

THE FIRST LATVIAN JAZZ MUSICIANS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE LATER DEVELOPMENT OF JAZZ IN LATVIA

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The article is dedicated to the first Latvian jazz musicians – Voldemārs Lācis, Oskars Saulespurēns, Jack Michalitzky, Eduards Ābelskalns – and their role in Latvian jazz history. The purpose of the paper is to examine the activities of these jazz musicians – the course of their lives, their creative activity in the 1930s, and their impact on the further development of Latvian jazz in the 1940s and later. The article is based on archive materials, video sources, interviews and press materials, and collections of Latvian National Museum of Literature and Music.

Keywords: jazz, jazz history, jazz musicians, Latvia, Latvian jazz history, shellac records.

When it comes to Latvian jazz musicians in the period up to the summer of 1940, there are still many unknowns. The details of many musicians' biographies are known, yet their activities have not been studied in depth. Publicly available information about these musicians is very fragmented, sporadic and difficult to find. The only exception seems to be the 2020 documentary film *On piano – Jack Michalicky! The first known Latvian jazz pianist (Pie klavierēm – Džek Michalicky. Pirmais zināmais Latvijas džeza pianists)*, which can be viewed on Youtube, but it is not a scientific study.¹

The question of the fate of the first jazz musicians after the 1940 occupation, and in the following political and historical collisions, is particularly compelling. Of course, it was a very difficult time for a large number of musicians, often with a very harsh outcome. However, not for everyone.

After the publishing of my monograph *History of Latvian Jazz 1922–1940*, I focused more on the research of later periods and events in the history of Latvian jazz. Surprisingly, and somewhat unexpectedly, in the process of research previously unknown information about Latvian jazz pioneers appeared. The information is not complete and research needs to be continued. However, it is important to take a look at Latvia's first jazz musicians and their impact on the Latvian jazz development in later years one more time.

The following article focuses on some of the most important jazz musicians in Latvia and their fate during World War II and the subsequent occupation of the USSR. It is important to note that a very large proportion of Latvian pre-war jazz musicians emigrated after the war or were killed during the war. Such a fate, for example, was in the face of most Jewish musicians who made up a large part of the Latvian jazz players up to 1940. Therefore, only a small number of pre-war jazz musicians survived and stayed in post-war Latvia.

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fB0pssfA4K0&list=PLPoGddOgVifoolmaUNwV1aV6qVIreY_CD

1. Some new testimonies about 20th century interwar jazz musicians in Riga

Jack Michalicky, whose life ended in 1941, was once considered the best jazz pianist in Latvia (his real name was Solomon Shlomo, in Latvian Solomons Šloma, 1908–1941). Despite his short and very tragic fate (he died in the very first days of the Nazi German occupation), Michalicky's fame as a jazz pianist was legendary at the time, therefore, he can be deservedly considered as one of the most important first Latvian jazz musicians.

A short biography² – born in Smolensk, Michalicky studied for a short time in Paris with the famous pianist – professor Isidor Philipp.³ After returning to Latvia in 1931, he played in practically all the leading Latvian jazz orchestras – in the *Šmits'– Krēmers' orchestra* in 1933, in the Mischa Alyansky orchestra in 1936 (*Segodnā Večerom*, 18.08.1936, 6), and in many others. In 1939, Michalicky led his own small big band at the “Lido” restaurant in Jūrmala. The enthusiastic memories of his contemporaries about the concert performance of this orchestra have been well preserved. As one of the best orchestras, Michalicky's band also accompanied foreign guest artists who regularly visited Jūrmala's entertainment venues (*Jaunākās Ziņas*, 04.07.1939).

It is no coincidence that several other leading jazz musicians of the time (discussed below) were also members of the orchestra – Oskars Saulespurēns – alto saxophone, Voldemārs Lācis – trumpet and Verners Troics – drums.

The recordings of the *Bar Trio* created by Michalicky, Saulespurēns and Troics are among the best examples of early Latvian jazz. In total, 11 compositions were recorded, presumably in the fall of 1940 (LNA LVKFFDA, BE, matrix Nr. 5024–5029, record nr. 3942, 3943, 3944). It is Michalicky's characteristic, intelligent stride piano playing style, restrained phrasing and nice, light swinging rhythm that are the qualities that both contemporaries and colleagues valued the most. Michalicky was definitely one of the best Latvian jazz musicians of that time and undoubtedly also a role model for later Latvian jazz pianists (Freimane, interview as of 11.12.2009; Bērtiņš interview as of 21.07.2012).

As mentioned above, in 2020, the music publishing house *Jersika Records* created the documentary film *On piano – Jack Michalicky! The first known Latvian jazz pianist*. Here, a big thank you must be given to the head of the publishing house, Mareks Ameriks (1980), whose search in the Kino-Phono-Photo-document Archive has also brought such extremely interesting discoveries as this short fragment of silent cinema, dating from around the beginning of the 1930s, which shows a ball in Riga – dancers and a jazz orchestra (LNA LVKFFDA, F51, Doc. Nr. 497).

