

Young And Old Favour Johnny

Or: "Out of the Horns of Babes"

By STEPHEN MCQUAID

On Friday, January 8, The Johnny Favourite Swing Orchestra played at Myron's. I've got to say that this was just about the best concert crowd I've ever been a part of. The smoking wasn't appreciated, but everyone was well behaved. The ages of the crowd members ranged from 19 up to people in their seventies, a healthy mix of young, middle-aged, and "old". It was a great diversity. The sad thing is, all of the older folks showed up all of the younger, "hipper" folks there. The older ones could actually dance and swing to the music, which was the complete polar opposite of the gyrations that most clusters of young folks were doing.

OK, let's figure this out. A swing band from Eastern Canada has a lead singer from Newfoundland, they do classics (Cab Calloway's "Minnie the Moocher" was a good one), their own tunes, and cover the likes of Led Zeppelin. Should it work? No. Does it? Yes. In the past decade, horns have experienced a resurgence in mainstream music. Then Ska came back, now Swing. I hope Swing sticks around for a while. It's great music and good clean fun. And with groups like this, Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, and Colin James, it looks like Swing may be here for a while. The band is very young, but they're also very good. I'm not sure if any are ready to become musical senseis for other budding musicians, but they're all quite talented. My only hope for them is that someone or some of them step up and produce some new quality songs. Their original guitar player, and co-founder, is now out of the group. The problem is, he wrote almost all of their songs. Without him, they could be in trouble, but that remains to be seen.

They started fashionably

(pun intended) late, and were ready to continue their personal vendetta on the feet of helpless dancers everywhere. The band started up, then Johnny hit the stage.

"Dance, Puppets! Dance!"

He didn't actually say it, but he didn't have to. It was understood. If anyone there wasn't moving at least one of their extremities, they must have been clinically dead. Their lone female performer, the baritone sax player, was missing, so they lacked a bit of their lower-end sound, but it still sounded great. She was sick, or so their clarinet player (David Christensen) told me. They did a short set, then took a break before the grand finale set.

I got a hold of Johnny during the break, and we talked for a couple of minutes. After a minute or two, I mentioned that I did music reviews for the UPEI student paper. When he heard this, he got a look of fear or apology or remorse on his face, pulled his hair back over his head as he said, "Oh shit! Man, we haven't played since New Year's Eve..." I quickly stopped his unnecessary apology and reassured him that they were putting on a good show. We arranged to meet afterwards and split.

My impression of him? A very friendly, accomodating, outgoing guy, with an unhealthy addiction to chain smoking, and a love for a drink here and there.

The show was exceedingly fun. The band even let a couple of wackos up on stage to dance. That very short-haired guy in the striped shirt and his vertically challenged gal he was with seemed nice enough, but were a bit odd. They were hanging off of Johnny all night, like he was momma kangaroo and they wanted back in the pouch.

Johnny left early after the show, partially due to them, in my opinion, but mostly because he found it too loud there. He offered to do an interview back at his hotel room, or maybe back at Myron's later, but my driver was already in the car by then, and I didn't want to abandon her or my girlfriend, so I decided to decline his generous offer. We shook hands and parted, so I struck up a conversation with one of the other band members.

The JFS Orchestra is a replica of Benny Goodman's orchestra, and he played clarinet, so I decided I'd talk to their clarinet player, David Christensen. I wasn't really expecting to interview any of them, so I didn't have any questions prepared, so we just talked about... stuff. We shot the breeze for a couple of minutes, both of us struggling to hear the other one. He like to listen to Radiohead, Johnny Cash, Stevie Wonder, all kinds of stuff, much like many of the other band members. In case anyone is curious, he uses VanDoren reeds.

I asked him, "Now that you're riding a renewed popularity of Swing music, are you trying to put any twists on it change it and do something new, trying to set yourselves apart from other bands? Like the cover of Led Zeppelin's 'Black Dog', for example?" He replied, "No, we're not trying to do anything really different, or change anything. And the Led Zeppelin cover just started out as a joke and it just ended up on the CD." They've played with the likes of Colin James already, I've seen Jeff Healy as a soloist in their horn section before, and Robbie Robertson co-wrote a song for them.

They've just been in Boston, New York, and are soon on their way to Los Angeles and the Bahamas, just to name

a couple of places, which Christensen seemed pretty excited about. If you missed them, too bad. It was a great time, and it only cost ten dol-

lars. They'll be back, though, sooner than later I imagine. As David said, "Watch out for us."

Books By Erin Fagan

The Cure for Death by Lightning

By Gail Anderson-Dargatz
(Vintage Canada)

I came across this exquisite novel as I browsed through the library stacks of the Robertson Library, searching for the perfect book to become absorbed with over the holidays. I consider the discover a stroke of luck, as the book has slipped into my shifting list of absolute favourite reads.

In describing the frame of the plot, it might sound like a typical coming-of-age: a fifteen year old girl exists on an isolated farm in rural B.C. during the turbulent years of World War II. Over the four seasons of one year, Beth Weeks struggles to protect herself in a world full of cruel neighbours and odd peers, disturbed and violent father, a mother who talks out-loud to her dead mother, and the usual sometimes-scariness of love and the opposite sex. However, the trick to the novel is that it transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary. Daily farm chores take on a depth and magic all their own, animals, humans and spirits become blurred classifications, and the harsh realism of human behaviour be-

comes completely blended with myth, monsters and supernatural elements. At the centre of the narrative is the recipe/scrapbook kept by Beth's mother, where the tempting recipes and quirky home remedies are used to mark the difficult passage of time (if you're wondering, the cure for death by lightning is to soak in vinegar and water). In the process of defeating human and inhuman forces, these little elements of life become a guide and recipe-book to navigating life without becoming a victim.

Anderson-Dargatz was short-listed for the Giller Prize on the merit of this first novel, and has used an incredibly poetic and multi-faceted language to craft her mysterious story. It is one of those novels which transcends many metaphorical layers of meaning and symbolism, yet all with a graceful simplicity which grants readability and credibility. While there are a few slow and awkward points in the story, it never loses itself. I only hope I have been able to describe it deservedly.