

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



HARRY JAMES

[This is the ninth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

What are the chances of a young boy, whose parents work in a traveling circus, growing up to be one of the most popular Swing-era bandleaders and exceptional trumpet player? Not good odds, I would wager.

Born on the Ides of March, 1916 in Albany, GA, Henry Haag James' mother was an acrobat and horseback rider, while Dad was the bandleader, in the Mighty Haag Circus. His father provided the trumpet lessons for young Harry, age 10, using the relatively unknown Arban Method, a very strict disciplinary method, reminiscent of the nuns/ruler/cracking knuckles method for a young pianist. If interested, see www.thetrumpetblog.com/arban-trumpet-method-what-is-it/. As a result, he developed superior technique and a full, rich sound that could be played unbelievably low and soft, to a double high C that would break Ella Fitzgerald's Memorex champagne glass! In fact, he replaced his father as bandleader at age 12. (Later in life, he once applied for work with the Lawrence Welk band, but was denied employment because, although he was good, he played too loud).

Settling in Beaumont, TX at age 15, he played the local dance band circuit and, within 4 years, landed a job with Ben Pollack; a year later, with Benny Goodman. His nickname was "The Hawk," a tribute to his ability to sight-read; i.e., put the sheet in front of him and with no practice – play it perfectly. In fact, the joke goes that if a housefly would land on Harry's sheet music, he would play THAT note!

At age 23, his own big band debuted in Philly known as Harry James and His Music Makers. And although Sinatra had been performing solo a few years before, Harry signed him to play with his big band in 1939. James wanted Frank to change his stage name to Frankie Satin. Sinatra refused. Thank God. Nobody's perfect, not even Harry!



His band was probably second only to Glenn Miller's during the early 40's. During that era, several vocalists owe their start to James, including Dick Haymes, Kitty Kallen, Connie Haines and Helen Forrest. And in the 50's, do you remember a Kirk Douglas film, *Young Man With A Horn*? Yep – that was Harry dubbing Kirk's rather ample “mime.”

James was into thoroughbred racing; big time. He owned several winning horses, including those who won the California Breeders' Champion Stakes (1951) and the San Vicente Stakes (1954). His exceptional knowledge was demo'd on a 1958 appearance on *The Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour* entitled “Lucy Wins A Horserace.” Try to catch it on YouTube – it's a hoot!

His nefarious love life included three wives; singer Louise Tobin from '35 – '43, Betty Grable from '43 – '65, and Vegas showgirl Joan Boyd from '69 – '70. Five children total, including one Tim James who, as an Assistant AG of TX, investigated the (infamous?) Chicken Ranch brothel in LaGrange, eventually leading to its closure. And almost as if Harry had orchestrated it, the story was the foundation for the Broadway hit and movie, *The Best Little Whorehouse In Texas*.

Interesting life? You bet. But don't lose sight of his everlasting musical contribution. I suggest his “Best of Harry James & His Orchestra, Curb Records, ASIN B000000CXI, remastered in 2011. Of the 12 songs, my fav is “Ciribirbin,” demonstrating his mastery of the trumpet.

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as “Just Me 2”, a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com. See them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic