

Chester Earle Jaeger Jazzy Obituary

The Dixieland Jazz world lost one of its most beloved citizens with the passing of Chet Jaeger on January 4, 2022, after a brief bout of pneumonia. He passed away at home at the age of 97. His wife Eileen, age 96, was by his side; he died a week short of their 76th wedding anniversary. He was surrounded by four of his five children, his daughter-in-law, and three Night Blooming Jazzmen; he was singing 'Sweet Eileen' on the CD at the moment of his passing. On January 8 the family held a private memorial service in the Jaeger's spacious Alamosa Drive house; 33 family members attended, and another 26 joined by Zoom from New York, Texas, Idaho, Northern California, Ecuador, and Taiwan. Altogether the descendants of Chet and Eileen number 58: five children (Barbara Cash, Jeri Jaeger, April Floyd, George Jaeger, Holly Proulx) and their spouses; 14 grandchildren with 13 spouses/partners; and 21 (and counting) great-grandchildren ranging from age 12 years to 3 weeks old.



Chester Earle Jaeger was born on November 7, 1924, in Columbia MO, where his parents Chester George Jaeger and Elfrieda A. Springmeier Jaeger were attending the University of Missouri. In 1928 the family moved to New Orleans, where the elder Chester, a newly minted PhD in mathematics, was hired to teach at Tulane. Chet doesn't remember hearing any jazz in New Orleans, but suggests that it may have seeped in subliminally. In 1931 Chet senior moved his family to Claremont where he took up the post of Chairman of the Mathematics Department at Pomona College, a position he held until his retirement in 1961; the younger Chet was 7 years old at the time, and his sister Harriet was an infant.

Chet began playing the horn at the age of 8, on a cornet borrowed from Pomona College, and from the beginning showed 'natural chops'. For his 13th birthday, his parents decided he was serious enough to have his own trumpet, a rebuilt King Liberty model that still stands in the Alamosa Drive home, on which several of his children and grandchildren have had their first lessons. He discovered traditional Dixieland jazz at a young age, and he put his first jazz ensemble together in 1940 when he was in Junior High. At age 18 he had begun his studies at Pomona College when, after one semester, WWII intervened, and he enlisted in the Army Air Corps. During a training program in Asheville, NC, he happened to be playing his horn for a USO gathering in a church basement, and was having trouble holding his music and playing at the same time, when a pretty young hostess volunteered to hold his music for him. Although the hostesses



were not supposed to date the servicemen, Chet and the young lady, Eileen Deem, hit it off immediately, and after a whirlwind courtship of less than 2 weeks they became engaged, just as Chet was shipping off to India and China, to serve as a weatherman (and of course bugler) for the Corps. When Chet returned to the states on New Year's Eve, 1945, he discovered that his parents and sister had come to Asheville to meet Eileen's family, and they decided that, as long as they were all together, they might as well have a wedding; thus Chet and Eileen were married on January 13, 1946, following the Sunday church service. When they returned to California, Chet completed his degree at Pomona College.

In 1950, Chet and Eileen were able to buy a house on Green Street in Claremont, CA, on the GI bill, and there their family grew from 2 children to 5. Chet began teaching mathematics at Chaffey High School in Ontario where he taught until 1984; he eventually obtained his Master's degree in mathematics from USC. During his tenure at Chaffey he created, directed, and performed in 13 faculty variety shows, designed to raise money for scholarships for Chaffey students. After their youngest child had started school, Eileen went back to college to complete her BA and teaching credential, and thereafter taught at Mountain View Elementary School in Claremont for 25 years. In the early 1960s it became evident that their first house was too small for the burgeoning family, and so in 1964 the family purchased a lot on Alamosa Drive in north Claremont and built a new house. Literally. While Chet hired a contractor and a bricklayer, Chet designed the house, and most of the work on the house was done by Chet, Eileen, Chet's parents, the 5 Jaeger children, and various friends who wanted to get in on this house-building adventure; this included roofing, painting, laying flooring, insulation, and so on. This house remains the Jaeger homestead to this day. After moving into this much larger house (which of course contains a stage at the front of the 30 X 40 foot living room), Chet and Eileen began holding annual Christmas Carol Sings at the house, for about 100 people at a time, a tradition which continued through 2019.



