

MAGAZINE
SECONDS

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RAY CONNIFF



RAY CONNIFF represents the lush pinnacle of Pop pleasure. He began his prolific career during the Big Band Era and, after a brief spell digging ditches, charmed a transitional post-War music scene with his relaxed reductions of standards and classics. During the Sixties he scored his biggest hits with “Somewhere My Love” (for which we earned a coveted Grammy Award in 1967) and “Invisible Tears” — songs that blend better into the tinkling clatter of supermarkets and shopping malls than into the desperate monotones of restaurants and bars. Today, ninety albums (and nine Gold records) later, Conniff still soothes the world with his music.

“The sounds I write are the sounds of the Big Band era.”

SECONDS: *What got you interested in music?*

CONNIFF: When I was a boy, my dad used to play a little piano and sing me comedy songs. I used to call them “oomp-chink” chords — he’d sing these funny little songs. Right from the beginning, I started to get a feel for rhythm. My father gave me trombone lessons when I was nine years old. I’d say my earliest inspirations are from my parents.

SECONDS: *And the trombone became the instrument you’re associated with —*

CONNIFF: That’s my main instrument, yes.

SECONDS: *What other instruments do you play?*

CONNIFF: I play what I call arranger’s piano. I’m not an accomplished pianist. I used to fool around with different instruments. I played trumpet for awhile, I played saxophone a bit; I never played violin.

I’ve got a smattering of knowledge of all instruments. When you compose and arrange orchestration, you have to have familiarity with what the different instruments can do, what’s playable and what’s difficult.

SECONDS: *At that time, did you want to be in a Big Band?*

CONNIFF: When I was in high school, I had a little band — seven of us and we’d go down to the music store and buy stock orchestrations. There were bands at that time like the Casa Loma Band and there were a lot of their arrangements in this stock arrangement form. Later on was Benny Goodman and the Dorsey Brothers. I’m from Attleboro, Massachusetts, midway between Boston and Providence. The big bands would play the ballrooms and we’d go down and listen to the guys warm up and then stand in front of the bandstand all night.

SECONDS: *And then you wound up in Artie Shaw’s band?*

CONNIFF: The first name Big Band I went with was Bunny Berigan’s band. Then I went with the Bob Crosby band, and then I was with three different line-ups of Artie Shaw’s bands after that.

SECONDS: *Was that when you began to do arranging?*

CONNIFF: Actually, I started arranging

right from the beginning. When I was in high school, my dad moonlighted in music. He used to subscribe to *Billboard* magazine. There was an ad in there for a device called a lightning arranger. What it really was was a musical slide rule and it cost one dollar. I sent away for it and that’s the best investment I ever made in my life. I made my first arrangement with that device. It was two celluloid sheets in an oval shape and it had two wheels on it. Basically, it was a transposing device. If you played a C chord and wanted to voice that for a trumpet, alto saxophone, and trombone, it’d tell you what

notes you had to write so that those guys would play the right notes to get the C chord. I remember the first arrangement I wrote was of “Sweet Georgia Brown.” I brought that into the guys and they thought that was the greatest thing ever.

SECONDS: *You were the trombonist and arranger. How about composition?*

CONNIFF: Well, I wrote a lot of originals. They were kind of “In The Mood” riff kind of things for the Big Bands. In every band I was in, I’d write quite a few of those originals.

SECONDS: *So this was at the height of the Swing era?*

CONNIFF: Yeah, the Bob Crosby/Artie Shaw era. The first band I was in was Bunny Berigan in 1938 and then I went with Bob Crosby in 1939 and then I was in three different Artie Shaw bands from 1940 through 1945. Then I went into the service in 1946. The war was almost over when I went in. I had married and had children by then. When I was discharged in late ’46, I started writing arrangements.

SECONDS: *How did the war change the music scene?*

CONNIFF: There wasn’t a real noticeable change except that the type of songs being written during the war were about doughboys. The Andrews Sisters and Johnny Mercer were very popular at the time and they were all writing songs like “Bring The Boys Back Home.” Other than that, I didn’t notice a change except that a lot of the real good players wound up in the service bands like the Glenn Miller Air Force Band and the



RAY CONNIFF

Artie Shaw Navy Band. Other than that, the music stayed pretty much the same as far as the styles of the Big Band.

