

Columbia's live
music scene
thrives down
the decades
by John Beahler



College Town Swings

IT SURE WAS A SIGHT FOR SORE EYES.

Paul Cherches was wailing away on his saxophone. Jim Widner's Big Band had hit a sweet groove at their gig early last year, playing smooth, seductive swing tunes that drew people out on the dance floor like moths to a street light.

Just over the stagelights of Columbia's old Varsity Theater, Cherches, BS Ed '50, M Ed '55, could see dozens of couples dancing up a storm—the guys throwing their partners over their shoulders, swinging the girls through their legs, jumping and jitterbugging.


"Paul," other band members whispered between numbers, "is that really the way it was back in the '40s?!"

Close, Cherches thought to himself.

Awful close. Not all that different from the old days, when he was as young as the kids dancing out there. Back in the 1940s, when he played for his supper with the Cal Weiss band at Gaebler's Black and Gold Inn across from campus.

But then this wasn't the Varsity Theater anymore. And it had been nearly 60 years since he'd played with another little band that accompanied vaudeville acts between movie reels here.

The ornate old theater is called The Blue Note now, and it's been the hottest nightspot and dance club in Columbia for nearly 20 years. That scene last spring that jogged Cherches' memory was the



Band leader Paul Cherches, left, worked with singer Chris Connor, who went on to perform with Stan Kenton during her 50-year career.

Blue Note's Swing Dance, an event drawing hundreds of Mizzou students to the latest campus craze. Students are dressing up in vintage duds, learning how to jitterbug, and hitting the dance floor. It's part nostalgia and part nouveau camp.

Behind it all, though, is the music, says Blue Note owner Richard King. "It really is a great sound. I think everybody's sick of long-haired guys standing up on the stage screaming. Swing is a refreshing change." In fact, swing has become so popular that the Memorial Union schedules regular classes and swing dances for a whole new generation of students. If MU



PHOTO COURTESY PAUL CHERCHES

graduates from the 1950s dropped by, they might have to pinch themselves to make sure they weren't back at one of the Touchdown Dances held in the Student Union after each home football game.

Of course the young guy with the wide lapels and skinny tie might be sporting an earring. And that little green cocktail number the young lady is wearing might match her hair instead of her handbag.

Still ... it's close, awful close.

For Paul Cherches, the swing music he heard growing up became his avocation, first as a musician around town and later as director of bands at Missouri Military Academy in Mexico.

He was still a high-school student

when it all started, back in the early '40s, when Cal Weiss invited Cherches to sit in with his band. The war had finally come, and many of the regular band members were called away to other arenas in Europe and the Pacific.

Gaebler's paid the band with meal tickets, but "I would have played for nothing," Cherches remembers. "That was the end of the world for me. I was so enamored of playing for the big boys."

Cal Weiss wasn't the only big boy in town then. There was the Count Solomon Band and the Charlie Fisk Band. In later years, Cherches even fronted his own group, called the Aristocrats. "Hardly a week went by when there weren't several

bands playing in various parts of town," he says. Some Saturday nights you could hear live music coming from almost all the fraternity houses along College Avenue.

But it was always a special treat when the big-name bands came to town. Charlie Barnett, Tommy Dorsey, Count Basie or Benny Goodman. "After the gigs, it was understood that there would be a jam," Cherches says. Everyone converged at a frat house or downtown at Dean's Golden Campus, a dark, smoky joint underneath a bowling alley on Broadway. Gene Krupa's band was just one group that jammed all night with the local guys, some of whom hit the big time.

John Klein, BS Ed '48, M Ed '52, was a drummer in a band led by Fred Rynearson, M Ed '51. A few years after leaving MU, Klein was the regular drummer for Lawrence Welk's orchestra, a gig that lasted nearly three decades.

By the late '50s, rock 'n' roll had elbowed its way to centerstage of the campus music scene. Popular pop acts ran the scale from crooners like Patti Page and Elvis to the Pelvis to straight-ahead rockers like Bill Haley and the Comets. The hottest band on campus, though, had to be the Kollege Kats, even though the group played what drummer Jack Smith, BJ '62, calls "jazz stuff people could dance to."