The most interesting things are the visible musical instruments – especially the drum set. In a short clip, the foot or bass drum pedal is also clearly visible; something which could possibly serve as a date. The video clearly shows the drummer's playing

2 Hereinafter the biographical facts of the musicians are taken from the monograph *History of Latvian Jazz 1922–1940*, generally based on collection of the National Museum of Literature and Music – the catalog of musicians' biographies, as well as the collection of Elmārs Zemovičs.

3 *Isidor Philipp* (1893–1934), pianist, piano professor at the Paris Conservatory.

technique – inking the cymbal with his hand – widely used by jazz drummers at that time and sometimes still today.

2. Continuation of the activities of certain jazz musicians in Latvia during the Soviet Occupation

As for the most important Latvian jazz musicians of the interwar period, we should mention the trumpeter **Voldemārs Lācis** (1909–1985), who played actively until the 1950s, the vibraphonist Eduards Ābelškalns and the aforementioned saxophonist Oskars Saulespurēns and drummer Verners Troics.

The Lācis' archive has been preserved in the collection of the Museum of Literature and Music (Voldemārs Lācis' collection). It contains the jazz magazines *Metronome* and *Melody Maker*, sheet music, instrument catalogs, and correspondence with foreign publishing houses. These materials show that Voldemārs Lācis corresponded intensively with several foreign music publishers, from whom he ordered sheet music, sometimes from even as far away as Australia. They are proof of his awareness of global developments in jazz and that he certainly served as a source of information for his fellow musicians.

Lācis was a member of the Belgian Jazz Club, so he was well informed about jazz developments in the world and Europe. There was even a correspondence between Lācis and the legendary trumpeter Louis Armstrong. A unique fact; although, unfortunately, these letters are now lost (Zemovičs, interview 10.10.2008).

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Lācis played in the best popular music orchestras of the 1930s (Teodors Kaiser's orchestra in 1931, Y.M.C.A. orchestra in 1932 and 1933, Herberts Šmit's orchestra in 1933, Valentins Janson's orchestra in the late 1930s, Jack Michalicky's orchestra in 1939, and soon after the end of the Second World War in Benjamin Chuzhoi's orchestra from 1946 to 1950). He can be seen in photographs and heard in most of the shellack records published by *Bellacord Electro*.

Composer Raimonds Pauls and jazz musician Zigurds Linde also shared their memories of Lācis, remembering him as a "very serious, punctual gentleman", who had a large library of sheet music, which he did not entrust to anyone. He always personally distributed, and then scrupulously collected the parts of the compositions before and after the concerts (Linde, interview 08.10.2008).

Lācis was undoubtedly one of the few truly competent jazz specialists in Latvia in the post-war period, who also actively played in various orchestras until the end of the 1950s. Unfortunately, in the political climate of that time, when jazz music had a conditionally "semi-legal" status, the knowledge of Lācis had no application and the new generation of Latvian jazz, which began to work actively at that time, was often unable to fully appreciate the experience of the older musicians. In the case of Lācis, his manner of playing was also more characteristic of the 1930s – something which could seem outdated and old-fashioned to the new generation of jazz musicians in the

late 1950s. This aspect was once emphasized by jazz drummer Zigurds Rezevskis in an interview (Rezevskis, interview 13.10.2008). However, there were musicians who learned from Voldemārs Lācis, and he is deservedly considered one of the figures that unites Latvian jazz musicians of the first independence and later generations.

Saxophonist **Oskars Saulespurēns** (1906–1998), the colleague of Lācis, is a truly legendary personality, one of the first Latvian professional saxophonists, who played in practically all the leading popular music orchestras of the 1930s.

Born in Riga, Saulespurēns worked in a photo company from 1922 to 1928. After serving in the army (1929–1930), he started playing in various ensembles and orchestras, while simultaneously studying at the Riga People's Conservatory (1933).

His professional activity in the 1930s was very broad:

In 1931 he played in Teodors Kaiser's orchestra;

In 1932 and 1933, the Y.M.C.A. in the orchestra, which also includes the first recorded jazz solo in Latvia;

In 1935, in the cafe *Kongress* orchestra, conducted by Vladimir Vlashek;

In 1939, in the Michalicky orchestra at the *Lido* restaurant in Dzintari;

1939–1940 in the *Alhambra* restaurant orchestra;

1940–1941 at the *Lido* restaurant.

He was also a member of Valentins Janson's orchestra in the late 1930s.

During the Second World War, between 1941–1945, Saulespurēns played the clarinet and saxophone in the Riga Radiophone Symphony Orchestra but in the first post-war years, he played in the Riga Construction Workers' Club together with Lev Tokarev-Sinkop. In later years, he played in various Riga restaurant orchestras.

