

*Pittsburgh's*

DANCE

BAND

*ETNA*



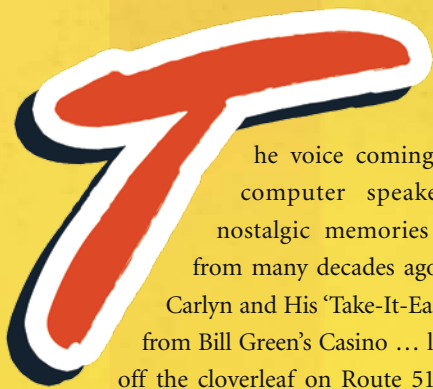


# A Nostalgic Look at Pittsburgh's Big Band Roots

By Paul Roth with  
Patricia Finkel







The voice coming from my computer speaker stirred nostalgic memories of music from many decades ago: “Tommy Carlyn and His ‘Take-It-Easy Tempos’ from Bill Green’s Casino ... located just off the cloverleaf on Route 51.” It was a 1947 recording of a popular Pittsburgh band being broadcast nationally on the NBC radio network from a nightclub in Pittsburgh’s South Hills. This show, and many others, are on a website that features radio broadcasts of dance bands

from various national locations.<sup>1</sup> I’ve had a lifelong interest in dance bands and their music, so that broadcast—which represented just a small part of Western Pennsylvania’s dance band history—brought back many poignant memories.

I’ve been a fan of dance bands all my life. I’ve played a number of woodwinds, led a recreational band, produced and hosted radio and TV programs of dance band music. I also have accumulated a collection of more than 10,000 recordings and film clips from the 1920s through the ’50s. And I’ve even produced several dance band CDs and written their descriptive notes.

In my early teen years, fellow band-fanatics would gather on summer evenings around the steps of the First Reformed Church

at the corner of Union and Library Avenues in McKeesport. We would vocally imitate our favorite bands by making a cappella instrumental sounds à la the Mills Brothers, even recreating complete broadcasts. I simulated the woodwinds and trombone while Chuck Coughlin imitated trumpet and Ted Fry created rhythm sound, to name just a couple of friends. We alternated in singing the vocal choruses.

For those of us older than 70, the era of the dance bands was an unforgettable time. We listened to broadcasts and recordings, and we danced to the bands in person or watched them perform on stage. With most of the performers and venues gone, it’s nice to have modern technology to help spark our memories and preserve some of the history.



LEFT: Dix recording label, National recording label, Jet recording label. Paul Roth Collection.

BELOW: By the 1940s, dance band fans in Pittsburgh had many options on their radio dial.

HHC Detre L&A, Pittsburgh Press, August 11, 1947.

## Around-the-Clock Radio

(Late Monday—Early Tuesday—Daylight)

(PROGRAMS ARE PROVIDED BY STATION)

