

PRELUDE

edited by peter gianopoulos

A Man For All Parties

KEN ARLEN IS PLAYING YOUR SONG

This is it. This is Ken Arlen's moment, his time to shine, to save the day. Standing just off stage at George W. Bush's inaugural celebration, "The Commander-In-Chief Ball," Ken, the leader of Evanston's Ken Arlen Orchestra, has just been asked to kill some time before the introduction of the Vice President. This isn't supposed to happen; on the strict itinerary that's been drawn up for this event, the band is supposed to be launching into a set of dance music. Nonetheless, Dick Cheney and his wife will be on stage in exactly seven minutes, and Ken knows what to do.

He orders the band into a medley of the theme songs for the four branches of military service, a musical tribute to the throng of soldiers standing in the crowd — and the soldiers love it. They sing along, jovial, like a crowd gathered in a pub. The tide of happiness and pride and emotion swells in the room, and the mood is...perfect. This is what Ken Arlen does.

This is why, in fact, Ken and his orchestra are here in the first place, because Ken knows what people want. He can read them, anticipate their desires, and intuit just the right song to play at just the right time.

Perhaps it was that gift that brought him to the attention of Bush's party planners to begin with. They had heard about Ken from the travel company executive who'd handled travel for Bush's campaign, a man who'd seen the Ken Arlen Orchestra perform at a conference and came to the inevitable conclusion that Ken Arlen could give you what you want. So Ken sent them some materials from the band, and with that the Bush people found what they wanted, too.

So Ken and his band began preparing for the show, including rehearsing a medley of the



theme songs of the four branches of military service. Preparing that piece, knowing it would come in handy — that's anticipation. But recognizing the perfect time to play it, whipping it out at just the right time to fire the crowd up into a warm-and-fuzzy frenzy? That's intuition, and more than that, it's improvisation.

Improvisation is a skill one acquires as a jazz musician, which is what Ken is, really. After cutting his teeth on classical clarinet, first as a high school student studying at Northwestern and later as an undergraduate at Denison University in Ohio, Ken discovered the music of Buddy DeFranco and other jazz greats and fell in love.

"I just went, 'Oh my God, what have I been missing?'" he says. "It just flipped a switch."

So he immersed himself, built a life saturated by this wonderful music, and upon graduation he took a job at a Madison, Wis. record store so he could buy every jazz record he could find. A year later he moved back to the Chicago area to study under saxophone legend Joe Daley, and three months into his tutelage, he switched to sax.

Although Ken continues to play jazz, in the Ken Arlen Orchestra he's found an outlet that allows him to be a bit more eclectic — conjuring everything from ABBA to Benny Goodman.

"I enjoy music no matter what the style," he says. "To me, it's all music."

And that's all Ken's clients are asking for: music. The perfect music, played at the perfect time.

Jeff Cockrell