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Hennepin

H I S T O R Y

Fall 1991



**Early Lighting
in Minneapolis**

**When Swing
Was King
at the
Orpheum**

When SWING

The Minneapolis Historic Orpheum and I share our 70th birthday this year, but our fates first intersected on Sept. 21, 1939 when the nationally famous Minneapolis organist, Eddie Dunsteder, played my "opening," as an Orpheum employee on the Service Staff as an usher-doorman. I was a witness to the Golden Age of Hollywood movies, the Big Band Stage Shows, the traveling road shows featuring the best of Musical Comedy and various famous headliners including movie stars, radio show hosts (Ralph Edward's Truth or Consequences, Doctor IQ) and Blackstone the Magician and many famous variety acts.

From 1921 to 1934 the Hennepin Orpheum Theatre was primarily a Vaudeville House. The fabulous Sophie Tucker (Last of the Red Hot Mamas) sang her theme song, *Some One of These Days*, in 1934 as a swan song of the last vaudeville show. Some of those early vaudeville performers became top radio stars, stars such as Eddie Cantor, Kate Smith and Burns and Allen (yes, the same George, **still** strong on Stage, TV and Cinema). From 1935 to 1955 Swing was King at the Orpheum. Benny

Service staff, opening day, Orpheum Theatre 1921.



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Goodman, the legendary King himself, "knocked us all dead" in the fall of 1938 when he featured trumpeter Harry James on a "far out" screaming High C above High C in the second chorus of his eventual theme song, *Ciriciribin*. "Hepcats" were truckin', shagging, jitterbugging and lindyng in the aisles, in the boxes, even up on the stage. It was pandemonium such as the Orpheum hadn't known before or since.

The stage was set for other great Swing Bands to follow Goodman. His trumpeter sideman James formed his own band, the Music Makers, and came back to the Orpheum in the fall of 1940. He featured Dick Haymes on vocals, who had just replaced Frank Sinatra, and the newly popular, Ink Spots. The Ink Spots stole the show with their renditions of their hits, *If I Didn't Care* (their theme); *We Three*; *Do I Worry*; *Maybe*; *Java Jive*, etc. It was ironic that Gloria Jean, Universal Studios child singing star, attracted the biggest crowd on the weekend and she didn't even sing. She was just interviewed by James, in an apologetic manner while the rest of the show was devoted to the great Swing of his Music Makers. Each show ended with his greatly anticipated, loud and exotic, *Two O'Clock Jump*.

Gene Krupa, drummer extraordinaire and another Goodman sideman, brought his great band to the Orpheum with top "scat singer" Anita O'Day on vocals and jazz trumpet legend, Roy Eldridge. Eldridge broke through the "color line" by appearing with Krupa in a white band. Krupa would lead his band with his drums at the center of the bandstand. It was the only swing band that had no "front man." Gene was popular with both the Service Staff and his audience. He always had an ingratiating grin and one-on-one eye contact.

Tommy Dorsey was the #1 Sweet Band in the Down Beat Magazine polls while Goodman was the #1 Hot Band. But

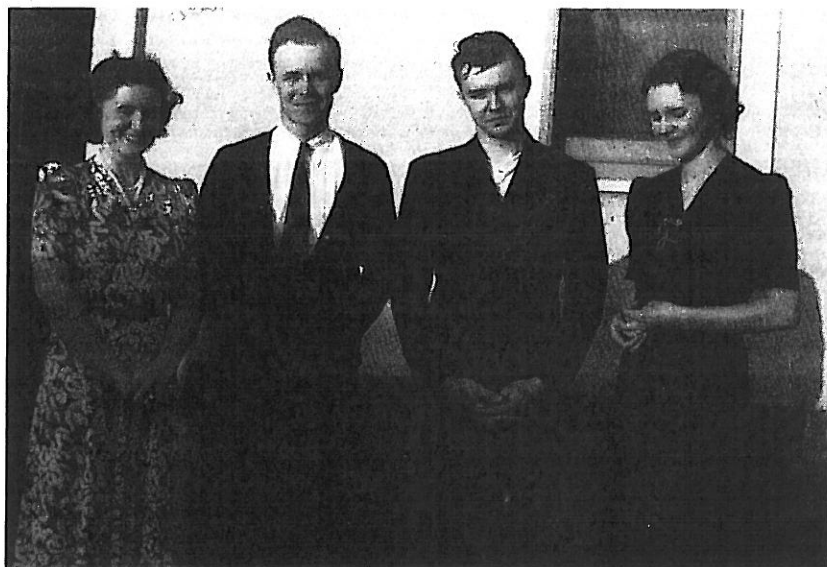
Was King At the Orpheum

By Les Saefke

Dorsey could also swing with the best of the leading hot bands; what with Buddy Rich's steady heavy beat on drums and Johnny Mince swinging on the clarinet, the Orpheum auditorium really "rocked!" Dorsey once played to a packed house after-hours for the benefit of the unfortunate residents of an apartment house fire. Both the band members and Orpheum employees donated their time. Goodman also donated some of his spare hours jamming for charity with a University of Minnesota dance band. The benefit was organized by Otto Silha, a former publisher of the Minneapolis Star Tribune. The Minneapolis North High Swing Ensemble also had the delight of jamming with Goodman at an event put on by Principal Albert Bank. The author was a member of that group.

