



The display case for the start of British Jazz at the British Music Experience in London with Ken's Derby mute and trumpet at the centre

CHAPTER ONE 'SOUNDS IN HIS HEAD'

BILL COLYER The same way that George Lewis and the New Orleans kids who grew up with those sounds from the cradle—Ken's was the same sort of background; he'd got sounds in his head... I'd be indoors when I was at home playing my records and obviously those sounds were going into Ken's head.

BEN MARSHALL There used to be a regular article in the *Reader's Digest* called "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Ever Met"—Ken would be mine. His life story reads like a film script; at his peak, playing some of the most glorious jazz trumpet to be heard, and at his lowest, suffering the pain and distress of serious illness and seemingly throughout his life a victim of the frustration he felt, as crystallised in a quote from his book, which he gave me years ago, *New Orleans and Back*: **"I was born about 60 years too late, the wrong colour and in the wrong country—a misfit."**

JULIAN DAVIES There's that little bit in *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon* by Joseph Mitchell—a book that meant a lot to Ken. "The people in a number of the stories—in this book—are the kind that many writers have recently got into the habit of referring to as 'little people'." I regard this phrase as patronising and repulsive. There are no little people in this book. They are as big as you are... whoever you are."

DIZ DISLEY I used to think he reminded me of Stalin. He wasn't a very good player but he was a good bloke.

KEN COLYER Some people tend to think that I'm very narrow-minded in my musical tastes. But this isn't so. I am in what I want to play. But of course, I mean, I like other styles of jazz, as well. And I'm well aware of them, you know.

MONTY SUNSHINE Ken was very, very deeply feeling the music. That's what he felt, and that's all you needed to have, as far as I was concerned, and I enjoyed his playing, which was fine; he was a great pleasure to play with. I mean, in a way it's the same as—the Hot Fives and so on are all very well, but in a way, it would be better if Louis played like George Mitchell. I've heard that remark more or less made. Well, Ken was like that. He had *that* quality, that you don't notice.

K. Colyer

JULIAN DAVIES I realised that for the first time in my life I was listening to a man who actually meant what he played. He wasn’t just playing a tune, he was living it. “Man, you sound just like Mutt Carey.” Ken turned to me and said, “Do you want to join my band?”

PAT HAWES I often got the feeling, when I was playing with him, that he’d much rather be somewhere else, or doing something else. **There is for my mind a distinct link between the playing of Ken Colyer and Miles Davis.** But I can hear it up there, rather than I can put it down on my fingers, or writing or whatever.

SONNY MORRIS Around ’53 when he came back from New Orleans, he was over the moon about Percy Humphrey. That was the greatest thing ever, according to Ken, when he came back from there—Percy Humphrey.

BILL COLYER But of course, playing at sea, you got the open-air lungs, so Ken was loud. Don’t forget, he’d heard Wild Bill in Condon’s, who was powerful, and they were only tiny clubs in New York, so you’d sit this close to Wild Bill. That’s a wall of sound. Ken was on an “Iron Chops” thing. **He learnt light and shade afterwards, power not noise.**

JIM GODBOLT All the guys that were making a lot of money out of New Orleans jazz never *went* there, including Humphrey Lyttleton, by the way—I don’t think Humph ever went to New Orleans. But Ken did—he made the effort; getting on that boat, getting off the boat, jumping ship, on the bus down to New Orleans. It was like Scott of the Antarctic.

ED O’DONNELL One day I said I thought Mezzrow’s book were a load of rubbish; well... Ken went up in the air. Sits down an’ mumbles something and John Parker gets up and sits down between us and says “Get on with your dinner.” And I never got a chance to explain.

And I thought: “You jumped your ship, took a risk, made your way down on the Greyhound, and went down to New Orleans, and Mezzrow didn’t have to do that.” You know, Mezzrow got some money off his father, probably, which he could’ve. I mean, he could’ve taken a train down there, or a bus

down there even, and found out what it was really like to be a black man—which he would have found out—really found out. And Ken Colyer said he couldn’t go in to the boozer with ’em, because of the colour bar.

COLIN BOWDEN I know that he liked Harry James, and I know that he liked Percy Humphrey, but he probably liked all of the very New Orleans players. But he had a lot of respect for musicians outside his genre.

