

# JAZZ NIGHT IN ELPHIN

*Peter Gordon*



IN A PREVIOUS treatise, I wrote about the showband era of the 1960s. At that time 650 bands plied their trade throughout the 32 counties. Music knows no boundaries. Every week people flocked to dance halls to see and hear their favourite bands. Not to go was just unthinkable. It was a ritual to go dancing at least once a week.

The recent passing of Terry Lightfoot, Clarinet player extraordinaire of the Terry Lightfoot and his Jazzmen Dixieland band reminded me of a great night in the Social Centre ballroom, Elphin in the 1960s. At that

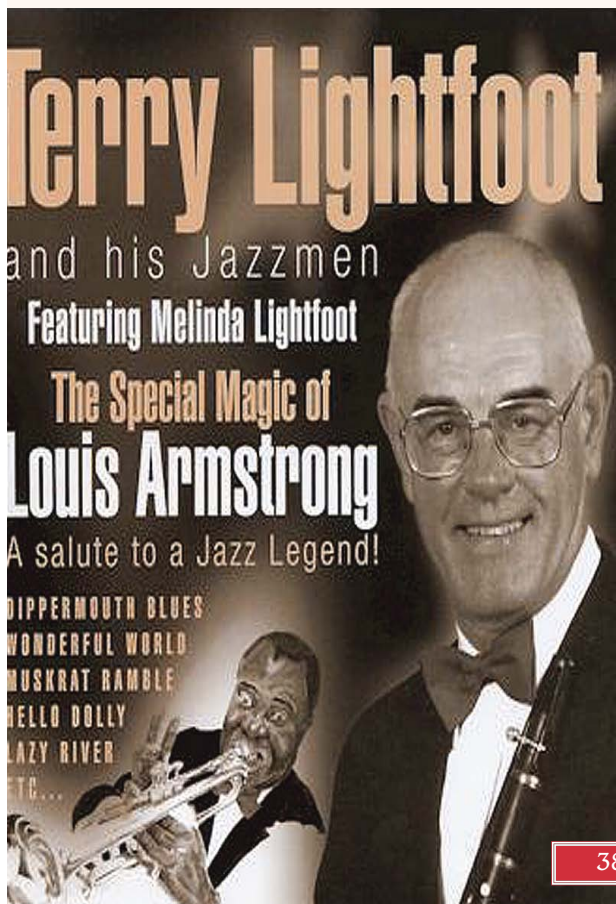


time there was a reciprocal arrangement between the Irish Federation of Musicians and the British Federation whereby a British band performing in Ireland had to have an Irish band

performing for half the session. The idea being that the Irish band would not lose the “gig” due to the visit of the British band. The Irish band booked to perform with Terry Lightfoot and his Jazzmen was the Savoy Swing Seven from Carrick on Shannon. Due to a mix up in the booking of the bands, a third band—the Savoy Aces from Kilkenny arrived at the venue. Instead of a two band, it morphed into a three band session.

■ SAVOY SWING SEVEN  
**Aidan Canning** *Trombone (d.1992)*  
**Mike Carroll** *Guitar/Banjo*  
**Jim Collum** *Vocals/Bass*  
**John Healey** *Leader/Trumpet*  
**Paddy Collum** *Drums*  
**Jimmy Shivnan** *Sax/Clarinet*  
**Christy Armstrong** *Piano*

The Savoy Swing Seven was easily the best Jazz band in Ireland and could compare favourably with the best in the world at that time, such as Chris Barber, Kenny Ball, Acker Bilk, Sid Phillips or indeed Terry Lightfoot. The personnel of the Savoy Swing Seven consisted of Roddy Gillen from Mohill on Banjo—like his father, a top class musician. The trumpet player was John Healy from Keadue. The sax player was Christy Armstrong from Carrick-on-Shannon, a noted multi-instrumentalist and music



teacher. On clarinet was Jimmy Shivanan from Arigna, Ireland's best, without shadow of doubt. On trombone was Aidan Canning from Ballinamore—another gifted musician in the top pantheon. On bass was Noel Morrison and on drums, Dominic Smith, both from Sligo.

The great Dixieland aficionados from Mohill and Carrick were in attendance on the night. These included such noted dancers such as Dick and Margaret Lawrence, Gerry O'Malley—more associated with his exploits in the slow waltz department, Vincie Crossan—a master of the quick step, Cyril McGovern—a doyen of the military two step and Gabriel Moran, the honours graduate of the Levinge academy of rock n'roll. However as these people are very versatile there were well able to hack the jazz dancing as practised on Bourbon Street and South Rampart Street, New Orleans. Wherever there is a gathering of Leitrim people, it is a sure guarantee that the craic will be well above the statutory ninety. Jazz night in Elphin was no exception.

After a great night of dancing, Terry Lightfoot and his Jazzmen and the Savoy Swing Seven musicians repaired to the bandroom for refreshments and discussion on the music scene. As I knew Roddy Gillen, Aidan Canning and Christy Armstrong very well, I decided to join them—masquerading as a musician.

After a few bevvies, Terry decided to give a masterclass. He started by playing a tune that nobody in that room had heard previously and stopped halfway, asking Jimmy Shivanan to use his imagination to play a hot chorus on the rest of the tune. Musicians call this exercise—wait for it—deep breath—extemporising on a theme. Jimmy did the extemporising without any bother as did the other members of the band, each giving their own interpretation of the piece. The music here was of a much higher standard than anything played in the ballroom. As Terry looked baffled, I asked him “What do you think of these lads?” Very excitedly he said “This country is out of sight, I cannot believe what I am hearing. I come to a small town in the West of Ireland and hear musicians as brilliant as these”.

What happened this elite group of musicians I hear you ask? A few theories have been put forward. In the 1960s most

bands played songs from the English Top 20, the Irish Top 10 and the American Top 20. Then along comes a Texas Messiah called Jim Reeves preaching the gospel of country music. He had eleven songs in the Irish Top 10 charts in the period 1962-1967. His influence and that of other country singers such as Larry Cunningham, Tommy Hands and Ray Lynam cannot be overstated. They found many “disciples” especially in rural Ireland. Secondly the Savoy Swing Seven was not marketed properly and the vast dancing populace was not aware of their talent.

Thomas Gray, 1716-1771, said it all in his poem:

ELEGY WRITTEN IN A  
COUNTRY CHURCHYARD  
*Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear  
Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen  
And waste its sweetness on the  
desert air*

