



Judging from his reminiscences, the thing Glenn Miller didn't like about growing up in Iowa and Nebraska was his mother's insistence on calling him in from the fields by his first name:

I couldn't stand the name Alton. I can still hear my mother calling me from across the field; "Alton" — it was never "Awlton," but "Al-ton," with a short a. "Alton" she would call . . . "come on home." I just hated the sound of that name. That's why I've always used Glenn instead.

Remembered now as the greatest bandleader of the Big Band Era, the name Glenn Miller evokes memories of "In The Mood" and

"Moonlight Serenade," of nostalgia and romance. Born on March 1, 1904 near Clarinda, Alton Glenn Miller spent the first five years of his life in Iowa.

Then the Miller family moved to Nebraska, and the change did not proffer a particularly romantic future, according to Dr. Deane Miller, Glenn's older brother. A sod house outside the town of North Platte, where Glenn's father Elmer worked, comprised the new family home. Deane remembered that the family often eased their sense of isolation with music. Glenn's mother, Mattie Lou, played the organ that stood regally, if incongruously, in the sod house. And out on the prairie, travelling overland by

Glenn Miller, Big Band Sensation

BY MAUREEN MCCOY

wagon, the Miller children used to sing as they rode along.

After five rough years in rural Nebraska, the family was nearly killed in a prairie fire. The Millers then moved into North Platte. There, Elmer Miller bought Glenn his first musical instrument, a mandolin, and Deane received a cornet.

In 1915, two years after the birth of Glenn's younger brother, Herbert, the family moved to Grant City, Missouri. There, Glenn traded his mandolin for an old horn. His mother remembered that Glenn constantly wandered over by the railroad tracks to play:

Glenn used to work on the beet dries and at lunch hour he'd go yonder down the railroad tracks and play that horn. He just played on that horn all the time. It got to where Pop and I used to wonder if he'd ever amount to anything.

At this time, Deane became a trumpeter in a small band. Glenn tagged along after him, and the bandleader, Jack Mossberger, was taken by his enthusiasm and signs of talent. He let Glenn play in the band and even gave him a new trombone, telling the future bandleader that he could shine shoes at his shop in return.

Glenn remembered that, while growing up, he wanted to be a professional baseball player. He did well in high school football, but he wouldn't think of playing college ball. By then music was too important; he had become devoted to the trombone and he feared injuring his mouth. By this time, the family had moved on to Fort Morgan, Colorado, and Miller was so anxious to leave town for a possible band job that he left it to his mother to pick up his high school diploma in May 1921.

Miller played trombone with Boyd Senter's band for about a year and a half, and he eventually enrolled at the University of Colorado. But he was too busy playing

music to apply himself in school. He completed few credit hours there, and he even flunked a freshman harmony course. Instead of taking on academia, Miller spent most of his time playing in a band led by fellow student Holly Moyer. The band was popular on campus, and Miller went on a few regional tours with it.

In September 1923 Glenn took off on a solo venture to audition for one of the outstanding bands in the southwest — Jimmy Joy's. He failed to make the grade, but it was mainly because the band played from memory rather than from formal written music; he simply couldn't follow them. Miller ended up in Los Angeles for a while, playing with a rather uninspiring band. Then came the big



On stage with Glenn Miller and the band (courtesy RC)

break. Ben Pollack, leader of a rapidly rising band, hired Miller to play and arrange for him. Pollack's was one of the first bands to play outstanding big-band jazz. His musicians were young, energetic, and jazz oriented, influenced by Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke.

Gil Rodin, one of the band's two sax players, remembered that "the little kid Benny Goodman" was to replace a Colorado sax player named Ted Maguiness, who lived with the still unknown Glenn Miller. Ted Maguiness would later be better known as Ted Mack, of "Ted Mack's Amateur Hour." But by connecting Glenn with Ben Pollack's band, Ted Mack made one of his most famous talent discoveries before the first

"Amateur Hour" ever aired.

Ted admitted to being less than fully committed to playing music. He said he used to complain to Glenn that "if I were going to keep on playing that lousy horn, somebody ought to kick me." But Glenn, Ted recalled, *was terribly serious about his music. He had a helluva good sense of humour — I can still see that puckish grin — and he was a real gentleman. But, when it came to his music, he never took his eye off the ball. It was nothing for him to stay up half the night teaching himself how to arrange out of Arthur Lange's instruction book.*

When the Pollack band returned to California, they went to listen to Glenn and talked with him backstage. The band asked him if he was interested in going to Chicago. Miller replied, "I don't care where I play."

The band opened to rave reviews at the Southmoor in Chicago, then travelled to the North Side to the Rendezvous Club. Sax player Gil Rodin claimed it was real gangland Chicago they ran into there:

The syndicate owned the place and they had their own barber chair and their own barber, and when a guy got a shave or a haircut, he'd be protected by their own guys with machine guns. But they were very good to us musicians.

During the Prohibition Era, close ties between gangsters and night clubs were common. The bootleggers were making money, and they wanted a place to spend it.

