The big bands were losing their great popularity in the early 1950s for many reasons, most of them economic. But there were a number of big bands still recording and some were still touring. Two of the most popular were from Greater Cleveland and one, launched in 1952, performed not only for a high school prom in Cleveland, but also with the Cleveland Orchestra.

Ray Anthony

Anthony was born Raymond Antonini in Bentleyville, Pennsylvania January 20, 1922 and moved to Cleveland with his parents and five brothers when he was very young. His father, who led a band in Cleveland, gave him trumpet lessons when he was only five. Shortly after he graduated from old Audubon Junior High School and while attending John Adams High School, he was leading his own band. He joined the musicians' union at the age of 15.

When he was 16 (in 1938), Ray Anthony went out on the road with the Al Donahue Orchestra. When he was 18, he was auditioned by the very popular Glenn Miller. It was an on-the-job audition. Anthony recalled he rushed to the Hotel Pennsylvania in New York City and almost fell off the bandstand in his excitement about playing with the nation's most popular band. He said the first number they threw at him was the very popular "Tuxedo Junction," which he had never played before. He said he got through it in "acceptable style" and joined the Miller band. But, according to George Simon in his book, The Big Bands, Anthony never really hit it off especially well with Miller and left the band six months later.

Anthony later played with Jimmy Dorsey and returned to Cleveland to form his own band. Among the musicians in that band was Hank Geer, a saxophonist who had just graduated from Collinwood High School. As a high school student, Geer had played with the Charlie Spivak Orchestra, the house band at the Trianon Ballroom. After high school, Geer spent the summer touring with Anthony's band. He left just in time to enroll at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio where he would lead an outstanding college dance band.

Anthony, meanwhile went into the Navy in 1942 for four years.

After World War II, Anthony returned to Cleveland, formed another band, and signed a contract with Capitol Records. It was during this period, the late 1940s, that there was a revival of Glenn Miller music. Anthony began playing many of the old Miller tunes, including his own arrangement of "Tuxedo Junction." His band was not playing much jazz, but it did swing at times and became very popular, making dozens of records and playing countless college proms. For his recording dates, Anthony frequently used top studio jazz musicians including Conrad Gozzo, Georgie Auld, Skeets Herfurt, Mel Lewis and Plas Johnson, who later played Cleveland Henry Mancini's "Pink Panther Theme" for the movie soundtrack. Anthony's most popular record was the theme song of a popular radio and television series Dragnet.

Leading a band through the 1950s, Anthony helped extend the big band era. He eventually settled in California and in the 1980s was conducting a mail order service for big band and jazz records.

Ralph Flanagan

One of the most popular big bands in the country in the early 1950s -- and one of the strangest -- was led by a musician who was born and grew up in Northeast Ohio.

Ralph Flanagan was born in Lorain April 7th, 1919. By the time he was in his early 20s, he was playing piano and arranging for the sweet band of Rocky River native Sammy Kaye. After serving in the merchant marines during World War II, Flanagan became a studio musician for RCA Victor Records in New York and began arranging for such bandleaders as Charlie Barnet, Hal McIntyre, Gene Krupa, Boyd Raeburn and Cleveland Blue Baron.

During the Glenn Miller revival of the late 1940s, RCA Victor re-issued all sorts of old Miller recordings and airchecks and was looking for new ways to continue the momentum of the Miller popularity. Record producer Herb Hendler hired Flanagan to record some Miller songs for a minor record label. When Hendler later went to work for RCA, Flanagan was working as a staff arranger for the Mitchell Ayers Orchestra which
was playing on the Perry Como television show. Hendler suggested to his RCA bosses that Flanagan front a Miller-type band and make some new records in the Miller style. The bosses at RCA apparently confused Flanagan with Bill Finegan who had written a number of excellent arrangements for the Miller Orchestra. Actually, Flanagan had no connection whatsoever with the Miller Orchestra, but Hendler figured that by creating a band that sounded something like Miller's, RCA would either create a popular new band or at least stimulate the sales of old Miller records. He managed to achieve both objectives.

Flanagan wrote some new arrangements and used musicians from the Perry Como Show to record them in 1949. RCA Victor mounted a huge promotional campaign and the records began to sell. Heavy disc jockey play prompted requests for the band to tour ballrooms in the East and Midwest. Hendler found himself in a box because, despite the popular records, there was no Ralph Flanagan Orchestra. It was strictly a pick-up studio band. So, Hendler hired Bernie Woods, the former music editor of Variety, to help form a touring band, manage it, and get booking contracts. Woods not only got bookings, he also got an agreement for commercial radio broadcasts from wherever the band was playing. The ballroom owners were attracted by the prospect of added publicity.

