

# THE GLENN MILLER STORY

*Although he died in Europe in 1944, his music lives for millions*

by DAVID A. WEISS

A FATHER RECENTLY ENTERED a Broadway music shop with his teen-age daughter and sadly shook his head as she picked a record.

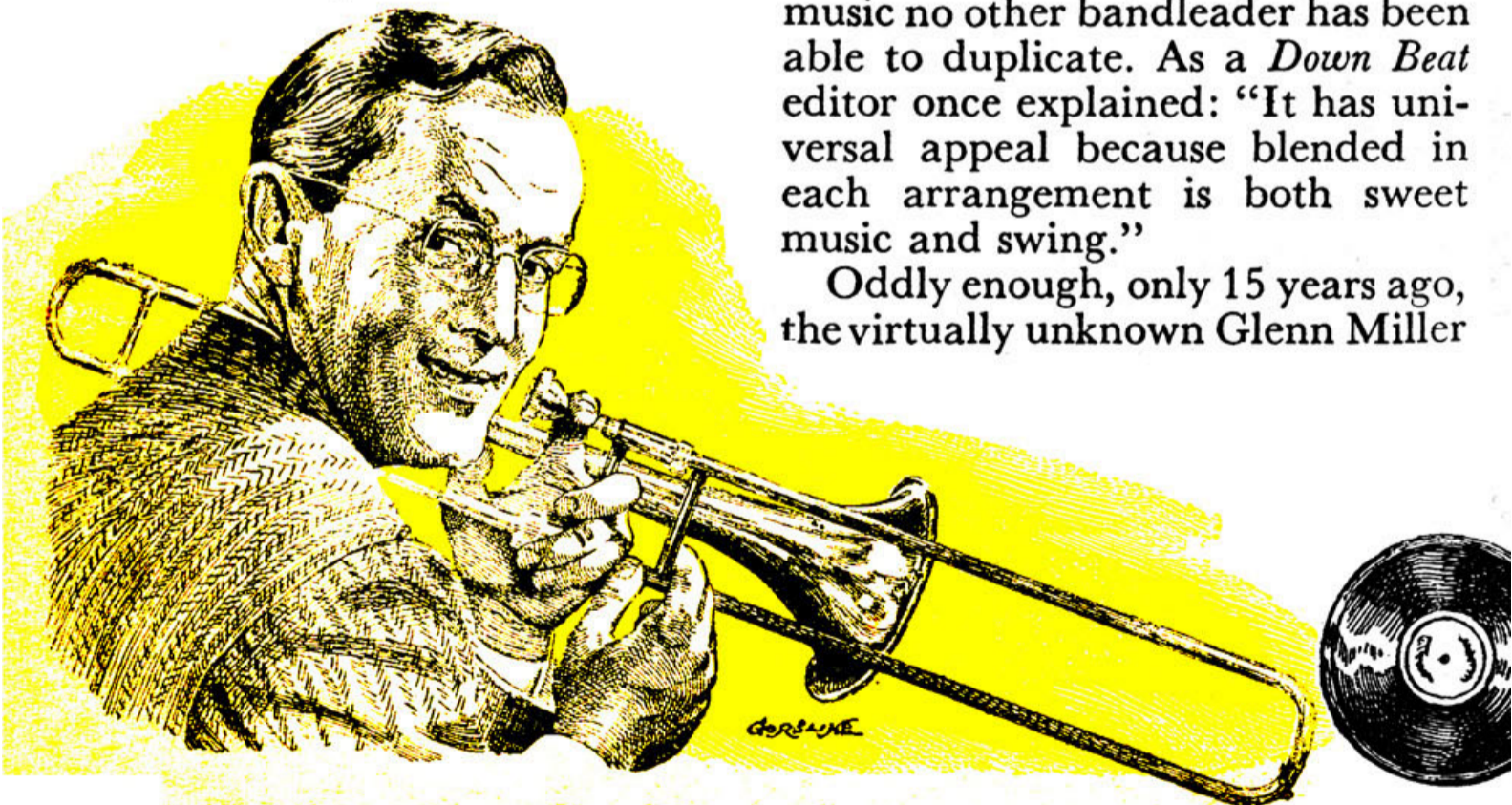
"Bop!" he lamented to the salesman. "What ever became of those old sentimental numbers like *Jumpin' Five* and *Tuxedo Junction*?"