|       | KDKA—1020<br>NBC Network      | WCAE—1250<br>American Network                       | WJAS—1320<br>Columbia Network                 | KC...        |
|-------|-------------------------------|---|---|--------------|
| 1:00  | Backstage Wife, drama         | Paul Whiteman<br>Continued                          | Hist Hunt<br>Continued                        | Juke Bo...   |
| 1:15  | Stella Dallas—Drama           | News; Tunes   | Barry Wood Show                               | Conti...     |
| 1:30  | Lorenzo Jones, Sketch         | Dick Tracy  | Universal Training                            | Juke Bo...   |
| 1:45  | Widder Brown, drama           | Terry & Pirates—Sk.                                 | House Party—Fun<br>Continued                  | Melody...    |
| 5:00  | A Girl Marries—Sk.            | Sky King—Sk.  | pittsburgh Story                              | Adventu...   |
| 5:15  | Portia Faces Life—Sk.         | Jack Armstrong—Sk.                                  | Musicals                                      | Hop Har...   |
| 5:30  | Plain Bill—Sketch             | Tennessee Jed—Sk.                                   | Bob Prince, Sports                            | Tom Mi...    |
| 5:45  | Front Page Farrell, Sk.       | Sports—News   | Beckley Smith, News                           | Radio N...   |
| 6:00  | News                          | Song Time   | Musicals                                      | Piano M...   |
| 6:15  | Slim Bryant                   | News; Music   | Bob Lewis Show                                | File Tray    |
| 6:30  | Mildred Don—Song              | Melodic Symphony                                    | Continued                                     | Cote Gle...  |
| 6:45  | Lowell Thomas—News            | Eddy Duchin, piano                                  | Bob Crosby Orch.                              | Henry Ta...  |
| 7:00  | Supper Club music             | Melodies  | Bob Trout News                                | Footland...  |
| 7:15  | News                          | Lone Ranger—Switch<br>Continued                     | Continued                                     | Continu...   |
| 7:30  | Songs You Love                | Lam & Abner—Com.                                    | Bob Hawk                                      | Charlie C... |
| 7:45  | Continued                     | Boobby Doyle Show                                   | Continued                                     | Continu...   |
| 8:00  | Play By Ear                   | Treasury Agent<br>Continued                         | Inner Sanctum—Myst.<br>Continued              | Continu...   |
| 8:15  | Vocal Stars                   | The Clock<br>Continued                              | Arthur Godfrey<br>Continued                   | Continu...   |
| 8:30  | Continued                     | Sammy Kaye Orch.<br>Continued                       | CBS Is There<br>"Escape"<br>Continued         | Continu...   |
| 8:45  | Continued                     | Doctor's Talk                                       | My Friend Irma<br>Continued                   | Continu...   |
| 9:00  | Telephone Hour—Music          | Buddy Weed Trio<br>Orchestra<br>Continued           | Bob Hawk<br>Continued                         | Continu...   |
| 9:15  | Dr. I. Q.<br>Continued        | Bob Prince—News<br>Sports<br>Orchestra<br>Continued | Ken Middlebrand, news                         | Continu...   |
| 9:30  | Continued                     | Swing Shift<br>Continued                            | In My Opinion<br>Dance Orchestra<br>Continued | Continu...   |
| 9:45  | Continued                     | Continued   | News; Musicals<br>Signature                   | Continu...   |
| 10:00 | Contented Hour—Music          | Continued   | Continued                                     | Continu...   |
| 10:15 | Continued                     | Continued   | Continued                                     | Continu...   |
| 10:30 | Piano Quartet<br>Continued    | Continued   | Continued                                     | Continu...   |
| 10:45 | Continued                     | Continued   | Continued                                     | Continu...   |
| 11:00 | News                          | Continued   | Continued                                     | Continu...   |
| 11:15 | Sports                        | Continued   | Continued                                     | Continu...   |
| 11:30 | Orchestra                     | Continued   | Continued                                     | Continu...   |
| 11:45 | Continued                     | Continued   | Continued                                     | Continu...   |
| 12:00 | Midnighters Club<br>Continued | Continued   | Continued                                     | Continu...   |
| 12:15 | Continued                     | Continued   | Continued                                     | Continu...   |
| 12:30 | Continued                     | Continued   | Continued                                     | Continu...   |
| 12:45 | Music to 2 a. m.              | Continued   | Continued                                     | Continu...   |



The author's friends would gather on summer evenings around the steps of the First Reformed Church in McKeesport to sing their favorite dance band tunes.

Photo by Brian Butko.

*In my early teen years, fellow band-fanatics would gather on summer evenings around the steps of the First Reformed Church...in McKeesport. We would vocally imitate our favorite bands by making a cappella instrumental sounds à la the Mills Brothers, even recreating complete broadcasts.*

| Programs<br>(Saving Time)<br>(DNS)  |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| WV—1410<br>Mutual Network           | WWV—1490<br>Victory Network                                     |
| Continued                           | News; Melodias<br>Melody-Go-Round<br>Continued<br>Continued     |
| Theater<br>Scores<br>—Child's       | News; Melodias<br>Continued<br>Record Hits<br>Continued         |
| News<br>Sports<br>Club              | Ray Schneider—News<br>Dinner Concert<br>Sports<br>Entertainment |
| News—News<br>Harmony<br>Taylor—News | News<br>Good Time<br>Joe Tucker—Sports<br>Orchestra             |
| Yard<br>ed<br>—Mystery              | News; Music<br>Waltz Time<br>Curtain Calls<br>Continued         |
| Weather<br>Orch.                    | News; Music<br>Warmup Time<br>Baseball Game<br>Continued        |
| Hunting                             | Baseball<br>Continued<br>Continued<br>Continued                 |
| th, News<br>Knights<br>Reading      | Baseball<br>Continued<br>Scores; News<br>Jazz Jamboree          |
| Reading                             | "1500 Club" Music<br>Continued<br>Continued                     |

