

or more than four decades, we've turned on TV late at night to see talk-show hosts joking about the latest scandal and celebrities hawking their new films. But more discerning listeners know that when they tune in postprimetime, they're also hearing some of the best musicians in the business-masters of precision who can tackle any genre and pick up the slightest cue. Since the halcyon days of Johnny Carson and Doc Severinsen's Tonight Show band, house bands have punctuated hosts' antics, musically introduced guests, played in and out of commercials and composed original scores for sketches-all in a night's work. It's time to shine a spotlight on the aces behind the music.

### **PAUL SHAFFER AND** THE CBS ORCHESTRA

The Late Show With David Letterman BANDLEADER: Paul Shaffer (keyboards) CURRENT LINE-UP: Anton Fig (percussion), Felicia Collins (guitar), Sid McGinnis (guitar), Will Lee (bass), Tom Malone (trombone), Alan Chez (trumpet/flugelhorn), Bruce Kapler (saxophone) NOTABLE FORMER MEMBERS: Steve Jordan, Hiram Bullock, Bernie Worrell, David Sanborn

When David Letterman landed an NBC late-night show in 1982, he turned to a man who knew something about late-night TV comedy: Paul Shaffer, who played keyboards in the Saturday Night Live band from 1975 to 1980. That proved crucial, as unlike most current TV bandleaders. Shaffer also serves as Letterman's second banana-the Ed McMahon to his Johnny Carson. "Paul is essential," says Letterman. "It's a long trip, and Paul is the funny flight attendant."

Letterman's NBC show provided a bridge from Carson's classic model to today's looser late-night offerings. In his recent memoir We'll Be Here for the Rest of Our Lives, Shaffer recalls Letterman asking him at their first meeting if he'd be OK with leading a quartet-a sharp contrast to the Tonight Show's orchestra. "I'd love it. Four pieces is what I do best," Shaffer recalls. "We could turn on a dime. With four pieces I could still do all the Motown and soul covers I've been learning my whole life."

Shaffer also reveled in breaking new ground stylistically, forgoing big band standards for an R&B/rock hybrid that took its inspiration from the 1960s and '70s. That sensibility has remained, even as the band doubled in size with Letterman's move



to CBS in 1993. Shaffer initially resisted adding horns to the band, as it would affect the versatility that became the quartet's hallmark. "Horns meant arrangements and more complex voicings," he notes. "But the players I chose are masters of flexibility."

The shift was successful, and in both incarnations Shaffer and his band have proved highly influential on future late-night bands. "I've been watching Paul Shaffer since he had a four-piece in the '80s," says Jimmy Kimmel Live! bandleader Cleto Escobedo III. "He's my childhood hero."

# MAX WEINBERG AND THE TONIGHT SHOW BAND

The Tonight Show With Conan O'Brien BANDLEADER: Max Weinberg (drums) CURRENT LINE-UP: Jimmy Vivino (guitar), Mike Merritt (bass), Mark "The Loveman" Pender (trumpet), Richie "La Bamba" Rosenberg (trombone), Jerry Vivino (saxophone), Scott Healy (keyboards), James Wormworth (percussion)

Max Weinberg started his career as a member of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band, playing on iconic albums like Born to Run and Born in the U.S.A. But when he ran into Conan O'Brien on a street corner a few years after Springsteen dissolved the band, he had a different pitch for the comedian's TV house band: jump blues. O'Brien, who was looking for a variety-show feel, was intrigued, and Weinberg assembled a sevenpiece band for the audition. By the second song, they were hired.

group jibed with not only the format of Late Night With Conan O'Brien, but also the emerging 1990s swing revival. And, as O'Brien had hoped, it recalled an older generation of late-night TV in both sound and look. "I wanted our band to sort of be an homage to the classic TV bands-[former Tonight Show bandleader] Doc Severinsen in particular-and they always dressed up. So it seemed like the natural thing to do," Weinberg said at last year's 2009 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction.

Like many house bands, they often serve as unsuspecting straight men for O'Brien's bits. La Bamba, with his trademark fedora, is an easy target for O'Brien's silliness. (A running joke is that he can't read music; an older sketch involved "dumbing down" current events for the trombonist )

"People don't realize how much work it is," says Weinberg, "I never did, I figured Doc just showed up at 5 and started to play." The job got even more hectic for Weinberg in 1999, when Springsteen reunited the E Street Band for a tour; he's juggled both jobs ever since.

In 2009, Weinberg and company made the move from New York to Los Angeles with O'Brien when he took over as host of the Tonight Show. But aside from adding percussionist Wormworth, their approach remains much the same.

"We have our unique sound whether we're in California or New York. We'll always reflect an East Coast muscularity," says Weinberg. "We continue to do what The energetic sound of Weinberg's we've done for 16 years, which is to create



music that complements and supplements the comedy on the *Tonight Show*, and keep reaching for as many different types of music as we can play from night to night."

#### **CLETO AND THE CLETONES**

Jimmy Kimmel Live!

