



THE CHURCH OF **BYRON STRIPLING**

AFTER 20 YEARS OF TOURING THE COUNTRY WITH JAZZ GREATS LIKE DIZZY GILLESPIE, LIONEL HAMPTON AND CLARK TERRY, GEORGIA-BORN TRUMPETER BYRON STRIPLING WAS OFFERED A GIG HE COULDN'T REFUSE: ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE COLUMBUS JAZZ ORCHESTRA. **HE'S THROWN OUT THE REPERTOIRE MODEL, COLLABORATED WITH LOCAL ARTS GROUPS AND RECRUITED SOME OF THE BIGGEST NAMES IN JAZZ FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY, SOLIDIFYING COLUMBUS' PLACE AS A BONA FIDE JAZZ DESTINATION.**



BY **ANTHONY DOMINIC**
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THE HOUSE LIGHTS DIM, A SPOTLIGHT FLICKERS AND BYRON STRIPLING STRIDES TO THE CENTER OF THE SOUTHERN THEATRE STAGE.

Trumpet in hand, he waves a lone bead of sweat from his brow and flattens the fat maroon tie tucked inside his pinstripe jacket. Seventeen pairs of eager eyes are on Stripling, waiting for his cue, his first move. Hundreds more gaze on from the darkened house.

The Columbus Jazz Orchestra isn't 30 minutes into "Trumpet Summit," the four-night finale of its 41st season, and the excitement inside the 118-year-old Downtown theater is palpable. Modern trumpet maestro Sean Jones, the night's guest artist, is readying backstage. The lofty set list promises the best from Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and Lester Young, to name just a few. And many inside the packed theater are already freely clapping and yipping at solos and crescendos—a good sign, Stripling knows. You get the sense the Southern was built, brick by brick, for nights like this.

Stripling, now in the spotlight, is feeling first-night nerves. But you'd never tell by his easy gait or relaxed brown eyes. "Byron lives on the stage," says his wife, Alexis, who's watched her husband's evolution from a soloist in New York City to the leader of Columbus' big band. "In some ways, he's most comfortable there. He has this ability to have an audience in the palm of his hand." The truth is, Stripling must be relaxed. He must be confident. If the artistic director of the band doesn't believe in the program, the musicians, the audience and, most importantly, himself, he can't expect anyone else to.

But there's no shortage of faith in Columbus jazz. It's one of the reasons Stripling was drawn to the city more than a decade ago. For years, as a touring artist, he watched more and more city big bands cut performances, musicians or even shutter altogether. He saw Columbus' deeply endowed Jazz Arts Group—the oldest not-for-profit organization in the country devoted to promoting jazz—as a port in the storm.

Since 2002, Stripling and the CJO have met challenges faced by big bands everywhere: aging audiences, tired repertoires and diminishing relevance in a digital age when everything, especially music, is brought to us—not the other way around. But the man's

boundless charisma, warm voice and sharp trumpeting carry weight. He draws top soloists from around the country, people who aren't just imitators but who have their own voices, like guitarist John Pizzarelli, clarinetist Ken Peplowski and, on this warm April night, trumpeter Sean Jones. He threw out the repertoire model and instead builds programs that make sense. If that means sprinkling James Taylor, Billy Joel or Pharrell Williams into a set list, so be it.

"That's one of the things that has helped us—well, it's upset some people," Stripling says with a laugh. "But if you like Billy Joel, that's cool with me. I'd love to force you to like Duke Ellington. You don't have to. But if I can get you in the hall, play you Billy Joel and put Duke Ellington in it, I've won."

His doctrine is simple, but progressive and effective. It's why, since 2006, the band performs four shows at the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium every summer. It's why the CJO saw record attendance during the 2008 recession. It's why the Southern is brimming on this night.

Stripling, standing tall at center stage, flashes a small smile and, at last, raises his trumpet. The band shadows him, readying their instruments in tandem—saxophones, trumpets, trombones, bass, piano, drums. Stripling closes his eyes and blows, the opening notes of "You Made Me Love You (I Didn't Want to Do It)" soaring high into the theater's golden proscenium. It's the instrumental rendition of the century-old tune, in the style of Harry James. And like James, Stripling's wailing tone is bright and pitch-perfect.

