Big dance bands were playing almost everywhere in Greater Cleveland in the late 1930s and early '40s — at ballrooms, theatres, and amusement parks. Big band jazz was the most popular form of music in the world and the bandleaders were bigger celebrities than the rock stars of a later generation.

Many of the big bands began in Cleveland and many Cleveland musicians played with the hugely popular touring bands.

Where they played

Veteran Cleveland saxophonist Andy Anderson said he heard most of the bands here. He remembered listening to Erskine Hawkins' 'Bama State Collegians and McKinney’s Cotton Pickers from Detroit. “Those guys were really blowing,” said Anderson. “They were playing like mad!” He recalled hearing bands downtown at the Palace and Hippodrome Theatres and at ballrooms around the city including Oster's, the Trianon and the Circle, and at Public Auditorium.

Trianon Ballroom

A favorite spot where many of the top national bands played was the Trianon Ballroom at 9802 Euclid Avenue. The Trianon opened in 1924 as the Crystal Slipper Ballroom. It could accommodate 4,000 dancers. In December of 1926, the Crystal Slipper advertised “The classiest dance crowd of Cleveland” with Moran and Wahl’s Crystal Slipper Orchestra. Thursday was “Novelty Night,” Friday was “College Night,” and everybody was welcome on Saturday and Sunday nights. Duke Ellington and his Orchestra played there for dancing as early as August of 1932. Two years later, the name was changed to the Trianon Ballroom.

Nehemiah Story, better known to his friends as “Chief” Story, said the Trianon in the 1930s and '40s had all the big bands on Thursday and Saturday nights. They played for both black and white dancers, but Story said there was a form of racial discrimination. “Duke Ellington, Count Basie or Jimmie Lunceford would be there two nights,” said Story. “They would charge 50 cents on Thursday nights for white people and a dollar for black people on Saturday nights.”

Story also remembered seeing and hearing the Tommy Dorsey and Woody Herman bands at the Trianon. The Dorsey Brothers Orchestra played there in 1935.

Les Brown and his Band of Renown were at the Trianon in January of 1937.

Andy Kirk and his Clouds of Joy played there the following month and originated national broadcasts on the NBC Red Network from the Trianon. On a recording of one of those broadcasts, you can hear the announcer saying, “Greetings and salutation from Andy Kirk and his Clouds of Joy featuring Mary Lou Williams, America’s foremost swing pianist, originating from the Trianon Ballroom in Cleveland.”

Pianist Al Lerner first heard his future boss, Harry James, at the Trianon Ballroom in 1939. “There were so many bands there!” said Lerner.

Bunny Berigan and his Orchestra spent much of the spring of 1939 at the Trianon. He played there three nights a week in April of 1939 and returned for several more appearances in 1942.

Saxophonist Hank Geer remembered trumpeter Charlie Spivak got his start as a bandleader at the Trianon. “He left the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra,” said Geer, “and MCA (the Music Corporation of America) wanted to build a band under Charlie. They sent him to Cleveland, to the Trianon Ballroom. His band became the house band.”

“After the Trianon was turned into a bowling alley in 1956,” Story said, “there was no place for black people to dance, so they opened a place out near 105th and Cedar called The Playmor. It was a former skating rink and a lot of bands came in there to play.”
Circle Ballroom

Anderson also remembered bands at the Circle Ballroom, a dance hall upstairs above Zimmerman’s Drug Store at East 105th and Euclid. “They’d have a breakfast dance at Zimmerman’s,” recalled Anderson. “They’d have two bands, maybe Horace Henderson at 10 o’clock in the morning and then another band at night.”

The building opened in 1920 as the Hoffman Theatre, and was expanded and renamed in 1927 to include both the Circle Theatre and the Circle Ballroom.

The Count Basie Orchestra was one of the big bands that played at the Circle.

Cleveland trombonist Bernard Simms remembered playing with a teenage band led by Evelyn Freeman at the Circle Ballroom. He said, “We broadcast on WHK with Tom Manning as the announcer.”

The building was torn down in the mid-1970s to make room for urban renewal developments.

Public Auditorium

Anderson also remembered jazz bands playing for dances at Public Auditorium downtown. “They had a battle of the bands there, Chick Webb at one end and Fletcher Henderson at the other! We went and danced all day long for 50 cents. And those bands were outplaying each other! Talk about hearing music!”

Cleveland’s Public Hall building, part of the Convention Center complex, was opened in 1929 and included both the large Public Auditorium and the 3,000-seat Music Hall. Bands that appeared there in the 1930s and ‘40s included Count Basie, Lionel Hampton, Lucky Millinder, Andy Kirk, Fletcher Henderson, Chick Webb and Duke Ellington.

When Story was still a teenager, he recalled, “I would make it my business to go down to Public Auditorium or to the Palace Theatre. If I didn’t go downtown, I would go out to the Trianon Ballroom.”

Aragon Ballroom

Cleveland’s longest-running dance hall was the Aragon Ballroom on West 25th Street near Clark Avenue. Built in 1919, it was originally called the Olympic Winter Garden and served as both a dance hall and a skating rink. In 1930, Lloyd Harry Meyers and his father, George Meyers, bought the ballroom and changed the name to Shadyside Gardens. Newspaper reports said they installed the dance floor on top of the regular floor, leaving a small air space for resilience. A few years later, they remodeled the ballroom and renamed it the Aragon after a famous ballroom in Chicago. When they reopened, they hired the nationally famous Red Nichols to play for dancing. Nichols and his band had been playing at the Golden Pheasant Chinese Restaurant on Prospect Avenue and making regular national radio broadcasts from Cleveland.

Another early band at the Aragon was Cleveland’s Freddy Carlone Orchestra featuring singer Perry Como.

Almost all the name bands played at the Aragon including Harry James, Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Dorsey, Bunny Berigan and Woody Herman. At its peak, the Aragon was open seven nights a week and frequently attracted as many as 2,000 dancers a night.

The unusual decor included a glitter ball revolving over the center of the dance floor, salmon and purple walls, burgundy carpeting leading to the maple dance floor and wine-colored benches where dancers could rest between sets.

After George Meyers was killed in a traffic accident outside the Aragon, his son, Lloyd, and his wife, Madeline, took over the operation and ran the ballroom for years.

Carl “Doc” Pfeil, who started working at the Aragon in 1930, made a framed sign which he placed in the ladies room. It suggested to the ladies:

Don’t hesitate to accept the offer of a dance from a gentleman when he asks you. He pays you a compliment. Please consider it in that light and the enjoyment of your visit here will be increased. You come here for a good time. We do our part by giving you the finest dance music, and a perfect dance floor in beautiful romantic surroundings. The rest is up to you, ladies.

The Aragon continued to present local and national big bands for dancing on a regular basis into the 1980s. The Meyers sold the ballroom in 1987 and the new owners continued to present big bands for dancing until 1993 when the music stopped and the doors closed.

The Cleveland Landmarks Commission declared the Aragon Ballroom a Cleveland Historic Site.
At one time in the 1990s, there was an attempt to convert the building into a night spot for the local Hispanic community, but that effort failed and the structure became the home of a Pentecostal church.

**Oster's Ballroom**

Veteran saxophonist and arranger Willie Smith remembered Oster's Ballroom was "where all the bands used to come, Benny Carter, Billy Eckstine, Count Basie, all those people would come through Oster's Ballroom." Smith said, "It was in the black neighborhood but many white people used to come to hear the better professional musicians."

Oster's Ballroom was originally located at 2052 East 105th Street, across the street from the YMCA. Later, it moved to East 46th and Euclid.

Andy Anderson played saxophone with the Marion Sears Orchestra at the original Oster's Ballroom two nights a week in the early 1930s.

In addition to the regular dances, Anderson said Oster's Ballroom had a very unusual event for some special dancers. He remembered, "Thursday afternoons, we played for deaf and dumb students. Mr. Oster would go to the school and bring them in buses. They'd go upstairs and dance. They did all the dance steps – fox trot, one-step, waltzes, what not. They felt the rhythm of the drums through the floor, the vibrations."

"Chief" Story, a participant and active supporter of jazz in Cleveland for more than 60 years, said Oster's "was a nice ballroom, with a spacious floor and people really enjoyed it, hearing the bands and being able to dance."

Many of the other top bands of the 1930s and '40s played at Oster's Ballroom including Fletcher Henderson in 1943, and Louis Armstrong in 1946.

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**Cleveland Area Ballrooms**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ballroom Name</th>
<th>Address Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aragon Ballroom</td>
<td>3179 West 25th Street (1919-1993)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bedford Glen</td>
<td>Glen Road, Bedford (1905-1944)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Central Armory</td>
<td>East 6th &amp; Lakeside (1903-1919)</td>
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<td>Circle Ballroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cleveland Public Hall</td>
<td>East 6th &amp; Lakeside</td>
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<tr>
<td>Danceland</td>
<td>East 98th &amp; Euclid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreamland Ballroom</td>
<td>East 13th &amp; Chester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Market Gardens</td>
<td>Akron (1930s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Euclid Beach Park</td>
<td>East 160th &amp; Lakeshore (1895-1969)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Luna Park Pavilion</td>
<td>E. 109th &amp; Woodland (1905-1935)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marcane Ballroom</td>
<td>3705 Euclid (1940s &amp; '50s)</td>
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<td>Martha Lee Club</td>
<td>East 17th &amp; Euclid (1920s)</td>
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<td>Oster's Ballroom</td>
<td>2052 East 105th &amp; 46th &amp; Euclid</td>
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<tr>
<td>Puritas Springs Ballroom</td>
<td>Puritas Road (1898-1943)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Springvale Ballroom</td>
<td>North Olmsted (1923-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trianon Ballroom</td>
<td>9802 Euclid Ave. (1924-1956)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**The Land O’ Dance price war**

In 1932, a man named H.W. Perry opened a new ballroom at 12th and Market in Canton called Land O’ Dance. He began booking many of the most popular bands in the country including Red Nichols. The Land O’Dance became very popular for a brief period, but Perry’s business was ruined by a brutal price war with other nearby ballrooms.

When the nationally famous Jan Garber Orchestra played in January, Perry charged 50 cents for admission. Two weeks later, when he booked Red Nichols, the promoter, facing competition from other ballrooms, dropped his price to 40 cents, but, when he spent a lot of money to book the popular Ted Lewis Orchestra, he had to raise his price to $1.10 and quickly discovered people would not spend that much. Nearby Meyer’s Lake Moonlight Ballroom got a much bigger crowd by charging only 25 cents for the relatively unknown Tommy Nichols Orchestra.

During the summer, Perry moved his dances to the Summit Beach Park Ballroom in Akron. There he charged 10 cents to hear Cleveland’s Emerson Gill Orchestra and 44 cents to hear the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra with Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter, Rex Stewart and Buster Bailey.

In a newspaper interview, Perry said, “Most of the boys are giving more consideration to admission price than band bookings.” He angrily charged he was forced to drop his ticket prices so low that he was unable to meet operating costs.

By the end of the year, the price war put Perry’s Land O’ Dance out of business.

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**Land O’ Dance - 1932**

- January 12: Jan Garber
- January 24: Red Nichols
- January 25: Husk O’Hare
- January 31: Don Redman
- February 16: Ted Lewis
- February 21: Ben Bernie
- April 8: Henry Thies
- April 24: Larry Funk
- October 4: Ted Hall
- October 20: Red Nichols
- November 8: Casa Loma
- November 15: Northerners
- November 17: Red Nichols
- November 22: Duke Ellington
- December 27: Duke Ellington
Summer amusement parks

From the 1920s to the 1950s, there were at least 150 dance halls in Greater Cleveland, according to Bob Strasmyer, the acknowledged authority on Cleveland area ballrooms. His count did not include numerous dance floors at hotels, nightclubs and party centers. Many of the most popular dance floors were at amusement parks.

Among the summer dance pavilions was Bedford Glen off Broadway near Warrensville in Bedford. Trains brought dancers to Bedford Glen from all parts of the area. The big bands played there throughout the 1930s until the pavilion was destroyed by fire in the 1940s. In later years, there was no evidence of a dance hall at Bedford Glen. It became the site of Mr. T’s Printing and Sandblasting and the Bedford Glen Garden Center.

Cleveland trumpeter Bob Peck, who later played with Glenn Miller and Bob Crosby, remembered playing at Bedford Glen and such other summer amusement parks as Brighton Park (near Brookside Park), the Brookside Park Pavilion, Euclid Beach Park, Luna Park, Puritas Springs Park, the Springvale Ballroom, Chippewa Lake Park, Summit Beach Park in Akron, as well as at Cain Park in Cleveland Heights, and the Edgewater Park Pavilion. “In those days,” said Peck, “we played all these parks. Some of them were five-cents-a-dance places. They would clear the floor after each song, and then fill the floor again and start the next tune.”

Among the hundreds of musicians who played with dance bands at area amusement parks in the 1920s was a young art student named Viktor Schreckengost. He told me that when he was studying art in Cleveland, he played saxophone and clarinet with a band led by Ken Webb at a variety of amusement park dance halls. Later, Cleveland Heights resident Schreckengost became world famous as an artist and industrial designer and was widely praised for his artistic depictions of jazz.

Al Lerner remembered hearing the Austin Wylie Orchestra at Euclid Beach Park. He said the band at the time included such future national names as Billy Butterfield, Gordon Jenkins and Claude Thornhill. Vic Stuart’s band played for years at Euclid Beach.

Saxophonist Hank Geer was still at Collinwood High School when he began playing with various big bands at summer dance pavilions. Geer remembered playing at Euclid Beach, Vermillion, Ruggles Beach, Mentor-on-the-Lake and other summer parks.

