

Nashville "City Paper"

Swing duo brings dynamic musical blend to Country Music Hall of Fame

By Ron Wynn

January 11, 2002

Guitarist Guy Van Duser and clarinetist Billy Novick have been playing a wildly eclectic classic kind of music with a touch of contemporary jazz for almost 26 years. They're both extremely knowledgeable about a wealth of vintage American music idioms, and the duo brings its distinctive sound to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum's Ford Theater tonight for a 7:30 show.

"We will celebrate our 26th anniversary together on Valentine's Day, which doesn't bother us too much until people recognize us on stage and say we've been playing more than a quarter of a century," Van Duser said. "One thing that's funny is that we met for the first time doing something totally different than what we're doing now. Billy was playing with some avant-garde group, doing all kinds of squeaks and squawks. I was working with a modern dance group. He was across the hall at this arena, and he had his clarinet on the stand. I just walked up to him and asked him if he knew "Rose Room." Things kind of just took off from there."

Today Van Duser and Novick are highly successful and acclaimed performers both as a duo and as individual composers. Billed as "The Two-Man Big Band," they've made frequent appearances on National Public Radio's Prairie Home Companion show and issued seven recordings including their current release *One Lovely Sunday Afternoon* (Daring/Rounder).

"My parents were married on a Sunday afternoon many years ago," Van Duser said. "My father was a lyricist and my mother a pianist, and they had all these old songs stored away at their house. I found the lyrics for this song, which dates back to the late-'40s but had never been performed. We put it on the album, both as a commemoration and because it's a great song."

Van Duser and Novick's music synthesizes and recreates multiple idioms, among them ragtime, traditional New Orleans, "hot" jazz from the '20s, and '30s big band hits and classics.

"We can do pretty much anything right up to the mid-'40s and bebop; that's our cutoff point," Van Duser said.

Novick's toured with both Leon Redbone and Martha & The Vandellas, and is a spirited, dashing clarinet soloist. Van Duser calls his approach "stride guitar." He blends finger-picking techniques with the influence of stride and swing piano, offering flashy solos with both exciting, aggressive lead ideas and equally adventurous supporting rhythms and accompanying phrases. Van Duser

also has a strong Nashville connection. He numbers the late genius guitarist, bandleader and producer Chet Atkins as both an influence and friend.

“One of the things that Chet Atkins had heard about me was that I could do Sousa marches on the guitar,” Van Duser commented. “We became friends, and he asked me to teach him how to play ‘Stars and Stripes’ on the guitar. He was a phenomenal guitarist and a great man and friend.”

Van Duser and Novick have become prolific television and documentary soundtrack composers in recent years. Van Duser works for Disney’s World of English division, composing songs that are used for English as a second language teaching guides dispensed throughout Japan and Taiwan. Novick has contributed to several PBS soundtracks.

“We’re very fortunate in that we don’t have to stay on the road just to make a living,” Van Duser said. “We normally do about three or four gigs a month, and we might not see each other for a couple of weeks. Then we get together, the music is fresh, and we’re happy to play with each other again.”

For those who ask why a swing jazz duo would be playing at the Country Music Hall of Fame, Van Duser says there’s a logical connection and link between all American music forms.

“Well, for one thing, we can do the Texas swing type stuff as well. For another, if you ever heard Chet Atkins, he covered all the bases and brought them together. Classic swing and hot jazz certainly shares things with Texas swing, and the finger-picking guitar style has definite country roots and connections. So I think the people who love good music and enjoy country will certainly like what we do.”

Guitarist Guy Van Duser and clarinetist Billy Novick, The Two-Man Big Band, will appear tonight at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum’s Ford Theater. Guitarist and former museum staffer John Knowles will be the opening act and also perform with Van Duser and Novick. Tickets are \$12.50 for the general public and \$10 for museum members. Call 416-2096 for reservations.