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## Final Chorus



by **Nat Hentoff**

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## Riverwalking

As ratings-driven National Public Radio has grown in listeners (more than 22 million now) and revenue, it has markedly cut its own jazz radio programs. Some individual public radio stations around the country keep the jazz faith with their own programming; and those stations affiliated not only with NPR but also with other national sources of programming can supplement jazz and news from those services.

Public Radio International, for example, not only carries first-rate news and commentary programs but also a remarkably multidimensional broadcast every week, all year round, called Riverwalk: Live From the Landing. It's heard on some 150 stations in 36 states. Despite the reach, my guess is that there are still many in the jazz community who don't know about Riverwalk. At its core is the Jim Cullum Jazz Band, which plays swinging traditional hot jazz but not like the "revivalist bands" of years ago that stayed so faithful to their classic models that it sometimes seemed as if they included the scratches on the worn vintage recordings of their youth.

The band, led by cornetist Jim Cullum, started over 40 years ago and is the house combo at the Landing on the Riverwalk of the Hyatt Regency in San Antonio, Texas. The late Stanley Dance, a critic of wide-ranging taste and experience, called the Jim Cullum Jazz Band "the best traditional jazz band in the country...and quite possibly the world."

As heard on the air (since May 27, 1989) or on their bountiful CDs, Cullum's guests have included Benny Carter, Harry "Sweets" Edison, Kenny

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Davern (my choice for the most satisfyingly inventive clarinetist still playing), Nicholas Payton, Clark Terry, Lionel Hampton, Jay McShann, Milt Hinton and Marian McPartland.

What makes this radio series so distinctive is not only the quality of the music but also of the documentary programs that become valuable additions to jazz history. The research comes from individual collectors, as well as the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University, the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers, the Smithsonian and other treasure troves.

Among the documentaries are The Bessie Smith Story, Honky Tonk (rollicking boogie-woogie) and International Sweethearts of Rhythm: America's #1 All-Girl Band. The latter hour-long show included interviews with two surviving members of that exhilaratingly swinging band: trombonist Helen Jones Woods and alto saxophonist Roz Cron. As Riverwalk's resourceful producer, Margaret Moos Pick, says of the program: "Roz Cron tells her story: this young Jewish girl in the late 1930s, loving to play jazz but with few chances to do it, was at home with her parents when she got a call from backstage at the Apollo Theater to join the International Sweethearts of Rhythm on a tour that next day. On the road, she had her first encounter with Jim Crow, thinking beforehand that 'it was some gentleman we would meet in the South,' having no idea that it referred to segregation laws. Subsequently, she learned to pass for black and dodge small-town sheriffs with her mixed-race bandmates."

A listener to Riverwalk, Worth Lovett, a music teacher at Wassom Middle School in Campbell, Ky., wrote the producer that he used the programs in his music history classes "and the students loved it." Currently, building the jazz audience for the future, the Jim Cullum Jazz Video Curriculum Project is involved in developing a program to teach elementary school kids how to play the blues and jazz on the recorder. It'll be a series of 54 lessons on DVD "based on a method of learning-by-ear elements such as short rhythmic jazz and blues riffs." By the sixth week, written music will be introduced.

Among the songs in the repertory are "C Jam Blues," "Ja-Da" and "When the Saints Go Marching In." A few years ago, when I played recordings of such spirited tunes for an elementary school class in New York, the kids wound up dancing to the music, and the teacher finally joined in. This Video Curriculum Project will also include jazz history within the hands-on

lessons.

To get a list of radio stations that carry Riverwalk and a list of available CDs and how to order them, contact 12 Western Avenue, 2nd Floor, Petaluma, CA 94952; phone 707-778-0339; riverwalk.org.

"The program," producer Margaret Pick told Jim Beal Jr. of the San Antonio Express-News, "is an amazing phenomenon. A handful of radio programs last that long. Most have a life of five, six years. Marian McPartland has had her jazz programs for 25 years and is still going strong, but that's rare. We've been successful in part because we have a very loyal audience. People are passionate about the music."

As Kenny Davern said in the same article, "You can study and you can read, but if you don't have an emotional experience, you don't get it. Music has got to grab you."

And those elementary school kids wailing the "C Jam Blues" on their recorders will "get it." As Art Blakey said, "You don't have to be a musician to understand jazz. All you have to do is be able to feel." But it's never too soon to expand on those feelings through an instrument.

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