

# Swinging Scots: An Outline of Jazz in Scotland

By Roger Craik

**FIRST, A WORD ABOUT THE TITLE.** Scottish Jazz? No such thing really. Jazz is, or certainly was, an American music. In a survey such as this, one can only hope to show that Scotland, its music and some of its musicians have played a material part in shaping British and some American jazz. Some of the "surprise" of the music is Scottish.

And, necessarily, an outline. Though a small country of around five million people, Scotland is quite a complex place with both a Highland and a Lowland culture. It has its own brand of traditional and popular music, played by various types of bands. It has cities which had many ballrooms/dancehalls and villages, where a solo accordionist might be the band. It has had many visitors: transient and permanent, particularly during and since the Second World War. It has two languages: English and Gaelic. Scottish people and their institutions have made their mark on the wider world. As has its music. So this must necessarily be an outline of the Scottish contribution to jazz music.

All that said, Scotland is part of the United Kingdom and has always had close links with Ireland. So the history of how jazz came to Scotland necessarily reflects much of the way in which the music was received in the rest of Britain. The original Victor O.D.J.B. records (issued here on the "His Master's Voice" label) would have been released in Scottish record stores as would the records of Paul Whiteman and the other early white heroes of syncopated music. In the big towns: Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen, youngsters would listen and absorb. In the country districts most people would shake their heads at this latest American madness.

Scotland had quite an early exposure to jazz in person. In his classic, *Sidney Bechet: The Wizard of Jazz*, the late John Chilton records visits to Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dunfermline in 1919 to 1921 by the Southern Syncopated Orchestra of Will Marion Cook, with which Bechet had lately been playing. The skills of the drummer, Buddie Gilmore, caused amazement. A local reviewer quipped: "And if the syncopated fellows would just lend their drum and drummer to the Glasgow Police Pipe Band, you couldna match the like of yon for music anywhere!"

The orchestra ran out of luck however on 9th October 1921 when, en route to Dublin from Glasgow, its steamer was in collision with



Johnny Keating's tribute to his fellow Scots jazz musicians.



The Squadronaires, Britain's Wartime Swing Band. Chock-full of Scots!

another and sank, losing several members of its personnel. The young Glaswegian pianist, Billy Mason, claimed (Chilton's *Who's Who of British Jazz*) to have worked with the orchestra during its Scottish tour. Mason went on to have a successful career as a bandleader in London and, in fact, led the British group which backed Louis Armstrong on his first British tour in 1932, which included a week at the Glasgow Empire Theatre.

In the summer of 1933, the Duke Ellington Orchestra on its first British tour also played in Glasgow. And, in August 1938, Fats Waller toured Britain and included Glasgow and Edinburgh. By this time, Scotland was starting to produce its own jazzmen and our George Chisholm (trombone) and Alan Ferguson (guitar) were in the group that backed Fats on his London H.M.V. recordings made in the course of that tour.

George Chisholm's career, as outlined in the invaluable *Who's Who of British Jazz*, appears to be fairly typical of a Scottish would-be jazz musician of that time. Born in Glasgow in 1915, he first doubled on piano and trombone. He played with various groups locally and, aged about 21, moved to London to specialise on trombone. There he embarked on a distinguished career, playing with Benny Carter (summer 1937) as well as with Waller, Bert Ambrose and, during the

war, with the R.A.F. Squadronaires. By the 1950s, he was generally regarded as Britain's top mainstream trombonist, making many recordings with Kenny Baker, Jack Parnell and others. Ironically, he found fame (and probably fortune) as a comedian/musician on the B.B.C.'s *Black and White Minstrel Show*. Back to the Southern Syncopated Orchestra, as it were!

Other notable Scottish pre-war jazz musicians whose career paths necessarily led to London were: Tommy McQuater, whose career as a top trumpeter spanned 60 years; Jock Cummings, who drummed with Jack Hylton, Ambrose, and the Squadronaires; Henry Mackenzie, clarinet, latterly with Ted Heath; Archie Craig, trumpet with Ambrose and the Squadronaires; Dave Shand, on sax and clarinet with the Jack Hylton and Ted Heath bands; Jock Bain, on trombone with Roy Fox and Ambrose. So quite a number of key personnel in those top pre-war British bands were Scots.

Whence had they sprung? Apart from classical music, the three

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