DOUG LANDAU His technique was well crafted rather than spectacular, but this was probably an artistic choice; he is on record as thinking Louis Armstrong’s dominating flamboyance to be “not for the benefit of the band.” His approach stood him in good stead when tackling the intricacies of rags, which he always carried off with authority. Stylistically he was much influenced by most of the New Orleans trumpeters that came to the fore in the revival, Mutt Carey and Bunk in particular, but he was never a slavish copyist, fashioning these influences in his own way.

KEN SIMS He wasn’t a stomper. I mean, if you listen to Herman Autrey or George Mitchell—they joined the rhythm section. Ken didn’t do that—he was a lyrical, melodic player. Beautiful.

PHILIP LARKIN Colyer combines a robust public personality with the tenderest of instrumental tones.

DICK SMITH He *did* sort of bully you a bit. But when you joined his band you knew what you were expected to... be like. Yeah, he told me not to do anything fancy. None of this bopping. And you could tell whether you were in with him. If you were standing behind him, you’d know.

I enjoyed it with Ken. I don’t know how, but he just managed to bring the best out in you.

STAN GREIG He was alright. I mean... he was a bit grumpy, that was the only thing. I thought he was just a guy with very definite ideas. Nothin’ wrong with that.

DELPHINE COLYER I think he thought everyone was against him—I don’t think he thought many people were on his side. If he had a sort of magic session, I suppose he would have thought that we were all going the same way, but I think he was fighting an uphill battle all the time, really.

KEN SIMS A very kind man—he was very good to me. Without him I would have been sleeping in doorways, certainly at that time. Even with the Bilk band, it was very hard to save any money. Couldn’t go home to Mum.

Ken was there—at Lillie Road—but he was having some kind of problems with his stomach. He had this lady coming in

Ken photographed at the flat in Lillie Road, Fulham, London in 1956



Ken Colyer

to care for him, who cooked him enormous meals, and Ken would give me most of it, so I’d eat mine and his. And he had an amazing record collection. Small groups from the Basie band, and then the next one would be what sounded to me like a second-rate Salvation Army band—and it was wonderful stuff.

JOHNNY PARKER Well, personally, I was frightened of him, because, you know, it was the old class thing of middle-class from a grammar school and there he was—rough speaking. He looked as though, you know, he’d sooner hit you than talk to you.

CHRIS BARBER His accent, to me, always sounded a bit like a cross between Australian and Birmingham, which is about the same—a funny, very strange accent.

Ken sounded about the same to me, all the time. I mean... it’s a very recognisable, individual sort of accent; it’s his voice more than the accent. Stu Morrison can do it perfectly. When Stu joined the band, Stu was standing behind Ian Wheeler, and Stu said “Wheeler,” and Ian nearly jumped out of his skin, because he thought Ken was standing behind him.

RON BOWDEN He didn’t speak a lot; but when he did, you knew what he meant.

DAVE BRENNAN I never found Ken a particularly disagreeable man. He was just forthright. Some things pleased him enormously. I once said he reminded me of Lee Collins in some of his playing. I was his friend for the whole evening. When he saw a newspaper article I’d written describing his trumpet playing as “dancing,” he went into raptures, repeating it over and over again with his eyes having a distant glaze. “Dancing, that’s it, man, dancing.” I felt he was very sensitive to criticism but only liked praise of the right kind.

LONNIE DONEGAN I don’t think we’ve had a jazz trumpet player with the talent of Ken Colyer. I could cry listening to him sometimes. He had so much in him—such a musical “soul” player on trumpet. But all artists have their funny psychological quirks.

PETE DYER Ken had a pretty unique sound from that point

of view, and he was quite exciting to play with. All musicians should have the “Four Ts”: Timing, Tone, Taste and Technique. By technique I mean being able to do what you want to on your instrument.

ALAN COOPER He was unswerving, never mind whether it made a few bob or it didn’t. I mean, he was doing something and he said this is what it’s about and did it, and I have the greatest admiration and respect for that. And so the wheel moves an inch further.

JOHN KEEN He was initially a jazz fan, like a lot of us were; we wanted to play like that. But he was much more talented than most of us. And he soon found that he could play effectively, but he also had a kind of a latent potential leadership inside of him, which meant that he knew what he wanted quite early on; and from what I know of him, he actually used to go around to people’s houses and say, “Look, we’re gonna form a band and this is what it’s gonna be like.”

