

M.U.S.-icology 101

Lecture No. 5
Topic: *Swing Cabaret*

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Another school year has come and gone, and so has the 19th M.U.S. Big Band Dance. I'm assuming, of course, that there has been one a year since its inception in 1981 (including the two this year).

Back when we initiated the "Swing Cabaret" tradition, dances featuring Big-Band-Era music were not at all common. It was not until the late 1980s that everyone and their mother started holding one—high schools, community jazz bands and the like. So the early M.U.S. Swing Cabarets drew all sorts, from semi-Senior citizens to the campus Ballroom Dancing Club. By the terms of our liquor licence, we were not allowed to advertise off-campus, so we depended on word of mouth to generate the extra ticket sales that helped make the event a success. Heck, some of our parents even came once in a while!

Most of the early Cabarets were held in the Mac Hall Ballroom (back when there was no MacEwan Student Centre) and our most successful ones drew 350 to 400 people, as I recall. When we started, and on various occasions thereafter, we co-sponsored the event with the Students' Union. We got less profit, but we didn't have to front money for the hall rental and the bar, and didn't have to deal with details like obtaining a liquor licence. My fondest memories, however, surround those cabarets that we ran completely on our own.

When you serve liquor in this province, some sort of food must be available. So we decided on popcorn to start. Hot air poppers were the preparation method of choice, since a commercial popper was out of the question and microwaving popcorn was not really viable at the time. Wanting this to be a top-notch affair, we tried to obtain commercial popping corn. Luckily, we had a source: Rolf Haensel. Rolf worked for the Students' Union when they used to show recent-run movies in Science Theatre 148. We got the popcorn alright, although I'm not quite sure I want to tell you how we obtained it at such a low cost!

We also served hot dogs to round out our menu of haute cuisine. Again, in our efforts to control costs, our fearless leaders Jeff Manley and Scott Stewardson would collect those little packets of ketchup, mustard, and relish every time they went

down to the Corral to see a hockey game or the like. (No, no Saddledome yet either.)

When we got to the venue and stoked up our hot air popper, we came across a problem: when we plugged it in near our concession table, it blew the circuit! We needed to heat the hot dogs near the table, so we couldn't unplug that. Eventually, we set it up in the hallway beside the ballroom and shuttled popcorn in.

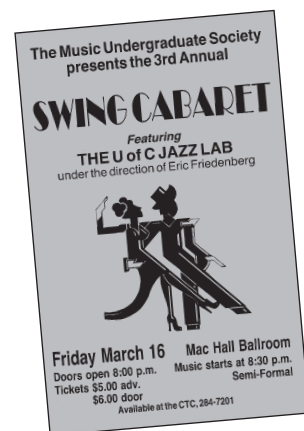
We always had two bands alternate sets, for a number of practical reasons. Some years, it was the Jazz Lab and a combo. Later, it became the Red and the Blue Bands. (Yes, friends, there used to be more than one jazz big band on campus—there were as many as three in the mid-'80s when the Red Band released their first album. And this was *without* a jazz studies program.) You would hear some of the big hits more than once in the night, since the book wasn't that big, but the audience was out for the big band experience and we delivered.

One of those years, I had worked the snack table for a lot of the night, being the shy boy of the group. The night was coming to a close—it was time for the last dance. I suspected I would do as I had always done in my life: be a wallflower while everyone else got close on the dance floor.

But someone decided to give me a gift that night. Her name was Cheryl Cowan—a tall guitar player with ravishing red hair. Cheryl's personality could be best described as "university guitar player"—she was a nice enough girl, but I never really understood her that well. That night, I found out how sweet she was.

She dragged me onto the dance floor (literally, as I recall) to dance to *Moonlight Serenade*. I started out in a formal ballroom stance, but she pleasantly guided me to a slightly more relaxed position. The most memorable moment: at the end of the song, she actually tried to lead me into dipping her. I'd like to say I followed her lead and suavely dipped her, closing things off with a passionate kiss, but alas, I was lucky to keep her from falling. Still, it was something in my young life that I still remember.

I am glad the the tradition of a Big Band Dance has been maintained by M.U.S., even though it is no longer novel or unique. And so, in the spirit of that era, I say to all of you, "Onward... to summer."



If you wish to read the first four M.U.S.-icology 101 articles, they are all available on my personal web site at <http://www.jazzace.ca/music/mus/> until the end of April. You need Adobe Acrobat Reader to view them.