

ARTIFACTS

String Theory



"It's peculiar," says musician Eddie Drennon, an eclectic talent who played with Ike and Tina, toured with Bo Diddley, recorded a little disco, and made something of a name for himself in the '60s with the New York *charanga* band Orquesta Novel. "I was raised

in Newark, N.J., right across from New York, but I didn't really listen to Latin music until I came to Washington."

Now 63, Drennon was one of a number of D.C. musicians who found their way to Latin jazz—including *charanga*, the danceable Afro-Cuban style that mixes jazzy flute and violin with percussive Caribbean rhythms—in the late '50s and '60s. He'd come to town in 1958 to study at Howard University and gotten himself a gig with bandleader Paul Hawkins. New York-based, Cuban-born flautist José Fajardo caught a gig, liked what he saw, and invited the young violinist to join him in New York.

"I don't speak Spanish, and Fajardo didn't speak English," Drennon chuckles. But others in the band did, and "I really knew the music; it was intuitive even though I wasn't part of the culture. I could fit in well."

Could he ever: In short order, Drennon was arranging and producing material for Orquesta Novel, a cult-favorite ensemble that was his musical home for a solid 20 years. He toured with the band to Colombia, Venezuela, and through the Caribbean; finding himself in demand, he also played an African tour with percussionist Johnny Pacheco, backed Tito Puente, and recorded sessions with a who's who of Latin performers, including Ray Barretto, Rubén Blades, and La Lupe.

But if he found a comfortable place in the Latin scene, Drennon—who grew up listening to swing and bebop—simultaneously explored the era's burgeoning rock and R&B scenes. In 1959, he met then-D.C. resident Bo Diddley, hit it off, and toured with the rock pioneer for 10 years. With Diddley, he pushed the boundaries of his instrument, bowing unusual guitar- and harmonica-like licks that, he says, "sometimes undid like the things [British '60s rock bands] later did with stain pedals.... I don't know if the Yardbirds or the Rolling Stones were mistaking [what I did with a violin] for a guitar with licks." But he's willing to believe maybe they did.

By 1976, Drennon was producing his own efforts. For theablanca label, home of Donna Summer and the Village People, he released the minor hit "Let's Do the Latin Hustle." In the late '80s, eager for more "family time," he scaled back life on the road, focusing instead on his local teaching job—at George Washington University, the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, and the Levine School of Music, where he's a faculty—and composing for area theater companies. Drennon isn't ready to stop completely, though. He's got a retro album in the works called *Urban Suite*, and is working on "African-American musical scales"—arguing from spirituals to rap, African-American music employs a 1 of intervals unlike that used in European classical music. He'd like to follow that with another book on African music on stringed instrumental music, covering everything from Cuban compositional patterns to the history of Noble Harlem orchestras to the life of his own Howard violin

professor, Louis Vaughn Jones, who "played with orchestras in Paris but couldn't get such a job here."

And of course he still loves Latin jazz—enough to take up his violin for a local Orquesta Novel gig this weekend. It'll be his first outing with the band in nearly 20 years. —Steve Kiviat

Eddie Drennon plays with Orquesta Novel on Saturday, March 29, at the Rosslyn Spectrum, 1611 N. Kent St., Rosslyn. For more information, call (703) 228-1850.



Everything Old Is Novel Again: Drennon has taken up with his old Orquesta.

Grays Area



On one level, a 30-year-old white lawyer from Potomac, Md., wouldn't be the obvious author for a book about Washington race relations during the '30s and '40s. But though Brad Snyder never set foot

in Shaw or on U Street as a kid, baseball offered him a perspective others didn't have.

Growing up, Snyder was a die-hard Baltimore Orioles fan in a family whose elders all yammered on about the Washington Senators, the team that left town the year before Snyder was born. But nobody talked about the Homestead Grays—a star-studded Negro League team that played in the Senators' Griffith Stadium, before big crowds in the heart of black Washington, for several years before Jackie Robinson crossed baseball's color line in 1947. When he discovered the Grays, Snyder was more than surprised. "I almost felt deprived," he says. "I had the sense that I had been kept from learning about the real history of this city."

His indignation fueled a Duke undergraduate thesis on the Grays. That paper, fleshed out with lots of extra research and more than 100 pages of footnotes, has just been released as *Beyond the Shadow of the Senators: The Untold Story of the Homestead Grays and the Integration of Baseball*.

Baseball's integration is hardly virgin territory for scholars. Snyder's book, though, takes a fresh approach. It focuses on the inescapable—and all too often awkward—relationship between white baseball and black baseball, played out in the nation's capital, a city that was at once Southern yet also home to the federal government.

Shadow locates its race-related conflicts within the overlapping relationships of several subtly drawn characters. In 1937, Sam Lacy, a crusading Washington sportswriter for

African-American newspapers (who's still alive and approaching 100), challenged Senators owner Clark Griffith to integrate the sport; Griffith's reply that the event was "not far off" made national headlines.

But it would take another decade: Despite his forward-looking words, Griffith, who made significant money on the Grays' rentals of his stadium, had reasons to support the status quo. (So did African-American Grays owner Cum Posey, who risked losing his business if

the major leagues integrated without compensating Negro League owners.) But despite his resistance to change, Griffith avoided general condemnation at the time—not least because Washington Redskins owner George Preston Marshall expressed more openly racist views than Griffith ever did. Lacy, meanwhile, clashed publicly with *Washington Post* sports columnist Shirley Povich, who, as one of the city's leading voices for integration, might have been his ally had personal animus not intervened.

To Snyder, these relationships not only shaped the tenor of race relations in Washington during that era but also, in a more mundane way, condemned the Senators to their legendary fate. "The amazing thing is that in September 1954—four months after *Brown vs. Board of Education* and seven years after Jackie Robinson—the Senators were still segregated," Snyder says. When the financially struggling team did integrate, it was with an Afro-Cuban player, Carlos Paula. "With their stadium in the middle of the African-American community, they could have desperately used a black star," Snyder says.

With Washington now awaiting a new baseball franchise, the lessons of the Senators reverberate even today. For all the focus on building pricey sky boxes, "you have to market a team to the entire community, not just to upper-class whites," Snyder says. "If the Montreal Expos move to Washington, the owners would be foolish not to market Vladimir Guerrero to the Latino community here."

—Louis Jacobson

Brad Snyder appears April 6, at 5 p.m. at *Politics & Prose*, 5015 Connecticut Ave. NW. For more information, call (202) 364-1919.

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