Nat Gonella

Trumpet, singer, bandleader
Born: March 7, 1908 in London, England
Died: August 6, 1998 in Gosport, England

Armstrong Acolyte Was A UK Star

Nat (Nathaniel Charles) Gonella was one of the first British musicians to establish a major reputation as a jazz soloist. He became a household name in the decades between his emergence as a star in the 1930s and the end of the so-called Trad Boom in the early 1960s, and remained active in music until the end of his life. He straddled the perceived divide between art and commerce, becoming a hugely popular draw as well as occupying a pioneering role in the development of jazz in the UK.

His influence on a subsequent generation of British musicians, including Humphrey Lyttelton, Kenny Ball and Digby Fairweather, cannot be understated. His own style was based firmly in that of Louis Armstrong, beginning at a time when the New Orleans trumpeter was not yet universally recognised as the great jazz master he was in this country. Indeed, Gonella told the late Max Jones that he remembers he and his brother, the trumpeter 'Bruts' Gonella, trying to trip up departing members of the audience as they left during the infamous walk-outs when his hero played the London Palladium for the first time in 1932.

Gonella was born in a deprived area of East London, but had the opportunity to take up cornet while attending an institution for underprivileged children, St Mary's Guardian School in Islington. His first professional job arrived when, after a brief spell as a furrier's apprentice, he joined Archie Pitt's Busby Boy's Band in 1924, a junior pit orchestra and touring review band. He remained with the band until 1928, and it was during this period that he became acquainted with the early recordings of Louis Armstrong, and the New Orleans jazz style in general.

He transcribed Armstrong's solos and learned them by heart, and went on to develop his own individual variation on the style in time-honoured jazz fashion. He worked with Bob Bryden's Louisville Band for a time in 1928-9, and with pianist Archie Alexander in Brighton, then joined the Billy Cotton band at the end of 1929, a move which provided him with a more prominent platform, both on the concert stage and on radio, and allowed him to record his first jazz solos and vocal features. He played briefly with Roy Fox in 1931, and then joined Lew Stone the following year, where he really established his reputation.

He contrived to meet his idol when Armstrong visited London in 1932, by the expedient of begging the staff at Boosey and Hawkes's music shop to allow him to return Armstrong's trumpet, left at the shop for cleaning, to his hotel room. The American was initially amused to find such an ardent devotee, but appreciated his willingness to help, and the pair became good friends.

Gonella's standing grew even more quickly after the formation of his own band, The Georgians, in 1935. They took their name from Gonella's highly-popular version of "Georgia On My Mind", which he recorded for Lew Stone in 1932, and began as a featured band within Stone's shows, before setting up as an independent unit. Gonella formed his own big band, and quickly became a headline artist on the still-thriving variety circuit, and continued to top bills around the country until the outbreak of the war.

He took his band to Europe in those years as well, and played a number of dates in the US as a soloist with a pick-up band during a visit to New York in 1938, where he met up with Armstrong again, played a solo spot with Cab Calloway, and recorded alongside Benny Carter and Buster Bailey with the John Kirby Sextet.

He joined the army in 1941, and was recruited into the Stars in Battledress campaign, touring allied camps in Europe and North Africa. He reformed his band after the war, but the economic and musical climate was changing rapidly at that time. He flirted briefly with bebop, acknowledged that it was not for him, and returned to the variety stage during the Fifties, touring with the likes of the comedian Max Miller.

The revival of interest in traditional jazz in the late Fifties allowed him to reform his Georgians in 1960, and he was featurd on the television show This Is Your Life the following year, which in turn yielded an album, The Nat Gonella Story, modelled on Armstrong's A Musical Autobiography. All of this attention re-established Gonella as a major name, at least until the advent of The Beatles brought the trad jazz boom to a shuddering halt.

He moved to Lancashire in 1962, and toured regularly on the Northern club circuit until his alleged retirement on the occasion of his 65th birthday, on 7 March, 1973. That retirement did not last long. Drummer Ted Easton persuaded him to come to his club in Holland to play in the mid-70s, and a new recording of a song he had first cut with Roy Fox in 1931, "Oh, Monah", became a hit in Holland.

It was to be his final flourish on trumpet, but he continued to sing after moving to Gosport, Hampshire, in 1977, where a square was re-named in his honour in 1994, and was always happy to stand up and do so in a local pubs or at the Gosport Jazz Club.

Digby Fairweather's New Georgians paid tribute to Gonella's musical heritage in 1984, and Fairweather and fellow trumpeter Humphrey Lyttelton co-hosted a television tribute, Fifty Years of Nat Gonella, the following year, in which Gonella himself was an enthusiastic participant. He continued to sing occasionally with various bands, and made the headlines again in 1997 when a sampled excerpt of his trumpet playing from a recording he made in 1932 was used in White Town's number one pop hit, "Your Woman".

Gonella was a down to earth and unassuming character, and remained so throughout his life. Humphrey Lyttelton is among those who have testified to the fact that fame and success sat easily on his shoulders, and reports that he would show genuinely astonishment (rather than false modesty) when Lyttelton would confess -- as he regularly did -- to Gonella having been his first jazz hero.

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