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MUSICAL TRADITIONS IN FLORIDA: A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY
by Kent Kaster, II

Music has figured prominently in American life throughout the nation’s history. Although in some instances music served as pure entertainment, it often reflected deeper social, economic or technological trends. Looking closely at music’s interaction with people and events provides insights into the history of the country and the Tampa Bay area.

European musical traditions arrived in the possession of the earliest colonial settlers. The first important cultural center in the American colonies was Charleston, South Carolina, and distinguished Charlestonians founded the St. Cecilia Society in 1762 to organize music supporters into a club. However, the New England area boasted the first formal concert with a Boston performance in 1731. Four years later Charleston recorded the first authenticated performance of an opera in this country with the staging of a ballad opera entitled Flora, or Hole in the Well.

In the late nineteenth century, budding communities along Florida’s gulf coast organized bands even before they developed basic public services. Indeed, it took a band to herald the opening of new bridges and buildings. No public celebration was considered complete without musical accompaniment. Even education featured music lessons, assuring that high school bands would take to the streets for festive occasions.

The presence in Florida of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds infused local culture with a wide variety of musical traditions. In their churches and segregated clubs African-Americans found outlets for both gospels and blues. One of the most peculiar – and dated – American art forms was the minstrel show in which whites assumed the role of black musicians, often reinforcing racist stereotypes. Tampa’s Latin community also had distinctive musical styles that set it apart. For example, Spanish clubs produced zarzuelas that drew on old world culture.

Beginning in the 1920s, the communications revolution nationalized musical tastes. In 1922 the first local radio stations arrived with WSUN in St. Petersburg and WDAE in Tampa. Radio featured not only live music but also recorded music through the new phenomenon of phonograph records. The combination of radio and mass-produced records brought music from far and wide into the homes of Floridians. The decade of the 1920s produced many standards such as “Stardust.” Florida’s real estate promoters also pitched their appeals in long-forgotten songs, such as “City of Palms,” a composition romanticizing Fort Myers. Indeed, the medium of radio gave advertising a musical voice.

The devastation wrought by the depression of the 1930s turned songs into a vehicle for social and political commentary. Even Franklin D. Roosevelt used the theme “Happy Days Are Here Again” to herald his rise to power. During the 1930s the radio remained the most important and least expensive medium for entertainment, including music. Following the trail blazed by WSUN and WDAE in the Tampa Bay area, stations made stars of singers and musicians such as Bing Crosby, Kate Smith, Guy Lombardo and Gene Autry.
Few people could afford the luxury of recorded music during the depression years, and the 1940s brought new restrictions. In 1942 the military’s need for shellac prompted the federal government to order record manufacturers to slash their use of shellac which was essential in the production of records. Nevertheless, during the war, music served as a means of escaping the burdens of everyday life. Off-duty soldiers flocked to dances organized by local communities, and the radio kept Americans abreast of the latest musical sensations, such as the young crooner from New Jersey, Frank Sinatra.

In the aftermath of the war, Floridians had more opportunities for musical entertainment. In Tampa an advertisement in December 1946 announced that local favorites Heavy Hammond and his “Florida Playboys” would once again draw crowds on Friday and Saturday with “Round and Square Dance Music” at the Gandy Boulevard Nite Club. For those with different musical tastes, the Florida West Coast Symphony opened its first season in 1948.

Each new decade after the war brought changes in technology and popular musical tastes. However, even with all the changes music remained an art form that touched most Americans as they listened alone to recorded music on headphones or attended a live concert at Tampa Stadium with 70,000 other fans. The accompanying photographs offer silent testimony to the important and continuing role of music in the lives of Floridians from the 1880s to the 1970s.
Formed in 1885, the Tampa Silver Cornet Band played at the Branch Opera House on Franklin Street. In 1890 the band included three members of the Lowry family: Charles and Lafayette (third and fourth from the right) and Samuel (seventh from the right).

Photograph from *Tampa: A Pictorial History* by Hampton Dunn.

