

THE LEADER OF THE BAND

SAMMY BILL

Did you ever go to a high school football game just to watch the band perform at halftime? Many Brownsville area residents remember an era when that is exactly what they did. The marching band that crowds flocked to see was the Brownsville Area High School Golden Falcon Marching Band, directed by Sammy Bill, Jr., and what a dazzling show the band would put on every week.

In the years following the 1966 merger of the Redstone Township and John A. Brashear Joint school districts to form the Brownsville Area School District, the Brownsville Area High School football team and its fans suffered through a string of woefully unsuccessful seasons. For some reason, the former Black Hawk and Brownie teams, each of which had been successful representing their former schools, failed to combine into a cohesive winning unit. In some of those early seasons, the football team struggled to win even a single game.

Yet the new Brownsville Area High School marching band, under the direction of former Redstone High School band director Sammy Bill, quickly jelled into an impressive unit that captured a 1969 national championship and captivated spectators with stunning performances at parades and Brownsville Area High School football games.

In the twenty years since Sammy Bill retired as the high school band director, he has remained remarkably active on the area music scene. I have known Sam since I began teaching at Brownsville Area High School in 1972, and earlier this summer I visited him at his home in Republic. It has been a good summer for Sam, who just a few weeks ago was honored at a banquet as a 2005 recipient of the Brownsville Area Schools Alumni Association Distinguished Alumnus Award.

Sam's love of music and his gift for teaching have endeared him to literally thousands of former students, friends, and associates. During our conversation, Sam surprised me by saying that compared to his father and older brother, he was the "least accomplished" member of his family in terms of musical talent. His remark led to a discussion of his years

growing up in Republic.

“Your parents were immigrants?” I asked.

“Yes, my dad was Sam Bill, Sr., and my mother was Angelina Bastolla Bill,” Sam said. “My dad came over here from Italy when he was twelve or fourteen years old and got a job on the railroad; then my mother came over from Italy.”

“They knew each other in Italy?”

“No, they met here. Tassones were our relatives, and Mrs. Tassone was my mother’s cousin. When my mother came here, she lived at Tassone’s house, just a couple of blocks from here [in Republic] until she met my dad and they got married.

“When we were kids, my parents owned Bill’s Service Station in Republic, located in the building where Nick’s news stand is now. My older brother William and I worked in the gas station, selling gasoline for 19 cents a gallon for ethyl and 15 cents a gallon for the lesser grade.”

Sam chuckled, “I still remember a coal miner named Ed Kozol regularly filling his tank, and after he’d drive away, my brother Bill would say, ‘Gee, Ed Kozol must be rich. He got two dollars’ worth of gas!’”

Needing to satisfy my curiosity about Sam’s surname, I said, “Sam, your last name doesn’t sound Italian to me. What’s the story there?”

“When my dad’s father came to this country, his name was Crescenzo Pelino,” Sam explained, adding that both his grandfather and his father were immigrants. “He worked on the railroad too, but when he started, he couldn’t get paid because they couldn’t spell his name.”

Sam laughed, “That’s the truth! His nickname was ‘Christy Bill,’ so that is how he signed all of his checks. Eventually he legally changed his name, and we became Bills. My real name is Salvatore Pelino, but I never called myself Pelino.”

“And where did you live?”

“My parents, my brother Bill, my sister Carmella, and I lived above the service station. Bill died in 1987. Carmella taught business courses at Redstone High School, married Raymond Grant, and moved to Maryland, where she lives today.”

“You mentioned that your dad and brother were both musically inclined.”

“When Bill was a kid, he used to point to a picture of the Marine Band that we had on the wall downstairs and say, ‘I’m going to practice my clarinet and be in the Marine Band!’ And sure enough, Bill was in the Marine Band for twenty years.

“He was the great musician in our family. He played in the Redstone High School band, and then he actually won a scholarship to

Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore. That's why I went there later on."

"And your dad?"

"My dad was a musician too. He played French horn and guitar. When I would go downstairs to practice, he had such a good ear for music, he'd holler at me every five minutes, 'That's a wrong note!'"

