

# WORCESTER JAZZ

## This Being a Requiem for the Way It Was When Al Hirt 'Fell In' at the Saxtrum Club

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Did you ever hear a man blow his horn back in the days when Harlem was king and the blues poured out of every joint on Summer Street?

Did you watch him lean back and close his eyes and blow in to the smokey darkness until the veins bulged on his forehead and wide beads of sweat raced each other down his face into the open collar of his shirt.

Those were the days of the upright piano and the steady click of a high-hat cymbal hooked to the driving pulse of a good string bass.

Two cats up front with their eyes clamped tight and the bells of their silver-plated horns pushed forward to gleam brightly in the thin blue light.

Ah, the Dixie Bar!

"Wail Gate... B-flat... There ain't no bridge baby. Keep right on blowin' till your axe is empty... C'mon daddy loosen them chops. They ain't no mikes in here... You got to blow, man... Now I read you Gate. Tell the story, man... That's sold Jack!... Ahhh, dig them muggles man, sweet like cotton candy... This sure do beat workin' for the WPA."

Are you with me? Do you remember Boots Ward's Nite Hawks and Stew Watson and the Phil Scott big band?

Boots Mussulli... BOOTS MUSSULLI! Now we're catching up with you, eh? You remember the king from Milford - "Kid Boots" -

The 50s. Nelson's in Fitchburg. McCann's Cafe in Leominster. The Wigwam in Ayer.

Stand in line baby. The joint is swinging.

Look out! That's Howie Jefferson on tenor. And he's wailin' "Heavy Juice."

If you have ever known this scene - if you've sat in a dozen darkened clubs on a dozen different nights and heard the sounds come pouring from a dozen different horns, then the facts of Worcester's musical scene in 1969 will come as no great shock.

But first, in all fairness, you must visit every nightclub in the city. For only after you have heard all of the music that local bands are playing these days will your suspicions become reality.

Jazz is dead.

The real roots of Worcester's jazz scene began in Harlem back in the 1930s. It started with the Negro bands in the days when musicians played all night long without a break and often were paid no more than a few dollars for their efforts. The music was blues: real New Orleans jazz played two to the beat in rich, fat sounds spiked with vibrato that came straight from the soul. Those were the days when many musicians couldn't read a note of music. And that really didn't matter.

They blew their jazz in ballrooms and at private clubs and parties and anywhere people would listen. There were no nightclubs in Worcester.

Their music wasn't polished. And it didn't wander far from the basic roots. A bop player of today would put it down. But believe it, it was the blues. It was soul and it got right inside you. It wasn't written down. You either blew it or you didn't. That was jazz.

In the late 30s things began to happen. There were a lot of fine, young musicians in the Worcester area who were just beginning to find themselves.

These were men like Howard Jefferson, Ockie Menard, Dick Murray and Paul Kukonen on sax; Luke Meyers and Judy Wade on guitar; Franny O'Connor, Barney Price and Emil Haddad on trumpet; Bill Tony, Kenny Proctor and Eddie Dolbear on drums; Pete Price, Tony Mandel, Alice Price, Rod Ford and Gretchen Morrowan piano; and Miff George - who played with Bunny Berrigan - on trombone.

Another well known musician, who played and composed music in the Worcester area in the 30s was Einar Swan. He is probably most remembered by jazz men for his original composition of the great standard, "When Your Lover Has Gone."

### Inspiration

The day of the sessions had arrived. They would continue until the early 1960s as an inspiration and joy to every jazz musician in the area.

"The cats loved to blow in them days," said Howie Jefferson, who became one of Worcester's most noted jazz sax men. "Man, every night after the gig we'd get together someplace and blow the blues until the sun come up."

"We had sessions at the Center and at Logan's in Trumbull Square and Domenie's Cafe on Green Street and lots of other joints around town.

"Them were the good old days of jazz when cats would come from all around and blow all night for nothin' just cause they dug the music."

