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Skitch Henderson, 'Tonight' Show Conductor, Dies at 87

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

Skitch Henderson, the conductor, pianist and radio and television entertainer who provided both music and repartee for the "Tonight" show from 1954 to 1966 and who founded and led the New York Pops, died on Tuesday at his home in New Milford, Conn. He was 87.

His death was announced by James M. Johnson, executive director of the Pops.

With his neatly trimmed Van Dyke beard and his friendly disposition, Skitch Henderson was a familiar personality to millions of Americans over a long career. He had programs of his own on radio and television and made many guest appearances in the 1950's and 1960's on such programs as "To Tell the Truth," "Password" and "Match Game."

He was also a mainstay of the "Tonight" show, conducting the studio band and swapping stories with Steve Allen and later Johnny Carson. He devised the "Stump the Band" routine, in which members of the studio audience would suggest obscure song titles and challenge the musicians in the band to play the tunes.

Mr. Henderson liked to stretch his musicians when he could, using arrangements by distinguished writers like Neal Hefti and Ernie Wilkins. Among the sidemen of the Henderson band were Doc Severinson and Clark Terry, both of whom would later lead the "Tonight" band.

Although he became as much of a performer as a conductor-pianist, Mr. Henderson always maintained his musical presence. He once described himself as "a middlebrow musician who does quality show music" and critics over the years seemed to agree with that assessment.

Under Mr. Henderson's leadership, the New York Pops was born unofficially in the 1950's, with 70 members of the New York Philharmonic. It faded after a time but Mr. Henderson started it again, formalized its existence in 1983, and conducted it for many years thereafter, drawing its musicians from the New York freelance pool.

Mr. Henderson was regarded as one the best-traveled musicians on the scene. He made appearances as the conductor of such orchestras as the Tulsa Philharmonic, the New York Philharmonic, the San Diego Symphony, the Utah Symphony, the Stamford Symphony, the Minneapolis Symphony and symphony-sized quality pops orchestras in Virginia, Florida and Louisville. Abroad, he conducted the Royal Philharmonic and the London Symphony.

He received a 1963 Grammy Award for selections from "Porgy and Bess," with the RCA Orchestra and Leontyne Price as soloist.

"What's great about Skitch," said Marvin Hamlisch, who performed with him often, "is that he can

move between any type of music. Now he does a lot of pop music, but he knows the repertoire of the classics as well as anyone. He's a consummate musician."

But music, and in particular a bath of musical scores, ultimately led Mr. Henderson afoul of the Internal Revenue Service in 1974. He was indicted on charges that he attempted to evade paying as much as \$50,000 in Federal taxes when he donated the scores to the University of Wisconsin.

Mr. Henderson said the scores were worth \$350,000 and testified that he had consulted Leonard Bernstein and Henry Mancini about their value. But Mr. Bernstein and Mr. Mancini testified that they had not been consulted.

Government prosecutors maintained that all the manuscripts taken together were perhaps worth a few hundred to a few thousand dollars. But the composer Morton Gould and Schuyler Chapin, then the head of the Metropolitan Opera, testified in support of Mr. Henderson's claim.

The case attracted widespread attention, in part because in certain aspects it resembled a tax case that had been mounted against President [Richard M. Nixon](#), who had tried to take a tax deduction for the gift of his papers to the National Archives. Mr. Nixon was never indicted, though an aide went to jail for backdating the deed of the gift. Mr. Henderson, though, was indicted, convicted and sentenced to six months in prison and fined \$10,000. He served four months.

Mr. Henderson remained a popular figure in New York's musical scene for years afterward. In July, 1997, Mayor [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#) awarded him the Handel Medallion, the city's highest official cultural honor, saying that, "As the founder and musical director of the New York Pops, Skitch is a treasure whose legacy of music has brought joy to generations of listeners around the world."

The following January, a celebrity-filled gala event was held at Carnegie Hall to honor him on his 80th birthday.

Lyle Russell Cedric Henderson was born in Jan. 27, 1918, in Birmingham, England. In interviews over the years he said he took piano lessons when he was six years old from his mother, who was a church organist. He said he came to the United States when he was 14 and by the time he turned 15, he had already decided he would try to make his mark in music.

He spent some of his teen years in Bismarck, N.D., he said, early on working for radio station WFYR in Bismarck, occasionally playing piano and organ. He also spent time in Kansas and Oklahoma.

Mr. Henderson told reporters that when he was very young, "I ran away and played with a rinky-dink band."

He was somewhere in the Middle West in the 1930's, playing a hotel - possibly the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs - when he encountered Judy Garland. He stepped in when her regular accompanist took ill and later was a rehearsal accompanist for both Garland and Mickey Rooney, who played opposite her in a number of movies.

In 1938 he played piano for "The Bob Hope Pepsodent Show" on radio. Two years later, Mr. Henderson enlisted in the Canadian Air Force. After the United States entered the war a year later, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps and became a fighter pilot.

After his discharge in 1945, he organized his own dance band and toured the United States . He worked with Bing Crosby on the radio and also was named music director of [Frank Sinatra's](#) "Light Up Time" radio program.

The following year he was hired to be a disk jockey on WNBC radio in New York, replacing Bob Smith, who left to become Buffalo Bob on "Howdy Doody." He then started doing nightclub dates in New York and replaced Richard Kollmar as the master of ceremonies of "Talent Search" on NBC.

Mr. Henderson went on to a staff position at NBC in New York which, he said, led to conducting engagements with the NBC Symphony on radio during two of Toscanini's summer vacations. He became music director of NBC and then worked on the "Tonight" show.

In 1950, Mr. Henderson married Faye Emerson, the actress and early television performer. They were divorced in 1957.

He is survived by his wife, the former Ruth Einseidel Michaels, whom he married in 1958; a son, Hans Christian, and a daughter, Heidi Maria.

He was often asked where he got the name "Skitch." He said it was given to him by Bing Crosby, who told him the public would never remember proper names like Harry Lillis Crosby (Crosby's given name) but they couldn't forget him when he became "Bing." Crosby began to call him the Sketch Kid, because as a rehearsal pianist he made piano sketches for the orchestrator. From that came Skitch.

In recent years, Mr. Henderson and his wife ran The Silo, a combination cooking school, art gallery and country store, at Hunt Hills Farms in New Milford.

In 1998, he summarized his career for the Salt Lake Tribune. "I've never had goals," he said. "I have worked and been lucky enough. If one trolley broke down, I was able to get on another that was running. Goals are dreams but they are seldom realistic."