This edition of “In The Spotlight” features Joe Vinikow and Julie Sakahara, musicians who have been at the heart of Swing Camp since the beginning. They have just released their new album, *Burning Down the Jukebox*, and will making its Canadian debut on September 26th at Dave and Luci’s Fabulous Roadhouse in Burnaby, BC. Below is a condensed version of my interview with the two of them on September 7, 2026.

Q: Joe, tell us how you got started with music.

Joe: I was six years old when my sister persuaded my folks to give her piano lessons. She's two years older than me. So, I, of course, insisted on having piano lessons as well. We got started with the local music teacher, who was actually a very accomplished teacher. Our Canadian friends will be amused that at one point we were sent up to Victoria for the Royal Conservatory of Toronto music examinations, to which I can certainly attest is probably the most efficient method of de-conditioning a human being for playing music creatively that you could ever imagine. Yeah, I endured one of those, and then that was it.

Q: Julie, I understand you also began playing music at an early age.

Julie: I learned how to play the guitar when I was about 15 years old from watching my friends play and trying to figure out what they were doing with those fingers and how to do the strumming thing. I was trying to be a folk musician. I got to the point where I stole all their licks.

I went to the YMCA to take a class taught by Dave Auer, one of the founders of the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop. I was a bratty little kid, so I would be asking him all kinds of questions during class. And he said, “okay, I'm going to have you co-teach this with me and you'll sing the songs.” He was not exactly a great vocalist and sometimes it was hard to tell what the melody was. He had me sing the songs and help him get people moving their fingers around.

Q: Joe, what were your early influences?

Joe: The next major influence was in March, 1964, when the Beatles appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show. And then, in fairly short order, I convinced my father to get me a guitar and amp. I had to get straight A's to earn it and I managed to do that. My first guitar was a little Gibson flat top. Very nice little guitar. I remember the day it showed up and that was a glorious day! And then, like millions of other American youth, I had a guitar in my hands and started playing in a little garage rock and roll band.

My first band was called Attila and the Huns. We had our first gig at the now defunct Crown Theater in Greenwood in Seattle. We were 13, 14 year old's, playing in the intermissions between an Elvis Presley quadruple bill. I remember dodging slingshots and peashooters and cat calls. We were playing Northwest rock, from the early Rolling Stones…you had to play "Louie, Louie", you had to play "Satisfaction", and "Gloria", and you really didn't need much more than that. Eventually, we were playing for teen dances, sock hops, and some frat parties around the university when they needed a cheap band. And then followed a variety of other bands all through high school.

Q: Julie, did you continue working with Dave Auer?

Julie: I co-taught with Dave Auer and Doc Knutson, who had YWCA guitar classes. And also Everett Community College. I was teaching sometimes with them, and sometimes just on my own. Dave Auer was my guitar guru. He married Flip Breskin, and when I graduated from college, he invited me to come live with them in Bellingham and play music. And they got together with a friend, Larry Squire -- amazing finger picker and terrific teacher -- and talked about having a music camp. They formed the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop. I was in on the ground floor of that because I was Dave's protege.

Q: Talk about your foray into teaching.

Joe: In Seattle, a bunch of the instructors from the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop and maybe a few other folks got together and formed the Musical Arts Workshop. I think this would have been late 80s, early 90s. We rented space in one of the public schools that was vacant at the time and had classes. It lasted for a couple of years.

Then Julie and I started an evening guitar program called Guitar for Grownups. These were small group classes for adults, held in the evenings and modeled on the classes that we taught at the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop and at the BC Swing Workshop.. A variety of different levels, A variety of different repertoires. Julie and I never stopped teaching small group classes. We've been teaching them for almost 50 years now.

Eventually Julie and I started a band in Seattle. A regular union gigging band, called Full Swing, doing casuals, dances and corporate things, and that band ran for many, many years. We were just regular, working, gigging musicians for a long time.

Q: Was the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop where you began teaching at music camps?

Julie: That was my start with music camps. I met Rosemary there, and at some other music camps that we were going to. We had discussions about what's the best way to learn, and how to make it an extremely supportive learning environment. And she took the ball and ran with it.

Joe: The Puget Sound Guitar Workshop was really the grandmother of all these music camps and workshops. It was really the model. And now they're all over the country, of course.

Q: You have mentioned your experience with bluegrass music. How did you end up in the Swing genre?