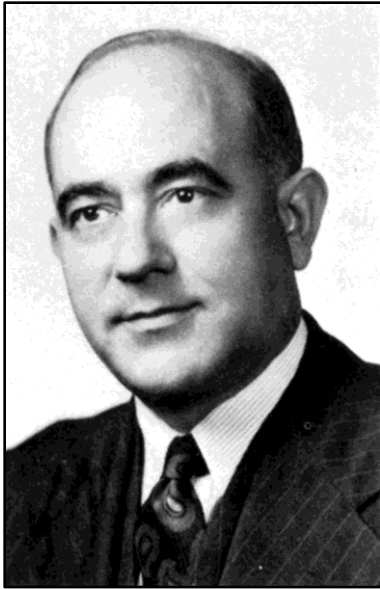
"What instrument did you play, Sam?"

"I started on the alto horn, which is like an upright French horn. You don't see the alto horn any more. That was the only extra horn we had in the house, so I started to play it. Then in high school, I played trumpet."

"Did your dad teach you how to play the horn?"

Sam paused thoughtfully for a moment. Then he uttered a name that will stir memories for many Redstone High School alumni.

"Actually, Mr. Montagna [Julius P. Montagna, long-time director of the Redstone High School band] was my first teacher. When I was in eighth grade, they came around to the grade schools and asked if anyone wanted to learn music. They said the high school band was going to need players next year."



Julius Montagna

"And you hadn't played any instrument up to that time?"

"No, I hadn't. I'll never forget, it was on a Wednesday afternoon when they came and asked if anyone was interested. Only another guy and I volunteered. So every Wednesday afternoon, we had to walk from the top of the hill where our school was located, all the way down to the high school.

"At first, I had only a mild interest in music, but I knew I would get out of class every Wednesday afternoon to go down and learn the horn from Mr. Montagna. So the first

day I went, I learned one note – F. The next week, I learned G. After two weeks, I knew two notes, F and G."

Sam laughed, "I fell in love with music when I could play two notes. I'll never forget that. For me, it was an accomplishment."

"And you joined the high school band the following year?"

“Yes. I played the alto horn and trumpet all the way through high school and graduated from Redstone High School in 1945.”

“The year the war ended.”

“Right, but I was drafted in 1946. I was only in the service for a year and four days, and then I was discharged in 1947 because they were getting rid of draftees. That same year, I started to make plans to go to Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore. My brother was already there.”

“How long were you at Peabody?”

“About three and a half years. Then I needed some more credits, so I went down to California and got a Bachelor of Arts degree. I also took some courses at West Virginia and Kent just to better myself.”

“Were you thinking of teaching, or were you planning to be a professional musician?”

“Now that’s a good question. I think I was planning to be a professional musician. I wanted to be another Harry James on trumpet, but I never made it.”

“You were earning some money with your new orchestra, weren’t you?”

“I organized my Sammy Bill Orchestra in 1950, and I played the trumpet for about ten years. Then we lost a sax player, so I switched from trumpet to sax.”

“That’s not an easy switch,” I remarked. “Those two are completely different.”

“It isn’t an easy switch,” Sam agreed. “The fingering, notes, range, mouthpiece are all different. But since then, I have stuck with the sax.”

“The early 1950s would have been around the time in your life that you got married,” I said. “Tell me about that.”

“Her name was Rose Marie Burns,” Sam said. “I met her at a dance when I was twenty-two. I was playing at the Victory Inn out at Continental, and she and her girl friend were there. I gave her a ride home to Buffington. A year or so later, we were married at Holy Rosary Church.”

“Just think, Sam, if you hadn’t formed your orchestra . . .”

“That orchestra played a big part in my life. I met my wife because of it, it helped me earn a living, and I’m still playing in it fifty-five years later.”

“Your wife passed away a few years ago . . .?”

“Rose passed away in 2001, after more than fifty years of marriage. We had three kids – Ralph, Darlene and Patty.”

“And did they inherit your love of music?”

“All three of my kids played in the band when I was band director,”

Sam said. “One daughter played flute, the other played horn, and Ralph is a horn player. During the four years that my youngest daughter Patty was in the marching band, we never took a second place – all firsts. I told her, ‘Gee, Patty, you’re good luck for us.’”

