

"Any Rags, Any Jazz, Any Boppers Today?"

THAT well-known phrase introduces us to Arthur Pearce, alias Turntable, alias Cotton-Eyed Joe. It is extremely doubtful whether there has been or is anyone in New Zealand more interested in music than Arthur. Certainly there is no one who is more conversant with jazz, its history and its musicians. Jazz occupies his every spare moment.

His only other hobby centres around cricket, and that dates back to 1923 when Bert Oldfield invited Arthur and his father to Australia as his guests to watch the England-Australia matches. At the end of the series Arthur was presented with one of the cricket bats which had been used throughout and which had been autographed by every member of the Australian team.

Arthur has almost as many books on cricket as he has on jazz, but his one disappointment is that he has not met another person in this country who is both a keen jazz and cricket enthusiast. To show that this rather unusual marriage of interests is not so uncommon he quotes the following: English trumpet star, Humphrey Lyttleton, is a fine cricketer. Don Bradman was a jazz pianist of sorts and early in his career, when on an English tour, he took time out to record for one of the major labels.

Arthur was first introduced to jazz at school, where he attended dancing classes. The teacher played as dance music the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, which was then available on Columbia Black Label 12-inch 78s. All the students danced comfortably and easily to this, completely unaware that they were hearing some of the finest jazz on record and proving that jazz was for dancing.

Jazz soon had a fan in Pearce, and as he grew more discriminating a preference arose for the Original Dixieland Jazz Band and the Duke. In fact, Arthur still remembers his initial thrill when introduced to Ellington's piano and orchestra. Radio work began in the mid-30's with a programme on the Duke, and was followed up with a discussion with Stanley Oliver on the merits and otherwise of dance music. On July 2, 1937, Turntable took the air for the first time with an hour programme called *Rhythm on Record*. It was filled with anything but jazz, which was almost banned from the air. Certain pleadings in the right quarter and by the right men resulted, however, in Arthur receiving the green light to spin on the turntable, during the last quarter hour of *Rhythm on Record*, discings of his own choice.

From the very beginning of this series, which is still being presented weekly, Arthur has played discs that give an up-to-date and comprehensive panorama of the American jazz scene. His idea has been to cater for every jazz fan, no matter what his taste.

The definite preference for the Bob Crosby band and Matty Matlock's clarinet in particular led to the theme, "Woman on My Weary Mind." It was only when every available copy of this item had been worn out some 18 or 19 years later that a new theme had to be found, much to the disappointment of many *Rhythm on Record* devotees.

It's difficult to talk to Arthur for long without getting around to jazz, but he is so full of his pet subject that you find his enthusiasm infectious.

He is very East Coast-West Coast minded in his approach to jazz. East Coast jazz sounds thrown together with little thematic material, whereas the West Coast arrangers make the constant effort to work to an end. Unlike the East Coast musicians, those in the West are of the outdoor type, who study seriously and take time out to think. Arthur's favourite musician is West Coast star, Bob Cooper, whose compositions, arrangements, oboe and tenor playing so appeal that almost every record featuring him has found its way into the Pearce collection. A highly thought-of citizen in his home town, Cooper leads a model existence. He has the respect of neighbours and musicians alike, and Arthur considers that extremely important when jazz is repeatedly made to appear as part of the seamy side of life. Jazz has earned and gained respect and musicians of the calibre of Cooper keep it that way.

Paul Whiteman has no more staunch supporter than Arthur Pearce. It was Whiteman who established jazz as commercial music by substituting the jazz soloist for the vocalist. Jazz musicians had been considered down-and-outs and cranks; and Whiteman, who early in his career had won public acceptance, indicated by using them in his orchestra that their music was worth attention. Whiteman furthered the jazz cause not only by building reputations for his jazz soloists but also by using *Rhapsody in Blue* as a concert piece. This was the first attempt to forecast the future for jazz composition and might be compared with what Duke Ellington and the arrangers for the Stan Kenton orchestra are doing today.

Charlie Barnett's was Arthur's favourite swing band, and although it was conventional and orthodox it did have character, as did every swing aggregation. Their music was for dancing and all "pops" were given the swing band treatment with the vocalist taking as a matter of course the occasional chorus so that the public would get to know the lyrics.

