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The Lively Arts: Soupy Sales, unlikely impresario

BY JOE M. COFFMAN Local columnist

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In “Once in a Great City,” David Maraniss’ evocative book about the 20th century dynamo that was Detroit, he includes its music, particularly the Motown label of the 1960s.

Detroit was always a music town with a tapestry of classical, jazz and pop since the 1920s and had all manner of show bars and clubs featuring the best and latest. But just before the 1963 period Maraniss writes about, there was an unlikely source to sustain this musical heritage too often forgotten.

His image is familiar — imprinted on all kids and most adults grabbing a sandwich or at home over the lunch hour in the '50s. That floppy sweater, rubbery face, crazy slide dance done whenever there was a lull and knowing glances telling older viewers he knew they were in on it and that was fine. Then the familiar shticks with supporting players, White Fang, Black Tooth, Marilyn MonWolf, Pookie the Lion, Willie the Worm and more — blocking the TV frame with dog paws and growls, caressing or mussing his stoic face or giving him a slap, always accompanied by silly grunts or moans that made the most acerbic critic have to laugh out loud.

A crazy guy knocking on the door was always answered followed by a slapstick swat or inevitable pie in the face.

His name was Soupy Sales, born Milton Supman, and these were the branded scenes that were repeated later in larger markets for the rest of his life, none of them exceeding his meteoric popularity in Detroit over less than a decade.

There was nothing like him on the town’s entertainment scene and hasn’t been since. But there was another Soupy we shouldn’t forget. This vagabond comedian from the South was a conduit for some of the best music entertainment in Detroit, especially jazz.

The most unlikely of impresarios, he used his alter ego as a local late night show comic to work in guest musicians playing all the best jazz venues in Detroit up to about 1960. The vehicle for this was his WXYZ TV late night show, Soupy's On.

At first just 10 to 15 minutes starting in November of 1953, it soon expanded to a half hour. The routine was always the same: a bit of stand-up, skits of characters ranging from buffoons to snobbish intellectuals and much in between, assisted by fine straight men and women from Detroit's radio talent veterans and local jazz musicians led by Hal Gordon and great vibes player Jack Brokensha, with guitarist Joe Messina who later joined with Motown giants. Toward the end of the show, we got a quick cut to a dim part of the studio as Soupy shyly introd'd artists in town for the weekend and let his guests work.

And what guests they were: Dizzy Gillespie, Lionel Hampton, Charlie Parker, George Shearing, Clifford Brown, Oscar Peterson, Ray Charles and even Miles Davis, who was a regular. Then there were singers galore and even a quick visit from Jerry Lewis. Soupy was true to his role as impresario, often making room for great musicians and artists in his other venues in Los Angeles and New York, in addition to the endless parade of pie throwing.

Soupy became an itinerant guest comic and host with breaks for forgettable film appearances over the years. Somehow he never got a continuing national gig for adults in late night as his skit talent was easily as good as Johnny Carson's and on a shoestring budget.

Soupy remains the biggest broadcast star Detroit will ever have and should always be remembered not just for comedy but the unselfish jazz impresario he was. If he had stuck around, no doubt the Detroit story would have improved considerably for everyone.

Joe M. Coffman has published features, reviews and commentary on the lively arts in newspapers, magazines and for broadcast.

Conversation

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