## DANCE BANDS

A dance band, also called an orchestra (and in later years a “big band”), was typically a group of 9 to 20 musicians playing arranged sheet music (or charts) on traditional instruments: woodwinds (primarily saxophones and clarinets), brass (primarily trumpets and trombones), and “rhythm” (primarily piano, drum, bass viol or tuba, and guitar or banjo). A few employed the accordion. Bands that played swanky hotel restaurants and ballrooms frequently included a string section. A vocalist or two would accompany the band. With

the exception of vocalists and occasionally a pianist, the groups were usually male. The actual size of an organization was partially influenced by the location and the contract for the appearance. They mainly played music for the fox-trot, but also for the other popular dances of the era: waltz, swing, polka, and Latin rhythms.

The dance band was usually identified by the leader’s name such as Glenn Miller or Johnny Long. Sometimes a catch phrase was attached such as Guy Lombardo and the Royal Canadians.





**ABOVE: Bee Bee recording label.**

Paul Roth Collection.

**RIGHT: Tommy Carlyn and Bill Green.**

HHC Detre L&A, Bill Green Collection.



Local bands such as Clyde Knight, Brad Hunt, and Benny Benack usually performed in a limited locality such as Western Pennsylvania. “Territory” bands, like Pittsburgh’s Tommy Carlyn and Baron Elliott, usually performed in a region such as the Midwest or the Tri-State area. Nationally known (or “name”) bands were headquartered in a major center of entertainment such as New York City or Chicago, and made one or more national tours annually. These could include hotel engagements, “one-nighters” at ballrooms, and stage shows at major theaters. Such famous name bands as Benny Goodman, Jan Savitt, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Ralph Flanagan, and Duke Ellington made frequent appearances in the Pittsburgh area.

Although the name bands were often not equal opportunity, there were some notable exceptions. Benny Goodman took the lead

in 1936 by hiring Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton to play with his small groups. In 1941, his band included trumpeter Cootie Williams (from Duke Ellington) and in 1934 Billie Holiday made her first recordings (“OP Pappy” and “Your Mother’s Son-in-Law”) with Benny. Gene Krupa—in 1942—featured the trumpet and vocals of Pittsburgh native Roy Eldridge. At each Count Basie performance I attended—in the 1950s (Pennsylvania), ’70s (Washington, D.C.), and ’80s (Florida)—his band was racially mixed. And in his last concert tour, around 1978, Benny Goodman’s trumpet section leader was Laurie Frink, a woman. Benny, by reputation, was interested in the best musical talent available. Irrespective of their personnel makeup, the major bands played at all kinds of venues in all types of towns and neighborhoods.

## LOCAL LEADERS AND MUSICIANS

A number of bandleaders who hailed from Western Pennsylvania attained national recognition, including Ted Weems (Pitcairn), Ray Anthony (Bentleyville), Chuck Foster (Arnold), Jimmy Palmer (Canonsburg), and Ray Pearl (Johnstown).

Saxophonist Baron Elliott led one of the most prominent and long-lived bands in the area. He started his band in 1933 as a senior at Allegheny High School. He told me, “By 1934, I was successful enough to be hired to play a summer-long engagement at Castle Farms, a ballroom near Cincinnati, Ohio.” For the next eight years, the band served Pittsburgh radio stations WCAE and WJAS as staff orchestra, except for the summer seasons when it toured to distant locales like the Trianon Ballroom in Chicago. Elliott was drafted into the Army in 1942. He disbanded for WWII until 1945. He

*Irrespective of their personnel makeup, the major bands played at all kind of venues in all types of towns and neighborhoods.*



was persistent in holding his band together until 1980, long after the dance band era ended.

Many of the bandleaders' names were pseudonyms created for easy recognition. For instance "Tommy Carlyn" was Anthony Collella; "Baron Elliott" was Charlie Craft; "Lee Kelton" was Leo Yagello.

