

## SEATTLE'S ALL-BLACK NAVY BAND

# JIVE BOMBERS

### THE GREAT LAKES EXPERIENCE

During World War II, over 5,000 Black musicians were recruited from across the country to serve as musicians in the United States Navy. They were trained to play in big bands at the Great Lakes Naval Base in Illinois. This program, known as the Great Lakes Experience, is considered today to be the birth of jazz instruction.

Bands were then sent out in 25-piece units to Navy bases all over the country to act as "Ambassadors of Goodwill", breaking down racial barriers and making an important step towards desegregation in the military.

**"The Great Lakes Experience" provided opportunities for the musical, personal, and educational growth of many men of color. It brought to the attention of the public several outstanding musicians who, otherwise, might not have been known. It opened the United States Navy Music School to black musicians. It provided the opportunity for many blacks to preserve their self-respect in a branch of the service known for a high degree of prejudice and basic inhumanity toward blacks.**

- Samuel A. Floyd Jr., Historian

Prior to 1942, Black men were only allowed to serve in the Navy as mess attendants and stewards. However, with the increased need for manpower during WWII, previously excluded groups were admitted to the Navy as reservists whose enlistments would end six months after the war.

**"They used to say 'In the Navy, white men are men and Black men are cooks'...In the forties, blacks asking to be sent to the Navy...was this change in attitude because, you know, the Navy had a pretty bad reputation among black people.**

- Huel Perkins, Great Lakes Experience Musician

**"Any race, any civilization, needs heroes; it needs legends, it needs fairy tales...We have given the Black experience another dimension that it did not have before we came together. This is a legend."**

- Huel Perkins, Great Lakes Experience Musician



In December 1942, a 24-piece Naval Air Station Band was transferred from the Great Lakes Naval Base to Sand Point Naval Air Station in Seattle.

They formed their own 18-piece "Jive Bombers" jazz ensemble shortly after; and in addition to the Naval functions, parades and WWII bond rallies where they played in uniform, the Jive Bombers were also active in the Seattle jazz scene.

IMAGE SOURCES: Informational images of the Jive Bombers from various sources including the Great Lakes Experience, the Naval Air Station Band Unit, and the Jive Bombers themselves. The Great Lakes Experience image is from the Great Lakes Naval Base. The Naval Air Station Band Unit image is from the Naval Air Station. The Jive Bombers image is from the Jive Bombers themselves.



**I**n the recreation building almost every sort of sports equipment is stocked and available on request. But not only competitive action is required. The huge gymnasium floor takes a high wax polish in between basketball games, and the acoustics for hot "jive" music are highly satisfactory.

One of the smoothest bands to be found for miles around is on tap under the trained baton of Chief Musician, Louis Braxton, and when the regular holiday or week-end dances are scheduled the hundreds of swing enthusiasts who attend are assured of really professional rhythm.

Observing the jive artists in full swing, one wonders whether to consider the orchestra and dance programs as combat conditioning or welfare. Probably, however, we can class it as welfare by considering the many social contacts brought about, the improved morale resulting, plus the psychological uplift given to men who thus have no opportunity to forget that they're away from home and familiar surroundings.



**Air Station Dance**

The first all-station dance for Negro personnel of Sand Point Naval Air Station will be a Halloween dance there tonight. Music will be by the "and Point Jive Bombers". There will be a grand march, jitterbug contests and prize dances.



## JIVE BOMBERS

During WWII, Seattle enjoyed a lively jazz scene with jam sessions largely made up of military musicians. The Jive Bombers, a "dynamic, Louis Jordan-inspired combo," played to enthusiastic crowds at the Washington Social Club, Jungle Inn, Finnish Hall, Eastside Hall and other local clubs.

**"They played a half-hour version of 'Flyin' Home' that featured floor-walking solos by Braxton and Hickey during which customers stuffed dollar bills into their horns.**

- Alex Albright, Historian

Shortly after WWII ended in September 1945, the Great Lakes Experience Navy Bands disbanded across the country.

**"The bottom did drop out and very few guys that came out of the Navy stayed in music...most guys were going in the Post Office or teaching...That's a fact.**

- E. Wilkins, Great Lakes Experience Musician

Jam sessions would last through the night in these clubs, and the Jive Bombers could find themselves playing alongside the biggest names in jazz - Lionel Hampton, Duke Ellington, Count Basie - when they came through town.



JIVE BOMBERS BAND - SAND POINT NAVAL AIR STATION  
May 11, 1945. Photo by U.S. Navy, Charles H. Hickey.

But in Seattle, the Jive Bombers band continued into the 1950s under the direction of Al Hickey and indeed, many of the Jive Bombers musicians like William Funderberg, Robert Braxton, Bob Marshall, Alvin Larkins, and Doc Moore continued to shape the Seattle music scene for years.



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