Music and humor held an important place in Chet's life from a very young age. His father, a former vaudeville performer, played the banjo and was an inveterate teller of old jokes, and his mother taught and played piano. As mentioned above, Chet began playing the cornet/trumpet in childhood, and as a teenager in 1941 he began organizing a brass ensemble at Christmas to go caroling around town, at churches, homes, fire stations, and various businesses. This evolved into the Jaeger Family Brass band which included his children, grandchildren, and close family friends; the band went caroling for the last time in 2019, as 2020 brought Covid and Chet's failing health. While living on Green Street, Chet supplemented the family income by putting together ensembles to play at dance functions; this group was called variously The Three Aces, The Four Aces (if the people hiring them could afford 4 players), and The Five Aces and a Joker (with Chet being the joker, naturally). In 1960 Chet was instrumental in creating the Society for the Preservation of Dixieland Jazz (SPDJ), which at the time was one of the very few venues in Southern California where jazz musicians could get together and play. In these early years Chet was honored to share the stage with the likes of Johnny St. Cyr, Jim Robinson, Andy Blakeney, Barney Bigard, Ed Garland, Alton Purnell, Joe Darensbourg, Eubie Blake, and Clarence Muse. As more jazz clubs were developed around the state the talent thinned out somewhat, so that there would be some excellent sets and some not so great sets, but to this day the SPDJ provides a venue for jazz musicians to get together and play the music they love with other aficionados. Chet played his last set with SPDJ just after Thanksgiving, 2021, at the age of 97.



In 1974 a new Dixieland Jazz festival was created in Sacramento, and it quickly became the most prominent festival in California. In 1976 the SPDJ decided to put together a band to send to the festival, and asked Chet to organize and lead this band. After one of the members commented on the fragrance of a night-blooming jasmine wafting through the window at their rehearsal space, the band decided to call themselves The Night Blooming Jazzmen (NBJ), and the name stuck. Chet was enjoying the band so much that he retired from teaching at age 60 to concentrate full-time on his music. Eileen also retired at age 60 so that she could take on the task of being the band's

merchandising manager, going to all Chet's gigs and selling vinyls, then cassettes, then CDs and DVDs, and shirts saying 'I'm a Night Blooming Jazzmaniac'. Since its formation, the Night Bloomers have played at innumerable jazz festivals, on river boats, in concerts on stage and in parks, and for private parties and funerals. Their venues have included 24 US states (including a riverboat cruise up the Mississippi and a gig in Alaska); gigs in China, Japan, Australia, Germany, Austria, and Holland (a riverboat up the Rhine), and South America (a riverboat up the Amazon). And even when Chet didn't have an official gig, wherever he went he would find welcoming bands to sit in with, because 'Dixieland jazz fans are the nicest people in the world'. Although the band's personnel has changed somewhat over the years (see below), as a group they put out around 40 recordings over the 45 years of their existence. Chet originated the idea of a 'Hymn Sing-along' for Sunday mornings at jazz festivals in 1977, and his hymn-sings have become a popular part of many festivals. In 2000 Chet was named 'Gentleman of Jazz' by the San Diego Thanksgiving Jazz festival, in which the NBJ had appeared for 20 years. After playing in the Sacramento Jazz Festival in its third season and nearly every year thereafter, Chet was named the Emperor of Jazz for the festival in 2014. Chet played his last gig with the NBJ in November 2021 at the funeral of one of the NBJ's fans; he continued to practice his cornet for an hour every day up until 2 weeks before he passed away.



Chet may be most familiar to Claremont residents due to the many summer Concerts in the Park the NBJ played over the years. Because many of the fans of Dixieland jazz are dying out, Chet thought of these park gigs as a way to introduce the style to new generations of music lovers, and thus help perpetuate the style into the future. In 1978 Claremont decided to name one of its neighborhood parks 'Jaeger Park'; this was done primarily to honor the elder Chester Jaeger for his involvement in the colleges and the city, but the memorial also contains a plaque recounting the younger Chet's contributions to the city, specifically through the NBJ.

The original Night Blooming Jazzmen consisted of Chet on cornet and microphone, George Anderson on Clarinet, Bobby Rutherford/Cliff Beard on piano, Ned Brundage/Tom Raffican on drums, Charley Colter on trombone, Tommy Hearn on banjo, and George Olson on base. Some notable additions to the NBJ over the years included Willie Martinez on clarinet, Peter Meijers on reeds, Alida Meijers on banjo, Paul Reid on piano, and Larry Koska on drums. While all the members of the Bloomers did vocals, it was their long-time trombonist, Dick Donor, who was their lead singer, and one of the best voices on the circuit. The most recent instantiation of the NBJ included Chet on cornet, Phil Andreen on trombone, Jim Richardson on reeds, Les Deutsch on piano and trumpet, Vinnie Armstrong on piano, Larry Koska/Nick Scarmack on drums, and Mike Olson, son of the original Bloomer George Olson and current president of the SPDJ, on banjo and clarinet. While the band is known for its lively and engaging (sometimes raucous) style, musical sophistication, and talented players and singers, Chet may be best remembered for his dry sense of humor. As the leader of the band, he produced a running commentary between songs, which usually involved both fresh witticisms and old corny jokes, some of which the audience would recite along with him (who can forget 'Repaint, and thin no more?'). The future of the band is uncertain, but Mike says that they are currently in conversation about it. Whatever they decide, the spirit of Chet Jaeger and the Night Blooming Jazzmen will live on.





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