The territory bands were working the Worcester area then, playing ballroom and club dates. The Watson Brothers, Dol Brissette, Gene Broadman, Bob Pooley, and Phil Scott all had bands that featured a few good jazz men like Menard, Haddad and Kukonen.

Haddad later had the distinction of blowing jazz with the immortal Charlie "Bird" Parker. Menard had offers from every big band in the country. Kukonen was featured on sax and clarinet with Bobby Hackett.

### Regular Job

After playing for four or five hours on their regular job at one of the local ballrooms, the jazz men in these territory bands gathered at places like the Town Club on Lake Avenue and the Jackson Club for jam sessions that would last far into the night.

By 1938 jazz was firmly established in Worcester.

During that year a group of local musicians started the club that would later become Worcester's most significant contribution to the betterment of jazz music.

"We had a lot of good cats comin' up in those days," Howie Jefferson said. "Man, they just lived for jazz. They didn't go in for no day gigs. And they didn't want to blow commercial."

"Well, these cats were lookin' for a place where they could just fall in anytime and blow as long as they wanted without nobody buggin' them."

"A group of seven of us got together and rented an empty store at the corner of Glenn and Clayton Streets. We named it the Saxtrum Club - SAX TRUMPET & DRUMS."

"After that things really begun to wail!" The musicians who started the Saxtrum Club were Jefferson (alto sax), Dick Murray (tenor sax), Ralph Biscotti (alto sax), Jackie Byard (piano), Eddie Sham (drums), Harold Black (bass) and Barney Price (trumpet).

### Impromptu Sessions

The freedom of expression and impromptu jazz sessions that typified the Saxtrum Club spread quickly through the area. Before long musicians were beating a path to the club's door. The membership rose to 135.

Some of the best local jazz artists who joined the Saxtrum Club were: Dave Robertson, Henry Monroe, Bobby Holt, and Barbara Carroll (piano); Dick Adshead, Joe Ferrazano, Murray Guralnick, Tony Finelli, Phil Scott and Kukonen (sax); Bill Tony, Kenny Proctor, Eddie Dolbear, Al Mercury, Billy Hallback, Rockie Blunt, Hal Drellinger, and Eddie Temple (drums); Haddad, Benny Hurwitz, Franny O'Connor, Moe Batchelder (piano); and Edie Wine, Mary Conlin and Bert Hardin (string bass).

The Saxtrum's reputation spread far outside the Worcester area. Musicians from all over the country knew that here was a place where jazz men got together to exchange ideas, to create, to "hearve" each other, and to help each other.

They loved it.

### Musicians' Language

Those were the days when the musician's language was in tune with the Harlem idiom. You called a cat "hipster" and a groovy solo was "solid" and money was "loot" or "gold" and pretty girls were called "fine diners" and not-so-nice girls were "bimbos."

The tunes were by Ellington and Basie and Goodman. Jump numbers like "One O'Clock Jump," "Jullipin' at the Woodside," and "Indiana" and pretty ballads, now standards like "Sophisticated Lady" and "Stardust" and "Body and Soul."

About the time the Saxtrum Club really began to swing, the big-name bands were appearing at the Plymouth Theater.

Top artists like Tommy

Reynold, Scat Davis, Gene Krupa, Chu Berry, Carl Hoff, Roy Eldridge, Anita O'Day, Cozy Cole, Cab Calloway, Sam Donahue, Charlie Ventura, Frank Sinatra and many others made frequent visits to the club and "sat in" with the local musicians.

### Tore Roof Off

Tuesday nights they tore the roof off the Saxtrum.

The name bands would arrive in Worcester on Monday for a three-day engagement at the Plymouth. Having traveled many miles by bus or car, they'd be exhausted after their Monday night performance, so they'd pass up the Saxtrum.

But on Tuesdays the musicians were refreshed and they'd all fall in to the Saxtrum as soon as their gig was over at the Plymouth. They'd play until the early hours of the morning, challenging the local musicians with new ideas and sounds.

Then, on Wednesday night, the band would finish at the Plymouth and be back on the road. It was a ritual each musician looked forward to whenever he came to Worcester.

