

Big Band

by Ellen Ashton-Haiste

the next generation



The Toronto All-Star Big Band deliver the songs made popular by the Modernaires, Andrews Sisters, Pied Pipers and even the later Manhattan Transfer.

My mother grew up in Port Stanley, Ontario, home to the Stork Club, one of the most well-known of the province's dance pavilions of the big band era. During the 1930s and '40s, she saw, and danced to, every big band of that era. And, to this day, she can "name that band in less than 10 notes."

Well, almost.

She was recently fooled. It was a CD, released last year by the Toronto All-Star Big Band, that did it. Oh, she correctly named the bands behind each of the songs on the disc. But the musicians playing those classic pieces were born decades after the big band era officially ended.

It was clearly a compliment to this dynamic group of young people, whose mandate, says artistic director Zygmunt Jedrzejek, is to recreate the music of the big bands as it was played by its originators.

The formula is working, almost better than Jedrzejek could have hoped. His band is in demand across the province and made a big impression, last year, on an international crowd at the Canadian

Snowbird Association's consumer trade show in Tampa, Fla.

Venues stretching as far afield as Elliot Lake, Ont. and Chicago's Daly Centre include the Toronto Beaches International Jazz Festival, Canadian National Exhibition, Niagara-on-the-Lake Peach Festival, Hamilton and Oakville jazz festivals, and the Mass Band Celebration in Kincardine, Ont.

A recent count of engagements for 2000 came up at 59, significantly more than was the case a few years ago, Jedrzejek says. "It is somewhat surprising, particularly for a non-full-time band. After all, the primary job for the members (aged 15 to 20) is to go to school."

He says the band seldom turns down a chance to play. "These kids love to perform! And, the more we play, the more exposure we get; the more exposure we get, the more we play. We now go 52 weeks of the year."

In fact, the All-Star Big Band had two engagements celebrating the dawn of 2000. A week before the big night it was celebrated during a Great Canadian

Coach tour to Rochester, N.Y., featuring the band; and, on Dec. 31, they were back playing for a club dance in Etobicoke.

The band's exposure and popularity have flourished during the past three years, since it evolved into a true "big band," comprising piano, guitar, bass, drums, brass, saxophones and vocals. Before that, much of the sound was achieved with electronic keyboards and, in fact, the orchestra grew out of an accordion band.

That instrument was Jedrzejek's background and, growing up, he was involved with the once-common large accordion bands. So, when he started his private music school — The Toronto Faculty of Music in Etobicoke — some 20 years ago, he formed one of his own.

But accordions are somewhat limited in providing a variety of sounds and their popularity was waning by the time keyboards came on the scene. So keyboards gradually replaced them and eventually saxophone students expressed interest in joining the group, followed by brass players. Before he knew it, Jedrzejek had a full orchestra on his hands.



It now includes 23 members, including five vocalists — two male and three female — who can deliver the songs made popular by the Modernaires, Andrews Sisters, Pied Pipers and even the later Manhattan Transfer.

"I truly love the music from the '30s and '40s," Jedrzejek says. "So it was my push to play that kind of music once we had the full contingent of a big band in place."

The mandate to play the music exactly as it was performed the first time around has a couple of rationales, he says. "Not every band really wants to do it that way...

musicians like to experiment and often it sounds great."

But there's many people who love the music the way it was and want to hear it played that way. And, the other reason goes directly to Jedrzejek's primary role. "It's an education for young musicians. Odds are that they never would have heard that music on their own, and they get to dissect it and look at how a solo is put together by real pros.... They realize how well written and well arranged are pieces like Arty Shaw's 'Begin the Beguine' or Benny Goodman's 'Let's Dance.' There

just isn't a note out of place... They are really amazed by some pieces that are very complex and others that are so well put together."

He says most students who audition for the band are familiar with the new swing sounds, thanks to groups like Brian Setzer or 'Cherry Poppin' Daddies, not to mention the up-tempo music and energetic dancing on television's 'Gap commercials. But playing with the Toronto All-Star Big Band gives them a chance to explore other styles of music and the other side of swing. Jedrzejek says they learn a lot and love all the sounds of that genre.

Consequently, he's being deluged with ever more requests for auditions. "I don't think we do a function that somebody doesn't come up and ask me how one can join the band," he says. And, because of the age of the musicians, there are always spots opening up.

But, Jedrzejek says he looks for more than just ability to play the music when he conducts the auditions. "You have to have the right personality because you have to have fun up there. If there's anything besides playing the notes that we get complimented on, it's that there's energy in the band and they really enjoy playing the music. You can see that on stage."