

WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

LEONARD B. SMITH 1915 – 2002 (1985 Inductee)

By Anthony M. Messina, Visiting Associate Director of Bands, Florida Atlantic University;
Doctoral Candidate in Wind Conducting, The University of Kansas

Few musicians have influenced the music world like Leonard B. Smith. He excelled at everything he put his mind to and as a result had a career that included successes as a performer, conductor, and businessman. However, like many great musicians, Leonard came from humble beginnings.

The son of Frank and Ethel May Schubert Smith, Leonard Bingley Smith was born September 5, 1915 in Poughkeepsie, New York. His father was a professional pianist and had his own orchestra and his mother was a soprano soloist and choir director at their local church. Having received his first cornet as a gift for Christmas in 1923, Smith began studying cornet shortly thereafter with Robert Coon who charged \$0.50 per lesson. In addition to teaching him the cornet, sessions with Coon also included scales, harmony, and theory.

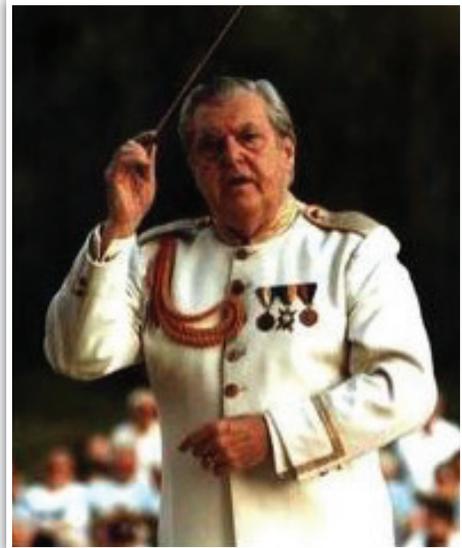
A gifted student, Smith progressed quickly and after two years of study, it was suggested that he was ready for a new teacher. Through various family connections, Smith was placed in touch with Ernest Williams in Brooklyn, New York and head of the famed Ernest Williams School of Music. Ten-year-old Leonard and his father would travel by train once every three weeks for cornet lessons and by the age of fourteen, Smith had developed impressive skills on cornet and trumpet.

Leonard's first major performance opportunity came through the Heckscher Symphony Orchestra of New York City. As the youngest member of the ensemble, his playing ability was noticed by other members of the ensemble, many of whom were notable musicians in their own right.

Following these early experiences, Leonard continued to work hard at the cornet and at the age of 15 he auditioned and received a full scholarship to the New York Academy at Cornwell where he received excellent training while also performing in the dance band with another notable student, Les Brown.

Despite all his successes in music which included solo performances with the famed West Point Band, his father had convinced him that a career in music would not provide enough money to make a living and upon his graduation from the Academy in 1933, Smith planned to enroll as an architecture major. Fortunately, he had been attending

the Williams Summer Camp, and decided to attend one last time. That summer, the bands at the Williams Summer Camp had two guest conductors, Edwin Franko Goldman and Arthur Pryor. A conversation that Pryor and his father had after the event would go on to change his future.



“I can remember us drawing straws to see who would play with which band. I drew Pryor, [Frank] Elsass drew Goldman. I played *Bride of the Waves*, and I recall Pryor discussing my dilemma with my father. He explained to Pryor that he wanted me to study architecture and not music. Pryor convinced him that he should send me down to the Ernest Williams School for at least one year. My father could then decide about my future as either a musician or an architect. My father then told me of his conversation with Pryor and I was enrolled in the Williams School of Music.”¹

While at the Williams School of Music, Smith studied with many outstanding teachers, such as Mayhew Lake and Erik Leidzen for composition, Arthur Pryor for arranging, Colonel George Howard for conducting, and Williams on cornet and graduated in 1936. He was immediately hired by Edwin Franko Goldman to serve as first chair and solo cornetist, a position he would hold until 1942. During his time with the Goldman Band, Smith would become widely known for his solo cornet playing, often being referred to as “America’s Premier Cornet Soloist.”² In fact, one notable summer with the Goldman Band included “500 cornet solos in a period of 175 days, from the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco through the close of the summer season in Central Park, New York City.”³

Smith's performance career would go on to include serving as principal trumpet of the Detroit Symphony from 1937 – 1942 which included performances on the famed Ford Sunday Evening Radio Hour and enlisting in the Navy Band of Philadelphia where he served as assistant conductor and soloist from 1942 until 1945.