"I remember Sam Donahue comin' in to the club and sittin' on his tenor case and wailin' right through about 20 choruses. Indiana. That's the way. And he got off the band. Howie Jefferson said, 'Man, that cat could blow.'"

Another regular at the Saxtrum was a chubby young cornet player they called "Jumbo."

### Fort Devens

"Old Jumbo was stationed up at Ft. Devens," Jefferson remembers. "It got so he was at the club every Saturday night. If he don't have no pass, he get off the band some way. And before you know it he be up on the stand blowin' 'herl-hues.'"

When he got out of the army, Old Jumbo changed his horn from cornet to trumpet and made a pretty fair showing from the experience he gained in those two years of "fallin' in" to the Saxtrum Club.

### His name is Al Hirt.

A lot of jazz musicians in the late 30s and early 40s found themselves involved in personal struggles that were impossible to shake. They were living out of suitcases, traveling about the country, trying to push a product that the public wasn't really knowledgeable enough to accept.

Some of them, due to the pressure, the hours, the sensitivity that makes up the personality of any artist, turned to drugs and liquor.

This is a fact that has been blown up way out of proportion, exploited and dwelled upon in the past. It is enough to say that these problems existed in the Worcester area to a very small extent, as they so often will wherever you find men capable of producing real art in any form.

### Armed Forces

In the early 1940s many of the local musicians went into the armed forces. This was the end of the Saxtrum Club. Although the few members who stayed out of the service tried to keep the club alive, things just weren't the same. Funds soon ran out and the club was abandoned. Today the Saxtrum is being demolished for urban renewal.

It was in the 40s that a jazz band called the Rockie Blunt All Stars was organized by a young Worcester drummer.

This was one of the first predominantly Negro jazz bands in the area to have a white leader. Two of its musicians were members of the original Boots Ward Nite Hawks band: Jefferson on sax and Price on trumpet. The band was rounded out by Henry Monroe on piano, Morgan Sorrell on bass, and Blunt on drums.

Blunt's band toured the Worcester area for several years and was noted for its fine sessions and concerts.

Hi can remember the caroling sessions we used to have," Blunt said. "A man



Gazette Photo

Howie Jefferson on a recent date at the Driftwood Lounge in Shrewsbury.

would set up on the stand and wait until he didn't have another note left in his horn. Then some other cat would come right up and try to cut him.

### Wanted the Best

"Music was competitive then. Everyone who played jazz wanted to be the best. But it's not like that today."

"In those days, we'd push each other all night. Then, after the gig, we'd all fall in to the Piccadilly Restaurant on Shrewsbury Street. For a buck we could get a platter of spaghetti and pork chops with five or six forks."

"Those were the really great days, when we'd sit around all night after the gig eating spaghetti and talking jazz."

"Today the cats can't get no life soul enough after a gig."

"In those days the best jazz center'd around Clayton Street and was played mostly by colored musicians and a handful of whites."

"Back then a musician would starve before he'd prostitute his music. Today it is just the bread that counts with most musicians around Worcester."

"The public won't buy jazz. The old Saxtrum days are gone forever."

### Major Influence

The major influence on the Worcester area's jazz scene in the 40s and 50s was furnished by Boots Mussulli.

The musicians held Kid Boots in awe. And it never mattered to this super-talented artist from Milford what they wanted to blow dixe, swing, mainstream, bop.

If it was fazz, Boots blew it. And everybody listened.

Local musicians felt the loss heavily when Boots died in 1965.

In the late 40s and early 50s the nightclubs really began to swing. There were jam sessions and jazz sessions all through the area.

The Wonder Bar in Auburn used to close its doors at midnight so the jazz men could come in and blow till the small hours of the morning.

The Wigwam in the Hotel Lincoln in Ayer had back-to-back sessions that lasted all day Sunday. They were fronted by Jefferson and other local jazz stars.

Seymour's in Shirley was swinging with sessions all through the 40s and Nelson's in Fitchburg was turning them away at the door in the 50s.