BANDLEADER: Cleto Escobedo III (saxophone) CURRENT LINE-UP: Cleto Escobedo Jr. (saxophone), Jonathan Dresel (drums), Jimmy Earl (bass), Toshi Yanagi (guitar), Jeff Babko (keyboards)

Hosts and bandleaders often take years to build a familiar rapport. Jimmy Kimmel and Cleto Escobedo III had it instantly, thanks to a friendship that dates back to their childhood. Growing up in Las Vegas, Kimmel and Escobedo used to stay up to watch

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David Letterman together. So when Kimmel landed his own late-night slot in 2003, he immediately called Escobedo, who was on the road with Marc Anthony, and asked him to be his bandleader.

Escobedo, who had also worked with Kimmel on Comedy Central's The Man Show, didn't think twice. "In your 20s it's awesome to be on the road all the time," says Escobedo from the Kimmel Live! set. "In your 40s, it's really appealing to be home and have a steady gig."

Not content with just one saxophonist named Cleto, Kimmel persuaded his friend to lure his father, Cleto Escobedo Jr.-who gained fame in 1960s soul group Los Blues-out of retirement. The younger Escobedo called his dad to give him the

news that Kimmel was getting a show and to ask his parents to support him during the bandleader audition. "And bring your horn,"

The family atmosphere would become one of the hallmarks of Kimmel's show. Other recurring characters include his uncle. Frank Potenza, Potenza's ex-wife, Aunt Chippy, and his cousin, Sal lacono. It makes for a casual, inclusive vibe that quests often pick up on. "One of my favorite quests is Don Rickles, because he always messes with the band," Escobedo says. "My dad and I are Latin, and he makes some jokes. He's always a fun time."

While the Cletones are always game for comedy bits, when it's time to pick up their instruments, they're all business,

"We'll play funk to Foo Fighters to polka," says Escobedo. "You have to be ready for anything."

# **KEVIN EUBANKS AND** THE PRIMETIME BAND

The Jay Leno Show

BANDLEADER: Kevin Eubanks (quitar)

CURRENT LINE-UP: Gerry Etkins (keyboards), Ralph Moore (saxophone), Vicki Randle (percussion), Marvin "Smitty" Smith (drums), Derrick Murdock (bass)

FORMER MEMBERS: Matt Finders, Stan Sargeant, Lee Thornburg

The passing of the *Tonight Show* torch from Johnny Carson to Jay Leno in 1992 was watched with rapt attention by millions. So it's no surprise that, musically, Leno came out swinging by appointing jazz heavyweight



Branford Marsalis as the leader of the year out." Tonight Show band. But the partnership seemed strained from day one, and Marsalis and his band jumped at the left-not particularly quietly-in 1995.

Into his place stepped guitarist Kevin Eubanks, a mellower but no less seasoned iazz musician who had played with Slide Hampton, Art Blakey and Dave Holland, among others. Eubanks' low-key vibe proved a perfect foil for Leno's antics (showcased in the long-gone "Beyondo" sketches, which featured Eubanks talking to a floating Leno head; and the still-popular "Headlines").

After taking the bandleader mantle, Eubanks called Smith, Moore and Etkins, with whom he'd studied at the Berklee College of Music, and asked them to join the band. With a stable of accomplished jazz players, Eubanks' band quickly carved a niche for itself in late-night TV.

By their nature, the mediums of jazz and television might seem at odds. The musical genre is marked by improvisation, innovation and a resistance to rules. TV music, on the other hand, not only has to appeal to the masses, but also has to adhere to strict limits in time and scope. But Eubanks and his band have always risen to the challenge. A few years after percussionist Vicki Randle joined the roster, Eubanks got the idea to have the accomplished vocalist sing during commercial breaks and bumpers-a twist the audience loved.

"You have to be able to deal with giving the music up for the good of the show,

After 17 years, Eubanks chance to change up their approach with the move to primetime for The Jay Leno Show, which airs at 10 p.m. EST. "We needed a new theme terribly bad," says Eubanks. "Remember, I have to play it every single

The earlier hour also required more vitality. "The music goes more towards getting the people to dance," says Eubanks. "I think this show needs a different kind of energy-a more physical kind of energy. Get 'em up, get 'em moving, get that energy into the show and get that feel into people's homes at 10 p.m."

#### THE SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE BAND

Saturday Night Live

BANDLEADER: Leon Pendarvis (keyboards) CURRENT LINE-UP: Katreese Barnes (keyboards). Ron Blake (saxophone). Alex Foster (saxophone), Earl Gardner (trumpet), James Genus (bass), Valerie Naranjo (percussion), Shawn Pelton (drums), Lenny Pickett (saxophone), Jared Scharff (guitar), Steve Turre (trombone)

NOTABLE FORMER MEMBERS: Paul Shaffer, G.E. Smith, Steve Ferrone, Michael Brecker, David Sanborn

tapped longtime friend and fellow Canadian Howard Shore, who assembled a horn-centric group inspired by Junior Walker's energetic R&B sound. Rounding out the rhythm section were keyboardists Paul Shaffer, getting his late-night start, and Cheryl Hardwick, who would play with the band for a total of 20 years. Shore composed the opening and closing themes, which have endured for the better part of the show's tenure.