The Western Pennsylvania region also contributed many musicians to national dance bands, among them Bob Doran, 87, who grew up in East Liberty and is now a retired woodwind repairman in Sarasota, Florida. He talked to me about being inspired by his

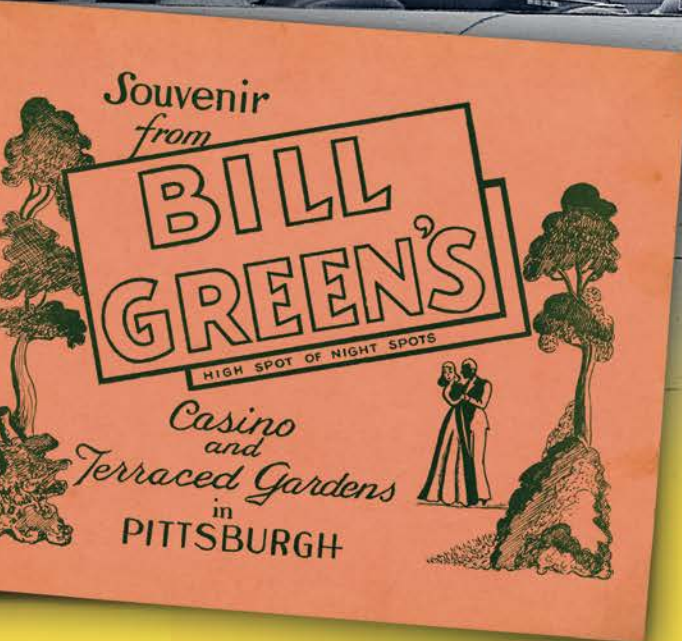
dad, who played banjo with Whitey Kaufman's Pennsylvania Serenaders in the early 1920s. (His dad played on KDKA radio in its inaugural year of 1921.) Bob said he was also inspired in his mid-teens by the recordings of famous tenor saxophonist Coleman Hawkins. He reminisced that as a local professional, he played tenor sax and clarinet with Larry Faith's Orchestra at the Greater Pittsburgh Airport's Horizon Room and with Art Farrar at the Penn-Shady Ballroom. Later, Bob continued to work in New York with nationally known bands, and later in studio orchestras. He says, "I still pick up my horn on occasion to play with local groups." [see photo, page 57]

The area also produced musicians who gained considerable national fame as expert arrangers and conductors: Billy May and Sam Nestico were among the most prominent. May was very influential at Capitol Records where, in the early 1950s, he helped revive Frank Sinatra's career. May was already an established arranger and leader with Capitol Records when Sinatra joined the studio. Thus he was responsible for many of Sinatra's early and very successful Capitol recordings, which featured a big band accompaniment. Nestico was a major creative influence for Count Basie and other jazz-influenced bands. Both had early career experience playing trombone for Baron Elliott's band.



**Tommy Carlyn and his dance band.**  
HHC Detre L&A, Bill Green Collection.

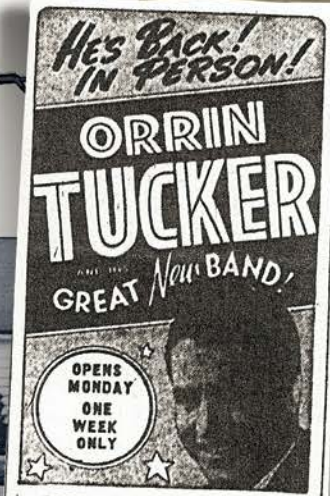




ABOVE: Bill Green's in Pleasant Hills was one of Pittsburgh's most popular nightclubs.  
HHC Detre L&A, Bill Green Collection.

LEFT: A souvenir from Bill Green's  
Dave Sallinger Collection.

RIGHT: Ads for various dance bands in the *Pittsburgh Press*.  
HHC Detre L&A, Pittsburgh Press, August 14, 1947.



