

Swingtime

The Region's Only Good Music Magazine!

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**Dave Lambert's Ragtime Windjammers
Playing for Swingtime March 10.
See pages 8 and 9 for details.**

Steve Lambert



Dave Lambert



Woody Strobeck



Ron Bill



Mike Lawrence



Tim Coakley

The Night Owl

Ye Newe Puzzler

Our hero worked with Austin Wylie, Isham Jones, Richard Himber, Mal Hallett, Phil Harris and Artie Shaw.

He formed his first band in 1939 in NYC. His sidemen included Hugo Winterhalter, Rudy Novak, Bob Jenney and vocalist Bonnie Lake.

He was married briefly to Kay Thompson, who went on to form her own group.

He recorded two versions of "Stardust," which he reprised later with Artie Shaw.

In 1943 he took over the Bobby Byrne orchestra when Byrne went in the service. Then he went into the Navy where he led his own band.

Some writers and musicians deem him the greatest trombonist ever.

He was in the process of organizing a new band in California when he died of appendicitis Dec. 16, 1945.

Half-Notes

I acquired the name Night Owl in the mid-1960s when I inherited the column from Ellen Lane Kane on the Weekend edition of *The Knickerbocker News*. Its content was live coverage of night life.

When the column moved to *Metroland* and then *Swingtime*, the theme remained the same. Today I don't get around much anymore, so the column will be more on history and nostalgia. I hope you will find it entertaining.

In Leonard Feather's second (1960) edition of *The Encyclopedia of Jazz* he calls Scott La Faro "a brilliant, extremely promising bassist." Today he is considered one of the greatest ever.

Charlie Barnet was one of the first bandleaders to hire black musicians. As a result some hotels and radio stations avoided him. Frankie Newton and John Kirby were in an early band. He was the first white bandleader to headline at Harlem's Apollo Theatre, and played there frequently.



Leonard Feather said Barnet's band was the most consistently jazz-oriented of all the white bands.

Bus Etri, his guitarist, who died in a 1941 car crash, was the first white player to use an amplified instrument.

When all the band's instruments and library were lost in a 1939 fire at the Palomar ballroom, Duke Ellington and Benny Carter sent Barnet scores. Ellington was his biggest influence and the Barnet band was closer to Duke's than any white band.

Barnet was a powerful tenor saxophonist. On alto he used a softer, Johnny Hodges approach. On clarinet he led the excellent woodwinds.

His rhythm section was paced by the highly rated Cliff Leeman, with Bill Miller on piano, Phil Stephens on bass and guitarist Etri. His best singer was the wonderful Mary Ann McCall, far superior to most big-band warblers.

Ina Ray Hutton's all-girl band fared much better than most when television had its brief flirtation with big bands in the early 1950s. Her show lasted four years. See photo on next page.

While building his famous orchestra, Benny Goodman still had to keep small town engagements for financial reasons. One was Easter Monday 1935 at the Whitehall Elks Club. . . Jo Stafford was the first recording artist to sell 25 million records. . . Anne Phillips, jazz singer, was choral director of St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in Manhattan. . . Singer Marlene VerPlanck met her husband, arranger Billy VerPlanck, when both of them were with Charlie Spivak. . . Tuff Green's 1947 band included girl trombonist Sammie Jett. . . Sonny Clay had a singer named Camille Allen. So does St. Pius X Choir in Loudonville. She is one of its best soloists.

Straight ahead, little friend.

--C. ROBIE BOOTH

*For the area's most up-to-date jazz calendar, visit
APlaceForJazz.org/calendar.htm*



Photo credit: Leo Walker's "The Wonderful Dance Bands"

DOWN MEMORY LANE

The Illusions Hit It Big

You've heard many people say, "Oh, I should write a book." Many people think their lives are extraordinary.

For Ruff Francis, it's true.

