

Through the Years with Preston Sandiford

Based on an interview by Dan Kochakian at 162 Boylston Street, Boston, on June 25, 1983 and published in *Whiskey, Women and...* No. 15, December 1985. Preston Sandiford died in Boston June 6, 1986.

Preston Sandiford, more commonly known as "Sandy," is one of the most highly acclaimed personalities of the Boston musical scene. Pianist, bandleader, arranger and president of the Musicians Union Local 535, are but a few of the positions Sandiford has handled. Here, he discusses his early learning days, his involvement with Boston's high society and his love for the swinging music he knows best.

Both my mother and father were immigrant West Indians from Barbados. I had my first music lesson when I was 5, and I played the classics until I was 13. My parents sent my sister, who was two years younger than I, and me to the Boston Conservatory. When we got there, the stuff they were teaching us we already knew. Anyway, we could not afford it because we were a poor family and the school cost \$400 a year. So I quit after a year; my sister stayed a little longer.

I went to a couple of private teachers after that. One was J. S. Pollen, who was a technician. I got more out of a few lessons with him than a whole year at the Conservatory. He slowed me down, because I was playing like most kids, fast. I went to play with some people after that, but it was frustrating to play with musicians who didn't know too much.

When I was 16, I joined the union. The jobs then required that you read music and be able to accompany singers, especially for me as a piano player.

I had a lot of work at in-town cafes and roadhouses on the outskirts of town. It was all very new and interesting for me. I stayed with that for quite a while and did a lot of substituting where a guy with a regular job wanted to take a night or two off. When they found out I could read music, they passed the word around.

I learned to play for parties at this time. The Negroes had a lot of Back Bay (a section of Boston) work, and when there weren't enough local musicians, the union brought in people from New York. Most of the fellows who were doing any good work were union.

There was a guy named James Europe. He had been overseas in World War I and had a marching band. It was the first marching band that played swing. He became a terrific popular favorite. When Europe came, he took over Boston by storm, and he was able to put a dance band in the Copley Plaza. While I was still a kid, there was a lot of work.

At that time, we had two separate locals: a black union, 535, and a white union, 9. We exchanged men from time to time and worked together. I did some writing (for Arthur Lee Simpskins and Eddie Fisher) and got along pretty good with arranging.

The old-timers in the union got me a job right downtown. I think it's where the Pussy Cat Lounge is now, but it was called the Palais-Royale then. We even had a broadcast wire in there for WNAC. I was about 19 or 20.

In those days, songwriters used to bring their music right up to you whether you were on the air or not, wanting you to play their tunes.

I had a very good band as far as reading music on sight. One night we had a thing called "Zulu Wail." I even remember the publisher: Beboe, Bloden and Lang from the West Coast. Their representative brought it right up and the guys played it on sight. They called up and wanted the band to go out there. They wanted us to record it, everything. But I was too chicken to go and wasn't sure that all the guys would go.

In that band then was Howard Johnson on first alto. He had a famous brother, Walter Johnson, who played the piano and was one of the first to go to the Coast and play in pictures. We also had Wendall Cully, a trumpet player. I can't remember the tuba player's name. He was an older man. We had tuba before bass. The drummer was Ray Cully or "Leggy" Taylor and Buster Tolliver was on tenor. He was with me quite a few times. These guys were all with me at the Palais-Royale.

Then we did general gig work. We played every club you can think of around here with the exception of the Ritz Roof. I played a couple of fashion shows there, though.

I played the swinging belt of clubs on Massachusetts Avenue and the hotels downtown, and made guest appearances at the Latin Quarter. That's where I got a write-up by a columnist, Walter McKinnon I think. He called me "Art Tatum with Eyes." I loved that.

I went with this show in 1931, HiDeHo. We had 16 chorus girls, eight show girls and three comedians. This was a real old-fashioned show, but it was a good show. At that time, I had 13 pieces, a group different from the one I had at the Palais-Royale. I had about 10, 12 or 15 groups. I'd lose one and start another. Some was due to my inexperience, not knowing how to handle it in the beginning.

When I first began to get so I could work on my own with my own name, there was a dance promoter named Clement Thorn who used to promote Negro dancers all through the area. Some dances were held at the Scenic Auditorium downtown. He was really responsible for me getting a good start because when he became interested in the sound of the band, he suggested that he could probably get me going. I would play what they called "Battles of Music," a two-band thing, and they'd advertise it as if you were playing against somebody else. He put me up against everybody.

The first time that I met Duke was at Ruggles Hall on Ruggles Street near Roxbury. This was early in his career. He was known as Duke Ellington and His Washingtonians. There were only eight men. I played against him, I played against Fletcher Henderson, Don Redman, Billy Cater. In Billy Cater's band was my first alto player who left me and had gone to New York, Howard Johnson, and when we got through with them in the battle, Howard said, "Gees, you didn't have to do that to us." We played over them. Billy came here with a regular band, a New York band. They played like heck, but they didn't sound like my band. We were tight.

