Get Rhythm in Your Feet…

A Profile of Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks

by **Michael P. Zirpolo** © 2012

It was an unusually warm and sunny Saturday morning in mid-October in New York City: it felt more like midsummer than early autumn. I sat back and enjoyed the noontime train ride from the Manhattan theater district to Brooklyn. I had arrived in New York the day before to visit my two adult children who live there, and to take care of a little jazz business. I was headed to the home of bandleader Vince Giordano, to visit him, and gather information for an article I was going to write about him. We were to meet at 1:00 p.m.

I have known Vince for many years, having met him in the 1990s at one of the late Joe Boughton's jazz weekends in Meadville, Pennsylvania, where he performed with his band known as the Nighthawks. I saw Vince perform later at the Chautauqua jazz fest, also hosted by Joe Boughton, and then later still at a restaurant called The Cajun in the Chelsea section of Manhattan. I had also seen and/or heard Vince in a number of Woody Allen films, and in Martin Scorsese's film based on the life of Howard Hughes called *The Aviator.* Now he has plunged into the murky waters of television, providing the music for the HBO hit series *Boardwalk Empire,* which is now in its second season, and has recently been renewed for another season. As a result of the pervasive influence of television in our society, Vince is suddenly, after more than thirty years of leading bands that play music from the 1920s and 1930s, finding more work for the Nighthawks, and more interest in him by mainstream journalists.

My children, a daughter aged 23 who works and lives in Manhattan, and a son, aged 21, who is in college in New York City and also lives in Manhattan, are well aware of my "hobby," that is my ongoing love affair with jazz and American Popular Song. They grew up hearing the sounds of the great bands, singers, and jazz groups of the last century emanating from all sorts of stereo systems and boom boxes around our home. They grew accustomed to living in a house where there were hundreds of books, and thousands of records and CDs. Indeed, they have been taken by me to any number of musical performances over the years, so music is sort of a given in our relationship, albeit a sometimes pervasive one. My daughter once said to one of my friends who was asking her about her father's interest in music: "Some people call it a hobby. Some call it a passion. *I call it an obsession!"* Perhaps she is right.

When I told my children I would be visiting Vince, they both enthusiastically asked if they could go along. Knowing their father and having met many of his musical friends, they have come to expect the unusual and the interesting. They were certainly not disappointed by Vince Giordano.

As we exited the train, we walked a short distance to Vince's house and I rang the doorbell. It was exactly 1:00. A smiling Vince answered the door and admitted us into his living room. He is a solidly built man who is about six feet tall. He plays string bass, tuba, and bass saxophone, and has large, powerful hands, in common with many other bass players I have known. He was delighted to see that my children had accompanied me. I explained to him that they were interested in him and his music, and that they wanted to see some of the things he had in his house. He eagerly began to point out and explain a number of the intriguing and often odd musical instruments and devices he had acquired over the years.

The living room appeared comfortably large, but was packed with musical instruments, sheet music, audio and computer equipment, photos, (including one of Ross Gorman, who played the famous clarinet glissando in Gershwin's debut performance with Paul Whiteman's band of "Rhapsody in Blue," standing

behind a forest of woodwind instruments), a large rack built into a wall which held literally hundreds of player piano rolls, and much other music related miscellanea. I consider myself rather well-informed about the instruments on which jazz has been played over the last century, but I saw a number of instruments in Vince's living room that I had never seen before, including a straight baritone sax, which stands almost six feet tall, which he acquired from the widow of bandleader Benny Meroff; a goofus, which looks like a tiny saxophone with accordion keys on it (proper name couesnophone); a hot fountain pen, and a slide whistle. He also has a violin with a megaphone on it ("It's a *Stroh* violin," Vince said excitedly), and a clarinet megaphone, among many other oddities. He pulled out a piano roll and put it onto the Steinway grand-sized player piano (acquired from a bar in the Bronx) he has in his living room and demonstrated how it worked. Then he assembled a collapsible bass drum from the 1920s, and showed us a photo from 1923 with Duke Ellington's long-time drummer, Sonny Greer, in a little band led by Ellington, using one. My children were transfixed by all of this, and so was I.

