

The Magic of Music

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A Personal Account

1915

PART I

This account of the years of my life devoted to music may be of little interest to professional musicians or sophisticated types of readers. They may find it naive or amateurish. It is a record of an untalented persons determination to be in dance band music and lucky enough to accomplish it. Had I been directed early on into a field of endeavor more suitable to my natural abilities, I may have avoided many frustrating years in discovering a reliable and profitable profession, but - music has returned to me the most enjoyable years and experiences of my life. So at this point you may decide to skip it - or, come along.....

In high school I was a complete "goof-off." I had artistic talent and took art courses to avoid anything requiring serious study. Coming off a Kansas farm at Coffeyville in 1938, I heard the swing music of the big bands just as the big name band era had begun. I had never heard anything like it,

Saxer - 80 YEAR. OLD -
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and I was already 15 years young when I first got a good look at saxophones. I was fascinated by the complex keywork and gleaming finish and the sound of the tenor saxophone nailed me for life, but I had to beg my parents for over half a year to get one, a cheap model from a pawn shop we purchased on July 6, 1940. I was not to discover until 50 years later that my mother had sold her wedding ring to get the money to buy it. My last year in high school was only 3 months away and I started practicing 3 to 4 hours a day, (because I was starting 5 years late,) to try to get into the high school band. I already knew music notation, scales, and chords, from having guitar lessons the year before and was reluctantly accepted. I didn't do the band much good, but it gave me the opportunity of playing with other musicians and making friends with a couple of talented band members who were also big band fanatics.

That fall I persuaded a local tenor sax playing leader, Mark Ehart and later his lead alto saxist, Harold Burris, to give me a few

lessons, as they were excellent players with many years of experience. They were very helpful and I continued the heavy practice schedule through all of my last year in high school. Then the biggest thrill of my life came on July 6, 1941, exactly a year to the day after getting my sax, the biggest name band of all, Glenn Miller, played at nearby Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The Miller band had achieved nation-wide fame within a years time as "Americas No. 1 Band" and had just played July 4th. in Kansas City to an unbelievable crowd of 15,000. The beautiful arrangements are still popular after over 60 years. I managed to get autographs of Miller and his famous tenor saxist, Tex Beneke. The perfection of the Miller band was overwhelming compared to the local bands. One thing I observed has aided me through all of my years in music, ~~At~~ at that time, I was trying to learn syncopation, i.e., how to play off beat notes, which anticipate a coming note by playing it one half of a beat in advance of the up-coming regular notes. The band was

on a stage several feet high, and I was stationed at the end of the bandstand where I could see all five saxplayers feet. They were all wearing white and black wing-tip shoes which made it obvious that they were all tapping their feet alternately by raising their toes on their right feet on the 1st. and 3rd. beats of a measure and raising their heels of their left feet on the 2nd and 4th beat of a measure! This was especially helpful in two ways: They always knew which beat of a measure they were on or anticipating and was very useful on rapid tempos. Within a few days I was progressing rapidly on syncopation by using their counting method.

By the fall of 1941, Mr. Ehart started letting me "sit in" on 4th tenor sax with his band - for no pay, but it was invaluable experience and a lot of fun and I was often permitted to take the 4th sax book home and practice the parts for a week at a time. During the fall of 1941

and summer of 1942, I saw 3 more name bands at Pittsburg, Kansas, Charlie Barnet, Charlie Spivak and Tony Pastor, whose band swung as hard as Millers.

For the benefit of readers who were born after 1945, a "Name Band" had become well-known nationwide, made "hit" records, was featured on radio programs and appeared at ballrooms, theatres, and hotels around the country, often making one-night stops while on tour.

By the fall of 1942, I was playing a few jobs with another local band for \$5.00 a job but World War II was heating up with the draft catching the 18 and 19 year olds rapidly. I barely managed to enlist in December 1942 in the U.S. Coast Guard. (The name suggested guard duty on the U.S. Coasts), less than a week ahead of a call from the draft board!! Years later I realized it might have been a life or death decision. Had I accepted the U.S. Army and been sent to Europe - well, a lot of lives were lost or injured for life there. While being inducted at Oklahoma City, luck was with me musically. Glenn Miller had disbanded a few months earlier and Tex Beneke was playing with a rhythm combo at a leading hotel. With no arrangements to bother with, he could play as many choruses on whatever numbers he liked - and he certainly did. He probably played more on (3) tunes than he played with the Miller band all evening. I managed to talk with him for a couple of minutes and he was very friendly and encouraging. In

March of 1943 I was called to active duty and reported to St Louis for 3 days on my way to boot camp. There I bought a powerful new sax mouthpiece and heard the up-coming Stan Kenton band with an extremely powerful brass section. After 6 weeks in boot camp in Kentucky, unusual lucky music breaks continued to happen. I was sent to Fort McHenry in Baltimore. An old cannon still sat there, and a bronze plaque which detailed the attack by the British in 1814 - which failed to dislodge the Americans. Francis Scott Key, a writer, and poet was quickly inspired to write a poem, which became the lyrics to our National Anthem. After visiting that hallowed ground, I resolved that my most favorite song had to be - "The Star Spangled Banner."