Cedar Point Ballroom

The ballroom at the Cedar Point amusement park in Sandusky first opened in 1903. In 1939, the park rebuilt the ballroom on the upper level of the Coliseum Building and began booking some of the most popular dance bands in the country.

The rebuilt ballroom was an art deco showplace with multi-tiered rainbow-colored lights casting a soft glow on the dancers. At the north end of the ballroom there was a large stage with a rainbow motif backdrop and colored lighting. At the other end, there were scores of tables and chairs and a refreshment stand offering sandwiches, beer, wine, champagne and liquor. It was considered one of the largest and most beautiful ballrooms in the Midwest.

One of the first attractions in 1939 was the Ozzie Nelson Orchestra featuring the singing of his wife, Harriett Hilliard. More than a decade later, they were the stars of the radio and TV series, The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriett.

Other bands that played at the Cedar Point Ballroom for almost two decades included Bob Crosby, Woody Herman, Benny Goodman, Gene Krupa, Tex Beneke, Ray Anthony, Duke Ellington and Claude Thornhill. For several years, NBC broadcast the bands live from Cedar Point on national radio.

Frequently in the late 1930s and early ‘40s, the band musicians performing at Cedar Point would hold after-hours jam sessions at Posner’s Castle Sandwich Shop. The shop was owned by Cleveland and jazz fan Frederick Posner.
The swinging Palace Theatre

Cleveland’s Palace Theatre, built in 1922 in the B.F. Keith Building at East 17th and Euclid Avenue, was a major stop on the vaudeville circuit. In 1925, the Palace also began showing motion pictures interspersed with the live entertainment.

Big bands played at the Palace as early as 1929 when the Paul Whiteman Orchestra performed for a week between showings of the movie Me, Gangster.

Other bands at the Palace in the 1920s, when Cleveland was the sixth largest city in the United States with a population of one million, included Ted Lewis, Fred Waring, and Guy Lombardo.

Beginning in 1931, there was an almost constant parade of big bands at the Palace, playing full-week engagements with several performances each day between showings of motion pictures. The first was Irving Aaronson’s Commanders which included clarinetist Artie Shaw who had been playing with Cleveland’s Austin Wylie band less than two years earlier. A relatively unknown Cleveland comedian, Bob Hope, was the featured live entertainer the following week.

Duke Ellington, on his first national tour, played at the Palace the week of July 4, 1931. It was the first of ten week-long appearances by the Ellington band at the Palace.

Ticket prices, during the depths of the Depression, were usually 25 cents for matinees and 30 cents for evening performances. That also included the movie.

By 1935, vaudeville acts had all but disappeared as the big bands, many of them featuring leading jazz artists, became extremely popular. They were the backbone of the Palace Theatre’s live entertainment for the next 15 years.

Tommy Dorsey and his Orchestra first played at the Palace in April of 1938 and did its coast-to-coast radio broadcasts from the stage. Many others also later made network broadcasts from the Palace.

An indication of just how popular the big dance bands were was the fact that the ten most popular records of the year in 1940 were all recorded by big bands.

Dorsey set the Palace Theatre box office record when his band, with drummer Gene Krupa and a new, 21-year-old clarinetist, Buddy DeFranco, played for a week in March of 1944.

During the period from 1931 to 1950, many of the bands returned year after year. Cab Calloway played ten weeks at the Palace, Louis Armstrong – five weeks, Tommy Dorsey – five weeks, Jimmy Dorsey – five weeks, Bob Crosby – five weeks, Fats Waller – four weeks, Nat Cole and his Trio – four weeks, Benny Goodman – three weeks, and Count Basie – three weeks.

By the 1950s, when television was beginning to make inroads into popular entertainment and the big bands were fading, the Palace discontinued its policy of live entertainment. With only a few exceptions, the theatre became a movie house until the 1970s when the Playhouse Square Foundation began a major effort to
The marquee of the Palace Theatre during the week of October 12, 1945, announcing Woody Herman and his Orchestra “on stage - in person” save the historic Cleveland theatres.

 Appropriately, among the first live performers at the restored Palace in 1975 were the Woody Herman Orchestra and the Glenn Miller and Duke Ellington ghost bands.

 Later in the 1970s, there were performances by Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughan, Peggy Lee, Mel Tormé, Buddy Rich, Doc Severinsen, Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson, Count Basie, Maynard Ferguson, Dave Brubeck, the Four Freshmen, Herbie Hancock, and Jean-Luc Ponty.

 Beginning in 1980, the Tri-C JazzFest brought a parade of major jazz artists to the stage of the Palace.

 But, the golden years for jazz at the Palace where from 1931 to 1950 when practically every major jazz artist and big band performed there live, frequently for a week at a time.

 The list of artists at the Palace reads almost like a jazz hall of fame:
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<th>Week of:</th>
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<td>9/5 - Louis Armstrong</td>
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<td>11/20 -</td>
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<td>1/13 -</td>
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<td>2/17 -</td>
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<td>3/8 -</td>
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<td>3/22 -</td>
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Source: Cleveland Palace Theatre
Cleveland Jazz History

**Cleveland’s white dance bands**

There were many white dance bands playing throughout Greater Cleveland from the 1920s through the 1940s. While it is an exaggeration to call some of them jazz bands, they were part of the overall popularity of big bands and many of them graduated familiar jazz names to national fame.

The Emerson Gill Orchestra was playing and recording in Cleveland as early as the 1920s.

Austin Wylie also began leading bands in Cleveland in the early 1920s. In the late 1920s and the ’30s, his band featured such then-unknown performers as Artie Shaw, Claude Thornhill, Tony Pastor, Vaughn Monroe and Helen O’Connell.

Trumpeter Bob Peck, who grew up in East Cleveland, joined Wylie’s band in the spring of 1937. Other members at the time included trumpeter Billy Butterfield from Middletown, reed player Bill Stegmeyer from Detroit, and pianist Chet Rice from Cleveland. Peck said Butterfield, who became one of the most respected trumpeters in jazz, added much to the jazz sound of the Wylie Orchestra. “That was a very swinging band,” he said, “with the personnel that we had.”

Peck said Wylie was “a wonderful person who had a penchant for the spirits. Sometimes he had a little difficulty standing up on the stage. In those days, all he did was wave the baton around.” According to Peck, Wylie seldom played. “He played the violin, but he’d pick it up only occasionally to help out with a waltz medley.”

The end of the Wylie Orchestra came in late 1937 when Billy Rose’s Aquacade was a featured attraction at the Great Lakes Exposition. “The Bob Crosby band,” said Peck, “was playing at the Aquacade and several of the best players from Wylie’s Cleveland band quit to join Crosby.” When they left, Wylie gave up his band to become the manager of Shaw’s then-nationally famous orchestra.

Freddy Carlone’s band from 1931 to 1936 featured a young vocalist from Pennsylvania named Perry Como. In March of 1933, the Carlone band played at the inaugural ball for newly-elected President Franklin Roosevelt. Frankie Laine also sang briefly with the Carlone band.

Sammy Watkins’ Orchestra played for years at the old Hollenden Hotel. In 1940 he hired a young singer from Steubenville named Dino Crocetti and changed his name to Dean Martin. Martin lived and sang here for three years.

Guy Lombardo, who grew up in London, Ontario, Canada, came to Cleveland, married a Lakewood girl, and played here until 1941. Lombardo’s band played for several years at the Music Box above the State Theatre during the winters and at Blossom Heath (later the Cleveland Yachting Club) during the summers.

Sammy Kaye, who had graduated from Rocky River High School and become a track star at Ohio University, formed his first professional band in Cleveland in 1931. He played at the Statler Hotel before winning national popularity with his “Swing and Sway” music. One of Kaye’s first and most popular records was an unusual version of “Daddy” which came from a University of Pennsylvania Mask and Whig Club production. Kaye later married a wealthy matron from Shaker Heights.

Charlie Zwick, who later headed the United States Information Agency for President Ronald Reagan, led a band at the Winton Hotel.

By the 1930s, black bands were also becoming very active and popular in Cleveland.

**The Jeter-Pillars Orchestra**

**Saxophonists**

James Jeter and Hayes Pillars, boyhood friends who had been playing in the Alphonso Trent band, formed their own territory band in Cleveland in 1934. They first played at a Cleveland club called the Hollywood Café.

Their orchestra helped launch the careers of several extremely important jazz artists.

One of the first members of the band was an 18-year-old trumpet player from Columbus, Harry Edison, who had been playing in
Cleveland with a band led by Chester Clark at a spot called Mamie Louise’s Chicken Shack. With the new Jeter-Pillars Orchestra, Edison played at various Cleveland clubs including the Magnolia Hotel Creole Bar.

Edison later said, “Jeter and Pillars were very good musicians and they stressed quality in their band.” But Edison said there wasn’t much room for solos. He toured the Midwest with the Jeter-Pillars Orchestra before joining Count Basie three years later.

Another member of the band formed in Cleveland was drummer Sid Catlett who had played with Benny Carter and McKinney’s Cotton Pickers. Considered one of the top drummers of the 1930s and ‘40s, Catlett stayed with Jeter-Pillars for two years before joining Fletcher Henderson. When Catlett left, he was replaced by another pretty good drummer, Jo Jones. Bassist Walter Page was also a member of the Cleveland-based band. Within a year, Jones and Page became key members of Count Basie’s legendary rhythm section.

In 1937, Jeter and Pillars moved their band from Cleveland to Chicago and recorded four sides for Vocalion Records. Included was a song called “I Like Pie, I Like Cake” featuring a vocal by Pillars.

From Chicago, Jeter and Pillars took their band to St. Louis and became a featured attraction at a club called the Club Plantation. In St. Louis, two extraordinary young jazz musicians joined their band – bassist Jimmy Blanton and guitarist Charlie Christian.

Blanton was playing with the Jeter-Pillars Orchestra at the Club Plantation when Duke Ellington first heard him in 1939. After joining Ellington, Blanton, more than anyone else in jazz, made the string bass a solo instrument.

In September of 1939, record producer John Hammond heard Christian playing and recommended him to Benny Goodman. On the basis of his recordings with Goodman, including “Sole Flight,” Christian became an all-time master of the jazz guitar, influenced generations of guitar players, and played with the pioneers of bebop in the early 1940s before his death in 1942 at the age of 25.

Others who played with the Jeter-Pillars Orchestra included drummer Kenny Clarke and saxophonist Jimmy Forrest who later replaced Ben Webster in the Duke Ellington Orchestra.

By 1942, the Jeter-Pillars Orchestra became the most popular band in St. Louis. Miles Davis, who grew up in the St. Louis area, called the Jeter-Pillars Orchestra “a great band.” It was featured on a popular national radio program, The Fitch Bandwagon.

Jeter and Pillars finally disbanded their orchestra in 1947.

In 1981, the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University and the Smithsonian Institution honored Pillars for his contributions to jazz. When Pillars died in 1992, services were conducted at a St. Louis funeral home operated by Eddie Randle, a bandleader who had first hired young Miles Davis in the early 1940s.

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On the road with Tommy Allen

Touring with the bands was a difficult existence. Veteran Cleveland saxophonist Tommy Allen, who played with the Lionel Hampton Orchestra among others, remembered the rigors of touring.

After growing up in New Castle, Pennsylvania, Allen joined a Youngstown band, Joe Brunswick and his California Nighthawks, with Tiny Bradshaw and Howard McGee. When Allen joined Ben Hilson and his Twelve Clouds of Joy, he recalled, “We came to Cleveland and played a big dance for about 600 people on East 55th Street. We stayed at the Majestic Hotel. We got stranded here. We couldn’t get out of town.” Hilson ran out of money.

Later, Allen joined Zack Whyte’s territory band. “His greatest forte,” said Allen, “was he made money but the musicians didn’t make any.” One time in Tampa, Florida, Allen remembered, “Whyte gave each member of his band 15 cents and said, ‘Go down to the corner. You can get a plate of beans and rice for 15 cents.’” Allen left the Whyte band a short time later.

After teaching and working in a steel mill in Steubenville, Allen got the itch again. He joined the swinging band of Don Redman. Allen said, “He had two books. You play out of this one if you’re playing a dance; and tomorrow night, you play out of the other one for a concert.”

Later Allen joined the Lionel Hampton Orchestra. His chief memory of touring with Hampton was “playing ‘Flyin’ Home’ non-stop for 45 minutes!”

In 1954 Allen moved to Cleveland and became the secretary-treasurer of Local 550 of the American Federation of Musicians.

Allen died May 21, 1999 in Cleveland.

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Musicians who played with the Jeter-Pillars Orchestra

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<td>Jimmy Blanton</td>
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George Thow and the Dorseys

One of the first Cleveland musicians to join a nationally known touring big band was George “Gus” Thow. He replaced Bunny Berigan in the Dorsey Brothers’ Orchestra.

Thow, born and raised in Cleveland, was never considered one of the greats of jazz but he played a key role in one of the pivotal orchestras of the early years of the big band era.

In 1934, the two brothers from Lansford, Pennsylvania, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, who had played and recorded with Bix Beiderbecke and the orchestras of Jean Goldkette and Paul Whiteman, decided to form their own band. They broke with the pattern of most of the white bands of the period, which performed mostly stock dance arrangements. The Dorsey brothers, borrowing from their experience with small jazz groups and some of the swinging black big bands, combined elements of small group jazz and big band dance music. They did it with only eleven players and unusual instrumentation: three reeds (Jimmy Dorsey, Skeets Herfurt and Jack Stacey), three trombones (Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller and Don Matteson), piano (Bobby Van Epps), drums (Ray McKinley), bass (Delmar Kaplan), guitar (Roc Hilman) and only one trumpet!

When the Dorsey brothers formed their band, they quickly went through a succession of trumpeters: Bunny Berigan, Charlie Spivak, Jerry Neary, and finally settled on the young musician from Cleveland, George “Gus” Thow.

