Gene Lees Ad Libitum &

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The Glenn Miller Years II

The Pollack band was booked to play at the Little Club on 44th Street in New York, and opened there in March 1928. Bud Freeman years later recalled that the band's personnel at that time included himself, Gil Rodin, and Benny Goodman on saxes; Glenn on trombone, Al Harris on trumpet, Jimmy McPartland playing jazz cornet, Goodman's brother Harry on bass, Vic Briedis on piano, Dick Morgan on guitar, and of course Pollack on drums.

Freeman said, "We were only there a couple of months and were continually getting in trouble with the boss. We were just an independent bunch of individuals and were always fluffing the boss off and getting just as fed up with him as he with us. It was a pretty swank place and he couldn't see us sitting with customers or anything like that.

"In a way those were the happiest days of our lives, only we didn't know it then and maybe we don't even know it now."

Another problem was the star of the show, the singer Lillian Roth, then only eighteen years old but already on her way to stardom and alcoholism. (The film *I'll Cry Tomorrow* with Susan Heyward is a chronicle of her life.)

Night after night the Little Club was filled with musicians, come to hear the band, which infuriated Roth, who skirmished endlessly with Pollack and his players. Whether it was for this or some other reason, Pollack gave his notice and the band's engagement came to an end in May. The band was now out of work.

Jimmy McPartland and Bud Freeman were living at the Mayflower Hotel. "This was 1928, before the Stock Market crashed," McPartland said, "and there was plenty of money floating around. A lot of people gave a lot of parties, and often we would be invited. You could get all you wanted to drink but nothing to eat. Just the same, it was better than nothing.

"We couldn't pay the rent, though, so after a couple of weeks we moved into the Whitby apartments where Gil Rodin, Dick Morgan, Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller had a suite. We all moved into that, practically the whole band, with the exception of Pollack, sleeping on chairs, couches, the floor, anywhere. The number of the apartment was 1411. And that is how that title came up: *Room 1411*, with Benny Goodman's Boys. We had been out of work about five weeks when Benny came home and said, 'I've got a recording date with Brunswick. We can get some money, buy some food, eat.'"

(Jazz musicians, at least in that period of the big bands, had a term, that I for one have always found charming and inventive: they referred to staying in someone else's hotel room without registering or paying for it as "ghosting.")

"We made that date. Goodman, Miller, myself and two or three more, playing different kinds of numbers like *Blue* and *Jungle Blues* and the one we named *Room 1411*.

"After the session was just about over, we started kidding around and playing corny. Out comes the recording manager from his booth, and he says, 'That's it! That's what we want, just what you're playing there!' We were playing as corny as possible.

"As a matter of fact, Tommy Dorsey had come up and was standing listening to us, and he picked up a trombone and started playing, kidding around too. The manager said, 'You gotta *do* that.' We called the number *Shirt Tail Stomp*. It sold more than any of the others. It shows the taste of people: still the same, I guess, the world over." The record was, of course, an echo of Boyd Senter. (I had a copy of that record when I was very young, and could only presumed that it was a joke, but I had trouble with that since it had Benny Goodman's name on it. I wish I still had it.)

In a July 7 1974 interview with the *Detroit Sunday News Magazine*, Goodman said that he and Glenn "spent a lot of time together as youngsters. We went on dates together, we went to ball games together, we played touch football together. And we lived together when we first came to New York. We both did freelance work, as sidemen for radio and records. Glenn and I did some recording together."

McPartland said, "You know, Glenn contributed a lot to the Pollack band. He was basically an idea man, and he certainly was a dedicated musician. He was a very decent man, but he wasn't much of a trombone player.He acted as the band's musical director and he was a real taskmaster. I remember he used to tell me to take home my parts and woodshed them. 'You'll be a better musician for it,' he used to say. It used to get me sore as hell, but it turned out he was right.

"Glenn was terribly competitive. When he played tennis, he'd hit every ball as hard as he could for a winner, but not many of them went in. I soon caught on that if I just kept the ball in play, I could beat him. I did, and he'd get sore as hell. But that was Glenn. He always tried to be the best."

Glenn was on another Benny Goodman Brunswick date with McPartland and, Breidis, Morgan, and drummer Bob Conselman. They made two titles, according to McPartland: *Jazz Holiday* and *Wolverine Blues*.

McPartland remembered attending a cocktail party on Park Avenue with other members of the Pollack band, presumably including Glenn. Also there were members of the Paul Whiteman band, including Bing Crosby, the Dorsey brothers, Frank Trumbauer, and Bix Beiderbecke. McPartland lamented to Bix the current unemployment for the Pollack band, saying they were having trouble finding money for food. He asked Bix if he could lend him ten or twenty dollars. Bix opened a wallet that was full of money and uncashed checks and proffered two one hundred dollar bills to McPartland, saying, "Take this." McPartland declined, accepting only twenty dollars.