Since New York City was only 4 hours away, I took two weekend trips there and saw 5 shows by the name bands. I also took a guided tour of the overwhelming grandeur of the city. After 4 months at Baltimore I was sent to Boston with about 20 to 25 U.S.C.G. members for "distribution", which turned out to be (Sea Duty) for the most part but we were offered a choice. I was shuddering with

fear when asked my preference , which was shore duty. There was still one left, which were 3 light-house stations up near Rockland, Maine, 4 hours from Boston. Arriving in the small town on a Saturday, I discovered a U.S.C.G. combo playing for dancing that night at a small ballroom.. They had 2 alto saxes, 2 trumpets and a 3 man rhythm section, but wonder of wonders - no tenor sax! They were reading stock arrangements, which was also my limitation. They became as excited as I was about getting together. I could hardly believe two such incredible breaks had occurred in two days. Had fate guided me here or was it the radiation of mental telepathy that mysteriously brings together the actual events that you so strongly dream about and concentrate upon? I was to reflect often during the balance of my time in the U.S.C.G. on this question as additional lucky

events occurred.

The Rockland Combo played dances regularly at the community auditorium for civilian and military personnel. Joining them at their next date, they were pleased that I read well enough - some of the arrangements I already knew but a few of the "jump" numbers called for extemporaneous jazz solos which required a natural talent I did not have. The other players said, "Get up and blow something - we will holler stop when its time to quit ", so I got up and blew some "hot licks" and technical tricks as hard as I could. At least I could stay in the right key! They all got a kick out of my boundless enthusiasm and the dancers didn't know or care, so it was a fun job for all.

Those jobs continued to be enjoyable for almost a year there-after to September 1944. During that time I often went to Boston on liberty when bands of my interest were there, including Cab Calloway, Les Brown and "Cootie" Williams with the beautiful Lena Horne in a 2 piece bathing suit singing

"Stormy Weather" as only she could perform it. Teddy Powell, not a well known leader, was playing at the same ballroom where Glenn Miller first hit it big. The band was quite a surprise, as hard driving and swing as any others I had heard. His star tenor saxist Charlie

Ventura and the Condoli brothers on Trumpets, were all amazing jazz soloists who became the fire behind the top rated Woody Herman band after the war, while Ventura became famous as a soloist with his own group. Also appearing for several weeks was Coleman Hawkins, then considered to be the worlds greatest jazz tenor saxist in a 6 piece combo at a small nite club. Several of his greatest recordings had been transcribed and analyzed. His ingenious playing around the chords of a melody were applied mostly to melodic popular ballads, practically all in 16th notes (4 notes to the beat). Like many tenor saxists, I eventually memorized his "Body & Soul" and will enjoy playing it for the rest of my life.

Swinging

This was far more interesting practice than practicing on chords and scales, which always sounded mechanical and boring whereas Hawkins solos always sounded fresh and joyful. From then on, I have never wavered from the belief that he was the greatest jazz tenor saxist of all time.

By the Summer of 1944 I had seen and heard 12 of the best bands in America and 4 of the best tenor sax solists. (Soloists)

At Rockland, our small combo group began to fear that we might be ordered, like many others before us to different jobs in active war areas and agreed to ask for duty, if and where available, as a group wishing to become part of a larger official service band. This request occasioned a year of events none of us could possibly have imagined and which we quickly regretted. The Boston U.S.C.G. headquarters had been requested by South Pacific headquarters for some musicians from the Boston band. Their leader was reluctant to lose some of his good men when our request

arrived! So he came to Rockland to audition us and seven of us were soon on our way to Los Angeles by rail to prepare for overseas duty. While there for 3 weeks we managed to see Woody Hermans band at the glamorous Hollywood Palladium and Tommy Dorsey in Santa Monica.

A Lieutenant Baldwin was assigned to accompany us and we were put aboard a small freight ship with a crew of 8 or 10 men on October

27, 1944 and headed for the South Pacific with rest and refueling at Hawaii and Guadalcanal. We arrived at Finschafen, New Guinea on December 12, 1944 and assigned to an open air "barracks" with mosquito net covers around our cots. This was really wartime

temporary jungle living, but it wasn't bad because we had feared the worst. We satisfied the officers with our first job for dancing. *BUT we* knew that due to our limited abilities our luck might not hold out for long, so we were advised by our guitarist, an

older well experienced musician and entertainer, to use the strategy of asking for more musicians so as to give them better music. It slowly began to work. I must explain that musicians, wherever they are or go, have their ears open for news about other musicians and of course, some found us. While in New Guinea, we found another trumpet and sax player and a highly talented and experienced pianist who could attract a barracks full of listeners after playing 3 or 4 numbers. A concert violin soloist joined us which permitted us to present a more varied program. We would soon become a variety show although we did not foresee it at the time.

By this time General McArthur's Army had retaken the Phillipines. We had played 27 jobs in New Guinea and were soon on our way to Tacloban, Leyte, one of the eastern shore islands of the Phillipines, again on a small freight supply ship which, arrived there on April 7, 1945.

Tacloban was a very busy place where large ships were serviced and much military activity going on. We were very fortunate to have a Commanding Officer there who understood the need of entertainment of war-weary servicemen and was anxious to supply it. He gave us everything we suggested and more. Our living conditions were primitive for a few weeks but this and so many other wonderful breaks happened so fast it was unbelievable. We met other musicians and comedians, or they found us. Within a month we had become part of a variety show with a big band with several excellent musicians and comedy entertainers. These included Arthur Marx, son of the famous "Groucho"; Bud McTaggart, an actor, jokester and a master of ceremonies and was as confident as Bob Hope or Art Linkletter; also a comedy writer and a radio announcer, All from Hollywood. I began to wonder if the U.S.C.G. had attracted a lot of musicians and Hollywood personnel as a hoped-for hiding-out place during the war! Our new found friends quickly developed a

weekly radio program and 30 minute radio broadcast with comedy skits. These included a local Filipino actress, Etta Abesamis, to add to the dialogue. The band alone now consisted of 17 musicians, plus the comedians and writers.