What did happen is the talk today of Tin Pan Alley. Sentimental or not, these old favorites are spinning on as many phonograph turntables as ever. Not only that, but their leading exponent—the late Glenn Miller—is still, from the standpoint of record sales, one of the nation's top bandleaders.

It has been ten years since Glenn Miller of the rimless glasses, thin lips and serious manner last stepped to the bandstand, trombone in hand, and led his orchestra through arrangements like *Moonlight Serenade* and *In the Mood*. Yet today his record sales are pushing 16,000,000 and recently released by RCA Victor is the Glenn Miller Limited Edition, a special long-playing album with 70 Miller hit tunes. Released not long ago by Universal-International is "The Glenn Miller Story," a Technicolor picture starring James Stewart.

There is a magic in the Miller music no other bandleader has been able to duplicate. As a *Down Beat* editor once explained: "It has universal appeal because blended in each arrangement is both sweet music and swing."

Oddly enough, only 15 years ago, the virtually unknown Glenn Miller



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orchestra was playing one-night stands in small towns. Then, in November, 1939, after engagements at Glen Island Casino and Meadowbrook, it hit the nation's top bandspot. Only six months, and Miller was vying with his two chief rivals—Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw—in waxing records, booking dates and signing radio time. America had awakened to a new band style: modern, exciting, danceable.

Cinderella of the Music World, Horatio Alger with a Trombone—is how the newspapers labeled the Miller success story. On that subject, the tall, slender bandleader who looked like a professor and was so modest that reporters disliked interviewing him because he discussed everything but himself, said simply, "It wasn't luck or anything else. I have worked hard."

So he had. Behind his skyrocket rise lay 17 years of labor on the musical rockpile. As an instrumentalist, Glenn had blown his trombone in more orchestras than he could remember. As an arranger he had worked for almost every top band in the country. Two of his own bands had gone broke.

Music was everything to Glenn Miller. Into it he poured all his talents and energies; the few close friends he had were musicians. So determined was he to perfect his band style that members of his orchestra sometimes found him

hard and demanding. So absorbed was he on the bandstand that audiences often considered him cold and gloomy.

Like everything else in his life, music had not come easy. When Alton Glenn Miller first puckered his lips in Clarinda, Iowa, in 1904, they closed on no silver spoon. Since his father could not make up his mind between farming and carpentry, the family moved all over the West in Glenn's early years.

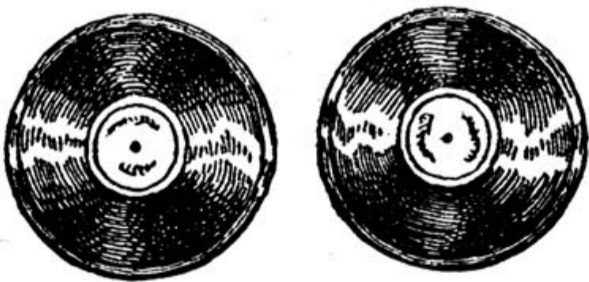
He milked cows all winter at \$2 a week to buy his first battered trombone. To pay for lessons, he worked after school as a sodajerk, shoeshine boy and garage attendant.

Although his mother, a former schoolteacher, was sympathetic, his father ordered him to practice out on the prairie; and his school handed him a "D" in music, an "A" in everything else.

With his trombone Glenn got in the school band, and bands soon came to mean more than school. After a two-year course at the University of Colorado, he left his studies—and a pretty coed named Helen Burger whom he later married—to go barnstorming with a Denver band.

When Glenn joined Ben Pollacks' Californians in 1927, he found there two other young hopefuls, a drummer named Gene Krupa and a clarinetist, Benny Goodman. Often after work they would lie on their hotel beds and talk of forming their own band. But the selection of a leader always stumped them.