I don’t know whether the word *crusade* is right, but he had a kind of a vision, and it also fitted in with that post-war world of: “Well, this is a democratic music and those people who weren’t commercial in the United States—the black blokes who played from their heart—they never got the exposure, and perhaps it’s up to us to do it.”

BILL REID He *did* have a magic to him. But quite how Ken had this magic, and this awe that got over to people, I don’t know, but he *did*. It was simple, and he was sincere, and he didn’t deviate. He stuck to what he liked, what he could do, and it worked. And he could play very well, and it did swing. He was more musical than many thought.

SAMMY RIMINGTON Years after I’d left the band, I went up to him and said, “You’re still playing with great feeling, Ken.”

You know, it was the feeling thing that got me. The sincerity, and the heart. The feeling he played with was sincere, which is quite rare when you think about it. There’s so many people like going through the motions of playing from up here [points to head] all the time, they don’t play with any soul, you know.

He kind of *was*, though, because he had a charisma, without doing anything; sometimes quietness or silence is mystical. He had that kind of charismatic power on stage, without doing anything. A lot of the musicians were afraid to say anything to him—people get sometimes a little bit afraid, because there’s no contact. So they’re thinking, “What’s he thinking?” So they’re making the magic in their own mind—it’s all happening in themselves. It’s all to do with that: control.

CHRIS BARBER It’s more than that. It’s the timing of every

Ken with Sister Rosetta Tharpe at the 51



Ken Colyer

phrase. Every note. That’s what Ken had, you see—the correct swing and feel and timing was always there and never wrong.

MIKE CASIMIR Musically I enjoyed his playing. He had a distinctive and lyrical style reminiscent to me of perhaps Charlie Love, Mutt Carey, Percy Humphrey and a few others. I approached him on this subject once and received a blank stare as an answer.

DELPHINE COLYER Very, very sensitive person, and more complex than some people have thought. He was a great reader. I think this is where he got his knowledge from, really.

CATHY COLYER Ken was a quiet man. And he never showed any showing-off business—he wasn’t someone that would say: “I’m Ken Colyer, I’m to be given a bit more respect”... and all of this. He wasn’t like that. He was very modest—he wasn’t a man to go into this “big star” business.

FRED HATFIELD Ken appeared to be a person that would be totally dedicated to whatever he was doing, at the time.

DICK ALLEN Another thing that I remember that Ken was very interested in, when he was here in ’52 and ’53, was trying to revive the English folk tradition. It shows up in things like *Bobby Shaftoe* and *Miner’s Dream of Home*, which he recorded with the Cranes.

JIM HOLMES In my opinion, Ken’s most telling contribution to the traditional jazz scene in Europe was leading a band that played ensemble music in good taste. At a time when commercial pressures led most other bands into gimmickry, this says a lot about Ken’s integrity.

Ken’s style of playing was in the early days quite strongly influenced by Bunk Johnson and Mutt Carey, and of course by many other New Orleans players. Through his career he was to develop his own very individual style.

KEN COLYER When I hear the Bunk Johnson American Musics it makes me feel warm inside—a warm feeling in the belly. No other music moves me like that. [BW]

CUFF BILLETT He *was* distinctive, whatever way you say it. You could hear Mutt Carey in him, and I could sometimes hear Elmer Talbert; some of the bowler-hat mute stuff reminded me of Elmer Talbert at times. And he’d probably been influenced by Percy Humphrey, being the player with George’s band; and of course, at that time he would use the bowler-hat mute. He wasn’t in the same league as Percy as far as power or rhapsodic playing. **But I thought I could hear Mutt Carey and Elmer Talbert in him. What I didn’t hear was any kind of influence of other British players that had been before; I didn’t hear any, shall we say,**

Humphrey Lyttelton coming out of him, although they were both on the same kick, Humph being a bit before Ken.

JOHN WURR I was interested in his influences. He always quoted Mutt Carey, Bunk Johnson and King Oliver as his major sources, and all these are apparent. He also loved the Condon mob, and there was quite a bit of Wild Bill in there. I’m not sure about Louis Armstrong. He claimed not to have been influenced by Louis, and clearly Ken’s style did not follow Armstrong’s path.

