

ENTERTAINMENT

Big band jazz on the rebound

REVIEW

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It's easy to understand why big band jazz is experiencing a revival in North America if you caught great acts such as the Swing Shift Big Band in concert last Saturday evening for the fourth season finale of the Roselawn Jazz Series.

This 16-piece band, founded by bandleader and alto sax player Jim John in 1996, proved to Roselawn Jazz Series patrons once again why they are considered to be one of the top three big bands in Canada. With their debut CD, *The Tradition Continues* (Palais Records, 2001), the big band has enjoyed radio play throughout Canada, including regular rotation at CBC radio.

Opening with Gershwin's *Strike Up the Band* this powerhouse of consummate jazz musicians was spellbindingly awesome from the downbeat. And as Swing Shift warmed up both the band and the house, the jazz proceeded to get tighter, faster and even better.

The instrumentalists are each remarkably talented players, a tight group whose members are in tune with each other, yet still maintain their own musical styles and strengths. Just as big band music is nostalgic of another era, so too is the camaraderie that transpires between the players. There was almost a palpable connection that edged the soloing musicians to perform to greater heights. Pushing instrumental limits is really what jazz is all about, and this



SPECIAL PHOTO

The 16-piece Swing Shift Big Band, which performed as the finale of the Roselawn Jazz Series, is one of the top three big bands in Canada.

group seemed to be pushing and playing their music over the top frequently throughout the concert.

Bandleader Jim John set the tempo for *Sweet Georgia Brown*, way up to an almost crazy speed but the band held on for the performance of a lifetime. It made the Harlem Globetrotters' theme tempo sound like a lullaby. It was intended to be a musical show-off and it was spectacular.

Soloist Dave Statham introduced his cool vocal talents to the mix with the

song that Harry Connick Jr. reintroduced in the '90s: *It Had to be You*. In the higher registers of this song the trumpets were full-out screaming, laying down some gorgeous musical layers in this classic favourite. Statham's obvious preference leaned toward Sinatra tunes and no true jazz lover minded this inclination. Statham sang *Lady Luck* and *Come Fly With Me* with perfect pacing, and endeared himself to the audience early on in the performance. Statham is a young talent, by far the youngest performer on stage, with a great voice and a promising career ahead of him.

Trio Bella, three woman vocalists featuring Erica, Catherine and Laryssa, also provided some lush harmonies in an Andrew Sisters-style vocal act. Trio Bella's crisp and quick-tempo singing polished classics such as *Sentimental Journey* and *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy* with confident clarity.

A personal concert favourite would have to have been the fabulously quirky Quincy Jones song, *Soul Bossa*

Nova, that achieved its pop culture fame as the theme song for Mike Myer's *Austin Powers* movies. It was wonderfully crisp, with precise and shrill flute accompaniment. This song was a newer classic standard that was a marvelous addition to the show.

There was a wide range of classic jazz pieces performed, from the early 1900s to the late 1970s. Even some Dixieland in *That's A Plenty*, and a slower ballad-type Hoagie Carmichael classic, *Stardust*, made the evening's repertoire. And what swing band would forget *Swing, Swing* – certainly not Swing Shift. Drummer Jay Alter made the drums sing for the solo in this piece.

Swing Shift was a superb way to finish off the Roselawn Jazz Series fourth season. Subscriptions for the upcoming season are being offered until June 30 at a reduced rate. The fifth season line-up includes jazz performances from Peter Appleyard, the Steve Koven Trio and the Jambalaya Jazz Band. For more information or to reserve a subscription, call the Roselawn box office at 905-834-7572.