As Saturday Night Live's cast of characters has changed over the yearswith some notable ups and downs-so has the band's. But for the bulk of the show's history, the SNL band has maintained that exuberant, horn-heavy sound.

One of the most visible members of the band for his 10-year tenure, G.E. Smith was partially responsible for the band's move to the main stage set in 1986. (They had previously played from the rafters.) The current line-up is an egalitarian group, with Pendarvis. Pickett and Barnes sharing musical director duties.

Over the years, the band has provided back-up for some memorable host musical performances: Jill Clayburgh singing "Sea Cruise" in season one, Jake Gyllenhaal belting out Dreamgirls' "I Am Telling You I'm Not Going" in drag, and Kate Winslet singing (and tap dancing) to Fred Astaire's "Pick Yourself Up" to prove the show was truly "live" the week after Ashlee Simpson's lip-sync snafu.

They're also called upon to provide original music for sketches when necessary, a gig that usually flies under the radar. But in 2007, Barnes earned headlines for



playing the music that best suits the show," In 1975, Lorne Michaels was creating Eubanks says, "Where I come from, we yow to serve the music. In TV, you vow to serve the show. You need to have a slow-burning intensity that stays consistent year in and

something singular on late-night TV-a live variety show featuring comedic sketches interspersed with performances by popular artists. To head up the music portion, he



co-writing the Emmy-winning "Dick in a Box," performed by Andy Samberg and host Justin Timberlake. At their request, Barnes wrote a '90s-style R&B melody, and the actors provided the instant-classic lyrics.

"You have to be patient with comedic talent, because they're under so much pressure to be funny," says Barnes. "So it's a balance of allowing them to come up with the material, not getting in the way of being funny, and working with them to make the material funny."

#### THE ROOTS

Late Night With Jimmy Fallon

BANDLEADER: Ahmir "?uestlove" Thompson
(drums)

CURRENT LINE-UP: Tariq "Black Thought" Trotter (rapper), Owen Biddle (bass), James "Kamal" Gray (keyboards), Frank "Knuckles" Walker (percussion), "Captain" Kirk Douglas (guitar), Damon "Tuba Gooding Jr." Bryson (sousaphone), James Poyser (keyboards)

Rumors that Jimmy Fallon had persuaded hip-hop's The Roots to be his house band when he succeeded Conan O'Brien at *Late Night* in 2009 were met with almost universal disbelief. Why would the group put a successful touring and recording career on hold to play little more than bumpers?

The Roots were candid about the motivation behind their decision. "It enabled us to survive," says bandleader Ahmir "?uestlove" Thompson. "This would basically match or surpass what we would make touring 200-plus days out of the year. And this allows us to be home."

Fallon was surprised and thrilled that they agreed. "They're amazing—they can play anything," he says. "From punk to soul to surf music."

Most house bands back musical guests on a handful of occasions per year at most. But in less than a year, The Roots have played with dozens of guests, including Elvis Costello, 50 Cent, Smokey Robinson, Incubus, Carly Simon, Christopher Cross and Q-Tip. The spontaneous feel that has made The Roots a critically acclaimed live act complements the "anything-can-happen" vibe that Fallon has tried to cultivate as his show's identity. Already some Roots-themed segments are hits, such as "Slow Jam the News," and "Freestyling With the Roots," in which Fallon selects random audience members and a musical style and challenges the band to improvise a rap.

While other late-night bands have released albums together only occasionally, The Roots continue to record. Last June on the show, they debuted the first single, "How I Got Over," from their forthcoming 11th album. Industry insiders are curious to see how the band's high profile on a show that averages 1.7 million viewers per night might translate to record sales.

"I think Roots fans might hear a difference in this album," ?uestlove says. "There's a chemistry that we've only previously put on the stage."

# **HOUSE BAND HALL OF FAMERS**

Doc Severinsen and the NBC Orchestra
The Tonight Show With Johnny Carson

In the same way Johnny Carson set the standard for latenight hosts, his band provided a blueprint that today's TV house bands strive to match.

Trumpeter Doc Severinsen took over as bandleader of the NBC Orchestra in 1967 (having predated Carson as a member of the *Tonight Show* cast from 1952 on). Former bandleader Skitch Henderson had already begun to assemble a top-notch jazz band, poaching instrumentalists like trumpeters Clark Terry, Ernie Royal, percussionist Bobby Rosengarden, trombonist Urbie Green and drummer Ed Shaughnessy from high-profile touring and recording gigs in big bands.

Severinsen followed that approach, luring trumpeter Snooky Young and (briefly) Louie Bellson, who Duke Ellington called "the world's greatest drummer." Under Severinsen's guidance, the NBC Orchestra became known for its full-bodied arrangements



(many provided by legend Bill Holman) of standards such as Cole Porter's "Begin the Beguine," Mercer Ellington's "Things Ain't What They Used to Be" and Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust."

When Carson went off the air in 1992, so did the NBC Orchestra, though they shortly embarked on a popular U.S. tour. Severinsen retired to Mexico in 2006, where he formed a trio, El Ritmo de la Vida, that tours the States periodically. He also owns Severinsen Custom Trumpets.

