

SENIORITY PROFILE

Maestro Spreads Music With Devotion and Love

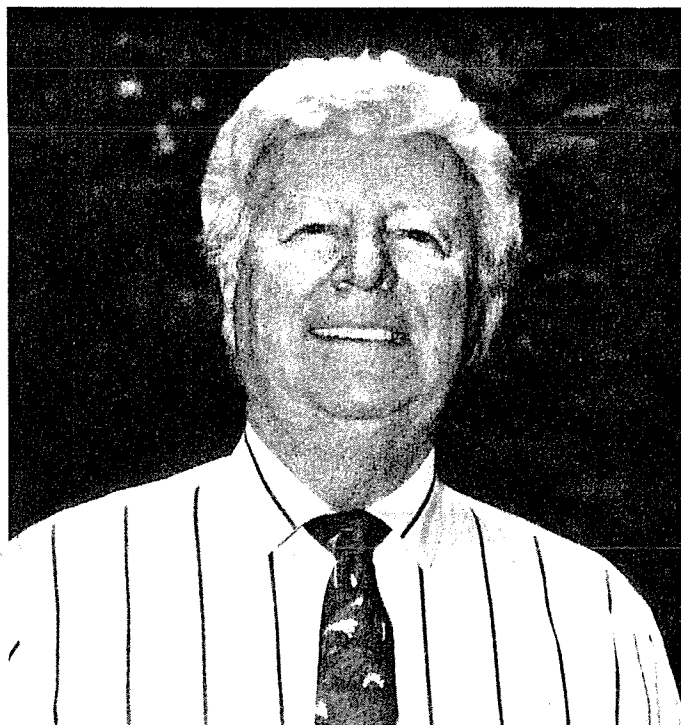
By Ellen Fix

ALBERT COLEMAN ANSWERS THE DOOR TO HIS modest Smyrna, Georgia, home with a bounce in his gait, the flush of vitality and good health radiating from his pink cheeks. He exudes warmth and a hospitable good nature. His demeanor is as lighthearted as the popular tunes of his Atlanta Pops Orchestra, which has delighted hundreds of thousands of fans since 1945. Albert's outward charm belies an intense devotion to music and the Atlanta Pops. The devotion never seems to wane, even as the 55-person orchestra enters its 46th year. As conductor, composer, director, producer, booking agent, and fund-raiser, Albert singlehandedly ensures that Atlanta and Georgia audiences continue to enjoy music — free of charge.

"I'll retire when I'm buried," he states matter of factly, gazing proudly around his basement office, which is crammed with musical arrangements, records and tapes, and photo mementos. His days begin at 6:00 am, and he doesn't stop until nine or ten in the evening. And, he's NEVER missed a concert.

"The two most important things in my life are my music and love. It wouldn't make any difference if there were two people in the orchestra." Besides bringing free music to the people, Albert's most significant contribution to this community (and his most satisfying activity) is giving aspiring young musicians the big "break" they need. He well understands that a musical career can be "exasperating" and admonishes youth, "Don't quit."

ALBERT'S COLORFUL LIFE and accomplishments span the globe. Born in Paris of a circus performer and a violinist, he traveled throughout Europe, Russia, and the Orient. He began his violin studies at age four. As conductor of a Ziegfeld-style vaudeville act and numerous hotel orchestras, he toured the United States and 20 other countries. He even held positions with the Shanghai, Singapore, and Saigon orchestras. In 1939, he visited Atlanta for the first time, where he conducted at the Paramount Theatre, next door to the Loew's Grand. Some Atlantans will remember this as the time and place of the Atlanta premier of *Gone With*



Photograph by Mike Carr

the Wind. Two years later, he found himself in Atlanta again at the Roxy Theatre.

