

Local Jazz History

Worthy of Note

Many musicians not listed in the history books are certainly . . .

There were many New England musicians not listed in Leonard Feather's Encyclopedia of Jazz who were among the most influential musical forces of the Swing Era in New England.

Whether it was because no radio signal carried Boston's music beyond the Berkshires or because the region's population base did not match that of New York, Philadelphia, Chicago or Detroit, the popular view throughout most of the nation still largely ignores New England as a major shaper of the American musical landscape.

New England musicians who hit the road with Duke Ellington, Count Basie or Lionel Hampton quickly earned fine reputations throughout the world, but those who remained in Greater Boston have long gone unrecognized for their contributions to the American art form.



Al Vega Part of Boston scene, Mae Arnette Boston's finest, Sabby Lewis Award-winning band

Those around Boston in the 1950s and lucky enough to have heard the Sabby Lewis and Jimmy Martin bands remember them as second to none among Swing Era big bands. The same recollections hold true for those who followed the singing career of Mae Arnette, who still lives in Boston.

Virtually thousands of young music students since the Swing Era have been influenced by drummer Bill "Baggy" Grant, who still can be heard now and then at Wally's; pianist and vocal coach Al Vega, who played practically every jazz club in Boston through five decades; and Alan Dawson, who gigged with the biggest names in the business when he wasn't teaching at Berklee. The list goes on and on and includes some of the most influential composers and arrangers of American popular music, such as Gil Askey and Hampton Reece, who wrote for Jimmy Martin's "Beboppers" band in the 1950s before leaving town to help create the sounds and music of the Supremes and BB King.

Vocalists currently living in Greater Boston have been given greater recognition on the West Coast, in Japan and in Europe than in New England. Among them: Eula Lawrence, Rebecca Parris, Steve Marvin, Donna Byrne, Carole Sloane, Paul Broadnax, Henrietta Robinson, Jim Porcella, Semanya McCord and Shawn Monteiro. There certainly is no shortage of performers capable of carrying on the region's jazz tradition.