

Local Jazz History

The Roots Run Deep

By Malcolm Jarvis and Dorothy Sloan

The list of worthy candidates for a Boston Jazz Hall of Fame is practically endless, but a good start would be in Roxbury in the 1940s and early '50s when the neighborhood swung from end to end with pickup bands and jazzmen, many of whom would either become leaders of their own groups or hit the road to play for famous band leaders of the era, including Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Lionel Hampton and Count Basie. Right out of the neighborhoods came Sabby Lewis, Johnny Hodges, Roy Haynes, Lennie Johnson, Sonny Stitt, Alan Dawson, Harry Carney, Joe Gordon, Marcus Foster, Irving Ashby, Serge Chaloff, Lloyd Trotman, Paul Gonsalves, Nat Pierce, Mae Arnette, and on and on and on.

After World War II, the music of the neighborhood, city and the whole nation was swing. Radio and records were carrying into Boston important influences of the big-name players and band leaders from Kansas City, New York and Chicago, and many of the young people in the neighborhood started learning fast. And in Boston, there was no better training ground than the Sabby Lewis Band. Practically every player or singer who ever made it on the road played with Sabby at least for a while.

The competition was tough, there were so many guys playing and dancing, so many young women singing. Most never got any recognition for all the hard work they put in mastering their instruments and the music, but at least then there were quite a few night clubs and dance halls you could work in.

There was the Tic-Toc, Connolly's, Estelle's, the Hi-Hat, The Savoy, The Cave, Basin Street, Louie's Lounge, the Pioneer Club and, yes, Wally's Paradise was in operation back then, too. No Boston jazz museum would be complete without mentioning those clubs and the ones that thrived at Revere Beach until the 1970s, like the Surf Club and Frolics.

There was a lot of pride in the black musicians union, Local 535, and most of the guys, including the ones that hit the road were members. In 1970, the courts ordered the black and white unions to merge, and so some of the identity was officially lost. That didn't take away the memories or loyalty though, and to this day those who are left from 535 still stay in touch.

In the 1950s into the '60s virtually every night club in the Boston area employed black musicians. The only venues for the white players were in the hotels, and most of those were for dancing. Back then, everybody knew where the real jazz playing was being done, and often a lot of it was in the after-hours clubs, like the Pioneer, Tic-Toc and Little Dixie. You could learn a lot more about what was going on after your paying gig was over. Maybe it's a shame those great after-hours sessions were never recorded for the sake of history, but there's no question those who were paying attention at the time learned a lot. Some of the white players came around, too. It wasn't a closed shop.

Everybody who came learned from players like Sabby Lewis, Dexter Gordon, Baggy Grant, Sam Rivers and Gigi Gryce.

It wasn't until the 1940s that the learning became formalized in schools, when the Schillinger House (later to become the Berklee School of Music) was established. Dr. Joseph Schillinger figured out a theory for a lot of what the jazz players were doing harmonically in those days and hundreds of white players came to learn that, but even at Berklee a lot of the teaching was done by players recruited right out of Wally's.



Lloyd Trotman, bassist. His family has deep jazz roots in Boston; his father Lambert was a well-known music teacher, and both his brothers, Ernie and Stanley, were good piano players.

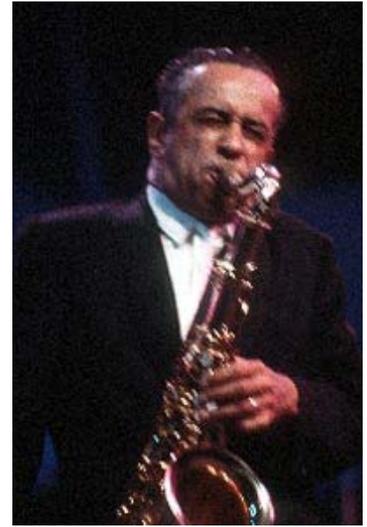


Johnny Hodges - A leading player for Duke Ellington

It wasn't until recent years that that fact was really acknowledged, and it's a credit to Berklee, the City of Boston and the various cultural and historic groups in the area that some of the Boston jazz pioneers out of Roxbury, the South End, Hyde Park, etc., are finally being recognized in some books, films, lectures and concerts.

There aren't too many of members of old Local 535 left, but those of us who are still around remember how it was pretty well, and we do stay connected, whether we now live in Boston or not.

To the ideas of establishing a Boston Jazz Hall of Fame to pay respect to the great players and a live music venue on the waterfront to let us share the music with more people, all of us feel pretty much the same way: *It's about time!*



*Johnny Hodges - A leading player
for Duke Ellington*