In the early 1950s, living on a limited income, Sam worked hard to perfect his playing technique, constantly practicing his horn with the ambition of having a successful career in music. Then one hot Sunday afternoon, while Sam was practicing with the windows open in order to coax a breeze through the house, Fate happened to drive by and hear the crisp tones of a well-played trumpet coming from an open window.

Only it wasn’t Fate who stopped his car, walked up to the front door, knocked, and made an offer that would change Sam Bill’s life.

It was Julius P. Montagna.

***REDSTONE BAND DIRECTORS SHARED ITALIAN
HERITAGE BUT DIFFERENT STYLES***

“Mr. Montagna drove past my house down in the project,” Sammy Bill remembered. “I was practicing my trumpet one Sunday, and he came by and heard me playing.”

Julius Montagna’s decision to take a Sunday afternoon drive changed Sam Bill’s life. Mr. Montagna, the Redstone High School band director until the early 1960s, was also former Brownsville Area High School band director Sammy Bill’s first music instructor, teaching him to play the trumpet in the early 1940s. Sam went on to graduate from Redstone High School, attend Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, and earn a Bachelor of Arts degree from California State Teachers College, all the while faithfully practicing his trumpet in hopes of becoming “another Harry James.” Little did he suspect that he would follow in the footsteps of a different musician.

As Julius Montagna drove through Republic on that Sunday afternoon, he was trying to think of someone who could help him with the music program in the Redstone Township schools. His answer came unexpectedly, wafting to him on the summer breeze in the tones of Sammy’s sweet-sounding trumpet.

“He thought of me because he heard me practicing,” Sam laughed, “so after that, I always told my kids, ‘It pays to practice!’”

“What did Mr. Montagna have in mind for you?” I asked.

“He asked me if I wanted to teach beginning music students three days a week in the Redstone schools, and I agreed to go around to all of the grade schools to help him out. The following year, I became his full-time assistant.”

With Julius Montagna directing the high school band and Sam Bill serving as his assistant and teaching in the elementary schools, Redstone Township school district had a talented tandem instructing its students in music. Sam Bill became a full-time district employee in 1953, and the following year John Batovsky, a third grader at Rows Run grade school, began taking clarinet lessons in school. His instructor was Sam Bill.

“In September 1954, Mr. Bill was teaching instrumental music in the Redstone Township grade schools,” recalled John, who now lives in Chester, Virginia. “On Thursday afternoons, he came to Rows Run grade school.

“That summer before school started, I told my parents that I wanted to play music, so my dad got out his old clarinet and taught me how to play two polkas. Back in the 1920s, Dad had been taught to play the clarinet, violin, and harmonica by Mr. Montagna, who had gone around to the grade schools teaching instrumental music just as Mr. Bill was doing in the 1950s.

“When I reported to Mr. Bill’s music class as a third grader, I couldn’t read a note of music, but I could play Helena Polka and Barbara Polka (also called Barushka Polka) on the clarinet. I remember playing them for Mr. Bill, and he got a clarinet and joined me in a duet. I was touched.

“Nine years later in 1963 when I was a senior, Mr. Bill took over as director of the Redstone High School band for Mr. Montagna, who was having health problems. Mr. Bill brought in a couple of sheets of Italian folk music. He told me they were songs that he and his dad would play



Sam Bill in 1963

together, and he invited me to play a duet with him.

“I felt truly honored. Maybe he was thinking of that time nine years before, when we played the polkas together. That was the kind of teacher he was. He knew how to inspire his students. We were blessed to have both Mr. Montagna and Mr. Bill as music instructors and band directors in Redstone Township. They were the teachers that had the biggest impact on me.”

During Sam’s first decade of employment with the school district, he assisted Mr. Montagna with the high school band while taking on other duties within the schools.

“Mr. Bill taught vocal music and music appreciation at the junior high,” John Batovsky noted, “and he directed the Redstone Junior High band, made up of students whom he had taught in the grade schools. He really worked hard with his students.

“When Mr. Bill directed our junior high band, we practiced for the parades by marching and playing in the streets of Republic. The people on Main Street and in the Veteran’s Project were our biggest fans. Mr. Bill always received praise from the good folks of Republic on how well the band sounded. I know it made him proud, and that pride rubbed off on all of his students.