STRIPLING WAS BORN IN A SWELTERING SUMMER, AUG. 20, 1961, IN DECATUR, GEORGIA.

But he never thought of the Atlanta suburb as home. By the time he was 5, his father, a classical singer, was on the move, attending grad school at the University of Kentucky and chasing jobs as a gospel choir director in Missouri, Minnesota and Colorado. At a young age, Stripling learned to live on the road. And it was in his father's Baptist churches in St. Louis and in Boulder, Colorado, where he first witnessed the power of music.

"I can never discount the value of seeing people, disenfranchised, come together," he says. "And the songs they sang were so important; they uplifted and moved them. Old Negro spirituals like 'Move On Up a Little Higher,' 'Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around' and 'Everybody Talkin' 'Bout Heaven Ain't Goin' There.'"

In those days, Stripling remembers his father coming home from work exhausted, dropping the needle on a record and collapsing in his chair—letting the music carry him somewhere far away. In the mornings, his father always listened to classical music. But in the evenings, it was jazz. It was Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie. It was Duke Ellington and Clark Terry. By the time Stripling was 11, he was begging for a trumpet. He wanted to be just like the players he heard every night on the records. He wanted to uplift others, like he had seen firsthand in church. His dad was charmed by the notion, and so he bought his son his first trumpet.

Stripling took naturally to the instrument. By the time he graduated high school, he had enrolled at the prestigious Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. But in his freshman year, he received Ds in almost every class. Stripling had no interest in textbooks; he preferred to read about Louis Armstrong and Count Basie. He didn't want to sit in class; he wanted to practice and listen to records.


"In the classroom, for me, nothing happened there," he says, shaking his head. "The practical application of what I was doing took place when the trumpet was on my lips, when I had some music in front of me. I didn't want to talk about it to anybody; I wanted to do it."

A sympathetic instructor picked up on Stripling's dilemma and allowed him to stow away in one of the school's soundproof practice rooms whenever he was feeling inspired—which was quite often. Almost daily, Stripling would take an armful of books, a tape recorder and his trumpet into one of the practice rooms, where he'd follow his own curriculum, he says.

Near the end of Stripling's freshman year, one of his heroes, Clark Terry, was scheduled to perform with the Eastman student jazz band. Stripling's excitement was unmatched. The first day of rehearsals, the band director, knowing Stripling had long admired Terry, suggested he pick up the famed trumpeter at his hotel across the street.

In his nervousness, Stripling arrived too early. After aimlessly pacing about the hotel lobby, he mustered the courage to call Terry's room.

"Mr. Terry?" Stripling said. "I'm downstairs waiting for you. Whenever you're ready, I'll walk you right over." Terry's casual reply



“IN MY 20S, I WAS JUST LIVING WITH MY PARENTS, BUT I WAS ALWAYS ON THE ROAD, SO I WAS NEVER THERE. I WAS PROBABLY THERE THREE WEEKS A YEAR. SO I CALLED HOME WHERE MY RECORDS WERE, YOU DIG? MY RECORDS WERE AT MY PARENTS’ HOUSE. WHEN MY RECORDS WENT TO NEW YORK—YOU SEE? **WHERE THE RECORDS ARE, YOU ARE.**”

caught the 19-year-old off guard: "I'm not quite ready; why don't you come up?"

When he got to the room, Terry let him right in. He was still getting dressed. "Wow, he puts on his pants like I do," Stripling remembers thinking. "He was the perfect person to meet, very loving, very caring, no airs about him."

In the following days, Stripling watched Terry's every move, analyzed every note he played. He had no idea Terry was watching him, too.

The night after the performance, before Terry left the building, he pulled Stripling aside. In a few months, Terry would be patching together a small road band of young musicians. He was wowed by Stripling's playing and wanted him onboard. As a formality, Terry asked for a performance tape and a resume by mail, but, as long as Stripling was game, his spot in the band was guaranteed.

Months later, one night in late winter of Stripling's sophomore year, there was a knock at his dorm room door. He had a phone call waiting, and it sounded urgent. Stripling rushed down the hallway to the dorm's lone communal phone to hear Terry's voice on the other end.

