

people to know

THE LEADER OF THE BAND

After more than half a century in the industry, Gill Harris continues to make music as well as buildings.

TO SAY THAT GILL HARRIS is involved in music is an understatement. From the time he first picked up a trumpet as a teenager, he has racked up more than 50 years of experience in the music business. That parallels his distinguished structural engineering career, which includes a six-year stint beginning in 1987 as the director of research and engineering for the Metal Building Manufacturers Association.

Harris played in the school band beginning in seventh grade, later joining his high school dance band. Soon after graduation, he found himself playing in an Army Band in Atlanta where he spent the latter days of World War II. Harris' next stop was Clemson University, where he studied civil engineering, followed by several years in Houston working in the metal buildings industry. While there, he earned a master's degree at Rice University.

In 1962, Harris moved to Columbus, Miss., to join Ceco Building Systems as the firm's director of engineering. Meanwhile, his interest in music continued.

"I started putting bands together back in the '60s and '70s," Harris said. "We did these old minstrel shows, and my job was to put together a Dixieland band down in front of the stage and play selections from the evening's music as folks came in.

"I belonged to a jazz club down in Jackson, about 150 miles away. There was a particularly good trombone player there and I invited him to come up and play with us. Well, I sort of built the whole band around him. Now whenever I see him I say, 'Howard, you're the one responsible for getting me in the big band business.' And he says, 'How is that?' I say, 'You know, I built that band around you, and here I was down there in that pit with that little band waiting for you to come in. The audience starting coming in, the auditorium filled up, and there was no Howard. We had to play that whole evening without you! And I said to myself, I will never, ever have a small band again!'"

Of course, it's no small task to put together a big band, not the least of which is assembling a book of "charts," the printed music from which the 18 band members play.

"I used to travel a good bit, and I would often go into a music store and rummage through their music. I never found a big mother lode, but would find one thing, like Les Brown's 'Leap Frog,' or Glenn Miller's theme song, one piece at a time. Eventually I built it up to a couple hundred songs, and so we have quite a library of pieces now."

As a trumpeter, Harris used to play Harry James-style solos, "but I don't have the chops for that now," he said. Still, he has a deep appreciation of the importance of a good trumpet section. That's especially true when he has the band play some of his favorites from Stan Kenton.

"Some of us in the band business consider the Stan Kenton Orchestra the absolute pinnacle of big bands," Harris said. "Stan was a great guy, a great manager, a great band leader and of course a fantastic musician. But you don't often hear bands play his music because it's rare to have a trumpet section that can blow his charts. He was a 'no-trumpet-left-standing' type band leader, with the trumpets really up there in the high register. Stan used to tell us, 'There's nothing very exciting about a trumpet playing low C.'"

Today Harris continues to produce concerts, most recently in early February when Gill Harris and the Big Band Theory played at the Trotter Convention Center in Columbus. "We're playing some Kenton these days," Harris said, "because I've got a trumpet section that can handle it. Leading a band the way that band was kicking last Saturday night brings out the Walter Mitty in me," he said.

Between concerts he also remains very involved in the engineering world, giving continuing education lectures, serving as a technical witness for litigation, conducting wind tunnel work, and "whatever comes along."

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- ▶ Gill Harris and the Big Band Theory, which he operates out of Columbus, Miss. Harris can be contacted at gillharris@cableonet.net.