But it is interesting to note that a large slice of Ken’s repertoire came from the Armstrong 1930s recordings. More interesting to me was that Ken also loved Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Lester Young, Charlie Parker and Woody Herman—something the Colyer idolisers care to gloss over. He told me once, with a conspiratorial grin and obvious pride, that he had given one of his mysterious roll-ups to Dizzy Gillespie.

RON WARD Another time in Leicester we played for a Students Rag Ball. **Towards the end of the evening we realised that Dizzy Gillespie was across the hall listening to us!** He had been playing a concert the same evening, just up the road at the De Montfort Hall. He stayed listening to us for a half hour or so and at the end of the set he spoke to Ken and told him he had liked what he heard.

ED O’DONNELL I think he was exploited... even when he was living.

HUMPHREY LYTTTELTON I think all musicians who worked—certainly in the traditional jazz field, and many outside it—respected Ken for the devotion to early New Orleans jazz, which he’s certainly shown throughout the years.

Ken’s belief was that in New Orleans the music was all part of the life, and had a particular flavour which was lost at that time. And so he came back and demonstrated this particular music, which of course had been heard on records by Bunk Johnson and Kid Ory and George Lewis.

And it really split the traditional jazz movement into two.

I suppose you could say at that time Ken and myself represented a divergence, and I went off. You see, I had the feeling that if somebody had stood at Louis Armstrong’s shoulder in 1923, when he was with King Oliver, and told him what he should play, and told him to stop doing this because... that’s not allowed, that’s not New Orleans style... my belief is, there would have been no jazz, as we know it today.

It would have just become a 1920s music and wouldn’t have developed. And I’ve had discussions and arguments with Ken about this. But certainly, as a representative of that style of music, which I love, you won’t find anybody more devoted than Ken.

CHRIS BARBER The main thing was, he informed us about what was going on in New Orleans then... as to the jazz of twenty to thirty years before. That helped us to start off, but of course I’ve heard where his influences came from: from Percy Humphrey, Mutt Carey, Wild Bill Davison, and so on. With the band, we *did* find a new style, even though we didn’t want to do so. We just wanted to play good jazz.

PETE LAY You know, there was never any antagonism between Ken and Chris as far as the music was concerned; he always respected Chris’s band. He said to me, “There’s things that Chris does, I don’t do them but Chris does them well. If people come to me and say ‘I want *Rent Party Blues*,’ I say ‘Chris’s is the band to do those things; I don’t do that type of arranged thing.’” He respected Chris for those sort of things. He was very respectful of other bandleaders, you know. I mean, Alex Welsh: he liked the Welsh band, and he liked the early Lyttelton band, and Bruce Turner.

BRUCE TURNER Ken’s way was always to assume that the music contained its own appeal. Ken simply played the stuff he believed in, occasionally transfixing with a scowl any members of the public who did not seem to be paying attention.

ACKER BILK Ken had a lot of dynamics in his playing—I like that. He’s not a trumpet player that plays in one level, you know. He drops it down, and the last choruses are up, and then the hat.

It’s quite exciting to play with. I mean, I made this record last year with Ken after... thirty years or more, you know. And he’s playing the same. I couldn’t play the same. I mean I’ve



Ken on board the SS Tamaroa, dressed ready to take on the town



changed—it’s not intentional with me; I get influenced by different people. And my style has changed a lot since. I think that’s a good thing. Because, in a way, I mean, Ken Colyer is Ken Colyer, and always will be. It’s good to have an institution.

JOHN WURR To be frank, we never got on particularly well. We had a shared interest in gardening, which was fine, but most of the time his legendary taciturnity obstructed any meaningful dialogue. Having hero-worshipped him as a youth, I found it quite difficult, as an adult, to accept that I didn’t really like the man very much. Some bandleaders seem to go out of their way to upset those that are there to support them (sound crews, stage managers, etc.) and Ken shared this characteristic with one or two others I have worked for.

His drinking didn’t help.

As a jazz trumpeter, Ken was primarily a melodist, rather than a harmonic improviser. A typical Colyer performance consisted simply of the tune played many times over. But the subtle variations in tonal colour, volume, and rhythmic placement of the notes created endless interest and variety. He was wonderfully easy to play *with*.