"Hey, B-Ron," Terry said. "Got that tape. We love ya! We're going to Europe for six weeks, taking a week off then doing three more in the States. Still down?"

Stripling nearly dropped the receiver.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm down," he replied reassuringly. "Just give me a second to call my parents. Check in, you know?"

Stripling was playing it cool with Terry, but he hadn't the slightest idea how his mother and father would take the news. Sure, his dad loved Terry's music, but this would mean missing more than two months of school. With a deep breath, he dialed home.

As he expected, his parents didn't take the news lightly. They were convinced he'd never go back to Eastman if he left.

"We're going to talk about it and give you a call back," his dad said, his voice cold.

Stripling walked up and down the hallway waiting for the phone to ring for what felt like hours, playing out every possible scenario in his head. His heart was pounding. How could he call back Terry with a "no"?

Brrnnnnng, brrnnnnng.

He pounced on the receiver. It was his mother.

"Well?"

"Well, what if we told you that you couldn't go?" she asked plainly.

Stripling paused. Couldn't go? He blurted the first response that came to mind.

"I'd go anyway."

Silence. Silence forever.

"That's what we figured," she, at last, chimed in. Her tone was different. It sounded as if she were smiling. "So you have our blessing. Go!"

TOURING WITH TERRY WAS LIFE-CHANGING FOR 20-YEAR-OLD STRIPLING.

Every night, he had the opportunity to play alongside and learn from the trumpeter he had first discovered with his father in their Boulder living room.

After the tour, Stripling returned to Eastman reinvigorated, but he would never complete his degree.

In 1983, when he was a senior, he received another fateful phone call. This time, it was pianist and bandleader Lionel Hampton. Terry, aware Stripling was worried about his job prospects after graduation, had secured a spot for Stripling in Hampton's touring band.

"Clark said all these things about me that weren't true," Stripling says, laughing. "He told Lionel I could play higher than Cat Anderson—a high-note-playing trumpeter in Duke Ellington's band. I called him up and



said, 'Clark, did you tell Lionel Hampton I could play higher than Cat Anderson?' He said, 'Yeah, B-Ron!' And I said, 'You know I can't play higher than Cat Anderson.' And he said, 'I know that, but he'll never know the difference. Just play a lot of high notes, man.'"

The catch: Hampton's tour started just a few weeks later, meaning Stripling, if he joined, would have to forgo the rest of his senior year. But the way he saw it, he went to school to get a job—and this was a job. What value would the degree have, anyway, if he wasn't out there doing what he had dreamed about doing since he was 11? Stripling left Eastman (much to his parent's chagrin, at the time) and never looked back. For the next decade, he performed with Hampton, Woody Herman, the Count Basie



Top: Trumpeters Red Rodney, Claudio Roditi, Byron Stripling, Clark Terry and Roy Hargrove; Bottom: Trumpeters Claudio Roditi, Roy Hargrove, Byron Stripling, Harry "Sweets" Edison and Freddie Hubbard; Opposite Page: Byron Stripling leads rehearsal with the Columbus Jazz Orchestra at the Southern Theatre.

“I WAS GOING TO AUDITION FOR THIS JOB, AND MY DAD TOLD ME, ‘YOU JUST GOTTA BE THE BEST GUY.’ IF THEY DENY YOU, SCREW THEM BECAUSE YOU DON’T NEED TO BE THERE ANYWAY. WHATEVER YOU DECIDE TO DO, JUST GO AHEAD AND BE THE BEST AT IT. WORK YOUR ASS OFF. BE SO GREAT, HE USED TO SAY, THAT THEY CAN’T DENY YOU. YOU’RE UNDENIABLE. I TRIED TO STICK WITH THAT AS MY STANDARD.”



ter) and the Boston Pops Orchestra (led by John Williams).

“I’m so fortunate because I caught the tail of the big band era,” Stripling says. “As I would play with these guys, these leaders, they would pass away. That’s one of the great things I’m able to do now. It’s so important for me to pass that on, because I’m not going to be here forever, either.”

The work rarely relented, as Stripling made connection after connection. With each gig, his playing improved, and his reputation grew.