"A week or so later," McPartland continued, "we went to work again, with short engagements in Atlantic City, Syracuse, and so forth. Back in New York I was having a couple of drinks with Bud Freeman and Pee Wee Russell one evening in a little speakeasy on 51st Street when Pee Wee began talking about a trombone player, the greatest thing he had heard in his life. We said we would have to hear the guy, and Pee Wee said, right, he'd just pop over and get him. Two drinks later Pee Wee was back with the guy, who was wearing a horrible looking cap and overcoat and carrying a trombone in a case under his arm. Pee Wee introduced us. He was Jack Teagarden, from Texas, and looked it. 'Fine,' we said. 'We've been hearing a lot about you, would sure like to hear you play.' The guy says, 'All right,' gets his horn out, puts it together, blows a couple of warm-up notes, and starts to play *Diane*. No accompaniment, just neat: he played it solo, and I'm telling you he knocked us out. And when he'd done with that he started on the blues, still by himself.

"We had to agree with Pee Wee. We'd never heard anyone play trombone like that. We were flabbergasted. They were going to a jam session later, up on 48th Street where Jack lived, so we went back and told Gil Rodin and a couple of others how wonderful Teagarden was. The other guys scoffed, but Rodin didn't."

Gil Rodin recalled:

"A bunch of musicians invited me to a jam session at the Louisiana Apartments. I remember I was living at the Manger Hotel . . . and Pollack had the room next to mine. That night at the Louisiana Apartments was the first time I'd ever heard Jack Teagarden. He was playing without the bell portion of his horn, just blowing through his slide into a glass and getting that eerie sound — it was the blues — and I was so knocked out I couldn't see straight. And then he sang, too, and that was just too much! With all due respect to Glenn — and he and I were good friends — this was a whole new world to me. When I got back to the hotel, I was so excited about what I'd heard that I woke up Pollack to tell him about it. He said, yeah, he'd heard the name, and turned over and went back to sleep.

"The next day I asked Jack to come down and sit in. I felt funny about it because, as I said, Glenn and I were good friends and I didn't want to show him up. But I just had to have Jack in our band. In the back of my mind I must have figured that maybe we could have two trombones, but that never happened — at least not then.

"Well you can guess what did happen. Jack knocked out everybody and, of course, that made Glenn feel pretty uncomfortable. We were scheduled to play in Atlantic City that summer, but before we left, Glenn announced that he wasn't going because he'd had an offer from Paul Ash to do some arranging and he thought he'd take it and stay in town."

Ash's large semi-symphonic orchestra gave Glenn the chance to write for and learn more about strings. Born in Germany and raised in Milwaukee, Ash by that time had centered his activities on Chicago, with "run-outs" to surrounding areas.

McPartland said, "We all knew, and I felt especially bad, what the real reason was. Glenn must have felt strongly that 'they really want that guy'and so he made his exit gracefully.

"Glenn was gracious enough to bow to a real jazz player like that. It was the greatest he had ever heard, too. Until then Miff Mole had been Glenn's idol, the person he'd patterned himself on. When Glenn raved, that was it so far as every-

body was concerned. Teagarden was earmarked for the Ben Pollack band."

Thought he ceased playing with the band, Glenn continued to write for it.

Weldon Leon Teagarden, universally called Jack, was born in Vernon, Texas, on August 19, 1905, of solidly German ancestry. Jack began playing trombone when he was quite small, and with his short arms unable to push the slide to the lower of the seven positions, he made the notes entirely with the lip. Because of this he developed an amazing technique, a facility on the trombone almost like that of trumpet. Teagarden and Tommy Dorsey — who developed a gorgeous high tessitura on the horn — between them revolutionized the technique of the instrument, not only in jazz but eventually in symphony orchestras as well.

McPartland's memory of that first encounter has the ring of accuracy about it. Jack was able, and inclined, to give such impromptu demonstrations. I once sat with him in a booth at the now-vanished London House in Chicago, where he was working. I asked him a question about the horn. He said, "You should be able to play any note in any position. The slide only makes it easier." He got his horn from the bandstand, returned to the booth, and with the slide in closed position played a major scale — and so *pianissimo* that he didn't disturb diners in the next booth. It was an amazing demonstration, and having gone through this wonderment at Teagarden's ability, I can well imagine McPartland's — and Miller's — mouth-opening encounter. Teagarden had that effect on every trombonist who heard him.