Lt. Baldwin, who accompanied us to New Guinea, had returned to the "States" and returned to Tacloban with a rhythm trio which sang amusing songs and were excellent musicians. They were also included in our now large entertainment group. Since all this happened so fast, I have wondered afterwards if there was someone much more important than our Commanding Officer, perhaps in the "States," that was responsible for putting it all together, or were the officers conducting the bitter business of running a war, dumping us all together just to get us out of their way and give us something to do! Because musicians, artists, and clowns, are not really suitable types for the deadly and serious battles of war.

Among the new musicians added to the band was a solid and talented string bass player from Hollywood. This gave our rhythm section a forceful boost, which was an absolute requirement for a big band. We were extremely lucky in getting a highly talented Tenor Saxist who played lovely jazz solos on slow ballads and could also "boot it out" on the up-tempo jump numbers. This was also an absolute requirement of a large band. I had learned early and to my embarrassment that I completely lacked this talent and that a good "paper musician" was going to be my limit, but I also had noticed that the large baritone sax was an absolute necessity in all the big bands I had seen because it added so much depth and harmony to the sound of the sax section. The Baritone ~~Choir~~ did not require jazz solos and needed a hard-driving player, which I certainly was and here ^{was} my opportunity! We now had the requirements of a big

Chair

band, 5-man sax section. We already had the No. 1 requirement, a dependable lead trumpet player, who was one of the original band group from Rockland, Me.. He was now the leader of a 6 man brass section and only 21 years of age. In the 27 months we were together, I don't recall that he ever missed coming in on the right beat or failed to reach a needed high note. He was also handsome and very intelligent, with a balance and maturity well beyond his age. I must momentarily depart from this account to add that this was later proven beyond a doubt. After World War II, he enlisted in the Army after completion of college and served during most of the Korean War and a total of 7 years in Vietnam, often escaping or avoiding death and became the most highly decorated American during that war and was loved by the Vietnamese people. We have never failed to exchange Christmas letters since 1946. He retired from

the service a full Colonel after 30 years of service.

Now, - back to 1945 and the Big Band. After the first rehearsal with the enlarged group, we were all surprised by the big sounds we could produce. It was the first time I played a Baritone Sax. It proved to be the easiest of the saxes for me to play and I was elated to hear that I was a "natural" for it - and that was the chair I really belonged in. By this time I had also become the bands music copyist and did some revisions to a few arrangements to better suit our talents.

We had also been able to rent the bottom floor of a very large house from a Filipino family, just across an alley from the U.S.C.G. galley, or "Mess Hall." We were able to erect about 20 of our mosquito netted cots thru-out the house. So here was two more lucky breaks. One of the excellent cooks from the galley liked our band and after we started playing evening performances, he would

often have refreshments ready when we returned from our shows. He was also from -- Hollywood!!

Our first show and broadcast, "Fun in the Phillipines," was on May 9, 1945, in an outdoor scenic jungle area with a temporary band shell, with several hundred servicemen in attendance. We all did O.K., but a few more performances were required to get everything going smoothly and sounding reasonably professional. Our performances then began increasing rapidly.

Big things on the military front were also happening with increasing speed. The war in Europe ended in May and many men from ~~this time~~ *there* were now arriving in the Phillipines to help prepare for the final assault on Japan. So, doing the final 3 months of the war, we played about everyday for every type of occasion and location imaginable - aboard every kind of ship, at every kind of military installation, private dance, parties and even a concert for a high school graduation.

There is no way to recall all the joyful incidents during these months but one was memorable and for me another that was unforgettable. On August 6, 1945, the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima, as a final persuader to Japan to surrender. That night we played aboard the Battleship "Arkansas." We took along a Filipino girl about 8 or 9 years of age who could do a mean hula dance. What a coincidence it

was that our guitarist and ukele player was a 230 lb. Hawaiian who came with us from Rockland, Me.. He was older than most of us and had entertained aboard cruise ships between Hawaii and California before the war. When her time to perform came, our Hawaiian started with ukelele and singing accompaniment-and then joined her, responding with a wicked hula of his own! As they cavorted around the stage, the hundreds, or maybe thousands, of servicemen burst into loud cheering

and applause. It was one of those inspired and impromptu moments that often happen in showbiz. At the end of our show, the ships

Skipper came on stage and thanked us for the show - and - bringing along that young female "Atomic Bomb".

A few days later, we played aboard the Battleship "Texas". A gracious offer was given those of us who were interested, to go below deck and see the giant machinery required to operate a battery of three of the ships' 16 inch guns and huge mechanically loaded shells. The guns could be rotated in a half circle and raised or lowered from level to a very steep angle. They also had huge "knee-action" shock absorbers to control the recoil when fired. All rather mind boggling.

During the next week, Japan capitulated and the war was over, with all the wild jubilation you can imagine. After 8 more shows we prepared to leave Tacloban for Manila on August 31, a day before the war officially ended, which started exactly 6 years before - on September 1, 1939.