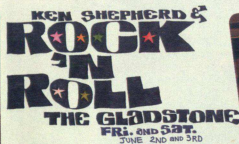
The Kats played all the most important frat dances. They bopped out at Columbia's dance joints. Sunday afternoons they presided over raucous jam sessions at the Stables, a down-at-the-heels student hangout perched on the banks of Hinkson Creek.

"Jam session" described the scene perfectly. Every inch of the dilapidated old Army barracks would be jammed with Mizzou students. Sometimes it got so crowded inside that bartenders lifted up the prefabricated walls like the flaps on an airplane wing so music-hungry students could sit out in their cars and take in the action.

Couples crowded the Stables' dance floor, too. They jitterbugged and twisted



The Krazy Kats are still pounding out party music after a 35-year career that started during their days at Mizzou.



Concert posters by local artist Gail Shen in the 1970s got out the word about upcoming music gigs, like this one by rock guitar monster Ken Shepherd at the Gladstone Manufacturing Co., a down-at-the-heels roadhouse south of town.



Live music brightened up this basement nightspot on Broadway, which was known earlier as Dean's Golden Campus.

away. They did the Stroll, or the Huckle-buck, or the U.T., a dance that was sort of a Michael Jackson moonwalk in reverse.

When the Kats played around town in the evenings though, they always mixed in a few ballads so the kids could slow dance, Smith remembers. "Everyone liked to dance close, and that was as close as it got back then. Maybe that's why they liked it so much."

But something happened after a few weeks at the top of the heap. "We noticed that we weren't getting some of our usual jobs, like the Pi Phi formal," Smith says, "and we were starting to lose some of our Saturday night jobs." The guys checked around town and heard that a new group was coming in from St. Louis to play at a local R&B club, then stayed over to do campus gigs on Saturdays.

So one Friday night the Kats drove out of town on Highway 40 to check out their competition. Just off the highway, where the old two-lane road snaked around a few hills and headed toward St. Louis, was a ramshackle roadhouse called the Paradise Club. Smith still recalls pulling into the parking lot. There was a faded marquee, with half the light bulbs burned out, that said:

"Tonight the Ike and Tina Turner Revue featuring the Ikettes and the Kings of Rhythm."

"I remember thinking, 'How is anybody ever going to remember a band with a long name like that?' Boy, did they ever

win us over in about five minutes," Smith says.

"The place was just pulsating. Tina looked and sounded almost like she does today, and there was a little skinny guy playing guitar. He'd play a guitar lick and his leg would shoot out. Tina, of course, was tearing 'em up. The Ikettes were dancing; the saxes were screaming. It was just incredible. It was the best live party band I'd ever heard, and I've never heard one better."

Ike and Tina made the Paradise Club a special date destination for Linda and Bob Yarbrough, a Webster Groves, Mo., couple who were Mizzou students in the early '60s. Neither of them owned a car, not many students did, so they would hitch a ride with friends and stand in line to hear Tina belt out "Proud Mary."

"It was just a great band. Word spread and everyone would come out there. There were always lots and lots of people trying to get in," says Linda Yarbrough, Educ '62. "Once we got in, we never stopped dancing."

By the time all the Kollege Kats graduated and moved on, there was another group waiting in the wings to inherit their "hottest band" title. This trio of longtime friends from Moberly, Mo., called themselves the Krazy Kats.

Most college bands only seem to last for a year or two, but after 35 years these guys are still playing around Missouri. Their brand of rock 'n' roll, tunes by

Little Richard, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry and Elvis, never seems to go out of style.

Willy Craig, BJ '74, plays keyboards for the Krazy Kats, and he still remembers the numbers that brought down the house when they played college bars in Columbia. Songs like "Oop Oop a Doo," "Rocking Pneumonia and the Boogie Woogie Flu," and, of course, "Louie Louie," the rock 'n' roll party anthem with the incomprehensible lyrics.

During the Krazy Kats' heyday, a pizza and beer joint had taken over from Dean's Golden Campus below the bowling alley on Broadway. It was called Romano's, and Craig recalls when club owner Jim Romano auditioned the Krazy Kats for their first steady job in Columbia. After the audition, they asked Romano how he liked them.

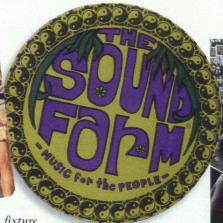
"He said, 'To tell you the truth I hated everything you played, but that's exactly the reason I'm going to hire you.' He figured that if he hated it, students would love it," Craig says.

