

Local Jazz History

Swing - Will It Bridge the Generation Gap?

By Frank Haigh

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Speaking of "Gap," it is a TV commercial for this clothing chain along with the release of the soundtrack from the movie "Swingers," that, for the most part, introduced today's "20 Somethings" to the music and dancing styles of the '30s and '40s. It's the same music that set the toes tapping and had boys and girls actually touching while they moved to the high energy sounds of the bands of Basie, Shaw, Miller, Goodman, Ellington and Dorsey.

Today the names have been changed to protect the newcomers from feeling too old. (God forbid the younger set admits to liking the music of the '30s and '40s). It was actually my 36-year-old son who first turned me on to the names of the current bands like "Squirrel Nut Zippers," "Big Bad Voodoo Daddy," "Royal Crown Review," "Cherry Poppin' Daddies," and "The Brian Setzer Orchestra." Setzer, who was lead guitarist for the pop group "Stray Cats," actually got the ball rolling in a big way with his 17-piece swing band, but only after other groups, such as the "Zippers" and the "Daddies," started to become popular. Setzer had been presenting his "swing" to teens and twenty-somethings for quite a while when all of the other bands kicked in and got the airwaves to open up and Setzer's cover of Louis Prima's "Jump, Jive & Wail" got radio's attention. Prima's original version was used in the "Gap" commercial, and it was this song my son referred to when he said, "Dad, there's a song I like on the radio and I think you'll like it, too."

Although these bands play some of the old tunes, much of their presentation is refreshingly original. These young musicians are turning out some tasteful music in a traditional vein. Who knows? In 50 years, people may be playing "Zipper" music like we now listen to Fats Waller & Louis Armstrong. Unfortunately, many young performers persist in putting theatrics above musicianship. But, like any lively art form, hearing the music "in person" remains part of the allure. The current "swing" music is not the rote deadly reproduction '40s swing, it is more like the jump blues of Cab Calloway, Louis Prima and Louis Jordan. OK you guys, include a few "swing ballads" and you'll get it right!

A free show this summer, at the Hatch Shell in Boston, saw 25,000 fans enjoying swing music by the "Big Bad Voodoo Daddies. Dressed in period garb, this group covered two Cab Calloway tunes including "Minnie the Moocher." The Daddies also sold out a Sunday night show at Boston's Roxy Night Club. All this popularity has prompted BMG to distribute a 15-track CD "Swing this Baby!" with tracks by "Big Bad Voodoo Daddies," "The Cherry Poppin' Daddies," "The Royal Crown Reviews," "The Brian Setzer Orchestra," and Boston's own "Bellview Cadillac."

Swing nights are suddenly the rage, and clubs such as Johnny D's in Somerville, Bill's Bar in Boston, Ryles in Cambridge, The Upstairs Lounge-Boston; and Fanueil Hall Marketplace (Wednesday nights through August) have been featuring live bands and dance instruction (at 5:30 p.m.). These are wonderful opportunities for youngsters to get out there and dance with a partner! And, for you old-timers, take a listen to the CD's by some of the new bands - you just might like what you hear.

- The Brian Setzer Orchestra
- Squirrel Nut Zippers
- Cherry Poppin' Daddies
- Big Bad Voodoo Daddies
- Lavy Smith & Her Red Hot Skillet Lickers
- Blue Plate Special
- Bellview Cadillac
- Blues Jumpers

- Sugar Ray's Flying Fortress
- Indigo Swing
- Royal Crown Review
- Dem Brooklyn Bums

--And this is only a partial list.

And, you advertisers (The Gap, Coca Cola, Jordans Furniture et al), keep on featuring those young dancers moving to "Jump, Jive & Wail" and "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree." It's like MTV for us seniors.

Northeastern, Harvard, Boston University and MIT as well as Berklee and New England and Boston Conservatories and high school programs in cities such as Foxborough and Brockton, the region has more jazz musicians today than it did even in the so-called golden Swing Era. A lamentable fact in Boston proper is that few of them are home-grown.

Because of the erosion of music education programs in Boston's public schools and the bottom-line, lowest-common-denominator financial motives of the broadcasting industry, virtually no young following has been established in the inner city where jazz and swing music once thrived. It is a shame on the city that most of the area's most accomplished musicians are coming from the suburbs or foreign lands, where music and the arts are still regarded as major ingredients for a quality life. Jazz still thrives where it is even moderately nurtured.

Quoting the late, great Boston journalist George Frazier in his recently published "Joy of Jazz", Washington author Tom Scanlan concluded that an era ends "when the laughter dies." According to Scanlan's observations, the Swing Era died in 1947. But, thousands upon thousands of musicians, dancers, listeners and educators throughout New England seem to be indicating that swing is not dead, it has just been sleeping.

Not including high school and college ensembles, there are at least a dozen big bands currently in "full swing" in New England; young people are joining swing dance clubs in record numbers, there are more festivals and concerts in the suburbs than ever; the Boston Jazz Society has just celebrated its 25th anniversary and Highland Jazz Inc, its 15th; Save Music American raised almost \$50,000 in an attempt to rescue the American Songbook on WGBH on weekday afternoons. Virtually all feel that Boston should be the Hub and that there should be a center for pulling all of these forces together - to preserve regional music history, present today's multitude of outstanding musicians and dancers, to educate the region's young people.

Keepers of the flame have been surviving, if not thriving. Contrary to Scanlan's depressing conclusion, the swingers in Greater Boston may not yet have enjoyed their last laugh.

Frank Haigh is editor of Quarter Notes magazine, which is dedicated to keeping jazz musicians, listeners and dancers throughout Greater Boston connected.