Similarly to Voldemārs Lācis, Saulespurēns also intensively collected and distributed materials about jazz. According to his son Mārtiņš Saulespurēns, his father translated Gene Krupa's school of jazz drums in the late 1930s – a textbook, probably the first teaching tool for jazz percussion instruments in Latvian, as well as Rudolph Dunbar's (1907–1988) clarinet playing school (Saulespurēns, interview 21.11.2008). Zigurds Rezevskis and Pauls Pavasaris (the drummer in the *Daile* dance ensemble), also remember the Krupa school, which is said to have "traveled around" in a rephotographed form (Rezevskis, interview 13.10.2008).

On the other hand, the Latvian jazz pioneer and drummer **Verners Troics** (1912–1987) played drums in the Y.M.C.A. jazz orchestra in the 1930's, participated in the orchestras of Valentins Jansons and Oskars Stroks (also known as Oscar Strock or Strok), as well as in *Bellaccord Electro* recordings. Troics can be heard in *Bar Trio* recordings with Jack Michalicky, where you can hear his swinging drum playing style with brushes. In the summer of 1941, he was saved by chance from the fate of Jack Michalicky escaping the holocaust at the beginning of the war by being invited to Moscow to participate in

the culture days of the Latvian SSR as a member of the Latvian SSR State Opera and Ballet Theatre Orchestra. During the war, Troics was a member of the Red Army, and after the end of the war he returned to Latvia and continued to play in different orchestras and ensembles. As Zigurds Rezevskis remembers, at that time Troics was one of the few pre-war musician-drummers with a clear understanding of jazz stylistics and manner, as well as appropriate playing technique, who also willingly shared his knowledge with the new generation (Rezevskis, interview 13.10.2008).

Oskars Saulespurēns and Verners Troics together with the ensemble (Edmunds Goldšteins at the piano) can be seen for a short moment in the cinema chronicle *Padomju Latvija (Soviet Latvia)*, in the story about the opening of the hotel *Rīga* in 1956 (LNA LVKFFDA, F8, Doc. Nr. 1558).

But the most successful, the longest and the most prominent carrier of any pre-war jazz musician has to be that of **Eduards Ābelskalns** (1914–1982) – probably the first Latvian vibraphonist, a member of many pop orchestras and ensembles, and someone who played in both the *Bellaccord Electro* orchestra, the legendary Latvian Radio Jazz Sextet, and REO.⁴

Ābelskalns was born in Kursk, Russia. After graduating from Gulbene High School in 1932, he worked at the factory VEF for a year. By 1934, Ābelskalns was playing in orchestras.

In February 1934, he played in the cafe *Gambija*, later in the cafe *Kalns* in Jūrmala. From 1935 to 1938, Ābelskalns was a member of the orchestra at the *Tempo* restaurant, but in the season of 1938–39 he worked in the restaurant *Klosterpagrabs*. The end of 1939 was spent in Jūrmala, at the Majori, restaurant *Corso*, and in 1940, Ābelskalns plays in *J. Steins* restaurant in Riga.

In the 1930s, Ābelskalns participated in the arrangements of the *Bellaccord Electro* jazz orchestra – he can be seen in the photo in the 1935 *Bellaccord* catalogue (*Bellaccord Electro*, 1935,18). From 1939 to 1940, Ābelskalns also studied for a short time at the Latvian Conservatory under professor Augusts Kukainis (1901–1984), but with the Soviet occupation, he left his studies (probably due to the political situation and problems).

After the Soviet occupation, in the summer of 1940, Ābelskalns became a member of the orchestra of the legendary cafe *Otto Schwarz*, where he continued to play during the German occupation, simultaneously performing with the Radio Dance Orchestra.

Immediately after the second Soviet occupation, Ābelskalns started playing in the newly formed Radio Symphony Orchestra, where he worked until 1951 as a vibraphone soloist. From 1952 to 1955 he played in the “Rīga” cinema orchestra, and between 1955–1957 and 1959–1961 at the restaurant *Astoria*.

4 REO (*Rīgas Estrādes orķestris*) was first Latvian professional variety and jazz music Orchestra (1957–1975), by the Philharmonic of the Latvian SSR. Performed jazz classics, original music by Latvian authors, songs in jazz and variety style, with their outstanding performance in Latvia and beyond.

In 1956, Ābelškalns became a member of the first professional Latvian jazz collective – the *Radio Variety Sextet*, and a year later – in 1957 – the newly formed REO (*Riga Variety Orchestra*), where he worked intermittently until 1961. From 1961 to 1966, he again worked at the restaurant *Rīga*, followed by four years in the newly formed Latvian Radio light and pop music orchestra (until 1970s). Two years followed at the restaurant *Kaukāzs*, Ābelškalns' last band was the *Rīga* brass band (1972–1976). Eduards Ābelškalns died on April 2, 1982 in Riga.