Smith's pride and joy was of course his Detroit Concert Band, which served as a shining example of his impressive skill in all areas of music and music business. As John Mantle of the *Detroit Free Press* wrote in a 1979 article, "Dr. Smith . . . has by a curious symbiosis merged his person with that of the Band through his multiple role of conductor, featured soloist, impresario, arranger, and sometimes defender." ⁴

The band, originally known as the Belle Isle Band, gave six unique concerts per week on Belle Isle in the summer months. Concert attendees would be treated to a mixture of orchestral transcriptions, original works for band, performances by many outstanding soloists (many whom were members of the band), and of course a great number of marches. Leonard's knack for programming left audiences always wanting more.



The band, which existed from 1946 until 1991, consisted of many of the finest musicians in the Metropolitan Detroit area and in some instances, musicians from around the nation. Whether a proficient amateur or a professional musician, they all had one thing in common: a profound respect for Smith's musicianship on the podium. Andrew Glover (WJU #423) stated in an address at the 2014 Windjammers Convention that Smith's "Technique was flawless – there was never any hint of doubt as to the beat. He navigated the most difficult of transitions with precision. Watching him conduct the band while accompanying one of Jim Underwood's cornet solos was extraordinary. Of course, the beauty in this was in watching this great cornet soloist of a previous generation accompany another great artist of the current generation. Despite this technical conducting brilliance, he was extraordinarily graceful as well. Even on marches, his conducting had a wonderful elegance to it;

never boxy or heavy or labored, even on the loudest strains. He was a picture on the podium." ⁵

His musical skills were echoed in the many original compositions and arrangements he wrote for the band. Concert attendees would often be treated to Smith's original marches such as the *Belle Isle March*; *Hail, Detroit*; and *American Champion*. In addition, he also arranged many orchestral and operatic works for the wind band, including works by Wagner, Strauss, Tchaikovsky, or Rossini. ⁶

As a businessman, Smith was second to none. When he put his mind to something, there was no stopping him and this is evident through his publication companies, *Bandland* and *BOVACO*, and through *H & L Records* which was the company he created to record, produce, and distribute all the wonderful recordings produced by the Detroit Concert Band. Leonard and the Detroit Concert Band recorded *The Sousa American Bicentennial Collection* (a ten-volume set of all of Sousa's marches), a holiday album entitled *Happy Holidays, Soloists of the Detroit Concert Band*, and nineteen volumes of *The Gems of the Concert Band*. His many compositions and publications are still available through C.L. Barnhouse and used by bands around the country. In all endeavors, Smith was top-notch.

Leonard was a vocal advocate of Windjammers Unlimited and an influential member (WJU #230) from the early years even though he never performed with a circus band due to animal allergies. Despite this, he could still be seen at conventions leading bands in rehearsal and performance and serving as the after-dinner speaker at banquets. He was inducted into the Windjammers Hall of Fame in 1985, an honor he cherished throughout his life.

Leonard B. Smith was a man without equal. He excelled as a performer, conductor, and businessman and was the beloved husband of Helen Rowe, and father of Sandra, two roles which were as important as any other. Leonard left us on July 23, 2002, and yet his legacy lives on. His publications still influence young musicians around the country and his recordings with the Detroit Concert Band are still considered some of the finest ever produced. What would the music world look like had he not touched it? I dare not speculate, for a world without the influence of Leonard B. Smith is one that lacks a tireless advocate and one of the greatest musicians it has known.