*Nightclubs like Bill Green's and the Vogue Terrace catered to teenagers... For my friends and me, such a costly evening was reserved for very special occasions or dates.*

## WHERE THEY PLAYED

Neighborhoods had local fire halls and clubs such as the VFW, American Legion, and Elks for holding dances. Amusement parks like Kennywood and West View had large ballrooms. Roller-skating arenas such as the Palisades in McKeesport and Ches-A-Rena in Cheswick hosted dance bands too. Downtown hotels such as the William Penn, Webster

Hall, and Roosevelt had ballrooms, while the urban fringes included the Hill District's Savoy Ballroom and Crawford Grill and East Liberty's Penn-Shady.

Dance bands appeared at suburban nightclubs, or "road houses," like Vogue Terrace (McKeesport), Bill Green's Casino (Pleasant Hills), Anchorage (Verona), McSorley's Colonial (Avalon), and Willows (Oakmont), and at community ballrooms

from Monessen to Sharon to Greensburg. A recording in my collection contains a 1939 broadcast of Red Nichols and His Five Pennies band playing at the Willows in 1939.<sup>2</sup>

Nightclubs like Bill Green's and the Vogue Terrace catered to teenagers, who could be admitted by paying the cover charge but not be served alcohol. For my friends and me, such a costly evening was reserved for very special occasions or dates. Likewise,





ABOVE: West View Danceland's dance floor, 1948.

BELOW: West View Danceland, c. 1940.

Charles J. Jaques, Jr., *Goodbye West View Park* (1985).



*One of the Nation's Great Dance Centers!*

if you were too young (or too broke) to be admitted to Kennywood's screened ballroom, you could stand outside and listen for free!

As a teen, one of my favorite things to do was to go downtown on a Saturday afternoon to see a movie and a stage show. For most of the Big Band Era, dance band stage appearances were presented by major theaters such as the Stanley, Alvin, and Loew's Penn; the Enright in

East Liberty; the Roosevelt in the Hill District; and the Palace in Greensburg. The stage show was repeated several times a day and would usually offer, along with the band, a complete variety show including (typically) a juggler, a dance team, and a comedian. Spanning nearly the entire period of dance band popularity, Loew's Penn, for instance, presented its first dance band, Ted Lewis, in 1927, and its last, Vaughan Monroe, in 1954.

It should be noted here that while teenagers gained most of the pop notoriety as dance band fans, most of the venues were out of their financial reach, with the exceptions of stage shows, public ballrooms, and proms.

The *Bulletin Index*, in December 1935, gave a listing of downtown places to dance on New Years Eve. The Roosevelt Hotel featured Bernie Armstrong's band, the Show Boat on the Monongahela River presented the Nelson Maple orchestra, and



the Smithfield Grill offered the music of Fran Eichler.

The November 1943 issue of *Down Beat* reported the locations nationally of over 100 major bands. This issue listed Cab Calloway's band on-stage at the Stanley Theater and Richard Himber's orchestra appearing at the Vogue Terrace. The April 1, 1938, *Pittsburgh Press* displayed the Stanley's advertisement for the appearance of Happy Felton's band.

The Chatterbox, a basement nightclub in downtown Pittsburgh's William Penn Hotel from 1933 to 1942, was the launching point for several name bands which subsequently had long careers, playing in hotels, ballrooms, and television. Lawrence Welk is reputed to have invented his "Champagne Music" style there while his band was playing a long engagement in the late 1930s.<sup>3</sup>

Orrin Tucker related that his band was playing at the Chatterbox when they got a telegram inviting them to play the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. "This was to be our first big-time engagement and the band celebrated that night with champagne."<sup>4</sup> Count Basie played an engagement at the Chatterbox on his way from Kansas City to his first New York appearance in 1937 that was broadcast and recorded. The Chatterbox was also a stepping-stone for Don Bestor, Dick Stabile, and others.

Gert Brog, 97, a Squirrel Hill resident, recalls her teenage years living on Center Avenue in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. She and her friends attended the



ABOVE: Dance band venues like the Stanley Theater advertised in Pittsburgh newspapers.  
HHC Detre L&A, Pittsburgh Press, c. 1938.

The Clyde Knight Orchestra.  
Dave Sallinger Collection.





Irene Kauffman Settlement House where they took dance lessons for 25 cents. They often walked from Center Avenue to the Chatterbox to hear dance bands: "Kay Kyser was our favorite because he made music for slow, easy dancing."<sup>5</sup>

## BANDS ON RADIO AND RECORD

Some prominent dance spots were coveted for providing widespread exposure through radio broadcasts, called "airchecks." Pittsburgh's Bill Green may have been one of the pioneers of having a telephone connection or "wire" installed at his establishment, enabling the orchestras to air their performances locally or nationally via network "hook-up."

