

Musician leaves fond memories

By JIM WINDELL

Life goes on as usual at the Kingsley Inn Lounge.

On a typical week night the piano bar is several people deep with drinking, singing and flirting business types who come well dressed, ready for revelry. Behind the piano bar is a new piano player. The same types of people crowd into the lounge, just as they have for the last 17 years.

Life goes on at 1859 Henrietta in Birmingham, too. Maybe not quite as usual. But it goes on. Without tears.

Marianne Preston was dressed brightly but casually in slacks and a yellow shirt. With her two children home, the friendly blond woman seemed almost eager to welcome a guest to talk about her late husband.

Don Preston, the man behind the piano bar at Kingsley Inn's Lounge for the last 17 and a half years, died Jan. 23.

Like publicists representing a respected and beloved client, Mrs. Preston and her grown children, Don Jr. and Brooke, talked of Preston's accomplishments. His achievements are of almost legendary proportions. The friendly and fond memories also abound.

"HE WROTE for Bix Beiderbecke. This would have been in the late '20s," Mrs. Preston said, "and he arranged for Tommy Dorsey and Horace Heidt."

Don Jr. said, "I think by the time he was in high school he had his own band. And he wrote a lot of songs. We've been poking through his music downstairs and there's tons of things he's written. Symphonies, arrangements, songs, music even for three-piece jazz bands. By 1937, he already had music in the AS-CAP file."

Brooke said, "He wrote music and arranged for a 55-piece orchestra when he worked all those years at WWJ radio."

For 26 years, Preston was a composer and arranger for WWJ. That was back in the days when live radio shows had live music. The WWJ Orchestra was under the direction of famed Detroit musician Miesha Kuttler. That job began soon after Marianne and Donn were married 32 years ago.

"I would sit here and listen to him write for this 'large orchestra,'" Mrs. Preston said. "I was just a young bride and thought he was fantastic."

The scene took shape as she described it, occasionally punctuating the narrative with infectious laughter.

"SOMETIMES WE sat up all night to get a piece done. Dad (Mrs. Preston often refers to him affectionately in this way) had a small organ which was painted bright red and he had to pump it to get music. Imagine, writing all the notes for 55 instruments on a little organ pumping away."

Composing never came hard for Preston. "It just flowed out of him," his wife recalls, still in awe of her husband. "I don't ever remember him being stuck for an idea."

She told what the small family had been doing in the cozy house the last several days. "The three of us have shut out the world this week. We've shown old movies from the time that Don Jr. was 3 years old."

"They all recall the family movies," Brooke explained. "We made a movie each year. Whenever we all got together, we'd make a film. It was sort of like a family project."

Preston had always been fascinated with gadgets and tape recorders, and film downstairs to intrigue him the most. A long time ago he turned the basement into a production studio where he made films for family and commercial purposes and recorded tapes of music and wrote music and arrangements. All the projects that kept him busy and active throughout much of the last 30 years of his life were carried on in the basement.

AS THE THREE family members talked, a flood of interesting vignettes flowed.

Brooke said, "He had a small film company and was hired by J.L. Hudson's. I don't know how many years ago, to film the Thanksgiving Day parade. Then Dad would bring the film home, write music to fit each float and then record the music on film, edit the final product and the whole film would be beautiful. Hudson's would make 150 copies of the film and send it around the country to schools and hospitals."

"Remember, he played with violinist Joe Venuti, and Venuti taught him to give a raspberry you could hear for a block. I think Dad even wrote a song about it."

"I remember" — it's Mrs. Preston's turn — "during the summer, going to listen to the Detroit Symphony when Walter Poole was the conductor, and they would rehearse Dad's arrangements. He was in heaven listening to his arrangements being played by a symphony orchestra."

There is more laughter at a long-forgotten tidbit: "Or how about when he did records under the name of Cucumber Jackson and the piano music was really speeded up," Mrs. Preston said.

Brooke smiled warmly as she said, "Remember all the commercials he made? There was an ad for the mayor of Detroit. We had our own studio right here. Dad would be filming a commer-

cial downstairs and when he needed a female voice, he would yell upstairs for one of us."

"I COULD DO a really good Zsa Zsa Gabor, remember?" Mrs. Preston said. "And I was the Town Club Girl," Brooke said.

"You know," Mrs. Preston said with a whisper of wistfulness. "I wish he were here right now to fill in some of the blanks. He could tell about some of the things we're forgetting."

There are also the memories of Donn Preston as a father and a husband.

Don Jr., a 47-year-old Los Angeles film composer, musician and record producer, recalled his father. "I remember one whole summer we tried to develop sound movie film. He wanted to get good contrast in the film. We went about it scientifically recording each step of each process. When we finally got a perfect picture, we discovered we hadn't made a record of that one experiment, and we never duplicated it again."

Brooke, a 32-year-old Fort Lauderdale housewife and mother of three daughters, was once an advertising photographer. A good photographer.

"Dad taught me everything I knew about photography."

She went on more personally, "He never said no to me in my life."

AND HER MOTHER chimed in, "He never interfered with anyone. He never told me what to do."



Donn Preston, shown in a favorite family photo, died Jan. 23. He was a mainstay at the Kingsley Inn in Bloomfield Hills, where he played piano for 17½ years.

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