Another popular draw was Tommy's brother, Jimmy Dorsey who was billed as the **World's Greatest Saxophonist** and **Prince of the Clarinet**. However, his band was more famous for its vocalists, Bob Eberle and Helen O'Connell. They recorded such Latin Style hits as *Tangerine*, *Green Eyes*, *Marie Elena*, *Amapola* and *Yours*. During an autograph session with the Dorsey Band, my job was to hold back the crowd. One sweet young thing mustered enough courage to ask Eberle for a cigarette. He dutifully, but apologetically, offered her a *Twenty Grand* which was the cheapest cigarette on the market. There were young people who followed stage and movie stars around, what we call groupies today but they were less in number and rather inconspicuous.

I idolized Artie Shaw who brought his new Swing Band to the Orpheum after his Navy stint. His clarinet stylizing of popular songs of the day was in contrast to the subtlety of Goodman's "licks." Shaw's were straight-on "out of this world" romantic, dreamlike, erotic phantasms. His theme song, *Nightmare*,



says it all. I caught him in the wings for an autograph during a performance which neither he nor the stagehands appreciated one iota.

Glamorous Doris Day came to the Orpheum stage with Les Brown and His Band of Renown as their vocalist during WWII. It was shortly after VJ Day that Doris Day became a #1 movie star. *Jolting Joe DiMaggio* was the novelty number I best recall in their performance which was accompanied by baseball bats, gloves and uniforms.

Woody Herman and his First Herd brought down the house with their thundering resonances highlighted by jazz breaks from tenor saxman Flip Phillips, "tromb man" Bill Harris and local piano man, Lou Levy. Herman's dreamy vocalizing seemed more reminiscent of his original band of the 1930's which he took over from Isham Jones. Tex Beneke directed the Glen Miller band after Miller's tragic death during WWII and the Orpheum was its host for a week. (With the grand exception of *Gone With The Wind*, no movie or stage production ever lasted more—or less—than one week for all the years I was aware of Orpheum shows.) Tex featured the classic Miller

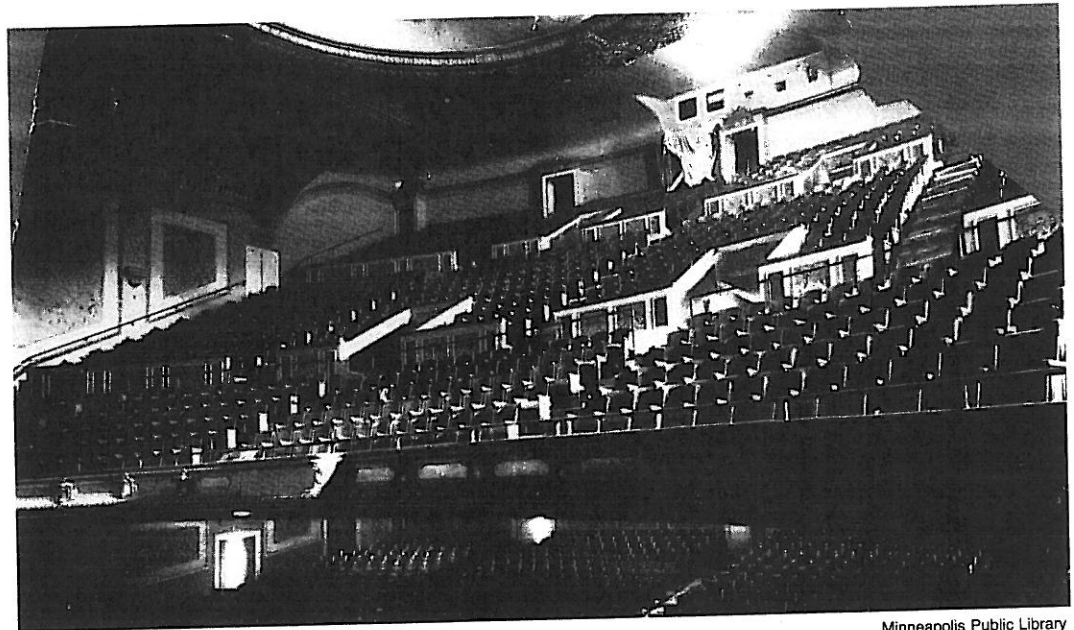
Author Les Saefke with his siblings in 1941. From left to right: Evelyn, 29; Richard, 26; Les, 19; Nettie, 32. "I was a pretty serious character then," says Les.

recordings with a rather weak *Re-Bob-A-Re-Bob* finale.

