

Boston Bandstand: A Musical Odyssey

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Originally published in Whiskey, Women and... No. 15, December 1985.

Boston, Massachusetts . . . the heart (dare we say "hub"?) of New England and the Northeast . . . the Boston Tea Party, Paul Revere, Bunker Hill, 1775, Old Ironsides, the Red Sox, the Celtics . . . The associations are endless, but one seems to always fall short: Boston's contribution to the field of black music -- jazz, jive, bop, R&B and gospel. Other cities seem to bask in the limelight (Chicago, New Orleans, Memphis et al) while Boston's musical history remains obscure at best. Let us now offer at least a partial remedy for that situation with a short trip through Boston's heyday period in black musical history.

During the early part of the 20th century, Boston was fast becoming an ethnic and racial mixture. While the older, more established "Yankee" order still held power, muscle-flexing from both the strong Irish and Italian elements was obvious. Almost lost in this eclectic hodge-podge was an ever-growing black population whose primary residence was, and still is, the Roxbury section of the city.

While music had always flourished in the college-oriented, aesthetic community, very little was heard from the growing minority populations. African-American membership in a musicians' union was almost unheard of, but by 1912, a group of black musicians headed by saxophone player Bill Smith formed a small local union. It was centered around a music store on Westfield Street in Roxbury. The Harmony Store, owned and operated by a musician, Harry Hicks, later moved to Tremont Street. It served as a hangout for musicians, a place to jam, and especially as a booking office for Hicks and Company, the "company" consisting of two other musicians, Vernon Eaton and Dave Laney. The average pay for Hicks' men was \$3.50 a night.

From this inauspicious beginning, other pioneers in booking emerged, including Walter Johnson, Clarence Cummings and Skinny Johnson. Their office in downtown Boston catered to a more discriminating clientele. Thus, black musicians considered to be elite artists were able to perform for Boston society and draw above-average pay. Their bookings included the finest hotels in Boston, including the Ritz Carlton Roof.

In 1915, the black musicians' union, Local 535, received its charter from the American Federation of Musicians. For many years, its office remained upstairs at Charlie's Lunch on Columbus Avenue; then it was moved to the Manor on Worcester Street, before finally becoming a noted establishment for more than 40 years at 409 Massachusetts Avenue. Its autonomy was lost in 1970 after a court-mandated merger with Local 9, the white union. It didn't take long before most African-American players dropped from membership of the newly formed Boston Musicians Association Local 9-535. However, during Local 535's heyday, African American union leadership handled some of the greatest names in black entertainment: Duke Ellington, Jimmie Lunceford, Earl Hines, Cab Calloway, Chick Webb, Buddy Johnson, and a host of fine local talent.

And Boston's club scene was bustling from the late 1920s to well into the '60s. Renowned clubs featuring black talent included the Royal Palms, Wally's Paradise, Louie's Lounge, the Hi-Hat, Eddie Levine's, the Pioneer Club and Handy's Grille, all South End establishments, along with what was known as "the great white way." Uptown around old Scollay Square (now the site of Government Center) were the Crawford House, the Imperial and the Paradise Cafe. The list was outstanding. As in most large cities, the "traveling" entertainers had established sleeping quarters, Boston's most famous being Mother's Lunch on Columbus Avenue.

Along with great musicians, the area clubs also featured some of the great vocalists of the time, including Billy Eckstine, who packed the house so consistently at Benny Ford's Tic Toc Club in the mid-1940s that he was given a bonus. In November 1954, Roy Hamilton, riding the crest of his hit, "You'll Never Walk Alone," broke Sarah Vaughn's attendance record at the Hi-Hat set nine years earlier. In fact, during a one-nighter at nearby Revere Beach, local police canceled Hamilton's second and third shows after the predominantly female audience of over 3,000 stampeded the eight policemen guarding Hamilton.

The artists and the stories are endless: Charlie Singleton at Eddie Levine's, Amos Milburn, Lynn Hope, Big Jay McNeely, the Penguins (who had to do their shows on Sundays because they were underage) . . . Cleveland Duncan held his crotch while singing "Earth Angel" at the Hi-Hat; the Drifters (with Clyde McPhatter) bumped their butts while singing "Bip Bam"; Lester Young required help getting to the microphone in the mid-'50s; Count Basie; the Midnighthers; Frank Motle; Bo Diddley.

The local talent was also exceptional, many achieving fame as sidemen, among them the Perry Brothers (Bey, Joe and Ray), drummers Roy Haynes, Bobby Donaldson and Alan Dawson, bassist Lloyd Trotman, and Lennie Johnson (who played with Basie, Ellington, Herb Pomeroy and Quincy Jones), pianist Dean Earl and tenor man Andy McGhee, all of whom also taught at the Berklee College of Music. Add to the list trumpeter Joe Gordan and pianist Jaki Byard (both featured with Pomeroy's big band at Vardi Haratounian's club, the Stables), guitarist Irving Ashby (who appeared in the 1943 movie, Stormy Weather, and went on to R&B fame as lead on Ernie Freeman's "Jiving Around" in 1956), and bass singer Herb Reed of the original Platters was from Arlington.

Others established themselves as soloists or band leaders. The area favorites included Sabby Lewis, Preston Sandiford and the Jones Brothers. Other popular locals included alto saxophonist Tom Kennedy, who was a member of Hillary Rose's relief band at the Savoy and later led his own band. Tom's smooth alto sound was highly influenced by Earl Bostic.

Clarence Jackson and His Four Notes of Rhythm never made it as big headliners, but they were great entertainers. Clarence did a little of everything well; he swung, he riffed, he mugged the words and was always very rhythmic. He could sing a very sensitive song, too, using a sort of falsetto. While he had a high range, he could also get rough and swing the blues. Clarence played what are known as cocktail drums because he was usually standing in front of the microphone. At times, he'd also play vibraphone. His other "Notes" usually consisted of bass, piano and guitarist Bat Johnson.

