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Billy Novick brings 'The Great Gatsby' to Amazing Things tonight

By Ed Symkus/STAFF

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FRAMINGHAM

Billy Novick first picked up a clarinet when he was in fourth grade. It was a hand-me-down from his older brother, who had switched over to bassoon, and the younger Novick took to it. A few years later, he could be found regularly haunting record shops, buying and digging music by jazz greats Jellyroll Morton, Louis Armstrong, Johnny Dodds, and Sidney Bechet.

"But I was also into Coltrane and Bird and Albert Ayler and far-out jazz and rock and blues and pretty much everything," said Novick by phone from his home in Lexington.

That was in the mid-'60s, and within a few years of that time, he was also playing saxophones and penny whistle, moved from New York to Boston, spent a year at Berklee College, then stepped out into the local jazz and blues scene.

He's still there. His upcoming MetroWest gigs over the next few weeks include Billy Novick's Blue Syncopators at the Amazing Things Arts Center on Jan. 25, Guy Van Duser and Billy Novick at the Sherborn Inn on Feb. 12, and the New Black Eagle Jazz Band, also at the Sherborn Inn, on Feb. 14.

If playing all of the time wasn't enough (he says that he's "down to" around 200 gigs a year these days), Novick is also a busy composer and arranger. That part of his career started a long time ago.

"When I was about 14 I thought I was going to be a composer," he said. "That's what I wanted to be, even more than a musician. It was something about the grandness and permanence of it that appealed to me."

He laughed lightly at that memory, then added, "I've always been writing.

Some of the bands I was in in the '70s did my tunes – both fusion and straight ahead jazz. I also played for modern dance classes a lot, where you just improvised the entire time. For each segment of the class I'd come up with a different melody, then improvise on that and put it into a musical form. So in the course of a class I may have 'written' eight tunes in all different styles and moods."

The film composer Mason Daring, a friend of Novick's for many years, once needed someone to write a detective theme for him, so asked Novick to give it a try, which eventually led to arranging and writing for close to 40 films, many of them for director John Sayles.

"There might have been a few parts that were out of Mason's realm of compositional knowledge," said Novick. "So he had a stable of three or four people working with him. I did his jazz and ethnic music stuff."

Novick was also a member of the David Bromberg Band for a few years in the mid-'70s, started his still-going-strong duet gigs with guitarist Guy Van Duser in 1976, and joined the New Black Eagles in 1986.

"I mostly stick to alto and soprano saxes at this point," he said. "But I've also played tenor and baritone, mostly on recording sessions. Sometimes if a whole horn section is needed, they'll hire me to put down all four sax parts.

"But I've really sort of restricted myself to certain types of music now," he added. "One of the things I felt, when I was in my 30s, is that I was just spread too thin, and at some point I wanted to play the music that I do best – that's the jazz stuff. So these days I play traditional jazz with the Black Eagles, 1920s jazz with the Syncopators, more modern stuff with various duos and trios, and Guy and I have our own take on things."

Not busy enough? A few years ago, one of his students – yes, he also teaches clarinet – 80-year-old Mort Speck, casually mentioned that his son, the conductor Scott Speck, had asked him what the typical instrumentation would be for a 1920s big band. Mort sent the note along to Novick, who sent along some different combinations directly to Scott.

"As a kind of joke, I also mentioned that if he needed an arranger for whatever the project was, I was available," recalled Novick. "Scott wrote back and said the Washington Ballet hopes to do a performance of 'The Great Gatsby.' Are you interested? And that was it. He hooked me up with the choreographer, Septime Webre."

The ballet premiered at the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater in Washington in February, 2010, with Novick leading his own band, playing Novick's score consisting of transcriptions of music by Duke Ellington, Bix Beiderbecke, and other composers of the 1920s; some public domain tunes that Novick rearranged, "sometimes pretty dramatically"; and some original music.

The show, with Novick's group, also went out on the road, and he's since

been hired, again by the Washington Ballet, and again working with Webre, to score another novel-to-ballet, "The Sun Also Rises," with a world premiere set for this May.

Novick refers to the Blue Syncopators, playing at Amazing Things next Friday, as "the 'Gatsby' band. It's seven of us plus a singer, and we largely do the 'Gatsby' score, which hangs together really nicely as a piece of themed music."

Looking back on his remarkable career, Novick, thinking out loud, suddenly sounded a bit stunned.

"I didn't think I was all that good," he said. "I was persistent, and I always had a good ear, and a sense of what to do. But all this stuff that's happened is unbelievable. Sometimes I think, well, maybe they couldn't get anybody else, so they got me instead."

WHEN: Friday, Jan. 25, 8 p.m.

WHERE: Amazing Things Arts Center, 160 Hollis St., Framingham

TICKETS: \$18/\$17 students and seniors

INFO: 508-405-2787, www.amazingthings.org