IAN WHEELER He didn’t strike me as an abnormal person, all the time I was with him. He didn’t suffer fools, I don’t think. But he was reasonable to most people. He was a bit short, sometimes; they make him out—some of these people—to be either one extreme or the other. But he didn’t strike me as anything other than perfectly normal. As I say, I had a good relationship with him—went on holiday with him... had a good time.

KEITH SMITH Sometimes Ken could be enjoyable company, but I often felt I was treading a fine line if I disagreed with his emphatic loves and hates for the British and our traditional class structures. **Ken loved eccentrics and often the romantic side of his character would come to the fore with enthusiasm for Judy Garland, for example,** and her various film appearances. This subject often concluded with a vocal chorus from Ken of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*.

Ken Colyer

On the darker side, he would vent his hate for religion, authoritarianism and his contempt for graduates of private schools, which are inexplicably referred to in Britain as “public schools.”

COLIN BOWDEN He didn’t like to do the showbiz bit of deliberately raving the audience up. He liked to do it in his own time and in his own way. I mean, we’d go on to the stage in these big band concerts, you know, and a trad band would have been blasting away, and Ken would start with a slow blues, just to get things down to his level, which was a very clever way of doing things. I mean, those four rags we recorded showed the introspective side of his playing. And then you’d get the wild stuff, where he’s going like a train. He could build up to a finale.

PETE DYER We were chatting at the end of the session and he’d say something like, “Do you know, we had two choruses in that tune where we got near there and that’s all you can ask for in one evening. That’s good.” And he used to speak like that... quite interesting. I think *he* knew in that sense, you know.

STU MORRISON When I first met him, he seemed quite remote, and...

the legend was flying about...
I mean, this was someone
who had been to the
mountain and come back
with the tablets, you know.

And he’d come back to tell a story. The people he had played with were names on record labels, so we had a feeling that he was of another species almost, you know? In later years, when I got to know him better—a lot better—it was obvious really that it was shyness, it was the unwillingness to put up with bullshit and a load of mindless waffle.

On parade with John Keen and Sonny Morris in the Excelsior Brass Band

BILL WILKINSON When he was invited to play with the Excelsior Brass Band he bought a tenor sax. He was so quiet you could never hear him. I asked him why. He replied, “‘Cause there’s too many bloody good trumpet players [*Cuff, Jim Holmes, Andy Dickens*] in this band.” **Every generation needs a Ken.**

BETTY COLYER He lived with us for a little while when he came back from America, and he was such a good raconteur when he was on form. He was so interesting—if you got him at a good moment, you know. He was *so* interesting. He was a very self-taught man.

I learnt such a lot from Ken and Bill with their knowledge of literature—Bill particularly.

COLIN BOWDEN I always remember him talking about Don Camillo—he used to love those stories, and he would use them as anecdotes. See, this is the way he is: classic example—somebody gave me an omnibus of all the Don Camillo stories, and of course I read them, and I thought they were marvellous. And I used to bring these anecdotes up, and of course in the end he’d never talk about Don Camillo after that.

But that was his way; he would like to find something that nobody else really knew about, I think. But I don’t know—you could say that I didn’t know him very well. All I knew of him was his musicality—his trumpet playing. I knew where he was going then, there’s no doubt about that.

BILL COLE I can’t really remember the exact first time I met him, but I remember that he struck me as being an imposing sort of person, in his own quiet sort of way.

TONY PYKE To some people Ken must have seemed abrupt if not quite rude at times. He didn’t find conversation easy, particularly with strangers, and had no time for small talk. He was usually alright on matters close to his heart such as music,

the sea and, later, gardening but basically he was extremely shy and introvert.

COLIN BOWDEN In the late fifties the band used to play Eel Pie Island, and the only way across the water was by the chain ferryboat. We were all travelling together on the way over, and Mac and Ian were having a heated argument on some subject or other.

To cool the situation down a bit, Ken said for them to toss for it and produced a coin. It was an old silver half-crown piece. They grudgingly agreed, Ken tossed the coin, he missed the catch as it came down and it bounced off the side of the boat into the river. You can guess what happened: The atmosphere changed from doom to hilarity, with Ken crestfallen over his good intentions. He probably got a pint out of it though.



