

Music in the Life of a Kid in the Bronx

Growing up in the '30s in the Bronx, most of us were aware of pop music, the big bands and tin pan alley. Kids would buy song sheets for a nickel with the words of the most popular songs, and would stand around, or sit on the stoop, and sing them. One of the most listened to radio programs was Your Hit Parade, and there were several programs featuring popular bands, almost all of them with vocalists. I was not one of the kids who sang the songs, or who tuned into the musical programs on a regular basis. The sad truth was that I could not carry a tune. We all learned the songs, almost by osmosis, but you seldom saw me singing them. As we moved into our teen-age years, the kids who knew the songs and who followed the bands were the ones who became the cool lindy dancers and who were popular with the girls. They dressed sharper and were hipper. And those of us who weren't "in" on the latest tunes, and didn't "dig" the swing bands, were quietly jealous of them.

Running concurrently with our after-school musical education, was the music that was taught in our public schools. In PS 62 and JHS 52, we had "music" as part of our curriculum. From first grade on, we were required to sing in "assembly." We learned all the patriotic songs: The Star Spangled Banner, My Country Tis of Thee, America the Beautiful, Columbia the Gem of the Ocean, Over Hill, Over Dale, The Marine's Hymn, etc. Then there were the holiday songs: for Thanksgiving: We Gather Together, for Christmas: Santa Claus Is Coming to Town, Come All Ye Faithful, Jingle Bells, etc. Then there was Americana: My Grandfather's Clock, and Stephen Foster. We learned a lot of songs. But then came the awful moment when our music teacher asked each of us to sing individually. After listening, she designated some of us "listeners" and asked us not to sing with the rest of the class. I was designated a "listener." What shame! What stigma! What a stupid way to teach music. I can't think of a better turn-off: To be told that you can't sing on key. What the hell is a key, anyway? The fact is, we listeners still learned the stupid songs, and we know them to this day.

In junior high school, we were also exposed to classical music. We were taught about the orchestra, the instruments, the role of the conductor, and the "great" composers. And we listened to musical excerpts. Our teacher also taught us words to go with the music. For example: "This is the symphony that Schubert wrote but never finished." And "Amaryllis is a dance written for (or by?) the king of France." Or when we listened to "The Swan" or "To a Wild Rose" we were supposed to imagine the swan or the rose and were encouraged to make motions in the air, tracing them. That was really going to get us excited about serious music.

Our homes were not without classical music, despite what our music teachers may have thought. I suspect most of my friends had a Victrola in the house. Ours must have been purchased in the '20s when it was the hottest new item around, along with the even more remarkable radio. The Victrola had a crank which you wound up when you wanted to listen to a record. After winding it up, you placed the record on the turntable, placed the arm with a needle on the record, and the music came out of the bell shaped speaker. You

had to be careful not to scratch the record when you placed the needle at the start of the record, and you had to be careful not to overwind the Victrola because that would make the record spin faster than 78 rpm, and the music would sound funny. And if the Victrola was underwound, it would go slower and sound funny in a different way. We had records by Enrico Caruso and Galli Curci singing operatic arias, and by several Cantors, and even some popular music. They were 12 inch records, recorded on only one side. One day, I really overwound the Victrola and I heard a spring pop, and the Victrola played no more. I tried turning the record on the turntable by hand, but ended up scratching the hell out of the record.

In junior high school our musical education was tremendously enriched by our performances directed by our music teacher. One, which my friends and I still remember was “The Ballad for Americans.” But the most ambitious undertaking was the production of Gilbert and Sullivan’s HMS Pinafore. Almost everybody in our class participated. It took a great deal of courage for Norman Perlmutter to agree to be little Buttercup. And even some of us “listeners” were allowed to be in the chorus. And that exposure hooked me on Gilbert and Sullivan. (My gallant crew, good morning.)

In high school music appreciation, we had a little more G and S because one of the students urged our teacher to include them. It was during that term I discovered that WQXR broadcast the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas every Saturday morning, and I made an effort to listen as often as I could. I even bought the Modern Library edition of “The Complete Plays of Gilbert and Sullivan” (for \$1.95) and followed along with the D’Oyly Carte recordings. Since I couldn’t carry a tune, and since I was so in love with these wonderful operettas, I tried to memorize the patter songs—I am the very model of a modern major general; When I was a lad etc. It was about this time that Danny Kaye was becoming well known and many of the songs that Sylvia Fine wrote for him had the same quality, and I tried to memorize them as well—I’m Anatole of Paris, Deena etc. It was not only the music but the marvelous play of words and rhymes that got me. How did Gilbert (and later Sylvia Fine) do it? When I started collecting records, the recordings of the various G and S operettas were among the first records that I bought, first in 78, then in LP.

Toward the end of high school, I began getting more interested in jazz. My friend Phil Bernstein had been introduced to jazz by a girl he met one summer, and he started listening to, and collecting records. However, he didn’t have a phonograph so he left his records at the homes of friends who did have record players. And he talked to us about the musicians—Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, musicians whose records I started collecting and whose music I have come to love to this day.

I end this remembrance in 1945, as I graduate from high school. The next installment will take me through college—the Dixieland Revival, Lewisohn Stadium, chamber music, folk music, Klezmer, the BSO etc. Stay tuned.

In the late '40s, there was the Dixieland Revival, and great Dixieland musicians were booked into two halls on Second Avenue: Central Plaza and Stuyvesant Casino. College kids from all over the Northeast would jam the place. I suspect some of them were attracted as much by the pitchers of beer that were sold as by the music. The great Bunk Johnson was the headliner, but there were scores of legendary musicians who played every Friday night. Many of them had been featured in New Orleans in the '20s but were unable to get any bookings during the depression and came out of retirement as a result of the revival. We knew their names from the records they had made, and it was exciting to see them in person. There were also some young white musicians who were into Dixieland and were able to get the crowd going. A good-looking trombonist who was the son of an art dealer generated a lot of excitement.

Big Chief Russell Moore

Traditional ending—marching around the hall to the Saints

Jazz clubs, 52nd street. Small combos, vocalists, bar.

Transition to bop—Charlie Parker, Dizzy, Birdland, Folkways, Sixth Av. record shops, cutouts, pirate records.

Radio- ? society of lower Basin St.

Symphony Sid