



Skitch Henderson, Conductor Who Led New York Pops, Dead at 87

By Kenneth Jones
November 2, 2005

Skitch Henderson, the conductor and musical director who banged the drum loudly for American popular music, died Nov. 1 of natural causes at his home in New Milford, Connecticut. Mr. Henderson was 87 and was an early bandleader for the "Tonight" show and founded The New York Pops, which introduced a new generation to the 20th-century American popular music of theatre composers Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Cy Coleman, George Gershwin and others.

In a long career he worked with such vocalists as Judy Garland, Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra.

Born in 1918 in Birmingham, England, with the name Lyle Russell Cedric Henderson, Mr. Henderson went on to "successfully transform himself into a popular American icon and, in doing so, has managed to be at the center of every phenomenon in American popular music and culture," according to the New York Pops.

According to his biography on the New York Pops website, Mr. Henderson began his career playing piano in the roadhouses of Montana and Minnesota in the 1930s and since then has been closely involved in all branches of popular musical entertainment — live performances, movies, television, radio.

Skitch Henderson's big break came in 1937 when he filled in for an ailing accompanist for an MGM promotional tour featuring Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney. "The tour was to promote a film called 'Andy Hardy,' which became a picture series," Mr. Henderson once said. "Mickey's father was Joe Yule, the burlesque comedian, and Mickey 'cleaned up the act,' as we say. He did a monologue and I played something and Judy sang a couple of songs, and basically, we told everyone how wonderful MGM was."

The tour started in Denver and wound up in Chicago, and Mr. Henderson was left with the original pianist's roundtrip ticket to Hollywood. "It was like a scene from a Warner Brothers movie," he recalled. "The tour manager said to me, 'Kid, what are you going to do?' and I said I don't know and he said, 'Well I got a ticket, why don't you come to Hollywood?' And that's exactly how I went."

In Hollywood, he continued playing piano however he could. He accompanied a young vocalist named Dolores Reed (the future

Mrs. Bob Hope), joined the music department at MGM, and ultimately played piano for Bob Hope and "The Pepsodent Show." The Hopes were "like family to me," Mr. Henderson once said. "Just like Bing. In fact, it was at their house that I first met Bing."

Crosby went on to play an important role in the bandleader's life. "He was like a guru for me," Mr. Henderson said. "Bing taught me stage presence and manners; he taught me a great deal. He was an incredible human being."

Crosby was also instrumental in creating the "Skitch" nickname. As Henderson explained it, "I was called 'the sketch kid' because of the way I would quickly sketch out a new score in a new key. And Bing said, 'If you're going to compete, get your name straightened out. People always forget Christian names but they never forget nicknames.'"

Mr. Henderson said, "It was sage advice. Skitch really stuck. And I even changed my passport."

Mr. Henderson studied music theory, harmony, and music philosophy with Arnold Schoenberg, who introduced him to the music of Mahler and Bruckner (Mahler remained his favorite composer). Mr. Henderson also studied conducting under Albert Coates and Fritz Reiner.

During World War II, he flew for both the Royal Air Force and, after becoming an American citizen, the United States Army Air Corps. Among other things, it was a way of indulging his ongoing love of flying and airplanes, according to his New York Pops bio.

After the war, Mr. Henderson became the musical director for a touring Frank Sinatra, and, later, for Sinatra's "Lucky Strike Show" on NBC Radio. Henderson said, "Sinatra and I were old music friends. I played piano on the first record he made. And after the war, he put me to work immediately."

He later found himself the music director for NBC television, but not without first doing a brief guest conductor stint for the legendary Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony. Eventually, Mr. Henderson was paired up with Steve Allen for "The Tonight Show," and much later, Johnny Carson.

Mr. Henderson was a guest conductor for symphony orchestras throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. In the spring of 1953, he began conducting pops concerts in a series with the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall.

As the conductor of the RCA Victor Orchestra and Chorus, he made a groundbreaking recording of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* with Leontyne Price and William Warfield that earned him a 1963 Grammy Award.

Mr. Henderson founded The New York Pops in 1983 "to share his passion for music by bringing the more accessible symphonic pops fare to a broader audience." The New York Pops is "the largest independent symphonic pops orchestra in the United

States, and its subscription season is one of the most successful at its home at New York City's Carnegie Hall."

The orchestra is also recognized for its tours as well as for its popular series of free Summermusic concerts in city parks, which debuted in 1995.

"We sat around for the first 10 years, saying, 'How do we get out of Carnegie Hall?' It's funny, because everyone else wants to get into Carnegie Hall!" Henderson once said. "But our mission was to get out – just for the summer – so we go to Central Park and Bryant Park."

He is survived by his wife, Ruth, and their children, Heidi Maria and Hans Christian.

Since 1972, the Skitch and Ruth owned and operated The Silo, Inc., which comprises a store, an art gallery, and a cooking school in New Milford, CT. They published two cookbooks "Ruth and Skitch Henderson's Seasons in the Country" and "Ruth and Skitch Henderson's Christmas in the Country," which includes a CD of holiday music by The New York Pops. In 2003 Ruth and Skitch Henderson co-founded the Hunt Hill Farm Trust, "an effort to preserve their farm's land and buildings and to celebrate Americana in music, art and literature through the creation of a living museum." An affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution resulted in the Trust's inaugural exhibit: "Skitch Henderson: A Man and His Music."

**Send questions and comments to the [Webmaster](#)
Copyright © 2002 Playbill, Inc. All Rights Reserved.**