



Rockie Blunt in a 1949 publicity photo

ALL-STARS

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the musicians downstairs and the girls upstairs."

In those days, many musicians carried flasks in their instrument cases. Touring jazzmen were often acquainted with marijuana. Blunt's earlier musical experiences - before the Saxtrum Club days - had involved playing in wild places like the Mahogany Rendezvous on Washington Street, the Sun Cafe on Harrison Street or Jan's Waterfront on Pleasant Street for \$2 a night while his father waited outside in a '36 Plymouth. The sight of prostitutes turning tricks on the fire escape, people having sex on the tables and men fighting over women with broken bottles had had a sobering effect on the young Blunt.

'It Terrified Me'

"What booze did to people for some reason or another - it terrified me," Blunt said. "I don't drink and I never did. Barney and Howard weren't drinkers. Morgan wasn't a drinker. These guys were all very clean-living men. They were all married except me. We never got into trouble. No dope, no booze, no nothing, no broads. We all went home to our wives. By 1948 I was married."

By 1948 the Rockie Blunt All-Stars were hitting their stride, building a following through jazz concerts in clubs all over Worces-

ter County - Seymour's in Shirley, Nelson's in Fitchburg, Maybarton's in Clinton, McCann's in Leominster and the Improvement Club in Oxford, among others.

"We played almost exclusively jazz concerts, not for dancing," Blunt said. "If we did what we call 'belly-rubbing' music - the slow stuff, 'Mood Indigo' and all of these others - people danced. But as soon as we picked the tempo up, the solos and the chorus ensembles became so wild that the people just stopped with their mouths open and kept screaming and cheering and egging us on."

Brightest Star

The musicians were all talented, but Howard Jefferson's star shone brightest. Jefferson's exceptional talents are clearly audible on tapes Blunt has preserved of the band's live engagements. Jefferson's pitch was excellent, his tone smooth or salty on demand, his stream of ideas constantly fertile.

"Howard was a giant," Blunt said. "Howard was offered by Basie and, I think, Lunceford both to come out on the road and he did not want to leave Worcester.

"Howard's sound as a tenor man was just unreal - his imagination, his impromptu improvisation, his ability to take a chorus. He would take four or five choruses in a row and build on each one. He would start with a simple theme and build and each one became more elaborate and more intricate and he never ran out of ideas... And he had that big, big sound. He was into the Lester Young, Coleman

Hawkins kick, you could hear a "little bit of each one of them."

The band broke up in early 1953. The big band era had died, bop was taking over jazz, vocalists were becoming more popular and club owners didn't want to pay a quintet \$8 or \$9 apiece when they could get a trio for less. On top of that, pianist Dick Hill left and Blunt couldn't find anyone as good to replace him.

fWorse Than Drummers'

"I just got so frustrated trying to keep good jazz pianists," Blunt said. "Piano players are temperamental as hell. They're worse than drummers."

Blunt went on to play with George Gregory's band and later the Classic Swing Big Band, with which he still performs. Jefferson had his own Jeff-Tones for many years. Price played with Jefferson and in the Soul Jazz Quintet. The Rockie Blunt All-Stars became perhaps the most swinging footnote to Worcester jazz history.

But the Worcester Historical Museum has expressed interest in acquiring copies of Blunt's tapes of the band. Despite some hiss and an occasional inaudible piano or drum part, these tapes show a top local band that caught the excitement of the late swing era and brought it home in style.

Too bad they didn't have videotape recorders back then.