

Jim Petrie – an appreciation

Jazz trumpeter and vocalist – born 14th April 1937 died 1st August 2020 in Edinburgh



(Photo from the collection and with the permission of Norrie Thomson, photographer unknown)

The loss of Jim Petrie in his 84th year after a remarkable playing career of over 60 years, deprives the traditional jazz world in Edinburgh of one of its most respected and admired – it would not be an exaggeration to say best loved – jazz musicians and band leaders.

Jim Petrie was educated at Tynecastle School in Edinburgh, where a class mate was future jazz trombonist Jack Weddell, and where both Jim and Jack were offered the chance to join the school band. Jim opted to take up the cornet while Jack's choice was trombone. The instrument that Jim was allocated was an Eb cornet. Jim was to maintain for the rest of his life that the instrument ruined his lip, that essential embouchure that brass players have to develop to play their instrument. Lessons were provided by a local dance band musician who visited the school as tutor. However, the future course of Jim's playing career was to be

decided, not by the school band, but by a selection of recordings lent by his brother. Some of these were jazz records and from that point on, traditional jazz was to be Jim's music.

Enthused by what they had heard, the young Petrie and Weddell soon made their way to the West End Cafe, in Edinburgh's West End, where the first band they heard was the visiting Graeme Bell's Australian Jazz Band. Soon after, Jim discovered the jazz club then functioning in India Buildings where local jazz bands led by clarinettist Sandy Brown and trumpeter Alex Welsh played each week. Another established local jazz venue was the Crown Bar in Lothian Street and it was there in 1954, at the farewell party for Sandy Brown who was leaving for London, that Jim met several other young enthusiasts including banjo player Mike Hart and drummer Kenny Milne. Almost right away, plans were put in place to form a jazz band which was to become the West Richmond Street Stompers.

The jazz scene in Edinburgh had blossomed in the 1940s with the revival of interest in the classic jazz of the 20s and 30s but, by the time Jim was involved, another form of early jazz had arrived and was making a big impact. This was what was to become known as 'purist jazz', music based on a still older jazz tradition, the music of New Orleans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Nowadays, jazz in this tradition is usually called New Orleans jazz. Jim's brother again played a part and it was his gift of a recording of the Bunk Johnson band playing Tishomingo Blues that determined Jim's early playing style in the purist manner.

Jim and the others clearly made rapid progress and, in 1955, the Edinburgh Climax Jazz Band was formed. Jim was to be in and out of this band several times including a 2 year gap for National Service in 1957/59, but the Climax Jazz Band was to remain a prominent and successful Edinburgh band for several decades, sometimes under Jim's leadership. Its membership over the years was to include such New Orleans stalwarts as Kenny Milne (drms), Jim Young (bs), Jake McMahan (clt), Jack Weddell (tbn) and Bill Salmond (bjo).

After the advent of the Edinburgh International Jazz Festival in 1979, Jim was to be a fixture in the programming for many years, leading bands of his own under a number of names. He was also a key member of the marching bands, the Auld Reekie Parade Band, led by bass player Jim Young, and the Criterion New Orleans Brass Band, led by drummer/trumpeter Kenny Milne. In the early 1980s, Jim Petrie was to form the band with which he would play until his death in 2020. This was the Diplomats of Jazz, a four piece band whose early membership was Jim (tpt), Andy Hampton (clt), Jock Westwater (bjo) and Simon

Carlyle (sousa). However, Jim began to feel that his personal style was not entirely right for the quartet.

The jazz literature says that jazz musicians seldom add anything new to their playing after forming their style and reaching their creative peak early in their careers but in this, Jim Petrie was an exception. The early influence of Bunk Johnson and Kid Howard was to remain but, later in his career, Jim was to broaden his playing, moving into a classic jazz style, influenced particularly by early Louis Armstrong and the fine trumpeter Jabbo Smith, who had a stint with the Duke Ellington band on his CV. Remarkably, Jim was still expanding his expressive range and, in the view of many including the present writer, never played better than when well beyond his theoretically most creative years.

As the years went by, there were to be changes in the Diplomats of Jazz which were to bring in successively 2 fine clarinettists whose styles nicely complimented that of Jim's trumpet lead, Jack Graham and Bob Busby. In addition, Jim recruited Beverley Knight on banjo and Bill Brydon on sousaphone. This line-up would remain throughout the rest of Jim's long career in jazz. Jim ensured that the Diplomats always had a repertoire of unusual numbers and excellent recordings of the Diplomats remain to remind us of their hot and tight sound. Later, Jim was to visit Australia with a Climax re-union band and, when the pool of traditional jazz musicians began to diminish, become one of many jazz musicians who played with bands from both Edinburgh and Glasgow, including in his case the George Penman Jazzmen and the Two Cities Jazz band, which he co-led with the Glasgow clarinettist Ivan Henderson. He was also in demand to play with several English based bands including Taff Lloyd's Ragtime Serenaders, the Savannah Jazz band and the Yorkshire Post Jazz Band, playing throughout the UK and Continental Europe

Jim's playing was always hot, described by many as fiery, both his playing and his singing full of jazz expression and rhythm. The thing that always struck the present writer was the sheer honesty of his music making - free of any hint of affectation or striving for effect, not a trace of a gimmick or showiness. If anyone could ever be said to play from the heart it was Jim Petrie. Humphrey Lyttelton once said on his 'Best of Jazz' broadcast, after playing a recording of Jim's band, '*...and that was trumpeter Jim Petrie there, blowing up a storm*'. Jim seemed always to blow up a storm and his playing was admired by jazz musicians of widely different persuasions. During one Edinburgh International Jazz Festival, an impressed visiting American was to hail Jim as '*...a national treasure*'.

Jim Petrie's last year was to be a difficult one with his wife Margaret dying in mid-2019 and, about the same time, Jim being given a diagnosis of a terminal illness. To his great credit, he continued to play and play well until, just a few months before he died, the coronavirus lockdown brought a temporary end to all gigs. It was Edinburgh's great good fortune that Jim Petrie was to remain a local jazz musician throughout a playing career that lasted from the early 1950s to 2020, covering a remarkable 7 decades.

Graham Blamire - August 2020