Born in Cleveland July 8, 1908, Thow lived at 1314 West 95th Street when he attended old West High School. He sang in the school glee club and played in the school orchestra. Records from the Cleveland school system show that he had a 90.5 average when he graduated in 1925 and was awarded a scholarship to Harvard University.

At Harvard, Thow played trumpet in a band led by Johnny Green and graduated in 1929 with a bachelor of arts degree in French literature, a rarity for jazz musicians.

After graduation, Thow joined the Isham Jones Orchestra, which included such future stars as Jack Jenney, Pee Wee Erwin, Gordon Jenkins, and Woody Herman. Thow recorded in 1934 with the early, but unheralded, Benny Goodman Orchestra which included Jack Teagarden and Teddy Wilson.

Then, the 26-year-old Clevelander joined the revolutionary new Dorsey Brothers Orchestra. With Tommy leading the band and playing trombone, Jimmy co-leading from the sax section, and Thow playing the band’s only trumpet, the band spent most of the summer of 1934 playing at the Sands Point Casino on Long Island and recorded for a new record company, Decca. Thow’s trumpet solo was featured on the band’s record of “Weary Blues,” arranged by Glenn Miller.

They had a female singer named Kay Weber, but no male vocalist until the booking agent demanded that Tommy and Jimmy hire Bing Crosby’s younger brother. The moody Tommy was not happy about being forced to add Bob Crosby to his band and kept needling him, asking if he could sing this song or that song. After Bob said “no” a number of times, it was Thow who broke the tension by joking from the back of the bandstand, “Can you sing?!” Even the temperamental Tommy Dorsey laughed. A short time later, Thow played a muted trumpet solo on Crosby’s recording of “Basin Street Blues” with the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra.

The night the band was scheduled to make its first radio network broadcast, a storm knocked out the electricity. Tommy had to run around taking candles off patrons’ tables so the band members could read their parts in the dark hall during the broadcast.

In the spring of 1935, the Dorsey Brothers began what Kay Weber called “a murderous schedule” – a tour of one-nighters that began in Toronto April 12th. They played in Erie the 13th and Cleveland the 14th. They played here at the Trianon Ballroom on Euclid Avenue. From Cleveland, the band went to New York, Pottstown,
New London, Waltham, Bristol, Troy, Dearfield, Scranton, Mahanoy City, Schenectady, Hanover, Passaic, Harrisburg, Pittsfield, Waterbury, Providence, Baltimore, and Allentown—all in less than a month!

It was at the Glen Island Casino May 30, 1935 that Thow had an indirect role in the famous break-up of the Dorsey brothers. Tommy and Jimmy had been getting on each other’s nerves for months. One night, Tommy called for the song “I’ll Never Say Never Again,” and counted off the tempo. Thow was getting ready to play a complicated chorus. Jimmy didn’t like the beat and looked up at Tommy and said, “Mac, that’s a little fast isn’t it?” While Thow was playing his solo, Tommy simply walked off the bandstand and never came back.

Tommy Dorsey, of course, formed his own band which became one of the most popular in the world in the late 1930s and early ‘40s, playing both very hot swing and some very sweet dance music. After the break-up of the Dorsey brothers, Thow remained with Jimmy’s band. Glenn Miller joined Ray Noble’s Orchestra and two years later formed his own band which became the most popular band of the swing era.

When Miller joined the Army and formed a wartime military orchestra, his drummer was his old buddy from the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra, Ray McKinley. After Miller disappeared aboard a small plane flying to France, McKinley became the leader of Miller’s AEF orchestra.

Thow played for a while with Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw, and went to California where he became a member of the NBC staff orchestra and played trumpet for a number of movies including a film called Syncopation. In 1956 Thow joined the popular Lawrence Welk Orchestra and served as part of the Welk TV show’s production staff. He also wrote several songs.

**Harry “Pee Wee” Jackson**

Another Cleveland who joined a nationally prominent big band in the mid-1930s was trumpeter Harry “Pee Wee” Jackson. He toured with several of the best black bands in the 1930s and ‘40s.

Jackson first joined Earl “Fatha” Hines’ orchestra in Chicago. Budd Johnson recalled in Ira Gitler’s book Swing to Bop, “Jackson was the first guy we took out of Cleveland.” Johnson said Jackson was “a very good trumpet player.”

According to Johnson, it was Jackson “who pulled our coats” about another Cleveland trumpeter, Freddie Webster. Johnson said the highly-regarded Webster “was never quite the trumpet player that Pee Wee was, but he had that big sound and he played pretty.”

Jackson joined Horace Henderson’s Orchestra in 1938 with another Cleveland trumpeter, Emmett Berry, and returned to the Hines band in 1940 with yet another trumpeter who had played in Cleveland, Tommy Enoch. In 1941 Jackson, Enoch and Webster were quickly developing what some were beginning to call “the Cleveland Style of Trumpet.” They went to Los Angeles with Hines and recorded six sides for Bluebird Records.

In 1942 both Jackson and Webster joined the high-flying Jimmie Lunceford band. When the band came to Cleveland, young musicians from Central High School turned out in force to cheer their alumni heroes.

Jackson and Webster returned to Hines again in 1942 and played with such sidemen as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Billy Eckstine and singer Sarah Vaughan. It was the band many later called “the incubator of bop.” Johnson remembered, “Freddie would play the big sound and the pretty things, and Pee Wee would play the bop-style songs.”

But Jackson apparently began drinking heavily and soon disappeared from the jazz scene. He was not heard from again until one day in the 1940s when a headline appeared in the *Cleveland Press*. It said, “Gabriel Blows His Horn.” The story described the adventures of a man who stole a milk truck and drove it through some of Cleveland’s better neighborhoods at 5 o’clock in the morning, playing “Taps” and other bugle calls on an old trumpet. After a number of complaints from stunned citizens, he was arrested by Cleveland police. The horn player the headline writer called “Gabriel” was Harry “Pee Wee” Jackson, the jazz trumpeter who had played
with some of the top bands of the 1930s and '40s.

Most people at the time thought it was just an amusing prank. But looking back, that incident was the tragic coda to the career of one of the first top-flight jazz musicians from Cleveland to emerge on the national scene. A few years later, the Cleveland jazz pioneer was dead and all but forgotten.

**The Bob Crosby Orchestra**

In the early 1930s, the Cleveland city dump was located next to Municipal Stadium on the lakefront. The foot of East 9th Street was a mess, with trash and garbage literally falling into Lake Erie. In the midst of all this and the Depression, when jobs, food and fun were hard to come by in Cleveland, local movers and shakers decided to fill in the dump and do something dramatic to add some punch to a tired city.

They raised a million dollars in private funds and got about $200,000 from the federal government’s Works Progress Administration (the WPA) and built a world’s fair-type site on the lakefront. They called it the Great Lakes Exposition. One writer at the time described it as “a city of ivory, a new Baghdad risen in the desert.”

Stretching from the Cleveland malls, there was a grand entrance, lined with towering silver eagle pylons. The exposition covered 135 acres, extending from Public Hall down to the stadium and as far east as 22nd Street.

More than seven million people attended the exposition during the summers of 1936 and 1937. They saw all the commercial exhibits that would, a couple of years later, highlight the highly-publicized New York World’s Fair, as well as a midway that included such acts as 260-pound ballerinas, an eight-foot-four-inch man, snake shows, boxing cats, and even a 90-pound sturgeon.

The centerpiece of the Great Lakes Exposition was a marine theatre at the site of what years later would became the Great Lakes Science Center. There were bleachers facing out toward a floating stage in Lake Erie. It was called the Aquacade. The show at the Aquacade was produced by entrepreneur Billy Rose who at the time was married to entertainer Fanny Brice. The stars of the Aquacade show were former Olympic swimmers Johnny Weissmuller, who played Tarzan in the movies, and Eleanor Holm, who would later become Rose’s wife.

The featured musical entertainment at the Aquacade during the summer of 1937 was the Bob Crosby Orchestra.

The Crosby band, unlike most big bands of the period, was a cooperative. The band members were, in effect, stockholders and they decided to hire Bing Crosby’s younger brother Bob, a singer but not an instrumentalist, to front the band. It was organized by former members of the Ben Pollack band in 1935, shortly after Benny Goodman had become extremely popular. The Crosby band members wanted something different, particularly more jazz improvisation than the Goodman band. They decided to feature big band versions of dixieland jazz.

While playing at the Great Lakes Exposition in Cleveland, the Crosby band hired Billy Butterfield who was playing with Cleveland’s Austin Wylie Orchestra. With his huge pure tone and wide range, Butterfield quickly became a key performer for the band.

A few months after Butterfield joined in Cleveland, the Crosby Orchestra was playing at Summit Beach Park in Akron. Butterfield, bassist Bob Haggart and pianist
Bob Zurke went to Akron’s Merry-Go-Round Bar. As they left, Zurke began doing a little dance. He slipped off the curb and broke his leg in two places. The band moved on to Los Angeles, but Zurke spent two weeks in St. Thomas Hospital on Main Street in Akron. A month later, with his leg still in a cast, Zurke took part in the first recordings of the Bob Crosby Orchestra small dixieland group, the Bobcats.

The Bobcats became the most talked about feature of the Crosby band, but the full orchestra also recorded in a big band dixieland style. One of the band’s most popular recordings was a Haggart and Ray Bauduc composition and arrangement, “South Rampart Street Parade.”

Haggart, Bauduc, Butterfield, Zurke and the rest of the Bob Crosby Orchestra attracted good crowds when they returned to Cleveland the week of December 9th, 1938 to play at the Palace Theatre.

Butterfield introduced two of his former Cleveland bandmates on the Wylie Orchestra to the Crosby band, Bill Stegmeyer, a reed player, and Bob Peck, a trumpeter. Both were excellent sight readers.

**Trumpeter Bob Peck**

Sitting at the kitchen table in his Seven Hills home, Bob Peck flipped through a stuffed scrapbook. He pulled out a 1940 copy of *DownBeat* magazine. On the cover was a picture of Peck and the other members of the Bob Crosby Orchestra. There were also clippings from the time he spent playing trumpet with the Glenn Miller Orchestra.

Peck said his interest in music began early when he was growing up in East Cleveland. At the age of five, with a group led by his piano-playing mother, he played drums. “I wore a sailor suit,” he said with a smile. “I sang and did a sailor’s horn-pipe dance.”

But he soon developed a more serious interest in music. “When I was about nine, my dad brought home an old, beat-up cornet. I picked it up and sort of took to it,” he recalled, “and they started getting me to take lessons. I was doing very well from then on.”

By the early 1930s, Peck was playing in Cleveland with a group of high school and college jazz musicians called the Rhythm Club. They played for high school and college dances. They also listened to the best jazz of the period.

“We listened to the colored bands,” said Peck. “We used to go down to Cedar Avenue and listen to Jimmie Lunceford and Louis Armstrong, all those great people, all those great bands, and Art Tatum playing at Val’s in the Alley!”

After high school, Peck went to Ohio State where he majored in music and played in the university’s symphonic orchestra, marching band, concert band and jazz groups.

At the end of the 1937 school year, Peck joined Cleveland’s Austin Wylie Orchestra and played at summer amusement park dance pavilions. Peck played for a few months with another local band in Cleveland before getting his big break. “I got a call from Glenn Miller. He wanted me to join his band, which I was more than happy to do. I joined them in New York.”

Peck became a member of the Miller Orchestra in 1938 when the band was about to become the most popular big band of the swing era. He recorded with Miller and played a series of one-nighters up and down the East Coast. This was the early Miller Orchestra, before it recorded such classics as “In the Mood,” “Pennsylvania 6-5000,” and “Little Brown Jug.” Peck recalled, “We played such ditties as ‘By the Waters of Minnetonka.’”

Miller was struggling at the time, but according to Peck, “It might have been a better band than Miller’s later orchestra.” Peck recalled Miller was doing many of the things that would make him a household name a year later. “Glenn was very strict as to who wrote what for him. In the early days, he wrote some himself. He was quite a gentleman,” said Peck, “but very insistent that everyone do their job the way we rehearsed it. Musically, he was strict.”

It was an exciting time for the young trumpeter from Cleveland, but he wasn’t making much money. “Most everybody in the band at that time was making $50 a week. That doesn’t seem like much, but we were able to get by because in 1938, $50 went a long way.” Another Cleveland in the Miller band at the time was trumpeter Bob Price.

But, less than six months later, Miller decided to hire a friend of Tex Beneke to replace Peck in the trumpet section. “I went up to Miller’s room to get my last pay,” recalled Peck, “and he asked me to stay on. Apparently the trumpeter they wanted had changed his mind. I said, ‘Well, no thank you. I don’t want to stay some place where I’m not wanted.’”

When Peck left Miller in Boston and took a train home to Cleveland, he had a pain in his abdomen. “I got into Cleveland early. My parents called the doctor and late that morning, I was operated on for acute appendicitis.”

Looking back, Peck said, “Being fired by Glenn Miller was really a blessing in disguise.”

After recovering, Peck in 1939 joined his old musical buddies from the Austin Wylie Orchestra, Butterfield and Stegmeyer, in the popular Bob Crosby Orchestra.

“Crosby was a figurehead,” said Peck. “He’d beat off the tunes and wave his baton around, but if (drummer) Ray Bauduc didn’t like the tempo, he would change it within the first measure. We came to expect that. But Bob was a nice fellow and handled the emcee and PR bit quite well.”
While Peck was with the Crosby band, it was broadcasting on the CBS and Mutual radio networks and ranked number three in *Down Beat* magazine's Swing Band Poll behind Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller. When the band did a radio broadcast sponsored by Camel cigarettes, Peck said the band members always carried their own favorite brands in Camel packages. According to Peck it was “a fun band.”