Poster for a Jazz Ball held at the Lyceum Theatre in Covent Garden

PETE DYER I can remember an instance where people used to come up and say, “Oh Ken, that last number—it was terrific. It was the best version I’ve ever heard.” And I’ve heard him say, “Well, obviously you haven’t listened to this version by George Lewis,” or Armstrong, or something. But of course, he liked to be praised.

EDWARD BLACK Listen to the records. His fine tone, flights of melodic invention, the human qualities which empower a musician to play blues and spirituals. The great Lizzie Miles at the time of the prison incident inscribed two records “To a great jazzman.”

Serious and dedicated, in touch with an ideal, Colyer was the creative artist on the razor edge of life. With his horn to his lips, he felt the contact of dead musicians motivating his playing far more than lesser artists accompanying him. Bunk had been showing the way (yet with his own distinct style Ken was properly scornful of copyists). When he played at the Düsseldorf Bier Bar the photo of Bunk on the wall appeared to smile or frown.

GEORGE MELLY At a recording session Ken went into the box to hear the playbacks and rejected the lot. “You can’t hear the fuckin’ inner rhythms,” he told the astounded engineer.

JOHN GUY A young lady who had been reading George Melly’s *Owning Up* asked Ken if he really used the ‘f’ word. “You can’t believe everything you read in books, my dear. Anyway, we forgive George because he’s good fun!” Thereafter Ken would refer, smiling, to “the *proverbial* inner rhythms!”

GEOFF COLE Ken realised that we were never gonna sound exactly like a New Orleans band. He said to me: “I’m not much on communication. I wish I could play all six instruments.”

Ken was very strong on inner rhythms, as you know. You know, you maybe play the same notes, but you don’t play them at the same time. They were improvising with time, rather than with notes. And he was very good at this. Bunk Johnson—he improvises with time, puts different stress on different phrases and places notes at different places over the beat.

Concerning Ken’s attempt at recreating New Orleans music, I didn’t think he was doing that. It seemed to me that Ken had already formed his own style.

BILL COLYER Number one: his mute work, and he’s been to New Orleans enough times to know. Ken with his mutes, best mute man in the business, Ken. He’s making sounds and when you are sitting behind him... I had to play washboard for some months till we found a real drummer, and I remember whenever Ken went in the bowler hat, the sound waves coming back, they turned you on.

IAN CHRISTIE I don’t think Ken’s actual trip to New Orleans changed the course of British jazz history. His style was already set, his ideas were completely formulated.

It did a lot for him, as he’d left the Christie Brothers Stompers, without any kind of a row or anything. I mean, he thought that we were diverging from the truth—the gospel—of New Orleans Music. I mean, he suddenly announced he was going to kind of recharge his batteries by going off to New Orleans and playing there. It reinforced his ideas rather than changed them, I think. And when he came back and started his own band, he had that unswerving dedication which he always had.

LEN BALDWIN Jim Godbolt in his book recently said about the chap who went up to Ken and, trying to be sycophantic, said, “Oh, Mister Colyer, your band’s better than George Lewis,” and Ken got up and punched him.

He was quite kind in some ways and was very tolerant if you had a problem, as at one time when I split my lip. The more I played the more it split. It was a problem, and he was great and very understanding: “Just do the best you can, man.” That sort of thing. Whereas somebody else, I won’t mention any names, would tell you to take a week off while he got someone else in.

COLIN BOWDEN I used to like him, but there were black periods. For example, if you met him and you’d go to a session in the evening, and if I didn’t get the right response then I would just move on and not talk to him. Or directly he went on a tack I didn’t like, I would just quietly leave the conversation. I found that better, then I didn’t get screwed up. He was moody, like Mac was, really. Ken could handle his drink—I could never keep up with him.

I think really Ken used to get very nervous. Sometimes when he would start a concert he wouldn’t go straight into it. I think he was very conscious of what he was doing, and I think he felt very vulnerable sometimes. And part of his whole psyche was a shield.

SAMMY RIMINGTON Ken was a bit funny. He loved loyalty: he really respected loyalty. And if anybody left him, he’d never forget it. I think he even said it to me, “You’ve left me now.” And somebody else left the band, and he didn’t take it good at all, you know. Because he felt that they’d let him down.