In 1944, he received an offer to work for WSB radio, to which he replied, "What's that?" Albert explains: "I really knew nothing about Atlanta, but I gave two weeks' notice and left on a train from San Francisco. This was the first time in my life I settled in one place. I fell in love with it; I wouldn't go anywhere else. I really felt like I was in the South," he continues. "I enjoyed the politeness more than any other place. The tranquility, the easy way of living — it wasn't such a rush. It was something I never had because I was always on the move, all my life."

Certainly, an exotic wanderlust had given Albert the sense of, as he puts it, "having lived like a millionaire." But by the time he started the Atlanta Pops Orchestra in 1945, he says, "I cured myself immediately. That was my big dream — to give free music with my own orchestra and to give young people a chance to appear. I always make sure they get paid before I do."

In turn, his members hold him in the highest regard. Mary Sue Taylor was 19 when Albert got her her first job: the only female in a dance band at the Dinkler Hotel. She and her husband still play with him. "There's something in his blood that keeps him

going. He can't wait to get to his office and 'solicit for his pops.'" Jimmy Taylor, who played with him while at WSB, relates how at the time Albert, being French, had somehow mistakenly thought there were 100 minutes in each hour, so he always had music left over at the end of a program.

But everyone agrees that nothing matches Albert's enthusiasm and energy. As an orchestra conductor, they say he is strong-willed, but easy-going and down to earth. "There's always a smirk behind his toughness," comments one loyal follower. "He works us hard, but he always gives his audience their money's worth." Why else would he have been invited to appear at the Radio City Music Hall's 50th Anniversary event several years ago? Plus, he has a quick sense of humor. During a rehearsal for an outdoor concert in Macon, his pants suddenly fell down, and struggling with one hand to pull them up, the baton in the other, Albert didn't skip a beat. He later joked to the orchestra, "I've been accused of doing many things to get publicity..."

YET, THIS IS THE SAME MAN who singlehandedly masterminded such major extravaganzas as the Coca-Cola 100th anniversary celebration at Woodruff Park. The Atlanta Pops Orchestra accompanied a chorus of 1,000 singers and were showered with daytime fireworks. Several choirs, jazz ensembles, and dance groups were coordinated into the program. Trusted by former Mayor Andrew Young to see to every detail, Albert arranged to have prisoners help him blow up thousands of balloons for the event. As his wife used to say to him, "You've got Cecil B. DeMille's ideas; you just haven't got the cash."

Albert's interests in musical styles are broad-based, ranging from country and jazz to gospel and classical. His two favorite composers are Gershwin and Tchaikovsky, although he prefers "everything modern" and is particularly drawn to romantic songs. Guitar legend Chet Atkins introduced him to country music, and Albert was "hooked." Chet was so impressed with Albert that he invited him to become his concert director. For six years this honor took him across the country and inspired Albert to record "Hooked on Country," a medley of 62 favorite country hits. This album and its successor, "Classical Country," were both nominated for Grammy Awards.

Albert has played with literally hundreds of other world-famous entertainers, among them Dinah Shore, Bob Hope, and Burt Reynolds. Chet and Boots Randolph remain his favorites. He also enjoyed accompanying Frank Sinatra and Julio Iglesias, and admires Red Skelton, with whom he has shared the stage. Although he is touched with national fame,

Albert is most proud of his induction into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame. This achievement represents a lifetime of promoting music and musicians throughout Georgia.

Because he also simultaneously operates his own booking agency and conducts a dance orchestra for private parties, Albert's spare time is scarce. For relaxation, he pursues photography and attends movies. He doesn't smoke or drink and enjoys cooking. (His specialties include an Indian curry dish and Italian ragout.) His family includes three children and three grandchildren. His son Lorne assists him as orchestra manager.

Albert's future is rich with ambitious plans. For instance, he is putting the final tracks down on an All-American patriotic music album. He was most recently invited to conduct two performances of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra in August. And he hopes to take the Pops Orchestra on tour around the state. In the mean time, you may find Albert combing the streets of Atlanta, raising funds so that his dreams continue to become a reality.

Free-lance writer Ellen Fix is an Atlanta native with experience in ad copywriting and public relations.

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