In 1987, Stripling was offered the biggest gig of his young career: portraying Louis Armstrong in the traveling musical “Satchmo: America’s Musical Legend.” After a worldwide search, producer Kenneth Feld and choreographer Maurice Hines decided no one could

emulate Armstrong’s singing, playing or stage presence better than Stripling.

The show toured the country for five months. Those months were a turning point in Stripling’s career. The 26-year-old showed the performing arts world he was more than just a skilled trumpeter; he was an entertainer.

In 1990, Stripling, by then living in New York City, got a phone call from a Ray Eubanks in Columbus, Ohio. Eubanks was planning a Louis Armstrong-themed show for his Columbus Jazz Orchestra, and Stripling’s name was at the top of his short list for guest artists. Stripling agreed to do the show, and when he arrived, the band sounded even better than he had anticipated.

Right away, Stripling was a “very big presence” on stage, recalls Bob Breithaupt, the

CJO’s drummer and a key player in Columbus’ homegrown jazz scene since the early 1970s.

“He and I hit it off well,” Breithaupt says. “Byron was a very personable and very gregarious guy. I think he was very confident on stage but eager to learn.”

Nine years later, Eubanks asked Stripling back for another show, this time with ulterior motives.

“We got a new venue,” Stripling recalls Eubanks’ pitch over the phone. “A place called the Southern Theatre. You’re going to like it.”

When Stripling walked into the newly renovated East Main Street theater for the first time, he didn’t like it. He loved it.

During a moment of downtime at rehearsal, Eubanks tugged at Stripling’s coat. Stripling followed him off stage.

"I'm thinking of cutting out here soon," Eubanks said, his voice low. "You might be a good leader for this. Send in your stuff. It'll be a strenuous process, but you should check it out."

Breithaupt, who was executive director of the Jazz Arts Group (the CJO's parent organization) upon Eubanks' retirement in 2002 until 2012, recalls many discussions about the prospect of courting Stripling to be artistic director of the band.

"Some people don't like change, but we knew that we needed to have a big personality because Ray had established a big presence," he says. "The director had to be a strong leader, had to understand all the elements of artistically leading an ensemble, how to communicate with the audience, and developing concepts for shows. And Byron has that."

After a series of interviews and guest conducting gigs, Stripling was named the new artistic director of the CJO in 2002—"the year everything changed" for Columbus jazz, Breithaupt says.

"I came in [as executive director], Byron came in and Ray split—this was the guy who founded JAG in 1973," he says. "Suddenly it was, like, 'OK, guys, it's your show now.'"

Stripling planned to commute between Columbus and New York, where and he and Alexis, a former Broadway dancer, were living with their two daughters. (This sort of long-distance arrangement is common among big band directors.) But every day Stripling spent in Columbus, the city grew on him. Back in New York, he was watching ensembles like the Carnegie Hall Jazz Band shutter. Yet the CJO was playing dozens of a gigs a year. Their number of seasonal subscribers continued to grow. The forecast in Columbus was promising—especially with what Stripling had planned for the seasons to come—so he and his family moved to Westerville in 2004.

"Coming from the mayhem of New York, especially after 9/11, it just seemed easier," Alexis says of Columbus. "The other thing is we both realized we could potentially be part of a city in the throes of evolving. Not another NYC or Chicago. Not a made city. Columbus was just creating itself."

THE LAST DECADE HAS NOT ONLY SEEN A PERIOD OF TRANSITION FOR THE JAZZ ARTS GROUP, BUT FOR ITS AUDIENCE, TOO.

The core of the CJO subscriber base—many had followed the organization since its inception in 1973—were aging and attending fewer shows. As the new director, Stripling was responsible for solidifying the base while aiming to attract younger, prospective jazz fans between the ages of 18 and 34.

He started by shaking up programming. Similar to Eubanks, Stripling builds shows

around themes—"Trumpet Summit," "A Night at the Movies," "Come Together: From Gershwin to The Beatles." These are loose templates he can tailor to guest artists, band musicians and audiences of varied tastes.

"If it's good music, I bring it in," he says. "As long as I stay true to the principal ethic of jazz: improvisation and spontaneity. If I hear great jazz improvisation within the context of pop, country and western, what's the matter with that?"

