

# 'Doc' Cheatham's vitality rubs off from jazz-legend friends

By Jeff Bradley

Denver Post Critic-at-Large

I put down the phone after talking with Adolphus "Doc" Cheatham thinking how nice it was to chat with a jazz trumpeter still thriving at the age of 91. Then it hit me.

When Cheatham mentioned trumpet pioneers Joe "King" Oliver, Freddie Keppard and Louis Armstrong, he was talking about men he'd actually heard and performed alongside!

The affable nonagenarian, who stars at Summit Jazz this week at the Hyatt Regency Tech Center, is one of the last men alive who can make such a claim.

Born in Nashville, Tenn., Cheatham began his career in vaudeville backing singers such as Bessie Smith. He moved to Chicago in the mid-1920s where he heard Oliver and Keppard and subbed for Armstrong at some gigs.

He had been planning to go to medical school — thus his nickname — but changed his plans after hearing Louis. "When Louis arrived there, he just tore it up."

Cheatham started his own group, then worked with Wilbur de Paris and Chick Webb before touring Europe with Sam Wooding and settling into Cab Calloway's band in New York.

He later backed Billie Holiday as part of the Eddie Heywood Sextet and played with Perez Prado, Herbie Mann and Benny Goodman, yet he didn't come into his own as a soloist until he was nearly 70.

These days, he's in demand at jazz events around the world and was recently honored at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival.

Doc traces his success back to Armstrong's second wife, the pianist Lil Hardin, who played with Louis in King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band when Satchmo arrived in Chicago from New Orleans.

"Louis had a wonderful wife. She was responsible for his success and for getting him places to play for a long time. Both of them took an interest in me because I was young and I had a raggedy cornet and tried to play it."

When Armstrong was offered more than one job the same night, he and Lil and would see that Cheatham was hired.

Doc's path remained charmed in the Depression.

"I was lucky to join Cab Calloway as soon as I got to town. He was swinging. And I've worked ever since. I was with Cab nine years, then Teddy Wilson, and I don't know how many other bands. I've just been very lucky."

In the mid-1930s, Doc played alongside Armstrong as part of Luis Russell's swing orchestra. "They had me playing lead trumpet. I had to read the music," he re-



Doc Cheatham

called. You can feel the smile and hear the warmth of Louis' playing in the singing vibrato of Doc's trumpet. His solos have the same impeccable shape and clarity as Armstrong's.

According to Doc, his New Orleans sound is no accident. "I had no one else to listen to but all those great players. I've been thinking about them day and night all my life."

I asked him to compare the styles of Oliver, Keppard and Armstrong.

"Louis and Freddie Keppard were as different as night and day. Keppard was a very powerful trumpet player, but he had a military style, while Louis had a beautiful melodic sound. That was the difference. Freddie's style was like he was playing in a parade."

"I saw King Oliver twice in Chicago. Louis developed almost everything he knew from Oliver, who had a beautiful tone. He just wasn't as strong a player as Louis. He was like I was when I first got to Chicago."

"He didn't have to blow his brains out. You could hear him, but he was never very loud."

Oliver and Armstrong's secret weapon was the solo break, played in synchronized duet. "Every time they'd play a break it would be different. They had that kind of tal-

## SUMMIT JAZZ

**WHERE:** Hyatt Regency Tech Center, 7800 Tufts Ave.

**WHEN:** 7 p.m. Friday to 6:30 p.m. Sunday

**TICKETS:** \$90 all three days. \$25-\$32 each session. Call 670-8471.

ent."

Doc's health remains good, although he's got some arthritis in his knees. "I have to use a darned cane."

Otherwise, he explains his musical longevity like this: "I had a very fine teacher who taught me how to use my diaphragm instead of blowing from my chest."

"That makes it easier for you to play. A lot of kids don't know that."

Just back from New Orleans where he spent two days recording a Verve album with young trumpeter Nicholas Payton, Cheatham believes jazz has a future.

"You go to New Orleans and you see so many kids learning jazz. I go into the schools to help them. They're coming along real fast."

"Before you know it, you're going to hear some great new players."

Organizers Juanita Greenwood and Alan Frederickson have put Cheatham into an outstanding lineup at the 18th annual Summit Jazz, a trad jazz party that begins at 7 p.m. Friday and includes sessions from 11 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Saturday, 7 p.m. to 1 a.m. Saturday and 11 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. next Sunday.

Pianist Dick Hyman leads an all-star band featuring Randy Sandke on trumpet, Ken Peplowski on

reeds, Howard Alden guitar, Peter Appleyard vibes, Michael Moore bass and Butch Miles drums.

The Jim Cullum Jazz Band from San Antonio, Texas, includes Evan Christopher on clarinet, Mike Pittsley trombone, John Sheridan piano, Howard Elkins banjo, Don Mopsick bass and Ed Torres drums.

The Grand Dominion Jazz Band from Mount Vernon, Wash., and Denver's Alan Frederickson Jazz Ensemble with the rollicking piano of Sue Downs complete the bill.

The University of Colorado at Denver School of the Arts will sponsor a concert by Cheatham, Hyman, Peplowski and Alden in St.

Cajetan's Center on the Auraria campus at 2 p.m. Friday, with admission free for CU-Denver students and tickets for the public ranging from \$4 for high-school students to \$10 for adults. Cheatham will give a free talk at 2 p.m. Thursday in the Auraria Arts Building, Room 295.