With Chris, he felt he got let down, I think. Because they went on a different way. The others were thinking more commercially, let’s put it that way. Their main thing was to make money, where Ken’s wasn’t. **He wasn’t aiming, as a goal, to get famous or to make money. He just wanted to spread that gospel—if you like—of that music. And to give him that feeling—himself—that he was aiming for it. He wanted to master it.**

GEORGE MELLY Awkward as an old bear, often too drunk to blow properly, he has played as he wanted to since the very beginning.

JOHN BEECHAM The things that struck me most about Ken’s playing were his bell-like tone, which he was able to maintain even in the deadest acoustics, and his knack at the end of a number of squeezing out one last chorus which was even hotter than the one before.

The interplay between cornet and trombone is very important in a New Orleans band, and I always listened closely to Ken’s lead and tried to complement his melodic and rhythmic approach.

He was never smug or self-satisfied, and so I’m proud to remember the times when he would smile and say, “We have a great rapport.” I also admired his professionalism. He turned out smartly dressed for every engagement, whether it was a dinner suit occasion or a casual gig; his beautiful cornet was always clean and shining; the band always started on time and played the agreed length of sets.

‘FESSOR’ LINDGREN He was fighting for what he believed in. A man who dedicated his life to the music.



How an English newspaper viewed Ken’s part in the beginnings of Pop music!

IAN WHEELER Yes, he *was* different. You could say that it was just that everyone else was following a slightly different line. So, what Ken was playing—based on what he learned in New Orleans, and what he liked—was not generally followed by most of the bands at the time. That’s why he was different. Different in so far as where he left the spaces. He spaced his notes very different from everybody else.

In fact, when I left Ken, I found it very difficult to play with anyone else, because I was playing over other people’s things, you know. Because I’d got so used to the way Ken phrased. You know—he phrased and you answered, type of thing, but the timing of his phrases *was* very different from other trumpet players.

GEORGE MELLY Even Humph, although he has always denied it, was affected by Ken’s ideas. For a month of two he turned to look over his shoulder. The Ghost of Mutt Carey whispered in his ear. Then he turned away, and swam slowly and deliberately into the mainstream.

JOHN PETTERS Melodic—that’s how I’d describe his playing, and I think he could play the blues as well; I think he could sing the blues. I remember hearing him do what he called *Lowland Blues*, which is the same as *Backwater Blues* on one of those LPs that I’d got at the time, and thinking, “Yes, this is as real as you can get... here and now.” From my experience of him, he was quite open-minded musically, but I think he was locked into the way that he played. He wasn’t like some musicians that can, say, turn on Louis Armstrong one minute and Bunk Johnson the next and that sort of thing. What you got when you heard Ken Colyer, was Ken Colyer.

TONY O’SULLIVAN I listened to my contemporaries who were more into the music than I was in about 1956, and kept hearing the name “Ken Colyer.”

His image was that of a non-commercial bandleader with the—to me—romantic overtone of the man who had jumped ship and gone to New Orleans to learn about traditional jazz at source and play an authentic interpretation of the music. I bought an EP of the Crane River band and decided that this



was the sort of music I wanted to be involved with—melodic, swinging and devoid of any great pyrotechnics.

I acquired my first trumpet in 1958 and, after the usual trials and errors of the self-taught musician, began to develop a personal approach to playing New Orleans-style jazz. At this stage, Ken Colyer was the seminal influence.

I had discovered Bunk Johnson, Kid Howard and Mutt Carey (inter alia), but **the accessibility of the Colyer band through records, numerous visits to Studio 51 and concerts in the London area gave me a live model on which to base my style and technique.** I even bought a Humes & Berg “Derby” mute.

What I learned specifically from Ken Colyer, which I like to think have lasted to this day, are the virtues of good leadership (exposing the theme of a number and controlling the balance between solo and ensemble work), controlling the dynamics of a number (plenty of light and shade and gradual building to a climax), and a controlled yet lyrical “middle register” style, which seems to suit my constitution.

In addition, the various types of ensemble Ken led—the brass band and “ragtime” interpretations, inspired me to

develop on both these fronts. I even did a bit of skiffing between 1957 and 1959 (which, if nothing else, taught me a bit about chords).