Vince then took us to his basement, which is filled with filing cabinets and more computer equipment. In and on the filing cabinets are musical scores, arrangements, hundreds of issues of *Metronome, Down Beat,* and *Billboard,* from the early decades of the twentieth century. Among the music are cue sheets for silent film accompaniments, and scores for vaudeville shows. All of this music has been meticulously cataloged, with the data having been entered into Vince's computer system. The second floor of his house has a number of small rooms, each of which is filled with recordings, books, photos, posters, and memorabilia, all related to music from the first four decades of the last century. I was particularly struck by a drum head which had been signed by many famous swing era drummers, including Gene Krupa, Jo Jones (Jo signed it "Joe"), Nick Fatool, Buddy Schutz, Sidney Catlett, Maurice Purtill, Chick Webb, and Lionel Hampton. In addition, there were signatures of non-drummers Benny Goodman, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Jimmy Dorsey, Adrian Rollini, Johnny Hodges, Charlie Barnet, Tex Beneke, and John Best.

In the room where Vince has a turntable set up to play 78s, he had a Victor disk on the platter, and he played it for us, but before doing so, changed the turntable speed to 33 1/3. Now I was really intrigued: he was going to play a 10-inch disk that looked like a normal 78 at 33 1/3 rpm. What was up? Much to my amazement, there were three separate songs on one side of this record. But they were not programmed one after the other. Rather, they were programmed so that the groove for tune one was immediately adjacent to the groove for tune two; and the groove for tune three was immediately adjacent to the groove for tune two. So there was room for only one chorus of each tune on each side of the disk. This record, which Vince revealed was called "The Puzzle Record," was apparently an experiment conducted by Victor, undoubtedly one of the earliest, which led ultimately to the long-playing record. (Ironically, in the late 1940s, RCA Victor initially balked at changing from the 78 rpm format to the LP format, largely because its rival, Columbia, had perfected the necessary technology first.) "These kinds of records were used from 1926 onward for Vitaphone film soundtracks. In the early 1930s, Victor did release a few 33 1/3 rpm disks for home use, and also dabbled in an early form of stereophonic sound."

At some point in his childhood, Vince discovered his grandmother's Victrola. It is now in his bedroom. She also had a number of 78s from the 1920s and 1930s that Vince, as a small boy, began to play. He immediately liked the vitality of the music and performances on those scratchy old disks. They provided the initial spark that ignited his passion for vintage American music. When Vince pointed out this bulky record player to my children and me, he jokingly made a reference to one of my (and my children's) favorite classic films: *Citizen Kane.* "This" he said in hushed tones, "is my Rosebud. On my deathbed, I'll whisper… *Victrola."*

After this, my children departed to enjoy the lovely Saturday afternoon weather in Brooklyn, and Vince and I got down to some serious discussion about his life and the history of the *Nighthawks.*

Vince was born Vincent James Giordano on March 11, 1952, in Brooklyn. The Giordano family moved from Brooklyn to Smithtown, in Suffolk County, the easternmost county on Long Island, in the mid-1950s. Vince's mother passed a few years ago. But his father, who is now 86 years old, moved the family to California in the early 1980s, and is still there. He has a sister, Roseanna, who is now a TV director; another sister, Suzanna, who is a professional violinist; and a brother, Ben. All are now living in the Los Angeles area. Vince's father was in the water well drilling business, and his brother continues that work in California.

In 1966, when Vince was fourteen years old, he wrote a letter to the now-legendary arranger Bill Challis, who lived with his sister in Massapequa, Long Island, about 45 minutes by car from the Giordano family home. Young Vince asked if he could meet Challis, and if Challis would teach him how to arrange. At that time, Bill Challis was sixty-two years old, was not working much as an arranger, and had been largely forgotten by people in the music business. But Vince knew that Challis was a musical giant, having listened to recordings of his many arrangements from the 1920s written for the Jean Goldkette and Paul Whiteman bands. He also knew that with Challis, he was studying at the source. The diffident Challis, with a bit of encouragement, agreed to tutor Vince. At their initial meeting, when he shook Challis's hand for the first time, it occurred to him that Challis's hand had been shaken by Bix Beiderbecke, Louis Armstrong, Paul Whiteman and all of his great musicians, George Gershwin, Hoagy Carmichael, and indeed Maurice Ravel, who once visited the Whiteman orchestra in the late 1920s. From Challis, Vince expected, he would be taught the authentic methods of creating all of the wonderful orchestrated musical sounds Challis had been responsible for from the 1920s well into the 1940s.

