Excerpted from George Yoshida's book *Reminiscing in Swingtime: Japanese Americans in Popular American Music: 1925 to 1960,* recently published by NJAHS.

The Down Beats. Tule Lake Detention Camp, Calif. 1943. Photo courtesy of Sam Mayeda.

Of Jive Bombers & Stardusters

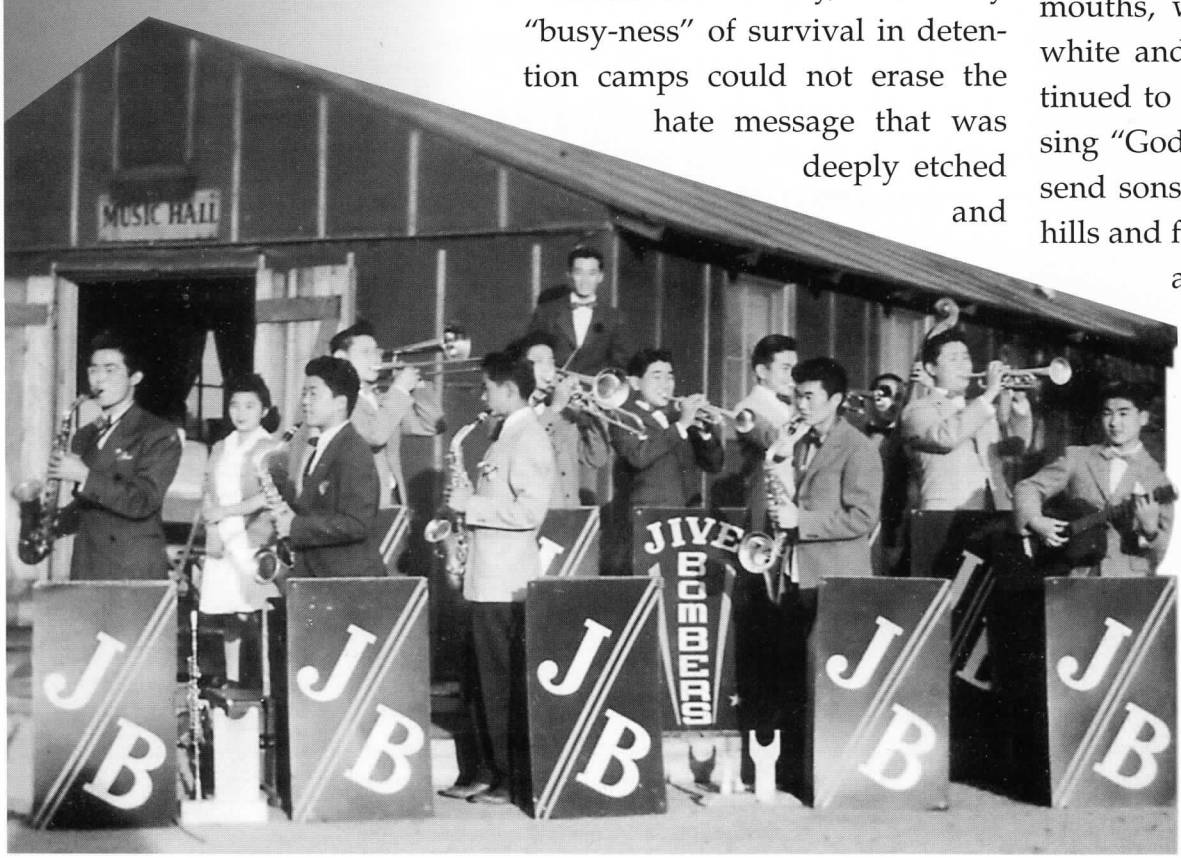
Dance Bands in America's Detention Camps

by George Yoshida

"Hey, we're Americans, you know-apple pie, baseball and Chevrolets! Aren't we?"

Needless to say, the daily "busy-ness" of survival in detention camps could not erase the hate message that was deeply etched and submerged in our psyche: "Japanese Americans are enemy aliens and not to be trusted!" Yet, despite the bad taste in our mouths, with hope in our "r white and blue hearts," we continued to buy U.S. War Bonds, to sing "God Bless America," and to send sons and brothers off to the hills and fields of Italy and France and to the jungles of New Guinea to defend the American Way of Life – to bleed and even to die a "glorious" death. "Yes, yes, yes, we are Americans!" we shouted in concentration camps surrounded by barbed wire.

