

Pianist gives expression to silent films

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From the earliest days, silent movies were accompanied by piano music, initially to mask the sound of the projector and later to enhance the viewing experience for the ever-expanding audience for "the pictures."

When silent movies are shown in the Chicago area today, they are most often accompanied on piano by local go-to-guy David Drazin of Evanston. Such is the case at the Wilmette Theatre, where Drazin is playing the piano for a monthly showing of silent films, including the romantic comedy "It" on July 18, starring Clara Bow as the symbol of a liberated woman in the Jazz Age.

Drazin is familiar with the classics of the silent film era. But, surprisingly, this jazz pianist played his first gigs in exchange for watching the silent movies free and, to hear him tell it, Drazin thought he was getting the better end of the bargain.

"It was 1965 and silent movies were being shown at the old Art Institute theater at Jackson and Columbus," he said. "I love silent movies, so I went to one there and spotted a piano. I had accompanied a few before and the next time I went to the Art Institute I asked the manager if he would let me in free if I provided music for the film."

The manager agreed, so Drazin sat down at the piano and went to work.

After the show, the manager approached Drazin, saying, "We need a guy like you!"

Soon, however, Drazin started thinking he should get paid for his work, and the manager agreed.

"I got a pitiful amount," he admitted ruefully, "but at least I was getting paid."

Fortunately, his fees have increased over the years.

Drazin was raised in Ohio; his first music lessons were with his mother when he was 5 years old. He earned a bachelor's degree in music from Ohio State, then played jazz keyboard in a local group for several years, which enhanced his ability to improvise.

After the band broke up, he moved to Chicago to join a jobbing band, which played for parties, weddings, benefits and other special occasions.

"We played the music the client wanted to hear, not what we wanted to do," he said. "It was depressing work."

He found steady employment at ballet schools such as the Evanston School of Ballet, the Gus Giordano Dance School in Evanston and Homer Bryant's Chicago Multi-Cultural Dance Center in Printer's Row.

"Playing at ballet schools is my day job," he explained, "and some teachers like it when I improvise."

He's also a member of Jesse Scinto and the Dignitaries, which played on the main stage of the Chicago Blues Festival in 2006 with saxophonist Big Jay McNeely. The group was invited to a similar festival in New Orleans the following year.

"That work is very satisfying," he said, happily, "not the least bit depressing."

In addition to Silent Film Sundays, Drazin plays for all the silent movies shown at the Northbrook Public Library, which will have a silent movie series this fall.

Initially, Drazin was not able to see silent films before he accompanied them.

"For the first 10 years I just watched the screen and went from there," he said.

That changed, however, when he was scheduled to accompany a series of silent cartoons made by Walt

Disney Studios.

"It was a press screening," he recalled, "so they didn't want me to play cold." He was able to view the films, take copious notes and match the scenes with appropriate music.

"In one scene a cat was ice skating on a frozen pond," he recalled, "and I quickly found the music for 'The Skater's Waltz.' Things like that are really fun to do."

He plays for romances, comedies, tragedy, Westerns, war films, disaster pics and everything in between. His goal is to provide the same emotional experience for the audience as does a film score.

Apparently he is succeeding.

"One man came up to me after a silent film showing and told me that it had been just like watching a modern movie, that he felt that he didn't miss anything the movie was trying to express," Drazin said. "I just love hearing things like that."

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Silent Film Sundays, 2 p.m. July 18 at Wilmette Theatre, 1122 Central Ave., Wilmette. \$12. (847) 251-7424;
www.wilmettetheatre.com