

Has Gary got the solution to Perth's big band problem?



■ CONSERVATORIUM'S THE PLACE FOR ALL THE JAZZ ACTION

■ THE CONSERVATORIUM is the focus for much interesting jazz activity these days. First off, on May 10, is a concert featuring two recent arrivals in Perth — British tenor saxophonist Danny Moss and American drummer Gary France, both of whom are working in the jazz department.

On June 10 the spotlight falls on the WA Youth Jazz Orchestra which finally made it to the TV screen recently in a programme for the Burrows Collection. WAYJO will top the bill in a concert entitled Youth in Jazz featuring jazz students and staff.

Meantime jazz department lecturer Wayne Senior is busy rehearsing his long-awaited jazz choir which will make its debut in a concert on May 26. But more of that later.

First, let's hear something of 29-year-old New Yorker Gary France who arrived here in February as the first artist-in-residence in the jazz department. Already his influence is being felt with the formation of yet another Conservatorium big band which contains several of the players who were members of the now defunct Lindsay Timms Jazz Orchestra (featured in this column — Vol 5. No. 1). The Timms band, in its turn, grew out of the first Con band, the leadership of which was not to the liking of some players. They went off and formed another band under the direction of trumpeter Timms, but this has now collapsed as well and Timms and the others are now back in the new Con band. As you can see, the jazz scene in Perth is a real merry-go-round!

One problem Lindsay never solved was his weak-link rhythm section, but the arrival of Gary France meant that at last Perth had a drummer who knew how to drive a big band. However, as an employee of the Conservatorium, Gary couldn't join Lindsay's band; hence the switch, although there were other reasons.

After all the traumas of recent months, the good news is that this band is beginning to settle down, and one reason could be that Gary is playing a prominent part in the running of it. It was at his suggestion that the band recently moved its rehearsals out of the Conservatorium and into a pub — the Bourbon and Beefsteak — in Fremantle.

Apparently, bands do this all the time in Texas where Gary was living before coming to Perth and it is popular with both the public, who gain an insight into the workings of a band, and with the musicians who are testing themselves out on an audience instead of just playing to four walls all the time.



Gary France ... the driving force behind the new Conservatorium Big Band.

Considering it's free, you'd think the place would be packed out every Wednesday — it isn't of course, but the audience is growing. Presumably, too, the management won't "sack" the band as they do with so many jazz gigs — after all they aren't paying them anything!

Gary, meanwhile, is relishing the opportunity to leave his mark on the Perth jazz scene. He got the job here at the invitation of Neil Slater, director of the North Texas State University One O'Clock Lab Band which came to Perth last July.

Neil learned that the Conservatorium was seeking an artist-in-residence for the jazz department and was asked if he could find somebody. Back home he put the proposition to Gary, a graduate teaching fellow who was in charge of another university lab band — the

Nine O'Clock!

The thought of spending a year in Perth, which Neil had described in such glowing terms, was irresistible and Gary's first thoughts after a few days here were: "Audiences listen more astutely than they do in the States, and musicians work extra hard to keep up with what is happening in the rest of the world."

Gary, who comes from a musical family — his father plays trumpet and his brother guitar — started on violin but quickly abandoned it for drums. In no time at all! Dad had his sons playing standards with him in the basement and this sparked Gary's interest in jazz.

After gaining a Bachelor of Music degree he went to live in Saratoga Springs — the summer home of the New York Ballet and the Philadelphia Orchestra. He played jazz gigs at

night and during the day ran a stereo store in which he became a partner.

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Gary bought an apartment block with the money he had made from the store — his intention was to set up his drums on the top floor and practice all day, then now and again pop out to collect rents from the tenants.

"Actually the building needed a lot doing to it," he said. "So in the year I had it I taught myself to be a handyman and I rewired and painted it. But I was getting bored not playing, so one day when I got a call to join a circus band I was off and I spent nine months on the road touring the country. Great experience."

He later sold the apartment block and used the money to pay for his studies at North Texas University for a Masters Degree in Music Performance. Here until the end of the year, Gary might return to America or if a permanent job comes up, he might apply — he likes the place so much.