McCann's Cafe in Leominster regularly featured Mussulli, Jefferson, Frankie Capp, Joe Roland, Morgan Sorrell and Howard McKee.

### Slammed Shut

Then, as suddenly as it had been opened, the door slammed shut.

The public no longer craved jazz.

Rock and roll had begun to creep into favor with the young set in the 50s. By the early 60s it had a firm hold on the music scene.

Guitars, amplifiers, organs and loud drummers were

what the public demanded and received. Jazz was passe.

A few places tried to compete with rock. The Millstream Steak House in Ayer had sessions in the early 60s but they fizzled.

"The last of the real sessions was held at the Fox Lounge in Westboro," Jefferson said. "I hated to see them sessions go, because that was the end of the good old days of jazz."

"Goin' back through the years, I remember bop never really caught on around Worcester. Even when things was goin' hot down in Boston back in the early 50s, we stuck to blues and traditional jazz around here."

"You know there's very few cats in this area today that can play blues. The blues has to come from the soul, man. And that's what the musicians comin' up ain't got - soul."

### Bread Counts

"Things ain't what they used to be. Jazz is gone. Musicians don't blow for kicks no more like they did when I was comin' up. Today the only thing that counts is the bread."

"There's plenty of good cats comin' up today that could blow real nice jazz if they had the chance. But the only gigs available are weddings and banquets and shows and dances. And of course, rock n' roll gigs."

"I don't knock rock n' roll. Some of those guys blow nice things. But there's a lot of fake musicians hidin' behind three-chord tunes and amplified guitars. That ain't jazz, man. It may be what the kids dig and it may have some nice things, but baby, it ain't jazz. You take the real good cats that are blowin' rock, they could play fine jazz too if they was brought up blowin' jazz."

"I'm lucky. I been playin'

at the Driftwood Lounge for six years and I still get to blow some blues.

"Tony Finelli's right down the street at the Bonfire in Westboro. He's blowin' with George Pearson, who is a good blues organ man."

"I guess guys like me and Tony will always have to blow some blues. Anyway, it's nice to think we will."

### Young Drummer

The man that local musicians have nick-named "Jefferson Lord" goes up on the stand with Dick Hill, his fine jazz organist, and his steady young drummer Steve Pappas.

His foot begins to stomp out the beat. His fingers are snapping.

And then suddenly he's leaning back, with the horn pushed up front just the way it ought to be. The veins bulge in his forehead and sweat beads race down his face. He's blowing B-flat blues at you. Real, gutsy B-flat blues.

The tune is "Pork and Beans" which he has written and recorded himself. The band is cooking.

You close your eyes and you can almost hear Emil Haddad and Miff George and Ockie Menard and Barney Price joining in with him to exchange choruses.

Then it's over. The mob's gone.

He's up there with his eyes clamped shut. And you can still see the sweat bubble on his brow and the flicker of a pulse at his temple.

The tune is a ballad, "The Shadow of Your Smile."

He plays the melody. It is very pretty. The customers are dancing. And you know the price a man must pay to keep his music alive.

## Area Musicians Plan Club of Their Own

The spirit of the Saxtrum Club will live again.

Musicians want to play jazz, but the public isn't interested. So the musicians plan to unite and build their own clubhouse. And they'll dedicate it to bringing the "artistry" back to popular music.

The Worcester Musician's Association, AFM local 143, plans to consolidate the neighboring associations in Milford, Marlboro, Southbridge, Fitchburg, Athol and Framingham. The union locals have a combined membership of 1200 professional musicians.

### Too Much Apathy

"There's far too much apathy in the music business today," said Edward Shamogian, president of local 143. "I've need a place where musicians and friends can come to rehearse and experiment and develop their creative abilities. What we really want is a club of our own, like the Saxtrum Club of the late 30s, where musicians can feel free to come any time of the day or night and play whatever kind of music they want."

The musicians have picked a site for the club on the Boston Turnpike. Ground breaking for the new building is expected by the beginning of 1970.