Vince was somewhat baffled then, and a little disappointed, when, at their first arranging lesson, Challis pulled out two large texts containing all there was to know about the Schillinger method of arranging. "I expected that he would show me how he had done those great arrangements for Goldkette and Whiteman. But instead, he started explaining the Schillinger method to me," Vince said. "I resisted it because Bill's study with Joseph Schillinger came in the 1930s, *after* he had done all of those marvelous arrangements for Goldkette and Whiteman. But Bill insisted. "'You really need this Vincent,' he would say. So I studied the Schillinger method of arranging with Bill Challis. It involved approaching music mathematically. We didn't use music paper, we used graph paper and worked out mathematical permutations. I continued studying with him for four years, the four years I was in high school. I was never fond of the Schillinger method, and have never used it as a basis for writing arrangements. Still, in spite of all that, I learned a bit about arranging and about music from Bill Challis. He was a perfectionist who insisted that all of the musical details be just right. He was also a very sweet, soft-spoken man whose company I enjoyed, especially when he began to reminisce about his days with the Goldkette and Whiteman bands. I guess I learned a lot more from Bill about the music business, its ups and downs, and heard many classic tales of his dealings with the bandleaders and musicians he worked with, than I did about arranging. A bit later, I had the honor to work with Bill on his Goldkette Project recording." (See below.)

Vince went to high school in Hauppauge, Long Island graduated in 1970, and then entered the U.S. Navy, where he attended the Navy School of Music and played in the Navy Show Band from 1970-1972. After his discharge from the Navy, he spent a short time in Florence, Italy, working in the band of Eddie Davis, a banjo player from Indiana. He then returned to New York and began his career as a full-time professional musician. At first, he played random gigs, as any musician must, simply to earn a living. But he kept being drawn back to the sounds he had first heard coming out of his grandmother's Victrola. He began to gather old stock arrangements and sheet music from the 1920s and 1930s from wherever he could find it. In due time, he had thousands of pieces of music from those years in his library. The next logical step was to put together a band to play the music.

Enter historian/radio personality Rich Conaty. Conaty is something of an analog to Giordano. He is two years younger than Vince and has been deeply involved with the music from the early decades of the

twentieth century since childhood. He has had a long career on radio in New York playing vintage recordings. He and Vince met in about 1974 after Vince had heard Conaty's radio program *The Big Broadcast,* broadcast over WFUV 90.7 FM, from the campus of Fordham University in the Bronx section of New York. (This program is also heard over the Internet on Sunday nights.) Conaty wanted to organize a band to play arrangements he had copied from the Paul Whiteman archive at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts.. This interested Vince, so a band was put together to rehearse the vintage Whiteman charts. Musicians were gathered and rehearsals commenced, but gigs were few and far between. Although Conaty acted as the band's front man onstage for audiences, Giordano, who is a first-class instrumentalist and arranger, actually led the band. He selected its repertoire and worked with the musicians in rehearsal.

Vince had little trouble bringing together some of the finest veteran musicians in New York to work with him. Among those who played in the earliest editions of the Nighthawks were: Al Galladoro, Clarence Hutchenrider, Adrian Tei, and Artie Baker on reeds; Jimmie Maxwell, Bernie Privin, Pee Wee Erwin, and Chris Griffin on trumpet; Bobby Pring on trombone; Art Ryerson and Carmen Mastren on banjo or guitar; Dill Jones and Dick Wellstood on piano. Also working with the band in its earliest days were: Sal Pace, on clarinet and tenor sax, Moe Dale on alto, clarinet and soprano sax, Herb Gardner on piano and trombone, and Johnny Varro on piano. When I asked Vince how he secured the services of such marvelous musicians, he laughed. "Yes, these guys were superb musicians who played beautifully, could read anything, and give you the exact interpretation that you wanted. But they were being edged out of mainstream musical employment because of age discrimination, rock and roll, and country music. They were very happy to work in my bands because we were serious about playing the vintage music in the Nighthawks' book with integrity. They understood that perfectly." Sprinkled in among these veterans were younger players like Ed Polcer, Warren Vaché, Jr., Randy Sandke and Randy Reinhart on trumpet/cornet, and Ken Peplowski on clarinet and tenor sax. Musically, there was no generation gap in the Nighthawks.

