

A Life In Jazz:

Jimmy "Mazzy" Mazzanovich '60

By Andrew Fletcher

The Colonial Inn in Concord, MA looks and feels exactly as a Revolutionary era New England inn should—aged wooden beams, uneven floors, white clapboards, twisted old nails, and a converted barn to serve as the bar.



Jimmy Mazzy

A colonial marching band, or perhaps a lone folk guitarist seem appropriate for such a setting, making the effect surreal when rollicking, early 20th century jazz music and a voice reminiscent of Louis Armstrong spill out of the Inn. But to regulars, it's just another evening with Jimmy Mazzy '60 and his band.

Most Wednesdays, Mazzy can be found nestled into a corner of the bar with his banjo and microphone at hand. His tall frame hunches slightly from many years spent curled over the instrument. Black hair flecked with gray falls just shy of his thick glasses, and a face that's quick to smile bends from grimace to bliss as the music dips and climbs.

"I want to thank you all for coming," says Mazzy between songs. "And these fellows up

here with me. Not only do they give us their time, but their great talent...these guys are wonderful players."

Mazzy is referring to his band, *The Last Minute Men Band*, one of seven bands he plays with regularly, and named thus because he's never certain who will show up until the last moment. The players range from a businessman cum horn player, to an elderly female church organist, a Russian immigrant

who learned jazz piano in a Moscow basement from old records, and Mazzy, perhaps the only professional musician of the lot.

Typical of his generous personality, Mazzy compliments everyone he plays with, and as a consummate bandleader, he waits for everyone else to solo before tackling a solo of his own.

"I try not to listen to myself if I can help it," Mazzy says with a chuckle. His modest attitude and the Inn's homely atmosphere belie Mazzy's stature as one of the premier traditional jazz banjoists and singers in the country.

Born and raised in Lexington, Mazzy has lived in Massachusetts his entire life. "If I had the money, I'd move away somewhere warmer," laughs Mazzy in the Holliston home he shares with Carrie, his wife of 20

years and occasional singing collaborator. "The problem is I'm fundamentally lazy, and I'd like to be fundamentally rich."

The two have created a cozy home. In January, the Christmas tree is still up because Carrie likes the lights. Mazzy keeps a steady stream of early jazz revolving on his record player as he talks about his career as a musician, telling anecdotes, and occasionally interrupting himself to point out a particularly good chorus or run in the music.

"Glorious conception of phrasing here, such soul in his playing," exclaims Mazzy about one of the tunes playing. And then moments later, "Have you ever heard of the bluesman 'Blind Lemon Pledge'? They say he always gave a very polished performance—that's an awful joke, I know." He chides himself, although clearly enjoying it.

Compared to many of his Browne and Nichols contemporaries, Mazzy has blazed a distinctive and fascinating career. When Mazzy was a child, his older brother collected jazz. Somewhere along the line, Louis Armstrong and the "Dixieland sound" struck a bell with him. So at age 13, Mazzy took up the banjo, although he would not gain a sense of purpose about his playing until his early 20s.

"I learned to play by ear, so I could never really join in bands throughout high school or college...and I started singing out of frustration, because I couldn't play the way I wanted to," says Mazzy.

After B&N, he matriculated at Bates College and then found himself becoming immersed in the New England Jazz circuit, especially when Dixieland jazz enjoyed a brief renaissance in the mid 1960s. Early on, he apprenticed himself to a piano tuner/repair man to help subsidize his music, and between that and playing, he has maintained a comfortable, if humble, living.

"There was no conscious decision to do this (music)," he says, and adds with characteristic irony, "I just sank slowly into the mire."

To hear him speak, one would never presume the many accomplishments and compli-



Jimmy Mazzy, Moishe Feldman, Edgar Kemp, and David First at the Colonial Inn

ments he has garnered through the years. Within a niche genre of music with a limited following, Mazzy has carved a difficult and exceptional career.