He was born Ralph Francis Passonno, Jr. into an industrious family. His grandfather founded the paint company bearing the family name and his parents expected him to continue in the business. But music beckoned. His quintet made the national scene. And today he is the president of a major firm, Uncle Sam Auctions of Troy.

In the 1960s his quintet The Illusions (later a sextet) played many of the top spots upstate (and down) from Duke's in Troy to the 1965 World's Fair in New York. They opened for the Dave Clark Quartet at Colonie Coliseum. Their recording of "Give Me Mercy" ranked numbers 14 and 20 on two Capital District radio stations,

hit nine and 10 in San Francisco and seven in Pittsburg. It was recorded at the CBS studios in NYC in the autumn of 1966.

Ruff was the leader, Fender Jazz bassist and vocalist; Phil Bazicki (brother of Tommy of the Valentinos), tenor sax; Eugene "Skeets" Boiani, guitar; Jackie Pender, tenor; and Micky Caruso, drums. Later drummer Alphonse "Pops" Jones joined them.

As time went by, they tended more toward jazz. Lyman "Butch" Strong, a mighty fine organist, was added. They often played with Troy's award-winning saxophonist Nick Brignola and Albany drummer Larry Jackson.

In 2014 they released a record of the Francis-composed "Misery Loves Company," which can be heard on YouTube, as can "Give Me Mercy."

--C. ROBIE BOOTH



The Illusions – hit-makers of "Give Me Mercy" in 1967. L-R: Eugene "Skeets" Boiani, Jack Pender, Ruff Francis, Phil Bazicki and Michael "Micky" Caruso. Photo courtesy of rufffrancis.com.

The Duke and Me, by Tim Coakley

Back in the late 1950s, I was an undergraduate at Utica College. One year, the great Duke Ellington Orchestra came to the hockey arena in Clinton, N.Y.

Some fellow students and I went to hear the band, which was set up on a stage at one end of the hockey rink. I had an old Brownie Hawk-eye camera, complete with flash attachment, and a pocketful of those old egg-shaped flash-bulbs. It took square photos.

I shot some pictures from the foot of the bandstand, which turned out not that impressive since I wasn't able to get very close.

But during an intermission, I saw the Duke seated at the piano, just killing time until the

next set. Without any qualms, I walked behind the stage and went through the door in the back to where he was sitting.

"Would you mind if I took your picture?" I asked. He said OK but asked me to take it from his left side since the flash would bother him on the right. He put his hands on the keys, smiled, and I took the shot. I thanked him and went back out.

I think back on that evening and wonder if I would have done the same thing in later years when he had become a legendary figure to me and everyone else. But I am happy to have the shot, which I had copied and enlarged before it could fade away.



Cats and Fammers



BIG BAND JAZZ by Albert McCarthy. 355 pages, 250 illustrations. Berkley Windhover, New York.

I try to limit my occasional book reviews to new publications, but this joyous discovery of a 1977 book is too good to hide.

This does not go the usual route of our music “up the Mississippi to Chicago and then New York.” It starts with syncopated bands—James Reese Europe, Ford Dabney, Wilbur Sweatman, W. C. Handy, Eubie Blake, Noble Sissle—then discusses black bands including that of Rex Stewart, who played regularly at the Stateline restaurant near Bennington.

“The late Rex Stewart was one of the most individualistic of all the leading jazz soloists. He is remembered now as a key figure of the Duke Ellington band. At the Empire Ballroom on Broadway from summer of 1933 to autumn of 1934, his band is an interesting one: himself (conductor, trumpet), George Thigpen, Ward Pinkett (trumpet), Nelson Hurd (trombone), Edgar Sampson, Allen Jadkoka, Rudy Powell (alto, clarinet), Noel Klukies (tenor), Fred Skerritt (baritone), my friend Roger Ramirez (piano), unknown bass (my guess would be Slam Stewart), Sidney Catlett (drums), Sonny Wood (vocal). . . An unusual aspect was all sax men except Skerritt doubled on violin. A swing band with four violins must have been a great novelty as was a five-piece sax section at that time. It is regrettable it was never recorded.” (Rex recorded for Jazztone in later years.)