Lawrence Welk played to empty houses during his week performance. The Service Staff was happy about it because it meant a day off. We were always scheduled to work seven days a week unless business was bad. Welk's enthusiasm on stage was overwhelming. He would whip around the stage waving the stick undauntedly and even high-jump with both feet up onto a platform

member vocalists Larry Cotton, Roy Cordell and Gordon McRae, the future star of *Oklahoma* and *Carousel*. The blind whistling virtuoso, Fred Lowry, had to be led on and off the stage but he always received the loudest applause. Popular pianist and recording star, Frankie Carle, played the popular songs from his '78 rpm phonograph albums and for novelty would even play the piano with his back turned to it. Bobby Hackett, the sweet trumpet lead

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Minneapolis Public Library

Orpheum Theatre interior

above the stage, all the while laughing up the whole thing; he did this even when he and his orchestra played to a nearly empty house. Since Welk had played elsewhere in Minneapolis, including the old Excelsior Ballroom, I imagine people thought he wasn't up to the calibre of Orpheum Theatre entertainment. Years later when Welk was a big TV attraction and almost all the other Swing Bands had been disbanded, Woody Herman lamented that only Lawrence Welk had the formula for attracting the old crowd of Swing Band fans.

In my humble opinion Horace Heidt was by far the most talented and flexible front man of any band or orchestra or stage show to ever appear at the Orpheum Theatre. And what a production he assembled every year! I re-

of the Jackie Gleason record releases, was also a highlight. Heidt in his mellifluous voice would emcee with good natured humour and vary his shows at the request of the audience to the extent of sitting down and playing the piano on a dare or having his band sing choir style. Sammy Kaye, another band leader, had a So You Want to Lead a Band event which meant the winner won the bandleader's baton. The audience found lots of humour in the unsteady waving of the baton on the part of the amateur and its effect on the shaky, unrhythmic music of the band.

Rudy Vallee, of course, was another great front man, emcee and variety artist as well as being the most famous crooner in the country. He was popular on radio when it was still a squawking box with its annoying static. At one time

he had radio's most popular variety show. He opened his theater shows in complete darkness singing his theme song, *My Time is Your Time*. Suddenly the spotlight would strike his upper body and the audience would respond with thunderous applause. He could change from acting the part of a ventriloquist's dummy in one skit to a dramatic monologue on a taxi driver's unknown dangerous fares which was entitled, *Where To?*

Paul Whiteman, the King of Jazz, opened his show with his theme song, *Rhapsody in Blue*. It signaled the start of great Whiteman tunes which seemed to always center on little Mike Pingatore setting the pace with the lively strumming of his banjo. Whiteman had a subtle sense of humour and would especially delight the ladies in the wiggling of his huge frame to the varied tempo of *Well Diggers Hoedown*. He was a startling sight striding through the foyer in his all-white panama hat and suit and being chauffeured around town in an all-white coupe.

Waving his right hand to the audience in time with the curtain's opening, Eddy Duchin would play his theme song, *Chopin's Nocturne in E Flat*. He had the most handsome smile of any band leader. A colorful showman with his own syncopated "Duchin" style, he played various Gershwin, Porter and Berlin melodies. He later took his musical ear into Naval Service in WWII. He detected sonar sounds, which was then a new military development. It was the one way he felt he could best serve his country.

Flipping his old battered black top hat and smilingly asking, "Is everybody happy?", Ted Lewis always struck a sentimental chord. His always popular *Me and My Shadow* number, with his life-long African-American partner trailing behind in perfect lock-step, was the highlight of the show. His sincerity endeared him to everyone. His *Peanut-Vendor Song* finale saw him pushing a peanut push-cart and throwing peanuts at the audience.

Cab Calloway was a very popular returnee each year to the Orpheum and his *Minnie the Moocher*, *St. James Infirmary*, and *Hi de Hi de Ho's* were echoed by the audience, along with even more difficult and humorous utterances. The audiences loved him. He had one of the best Swing Bands in the country with Chu Berry on jazz tenor sax, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker and Billy Eckstein. Duke Ellington also honored us with his classics: *Mood Indigo*; *Sophisticated Lady*, *In My Solitude*.

Phil Spitalney and His All-Girl Orchestra featuring Evelyn and Her Violin appeared here and Ada Leonard, Queen of Burlesque, also fronted an all-girl band, featuring a strip number. Jane Froman, Martha Raye, Mae West, Marie Wilson (My Friend Irma), Simone Simon, Chester Morris (a magic act), Billy Gilbert, Hugh Herbert—all movie people—were Orpheum headliners at various periods. Famous musical shows like the Folies Bergere of 1939 came directly from Paris, France.

My biggest thrill at the Orpheum, I think was seeing Suzanne Larsen of Minneapolis become Suzanne Faster of the great movie, *The Phantom of the Opera* starring her and Nelson Eddy. The climax of the movie was **not** Suzanne pulling the mask off Claude Rains as the "phantom" under the Paris Opera House, but rather her singing the highest note ever recorded in any movie by any previous singer. And it all began at the Orpheum.

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Eddy Duchin

