



For The **LOVE** OF MUSIC

The Notables bring the retro sounds
of swing to life in Central Oregon.

*by Laurel Brauns, for The Bulletin Special Projects
photos by Kevin Prieto*

Tom Foote

Americans want to dance again, and we're not talking about some new fangled moonwalk for millennials. Big band music of the 1920s, '30s and '40s is back in a big way.

Here in Central Oregon, The Notables, a band made up of more than 20 classical and jazz musicians, is bringing swing favorites back to life under the guidance of Seattle transplant and jazz aficionado Marvin Thomas.

"Our favorite gigs are where everyone is dancing," Thomas explained. "Then we know we have hit it just right with tune selection and tempos ... The band feeds off the enthusiasm of the crowd, and we always play better."

While the band has yet to capture the attention of Bend's younger set as swing has done in cities such as Seattle and Portland, the older set enjoy The Notables at venues including The Belfry in Sisters and Sunriver Resort's Great Hall, where they dance the night away to the enchanting notes of Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Glenn Miller.

Dancing venues offer a great outlet for the band's music, but Thomas said the musicians also love playing at the many local summer festivals. Whether they're at the Music on the Green in Redmond or the Picnic in the Park in Prineville or even at the Deschutes County Fair & Rodeo, the events give the band a chance to bring their audiences all the best music from the past.

Like almost all the members of the band, Thomas has been playing music since high school. He organized a swing band at a young age, joined a musician's union, and later ran a popular Seattle jazz club, all while paying the bills as a pharmacist by day. His son shared his passion for this style of music, eventually making his living from it and collecting hard-to-find swing music scores along the way.

With his son's collection of rare music scores in hand, Thomas moved to Bend 10 years ago, hoping to form a

music group. But, it wasn't until the right combination of musicians came together as an offshoot of the Cascade Horizon Band four years ago that a professional group became possible.

The Notables come from a surprising range of backgrounds, including two NASA engineers, a mail carrier, a chemistry teacher and an artificial limb manufacturer. What they share is a genuine appreciation for the music they create together and an understanding that they are part of something unique to Central Oregon.

Today many of the members consider The Notables to be one of the most important elements of their social lives and musical fulfillment.

"This music makes me happy. I love making other people so happy when they dance," said Karen Larson.

Larson played the trombone throughout high school and college, but put the instrument down for most of her adult life to raise a family. Joining The Notables gave her a reason to pick it up again. Today, she appreciates the difficulty and challenge of the band's repertoire. Outside of practice and shows, she enjoys the friendships that emerged through connecting with other band members, meeting some of the women from the trombone section for regular lunch dates.

Bob Shimek, one of the band's trumpet players who frequently takes the spotlight on solos, shares the sentiment that swing music is "happier." His children, ages 29 and 32, both dance regularly in the Seattle swing scene, and he's been playing in bands like The Notables for most of his life.

Shimek is not in it for the challenge, he said, but because he loves the music and working with Thomas.

"Marvin took something that did not exist before he got a hold of it and created it," Shimek said. "He sets a good example; he's a good leader with a good sense of humor. His priorities are

Cliff Robison



'It Don't Mean a Thing if it Ain't Got That Swing'

The sound of swing music transports listeners back to a time in American history before the Second World War and on through the 1950s. The style is named for the "swing feel" or emphasis on the offbeat (the "and" beat), as opposed to classical music, which holds to the "one-two-three-four" feel. The strong rhythm section creates the foundation for brass instruments such as trumpets and trombones, and wind instruments including saxophones and clarinets. Swing bands usually feature soloists (such as Louis Armstrong) who improvise over the melody. After WWII, pop vocalists took center stage in swing music and were lead by Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland and Ella Fitzgerald. Learn more about the genre by watching movies such as "Beyond the Sea" (2004) or "Swing Kids" (1993). Or better yet, put on your dancing shoes and catch the next gig by The Notables, Central Oregon's own swing band.

Visit www.thenotablesswingband.org for more information and a schedule of shows.

"I still get goose bumps when I hear the smooth sound of the band and realize I'm part of it."

Marvin Thomas



"We're a swing band made up of classical musicians," John Aklonis, a tenor sax player, explained. "Swing is a different language ... you read the same music, but you don't play it the same way. It has more to do with feel. Very few of us knew how to play this stuff, and Marvin taught us how to do it."

While the musical challenge and the bonds of friendship inspire The Notables members, they are also motivated by the causes their concerts benefit — 100 percent of proceeds from the concerts are dedicated to helping others, such as local veterans groups and music education programs for youth. From care packages for troops, to student tuition for band camp, the musicians know their songs are providing more than just a night out on the dance floor.

Aklonis always dreamed of playing in a band like The Notables and said the experience has been spectacular.

"We usually start each gig playing Glenn Miller's 'Moonlight Serenade,'" said Aklonis. "I still get goose bumps when I hear the smooth sound of the band and realize I'm part of it."

right. He's more interested in having fun than being perfect."

Shimek's mastery of the genre is the exception rather than the rule in The Notables. Many members, especially those with a classical background, struggled at first to understand the nuances of jazz and swing.

Saxophone player Karen Pagen went so far as to study jazz technique with local instructor Andy Warr.

"There are different accents on the notes, and a different feel ... I had to learn doodats," she explained.



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