

By Julian Gallant

Born in 1917 in Winnipeg, John Gallant left this once-prosperous city for the metropolis of Montreal in about 1936. He was looking for work as a jazz musician, and his home city's opportunities were few and far between. War approached inexorably, and he was faced with the choice of eventually being drafted into the infantry or signing up voluntarily with the Royal Canadian Air Force. He chose the latter, but was disqualified as air crew by his poor eyesight. I suspect he consciously avoided ground crew too, given his complete lack of talent for anything mechanical.

This was a musician, pure and simple, and when an opportunity arose to join a Canadian Airforce band, he took it. He came over to Britain in 1940 on the Queen Mary and spent the years 1940-1944 touring with "Blackouts", performing to Forces around the country. Prior to his departure he had been married to a certain Mavis Young, who adopted his name and became one of the most important female authors of the 20th century; they divorced in 1947.

After the Normandy landings, the entertainment followed the Allied advance into France, then Belgium, then Germany. After the war, he returned to Canada, attended McGill University and eventually took up work as MD at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Montreal. This was one of the destination nightclubs in North America for audiences and performers alike. That is where he met my mother, his British wife-to-be, in 1963.

John Gallant had a good war, strange to say. He had something to do which he loved and which kept him at a distance from danger. He did relate how once, when playing Gershwin's Summertime in a posh London house, he heard a "doodle bug" (V1 pilotless aircraft, the original cruise missile) engine cut out overhead.

He remembered an emaciated Belgian girl offering him the works for a few cigarettes; someone else who found good use for a pat of completely rancid butter that had been sent to him from Canada; and the unbelievable destruction wrought by Allied bombing on German cities. He stomached wartime food by putting peanut butter on EVERYTHING.

On the musical front, John Gallant was part of a transition. Jazz in the 1930s was the popular music of the day, witness the success of Duke Ellington's orchestra or The Glenn Miller Orchestra. After the war, jazz became more specialist, more esoteric, and he found a better platform in French popular music as personified by Edith Piaf. But even more important, music prior to World War 2 wasn't compartmentalised into classical, jazz, opera, folk etc; it was one live continuum where styles and genres mingled freely. My father once obtained Bela Bartok's address in Hungary, with a view to studying with him there. He could easily relate a Cole Porter song to Brahms' Piano Concerto No.2.

His life was absolutely key to my own attitude and the freedom I've always felt.

Julian Gallant is a musician too. John was 48 when he was born.