

Tenorman Mel Dalton

"Sideman Extraordinaire"

"Sideman" is defined as any member of a band or musical group other than the leader. For Mel Dalton, this was always a role of choice, not to be equated with such sayings as "always a bridesmaid, never a bride." Wedded to making music, not making deals, his tone and talent on the tenor saxophone has kept him in demand with a diversity of bands and combos for over 50 years.

Born in Pittsburgh on June 28, 1931, Mel attended Westinghouse High School along with such future jazz stars as Stanley Turrentine, Ahmad Jamal, Ray Brown, Earl Garner and Art Blakey. He remembers a 14 year old Billy Strayhorn writing a rather dissonant little number called "Lush Life." His first instrument was the clarinet, chosen at age 12. His father played piano and guitar, sister Martine sang and Mel wanted to play in a concert orchestra.

After graduation in 1950, Mel enlisted in the Army, serving in Korea before being stationed close to New York City in 1953, where he had ample opportunity to check out the 52nd Street jazz scene, then at its apex. Having met and married a lovely lady from Youngstown, Ohio, who was attending nursing college at Columbus, Mel switched from clarinet and alto to the more in-demand tenor sax, joined Musicians Local 802, and quickly found his niche as husband to Jean and sideman in a big band.

Paul Williams, baritone saxman from Detroit, had a monster R & B hit, "Do the Hucklebuck," with his big band. The band rocked the famous Apollo Theater in Harlem and traveled everywhere. In 1956 Mel switched to Sil Austin's band (father of vocalist Patty Austin), where his tenor doubled the trumpet melody of Howard McGee to great effect. In 1959 he was in the front line of the Lloyd Price jazz band, appearing twice on the Ed Sullivan show with Price's popular vocals on "Lawdy Miss Clawdy" and "Personality."

The call to come to Grand Rapids came in 1960 from a former Pittsburgh friend, pianist/organist Doug Cook, to join a steady gig at the Blue Note on South Division. With a growing family (two daughters, with a third to be born in Grand Rapids) and Jean's moveable skills as an operating room scrub nurse, Doug sold them on Grand Rapids as

a good place for work, owning a home, and educating the girls. It sounded like the right career move.

The Doug Cook band featured Lloyd Brown on drums at that time (a friend for the next 42 years, Lloyd passed away 3 months ago), and future boxer Buster Mathis at the door as bouncer. Throughout the '60s and early '70s Mel worked with Doug's groups, the Count Fisher band and others throughout Michigan. All the white-owned clubs wanted black bands at that time. Meanwhile, Mel worked the "graveyard" shift at Guardsman Chemical (midnight to 8 a.m., sometimes paying a sub to cover the first two hours of his shift before dashing from a gig to the "regular" job!

The '70s brought the advent of the Beatles and white R & B groups to the forefront. Integration killed a lot of black clubs; the gigs for Lloyd Brown's big band at resorts like Idlewild dried up; but there were always weekend gigs with "Popeye" at the Foxhead Inn in Ada or a big band headed by Al Mondaro at the Morton House. The Biermeister,

next door to the now reopened Wealthy Theater, served up jazz five nights with local and regional combos, becoming a showcase for another tenorman, Jimmy Forrest, when he was in town. Mondaro's band—16 pieces including Mel—played for all the conventions at the Amway Ambassador Ballroom,

Below: Claude Black on piano, Mel, Dan Heines, Carter Hatfield trumpet, Randy Marsh, drums, Jeff Halsey, bass.



and with Doug Cook's group he was featured soloist at the Inner Circle Lounge off the lobby. The beat went on—always!

Mel and Jean had bought a home in St. Croix after a vacation visit in 1975, using the duplex as income property until they both took early retirement and moved there in 1985. Lead clarinetist Jimmy Hamilton from the Duke Ellington Orchestra had also "retired" there and Mel joined his group playing at the exclusive Carambola Resort. Daughter Barbara, working for the Customs Department, shared the duplex. St. Croix was a paradise; friends from Michigan visited and left envying the Daltons their new life style—which blew away in the hurricane of 1989!

