

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



LES BROWN

[This is the thirty-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.]

If you were asked to name the greatest bandleaders of all time, your response would probably contain the names of such notables as Miller, Dorsey, Goodman and Lombardo. And if I asked you “how about Les Brown,” you’d most likely answer “Oh, yeah -- him too!” Let’s look at my reasons for including Brown in that stellar cast of characters, above.

Born March 14, 1912 in Reinerton, PA, Lester Raymond Brown learned early on that he and his two brothers could get out of working at their father’s bakery by taking music lessons. Les took up the cornet, but switched quickly to the soprano sax, also learning clarinet and bassoon. By age 14, he was proficient enough that his father enrolled Les at a military band school in New York, later earning a music scholarship to another prestigious NY school, where he played sax in the band and began to write music.

In 1932, Brown chose to enroll at Duke University, because it had the best-known college swing band, The Blue Devils. Les soon became their leader and in 1936 toured the east coast with the band for more than a year. He formed his own 12-piece band when offered a recording opportunity with RCA Victor’s *Bluebird* label. His popularity soared because of his recordings, but he struck it rich when he got a tip in 1940 that Bob Crosby was about to let his female vocalist go. Doris Kappelhoff was just a teenager, but had strong magnetic appeal. A friend of hers thought her surname was too long to fit on most marquees, plus he loved her rendition of *Day After Day*. Thus, entered one “Doris Day.”

Day joined Brown’s band in August, but soon left to marry and start a family. She divorced in 1943 and Brown quickly extended the offer for Doris to return. But she had a child and insisted that the boy stay with her on the road, requiring a full-time nanny. Les gladly picked up the added expense, employing Day’s mother as nanny, even though Doris had not yet achieved stardom. But Brown recognized her potential. In early 1945, Brown and Day recorded *Sentimental Journey*, which Les co-wrote, landing on the Billboard charts as #1, where it remained on the list for twenty-three weeks, five weeks as #1. Coinciding with the end of WWII, it became the homecoming theme for many vets and furthered Les’ reputation as a leader, and launched Doris’ fantastic career. Over the next two years, the Brown-Day combination would score a dozen top ten hits.



Doris left for movie and soloist careers and Les moved his band to Hollywood, where he soon was befriended by Bob Hope. Brown was tired of travelling and saw Hope’s

Hollywood Palladium show as a solution. He proposed to Hope to replace Desi Arnaz as bandleader. Hope was not totally pleased with Arnaz and liked the smooth, precise orchestral sound that Brown delivered. In addition, Les was good at playing straight-man to Bob's comedic repartee. Their association lasted for nearly half a century and over 800 shows, with Brown as official bandleader! They did 18 USO Tours for American troops around the world, and entertained over three million people.

Les continued to record throughout the 50s and 60s, with his recordings appealing to then aging members of "the greatest generation." Brown and his Band of Renown were also the studio band for *The Steve Allen Show* from 1959–1961 and the *Dean Martin Variety Show* from 1965–1972. Throughout his career, Brown always took a back seat to his "star," whether it was his vocalists, his sidemen or his celebrity employers. His job was to provide perfect accompaniment, and provide it he did – flawlessly

In 1959, as President of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences, he began presenting annual awards which featured a gramophone. The venue was often someone's office or a hotel lobby. Based on his association with Bob Hope, Les was asked to produce a show like the Academy Awards, to give credence to the music awards. It's reported that NBC agreed to carry the program, only if Brown could convince Hope or Frank Sinatra or Bing Crosby to appear. Because Les was so well-respected, all three superstars participated and the *Grammy* became the benchmark for the business of music.

The *Guinness Book of World Records* pronounced Brown as leader of the longest-lasting musical organization in pop history. Upon Les' death at age 88 in 2001, Bob Hope related "I have lost my music man, my sideman, my straight man, and a special friend." You can see why, in my opinion, the musical world was a better place because of the unassuming, consummate professional named Les Brown. He truly belongs in the same group of perhaps the better-known bandleaders.

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