I asked Vince if the name Nighthawks came from the Coon-Sanders band of the 1920s. He said, "Yes, it did. Coon-Sanders was one of the first bands to broadcast regularly on radio in the 1920s. I've always thought it would have been very exciting and romantic to have listened to late-night radio broadcasts by bands. That was what inspired me to name my band the Nighthawks."

So, for a period of time in the mid-1970s, the Nighthawks operated with Rich Conaty acting as front man, and Vince Giordano acting as the bandleader in every other respect. The band eventually got a regular gig at the Red Blazer II, on Third Avenue between 88th and 89th, playing a couple of nights a week. Although the band eventually stayed at the Red Blazer II for about seven years, Conaty soon dropped out to pursue a full-time opportunity in radio in Pittsburgh in the mid-1970s. At that point, Vince Giordano became a bandleader by default. He and all of the musicians who were working with him in the Nighthawks wanted to keep the band going. Fortunately, the Red Blazer engagement lasted into the early 1980s, and this base of operations allowed the band to become very tight as a performing unit, and begin to establish a reputation.

It was in the early 1980s that Vince Giordano began working in feature films. "The band was at the first Red Blazer, the one on Third Avenue. One night the pianist and arranger Dick Hyman came in. We talked a bit and he told me that he had been contracted to provide music for a film that was being made by Woody Allen called 'Zelig' (1983). I was lucky to be in Dick's band on that film, and that led to working with him again in the Woody Allen film 'The Purple Rose of Cairo' (1985). In between, I worked with clarinetist/saxophonist/arranger Bob Wilber on a film that was being made at the Kaufman-Astoria studio in Queens by Francis Ford Coppola called 'The Cotton Club' (1984). One thing led to another, and I wound up both on screen and on the soundtrack of 'The Cotton Club.' These films were my introduction to film work, and to Woody Allen. I also did some work on Woody's 'Radio Days' (1985). My continuing work with

the Nighthawks allowed people to see and hear that I could provide authentic music from the early decades of the twentieth century. They really appreciated the integrity we approached the music with. I worked with Woody Allen again in 'Bullets over Broadway' (1994). In between, I also worked on 'Bloodhounds of Broadway' (1989), which was a film based on four stories by Damon Runyon, which was set on New Year's Eve, 1928. Madonna was in that. Drink lots of coffee before you watch this film or else you'll fall asleep—it's terrible."

Vince continued to lead the Nighthawks during these years. "After the gig at the Red Blazer II ended, we went into a club on West End Avenue called Sweetwater's. Ahmet Ertegun, then the president of Atlantic Records, came in quite often with his wife Mica. They liked the band. We got to know each other. To me, Ahmet Ertegun was like King Midas; everything he touched turned to gold. He began dropping a good word here and there around town about us, and we began to work more, at better-paying jobs. To show you how our fortunes changed, we went from Sweetwater's to the Carlyle Hotel, and worked there in the Café Carlyle for several years. We were also doing other gigs; we were working like mad. People liked what we were doing. It was great."

"We worked at the Café Carlyle for a couple of years in the mid-1980s. That was an entirely different world for us. Bobby Short worked there five nights a week, we worked the other two nights, which were Sunday and Monday. The audience on a given night could include Sean Connery, Whitney Balliett from *The New Yorker,* and many other celebrities who were staying at the Carlyle. Bobby Short himself would come in on occasion."

"We then went into the next edition of the Red Blazer II. This one was on West 46th Street. We did very good business there, and stayed for about five years. Then the landlord jacked the rent way up, and Dennis Cary, the owner of the club, had to close. I've seen this happen time and again in New York. The upshot is that the band was thrown out of work."

In 1990, Vince was contacted again by Bob Wilber, this time to go to Italy to work on the soundtrack of a film project called "Bix: An Interpretation of a Legend." "I worked on that with a number of other American musicians including Andy Stein on violin, Kenny Davern on clarinet, and Tom Pletcher on cornet. We worked with some Italian musicians. The music we made was good, and was issued on an RCA CD. But the film itself was ridiculous. It made the film 'Young Man with a Horn' look like a documentary. The director of the film, Pupi Avati, really struck out with that one. But his heart was in the right place, I guess."