“It was pride that came from a lot of hard work. In addition to parades and football games, the junior high band played the processional for the Republic grade school kindergarten graduation. We also went on a concert tour, which consisted of playing lawn concerts at Filbert and Rowes Run elementary schools. One of the tunes in that concert repertoire was ‘Cielito Lindo.’ Mr. Bill knew very well what his listeners liked!”

Mr. Montagna also knew how to please the heavily ethnic communities that made up the school district.

“The high school band under Mr. Montagna played a lot of polkas and Italian songs,” John recalled. “In the halftime shows, we played tunes like ‘O Sole Mio,’ ‘Arrivederci Roma,’ and some polkas, because that was the kind of music that was appreciated.”

For Julius Montagna, “work” was not a four-letter word.

“Mr. Montagna was a great music teacher,” said John Batovsky, “and somewhat of a perfectionist. To him, you were never as good musically as you could be or thought you were. He was all about intonation, technique, phrasing, and articulation. He inspired his students to practice and to be the best we could be.

“The tradition of being judged the best band in Pittsburgh’s St. Patrick’s Day parade nearly every year was started in the 1950s by Mr. Montagna, and it was a tradition that Mr. Bill continued at Redstone and



Redstone High School marching band performs in Uniontown c. 1950

later at Brownsville Area. We competed in that parade against a lot of affluent suburban Pittsburgh schools. Although very few of our students took private music lessons and most of us weren't nearly as privileged, every year under the excellent tutelage of Mr. Montagna and Mr. Bill we proved to be as good as any of them and better than most."

Even though Mr. Montagna was a disciplinarian, there was a pesky long-standing tradition within the band that he was unable to eradicate.

"In my underclassmen years at the high school," John Batovsky explained, "the upperclassmen practiced 'band initiation.' It usually consisted of being beaten with a belt by most of the senior and junior boys in the band, plus whatever belittlement they could dream up to make you feel like a freshman. It started in August, and it usually lasted throughout football season.

"On our first day at band practice, all of us freshmen had to have a 'race,' pushing a penny with our nose along the sidewalk for the enjoyment of the upperclassmen. The following day, all the freshman boys came to band drills with big scabs on our noses. Mr. Montagna questioned us for a long time about it, but no one 'fessed up as to why we all had a scab on our noses.

“So he said we were to sit in the classroom across the hall from the band room by ourselves and talk it over amongst ourselves. We all talked about what happened, not knowing that he had gone into the principal’s office and turned on the intercom so that he could hear what we were saying. After about an hour, the upperclassmen came in and apologized, saying it wouldn’t happen again. Sorry to say, the practice didn’t stop.

“Because of the initiation, a lot of very good junior high bandmen didn’t go out for the band in high school. We all knew of students who did very well in junior high band but gave up music entirely after eighth grade. When Mr. Bill took over the band, being younger than Mr. Montagna, he was better able to see what was happening. The initiation stopped that year because he let us know how he felt about it, and I give Mr. Bill credit for being instrumental in stopping it.”

In the fall of 1963, Sam Bill succeeded Julius Montagna as high school band director. Although Italian blood coursed through the veins of both men, their disciplinary and musical styles were very different, and that made 1963 an interesting transitional year for the Redstone High School band.

“I remember the first year I taught in Mr. Montagna’s place,” Sam told me. “When I started as band director after having been the assistant for so many years, the kids knew me, but I wasn’t a Mr. Montagna.

“After three or four weeks of band practice that fall, I noticed kids gathering, three here, three there, all talking. So I said to one of my good kids, ‘What’s wrong?’ He said, ‘They miss Mr. Montagna. You’re not like him. You don’t do things like he did.’ I guess that always happens when you get a new band director.

“Well, Mr. Montagna’s band used to win the St. Patrick’s Day parade in Pittsburgh as far back as when I was in the band. So do you know when the kids finally accepted me as their band director? It wasn’t until March of that school year, when we won first place in the St. Patrick’s Day parade, playing Sammy Bill music and using Sammy Bill arrangements. Then everything was okay – but it took about a year.”

