Some Reflections on Benny Goodman’s Carnegie Hall Concert 80 years ago

By: F. Norman Vickers , 1-17-2018

Benny Goodman’s jazz concert at Carnegie Hall was January 16, 1938 was the first jazz concert to be held in Carnegie Hall. It was historic in a number of ways. It was first time that the band had performed in a strictly concert setting. That is, no dancing and no alcohol. It also was an integrated band when the custom was that bands were not integrated.

In January 1988, the New Jersey Jazz Society (NJJS) put on a 50th anniversary concert in Carnegie Hall. My wife Betty and I were privileged to attend. Tickets were also purchased for Jazz Society of Pensacola members Mack and June Miller and Holliday and Mary Veal. Unfortunately, June was diagnosed with cancer and complications prevented the Veals from attending. Those tickets were returned and resold by the NJJS. Clarinetist Bob Wilber was to perform Goodman’s part.

Permit me some observations about the concert:

There were chairs set up on the stage behind the band. Explanation for this was that Goodman had about 30 persons he had invited to the concert but had forgotten to ask for tickets. When told that the concert had been sold out, chairs were set on stage to accommodate his guests.

Before the band began to perform, audience members who had been at the original concert were invited to stand. There must have been sixty or so in the audience who stood. The gentleman sitting beside me, one who got the Pensacola return tickets, was Edmund Anderson, co-composer of the 1940s song, *Flamingo,* first recorded by Ellington with vocalist Herb Jeffries. In conversation Anderson, a white man, told me that he had sat with Ellington at the original concert. He reported, also, that he and others had urged Ellington to perform at Carnegie Hall but that Ellington had little enthusiasm for that. Anderson also reported that when Ellington died, he, Anderson, got the care of Ellington’s little dog.

At a later time, I had opportunity to talk with another attendee who had also been at the original concert. He reported that he and friends had gone to the Carnegie Hall concert and didn’t think it was extra-ordinary and that he and his young friends had all gone to Harlem after the concert to hear music at the Apollo theatre.

Hal Davis had been Goodman’s publicist for many years, a remarkable feat in that Goodman was notoriously difficult to get along with. After Davis retired, he moved from New York to Sarasota, FL with the express desire to start a Jazz Society. Our paths crossed frequently in the’ 80s and ‘90s when we were both active with the American Federation of Jazz Societies. Davis confirmed the story about the recording of the concert. Goodman was unaware that the concert was being recorded. Davis got a copy for his own use and Goodman was given a copy. It turns out that Goodman, notoriously forgetful, put the copy in the closet and forgot about it for a number of years. It was only later that it was put on LP and became a hit.

Bassist Bill Crow posted on the internet, after Goodman’s death, a piece about Goodman’s leading a U. S. State Department tour to Russia. True to form about Goodman’s being a difficult person, there was a near revolt of the performers during which Hal Davis was called upon to mediate. The tour was completed and was a musical success. It’s a long read but worth it. Search: To Russia Without Love by Bill Crow.

Here’s a link and commentary about the original and the recent, 80th anniversary concert. There is an approximate 6 minute clip also including some of the music.

[How Benny Goodman Orchestrated 'The Most Important Concert In **Jazz** History'](https://www.google.com/url?rct=j&sa=t&url=http://interlochenpublicradio.org/post/how-benny-goodman-orchestrated-most-important-concert-jazz-history&ct=ga&cd=CAEYACoUMTQ4MTgyOTYyODQ3MTkyODQ5ODQyGjg0ODMwYTBkMzIzNTE5NDM6Y29tOmVuOlVT&usg=AFQjCNFwCqV_19tMjhAZN-f4m-1JDwBzjg)

Interlochen

By 1938, clarinetist Benny Goodman was already known as "The King of Swing" — the leader of the most popular dance band in America at a time when swing **jazz** was America's most popular **music**. But nobody knew how it would be received in Carnegie Hall, America's temple to classical **music**.

 --End--