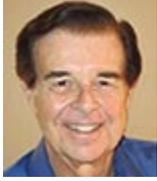


ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



TEX BENEKE

[This is the forty-first 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.]

Few would dispute that Glenn Miller will always be remembered as one of the chief architects of the Big Band Swing era. But how did Tex Beneke ascend to the leadership of the Miller band, after Glenn's death? Was it just sheer dumb luck or was Beneke really deserving of the position? Let's examine the facts.

Born February 12, 1914 in Fort Worth, Texas, Gordon Lee Beneke began playing saxophone at age 9. He had a rather normal, uneventful childhood, and didn't enjoy professional work in music until he was 21. In 1935, he joined the Ben Young Orchestra, playing an endless string of one-nighters all over the Midwest. Then Detroit happened!

Drummer Gene Krupa left Benny Goodman's band in 1938 to form his own. Looking for new talent all over the country, Krupa dropped in to listen to Ben Young's band at a Detroit ballroom. Gene took a couple of the boys back to New York with him and although he wanted Beneke as well, Gene's sax section was already filled. Krupa knew that his friend, Glenn Miller, was forming his own orchestra, and recommended Beneke to him. Glenn trusted Gene's appraisal of the young tenor sax player from Fort Worth, and phoned Beneke with an offer at the salary of \$50 a week. Beneke countered with \$52.50. After a silence, Miller reportedly replied "All right, I'll give it to you. But you're going to have to prove that you're worth the extra two and a half dollars."

At the band's first rehearsal, Miller said "OK, Tex. Get your horn." The nickname stuck, and Tex Beneke quickly proved his worth. He earned that extra \$2.50. Initially, Tex just played sax in Glenn's band. One night while on tour, Glenn and Tex would take turns driving Miller's car. Beneke was singing *Ida! Sweet As Apple Cider* to himself to stay awake. Glenn liked what he heard and asked his arranger, Billy May, to write an arrangement that would take advantage of Beneke's smooth, southern voice. Even without any previous professional singing



experience, Tex soon became one of the band's most popular soloists. That's him you hear singing the lead on *Chattanooga Choo Choo*, *Don't Sit Under The Apple Tree*, and *I've Got A Gal In Kalamazoo*. [The photo at the top of this paragraph shows Tex, Glenn and singer Marion Hutton.]

Soon after Glenn broke up his band to join the Army Air Corps in August, 1942, Beneke joined the Navy, where he led a Navy band in Oklahoma. Miller's plane went missing in December, 1944, and after the war, Glenn's wife, Helen, requested that Tex take the Miller band back on the road. Beneke put together a ghost band," with primarily the same composition as Miller's Army Air force band, which featured a large string section. It also featured a young pianist named Henry Mancini!

As time went on, Tex modified the Miller charts, sometimes playing them at a different tempo or in a different key, trying to sound reasonably different from the Glenn Miller formula-sound. By the late 40s, Beneke and the Miller estate parted ways. Could that be the reason that his character in the 1953 film release, *The Glenn Miller Story*," was conspicuously absent, even though Tex played such a *huge* part in the band's success?

Tex Beneke and His Orchestra performed world-wide for the next 50 years, playing music *close* to the Miller sound, but with as much new music as old. One notable songstress performing with his band was Eydie Gorme, a vastly under-rated jazz and pop singer. Beneke and former Miller singers Ray Eberle, Paula Kelley and The Modernaires first recorded the LP, *Reunion in Hi-Fi*, recreating the original Miller material (Available on Amazon, but only on used Vinyl, Coral Label, ASIN: B003IJ0X0M (Note: Try YouTube – hopefully someday, someone will have uploaded this true masterpiece).

His band played a lot of *Disneyland* engagements, and Tex often appeared on the late night talk shows, where Merv Griffin and Johnny Carson would feature many musical greats. I vividly remember watching, during my high school years, Beneke and fellow Miller veteran alto sax player, Al Klink (by that time, a member of the *Tonight Show* band), trading two-bar solos on Miller's *In the Mood* and *String of Pearls*. (If you see me at one of our gigs, just request them – probably two of the best swing band pieces ever written – I'm still in awe every time I play them)!

OK, death and taxes; you know the drill. Respiratory arrest took this jazz legend from us in the year 2000, at age 86. Did he really deserve to be the torch-bearer for the Miller legend? In my mind – absolutely! And he did it with class. I really feel Glenn would be proud; Tex would have been his pick. I believe that without a doubt!

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