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Benny Goodman Played It, And This Band Does Too



Maxine Hicks for The New York Times

STEP BACK IN TIME Steve Shaiman, band leader, left, directing the Swingtime Big Band in a performance last month at Martha Clara Vineyards.

By **KARIN LIPSON**
RIVERHEAD

EVEN before the Swingtime Big Band began its opening number, Benny Goodman's "Let's Dance," Lorraine Angeletti had gotten the message of the song.

"It puts you in a joyous mood, and it makes you want to dance," the Middle Island resident said as she sat with friends and family under a tent at the Martha Clara Vineyards here, where the band was performing last month.

No surprise, then, that Ms. Angeletti, who was celebrating her 50th birthday, wound up doing the lindy with her mother to the sounds of Goodman, Count Basie, Glenn Miller and others who made the 1930s and '40s swing.

"That happens pretty regularly at our concerts, because so much of it was dance music," said Steve Shaiman, Swingtime's band leader, after the performance presented by the East End Arts Council.

The concert was one of more than a dozen public engagements, as well as several private parties, on Swingtime's roster this year, most of them on the band's home turf of Long Island. Next up: a free concert on Sept. 21 at 3 p.m. in Rotary Park in Sayville, sponsored by the Islip Arts Council.

With 20 members, including two vocalists, Swingtime is among the larger local bands of its type, said Amy Tuttle, the Islip council's artistic director. Yet the band members (who hold varied day jobs like doctor, courtroom reporter, music teacher, IT specialist and, in the case of Mr. Shaiman, classical-music executive) play as "a dynamic, single unit," Ms. Tuttle said. "They've got a terrific energy level."

Past performance highlights include an appearance last year at the Midsummer Night Swing at Lincoln Center, the popular outdoor dance-music series that draws both veteran ballroom dancers and neophytes.

Musicians who make the sounds of the prerock era rock.

Older dancers, whether jiving on the plaza of Lincoln Center or on the damp grass of a Long Island vineyard, undoubtedly feel the tug of nostalgia. "Big-band was the rock 'n' roll music of the '30s and '40s," said Bill Bragin, the director of public programming at Lincoln Center. "This was the youth culture."

Starting in the mid-'90s, Mr. Bragin said, swing has been enjoying a revival, with the success of TV shows like Fox's "So You Think You Can Dance" and ABC's "Dancing With the Stars" factoring into the increased interest.

Some neo-swing groups are interpretive, but the Swingtime Big Band is of the purist variety (though its repertory extends to the '50s and '60s). "When we play a Glenn Miller tune, it sounds like the Glenn Miller band," Mr. Shaiman said. "When we play Artie Shaw, it sounds like Artie Shaw."

Yet the original big bands typically didn't publish their arrangements, he said: "The band leaders didn't want other bands to replicate what they did — that was their main interest."

To achieve authenticity, Swingtime's musicians listen to original recordings; the band has also obtained some high-quality transcriptions of original big band records from swing groups, Mr. Shaiman said. And previously unknown tapes, made during big band-era radio sessions, have been surfacing on the Internet.

Sometimes, it turns out, there are several authentic versions. "We sort of gravitate to the original studio recording," Mr. Shaiman said. But the additional source material "gives us a certain license" to vary the music, he said: "Benny Goodman didn't do it the same way every night."