

Musician's life more than just jamming

By JIM WINDELL

Somewhere you don't expect Detroit jazz musicians to live in suburban comfort in Bloomfield Township. Maybe on Detroit's northwest side, but certainly not on Wing Lake.

That, however, is where Jack Brokensha lives. Brokensha is comfortable with his life which at present means not only living in suburbia, but being on call to produce industrial music for advertising and promotion. It is the marketing end of music which is responsible for his financial success and his enjoyment of the good life.

Despite all of this, he says that "Getting a nice rhythm section together and playing jazz is still probably the nicest thing to do musically."

The 53-year-old vibraphone player will get a chance to play the jazz he enjoys when he, pianist Bess Bonnier and guitarist Joe Lu Duca open a three-week engagement at Tweeny's Cafe, Birmingham, on Friday, July 20.

TWEENY'S CAFE owner Yvonne Gill-Davis, who is from New Zealand, found a certain kinship with Australian Jack Brokensha when she visited his club in Detroit 10 years ago and listened to Bess Bonnier and Brokensha play their melodic and swinging jazz. When she decided to bring entertainment into her gourmet restaurant, which has had a liquor license and served dinner for only a year, she

thought of the music she had previously enjoyed in Detroit.

Yvonne Gill-Davis is among a large number of followers of Brokensha and his sound, which is why he stayed in Detroit after originally planning to come here for only one year back in 1960.

At that time, the famous Australian Jazz Quintet, a popular modern jazz group that had recorded extensively in the 1950s for Bethlehem Records, had broken up after about seven years of recording and touring. Brokensha went back to New York, where he received an offer to come to Detroit and WXYZ-TV to play in the Soopy Sales late-night TV show studio orchestra. He has been a Detroit resident ever since.

Recently, Brokensha, his wife and their two daughters were vacationing "away from the maddening crowd" and the pressures of industry deadlines in their retreat in Sarasota, Fla. When he answered his phone and cheerfully agreed to an interview, his charming Australian accent came through with the gusto befitting a man who enjoys life. "It's the car season now in Detroit," he said. "You know what it is like in Detroit. I have some writing to do and this is a quiet place to do it."

BROKENSHA MUSICAL Services Inc. was formed some years back to handle the various Brokensha enterprises. These include the production of music for industrial motion pictures

and car introduction shows. "In Detroit, we are all car oriented," he said. "It is a big industry. That's really what we have been doing, a lot of the music for industry films and the music for business meetings."

With a nucleus of musicians and talented people in Detroit, the Brokensha company produces whatever music is required for various radio and TV commercials. "We do anything from a quartet to a 30-piece orchestra. The music could be any type from straight-out classical to country and western."

They also go wherever they are needed to produce live music for business meetings. This could take Brokensha in any week to New York, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles or Las Vegas. "The only reason I'm able to work this job at Tweeny's is that it will be on the weekends, and I stand a fighting chance of getting back into town," he said. "The phone rings for me and the next thing I know I'm on a plane flying somewhere."

This year he has been involved in providing music for Ford, Lincoln-Mercury, American Motors, Fiat, Volvo and Peugeot. He explained that, "The marketing companies, like Wilding or Visual Services, are hired to introduce a car or let the sales staff know of a new product or approach to selling a car. Then they call us in to do the music side of it."

BROKENSHA SAID that the writing

of the music is the easiest part in such an arrangement. "After the writing comes the hard part. Figuring out who should sing and who shouldn't, and who will be the talent on the recording. Then a decision has to be made about where it should be recorded and in what studio. We usually package the whole thing for a production company."

Until Brokensha came to Detroit, he did not know how much of a part music played in the marketing of cars and other products. He believes that "Detroit advertising and musical people invented many of the merchandising techniques that rely on music."

While he would prefer to play jazz exclusively, he has found some compensations in commercial ventures. "The good thing is that we are involved with some of the most qualified people in the musical business. You may be hired to sell an automobile, but you can work with the best musicians, singers and the music has to be current."

"It is most satisfying that you work with the best recording people and the best recording techniques. And you go where they are. If you decide that the best music for an ad is going to be a stone disco thing, then you go to the West Coast to do it," he said.

John Joseph Brokensha was born in Nailsworth, Adelaide, South Australia, in 1926. His father was a professional

musician, and as a child Jack had a xylophone act of radio and in vaudeville. By 1942, he was performing with the Australian Symphony Orchestra, and after a stint in the Air Force had his first musical group which toured the country doing concerts and broadcasts. That ended in 1953 when his group was reformed and called, quite naturally, the Australian Jazz Quintet.

"I was in the Australian Jazz Quintet from beginning to end," he said. "It was really an extension of a group we had in Australia. It was when we came to the United States that we called it the Australian Jazz Quintet."

"We TRAVELED and made a bunch of albums and did all the things you're supposed to do. Then we went back to do a concert tour in Australia in 1959, and the group broke up when a couple of the guys quit to get married."

"We had been traveling for seven years and that was a long time. It was time to quit that sort of life. I went back to New York and got the offer to come to Detroit. I thought I'd rather do that than form another group and go back on the road."

After settling in Detroit, Brokensha began to play with the other well-known and respected jazz musicians in this area, such as Bess Bonnier. From 1965 to 1969 he had his own night club Jack Brokensha's — in an old two-story house near the Fisher Theater. Brokensha played the vibraphone in his club

with a group that included Bess Bonnier and singer Ursula Walker. Bess Bonnier was with him in the club from the time it opened to the night it closed, he said.

Commenting on the club, Brokensha said, "That was a nice thing to do and I enjoyed that very much. It remained nice up to the time the city became a little funny. We just couldn't do what we were doing any more."

"Now, you could probably do that again. But I'm involved with other things, and it would be difficult for me to go back to that."

While some things have changed for him, others haven't. This includes his musical style. "We do contemporary music of the day. Our particular style hasn't changed since we were playing in the 1950s. It's a style that will still be with us as long as people are blowing."

"I wouldn't call it bebop, but it is a melodic style of jazz that is rooted in the music of the '50s, when jazz was so big."

Since the 1950s, he has been constantly playing and listening to music of all kinds. "Gary Burton is the current, contemporary vibe player and he is doing some very interesting things. However, I have probably been more influenced by my eight years of playing at Motown, where I did all the mallet work for all those years behind all of their musicians and singers."

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