It is no wonder that in this physically a



The Jive Bombers. Manzanar Detention Camp. CA 1943. Courtesy of Mary Nomura.

psychologically depressed ambience, dance bands spontaneously and swiftly came into being. The vacuum created by the need for sustenance of hope, for distraction and for the uplifting of wounded spirits was satisfied for many by music and dance. Artists are healers – youthful Nisei provided the balm to disheartened souls. Youngsters who earlier had acquired some ability to play musical instruments joined together in their barracks in an attempt to recreate the great sounds they heard late at night over their radios.* The sweet sounds of Tommy Dorsey's trombone would float over the air; but that music was being played on the "outside" – forbidden territory to us "enemy aliens."

On the "inside" in a sweltering mess hall, we heard the not-too-bad-not-too-good music of the Music Makers, the camp band. Twelve collective voices of saxes, trumpets and 'bones accompanied by a barely adequate rhythm section, playing their theme song, their version of Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade." Girls in their neatly ironed dresses and white saddle shoes and young men in Levis and polished boots would glide, not too

*Radios and transmitters were contraband and confiscated when Japanese Americans first arrived in temporary detention centers in the spring 1942. Later, restrictions loosened.

Jive Bombers *(continued on p. 6)*

Topaz Rhythm Kings, Topaz, UT, 1943. Courtesy of Kazu Maruoka.

Bata-kusai

Nisei Musicmakers in Pre-War Japan

Fumiko Kawabata (back) and Betty Inada (front), 1934. Betty Inada collection.

In the 1930s they referred to Nisei singers performing then in Japan as being *"bata-kusai"* (reeking of butter) – that is, Nisei were perceived to be very Western and un-Japanese since they were so culturally American. But that was just the exotic element that resulted in Nisei music makers' attraction to urban Japanese audiences. Several ambitious Nisei had taken ocean trips to the land of their parents to seek success as vocalists and musicians of popular American music; they had faced a bleak career in the U.S. mainstream entertainment world. The timing was perfect. As it was in the States, Japan was embarking on its own Swing Era. Steam ships carried from the U.S. to Japan a barrage of jazz recordings, popular sheet music, and movie musicals.

Batakusai *(continued on p. 8)*

Left: Watsonville Y.B.A. Orchestra. This orchestra set the stage for the swing band at Poston #2. Watsonville, CA. Jan 1, 1942. Courtesy Helen Iwanaga.

Below: The Music Makers. Gila River Butte Detention Camp, AZ, 1943. Courtesy Mitsugi Kawamoto.

"Youthful Nisei provided the balm for disheartened souls."

Jive Bombers *(Cont'd from p. 5)*

gracefully, on rough linoleum-covered floors in the dim mess hall decorated with niggardly strips of bright red crepe paper.

In one especially dark corner of the room would congregate a cluster of strongly judgmental, pimply-faced, shy stags eyeing the non-dancing girls who were sitting demurely across the room, waiting to be invited to dance. The only cure for this commonly occurring impasse was the pronouncement: "The next dance will be the last dance." This forced a desperate action on the part of anxious youths who, emboldened with sudden courage, walked forward to seek a special partner: "May I have this dance?" Proceeding to shuffle in a soft embrace, rocking very slowly from side to side, disregarding the rhythm flowing from the band, they, before long, experienced terrible disappointment. The band, after playing for some time, had come to the end of the last chorus. The evening ended much too soon!

On a given Saturday night in the summer of 1943, there may have been as many as ten such dances taking place. Dance bands, all playing identical arrangements of ballads and swing tunes, performed for crowds of young couples in isolated barbed-wire enclosed cities. The response to the quality of music of individual orchestras ranged from a non-committal "It's OK" to a fervent "The jive is jumpin'!" The number of advanced students in music, especially in jazz, was limited and band leaders had to be content with whoever showed up for rehearsals. Nevertheless, frivolous as it may seem, dance bands proliferated for a while during the wartime incarceration of Japanese Americans. It was a matter of survival and a subconscious affirmation of self – a way to express through music: "I am an American!"

Tom Tsujii established the Tanforan Tooters and the Topaz Tooters when they moved to Utah. He learned to play the drums in junior high school and later studied the xylophone. He moved to study timpani in New York City after his detention in Topaz. Eventually he became the chief timpanist for the New Orleans Symphony Orchestra.

"Tom Nakshige, the assistant band leader, picked and ordered

Left: The Jivesters. Topaz Detention Camp, Utah. 1943. Courtesy of Kazu Maruoka.

Below: The Stardusters, Merced "Assembly" Center, Merced, CA, 1942. P. Higaki Collection.

