

# THOSE DORSEY BROTHERS



by ROBERT J. KUHN

**W**HEN THE NEWLY organized Dorsey band landed an engagement at New York's Glen Island Casino, the future looked golden for brothers Jimmy and Tommy. The Casino was the goal of most dance orchestras: they were hired to open there, and open they did—just long enough for Tommy to blow up and split the band in the middle of a downbeat the night of May 10, 1935.

The couples were dancing to the tune of *I'll Never Say Never Again* when Tommy set a tempo that irritated his mild-mannered brother. Instead of the melody, Jimmy's horn gave forth a gentle but unmistakable burp, to which he added in sweet words: "Let's do it right—or not do it at all."

"Okay!" shouted Tommy. "We won't do it at all!"

With that he tucked his trombone under his arm and pushed through the crowd of bewildered dancers, giving off sparks as he went. Next day Jimmy hired an-

other trombone player and billed himself as "The Original Dorsey Brothers Band"—a move not calculated to win friends and influence brothers. Tommy swore revenge, organized a band of his own—and in the ensuing rivalry, both achieved greater fame and fortune than they could have achieved together.

The story of their lives has been filmed in Hollywood; the Pennsylvania Legislature has passed a resolution lauding them for "courage and perseverance in rising to the top of the musical world," and their combined incomes last year topped \$1,500,000. Yet 25 years ago the Dorseys were picking slate from coal piles at ten cents an hour. And like as not, throwing it at each other!

"We just don't think the same way," Jimmy explains mildly.

"And we never will!" echoes his brother.

Now in their early forties, the brothers present an appearance as dissimilar as their temperaments.

Jimmy is of medium height, has dark hair, soft features and gentle eyes. Tommy is well over six feet, has steel-gray hair and a face and eyes as gentle as a hawk's. Jimmy is shy, soft-spoken, modest. Tommy is loud, opinionated, sure of himself.

Ultra-modern jazz is their pet hate. "Be-Bop?" Tommy demands in a voice that can be heard over the blare of trumpets. "What is it? Even the guys who play it don't know. What they ought to do is play that kind of stuff at home for practice and then come out and play a melodic line."

"Be-Bop isn't very easy to follow, is it?" asks his brother.

This contrast in temperament is further reflected in the boys' incomes. Tommy, the more aggressive, takes in \$850,000 annually. Jimmy coasts along on \$650,000. But after taxes the difference is not so noticeable.

The money comes from many sources, for a big-name band leader is a big-time business in himself. To handle their theater bookings, one-night stands, nightclub engagements, radio programs and other assorted activities, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey are surrounded by a large corps of hooking agents, road managers, arrangers, publishing assistants, accountants, lawyers, public-relations experts, tax consultants and band boys—to say nothing of some 40 temperamental musicians and vocalists. Yet the brothers somehow still think it is all worth while.

James Francis Dorsey was born in 1904 in Shenandoah, Pennsyl-

vania. His father, Thomas Dorsey, was a self-taught musician who earned \$10 a week in the coal mines and a few dollars extra by giving music lessons. When the second boy, Thomas Francis Dorsey, was born in 1905, the father made up his mind that his sons would be musicians, or else!

While still in knee pants, both learned all the wind instruments before specializing, respectively, in the saxophone and trombone. To this day many consider Tommy a better jazz trumpet player than

trombonist, and one of the early Paul Whiteman recordings, *Sand*, is now a collectors' item because it features a hot trumpet chorus played by Tommy, Jimmy and the late

great Bix Beiderbecke.

The boys' mother, Tess Langton Dorsey, often was distressed by her husband's rigid disciplining of his sons. To miss a day's practice meant a licking; but when she tried to intercede for them, the stern father would shout: "Tess, my lads are goin' somewhere! I didn't have nobody to teach me, but they have and they're goin' to learn."

Because the family needed financial help, both boys took jobs picking slate from coal. It was back-breaking work. Tommy stood the gaff briefly, then opened a grocery in the Dorsey parlor and sold canned goods to neighbors. Jimmy stayed on at the mines and earned \$4.50 a week for a nine-hour daily shift. Meanwhile, formal education brushed the boys but lightly.

After the brothers were sufficient-

A pair of horn-tooting kings of swing bear the same name, but they're a sharp study in contrasts.

ly trained in music, their tireless father-teacher built an orchestra around them. Since there was no park in Shenandoah, seats were set up outside a dry-goods store and every balmy evening the musicians went to work. Jimmy was 15, Tommy 14. The music was good but the townfolk were poor; so ultimately Jimmy took another job, this time as a blacksmith's helper.

When his hand slipped one day, causing the sledge hammer to hit the blacksmith instead of the horse-shoe, the brothers decided that Shenandoah no longer fully appreciated them. Gathering a few teenage cronies who also knew music, the petulant Pied Pipers led the youngsters out of the town. The year was 1922; Jimmy was just 18, Tommy not yet 17.

Alice Rasely, proprietor of the West Side Amusement Park in near-by Berwick, gave the band its first engagement and its name. Reporting for work the first evening, the boys were startled to see posters announcing "The Dorsey Brothers' Wild Canaries."

Even after the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra had gone dignified to the tune of \$500,000 a year, close friends still referred to the outfit as the Wild Canaries, and some of them do to this day.

