When Big Bands were 'Beach Music': The Swing Era in the Coastal Carolinas
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This paper emerges out of very early research into beach music, a phenomenon of the post-World War II era in southern coastal towns like Virginia Beach, Virginia, Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and eventually Panama City, Florida. The music also provided the backdrop at inland Carolina getaways like Lake Lure and Mirror Lake. Rhythm and blues and jump blues began appearing on jukeboxes in southern white establishments in the decade following World War II, and gradually, a few small radio stations in the Carolinas began featuring short R&B shows. Simultaneously, postwar affluence made the Carolina coast an increasingly popular summer vacation destination, spawning an industry that provided summer jobs to a host of white youth. These young people adopted the new R&B as their summer soundtrack, marking the beginning of beach music. Beach music was black music enjoyed by white youth at a time when their parents would not have approved.

The organizers of this conference asked me to take a step back, into the 1930s. So I decided to explore what preceded beach music in Carolina beach towns. What did vacationers listen to in the 1920s and 1930s? What I found helped me understand why beach music became such a popular trend at these resorts. Because these southern beach resorts came of age during periods with strong traditions of dance – the 1910s when social dance became a national craze and the 1930s when swing pervaded American popular music – dance became an enduring part of young people's experiences at the beach. The youth of the 1940s and '50s adapted this tradition by claiming the emerging R & B of the era as their own. Several towns claim important places in the post-war development of beach music and "the shag," a variable-speed jitterbug practiced by young beach-goers, including Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and Atlantic Beach, North Carolina, but Wrightsville Beach developed earliest and had the most established infrastructure and the most vibrant entertainment tradition of the 1930s, so I will focus today on events there.

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Wrightsville Beach is located on a barrier island just off the coast from Wilmington, North Carolina. At the turn of the twentieth century, Wilmington was the most populous city in the state, helping to explain why Wrightsville Beach developed early into a mature summer beach resort.[1] The center of Wrightsville Beach social life in the early decades of the century was Lumina Pavilion, a 12,000-plus square foot entertainment center that opened on June 3, 1905. From its beginning, Lumina featured nightly concerts and dance music but struggled to

[1] North Carolina Business History, "North Carolina Cities Population Changes in the 1800s," http://www.historync.org/NCCityPopulations1800s.htm, accessed 31 October 2009.

attract crowds because popular opinion still viewed social dance with suspicion. To counteract this, Lumina management hired a "socially prominent lady," Mrs. Cuthbert Martin, and "her staff of social dowagers" who "supervised these dances with implicit propriety" and attendance grew.[2]

The popularity of the resort in general and dancing in particular can be seen in the 1909 decision to double the size of the dance floor and add an orchestra shell. John F. Kniessel's orchestra entertained resort goers for the next two seasons, and the composition of his ensemble was typical of those hired for the era's formal dancing, which centered on the one-step, two-step, and waltz. Kniessel directed four violins, viola, bass, harp, cello, flute, cornet, clarinet, oboe, trombone, two French horns, and trap drums.[3] Early in the 1910s, chaperones prohibited the new elements of social dance then sweeping the country, dances with provocative names (and steps) like the camel walk, the bunny hug, and balling the jack, dances performed to the newly popular ragtime music. But even the formidable Lumina chaperones could not halt the influx of the modern as "America went dance mad," and in 1914, Lumina management hired instructors to teach the new dance steps to its patrons, a move that helped legitimate the dances and make them respectable, mimicking Vernon and Irene Castle example in New York City.[4] Shortly thereafter, a local Wilmington musician, Charles S. Grainger, organized a ragtime band that entertained beachgoers for several years, and ragtime and the new dances dominated Wrightsville Beach for the rest of the decade.[5]