The new “Sammy Bill style” of music played by the Redstone High School band was very popular with the audiences at football games and parades. Then in 1966, the unthinkable happened. Two rival school districts, Redstone and John A. Brashear, which for so many years had been bitter adversaries on the athletic field, merged to form a single school district.

When Brownsville Area High School opened its doors on the first day of school in the fall of 1966, the potential for dissension within the newly merged student body was high. Next, Sammy Bill remembers

what happened when his Redstone High School musicians and their John A. Brashear counterparts combined to form the brand new Brownsville Area High School Golden Falcon Marching Band.

***SAMMY BILL LED THE BAHS MARCHING
BAND TO A NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP***

Ah, the camaraderie that has been shared by thousands of young people in high school marching bands. Brownsville native Jim Wardman of Phoenix, Arizona still has fond memories of his experiences in the 1968 Brownsville Area High School Golden Falcon Marching Band.

“We marched four miles in wool uniforms in ninety-plus degree heat and high humidity,” Jim recalls. “The captain of the drummers did the final halt, and as everyone stopped, she fell over backwards, the snare drum still attached to her leg. I think she spent about four hours in the emergency tent they had at the end of the parade.”

Well, perhaps that was one of Jim’s rare not-so-wonderful memories – but most of them are much more pleasant.

“In 1968, we had a very good band,” reminisced retired Brownsville Area High School band director Sammy Bill, “and we went to Winchester, Virginia for a competition. There were ninety bands there and it was so hot, half of our band got sick. We had to stay an extra day because some of them were in the hospital.”

Despite the difficult conditions, that particular Winchester appearance led to a rare opportunity for the band.

“We won first place out of ninety bands,” Sam explained, “and a guy came up to me afterward and said, ‘You have a good band. We’d like you to come to St. Petersburg, Florida, to compete for the national championship.’”

It was the first step along Brownsville Area High School’s road to winning the 1969 national championship. The band’s rise to excellence was remarkably quick after a 1966 jointure between the Redstone Township and John A. Brashear school districts formed the Brownsville Area School District.

“When the two districts merged,” Sam said, “I became the Brownsville Area High School band director, and Dick Schiffbauer, the former Brownsville band director, became the junior high school band director.”

“How large was the new high school’s band?”

“In those early years we had over 190 members, counting auxiliary units like the silks, majorettes, and color guard. In fact, a school board member once told me ‘You’ve got to cut that band down. We can’t afford any more uniforms.’

“I said to him, ‘You mean a kid’s going to practice through eighth grade and you’re not going to let him in the high school band? I can’t do that.’ But over the years, the size of our band eventually decreased as the school’s enrollment did. I’d say our average band was about 125, with around 80 playing members.”

“How did you convince so many kids to participate in the band?”

Sammy laughed. “I would go through the halls at the high school and recruit guys. If I needed tuba players and I’d see some big guys coming down the hall, I’d approach them and say, ‘Hey, come here. How would you like to be in the band?’

“They’d say, ‘Oh, we can’t play an instrument.’

“I’d tell them, ‘Well, this is the beginning of the year. By the end of the year, you’ll be able to play.’ I recruited five or six kids, boys and girls, and while I was teaching my class, they were in there tooting on a horn.” Sam chuckled, “By the end of the year, they were pretty good!”

Sam even lured prospective band members by quoting statistics to them.

“When I’d see guys and ask if they wanted to join the band, at first they’d say, ‘Oh, I don’t think so.’

“Then I’d say, ‘You know, the band has 100 girls and 30 boys in it.’

“‘Yes!’ they would say, ‘we’ll join!’”

Sam Bill’s bands featured a lot of individual and group precision movements while on parade and performing at halftime, and that required plenty of preparation.

“What was your band’s practice routine?” I asked Sam.

“I give the kids at Brownsville so much credit for staying after school every day,” Sam said, “because we never had a band period during the school day. I would argue with the principal every year about that, and I was always told it would be too difficult to schedule all of the kids into one band period. So the kids got no official credit for being in the band, and our practices were strictly volunteer, daily after school from 3:00 to 5:00.