After the Wild Canaries had won their wings, the Dorseys let the Scranton Sirens lure them into becoming side-men. Then Jimmy got an offer from Jean Goldkette and soon made a place in the band for his brother. Both boys were learning their art in nightly practice on the bandstand and in jam sessions in smoky hotel rooms with the top instrumentalists of the day. They

learned well, and when Vincent Lopez offered Jimmy a job in 1925, he accepted with the proviso: "Wait till you hear my brother!"

**F**ROM THE LOPEZ BAND there was only one step higher to go—to "Pops" Whiteman, unchallenged King of Jazz. In 1927 the Dorseys took that step. Jimmy, whose only interest outside of music is golf, had befriended a likeable youngster who also loved the game—a member of the Whiteman Rhythm Boys called Bing Crosby. Tommy found mutual interests with another trombone player named Glenn Miller.

But the turbulent Dorseys could never stay put for long. By 1930 they had left Whiteman to skim the cream off the new radio industry. As star instrumentalists with studio bands, each was picking up an easy \$500 a week. And they might never have formed their own band again had it not been for Tommy's terrible temper.

While rehearsing a commercial program, T. D. was irritated by the sponsor, who thought the first number should be played third, the third number fifth and the fourth number first. Finally Tommy blew his top instead of his trombone.

"Why doesn't that bald-headed old fool go duck his head?" he demanded of no one in particular.

But the microphone was listening—and up in the client's booth sat the sponsor. Tommy was banned from the network and Jimmy quit, so there was nothing to do but start an orchestra of their own.

In doing so, they did not realize they were setting the pattern for almost all band leaders to come. Most of the big-time leaders before

them were good businessmen like Paul Whiteman, or personalities like Ben Bernie, or indifferent solo instrumentalists like Guy Lombardo, who depended for success on the ensemble of the orchestra. Today, most of the popular leaders are men who first established their reputations as jazz virtuosi. And the brothers Dorsey led the way.

Starting an orchestra in 1934 was not easy, yet the brothers were in the black from the first day. They signed a recording contract and their discs began selling like popcorn at a country fair. The networks which had banned them as side-men welcomed them as leaders. General Amusement Corporation booked them into Glen Island Casino and began giving them a big-name build-up. But they just couldn't get along together.

"I like to take things easy," Jimmy explains.

"You've got to drive!" his brother insists.

A split was inevitable. When it came, the rivalry turned into a bitter feud. Tommy set forth to outshine his older brother. He built star after star: Jack Leonard, Frank Sinatra, Dick Haymes and Jo Stafford, and launched them on their own once they had achieved fame with his band.

"Frankie?" he reminisces today. "He was a good kid; we used to send him out for coffee."

Jimmy, on the other hand, finds that his vocalists and musicians rarely want to leave. Part of the attraction is Jimmy's honest admiration for good work. He is a perfectionist who rehearses every number until every note is right, every phrase flawless.

To Tommy, however, musicians are merely the working parts of a good orchestra and are easily replaceable. He disbanded his outfit this year, and says today that he will start a new band "as soon as I can get some musicians who don't think they know more about the business than I do!"

What T. D. knows about the business is considerable. For the past ten years he has been among the top three in every orchestra popularity poll. After leaving his brother, he originated the trick of having his band sing obligato backgrounds to such melodies as *Marie*. When the public wanted swing, he gave them the best: when the public wanted "sweet" music, he gave them his theme song, *I'm Gettin' Sentimental Over You*.

TOMMY DORSEY DRIVES himself as mercilessly as he does his men, working from noon until 3 A.M., seeing agents, attending to the music-publishing business he recently established with his brother, recording, choosing new arrangements, working in theaters and night clubs, making guest appearances on the air—and sitting in Italian restaurants until dawn, eating his favorite dish, spaghetti.

The Dorseys are no strangers to movie sets: both have appeared in full-length films and musical shorts. While Tommy loves night clubs, Jimmy prefers quiet evenings at home with his wife and daughter. Tommy rarely cracks a joke, while Jimmy's sense of humor is keen. But in the band business, both brothers have thrived on competition—with each other.

When Tommy's recording of *I'll*

*Never Smile Again* made the best-seller lists, Jimmy countered with *Green Eyes* and *Brazil*. When Tommy signed a night-club contract for \$5,000 a week, Jimmy topped it by \$9,000 for seven nights' work. When Jimmy accepted \$20,000 a week for theater engagements, Tommy got \$27,600 for a week at the Oriental Theater in Chicago.

Finally, in 1941, mutual friends persuaded them to meet at the Hotel Astor to shake hands and call off the feud. They met, shook hands, smiled. Then Tommy offered an opinion on music; Jimmy disagreed. Within five minutes they were swinging haymakers at each other. When the neighbors back home in Shenandoah read the newspaper stories, they shook their heads and murmured, "Those Dorsey

kids haven't changed a bit."

The brotherly competition finally ended in 1942, with the death of their father. Yet a habit of long standing is hard to break, and only today, after years of feuding, have the Dorsey brothers been able to draw close to each other. Perhaps competition from the rising crop of youngsters has something to do with it.

"They call us has-beens," says Tommy bitterly. "Me and Teagarden and my brother. Get that—has-beens! Why, my brother plays more horn than any wet-eared kid in the business!"

Jimmy smiles softly. "It's this way," he explains. "We've got everything—success, money, a little fame—so now we figure we'll just try to act like brothers, that's all."