When the Pollack band played New York's Little Club, Glenn started studying musical composition with NYU Professor Joseph Schillinger. On a homework lesson



designed to show what he knew of harmony, counterpoint and orchestration, he wrote an exercise for the trombone.

Glenn gave it to a musician pal and was surprised at the reaction. "Say, that's good. You ought to do something with it."

"I will some day," Glenn answered.

That some day came years later when Glenn resurrected it for the other side of a Frankie Carle record. He consulted Mitchell (*Stardust*) Parish about writing lyrics.

"What about the title?" asked Parish.

"Well, since Frankie's side is *Sunrise Serenade*, how about making ours *Moonlight Serenade*?"

Eventually, *Moonlight Serenade* became Glenn's theme song and one of his biggest hits, but right then he was occupied with the hits of others. He worked mostly as an arranger and his abilities never ceased to astound his colleagues.

Once at a recording studio, a minute before the red recording light blinked on, Glenn waved his arms. He felt the arrangement was bad. On the spot he composed a new one. Going from musician to musician he dictated new notes, keeping the entire score in his head.

Glenn was years ahead of his time in music. So radical were his arrangements that leaders hesitated playing them the way they were written; he was constantly being asked to revise the arrangements. When he accidentally discovered the main feature of his now famous band style—to accommodate a personnel problem, he substituted clarinet leads for the usual trumpets—bandleaders turned thumbs down.

Glenn could stand it no longer. "I got tired of arguing about the arrangements," he said later. "So I decided to form my own band."

Before long, he had organized not one but two bands into which he poured his \$30,000 savings. He rehearsed them for months, played grueling one-night stands around the country, and then saw them fail.

Christmas 1938 was so bleak for the Millers that the dinner they sat down to had been paid for with borrowed money. The phone rang. A friend said M-G-M was going to offer Glenn an arranging job at \$350 a week.

Glenn looked at his wife Helen. She looked back and already knew the answer. Tossing down his napkin, Glenn started calculating on sheets of paper. He was going to try his third orchestra.

Mortgaging everything he had left, borrowing on his life insurance, Glenn began again. Twelve months later the band was grossing \$500,000 yearly. Everywhere it shattered records. Glenn's studious face topped by the ever-present rimless glasses became a symbol of the best in dance music. One of every three records in the nation's juke boxes bore the Glenn Miller label.

Success might have changed the width of Glenn's smile but it hardly turned his head. Unlike many of his colleagues who ran wild after striking paydirt, Glenn could still claim smoking as his strongest vice. Rather than collect new friends, he stuck by the old ones. And although he did start warming up to his audiences, he never was carried away by their sometimes fanatical devotion. One thing Glenn never

forgot was the value of a dollar.

When he moved across the Hudson for tax reasons, he found he liked Tenafly, New Jersey—as he liked all small towns. The boy from Clarinda, Iowa, felt better here than in Hollywood where even the \$100,000 he received filming “Sun Valley Serenade” with Sonja Henie didn’t put him at ease.

“I want to go back to one-night stands,” he grumbled. “Back to my kind of people.”

His kind—those youngsters who thronged the ballrooms and raised the roofs at his appearances—were taking criticism from parents who saw something delinquent in their frenzied adulation. But Glenn took up for them.

“Hepcats, sure. Rugcutters, sure,” he agreed. “But what if they are demonstrative? That’s superficial. I know those kids have the stuff.

Despite demands on his time, he still turned out three arrangements a week, about half the numbers his band introduced. *On Moonlight Bay*, *Kalamazoo*, *Little Brown Jug*, *Sweet Leilani*—they all came from his pen, each taking about six hours to arrange. Also looked over each week were the hundred-some arrangements that came in the mail from hopeful composers, amateur and professional.

As hard as Glenn worked, he also expected his band to work. A stickler for perfection, he rehearsed five days a week, sometimes six. “The men coast if you don’t watch them,” he said.