“One year, we didn’t even have a field to practice on for some reason, so I rigged up that old grassy area behind the high school for a practice area. The kids cut the grass and straightened it up, but we didn’t have any lines on it. I kept telling the janitor that we needed lines to practice, but they never got around to putting any lines back there. So in

our practices we would establish a point in the grass and tell everybody, this is the fifty-yard-line, you take eight steps and you're on the 45, five yards away.

"To practice that stride, we taped the floor of the hall that led to the high school band room. Pieces of tape were placed 22½ inches apart, and every kid who came down the hall to the band room practiced taking those strides. The tape continued into the band room, where I'd play a record, and the kids would march around the room with 22½-inch strides."

As it turned out, this unusual method of learning precise strides paid off in an unexpected way.

"At the end of that year, we went up to Canada for a major competition," Sam said. "Among the bands that were up there were Bethel Park and some other big 200-piece bands, and we were competing against them. Then the darnedest thing happened. The field competition was at night, the lights were on, and there was a large crowd in the stands.

"Just before we were ready to start the competition, some of the band directors from the other schools came over to me. They were upset. They said, 'Hey, Sam, they want us to perform on the field, but there are no lines! What are you going to do?'

"I looked at them and said, 'We're going on!' We went onto the unmarked field, established our ranks, and won first place over all of those big bands that had more money in their drum section than we had in our whole band. But by golly," Sam laughed, "my kids knew what 22½-inch steps were!"

Sam even got a telephone offer from officials at the "granddaddy of all parades," the Tournament of Roses parade in Pasadena.

"We did get a call from the Rose parade officials," Sam confirmed. "I'll never forget it. It was about ten 'til twelve, and the call came for me at the high school. They said, 'We've had a lot of good reports on your band. You have to call us back if you're interested.'

"George Alberts was the superintendent at the time, so the high school principal, Mr. Barantovich, let me go over to the District Office to see Mr. Alberts. When I told Mr. Alberts about the invitation we had just received, he looked at me nonchalantly and said, 'What do you want to go there for?'

"His reaction was so unexpected that I hesitated, then said, 'I think it would be a nice feather in our cap.'

"He said, 'You want to take all of that money out of this area? You're crazy!' He was talking about the fundraising we would have to do to finance the trip. In about ten minutes, he talked me out of it. I

called the guy back and told him we couldn't come."

"Annual trips like that required a lot of parental involvement, didn't they?"

"We had a very active band parents group," Sam agreed, "and when we would go on a trip, we would often take one or two tag-along buses with us."

"Weren't you nervous about being responsible for all of those kids?"

"The band parents helped a lot with bed checks and chaperoning. Occasionally there was some excitement. Once we were heading home from Florida after one of our competitions, and all five of our buses were supposed to stick together. A young guy was driving the last bus, and we had only been on the road for an hour or two when we realized we had lost the last bus.

"We stopped and talked about it. We couldn't find him. Nobody knew where he had gone. We called everybody we could think of. We even called air traffic to try to find that bus, but we couldn't find it. So I went up to the door of a nearby house and knocked and said, 'Lady, can I borrow your car? I want to go look for a bus!' She looked at me as if I was crazy.



Sam Bill in 1973

"I was mad as a hornet. My daughter was on that bus, along with a lot of other musicians. If I'd have had that guy right there, I'd have choked him. We continued on our route, hoping he'd turn up, and while we were stopped about 100 miles from home, here came the missing bus. It turns out the driver had stopped to buy oranges for himself and had fallen half an hour behind us.

"I went over and got on that bus, and if there hadn't been kids on there, I know I'd have cussed him out. I said, 'Hey, buddy, you should have stayed with us. You're never going to drive for us again.'

"Boy, you could hear a pin drop in the bus. 'You made me a nervous wreck,' I told him, 'and you'll never do it again.' So that was it for him."

Despite the occasional heart-thumping incident, Sam Bill enjoyed his thirty-two years of teaching music and directing bands in the

Redstone and Brownsville Area school districts. Sam retired from the Brownsville Area School District in 1985, but “retirement” doesn’t accurately describe his lifestyle. During his retirement he plays and arranges music for the Sammy Bill Orchestra, continues to be involved with the Mon Valley Band, and gives private instrumental music lessons several days each week.