In March of 1950, with a new, young group of touring musicians, Flanagan set out on the road with his Glenn Miller-sounding band, but Flanagan quickly provoked the anger of other big band leaders. He was charging only $1,000 a night during the week and $1,500 on weekends while most of the other big bands were getting $2,500 a night. Tommy Dorsey openly accused Flanagan of trying to undermine the older, more established bands.

Propelled by the heavy RCA promotion of the Miller-style records, Flanagan's ploy worked. Woods, in a 1994 book entitled When the Music Stopped, said the Flanagan band quickly became "the most sought-after band in the country." There is no doubt the band was popular. During its first year and a half on the road, the band got only one night off per week, played for more than three million people, and grossed about $1.5 million, an unheard of figure for the era.

Among the band's most popular songs were "Hot Toddy" and "Shaker Heights Stomp."

While the Flanagan Orchestra was playing new songs arranged in the Glenn Miller style, there was little jazz content, but the college kids thought they were dancing to the same kind of music that propelled the early years of the swing era.

The biggest problem, according to Woods, was Flanagan. In his book, Woods said Flanagan simply did not like being a public figure. "He loved the money," said Woods, "but he hated being a bandleader." And the ballroom operators, who liked his music, didn't like him. Flanagan's band manager, later called the leader "A mouse of a man," who seemed to do everything he possibly could to alienate almost everyone. When his fans approached the bandstand, he would turn away. When they tugged at his trousers, he kicked at them. One time in Albuquerque, said Woods, "Flanagan kicked a girl in the teeth and her boyfriend tried to drag the bandleader off the stage."

In the fall of 1951, the Flanagan band was booked in a package tour through a series of Michigan cities with the Mills Brothers. The legendary African-American singers asked if they could ride on the bus with the band, but, according to Woods, Flanagan refused to permit the Mills Brothers on his bus.

One time in the mid-1950s, Flanagan attracted the amazement of newspapers by taking an early morning stroll in the nude along an East Coast beach.

Some of the Lorain native's biggest problems were prompted by his love of flying. He had a pilot's license and enjoyed flying his own plane when the band was touring. One time in Iowa, he spotted the band bus from the air and flew in low twice, buzzing the band. When he landed the plane at a nearby airport, he was greeted by some not-very-friendly policemen.

Another time, when he was scheduled to play at the Steel Pier in Atlantic City, Woods went up in Flanagan's plane to toss advertising leaflets out the window. As Flanagan piloted the plane up and down the beach and Woods threw leaflets out the window, the plane narrowly missed a steel cable that was attached to an advertising balloon.

Another time, Flanagan tried to fly into Vandenberg Air Force Base in California where there was extremely
heavy security. He was told by the control tower to veer off; private planes were not allowed in the military air space. Woods said the Air Force was set to blast Flanagan out of the sky until the Air Force pilot spotted the band name on the side of his plane.

In Chicago, he was taking off from Midway Airport when the control tower told him to wait for an incoming airliner. Flanagan decided to try to take off anyway. As the big airline was landing, it blew over Flanagan’s plane as it was taxiing for takeoff. He escaped serious injury but finally the authorities lifted his pilot’s license.

Flanagan also managed to get in trouble with labor unions. He frequently refused to give his band members the required number of days off. The American Federation of Musicians also jumped on him for embarrassing his band members.

It wasn’t just the musicians’ union. At the Capitol Theatre in New York, Flanagan got into trouble with a theatre union. In a dispute in which union members said he was violating union rules by personally moving equipment into the theatre, he knocked down an angry stage hand. A few minutes later, a sandbag from the flies above the stage dropped and narrowly missed Flanagan’s head.

Woods also recalled that one time in Phoenix Flanagan went to a barber shop and fell asleep in the chair. The barber gave him a very close haircut. When he woke up, he discovered the barber had snipped away at his hair-piece.

Fed up with the leader’s strange behavior, Woods left the Flanagan band after about a year and a half. Flanagan continued to tour and record until the late 1950s when popular vocalists, early rock ‘n roll, mounting big band costs, and his own antics destroyed the popularity of the Ralph Flanagan Orchestra.

Flanagan continued arranging in the 1960s.

The early 1950s was an odd time to form a new big band. Ballrooms around the country had closed. The costs of operating big bands had skyrocketed and record companies and radio stations were spotlighting singers rather than bands.

Despite the current trends, Sauter and Finegan called the best studio musicians they could find into RCA’s Manhattan Center studios on May 12, 1952 and recorded their first two sides, “Doodletown Fifers” and “Azure-Té (Paris Blues).” Among the musicians on the record date were some excellent jazz artists — trumpeter Bobby Nichols, trombonist Bill Harris, pianist Ralph Burns and drummer Don Lamond, all from the Woody Herman band. A couple of weeks later, after trombonist Kai Winding joined the band, they recorded an almost classical version of “April In Paris” with soprano Florence Blumberg singing a haunting, virtually wordless obligato with Nichols’ muted trumpet, and “Midnight On The Ganges.”

