

Reunion to recall 1941 music

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It's going to be 1941 all over again this month for an enthusiastic group of Washington High School alums.

And the ingredient not usually found in high school reunions, original music, will be the highlight when the class of 1941 re-creates a typical weekend of that fateful year.

Bringing together musicians, music and dancers 30 years later is no simple task but the class committees are succeeding. Woody Hite, who led one of the most popular bands in the area in the pre-World War II era, has agreed to return to Portland for the 30th reunion and will front an aggregation of former sidemen playing original arrangements.

A sidelight to the get-together deals with the years the class waited to do it. Bob Baker, in charge of bringing the band together for the function and a musician him-

self, said "We waited 30 years for this reunion. Now we'll have the chance to hear the sounds we've been in love with for 30-40 years and see some people we've not seen in some time."

Baker said that while most reunions take place at 10 and 25-year intervals his class just never got around to it. "It just would not have been a true function without Woody Hite's band to play for us. It's going to be as if you drove up to a dance hall in your Model A, listening to the music of Woody's band playing tunes like 'String of Pearls' and 'In the Mood'. We'll recapture the pure sound of the music we danced to 30 years ago."

Band recreated

Many of the musicians in Woody's bands of long ago are still active in music and the organization playing at the Eagles Hall, off Barbur Boulevard, June 25 will include several. Woody, now a

contractor, will fly up from his Southern California home to lead the group and his brother Don will be at the piano. Don Hite is an assistant cashier at the head office of the U.S. National Bank in Portland but he still plays an occasional job.

Other musicians set to play in the 12-man group are Ray Spurgeon, alto saxman turned stock broker; Mack Stout, tenor; Julian Dreyer, trumpeter and professional musician; Warren Black, guitar; Freddie Keller, a trombonist who also led bands at one time; Ed Potter, also trombone; Chuck Bradford, Larry Morrell and Sam Piazza.

The Woody Hite band increased from a small group to a dozen men as its reputation for good, danceable music grew in the late Thirties. The band played at the dance pavilions Portlanders frequented in the swing era. Places like McElroy's, the

Uptown, the Palais Royale (formerly the Uptown) and Jantzen Beach were crowded with young dancers. In fact, there is a kind of basic kinship with the rock music palaces of the Seventies. The music is different, the dress is perhaps stranger, but ballrooms like Springer's, east of Portland, serve the same purpose.

Dances plentiful

High school sororities and fraternities were sponsors of the weekly dances and a teenager in 1940 never lacked for a place to hear music, Baker said. "There was a dance every weekend at the Masonic Temple in those days."

The Woody Hite band gained its reputation in Sherwood in the Thirties and was forced to make the move to Portland when the club it played in could not handle the large crowds coming from the city.

On a fashion note, the reunion organizers are wondering if the apparel in vogue prior to World War II will make an appearance at the 30th get-together. Don Hite recalled the suits musicians of the time wore and Bob Baker reminisced about the "uniform" that boys wore to school.

"Those white cords were so dirty they could stand alone in the corner," Baker said. "We never washed them; the dirtier the better."

But Hite thought a moment about the suits Woody's band wore and recalled the tailor responsible for them. "Ralph Grabler, that's who. Ralph tailored our tuxedos and were they ever something. It was the zootsuit era coming in and Ralph made the trousers so they came almost up to the chest and the coats with a deep one-button roll. They were sharp. In fact, Ralph got quite a bit of business from fans of Woody's band who liked the suits and ordered for themselves. You know, Ralph is still alive. He's out in King City and lives on the seventh fairway of the golf course."

Reunion held

The Woody Hite band had a reunion of its own in 1962 and, by coincidence, used the same Eagles Hall facility the band will play in June 25. Attending that bash were a number of other musicians employed at one time or another by Woody. Included then was Ralph Rosen, a tenor sax player who went on to fame with big hands.

The Woody Hite band broke up during World War II and Hite was never able to put the pieces back together. He played with a smaller group at the Top-O-Scott from 1943 to 1950 but left Portland for California in 1951.

The class of 1941 included 353 members and Baker said more than 200 had been found and contacted. He said the reunion will take the style of a luau for the dinner portion and that several members of the 1941 faculty of Washington High will be greeted by the group, which includes Victor Atiyeh, class president in 1941 and now a senator in the Oregon Legislature.



BROTHERS — Woody Hite, on bass, and brother Don will be together again at reunion of Washington High School class of 1941 when Hite band of pre-war days plays for dinner-dance. Woody is California contractor and singer-pianist Don works at U.S. Bank. Photo was shot at old McElroy's Ballroom in 1941.



1941 SOUNDS RETURN — Some of these musicians will be on hand June 25 for reunion of 1941 class, which also serves as reunion of Woody Hite and former sidemen. Scene above was shot in 1940 at Uptown Ballroom. Sax section, from left, Claude Crittenden, Milt

Kleeb, Roy Spurgeon, Bob Alldrin. Mel Ellis is drummer and Warren Black is on guitar, Clyde Sanders, trumpet, is seen in back row. Arranger Kleeb comes from Seattle to play and Spurgeon and Black will be in 14-piece band.