

Red Bog PANGMAN, Alex

IT DON'T MEAN A THING IF IT DON'T HAVE THAT (BELATED) SWING

JAZZ SINGER ALEX PANGMAN HAS A SONG IN HER HEART FOR CONNEE BOSWELL, SAYS JOHN STEWART



JOHN STEWART
Column

Musicians love to honour those who first inspired them to sing, compose or write lyrics.

Erin Mills-raised jazz singer Alex Pangman - part singer, part researcher, part archivist and full-time proselytizer for the swing music of the '20s and '30s - was drawn to the Boswell Sisters when she first heard the New Orleans siblings.

They "permanently influenced the course of their art from" according to the great jazz critic Will Friedwald. Fellow critic Gary Giddins called the Boswells, "jazz's answer to the Bronte sisters."

The hallmark of the group was not only the higher plane of rhythm and harmony that common genes engender but a risk-taking style featuring the indelible lead voice of Connie Boswell.

The group became so popular Connie changed her spelling to Connee to avoid cramps from "dotting the i" for so many admiring servicemen seeking autographs.

Pangman has done more than just pen an ode to her muse, she's recorded an unpublished song Boswell wrote a very long time ago.

It was "sitting in a drawer" until discovered by Boswell's grandniece. Pang-

man opened her mail one day to find an unexpected gift from the past, the sheet music to a bouncy little number called "If I Don't Mean It." Boswell's relative also sent her a pair of red gloves the singer once wore. On Boswell's birthday, Dec. 3, Pangman released the single.

"It's a cheerful earful" says Pangman, sounding very much like a disc jockey of past eras, appropriately enough since she now hosts jazzcast.ca's "Swing Set" program.

"The song was written in the dirty 30s and was meant to lighten the load of a pretty rotten time. It's a lovely bit of distraction. The world needs more happy, gentle songs. It's a nice antidote to what was going on then - and what's going on now."

Pangman's an unabashed admirer of Boswell's serial innovation.

When her sisters wanted to destroy an angry letter from a radio listener complaining that Connee's avant-garde approach disrespected beat, lyrics, rhythm and time (he deemed them "Savage Chanters") the singer insisted on keeping it. She appreciated the backhanded compliment.

No less an authority than Ella Fitzgerald said, "one singer influenced me. I tried to sing like her all the time because everything she did made sense musically. That singer was Con-

nee Boswell."

Pangman admires her earthy tone and liberating approach. "When given her rein, she'd back-phrase and syncopate the melody. It's absolutely stunning and quite original. She's a treasure to American music."

The two singers also have health challenges in common. Boswell contracted polio at age three and was in a wheelchair. While two double-lung transplants as a result of cystic fibrosis haven't slowed the swing in Pangman's step, or voice.

She points out that her No. 1 Connie, after Boswell and country singer Connie Smith, is her mother, who still lives in Mississauga.

The Mississauga Music Walk of Fame inductee doesn't expect a Connee Boswell revival. She wants to recognize a mostly-forgotten pioneer of jazz and swing. "I just hope this will bring her name to more people's lips."

And a swing in their step when they hear her sing.

John Stewart is a retired longtime journalist with the Mississauga News. His column, My Back Pages, appears each week.

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