

Swing shift

After stints with Conan, Springsteen, Max Weinberg does his own thing

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John Bonham, now there's a guy who looked like a rock drummer.

Bonzo, Ginger Baker, Carmine Appice, those cats presented like cool, crazy monsters behind the kit. But Max Weinberg? Well, he's spent most of his career looking like a guy Tony Bennett would trust to keep time - or do taxes - for him.

No matter. Weinberg's un-rock, almost-square appearance never kept him from slammin' skins like a bar-band Bonham when he served behind Bruce Springsteen in the E Street band.

Well, finally, Weinberg's music fits his smartly dressed, bespectacled look. On Tuesday, the Max Weinberg Big Band plays the Regattabar.

"I started doing the big-band thing years ago with a couple of concerts with college jazz ensembles between the E Street Band and my work on 'Late Night' (With Conan O'Brien)," Weinberg said from his New Jersey home. "But it's actually taken me this long to be good enough to lead my own big, 15-piece, swinging band. Or, as my wife refers to it, Max Weinberg's big, 15-piece, expensive band."



With big-band music a niche art form, Weinberg is floating the group on his own dime. It's a labor of love he's convinced will eventually turn a profit.

"This is a start-up business that I'm funding," he said. "It's about introducing this band, it's about letting people get to know me in this context. I want to take the music that I want to play to the people. You do that by the time-honored tradition of getting on a bus and traveling. That's also the only way to get a band tight, and I plan on getting this band tight."

"This is not bebop, this is not precious jazz - this is big, swinging, highly energetic jazz inspired by Buddy Rich, Count Basie, Maynard Ferguson," he continued. "When I was coming up, my love was rock 'n' roll. I'd never put myself in the class of jazz drummer, but for me, jazz is Duke Ellington playing on the Sammy Davis Jr. show in 1967. It's Doc Severinsen. It's not coffeehouse, progressive jazz, but music that has great parallels with rock 'n' roll."

In the last 17 years, between his work as O'Brien's band leader and the E Street Band's world tours, Weinberg's barely had a day off. But the drummer - who says he hasn't talked with O'Brien about working on the comic's November-slated TBS late night show - isn't interested in taking a breather.

After the circus feud of O'Brien-Leno, which ended with Weinberg out of a job, the first thing he wanted to do was get behind the kit.

"OK, I did take a few months off after 'The Tonight Show,'" he said. "But what I wanted to do is get this going as fast as I can. I want to be out there 180 days a year."

Attention, Springsteen lovers. There's a good shot of E Street nostalgia to his set.

"We do a segment in the show called Big Band Boss where we do a few of Bruce's songs in jazz style," he said. "It's not karaoke. It's not like a backing track without vocals. These are powerful arrangements with jazz chord changes. If you're a Bruce fan, if you're a fan of high-energy, skilled players playing in a small room, you're going to love it."

And it's likely the closest you'll get to E Street for a while.

"At some point, we're going to do another tour and album with Bruce," Weinberg said. "But until then I'm doing this, and after E Street I'll be back to this. I plan on doing this until I die."

The Max Weinberg Big Band, Tuesday at the Regattabar. Tickets: \$30, 617-395-7757.

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