Much to my surprise, the shag, an integral part of the post-war beach music scene, made its appearance long before World War II. Instead, it was part of the dance-naming craze of the 1920s. In his memoir, Lewis Philip Hall, a North Carolina native and Wrightsville Beach denizen of the 1920s and 1930s, claims to have invented the shag with a friend in 1927. It became so popular that "the managers of Lumina decided" to host "a Shag contest" in 1932, and shag contests became regular occurrences. Whether or not Hall himself invented the dance, local and national newspapers document its growing popularity by the early 1930s. In July 1932, a Michigan paper called the shag "one of the favored dances" of the season. And in 1935 the *Wilmington Morning Star* announced that "Hod Williams and his orchestra will give a specially prepared program of music for the 'shaggers' at the Lumina."[6]

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[2] Lewis Philip Hall, *Land of the Golden River: Historical Events and Stories of Southeastern North Carolina and the Lower Cape Fear*, vol. 1 (Wilmington, N.C.: Wilmington Printing Co., 1975), 86; Robert Martin Fales, *Wilmington Yesteryear* (Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, 1984), 72. As was the case with many early-twentieth-century resorts, the railroad company that provided access to the beach, the Consolidated Railways, Light & Power Company, built and managed Lumina.

[3] Hall, 80-8; Ray McAllister, *Wrightsville Beach: The Luminous Island* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: John F. Blair, 2007), 47-55; Susan Taylor Block, *Cape Fear Beaches* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia, 2000), 29.

[4] Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* 2nd ed. (New York: Da Capo, 1994), 97-8.

[5] Hall, 94; McAllister, 55.

[6] Advertisement, *Charlotte Observer*, 29 December 1935; "In Gotham," *Ironwood (Mich.) Daily Globe*, 22 July 1932.

That Wrightsville Beach came of age during the 1910s, a dance-crazed decade, helps us understand why the resort stayed attuned to the latest trends in dance and music for the next several decades. By 1919, Grainger called his ensemble a Jazz Band and had reorganized the instrumentation accordingly by nixing the three violins and adding two saxophones.[7] Then, by the mid-1920s, the large bands that typified the jazz of that era had arrived in Wrightsville Beach. Robert J. Weidermeyer and his orchestra from West Virginia played at both Lumina and the Oceanic, a rival hotel, entertaining with a mix of old favorites and new tunes. His offerings demonstrated the powerful influence of Tin Pan Alley at its height, including "It Had to Be You" (1924), "Old Man River" (1927), "Sweet Georgia Brown" (1925), "If You Knew Susie" (1925), and "Who's Sorry Now" (1923).

Dance bands continued to be central to Wrightsville Beach entertainment in the 1930s, and, like Grainger and Weidermeyer, most of these performers continued to be "territory bands," such as Hod Williams and His Orchestra and Jelly Leftwich and His Duke University Orchestra.[8] Sadly, research into these territory bands remains sparse. Hod Williams' very popular twelve-piece band, based in Charlotte, toured "the hotels, ballrooms, country clubs, night spots, summer dance pavilions, and other entertainment venues of the South during the 1930s."[9] He scored a 1937 hit with Lee David and John Redmond's (Cotton Club score writers) composition, "The Big Apple," ostensibly named for a popular dance originating at an African-American dance club in Columbia, South Carolina.[10] The dance was hugely popular nationally and at Carolina beach resorts that year.[11] "The Big Apple" was one of a handful of songs Williams recorded in August of that year in Charlotte, one of several locations used for field recordings by the major labels. Another song recorded in that session was Johnny Mercer and Richard Whiting's "Old King Cole." Let's listen to it now. Although the territory bands were the workhorses of the Carolina beach resorts, playing six nights per week at Lumina, for example, Wrightsville attracted national acts as well. In his autobiography, David Brinkley describes the magic of being fifteen years old and listening to Kenny Sargent of the Glen Gray Casa Loma Orchestra "driving the women crazy" with "Under a Blanket of Blue" in 1935.[12] Other big-name visitors of the era included Paul Whiteman, Guy Lombardo, and Tommy Dorsey.

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[7] Hall, 94-5.

[8] "'Shag' Night to be Featured at Lumina this Evening," *Wilmington Morning Star*, 16 August 1935; McAllister, 101; Hall, 145.