JOHN BEECHAM When I heard his record *The Isle Of Capri* on the radio, I saved up enough money to buy the record. The ‘B’ side was the majestic *Goin’ Home*. This music knocked me sideways, and I decided that I’d have to have a go at playing it.

Most people who love music are happy to listen to it, but other poor devils are driven by an irrational need to play.

I would never have guessed in those days that I would be lucky enough to play professionally with each of the six guys on that recording and that I’d even get to make records and appear on TV with most of them.

As you can imagine, it was a tremendous thrill when, many years later, Ken asked me to join his band.

DAVE BAILEY I had been knocked out hearing the recordings of his late fifties band with Mac and Ian in the front line. The first time I ever met him was when I was on tour with the Yarra Yarra band in 1969. We were the backup band at, I

think, Osterley jazz club. He seemed somewhat remote and difficult to make contact with, but then who wouldn’t, being constantly pestered by the punters during the intervals.

CHRIS BARBER I have to say that, during the year or so we were together, I learned from Ken Colyer everything I knew about timing.

For that sort of music, Ken would still be the best were he alive today. He had a perfect understanding of how to make a New Orleans band swing—while doing almost nothing. He was a marvelous musician who became a pain in the arse.

PETE DYER Well, we were both Sinatra fans. We could hear the timing, you see. Timing. And I think Ken recognised that.

COLIN BOWDEN But Ken had an ego. It was a weird combination. Ken loved that New Orleans ensemble sound... but he still liked to be in charge and be the focal point.

And the way he controlled a session to go the way *he* wanted to do it... and not the way the audience expected it. If he wanted to play four slow blues in succession, he would, you know.

BILL STOTESBURY I went in his garden, and he’d got this fishpond with straight sides; concrete fishpond. And he’d got this little ladder coming out of the fishpond. And I said, “What’s that for Ken?”

“Oh... that’s for the hedgehogs.” And I said, “What do you mean, the hedgehogs?” and he said, “Well, they keep getting in the pond and drowning. So I put the ladder up for them to get out.”

And I said, “You’re joking.” He said, “No.” So I said, “Does it work then?” and he said, “Well, I haven’t had any hedgehogs drown since.”

And funnily enough there was something on the radio about a month later, and somebody—in a gardening programme or something—said, “Oh, but hedgehogs can climb, so...” And I said to him afterwards, “You were bloody right.” And he said, “I know...”

MARTIN COLYER In the course of making a record in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, our band went to a club gig way out in the countryside. The bar band were tremendous, and when the musicians came down from the bandstand we were introduced to the guitarist—local legend Travis Wammack.

Travis was a slightly scary figure. He had probably been ripped off by men with much less talent, but much more business sense, throughout his life, something he had in common with many jobbing musicians in the American South (and all over the world, probably). Travis is a man whose lips

Ken at the Pizza Express in the eighties, with brother Bill on washboard and Paul Sealey on guitar



smiled (in a Jack Palance-type way) as his eyes said, as Mark Pringle, our guitarist, put it later, “Just what do you want from me, boy?” The only other time he had experienced a similar look, he told me, was when he was introduced to my uncle, Ken Colyer, at the 100 Club.

ED O'DONNELL Oh, he was a funny bugger!

ALEXIS KORNER It is easier to gain liking than to gain respect. Liking, after all, makes few demands on the giver; it is so often a casual matter. Respect implies a degree of thought and, in some cases, admiration—which may not always be given too willingly. One such case is definitely that of Ken Colyer.

Here is a man of solitary nature, moody, diffident and utterly dedicated to his music, a man whose absolute integrity is admired even by those who do not like what he plays.

He does not make friends easily—Colyer is not “casually” likeable—but when he gives his friendship he expects to make and meet the demands which such a relationship must imply. His pride leaves him open to sudden wounds, his intensity betrays him into strange depressions. And all this is plainly audible in his music.

GEORGE MELLY Ken Colyer came back from New Orleans like Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the law. To the growing number of New Orleans purists he trailed clouds of glory, and every note he blew was sacred.



K. Colyer



Ken with Chris Barber and Acker Bilk, probably photographed on a 'Floating Festival' on the Thames