

Local Jazz History

Where's Boston

New Orleans perpetually celebrates Dixieland. Detroit has Mo-Town. Chicago and Memphis, the blues. Kansas City has opened a jazz museum, and New York is in the process of establishing an \$88-million wing to the Kennedy Performance Center. "Where's Boston" was the name of a slide show for tourists in the 1970s and '80s, but the question can also apply to just where the city has not been in promoting its native musicians.

Not that New England jazz artists can lay claim to the music that swept the entire country in the 1940s and '50s, but the region - with Boston as Hub - was second to no other in producing "Swing Era" musicians, singers, composers, arrangers and dancers. Throughout the world, this is a recognized fact and accounts for the hundreds of students who annually come to Boston from foreign lands to study music and hone their jazz-playing skills.

Virtually every Boston neighborhood and every sizable city in New England produced a musician significant enough to be mentioned in Leonard Feather's Encyclopedia of Jazz, published in 1960. From Roxbury and South Boston came two of the world's most accomplished baritone saxophone players - Duke Ellington anchor man Harry Carney and one of Woody Herman's "Four Brothers," Serge Chaloff. Millions of Americans in ballrooms throughout the world danced to the music of East Boston's Jerry Gray (Grazano), who wrote arrangements such as "Pennsylvania 6-5000" and "String of Pearls" for Glenn Miller and scored Artie Shaw's best-selling record "Begin the Beguine" and was awarded the Army Air Force Bronze Star in 1946 for keeping the Miller band together after Miller's death. Newton's Ralph Burns composed "Summer Sequence" for the Herman Band, out of which came "Early Autumn" and the tenor saxophone sound that helped launch Stan Getz's career. The history - most of it still unwritten - runs long and deep, enough to fill volumes.

With the erosion of music education in the public schools and the bottom-line, lowest-common-denominator policies of the entertainment industry, an entire generation of Bostonians has grown up ignorant of the region's most significant contributors to American music.

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 America 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 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.