[9] Liner notes, *Tar Heel Jazz: Territory Jazz Bands Charlotte, North Carolina 1936-37*, IAJRC, 1993, compact disc.

[10] "Music: Big Apple," *Time*, 13 September 1937, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,770875-1,00.html, accessed 15 October 2009; "Big Apple Dance is Making Sweep in Dixie," *Charlotte News*, 1 August 1937.

[11] Advertisement, *Marion (S.C.) Star*, 4 August 1937; "It's 'Big Apple' Time at Myrtle Beach," *Myrtle Beach (S.C.) Sun News*, 22 July 1937, B1; advertisement, *Sumter (S.C.) Item*, 22 September 1937; "Myrtle Beach has a New Dance," *Charlotte News*, n.d.; "The Big Apple," *Song Hits Magazine*, February 1938.

[12] David Brinkley, *David Brinkley: 11 Presidents, 4 Wars, 22 Political Conventions, 1 Moon Landing, 3 Assassinations, 2000 Weeks of News and Other Stuff on Television and 18 Years of Growing Up in North Carolina* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 38-39.

Historian David Stowe, riffing on Ralph Ellison's assertion that American culture is "jazz shaped," asks whether it is possible to say that American culture ca. 1935-1945 was "swing shaped." His answer is yes. Not only was swing pervasive in popular music in a way that no musical influence was before or since, but the contradictions within swing – concerning race, politics, and gender – were the same ones that played out in larger society at the time.[13] And we can see a microcosm of these contradictions in Wrightsville Beach in the 1930s and 1940s.

Stowe and other historians highlight the fact that although the New Deal/swing era witnessed significant gains for African Americans, the gains were circumscribed by pervasive racism and unequal distribution of economic benefits. FDR had Mary McLeod Bethune and his black cabinet, but fear of antagonizing powerful southern congressmen, whose votes he needed for his economic reform measures, kept him from supporting the two major civil rights bills of the era: an anti-lynching bill and a bill to abolish the poll tax. Similarly, in 1941, the federal government employed 150,000 blacks, more than three times the number under the Hoover administration, yet the Agricultural Adjustment Act systematically displaced as many as 200,000 tenant farmers by giving subsidies to larger farm owners who cut production by reducing the acreage of their renters and sharecroppers, many of whom were black. And we see parallels in the world of music. African Americans, the musicians who had pioneered swing just as they had earlier forms of jazz, began to receive some rewards – pecuniary and otherwise – from the mainstream. For example, Benny Goodman began to form integrated small bands, white crowds went uptown, and black audiences were sometimes tolerated downtown. Conversely, certain avenues to success were closed to black artists. For example, radio stations invariably deferred to sponsors who didn't want their products associated with African-American performers. Black bands could tour, make and sell records, and even play white venues on occasion, but they would not benefit from the security of regular paycheck from a radio-show sponsor.[14]

Gains for blacks in a southern resort like Wrightsville Beach would be even more limited than those secured by northern blacks, for the beach town developed during a time of strict Jim Crow. In 1898, Wilmington experienced a race riot in which white Democrats terrorized the African-American community, destroyed the local black-owned *Wilmington Daily Record*, and engineered an overthrow of the local government by driving Republican officials – black and white – out of town. Upheavals followed throughout the state, as Democrats imposed a strict system of legal segregation that lasted until the 1960s. It is in this context that we must understand black activity at Wrightsville Beach.[15]

On Wrightsville Beach in the early twentieth century, blacks could swim only at a little-used northern extension. In 1917, African Americans petitioned to use the southern-most portion of the island for a Jim Crow pavilion and beach. Although some prominent whites endorsed the

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[13] David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 1-2.

[14] "Are Colored Bands Doomed as Big Money Makers?" *Downbeat* 1 December 1940, online archives, http://www.downbeat.com/default.asp?sect=stories&subsect=story_detail&sid=54, accessed 24 September 2009; Stowe, 122-3.