Manila evoked mixed emotions. It was nice to be back in a more reasonable modern city but the horrible condition of many tall buildings partially bombed to piles of rubble was a different kind of - awesome, however, the people were rapidly returning to normal peacetime business. In only 3 weeks there, we played several more shows, but not particularly memorable as everyone was excited about going home. Our last performance was a night to remember. It turned out to be at Malacanang National Palace, for a large, lavish victory celebration party and dance for the high government and social class. The ladies were beautifully and formally dressed and we wore our white sailor uniforms, instead of our dungarees and white caps.

A couple of days later, we were able to obtain passage aboard a huge troop transport ship, the U.S.S. Gen. Altman, for the U.S.A., by a round-about route. The ship headed for Okinawa to pick up many servicemen before heading for America.

On September 27, our band and clowns were set up aboard ship to play a show just before our departure. We were to await a signal from the skipper to break into "California Here I come" the moment the ships anchor was lifted and our voyage began - with a roar of applause from 4400 men and 8 nurses. The ship headed straight across the North Pacific, a long monotonous trip through 5,000 miles of ocean but we would soon be home, but not to California. Radio instructions directed the ship to go to Portland, Oregon, which turned out to be most of a days travel inland on the Columbia river, which required careful maneuvering for so large a ship - 1,060 feet long. We arrived on October 11th. 1945, with a welcoming party awaiting. After some celebrating that evening, we then had to report the next day and week-end to Seattle, WA to await orders to travel by train to Long Beach, California, with a days "rest stop" in San Francisco. This seemed like an inefficient way to get us to our destination, but it also gave us the

opportunity of a scenic trip down the entire West Coast and a tour through its largest cities. Upon our arrival in Long Beach, we found that a Victory Bond Drive for Southern Calif., was being planned by Lt. Henry Wilcoxon in the U.S.C.G., a Hollywood star from the thirties who had been featured in biblical, or epic type films. He planned to have appearances with various lesser known Hollywood stars, a U.S.C.G. concert pianist, a dance team, our violin soloist, our rhythm trio and our band, with himself as M. C.. Our original M.C., the confident and risqué Bud McTaggart, had received orders in Seattle to report to San Francisco, much to our surprise. It seemed obvious now why he was being replaced.

The final act of the show was to be Lt. Wilcoxon being interrupted by an ethereal voice from the sky of Franklin D. Roosevelt, thanking America for it World War II Victories. The voice was supplied by actor Jack Young, seated off-stage before a microphone. He was well known for his portrayal

of President Roosevelt, with his back to the camera, in the movie "Yankee Doodle Dandy," starring James Cagney. Mr. Young was very considerate and friendly to the band members. What a thrill it was to be casually joking and making small talk with such famous and greatly talented people. However, a month of bi-weekly rehearsals came first, which gave us considerable free time. We were treated to a sumptuous Thanksgiving Dinner, by the cook who gave us special consideration in Tacloban. He had already received his discharge and was assisting his father in managing a very upscale restaurant at one of the major boulevard intersections in Hollywood. Several of us were quartered at a downtown hotel in Los Angeles. On Thanksgiving day he came to the hotel in his cadillac convertible to take us back on Sunset Boulevard. The day was warm and sunny and 3 of us sat on top of the back seat - waving at the people on the sidewalks as if we were really somebody! After a late dinner, he took us up to his Fathers home in the Hollywood Hills for a relaxing evening. The house was new, large, modern and luxuriously furnished with several glass-wall views of Hollywood and Los Angeles, a very spectacular view at night. Most of us had never been in such a gorgeous home.

Bandleader Stan Kenton was playing

at the Hollywood palladium during November and the fanatics like myself went to spend a number of evenings there absorbing those wild arrangements.

Our show was to include a lovely redhead vocalist from the Coast Guard to sing two very standard ballads for whom a Hollywood arranger had written special scores, and asked if we had a copyist to write the parts for all of the instruments. My hand shot up - this was a chance to get acquainted with some top-notch Hollywood musicians. It was time consuming and I learned a lot.

After our rehearsals we were to give 8 performances, the first on November 24 at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, with stars Eddie Bracken and Janet Blair sparking the show. The final was to be on December 10 at Long Beach Municipal Auditorium. We performed all the shows passably well as we only played 3 or 4 feature numbers, the balance was mostly accompanying the soloists. The last show was played with mixed emotions. Within a few days we would all be discharged and on our way home but it also meant the end of what, for some of us had been the most exciting and rapid development we would ever experience.

We sadly parted company during the next few days getting our discharges, most of us never to see each other again.

Even to this day, I can't help but wondering about those incredible lucky breaks which occurred so rapidly during only 2 years and 9 months of service in the U.S.C.G. Service. Hell, I had been the recipient of nothing but service! This dumb hick kid from Kansas and Oklahoma farms had been twice across the U.S., seen and heard all the great swing bands in the largest cities on both coasts and the midwest, been across the Pacific and lived in the jungles and large cities with the most enjoyable types of talented people, all at the expense of the U.S. Government - which was now going to pay for most of the balance of my formal education. However, that did not prove to be as educational or interesting as the education I had already received. I was discharged on December 18, 1945 at San Pedro, California, and

departed the next day for home.

This ended my military "service" which turned out to have been probably the greatest uplifting experience in my life. So many had lost their lives - while the only weapon I was required to operate was a saxophone! I was soon to learn that I had acquired a false idea of my true abilities - that I needed years more of practice and experience to get there with a Truly Professional Band.