We never called our music "jazz;" it was "swing." It took us a long time to get used to that word, "jazz." Jazz to us represented a whole different conception, sounded like a European derivation. A lot of people would say they were into jazz and then they'd beat on the first and third beat. That's polka time, that ain't jazz. That used to drive us crazy.

The Casa Loma band was the tightest band I ever heard, so precise and real swinging. Now, Whiteman tried to mix it up and called it symphonic jazz. Ferdie Grofe, his arranger, was the guy who wrote that "On The Trail," that mule train thing. He was a very talented arranger.

When Guy Lombardo first started, he was what we call a "chorus band," and they used to swing. They used to broadcast from Canada. Everybody turned them on late at night. Finger poppin' music. I met Guy once and kidded him.

Now, before my time, Eddie Deas was playing with George Tynes, a piano player. Eddie was a so-called drummer. George and Eddie didn't get along because there was a clash of personalities there. Eddie didn't feel like he was being treated fairly as far as front-line advertisement. Sooner or later, he decided to break away from George. At about this time, I was losing one of my bands, so I put together my half and Eddie's half. I had charge of the music, chiefly because I knew more music than most of them, and the other reason was that I was married to Eddie Deas's daughter. He used to depend on me.

One night, Eddie said, "I'm going to introduce you to a friend of mine. I went to school with him in Florida." Eddie had gone to the university down there with Fletcher Henderson. I was out somewhere, and Fletcher was working with Charles Shribman. We finally got together, and Eddie says, "This is my son-in-law, Preston Sandiford." Fletcher took one look at me and turned his back, just turned right around. It was a prejudice Negroes had among themselves, color and so forth. I was crushed and embarrassed.

I couldn't get Fletcher, but I got his brother, Horace. He came in with a band for a battle, and we chewed them right up. When we got through with our second set, the people didn't want to hear them anymore. That was the only revenge I got.

I played a lot with Eddie Deas. We had a place around the corner here, before it was the Tic Toc Club. We were working then for Charlie Solomon, the gangster. He owned clubs, theaters, everything, and was a damned good guy to work for. His lawyer, Barney, got most of what Charlie left when Charlie got shot.

One time we were playing a club at Stuart and Tremont Streets here in Boston where that ticket agency is now. We also had some girls who worked in a line. On all those jobs, you always got your meals. The guy served us spaghetti, which was all right with me, except that it was the third day in a row and it was a little old. Some of the girls got sick. Charlie Solomon came up that particular noontime and Eddie went right over and told him what happened. The Alpini Brothers had the catering. While we were sitting up on the stand, we heard a crash and a bang! Charlie had gone out there and checked the food and then threw dishes at the chef. They lost the account.

Jabbo Jenkins, one of our trumpeters, was a crazy bastard. Sometimes, he'd just take off, don't know where. You'd go on a job and when you'd get there, you'd ask, "Where's your horn, Jabbo?" "At the pawnbroker." The pawnbroker closed at 6, but he hung around because he knew we'd be down to get Jabbo's horn. Strange guy, but he could play!

One time Jabbo came late for a show or something. The manager thought he could talk to him. Jabbo was standing away

from him half drunk, swinging his horn, saying, "Don't come any closer." "We're your friends, Jabbo, we just wanna talk to you." Then Jabbo picked up a brick and hit the guy over the head. We got canceled for two weeks!

I was playing at the Lafayette Theatre with Eddie Deas' Brown Buddies, but our name may have been the Harlem Hot Shots. Adelaide Hall joined our show there and she had these two piano players with her. Her pianist, Joe Turner, not the singer, had just gotten fired, and she had Francis something and Art Tatum. Tatum and Turner were with her in Canada just before she joined our show.

She did her first show at the Lafayette, a great job. After the first show, the theater went dark and I started practicing. I thought I was great, feeling real good about myself. I played about an hour and I started off-stage, and all of a sudden, I heard this piano. I thought at first it was two or three guys, then I turned around and there was this one guy, Art Tatum. I never heard so much piano in my life, and we became friends right after that. I've never heard anyone like him since. We used to call him "God" in those days.

So I hung out with him. I stayed in New York for two years, but didn't like it. In fact, I hated New York; still do.

Tatum and I had a ball. One night, while we were in Atlantic City, Tatum, Buster Tolliver and I had a habit of going around. Buster was playing good piano, but I could wipe him out and Tatum could wipe me out, no question about it.

