

Lord-Warner's <u>Pitch a Boogie Woogie</u>, made in Greenville, N.C. in 1947, premiered there on January 26, 1948 in the Plaza Theater on Albemarle Street. "That theater was a wild and crazy place," recalled **Beatrice Atkinson**, whose rolling pin can be confused for three of the pops you'll hear in the title "Jam." "They were having fits, clapping and screaming. Everybody loved it. For a long time I'd hear people say, 'Hey, there goes that girl that hit them men on the head with the rolling pin.'"

Despite its great local success, Pitch never showed but in a few black audience theaters in the Carolinas, and Lord-Warner folded in 1949. John Warner went to work for a local television station, and his brother, William Lord (who'd changed his name from Walter when he first left their Washington, N.C. home in the 20s for Broadway) returned to New York. After retirement, Warner bought the Roxy Theater across the street from where his Plaza had stood, and he sometimes showed Pitch there before he died in 1970. Lord returned to North Carolina in the 60s and died in Tarboro in 1981.

In 1975, Greenville musician Bill Shepherd found the forgotten reels of Pitch in the abandoned Roxy. In 1985, the American Film Institute restored it from its original 35mm nitrate, and on February 8, 1986, it repremiered on the East Carolina University campus before 500 fans, in its first showing to an integrated audience. Highlighting the evening was a reunion jam with the Rhythm Vets.

In <u>Pitch</u>, what you see is seldom what you hear, for the movie was made with a band on-camera, Den Dunning's Orchestra, but the sound is by Charles Woods and his Rhythm Vets.

Dunning's band was from the Winstead Mighty Minstrels of Fayetteville, who also provided a dance revue. The Minstrels, begun by Thomas Store Winstead in 1931, toured the eastern U.S. until 1956. Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters and Pigmeat Markham all played with them for brief times. "Bessie was making \$700 a week from us, 5% of the gate, right before she was killed," remembered Mattie Sloan, who was with the troupe "from the day my husband got Mr. Winstead out of prison (for bootlegging) in Raleigh, October 1931."

But for several reasons, Warner booked the Rhythm Vets from Greensboro. They'd all returned to college at N.C. A&T, from WWII service in both the U.S. Navy B-1 Band and the Great Lakes Experience, the Navy's first experiments to integrate its general ranks. The instrumental soundtrack was recorded on July 29, 1947, when the Vets did "mostly headwork," one member recalled, as they watched singers and dancers on the clips of film Warner showed them, for most of that night and the next morning. Matching the steps of the dancers Warner had assembled, with their Lindy hopping and eccentric tap dancing, presented a strong and often frustrating challenge. "That was all right, though," another Vet remembered. "We started getting overtime about 2 a.m."

Since the Vets had sheet music for the five original songs penned by William Lord, synching up with the vocalists wasn't as difficult. "That was one of the reasons Mr. Warner hired us," remembered Thomas Gavin, alto sax, "so we could read those sheets. He had the first tape recorder we'd ever seen, a big cabinet thing." Gavin, a retired teacher, has been playing jazz professionally with the Paul Reichle Trio in Fayetteville for the past 19 years.

Pianist Carl Foster, retired cultural arts director for Greensboro City Schools, wasn't the regular Vets pianist in '47, but he'd played with several of them at the Artists' Guild, a legendary after-hours spot in Greensboro that in the post-war years attracted many of the jazz greats for jam sessions. "Coltrane was just a kid when he came through," he said. "There were so many of them that came in wanting to jam, and we had this trick to keep them thinned out. 'Cherokee' is a difficult tune, especially the bridge, in B flat, and we had 10-12 tenors waiting. It was Guy, Woods and me, and all these trumpet players and sax players waiting to jam. So we changed the key to B. Coltrane stumbled on his solo and put his horn down."

Retired Rocky Mount band director Charles Woods always drove to the band's gigs so he could carry his bass, the same one he brought for the reunion jam. "We were racing up to Greenville," he recalled. "They had this one-lane bridge on 98 and Gavin pulled out to pass me. We were side-by-side going across it. Sometimes I don't know how we survived those days." He admitted that it wasn't really 'his' band; he'd booked the gig and Warner liked having the band 'belong' to someone.

Drummer Jehovah Guy, from Greensboro, remembered, "Once when we were doing the recording we noticed we were missing Lou. He has asthma and he thought walking was good for it, so he'd gone for a walk, must've been about dawn. We found him sitting on a bench in the park."

