

Elements of Style

SAX APPEAL

Near the end of *At the Circus* (Marx Brothers, 1939), there is a shot of an orchestra floating out to sea. Though the dock they're on has been cut adrift, the musicians keep on playing; the strains of their music come faintly, faintly over the water, while onshore Margaret Dumont's party wails on, unheeding.

Something of the sort is happening here tonight at New York's Marriott Marquis Hotel. The Kit McClure Big Band, a vibrant sixteen-woman orchestra, is on a platform swinging Basie's "One O'Clock Jump." McClure herself, a neon stage presence with her torrent of red hair and scarlet lipstick, dressed in an ice-blue flapper gown, is soloing now. She leans into a long, searing note on her tenor sax—and meanwhile, far away, across oceans of space, across time zones, is the party, hundreds of auto dealers in black tie milling around with glitzy ladies. It is the kind of venue that is heavy on the catering, light on the class. Hired funsters are on hand: someone in an Uncle Sam suit staggering about on stilts; two other guys wearing immense foam-rubber Archie and Jughead heads. Hard to believe that six months ago the Kit McClure band was touring with Robert Palmer, playing "Addicted to Love" to dazzled hordes. Making money with a big band these days is a struggle, though. In gigland, they can't all be gems.

Kit McClure created her band five years ago in the teeth of the musical evidence. The Mel Lewis Orchestra, New York's premier big band for two decades, can put together only ten weeks of work a year. A few other outfits eke along, like L.A.'s rollicking Capp-Pierce Jugernaut. Woody Herman is in his fifty-first year of touring, and the ghost bands, like Ellington's and Basie's, get by. Otherwise, barrenness. But lately there's been a resurgent interest in the music; that bulge of baby boomers, it appears, now seasoned with age, is developing a taste for

**Kit McClure and her
brassy girls are
betting big bands
can bounce back**



From Manhattan to Milwaukee to Monte Carlo, the Kit McClure Big Band has shown off its equal-opportunity finger-popping and low-down swing.

lighter percussion and mellow melody. The Radio Information Center reports that in 1983 there were 696 big-band radio stations, today 887. Woody Allen's latest movie, *Radio Days*, bounces to a Forties big-band score. Even Charlie Watts, the Rolling Stones' drummer, has put together an orchestra. It's gluey and overlarge (thirty-three pieces), the swing equivalent of the Anvil Chorus, but still, it is encouraging a lot of people to rediscover the old tunes, the old recordings. The question is, Can any modern big band sell?

Like the female swing orchestras of the Thirties (Ina Ray Hutton and the Melodears, the International Sweethearts of Rhythm), Kit McClure's group has one thing in its favor: The musicians are fun to watch. Says Mel Lewis, "Kit has the makings of a first-class show band. It's the facts of life—the

girls are cute. They do things guys can't or won't do." Like Lauren Draper, lead trumpeter, breaking briefly from the back line to jitterbug with another horn player. "Meanwhile, their level of playing is very high. Jazz people tend to be extra serious," adds Lewis, "but if it isn't fun, it isn't serious."

McClure, 36, has always approached life with this sort of double vision. She laughs readily but is a tough-willed woman, a tide-bucker. Growing up in Little Falls, New Jersey, she learned trombone on the sly because her parents didn't consider it ladylike. At Yale (originally class of '73, the first to admit women), she formed the eight-piece New Haven Women's Liberation Rock Band, which featured original boogie about abortion and day care; she taught most of the band members to play their instruments. Entranced by the fat (continued on page 60)

E lements of Style

(continued from page 57) tone of Sonny Rollins, she switched to the tenor saxophone at 21, first soloed professionally at Radio City as part of the sixty-three-woman Barry White Love Unlimited Orchestra, then fell into work on the rhythm-and-blues circuit. She went out first with Silky Slim and his nine-piece soul band, touring the ghettos of Syracuse and Rochester and Buffalo.

"It was a black band with two white girls," she says, "me and Laurie Frink, a trumpeter. We worked for \$25 a night, six nights a week. Every guy in the band looked like the pimp on *Baretta*." After Silky Slim came more hardscrabble times playing in several New York Latin bands, "which was great for me, although there were times I felt threatened. There was a fair amount of ducking down in the car because somebody was pulling a gun out in front of the club. Some of the clubs we played were completely empty because they were fronts for drugs or gambling. Good music, though." She got a breath of fresh European air playing bebop in Italy in 1979, then came home and hooked up with soul stars Sam and Dave on the chitlin circuit.

Even then there weren't always enough chitlins to go around. "Black clubs don't pay very well, especially in the South, so sometimes we didn't eat. And there were some pretty massive drug problems in the band. But I learned a lot with those guys—the R&B style, timing and interplay, how a rhythm

section supports a soloist." She followed Sam and Dave to Europe in 1982 on a suddenly royal tour that also featured Eddie ("Knock on Wood") Floyd, Carla Thomas and Wilson Pickett. A soul carnival with a thread of danger: A dissatisfied bodyguard once hung the road manager by his heels out a seventh-floor window. McClure returned to the States ready for the more civilized perils of forming her own big band.

Five years of jobbing around followed: rock-and-roll grottoes; Brooke Shields's birthday parties; grisly suburban weddings.

**"It's the business
people where you
find the resistance.
Not the audiences."**

Along the way the band assembled a book of 143 tunes, mostly swing—but with a difference. "Those guys with Sam and Dave," says McClure, "every now and then in a jam session they would play the best swing I've ever heard. Very locked in, with an intense rhythm track." Echoes of that sound can be heard in her band today.

Punch. Versatility (the women also play moodier, more orchestral jazz; some soul covers, like "I Feel Good"; and a few McClure mean-streets originals). Plus uptown sex appeal. That's what led Robert Palmer to sign them for a tour of the Northeast last year, winding up at Radio City. In addition to "Addicted to Love," the band played five swing arrangements behind Palmer, tunes like "You're My Thrill" and "The Girl That Got Away." McClure herself toured the rest of the country with him playing solo sax, then went to L.A. to cut tracks for his newest record (working title: *Heavy Nova*).

Right now she is working on her own first album, all original material—the direction the band must go in if it is to acquire not just a style but a voice of its own. McClure is also dedicated to getting more women instrumentalists work everywhere. "It's the business people where you find the resistance. Not the audiences. The women love it. Housewives will say, 'I had an idea once I wanted to do that. Good for you.'

—POPE BROCK