

They Came, They Played, They Left a Legacy. . .

By Mike Kuczala

In the beginning, there was only a murmur. Then a snap and a tap, then a chord, but without direction. A leader was needed, someone who had shaped and guided a jazz lick before. His name is Edwin Baker and he came from Indiana.

Buddy, as he is known to his friends and colleagues, came to then-Colorado State College (now UNC) in the fall of 1965 from one of the top schools of music in the world, Indiana University.

At each school, Baker founded what have become two of the most celebrated jazz departments in the college music scene.

"Jim Miller deserves much of the credit for beginning the program (at CSC)," says Baker. "He was the interim dean at the time and he was very excited about the possibility of jazz coming to CSC.

"In 1965 we had one jazz band in the curriculum for one credit and that's where it all started."

Musicians who were students at CSC before 1965 tell stories of having someone else "front" their dance bands because they didn't want some of the faculty to know they were playing dance jobs.

Baker was stepping into territory he was familiar with.

"I had been through this same type of situation at Indiana University, so it wasn't new to me," Baker says. "I really felt that the faculty respected my ability as both a classical and jazz musician. As long as I had that I knew I could get the jazz program going."



By the fall of 1967, a second large jazz ensemble was added to the curriculum and directed by Derryl Goes, a percussion instructor who joined the faculty during the fall of 1965. By the 1967-68 school year, the program was in full stride.

Baker's group, Band I, was coming into its own. In the spring of 1968 the band won the Intercollegiate Jazz Festival in Salt Lake City and earned a spot at the national finals in St. Louis.

"The 1968 band was really a good band," Baker said. "I had two really outstanding musicians in John Pisci, our drummer, and Tom Snelson, the lead trumpet player. We didn't place in St. Louis, but we came on the national collegiate jazz scene after only three years of existence."

Says former band member David Cole: "To put this in perspective, it would be very much like having a football team make the national top 10, ranked without regard to school size, and do this in only the third year of the program."

In the fall of 1970, a third large jazz ensemble was added to the curriculum and was directed by Jack Robinson, a bass

trombone and tuba instructor who joined the faculty two years before. Three years after the program began, jazz improvisation, arranging, history and small jazz ensembles classes had been added to the curriculum.

Goes went on to become the director of the jazz studies program. By 1973, Jazz Ensemble I had twice won regional jazz ensemble competitions and had twice competed in national events. In the spring of 1971, the UNC/Greeley Jazz Festival was born.

1993 marks the 25th anniversary of Baker's Band I that won in Salt Lake and gained national recognition. They will play together again at this year's festival.

The reunion was the brain child of Cole, a tenor saxophonist who became an

accountant and now lives in

LaSalle, south of Greeley.

"I was driving across Utah not long ago and I was thinking it had been 25 years since the band played together and wouldn't it be nice if we could do it again?" Cole says. "I called Buddy and the rest of the guys."

To Cole's delight, all of the band members will return to Greeley for the reunion. Only two of the members, C.J. Shibley and Steve Hurt, will sit out and cheer from the audience. Most of the others have remained active in music.

Snelson and Pisci both play with the Riviera Hotel Band in Las Vegas. Trumpeters Rich Dechant and Steve Veikley both front their own bands. Saxophonist Ken Lempka has been an Air Force musician for 15 years and is the saxophone supervisor for the Strategic Air Command band at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska.

Trombonist John Tesch is on the music faculty and director of the Wind Ensemble at Moorehead State University. Three of the players — Snelson, Veikley and Shibley — are all alums of the Glenn Miller Band. Many other band members still teach, play and compose avocationally.