### Will Raise Funds

Funds for the building will be raised by the musicians themselves through performances in concerts, clubs and Union sponsored affairs.

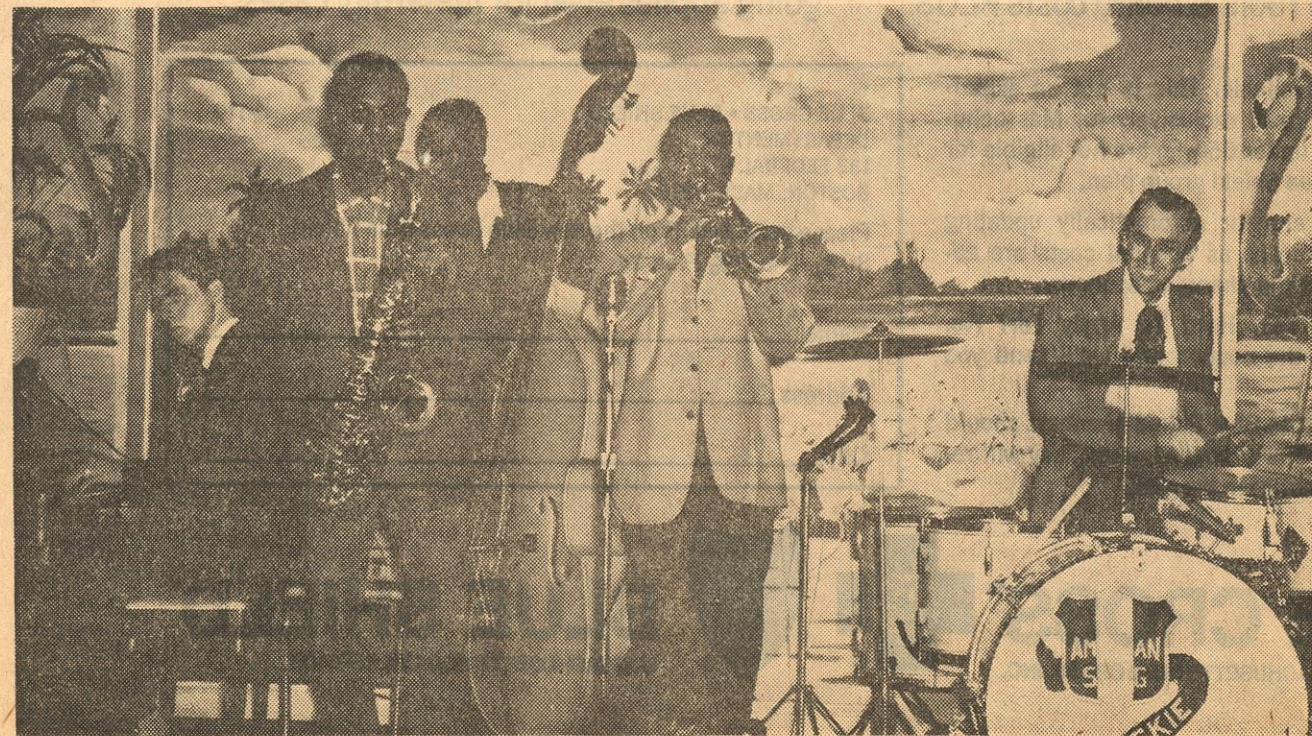
Shamogian, a Worcester lawyer, known in local music circles as jazz drummer Eddy Sham, said the American Federation of Musicians is watching the movement very closely.

"They're 100 per cent in favor of what we're trying to do," he said. "They're as much aware of what's happening to the local musicians as we are."



Gazette Photo

Tony Finelli plays jazz at the Bonfire in Westboro.



The Rockie Blunt All-Stars swing a diorus of lie-Jam" blues during an all-night jazz session at Nelson's Cafe, Leominster in 1949; (from left) Rockie Blunt (drums), Barney Price

(trumpet), Morgan Sorrell (bass), Howie Jefferson (sax), and Chet Lavallee (piano).