This was acknowledged by nationally known bandleader Sammy Kaye, who said that his wide-spread popularity started when he brought his Cleveland-based band to Bill Green's, where his radio broadcasts attained a local and national following.

We floundered around quite a bit after we left high school and finally ended up at a place called Bill Green's in Pittsburgh. So we played there in the summertime. We went there and played for the whole season for \$350 a week for the whole band. We started broadcasting. I made a deal with Mutual to pick us up anytime they wanted to. We would come in there at noon, in our pajamas, and do a half-hour broadcast. Another good broadcast that we had was every afternoon about 4:30, nobody in the place, just the band. Of course we would broadcast every night when we played there. That was a big stepping stone.<sup>6</sup>

This resulted in a contract for his first New York City appearance at the Commodore Hotel. Kaye played at Bill Green's every year until April 1953.<sup>7</sup>



SWING & SWAY  
with  
SAMMY KAYE

18 East 48th Street  
New York, N.Y. 10017  
(212) 688-6230

*Pittsburgh's Bill Green may have been one of the pioneers of having a telephone connection or "wire" installed at his establishment, enabling the orchestras to air their performances locally or nationally via network "hook-up."*



## Friday Afternoon and Evening

(EASTERN STANDARD TIME)

(Programs under each heading are listed for quarter-hour periods.)

| KDKA  | WCAE   | WJAS   |
|---|--|--|
| —4 P. M.—<br>Northwest Pioneers<br>Press News Reeler<br>Club Matinee<br>(Variety program)                           | —4 P. M.—<br>Lorenzo Jones<br>Mary Marlin<br>Rush Hughes<br>Road of Life                       | —4 P. M.—<br>Home Owners<br>Chicago Varieties<br>Goldbergs<br>Dr. DaFoe                            |
| —5 P. M.—<br>Junior Nurse Corps<br>Junior Safety Patrol<br>Silhouettes<br>Dog Heroes                                | —5 P. M.—<br>Dick Tracy<br>Garden Talks<br>Jack Armstrong<br>Orphan Annie                      | —5 P. M.—<br>Follow the Moon<br>Mary Sothern<br>Stepmother<br>Hilltop House                        |
| —6 P. M.—<br>News; Sports<br>Under the Sea<br>Dot and Pat<br>Lowell Thomas  | —6 P. M.—<br>Stardust<br>Art Directors<br>Airliners<br>Serenade                                | —6 P. M.—<br>Lum and Abner<br>News of the World<br>Boake Carter<br>Benny Burton Orch.              |
| —7 P. M.—<br>Political Talk<br>ditto<br>Let's Celebrate<br>Songs of Long Ago  | —7 P. M.—<br>Amos 'n' Andy<br>Uncle Extra, sketch<br>Answer<br>(New radio game)                | —7 P. M.—<br>Just Entertainment<br>Arthur Godfrey<br>Hollace Shaw, songs<br>ditto                  |
| —8 P. M.—<br>Grand Central Station<br>(Dramatic sketch)<br>Spelling Bee<br>(Librarians vs. Booksellers)             | —8 P. M.—<br>Lucille Manners<br>(With<br>Frank Black<br>conducting)                            | —8 P. M.—<br>To Be Announced<br>To Be Announced<br>Paul Whiteman<br>(B. Berigan, Mildred Bailey)   |
| —9 P. M.—<br>Tim and Irene<br>(And George Olsen)<br>Spelling Bee<br>Librarians vs. booksellers                      | —9 P. M.—<br>Waltz Time<br>(Frank Munn, Lois Bennett)<br>A. L. Alexander<br>(Human Relations)  | —9 P. M.—<br>Hollywood Hotel<br>("Goodbye Broadway,"<br>with Alice Brady<br>and Charles Winninger) |
| —10 P. M.—<br>Middleweight Fight<br>(Fred Apostoli vs. Glenn<br>Lee, blow-by-blow details)<br>News and Weather      | —10 P. M.—<br>First Nighter<br>(Dramatization)<br>Jimmy Fidler, chat<br>Dorothy Thompson, talk | —10 P. M.—<br>"Song Shop"<br>(Dana Seuse, famous<br>girl composer)                                 |
| —11 P. M.—<br>Joe Louis vs. H. Thomas<br>(Heavyweight crown fight)<br>Music You Love<br>(Songs that never grow old) | —11 P. M.—<br>News<br>Music Educators<br>Lawrence Welk's Orch.<br>(Dance music)                | —11 P. M.—<br>News<br>Jimmy Dorsey's Orch.<br>Frank Dailey's Orch.<br>(Dance music)                |
| —12 P. M.—<br>Fran Eichler<br>DX Club<br>Dance Orchestra<br>Lou Breeze's Orch.                                      |  |  |
| —1 A. M.—<br>Signature  |  |  |