"Jimmy was recently voted the number one Trad Jazz banjoist and number two male singer in the field, according to two of the major publications that follow Jazz (*Jazzology* and *Mississippi Rag*)," Carrie points out. Not one to self promote, Mazzy nods shyly.

Perhaps Mazzy's greatest accolade is the respect of his colleagues in the jazz canon. He is one of the few musicians good enough to have bands regularly call him and has played with a laundry list of people, from members of Louis Armstrong's last band, to Earl Hines, Woody Allen, and contemporary pop/rock musicians such as Chris Trapper.

As a "hired gun" playing in numerous ensembles, Mazzy has toured the world, visiting over 17 U.S. states, England, France,

Holland, British Columbia, and Bermuda. This spring he will tour the heartland of the country as a member of pianist Butch Thompson's band *The Big Three*, and will also play at various music festivals.

His career has been a labor of love. "I love music, but not all of the playing situations are ideal. Some mornings you'll wake up in a hotel and feel like you slept the night on a sheet of marble," Mazzy says. "Of course the hardships that we think we have are nothing compared to the musicians we are emulating."

He refers to his idols—the early and mid-1900 jazz players whose records Mazzy imitated in learning his craft. Names like Louis Armstrong, King "Papa Joe" Oliver, Red Allen, "Banjo" Ikey Roberts and singers such as Paul Robeson, Arthur Prysock, and King Curtis—all pioneers who dealt with not only hard beds, but hard attitudes and sometimes much worse.

Forty-some years into his career, Mazzy looks back on his life with a comical and candid approach. He speaks in a combination of surreptitious metaphors and anecdotes, both humorous and wise.

"If Louis Armstrong were an overhead fastball on the trumpet, then Red Allen would have been a slider over the outside corner," Mazzy says.

Reminiscing about his academic days studying *Moby Dick* in B&N

English Teacher Hal Melcher's class, he is reminded of a favorite saying that Captain Ahab might have done well to abide by: "Forgive me God for my little jokes on thee, and I'll forgive you for your big one on me."

Throughout his time at B&N, Mazzy was not always enamored of the school. "I never went anyplace where the food was worse," he recounts with a grin. "You'd get your soup and a pea would surface, wink at you, and disappear again."

But he recalls certain faculty members with fondness such as English Teacher and Crew Coach Jimmy Ducey, and History Teacher John Brisbois, with whom he would catch rides home from school. And an avid passion for reading, he says, is one thing he emphatically attributes to his time at B&N.

"I think the School instilled in most people a love of language and literature, and I probably would not have had that opportunity at another place," says Mazzy. "Reading is still what moves me, the emotional charge in writing drew me to it, and B&N gave me that more than college."

As if to illustrate, he later mentions Hemingway, comparing his own weekly gig at the Colonial Inn to the experience of the famous author's story *A Clear, Well Lighted Place*.

"I think of it as an opportunity for people to come in from the interstellar chill...to be in a warm spot with people they know, listening to music and what have you. That sense of well being...it's worth a lot."

To see him play is to become part of that captivating, timeless scene. Everyone smiles, taps an appendage in time, meets their neighbor, and feels like a kindred spirit in a speakeasy. Meanwhile, hunched over his banjo with stalwart concentration, Mazzy's skilled hands pepper the frets.

When he sings, his brow furrows in furious concentration, and if not for the contentment emanating from the music, one might think it almost hurts—music from the soul often does.



Butch Thompson, Mazzy, and Duke Heitger perform together

Jimmy Mazzy — Banjoist and Vocalist Extraordinaire

This is the eleventh in a series of biographies of musicians who are associated with the San Diego Thanksgiving Dixieland Jazz Festival.

By Hal Smith

Jimmy Mazzy is one of the most in-demand performers of traditional jazz. His driving banjo and spellbinding vocals are heard at festivals and clubs from coast to coast as well as on a long list of recordings.

