

KCSM jazz man has been a nightclub owner, Oakland Raiders player , reporter and marriage counselor â?? but music is what makes his soul sing

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Itâ??s a typical Saturday morning for Sonny Buxton. Heâ??s up early, fixes himself a bowl of oatmeal and gathers up a stack of CDs heâ??s going to play during his morning broadcast at KCSM. By 8.45, his son is at the door of his South San Francisco home, and they drive to the College of San Mateo, where the station has its home.

Buxton, 84, has been a fixture in the Bay Area jazz scene for decades. Heâ??s owned a popular nightclub, played the drums professionally, lectured and taught jazz-related courses at Stanford and the Fromm Institute, and worked as a talk show host and reporter for KGO Radio and television.

At a time when much of radio is formulaic, Buxton controls his playlists. And while KCSM has an extensive collection of jazz recordings, he prefers to bring his own, emphasizing the work of greats like Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker and Billy Strayhorn. â??I call myself the gatekeeper,â?• he said.



Buxton in the KCSM studio. (Photo courtesy of KCSM.)

His resume includes a stint as a marriage counselor and five years as a defensive back with the Oakland Raiders. Varied as his career has been, Buxton says the unifying theme has been his desire to

meet and overcome challenges. â??I have to get flattened first and then go at it again.â?•

Buxton dreamed of being the next Gene Krupa, one of the 20th centuryâ??s best-known drummers. Instead, he drifted into broadcasting: â??It was almost an accident,â?• he said. Accident or not, becoming a broadcaster meant defeating more than the usual professional challenges.

â??I was a stutterer; Iâ??m still a stutterer. People would tell me you are crazy to think of going into broadcasting,â?• Buxton said. That didnâ??t stop him. Much like the protagonist of the movie the â??Kingâ??s Speech,â?• he worked with a speech pathologist, doing exercises with a metronome, and filling his mouth with pebbles and declaiming over the roar of the ocean. â??The king had it worse than me,â?• Buxton joked.

Facing inequality

Buxton was introduced to broadcasting while an intern at a small station in Los Angeles. He later did a stint as a late-night disc jockey, hosting the â??House of Bambooâ?• for Armed Forces Radio while stationed in Japan with the Air Force.

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Buxton has lived in his Daly City home for 24 years. The basement, which looks out on a pleasant back yard, is where he keeps his CDs and recording equipment. (Photo by Robin Evans)

Those early experiences were good ones, and Buxton saw a career path. But the ingrained racism of the radio industry was a formidable obstacle. Earning an engineerâ??s license, a requirement for many broadcasting jobs, should have helped him enter the business. License in hand, he sent a demo tape to a Berkeley radio station.

Management liked it and invited him to an interview. â??But when I arrived, everything changed. The managerâ??s jaw dropped when he saw me,â?• said Buxton, the son of Jamaican immigrants.

â??He started talking about â??negro radio,â?? and let me know I wouldnâ??t fit in. As I was leaving, I turned around and saw him toss my stuff into the trash.â?• Buxton was angry but not discouraged: â??I thought someone is going to hire me on my own terms.â?•

Buxton learned more about inequality when he moved to Los Angeles. â??Until then, I hadnâ??t thought about racism in the music industry. There was a black musiciansâ?? union and a white musiciansâ?? union,â?• he recalled. â??I was dismayed,â?• to find out how few black musicians could get jobs in Hollywood. Buxton performed in the club scene and was warned to never be seen leaving with a white woman. â??The police will nail you,â?• he was told.

Teaching the truth

That first-hand knowledge of racism infuses Buxtonâ??s approach to teaching. During his recent Fromm Institute class on jazz vocalists, he recounted how Lena Horn was blacklisted for her outspoken advocacy of civil rights and her refusal to portray maids or other stereotypical roles in Hollywood productions. White and black performers, Buxton said, were forbidden to touch one another on-screen, and scenes of black singers were often cut from movies when they were shown in the South.

Indeed, the stereotypical images of black performers can be traced as far back as the 1850s, when a white entertainer named Dartmouth Rice donned black face and performed as a character he called Jim Crow, Buxton said.

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He has a rich store of anecdotes and livens his classes with a carefully curated collection of videos to showcase performances of jazz greats. Racism in Hollywood and the music industry is a recurring theme in this class, as is his personal story. â??I appreciated his ability to blend his personal experiences and research to present material without bitterness,â?• said Marylyn Tesconi, a retired Department of Motor Vehicles manager who was in the class.

There has been progress, Buxton said, but not enough. â??The barriers are lower to some extent, but they are still out there. Most of the (jazz) critics are still white,â?• he said. â??You have jazz studies programs all over the world; most of the people in charge of them are still white.â?•

Buxton isnâ??t much of a techie, but heâ??d likely endorse the Silicon Valley mantra of â??fail fast and break things.â?• His first entrepreneurial venture was a coffee house in Seattle that featured jazz at night. â??I fell on my face and lost all my money in about six months,â?• he said.

A man of many talents

Lessons learned, he later owned successful clubs in several cities. He didnâ??t become the next Gene Krupa, but he did get to play drums for Billy Strayhorn, best known for his composition of â??Take the A Train.â?•

He was close to missing the cut when he tried out for a basketball team in the Air Force. â??I wound up as the 11th man,â?• Buxton said. Realizing basketball wasnâ??t his best sport, he turned to football, playing for Washington State University and Long Beach State College. He succeeded so well that he was drafted by the Oakland Raiders and played five seasons. At one point, Al Davis, then the teamâ??s owner, confronted him, saying he didnâ??t seem dedicated.

Davis was right, Buxton concedes. â??I was a dilettante. While waiting to work with a trainer in the locker room, I would use the down-time to read. That didnâ??t go over well with Coach Davis because it wasnâ??t about football formations. As I told him, â??Those books are about life. Iâ??ve got to know

where Iâ??m going after this.â??â?•

Jobs in broadcasting followed. Although he had a background in jazz, Buxton refused to be pigeonholed and hosted country and western and bluegrass programs for a time. â??It was a challenge,â??â?• he said. Later he got a job as a reporter, becoming he believes, the first black television reporter in the Pacific Northwest.

Buxton has worked at a host of stations in the Pacific Northwest and the Bay Area and has run jazz clubs in Seattle and San Francisco. In 2013, the Jazz Journalists Association honored him with the Jazz Hero Award for his contributions to broadcasting. His morning gig at KCSM is four hours â?? 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. â?? on Saturdays, but Buxton says heâ??s content doing just one show a week.



Buxton said he once had 8,000 LPs. Theyâ??re gone now but just a corner of his basement shows heâ??s catching up with CDs.

If thereâ??s such a thing as a music appreciation gene, the Buxton clan seems to have it. Buxtonâ??s uncle was Noble Sissle, a well-known bandleader before World War II, who produced the first successful all-Black musical on Broadway. His younger son is a jazz fan and often hangs out in the station while his dad broadcasts. A grandson majored in broadcasting and lives in the Seattle area, where Buxton, now divorced, was born.

Although his knowledge of jazz is broad, his tastes favor the mainstream. On a recent Saturday morning, he began his show with tracks from Kenny Washington, The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, Jimmy Cobb, and Bill Evans. Says Buxton: â??I try not to play outside the basic boundaries. And I wonâ??t play stuff you canâ??t tap your feet to.â?•

There may be a book in Buxtonâ??s future. â??I started writing a book 12 years ago. Itâ??s a memoir,â?• he said. Like a lot of people, Buxton thought the forced downtown during the pandemic would give him the space to finish his project. But itâ??s still a work in progress.

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