

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



RAY MCKINLEY

[This is the forty-second article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

I never met Glenn Miller. Tex Beneke cancelled his show in my home town, Cleveland, so I didn't meet him either. But I did indeed meet Ray McKinley. Let's take a look at the final member of my trilogy profiling the bandleaders of the famous Glenn Miller Orchestra.

Raymond Frederick McKinley was born in Fort Worth, TX, on June 18, 1910, and began playing drums with local bands at the tender age of 9. When he left home at age 15, he joined Milt Shaw's Detroiters, and then the Smith Ballew and Duncan-Marin bands. His big break came when he turned 24. He became the featured drummer in the Dorsey Brothers Band. McKinley remained with the Jimmy Dorsey band, after the feuding brothers split up for good, for another four years. In 1939, he became co-leader of the Will Bradley band, and recorded his biggest hit to date, *Beat Me Daddy, Eight To The Bar*. As a vocalist as well as the drummer! This led to his nickname, "Eight Beat Mack," found in the lyrics in another favorite, *Down The Road A Piece*. Two other hits during this period, featuring Ray's rather humorous vocals, had the unlikely names of *Celery Stalks At Midnight* and *Fry Me Cookie In A Can Of Lard*. Honest!

Unfortunately, Bradley and McKinley began to get on each other's nerves. Will became resentful of all the novelty numbers popularized by Ray, while Ray found Will's style of playing trombone extremely "schmaltzy." When they parted ways in 1942, McKinley joined Captain Glenn Miller's Army Air force Band. He had played with Glenn in the Dorsey Brothers Band and they had become good friends. After the war, he led his own band from 1946 – 1952, but with the decline in the popularity of Big Band, he sought a solo career in Radio and TV, even at one time working as a disk jockey. But, as always, good luck followed McKinley.

In 1956, when the Jimmy Stewart movie, *The Glenn Miller Story*, rekindled interest in Big Bands, Miller's widow asked him to take over command of the Miller Orchestra after bandleader Tex Beneke left. Ray led the group until 1966, keeping the "Miller Sound" alive, while touring the U.S., Europe and Japan. I remember seeing McKinley and the band on TV during the summer of 1961, when he co-hosted the *Glenn Miller Time* 13-week series with singer Johnny Desmond, another Miller Orchestra alumnus.

I met Ray in the very early 60s, when the orchestra played a gig at the Chippewa Lake

Park Ballroom, outside Cleveland. In fact, the band I was playing with was on the “undercard” that night, acting as the warm-up band for McKinley. I remember Ray, off-stage, was watching and listening to us (we carefully avoided playing any “Miller Music”). After we finished, he shook our bandleader's hand, turned to our Dance Band and said “good job.” Wow! Did that feel good. I think we would have played for free that night!



In the early 70s, Ray played drums for still another incarnation of the Miller Orchestra, this time led by clarinetist Buddy DeFranco. The band was called "The World Famous Glenn Miller Orchestra, Directed By Buddy DeFranco." Some of the group's recordings on the *Columbia House* label featured McKinley, still as swinging and energetic as ever.

Ray's final recording session featured him on drums and Lou Stein on piano. The album, *Stompin' 'Em Down*, is unfortunately NOT available on CD, only the original vinyl LP. (Label: Chiaroscuro, LP, CR 173, 1977! You'll often hear selections from this recording on vintage-jazz radio stations.

Ray retired from the music business in 1978, but found renewed energy to visit England in 1985 for a television show with two of his Glenn Miller colleagues, the trumpeter Zeke Zarchy and Peanuts Hucko. (Musicians never really retire, do they?). His dry wit and his performing effervescence will always be remembered by everyone who followed McKinley's career. Ray departed this world on May 7, 1995, in Largo, FL, at age 84.

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com. See them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic