

The Glenn Miller Years VII

"Glenn," Tom Shiels said, "bought a station wagon from Ralph Brewster's dad. Ralph Brewster was one of the original Modernaires. His father had the Oldsmobile agency in Atchison, Kansas. Glenn wanted me to take it on the road and promote his records. This was 1942.

"He had great business sense. He knew there'd be a freeze on a lot of civilian products. So he sent me to Wisconsin to buy some Shastock mutes for trumpets and trombones. I bought a few hundred of them, bucket mutes, harmon mutes, and put them in Manhattan Storage Warehouse on Seventh Avenue. I said, 'What do you want those for?' He said, 'Some day we'll have use for them.'

"Subsequently he did. When later on he started these Army Air Force bands around the country, he supplied all the mutes for them.

"The same when we did the *Sunset Serenade* program. He bought all these RCA radio-phonographs from Victor at cost, because he was a Victor artist. He gave them away as prizes on *Sunset Serenade*. That's why I never got on the road with the records: he put me in charge of the logistics on that. I would have to contact the military base and arrange for them to pick their favorite song for *Sunset Serenade*, and then urge their friends to send in a penny postcard saying something like 'My favorite song is *I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire*,' from Fort Dix, New Jersey. Or *Can't Get Out of This Mood*. They'd have their families send in these postcards. Whoever got the most postcards would win the phonograph. I would go and have the plaque made: 'To the men at Fort Dix, compliments of Glenn Miller.'

"One week five camps picked *I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire*. That week we sent out five phonographs and plaques.

"I think Glenn would have been successful no matter what kind of business he went into.

"I loved Helen Miller. She and my Helen, Helen Burke, who later became my wife, were close friends. She came to our wedding with Polly Haynes, Don's wife. I think June Allyson did a good job as Helen Miller." Don Haynes was Miller's manager and later, during the war, his executive

officer.

Paul Tanner said: "Glenn was also keenly aware of the value of publicity, many times accepting location jobs offering free radio time instead of the higher-paying one-nighters, and going out of his way to make friends with as many disc jockeys as he could, realizing, even then, their power in making or breaking a record. By the same token, he bypassed large sums of money every week by tying the band up with a series of hour-long Saturday radio shows, calculating correctly that they would tend to bring thousands of fans in to see us on the road; fans who never failed to walk away with Glenn's autograph if they wanted it."

Among the best musicians in the band was Johnny Best, one of the finest of all lead trumpets. Johnny was born on October 20, 1913, in Shelby, North Carolina, population at that time about three thousand. He attended Duke University and played in the Blue Devils, probably the most famous of college bands. Eventually he went with Artie Shaw.

"That's when Billie Holiday was with the band," he told me. "That was at Roseland State Ballroom.

"Artie started criticizing a little bit. Said I was playing too many notes. Something went on that I'd rather not talk about. It had to do with a woman. I left that band at the Capitol Theater in Washington, D.C. and joined the Miller band immediately. Glenn had just closed at Glen Island Casino. Glenn had offered me a job a year before that. He said, 'I can't pay you as much as Shaw.' I knew him as a friend. He said, 'I want you to play solos on ballads and play relief lead trumpet.' He just had three trumpets then.

"Glenn was a friend of mine. He was always nice to me. He was a sorehead, in ways. If you got in a crap game with him, you found that out. I made three passes on a rug in an apartment in Hollywood. Hal McIntyre, Glenn and I were playing. We were on the floor. The dice hit the wall and bounced back. And he said, 'They didn't touch. Three in a row.'

"When I first joined the band, I was riding with Glenn and Helen Miller. We were talking about mountains. I said Mount Whitney was the highest mountain in the United States — not counting Alaska. He said, 'Oh there are fourteen mountains in Colorado higher than Mount Whitney.' I said, 'Glenn, you wanna bet?' I said, 'Sure, I'll bet

you five dollars.' Next day he said, 'You don't bet unless it's a sure thing, do you?'

"Toward the end, when the band was losing popularity, I was walking across the street with him. We were playing the Stanley Theater. We were coming from the hotel. He had a hangover from the night before. Harry James was getting hot in record sales. He said, 'Now I know how Benny must have felt when Artie started coming up.'

"I could say the same thing about Artie. Artie gave up his band when Glenn Miller was coming up. We were both booked in New York City at the same time. He was booked at the Strand Theater and Glenn was booked at the Paramount. This would be in late '39.

"I rode it out with Glenn to the end, three years. When he broke up the band, he wanted many guys to go with Charlie Spivak, who he was backing. I was one of them. I guess I said, 'Okay.' I had spoken to Charlie on a long distance call from Chicago to New York for thirty minutes, trying peacefully to get out of that. I liked Charlie very much, but I didn't want to go with a trumpet-playing leader. That wouldn't be any fun. Benny Goodman wanted me, and I talked to him. And I talked to Bob Crosby. I went with the Crosby band. They were doing nothing but theaters. Every band started breaking up. I had my draft notice in my pocket. I knew I had to go in December. Miller had said, 'Don't do anything until you get in touch with me. I'm going to do something in the military.'

"You want to hear a million-to-one shot? We were at the Chicago Theater. We were all through, finished the last show. We were walking to the hotel. I was with Yank Lawson. We got half a block away, and Yank says, 'Walk back to the theater with me. I want to send my jacket out and have it pressed.' The theater was dark. The night watchman let us in. I stayed there by the door. Yank went over to the dressing room. The night watchman took off. The pay phone rang. I picked it up. Operator said, 'Long distance call from Artie Shaw for John Best.'

"So he said, 'What's your draft status?'

"I said, 'I'm 3-A.'

"Artie said, 'I have permission from the Navy to recruit a band for the sole purpose of going up to the front in this war and entertaining the troops, as close as they will send us. And I have a place for you, if you're interested.'

"I flew to New York and took a day off. The guys came in with medical deferments. I didn't know what mine was. Davey Tough, Max Kaminsky, both of them. I signed up with Shaw. That's how I came to spend a year in the South Pacific with Artie instead of going to England with Miller.

"The next time I saw Glenn, I was in the Navy. He had the

Army band going. This was after we'd been in the Pacific. I had Christmas dinner with him out at Tenafly, New Jersey.

"He said, 'Tell me one thing, John. Did you try to get in touch with me before you went with Artie?'

"I said, 'I tried to call you and they said you were in the hospital in Fort Mead.'

"He wanted to know my preference.

"My mind was made up as soon as Shaw called me. I said, 'Well, musically, I can't do any better than that. The Miller band was . . . Well, it was the Miller band. But today, the Miller band is still a huge thing. But Artie was a great player. A brilliant man. Funny too.

Some comments by the late Dave Dexter are revealing.

Born in Kansas City, Missouri, Dexter wrote freelance articles for *Down Beat*, then moved to Chicago — the magazine's headquarters — as a staff member. He recalled in an interview now in the Marr Sound Archives of his alma mater, the University of Missouri at Kansas City:

"My big problem was that I had no expense account. If I wanted to see the Bob Crosby band at the Black Hawk, the best I could do was maybe get a seat at the bar and have a Budweiser and nurse it for two hours and meet the musicians between sets. Once in a while a bandleader would invite me to sit down and have dinner and he would pick up the check. Woody Herman was marvelous that way. Benny Goodman used to do that a lot too. Glenn Miller was always picking up the check on me.

"The first time I met Glenn he had won for the first time the *Down Beat* poll. In those days that was a big, prestigious victory for a bandleader. And I took the train to New York from Chicago, and presented a little plaque that must have cost four dollars, on the Chesterfield show. That was in '39.

"Glenn was a nice man. A good middle-western man. He'd size you up. You'd sit and talk with him. He had a nice wife, Helen. He had been burned so many times and he'd had a couple of failed bands. He'd had a tough life. So he was a little cautious. He was cordial, but he wasn't a black slapper like some of the bandleaders. Glenn wasn't that way at all. But he was very helpful to me.

"I remember catching the band at the Pennsylvania Hotel. Boy, how they would scream — the people loved that band. It wasn't my all-time favorite band but I do believe it was the most popular big band of all time.

"Glenn was a tough boss. I sat in on a couple of his record dates for RCA Victor. He was really astonishing. He'd sit in the booth with the producer and they'd run down a new tune. He'd go out and move the lead alto chair six inches closer, and maybe have the trumpets all blow just a little bit to the side instead of directly into the mike. I never saw any other

bandleader do that. He'd move each man in the band maybe a few inches. They'd each have instructions when to stand up. Boy, he was some leader.

"Glenn had really made it when I met him. I didn't know him when he was struggling so hard and all that.

"He was very courteous. But he didn't talk or tell jokes or try to impress you. He didn't try to impress anybody. But he was awfully good to me. I'd go over to the Pennsylvania Hotel. They'd have all these top music publishers who just swarmed the place. All of them had number one plug songs they wanted to get to Miller. Jack Robbins and all these big-name guys. Dozens of them. He'd walk right past them, come over and sit down at my table. And then he'd say, 'Let's go have some jelly pancakes after I'm through.' We'd go over to Lindy's or some place. He and Helen would sit and we'd talk. That was of course after I got to know him better. Once you got to know Glenn, and if he accepted you, he was loyal and generous. He'd always send you Christmas presents.

"I remember one Christmas I went to the Pennsylvania Hotel, and in the lobby was a brand-new big black Buick. I don't know how they got it in there. It had enormous red ribbons wrapped around it. The guys in the band had bought that for him.

"There was another Christmas when he had a sixteen-millimeter movie outfit. That was in the Paramount Theater. I went backstage. He'd make movies of everybody who came back there. He was so excited.

"I liked Glenn. Some of the musicians didn't like him, but most of them did. He was so strict. Boy, they had to dress a certain way, move in and off the bandstand a certain way.

"I did a long feature on him in *Down Beat*. I very rarely showed my copy to somebody before publication, but in this case I did, because it was a long involved story. I took it over to Glenn at a theater and showed it to him. He said, 'Whoa, whoa, it's fine up to here. You've got a paragraph in here about Marion Hutton. I sure wish you'd change it some way.'

"I said, 'What's wrong with it?'

"He said, 'Well, she's not a good singer, Dave. But she's a good little showman. She walks out there with that blond hair and a pretty gown. Play that up. Don't mention much about her vocal ability.'"

Tom Shiels told me:

"Last night I was playing a cassette of Glenn's next to last radio broadcast before he went into the service. It was a Wednesday night Chesterfield. They did *Juke Box Saturday Night*. If you remember the recording, they do an impression of Harry James, which my friend John Best used to play.

"Billy May said they were playing a lot of military bases. Billy was going to leave to go to another band. Miller said,

'Look, I'm going into the service, and I don't want the word to get around yet. Will you stay with me until I have to break up the band? I'm waiting for a commission to come through.' Billy and Dale McMickle went with the Paul Lavalle Orchestra so Billy could stay in New York and write.

"I think Glenn went into service the middle of September. We were at a theater out in New Jersey. I remember that night. He said, 'I'll say good-bye the best way we know how.' Then they went into *Moonlight Serenade*. Marion Hutton was crying, everybody was crying. That was a sad night.

"I had given my notice because I'd got my Greetings from Uncle Sam. So I told him I had to leave. He got Chummy McGregor to do my job in the office. Chummy was not that kind of worker. He didn't want to do it. I got married on December 12, and I was supposed to go on the 15th for my exam. My wife and I talked. Should we go ahead and get married? So we did. Helen and Polly were there and I think Chummy too. On Park Avenue in New York City.

"I went down there with all these other draftees at Grand Central Palace in New York. They came to the final guy and he's got one rubber stamp saying Accepted, one saying Rejected. And you're watching. Your whole life's future is in his hands. He hits it *Rejected*. I was very patriotic. All my buddies had gone into the service. I was gung-ho to go. I said, 'What did you reject me for?'

"He said, 'It says you have severe hay fever.'

"I said, 'So what's the big deal?'

"If we're attacking the Japanese in a jungle somewhere and we're approaching in the middle of the night and you start to sneeze, you could blow out a whole battalion.'

"So then Glenn hired me back, to run whatever affairs he had. When he signed Tex and we signed the Modernaires and Ray Eberly, in addition to an employment contract, there was a personal management clause — if, as a result of their working for him and any notoriety they obtained, and they went on their own, they would hire him as their manager.

"He had another clause saying that if for any reason he was unable to perform his services, he could delegate someone else to act on his behalf. He delegated me. I was representing Marion and Tex and Ray. We did a few jobs with Tex. One was with Chico Marx at the Roxy Theater in New York City, with the Glenn Miller singers as guests.

"After that Tex went into the Navy. Marion was making so much money, or could potentially, we decided to put her out on her own and put Paula Kelly back with the Modernaires. We were supposed to collect, I think it was, ten or fifteen percent. We didn't collect anything from Eberly. Glenn said, 'Don't bother him.' He figured Ray was strug-

gling.”

Tex Beneke said: “Glenn had planned to give me a band, before the war, like he had done with Hal McIntyre, Charlie Spivak, Claude Thornhill. I said, ‘Glenn, I’m not ready yet.’ Then the draft started to hit him hard. We said that we’d keep together, keep in touch, and I said, after the war, ‘I want to come back with you and learn a little more about leadership.’

“He was a great businessman as well as fine lead section trombonist. Look, all leaders have to lay the law down, once in a while, even though they love all their guys. They gotta say, ‘Look, you made the mistake here, this time. Next time make it someplace else, if you gotta make a mistake. And if you don’t want to play the way I want you to play, take your horn and go. Forget the two weeks notice. Just go.’

“Being in the Navy, being in charge of two bands, being in touch with Glenn, overseas, I learned an awful lot and it worked out beautifully for me when I did take the band over in ’46. We had the strings and a total of 36 people. This was the Miller Air Force group that came back, which he had planned to keep together.

Tex went into the Navy with the rank of Chief Petty Officer and was posted to the Technical Command at Norman, Oklahoma.

He formed two dance bands, the Gremlins — the term originated as U.S. Army Air Force slang because of strange things that could go wrong with an aircraft in flight, supposedly the hand work of invisible little elves called gremlins — and the Corsairs. The repertoire of neither band was in the Miller style, or very little of it. “Most of the music was written by boys who were in the band,” Tex said. As an adjunct to the bands, there was a training program for young musicians coming into the Navy.

“People would ask me later on what I was doing in the Navy on the middle of Oklahoma,” he said. “I always answered that if you noticed, I fought so effectively that a Japanese plane never got within ten thousand miles of Norman, Oklahoma.”

Miller suffered incessant condescension from jazz critics and even some musicians. The band wasn’t hot enough, it didn’t swing. The band was “too” polished, too sentimental. I was not one of its most ardent fans, I must confess. My tastes ran to the crackle of Tommy Dorsey and the effortless swing of Count Basie. But my vision of the band was radically altered in 1984, in Switzerland. I was in Geneva, writing the lyrics for an album to be recorded by Sarah Vaughan. The arrangements were by Francy Boland, co-leader with Kenny Clarke of the Clarke-Boland Big Band. I consider him one of the greatest writers jazz has ever known, with an ability to turn out pieces

that were not orchestrated song-form but true developed works with jazz solos beautifully integrated into them. And that band swung like hell.

I worked in close consultation with Francy on those charts, and we became intimate friends. He had two tastes I found surprising. He liked military music and in particular that of John Phillip Sousa. And he kept a cassette in the car of Miller’s Air Force band. It may have been bootleg because I don’t think any of that stuff had ever been issued. Francy played that tape incessantly along with a lot of Prokofiev. He thought that the Miller Air Force band was one of the greatest in history.

Miller wanted to join the navy, but he was turned down because of his age. The Army Air Corps was willing to take him. He set up shop in Atlantic City and started to put a band together. And the first thing he wanted was a string section. This desire goes back at least to the days with Pollack.

String sections in popular music present a problem. They have very little volume compared to brass. And the instrumentation that had evolved in American “dance” music — in general three or four, maybe even five, trumpets, three, four or five trombones, and five saxophones, plus rhythm section — could drown a symphony string section of sixty men without breaking a sweat. No bandleader could even dream of hiring enough strings to fill his needs. But Miller now had the extended resources of the U.S. military, and he was able to get such players as George Ockner, who had been with the NBC Symphony in New York.

In Atlantic City, he had one of those encounters that, seen in retrospect, change history. It was with an eighteen-year-old Juilliard student named Henry Mancini, universally called Hank. (His birth certificate says Enrico.) Many years later, after he had changed the character and direction of American film music and I was helping him write his autobiography, Hank told me:

I turned eighteen in April and registered for the draft. I was soon called up. Had I been drafted in my home town, I’d have been sent to the 66th Division, whose patch was a black panther’s head on an orange circle. They were the grunts of that era. I would have been in the band of the 66th. But because I was called up from New York, I was assigned to the Army Air Corps. For basic training, I spent six weeks in Atlantic City, in winter. I was supposed to go to the TTC, the Technical Training Command.

All the old hotels along the Beach — the Traymore, the Marlborough-Blenheim among them — were full of service men. We were at the Traymore.

At the Knights of Columbus Hotel on a little side street, Glenn Miller was forming his band, putting all the elements together in preparation for going to Yale. Arnold Ross was the pianist; Mel Powell hadn't come in yet. Trigger Alpert was on bass and Ray McKinley on drums.

I used to hang around with them in the evenings after dinner, and despite my awe of them, I got to know them pretty well. They knew what I did and asked, "What are you going to do after basic training?"

I said, "I'll probably be a tail gunner or something." They said, "You'll be finished basic training in two weeks, why don't you talk to Glenn?"

I said, "Gee, I don't know him." I was embarrassed and frightened. Miller had gone into service at the peak of his career. People today don't realize how big these bandleaders were then, as big as Elvis Presley or the Beatles later on. I knew everything the Miller band had ever recorded. But my new friends got me an appointment with him and pushed me through the door.

The office was quite small, sparsely furnished with a desk, a chair, and a coat rack. The man I knew so well from photographs was sitting there in his captain's uniform. I remember him as very trim. He was about thirty-seven at that point and I was eighteen. I didn't even sit down. I stood there and saluted.

Most of the great bandleaders of that era were severe disciplinarians because musicians in groups can behave like children, and if you don't control them, they'll control you. And Miller had a reputation for discipline. But then the only other big band leader I'd met was Benny Goodman. Each of them had a kind of chill about him, but Miller seemed to me to be very straight and his men liked him, and he was cordial to me.

He looked at me through those rimless glasses and said, "I hear you're an arranger. Do you write well, are you a good writer?"

I said, "Well enough, for what I've done. I also play flute and piccolo and piano." He said, "Okay," and took down my name and serial number. He dismissed me, I saluted again and I left. That was the only conversation I ever had with Glenn Miller and I thought that was the end of it.

I finished basic training. To my surprise I was assigned not to gunnery school but to the 28th Air Force Band, later designated the 528th. I have read that the life expectancy of a tail gunner in combat was measured not even in minutes but in seconds. Without Glenn Miller, I might have been fire-hosed out of a ball turret

or the tail of a B-17. I assuredly wouldn't have been assigned to a band. Glenn Miller, for all the brevity of that conversation, was very nice to me. He didn't have to do that for me.

There was more to it than that. After the war, when a new Glenn Miller band was organized under the leadership of Beneke, Hank joined it to play piano and write for it. The band included a number of the veterans of the wartime band, and it gave Mancini his first professional experience at writing for strings. And when *The Glenn Miller Story* was filmed with James Stewart and June Allyson, the composer assigned to write its score was Mancini.

Unlike the compulsively contentious Artie Shaw, who seemed to tangle with almost every Navy officer he confronted, Miller smoothly cultivated the higher brass, and even had the written authority of one high general to issue any order he chose and simply sign the general's name. Thus Miller had immense power to reach out into the armed forces for the musicians, now in uniform, that he wanted. Then-Sergeant Harry Katzman, a Juilliard graduate and award-winning violinist who had spent many years leading New York network radio orchestras, recalled to British writer Geoffrey Butcher his experience at the time:

"I was stationed in the Air Force at Boca Raton, Florida. I was the director of a symphony orchestra and a large dance band, 17 or 18 men, and I also had a small dance band, six or seven men, and all really superb players — most of them down from New York. I got arrangements from New York through the people I used to work for, like Mark Warnow, Leo Reisman, and Al Goodman, who sent arrangements to help the orchestras get something to play instead of the regular stocks.

"I enlisted in the Army in, I think, late August 1942 and brought a lot of men from New York City who were on the staff in the studios and the musical field, also in the symphonic field.

"One of the men in the band was Zeke Zarchy, a first-class trumpet player of course. About January or February, 1943, suddenly orders came in for Zeke Zarchy to be shipped. We had all heard about the band being formed by Glenn Miller and we suspected that as long as he was going up there, he was going to be with Miller . . .

"I was conducting a dance for the soldiers at the USO and one of corporals came up to me and said, 'Hey, you're getting shipped tomorrow.' I couldn't believe it because here I was with the big orchestra, the dance band, and the small dance band, and I thought it was an ugly rumor. But when I came home that night one of the trombone players, Jack

Lacey, who used to work with Kostelanetz . . . said, 'Hey you're getting shipped tomorrow.' Well . . . when I came in the Captain called me in and said, 'You know, you have to leave today. We're going to try to do everything we can to do stop it.' I said, 'Where the hell am I going?' He said, 'Your orders will be there, we can't say anything about that.' There was another violinist there, Nat Kaproff, who was on the same orders as I was to go up to Yale. This was in April and I think the band had moved [from Atlantic City] to New Haven."

Katzman continued unhappy with the reassignment. In Florida, he'd had his own orchestra and he and his wife were living in a little home off-base near the sea. Miller sensed his discontent and said, "You seem a little unhappy." Katzman said, "Well, yes, I am. I was very happy where I was."

Miller said, "Well, you'll be making a mistake if go back there because you think it's going to last forever but it will be broken up. I think you'd be wise to stay here." He urged Katzman to talk it over again with his wife; if they were still determined, Miller said he'd authorize the transfer back to Florida. Next day Katzman told Miller they had decided to stay, and Miller told him he was glad.

"When I got there," Katzman said, "George Ockner was the concert-master. They had already had rehearsals. They had eight or nine French horns. The arrangers were Jerry Gray, Danny Gool (who arranged for Hollywood pictures), Will Hudson (who had been making stock arrangements for the song publishing companies in New York) . . . and Perry Burger. Of the strings who were there already I remember there was George Ockner, Henry Bryan — at least ten or twelve.

"I asked George, 'How the hell did I get up here?' He said, 'Well, you know, Miller would ask Zeke if there were any good guys where he came from and he mentioned you and Kaproff.'"

One of the witnesses to the assembling of that remarkable orchestra was singer Johnny Desmond, who came to it from the Gene Krupa band. Desmond was born in 1914 in Detroit and named Giovanni Alfredo De Simone. Schooled at the Detroit Conservatory, he formed a vocal group that went with the Bob Crosby band, billing themselves as the Bob-O-Links. Then he joined Krupa as a single.

"I was about to get drafted," he told Fred Hall in a 1982 interview. "I decided to beat the draft and was sent down to Enid, Oklahoma, with a band. In fact, four of us left Gene Krupa's band in Baltimore. We went down to Enid and enlisted in the Air Force base down there. They made it easy for us to get into the Air Force. They were developing a big unit to raise money and do shows for enlistment. We were going to be on the radio and go out and do shows, very much

as we did later with the Glenn Miller band. In fact, the commanding officer of the base, who wanted to do this, was transferred out a week before we got there. The whole big plan had fallen on its face. Everybody had to scramble and do something else. I found out that Miller was organizing this Air Force orchestra, so I wrote him a letter — which you're not supposed to do. You're supposed to go through channels, but I figured the channels would never get out of the base. I waited for an answer. Everybody laughed at me. Two weeks later I got a letter from Captain Glenn Miller. And he said, 'Yes. I would like to have you in my band, if you can effect a transfer from the Flying Command,' which I was a part of, to the Technical Training Command, which he was.

"I went to headquarters and talked to the commanding officer. He was glad to get rid of me, I guess. He said, 'Sure. All you've got to do is tell him this and tell him that, and when the request comes through, we'll okay it, and you'll be on your way.'"

Desmond did as he had been instructed, got the transfer, and joined the band in Atlantic City.

"They were there for about a month," Desmond said. "They got everybody they needed, and then they moved us to Yale University in New Haven.

"The band was doing its *I Sustain the Wings* show. We were on NBC Saturday nights. We went on at eight o'clock in New York. We'd do a repeat broadcast at eleven o'clock for the West Coast."

The shows were based on the format of Miller's old Chesterfield Supper Club shows, something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.

"That was Miller's thing, his way of doing a medley. That was always a part of the show. It was a wonderful show. God, we were getting to everybody.

"Everything was brand new. Ray Eberley had been with the civilian band, and Miller's army band had twenty-two strings and French horn. Everything was written specially for us. We had a battery of about five arrangers. We had three copyists. We had two instrument repair men. We had a band of forty-six, including the Crew Chiefs, with the group.

"I wasn't getting anywhere, really. Glenn Miller was magic in those days. And he still is, incidentally. He's the biggest thing in music, even today. It was a great stroke of good luck. Anybody with the Miller band in those days was just immediately accepted by eleven million GIs. And the rest of the world that got to hear the band. We were very popular wherever we went."

The band's final assembly took place at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. And the change from Miller's

civilian band was monumental. A number of factors contributing to this, but the biggest, I think, was Ray McKinley, whom Miller had known since the Pollack days.

Johnny Desmond said, "Ray was wonderful. He has a marvelous time playing and singing. He's one of the most under-rated talents in the whole world."

Fred Hall said, "Miller never really had a swinging rhythm section until then."

Desmond said, "We sure had one with Ray, Mel Powell on piano and Trigger Alpert on bass."

Fred said "You listen to those old things like *Song of the Volga Boatmen* and listen to the difference that McKinley makes with that band."

"He's marvelous. He always played with a sense of humor too, which is kind of nice."

McKinley almost didn't make it into the Miller Air Force band. He tried to enlist in the Marine Corps.

Ray said, "I ran into an old friend from Fort Worth who was in the recruiting section of the Marines. Draft notices were flying around like snowflakes to all the orchestras. I think seven of us got our notices in a couple of days. That did it. This friend convinced me we could go in as a unit, The band took their physicals in downtown Los Angeles. We had a couple of guys that physically couldn't have joined Troop C of the Boy Scouts. Lou Stein, the pianist for one. The guy said, 'Walk up to that eye chart until you can see.' He wound up with his nose right up against the board. Perry Burgett, the arranger, too looked like he'd already been in a death camp in Europe.

"I called Tommy Dorsey. I said, 'What do you need? I've got this, got that. Guys who were 4-F.' There was no way they could go in the Army. He took about four guys. Pete Candoli was one. Another trumpet player, Larry Brooks. A saxophone player and a guitar player. They all went with Tommy. The rest of us got tagged.

"Ratings were assigned. I was to have a Marine gunner rating, whatever it was, equivalent to a warrant officer in the army. The Marines were fighting a war on Guadalcanal.

"I had seen Glenn in Boston. He said, 'Should you go in, let me know. I think I'll be able to get together with you.' I contacted him when I went in at Camp Walters, right outside of Fort Worth. I got hold of Glenn and he said, 'Give me your serial number.' And first thing you know, here come the orders down there. 'Report to Atlantic City, a cadre of one.' A great big thick thing, orders written. It looked like a telephone book. And somewhere in there was my name. I thought it was plans for the invasion or something.

"Zeke Zarchy was in charge of some fellows and they were playing around Atlantic City. The band had not truly been

organized, although there was some sort of library, not as large as they had later up at New Haven, but enough to play. Let's see, we had Lou Stein with the piano, Jimmy Harwood with the trombone, a whole bunch of fellows from my band. I'd told Glenn about them, too. We were all brought up to Atlantic City. I think I was there three weeks. Next thing I knew I had orders to report to New Haven, where the Technical Training Command had taken over Yale University for training of the O.C.S.

"Mel Powell was in Atlantic City for a while. We didn't even have uniforms. We were less than privates. They called us jeeps. We had on overall fatigues.

"I remember one viola player, Dave Schwartz, down at Atlantic City. He had some sort of clerical work. He told me the symphonies he'd played with. I said, 'Give me your name.' I gave his name to Glenn the minute I found they had some strings. Glenn was glad to know it. Dave's credentials were super. He was just wonderful."

Fred Hall told Ray: "I want to tell you what a difference you made with that Miller sound. All the things that were recorded for Bluebird and Victor that the Air Force band began to do sounded so vital. They came to life. I never thought Glenn had a very good drummer, to tell you the truth. I know that Maurice Purtill was a fine fellow and highly respected, but it didn't have the sock to it."

McKinley, who was a modest man, said, "It wasn't just me. After all, Chummy McGregor wasn't much of a piano player, either, and now you had Mel Powell in there. And of course you had Trigger Alpert. I think Trigger swung that pre-war band all by himself. He was the mainstay, he was a beautiful bass player. Carmen Mastren was a fine guitar player. Also, I think, the commitment to things rhythmic was a little stronger in the Miller Army band than it was in the prewar band.

"Maurice was a good drummer, a little ponderous is all. Glenn once said that to me. Up in New Haven, there was a little radio network that covered Connecticut, I think. I had my library from the band that broke up at the Golden Gate. We'd go up to the mess hall where the cadets fed. We'd go up there and play. We were there one time and the band was swingin'. We got into a little discussion, and Glenn said, 'That's one thing we never quite achieved.'"

McKinley said, "Mel Powell was marvelous. He was such a great player. But more than that, he was a fantastic arranger. He did some of the best writing, different things than you ordinarily would hear the Glenn Miller band playing. Miller wanted his arranging talents as well as his playing talents. *Mission to Moscow*. *Pearls on Velvet*, which is an almost classic composition."

Powell also brought into the band some of the pieces he had written for Goodman. Theoretically, those charts were Goodman's property, but then Goodman was one of Miller's best friends, and their association, like that with Ray McKinley, went back to the Pollack days. He was an extraordinary musician.

He was born Melvin Epstein in the Bronx. He got his draft notice and was shipped to Fort Dix where, he told me, "I encountered a southern sergeant who had a genuine hatred of Jews, and when he saw the name on my papers, he assigned me immediately to latrine duty. I changed it legally. An uncle had done it before me, taking the name Powell from Poljanowsky."

He would not have stayed on latrine duty in any event: almost immediately Glenn Miller commandeered him. Because Mel had an extensive classical education, Miller set him to work writing string quartets and chamber pieces for members of the string section he was assembling.

Probably the youngest member was a trombonist from Brooklyn named Nat Peck who, at eighteen, was not long out of high school. A Swing Sextet was organized within the Miller band, with Mel as its director. Long afterwards, Peck said that "Mel took a liking to me for some odd reason and I was chosen to do it . . . The reason I was picked, I think, was that I was the only one in that trombone section who had any sort of experience in playing jazz . . . Mind you, at the time I was very nervous about it — I didn't know Mel that well. Mel was a very distant sort of a personality—not that he was unkind, or anything like that, but he was already very big-time . . . and I used to sit in (the) band a little worried about things and he misinterpreted my attitude. He thought that I was putting him down, or being critical about what was going on in the band, when, to tell you the truth, I was more scared than anything else. He discovered that, though, soon enough and we ended up really very, very good friends."

Peck made these comments to the British writer Geoffrey Butcher. That Miller thought as highly of Powell as Goodman before him is evident in Peck's comment:

"Mel had a completely free hand. The only time Miller ever turned up was on the first rehearsal . . . Probably it wasn't from lack of interest, but he listened to the broadcasts and he found them eminently satisfactory and decided not to intervene in any way and Mel was free to do as he wanted."

Miller continued to expand the string section until it stabilized at twenty. It was superb. He could never have had such a section or such an orchestra in civilian life. Here were the wages of naughty wicked socialism. Able to draw on the resources of the entire U.S. military for personnel, able to select the best of them (and he sent other excellent players

on to other orchestras, as in Mancini's case), not restricted by union rules on the length of rehearsals, freed of the necessity of turning a profit each night of performance, Miller built one of the most remarkable orchestras ever.

