

Music links generations of freedom's defenders

I'm standing on the terrazzo of the Air Force Academy, behind a sound stage built for a cadets-only concert. Big Bad Voodoo Daddy is headlining; they're going through their sound check now. Once they're done, my band will try things out. We aren't scheduled to hit for another couple of hours, plenty of time to get it right.

As post-teenage male fantasies go, this one is pretty good. My band started out as a bunch of geeks with day jobs who just wanted to play. One thing led to another, and now we're watching Big Bad Voodoo Daddy do its sound check. The members run through "Mister Pinstripe Suit" and decide that's good enough. I'd have to agree, they sound fantastic.

I climb up the stairs and look around the terrazzo. This is a view of the academy that most people don't get to see. Over there's the famous chapel, behind us is the dining hall. Across from me in the distance, the American flag flies from a towering flagpole. At its base, a Wall of Honor, dedicated to academy graduates fallen in battle.

Flash back to another gig: Last New Year's Eve, Colorado Springs VFW Post. I'm sitting in with a big band this time, playing Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, Count Basie. Everyone on the dance floor is older than I am, but they move with effortless grace. I think of these men, some in their 80s, dancing with their sweethearts when these songs were new. One last fling, before shipping off to fight the Nazis. Many would not come back.

Watching the Greatest Generation dance to the music of a bygone era, I feel a strange mixture of pride and sadness. Pride at being part of the evening, being able to play such great music with such great people, but sadness at its passing. Something vital will have gone from the world if these songs, these memories are allowed to fade away. Something that the world desperately needs. Something good and true.

Cut to the present. We're all set up on stage and run through a couple of tunes. Thanks to the professionalism of Big Bad Voodoo Daddy's crew, we sound better than



OPINION

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ever and we're ready to go. We duck out for a bite to eat, come back a few minutes before our set begins, and hit the down beat at precisely 1800 hours.

Because it's a young audience, we play mostly funk and jazz, and those go pretty well. Cadets are polite but appreciative, and we're enjoying ourselves. We've even got gel spotlights that the crew flash on us in time to the music, despite never having heard our show before. Thanks guys, that's a nice touch.

But when we get to the swing tunes, I wonder how much a young audience really knows or cares. Two generations removed from the Big Band era, do kids today think it can mean something if it doesn't have that swing?

Our set flies by quickly. We head into our last song: Benny Goodman's "Sing, Sing, Sing," the swingin'est tune we've got. Our drummer, "Grandpa," pounds out the opening bars. Mike lays down the bass line, and James chimes in with some of Benny's original licks. Then something amazing happens.

As we kick into the chorus, cadets start dancing. Not just dancing, but swing dancing. Boys twirl their girls around and fling them high in the air, moving with the easy, syncopated grace that this music was made for. Watching this younger generation dance to the beat of an older one, there's an elegance and a sense of mutual attraction mixed with mutual respect that takes me back to New Year's Eve at the VFW lodge. Then further back, maybe 60 years or so.

And why not? These young people are the inheritors of that same tradition, those same values. It's their job to make sure that certain things don't pass from the world. Things that are good and true and right. Things like honor. Responsibility. Duty. Respect. Courage. Freedom.

I wasn't sure back on New Year's Eve, but now I know: All those things have got swing. They have to, because they mean a great deal. While America stands, they'll be around a long time.

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