

# THE CAT'S MEOW



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## Larry Conger and the Roots of Jazz

**Lourie Center at Maxcy Gregg Park (just off Pickens near Blossom)**

**2:30-5:00 pm, Sunday, March 1, 2015**

No - No, I'm not implying that Larry was down in New Orleans in the 1900's. But there is a relatively close musical connection between Larry and early New Orleans jazz musicians. That link was Bunk Johnson. Bunk, an early New Orleans Cornetist, made his way to California in the early 1940's and was a big influence on the "California Revival". Dental problems and an over fondness for alcohol had derailed Bunk's musical career forcing him to spend a decade doing manual labor before being "rediscovered". What's more, alcohol was very likely the cause of his dental problems. He lost two front teeth in a fight one night.

If you are interested, here's a link with a lot more info on Johnson (<http://jazzhotbigstep.com/319412.html>). But the gist of the link is that two writers doing research for their book "Jazzmen", discovered that Johnson was still alive. In addition to getting oral history from Bunk, they, with help from others, managed to get him to a good dentist (Sidney Bechet's nephew) and bought him a new horn. That restarted Bunk's musical career.

The writers found Bunk to be a font of information on early New Orleans Musicians (it should be noted, however, that many believe Bunk over-emphasized his own contributions). Nonetheless, Bunk did offer a lot of information on the early days in New Orleans, information that was not available from other sources. More importantly, he was a huge influence on San Francisco area musicians, especially members of the "Yerba Buena Jazz Band". And one of the musicians in that band was Turk Murphy, the band leader who gave Larry his big break.

If you are familiar with the concept "Six Degrees of Separation", we have a connection between Larry and the most famous of the early New Orleans Cornetists, Buddy Bolden, with just two or three degrees of separation.

In my early days exploring jazz, I checked out the Jazz section of every record shop I visited. I found some '78 records featuring Bunk that left me singularly unimpressed. But the recordings had lots of reverb and I've never liked that in a recording or a venue. Perhaps more importantly, the recordings were very late in Bunk's career and very early in my exploration of jazz. But some do say that Bunk provided the best indication of the sound you might have heard from the legendary Buddy Bolden.

**THE CAROLINA JAZZ SOCIETY** was founded in 1958 to enjoy Dixieland Jazz, one of America's original art forms.  
Concerts are \$10 for non-members, \$5 for members, free for Patrons and young people under 18.

### **Bunk Johnson (continued)**

We don't know what Bolden sounded like because he never recorded anything (note: some early jazz musicians refused to record fearing that it would make it too easy for young musicians to copy their style). And some, musicians even played with a handkerchief over their hand so that others couldn't see their fingering. But perhaps of more significance, recording studios were located primarily in New York, Chicago & California, not in New Orleans.

### **The Internet**

I continue to be amazed at the internet and the information available. I can't always trust my memory and I use the internet a lot when I start a newsletter. In the course of writing this, I googled "Buddy Bolden" and was shocked to find that he suffered an episode of schizophrenia when he was about 30. He spent the rest of his life in an asylum (the term used for a mental institution in those days). But Bolden's influence lives on. He was known for his improvisation and for his very powerful cornet. It was said that you could hear his horn all the way across Lake Pontchartrain. And Larry carries on that tradition. You can hear his horn in the far reaches of the room with no need for amplification.

### **Thank You Jack Sutherland!!!!**

**There is a big reason for saying "Thank You". Jack left a substantial bequest (several thousand dollars) to the Carolina Jazz Society (Jack also made a substantial bequest to the SC Governor's School for the Performing Arts).** The letter from the attorney saying Jack left money to the club was a huge surprise.

Jack was a really nice guy, a very good businessman and a good friend. I got to know him at a different level when we travelled to some concerts and to some lectures on Jazz. Jack lived in Rock Hill and heard about the Carolina Jazz Society from club members living in the Charlotte Area (we had a large contingent who used to come down to every concert back then). Jack immediately joined the club and gradually began to sit in. Then, after Joe King became incapacitated, Jack played more and more, eventually becoming our regular trombonist. Here's a bit I wrote in '98.

The big man will bring his trombone down from Tega Cay and call the tunes as the house band blasts into the new year. Jack plays a distinctive, powerful trombone that can really drive the group when he starts blowing riffs. Jack got his start in Wisconsin and still gets together with his old college band. He played with the Riverboat Rascals in Milwaukee before moving south. In this area, he fronts the Dixie Kix with musicians drawn from the Carolinas and Virginia. And he jams with the Charlotte group (3rd Sunday 6-9pm at the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge, 1201 Hawthorne Rd). Of course, he has been heard for many years, first as an occasional guest and now as a regular with our guys. Jack likes the other end of the horn also. He and his wife, Bunny, are regulars on the festival/cruise circuit. They say they've met some wonderful musicians and some wonderful people (often but not always one and the same) through both facets.

We need to be good stewards of the money and you might start thinking about how best to use it. My recommendation will be for the board to choose the two best options and to place them before the members for a vote.

Red Smith, Editor