

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



DORSEY BROTHERS

[This is the twelfth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

What entertainer got his first live national TV exposure, thanks to Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey? Hint: The Dorsey Brothers Stage Show at CBS Studio 50 in New York City on January 28, 1956. That night, Tommy introduced Cleveland disc jockey Bill Randle, who said to the audience: “We’d like at this time to introduce to you a young fellow who, like many performers, came out of nowhere to be an overnight star. We think tonight that he’s going to make television history for you. We’d like you to meet him now – Elvis Presley!” (Even jazz superstars can recognize talent in another genre.)

Tommy and older brother Jimmy were born and raised in Shenandoah, a small Pennsylvania coal town. Their parents gave, to both sons, their father’s middle name, Francis. The youths progressed musically under the watchful eye of their father, a music teacher, who reportedly hid their shoes so they couldn’t play outdoors. Both brothers started out playing the cornet, but fortunately gravitated to alto sax and clarinet (Jimmy) and trombone (Tommy). By their late teens, they were good enough to leave home and tour with several bands. Even with the Depression coming on, the Dorseys prospered because radio was rapidly expanding, the studios insisted on live music, and the brothers were true virtuosos and expert sight readers.

They began recording in 1928, using studio musicians, and formed their own band in early 1934. Their music, according to author Gunther Schuller, was “light, bouncy and airy,” and kept the arrangement as primary with solos and ad lib only incidental. At this point in time, that’s exactly what the public wanted. They also enjoyed having Glenn Miller as one of their arrangers. But the brothers’ union was short-lived. They often argued. Tommy was always driven by a quest for perfection, having no tolerance for others’ mistakes.



Jimmy, usually timid, could get Tommy’s goat quite easily, which he often did. In late May of 1935, at the famous Glen Island Casino, Tommy, conducting the band, counted off the tempo. Jimmy, as part of the sax section, called out something to the effect of “Isn’t that a little too fast? Let’s do it right or not at all.” Tommy obliged, shouting “All right. We won’t do it at all!” With that, Tommy walked off the stage, never to play again with Jimmy for the next 18 years.

Each achieved tremendous popularity on his own. Jimmy's dance band scored hit after hit, such as *Green Eyes* and *Tangerine*, with singers Helen O'Connell and Bob Eberly. Tommy's band featured soloists Bunny Berigan on trumpet, crooners Frank Sinatra and Jo Stafford, and even himself on trombone. Although we would think of his *I'm Getting Sentimental Over You* as his most popular song, his biggest hit was actually, in terms of sales, *I'll Never Smile Again*.

The swing band era began to die in the late 40s, as it became too expensive to book big bands for live shows. Even so, Tommy and Jimmy reunited in 1953, but the band lasted only until Tommy's death in 1956 (Jimmy, born a year before Tommy, died a year after Tommy in 1957). But before he passed away, Jimmy scored an unlikely Gold Record hit with his poignant song, *So Rare*, recorded 7 months before his death.

To enjoy their combined music once again, I recommend the April 24, 2012 CD *Presenting Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey*, available from Amazon (ASIN: B000002NWQ, Signature label). The CD contains twenty of their best tunes.

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com. See them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic