

Big bands are back

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Styles come and go, and then come-back again. Nowhere else but in the music industry has this been so audibly apparent in the past 10 years. Punk, folk, psychedelic rock, motown, and jazz, especially performed by big bands, are enjoying a surging trend of retro revival. Jumping on the big band bandwagon is bandleader Jim John, who founded the Swing Shift Big Band, almost nine years ago.

John founded the band, an 18-piece with feature singer soloists and a singing trio, Trio Bella, in the early 90s, when Harry Connick Jr. was shaking the foundations of the music scene in ways that most of us didn't expect. "You know it's funny," John says of the big band revival, "I read a really cool quote a while back that went something to the effect that big bands have never gone away – only the audiences have. But now the audiences are back again."

And this time John said that it's a whole new generation of listeners that can't get enough of big band music. "We've got a new generation of people interested in swing. When we play The Rex (nightclub in Toronto) for example, we have kids in their 20s come and listen to us and they enjoy the classics – the Glenn Miller (songs) and the Count Basie (songs) and the Stan Kenton (songs). But what's happening now is that the Rock 'n Roll music of the '60s and '70s is now being turned into swing and big band type arrangements."

What this means to big bands that cover the big band classics is that they're now expanding their repertoires by adding classic rock songs to their mix, and making music by the Beatles, or James Taylor, swing in ways they may not have swung before. And this, John said, is a good thing for keeping big band music out there.

Put a popular song through the swing machine and it's bound to come out a winner, is John's theory. "To me the one thing that keeps people interested (in music) is when they recognize a song. Swing has a universal appeal because it's happy music. There are lyrics in some of the love songs that are 'oh he dumped me,' but the music is so happy that it doesn't bring you down. If you put those same lyrics to a country and western (tune) you'd be crying at the end."

Having released one CD to date, *The Tradition Continues*, the band is working on a new CD, and many of these songs will be featured in their performance in Port Colborne, for the Roselawn Jazz Series. Swing Shift will be trying out some of the newer rock standards (with a swing flavour) as well as the classic big band standards. John chooses music for the band by the simple criterion of looking for songs that are known and loved by many. "If I pick up a CD and I'm deciding whether to buy it – I look at the list of tunes and if I recognize them and like them, I'll buy the CD. If I can't associate with them I'm going to leave it. I want to be able to approach a broader audience."

Also straddling a span of musical genres is featured soloist singer Dave Statham. When he isn't performing Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin favourites for Swing Shift, Statham can be found playing drums and singing in one of the two other bands that he's in: a punk band and a country and western band. "He's pretty versatile," John says. "But his love is Sinatra. He grew up idolizing Sinatra."

Having performed at Roselawn in 2003, John admits that he and the band are excited to be coming back to play in Port. "This is one of our favourite theatres to play," John said. "When we play bars most people are talking and laughing – they're not really concentrating on the music, but in a theatre you have no choice – that's why you're there. And Roselawn is the perfect size – it's not too big where you feel like you're playing to a big, black void."