¹ John Vincent Polce, *The Influence of Leonard B. Smith on the Heritage of the Band in the United States*, (Ph.D. diss.) The Ohio State University, 1991, <http://search.proquest.com.www2.lib.ku.edu/docview/303964620?accountid=14556>, 27. ² William Rehrig and Loras John Schissel, "Obituary: Leonard B. Smith," *Circus Fanfare*, 32, no. 6 (October 20, 2002): 14. ³ John Mantle, "17 Jun 1979, Page 139 - *Detroit Free Press* at Newspapers.com," Newspapers.com, accessed April 25, 2017, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/98960237>. ⁴ Mantle. ⁵ Andrew Glover, "2014 Windjammers Annual Convention Banquet Presentation: Leonard B. Smith," *Circus Fanfare*, 44, no. 1 (January/February 2014): 15-17. ⁶ Polce, 64-72.

REMEMBERING LEONARD B. SMITH

by Andy Glover, WJU #423



I consider myself fortunate to have played in the Detroit Concert Band under the baton of Leonard

B. Smith, and I consider him a great teacher and mentor. I was very aware of Leonard, his career, and the recordings of his band before I was hired to play euphonium for him in 1982. Joining the DCB was a dream come true.

I had the oddest audition for the band. I had been recommended to Leonard by Keith House, my college band director, and another great mentor. One day in June, 1982, I got a phone call from Leonard, inviting me to join the band. I thought somebody was playing a prank on me! When I was reasonably convinced it really was Leonard on the phone, he asked me a series of musical questions. I later realized this was part of my audition. He asked, "The key signature of five sharps indicates two keys, one major, one minor. What are they?" I immediately answered (correctly!) and I later learned that the speed of my answer indicated to him that I was OK. I also later learned he had called Merle Evans for a recommendation on me. He subsequently asked me to mail a tape of my playing since Leonard was in Detroit, and I was in St. Louis. Thus, an "in person" audition was not practical. I got a little cocky about the idea of Leonard wanting me for his band, and several days later he called me after listening to my tape. I smugly asked, "How'd you like it?" and Leonard quickly retorted, "Your high F is very sharp!!!" That put me back in my place.

Much has been said, written, and documented attesting to Leonard's enormous musical skill, and those who played under him knew that he could be quite demanding. He was very much a "no nonsense" musician, and expected nothing less than perfection. He had little patience when he felt a musician wasn't giving their best effort, but he also was quick to recognize excellence and effort. My side partner in the band was Earle Louder and, in my opinion, one of the greatest players in the history of the euphonium. Whenever a "clam" came from the euphonium section, I was the recipient of the famous Leonard Smith glare. I was the usual culprit, but on those rare occasions when Earl hit

a clinker, I still got the glare, much to Earle's amusement.

Despite Leonard's strict nature and exacting musicianship, he was a very kind mentor to me. I believe he appreciated my interest in band music, music history, composition and arranging, and conducting, and spent many hours expressing his philosophies on those (and other) topics to me. For three summers, I worked in the band office and on a daily basis I was regaled with an invaluable education from Leonard on all things musical. He was an early riser, and always offered to buy breakfast for me at the Big Boy restaurant down the block from the band office if I could be there when they opened at 6 a.m.! (I rarely missed.)

Leonard had a great sense of humor. On his desk was a sign reading "BOSS spelled backwards is double SOB." Another of his favorite quips was to say how his band members called him the "sweet old bandmaster," but usually did so by the initials. One-time Leonard was writing a script for a concert, including the story of Sousa's composing the "Invincible Eagle" March, as told by soprano Blanche Duffield. Leonard would read his script aloud (to himself) and when he got to the quotes from Miss Duffield, he would switch to a squeaky falsetto, which I found tremendously amusing.

I believe Leonard was the last great link to the classic concert band era of Gilmore, Sousa, Goldman, and King; and I consider it a privilege to have played for, worked with, and learned from this musical giant. To this day when I conduct bands, I find myself repeating many "Leonardisms" which he used so wonderfully to express himself. "It should be as subtle as the 'b' in 'subtle'," he would sometime say. If the band was lagging behind, he would admonish us to "Play with your eye – confirm with your ear!" I hope some of the wisdom he passed on to me and others who played under him will be passed along to others as well.