SECONDS: *What was life like for a musician back in those days?*

CONNIFF: The drugs were not in the scene as heavily. In fact, they weren't at all. Mostly the musicians liked to drink. There was a little Pot around but it wasn't a major thing. I only ran across real hard drugs once and that was a drummer. None of us in the band even knew he was on the hard stuff until he got busted one day in a hotel room and wound up being sentenced. That's how quiet it was. The real heavy drugs were not out in the open and prominent like they are today.

SECONDS: *Race relations were changing and Black and White music started to fuse a bit —*

CONNIFF: The first time I was in a band that had Black musicians was the Artie Shaw band. Hot Lips Page was the featured trumpet player in the 1940 band. We'd play one-niters around the country and, depending on where we were, he had trouble getting into the hotel. After hours, we'd find a back way into the hotel and sneak him up. It was very pronounced in those days, especially down South. The second Artie Shaw band I was with had Roy Eldridge as a featured trumpet soloist. When we played big cities like New York, they'd stay in the hotels uptown in Harlem. When we played Cincinnati or Detroit, they'd get a hotel in the Black section of town. Then there were times that didn't work because all the towns we played weren't big towns and they were very narrow-minded in these hotels. Those two guys were the best guys in the band and we felt badly they were treated so shabbily.

SECONDS: *Do you feel the music of the day helped to promote better Race relations?*

CONNIFF: I wouldn't quite look at it that way. All of us guys in the Big Bands idolized the Black bands. We loved the Ellington

band, we loved the Count Basie band, Andy Kirk, Jimmy Lunceford's band — they had great arrangements and the bands would swing much better than the White bands. I'd say Benny Goodman was instrumental in integrating the bands. It used to be the Black bands didn't play where the White bands did. We'd play a series of ballrooms and the Black bands would play other ballrooms. When Benny started using guys like Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton in his band, it did help, to answer your question. They were judged from a standpoint of talent, not skin color.

SECONDS: *Then there was the development of the Bop scene?*

CONNIFF: That happened when I was in the Army. I was transferred to Hollywood where I was working for the Armed Forces Radio Service. While I was still in my soldier suit, Benny's band was at The Palladium in Hollywood. I was walking down Vine Street one day and Benny came down the sidewalk with Doda Marmarosa, the piano player. Doda and I knew each other from the Shaw band so we started chatting and he said to Benny, "Do you know Ray Conniff?" Benny said, "What are you doing?" I said, "You can see what I'm doing —" I was in my soldier suit. He said, "Why don't you bring an arrangement over to the Palladium? We're having a rehearsal Thursday." ... Benny Goodman was a very foggy guy. I think he forgot he asked me to bring an arrangement. He kept me sitting for two hours. Finally, at the end of rehearsal he says, "Okay, that's all." I said, "Benny, you asked me to do an arrangement." So he did the arrangement but a whole bunch of Bop guys had infiltrated his band and they were controlling the styles of the band. He ran my arrangement down once and said, "Okay, that's all, fellas." I said, "You mean you're only going to run it down once?" He said, "It's not our style." He was trying to get into Bop — which he never did feel.



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SECONDS: *What was Bop, in a nutshell?*

CONNIFF: I always liked a driving, strong beat. I used to sit in on sessions where the Bop guys played. In fact, Dizzy Gillespie and I were friendly and we used to play

together. I always got the feeling that the rhythm was supposed to float. The guys playing the horns weren’t supposed to hear a strong beat; they were supposed to sense it and feel it. Everything was floating. That’s my impression from playing with those guys. I always wanted the drummer to lay it down strong and he was always floating along on the top cymbals.

SECONDS: *Around that time, you had a hiatus from the music scene?*

CONNIFF: Yeah, there was a period of a couple years where I didn’t do much. I was out in Los Angeles and I had gotten out of the Army. I was writing steady for Harry James and then he started getting into the Bop scene. I remember they were playing The Palladium and I came in and he gave me a song, I remember the song was “Ruby.” He said, “By the way, when you make the arrangement, why don’t you write it in the style of the Bop arrangers?” I looked at Harry and said, “You know, Harry, we’ve had a wonderful association,” — I’d been working with him for many years — “but I just don’t feel Bop. If you want that kind of arranger, you should give it a guy like Neil Hefti. I don’t think I can please you because I don’t feel that kind of music.” His jaw dropped; he couldn’t believe it. We shook hands and said goodbye and I went through a lean two years where I hardly did any writing. That’s when I started analyzing where I’d been and where I was going in the music business. You know, “what happened?” In 1940, Artie Shaw hired me for three hundred bucks a week to play trombone and write, and that was big money in those days. I wound up digging ditches out on a tract where they were building houses

out in Reseda. With a pick and shovel, I used to think, “What would happen if I wrote for the people that are out dancing and buying records instead of for the guys in the band?”