There are major omissions. Stan Kenton not being profiled is ludicrous when territory bands like Sonny Clay get six long paragraphs. Connie Haines is not mentioned with Tommy Dorsey. Les Brown, Ray McKinley, Charlie Spivak, Bob Chester and Tony Pastor are not credited.

There is an interesting chapter on the expatriates who spent many years, sometimes decades, overseas: Sidney Bechet, Albert Nicholas, Teddy Weatherford, Jack Carter, Leon Eddy, Benny Peyton, Sam Wooding, Bobby Martin and Willie Lewis.



Rex Stewart

Bring 'Em Back

Three Upstate ballrooms in 1940 featured a mixed bag of big bands. Sherman's at Caroga Lake reported Fletcher Henderson did the most business but Ray Keating won the best patronage reaction.

Enna Jettick Park in Auburn reported Mike Riley did the most business but Les Brown and Rita Rio were fan favorites. At Canadarago Park in Richfield Springs, Guy Lombardo did the best business but Gene Krupa got the best reception.

Buddy Rogers (married to Mary Pickford) held the Paramount Theater house record for top gross by a dance band.

Paul Specht, whose big band was huge at Albany's Kenmore Hotel ballroom, was the driver behind the \$100,000 lawsuit that prevented England's Jack Hylton from bringing his band to America. England had started the feud. Ray Noble came to the U.S. alone and lined up his band's musicians based on recommendations by Glenn Miller.

--C. ROBIE BOOTH

Swingtime Snapshots

Photos by
Jerry Gordon



From the jam session at our January 13 concert. Above, L-R: Mike Lamkin, Mike Novakowski, Eileen Mack, Patti Melita and Freddy Isabella.
Below: Jack Speraw, Tim Coakley, Steve Horowitz and Pete Toigo.



Ragtime Windjammers on March 10

Dave Lambert learned to play the clarinet from Mel Schiff in a fifth-grade group in the Niskayuna public schools. After some bumpy years of fitful practicing in middle school, he suddenly took to playing saxophone in his freshman year of high school with Schiff once again. While in high school, he played the school's baritone sax in the concert band, the stage band and on the sly in many small time, semi-professional gigs around the area. He has essentially never stopped doing so -- although he did finally return the school's bari sax. He eventually re-learned how to play the clarinet when he fell in love with Traditional jazz somewhere along the line.

Trumpeter **Steve Lambert** was born and raised in Schenectady, where he performed with and learned from some of the best musicians in the area including Nick Brignola, Mike Canonico, Rennie Crain, Mike Wicks, George Muscatello and Brian Patneade. In 1999 he moved to New York, where he worked in the office of Second Floor Music as assistant to trumpeter/arranger/producer Don Sickler, where he interacted with such legends as Jim Hall, Renee Rosnes, Charli Persip, Ray Bryant and Rudy Van Gelder, and worked on many publications including "The Thelonious Monk Fake Book," "Sing Jazz!" and Charli Persip's "How Not to Play Drums." He also freelanced around Manhattan and honed his chops in jam sessions at Smoke, The Lenox Lounge, Small's, and Cleopatra's Needle.

He returned to the Capital Region in 2003 and has since performed with The Temptations, The Four Tops, Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight, Johnny Mathis and Frankie Valli. He was in the pit at The Cohoes Music Hall from 2004-2006. He currently performs with the Big Soul Ensemble, the Silver Arrow Band, the Ragtime Windjammers, the George Muscatello Quartet, Dave Fisk/Jon Leroy Quartet as well as projects under his own name. He released a CD in 2008 titled "May" playing a mix of original compositions and standards. Another CD is set for release in 2019.

