

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



GLENN MILLER – Part 1 of 2

[This is the thirty-seventh article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

So what was it that made him and his music so special?

There were dozens of other bandleaders of that era; Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, and the list goes on and on. What did he do that outlived him by seventy years, and is still going strong? Let's take a look, shall we?

Born Alton Glenn Miller March 1, 1904 in Clarinda, IA, his first musical instrument was, in fact, a mandolin (thanks to his father, Elmer). But .. right church, wrong pew! At least, it kindled in the boy a love for music. By the age of 14, young Glenn had found that a trombone would put him into his high school band (not much call for mandolins in those days). After school, he tried college, dropped out, played with several small groups, and joined Ben Pollack's band in the mid-20s as a trombonist and, more importantly, as an arranger. In fact, in 1928 he and Benny Goodman played together in a few Broadway pit orchestras, and co-wrote *Room 1411*. (Did you know that Benny played the baritone sax, not his clarinet, on that recording?). They were an interesting duo. If Goodman looked "professorial," then Miller, with his rimless glasses, slender build and serious demeanor would have been "the accountant."

He married his college sweetie, Helen, joined the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra, and studied music theory with the best of the day. While working with the Ray Noble Orchestra in 1934, he recorded under his own name, which gave Glenn the confidence to organize his own band in 1937. But it flopped! He reorganized the band, and scored a major booking at the Glen Island Casino in New Rochelle, NY, in 1938. From 1939 – 1942, Glenn and the boys were a huge success, recording 17 Top 10 Hits in 1939, 31 in 1940, 11 in 1941 and 11 in 1942. His 15 minute CBS radio series *Moonlight Serenade* played in primetime 3 nights a week and ran for three years. Miller and his band were also featured in movies, such as *Orchestra Wives*. In 1941, they appeared in the film *Sun Valley Serenade*. His recording of the film's hit song, *Chattanooga Choo Choo*, sold more than one million copies and RCA Victor in February of 1942 awarded to him the very first Gold Record. During this time, Glenn was making about \$20,000 weekly. Not bad for a college dropout.

Miller's music was wildly popular because of both style and sound. He was quoted as saying "a band ought to have a sound all of its own. It ought to have a personality." His style was "Swing," an offshoot of Jazz. Whereas Jazz favors improvisation and primarily soloists, Swing relies on solid structure and orchestration, with only occasional (and short) solos. This music allows the audience to hear and experience familiar renditions

of their favorite tunes each time, whereas the jazz of the era was often new and unfamiliar because most of it was improvised.

As regards the unique sound, I recall a movie scene from *The Glenn Miller Story* where, during a rehearsal, the lead trumpet who was playing the melody hurt his lip when his instrument accidentally collided with his music stand. Glenn decided to use a member from the sax section to play the lead with a clarinet. Great story, but pure fiction! Miller, using his experience as an arranger, had experimented for quite some time to achieve a unique melodic sound. He found the answer by modifying the standard 5-man sax section (two altos, two tenors and one baritone sax). The new version had a clarinet and tenor sax sharing the melody, with one alto, the second tenor and the bari playing complementary harmony to the melody (think of his beautiful *Moonlight Serenade* theme song).



A reporter once asked Glenn if he wanted to be the new “King of Swing,” as Benny Goodman was then labeled. Miller responded “I’d rather have a reputation as one of the best all-around bands. Versatility, more than anything else, is what I want to accomplish.” But at the height of his popularity, there was still more that Glenn wanted to accomplish. Just eight months after America entered World War II, Miller volunteered for military service.

[To be continued ...]

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