

Jan. 21, 1990—

Jazz saxophonist Ornette Coleman often tells the story of seeing soul saxophonist Big Jay McNeely deliver some serious marching orders at a nightclub in the 1950s.

McNeely was turning the same note over and over like a flapjack when he flipped, flopped and flew outside the club, followed by a line of dancing customers. McNeely—still playing his tenor saxophone—led the group on a trolley, got off and took the next trolley back to the club. According to Coleman's account, McNeely and his band were still playing together when they were reunited.

Do saxophonists blow hot air?

"It's a true story," said McNeely in a phone interview from his home in Los Angeles. "Actually, I got locked up in San Diego for doing that. At that time, I had no wires. Now I have wires where I can go 2,000 feet and you can still hear me. My brother (Bob) was playing baritone sax and trombone. So we walked outside onto a trolley. An off-duty cop called the police and sent me to jail for disturbing the peace."

Here is where the poetic license comes in.

"I bonded out on \$50," McNeely said. "By the time I came back, the band was still playing. We did that all the time. Even at Birdland, I'd walk into other clubs, get the people (from the competing clubs) and bring them back into Birdland."

McNeely will make his first Chicago area appearance in 30 years this weekend at FitzGerald's in Berwyn, IL. McNeely will be backed by a four-piece Chicago band. When McNeely last appeared in Chicago, he shared a bill with soul singers James Brown and Little Willie John.

A native of Los Angeles' Watts neighborhood, McNeely cut his teeth in jazz circles and was a childhood hero to Coleman—although at 62, he is only two years older. The irony is that Coleman began his career on the wide-open Texas rhythm-and-blues circuit (he was a member of Pee Wee Crayton's band) before moving on to innovative jazz. McNeely began in jazz before heading off to rhythm and blues.

"I wanted to make some money, so I became legit," McNeely said. "On my first record, I

forgot everything I learned in jazz and just played soul. That was 'Deacon's Hop.' It was a big hit (the growling instrumental reached No. 1 on the rhythm and blues charts in 1949), and I came to be known as 'One Note Jay.' That didn't bother me, because I knew what I could do."

McNeely had previously played with Charlie Parker and Miles Davis when they were in Los Angeles. He would take experimental jazz passages and expand on them, usually driving one note into the ground. But the associations gave McNeely fast credibility on the New York jazz circuit. "I'd go back east and work Birdland with Sarah (Vaughan), Diz (Dizzy Gillespie) and all the heavy guys. Bird (Parker) and all them would come and talk to me. That impressed other people. But I always remembered that the one-note things were selling."

McNeely's appearance at FitzGerald's will pay tribute to the dwindling number of post-World War II juke jumpers. A flourishing World War II economy was responsible for the proliferation of R&B-flavored big bands such as Johnny Otis and Lionel Hampton. When the economy bottomed out after the war, these bands were streamlined to a couple of horn players and a rhythm section. Louis Jordan and his Tympany Five were at the forefront of the minimalist movement, followed by McNeely, who started his own band with his late brother, Bob, and saxophonist Chuck Higgins, a native of Gary who became a West Coast peer of McNeely's. And in the early '50s, Higgins and McNeely appeared in "Battle of the Saxes" shows in the Los Angeles area. Wearing shorts, each musician would play on a stage that resembled a boxing ring.

It was just one of many gimmicks McNeely has used throughout his career. On Saturday, he'll be playing a fluorescent horn that glows in the dark, and of course, he'll do the barwalk.

"When I was young, Lionel Hampton used to march his band around a lot," McNeely said. "So in 1951, I was playing in Clarksville, Tenn. I had done two hours before taking a break and the people hadn't responded. So after intermission, I figured I'd play on my knees. Well, that didn't happen. I laid down and people started screaming. There was nothing left to do but march around."

A year later, McNeely appeared with Hampton at Wrigley Field in Los Angeles. McNeely stole the show, first parading around the horn (baseball talk for the diamond) and then into the stands, blowing his own dangerously distorted horn all the way.

McNeely augments his stage antics with some airtight saxophone playing. On Saturday,

he'll cover his hits, "Deacon's Hop," "Benson's Groove" (which he wrote for Chicago disc jockey Al Benson in a stab at airplay) and the bluesy "There Is Something on Your Mind," for which he will provide his own vocals. The original "Something" was recorded in 1957 with vocalist Little Sonny Warner in a basement in Seattle, and it hit No. 1 on the rhythm and blues charts. The song has since become a New Orleans standard, covered by that city's Bobby Marchan and Professor Longhair.

McNeely's best-known vocalist was crooner Jesse Belvin, whose enchanting tenor influenced Sam Cooke and Stevie Wonder. Belvin co-wrote "Earth Angel" and had hits with "Goodnight, My Love" and "Guess Who." Belvin's first recording was "All That Wine Is Gone," a prelude to Stick McGhee's and Jerry Lee Lewis' "Drinkin' Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee," which Belvin cut with McNeely in 1950. In 1960, Belvin died in an automobile accident in Los Angeles. He was 27 years old.

"Jesse and I grew up in Watts together," he said. "He was 16 when he joined me. He was such a smooth singer. I do vocals myself now, but at that time, I didn't think I could sing. I wish I had started singing earlier - jive singing, anyway. People can relate to words more than instrumentals."

McNeely has just finished mastering a country album that features remakes of "There Is Something on Your Mind" and a cover of Ray Charles' "I Can't Stop Loving You."

"About once a month, they have a rockabilly thing out here, and I sit in on that," he said. "Whenever we rehearse, I do 'I Can't Stop Loving You' and it always sounds great. I told the steel guitar and violin players to play funk and I did some (excitable) Jerry Lee Lewis things with my saxophone and sang. I try to sing like I play my horn. I pay attention to phrasing. I try to be somewhat stylish. I couldn't sing a beautiful ballad, but as long as the beat is going, anybody can sing."

And as long as the beat is going, Jay McNeely will be big.