Ron Bill has played banjo in many venues from big band swing to New Orleans Traditional Jazz, from solo to small groups. He has appeared mostly in the Saratoga-Albany-Troy area. Locally, he has played with Skip Parsons' Riverboat Jazz Band and Reggie's Red Hot Feet Warmers and has been co-leader of the Pearl River Jazz Duo with the late Mo Rancourt. He has also played with a host of famous names, including Vince Giordano's Nighthawks, Keith Ingham, Dick Wellstood, Kenny Davern, Warren Vaché, Pee Wee Irwin, Roy Eldridge, Ed Polcer, Dave McKenna, Bobby Hackett and Vic Dickenson. He plays a wide variety of songs from the '20s, '30s and '40s. Solo banjo is probably his strongest forte.

Woody Strobeck was born in North Syracuse, where he attended school and began to study the trombone. He entered the music program at Syracuse University, but graduated from Fredonia with a music degree. While in college he became interested in the early jazz style and played in and around the Syracuse area. He was an admirer of the Will Alger/Jack Mahew Salt City 5.

Soon after college he accepted a teaching position in the Cambridge school district, from which he has formally retired as music/band director. While in that area he played with several Dixieland groups including the Storyville Stompers and a band called the Steel Pier Jazz Band. After the death of leader Larry Johnson, he assumed the leadership of the band, which he led in the Lake George area for nearly 20 years. For several years, he performed with Skip Parsons' Riverboat Jazz Band.

Mike Lawrence has been playing the upright bass since age 10 and the electric bass for several years. Freelancing in a variety of settings, his primary focus is now playing with jazz musicians. He has performed with his fair share of artists in and around the Capital District, including Keith Pray's Soul Jazz Revival, Dave Gleason/Pete Sweeney/Sensemaya, Yuko Kishimoto Trio, Joe Finn, Mark Capon, Mike Benedict's Jazz Vibes, Charlie Smith Blues Band, and the Tas Cru Blues Band. Teaching occupies many of his daytime hours, both at public school and with private bass students. He holds a master's degree in music education from Boston University, bachelor's degree in music education from the College of Saint Rose and certificates from the multiple summer programs he attended at Berklee College of Music when he was a teenager.

Drummer **Tim Coakley** was born in Utica, N.Y. He grew up listening to some of the best local musicians, including tenor saxophonist J.R. Monterose, trumpeter Sal Amico, bassist Sam Mancuso and drummer Ronnie Zito.

Mostly self-taught, he listened to all the local drummers. His first job was on a set of borrowed drums at Utica College. After learning the basics of drumming, he began playing with local musicians in and around the Utica area. In 1974 he moved to Schenectady, where he was asked by promoter Bob Rosenblum to be part of the rhythm section for legendary swing trumpeter Doc Cheatham. That was followed by appearances with tenor saxophonist Buddy Tate, pianist Dill Jones, and trombonist Vic Dickenson. He also played at the Van Dyck Restaurant in Schenectady with guitarist Herb Ellis, as well as several engagements with pianist Benny Harris. In the later '70s, he was asked to join Skip Parsons' Riverboat Jazz Band, where he still remains.

SWINGTIME

Jazz Society

swingtimejazz.org



Proudly Presents

Dave Lambert's Ragtime Windjammers

Steve Lambert



Dave Lambert



Woody Strobeck



Ron Bill



Mike Lawrence



Tim Coakley

Sunday, March 10, 2019, 4-7 p.m.

Including an open jam session



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The **Swingtime Jazz Society** roster of members has reached 92. You are encouraged to join us by using the coupon on this page.

The Society's mission is to promote quality jazz by employing the finest regional artists for four or five events every year. The format is two hours of concert-cabaret music by the featured artists, followed by a one-hour jam session open to all cats.

All members have a full vote on future attractions and electing officers of the non-profit corporation. We also have a wonderful series of dinner meetings hosted by members. There is a once-only fee of \$100 to join.

See Pages 1, 8 and 9 for our March 10 attraction, **Dave Lambert's Ragtime Windjammers**.

I want to join the Swingtime Jazz Society. Enclosed find my lifetime membership fee of \$100.

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