Ābelškalns' vibraphone can be heard in *Bellaccord Electro* orchestra recordings of the 1930s, and on those of the *Latvian Radio Variety Sextet*, the REO and the Latvian Radio Light and Variety Music Orchestra (Latvian Radio bigband) after the war, where the clear sound of his vibraphone attracts attention (Mazvērsīte 2020,144).

Ābelškalns' sound and manner resembles that of the famous US jazz vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, whose characteristic “fast” vibrato is well heard in Ābelškalns' playing. Ābelškalns instrument is also surrounded by legends – at that time it was the only vibraphone in Latvia made by the American manufacturer *Premier* (which was once sent to him by his brother from Australia). This instrument, unique in its time, is currently in the possession of our percussion teacher Artis Orubs at the Latvian Music academy (Veitners 2015, 38).

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Although initially sounding not dissimilar to the world famous *Benny Goodman Sextet* (including the vibraphone, guitar and clarinet), in several arrangements the impression of a slightly different, later period, but no less famous jazz line-up can be clearly heard in the work of the *Radio Variety Sextet*. It is the sound of the famous English jazz pianist George Shearing's quintet with vibraphone, guitar and piano, playing in block chord technique with nice unison lines. The characteristic, timbrally soft and romantic sound, known in jazz history as “the Shearing sound”, was very popular around the world in the 1950s and is also recognizable in some of the Radio sextet recordings. A typical example of Shearing's sound can be heard, for example, in Aino Bāliņa's song *Kam gaidi mans draugs* (*Why do you wait, my friend*) and *Good night*.

Although Ābelškalns' activity in Latvian popular music was quite long and successful, it is thought this was largely determined by the vibraphone's niche as a specific instrument. The excellent *Premier* instrument, combined with his very professional playing, ensured Ābelškalns a stable place in the Radio Sextet, the REO and other orchestras for many years. There is no disputing the importance of Ābelškalns as a great jazz musician (Rezevskis, interview 13.10.2008).

Conclusions

In most cases, those Latvian jazz musicians who managed to survive the changes of time and the difficult historical turns of the 1940s, continued their activities into the 1950s, influencing the further development of Latvian jazz.

However, this impression was largely limited by ideological restrictions, the considerably more difficult acquisition of information about jazz events and the different understanding and approach to jazz of the new generation of musicians, which was more related to the development of modern jazz.

The old generation – the musicians of the 1930s – mostly represented the swing style, formed in a completely different musical aesthetic. Modern jazz deviations such as bebop and cool often earned a very negative attitude from these musicians, whereas the representatives of the new generation often considered the *Bellacord* sound of the 1930s to be hopelessly outdated.

The very harsh life experience must also be taken into account, as a result of which many musicians of the past were quite simply afraid to openly play jazz – music with an unclear official status, due to which some had even suffered repression. This attitude, as well as the loss of demand after the previous time of music, largely determined by completely different aspects of the change of musical fashion, but most importantly, the demands of the ruling ideology and the general state control, largely determined the departure of these musicians in the “shadow” and to some extent can be seen as a “survival strategy” for them. They chose a more peaceful path – restaurants, dance orchestras in clubs or even teaching work.

All of these factors, as well as the small number of surviving musicians, greatly reduced the impact of the previous generation, and from the end of the 1950s onwards, a new generation of jazz musicians began to work in Latvian jazz, which strongly tried to follow the development and example of American jazz.

The sound and experience of the 1930s no longer seem relevant. Perhaps this is the reason why, at the end of their lives, most of the “old” musicians were mainly active in restaurant ensembles, whose repertoire was more in line with their understanding of the jazz sound.

However, they were not forgotten. Boris Mohir, an activist of the *Riga Jazz Club*, gave completely unexpected information when I interviewed him in connection with the *Vasaras Ritmi* festival. Being a fan of traditional jazz, in around 1980 he had organized a concert of veteran Latvian jazz musicians at the *Riga Jazz Club*. Both Oskars Saulespurēns and Verners Troics as well as several other old jazz musicians, whom Boris had found with great difficulty and persuaded to perform, took part in the concert. Most of the participants were said to be over 80 years old, most of them at that moment almost completely forgotten and having long since left the stage. The event was turned into a touching journey through the beginnings of Latvian jazz with the participants’ reminiscences and music (Mohir, interview 18.03.2021).

Unfortunately, no further information about this concert has been preserved, but apparently it was the last joint public performance of the surviving Latvian jazz pioneers. Mohir also recorded the concert, but the recording has unfortunately been lost. I really hope that it will be possible to reveal more details about this event – a unique testimony to the very beginnings of Latvian jazz and its continuation up to the present day.

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