The storm that ravaged the island for an endless 12 hours swept away a houseful of possessions while Jean and Mel huddled in their daughter's lower level apartment. President Bush had to send in the 82nd Airborne to protect U.S. citizens from native gangs using the turmoil as an opportunity to ravage and murder. Daughters Fran and Martine chartered a plane in Miami to rescue their parents. Mel boarded with his sax and a suitcase; most momentos of his already 40-year career were literally "gone with the wind."

Returning to Grand Rapids, it was as if his five year absence never happened. Lloyd Brown's band welcomed him back. Gigs



were plentiful; Mother's Lounge on Plainfield Ave.; the Imperial House; a new group aptly named "New Connections" headed by Dr. John Hair on trombone was much in demand, especially at Dr. J's Coffee House. The '90s groups found audiences enjoying a return to the standards that always had

a dynamic swing in the hands of this veteran sideman. An added enjoyment came in working with pianist Dick Reynolds in classrooms throughout the area, bringing the West Michigan Jazz Society's "Jazz in the Schools" program to middle school students. Mel's advice to them: "Go to college; learn to read [the music]; and get a degree."

Meanwhile, whether at private parties, club gigs, or blowing into the wind at our annual "Celebration on the Grand" festivals....there is no such thing as "retirement" for this extraordinary sideman!



Reservation form – Must be received by Thurs., May 30th

Buffet Menu

Focaccia crusted chicken
Roasted vegetable
lasagna
House salad
Grilled vegetable and
orzo salad
Garlic bread sticks

Name _____

Address _____

City/Zip _____ Phone _____

No. of reservations _____ x \$25 = _____

Make check payable to: West Michigan Jazz Society

Mail to:

304 Paris S.E.
Grand Rapids, MI 49503

Tables of 10.

Call 458-0125 for special seating arrangements.



DALTON — Merritt Alfred Dalton

blew his first note on June 28, 1931 and whispered his last one on April 12, 2008. Known in the music world as "Mel" and "The Silver Fox", he was born in Pittsburgh, PA to James and Julia Dalton. Mel was an extraordinary musician celebrated for his ability on the saxophone, but capable of playing any woodwind instrument. Mel's career started in junior high school when he formed a band with Stanley Turrentine, Dakota Staten and Ahmad Jamal. Mel performed internationally as well as at the Apollo Theater in New York City and on the Ed Sullivan Show, often with well-known jazz greats like Dizzy Gillespie, Ray Charles, Nancy Wilson, Lloyd Price, Art Blakey and Sil Austin. He has opened for various musical greats in our own venue of DeVos Performance Hall. Mel served his country during the Korean Conflict and after being honorably discharged from the US Army, Mel married his sweetheart, Jeanne Audrey Monroe. Mel moved from New York to Grand Rapids, MI to accept an offer to play with the Doug Cook Band at the Blue Note nightclub in 1959. With two daughters and a third on the way, Mel decided it would be a good gig for raising a family. Along with that, he worked for Guardsmen Chemical until his retirement in 1985. He continued playing until illness overcame him this past December. He was preceded in death by his parents. Mel leaves his wife, Jeanne and their daughters, Frances June Dalton, Barbara Dalton-Skanes, and Martine Julia Dalton. Also mourning Mel's passing are his two brothers, James (Glonda) Dalton and Cabel Poindexter; one sister, Martine Rita Dalton; three grandchildren, Brianna Dalton Rodriguez, Bailey Jeanne Dalton and Brandi Jeanne Skanes; one great grandchild, Julian Dalton Aponte-Rodriguez; special friend, Doug Cook; and a host of nieces, nephews and loving friends. His funeral Mass will occur on Thursday, April 17 at 11 a.m. at St. Mary Magdalen Church, 1213 - 52nd St. SE, Kentwood. Visitation will be Wednesday, April 16 from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. and the musical visitation will begin at 8 p.m. until 9 p.m. with a rosary immediately following at the Ivy K. Gillespie Moody Memorial Chapel, 1865 Eastern Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Grand Rapids Federation of Musicians, Local 56.