Many folks come out to listen and dance when the Sammy Bill Orchestra performs. In the final article of this series, we will take a look at the Sammy Bill Orchestra and reflect on Sam’s colorful music career.

RETIREMENT HAS NOT SLOWED DOWN SAMMY BILL

Sammy Bill did more than produce award-winning bands and instruct instrumental music during his thirty-two years of service at Redstone and Brownsville Area high schools. Sam was a top flight arranger, a talent he still utilizes with his orchestra and the Mon Valley community band.

“Do you still give music lessons?” I asked Sam, who retired from the Brownsville Area School District twenty years ago.

“I still teach trumpet, clarinet, saxophone, trombone, and flute,” he confirmed, “three days a week at the Mon Valley Music Centre in Monongahela. I’ve been teaching there for about four years.”

“And you also still arrange music for your orchestra and for the Mon Valley Band?”

“That’s right. My orchestra has a repertoire of 850 songs. It has taken me a lifetime to compile them since we started the orchestra in 1950.”

Sam also created memorable arrangements for his Brownsville Area High School bands. There is no doubt that his unforgettable arrangements of “Dallas,” “Ice Castles,” “Shangri La,” and “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” to name a few, played a significant role in the band’s long-term success. In fact, Sam’s talent for writing music for his marching bands caught the attention of one of the nation’s foremost arrangers.

“One time we were in New Jersey,” Sam recalled, “and our band was performing. Bill Moffitt, who has written arrangements for bands all over the country, was in the crowd. At that time, if you would get an arrangement from Bill Moffitt, you’d say, ‘Boy, that’s great!’ He was

like a god, and he is a great arranger.

“Anyway, I’m standing there watching my band play, and I hear a voice behind me. I won’t use the language the man used, but he said, ‘Where in the h--- did you get this band? Who writes these arrangements? How do you train these kids?’

“When I heard the voice, I thought, ‘Who’s asking me that?’ I turned around, and there he was, Bill Moffitt, one of my idols. He said, ‘How you doin,’ boy?’ and we talked for a while about the band and my arrangements. All the while we were talking, I was thinking, ‘Wow, this is Bill Moffitt! I’d work for him for nothing, anytime he wants me to!’

“From then on, any time he was a judge at any competition we were in, we would win first place. We went to a big East Coast competition in Canada, and there was a band from Florida that won first place there all the time.”

Sam laughed, “They came up against us, and Bill Moffitt was one of the judges. We won by half a point!”

“Sam,” I said, “when you arrange a piece of music such as ‘Dallas,’ a popular piece that your band performed for years, do you have to write the music for every instrument in the band?”

“Yes, you do,” said Sam matter-of-factly. “One time I said to myself, ‘I’m going to count the notes in ‘What I Did For Love,’ a pretty simple piece.’ I discovered that for all of the musicians, there are 7,000 notes in that piece. I have arranged around twenty songs for the Mon Valley Band. I joke with them that as many notes as I’ve written, I’m entitled to make a mistake once in a while!”

“And you write all of the music for every instrument by hand?”

“Yeah,” Sam smiled. “I write every note by hand. Everybody tells me, ‘Get a computer!’ Well, I have a computer here that I got three years ago, but I have never turned it on.”

“I can’t imagine writing the music for every instrument in a band or orchestra,” I remarked. “Wouldn’t you have to know how to play those instruments?”

“Once I got into arranging music,” Sam said, “I was able to cover the fingering on about ten instruments. I could play a little song on each instrument, and yes, it does help in arranging.”

“When you arrange a song, where do you begin?”

“First you write the melody in concert key,” Sam explained. “Concert key is for piano, usually the key of C, and that is your ‘basis.’ Then, either on a piano or in your head if you know the chords, you say, ‘This is a C chord, so trumpet gets a C, 2nd trumpet gets a G, 3rd trumpet gets an E.’ Then you move onto the next chord.”

“And after you’ve arranged the whole song for trumpet,” I said,

“you then have to do the same thing for every other instrument? How long does it take to write an arrangement for an entire band or orchestra?”

“I would say about three days for an average song. The Sammy Bill Orchestra has 850 arrangements in our book, and I arranged about 750 of them. Sometimes I joke, ‘I’ve written more music than Beethoven – but his counted!’”