Still, it can’t be said he was ever

unreasonable or unfair. On the eve of the band’s debut at the Hotel New Yorker, drummer Maurice Purtill approached, telegram in hand. Tommy Dorsey was offering him a better job.

Glenn knew Maurice could not afford to pass up the opportunity; he also knew Maurice’s departure would hurt his band’s chances. But he did not hesitate. He released the drummer.

In September, 1942, Glenn Miller was sitting on top of the musical world. His record sales were over 6,000,000. Just released was *Chattanooga Choo-Choo*, destined to sell a million

copies, the first since Gene Austin’s *Blue Skies* recorded in 1927 at the height of the phonograph boom.

But one thing meant more to Glenn than his orchestra—his country. Broadway never understood why—the day after he signed a fabulous CBS contract—he disbanded his million-dollar band and enlisted in the Army.

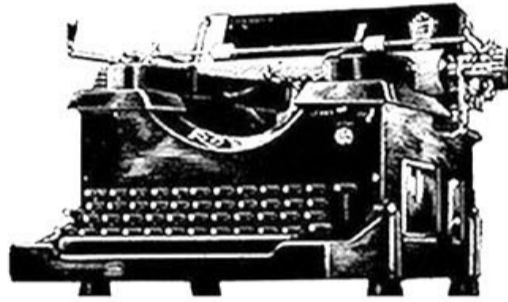
Only a few months before, he and Helen had adopted a baby boy, Steven. But as Glenn explained with characteristic bluntness and honesty, “I sincerely feel I owe a debt of gratitude to my country.”

Service stripes popped when the Army learned what Capt. Glenn Miller was doing to the 418th Army Air Force Band. Top brass reviewing it one autumn day in 1943 saw the band march down the drill field to the tune of the *Jersey Bounce!*

“Sacrilege!” shouted old-time bandleaders.

Glenn retorted, “If we don’t go

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after band music and streamline it, Army music will soon be extinct. We've got to keep pace with the soldiers."

Glenn stepped up his own pace by getting permission to organize the official Air Force band and take it overseas. In London, his Flying American Band of the Supreme Allied Command performed yeoman service for the GIs, broadcasting nightly over BBC, making 528 broadcasts and 435 personal appearances.

Visiting soloists like Dinah Shore and Spike Jones called it "the best band ever." But the finest comment of all came from an officer of slightly higher rank than Captain Miller:

"Next to a letter from home, the Miller band was the greatest morale builder in the European theater." The signature: General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

When the Allies landed at Normandy in June, 1944, Glenn, now a major, promised the GIs a Paris concert on Christmas, and that promise cost him his life.

On December 14, he motored to a London airfield to fly to Paris to make final arrangements. Fog! All except combat flights had been grounded. Glenn pleaded in vain. Then accidentally he met a sympathetic friend, Lt. Col. Norman Basselle.

"Sure," the colonel said. "We'll fly you over tomorrow morning."

When Glenn, Flight Officer Morgan and Basselle, who was to be co-pilot, showed up, the fog was still thick. Glenn was saying good-bye to Lieut. Don Haynes, his manager, who had followed him into the service, when Basselle bellowed from the single-engined Norseman:

"Come on, Miller, you can't live forever."

Glenn hopped in and the plane zoomed off.

When Haynes arrived at Orly Field in Paris the next morning, he thought there had been a mistake. No Norseman had logged in; Glenn's flight was unrecorded. A routine Army search was made, then an intensified one.

On Christmas Eve a telegram reached Helen Miller in Tenaflly: "Major Miller Missing."

The grief-stricken wife couldn't believe the words. At her side were little Steven; and Jonnie Dee, an adopted baby daughter whom Glenn never saw, was soon to arrive.

Helen Miller refused to give up hope. Even after the War Department officially declared Glenn dead a year and a day later, she pathetically tried tracking down leads on his whereabouts.

Of course, in one sense, Glenn Miller did not die. As long as we have radios, phonographs and memories, his arrangements will continue to come out of the air, as beautiful and perfect as ever.

 **Coronet** 

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