Today, on the other hand, it's the vocalist, backed by a studio band, who presents the "pops." The public prefer the name singer, and if they want an orchestra at all they call for the colourless, sweet and cloying music of the Guy Lombardo, Lawrence Welk school.

Interpretation has taken command in the "pop" market and the modern songwriter depends entirely upon a gimmick style which allows him to sit back and wait for the interpretation that will sell his song. Hit Paraders such as "Hound Dog" and "All Shook Up" are merely "blues vamps," and if this indolent attitude did not exist amongst present-day songwriters, performers of the Gene Vincent, Elvis Presley type would be out of the music business.

Maybe "Rock 'n' Roll" is disappearing rapidly, but Arthur feels that the fishbeat bass, which is the backbone of this style, will be modified and used in jazz in the future.

Arthur has tried his hand at composing and lyric writing. Back in 1938

he wrote lyrics to Ellington's "Black Butterfly," which he submitted to the Australian publishers; but, unfortunately, before they could be sent to Ellington for his perusal, the Australian firm lost the agency for the Duke's music. In the early 40's, the Americans, a 10-piece group featuring Art Rosoman and Bill Sinclair, were providing the dance music at the Majestic Cabaret, Wellington, and amongst their arrangements was one of Arthur's compositions, a little thing called "I Wouldn't Know."

One of the first attempts to commit Dixieland jazz to wax in Sydney was made by Arthur and his Seven Pearce Arrows in 1938, and he still has the results of this enthusiastic group, which featured trumpet man Frank Coughlan and pianist Arthur Pearce.

As his role with the NZBS has been more in the nature of a compere rather than a critic, Arthur has developed a liking for all jazz, but his preferences centre around the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, Bix Beiderbecke, the New Orleans Jazz of the 1950's, Bob Cooper, Duke Ellington, the Firehouse Five Plus Two, music from Mexico, Rhythm and Blues (Southern style), church music as sung in the modern evangelical manner and as presented by Billy Graham's organ and piano team of Paul Mickle-son and Tedd Smith, and the music which has given us Arthur's "other" programme, hillbilly style.

This last-named interest led him on April 1, 1948, to perpetrate what he terms as the worst April Fool's joke in the history of the NZBS—the birth of Cotton-Eyed Joe and his Western Song Parade. For seven years Arthur filled the Parade with puns and gags which came at the listener faster and thicker than any *Goon Show*. A couple of years ago Arthur found that he could no longer afford all the time necessary to prepare the Parade to meet his requirements. Rather than let the high standard of the show fall away, he turned it into more of a biographical programme, and that is what the listener hears today. Many of us, however, have not forgotten those original Parades, and hope that some day, in the not too distant future, Arthur will find time to recreate them.

One evening, for instance, he went along to 2YD to present his usual Western Song Parade, and when lining up the discs for the technician found that the theme was missing. He had a few minutes to go before the show was scheduled to start, so he suggested that if the technician put up a mike and got a reasonable balance, he would go into the main studio and sing the theme himself, providing his own piano accompaniment. Everything went according to plan. Arthur played a few hillbilly chords, warbled the lyrics sweetly; the technician okayed the balance and recommended Arthur for singing commercials. While they were waiting for 7.20 p.m. to roll around and the presentation of this live theme, they found to their horror that the wrong plug had been connected and that they had been on the air right from the time Arthur first walked into the studio.

Arthur has been living out at Karehaha Bay for 11 years now, and although he's only a few minutes from the beach and has a wonderful sea view over the Titahi Bay headland and the



Spencer Digby photograph

2YA transmitter, he also looks out over rolling green farmlands from his back door down to the main road north. He says that the pastoral view inspires his Western Song Parade.

Living with his wife and his three children, who all hold differing views about music in general, and a collection of over two thousand discs which reflect his wide musical taste, Arthur is not perturbed by the modern preference for Davy Crockett and Rock 'n' Roll. He rather likes a honking tenor himself, and now that his eldest son has become a keen follower of this type of music, there's a lot more of it in the house than formerly.

—R.F.H.

NEXT WEEK: Lyell Boyes