Raymond Pettiford, tenor sax, taught at Palmer Institute till it closed. "We shot about three scenes live there, one with Tabu (the others probably with Greenville residents Joe Little, and the Melodiers)." Like several other Vets, he had his chances to extend his professional music career on the road. "I started out with a medicine show while I was in high school. After school, I'd ride up to Reidsville, High Point, maybe Thomasville. While I was young, that was all right, but I got married, started a family, and that seemed more important."

Lou Donaldson, pernaps remembering his reputation in North Carolina as a walker, titled one of his several Blue Note albums "Blues Walk." He's made nearly 20 on different labels since his first sessions with Charlie Parker, Sonny Stitt, Horace Silver, and Art Blakey. "I think I was playing clarinet," he said when I first called him about the movie he'd long since forgotten, and never seen or heard. "Gavin says it's your alto on the solo at the end," I said. "Gavin knows," he admitted. As I drove him back to the Kinston airport after the reunion jam, he apologized for the cold he had. Without it: "I'd have sung the blues last night. That would've tore the place down."

Dr. Richard Jones, still a music professor at Fayetteville State U., learned trombone because he wanted to march in the front of his high school band. He's since played with Dionne Warwick, the Temptations, the Dells, Roberta Flack and Nancy Wilson.

Since 1947 band director at N.C. A&T U., trumpeter Walter Carlson couldn't help but be a little critical of the Vets' job on the soundtrack when he became the first, in 1985, to hear what they'd finished in '47. "I rememberd the riffs more than I did the songs, especially the brass and reeds. We had a 9-piece band, see, and we sounded pretty full usually, but there are a few places where this sounds kind of light. Maybe it's not us?"

Otto Harris, trumpet, died in January, 1986. After a long career in education, he was nearing completion of his doctorate degree.



Beatrice Atkinson with her rolling pin, and co-stars Foreman (1) and Forbes.

Herman Forbes, co-star "Bill" ("A Swell Boogie"), a retired elementary teacher, won N.C.'s Teacher of the Year award in 1975. No longer a boogie pianist, he's a church organist in High Point.

Tom Foreman, co-star "Tom," was a community leader in Greenville until his death in 1978. Miss Atkinson retired from the ECU library in 1985.

Tabu Mike ("And Even More"), from Steubenville, Ohio, transferred from A&T to play football at UCLA, then professionally in Canada, before making several records in Detroit in the 50s. He died in the mid-60s.

Joe Little ("Te Quiero") is now the Rev. Dr. Little at Cherry Noah's Ark's Holiness Church, Newark, N.J.

The Melodiers ("I Heard You Say") were James and Mary Clark, Joe Little, and Herman Walters. Walters died in Greenville several years ago; the Clarks were last heard from in Philadelphia.

Rosa Burrell ("Veni, Vedi, Venci") and Evelyn Whorton ("Pitch a Boogie Woogie") were with Irvin C. Miller's Brown Skin Models, begun by Miller in Harlem in 1924. The stomping, shouting Lindy hoppers on Miss Burrell's song are The Count and Harriet, also with the Models. All the applause is provided by extras Warner employed for audience shots.

The A.F.I. successfully restored Pitch despite a virtually inaudible soundtrack when it was found. After a thorough cleaning, the soundtrack was resynched and major gain problems were rectified by Ralph Sargeant at Film Tech Corporation in Hollywood. Audio Arts' Lewis Gidley separated the track from a 16mm reference print and performed some minor miracles with his editing and further improvement in gain levels. Still, some of the problems of age and wear to the film couldn't be helped, and there are a few pops at bad splices (as well as some rolling pin licks applied to the co-stars' heads).

--Alex Albright

(cover) 1 of 8 promo posters. Both top corners are of the Models; bottom left is the Melodiers; bottom right is Cleophus Lyons, tap dancer.

(back cover) The Vets, in Greensboro radio station WBIG in 1949, were (1 to r): Guy, Pettiford, Jones, Harris, Gavin, Clarence Yours, Carlson, Jatha Coward, and Winston Childs.



The soundtrack Vets, reunited for the re-premiere in 1986, (1 to r): Guy, Foster, Woods, Gavin, Donaldson, their friend and Navy buddy Abe Thurman from Beaufort, N.C., Carlson, and Jones.