[15] Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 111-114.

idea, the proposal went nowhere. Then in the early 1920s, white developers caused a great stir by purchasing neighboring Shell Island, where they intended to create a "separate paradise" for blacks. Unlike some other southern resort areas of this era, including Jekyll Island, Georgia and St. Augustine, Florida, southerners developed Wrightsville Beach, and the bulk of the resort's clientele came from North Carolina and surrounding states. Thus Wrightsville entrepreneurs had to cater to southern racial mores. As Shell Island became a reality, local white newspapers carefully assured readers that Wrightsville Beach "remained white." Meanwhile, ferries took black patrons, mostly from Wilmington, to Shell Island, where they enjoyed a pavilion, private cottages, jazz performances, and the beach. But an African-American resort may have been too much for local whites to tolerate; in 1926, a series of unexplained fires plagued the island, entrepreneurs abandoned the project, and the "separate paradise" collapsed.[16]

Although African Americans were prohibited from swimming on most of Wrightsville Beach, blacks did live on the island; after all, white entrepreneurs and families needed a labor force. Individual families brought their African-American maids and nannies along to the beach for the summer. Nannies must have found their jobs nerve-wracking as they tended their young white charges at the beach. While the youngsters built sandcastles and played in the surf, black nannies could only wade into shallow water, their color barring them from swimming in the ocean.[17]

While white vacationers brought along their house servants, businesses on the island relied on two basic labor pools: white teenagers and African Americans. The teens, like David Brinkley, were happy to have summer work that gave them room and board at the beach, the ability to help their families, and/or some money to spend on their days off. In fact, working teens provided the core of the beach music enthusiasts of the 1940s and '50s. African Americans more than likely had less expendable income than their white counterparts at the resort and most certainly had fewer local venues at which to spend it. But they wanted to take advantage of the pleasures of the ocean water, and two nights per week, Lumina management allowed black employees to swim in the ocean in front of the resort.[18]

The first black musical labor arrived at Wrightsville Beach in 1932 when Don Redman and his Connie's Inn Orchestra regaled white audiences. Unsurprisingly, this color barrier was not broken at Lumina, the jewel of the island, but instead at the Seashore Hotel, a venue somewhat lower on the local food chain. Presumably the Seashore manager, a Floridian named Ralph Hartman, took on this risk in an effort to draw crowds from its larger competitors.[19] The next year Hartman opened the season with music by Chicago's Billie Bailey. We know that other black performers followed, including Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway, both of whom

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[16] McAllister, 67-72; Hall, 115-6.

[17] McAllister, 67.

[18] Block?

[19] McAllister, 98; Hall, 159.

played Lumina. These seemed to be the exceptions to the white rule, however, as white territory bands continued to supply the bulk of the talent on the island through the 1940s.

Swing continued to dominate the musical scene in Wilmington and Wrightsville Beach through the mid-forties as it did elsewhere in the country. Wilmington's economy benefitted from the war as it was home to the North Carolina Shipbuilding Company, and thousands of troops from all branches of the service stationed nearby.[20] On the beach and at the bases, locals and soldiers jitterbugged to the sounds of swing, although it more often came from record players and jukeboxes than from live bands.

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One scholar has suggested that the decline of big-band swing led young people at the beach to search for an alternative.[21] My working hypothesis is that this is only part of the answer. Generational change as well as transformations in technology and the music industry also had profound effects on musical output and tastes. Although jukeboxes began appearing in restaurants and nightclubs in the 1930s, they became much more common in the late 1940s. And it was much easier for bands to cross the color line in the segregated south via jukeboxes than in person. Additionally, the rise of black-oriented radio stations in the post-war era had a huge impact, exposing young whites to the emerging rhythm and blues of the era. Finally, young people wanted – as young people usually do – to define themselves through something other than the music to which their parents danced.[22]

[20] McAllister, 106-7.

[21] Frank Beacham, "Beach Music," in *South Carolina Encyclopedia*, ed. Walter Edgar (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007).

[22] Gilbert A. Williams, *Legendary Pioneers of Black Radio* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 1998), 1-28.