

KEN ALBERS - A GREAT GENTLEMAN OF SONG

by Gregory K. Stegeman (FF Hall of Fame)

While attending Ken's memorial service in Simi Valley, CA on May 4th, I was reminded how much he impacted all of us who knew him, not only as a world class musician but as a man. Ross, of course, spoke of Ken with such tenderness and affection that you knew that he understood him and loved him perhaps more than anyone outside of his immediate family. Bill Comstock, who knew Kenny for 60 years (!) and performed along side him as both a member of The Stuarts and The Four Freshmen, sent a letter of deep feelings for him as well, and Dave Bentley gave a fine tribute that included quotes from various ex-Freshmen.

Naturally, we also heard moving stories from Kenny's family and we had the pleasure of viewing photos from his life that covered the entire length of it. There was one photo in particular that I was really drawn to and that was of Ken (in his early 20's) at the piano with that famous and warm smile over the shoulder. You could tell that he was on the brink of greatness.

I'm sure that this issue of Fresh News will include several pieces on Ken. For this reason I've chosen to highlight some of the specific musical moments from him that inspired me and thousands of other musicians. I never got to know Ken on a personal level other than the pleasantries exchanged at the two conventions he attended. I tried to engage him in musical conversation a number of times but he was so shy and self-effacing that you knew he wasn't that comfortable talking about himself. He was always polite, never condescending, but a severely private man to be sure. I'm just glad that he showed up at these FFS conventions to realize how much he was loved and admired. I did write him two lengthy letters, once when I first joined the group, and then, at Ross's suggestion, just three weeks before he passed. There, I poured out all the things he did that moved me.

Years ago, I made a tape editing together all of Kenny's horn solos recorded with the Freshmen and it wound up being little more than 15 minutes in length. The tape began with Ross saying "Ken doesn't ever say anything. Is there anything you want to say tonight, Ken?" Then I had Ken come in shouting with his awesome solo on "Take Your Shoes Off, Baby" from "In Person, Vol. II." I invite you to listen again closely to his trumpet on this. It's soulful, swinging, emotional, hip and with a fire that he never dared to display as a human being.

Music was how Kenny expressed himself and after he was through, he didn't NEED to add mere words. Best ballad solo? For me, it's "Moonlight" from "Voices in Love". That solo is so perfectly constructed and performed that it belongs in the Hall-of-Fame of all trumpet solos. "It Could Happen to You" was also one of the best and so much so that I tried playing most of it whenever we performed it as a heartfelt tribute. I also tried to learn his solos on "Route 66", "Somebody Loves Me", and any number of other tunes. But I couldn't do it. He gracefully maneuvered through difficult chord changes like we maneuver through zero traffic.

"The Swingers" album allowed both Ken and Bob to stretch a little more than usual on their horns so I would thoroughly recommend listening to that recording in detail again for examples of his effortless swinging abilities. Much later, Ken played a flugelhorn solo on Bill's "Summer Has Gone" from the "Live at Butler University" with the Kenton band that became legendary. Bill wrote sophisticated harmonies that demanded a lot, but Ken cut Freshmen moving lines through that song like a hot knife through butter. I could write a book (hey, isn't that a song?) about all of Kenny's horns solos but I guess I don't have to tell you all that. He's a huge reason we're all Freshmen nuts.

I just wish he had recorded his own album, much like Bob Flanigan did on his trombone with "Togetherness." Can you imagine what we could have heard from Ken if he had been allowed to really cut loose on his horns? Did you know he also played vibes?!

Ken's brass work is probably what we remember the most about his Freshmen experience and yet he was also one of the best vocal arrangers the group ever had. To my ears he was every bit as good as Dick Reynolds. I didn't find out until I joined the group myself that he wrote the charts on "There Will Never Be Another You," "Day In, Day Out," "Fools Rush In," "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You," "Dream," and almost everything on the "Stars in Our Eyes" album. In his book, Now You Know, Ross mentions that Ken arranged "I Wish I Didn't Love You So" from "Love Lost" which features one of the very best acapella intros and endings by the Freshmen ever. I could listen to those last few bars every day and not tire of it: "I.....wish I didn't love you so...." Beautiful, original and sublime...."The Freshman Year" is also one of Kenny's best writing efforts with yet another perfectly constructed trumpet solo. Again, I could go on and on about his craftsmanship.

Last but not least, there's no talking about Ken's contributions without talking about his obvious vocal prowess. For the first ten years of his Freshmen life he was the 4th part singer stretching all the way down to a low D on the last chord of "Tom Dooley." When he and Bill decided to switch parts during the Liberty recordings, Ken had to sustain a high A on the last chord of "Byrd Avenue." I can't think of ANY group singer that has had more demanded of him. Think what he and Bill went through in live performance when they did a mix of old and new material that had them doing vocal gymnastics that would maim lesser men. I loved the edgy sound that Ken got in his extreme low register....example: the last two notes of "At Last" from "First Affair". He made those sound like they were Y and Z. As we all know, Ken even briefly sang the 3rd part when Ross left in 1977. Amazing...

Ken Albers - an uncanny musician and one that we will keep alive in our hearts through the blessing of recorded performances always.