SECONDS: *What got you out of digging ditches?*

CONNIFF: I going around town and knocking on doors. I knew everybody out here, like Paul Weston, the head of Columbia Records on the West Coast, and Sonny Burke, head of Decca Records here in Los Angeles. I’d go see them and I’d been out of work for so long, I was really singing the blues, you know? I found out people don’t want to hear that kind of story. They don’t like losers around; they want positive people around. Around that time, I ran into a buddy of mine, Jack Ordean, a sax player. He laid a pamphlet on me called

“God’s Law Of Adjustment.” It was a Christian Science pamphlet all about prayer and that God gives you spiritual ideas and that in turn gives you daily supplies. That little pamphlet was like somebody held a light over my head. It suddenly dawned on me there was no problem, I just had to turn this whole thing over to the ol’ boy upstairs and everything was going to work out. Then when I went around to see guys like Sonny Burke, instead of singing the Blues, I’d say, “By the way, how’s the family? If anything comes up where you can use me to write arrangements, I’m sure I can be mutually beneficial to both of us.” The guys started to say, “What happened? That’s not the Conniff that was here last week.” The phone started ringing and the whole thing turned around.

SECONDS: *Could you sense the Swing Era was coming to a close?*

CONNIFF: I never thought of things that way; you just went day to day. It was about that time it was changing, but no, it didn’t really dawn on me. I got fairly busy after that and Frank Devol gave me a steady



RAY CONNIFF

job playing trombone for a radio show with Dinah Shore and Jack Smith. We were on that show five days a week, but I felt there was more I could be doing. My wife and I — ex-wife now, she passed away — packed up and we moved to New York and that's when I ran into Mitch Miller and he gave me the chance to start doing things under my own name. I told him I was in town and said, "If you need any arrangements, give me a ring." He said, "I'll keep you in mind." Sure enough, two weeks later he called me to do backings for a new girl he had. He was tickled with the work I was doing and I started backing all of his top artists like Johnny Ray, Johnny Mathis, Frankie Laine — all the great artists of that time. He was



happy with my background arrangements; it'd be like Frankie Laine with the Ray Conniff Orchestra. I remember Johnny Ray's "Just Walkin' In The Rain" became a million seller and Guy Mitchell's "Singin' The Blues" became a million seller. Those were my backings, so Mitch decided to give me a chance to do something on my own. That's how I came to do that first album, *S'Wonderful*.

SECONDS: *Did you have in mind the concept of Easy Listening?*

CONNIFF: There wasn't any Easy Listening then. I just did a Big Band thing with voices. Somebody put the "Easy Listening" name on things later on.

SECONDS: *What were you looking to get out of the Big Band?*

CONNIFF: I wanted a good Swing band and play great standards by Cole Porter and George Gershwin. I wanted to do them with a Big Band sound like we used to do on the road but I wanted to add voices. Some of the backings I'd done were quite strong and I

felt it was due to the chorus. One of the first things I did under my name was *S'Wonderful* and that was the same arrangements I had done for Artie Shaw back in 1940, but this time it was with voices. I wasn't trying to be commercial, but instead of going far out with chord progressions and odd rhythm patterns that people have difficulty understanding, I simplified things so that the average person could identify with it. To this day, guys come up to me and say they were in college when my first stuff came out in '56-'57 and that they romanced the girls with my records.

SECONDS: *So you made music for lovers. Were you aware of it?*

CONNIFF: No, I wasn't. I was just aware of big sales. We did a tour of the United States in 1962 and I was very strong in the colleges so I had an inkling that that was where a lot of the sales were. We did some motivational research studies and found the ages of eighteen to thirty-five were the biggest of my buyers in the Fifties and early Sixties.