PART II

Upon my arrival back in Coffeyville, on December 22, 1945, I immediately contacted the musician leader I had played for before my departure in March of 1943. He had a band and was to play a New Years Eve dance at the Municipal Auditorium and could use me on the Tenor Sax! Harold Burriss, who had been helpful to me pre-war, was there on the lead alto sax. He told me at intermission that I had improved 200 per-cent! He was not the kind to engage in flattering comments which gave my confidence a needed boost. That evening was quite a party, as many of the guests were veterans who also had just returned home, besides many other friends and acquaintances from the pre-war days.

Since this account concerns a musical experience, I will skip the details of my return to California but feel that a few facts are in order. I had resumed my education and needed to attend a University to complete it. There was no possibility of regular musical engagements in a small town of 19,000. My parents were reasonably acceptable to the idea of all of us making a move which could be managed without formidable problems. So, by the fall of 1946 we had relocated in Redlands, California, a university town 60 miles east of Los Angeles.

In November, 1946, I was accepted in a 12 member band playing 4th tenor sax and doubling on baritone twice a week at a nearby San Bernardino Ballroom. All of the musicians were quite capable but the leader was using rather dull "stock" arrangements. I was now a musicians union member playing for "scale", which was not much but certainly welcome to a college student. In early 1947 our jobs were reduced to once a week and continued until the fall of 1947. The leader had

(Musicians)

decided to completely revise his band and I was then "at liberty" for a short time. One of those lucky breaks then occurred. During the latter part of 1947 most of the nationally known bands had disbanded due to lack of public interest. It so happened that the manager and lead trumpeter of the Bobby Sherwood band, Irwin Stump, lived in San Bernardino, all of whom were also "at liberty." The Sherwood Band was nationally known but was not among the top 5 to 10 famous names. The trumpeter had organized a group of local musicians using the Sherwood "book" (library), to play local jobs. I happened to get the call to play Baritone sax, although I was the least experienced member of the group but since the leader had no big name to live up to, I was o.k., for local jobs. This was the biggest thrill of my life in music but proved to be very short lived. The Sherwood arrangements were as high a quality as any I had ever seen or heard and some were beyond my capability. I now fully

realized that I still had a long way to go if I were to become a really professional big band musician. To get the band playing smoothly, the leader, "Stumpy", called several 5 hour rehearsals and really worked us hard. So, this was what working in a name band was like! Tough — but exciting beyond belief. The leader would come down from behind the saxes and stand beside where I was seated and cut loose with ad lib jazz solos as great as any I had ever heard. I was amazed and I had seen and heard a lot of them by then. The leader had a few jobs and what we hoped would become regular engagements, at the San Bernardino Municipal Auditorium. The crowds did not come, so after a couple more jobs were played, it was all over.

Most musicians agreed by then, 1948, that the wonderful "Big Band Era" was over and that only a very few of the famous names could obtain enough jobs to stay together.

I resumed my college studies at

the University of Redlands in 1947. It was here that music, logically enough, played a funny role in bringing me and my (wife-to-be) together. We were in a small speech class and I had talked about my band experiences overseas. She was an opera and classical music fan. This led to us trying to debate each other down, with no victory for either of us but happily we easily reconciled. We were both mid-westerners from ordinary rural backgrounds where people are generally friendly, lacking in phony pretensions and honest to a fault. When we realized how much we were alike our different tastes in music seemed pretty minor and we felt very comfortable together — and Yes, the Boy meets Girl thing took over. We were soon seen everywhere together which was quite amusing to our classmates and Speech Instructor.

Music had done its job!! We continued seeing each other whenever we could throughout the next school year. Economics

forced us to take a long time to get to the Alter. (Altar)

It was now the spring of 1948 and there didn't seem to be any musical jobs available. I could make graduation by January 1949 by taking both summer sessions, so I gave up practicing to accomplish it. Then in mid-December the leader of the first band I played with in 1946 called and needed me to play 3 jobs during the New Years Eve weekend, the last on January 1, 1949. I didn't know it at the time that this would be my last job with a band for many, many years to come.

PART III

Now comes a fast forward to my next job with a band. In 1949 there wasn't much demand for "average" college grads. in business. My parents had moved to Oceanside in 1948, so I worked with my father, building small homes. I began drawing plans and helping with all phases of the construction and eventually making a few home sales. I also obtained a contractors license but by 1953 building had slowed considerably and I realized also, that I lacked the physical stamina and drive for so demanding a job. After a couple of ill-advised business ventures in Los Angeles and Salinas, during which my college chum and wife since 1951, worked to support us both, we moved to San Diego and I obtained a job selling builders hardware. This became my lifes work, full time for 22 years as well as doing specification writing as an independant consultant for an additional 11 years. In 1965 I became a member of the professional "Architectral Hardware Consultants" Society. Music had long been just a memory - or so I thought.

There had been tours by a few of the old big name bands with San Diego on their itinerary but I had never attended any of their performances. Then, in 1971, Tex Beneke, the saxophone star of the Miller band, played a Miller music nostalgia dance concert in San Diego. After 30 years it seemed like a fun thing to go and see him and listen to the Miller music again. As "old folks" now, my wife and I decided to just sit in the balcony and listen. During the first number the dance floor instantly flooded with dancing couples. What a beautiful sight!