I visited Ray McKinley at his home in Florida, shortly before his death in May 1995. He was very ill, resting in a recliner chair, and I felt I was intruding and made motions to leave, but he said, "No, stay a little." And we talked about the Miller Air Force band. In his relations with Bill Finegan, and others, it had been said that Miller was cruel. "No," Ray said, drawing for breath. "Cold is a better word." And remember, they had been friends since 1929.

Then, he said of the Miller Air Force band, his words coming out spaced and well considered through his struggle for air: "That . . . was the greatest . . . orchestra . . . ever to play . . . American popular music."

As for the famous — or infamous — string section, certain factors have to be taken under consideration. I remember that one of the militantly leftist jazz critics said of the 1949 *Charlie Parker with Strings* album that "the white man shoved those strings up Bird's ass." The white man did no such thing, and Parker's unfulfilled ambition was to study composition with Edgard Varèse. The problem with that comment is that the string writing on that album, quasi-Tchaikovsky, is crappy. The album was Parker's greatest commercial success.

Strings were little used in the big-band era because of the problems of balancing them against saxophones and brass sections. But balancing and mixing are the very essence of orchestration, and no one had yet acquired the knack and the knowledge to use strings in jazz. When in the mid-1950s, Gunther Schuller, J.J. Johnson, John Lewis and some others made some recordings of what Schuller called Third Stream music (a coinage I think even he came to regret) the music seemed oddly sterile. The writing simply wasn't very good, and Miles Davis (I am paraphrasing from memory) said in his usual tart and laconic manner (so like his playing) that John Lewis could take a symphony string section and make it sound like four fiddles. And André Previn said that a Third Stream would have to comprise something more than Percy Heath walking four in front of a string section.

The general disdain toward strings derives from the dark ignorance of "classical" music among the so-called jazz critics in the music's formative years, the spectacular exception being Robertson Darrell. Indeed, Darrell was a classical music critic schooled in composition who "discovered" jazz. But most of those early jazz writers knew next to nothing of classical music, Ralph Gleason and George Hoeffler among them, and even Leonard Feather, who had a

pretty good knowledge of harmony and played passable piano. All of them would have been at sea in a conversation about Debussy or Shostakovich. That is why the “moldy figs” found the harmonic and other practices of bebop arcane and incomprehensible, when they weren’t really all that new. The musicians harbored no such ignorance. Bix Beiderbecke was a devotee of Ravel, Debussy and Stravinsky, Earl Hines knew the classical piano literature well, as did Fats Waller, and Dizzy Gillespie said that attending a symphony concert was like going to church. Many jazz musicians, in fact, were conservatory trained. And so the hepsters at *Down Beat* projected that there was some vast gulf between jazz and classical music, and I think they did a lot of damage. Growing up, I thought there must be something strange about me, since I had a taste for both. The first records I remember buying were Coleman Hawkins’ *Body and Soul* and Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker Suite*.

Down Beat in fact ran a contest among its readers to find a new term for jazz. Since classical music was called long-hair, the winning entry was *crew cut*. Oog, as Pogo used to say.

The implication was always that strings were somehow sissified, indeed downright faggoty. But every musician knows that there is nothing as magnificent against which to set a solo or for that matter a passage by one of the other choirs than strings. They offer an exquisitely transparent coloration. You can hear all the way down through the harmony, like looking through clear running water at the stones on the bottom of a creek. Interestingly, when this synthesis of strings and “classical” music with jazz was finally achieved, it would be in movies, where — like Miller with Air Force money — budgets made it possible, and one of the pioneers in this area was the kid who had stood before Miller in Atlantic City and immediately after the war joined the Glenn Miller Orchestra led by Tex Beneke: Henry Mancini. And they never even met again.

There is no direct link of the Miller military band to the Third Stream, but there are indirect connections. The arrangers in that band got experience in using strings with big band and very American music. Then there is Mel Powell. After the war, he did not return to a jazz career. He studied with Paul Hindemith, back at Yale in New Haven, then became his teaching assistant and finally head of the classical composition department. Mel was a third stream.

The Miller Air Force band, gradually assembled at Yale University in New Haven, worked in the United States for two years, performing regularly on a network radio show out of New York City on a show called *I Sustain the Wings*, which

was the motto of the Air Technical Training Command, of which the band was a part. It took part in morale-building performances, playing for the troops in sundry locations.

Johnny Desmond said, “There’s a letter that Miller had written to Washington. If you ever get to the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio, they’ve got his hand-written letter in which he really pleaded with the powers to allow him to enlist in the Air Force. He was too old, he was over the age limit. He was married. It was General Hap Arnold, I believe, he wrote the letter to. And finally he was accepted. And he had to plead again, so that we could go overseas as a unit.

“Before we went, we had this big meeting at Yale University. He said, ‘Fellows, this is what we’re going to do. This is my dream. Now anybody who doesn’t want to do what I want to do and go with us to Europe. Let me know privately. You can meet me in my office. Whatever your reasons are, if you don’t want to go, I’ll be very happy to see that you can secure a position somewhat like you have now with my band with some other group.’ Everybody left except maybe one guy.

