

A Brief Look at American Riverboat Musical Styles, Tom Richeson, Associate Professor of Music

I was a free-lance trumpeter in the 1970s, performing in the horn sections of pop stars, jazz big bands, ice shows, for trade show and theater *pit bands*, and in orchestras. I traveled to the Middle East, Europe, the Caribbean, and throughout Canada and the continental United States.

The most interesting of all the musical engagements was a one-week tour with *Hank Needham and the Riverboat Rhythm Kings* aboard the steamer *Mississippi Queen*. A friend of mine, a regular band member aboard the *Queen*, asked me to come to New Orleans and fill in for him while he vacationed. Every day aboard the *Queen* we played *Dixieland* during *happy hour* at the paddlewheel bar. At night we played for dancing in the ballroom – waltzes, polkas, swing, fox trots, ragtime, ballads, Latin music, movie themes, and anniversary and birthday songs – if someone requested it, we were expected to play it. During lunches we played light background music. In the early evenings the piano player (Hank Needham) played the calliope. A calliope is a musical keyboard instrument that features organ pipes. It's powered by steam and typically heralds a steamer's arrival at river ports (DeVeaux/143). Go to <http://www.steamboats.org/whistle-calliope/calliope-mississippi-queen.html> for some riverboat calliope music recorded aboard the *Mississippi Queen*. When the steamer docked at Natchez or Vicksburg, Mississippi, we played *Dixieland* as the passengers boarded or de-boarded, as we also did on the New Orleans docks at the beginning and end of the cruise.

It was at the New Orleans docks that I was privileged to perform with clarinetist *Willie Humphrey* (1900 – 94). Born into a family of New Orleans musicians, Willie was a regular clarinetist in the *Preservation Hall Jazz Band*, both in New Orleans and on tours. Willie also worked on the riverboats with the *Streckfus Line* bandleader *Fate Marable* (Kenney/181). In the early 1980s I met another musician who worked on the Streckfus boats with Marable, Arkansan *Ralph Porter* (1912 – 2000), a fellow member of the *Arkansas Jazz Hall of Fame*. Ralph worked in Marable-led bands between St. Louis and Pittsburgh (AJHF and Kenney/183). I never found the time to interview Porter, one of my research regrets...

The styles of music we played on the *Queen* were similar to the styles earlier musicians were expected to play all along the Mississippi and Ohio River watersheds except that they reflected popular music of each era. The function (dancing) did not change.

“Streckfus Steamers had built dance floors into their excursion boats and hired a dance band. Passengers were to dance. If they didn’t dance, they would become bored. If they became bored, they wouldn’t come back.” (Kenney/35)

Music performed aboard the Streckfus boats featured popular styles, not innovative ones. After all, the music was intended for dancing, not concertizing. Fate Marable, the most famous of the St. Louis Streckfus bandleaders, favored hiring New Orleans musicians (beginning in the teens but particularly in the early to mid-1920s) in part because of their unique and animated rhythmic style, which was rougher and featured a harder edge than musicians from other parts of the country. Blues, on the other hand, was considered too harsh for the boats. The New Orleans musicians were at the same time expected to learn refinement, leading to a hybrid of “edge” and “polish” (Chevan/159). Other aspects of the New Orleans traditional jazz style, e.g., polyphonic ensemble playing, were incorporated into some dance selections, but as “hot jazz” faded in the public imagination a new dance style replaced it – *swing*. By the 1930s many Streckfus musicians were recruited in St. Louis, in part because of a regional emphasis on European musical traditions. Improvisation gave way to notation and a newer, more *in control*, sense of professionalism. Musicians who were able to consistently read arrangements in the *swing* style of the jazz big bands were hired instead of the hot traditional jazz improvisers. When hot jazz was requested it tended to be memorized or read from arrangements, not improvised. Charlie Creath, a St. Louis trumpeter and Streckfus bandleader *“emphasized a sweet style of playing and a well-rehearsed horn section”* (Chevan/167).

There isn’t very much documentation regarding the music on the boats in Arkansas. I mentioned Arkansas Ralph Porter above. Bandleader *Alphonso Trent* (from Fort Smith, Arkansas) and *The Alphonso Trent Orchestra*, with guest soloist Louis Armstrong, played aboard the *St. Paul* in St. Louis in a *battle of the bands* opposite the *Floyd Campbell* band in 1928 (Chevan/158). The band played on the Mississippi river excursions for a brief time in 1928 (Rinnie/239-40). Most of the excursion steamers that operated along the Mississippi and Ohio rivers and their tributaries were owned and operated by the St. Louis Streckfus family, of which there is plenty of material for inquiry and study.

NOTE: Chevan (Chevan/179) includes a discography (albeit slight in number of selections) of Riverboat bands from St. Louis.

Notes

Arkansas Jazz Heritage Foundation (AJHF), *Ralph Porter*, Arkansas Jazz Hall of Fame 1996 Bio, http://www.arjazz.org/artists/hof/1996/96_ralph_porter.html

David Chevan, *Riverboat Music From St. Louis and the Streckfus Steamboat Line*, Black Music Research Journal, Vol. 9, No. 2, Papers of the 1989 National Conference on Black Music Research (Autumn 1989) pp. 153-180, Published by the Center for Black Music Research – Columbia College Chicago and University of Illinois Press. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/779421>

Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddins, *Jazz*, 2009 W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., ISBN 978-0-393-97880

William Howland Kenney, *Jazz On The River*, 2005 The University of Chicago Press, ISBN: 0-226-43733-7

Barry Kernfeld, editor, *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 1988 Macmillan Press Limited, ISBN 0-333-39846-7

Henry Rinnie, *A Short History of the Alphonso Trent Orchestra*, The Arkansas Historical Quarterly, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Autumn, 1986), pp. 228 – 249, published by the Arkansas Historical Association, stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40027761>

<http://www.steamboats.org/index.php>

Tulane University Hogan Jazz Archive, <http://jazz.tulane.edu/exhibits/riverboats>
NOTE: an excellent source for pictures.

Tom Richeson, UALR Associate Professor of Music/Jazz Studies Coordinator. He's performed trumpet or MIDI wind controller with jazz artists Pharoah Sanders, Jerry Coker, Stan Samole, Art Porter Sr. and Jr., Charles Thomas, Ted Ludwig, and Frank Sinatra, and on tours with many pop groups, including The Jacksons, Diana Ross, Lou Rawls, and The O'Jays. Honors: Arkansas Jazz Hall of Fame (2014), National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Fellowship (1986), Honorary Visiting Professorships at Qingdao and Binzhou Universities in China (2014). He's the principal author of *The Mystery of Music*, McGraw-Hill (2012). Recordings include *Jazz Tracks* (2014).