Joe: A lot of us got into playing swing music through bluegrass. I first had a jug band in high school, and then a bluegrass band in college. That got us listening to people like Dan Hicks and Jim Kweskin and listening to 78s and reviving this music. So it was a natural progression, I think, for a lot of us playing bluegrass to just branch out harmonically in terms of the repertoire.

The DNA of the swing workshop had a lot to do with the bluegrass tradition, because there had been this bluegrass workshop going on at Sorrento for years before swing camp started. It's important to distinguish the workshop vibe of the bluegrass festivals -- which has always been very much do-it-yourself, participatory, jam oriented culture -- with the traditional jazz workshops like Centrum, at Fort Worden. They have top flight, professional jazz players who are teaching folks who are more on a “professional track”. There's more young players there, kids in high school or college, along with older players. But it's more of a professionally focused curriculum, whereas swing camp came out of a much more jam-focused, participatory concept. It was more recreational music, where people played because they were enjoying it. They weren't necessarily on a professional track.

Q: I understand that you two were instructors at the **first** BC Swing Workshop which has morphed into our society, Swing West Jazz. What are your memories of that first camp?

Julie: We were all finding our way at that point. And swing music was very familiar to the staff, but not all of the students. A lot of the students hadn't really heard it much. Maybe they danced to it, or maybe they were just sort of swing curious.

The first dances that we had, I remember the vocalists really struggling with the idiom. Band lab helped. The students could take the excellent instruction they were getting from

their teachers. Because the staff was top notch. Not only were they great players, but they were encouraging, supportive teachers to help students try new things.

Joe: Well, I just remember that it was fabulous. It was working in an area that we had been really specializing in for a long time, which was the great standards, the songbook. The students were very engaged, and attentive and hard-working.

A lot of the faculty are the same ones we see now. Jen and Rene were there. Bill Coon. Tom Keenlyside. Phil Belanger. Michael Creber, Ron Peters. It was a great group. And for us, it was just a wonderful opportunity to meet all these terrific musicians, mostly from the Vancouver area, who we really hadn't had a lot of contact with. And we just had a ball collaborating and playing with them

Q: Turning to the early days of BC Swing Camp, do you know the origin of the camp's signature offering, Band Lab?

Joe: This key component of what became BC Swing was an innovation of our friend John Miller, the guitarist, now from Bellingham. Originally, John had the brilliant idea of doing a camp that had this thing called a band lab. That camp, which I think was called the Sound Acoustic Music Camp, had three separate tracks: bluegrass, old-time music, and swing. There were literally three band labs that would happen simultaneously in the afternoon!

Taking that component, which I think is really the heartbeat of Swing West, put those pieces together in a highly structured learning performance environment, and additional, related events, like a dance and student concert, (which originated at the Puget Sound Guitar Workshop), it's really kind of a fusion of those events, I think, that contributed in a very significant way to developing the overall structure and curriculum of the BC Swing Workshop.

Q: BC Swing Workshop began in 2001. Swing West Jazz has continued its traditions. How has it changed over the years?

Joe: I think the basic structure, and this is much to Rosemary's credit, was baked in from the beginning. And I would say probably a significant change is that we don't party quite as hard or as late or as loud as we used to back in the day (Laughter).

The thing that's changed the most is the overall ability level of the student population. I think they are the most hardworking and committed group of students in a camp that we've ever worked with. And as an instructor, that's extremely gratifying to see students improve year after year after year. You can see it, in the quality of the performances, both in the

band lab and in the student concert, and I think especially, in the swing dances. There's no question that it's the camp that has the highest level of proficiency of any of the camps that we've taught at.

Julie: One of the big changes that I see, as the person who reviews the charts for the dances and gets to work with all the singers, was in the beginning, people couldn't figure out what their key would be. They would pick tunes that weren't really danceable. They would sing it as if they were trying to sing an opera or something. There were a lot of issues with the vocals, although everybody was very earnest and presented their songs in a wonderful way.

The band has always been amazing. And big! I have no idea that you could find any other band that has 30 to 60 people trying to play a song that they've maybe heard before (or not) with no rehearsals and just, bam. It's there for the dancers and everybody's having a great time.

The change that I see is since those first years of just trying to figure out the genre, you see so much growth in the students. That's what sets BC Swing apart from all the other camps that I go to. Many of them have a very supportive learning environment and excellent teaching staff and even after decades, the students don't play much different than they did 20 or 30 years ago. They still kind of do the same things and approach things in the same way. And that's *not* true of the students at BC Swing.