SECONDS: *Ideally, what effect would you have hoped your music had on the listener?*

CONNIFF: The questions you ask are very interesting, but you know, George, I didn't think about it that way. I was just doing my thing. I

loved music. I liked working on those old standards and I was having a ball just going in and recording. I wasn't thinking, "Is this going to have an effect on society?" It's just something I did that came naturally and was successful commercially. I never tried to make a lot of money; it just happened that way.

SECONDS: *Where did your interest in voices come from?*

CONNIFF: I've often tried to figure that one out. It didn't dawn on me until a few years back that when we rode around with the bands, like Bunny Berigan's band and Shaw's band, we'd listen to records of other bands. We listened to a lot of the Black records — I told you about Ellington and Basie. Sometimes we'd do five hundred mile trips for one-niters and sometimes somebody would start singing Benny Goodman's arrangement of "King Porter Stomp." First thing you know, the whole band would be singing Benny's arrangements. We'd sing it through from beginning to end with "da-

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da” syllables. Maybe that’s where it started. The first time I ever used voices on record was with a song called “Band Of Gold.” As an arranger, I was always looking for new ideas. I came up with an introduction and I thought, “I wonder what it’d be like to use a Big Band sound doubled by voices ...” That’s what I did and when I recorded the introduction, Mitch came running out of the booth and said, “Ray, this is a fantastic sound! When you get through with this session, I want you to go home and write a few arrangements. We’ll put a single out — ‘Ray Conniff Orchestra And Chorus.’” I said, “What’ll I do?” He said, “Just pick a couple of tunes you like and we’ll put it out. But make sure you use those voices.”

SECONDS: *Were the voices as interchangeable with the instruments?*

CONNIFF: I did use them with the instruments. It was up to the engineer to get an equal amount of both on the records. At times, I’d let the voices go by themselves and do a sustained background pad, like strings do.

SECONDS: *Were your choruses both men and women from the onset?*

CONNIFF: Yeah, I used four men and four girls. Later on, I wanted to do the same thing with them using words, so I enlarged the chorus times three to twenty-four — actually twenty-five. The singer’s union had a breakdown, so it was cheaper to use twenty-five than twenty-four. So I’d use twenty-five but the writing was the same as I wrote for eight, except there’d be three people on each note if I had eight parts.

SECONDS: *“Band Of Gold” made it up to #5.*

CONNIFF: All my singles were getting tremendous airplay. The disc jockeys were very important in making me known. That “S’Wonderful” arrangement had a strange thing about it. About two-thirds of the way through, there was a stop and the bass went, “BUMP — Bump — bump” and then a cymbal crash. Then the band came back in, swinging for twenty-four bars. From that cymbal crash to the end of the last note was exactly sixty seconds, and disc jockeys all over the United States used it for a theme. Larry King used it as a theme when he was a disc jockey.

SECONDS: *At that time, Rock Music was*

beginning. How did that influence you?

CONNIFF: Well, as a matter of fact, Fats Domino and that kind of stuff was very prominent. The second album I did after *S’Wonderful* was *Dance The Bop* and I wrote twelve songs in the style of all the songs that were hits, like “Blueberry Hill.” I did this album with a lot of guitars; a Rock sound with voices. It was a mistake because people flocked into stores to buy the new Ray Conniff release and they were disappointed. They thought it was going to be like *S’Wonderful*, which it wasn’t. We quickly recalled the album off the market and I did



the album *S’Awful Nice*.

SECONDS: *Are you comfortable with the concept of Easy Listening or Elevator Music, titles that suggest music has a secondary role?*

CONNIFF: I don’t know where those words came from. The sounds I write are the sounds of the Big Band era. As I branched out later, I started doing albums with just the singers singing the words and I didn’t use the Big Band brass on those.

SECONDS: *Where did the spaciousness of your arrangements come from?*

CONNIFF: That was the use of equalization, reverberation, and echo. That started with the Big Bands, though you may not be aware of it. One time, Benny Goodman came to New York to record, and all the studios were filled up. All the arrangements were ready and they couldn’t get in the studio. So they booked a place called Liederkrantz Hall and it turned out to have a natural reverb sound to it; it sounded like playing in a big cathedral. It had such a great sound that all the bands wanted to record there. Then we found out

RAY CONNIFF

we could get the same sound by putting a microphone and a speaker down in a cement basement. We'd add that onto records and make a big reverb sound.

