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Big Al Hirt's Big Family

On Father's Day, no show-business papa is prouder of his brood than the big daddy of Dixieland trumpet players

By **GEORGE S. O'NEAL**



Al's wife holds Jeff Davis, 3, youngest of their eight children. Others are Rebecca, 12, and Gretchen, 17, at

left; Mary Lee, 19, standing; Brigid, 11, with dog; and on the floor, Rachel, 9, Jennifer, 5, and Stephen, 7.

SECRET SERVICE men at President Kennedy's inaugural ball closed in on a stranger who was squirming through the crowd.

The massive, black-bearded man was carrying a musical-instrument case that was just the right size to hold a Tommy gun. When he told them his name and said he had been invited to play his trumpet at the ball, they were unimpressed. They had never heard of Al Hirt, and before they let him go, he had to show them his trumpet and prove his identity.

That could hardly happen today; in a little more than two years, Al Hirt has become a celebrity. Millions of tv viewers have seen the Dixieland trumpeter on the Ed Sullivan, Dinah Shore, and Andy Williams shows. He also has made two movies, "World by Night" and "Lovers Must Learn"; he packs them in with his night-club act, and his record albums have triggered a big popular response. On his upcoming LP, "Beauty and the Beast," Al not only plays his horn but shares the vocals with singer-dancer Ann-Margret.

What's Al Hirt like? I spent a good deal of time with him and his wife Mary during a visit they made to New York—and I can assure you that Al is a big man in more ways than one.

Six-feet, two-inches tall and weighing 300 pounds, Al has an appetite to match his size. He can stash away a dozen eggs for breakfast, a peck of shrimp and a brace of lobsters for lunch, and a rack of lamb for dinner.

But above all else, the keystone of Al's engaging personality is his bighearted love for his children and the enormous enjoyment he gets out of raising a large family.

He and Mary already have eight youngsters, and they are determined to have four more. Their oldest, Mary Lee, is 19. Then comes Gretchen, 17; Rebecca, 12; Brigid, 11; Rachel, 9; Stephen, 7; Jennifer, 5; and Jefferson Davis, going on 4.

The Hirts live in a large seven-room house in New Orleans. But with a brood the size of theirs, complete privacy is still hard to come by. Mary recalls one Sunday morning when she awoke with the feeling that someone was looking at her. When she got her eyes wide open, she discovered she was right. The door to her room was ajar, and there was Steve taking a pal on a tour of the premises. Pointing to Mary, Steve said, "And that over there, she's my mother."

OF NECESSITY, the Hirt household is well organized—but not with cold, impersonal precision. For instance, each of the children looks forward to the day when he will be promoted from the small-fry nook to the grownups' table in the dining room. There is no set time for promotion; it comes when Al and Mary feel the child has earned the advancement.

Now that Al is on the road a great deal, the big moment of each day for the Hirt family is 6:30 p.m. That's when he calls long-distance for a family confab. The children and Mary are there, waiting for the phone to ring. One by one, they take their turns talking with Daddy. Precedence is determined not by age but by who is the most eager to talk next.

"Those long-distance calls take around 45 minutes, and they run into plenty of money," Al says. "But they make my life worth living."