The students at BC Swing have excellent instruction and a terrific program that gives them the idea of how to work in a group, and how to express themselves within a group. The amount of improvement of the instrumentalists and the singers has been just breathtaking to me. It's so exciting! I can't wait to see people the next year to see how they progressed. And they do. They progress.

Q: Joe, you have always led the Big Band for the swing dances at camp. Everyone wants to know: what is going on in your head as you arrange tunes on the fly?

Joe: I guess I'm always thinking of what a great record would sound like. If Benny Goodman was playing this, or Count Basie was playing this, or Gerry Mulligan is playing this, what would the record sound like? Where would we want to bring in what instrument?

And starting with the beginning, what's the tempo going to be? I always consult the singer. Tempo and groove are crucial, and the singer usually has an idea of what that's going to be, and that's usually fine. Sometimes I give them some suggestions: maybe we should bring

the tempo up a little bit, or we should bring the tempo down a little bit.

But actually on the bandstand, I'm thinking okay, maybe this is when we want to have the horns or the strings come in and, look who else we've got for soloists. Just try to pass the solos around. Of course, we try to keep them short.

But the great thing about that band is that *everybody* is listening and everybody can move on their feet and keep their knees loose and make it work. And to me, it's always just amazing how this contraption of so many moving parts can come together and make an amazing arrangement right on the fly.

We have to give a shout out to the magic that Tom Keenlyside does with his horn sections. It is absolutely a magic trick in plain sight, whereby the time we get to a second chorus, he's already taught his group a great little riff that they can play. A call and response thing. They could do a shout chorus on the spot. It's like magic when that happens. It's an event that's completely unique. There's no other event that we've ever participated in -- and we played music all our lives -- that's like a BC Swing dance. Now Swing West Jazz dance!

And again, part of that is due to Julie, the Queen of the Wall of Wood, which is such a great innovation. It gives players who might not have had any experience at all playing from a chart, keeping in time with their fellow players in a very, very low pressure environment.

Q: Julie, you have played a big role in the dances as well, reviewing and approving charts and leading the “wall of wood”. Tell us about that.

Julie: The Wall of Wood came from other camps as a place where rhythm players could get together and be the rhythmic drive for the dance. It's close to the gypsy jazz tradition where you have a whole bunch of rhythm players doing what they call La Pompe, and they're just pumping that rhythm, and they're all together, right in time. It's really powerful.

The Wall of Wood is an outgrowth of that, to allow people to experience the joy of being right in the middle of the rhythm. And one of the things about BC Swing that really set it apart from the very beginning was including dance instructors, because swing music is all about dance.

Q: You spend much time and effort with music but what else do you do for fun?

Joe: Well, we're both multi-generational Northwesterners. Both Julie's family and mine are third generation in Seattle or Puget Sound area. Like many old Mossbacks, we like to spend a lot of time outdoors. We like to hike and bike. We've got a kayak that we like to paddle

around in and generally get outdoors as much as possible.

Julie: Ski.

Joe: Oh yes, and skiing. That's another great connection to BC, because we try to get up to Whistler if we can. So that's a big part of what we like to do year-round.

Q: Tell us some of the details about your upcoming house concert at Dave and Luci's.

Joe: The concert is going to be fabulous! We are very happy to plug our new CD that just arrived two days ago. We recorded this in Nashville last December and it's called *Burning Down The Jukebox*. It's about highlights of 10 years of songwriting, together with the magic fairy dust that they will sprinkle all over your songs when you record with folks in Nashville. We will be making this Canadian debut on September 26th at Dave and Luci's Fabulous Roadhouse in beautiful Burnaby, BC.

You can get more information about it by going to our website, which is www.motel5.com. Seating is limited. It's not a big joint and we always really appreciate the crowd and the enthusiasm, the folks who show up both from Swing Camp and from the community in general. We'll be there with Michael Creber.

Concert Details

Joe Vinikow and Julie Sakahara are delighted to announce the release of the latest recording by Motel 5, live and direct from Music City USA.

They are thrilled to be joined once again by keyboard kingpin Michael Creber for a crackling concert of compelling compositions.

Saturday, September 26th, at 7:30pm. Doors open at 7pm.

Seating is limited, tickets $25 at the door.

(Refreshment contributions will be cheerfully consumed.)
Reserve your seat now just click here.

And click here to sample some of our exciting new tracks.
Please tell your pals and forward or post our link to the event on your social media.