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Notes from the past



Vince Giordano, Stroh violin in hand, is at far right as a member of the band at Babette's in the HBO drama "Boardwalk Empire."

Drawing inspiration from old masters, Vince Giordano provides musical authenticity to 'Boardwalk Empire'

It's the first scene of the first episode of "Boardwalk Empire," and Vince Giordano is exactly where he wants to be. He's right in the middle of the bandstand, leading his musicians through a dance floor smash that's nearly a century old. In his hands is an instrument that even savvy fans of the HBO hit television show can't have seen before: something like a cross between a fiddle, a phonograph and a Colonial musket.

"It's a Stroh violin," says Giordano, "a fiddle with an amplifying device built in." "It's mine." Historical accuracy is important to the creators of "Boardwalk Empire": They're sweating every detail, and they want to make sure their audience notices. Giordano, whose on-screen performances with the Nighthawks give "Boardwalk Empire" much of its distinctive sonic signature, fits right in. He's more than just the bandleader at Babette's, the glitzy Atlantic City nightclub where the corrupt politician Nucky Thompson and his fellow operators make their shady deals. He's a student of the sounds of the 1920s, and a trusted voice in the ear of Randall Poster, the program's music supervisor.

The Stroh violin, for instance, was his idea. "At the time, they had no microphones in the clubs," says Giordano, who lives in Queens, "and the poor violinists didn't have a prayer of getting heard over the brass. So they made this device. I

thought it would be a neat thing to bring to the show." "Boardwalk Empire" begins with a drunken dance party. In Nucky's Atlantic City, Prohibition is just another lark — something for vacationing sophisticates to laugh at. The drinks are spiked with an inebriating dose of heavy irony, and the town is awash in song. It's just an educated guess, of course; only those who were there at the time know exactly what it was like. But if any band on earth could channel the sound of those wild Jersey Shore evenings, the Nighthawks can.

"At the time the show



VINCE GIORDANO

ON MUSIC
Tris McCall

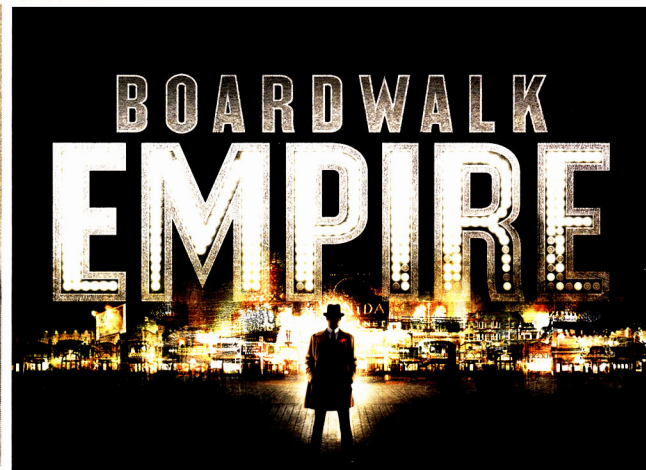


opens," says Giordano, "the hottest act in the nation was the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. 'Tiger Rag,' 'Clarinet Marmalade,' these were the songs that people would've wanted to hear. As the bandleader at Babette's, I knew we had to cover that stuff. This is our version, but we still give you the flavor of the hot jazz of those times."

Part preservationist and part jazz virtuoso, the musician has been busy keeping the flame of '20s- and '30s-music burning since starting his band in 1976. The Nighthawks are to early 20th-century jazz what the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields Orchestra is to baroque composition: They're loving re-creators who've simulated the sound and feel of the period by playing authentic instruments and following original scores.

"I got hooked as a kid," says Giordano, "after discovering a collection of phonographs in my grandmother's basement. She was a big fan of Al Jolson

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and Paul Whiteman. Even as a young person, I had a sense that what I was hearing on the radio was kind of lame. I put on my grandmother's records, and I fell in love with the syncopation, the creativity, the dynamic deliveries of the singers."

Finding others who shared his passion was not easy. "In those days, the only place you heard old jazz was on programs like 'Little Rascals.' Kids my age would say, 'There goes Vince with his crazy cartoon music.'"

But that meant the field was clear for Giordano to experiment with timeless styles that had fallen out of fashion. When the Nighthawks began playing club gigs, the group had virtually no peers. There were Dixieland bands in New York, but few jazz combos were dedicated to resurrecting the sound of the '20s with genuine fidelity. The bass saxophonist and bandleader threw himself into his work, acquiring so many vintage instruments and scores that he ran out of room for them. Giordano was forced to purchase the house next door and turn it into a warehouse for his collection of more than 60,000 scores.

Giordano has been called a good-humored eccentric. But because of his dedication to historical accuracy — and his musical excellence — he's made himself indispensable to filmmakers looking to resurrect the spirit of the early 20th century. "Boardwalk Empire" isn't his first close encounter with Martin Scorsese: Giordano contributed to the soundtrack of "The Aviator," the 2004 retelling of the Howard Hughes story. Jazz fan Woody Allen found room for him in the "Sweet and Lowdown" band. It was on that set that the musician discovered something else about himself: In front of the camera, he was as comfortable as a movie star, no matter how hectic a scene got.

"I was playing bass behind (bandleader) Sean Penn," says Giordano, "and he was swinging around that big prop moon so much that he almost took my nose off. I was getting nervous, but I didn't complain. Finally, I guess I must have shouted. One of the editors later asked me, 'Did you say something on film? Well, you're going to have to join the Screen Actor's Guild!'"

Working on "Boardwalk Empire" was an opportunity that the musician couldn't turn down. For Giordano, it's a dream come true — an opportunity to step into the Roaring '20s, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, once a week.

"On the show, the Nighthawks back up different singers and entertainers, which is just what a club band on the Boardwalk would have done. Because of its proximity to the city, Atlantic City regularly got enormous names: Sophie Tucker, Edith Day. Before taking his act to New York, Eddie Cantor would come down and try out the material in Atlantic City to see what got the laughs."

Giordano's on-screen character will evolve as the show does. Future episodes may be set in 1921 and '22, and the Nighthawks' repertoire will change to reflect then-contemporary musical trends (there is, he says, a rumor that he'll soon be joining Paul Whiteman's band). Along with Randall Poster, the Nighthawks bandleader sees "Boardwalk Empire" as an opportunity to educate the public about the diversity of early 20th-century song.

"The 1920s were a big buffet of music," says Giordano. "There was sentimental music, wild jazz, early blues. There were xylophone groups, ukulele groups, novelty bands. Some of the dance steps I've discovered are very sophisticated. I found a dance step in 5/4 time, for instance. People think of that as a more modern time signature, but people were hip to it then. They called it a half-and-half."

The dancing doesn't have to stop when "Boardwalk Empire" ends. Jazz enthusiasts can catch Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks live at Sofia's (221 West 46th St.) every Monday and Tuesday night.

Footage of the Nighthawks is available on YouTube, and his soundtracks are downloadable on iTunes. In a peculiar sort of way, this musical archivist has become current.

"When I started, it was hard to find a place for '20s and '30s jazz. Now, it's a wonderful time for vintage material. All this great music is just a click or two away."

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From top: Edith Day, Sophie Tucker, Eddie Cantor and Al Jolson are among artists who were popular during the period in which "Boardwalk Empire" is set.