“It was also,” said Peck, “a heavy-drinking band. There was no such thing as dope, but the alcohol passed around freely.”

Butterfield was the featured trumpeter. When he joined the Crosby band, bassist Bob Haggart wrote a showcase piece for him called “I'm Free” (later renamed “What's New”). Peck said Haggart was “a wonderful musician, but he was lazy and we always used to be on his back. He was so talented, multi-talented, and when he wrote things, they were beautiful. But, he didn't like to work. Writing takes a lot of work.”

One of the band’s big crowd-pleasers was a duet by Haggart, whistling and playing bass, and Ray Bauduc on drums, called “Big Noise From Winnetka.” “Oh, gosh, they used to hate doing it,” recalled Peck. “They had done it so often. Except Bauduc liked to show off.”

Peck said saxophonist Eddie Miller was the musically most consistent member of the band.

The Clevelander enjoyed touring with the popular Crosby Orchestra but remembered some of the guys got a little edgy at times, particularly riding through snowstorms on the band bus.

In 1940, some of the best musicians left after an incident at the Blackhawk Hotel in Chicago. A new, young member of the band, trombonist Ray Conniff, was teasing clarinetist Irving Fazola by flicking his ear with his trombone slide. “At the end of the evening,” said Peck, “Fazola was pretty drunk and said to Conniff, 'I'll see you upstairs!' We went upstairs. The whole band went up there and we were trying to separate them. Bauduc was trying to break it up when Fazola hurled a few invectives his way and Bauduc hauled off and brought one up from the floor into Faz’ mouth. That ended the fight. Somebody took Faz to a hospital and his whole lip was all stitched up. The next night, there was a new clarinet player in the band, Hank D’Amico.”

When the United States entered World War II, most of the remaining key members of the Crosby band went into the service. Peck served in the Army for more than four years.

After the war, he went to New York and played with Paul Whiteman’s radio orchestra. When Butterfield formed his own orchestra in 1945, Peck became an important part of it. He wrote for the band, which recorded for Capitol Records. Among his compositions was a song called “Narcissus.” “The record sold fairly well,” said Peck, “but I got only about $49.”

When the Butterfield Orchestra disbanded, Peck replaced Sonny Berman in the Woody Herman Orchestra. “We did a record date in Chicago and played theatres and a bunch of one-nighters.”

Peck also toured with the orchestra of Claude Thornhill, but again was hit by a medical problem. “We were playing the West Point prom and I couldn’t make it. I sent a sub. The next day, a doctor determined that I had TB.”

Peck spent a year and a half at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Brecksville and decided to go into teaching. He completed his bachelor's degree and got a master's degree at Western Reserve University. He spent the next 30 years teaching music in Flint, Tucson, Cleveland, Cleveland Heights, and Woodridge in Summit County. He also continued to play trumpet in Cleveland.

In his 70s, Peck continued to practice and remember his days touring and playing with some of the most important bands and musicians in jazz history.

Butterfield continued playing with the Crosby Orchestra until 1940 when he left to join the Artie Shaw band. Butterfield soloed on such Shaw big band classics as “Star Dust” and “Summit Ridge Drive.”

Later, Butterfield joined the Benny Goodman band. After viewing both Goodman and his musical arch rival Shaw at close range, Butterfield said, “Goodman was the superior improviser but I never did understand him as a person.”

Butterfield also played with Les Brown before forming his own band in 1945. But, the timing for a new band was not good. The bottom fell out of the big band business and Butterfield lost about $35,000, a lot of money in those days. When the orchestra quickly disbanded, Butterfield went to New York, played in studios during the day, and at such dixieland clubs as Nick’s and Eddie Condon’s at night. Butterfield was later a member of a group, made up mostly of Crosby alumni, called The World’s Greatest Jazz Band.

Bob Crosby had a popular nightly CBS radio program and continued to appear into the 1980s in reunion concerts of his popular 1930s and ‘40s band.

Ben Pollack at the Mayfair Casino

When the members of Ben Pollack’s band quit en masse at the end of 1934 and organized their own band, the Bob Crosby Orchestra, Pollack formed another band. He billed himself as “The Dean of Sophisticated Swing” and came to Cleveland to play at the Mayfair Casino, a nightclub at the redesigned Ohio Theatre building.

Among the sidemen with Pollack’s new Cleveland band were Cleveland drummer Morey Feld, trumpeter Harry James (before he joined Benny Goodman’s Orchestra), pianist Freddy Slack (later a leading boogie woogie pianist), clarinetist Matty Matlock and saxophonist Eddie Miller. Miller later said he and Matlock worked out a device with the Pollack Orchestra in Cleveland – playing the sax and clarinet in unison. They said the device became the inspiration for what later became “the Glenn Miller sound.”

In the early 1920s, drummer Pollack had played with the New Orleans Rhythm Kings in Chicago. In 1926, he formed his own band which included 16 year old Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, Jack Teagarden and Jimmy McPartland and recorded for Victor. Many believe Pollack had the best white big band of the late 1920s. He introduced the device of a small group within a big dance band, coming down front to play hot jazz. His small group foreshadowed such later groups as the Goodman Trio and Quartet, Artie Shaw’s Gramercy Five, Tommy Dorsey’s Clambake Seven and Bob Crosby’s Bobcats.

Bunny Berigan blowing in Ohio

Part of the triumph and tragedy of one of the most important musicians of the swing era took place in Ohio. Robert Depuis, a retired Detroit school principal, wrote in his Bunny Berigan, Elusive Legend of Jazz that Berigan, who was strongly influenced by Louis Armstrong, got his first big band job in 1930 with the Hal Kemp Orchestra. After touring Europe, Berigan and the Kemp band came to Cleveland to play from November 22, 1930 to January 23, 1931 at the Golden Pheasant Chinese Restaurant on Prospect Avenue and broadcast on Cleveland radio station WTAM. During that gig, Kemp hired a young pianist named Claude Thornhill who had been playing with Cleveland’s Austin Wylie Orchestra.

In the following few years, Berigan played with Paul Whiteman, the CBS studio band, Abe Lyman and the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra.

In 1935, Berigan joined the new Benny Goodman Orchestra and made a now-historic tour across the country. Traveling in four cars, the Goodman band played at the Valley Dale Ballroom near Columbus where there was only a small turnout. The same thing happened in Toledo and Milwaukee, but, by the time the band got to the West Coast, a large crowd was waiting outside McFadden’s Ballroom in Oakland to hear the new band playing the new music called “swing.” They had apparently heard the Goodman band on the radio.

At the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles, Goodman later said, “There was so much yelling and stomping and carrying on that I thought a riot had broken out.” The seven-week engagement attracted 200,000 people. That gig launched Goodman’s career, established Berigan’s reputation, and is generally considered the starting point of the swing era.

After Berigan was voted the nation’s number one trumpeter, he joined the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra in December of 1936 and recorded two now-classic sides, “Marie” and “Song of India,” with Dorsey.

Early in 1937, Berigan formed his own band and recorded his own classic jazz version of the George Gershwin and Vernon Duke composition, “I Can’t Get Started:

I’ve flown around the world in a plane;
I’ve settled revolutions in Spain;
And the North Pole I have charted,
Still I can’t get started with you . . .

The record became so popular that Berigan took his band out on the road to play a series of one-nighters including October 28 in Akron, November 12 in Cleveland, November 13 at the Valley Dale Ballroom in Columbus, and November 14 in Fremont.

There was another grueling tour in 1939—60 dates in three months. After playing at the Colosseum Ballroom in Lorain January 24, the band members drove their cars through a blinding blizzard to Bedford, Pennsylvania. On the way, one car was involved in an accident and two band members were injured.

It was in 1939 that the Berigan band spent the entire month of April in Cleveland. After rehearsing here for three days, they played every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday night at the Trianon Ballroom. In addition to the Trianon gigs, the band also performed at the Hotel Cleveland on Public Square and made short
Bunny Berigan in Ohio

Nov. 2, 1930 - With Hal Kemp Orchestra at the Golden Pheasant Restaurant, Cleveland
July 14, 1935 - With Benny Goodman Orchestra at Valley Dale Ballroom, Columbus
July 15, 1935 - Berigan Orchestra at Trianon Ballroom, Toledo
Aug. 14, 1937 - Moonlight Gardens, Cincinnati
Oct. 28, 1937 - A ballroom in Akron
Nov. 12, 1937 - A ballroom in Cleveland
Nov. 13, 1937 - Valley Dale Ballroom, Columbus
Nov. 14, 1937 - A ballroom in Fremont
Jan. 24, 1939 - Colosseum Ballroom, Lorain
Apr. 6-7, 1939 - Orchestra rehearsal in Cleveland
Apr. 18, 1939 - Hotel Cleveland, Cleveland
Apr. 19, 1939 - Trianon Ballroom, Cleveland
Apr. 21, 1939 - Trianon Ballroom, Cleveland
Apr. 22, 1939 - Trianon Ballroom, Cleveland
Apr. 23, 1939 - Valley Dale Ballroom, Columbus
Aug. 1, 1941 - Lakeside Park, Dayton
Aug. 2 to Sept. 1, 1941 - Buckeye Lake
Feb. 7, 1942 - Cincinnati University
Feb. 8, 1942 - Aragon Ballroom, Cleveland
Feb. 12, 1942 - Nu-Elms Ballroom, Youngstown
Feb. 14, 1942 - Aragon Ballroom, Cleveland
Feb. 17, 1942 - Rainbow Gardens, Fremont
Mar. 21, 1942 - Bowling Green University
Mar. 29, 1942 - Trianon Ballroom, Toledo
Apr. 5, 1942 - Crystal Beach Park, Vermillion
Apr. 10, 1942 - Wooster College
Apr. 12, 1942 - Nu-Elms Ballroom, Youngstown
Apr. 13, 1942 - Nu-Elms Ballroom, Youngstown
Apr. 15, 1942 - Nu-Elms Ballroom, Youngstown
Apr. 16, 1942 - Nu-Elms Ballroom, Youngstown
Apr. 17, 1942 - Granville, College, Granville
Apr. 19, 1942 - Nu-Elms Ballroom, Youngstown
Apr. 21, 1942 - Hotel Cleveland, Cleveland
Apr. 22, 1942 - Trianon Ballroom, Cleveland
Apr. 23, 1942 - Valley Dale Ballroom, Columbus

trips to Charleston, Meyer’s Lake in Canton, the Masonic Auditorium in Detroit, Crystal Beach Park in Vermilion, Beaver Falls, and the Valley Dale Ballroom in Columbus.

But Berigan, who was drinking heavily, was a much better musician than a businessman. Four months later (August 31, 1939), he filed for bankruptcy. With no money and no band, he rejoined the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra which, at the time, included Buddy Rich, Frank Sinatra and Jo Stafford.

After playing with Dorsey for six months, Berigan decided to form another band of his own. This time, he hired a bunch of unknown youngsters, mostly from the Trenton, New Jersey area. They spent the month of August, 1941 playing at the Crystal Danceteria at Buckeye Lake, east of Columbus.

Pianist and arranger Gene Kutch said, “The first few nights, we sounded terrible. We lived in a boarding house, frantically tried to write new arrangements, and rehearsed all afternoon.” Eventually, Berigan’s young band improved.

While at Buckeye Lake, Berigan read an article in DownBeat quoting his early hero, Louis Armstrong, saying Berigan was his favorite trumpeter. But, under the stress of the grueling pace and almost non-stop drinking, Berigan’s health was failing.

In early 1942, Berigan brought his band back to Northeast Ohio. In February, it played two dates at the Aragon Ballroom on West 25th Street in Cleveland, the Nu-Elms Ballroom in Youngstown, and Rainbow Gardens in Fremont.

In April of 1942, with his health getting worse, Berigan again returned to Ohio for two weeks, playing in Vermilion, Wooster, Youngstown and Norwalk. One night on the band bus, he finished off a bottle of liquor and began to sob, “I’m too young to die.”

Berigan played his last gig in Northeast Ohio April 19, 1942 at the Nu-Elms Ballroom in Youngstown. The next day, he finally went to a hospital. A month later, Berigan, one of the most important artists in jazz history, was dead at the age of 33.

Louis Armstrong, the trumpeter’s longtime idol, said, “Bunny Berigan was great, but he had no business dying that young!”

Benny Goodman in Cleveland

He was at the peak of his popularity in June of 1938 when Benny Goodman first appeared with his swing band in Cleveland. They played several shows a day for a week beginning June 3 at the Palace Theatre between showings of a film appropriately entitled College Swing.

It was almost three years after Goodman’s band had scored its big hit at the Palomar Ballroom in California and just five months after his historic Carnegie Hall concert.

A few weeks later (August 8, 1938), the very popular Life magazine ran a long feature article on Goodman and proclaimed, “Swing is the most popular kind of popular music.”

The Goodman band played in Cleveland at least twice in 1939 – the week of May 12 at the Palace Theatre and October 1, during a rodeo, at Municipal Stadium. The swinging band spent a lot of time in Northeast Ohio in late 1940 – at the Trianon Ballroom November 24 and December 27, in Youngstown December 28, and at The Country Club in Pepper Pike December 30.
From 1936 until 1940, vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, a black jazz musician, was a star attraction of the band.

**Lionel Hampton with Goodman**

After joining Goodman in 1936, Lionel Hampton became a key member of the historic Goodman Quartet. In a 1985 interview, Hampton told me he had fond memories of playing with the group. “Goodman was very disciplined,” said Hampton, “and we didn’t have no let down. We played good tonight, tomorrow and the next day. We were trained that way.”