The Sauter-Finegan Orchestra combined elements of jazz, classical music and pops in clever and frequently humorous arrangements. They used all manner of instruments — the entire woodwind family, a keyboard glockenspiel, celeste, harp, recorder, tubas, bells, tuned water glasses, a toy trumpet and even kazooas. Finegan told me, “People never knew what to make of us because nobody could put a label on it. We were often asked, ‘What is it?’ We would simply say, ‘It’s music.’ They would ask, ‘Is it jazz?’ We’d say, ‘Well sure, there’s some jazz there.’ We had some great jazz players in our band. Some people would say, ‘The band doesn’t swing.’ We’d say, ‘You haven’t listened to it.’ Every single thing we played was not a swing piece like Count Basie or Duke Ellington or Woody Herman, but there’s swing in there. There’s jazz in it. It has many elements. We never tried to put a label on it. It was just music.”

It was different and interesting music, but it was not all jazz despite the presence of such other jazz artists as Doc Severinsen, Lou Stein, Mundell Lowe, George Duvivier, Milt Hinton, Al Klink and Mousey Alexander.

When Finegan came to Cleveland in November of
1991 to be the guest conductor of the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra, he told me, “Most of the things we were writing were sort of in transition from the dance music of the big bands into more concert-listening type things. We had a foot in each camp there for a while.”

He said, “We started recording these things in New York with no intention of going out on the road with it and playing in person. We hoped to just make records.”

When the orchestra began getting rave reviews and its records began selling well, booking agent Willard Alexander urged the band to go on the road. Finegan recalled, “The first summer we went out, we worked our way to Chicago and I think we played mostly ballrooms in amusement parks, and they weren’t too ready to listen to concert material. They’d look at the band and they’d see a tuba and a harp and the percussion section and hear the xylophone and they’d say, ‘How can you dance to that?’ They were used to brass and saxophones with the old dance bands.

Finegan remembered, “The funniest remark of all time was one night when somebody hollered up, ‘Hey, when are you gonna play something we can dance to?’ One of our trombone players (Sonny Russo) hollered right back, ‘When are you gonna dance something we can play to?’”

Eventually they were forced to play some dance music. Finegan said, “We quickly wrote some charts of things people could dance to, and we would do some of our regular things.”

The Sauter-Finegan Orchestra played February 19, 1954 at the Aragon Ballroom in Cleveland.

I saw the band in Wilmington, Delaware. Their bus carried a large sign proclaiming, “Music Is Fun!” In the middle of the wild assortment of instruments and red blazers on the bandstand, Finegan conducted from a large audio control board (years before musicians went crazy with sound systems). He used the mixer, which had been built by Sauter’s brother, an engineer with Bell Labs, to increase the volume of small instruments in the orchestra.

When the Sauter - Finegan Orchestra performed “Midnight Sleighride,” based on Prokofiev’s “Lt. Kije Suite”, which begins with the sound of a horse’s hoofs in the snow, Finegan soloed. He beat his hands against his chest in rhythm. Finegan later said it was probably his best solo work on record — “or on snow!” Later Finegan said of his chest-thumping, “I made a fool of myself for five years.”

When they did “The Honey Jump,” most of the band members played a battery of kazooos. On “Yankee Doodletown,” Sauter soloed on a toy trumpet.

The Sauter-Finegan Orchestra performed a joint concert with the Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Hall. Together they played “Concerto for Jazz Band and Symphony Orchestra.” In addition to the concerto, Finegan recalled, “They played a couple of things and we played a few things. It was a great concert. We really enjoyed being here.”

Eventually economic pressures caught up with the Sauter-Finegan Orchestra. Sauter took a job as music director of a radio station in West Germany. Finegan continued with the band for a while using studio musicians, but finally disbanded the orchestra in March of 1957.

Sauter, who later did the orchestrations for the album *Focus on Stan Getz*, died of a heart attack in 1981. Finegan later wrote arrangements for the Glenn Miller ghost band and the Mel Lewis Orchestra, which included Cleveland’s Joe Lovano, and taught jazz at the University of Bridgeport.

Some of the former Cathedral Latin students were at Cuyahoga Community College in November, 1991, when Bill Finegan, then 74, returned to direct the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra playing some of his arrangements. It was the first time any other band had played the complex Sauter-Finegan charts.

The CJO performed another Sauter-Finegan concert in January of 1999.