

Universal swing craze?

By MARK RAWLINES

It seems that 1998 was the year of the swing band and it also seems like every major label jumped, jived or wailed their way onto the bigband wagon hoping to cash in on this craze.

Universal Music was no exception, signing no less than 20 new artists to fill their roster. Unfortunately for Universal, even novices to the

world of "hot" jazz can spot a phony and just because a band's name includes the words daddy, orchestra, swing or jump, and just because they are fronted by a crooner named Johnny, Jake, Steve, or Bill, and just because they wear a set of ill-fitting pinstriped zoot suits and fedoras, may not be enough reason enough to warrant having them available at a record store near you.

One positive thing about

this recent trend is possibly the fact that it introduces a new style of music to those who missed the original swing craze of the Goodman, Miller, Ellington eras. Another good reason for new listeners is that this music is just plain fun and with its driving beats (with tempos just a little more "up" than in Krupa's time) you have the perfect opportunity to learn to really dance (like the beautiful people on the GAP

commercials). Imagine for the first time, perhaps ever, being able to go to a dance and having people not just flail around beside you, but actually know a few steps. Perhaps there is a little something more to this rebirth of swing than the almighty dollar....

I was pleased to sample some of the ambassadors of the "new" swing movement, just to see what the kids were making such a fuss about with

all this talk about how these "cats" can really "jive." The releases I listened to were Universal Music's compilation album *Jive's Alive — The Best of Swing 1998!* and one of their newest signings the Johnny Favourite Swing Orchestra and their first major label release *Holiday Romance* (this release follows the success of their release on Lucky Life Recordings, *The Life Desire*).

The Johnny Favourite Swing Orchestra *Holiday Romance* (Universal)

This release stands as this Halifax bigband's first big name release. The success garnered after the 1997 Lucky Life Recording Company's *The Life Desire* (available at Atlantic locations of Sam the Record Man) prompted Universal to sign this 12-piece group. Highlights off *The Life Desire* include having the video for the single "Rootbeer and Licorice" featured on the Bravo! network. Unfortunately for Favourite & Co., Universal has polished up their sound, increased their tempo and taken away the rather charming innocence of their first release; they now sound like every other dance band on the market. This album contains two previously released tracks ("Rootbeer and Licorice" and "We Still Talk"), both of which sound better on their original takes. They seem somewhat overproduced now and have lost that rough sound that made them so appealing.

Still the album does have its better moments. For instance, the title track (*Holiday Romance*) has a definite musical character about it and strikes close to home with references to Halifax. It suits the context of this album much better than it does on *Jive's Alive*. Other notable tracks include "Black Dog" (a clever cover of a Led Zeppelin tune treated with a touch of class), "Bessie Smith" (this track has a good "going down the road" feel reminiscent of the traditional standard "Calling the Ewes"), and "Postcards from Paris" (suits favourite vocal stylings extremely well). I should be mentioned that they do a great job at writing and arranging the original work (notably John Wesley Chisholm). Although a little contrived in places the Johnny Favourite Swing Orchestra should be pleased with their first release.

Rating (1-10) — 6

Canadian Content — 100% Canadian material

This group has a good feel for the style and are really trying to branch out to a wider audience. This was release has effort written all over it and some moments of great potential. Even though I wouldn't put it on par with *The Life Desire*, I would recommend that you give "Holiday Romance" a try. This music is supposed to be fun and fun is how I would describe the Johnny Favourite Swing Orchestra. I give this album a rating of 6 of a possible 10.

Various Artists *Jive's Alive — The Best of Swing 1998* (Universal)

This release is a compilation of the main contingency of Universal's swing stable and provides some solid tracks and a few rather weak parodies on the genre. Obviously the choicest cuts on the album come from the more established artists such as The Brian Setzer Orchestra ("This Cat's On A Hot Tin Roof" — good work from this former Stray Cat whose band has one of the fattest sounds of any swing band currently playing; check out his last album *The Dirty Boogie* for more from the Granddaddy of Swing), Diana Krall ("Hit That Jive Jack" — although known for her smokey ballads, this Canadian girl show that she can pick up the pace too. This track has kick!), and Royal Crown Revue ("Hey Pachuco!" — if you've seen Jim Carrey's film *The Mask*, then you'll remember the club scene where Carrey cuts a rug with Cameron Diaz to this track. These boys offer great changes between the shout section and its driving opening beat reminiscent of Gene Krupa's work in "Sing, Sing, Sing (With A Swing)" and the slow, laid back Basie feel of the bridge).

Some Tracks which I could have done without include those by Big Time Operator ("It Don't Mean A Thing [If It Ain't Got That Swing]" — this Ellington standard has seen better treatment; this cover misses Duke's goal completely), Lavay Smith & Her Red Hot Skillet Lickers ("Oo Poppa Do" — Smith just doesn't have the appeal of Diana Krall, or the talent. Her Skillet Lickers tend to lag behind with sloppy work), and Steve Lucky & The Rhumba Bums ("Jumptown" — sorry Steve, the results of this session weren't so lucky for you. Your band could use some pointers from Pucho and his Latin Soul Brothers on the transition from swung to straight eights).

Rating (1-10) — 7

Canadian Content — Diana Krall and Johnny Favourite Swing Orchestra (maybe others)

Although this compilation has some additions made obviously for the sake of filling an album, the level of fun oozing from track to track and the generally high level of musicianship of most of Universal's artists earns "Jive's Alive" a rating of 7 of a possible 10.