He was right. The Krazy Kats rocked at Romano's every weekend night, even though the owner made a point of wearing earplugs whenever they played.

Graduation and the draft board relocated the Krazy Kats from the local music scene by the mid-1960s, but other bands were waiting to take their place. That's the thing: In any college town it seems like there's always another band waiting



Lee Ruth, still a fixture on the local music scene, played at the Road Apple Party Palace, known earlier as the Paradise Club.



The Sound Farm was one of Columbia's hottest bands during the era of Vietnam War protests.



The Blue Note has catered to footloose Mizzou students since 1980. After 10 years on Business Loop 70, the Note moved downtown to the old Varsity Theater.



Concert goes always get what they want when the Rolling Stones take the stage. The Stones rolled through Memorial Stadium in 1995.

for its turn to jam.

Music has always provided a backbeat for campus life. Ask MU students from any era what they remember about their college days. It's as likely to be a memory from some concert, or a dance or a popular tune, as a favorite professor.

Groups like the Sound Farm, whose music punctuated anti-war demonstrations on campus. Or the cosmic country sound that the Mid-Missouri Hellband brought to the Gladstone roadhouse.

Or maybe it was rocking with the Allman Brothers when they played the dusty, drafty old Brewer Fieldhouse in 1970. That was one show Steve Watts missed. He's a history professor at Mizzou now, but as an undergraduate back then, Watts, AB '75, PhD '84, worked his way through school playing with local groups. He recalls that fellow band members "contemplated suicide" when they realized they couldn't ditch an out-of-town gig to hear the hottest of all Southern rock bands.

There were other great concerts though. The Byrds played to a packed house at Jesse Auditorium that same year. "I cut my own teeth as a musician on the Byrds. I was thrilled no end to hear them," Watts says.

He was on hand in 1971 when the rock group Poco played Brewer. In fact, he and his girlfriend hung around after the concert and got invited backstage to meet the band and get their autographs.

The early '70s was certainly a high note of Mizzou's music scene: Everyone from the Beach Boys, Elton John, Judy Collins and Gordon Lightfoot to the original In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida guys, Iron Butterfly, played Columbia. The rock band It's a Beautiful Day lived up to its name at a glorious spring concert outdoors at the Reactor Field.

But it wasn't only rock 'n' roll that got Mizzou students hopping. The local jazz scene saw a revival during the mid-1970s, including bands like Jasmine that played at local watering holes like the Flaming Pit and Fish 'n' Friends. Mellow guitar work by Jasmine's Lyle Harris, Agric '59, influenced a generation of campus musicians.

The beat still goes on. Fans came to Mizzou from all over the Midwest a few years back to watch the Rolling Stones strut their stuff under a full moon at Memorial Stadium.

For two decades now, there's been one bass line to Columbia's music scene. If you remember one show from your Mizzou days, the odds are better than even that you heard it at The Blue Note.

That's where Jon Poses, MA '80, saw blues legend Willie Dixon perform. Poses is in the music business himself now—he produces and promotes concert tours for national jazz groups—but he still remembers the venerable Chicago bluesman wailing on his bass guitar and singing his signature tunes like "Wang-Dang-Doodle"

and "Spoonful."

Blue Note owner Richard King has been bringing top bands to town since 1980, when he and partner Phil Costello took a plunge in the music business.

They took over a one-time bakery at the north end of Eighth Street, where a few other clubs like the 18th Amendment and the Brief Encounter had tried to make a go of it there, but couldn't strike the right chord.

"At first, everybody laughed at us. That was fine, we really didn't care," King says. Ten years later, when he moved the Note downtown to 17 N. Ninth St., those skeptics weren't laughing any longer. It took equal measures of persistence and luck to build the Blue Note into a Columbia institution, King says.

That, and being as flexible as his audiences when it came to booking bands. One night you might sit down to tables with white tablecloths and listen to a jazz ensemble. The next night you could be packed in wall-to-wall to hear blues legends like KoKo Taylor or Buddy Guy belt out a few ballads. The night after that, you might even try body surfing in the mosh pit while the GooGoo Dolls flail away on stage.

"I think the live performance is the key to the whole thing. It can be an experience you will never forget," he says. "There are still shows that I can remember that are etched in my mind forever. It can be a magical thing." ●