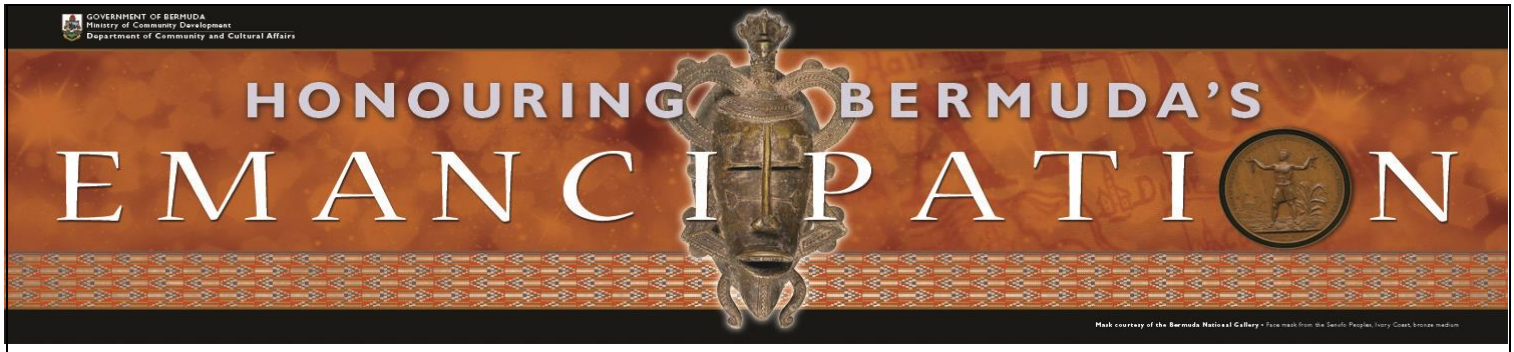


Jazz and Bermuda
by Ronald Lightbourne

Jazz burst upon the world at the dawn of the 20th century, surging out of the American South spreading like a wild fire north to Chicago and New York, and east to Kansas and California. It was joyous, and it was revolutionary. Musical instruments simply had not been played in such a manner before. Blues, field hollers, Ragtime, marches, and dirges all stewed in a veritable melting pot. It was the gift of the Freedmen, the formerly enslaved sons and daughters of Africa taken in captivity, a shout of freedom that reverberated around the world. New Orleans was the locus of this new way of playing music, of "jazzin'. "

The white establishment frowned upon it, called it savage, and it did for a while flourish in bawdy houses. But its deeper significance was that it was the voice of a newly freed people, recently out of bondage.

It is no accident that jazz grew up in the American South, in the post bellum era. Other slave societies have given the world music, but there is only one birthplace of jazz. It wasn't in Brazil, a country with the largest African population besides Nigeria. It wasn't Cuba, with it slave ports of Santiago and Havana.

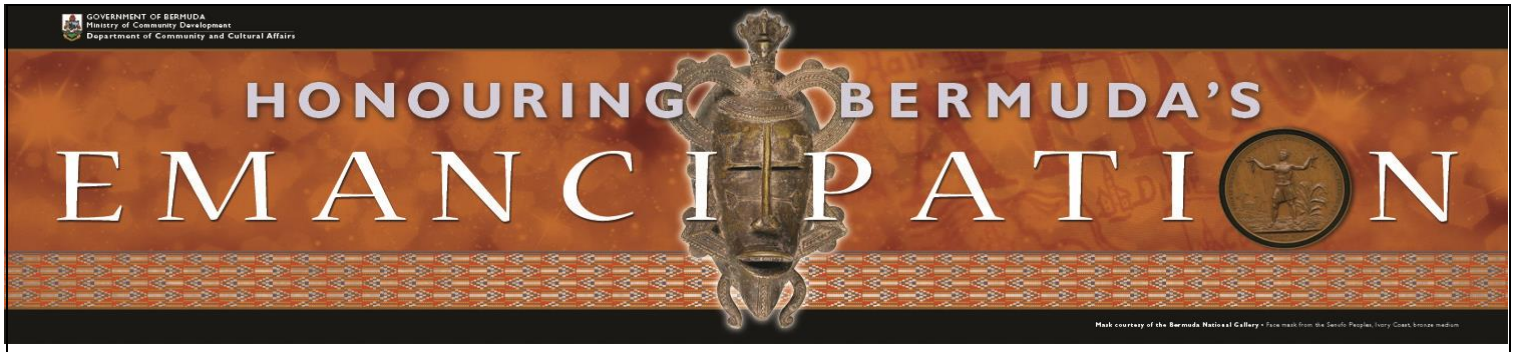
It was in New Orleans.

And from New Orleans came its first internationally acclaimed genius. Louis “Satchel Mouth” Armstrong. His travels trace the movement of the new music from the South to Chicago. Young Louis went to Chicago to play second coronet with King Oliver, and was so brilliant he outshone his leader and before long was fronting his own band.

Then Swing became the sound of the days, and big bands the thing. In the USA, Ellington , Basie, and others set the standard. It was being broadcast on radio, and the airwaves reached Bermudian shores.

It is difficult in these modern times to grasp the hold jazz had on people's minds, and especially on their bodies. It was dance music, first and foremost.

“Le jazz hot” leapt the Atlantic to Paris where clubs sprang up and American expatriates became legendary stars. Charlie “Bird” Parker, and Miles Davis are just two of many who conquered the city of light with their music.



Bermuda's love affair with jazz started with the radio. Jazz lovers tuned into New York radio stations and bought records when they could. Important also was the fact that Bermudians who worked on cruise liners like the Queen of Bermuda made weekly stops in New York where they visited clubs, record stores and even the studios of music teachers where they studied to new music. The late 'Pres' Ebbin was one such.

The legendary Lance Hayward absorbed it by radio as well. Ghandi Burgess, also a legendary Bermudian player, went to Chicago to play at the Major Bowes radio show at the age of 14 and came home with the top prize.

The two giants of Bermuda jazz fashioned international reputations, their names mentioned among the great of North America. Burgess was so well thought of in recording circles that he was offered a contract when one trumpet star passed away, and Hayward's gig in the Greenwich Village was the place other musicians and celebrities went to hear music on their off-days. Lance shared that a frequent visitor to his club was the American international star Lena Horne.

But that was later. Before that era, there was the officer's club at Kindley Air Force Base. Shirley Horne and Bobby Brookmayer are just two of the headliners that come to mind among many who played in Bermuda. Pianist Al Haig, who recorded with Charlie Parker, had a solo gig in a Bermudian hotel.

All of this speaks to tremendous penetration of the local scene by what was by then an all-conquering art form.

Naturally, with opportunities for musicians in hotels, many local big bands sprang up. Al Davis led one such band. Pot Gilbert led another. The Somerset Brigade Band is itself the foundling of two such dance bands, brought together one Christmas to accompany the procession of the Shepherds in Somerset.

Individuals have shone. The legendary Tootsie Bean, who worked with Hayward in New York, became a highly sought-after percussionist and travelled the world with the great jazz singer Ruth Brown, playing such distant shores as London and Tokyo.

Shine Hayward and Dale Butler JP, MP have cooperated in founding the Bermuda Music Hall of Fame on St John's Road. People like the late guitarist Milton Robinson, Tootsie Bean, Lance Hayward, and Ghandi Burgess are there right honoured as the finest jazz musicians this island has ever produced. Put a visit to the Hall of Fame on your list of things to do in the near future. Honour these musical heroes and keep the memory of Bermuda jazz alive.