

George Young

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his extended family.

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Stan Getz once asked how he fingered his F sharp. Dizzy Gillespie called him a name too obscene to publish, and, 15 years later, Young learned it was Gillespie's highest compliment. Ed Sullivan, arms folded, watched a 20-something Young perform on his show, nodded rigidly, and declared, "This boy is going to be a really big star... really big star."

Sinatra? The Chairman of the Board was on a stage in Atlantic City, surrounded by the string section, singing the Beatles classic, "Something." Young and the other horn players sat in the dark, watching the performance as quietly as they could.

Suddenly Young began to cough. And he couldn't stop. Glasses of water were being passed frantically from all parts of the orchestra. To no avail.

The performance destroyed, Sinatra crossed the stage. He leaned toward Young, locking in with his famous blue eyes.

"I was thinking uh-oh... there go my kneecaps," Young says. "And Frank asks me, 'Are you all right? Are you gonna be OK?' He was genuinely concerned — almost fatherly. I thought he was going to be extremely angry, and he was exactly the opposite."

Experiences like that one have been largely the norm for Young, who has few negative words to say about any musician that has crossed his path. It's something about the music itself, he says, that turns much of that community into the world's largest family.

"You can go anywhere in the world, take out your horn, and start playing," Young says. "And if you have anything to say, it's going to come through. You're going to make people happy, hopefully, and there's an immediate connection."

Young was born into that connection. His father, a factory worker in Philadelphia, was one of five brothers, all of whom learned to play musical instruments via mail-order instruction. A 6-year-old George pulled his father's saxophone from under the bed, assembled it, and snuck off to the bathroom to learn to play. When his dad found him, George expected a spanking. Instead, his father wept happily.

Lessons ensued. Family jam sessions became the weekend tradition, moving from house to house.

Cousin Leon played boogie-woogie piano, and twin brother Raymond played violin. Uncle Steve blew the tuba. Uncle Louie (once recruited to tour with Fred Waring) was on piano and banjo. Cousin Champ played trumpet. Anybody who couldn't play... well, they sang.

Shy and modest, young George left his sax in the trunk of the car, or hidden in a corner, until his father nodded and said, "Go get the horn." Then, he'd join the jam.

He had talent, but didn't want to hear about it.

"I was very, very hard on myself and I didn't like compliments," he says. "If anybody said they liked the way I played, I stayed away from them. I knew how I wanted to sound and always wanted to sound better. If they dug how I sounded, that meant their credentials weren't that hot.



Special to The Herald

George Young accompanies Liza Minnelli in 1975. Dean Martin, Ray Charles, Joe Cocker? Yeah, he played with them. Eric Clapton, Dionne Warwick, the Four Tops, Mick Jagger? They're on the list, too.

Kind of sick, huh?"

A German music teacher got him started, then turned him over to Carl Waxman, a member of the Philadelphia Orchestra. "He worked on my sound, my approach, my connection to the instrument, and the greater classical literature," he says.

His father encouraged a jazz approach, bringing home sheet music and imploring George to stray from the literal. "Put a little stuff into it!" he'd tell his son. "Relax. Play it. Sing! Sing!"

Young became a studio musician in 1958 in Philadelphia (the first hit he played on was Bobby Rydell's "Kissing Time"), then moved on to New York City, where studio work was more than abundant. He became a first-call musician, the elite list of studio artists.

"I'd be at Jim & Andy's restaurant, having lunch, and I'd get a call: *Can you be over here in 5 minutes?*" Young recalls. "I was on a bicycle, with my horns on my back, and I could be anywhere in five minutes."

When Saturday Night Live made its debut, Young often was part of the show. From 1990-96, he was a regular in the SNL band, fronted by G.E. Smith, a musician with a mega-ego. It was stressful, difficult work.

"All the musicians would go to work in the morning, get our instruments out, and work all day on the things we were going to play live, on the show. Very cool, very enjoyable," Young remembers. "Then, G.E. would walk in, right at the last minute or late. He'd plug in his amplifiers, a whole wall of them, almost like an animal marking his territory. And he'd ruin the whole vibe."

Worse, when the band went on the air live, Smith generally did his own thing, ignoring everything the band had

rehearsed. With the whole world watching, the others had to adjust on the fly.

"The fun part for me was eating at the commissary every day with Kevin Neelon, Phil Hartman, sometimes Chris Farley," Young says. "Neelon was a tremendous guy. I'd have such intelligent conversations with Phil. And Chris was absolutely crazy, very sick. He really wanted to be John Belushi, and I'd scold him, about it: 'You're not John, tell me Chris. If you want to stick around and continue to be Chris, you have to clean up your act.'"

Farley died of a drug overdose in 1997. Hartman was slain by his wife in 1998.

Young was on the SNL set, standing a few feet away, when Irish singer Sinead O'Connor tore up a photo of the pope on live television. (During dress rehearsal, he says, she had torn up a photo of Joey Buttafuoco.) He was in the band one night when a snoozing Belushi rolled off a riser, crashed onto the floor, then leapt to his feet and improvised the blunder into a comedy bit. Mostly, though, he tried to stay out of the way.

"The backstage vibe was pretty wild — always a lot of electricity in the air," he says. "The actors and comedians were dashing all over the place, flying around, trying to get costume changes, hair changes. I just kind of stood back, tried not to get run over."

Nowadays, Young's pace is significantly slower, which is what he now prefers.

He recently moved to Carmel Valley with his wife of one year, Cynthia, a certified massage therapist at The Spa in Pebble Beach. Their combined family, from previous marriages, includes eight children, ages 10-40. They're expecting their fourth grandchild in October. He plays various gigs, often

appearing at the Monterey Hyatt-Regency, part of a local quartet. His next appearance will be Sept. 21 at the Monterey Jazz Festival.

Mostly, Young focuses nowadays on giving back to a world that has rewarded him richly. His current project — Cynthia's concept — is a 17-track compact disc entitled "The Joy and Labor of Love, Vol. I," an album featuring Young and talented local artists ("The Gateway Ensemble"), all of whom volunteered their time.

Proceeds (and matching funds from an anonymous donor) will benefit Pacific Grove's Gateway Center for the Developmentally Disabled.

Gateway, a nonprofit organization that requires \$350,000 a year to break even, provides independent-living homes and occupational training for people who are physically and mentally challenged.

The CD will be available soon in stores, but Young encourages people instead to visit the Gateway Center to purchase one. Tours are available.

"For George, all the traveling, and all the great studio work is a rich fabric of his history," says Cynthia, who wrote lyrics for "Gateway Theme," the final song on the CD. "But at this point in his career, we're looking to see where he can help other people, where his talent and experience can be used to inspire younger players."

For Young, it's no longer about the money. In truth, it never was.

"Whether you get 5 cents, or five grand, it's still the same song," he says. "And sometimes, like with the Gateway CD, you play harder when you're not getting paid."

It's always been about the giving, and the music, and the vibe, which is why Young relishes his reputation. He enjoys being one of the most-heard, least-known musicians in the world.

Dennis Taylor is a staff writer for the Herald. He may be reached at 646-4344.