

Dave Napier in Profile

by Harry Vulgamore

If you wind up in Branson, Missouri, stop by the Mickey Gilley Theatre, listen to the Les Brown Orchestra led by Les Brown Jr., and say hello to Dave Napier. He lives in Branson, plays baritone sax six days a week and still goes on the road with the band. But, let's start at the beginning.

Dave was born on Staten Island, New York and started playing at Tottenville High School. He also took private lessons from **Eddy Bischof**. "He was a trumpet player, who taught me to read music quite well, but he didn't know much about saxophone fundamentals, so that was something I had to pick up later."

Dave attended the prestigious Juilliard School at the tender age of 16. The Korean War was over and thousands of veterans, including musicians, flocked to colleges on the GI Bill. Dave found himself in classes with guys who were not only more mature, but had a lot of musical experience under their belt. Intimidating for a young teen. Dave says; "I left with a mutual agreement, 'you leave and we won't throw you out.'" Keep in mind, this is Dave's sense of humor.

At Juilliard he studied with **Jimmy Abato**. When Dave was leaving he told Abato he was joining the Air Force. Abato said, "Congratulations, you'll make a fine pilot." The two reunited when the NORAD Band played Carnegie Hall and Abato was a guest artist.

In Basic Training, Dave's Training Instructor found his sax mouthpiece in his footlocker and asked if he wanted to audition for the band. Until this point he could have been assigned to any field in the Air Force. After the Korean War, many musicians left the service and the band career field needed replacements, so TI's were asked to be on the lookout for musicians. After Basic, Dave was assigned to Bryan AFB, Texas. Then he was off to Japan for two years under **Bob Bunton**. "I met some great guys there: **Jim Williams, Chuck Jones and Paul Galloway**. I also made the switch to baritone sax and continued to learn."

He rotated back to Richards-Gebaur AFB, Missouri in 1958. Dave met his

bride to be, Marjorie Shehan, in Kansas City where she was working her way through college as a waitress. She told me, "Dave used to kill time in the restaurant where I worked while he waited for a friend at a nearby skating rink, and the romance progressed from there." Dave and Marj were married in 1959. He was proud that **Darrell Reed** drove from Colorado Springs to Kansas City to be his best man. Marj later earned degrees in psychology and nursing and worked as a neo-natal nurse in Las Vegas for many years.

After an aborted early-out where he couldn't find work in New York City, **Bob Hilton** called to tell him the NORAD Band was forming and asked if he wanted to come back. He spent five years at NORAD and tells me, "More things happened there than anywhere else. There were the trips to El Paso in my old Caddie. Another time on the bus I remember **Phil Wilson** wrote *Basically Blues* on the way back to Colorado Springs."

Phil Wilson, now teaching at the Berklee School of Music in Boston tells me, "I remember at Kirtland AFB we played a dance at the officers club and found ourselves on a very smooth highway (the runway)--unusual for a quick drive back to our quarters--only to find the AP's flashing squad cars who judiciously escorted us to our barracks. I don't remember if it was **Tom Pomeroy** or Dave driving that night."

Dave remembers when the band was booked into an ancient, dusty, open bay barracks at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar. "There wasn't a place to hang clothes except for one rusty nail. We agreed to assign the nail to **Nick Rossi** because he was the ranking member of the Commanders.

"The NORAD Band was where I really learned to play, with all the TV gigs, national exposure, and the sheer volume of performances. All those Army jazz players! **Paul Fontaine, Bob Jenkins, Jimmy Trimble, Bill Prince, Bobby Shew** and **Phil Wilson**. And the Canadians, **Ken Graydon** and **Bobby Herriot**. Of course the Air Force also had

its share. **Bill Barbier, Ray DeWitt, Gene Miller, Dick Norcross, Eugene Sylvester** and **Bob Hilton** were all great musicians. I would have never gotten on the Note (Airmen of Note) but for NORAD. Arrangements by **Art Wiggins**, **Tom Pomeroy** and **Phil Wilson**. Wow!

"In 1963, I was assigned to Panama. We didn't want to go overseas until our daughter was older, so I put in for the Band School in D.C. After 1 ½ months at the school, **Frank Denton**, the bari sax man on the *Airmen of Note* got out and **John Osiecki**, the leader, asked me to fill in for an upcoming recording session."

Dave spent the next 13 years on the band, becoming the leader in 1974. As leader he recalls jazz festivals, college performances and recording sessions. "**Sarah Vaughan** stands out, but so do **Clark Terry, Sue Raney** and **Joe Williams**. As always, the *Airmen of Note* had great players: **Scott Waller, Ernie Hensley** and **Rick Whitehead**. **Dave Steinmeyer** was the best player I've ever worked with, but I really could call on almost anyone when it came to featuring soloists. I've always listened to **Basie** and I swear **Don Grossi** played just like **Marshall Royal**. We were also blessed with great arrangers: **Sammy Nestico, Paul Kelley, Kim Richmond, Roger Hogan** and **Mike Crotty**.

"I was very lucky to have served under **Arnald Gabriel**. In my 50 years in music, I've never met a better person or leader." Dave retired from the Air Force in 1976 and moved to Las Vegas.

"After a time playing casuals, a call came in 1977 from Caesars Palace to play bari in their house band." Dave was in the Caesars Band for 18 years and played all



Dave Napier: Leader, Airman of Note, 1975