Known mainly for his recordings for DECCA's 48000 series was Paul "Fat Man" Robinson, whose quartet was one of the great good-time R&B jump bands in the area. "Fat Man" patterned his style after the ubiquitous Louis Jordan. A good-humored vocalist, "Fat Man" would also play his sax in all sorts of positions . . . a true bootin' specialist.

It also should be noted that most local clubs also featured other acts on the same bill, among them tap dancers, some exotic dancers, such as Sally Rand, and comedians such as Johnny Q. Nutt.

By the time the 1950s arrived, R&B was in full swing and a new segment was added to the entertainment scene -- the vocal harmony group. One of the earliest to gain local notoriety was the Love Notes, whose recordings are highly sought collectors' items.

However, among the R&B group harmony groups from Boston, two names head the list -- the G-Clefs and the Tune Weavers. Both achieved prominence nationally, too. While the G-Clefs' story is told elsewhere in this issue, here's a short biography of the Tune Weavers.

The Tune Weavers were actually a family affair, consisting of lead singer Margo Sylvia; her husband, Johnnie, bass; Gilbert Lopez, Margo's brother, tenor; and Charlotte Davis, a cousin to Margo and Gilbert, who sang obligato. The group came to the attention of Frank Paul, owner of the Casa Grande label in nearby Woburn, who first heard them sing at the request of his brother-in-law. As Paul put it, "The group knew nothing about music, but their arrangements made my ears take notice. When they sang an a cappella version of 'Happy, Happy Birthday Baby,' I jumped up and said, 'That's it. That's the one we're going to record!' "

Paul became their manager, and on March 7, 1957, they cut the song at Boston's now-defunct Ace Studios, with Preston Sandiford as the arranger. By July 1, the record had broken big in Philadelphia, selling 75,000 copies in that city alone. By August, the record was in such demand that Paul's small label could not handle the supply and he signed a deal with Phil Chess in Chicago to distribute it nationally on his Checker label. By October 4, the disc was listed No. 2 in Billboard magazine. Although the record sold over 2 million copies, it was to be the Tune Weavers' only major hit. Due to misunderstandings between Chess and Paul, subsequent releases by the Tune Weavers were on the smaller Casa Grande label. Although the material was strong and had potential, the records became only local hits, lacking Checker's distribution power.

Also worth noting is Paul's other vocal group discovery, the Blends. This fine group was from the Brockton/New Bedford area and landed a contract with Casa Grande after winning a WBZ radio contest held at Fort Devens. The group was led by Big John Croft, who sang lead and played guitar. He was backed by three singers, a drummer and electric bass. They were famous for their tight harmony and exciting stage routines, including exceptional choreography. Billboard picked them as an outstanding up-and-coming group in 1960, but after touring the East Coast and Europe, the group split up and disappeared, thus making Casa Grande the label that let two outstanding groups get away.

Other groups achieving their share of local renown included the Sophomores; the VibraTones, whose "Regretting" was a local hit in 1956; the Dappers, led by George "Dapper" Cromwell, who still lives in the Boston area (their "Mamba Oongh" was a local favorite in 1955); the Five Shillings from Malden, actually the Walton Brothers led by Buddy Walton (their "Letter To An Angel" on Decca was a 1958 hit); and the Interludes, who charted with "I Shed A Million Tears" for RCA, also in 1958.

Lesser known nationally were the Owens Brothers: Johnny, Bill, D.J., and Bob. Their version of the classic "Night Train" from 1957 is one of the most raucous versions of this tune ever recorded. Former group member Bill Owens is now a Massachusetts state representative.

Hidden in obscurity to all but the staunchest collector's eyes are groups such as Jan Strickland and the Shadows, whose "Love Me Baby" cut for the local HUB label is hard to find today, and the Supremes, a male group from Lawrence, which stakes one of the earliest claims to this now-famous name.

As the 1950s came to an end, so too did a musical era seem to slowly fade away. To me, it seemed that although there were still clubs and entertainers aplenty during the 1960s and '70s, much of the ambiance had disappeared, and the music was changing, too. Good old Rhythm & Blues was being replaced by a variety of sounds. One of the last local 1950s R&B tunes to hit the Boston airwaves was called "Let It Roll (Everybody)" featuring Della Thomas and the fine Hopeton Johnson Orchestra. It seemed to be a last cry from an era that had slowly passed.

However, no local odyssey can be complete without a mention of Boston radio. There were many fine DJs who played R&B music, but the one who brought "the sound" to Boston was old Symphony Sid Torin over station WBMS. His daily gospel show, where he became "Brother Sid," was also a pioneering venture in the Northeast. Emulating his early days in New York, Sid would do live remote broadcasts from the Hi-Hat, from which he would read commercials for the legendary Smilin' Jack's College Music Store on Massachusetts Avenue, where yours truly purchased a multitude of classic wax.

Other noted R&B jocks were Ken Malden, Joe Smith on WVDA, Arnie "Woo Woo" Ginsburg (although he tended to be more commercially oriented), and the legendary black jocks, Jimmy "Early" Bird and "Wild Man" Steve.

Memories of those days abound, and I am happy to have shared in at least the last third of them: the great R&B shows that played the Boston Garden with a who's who of talent; the final show, now famous as Alan Freed's Boston Riot Show that brought an end to these extravaganzas; a performance in the 1950s in which Ray Charles and his band received third billing (The headliners were James Moody and his orchestra with vocalist Eddie Jefferson and Dinah Washington with the Eddie Chamblee Trio). It's mind-boggling to think of the talent abundant then.