SECONDS: *How did stereo influence your arrangements?*

CONNIFF: You'd start thinking differently. You'd think about where things were going to come out when you wrote. You tried to make it interesting so there'd be activity on each side. The way I wrote for stereo, I used the rhythm in what we called the center — of course, there was no center; we only had two speakers. If I put the drums on both sides, it sounded like it was in the middle. Also, when the voices did the pads, I'd put those in the middle as well. When I started writing for the twenty-five singers, I'd put the girls on the right and the boys on the left and have

player plays all six strings and doesn't think of weaving different lines in and out. In any symphonic work, any of the notes of a chord could wind up in the bass, and some of them make beautiful sounds as inverted chords.

When you write on guitars, they can't play those kind of chords. I think that stilted chord progressions a little bit, when so much was concentrated on people with guitars.

SECONDS: *You did some wonderful arrangements of guitar-oriented music, like Glen Campbell's "Wichita Lineman."*

CONNIFF: That's one of the exceptions. That doesn't sound like it was written by a guitar player.

SECONDS: *What do you look for in a song when you choose to do an arrangement?*

CONNIFF: I love great melodies. I love Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, Victor Young was a great melody writer, as was Henry Mancini. I look for great melodies and great chord construction. I look for class. I don't like a lot of today's songs — I call them "left-handed songs." They have an odd number of bars in the phrases. Instead of eight-bar phrases, they'll have a seven-bar phrase and then a nine-bar phrase. You lose the average person with that. If they're dancing, they don't want to have their foot in the air when the downbeat comes. I think the average person likes simplicity. I look for simplicity in music but also a richness in the

chord structure. People love to hear the song they fell in love to, and if you can make a new arrangement of their favorite song they'll run out and buy it. After all, that's what it's all about. If I don't record music that people go out and buy, I won't be around. They won't keep me on the label if I don't sell. You've got to find a way for the product to sell, otherwise you'll be out of the business.

SECONDS: *In the Sixties and Seventies, you incorporated Rock rhythms into your songs and then used the melody as a counterpoint.*

CONNIFF: You're very observant. That's quite true what you said. There was a purpose to that and the purpose was what I told you. I love music, I love recording, I love being in the business, but I'm smart enough to realize if product doesn't sell, I won't be in the business. It's no fun to just write compositions; I get a kick out of it when I see



them answer phrases.

SECONDS: *My favorite record of yours is Invisible Tears.*

CONNIFF: It's strange that you mention that because that was the first time I tried experimenting with overdubbing.

SECONDS: *There's quite a revival of the stuff you've been noted for.*

CONNIFF: It's funny — my royalties took a big jump up last year, almost double the year before.

SECONDS: *Perhaps people have been banging their heads on walls long enough, and now they're looking for musical forms that are relaxing, contemplative, or fun —*

CONNIFF: I think a lot of music went on a downward trend when they concentrated on guitar players writing songs. With the guitar, you don't have a tendency to write interesting lines in the music. A guitar

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an audience and they really like it.

SECONDS: *Do you hear your influence in music today?*

CONNIFF: Not so much anymore. For a while, there were a lot of guys copying what I did. I'm still very popular in the Latin countries and every Latin country has a band that imitates what I do.

SECONDS: *What's been your greatest contribution to music?*

CONNIFF: I'll tell you what has made me the happiest about what I've done. I've received quite a few letters from fans — some of them have been quite touching. One letter was from a young girl in a Latin country. When girls in Latin countries have their confirmation, it's a very big occasion for them. This girl wasn't with her natural parents and nobody paid attention to her in the family. When

her confirmation came, it was completely ignored and she became very despondent about her life. At some point, she decided

this life was not worth living. She had gotten a gun and she put the gun to her head and just before she pulled the trigger, she heard music from a record store down on the street. She stopped and listened to the music and it turned out it was my arrangement of

“Besame Mucho.” She put the gun down and went down to the record store. She started listening to my music and it changed her life — there's another letter I got that comes to mind. A woman was in an insane asylum and they didn't seem to be able to do anything with her — she wrote me, too — and one day her husband brought her a record player and one of my albums. She started listening to it, so he brought her another one of my albums and she became well — I've gotten quite a few letters like that and that means more to me

than anything else — much more than all the money. ●●●