In 1995, Vince provided the music for three silent films: "Sherlock Junior," starring Buster Keeton, and "Get Out and Get Under" and "High and Dizzy," starring Harold Lloyd. "This was a project sponsored by AMC (American Movie Classics), when they did the Third Film Preservation Festival. The subject that year obviously was comedy. I really enjoyed that project, as did the Nighthawks, who worked on it with me. We later did Buster Keeton's 'Cameraman' for TCM."

At about this time, Vince disbanded the Nighthawks temporarily. "I had a disagreement with the union over money they were taking to fund union health insurance and other benefit programs. The way it was set up, we were being treated, as far as deductions from our pay, the same as the New York Philharmonic and the Broadway pit orchestras. The difference is that we worked on average two or three times a week, when we were working. Those orchestras were working pretty much full-time fifty-two weeks a year. The way I saw it, we would never accumulate enough work credits to qualify to receive the benefits. So we were in effect subsidizing those benefits for the musicians who did qualify to receive them. It was not a pleasant experience."

Vince then went to work for what was then Bertelsmann/BMG Records. “I worked for them for eight years, 1996 to 2004. I was assigned to archives that were then located in the building at 1540 Broadway, at 45th Street. My job was to go back to the beginning of the Victor label and catalog everything. I worked on classical, opera, dance music, pop music and jazz. I enjoyed this work, but of course am not exactly the corporate type. I was let go when BMG merged with Sony because I was the member of the archive staff with the least seniority. The cataloging project I worked on is still going on.”

“I continued to work as a musician during this period. One night, I was told to be at a certain place at a certain time with my bass. I showed up when I was supposed to, but the pianist who was already there told me he was not using a bass that night. Here I had schlepped my bass all the way from Brooklyn into Manhattan, and this happened. I was not real happy. So I decided to go to the bar and have a drink. There were two good-looking ladies there. I struck up a conversation with them and ended up having a fine time. One of the ladies was Carol Hughes. We’re still together, fourteen years later. So I guess that that was the best fouled-up gig of my life!”

After Vince’s hiatus from band leading, he nevertheless continued working in films. “One of the best projects from those years was the film “Finding Forester” (2000), directed by Gus Van Sant and starring Sean Connery. I worked on that with the Nighthawks. Two of our tunes wound up in the film: ‘Deep Night’ and ‘They Didn’t Believe Me.’ The sound track also included a lot of modern jazz by Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, and Wayne Shorter.”

I continued working with Woody Allen and Dick Hyman during this period. In “The Curse of the Jade Scorpion” (2001), I appeared in the film, but did not play any music. That same year, I used the *Nighthawks* to provide some of the music on the soundtrack of “Ghost World.” The director of that film, Terry Zwigoff, is a very knowledgeable record collector, so we got to do some interesting music including King Oliver’s ‘I Must Have It,’ Hoagy Carmichael’s ‘Georgia on My Mind,’ Tiny Parham’s ‘Clarice,’ and King Oliver’s ‘You’re Just My Type.’ In 2005, we worked for director Martin Scorsese in the film “The Aviator,” based on the life of Howard Hughes. That led to other good work.”

It seems that television, at least until recently, has not been as hospitable to classic jazz as feature films have been. “I did a little work on Ken Burns’s ‘Baseball’ (1994), and the cartoon series “Family Guy.” In 2009, we were contracted to provide the music for HBO’s ‘Boardwalk Empire.’ That series has had two successful seasons, and has been renewed for another season. TV today is like radio was during the swing era—it gives a band a lot of visibility. As a result of ‘Boardwalk Empire,’ a lot of people who wouldn’t otherwise know about the Nighthawks know about us, and are giving us work. And that is in addition to recording all of the music that is used on the soundtrack of each episode.” I had hoped to attend a recording session for music used on ‘Boardwalk Empire,’ but as fate would have it, the final session for season two was completed two days before my visit to New York.

I looked at my watch and was astonished to see that it was now 5:30. I thanked Vince for his kindness and patience, and told him that I had to get back into Manhattan to meet my children for dinner. He said that before I left, he had to play a recording for me. I had no idea of what he was up to, so I simply sat back and listened as he played what appeared to be incidental music and sound effects from something I did not recognize.