Hampton said Goodman's quiet decision to include two black musicians, Hampton and pianist Teddy Wilson, with two white musicians, Goodman and drummer Gene Krupa, “was an historic break-through.” Hampton said, “The world looked at it to see how the reaction was gonna be. Everybody received us and we just started melting down segregation.”

Hampton said the Goodman Quartet was the first example of racial integration by a major national figure in any field, not just jazz or music. “In football, baseball, any endeavor, on the stage, in motion pictures, the only thing blacks could do,” said Hampton, “was to play maids or butlers. I think this (the formation of the Goodman Quartet) was instant integration!”

Goodman, who never claimed to be a racial pioneer, later said, “Nobody cared much what colors or races were represented just so long as we played good music. That’s the way it should be.”

**Charlie Christian’s last performance**

Guitar sensation Charlie Christian, who joined Goodman in August of 1939, was with the band when it began a week’s engagement at the Cedar Point Ballroom in Sandusky June 14, 1941. Christian collapsed at Cedar Point and was rushed back to New York where he remained hospitalized with tuberculosis until his death March 2, 1942 at the age of 25.

**Benny and the Cleveland Orchestra**

It was Sunday afternoon, January 5, 1942 – less than a month after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The scene was Cleveland’s Public Hall at East 6th and Lakeside (where the Republican Party had held its National Convention six years earlier). The attractions were the Cleveland Orchestra and Benny Goodman and his jazz band.

People were still arriving as the unusual concert began. The Cleveland Orchestra, under the direction of Artur Rodzinski, played the overture to Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville*. Goodman came out and soloed with the symphony orchestra. He played Debussy’s “Rhapsody for Clarinet and Orchestra” and Mozart’s “Clarinet Concerto in A Major.”

Cleveland Plain Dealer reviewer Herbert Elwell was apparently surprised that a jazz musician could play classical music. Elwell wrote, “One could look in vain for evidence of anything but the most well-behaved musicianship. In fact, his playing was on the restrained side. A little too refined to have much character. It pleased by technically brilliant passage work, smooth legato and an even quality of tone.”

Goodman had studied classical music as a child but seldom played classical music publicly until after he had won fame as a jazz clarinetist. He recorded with the Budapest String Quartet in 1938 and with Béla Bartok in 1940. Jazz reviewers raved but classical reviewers were merely polite. One review said Goodman’s classical clarinet “while correct and expert, was dull.”

But most of the 6,355 at Cleveland’s Public Hall came to hear Goodman *swing*.

Elwell wrote, “The audience seemed impatient to have the stage cleared of the elaborate paraphernalia of a symphony orchestra and was happy when the jazz boys began to whoop it up and the hot tunes began to sizzle.”

Cleveland newspapers reported Goodman left New York by train late Saturday night after a gig at the New Yorker Hotel. The rest of his band was to catch a 9:30 plane Sunday morning. Their flight was delayed at LaGuardia Airport by bad weather and they didn’t leave until almost noon. The Cleveland Orchestra was making last-minute plans to extend its part of the concert if necessary. The members of the Goodman band arrived at the Cleveland airport at about 3 p.m., barely an hour before the concert, and got to Public Hall just in time to go on stage after the classical portion of the concert.

Goodman and his swing band opened with “Don’t Be That Way,” followed by “Let’s Do It” and “One O’Clock Jump.” Elwell wrote, “The Goodman Orchestra played many songs not listed in the program and each seemed to bring a fresh response of enthusiasm from the delighted listeners.”

The classical reviewer also wrote, “Not being well-versed in this highly specialized form of music (jazz), I cannot pretend to appreciate all of its fine points, though I heard most of its rough ones. I was particularly interested in one Cootie Williams, who made the trumpet sound like a sneeze and whose contortions suggested the colic or some violent form of hysteria.”

The Plain Dealer reviewer was also perplexed by the
Goodman band’s girl singer. He wrote, “I was interested in the convention which now prescribes having a young lady sit in front of the band and smile knowingly when anything of special merit takes place. This is a great help to anyone ignorant of the refinements of the jazz idiom, which to me seem not nearly so interesting as they used to be. The young lady in question (Peggy Lee) got up before the microphone occasionally and uttered sounds which did not resemble singing and were unrecognizable as English (“Why Don’t You Do Right?”), but they undoubtedly have special meaning for those accustomed to this sort of thing.”

The newspaper account of that 1942 concert said, “A few gray haired women and one or two crochety (sic) old gentlemen got up and left before the program was finished. It lasted well into the evening, what with the audience demanding more and more.”

The Goodman band also played its rollicking showstopper, “Sing, Sing, Sing,” with drummer Ralph Collier recreating the drum solo Gene Krupa had made famous four years earlier.

Other members of the Goodman Orchestra at the time included pianist Mel Powell; saxophonists Vito Musso, Clint Neagley, Julie Schwartz, George Berg and Chuck Gentry; trombonists Lou McGarity and Cutty Cutshall; trumpeters Cootie Williams, Jimmy Maxwell and Billy Butterfield (who five years earlier had been playing in Cleveland); and guitarist Tommy Morgan.

The Plain Dealer reviewer summed up the evening by saying, “The concert was a little like a contest in which the home team lost to the visitors. The huge audience lost no time in expressing itself emphatically in favor of the last half of the program, given over entirely to the delirious doldroms (sic) and frenzied furbishes of Goodman and his jitterbugs.”

The headline in The Plain Dealer the next day said:

HOME TEAM LOSES
TO BENNY GOODMAN BAND

Cleveland drummer Morey Feld

Beginning in 1944, two years after that Goodman concert with the Cleveland Orchestra, a self-taught drummer from Cleveland named Morey Feld, was playing with Benny Goodman’s sextet and orchestra. Born in Cleveland in 1915 and a graduate of Glenville High School, Feld got his first real band job in 1936 at the age of 21 playing with the Ben Pollack band at the Mayfair Casino in the Ohio Theatre building. Guitarist Fred Sharp recalled, “At one time, we had a little band (in Cleveland) with me, Morey, Art Cutlip, Wiz Rosenberg and Dick Cutlip. My wife, Iris, sang with the band.”

In 1938, Feld joined Joe Haymes’ band and first recorded with the combo of pianist Jess Stacy in 1940. He was playing in New York City when Goodman in 1944 put together a new quintet with Red Norvo, Teddy Wilson and Sid Weiss. Feld was added as the drummer. In 1945, Goodman added bassist Slam Stewart to the group and began making sextet records which are still considered some of the best-ever small group swing recordings. The group, including Feld, played at Cleveland’s Palace Theatre the first week of August, 1945.

A short time later, Goodman decided to form a new big band and included Feld as his band drummer.

It was Feld who in 1945 helped young Cleveland guitarist Bill de Arango find work in New York playing with Ben Webster and Dizzy Gillespie.

After being replaced by Cozy Cole in Goodman’s big band, Feld began playing with Eddie Condon’s dixieland groups at Nick’s in Greenwich Village. He served as a staff musician at ABC and returned to the Goodman Orchestra in the 1960s. He later moved to California where he opened a drum school.

Feld died at the age of 55 in 1971 during a house fire in suburban Denver.
Glenn Miller swings in Cleveland

The Glenn Miller Orchestra had been in existence for only a few months and was struggling when it first appeared in Greater Cleveland in June of 1937. The band played for a Friday night dance at the Chagrin Valley Hunt Club. Members of that early edition of the Miller band included trumpeter Charlie Spivak, saxophonist Jerry Jerome, and drummer George Simon, who later became a writer and a prolific chronicler of the big bands.

Miller did not return to Cleveland again for two and a half years.

Shortly after that gig at the Hunt Club, in November of 1937, Clevelander Bob Price joined the band and became Miller's lead trumpeter. The following summer (July of 1938), saxophonist Bill Stegmeyer, who had been playing in Cleveland, joined Miller. In October of 1938, Cleveland trumpeter Bob Peck joined the band, but both Peck and Stegmeyer left before the band returned to Northeast Ohio in December of 1939.

By that time, the Miller Orchestra had become extremely popular. It played for more than 2,000 dancers at the Nu-Elms Ballroom in Youngstown December 7, 1939.

The next day, the Glenn Miller Orchestra returned to Cleveland to play for a week at the Loew's State Theatre. The Plain Dealer reported crowded houses for five 45-minute performances from 12:40 in the afternoon until after 11 o'clock at night. Plain Dealer reviewer Ward Marsh said there was yelling and screaming and dancing in the aisles.

Marsh could have been describing a latter day rock show when he wrote, "The brasses and the drummer began to work on the emotion of the crowd. I began to question both its sanity and mine." He said the band "created a kind of frenzy which made me a little fearful of the outcome of the show, blasting brasses, wailing saxophones, and a drummer with six hands and two left feet."

We sometimes forget the Miller Orchestra played more than just sweet dance music. In fact, it was ranked as the number two swing band behind Benny Goodman in the 1940 DownBeat poll.

The Miller band also played during the summer of 1940 at the Valley Dale Ballroom in Columbus, set an attendance record at Buckeye Lake, and played for crowded dances at Meyer's Lake in Canton and the Pier Ballroom at Geneva-on-the-Lake.

In November of 1940, a young trumpeter from Cleveland, Ray Anthony, joined the Miller Orchestra. He was with the band when it returned to Cleveland to play for a week at the Palace Theatre beginning February 21, 1941. Again, the band played five shows a day, from late morning until late at night, between showings of a movie called Night Train.

This time, The Plain Dealer reported "whistles, applause in time, stomping, and all those outward expressions of great joy during the show." Variety called the week in Cleveland "a whammer."

While in Cleveland, Miller and his band originated their three-nights-a-week 10-to-10:15 p.m national radio broadcast on CBS from the stage of the Palace. One of the announcers for the Miller broadcasts was Paul Douglas who later became a popular Hollywood actor.

A month after that week in Cleveland, the Miller band went to Hollywood to film a movie, Sun Valley Serenade.

The band was back in Northeast Ohio on a Sunday night in August of 1941 to play at Summit Beach Park in Akron. Billboard reported, "Playing his only one-nighter this season, Glenn Miller and his orchestra attracted 4,300 paid customers, most of them at the $1 advance price, but plenty at $1.25. Ticket lines an hour before starting time extended to all corners of the park and police were necessary to keep the ticket buyers in line. Lew Platt, manager of the park pavilion, said the Miller
band gross was the best at the local spot for any band in the five years Summit Beach Inc. has operated the spot.”

Variety reported Platt was jailed for running a dance on the Sabbath. Platt was fined $50, a drop in the bucket considering the thousands of dollars the park made from the appearance of the Miller band.

A week after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, thrusting the United States into World War II, the Miller band returned to Cleveland for another week at the Palace and again did its radio broadcasts from the Euclid Avenue theatre. They broadcast for an hour on Saturday afternoon from 5 to 6 on Mutual, and each night from 10 to 10:15 on CBS. This time The Plain Dealer headline said, “Miller band gets cheers from Palace’s jitterbugs.”

Billboard reported, “Glenn Miller’s ork gave the RKO Palace (3,200 seats) one of the heftiest weeks in recent years, a huge $31,000.”

During the spring and summer of 1942, the Miller band played at Meyer’s Lake Park in Canton June 7, at the Palace Theatre in Akron for four days beginning July 31, and at the Palace Theatre in Youngstown for three days beginning August 4. The band also did its nightly radio broadcast from the stage of the Youngstown theatre.

A month and a half later, Miller’s civilian orchestra played its last performance. It was in Passaic, New Jersey. Miller enlisted in the Army and formed a large military orchestra which included some string players from the Cleveland Orchestra including Ernie Kardos of Cleveland Heights.

Miller died at the age of 41 when his plane disappeared over the English Channel December 15, 1944. The U.S. government speculated at the time that Miller’s plane was forced down by ice on the wings, but years later, two members of a British bomber crew, pilot Victor Gregory and navigator Fred Shaw, said they were returning from an aborted mission that day and jettisoned some bombs which exploded. They remembered seeing a Norseman, the same type plane Miller was flying in, knocked into the sea by the shock waves of the bombs.

Helen O’Connell

She was the prototypical big band “girl singer.” Like so many others who contributed to the popularity of the big band era, Helen O’Connell was a native of Ohio. She was born and raised in Lima and began singing with bands at the age of 16 (in 1936).

After singing with the Austin Wylie Orchestra in Cleveland, she toured and sang with Larry Funk and “His Band of a Thousand Melodies,” a band that frequently played in Northeast Ohio. As early as 1932, Funk and his band were playing at Land O’ Dance in Canton. Funk had organized the band at radio station WGN in Chicago and toured extensively. Critic Lamont Patterson recalled seeing O’Connell with the Larry Funk band in Indiana, Pennsylvania in 1938. He said he fell in love immediately with the 18-year-old blonde with dimples. A short time later, Funk took his band for the first time to New York City.

In 1939, according to George Simon in his book The Big Bands, Billy Burton, Jimmy Dorsey’s personal manager, heard O’Connell sing one night at the Village Barn in New York’s Greenwich Village and told Dorsey about the very pretty blonde singer. He said she was a very sweet person who usually wore a religious cross when she sang. Dorsey hired her.

During her first two years with Dorsey, she sang mostly novelty numbers like “Arthur Murray Taught Me Dancing In A Hurry.” Fellow singer Bob Eberly said she had a habit of exploding certain notes. He said she exploded some notes so forcefully that, “I always pictured some little

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**Glenn Miller Orchestra in Ohio**

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Source: John Flower’s Midnight Serenade
The Big Band Era

man standing behind her and pinching her at crucial times.”

During the third week of April 1939, Dorsey brought his band with singers Eberly and O’Connell to the Palace Theatre in Cleveland for a week. It was the first time she appeared at the Palace.

In 1940, she won the Metronome magazine poll for band singers, but her greatest fame was yet to come.