At the Second Depot in Clearwater, a band greeted a train arriving in 1911.

Photograph courtesy of Pinellas County Historical Museum.
An advertisement for the Great Barlow Minstrels in the early 1900s promised an evening of “music, mirth and melody...absolutely free from an objectionable word or action.”

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
The completion of the Panama Canal in 1910 provided the occasion for this celebration in Clearwater which featured a local band on a decorated wagon.

Photograph courtesy of Pinellas County Historical Museum.

Beginning in 1904, Tampa’s Gasparilla Day featured a parade with floats and musicians. This photograph of the 1914 parade shows Plant Park and the Tampa Bay Hotel in the background.

Photograph courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
A picnic organized by Tampa’s Centro Asturiano early in this century included musicians (in the front row) who played the Asturian bagpipe and drum.

Photograph courtesy of Pizzo Collection, USF Special Collections.

WDAE, Florida’s first radio station, went on the air in 1922, and three years later the Tampa station carried the first singing commercials by a trio known as the Southern Songsters, composed of (left to right) Edith Price Montgomery, Sue Jones Klintworth and Georgia Goodell Rogers.

Photograph from Tampa: A Pictorial History by Hampton Dunn.
In 1937, Tampa Latins still celebrated “La Verbena del Tobacco” (“the Tobacco plant”), a festival with Spanish costumes, dances and guitar accompaniment.

Photograph courtesy of Pizzo Collection, USF Special Collections.

From its store on Tampa Street, the Dixie Music Company sold and serviced “automatic musical instruments.”

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
Music teacher Fred Market poses with a group of his students in 1930 at the Faith Mission, located off Habana Street in Tampa.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

From the days of slavery, African-Americans expressed themselves in music, especially songs grounded in religion. This 1942 photograph shows the members of the Tampa’s Beulah Baptist Church Choir.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Songs and sheet music were among the many methods used to promote Florida’s real estate boom in the 1920’s. “City of Palms” portrayed “The Beautiful ‘Fort Meyers’ ” as so idyllic that people may well have overlooked the fact that the song’s publisher in North Carolina misspelled the city’s name.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Watts Sanderson’s Central Terrace Beer Garden on Central Avenue in Tampa attracted a sizeable crowd on this summer night in 1942. Among the prominent features of the tavern was a coin-operated, counter-top jukebox shown on the right.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

During the depression of the 1930s, New Deal work relief paid for this WPA orchestra to entertain Tampa citizens.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
An evening of dancing at Tampa’s Starlight Club, located at 10011 Nebraska Avenue in Tampa, provided an escape for these couples in 1941.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

The director of the 735th Army Band sets the pace as these military musicians stage a benefit show to promote War Bonds at Tampa’s Lincoln Theatre in 1944.

Photograph from *Tampa: A Pictorial History* by Hampton Dunn.
Dixie Lily Milling Company, which advertised that its fine foods went “From the Farms to the Mills – From the Mills to Your Grocery,” sponsored performances by country and western bands, such as this one at the 1951 State Fair in Tampa.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

After World War II, local musical tastes became more varied as the Tampa Bay area sought to duplicate the cultural attractions found in big cities. In 1951 members of the Tampa Symphony Orchestra accompanied a local ballet troupe at the Municipal Auditorium, which is today known as McKay Auditorium, on the grounds of the University of Tampa.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
A 1944 dance at Tampa’s USO Club on Madison Street featured a live band and marked the third anniversary of the USO Club.

Photograph from *Tampa: A Pictorial History* by Hampton Dunn.

Bobby Lord was one of many Tampans who launched their musical careers locally and went on to national fame. Lord, shown here at a concert in Tampa in the 1950s, became a favorite at Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry.

Photograph from *Tampa: A Pictorial History* by Hampton Dunn.
These members of a “kitchen band,” with their decidedly low-tech instruments, demonstrated at a Bradenton concert in 1979 that amateur musicians with skill and imagination could still attract an audience.

Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Society.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