He said, “This is from the Chaplin silent film ‘One A.M.,’ which was one of his Lone Star Mutual films. It was made in 1916, but this soundtrack was recorded later, probably in 1932.” (Vince knew of my biography of Bunny Berigan. In fact, the book had been out for only a couple of weeks when I was visiting him, and he had looked at a copy with great interest earlier in our visit.) The music on the soundtrack featured a trumpet and a clarinet, was somewhat repetitive, and was not jazz. The complete recording was about twenty

minutes long, and had themes that reminded me of the pop tunes “It’s Been So Long” written in 1936 by Walter Donaldson (music) and Harold Adamson (words), and recorded in that year by Benny Goodman, with a vocal by Helen Ward, and “When I Take My Sugar to Tea.” “Can you identify the trumpeter and the clarinetist?” Vince asked. “Well,” I said, “the trumpet sounded like Bunny Berigan. The clarinet is less distinct. It is certainly not Benny Goodman or Jimmy Dorsey.” I had heard many recordings by them from that time period, and this clarinet playing sounded unlike those recordings. “I suppose it could be Artie Shaw, because he, like Bunny, was in New York in 1932 for substantial periods of time, so at least he could have been the clarinetist. But I can’t say that it was his playing for sure because I have heard very little of his recorded work from the early 1930s. His playing changed rather dramatically later in the 1930s, after he became a bandleader.” “Well, I’m not sure who these guys are either,” Vince said. “But I agree with you that the trumpet sounds like Berigan, especially the phrasing and vibrato; and the clarinet reminds me very much of Shaw’s playing on a recording session he did a few years later with Frank Trumbauer and the Teagarden brothers, especially his playing on ‘S’Wonderful,’” (April 27, 1936, for Brunswick) where it sounds like he is using a couple of the same licks.”

With the music from the “One A.M.” soundtrack now firmly etched into my mind, Vince and I went out his front door into the mild late afternoon air. He knew that I would remain in New York until the following Tuesday, so that I could catch him and the Nighthawks at their regular Monday night gig at Sofia’s, in the subterranean level of the Edison Hotel (221 West 46th Street). “Why don’t you come by Birdland on Monday afternoon about 4:00,” he said. “We will be rehearsing there for a sort of little show Charles Osgood, the CBS TV and radio personality, has put together. As best I can tell, it will be a private show for broadcasters at CBS. We’ll rehearse until about 5:45, and then do the show with Charles at 6:45, and then rush off to Sofia’s for our regular 8:00 show there. Birdland (315 West 44th) is only a couple of blocks from Sofia’s.” “Great,” I said as we parted. “I’ll see you there.”

At shortly after 4:00 the following Monday, I entered Birdland through what appeared to be a service entrance. The club is impressively large and well appointed, with tables and chairs on tiered steps going up from the main floor, on which the large bandstand is located. Vince, the Nighthawks, and Charles Osgood were already rehearsing. The music they were going over was not (with the exception of *Christopher Columbus*—it was Columbus Day) the standard repertoire played by the Nighthawks, but was music Osgood had chosen and Vince had arranged for the show. The Nighthawks consisted of three saxes/clarinets; a violin/baritone sax; two trumpets; a trombone; piano, bass, and drums. I recognized several of the musicians. The personnel was: cornetist Randy Reinhart; trumpeter Mike Ponella; trombonist Jim Fryer; reedmen Dan Levinson, Dan Block, and Mark Lopeman; (Andy Stein played violin and doubled baritone sax); Ken Salvo on guitar and banjo; Peter Yarin on piano, and drummer Arnie Kinsella. Vince, of course, played bass, tuba, and bass sax. His singing, in this show, was limited to *Christopher Columbus.*

It quickly became clear to me that the rehearsal was for the benefit of Charles Osgood, and the man and woman who would also sing, Mo Rocca, a CBS reporter, and Liz Powers, Osgood’s assistant, so that they would feel comfortable with their songs. Osgood sang in a good-natured way, and played the piano. The band was letter perfect on everything they played, even though they were sight-reading Vince’s freshly written arrangements. They were basically idling through the rehearsal, though at one point my ears perked up as Mark Lopeman played a lovely Lestorian eight-bar solo on tenor sax on one of the tunes being rehearsed. Osgood, being the veteran broadcaster, was setting the sequence of the program, and also was carefully checking the timings of everything. He told everyone assembled that the show would be precisely one hour long. I had my doubts, because there was a lot of singing to be done, as well as some talking by Osgood. At 5:45, Osgood declared the rehearsal over, and told the musicians they could help themselves to the food he had very considerately had brought into the club.