After doing well in Chicago, the band went on to New York. At this time, Miller still aspired to be known mainly as a trombonist. But the band concluded that it had to replace him with the dazzling Jack Teagarden, whom they had just discovered. Retaining two trombonists was out of the question for the band. Miller turned to writing and arranging for a lush, but dull, orchestra — but not without wounded pride. For the first



(RCA Records)

time in his life, however, he had made enough money to save some, and in 1928 he found time to marry Helen Burger — a woman from back home in Colorado. They had corresponded since he left the University of Colorado, but until now his music had interfered with their marriage plans.

In 1929, Miller cut several records with Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, and some of the cuts featured an exciting new voice: Bing Crosby. Glenn continued to be paired with better trombonists on these recordings, often with Tommy Dorsey himself or with Jack



Bandleader Glenn Miller entertains the troops at a USO club. (SHSI)

Note on Sources

The sources consulted in the preparation of this article were: George T. Simon, *Glenn Miller and His Orchestra* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1974); and George Frazier, *Glenn Miller (1904-1944)*, © Radio Corporation of America.

Teagarden, who was with Red Nichols' band now. Glenn arranged music, but playing was important to him too. When he played to Teagarden's vocal number, "Sally Won't You Come Back," jazz critic George Frazier wrote: "It is as good as anything that Louis Armstrong ever played behind Bessie Smith."

Glenn's career as a trombonist now got a boost from Red McKenzie, a singer and entrepreneur who arranged a recording session that has since made history. Glenn was invited to be the only trombonist for the session. "Hello Lola" and "One Hour" were recorded at the session, and they were considered great music, but greater still was the fact that, for the first time, blacks and whites recorded together in the same session. Besides Miller, the musicians included Pee Wee Russell, clarinetist; Eddie Condon, guitarist; Gene Krupa, drummer; and Coleman Hawkins, tenor sax. Later, when asked about his best playing, Miller remembered this recording session as musically outstanding.

Miller continued to work with Nichols in 1930, recording in studios and working in the Alvin Theatres and in orchestras in Times Square — orchestras that included an all-star cast of jazz musicians, men like Benny Goodman and Gene Krupa.

The Depression cut down on the size of dance bands. Miller went to a band Smith Ballew had formed, and the band hit the road. There were some highlights, but the band deteriorated by 1933. The Dorsey brothers had their own band by this time, and Miller played and arranged for them for a while. But the Dorsey brothers were prone to heated and prolonged arguments over their musical arrangements, and Glenn got tired of the squabbling and headed for England.

In 1935 Miller agreed to play for British bandleader Ray Noble, who wanted him to put together a group of American players.

The band did well playing the RCA Building in Radio City, and they made good money for a year, but Miller grew restless. He and Noble had different styles and ideas about music. In 1936 the band's popularity ebbed. Miller began marking time, waiting for a chance to put together his own band. Miller said once of the flowering of his true talent — arranging — that arranging for someone else's tastes, for someone else's band, just didn't work:

I was tired of arguing about arrangements, of having things come out different from the way I wrote them. I wanted to hear my ideas and I figured the only way I could was with my own band.

Miller was finally in a position to put together his own band now, and he wanted no prima donnas, only young, eager musicians who would play as part of the band. During his days with Ray Noble, Miller had discovered his liking for an emphasis on the reed section. By combining Miller's writing with clarinet leads, the distinctive sound of the Glenn Miller Band was formed. The musicians came and went as the band developed, but two who joined Miller during the formation of his band stayed on until his enlistment in the Army: sax players Willie Schwartz and Gordon "Tex" Beneke. Schwartz's unique clarinet playing became the basis of the Glenn Miller Band sound.

In 1939 the band struggled through a series of depressing one-night prom and ballroom dates and had scant recording opportunities. Then the news came that they had been offered a summerlong engagement at the Glen Island Casino, in New Rochelle, New York. Every band of the time wanted to play there; it was the most prestigious engagement in the country.

Glenn Miller's opening at the Glen Island was wildly successful. Now RCA Victor began offering the band regular recording dates. The Glenn Miller Band soared to pop-

ularity, with Miller himself emerging as the most popular dance-band leader of the day. In 1940 the band started broadcasting three times a week from the Casino. Millions of Glenn Miller records had been sold by that time, and all his records were hits: "In The Mood" sold two million copies, "Chattanooga Choo Choo" one and a half million, and "Kalamazoo" one million.

The Glenn Miller Band played to its last civilian audience shortly before October 7, 1942, the date of Miller's enlistment in the Army. By then, the nation had been at war for ten months, and Miller concluded that his war-bond tours weren't enough of an effort to make for the country. His farewell appearance was an emotional affair; over a thousand fans packed the Glen Island to pay their respects, and their reactions ranged from cheers for his performance to sobs at his departure.

In the service, Miller joined and directed the 418th Army Air Forces Band. He became known for injecting his own swinging Big Band touch into the "Stars and Stripes Forever." On June 1, 1944 Miller and the band were dispatched overseas to boost the troops' morale, and that December, on a foggy Christmas Eve flight from England to France, the plane carrying Miller went down over the English Channel and was never recovered. Miller's death, tragic and premature, was felt immediately as an irreplaceable loss by the music world.

After the war, members of the reconstituted Miller band resumed touring, playing their leader's arrangements throughout the United States and around the world. Glenn Miller's music still draws crowds today, of course, especially in Iowa, his boyhood home. Indeed, in recent years the citizens of Clarinda have hosted an annual Glenn Miller festival, honoring the man and the music that epitomize the Big Band Era. □