unique way of aiding its preservation: the continuing sponsorship of a carefully tutored youth group, under the aegis of Federal Focus, Inc., a non-profit corporation of which Dr. Tozzi is chairman. Knowing of my heavy involvement with traditional jazz styles -- and particularly my clinic and concerts in loyal schools -- Dr. Tozzi approached me about directing such a band.

His proposal sounded too good to be true. I would select the band members from area wide auditions; those selected would be paid for weekly rehearsals and frequent gigs; and Federal Focus would provide for private tutoring, transportation, uniforms, and quality instruments as needed. Federal Focus would line up quality gigs on Capital Hill and other prestigious locations, and I would select repertoire, conduct rehearsals and coach the band in the various styles of traditional jazz. Did I jump at the chance? Is the Pope Catholic?

For help in putting the word out into the schools, I turned to the Potomac River Jazz Club, one of the country's largest and most active jazz support organizations. With their help, auditions were held in the fall of '88; and in January '89 the Federal Focus Jazz Band was born. By April the band was gigging regularly. And this is from a cold start: while each member of the band is a talented musician, the amount of prior traditional jazz experience was virtually zero. Teedo had never even touched a banjo before. Yet by May the band was ready to cut this album, presenting a variety of traditional jazz styles.

The band will continue so long as talented musicians are interested in learning the genre can be found -- and funding is available to keep it afloat. Federal Focus, Inc.,

depends on tax-deductible contributions from culturally concerned individuals and corporations to supplement its own substantial investment in the program.

With enough financial support, Dr. Tozzi intends to eventually sponsor a continuing program of formal traditional jazz instruction in D.C. school system. It is also intended to put the Federal Focus Jazz Band more in the public eye, including special performances at schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and charitable institutions.

Auditions for the Federal Focus Jazz Band are open to all musicians of college age or younger. Federal Focus is especially interested in attracting inner-city applicants who possess talent but limited performance opportunities.

It is my privilege to work with these talented young musicians, and I think you'll be hearing more from the Federal Focus Jazz Band. The tradition continues!

---- Dave Robinson