

Norway's Mean Ensemble Pays Tribute to Raymond Scott

By Lynn Redmile

Don't Beat Your Wife (Every Night) is a dubiously-titled, attention-getting name for a show performed by The Mean Ensemble from Norway, and with the subtitle of *A Tribute to Raymond Scott (and the perfect world of commercials)*, it was certainly a harbinger of things to come. During a brief introduction in the Rose Nagelberg Theater at the Baruch Performing Arts Center, Manhattan on March 12, 2013 by Jeff E. Winner, operator of the Raymond Scott Archives, and Raymond's son Stan Warnow, the audience was asked how many were familiar with the work of Raymond Scott. When only a few responded, it seemed natural to wonder what attracted so many to attend! But wasn't it curiosity that caused Scott himself to compose as he did, inventing instruments and innovating recording techniques to create the sounds he imagined?

The Mean Ensemble acted and dramatized the sounds their instruments were making, smoked cigarettes, dressed the part and



The Mean Ensemble in performance at the Baruch Performing Arts Center, Manhattan on March 12, 2013.

Photo by Lynn Redmile.

Remembering a "Dream Job"

"Raymond Scott, an innovative composer and pianist, came to CBS to form a 'Dream Jazz Group' for the network. It was a dream to me to be chosen by him to join the group. Listen to this lineup: Billy Butterfield, Ben Webster, Charley Shavers, Hank D'Amico, Cozy Cole, Toots Mondello, Paul Ricci, Lou McGarrity, my old friend from the George Hall days, Johnny Guarneri, and so many others, that if I could remember them all it would make a super Who's Who list of the greatest names in jazz at the time.

The band played a daily half-hour show on the CBS network. The singer on the show was Frank Sinatra. Frank had just left the Dorsey band and was starting his climb to stardom. He didn't stay on the show very long. CBS gave him his first commercial radio half-hour show once a week. I even remember his first sponsor: 'Vimms Vitamins!'

— Guitarist Tony Mottola
My Life, unpublished memoir, 1991

even wore Buddy Holly-style spectacle frames (without the lenses) as though in a 1960s television studio — and with deep passion and precision, these Norwegians paid tribute to this prolific and maverick American composer and inventor. For comedic effect, and to reemphasize the time warp, the Mean Ensemble interspersed Scott's compositions with classic vintage commercials for products like Wrigleys, County Fair, Hostess Twinkies, Good Air, Light Works and Society National, all in subdued blue-grey light to simulate black and white film footage.

A band of highly skilled musicians, The Mean Ensemble jazz nonet is led by Harvard Lund (bass clarinet), with Oivind Nussle (violin), Johannes Skyberg (viola), Hans-Urban Andersson (cello/baritone sax), Hakan Henriksen (double bass), Arnfinn Bergrabb (percussion), Are Simonsen (electronium and guitar), Lasse Rossing (trumpet) and Ole Kristoffersen (clarinet). They fully embraced the challenge of recreating Scott's world — *Don't Beat Your Wife (every night)*, written and directed by Anders Alterskjaer Whist, and produced by Vibeke Forshaug and Musikk I Nordland, premiered in Norway in 2011 and the group gave their first USA performance in the Baruch Performing Arts Center, New York in March this year.

Scott created his pieces by ear — composing by humming phrases to his sidemen, and demonstrating riffs and rhythms. He allowed creative innovation while the piece was being developed, but once complete, he required strict adherence to the piece, with no

improvisation. He also demanded that his complex orchestral arrangements were memorized — and the Mean Ensemble did just that, playing without sheet music, apparently the only band to do this with the music since Scott’s own 1930s Quintette. Scott called his music style “descriptive jazz,” and the band brought every dimension of *New Year’s Eve in a Haunted House*, *Dinner Music for a Pack of Hungry Cannibals*, *In an 18th Century Drawing Room*, *War Dance for Indians* and others vividly to life, reproducing the compositions note-perfectly and physically demonstrating the scenes they thought Scott envisaged when he titled the pieces. Music director and bandleader Harvard Lund even reenacted Scott’s penchant for rigidly controlling the band’s repertoire and style.

No show honoring Scott would be complete without using his own creation, the Electronium, which Scott invented in 1949, operated in this show by Are Simonsen. It generates original music by means of random sequences of rhythms, timbres and tones. It isn’t a synthesizer as it has no keyboard but it undeniably paved the way for electronic compositions of the future.

Raymond Scott was a ground-breaker, leading the first racially-integrated radio band in 1942 when he was appointed music director for CBS (see sidebar). His musical creativity was sometimes negatively judged — his more popular works were often disdained as novelty music, and he alienated many jazz purists and critics with his lack of improvisation allowed during the performance of his pieces. Serious musical authorities dismissed his practice of adapting classical motifs in his pieces as “trivializing the classics” but none of this negativity was reflected by the Mean Ensemble’s audience who chuckled through the works, and loudly applauded at the end of each piece. At the conclusion of the show, more than one person could be heard asking when next show was, and expressing extreme disappointment when they discovered the group was returning to Norway the next day. Clearly, when next they visit, this is a band and show not to be missed. **J**

A New House for JHK



Joining ribbon cutting ceremonies are (l-r): Montclair Councilor Renee Baskerville, Montclair Deputy Mayor Robert Russo, JHK president/founder Melissa Walker, JHK board chairman Fred Smagorinsky (partially hidden), Mayor Robert Jackson, producer Tommy LiPuma, JHK artistic chair Christian McBride, Congressman Donald Payne, Jr., Councilor William Hurlock, Assemblyman Thomas Giblin (partially hidden) and Essex County Freeholder Brendan Gill. Photo by Richard Conde.

Jazz House Kids moved to a brand new 4,000 square foot facility of studios and offices in the heart of Montclair, New Jersey’s arts and music district at 347 Bloomfield Avenue. The new Jazz House provides year-round instruction for students of all ages and levels from more than 10 counties and 30 school districts across New Jersey. The organization also provides instruments and scholarship support for more than 30 percent of its student body.

More than 100 government officials, educators, musicians, supporters, students, friends and family came out to celebrate the official ribbon cutting on Friday, March 1. Montclair Mayor Robert Jackson officially cut the ribbon, with local dignitaries looking on. Attendees included JHK artistic chair Christian McBride, music producer Tommy LiPuma, jazz trumpeter Dominick Farinacci, Congressman Donald Payne, Jr., Assemblyman Thomas Giblin, State Senator Nia Gill, Essex County Freeholder Brendan Gill and representatives from the Montclair Township Council.

Mayor Jackson remarked that Jazz House Kids is leading the way for an arts/jazz hub not only for Montclair but the entire region. “I think the revival here says that we are on our way to making Montclair an even better arts mecca for the entire state of New Jersey,” he said.

For Melissa Walker, president and founder of Jazz House Kids and professional jazz vocalist, her dream of a Jazz House is finally a reality. What started as a straightforward idea — to open the window for students to understand, appreciate and apply jazz and its rich cultural and international legacy — has become a rich gathering place of musical talent and shared promise. Over the past decade, Jazz House Kids has become a highly regarded New Jersey arts education and performance organization, fostering a strong community of award-winning students, dedicated teachers and first-rate professional musicians. **J**