



# NOTES FROM THE BANDSTAND

The Amazing Career of Woody Herman

By KARL PEARSON

Clarinetist Woody Herman recently celebrated his fiftieth year as a bandleader, probably surpassed in longevity only by Lawrence Welk. What's even more amazing is that Woody has been in show business for sixty-four years!

Woodrow Charles Herman (not Woodrow Wilson Herman as claimed by some other sources) was born in Milwaukee on May 16, 1913. Woody entered show business at the ripe old age of nine, not as a musician, but as a singer and dancer in an entertainment unit. At age ten he was singing, soft-

shoeing and playing saxophone in the Wisconsin area. A year later he picked up the clarinet and at about the same time discovered jazz, which Woody later recalled being "the most exciting music there ever was." And ever since then Woody, the clarinet and jazz have been inseparable.

Like fellow clarinetist Benny Goodman a few years earlier, Woody took to the road as a teenager, with an orchestra led by west coast bandleader Tom Gerun. It was with Gerun in 1932 that Woody made his first records. Gerun, whose real name was Gerunovich, also had a young sax player named Al Morris and a vocalist named Virginia Simms in his band. Morris later gave up his sax and became better known as singer Tony Martin and Virginia became Ginny Simms, vocalist with Kay Kyser.

In 1934 Woody moved over to the sax section of Isham Jones' band, one of the top dance bands of the day. Little did Woody know that this move would shape his entire career, for when Jones decided to give up bandleading two years later, Woody became the leader of a cooperative band that included five members from the Jones band. The band made its debut at Brooklyn's Roseland Ballroom in November, 1936 and was known as "The Band That Plays The Blues." The band took its title seriously by playing many blues- and swing-tinged numbers. Sometimes though, the band took the title a bit too seriously,





especially when several of its nightly broadcasts featured nothing but thirty minutes of blues. Featuring arrangements by the band's flugelhorn player Joe Bishop, Woody and the boys played such numbers as "Dupree Blues," "Callope Blues," "Royal Garden Blues," "Laughing Boy Blues," "River Bed Blues," "Blues Upstairs" and "Blues Downstairs." It took awhile for the public to catch on to the Herman style, but in 1939 when the band recorded the blues-based "Woodchoppers Ball" for Decca Records, the public got the idea. The tune became one of the big record hits of the year and brought Woody many new fans.

After a while Woody grew tired of the blues format and made a few changes in the band's style. He dropped the blues approach and made the band a bit more commercial, alternating swinging instrumentals with smooth ballads. He even featured female trumpeter-singer Billie Rogers for awhile with his band.

There were a number of fine vocalists in the Herman band over the years, including Mary Ann McCall, Carolyn

Grey and Frances Wayne. But many of the critics agreed that the best vocalist in Woody's band was Herman himself. Woody was known as an excellent ballad singer, featuring a very warm, emotional and musical touch on such numbers as "Laura," "It's A Blue World," and "This Time The Dream's On Me." Woody also sang many of the jazzier vocals on tunes such as "Blues In The Night," "Amen," and "Ooch Ooch Agoonattach," which was the Herman version of Glenn Miller's hit song "Chattanooga Choo Choo" with one difference; Woody's train ran backward!

Herman continued to experiment as 1942 began. Some of the Duke Ellington style began to appear in the band's repertoire. In July of that year the band recorded a tune titled "Down Under" in a new style known as "bebop" (later it was just known as "bop") which was just starting to appear. "Down Under" was written and arranged by a trumpeter named Dizzy Gillespie, who would later lead the bop revolution.

By 1944 the Woody Herman band was very much into the new, modern style, with a brand new group of

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young, fresh musicians. Tagged "The First Herd" by Metronome writer George Simon, the band featured such men as saxist Flip Phillips, veteran drummer Davey Tough and trombonist Bill Harris, who each brought an individual style to the band. A powerhouse trumpet section including Ray Wetzel and Pete Candoli packed a punch, while pianist Ralph Burns wrote many of the new arrangements. It landed a summer radio series for Old Gold Cigarettes on CBS and waxed many fine V-Disc records for the armed forces. And in November of that year the band began making a string of fine recordings for Columbia. Titles such as "Blowin' Up A Storm," "Apple Honey," "Laura," "Happiness Is Just A Thing Called Joe," and "Ah, Your Father's Mustache" became big sellers. The rhythm section on all of these fine recordings was powered by a young energetic bassist named Chubby Jackson, whose equally energetic shouts could be heard on many of the band's

broadcasts and public appearances. And vibraphonist Red Norvo joined in 1946 to be heard with the big band and with Woody's small group known as the Woodchoppers.

At the front of this group of enthusiastic musicians was Woody, the perfect leader for such a group. Equally energetic, he made the men want to play. He was the boss, for sure; but he was also one of the boys. And he was always willing to listen to and try new music styles.

The new approach paid off when the band landed a full-time radio series for Wildroot Hair Tonic. It also won several orchestra polls and was featured as the Esquire Magazine Band of the Year. Composer Igor Stravinsky was impressed with the Herman band, particularly with the trumpet section; the unison trumpet passage on "Caldonia" was a particular favorite of his. Stravinsky wrote a special piece for the Herman orchestra titled "Ebony Concerto," which was premiered at Carnegie Hall.

The public dug the Herman sounds too, requesting "Woodchopper's Ball," "Caldonia" and the other favorites night after night after night. The strain of one-nighters started to show, and several key members began leaving at the end of 1946. Finally in December of that year, a tired Woody disbanded to take a well-deserved rest.

But Woody didn't rest long. In the fall of 1947 he was back with his Second Herd, another group of young musicians who made musical history with "Four Brothers," "Lemon Drop" and "Early Autumn." In 1951, a Third Herd followed the Second, and later a Fourth and a Fifth, until everyone (including Woody) lost count. Still surrounded by young and enthusiastic musicians, Woody to this day continues to play and to look for those new and exciting sounds.

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