The Sammy Bill Orchestra

“What about copyrighting your arrangements, Sam? Can an arranger copyright?”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No. Actually, I even wrote two songs from scratch for the orchestra, including vocal, but I never published them.”

“Does the orchestra play them?”

“No.”

“And you’ve never really had the urge to write your own songs? You’d rather be an arranger?”

“I just feel there are so many songs out there, I don’t know if I could get something to catch the people’s ear or not. And frankly, I get more satisfaction out of arranging music.” Sam chuckled, “I’d rather write an arrangement than read my mail!”

“Sam, I watched your bands perform many times over the years, in parades and at halftime shows,” I said. “In particular, ‘Dallas’ and ‘Ice Castles’ were great arrangements that I remember. And of course, ‘Battle

Hymn' has always been a crowd pleaser on parade."

"I used to get letters from colleges asking for my arrangement of 'Ice Castles,'" Sam said. "To this day someone occasionally asks me for 'Shangri-La,' which we played years ago. I still have some audio tapes of the band, including one of us playing 'Dallas.'"

"It's too bad video cameras weren't around when your bands were performing," I said. "Wouldn't it be something to see and hear those bands of yours on videotape, performing your arrangements? How did you learn to arrange music?"

"I took arranging lessons from a fellow named Phil Faini, who was a professor at West Virginia University. Phil Faini was a great teacher, and he was a big influence on my life."

"I am noticing a common thread among the influential musicians in your life," I said. "Your dad, Mr. Montagna, Professor Faini . . ."

"Oh, yeah," Sam laughed, "all Italians!"

His Italian mentors would be proud. The Sammy Bill Orchestra still performs in the area, fifty-five years after Sam founded it in 1950.

"The orchestra still has two people in it that were there from the beginning," Sam said, "Andrew 'Diz' Drazga from Uniontown and myself. Diz plays organ and tenor sax, and he sings. There were ten of us in the orchestra, but one of the guys passed away. We didn't replace him, so there are nine of us now."

"What kind of events do you do?"

"We perform at Landmark, a dance club in Monessen, at a dance hall in McKeesport called Palisades, and at other venues in the area. Of course, we play the big band type of music – Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, danceable music. We play less now than we used to. That first year in 1950, we played over 135 jobs. Now we play about twenty times a year."

"I imagine your orchestra's musicians are so experienced that rehearsal is hardly necessary."

"We rehearse about once a month, down in my cellar," Sam said, motioning toward his basement stairs. "I have a piano and everything we need down there."

"That must be loud," I commented, imagining a nine-piece orchestra belting out a Glenn Miller tune in this little house on a quiet block in Republic.

"When we practice in the summer, we leave the cellar door open," Sam grinned. "People just walk in from the street to listen. They say, 'We heard you playing!' and they come in and sit down."

So the beat goes on for Sammy Bill. Many years have passed since that Sunday afternoon in Republic more than half a century ago, when

Julius Montagna heard him practicing his trumpet through an open window. That led to an offer that propelled Sam into an unforgettable career of teaching music and molding generations of young musicians.

“I never knew a student of his who didn’t like him,” says Ron Barry of Brownsville, who played in the Brownsville Area High School marching band during Sam’s last two years at the helm, 1984 and 1985. “He was a great teacher and was well respected by his musicians.

“The lyrics of the song ‘The Leader of the Band,’ by Dan Fogelberg, express how a lot of us feel about Mr. Bill. The line, ‘The leader of the band is tired, and his eyes are growing old; but his blood runs through my instrument, and his song is in my soul,’ reflects the lasting good memories we still have from our years in the band.

“And the line, ‘He earned his love through discipline, a thundering velvet hand; his gentle means of sculpting souls took me years to understand,’ reflects the lasting impact he had on our lives that many of us carry to this day.

“Mr. Bill made me a better musician and a better person for the experience of it all. I still thank him for that when I see him. I know that there are countless others who feel as I do, and we owe him a lot.”



Sam Bill in 1980

Sammy Bill, for the pride you have brought to countless individuals and to your community, and for the

years of giving so freely of your time and your talents . . .

A well-deserved standing ovation.