By the end of that first number, I was in front of the bandstand - again enraptured. Most of the arrangements of the big hits of the name bands, especially those of the Miller Band, had been published and I had played them in several bands many times. The next morning I pulled my horns from a dusty closet and attempted playing some of those numbers. I had not touched the horns for 10 years, so what came out sounded pitiful. Now, I had attempted to get in shape musically a couple of times over the years, but after 2 or 3 months of practice, I gave it up as pointless. However, this time I kept at it, not knowing why. My old 1941 sax had become pretty well worn and 8 months later I became the proud owner of a late model Selmer Tenor sax. These were made in France and were known as the Cadillac of saxophones and played by 9 out of 10 professional players for about 40 years. This gave me additional incentive to keep practicing. In early 1973, I heard of what was now known as a "nostalgia" big band locally and contacted the leader, Ed Stangler, who played lead Alto Sax. He agreed to call me for a try out the next time he needed a tenor saxist. On July 21, 1973, he called and asked if I could play that night as a substitute. Wow!! I barely got to the job a few minutes before starting time. It had been 24 years, 6 months and 21 days since I had been on a bandstand, a thrill beyond belief. I must have done alright because a few weeks later Mr. Stangler called and asked if I could play 4th tenor the following night for he had decided to replace a player who had a drinking problem and the chair was mine if I wanted it. So began my second chance in life to do what I loved to do best, at age 50. Another of those lucky breaks so many years later and which lasted for many more years than I could possibly have imagined. I was pretty "rusty" at first. The arrangements were not difficult and the band was normally playing two nights per week and I began to improve rapidly.

The bands music was mostly of the commercial or "Sweet Type", such as the styles of Hal Kemp, Guy Lombardo or Sammy Kaye variety, often scorned by swing band musicians but I could care less. I was playing steadily again and that was all that mattered. I could hardly wait the days between jobs to get on the bandstand, - I was 20 again! The other band members were mostly of middle age also. The music contained many ballads and swing numbers of the 30's and 40's, so we all had a lot of memories to share. In 1974 we became the "house-band" at the U.S. Naval Air Station in San Diego playing two nights a week at the officers club. A few outside jobs were also played for various organizations, clubs and private parties. We were non-union and played for whatever the leader could get for a 12 piece band which wasn't more than travel expense and instrument upkeep but we were not playing for a living now, mostly just for fun. One interesting diversion to our usual engagements occurred shortly after I joined the band. We had played for a convention of an antique car society locally and they wanted us to play succeeding conventions held in Southern California. These required trips to Disneyland, Pasadena and Long Beach where we played aboard the Queen Mary - quite a grand luxurious floating city in its day but now an interesting relic. We also found the complete renovations and restoration of automobiles manufactured as early as World War I, an added plus to these trips.

About a year later the Navy reduced our jobs to one per week. This allowed our leader to take other jobs with more variety, then the Baritone saxist decided to take a leave of absence which lasted longer than expected. So there I was - back on the big baritone where I remained for 6 years. There were no rapid changes during this time span as in World War II. Our leader was a capable arranger and was giving us new and better music to play. A lot of the younger musicians would get bored or tried to move up or on, after a year or so. Four or five of us "old men" never left the band during the many years I was a member.

Other than our Navy jobs there were many varied jobs to play for every kind of club, party, celebration or convention in the San Diego area. We played at most of the large hotels and convention centers for these affairs, many of which were large and memorable and some very lavish.

Ocasionaly one of the amusing incidents that so often happen in band life occurred. Such as a job we played at Rancho Santa Fe, one of the wealthiest multi-million dollr home suburbs near San Diego.

The hostess of the club, dressed in a beautiful formal gown, left her table at intermission to visit the band. She had apparently been drinking heavily and suddenly just collapsed, or melted, to the dance floor and had to be carried out by some formally dressed men!! Then there was a national convention for law enforcement officials. I believe it was a county sheriffs organization, when the large, burly sheriff in charge of the affair lost his badge! Quite a search followed on the large dance floor - among much laughter.

One of the conventions featured an intermission show of young female dancers dressed to resemble angels, i. e. , they wore skin tight semi-transparent gowns of white with large pairs of wings attached to their backs. All of the girls, except one, were wearing white undergarments under their translucent gowns. I was not aware of this but the trombonist behind me said, "Ray, how do you like the nude in the front line?" Wow! No undergarments, I had seen a real live naked angel!!!! Well, almost!

One Saturday evening at our U.S.N.A.S. jobs, the trombone player said, the greatest opera tenor singer in the world was out front. I didn't bother to look as I couldn't believe such an artist would waste his time listening to a 3rd rate nostalgia band. The following evening I attended an evening variety concert at San Diego State and while walking up a double set of stairs, there was Mr. Pavarotti alright-coming down the opposite stairs in the crowd of people. He saw my smile of recognition as we passed. He was so casually dressed, probably very few people recognized him.

There was always the usual camaraderie among fellow musicians, always talking about music, at intermissions, in restrooms, restaurants and trips to and from jobs. There was usually the passing around of raunchy jokes and discussions of the most attractive women in the the audience. All this was a great lift to our spirits after a weeks grind at our daily jobs. Musicians have often been the target of jokes and disparaging remarks. There are always exceptions of course but I have found in general, they are the most dedicated people to improving or maintaining their skill one can imagine. Many will practice for hours and weeks to over-come some tiny flaw in their playing or just to stay in top form. I have met more "health nuts", of which I proudly am, than drunks or smokers among musicians. Bandleaders can't tolerate much of that on a bandstand. There are musicians from every occupation, or day job in bands, from carpenters to doctors. Many are highly articulate, literate and witty but all bonded together by one powerful adhesive, "their love of music.