A 1938 radio listing from the *Pittsburgh Press*.

HHC Detre L&A, *Pittsburgh Press*,  
January 1, 1938.

*Pittsburgh-area radio stations broadcasted live dance band music... Unsponsored on-location (live) dance band broadcasts filled the airwaves after the evening network radio shows ended.*

From 1979 onward, when I was producing and hosting a weekend big band radio show on WEAM in Washington, D.C., I had the opportunity to interview many of the national bandleaders who were my boyhood heroes. I usually asked them if they remembered at which Pittsburgh locations they had appeared. Les Brown, Dick Jurgens, Freddy Martin, and others fondly remembered engagements at Bill Green's and the Vogue Terrace. Others recalled "one-night stands" at the amusement parks and at the Palisades.

Pittsburgh-area radio stations—like many stations across the U.S. and Canada—broadcasted live dance band music. Pittsburgh stations KDKA, WCAE, WJAS, and KQV, then-affiliates of the NBC, ABC, CBS, and Mutual networks, frequently featured such broadcasts. Unsponsored on-location (live) dance band broadcasts filled the airwaves after the evening network radio shows ended. Transcribed (recorded) programs were supplied by recording companies to be used by stations to fill unsponsored spaces in their daily schedules. Dance band programs could be found in newspaper daily radio schedules, as could advertisements for local appearances.

I recall as a teenager staying up listening to dance band broadcasts late into the night;

## COUNT BASIE & HIS ORCHESTRA



*The Count at the Chatterbox.*



These recordings are the kind that make historians like myself and myriad swing fans weep with joy. The Basie band on its ascent to national fame, scuffling and swinging like mad, but not quite a national sensation as yet. The William Penn Hotel was hardly a hothouse

Count Basie and his jazz-influenced dance band often played in Pittsburgh, to the delight of local crowds.

Paul Roth Collection.



Western Pennsylvanians could hear distant stations' on-location broadcasts because selected radio stations (such as Pittsburgh's KDKA) were designated as "clear-channel," meaning that their broadcast frequency was exclusively reserved. Stations such as WGN and WBBM in Chicago, WWL in New Orleans, and KMOX in St. Louis sent strong signals.

In the larger cities, radio stations frequently employed dance bands as staff orchestras to present afternoon or dinner time musical programs. In Pittsburgh, KDKA's Maurice Spitalny and WCAE's Baron Elliott provided music for listeners' mealtime pleasure.

When a broadcast began, one could recognize the the band's identity by hearing just a few bars of that band's theme song. Most dance bands adopted a melody that was played at the beginning and sometimes the end of a radio broadcast for immediate listener recognition. For example, "Auld Lang Syne" was Guy Lombardo's tune, while "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You" identified Tommy Dorsey. A local example would be Baron Elliott's playing of "Star Dust."

I recently donated my collection of records made by Pittsburgh's local dance bands to the Pittsburgh Music Hall of Fame. These were 78-rpm records produced by local recording/distributing companies, usually sold at record stores such as National Record Mart and Stedeford's and also at 5-and-10 cent stores. Some examples produced in the late 1930s through the 1940s were the by the bands of Baron Elliott on the Jet label, Lee Kelton on Dix, Tommy Carlyn on Bee Bee, and Lang Thompson on National Record Mart's house label. During my college years, I had a job at the National Record Mart working weekends and summers, enabling me to have first pick at buying these now-rare items. As a guest on Pittsburgh radio station WDUQ in 2008, I got to play some of them on the program "Music: Sweet and Hot."



