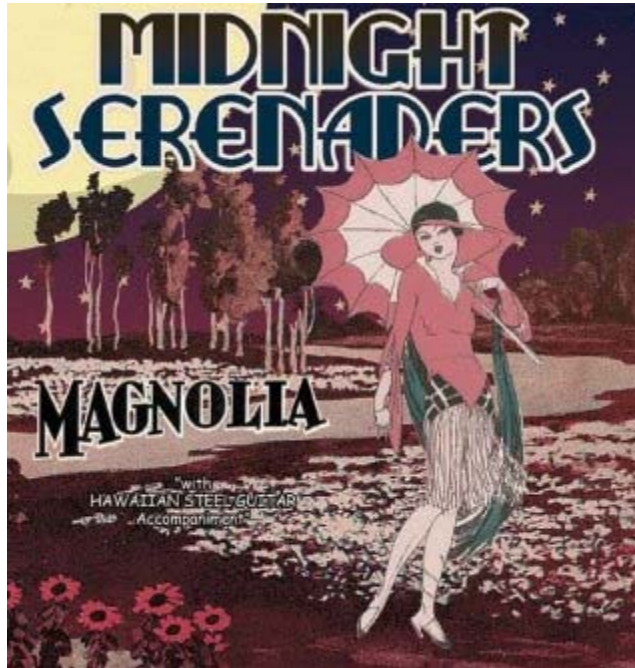


JazzPolice.com

Bright Young Things: The Midnight Serenaders

Contributed by Maxwell Chandler

Saturday, 08 September 2007



Midnight Serenaders: Magnolia

New Orleans, arguably the birthplace of jazz, was the perfect place for an art form to grow that would incorporate so many diverse elements. The first brass bands playing dances, bars and other colorful places in the Storyville area of New Orleans relied on a simple form--a specific rhythm was set up and people would shake their thing on the dance floor or march down the streets in a funeral procession. Slowly, soloists and their distinctive voices started creeping into the music, playing a more prominent part and serving as catalysts for more complex arrangements. The innovations of Kid Ory (1886-1973), Joe "King" Oliver (1885-1939), Louis Armstrong (1901-1971) and Bix Beiderbecke (1903-1931) brought jazz closer to the art form as we know it today. The tempos and rhythms still strongly emphasized dancing, but now too there were the beginnings of more formalized arrangements for the band.

With the end of the First World War and promises of employment in the north, many of the initial progenitors of jazz soon found themselves in Chicago, serving residencies at its various clubs. Artists such as Earl Hines, Sidney Bechet and Jelly Roll Morton brought a wider recognition of jazz through the new medium of records. The entire country seemed caffeinated and the rhythms of this hot jazz gave cause to create kinetic sculptures on the dance floor. Just as instrumental soloists had crept into jazz, further evolving it, so now too did vocalists such as Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters and Ma Rainey. The number of musicians in an ensemble now also increased, too. Pop music was the dance music, and almost every song seemed to have a dance for it-- the Charleston, The Lindy Hop, the fox trot, etc.

Along with the increased availability of records, radio shows broadcasting from the various ballrooms also got their start around this time. Dubbed the Jazz Age from the period writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald, the era soon gave way to the big band era. Bandleaders such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway, along with many others who had just been getting their starts during the jazz age, would go on to flourish in the coming decades, contributing greatly to the jazz canon. The big band era saw a further complexity of arrangements and technological advances in both records and radio broadcasting. Meanwhile, other genres, tributaries which flowed from the same wellspring, gained popularity, including Stride and Country Swing.

Country Swing

Country Swing was best exemplified by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys. Cutting their first seminal recordings in 1935 in a homemade studio in Dallas, their stylistic elements would serve as key components to the more progressive elements of this big band sub genre. Like Duke Ellington, Wills (1905-1975) gathered top-notch musicians around him to both record and perform in live situations. To the blues and diverse cultural elements of southern practitioners, Wills added western influences such as fiddle music and components from south of the border. There was also a European feel not dissimilar to what people like Django Reinhardt (1910-1953) and his Quintet du Hot Club de France were doing over in Paris. In both cases it was one of the occasional and rare occurrences in music when popular culture and art seem to perfectly align, the artists achieving stardom on an international level.

Aside from mixing the different regional influences that included horns, fiddle and lap steel, Bob Wills' music also incorporated vocalists, cementing their popularity as well as making them more accessible to the more casual, non-dancing listener. From his initial recognition when he and his group were known as the "Aladdin Laddies" (Aladdin Lamp Co. was their sponsor) until well after he had received many accolades, Bob Wills always referred to his music as "Western Dance Music," not "Country Swing."

The Midnight Serenaders and *Magnolia*



Midnight Serenaders © Todd Bishop

As much as I often refer to genre names, it is easy to get too bogged down in labels. This emphasis on genre can hinder or prevent one's enjoyment and exploration of all the music which is out there to discover. I recently had the pleasure of discovering the music of a sextet out of Portland, Oregon, called The Midnight Serenaders. Are they hot jazz, country swing? It does not matter; they incorporate many early jazz elements. Their album *Magnolia* is a pleasure to listen to. It manages to be both fun and art.