O’Connell, Eberly and Dorsey were the three stars of the band and arranger Tutti Camarata devised a routine that featured all three. Eberly sang the first chorus of the song as a ballad. The band picked up the tempo and Dorsey played a jazz chorus. When the tempo slowed again, Helen came in with a semi-wailing finale.

The first record they made with this three-star arrangement (in February of 1941) was “Amapola.” It sold a million copies. Ten months later, another big hit with the same kind of arrangement was “Tangerine.” The gimmick proved to be a sensation. The biggest hit was “Green Eyes” which sold 90,000 copies in the first few days, at a time when 25,000 copies was considered a great selling record.

Eberly credited much of the success of “Green Eyes” to the way Helen sang these pickup notes:

...those cool and limpid green eyes

What amused Eberly was that because of her limited vocal range, O’Connell could not sing the notes the way they were written, the way Eberly had sung them on the first chorus, starting low and going up. Instead, she sang different and easier notes. The effect on the public was devastating and “Green Eyes” became a classic of the big band era.

O’Connell, Eberly and the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra attracted large crowds the week of January 23, 1942 when they again performed on the stage of the Cleveland Palace Theatre. They sang and played between showings of the Abbott and Costello wartime movie You’re In The Army Now.

In those days, singers, unlike instrumentalists, were not members of a union. When she began recording with Dorsey, O’Connell got a flat fee of $15 a record. Eventually, when the records became big hits, her rate went up to a whopping $25 dollars. Most of the record royalties went to Dorsey. Also, because singers were not members of the musicians union, they were not eligible for pensions and health insurance.

O’Connell left the Dorsey band in 1943 and was replaced by Kitty Kallen. Helen began raising a family. She had three daughters in her first marriage and later married conductor Frank DeVol, a native of Canton.

In the 1950s, she re-emerged as a television hostess. She was Dave Garroway’s sidekick on the Today Show on NBC-TV for almost three years and appeared on a number of other telecasts. In the 1970s, she was singing again with big band era nostalgia shows.

In the 1990s, when she was in her early 70s, O’Connell was singing with the Jimmy Dorsey ghost band led by trombonist Jim Miller at places like New York’s Roseland Ballroom. By many accounts, she was singing better than she had sung with Dorsey in the 1930s and ‘40s.

She was still singing in August of 1993. At the Valley Forge Music Fair near Philadelphia, she experienced chest pains and returned to her home in California. She underwent surgery for cancer and less than two weeks later, she was dead at the age of 73.

Charlie Barnet’s lust for life

One of the most popular and most-jazz oriented big bands, the Charlie Barnet Orchestra, had just completed a week’s engagement at Cleveland’s Palace Theatre in August of 1940. With a day off before playing in Buffalo, Barnet decided to take his band on a Lake Erie excursion boat from Cleveland to Buffalo.
During the cruise the band members were toasting drummer Cliff Leeman and his wife on their wedding anniversary. When they finished their drinks, they threw their glasses overboard. Someone threw a bottle. Everybody else threw an ice bucket. Then, the entire band joined in. They started throwing wicker deck chairs into Lake Erie. Arranger and trumpeter Billy May later recalled, “We were all throwing the chairs overboard like crazy! Soon all you could see in the wake of the boat were wicker chairs floating in the moonlight.”

A member of the ship’s crew came running up screaming, “Whose band is this?!” With a sheepish grin, Barnet looked him straight in the eye and said, “This is Jimmy Dorsey’s band.”

It was typical of the band led by a man whose lust for life and adventure may have been even bigger than his considerable appetite for playing swinging jazz. Born to a wealthy family, Barnet never worried about the necessities of life. Instead he focused on the pleasures of life – mostly music, women and whiskey, and not necessarily in that order.

Just before coming to Cleveland, his band was playing in Youngstown. After checking into a hotel, Barnet took a taxi to a house of prostitution called Helen’s and was surprised and amused to see his band bus parked out front. On the bus was a large sign:

**THE CHARLIE BARNET ORCHESTRA**

In his autobiography *Those Swinging Years*, Barnet said, “The whole band had taken over the place.”

Barnet once described his band members as “unacceptable in any other line of work or, for that matter, in any other band.”

When his band played for a week at the Palace Theatre, the band quickly learned a local custom. Whenever anybody on stage mentioned the name of a Cleveland brewery during the show, free cases of beer appeared backstage.

Musically, Barnet openly idolized Duke Ellington. He quietly hired more black musicians than any other white bandleader. They included Benny Carter, Rex Stewart, Charlie Shavers, Howard McGee, Trummy Young, Roy Eldridge, Clark Terry and singer Lena Horne.

Barnet was best known for his hit records of “Cherokee,” arranged by Billy May, and “Skyliner,” composed by Barnet on an old pump organ.

One time when a songwriter offered Barnet a new tune, he rejected it and suggested the songwriter take it to Glenn Miller. The song was “In The Mood” which became the most popular record of the swing era. Barnet said years later he still didn’t like “In The Mood.”

Barnet also lost Billy May to Miller. After joining the Miller band, May said he missed Barnet’s band and all the things that happened off the bandstand, things that just never happened with Miller’s orchestra.

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**Al Lerner and Harry James**

Born in Cleveland in 1919, Al Lerner (not the later owner of the Cleveland Browns) recalled starting his musical career early by performing in a Prohibition era saloon. “We grew up on Woodland Avenue,” he said, “and we used to go into a saloon there and stand on the tables and sing for nickels or whatever. I was five or six years old.”

The saloon was a few doors from his stepfather’s sheet metal shop where Abe Lerner made stills for bootleggers. He camouflaged the stills with burlap and loaded them into gangsters’ trucks. Al remembered rival bootleggers showing up, taking out their guns, and killing their competitors in the street. Soon the feds busted the still-making operation and Al’s parents had almost no means to support their children.

But somehow they always managed to have a piano in the house. “Music just came naturally,” said Al. “My brother was a drummer who went on the road with bands. Evidently that had a lasting effect on me.”

Young Al listened to the Cleveland bands of the day, including the Austin Wylie Orchestra with young Artie Shaw.

By his teenage years, Lerner was playing gigs at a bar where the entertainment consisted of waitresses who doubled as strippers and Al’s young trio. “When I was about 16,” he recalled, “I played at a place called Shadowland. It was at 65th and Carnegie, on the corner. Years later, I took my wife by there to show it to her and it was just an empty lot.” Lerner played piano at Shadowland with his trio for $15 a week. “I worked there seven nights a week,” he recalled, “from 9 p.m. to 2:30 a.m.” I had a Model A Ford and I used to stop at the gas station and get a dime’s worth of gas.”

While playing at Shadowland, Lerner and his friends went to Val’s in the Alley to hear pianist Art Tatum. The teenage pianist became a friend of Tatum, a friendship that lasted until Tatum’s death in 1956.

When he was playing at the Carnegie Avenue bar, Lerner recalled a singer “used to drift in and sing for a sandwich or a beer.” The young singer was Frankie Laine. “I used to tell him,” said Lerner, “‘Don’t give up your day job!’”

Another friend Lerner first met in Cleveland was saxophonist Earle Warren who was playing with the Marion Sears Orchestra at Cedar Gardens. “When I was in New York later and Earle was with the Basie band,” Lerner said, “we used to see one another quite a bit.”

One night in 1939, Lerner went to the Trianon Ballroom. He said, “It was the first time I heard the Harry James band with Frank Sinatra. I thought it was a wonderful band.”

A few months later, the James Orchestra returned to Cleveland and Lerner was invited to sit in during a
dance at the Hotel Cleveland. “Harry came over,” remembered Lerner, “and said, ‘How would you like to come with the band?’ I said, ‘Gee, it sounds interesting. Like when?’” He said, ‘Tonight!’ Knowing Harry already had a pianist, I said, ‘No, I can’t.’”

But a year later, after getting home from a trip to Florida and Cuba with Irv Metzenbaum (the brother of Howard Metzenbaum who became a U.S. Senator), Lerner said his mother told him, “‘Somebody has been calling you from New York.’ ‘What’s his name?’ She said, ‘I can’t remember... Jimmy Harry? Harry Jimmy?’ I said, ‘Harry James?!’ ‘That’s it! He wants you to call him as soon as you get in.”’

Lerner called James. In a few days, he became a member of the popular Harry James Orchestra.

The band was working at a roadside club called the Chatterbox in Plainfield, New Jersey. The first night, James personally drove Lerner to the gig. “To my surprise and bewilderment,” recalled Lerner, the piano player I thought I had replaced was on the bandstand at the piano. His name was ‘Jumbo Jack’ Gardner. He weighed about 450 pounds.” Gardner played the first set and Lerner played the second.

The next engagement was the Paramount Theatre in New York City and Bea Wayne was the featured vocalist. This time, the James band had two pianos and two pianists, Lerner and Gardner, on either side of the stage. When Wayne came on stage to sing her big hit, “My Reverie,” Jumbo Jack was supposed to play the arpeggio. When James nodded the cue, nothing happened. Jumbo Jack had passed out on the keyboard. Lerner quickly picked up the cue on his piano.

Lerner played the rest of the show with Jumbo Jack slumped over his piano. When the stage, on hydraulic lifts, descended into the basement, it took three band members to carry the big, dead drunk pianist through a tight doorway to the band room.

The next day, Jumbo Jack Gardner was gone and Clevelander Al Lerner was the sole pianist with the James Orchestra.

The opening act at the Paramount that night was a brother and sister dance team called “Vilma and Buddy Ebsen.” Buddy Ebsen, years later, was a star of the Beverly Hillbillies TV show.

The male singer with the James band at the time was Dick Haymes. He and Lerner roomed together and, in later years, Lerner became Haymes’ musical director. Remembered Al, “Dick was great. He was probably the best singer of the time. As a singer, nobody sang any better than Dick. He had a lot of other faults and he could have been a much bigger star than he was.”

Al remembered playing with the James orchestra at the 1940 World’s Fair. There were other bands there including Mike Riley, the man who wrote “The Music Goes Round and Round, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh.” Lerner said Riley “was a crazy man. He put on a raincoat to do ‘I Cried For You.’ He had little hoses in his raincoat and while he was playing, tears of orange, green and blue shot out of his raincoat!” At the Steel Pier in Atlantic City, Lerner remembered that Riley one time jumped off the end of the pier into the ocean – while playing his trombone.

Also at the World’s Fair, when the Harry James band was playing for an outdoor dance, Lerner soloed on “9:20 Special,” a song written by two musicians he had known in Cleveland, Earle Warren and Buster Harding.

“One weekend was a lulu,” recalled Lerner with a look of agony on his face. “Harry came up with an idea of offering a prize for a Judy Garland sound-alike contest. On what were probably two of the hottest days of the summer, I played piano accompaniment for over 120 singers! I was burned to a crisp by the hot August sun which beat down on me unmercifully. I was blistered about my face and neck. The rest of me was covered with heat rash. To this day,” said Lerner, “I do a slow burn whenever I hear someone singing ‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow.’”

After touring with James for five years, Lerner played piano with the Charlie Barnet, Tommy Dorsey and Artie Shaw bands. He said the Barnet band was “one of the best swing bands with good jazz players. A lot of them weren’t much of anything else, but they could play and they could swing. And it was the drunkest band in the world. You couldn’t go to work unless you had a jug. If you didn’t have one, Charlie would get one for you.”

Lerner said he had no idea how many records he played on. He made many records with James, Dorsey and Shaw, plus many others. He said somebody in Los Angeles “brought me albums and records of things I don’t remember making. My name was on them as conductor. I don’t remember them at all. There were a lot of them.”

In 1957, he recorded a jazz group album for Roulette called Ivory and Bone with guitarist Al Hendrickson and vibraphonist Frank Flynn.

Lerner also wrote the closing theme song for the Tonight Show when Jack Paar was the host. It was called “So Until I See You.”

In the early 1980s, the Cleveland native rounded up many of the original members of the Glenn Miller Orchestra and made several tours of Australia. He also took the Miller alumni band to England to play for the BBC.

One night, Lerner went to see the motion picture Greedy with Kirk Douglas and was surprised to see himself in the opening scene with comedian Jimmy Durante. “There I am on the screen,” he said with a laugh. “A clip was taken from one of our old Harry James pictures, Two Girls and a Sailor in the 1940s.”
Vaughn Monroe

Most people remember Akron area native Vaughn Monroe as a muscle-voiced ballad singer. He was very popular in the 1940s and '50s. But, many people forget he was also the leader of a swinging big jazz band.

Monroe formed his band in 1940 after he had played trumpet in the Cleveland area with bands led by Austin Wylie and Larry Funk. Within a year, the 28-year-old Monroe's band developed a large and enthusiastic following. Among his sidemen were trombonist Ray Conniff, drummer Harry Jaeger, saxophonist Carl Rand and trumpeter Bobby Nichols who later played with Glenn Miller's Air Force Band and the Sauter-Finegan Orchestra.

Monroe's band featured a number of excellent improvised solos within the big band charts. Their most popular number was "Take It, Jackson."

Trumpeter, valve trombonist and singer Monroe brought his band to Cleveland's Palace Theatre in January of 1945 and again in February of 1946. Shortly after the second appearance at the Palace, Monroe made a record, "There I've Said It Again," which became a huge hit. While RCA Victor recorded more Monroe vocals, he continued to tour with his jazz band into the 1950s.

Monroe died in 1973 at the age of 62.

Hank Geer

Hank Geer, whose real name was Gerspacher, was growing up in the Collinwood section of Cleveland in the 1930s when he said, "I was able to get a saxophone." He said he didn't take any lessons. "You just learn to play."

Geer's sister, Bertha Basler, later said she believed Hank was "born with music. As a small child," she said, "he watched the keys go up and down on the player piano and learned to play." When he was older, she said he would sit on the basement steps with a music stand in front of him and practice every day.