In the hour between the rehearsal and the show, many of the musicians did indeed sample the food provided by Osgood. I went to the bar and enjoyed a cocktail. I also talked with Vince and a number of the musicians, and other people from the music business who had started coming into Birdland. Before I knew it, Vince and the band were back on the stand, with Charles Osgood taking firm control of the show. Within the next hour, all songs were sung, all music played, and all talk completed—with the proceedings ending precisely at 7:45. I was impressed. Charles Osgood certainly knew how to put on a show. Vince and the band then dashed off to Sofia's, where they were to begin their regular Monday night job at 8:00. I walked in leisurely fashion the short distance to the Edison Hotel, where I met Carol Hughes at Sofia's. She was helping everyone get seated as the band members gathered on the small stage. I got a table for myself and my children, who were eager to catch the Nighthawks in full flight.

Sofia's is an intimate club which has good lighting and acoustics, but a minimum of interior decorating. It holds about 150 people, and on this particular night was filled with people of all ages. In front of the stage is an area where dancers gathered. Others were enjoying a glass of wine and dinner. There was an air of conviviality about the place.

I was curious to see my children's reaction to the band. My son, having had piano lessons for many years, had played a number of musical instruments through high school, and had a good understanding of music. My daughter's exposure to music was more limited. As the band hit, they both said with one voice "Wow… these guys really play!" Indeed, the Nighthawks do play enthusiastically, and well. As they worked their way through the first set, Vince would introduce each tune from his place at the back of the band, using his prized 1931 Kellogg microphone. He would always provide the audience with a bit of background about each tune, and then count it off. In addition to doing this, and playing bass, bass sax, and tuba, Vince would also sing every now and then. He is a bundle of energy on the bandstand. Vintage tunes like "Nagasaki," "On the Alamo," "Riverboat Shuffle," and "You're Driving Me Crazy," filled the sonically charged air.

After each set, Vince and the musicians would circulate throughout the room, frequently chatting with old friends, and listening patiently as new friends asked questions and made requests. During the first break, my son observed an elderly man sitting at a table off to the side of the room, assembling a clarinet. "What's that about" he asked me. "I'm not sure," I answered. As the second set began, the clarinetist began to warm up quietly, as the band swung through the first couple of numbers. Then Vince announced, in his enthusiastic way: "Ladies and gentlemen, we have a wonderful clarinetist here with us tonight, Sol Yaged!" As the eighty-eight year-old clarinetist walked slowly to the front of the band, Vince then briefly outlined Sol's career for the audience, and asked "Well, what do you want to play Sol?" Yaged, without saying a word, began playing "If I Had You," and the band fell in effortlessly behind him, playing strategically placed harmonic hums throughout the tune. Yaged played quite well, and the audience was warmly appreciative. He then returned to his table, and would return to play one or two tunes in the succeeding sets.

All the while, dancers of all skill levels were gliding about in front of the band. In a banquette to the left of our table, my daughter noticed a group of athletic-looking people who were frequently on the dance floor, dancing with each other and with many of the other of the patrons. "Those people really love to dance," she said, "and they really know how to dance." As Vince noticed this group of people toward the end of the second set, he began to call numbers with faster tempos. The number of dancers on the floor decreased as the tempo increased. But the dancers who remained truly knew how to dance, in fact, we discovered that they were professional dance instructors. They put on a display of dancing that night that probably hasn't happened since the glory days of the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. What they did on the dance floor was truly amazing, and physically taxing. A couple of the men were soaked with sweat as they came off the dance floor. But they had brought several changes of shirts with them, so by the time the next set began, they were all ready to dance again, in fresh, dry shirts.

As the gig ended at around 11:00, the musicians quickly disappeared. Vince and Carol remained and talked with people who were leaving the club. It had been another night of good music, good dancing, and happy camaraderie at Sofia's, with Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks. As we ascended the steps and walked out onto West 46th Street, audiences from the nearby Broadway theaters were also coming out into the balmy October night. Although it was a Monday evening, Manhattan was alive with activity.

While I was writing this profile of Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks, it was announced that Vince and the band were nominated for a Grammy award for their CD "Music from 'Boardwalk Empire: Volume One'" (best compilation for visual media). On February 12, 2012, it was announced that they won the Grammy. It is a fitting recognition for a man who has dedicated more than forty years to breathing life into the music of the 1920s and 1930s.