He was born in Westport, CT, but his family moved to Lexington, MA when Jimmy was a toddler. He discovered jazz listening to his brother Jack's record collection and focused his attention on the banjo after hearing one featured in a Vaseline Hair Tonic commercial in 1955. Jimmy's father bought two banjos and briefly took lessons along with his son, though only Jimmy kept playing. Next, he became interested in brother Jack's records of Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke and Turk Murphy. Jimmy started sitting in with musical groups around Lexington and learned more about the music from banjoist/vocalist Bob Ingraham. Jimmy worked with Bob in Maine, then in 1964 landed a steady job at the "Salty Banjo" in Hull, MA.

In the '60s, Jimmy worked at "Your Father's Moustache" in Boston. During this time, an associate criticized Jimmy's style as being "too busy" and he was told that he should concentrate on basic chording. He also discovered that his banjo was improperly tuned. Fortunately, Jimmy made the acquaintance of banjoist Pat Terry, who helped him learn the correct fingering.



Jimmy Mazzy

Jimmy continued to work at banjo clubs such as "Sweeney's Gay '90s" and "K-K-K-Katie's," but he longed to play classic jazz. He was finally able to do so with cornetist George Blood, tubist Chuck Stewart and others at the Tally Ho Restaurant in Easton. (The Tally Ho job also produced Jimmy's very first recording session).

In the early '70s, Jimmy was working with a talented group of musicians from Concord, including cornetist Scott Philbrick, Sandy McCone and the legendary pianist Reggie Phillips. Reggie played a long residency at the Colonial Inn and featured Jimmy on one of his recordings in 1978. When he died in 1979, Jimmy took over the job, where he continues to play. While he gained notoriety as an excellent banjoist, Jimmy also began to develop his unique vocal style. He claims Louis Armstrong, Red Allen and Bing Crosby as major influences, though he is definitely does not imitate any of them!

The late Bob Osgood and his wife Mary produced four feature albums for Jimmy in the late '70s. They also helped to set up Jimmy's famous duet recording with tubist Eli Newberger for Bob Erdos' *Stomp Off* label. Soon, Jimmy was a "name" in traditional jazz and began to work with bands around the country. He was a guest artist with the Golden Eagle Jazz Band, Devil Mountain Jazz Band, Hot Cotton Jazz Band, Professor Plum's

Jazz, New Yankee Rhythm Kings, Magnolia Jazz Five, Black Diamond Blue Five and others. One of Jimmy's most important and lasting associations has been with Ray Smith's Paramount Jazz Band. This group is known for having an exceptionally large repertoire, the ability to play in a number of different styles and a beat which is a dancer's delight. More recently, Jimmy has become a regular member of Butch Thompson's Jazz Originals and he works with Alan Adams' New Orleans Wanderers whenever circumstances permit.

Jimmy Mazzy excels at making a band play over its head as he lays down perfect time. To quote chef Emeril Lagasse, Jimmy can also "kick it up a notch" as he sails into a thrilling vocal, which lifts the band and the listeners to another level. As always, it will be a great experience to hear him again when he joins the New Orleans Wanderers at Festival #22!

Play the Banjo
for only \$295

The
Goodtime
Banjo



The Banjo is fun and easy to play! American made, this great sounding, great playing 4 lb. maple banjo can go with you anywhere.

Banjo \$ 295, Travel Case \$ 58

DEERING BANJO CO.

The Great American Banjo Company
Dept. W2, 7936 Lester Ave
Lemon Grove, CA 91945

For a Free Catalog
Call (800) 845-7791
or (619) 464-8252

Visit our Web Site:
www.DeeringBanjos.com



**DIXIELAND
WORKSHOPS**



AFCDJS-sponsored workshops will continue in 2001 at the Musicians Hall, 1717 Morena Blvd., from 7 to 9pm. The next sessions are planned for Thursdays, March 8, 22; and April 12, 26.