

Stardust Memories Big Band keeps flames of swing music burning

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To record your band's first rehearsal, and then use that as a demo, takes a lot of brass.

But that's just what the Stardust Memories Big Band did, and that's what they have. From all over Southwest Florida, 17 musicians gathered in the band room at Florida South Western State College in Fort Myers Monday evening, took out their horns and got down to the serious, and seriously fun, business of making music. Swing music.

Although many of the players knew each other from other bands and other gigs, this was the first time this assemblage had ever taken the bandstand together. To hear their sound, though, you could have believed they had been barnstorming since the days of World War II, when Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey ruled the airwaves. A number of them had played in the Naples Jazz Orchestra, but preferred to talk about the new ensemble.

"With this level of musicians, on the first take, it's gonna sound great," bandleader and organizer Craig Christman confidently predicted before the session. Christman, a Tom Arnold look-alike, is Stardust Memories' musical director, and clarinet and alto sax virtuoso. "I play the Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman parts," he said.

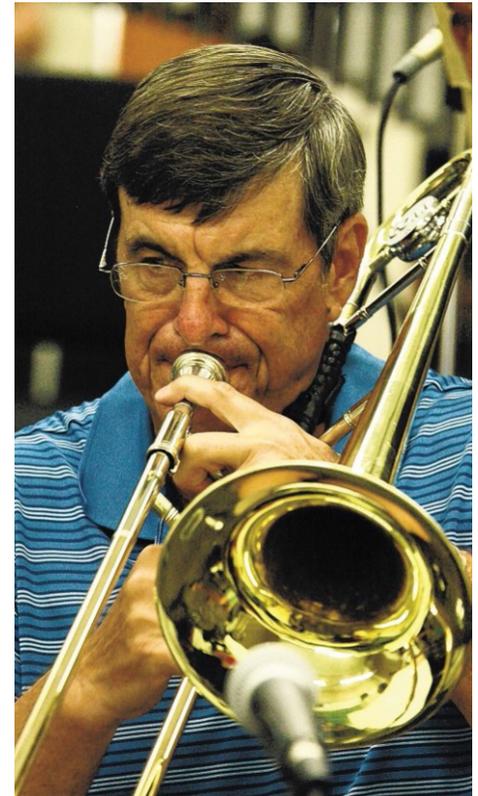
"We have a passion for this music. There are a lot of big bands, but we're going for a more-focused market. We're strictly '30s, '40s and a little '50s," said Christman.

"We play the authentic, original music. If you've heard the Benny Goodman arrangement, that's our arrangement."

Stardust Memories has four trumpeters, four trombonists, five saxophone and clarinet players, who generally double on those instruments, plus a rhythm section of bass, drums, piano and guitar. Each of those trombonists, trumpeters, etc., within their section is playing a different part from a different chart, and each has to come in and mesh with the others for the arrangements to work, yet once the tape — or its digital equivalent — was rolling, the band knocked off one number after another in one take.

"It has to be very tight, very precise," said trombonist Lex Tsaggaris, and that's what keeps these musicians in love with these old tunes, and creates the complex, "swinging" sound Stardust Memories is dedicated to preserving and recreating.

With half the players coming from Naples and the rest from between Fort Myers and Sarasota, the band will play all over Southwest Florida, focusing on Naples, said Tsaggaris.



Lex Tsaggaris plays his trombone. Members of the Stardust Memories Big Band got together for the first time Monday evening at Southwest Florida State college in Fort Myers and wasted no time, cutting a demo disc at their first rehearsal.

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“Primarily country clubs, dinner dances, charitable events,” Christman amplified. “We want to strictly book it for people who want to hear what we do.” Musicianship is key, he said. The group has both a website, <http://www.stardustmemoriesbigband.com>, and a phone number, 239-823-7240.

“There's nothing worse than playing in a band that hacks this stuff up. I called everyone here, and I'm honored and very flattered they said yes.”

Of course, music is a tough way to make a living if you're not Eric Clapton or Jay Z, so the players have day jobs, but many of those are in related fields. In addition to his studio and club dates, Christman owns an instrument repair business, keeping other bands' horns playing. Trombonist Adren Quest Hance, Jr., teaches band at East Naples Middle School.

String bass player Kevin Mauldin's “day job” is serving as the principal bassist for the Naples Philharmonic Orchestra. Asked what is the most important instrument in the band, he refrains from “blowing his own horn.”

“To be honest, that's why it's a band. Everyone has to contribute. But you've got to have the rhythm section locked tight. The bass and the drums need to drive the pulse of the band, and then you add to that,” he said. “Let's start with 'String of Pearls' — a nice easy one,” Christman told the band, and they proceeded to knockout 18 numbers in two hours, the classics of the genre, from “Stompin' at the Savoy,” “Tuxedo Junction,” their namesake “Stardust,” the primal drumbeat of “Sing, Sing, Sing,” and, as Christman quipped to the musicians, “everyone's favorite—'In the Nude.’”

The players waited quietly between numbers, and then played each tune — one time—and moved on. On cue, various horn players took their solos, with only one effort, a screech trumpet obbligato at the upper end of the register by first trumpet Mike Santiago on “I Can't Get Started,” garnering applause from his fellow musicians.

Christman conducted from the bandstand, but beyond setting a tempo, and signaling each tune's finish, these players needed little direction. Although solos are ad-libbed, all the basic parts, from guitar chords to drumbeats, are there on the sheet music each musician followed. On certain songs, the horn blowers pulled out a variety of mutes to go into the bells of their instruments, including cup mutes, straight mutes and — the most eye-catching—toilet plungers with the handle unscrewed, all as indicated on their charts.

The instrumentalists will augment their sound with a male and a female vocalist, and have “a few potential gigs lined up,” said Christman. If you've got \$3,000 in your budget —their introductory fee— the Stardust Memories Big Band is ready to swing.



Trumpeter Mark Pettey of the Stardust Memories Big Band plays a solo.

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