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When jazz changed face of the Navy

BY HOWARD REICH

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They came from New York and Los Angeles and the South Side of Chicago, and though they may not have intended it, they were on the front lines of desegregating America -- years before anyone had heard of Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King Jr.

Moreover, they helped pry open a predominantly white institution -- the United States Navy -- simply by playing their horns and drums and bass fiddles.

Though nearly forgotten by history, the 5,000-plus black men who converged on the Great Lakes Naval Station near Waukegan, Ill., from 1942 to 1945, taught the Navy how to swing at a time when black culture was virtually banished from that branch of the military.

Now, 60 years after the first wave of African American musicians turned up at Great Lakes as part of a concerted federal effort to integrate the military, the old sailors will reconvene in Chicago and Waukegan next month to tell their stories and make music together again.

They're in their 70s and 80s now, but they're eager to get a chance -- however belated -- to point to an important era in American cultural history during a weekend's worth of commemorative events Feb. 28- March 2 at Great Lakes Naval Training Center and Symphony Center in downtown Chicago.

"I wouldn't say the public forgot what happened at Great Lakes -- they never really even knew about it in the first place," says octogenarian jazz trumpeter Clark Terry, one of many celebrated jazz artists to have emerged from "the Great Lakes experience," as the men called it.

Among Terry's famous brethren were such emerging stars as saxophonists Von Freeman and Ernie Wilkins, trombonist Al Grey, composer-arrangers Gerald Wilson and Luther Henderson, and bassist Major Holley.

"People need to understand this," Terry adds, "because you had 5,000 Rosa Parks doing something that no one thought was possible before it happened."

For most of the 1920s, blacks were explicitly restricted from entering the Navy. Thereafter, the strictly segregated Navy discouraged blacks from joining by relegating them to menial tasks and service positions in the separate branch called the Steward's Branch. In 1940, only 2.3% of the Navy's 170,000 personnel were black, and all but six were stewards and messmen -- or "seagoing bellhops," as the black press termed them.

It was President Franklin D. Roosevelt who suggested that the Navy "make a beginning" toward integration by placing "good Negro bands" aboard battleships, but the Navy bureaucracy resisted.

Roosevelt, pressured by the NAACP and his wife, Eleanor, would not relent, and on June 1, 1942, the Great Lakes Naval Training Center belatedly began accepting black volunteers under a new policy that allowed African Americans to serve in construction battalions, supply depot training and air stations, shore stations, section bases and yard crafts.



“It was a thing of mixed emotions,” says Terry, whose nascent trumpet virtuosity made him a leading figure among the young black artists at Great Lakes. “We had a great time making music, playing these beautiful arrangements that our own guys were writing for us, playing every morning for the raising of the colors and for all kinds of special functions in Chicago.

“But when you sat back and realized that you still were part of a very bigoted and prejudiced and biased nation, it took you aback.”

Certainly the new sailors could not easily ignore the pervasive racism of the period, considering that Great Lakes housed them in three camps designated for blacks only. And though the best of the musicians played on radio programs broadcast nationally from downtown Chicago and at large public concerts in Grant Park and Comiskey Park, they often felt cut off from the white population.

On purely musical terms, however, the young men knew that they were benefiting from the experience, if only because unknown, up-and-coming players found themselves seated next to some of the best players in the business -- many of them alums of bands led by Duke Ellington, Chick Webb, Jimmie Lunceford, Earl Hines, Fletcher Henderson and Jay McShann.

The social experiment that flowered at Great Lakes during the last three years of the war amounted to much more than a historical footnote. In many ways, the effects of this breakthrough rippled across the country, in part because most of the musicians who came through Great Lakes soon were shipped out again.

Terry and Great Lakes bandleader Len Bowden grouped the recruits into 25-piece bands that were dispatched to bases from Chapel Hill, N.C., to Corpus Christi, Texas. By performing free concerts in these cities -- at universities, high schools and civic centers -- the bands introduced large segments of the white population to a musical culture they otherwise might not have encountered.

“At the start of the war, a lot of people in America thought of Glenn Miller when they thought of swing music,” says Lt. Kevin Bissel, director of the Navy band at Great Lakes. “But the black musicians at Great Lakes changed that. They showed America where this music came from.”



Navy Music School, which had been acknowledged as one of the country's great training centers for musicians of all kinds, opened to black musicians.

And on July 26, 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed executive order 9981 integrating the U.S. military. By declaring that "there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin," Truman was ordering all branches of Armed Forces to cease making distinctions between black servicemen and their white counterparts.

"I believe that what happened at Great Lakes helped set the stage for Truman to go further in integrating the Armed Forces," says Samuel Floyd, founder of the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College Chicago and one of the first scholars to write on the Great Lakes bands, in the early 1970s.

Roughly three decades later, a once-lost chapter of black musical history is about to attain new prominence, thanks to the forthcoming concerts, seminars and a planned documentary film. By taking a leading role in organizing these activities, the Navy appears to be acknowledging its past and making amends.

"It's important that this story get out there," says Musician 1st Class Greg Dudzienski, leader of the Great Lakes Naval Jazz Ensemble. "I knew there was something significant that happened back in the '40s, but I didn't know specifically about it. Now I've learned what happened, and a lot of other people are going to, also."

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