Retirement is something they never think about -they will be playing as long as they can walk or crawl onto a bandstand. They would rather be dead than be away from or denied, music. The absolute requirement of a committed musician, is to play -whether in primitive conditions for natives in tropical jungles, in swank hotels for the rich or rehearsal bands with no pay, all of which I have done - because - I must play as long as I am able. I have played jobs when so sick with colds or asthma attacks I could hardly set up, taking several de-congestants and pain relievers to last through the job, or suffering with some injury and I have seen other musicians do the same.

In the Stangler band, all of the imaginable human foibles occurred at one time or another. Forgotten instruments, wearing wrong uniforms, forgetting a job, falling off the bandstand, knocking over instruments, sudden sickness on the job. For health reasons, I was suspended for a couple of years but invited back in 1982, playing Alto Sax. The alto was hard for me to play in tune, so after a year, I was back to my first love, the Tenor Sax. One interesting break in our routine came in the summer of 1982 when we hoped to revive the Friday Afternoon, "tea dances" from 5:00 to 8:00 P.M.. These were played in a coastal 12 story top-floor hotel ballroom with a full length wall of glass with a panoramic view of San Diego Bay, the city skyline and the mountains beyond. Quite an evening view, especially when the full moon came out. These were successful at first, but after 3 months attendance dropped to below break-even for the hotel and further jobs were cancelled. Such are the uncertainties of music but we still were playing the weekly N.A.S. jobs and varied club type jobs.

Upon my return to the Tenor Sax I was given the "solo" chair which required innate talent for extemporaneous solos, but there were only a few, so I wrote and memorized and practiced them so I could get up and blow a "hot" memorized chorus whenever those numbers came up. This didn't fool any of the musicians but they never complained if I goofed up. The public didn't know the difference so I got by with it as long as I was on the "solo" chair. Enthusiasm can compensate for much inadequacy. Most musicians avoid criticism but

will applaud an especially good performance, by a fellow member.

During my 2 year sabbatical at the start of the '80's, the leader had written a large number of new arrangements to replace his old stocks and made several changes in personnel. A highly talented trumpet and trombone player and singer, Jim Belk, had joined the band, possessing a resonant, lower range voice.

Besides playing 2 instruments, made him a valuable addition to the band and he had the fastest wit I had ever heard. He had played for the '40's name bands of Freddy Martin and Ted Weems for several years each. A greatly talented tenor saxist, Gene Porter, from the highly regarded Jimmie Lunceford band of the same era often came with the band as a guest soloist... He did not need music and our leader allowed him to take off on jazz solos of his choice several times during the evening. He was as spell-binding as Ventura, Beneke and Hawkins and here he was sitting beside me on the bandstand! (Forty years later). The band had several female vocalists over the years and in the mid. 80's when the position became open, a lady at our Navy Club, Mary Hicks, offered an on-the-job trial. We were all so surprised by her ability to sing any kind of ballad or fast moving lyric, with only rhythm accompaniment, that our leader encouraged her to do just that, several times during the evening. She loved singing, jazz,

the hard swinging bands and drove over 50 miles to be with the band for several years. She was still with the band years later when I "Retired." Another similiar surprise occurred with a young trombone player. I guess our regular vocalist was off a particular night and we had a rather corny number requiring a male vocal. Our trombonist offered to try it and our leader, with some doubt said, go ahead. Surprise, he was absolutely perfect for the novelty songs as he had a rather high pitched voice, could use a monotone type of pronunciation and highly unusual for a male singer - a two octave range. The comments, "A Star is Born" and "hire him, hire him" came from the band. Now we had 3 talented and varied style vocalists as additional assets for the band. Another star Alto Saxist, Ralph Bruno helped out when our leaders health began to fail. He had played lead with the old Sammy Kaye Band and surprisingly to me, also with my first idol, Tex Beneke when playing East Coast dates. He had a strong even vibrato with a big tone, perfect for the 1st. Alto and a joy to play with. Having a sound like that above you inspires you to do your best and it was easy to match his vibrato after playing a couple numbers. Another Tenor Saxist joined the band from the 1970's, the Guy Lombardo Group. This was our leaders favorite band from its earliest years in the thirties. He was not a jazz player but otherwise a perfect musician, never missing a note! - as dependable as they come and a real Gentlemen. Our leader was so pleased to have him.

In February 1988, a fire in the N.A.S. officers club caused extensive damage, requiring complete remodeling and rebuilding which took the balance of the year. We had few jobs until the re-opening on New Yars Eve. We had feared the possible loss of some of our loyal supporters, but the evening was a big success and we were again playing there once weekly. In July of '89 our dates were cut to (2) per month Starting in 1990, our jobs were reduced to one per month.

Declining jobs became a trend during my remaining years in the band, however those years became more rewarding musically. During the recent years in the band I came to appreciate our leaders preference for the arranging style of the Hal Kemp band of the late '30's, which featured low-register clarinets, staccato trumpets and "silky" trombones. They were usually in excellent taste, skillfully arranged and smooth and easy on the ears. After listening to a tape of the arrangements I felt the best of the lot was a great hit by Irving Berlin, "Cheek to Cheek", from a 1935 movie, "Top Hat", starring dancing artist Fred Astaire. It was fairly easy to copy from listening to the tape on one of the old 7 1/2" reel recorders. I had copied a couple of numbers by other bands which were not in favor by our leader but he liked this one and played it often.