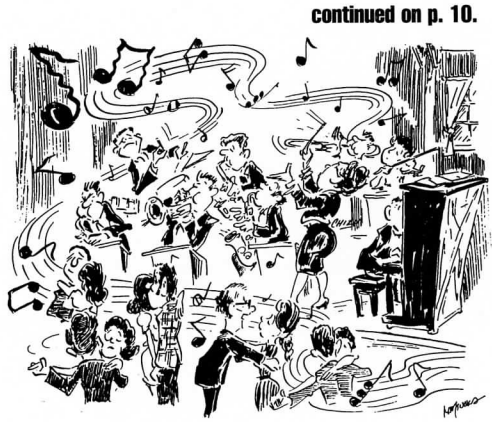
the band arrangements.... Our music library had a lot of old standards which were very easy to dance to. Our theme song was 'Rose Room' and I still remember the enthusiastic reception we received at the first big dance in Tanforan." – Tom Tsujii.

An entirely new band, The Jivesters succeeded the Tooters in late 1943. Made up of high-schoolers, this seven-piece ensemble was led by tenor sax player Takeshi Enomoto. Ichiro Sasaki's drum set consisted of heavy field drums and cymbals with snare and cymbal stands handmade from scrap lumber.

Tule Lake enjoyed the music of two dance bands – the Starlighters led by Mickey Tanaka and the Down Beats, led by Woodrow "Woody" Ichihashi. Tanaka enjoyed "listening to Richard Okumoto's Syncopaters (in Sacramento).... I took alto sax lessons from Richard and played in the high-school symphonic band.... I liked the sound of Jimmy Dorsey's alto sax. My favorite bands were Glen Miller and Freddy Martin, who had a nice tone on his tenor. My band, initially named the Starlighters and later, the Star-dusters, played good dance music. We had a great following in camp!"

The Down Beats, a name derived from Downbeat magazine (read avidly by jazz dance band fans in the '40s), was a swing-oriented dance band a la Count Basie or Tommy Dorsey. Its first leader Woody Ichihashi, (a university student in architecture at the time of his incarceration at Tule Lake) loved the syncopated sounds of Jimmie Lunceford – ideal for the frenzied gyrations of excitable jitterbugs. Ichihashi's music choice confirmed with passion Duke Ellington's thesis: "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing!" Ichihashi assembled a well-balanced ensemble and assumed leadership of the band for nine months until 1943, when he

continued on p. 10.



Poston Camp #2 Band. Jack Matsuoka, artist. Poston, Ariz. 1942.

Betty Inada in stage review. Tokyo. ca. 1936. Betty Inada Collection.

Shinichiro Rickey Miyagawa *(From Pg. 9)*

versational interludes during his singing is an affectation that brings smiles to listening faces."

Rickey appeared in elaborate stage shows featuring top entertainers and wrote Japanese lyrics to popular American hits which were in great vogue in Japan at the time. His hero was Jack Oakie, the popular Hollywood comedian with a wide smile and an easy-going singing style.

Miyagawa relinquished his U.S. citizenship during World War II. Returning to America in the face of an uncertain future, most certainly quite unlike the exciting lifestyle he was enjoying in Japan, was not an alternative to relish. He married a Japanese woman and spent the balance of his life in Japan, never returning to the States.

Betty Inada *(Cont'd from Page 9)*

tap dancer, was featured with Saburo Nakagawa, the top male Japanese tap dancer, in a 1936 film *Hodo no Sasayaki*.

Abandoning her musical career in Japan, Inada returned to Sacramento in 1958. She now resides in Los Angeles with her husband Cecil Silva. In 1993, at age eighty, Betty Inada said, "I have no regrets. I did what I wanted to do in my own small way." Just four feet ten inches in stature, but big-hearted and possessed with dogged determination, the Sacramento flapper was dubbed by Japanese jazz historian Koichi Uchida, "Japan's most popular pre-World War II female jazz singer."

Jive Bombers *(Cont'd from Page 7)*

left Tule Lake for work in Detroit. Riki Matsufuji replaced Ichihashi as band leader.

Matsufuji, after leaving Tule Lake, worked as a professional vocalist in the Midwest dance band circuit as "Dick Wong."

About the Author

George Yoshida established the Nikkei Music History Project in 1991 under the aegis of the National Japanese American Historical Society to document the diverse musical legacy of the Nikkei – from the immigrant experience to the acculturation of the second generation Nisei. Six years of research led to his book *Reminiscing in Swingtime, Japanese Americans in American Popular Music: 1925 to 1960*, published by NJAHS, and to the development of an accompanying exhibition.

Mr. Yoshida retired in 1987, after a 35-year career in the Berkeley Unified School District. In 1989, he organized the J-Town Jazz Ensemble, a 17 piece swing band based in San Francisco. He continues to teach tai chi and yoga to seniors. He resides in El Cerrito, CA, with his wife Helen.