We'd go around setting up piano players. We'd go in somewhere, listen for an hour or so, then Buster would go up and say, "Do you mind if I play a little?" "Oh, no, go right ahead." So Buster would play and if the guy was any good, he'd get back up and wipe Buster out, then I'd get up and sometimes the other guy would wipe me out, too. But we didn't worry about it, though, because Tatum was there. He was just getting to be known then. This guy had worked on Buster and he'd saved a little, so Tatum went up and played. One cute trick Tatum had was that he'd listen to you for 10 or 15 minutes and he could play your style better than you could!

So he kind of pushed the guy and the guy came back and played very, very strong. Tatum said, "Oh, this is a wise guy" and went back up and really wiped the guy out. Oh, we had fun!

Clement Thorn was plugging my group, and how it developed was that Thorn had a deal with the Shribman bothers, the guys who brought out Mal Hallet. They had 99 percent of the booking in this whole area of New England. What they used to do was bring in a name band from New York and would book them, maybe three dates. Sometimes between the dates, there were gaps and they would let Thorn book my band or whatever band he had, in those gaps. Being a name band, they used to be able to draw a crowd. One day, he said to me, "You know, these two guys are going to pull something on me." He began to make his placards up ahead of time with the name of whatever band they had. Sure enough, one holiday, a pretty important date, they told him they couldn't give him the band that they had promised and he came to me and said, "Here's your chance."

I had a good break on that. Because of the holiday, everybody was out. The place was jammed and the band played. Then we started getting a lot of work. Unfortunately, Thorn died less than a year after he got going. He fell in love with a girl and she dumped him and he went right down and out.

Thorn's important in my life because of certain other things. He introduced me to the Back Bay set: the Cochorans, the Pickmans, the Searses and all. Through him, Adeline Cochoran, who later became Mrs. Pickman, was taking dance lessons down on Charles Street and they had me go down and play for her lesson three or four times. It seems as though she was going into one of the Vincent variety things. They had a different name each time they brought the show up. That's the Back Bay set.

Adeline was dancing one particular year to a tune called "Dixie Cinderella." When she got it as close as she could get it, she insisted that I write the music for it, and like a greenhorn, I did. But I put everything into that, overloaded it, and Ruby Newman and the band couldn't play it. She was very disappointed, and they played something else for her.

Now I had a run where I began to get a lot of that type of work on my own and began to teach all these kids. Sally Sears was a first-line pupil and there was Lucy Cochoran and all their friends. So for maybe four or five years, I played their Christmas parties up on Mr. Vernon Street on Beacon Hill. It was really a good deal.

I only got two or three deb parties, coming-out parties, because Ruby Newman was in too strong. I was strong with the Sears family. I got to know the mother, and she had me look out for the girls a couple times. She thought they were straying into areas where they weren't quite safe.

In 1928-29, I was on the WPA deal. The only reason I was on that was that I was very proud and didn't want to take handouts. It got so I couldn't get anybody to go on an ordinary one-nighter because they were all on the WPA. I joined out of

self-defense.

I was doing the arranging and rehearsing of the band for Unit B which was part of a Vaudeville project that was all black. They went to hospitals and all that WPA did. My job was to write the music for the band, rehearse them and whip them into shape. The money that they paid me was for working in the arranging room under a man named Charlie Fox.

About 1930, I started rehearsing the band that went on the show. They went about one year without a job, 9-to-5. That's when these things started to fall into place, offers and like that.

I brought in Stanley Brown. He really gave me a good start on how to write for dance routines properly. He had definite ideas, and they were all good about what kind of a background I would put on for these people. Later on, when I had a chance to hear Luther Henderson's work, I realized how good Stanley was.

In the thirties, I moved to Albany, New York, where I stayed for about seven years. I ran into a guy named Mitchell Lewis who did take-offs on Bert Williams, absolutely perfect. All the old people with canes and everything came and gave him so much money, it was ridiculous. He had a little portable bar that he pushed around to the different tables. I didn't stay with him, because he robbed me. What a liar that guy was. But he was slick and smooth. He grabbed me, a newcomer. He must have gone through everybody else, too.

Albany is where I first met Helen Humes. I taught her a song. I was still coaching then. She was going with a piano player named Vince Delaney and she was crazy about him, went overboard. He was a little freckle-faced black man. One day, she and Vince had an argument. He walked out on her, and she was down. She came to me one day just before she was going to open in Troy, just across the river from Albany. I said, "Well, I've got a song I think you ought to sing." The song was "Blue." It goes, "I'm blue because of you, broken-hearted, too." She learned it and sang it on her opening night, and they tell me she had a blue pinspot, a little spotlight, and it just covered her face, and she was crying as she sang the song.