In 2004, Stripling paid homage to his gospel roots with "Seven Steps to Heaven." It was the first time the CJO fused gospel and jazz, and the show earned the Greater Columbus Arts Council's Artistic Excellence Award of the year.

"Gospel's just jazz," Stripling says. "It's the same thing. When you hear Aretha Franklin singing her greatest hits, you're really just hearing someone who sings gospel. Ray Charles' singing 'Oh, Georgia'? You're taking out 'oh, lord' and putting in 'oh, baby.'"

In 2005, the CJO invited Columbus College of Art and Design students into the Southern Theatre for "Art of the Big Band." During the band's 90-minute set, CCAD students painted freely, using the live music as their inspiration. After the show, concert-goers, unprompted, started buying finished paintings from the students.

"All these people said, 'That's the most ridiculous thing ever. This is going to be horrible.' You hear the whispering," Stripling says of the CCAD collaboration, smiling. "Yet nobody anticipated people would want to be buying the kids' paintings. It was a win for everybody."

Stripling's ambitious programming helped the Jazz Arts Group to win The Columbus Foundation Award in 2011, becoming the first performing arts organization to do so. (Since 1986, the award has recognized non-profits that bolster the quality of life in Central Ohio.) With it came a grant for \$25,000.

Under Stripling's leadership, the CJO now has the largest jazz orchestra subscription base in the country, at more than 2,000 subscribers.

"Our performance schedule here in Columbus is actually larger than that at Lincoln Center [in New York City]," he says. "I'm happy to say we do four performances [per show]. Nobody else is doing that. Just last week I performed with the Denver Jazz Orchestra, and it was one night. Friday night."

Despite their accomplishments, Stripling and the CJO still face one threat that he's convinced will never wane: relevance. He believes in the programming and the musicians because these are variables within his control. The band can practice harder. The programs can be better. The challenge of

getting people out of their homes and into the Southern Theatre is what keeps him up at night. As he sees it, he's battling Netflix and YouTube.

When the CJO puts on a show, it must exceed expectations. It's not a club gig, where, if the music's lousy, you blew \$5. When tickets are \$40, \$50 or \$60, if you don't like what you hear, you're not coming back. This is why Stripling continues to collaborate with organizations like BalletMet and the Columbus Gay Men's Chorus. ("Maybe jazz isn't your thing, but ballet or the choir is," he says.) It's why he strives to deliver programming that is both artistic and familiar. He can never ask himself often enough: "How is what we're doing relevant to Columbus?"

"It's a constant challenge, the accessibility with entertainment and art," Breithaupt says. "But with [Byron's] attributes, he's confident, very sure of what he wants the end product to be and convey."

Stripling believes his battle for relevance is half-won thanks to the raw talent of the CJO. Because musicians like Bobby Floyd, Dwight Adams, Pete Mills and others choose to drop their anchors in Columbus. When they're not on stage at the Southern, many are touring, recording or teaching. For the CJO, jazz is a lifestyle, not a light-switch relationship.

"All I got to do is get you in the hall, and we'll make you tap your foot," Stripling says. "That's my gig. If I can make you tap your foot, if I can make you feel the music in your body, it'll be like an infection that goes through you, and there will be no cure for it. 'Cause you'll want it some more. Jazz is almost like sex. Once you get it, it's like, 'When we gonna do that again?'"

Stripling, too, spends much of the year traveling and performing as a soloist with big bands across the country. It keeps him sharp, he says. He couldn't imagine it any other way.

"When he's home, it's a special time," Alexis says. "He makes a real effort to make those moments happen—holidays, birthdays. But performing is the only thing we've known. We've never clocked in for any nine-to-five job since we've known each other. And it makes him happy, doing the thing he loves. He's always on, and once you're a performer, you're used to being on."

When asked to explain his drive, Stripling quotes philosopher William James: "I don't sing because I'm happy; I'm happy because I sing."

"There's something in us, and we got to get it out," he says. "All we play is the truth. And the truth feels good. When you finally peel off the onion skin, all the shit you're dealing with in your life, and you come to the truth, that's when it feels good. And that's jazz."



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