
John Coppola, Green Street Mortuary Band trumpeter, dies

By **Carl Nolte** | November 1, 2015 | Updated: November 1, 2015 2:46pm

One of the oldest and best-known traditions in San Francisco is the ritual of the funeral procession through the heart of Chinatown — a hearse and a cortege of cars carrying mourners, all led by a brass band playing hymns.

The cortege with brass band is a combination of Asian and Western funeral tradition, and the band is unique to San Francisco.

For years, right behind bandleader Lisa Pollard, was John Coppola, marching slowly through the streets playing trumpet. Now it is time to mourn Mr. Coppola; he died at his home in San Francisco on Oct. 25 at age 86.

Few people who saw the Green Street Mortuary Band leading a

funeral procession knew that Mr. Coppola was married to Pollard. Or that both were well-known musicians. Mr. Coppola, in fact, was a noted arranger and teacher as well.

He began playing professionally when he was 13 and living in Oakland. He played with Charlie Barnet, Charlie Haden and Woody Herman's big band, and was the lead trumpet for Stan Kenton. Critic Eugene Chadbourne called Mr. Coppola one of Kenton's best brass men.

Mr. Coppola also worked with Frank Sinatra, Nelson Riddle, Nat King Cole, Dizzy Gillespie, Billy May and Henry Mancini.

"I can't say enough about John," said Jerry Dodgion, the noted saxophonist. "He was a great lead trumpet player, a teacher and a mentor to me. He always shared what he knew. He was a special person and a really good guy."

Mr. Coppola was born Giovanni Michelangelo Coppola in Geneva, N.Y., in 1929. When he was 7, his family moved to Oakland.

He was always interested in music. He wanted to play the clarinet, but his mother discovered that trumpets were on sale at Sears Roebuck for \$14 each. He got his first professional job, a one-night stand, when he was 13. By his senior year in high school, he was working most nights at Sweet's Ballroom in Oakland. He always



Photo: Ernest Beyl

John Coppola, who signed with Charlie Barnet in 1950, plays at Capp's Corner in North Beach.

liked to say he was making more money than his teachers, recalled Paul Halvonik, an old friend.

“I didn’t have much experience, but I had the endurance,” Mr. Coppola said years later. “I could play loud and high, and that seemed to be enough.”

Oakland had a big music scene during World War II. Mr. Coppola remembered Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Lionel Hampton all appearing in town on the same night. He went to hear the famous bands, listened and decided to make music a career.

Mr. Coppola went on the road with a band right after high school. That band ended up stranded and broke in Idaho, but Mr. Coppola was hooked. He got progressively better jobs and in 1950 signed with Barnet. “My biggest education,” Mr. Coppola said.

He played lead trumpet and did solos. He came to Kenton’s attention, and his career took off. He traveled all over the country. His longest was a three-year road trip with Herman.

He eventually tired of traveling, he said, “and came back home to stay.” Home was San Francisco, where he worked the various club scenes, theaters and civic light opera, with occasional road trips, one with Petula Clark.

But he was more interested in jazz. Mr. Coppola had his own sound. “He liked a combination of styles — bebop mixed with swing,” Halvonik said.

He had married singer Frances Lynne, and they were together for 52 years when she died in 2008. Five years later, Mr. Coppola married Pollard. It was a good match: They had known each other for years and shared a love of music.

They had both helped organize the Green Street Mortuary Band a quarter of a century ago and turned it into a more professional group. Mr. Coppola arranged hymns and melodies for the marching band and played, and Pollard led the way. The band, which plays at almost 300 funerals a year, has a simple motto: dignity, honor, respect.

Mr. Coppola had to give up the band as his health declined. He died of complications of dementia. There will be no sad songs for him. At his request, there will be no funeral.

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