Local musician Bob Doran played with national bands and studio orchestras. He still plays with local groups in Florida.

Photo by Paul Roth.

## AN ERA ENDS

The number of dance bands began declining during WWII due to personnel shortages and the closing of dance locations. Many bandleaders and musicians joined the Armed Forces (Rudy Vallee, for instance, left to lead a Coast Guard band), plus the government began to impose heavy entertainment taxes. Suburban locations suffered due to shortages of gasoline and rubber. Recording bans initiated by the musicians' union in 1942 and 1948 had the effect of lessening the popularity of dance bands as the public's attention to singers and other forms of musical performance increased.<sup>8</sup> By the mid-1950s, with the advent of television, popular music and dance styles were changing. As teenagers flocked to rock 'n roll, traditional night clubs and ballrooms began to disappear. Live radio broadcasts were replaced by disk jockeys who promoted "artists" (vocalists and vocal groups) rather than bands.


Perhaps most difficult was the cost of maintaining a large band: paying salaries, arrangements, and transportation made it uneconomical as interest waned. According to national bandleader and local favorite Tommy Tucker, "My touring entourage could number over 20, including the band members, a manager, arranger, and staff to make copies of the score for each musician."<sup>9</sup> Unlike most bandleaders, Tucker occasionally invited wives to join the tour. Art Landry, a pioneer bandleader who started his band in the early 1920s, sometimes needed two railroad Pullman cars to transport his entourage.<sup>10</sup>

Such expenses, combined with the emergence of different post-war musical tastes, led to the emergence of the combo, a small instrumental group that played a repertoire of music different from the dance band fare at a much lower cost. Finally, even radio stations abandoned their staff orchestras.



# THE "LAST" DANCE BAND BROADCAST

In 1980, I had a part in what may have been the last live remote radio broadcast of a dance band. Traditional touring bands were making a brief comeback, and I was fortunate—on a weekend trip to Pittsburgh—to enjoy the revived Jan Garber Orchestra playing for enthusiastic dancers in Greensburg. Because I had a regular weekend program on Washington, D.C.'s WEAM, I convinced my station's manager to engage the Garber orchestra to play a "one-nighter" public appearance at Washington's Shoreham Hotel. This led to fulfillment of a lifelong desire to announce a name band's live radio broadcast to a standing-room-only crowd.

The dance band era ended long ago but our memories remain, and it is preserved too in old records, films, a few books, and an occasional web site offering electronic artifacts such as "Tommy Carlyn ... from Bill Green's Casino ... on Route 51...." 

**Paul F. Roth**, retired from the Computer Science faculty of Virginia Tech, has technical degrees from the University of Pittsburgh and University of Pennsylvania. He is a noted musicologist, specializing in the popular and show music from 1900 through 1960, and has produced and hosted musical radio and TV programs. His extensive collection of records and taped bandleader interviews is now the Paul F. Roth Collection of the American Dance Band at the Stanford University Music Library.

**Patricia Finkel** is a volunteer at the Heinz History Center

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.otrannex.com/papertapes/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Red Nichols, 1939 aircheck recording, Paul Roth Collection.

<sup>3</sup> Marianne Lee, "A Grand Dame Named William Penn," *Pennsylvania Heritage Magazine* (Spring 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Orrin Tucker, interview by author, December 21, 1979, Hollywood, California.

<sup>5</sup> Gert Brog, interview by author, July 10, 2011, Pittsburgh.

<sup>6</sup> Interview from *Skitch Henderson Radio Series*, n.d., courtesy David Sallinger, from "Bill Green's Nightclub Naming Claimed by Bandleader Kaye," unknown newspaper, February 24, 1988.

<sup>7</sup> Kaspar Monahan, "Reunion Slated by Sammy Kaye and Bill Green," *Pittsburgh Press*, October 11, 1961.

<sup>8</sup> George T. Simon, *The Big Bands* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

<sup>9</sup> Tommy Tucker, interview by author, March 21, 1987, Osprey, Florida.

<sup>10</sup> Art Landry, interview by author, December 22, 1978, Sarasota, Florida.

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