Hank bought a few books, studied, practiced and basically taught himself to play the saxophone. Soon the teenager was playing with various bands around Cleveland.

He recalled, "The summer months would come along and we were working the summer parks – Ruggles Beach, Euclid Beach, and Mentor-on-the-Lake. Somebody called, needed a new player, and I went along."

When Geer was only 15 and still a student at Collinwood High School, he got a chance to play with a band led by a cheery, chubby trumpeter named Charlie Spivak. Geer and some other young Cleveland musicians were sitting in and jamming at Julian Krawcheck's Hot Club of Cleveland. "Charlie came in," remembered Geer, "and said, 'Get that kid!'" One of Spivak's regular saxophonists, Bob Bassey, had just been rushed to the hospital with a ruptured appendix. Geer played with the Spivak band at the Trianon Ballroom in Cleveland. But, when the band went to New York, Hank, then less than 16 years old, went back to high school. He wanted to go to college and study to become a doctor.

The summer after he graduated, Geer joined the band of Ray Anthony, a Clevelander who had played for six months with the Glenn Miller Orchestra. At the end of the summer, Geer left the Anthony band to enroll at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

At Miami, Geer joined an outstanding college band, the Miami University Campus Owls. Originally formed in the 1920s, the Campus Owls were considered one of the best college big bands in the country. Geer later became the leader of the Campus Owls.

When he took a bus to Cincinnati to take some pre-med courses at the University of Cincinnati, he managed to get a job playing saxophone with a studio band at radio station WLW for a 15-minute program called The Lion's Roar. The singer on the program was a young girl who had spent a year singing with the Les Brown band. Geer remembered going out for hamburgers with Doris Day who became an extremely famous and popular singer and movie actress.

When he was in college, Geer was torn between his interests in medicine and music. He said, "I had some very good offers and said to myself, 'Hey, music is my
first love! I'll give it a shot. I can go back to school if I
don't make it."

He went on the road, playing with various big bands,
but got sick and came home to Cleveland. When
Anthony formed his post-war band, he asked Geer to join
it. But Geer turned down the offer. He wanted to
continue his education and do more in music than play
with dance bands that, at the time, were doing little more
than trying to extend the big band era.

“That’s when I went to Tucson, Arizona,” said Geer,
“and started teaching at the university. I played in the
Tucson Symphony and got into real estate right after the
war.”

Still in his 20s, Geer moved to Los Angeles City
College and began doing orchestrations for movies. He
went to Miami, enrolled in a university there and began
studying the adaption of music to choreography. He also
played with theatre bands in Miami.

When there was an illness in his family, Geer returned
to Cleveland and became involved in real estate, building
and development. He opened a motel on Lakeshore
Boulevard and started his own jazz nightclub, the Euclid
Shore Club, but he never gave up his love of playing
music.

In the 1950s, Geer toured briefly with the Tommy
Dorsey Orchestra. The Cleveland saxophonist later said
Dorsey “was a hell of a businessman. That’s what it’s all
about. He knew how to communicate with his audience.”

After Dorsey died in 1956, Geer again toured with the
Dorsey band, then led by Warren Covington. Hank again
tired of touring. He said, “Living and playing out of a
suitcase on the road all the time, I asked myself, ‘Is this
what I want to be doing 10 years from now?’ I tried to
find other avenues.”

Geer became more involved in the building and
development business in Cleveland. He also bought
Marie Schreiber’s Tavern Chop House on Chester
Avenue near East 9th Street. He continued to play with
his own combo in Cleveland, at first with pianist Hugh
Thompson. They played for 13 years at various venues
including Blossom Music Center and opened shows for
such artists as Nancy Wilson.

After Thompson died, Geer performed for years with
pianist Bill Gidney and bassist Chink Stevenson.

Geer and his group began playing at Sammy’s
restaurant in 1980. The dean of Cleveland jazz musicians
became a fixture at the restaurant in the Cleveland Flats.

In 1991, he was seriously injured in a freak accident
outside Sammy’s. A car crashed into the wooden deck
where Geer was standing during a break and threw him
40 yards down a steep hill onto some railroad tracks.
Geer suffered multiple fractures, including a badly
mangled left hand. A year later, after months of
operations and therapy, Geer, pushing 70, was playing
again at Sammy’s.

Following another accident, Geer died October 12,
2000 at the age of 78.

Stan Kenton and Cleveland

On September 11, 1942, an unusual big band led by a
30-year-old, six-foot-four-inch blond pianist began a
week’s engagement at Cleveland’s Palace Theatre. It was
the Stan Kenton Orchestra and billed itself as “The First
Band With a Sound All Its Own Since Glenn Miller.”

The Cleveland appearance was part of Kenton’s first
tour after debuting his band the previous summer at
Balboa Beach in California and a year before Kenton
recorded his theme song, “Artistry in Rhythm,” and
“Eager Beaver.” Kenton’s big band did have “a sound all its own” – modern, different and loud.

The Kenton style, even then, consisted of a staccato reed section and screaming brasses. Eddie Condon once said, “It sounded like Stan signed on 300 men for the date and they were all on time!”

Led by Kenton’s enormous energy and zest, the band became a national phenomenon in the 1940s. It included such outstanding sidemen as Eddie Safranski, Shelly Manne, Boots Mussulli and Kai Winding.

In 1946, young Howard Hoffman, who would later become a television weatherman and announcer at Cleveland’s WJW-TV, joined Kenton’s band as a member of his vocal group, the Pastels.

Through many personnel changes and sometimes strong criticism from critics, Kenton never lost his boundless energy to play his music – or his sense of humor. One time in the 1950s, he recorded a blues duet with Benny Goodman in which they kidded each other. Goodman began by singing, “I hear you got a band, it features 19 brass, and when they hit a clinker, you call it ‘progressive jazz.’” Kenton responded with, “It’s a good thing you said ‘jazz.’ Now watch it, Mr. Goodman. Be careful what you say. You know exactly what you’re doing. You’re giving me that B.G. ray (Goodman’s infamous stare)!”

Clevelander Phil Rizzo composed and arranged for the Kenton Orchestra. He also arranged for the Sy Oliver band and wrote ten books on jazz technique. In the ’50s, Rizzo returned to Cleveland and opened his Modern Music School on Lee Road in Cleveland Heights and conducted a number of Kenton clinics.

In the 1960s, drummer Nick Ceroli from Warren, Ohio, joined the Kenton Orchestra.

In 1964, a 21-year-old trombonist from Richmond Heights became Kenton’s lead trombonist. Jiggs Whigham toured with Kenton for two years before deciding to move permanently to Germany.

Cleveland drummer Ted Paskert also played and recorded with the Kenton Orchestra. Paskert was later a news cameraman at WKYC-TV.

Before Kenton died in 1979, he decreed there would never be a Stan Kenton ghost band, but he left 38 years worth of scores and music which are still played by bands around the world.

Cleveland Stage Door Canteen

Woody Herman’s “First Herd” was playing for a week at the Palace Theatre in February of 1943. The band included such top sidemen as saxophonist Flip Phillips; trombonist Bill Harris; trumpeters Pete and Conte Candoli, Sonny Berman and Neal Hefti; pianist Ralph Burns; guitarist Billy Bauer; bassist Chubby Jackson and drummer Davy Tough.

During the run at the Palace, the Herman band also played a Tuesday night gig at the new Cleveland Stage Door Canteen at 1515 Euclid Avenue. It was one of only seven in the nation opened by the American Theatre Wing to provide free entertainment, food and services for World War II U.S. servicemen.

Servicemen from the Navy Bureau of Supplies and Accounts and from ships docked at the Cleveland lakefront, soldiers and marines from the Crile Hospital in Parma, and other servicemen passing through Cleveland’s busy Union Terminal flocked to the Stage Door Canteen. The free Tuesday night shows and dances usually attracted about 500 servicemen to see and hear some of the biggest names in show business.

The Count Basie Orchestra, with Harry “Sweets” Edison and Earle Warren, played there March 27, 1943.

In March of 1944, the Tommy Dorsey band with drummer Gene Krupa and clarinetist Buddy DeFranco entertained the troops at the Euclid Avenue canteen.

The Stage Door Canteen staged its biggest show September 3, 1944 when more than 1,800 servicemen crowded the hall to see and hear comedian Bob Hope, who had grown up in Cleveland, singer Frances Langford and the Les Brown Orchestra.

Two weeks later, the Stan Kenton Orchestra, on its first national tour, played at the canteen with singer Anita O’Day and such instrumentalists as Eddie Safranski, Vido Musso, Shelly Manne and Pete Rugolo.

Other entertainers who performed at the Cleveland Stage Door Canteen included singer Perry Como, who

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<td>January 30, 1943 - Woody Herman Orchestra</td>
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<td>March 27, 1943 - Count Basie Orchestra</td>
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<td>March 11, 1944 - Tommy Dorsey Orchestra</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 3, 1944 - Bob Hope, Les Brown</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 17, 1944 - Stan Kenton Orchestra</td>
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<td>October 26, 1945 - Marion Hutton</td>
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had been singing in Cleveland seven years earlier; comedienne Patsy Kelly and Martha Raye; actor Victor Mature and the Cleveland band of Mickey Katz, the father of Broadway entertainer Joel Gray.

During its 33-month existence, Cleveland’s Stage Door Canteen served 750,000 servicemen and offered them some of the best live jazz in the world at the time. The canteen closed October 26, 1945, two months after the end of World War II.

**Wally Kinnan’s Sagen Serenaders**

If you were in Cleveland in the late 1960s and early ‘70s, you probably remember Wally Kinnan, The Weather Man. He was part of Channel 3’s popular television news team that included news anchor Virgil Dominic and sportscaster Jim Graner. Kinnan had the unusual knack of communicating his vast knowledge of weather in a folksy and humorous style.

A few of us who worked with Wally in those days knew that he had played trumpet in some of the big bands. Fewer knew that he had also been captured by the Germans during World War II and had been held in a prisoner of war camp.

Years later, we learned that Wally Kinnan The Weather Man had also been a leader of one of the most unusual bands in jazz history.

In August of 1943, Lt. Henry Wallace Kinnan, a 23-year-old American airman, who had played with the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra before becoming an aviation cadet, was shot down by German planes on a bombing mission over Schweinfurt, Germany. His captors took him to a prisoner of war camp, Stalag Luft III, at Sagan, Germany, about 90 miles southeast of Berlin. At that prisoner of war camp, Kinnan and Pilot Officer Leonard Whiteley of the Royal Air Force formed a big band.

Writing in the February 1994 edition of the *Ex-POW Bulletin*, Wally recalled, “We were forced to make the most of a very few musical instruments of dubious heritage, which had been acquired from the Germans, the Red Cross and the YMCA.” He said the real classic among the instruments was a Polish trombone which Wally described as “a plumber’s nightmare.” He said it could hit only six of the classic slide positions: “The seventh required the player to reach over his shoulder and pull a chain which, in turn, operated a rotary valve in a veritable maze of tubing to produce the desired result.” Wally said that awkward trombone was quickly retired from active duty “when some of the more inventive lads determined that the extensive tubing of the old horn could be put to more popular use in a homemade still to produce a local home brew of lethal proportions out of our aging potato crop.”

By the end of 1943, Wally said new groups of prisoners, coming in almost daily, produced a surprising wealth of professional musical talent. Among them were pianist John Bunch (who later played with Woody Herman and Benny Goodman), Tiger Ward, John Brady, Hi Bevins, Nick Nagorka, and trumpeter Vince Shank (who later played with Russ Morgan and others).

Kinnan, who may have been almost a real-life Hogan’s hero, persuaded the German staff to find some real musical instruments so they could put on organized musical programs for the prisoners. With Shank, Bunch and the other professional musicians, Kinnan formed a prisoner of war camp big band called the Sagan Serenaders.

Wally said arranger Ward “gave the band a growing library of contemporary big band swing hits that were incredibly accurate reproductions of the sounds of the day.” Kinnan said, “Some arriving prisoners went almost into shock when they heard the band play tunes they had been listening to only a few days earlier in England” before they were shot down.

The Sagan Serenaders included four trumpets, two trombones, five saxes, and four rhythm instruments including guitar. By the summer of 1944, all of the chairs were filled by former professional musicians.

One band member recalled Kinnan did a novelty skit with a puppet on his left hand that inspected his trumpet while Wally valved the horn with his right. The band member called it “a hilarious routine.”

Wally said, “We were beginning to talk seriously about taking the band on tour in the U.S. when and if we could manage to survive the war.”

By the winter of 1945, the Russians were approaching the German prisoner of war camp where the jazz band was playing. On Sunday, January 28, the Germans marched the 12,000 American prisoners, including the band members, out of Stalag Luft III. Wally later said he believed they would be marched into a field and shot. As he marched into the night, he leaned his trumpet against a fence.

They were not executed. They were led on a forced march through a blizzard to Spremberg, almost 200 miles away. Many of the prisoners died during the forced march. Pianist Bunch said he was starving and ready to die when Kinnan saved his life by sharing a potato with him.
The prisoners were taken to another POW camp at Moosburg, 30 miles from Munich.

General George Patton and the American Third Army arrived April 29, 1945 and freed the prisoners. The next day, Adolph Hitler committed suicide. A week later, the Germans surrendered. And a few days after that, Kinnan and the other American flyers, who had formed the big jazz band at Stalag Luft III, were back in the United States.

Wally and the others never did take the Sagan Serenaders on tour, or even hold a reunion of what was perhaps the most unusual big band in history. Wally did play trumpet with several name bands after the war before becoming one of the founders of the American Meteorological Society and going into television weather reporting in the early years of TV.