When the cocktail/swing revival of the late 1990s came about, there were many retro/novelty bands popping up in every major city, running the full gamut from swing to cocktail to hot jazz. Now these bands are mostly all gone, briefly having had their moment in the sun. Those that remain or who are newly minted now do it for an affection for the music. The Midnight Serenaders manage to transcend mere kitsch/retro, as all the music captures the emotional authenticity and stylings of the early years of jazz.

All the band members are fully committed to the music and this translates into an authenticity which, while managing to offer a sonic glimpse of jazz's early years, is never a thing coldly trapped under museum glass. Their execution is so well done that it avoids completely the risk of being merely a nostalgia act. Never once on the album do you get the feeling that you are listening to musicians doing a side project which allows them to play in a style outside their day-job *métier* to break up professional monotony.

In their promotional material and musical execution. The Midnight Serenaders avoid pigeonholing themselves by strictly aligning too specifically with one particular musical school, incorporating aspects of hot, swing and other early musical components. It is all seamlessly merged.

The songs on *Magnolia* are covers which run the full range of early jazz oeuvre, from “A Porter’s Love Song to a Chambermaid” (James P. Johnson) to a saucy “My Handyman” (Eubie Blake). The vocal chores are shared by Dee Settlemier, who doubles on ukulele, and Doug Sammons, who also plays guitar. Dee’s singing throughout is strong and you never get the suspicion that studio wizardry is involved with any aspect of her performance. She is one part Louise Brooks mixed with one part Anita O’Day for the perfect vocalist cocktail. Doug’s vocals too are good, he sounds completely at home with the music, never once stumbling or having to ever resort to the sort of “talk/singing” some do when out of their depth. On the songs where they sing together the contrasts are made interesting and work because they can both actually sing and their sense of fun and knowledge of the music clearly comes through on every song.

“I Must Have That Man,” largely associated with Billie Holiday, here is given a new spin, surely the way one should approach any song already “owned” by a great. The Serenader’s version is melancholy, but unlike Lady Day’s, the romantic yearning is a temporary, minor setback. Here, one gets the feeling that the song’s protagonist *will* eventually get her man.

David Evans doubles up throughout the album on clarinet and saxophone. He gets a rich, laconic feel during some of his solos on saxophone such as can be found on “My Handyman”. His clarinet playing is as equally satisfying, letting out a low purr during some of the quieter moments on the album or playfully bubbling elsewhere.

Garner Pruitt on trumpet manages to encompass a compelling and varied technique throughout. He sometimes plays with mute, other times does a trebled brass bumblebee shaking with mirth. It is nice too to hear someone play on a mute in a way other than how Miles Davis approached it.

The song “Sand” has some nice soloing on Hawaiian steel guitar by Henry Bogdan. The entire band plays but towards the end there is a sort of duet between clarinet and the Hawaiian steel which can easily set one to day dreaming. Hawaiian steel/lap steel is not that old of an instrument. I am surprised that it is not encountered more often in jazz. Much like vibraphones, part of the instrument’s power is in its ability to rapidly shift from helping to provide a sort of sonic ambient background support to one of lead solo voice. When soloing it can easily shift emotional gears, allowing for more varied expressions in its musical statement.

The bass played by Pete Lampe is tasteful and a perfect fit. There are no overly fancy solos of a style not congruent with the rest of the music. There is no drummer in the band; instead the various stringed instruments mixing with what Pete is doing reflect shades of Django Reinhardt and his Quintet du Hot Club de France.

A lot of the lyrics tell stories and are fun to listen to, Tin Pan Alley’s wry humor now being largely forgotten by modern lyricists. Lyrically too, the innuendos are clever and often fun, sexy but all delivered without overdoing it. The vocal stylings and the way the music meshes with help this album stand up to repeated listening. There are no weak links in the band and you never get the feeling you are listening to a singer’s album where a few token solos are thrown to the band.

The sound throughout is pristine. All the instruments and their layering can be heard even in a car with lackluster stereo. There are no liner notes, but the CD pamphlet is styled to look like an old magazine music ad. Throughout the album, the music is fun and all the band members’ personalities clearly come through. There is never any sense of gimmickery or stale nostalgia. These are good musicians who have decided on a slightly different path. Expand your palette, have a drink and take a turn out on the dance floor with the Serenaders.

The Midnight Serenaders’ Magnolia features Doug Sammons - guitar& vocals; Henry Bogdan - Hawaiian steel guitar; Dee Settlemier - ukulele& vocals; Pete Lampe- upright bass; Garner Pruitt - trumpet; Davis Evans - clarinet & saxophone. For more information, visit www.midnightserenaders.com. Maxwell Chandler will return with more adventures in sound.