

Bandleader 'Skitch' Henderson Dies

By Adam Bernstein
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"Skitch" Henderson, 87, the maestro with a trademark Vandyke beard who was the first "Tonight Show" bandleader and founder of the New York Pops, died Nov. 1 at his home in New Milford, Conn. No cause of death was disclosed.

Mr. Henderson said his two crucial early influences were pop crooner Bing Crosby, who taught him a relaxed stage presence, and classical composer Arnold Schoenberg, who showed him the principles of musical harmony. The rest of his career straddled the popular and classical spheres, and he became one of the most versatile and instantly recognizable of musical personalities through six decades in the public spotlight.

From 1954 to 1956, Mr. Henderson was musical director of "The Tonight Show," where host Steve Allen encouraged his work in skits. He played such characters as the slow-witted Sidney Ferguson in the man-in-the-street segment.

Starting in 1962, he spent four years under host Johnny Carson, sparring with him in comic routines and performing the "stump the band" routine. He once said Carson "didn't really want me" but agreed once Carson's brother was hired as a director. Carson later fired his brother, prompting Mr. Henderson to observe, "Isn't it wonderful, to be in television?"

The medium brought him a reputation as one of the most visible and adaptable conductors of his era. "I think I reached an epitome of some kind when in one hour, one night, I rehearsed Louis Armstrong and Van Cliburn," he once said, referring to the jazz trumpeter and classical pianist.

A devotee of the classics, he grew his noted beard to honor English conductor Sir Thomas Beecham and began a long career conducting orchestras from Scranton, Pa., to London.

He received the Grammy Award for best classical performance for "Great Scenes From Gershwin's Porgy and Bess" (1963) featuring opera singer Leontyne Price. He also met with applause at New York's City Center in 1963 conducting the Kurt Weill's opera "Street Scene."

In 1983, he revived an earlier attempt to create the New York Pops and led the orchestra until his death. The group specialized in Americana from Stephen Foster to Leonard Bernstein and some light classics. The format benefited from Mr. Henderson's enforcement of a crisp and upbeat tempo that contrasted with an avuncular stage manner. If the band flubbed a bar, he might tell the audience to go enjoy a glass of schnapps while he worked out the problem.

Lyle Russell Cedric Henderson was born in Birmingham, England, on Jan. 27, 1918. He once said his father had vague hopes he would join the British diplomatic corps, but he was drawn instead to music by his organist mother. After her death, he was sent to live among relatives in the United States. Soon, he said, "I ran away and played with a rinky-dink band."

He was in Denver in 1937 when child film actors Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney toured the city in a vaudeville show to promote their films. When their pianist fell ill, the stage manager hired Mr.

Henderson, and he was invited to work as a rehearsal pianist with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios.

In Hollywood, crooner Crosby gave Mr. Henderson his lifelong nickname -- a variation on his ability to arrange musical "sketches" instantly. He despised an earlier name, "Seedy," a corruption of Cedric.

After World War II service in the Army Air Forces, where he developed an infatuation with flying, he became a musical director at NBC Radio in New York. He was a music director for Frank Sinatra and led the NBC Symphony during two of conductor Arturo Toscanini's summer vacations.

He also fronted his own jazz band and had a self-titled radio show. An able raconteur, he was soon a staple of other programs, including that of his first wife, actress Faye Emerson. He later called their eight-year marriage "a major train wreck."

Easing from radio to television, Mr. Henderson loved the new medium and was skilled at improvising during the inevitable technical glitches. However, he found a certain prejudice against the tube when he went to guest conduct with orchestras.

He once told the St. Petersburg Times: "I remember working with the National Symphony in Washington, and when I walked onstage for morning rehearsal at 9:30 the orchestra faked the theme from the 'Tonight' show in the most god-awful way as a message to me, I suppose, putting me in the category of a buffoon."

A conviction in 1975 on charges of filing false income tax statements seemingly did not diminish Mr. Henderson's career. He spent ample time guest conducting and maintained many properties, including restaurants in the New York area.

He lived on a 135-acre former dairy farm in western Connecticut once profiled on the television show "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." In January, he received the James Smithson Bicentennial Medal from the Smithsonian Institution for his contributions to American culture.

His marriage to Emerson ended in divorce.

Survivors include his wife, former fashion model Ruth Einsiedel Henderson, whom he married in 1958; two children from his second marriage; and four grandchildren.