I first worked with Wally in 1961 at the NBC radio and television stations in Philadelphia where he was extremely popular. Every evening before the newscast, he came to my desk to look out the window to see if his weather forecast was holding up.

When Wally and I both came to NBC in Cleveland in the 1960s, we chatted occasionally about his prisoner of war experiences and about playing with some of the big bands. He even played occasionally with bands in Cleveland. I remember a NBC Christmas Party one year, after Wally had been fired by Channel 3. Dan Zola’s big band was playing for the party and there, blowing solos in the trumpet section, was former Channel 3 weather man Wally Kinnan.

After leaving Channel 3, Wally moved to Florida and later formed his own 16-piece band in St. Petersburg. It was probably a pretty good band, but certainly not as memorable or as historic as the Sagan Serenaders – the prisoner of war professional jazz band Wally Kinnan formed at Stalag Luft III in 1943.

Kinnan died at 83 November 22, 2002.

Trombonist Mitch Zaremba

He was not a legendary force in jazz, but Cleveland trombonist Mitch Zaremba played key roles in several important big band era orchestras.

Born in Cleveland in 1924, Dolny joined Zoot Sims in the innovative Sherwood band led by a man who was an arranger, composer, singer, trumpeter, guitarist, trombonist and pianist. They made several popular big band recordings including “The Elks’ Parade” and “Sherwood’s Forest.”

After Sherwood broke up his band in 1949, Dolny joined the Buddy Rich band which included Cleveland trumpeter Emmet Berry and played arrangements by Cleveland Tadd Dameron. In 1950, Dolny was a member of the Claude Thornhill Orchestra, playing arrangements by Gil Evans and Gerry Mulligan. Dolny also later played with the Jerry Wald Orchestra.

In the 1950s, Dolny lived in Los Angeles and played a number of studio dates including recordings with the Ray Anthony Orchestra. He also performed with the Harry James Orchestra in the ‘50s.

When Cleveland guitarist Jim Hall went to the West Coast in 1955, it was Dolny who helped Hall get a job with the popular Chico Hamilton group.

For years, Dolny led one of the best rehearsal bands in Los Angeles and wrote arrangements for a number of bands including the Si Zentner Orchestra.

Dizzy Gillespie’s big bop band

In 1946, bebop pioneer Dizzy Gillespie formed a now-legendary big band to play bebop arrangements. The unusual band included a number of future jazz giants as well as several musicians from Cleveland.

The trumpet section included Gillespie, Miles Davis,
Fats Navarro, Kenny Dorham and Clevelander Freddie Webster. Cleveland guitarist Bill de Arango recorded with Gillespie’s big band. One of Gillespie’s closest collaborators and arrangers was Clevelander Tadd Dameron. It was Dameron who suggested that Gillespie hire Cleveland trombonist William “Shep” Shepherd.

When Gillespie’s band was playing for a dance at Cleveland’s Public Auditorium, Dizzy auditioned Shepherd who was playing at the time with Cleveland’s Johnny Powell Orchestra. Gillespie told Shepherd simply, “You can leave now or wait and come tomorrow and meet us in Pittsburgh.”

Shepherd told me he met the band the next day in Pittsburgh and toured with Gillespie for two years. He played lead trombone with the Gillespie band that included such jazz artists as John Lewis and Milt Jackson, two future members of the Modern Jazz Quartet.

According to Shepherd, “Dizzy was the most wonderful person to work with you ever seen in your life and he was just like a teacher.” He said Dizzy was also “a brilliant person, a deep person.”

It was an exciting experience for the Cleveland trombonist. One night in Philadelphia, remembered Shepherd, “This woman came over and sat down right in front of me and got in the way of my trombone slide. It made me kind of peeved. I said, ‘What right does this woman have to come and sit in front of me like that?’ Dizzy looked up, went over and grabbed her, and introduced her, ‘Shep, this is Billie Holiday!’”

In 1948, Shepherd and the Gillespie band toured Europe. It was Shepherd who suggested that Gillespie hire Cleveland trumpeter Benny Bailey for the European tour.

They went by ship and ran into a frightening storm. “That was the most awful storm I had ever seen,” said Shepherd. “I had never been on the ocean and the waves looked like mountains. They vibrated the whole ship. The crew locked the doors and boarded them so we couldn’t get out. They said, ‘If you go out, you’ll be blown off the deck!’”

The band played several days in Gottenburg and Copenhagen and met the Prince of Sweden, an avid jazz fan who went with the band to Belgium and Germany.

Shep remembered Gillespie was very popular in Europe at the time and found many people copying his bebop style of wearing a beret, horn-rimmed glasses and a goatee.

Eventually, the Gillespie band got to Paris. For a wildly enthusiastic crowd, Clevelanders Shepherd and Bailey and the other members of the band played a composition by Clevelander Tadd Dameron, “Good Bait.”

Bailey remembered, “They accepted this music we were playing which was very new. We got a great reception everywhere. I decided then that I wanted to live in Europe.”

Shepherd, the well-schooled trombonist from Cleveland, also performed with the Gillespie band at New York’s Carnegie Hall in 1948. They played an ambitious piece called “Soulphony,” composed by Dameron. He wrote a special arrangement for Shepherd.

“He had me start off playing a high B natural, that high note. I said, ‘Tadd, why are you putting me up so high at Carnegie Hall?’ He said, ‘Don’t worry about it, Shep, you can do it.’ So, when I played the solo, I hit the note right on the head, just as loud and clear, and
Buster Harding, who had played with the Marion Sears Orchestra at Cedar Gardens in Cleveland, also arranged for Gillespie's big band.

Longtime Cleveland jazz drummer Lawrence "Jacktown" Jackson was on the road in the early 1950s with a band that ran out of money in Florida. He was stranded but he found an unusual way to get home. Jacktown recalled, "Gillespie's band came through Pensacola for a dance. It was canceled because of bad weather. It was raining cats and dogs. Dizzy needed a valet. He had one, but his entourage was so large that two men were needed. Milt Jackson and Kenny Burrell were in the band. Kenny and I were classmates in high school (in Detroit). So with his recommendation, and me being a little husky fellow, Diz hired me, not realizing I was a drummer with drums. So here I am with a job but no room for my instruments. I asked my friends to send my drums back home."

Through the generosity of Gillespie, Jacktown worked his way back home by hauling luggage. He recalled, "Ella Fitzgerald was on the tour with her maid, her musical director, Dizzy's wife Loraine, the bus driver, the road manager, 15 band members, two valets as well as all the drums, vibes, bass fiddle, music stands, music, and everyone's luggage."

Shep Shepherd was Jacktown's roommate. Saxist James Moody was his seat partner on the band bus.

Jacktown said Dizzy was always trying to have fun. "He was really a big clown," said Jacktown. "The band would be up on the bandstand playing and he'd be down on the dance floor, shakin' 'em up. I remember one incident. He was on the dance floor with a girl and his wife was coming in. I had to get off the bandstand to go get him, pull his coat, and yell, 'Here comes Loraine!'"

After becoming a jazz legend, Gillespie formed another big band in the 1980s and toured the world. His all-star United Nation Festival Super Band played an outdoor concert at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo August 21, 1988. Members of that later band included Jon Faddis, James Moody, Slide Hampton, Sam Rivers and Paquito D'Rivera.

Gillespie's last performance in Cleveland, a concert with a small group, was November 16, 1990 at the Cleveland Museum of Art in University Circle. Dizzy died two and a half years later (January 6, 1993) at the age of 75.

The Boyd Raeburn Orchestra

Another revolutionary band that appeared after World War II also had a number of Cleveland connections. For many, the Boyd Raeburn Orchestra was the big band of the 1940s. The inventive, imaginative sounds of the Raeburn band were far ahead of their time.

Big band chronicler George Simon called the Raeburn Orchestra "one of the truly great bands." Jazz historian Jack McKinney said, "It may have been the most inventive band of any era."

Four Clevelanders made contributions to the Raeburn Orchestra. Tadd Dameron, Ray Anthony, Wes Hensel and Ralph Flanagan all arranged for the band.

David Allyn, who sang with the band, told me the story about one foggy morning when the driver of the band bus got lost in Cleveland. "We could see we were in Shaker Heights," recalled Allyn, "in an area where there were tremendous estates with great iron gates, stone walls and great green lawns and shrubbery, just fantastic places!" Allyn said the band members were
digging all the big estates when he suddenly became aware of the ironic situation. Looking at all the big homes they were passing, Allyn said, “We’re just roving, wandering gypsies! We’re not hip! We’re square. Look at this! Look at us! What have we got? These people in these big houses don’t care about what we’re doing.” said Allyn. Suddenly, from the back of the bus came the voice of another band member. “Wait a minute, man!! What do they know about Diz and Prez and Bird?!!

Despite the general public apathy toward their music, the members of the Boyd Raeburn Orchestra and their group of followers felt a sense of musical exhilaration.

Raeburn formed his orchestra in 1944 and hired an arranger named Eddie Finckel who later said, “We used to take Lester Young’s choruses with the Basie band off records and write them out, analyze them, study them, and write band arrangements based on them.”

Later, another arranger arrived. George Handy, who had studied with Aaron Copland and was influenced by Igor Stravinsky, helped create what Allyn called “a new concept of the big band sound.”

Among the band members at various times were Buddy DeFranco, Conte Candoli, Jimmy Giuffre, Pete Rugolo, Don Lamond, Jack Jenney, Mel Lewis and even, for a brief period, Dizzy Gillespie. DeFranco later said, “The world just wasn’t ready for this kind of music.”

Raeburn disbanded in 1948, but many jazz musicians and fans still fondly remember the inventive and exciting Raeburn Orchestra.

Henry Mancini

Known primarily for his lush Hollywood arrangements and compositions, Cleveland native Henry Mancini played in several big bands and made a significant contribution to jazz history in 1958 when, for the first time, he used jazz as background music for a television drama.

Shortly after he was born in Cleveland April 16, 1924, Mancini’s family moved to the Pittsburgh area where his father got a job at a steel mill. When Henry was 12 (in 1936), he was listening to records and radio broadcasts by the Benny Goodman Orchestra. At 13, he played flute in the Pennsylvania All-State High School Band. At 14, he began taking piano lessons from Max Adkins, the conductor of the pit band at Pittsburgh’s Stanley Theatre. After Mancini graduated from Aliquippa High School, Adkins introduced Mancini to his idol, Goodman.

Goodman invited Mancini to go to New York where the teenager wrote an arrangement for a song entitled “Idaho.” It was a complicated arrangement. After listening to his band play it, Goodman said, “Kid, I don’t think you’re ready yet.” Realizing he was in over his head, the young Mancini enrolled at Julliard.

He got a job playing piano for the Vincent Lopez Orchestra, but was fired on the spot for playing too loudly, drowning out the leader.

When he turned 18 (in 1942), Mancini was drafted into the Army Air Corps (in the days before a separate service called the Air Force was formed). He tried unsuccessfully to get into Glenn Miller’s Army band, but Miller had him transferred to another military band and assigned to accompany singer Tony Martin.

When Mancini was discharged, an Army buddy helped him get a job playing piano with the post-war Miller Orchestra led by Tex Beneke. After touring the theatres and ballrooms of the country, Mancini said, “When you’re on the road with a band, you live in a capsule, a cocoon. There is no other world but the band. You breathe and talk the life of the band. Everything comes down to two things: where do we eat and what time does the job start?”

Because of his unusual sense of humor, other members of the Beneke band called Mancini “Weirdo.” One night on the stage of the Earl Theatre in Philadelphia, he teased fellow Cleveland Stan Harris and said, “You’re losing your marbles!” For emphasis, Mancini rolled a handful of marbles across the stage as the band was playing. Beneke simply kicked them into the footlights.

While he was with Beneke, Mancini began dating Ginny O’Connor, a member of the band’s vocal group.
He brought her home to Cleveland to meet his family. After they left the Beneke band, they married.

He went to Hollywood, got studio jobs playing for several bands and writing music for some forgettable movies.

In 1954, Mancini was the music director for The Glenn Miller Story, a movie based loosely on the life of the bandleader who had refused to hire him 12 years earlier. Mancini wrote the love theme for the film, “Too Little Time.”

Mancini’s big break, and his most important contribution to jazz, came in 1958. He was asked to write the music for a new television detective program called Peter Gunn. It was a jazz score. It was the first time jazz had been used regularly in a dramatic TV series.

“The idea of using jazz in the score was never even discussed,” said Mancini later. “It was implicit in the story. Peter Gunn was hanging out in a jazz road house where there was a five-piece jazz group.” To record the jazz for the TV show, Mancini used several musicians he had known on the Beneke band including trumpeter Pete Candoli, drummer Shelly Manne and bassist Red Mitchell. When the television program became a hit, RCA released an album of the music. It was number one on the Billboard chart for ten weeks and stayed on the pop charts for more than two years, an unusual accomplishment for a jazz album during the early days of rock ‘n roll.

The success of the Peter Gunn album thrust Mancini into the public spotlight. He composed and recorded music for a number of motion pictures including Mister Lucky and Breakfast at Tiffany’s. “Moon River,” written for Breakfast at Tiffany’s, became a major hit and a popular standard that was recorded more than a thousand times. In 1963, he wrote “Days of Wine and Roses.” Later that year, Mancini played a concert of his music with the Cleveland Orchestra.

There was another big hit in 1964, “The Pink Panther Theme.” It was voted the best instrumental composition of the year and was recorded many times, even by Benny Goodman, who 23 years earlier had told Mancini, “Kid, I don’t think you’re ready yet.”

Over a 30-year period, the Cleveland native sold more than 30 million copies of his albums and won 20 Grammys and four Oscars.

Mancini died at the age of 71 in Los Angeles in June of 1995.