“Glenn said, ‘Here’s what’s going to happen when we get over there. We’re going to set up a broadcasting studio. And we’re going to do all kinds of programs. We’ll do some with the big band, and then the strings are going to have a show, and then Johnny’s going to have a show, and then Ray McKinley’s going to have a show with the dance band, and Mel Powell’s going to have a little jazz show. We’re going to fill so many hours a day in broadcasting, and when we’re not broadcasting we’ll be flying to some air bases and doing in-person shows. This is my dream.’

“It was all realized before he got lost.

“The incredible thing about Glenn Miller’s career is that he really only had about two and a half years as the top band. That was from the day that he made his first hit record to the day that he gave it all up to go into the Air Force. When you think about the impact the Glenn Miller music has made on the whole world, then you’ve got to see how incredible the whole thing seems.”

While the Miller band was resident in England, the Artie Shaw band came home from the South Pacific. Sam Donahue took over its leadership. The band was then sent to England. One of its members was Johnny Best. Rumors have persisted that Miller was ill and wanted to die. Johnny Best told me that this was absolute bloody nonsense:

“The thirteenth of December, our band came to town. We were a hundred and fifty miles away. There was a message for me to call Glenn Miller at the Mount Royal Hotel in London. He was having a little party and he wanted me to come. He showed me plans for his home in California.

“He had a ten-year contract with Fox, one movie a year. He wanted to play six months and then take off. He loved to play golf. He wanted the strings, just about like he had in the army band, and do concerts only. I don’t think he wanted to do dances any more.”

Indeed, Miller wanted to set up a large company whose projects would include sponsoring and managing other bands, as he had already done with Hal McIntyre, Charlie Spivak, and Claude Thornhill. He planned to build a compound where he and other musicians could live under amenable conditions.

In psychology, it is known that there is a certain progression in life, particularly in creative people, especially in the sciences. The brilliant breakthroughs usually come from the young. In the years later, they explore and consolidate their discoveries. As they reach their forties, they develop a desire to delegate the work and supervise it — to let the young get their arms in the soapy water. Thus reporters become editors.

I think Glenn was that way. An executive ability was evident from the beginning, and it appears to have been growing. Thus he loosened up and let Ray McKinley run the big band, Mel Powell run the small group, while he handled the problems of their military superiors and the sometimes annoying policies of the BBC, on which network he was broadcasting. I don’t suggest he liked doing it, but he accepted the responsibility. That is part of the reason the band was so brilliant: he had loosened the reins. He knew how to handle things. He was at first assigned to building conventional marching bands, and he did so, but he wanted to play swing arrangements of conventional material. The military brass fought him on this, with one officer saying, “Sousa’s marches were good enough for our troops in the last war.”

Miller said, “Tell me, major, are we still flying the planes we flew in the last war?”

In collaboration with Ray McKinley, Miller set up platforms on the backs of two jeeps to carry the rhythm section when on occasion the band was forced to march.

Harry Katzman, who had not wanted to leave Florida to join the band, said that “In New York, all the studio musicians would come in for rehearsals and they were all flabbergasted.”

Miller’s was not a jazz band. He never intended it to be, although he appreciated and made excellent use of jazz soloists. Katzman said: “I felt that Miller was really an extraordinary musician with immaculate taste and a wonderful idea of how music should really sound. For a man who had never really used strings in his civilian band he used them so much better than anyone else has ever done even to this day. Generally he used the strings as a cushion to soften the sounds of the brass. The sound was really extraordinary . . .

“He was just a natural musician, with immaculate taste. I

think if he had gone into the classical field, he would have been just the same. But he found, of course, his medium and it was original, and that’s what he went with. I think he was a musical genius, and I had the greatest respect for him as a musician and as a man too. I think everybody felt the same way.”

Johnny Desmond said, “The band played in the U.S. for two years, with Miller all the time pressing to go overseas and perform directly for the troops.”

Miller finally got his way. The band sailed from New York on June 21, 1944. Miller flew to England to join them, and they forthwith began performances and broadcasts to the troops and civilian audiences on the BBC.

After Allied troops landed on the continent and overran France, Miller became anxious to play for them in person. The band went to Paris before him. On December 15, Miller left in bad weather in a Norduyn Norseman, a high-winged monoplane. It never reached Paris. The mystery of its disappearance is unsolved.

It has been said that if everyone who claimed to have been on that foggy English airfield when the plane took off were assembled, it would take a hall of 14,000 seats to accommodate them.

Billy May told me: “I’ve got to tell you a story. After the war, Willie Schwartz worked a one-nighter with Tex Beneke at the Palladium. It was a Miller memorial. When the band was off the stand, a guy came up to Willie with a shoe box. He opened it. He had some straw or dirt or something in there. He said, ‘Do you know what this is?’ Willie said, ‘No.’ The guy said, ‘That’s the last piece of dirt that Glenn Miller stepped on.’ He asked Willie what he thought he should do with it. Willie said, ‘Why don’t you smoke it?’”

One day in 1972, I was having lunch with Guy Lombardo, and Miller’s name came up. Guy said, “If Glenn had survived, I think he would still be in the music business, and it would be a better business for it.”

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Dedicated to the memory of Artie Malvin of the Crew Chiefs, who after the war became a highly successful studio singer in Hollywood.

In the 1980s, I was on several of the Caribbean jazz cruises of the S.S. Norway. Artie, a charter subscriber to the Jazzletter, was also on one of those cruises. He urged me to write something on Glenn Miller. I said that I thought it all had been written. He said, ‘No it hasn’t, and what has been written mostly isn’t right. You’d get it right.’

I hope so. This is for Artie.