I went to work with a guy named Jimmy Smith. He used to be the bass player for the Missourians. The Missourians preceded Cab Calloway in New York. Cab never was a musician, he was an entertainer. They did that a lot; guys who could sing or dance were put in front of bands. Cab got in there and eased the guys out who originally belonged there and he put in his own guys. Jimmy wound up going to Glens Falls, New York, and on the way there, he'd heard about me in Albany, so he took me along and George Matthews, too.

This was the smartest band I ever had, barring none. Jimmy had two trumpets, alto sax, drums, and he played the bass. This band never needed to rehearse. We played shows after one reading, without the music. We had an excellent singer, Harold Humphrey, who sang and danced. If the shows that came into the place we worked were not the greatest, then they suffered because we put on a show, too. R. Q. Dickinson and Bing Hunt were the trumpet players. They were very talented and worked well together.

Bing did an imitation of Bing Crosby. If you turned your back, you'd swear it was Bing Crosby. He also did Erno Rappe, the director of the Roxy Theatre, a little hunchbacked man, very well. Erno had a habit when the music was going good. He'd turn around and grin and shake his head. Bing Hunt did that to perfection.

We used to give the shows hell. Harold Humphrey did his specialty, tap dance or he'd sing a few songs. We always had one called "Donkey Serenade," about this guy who loved his mule. He was singing to his mule. And all the time, Harold ended his act with a dustpan and broom. No explanation needed. The audience always got it. He had to clean up after his mule.

I did a lot of arranging throughout my career. Jan Strickland, a male singer, had a hit with "Love Me Baby" that I arranged. He's got a real high voice. I broke Clarence Jackson of that habit. He's with Ted Herbert's band now. He was around here for years, playing all the clubs with his little three- or four-man group. He invited me to hear him at a little spot at Dover and Tremont streets by the railroad bridge. He was singing this stuff all night long. He said "What do you think of it?" I said, "You sound like a queer. What are you doing that crap for?" From that night on, he didn't use falsetto.

I came downtown to work at Casper Gordon Studios. That was the first big New England recording studio right down the street here at 140 Boylston. They introduced me to another line: arranging for jingles.

Our big hit was "Time Out For Dawson's." At that time, the ad people threatened to take the account away from Casper, and he let them bully him into accepting a flat fee. In the meantime, Hanley Noran, my co-writer, had been reading the periodicals that came through. All the periodicals said, "Lease, Don't Sell," and take your residuals, but when he sold out like that, we couldn't do it. So I had to watch 15 to 16 years of that jingle play and I only got a flat fee.

I quit Casper Gordon only because they were beginning to do things to the musicians that I didn't want any part of. You've heard of being paid off in the dark. Literally, that's what happened. I made great money with these people, but if the Union ever got hold of them, I was bound to go, too. I was scared. By that time, I had become president of the black local and they sent an inquiry down from New York about practices, and I had some evidence through one of the guys who used to get paid there. It's a good thing I quit, because they closed the place up temporarily.

After that, I went to Ace Recording. I remember the first time they came on the scene, down that alley, Warrenton Place. I went to Eddie Casper one day and said, "You know those instantaneous records we're doing?" We used to make acetates where you want to hear your voice or you want to sing or you want to send a birthday present to your wife. We'd get five dollars for that. Ace opened up and started doing it for three. So I told Casper, and the first time, he wouldn't even listen to me. We used to have meetings where we had a bottle of rum and it came out of petty cash from the sale of the instantaneous records. One day, he said, "Where's the money?" I said, "They've got it next door at Ace Studios." He said, "Oh, yeah, they can't do that." Well, six months later, he found out that Ace had taken that business right away from him.

Eddie Casper found out that his partner, Aaron Bloom, had taken all their money and headed for the Coast. He's never been heard from since.

With Casper, I had a good deal. I did a lot of Armenian music with some brothers right over there by Chinatown. We did their recording.

When I joined Ace, they did a lot of jingles, too. There wasn't one as successful as that Dawson's jingle, though.

After Ace, I came down to this office where I've been for 20 years now.

Sandiford is still going strong, teaching piano in his downtown Boston office every day and holding forth the piano and arranging duties for the Mary Karl Orchestra, a well-known dance/swing band in the New England area.

EDDIE DEAS AND HIS BOSTON BROWNIES: Eddie Deas, vocal/drums; Bob Johnson, Howard Callender, Jabbo Jenkins, trumpets; Chester Burrill, trombone; George Matthews, Wilbur Pinckney, clarinet, alto sax; Buster Tolliver, tenor sax; Preston Sandiford, piano; Victor Hadley, banjo/guitar; Hubert Pierce, bass.

October 22, 1931

70294-2 Jes' Shufflin' VICTOR 22841

70295-1 All I Care About Is You VICTOR 22844

70295-2 (Everyone In Town Loves) Little Mary Brown

70296-1 Signs Of The Highway VICTOR 22841