During the years I also became acquainted with musicians from several rehearsal bands and was invited to play Tenor or Baritone regularly with two of them. A rehearsal band was just a nostalgia and fun group of elderly or retired musicians to get together and play their preferred type of numbers for a couple of hours, weekly or bi-monthly. This lasted for several years so I was usually rehearsing

6 nights per month plus the occasional job with the Stangler band playing from 3 different books was fun with some really professional musicians. The brass section could go to full size, 4 trumpets and 4 trombones, since they didn't cost the leaders anything. Each group had players that had played with the old name bands and as usual I felt far out-classed but my enthusiasm was welcomed. During one of these rehearsals I received the greatest compliment of my life. The leader of the sax section, Ralph Bruno had us play the clarinet lead Sax chorus on the Glenn Miller arrangement of "Danny Boy", a great number for its brilliant wailing sound and I was playing Tenor Sax. It sounded so good Mr. Bruno said "play it again -and- blow the hell out of it!" "WOW", I looked around to

see the surprised looks of the brass section and a large burly trumpeter from the Ralph Martieri band said to me: "you've got a perfect sound for a Glenn Miller Sax Section"!! I was so shocked at so gracious a compliment I could only mutter incoherently. Over the years I often practiced the Miller Sax section vibrato by playing with its recordings. I had achieved it -- 50 years later!

The numbers I copied from records were played and appreciated by these bands. I also wrote the extra parts for some arrangements for the 8 man brass sections. Occasionally one of the other bands would call me to substitute for one of their regular members which I was happy to do. One of them had obtained an unusual job for good pay, to play for an elaborate wedding party outdoors - in a very large tent - in the winter - at night - on a bluff overlooking the Ocean. The required heat was supplied by portable electric heaters placed several feet apart around the perimeter on the inside. The price for so memorable an evening must have been a very nice piece of change for there were at least 200 and more guests in attendance. The band didn't even have a name but a lady came up to me and said: "Whose Band is this - You guys are great!", to which I replied: "well just look around and you'll see that we all have 20 to 40 years of experience."

Mr. Stanglers health, my long time leader, had been in decline for a couple of years after a stroke and by 1994 had to give up playing but came with the band as a listener. By December he looked very bad and passed away in February of 1995. The band was inherited by his long time friend and saxophonist, Carl Hansen who was playing Baritone when I joined the band in 1973, rejoined the band in 1980 and now was our leader. Due to his poor health, Mr. Stangler

had been able to obtain but few jobs for 1995. The band members remained loyal but in 1996 and 1997 we were kept together by only a few repeat jobs from several clubs. I kept busy with the rehearsal bands and working on a few arrangements which was tedious and time consuming. My arrangements were only mediocre and mainly written as accompaniment for our lady vocalist who could deliver an excellent rendition on any kind of an arrangement.

By the summer of 1997 however, I was 74 and having foot problems. For sometime I had been in possession of the bands stands and library and helping to "set up" and "tear down" and load the equipment after jobs was getting tiresome. A few future engagements appeared to be difficult ones and I did not play well on an engagement of August 25, 1997. I then decided it was best for me and the band to resign. It was an agonizing decision and I procrastinated for more than a week before informing Mr. Hansen. So, after 24 years, my second childhood in music ended, all due to the tolerance and guidance of a little known bandleader, Ed Stangler, who made it possible. I had logged 990 jobs with the band. The occasional jobs I also played with the rehearsal bands brought the total to well over 1,000. Not much to a professional musician but for a "week-ender" starting over at age 50 with little talent, I considered it a pretty fair score.

So, there can be a second chance in life to do what you love to do best, even if your talents are limited. My experience at least says it may always exist but takes some unforeseen event to turn it on.

Perhaps the most important element is to be prepared for the opportunity. Why I could have been so lucky, I will never know but the Stangler band very quickly became the most important part of my life - even while writing hardware specifications for Architects until 1989. The big question remains -- was it worth all the effort?? An unanswerable question -- I cannot relive my life to find out. The only thing I can say is - I believe it was.

All the musicians I know, agree that there is no thrill like playing those great arrangements for a big band, for, when you get to the "blow-out" chorus with all of the horns blowing a solid wall of harmony at full volume with your adrenaline doing the same, you are on the greatest "high" there is, no drugs required, which allows me a little bragging. I have never, ever, used alcohol, narcotics or drugs to

"make me play better. ""MUSIC"" - is the drug - nothing equals it. So, why greatly talented musicians destroy themselves by using poisonous or debilitating stimulants or depressants suggests a very serious character flaw, such as a strong inferiority complex or fear of not being able to "stay on top" without assistance. For me and most musicians, our constant goal is to deliver a perfect performance on tonights engagement and I certainly want a clear head and all reflexes in perfect synchronization in the hope of reaching that euphoric, elusive, but seldom attained goal.

Although this account has concerned only the popular music of the big band era, this does not mean my interest has been that limited.

I have enjoyed hoe down fiddlers, (My Grandfather was a Champion), the "Boston Pops", the lighter renditions of Mozart and Tschaikowsky, the 140 year old Strauss Waltzes, Mexican Rancheras and Vocaltrios. What if I had heard and seen George Gershwin perform "Rhapsody in Blue" at the age of 12 years? Would I have tried to become a concert pianist? So, whatever kind of music that lifts you up and turns you on, jump on board and enjoy the ride, because it will reward you more benefits than you can imagine.

I can honestly say that of all the places I have been and seen and played in from the most humble and primitive, to the most exalted and sophisticated, that practically all of the credit for it is due to my slavish obedience to the siren call of sound - that inspiring, thrilling, Magical, Invisible, - - "" WITCH - MUSIC! ""

Ray Binkley - May, 2002