

Memorials ~ Lit Writing

James F. “Jim” Blewer
March 2002

Musician. Teacher. Gentleman. A real character.

All are words used to describe James F. “Jim” Blewer. Folks who didn’t know Jim by name might have referred to him as “that fellow with the huge white moustache, bow tie and glasses.” To the staff at Ole’s Coffee Shop, he was the man who ordered burnt waffles.

Another term that describes Jim is “frequent contributor.” Jim’s quips, plays-on-words and news items made their way into Herb Caen’s column about 120 times. The 1941 Cal Berkeley graduate also held the record for the most “Twisted Titles” printed in California Monthly, the Cal alumni magazine. Some of Jim’s titling handiwork: “The Y-Files – the sequel,” and “Will Work for Foot – the podiatrist’s credo.”

Jim also wrote to local columnists proposing subjects, people of note in the community. His wife, Shirley, says he did that to give credit to others. He was fascinated by people with interesting backgrounds, and he wanted to share their stories with the world.

But, Jim was a frequent contributor to more than the printed word. He was an active participant in life until his death in February at age 81. A writer once described the people of Jim Blewer’s generation, the “greatest generation,” as the ultimate team players—people interested in contributing to the whole, not standing out as individuals. In true form, Jim had been in his studio, pitch pipe in hand, practicing barbershop quartet parts for an upcoming rehearsal before suffering the stroke that took his life.

The Oakland native served in World War II with the US Army 32nd “Red Arrow” Infantry Division. Later, he was an active volunteer with the Boy Scouts of America. Jim’s career as a teacher in the Oakland Unified School District spanned 34 years. Shirley, also a teacher, recalls that her husband took on complicated classroom projects and special field trips, like an overnight trip to Fort Point, that other teachers might be tempted to bypass. He directed the school choir at his last assignment, Piedmont Avenue Elementary.

Music was a constant in Jim’s life. He took up clarinet and saxophone at age 32 and learned to play the instruments by ear. Within a few years, he was leading a jazz and swing group called the Bluenotes, later the Yachtsmen.

When asked how a particular gig had gone, Jim would answer, “It was a triumph.” He always had paying music jobs. The week he died, he had two gigs on the books, which fellow musicians stepped in to cover.

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Jim never stopped challenging himself musically. He took up barbershop quartet singing a few years ago simply because he had always wanted to. He joined the Alameda Community Band to improve his music reading skills. Jim was a mainstay in the band, which dedicated its March 6 Winter Concert to his memory. Jim also performed with the Retired Teachers’ Band and with Dave Coffing’s Magical Music Orchestra, a swing band appearing regularly on the USS Hornet.

Andrew Storar, a professional musician with the Royal Society Jazz Orchestra, recalls the advice that his “Uncle Jim” gave on learning that Andrew had taken up the trumpet. Jim said, “Work hard everyday. Practice and become good at this, and you’ll become a star.” Andrew looked up to Jim, so he took his words as great encouragement.”

Year later, when Andrew played gigs with Jim, he noticed how the singer and saxophone player won over audiences with his appealing style and excellent vocal range. As Andrew said, “Jim entertained his heart out, singing and playing the music that he loved.” When Andrew led a jam set of international musicians at the 1999 Sacramento Jazz Jubilee, Jim was in the audience. After the applause died down, Jim walked up to Andrew and pronounced the event, “a triumph.”

Veteran. Friend. Contributor.

In focusing on contribution rather than seeking the spotlight, Jim Blewer became noteworthy in his own right. I hope that, somehow, he knows an entire article, finally, has been written about him.

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