By this time, Pollack perceived himself as a bandleader and singer, gave up the drum chair, replacing himself with Ray Bauduc, and restricted himself to leading the band.

In any case, the members of Glenn's gang, including Benny Goodman, had left town with Pollack. George Simon thought that it was at this time that Glenn gave more and more thought to Helen Burger, the petite and pretty and quiet girl he'd met in their classes at the University of Colorado. In the years since then, he had kept in touch with her by letter — "long-distance" telephone was not yet commonplace. It was assumed that they would eventually marry but her patience had by now grown short. Indeed, on his dresser he kept her picture, inscribed, "To Glenn, the meanest man in the world."

And her parents were not enamored by the idea of her marrying a man in the unstable profession of jazz music. She told Glenn that she was now "practically engaged" to another man. He made his move, and in keeping with all the general trends of his character, including those that later emerged in the bandleader, the step he took was, as George Simon put it, "practical, unemotional and straight to the point. Convinced that he could now support the girl he sent her a terse wire, summoning her to New York for the purpose of getting married."

Helen arrived in New York and checked into the Forrest Hotel. With trombonist Vincent Grande as one of the witnesses, Glenn and Helen were married by clergyman Dudley S. Stark on October 6, 1928.

In that 1974 interview, Goodman said, "I gave him the money to get married. I'd forgotten about it until many years later when Glenn became famous and he said, 'Here's the money I owe you.' I didn't know what money he was talking about. I'd forgotten about it completely."

Gil Rodin said that Glenn was a practical joker. He told Simon, "When Earl Baker, a trumpet player in the [Pollack] band, got married, Glenn fixed the slats in the bed so that when they got into bed it would collapse. But Glenn was smart. Later, when *he* got married, he wouldn't let anybody know about it, and he even went far away into Westchester County at some hotel for his wedding night."

A newspaper story in Colorado bore the three-line heading Former Colorado U. Students Married in New York City. The story read:

> Boulder, Colo., Oct. 9 — Miss Helen Burger, graduate of the University of Colorado and member of the Pi Beta Phi Sorority, was married at New York City Saturday to Glenn Miller, also a former university student and now the highest paid trombone player in the United States. They will live in New York.
>
> Miller's parents reside at Fort Morgan. Mrs. Miller is the daughter of County Clerk and Mrs. Fred W. Burger of Boulder County.

Mike Nidorf, one of Glenn's friends and business associates, was close to the couple. He said, "The greatest thing that ever happened to Glenn Miller was Helen Miller."

George Simon wrote:

> During almost two generations I have known many band leaders and musicians and their wives and have seldom been surprised by the tensions that have permeated their marriages — marriages that because of the occupational hazards involved, survive and flourish. Of all those marriages, the one that impressed me as the most endearing and enduring was the one

between Helen and Glenn Miller.

> But much as I liked and admired Glenn, it was to Helen that I gave most credit for their happiness. In her own quiet way she was an immensely strong person. She would remain discreetly in the background, and yet, whenever Glenn had an important decision to make, he would turn to her, and she would help him. Polly Haynes, their closest friend and confidante, recently described the subtle depth of their relationship: "I've never known any couple that said so little and felt so much."

The late June Allison, my neighbor for several years, told me that for *The Glenn Miller Story*, she worked on her preparation to play Helen Miller. Helen was on the set almost all the time, and June spent as much time with her as she could. When I asked him what he thought of the movie, Steve Miller, Helen and Glenn's son adopted not long before Glenn went into the U.S. Army Air Corps, said, "June Allison did a very good job of playing my mother. Jimmy Stewart did a very good job of playing Jimmy Stewart."

For the first three years after their marriage, Helen and Glenn lived at 30-60 Twenty-ninth Street, in Astoria, Long Island. They were not far from the Fifty-ninth Street bridge to Manhattan, nor from the subway. Glenn had more or less easy access to the recording and broadcasting studios and to the theater district.

Whatever insecurities Glenn felt about his trombone playing, they could only have been exacerbated by the fact that in 1929 he recorded with a group led by Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. He also recorded alongside Jack Teagarden on many records by Red Nichols and His Five Pennies. He might have found some consolation in the fact that Dorsey too was insecure about his jazz playing. But Glenn was apparently secure about his abilities as a writer: he wrote a lot of arrangements for Nichols, who played tasteful cornet after the manner of Bix Beiderbecke.

The singer on one of the recordings with Nichols was Red McKenzie, once a St. Louis bellhop who would play jazz on comb-and-paper while his friend Dick Selvin played kazoo. They found their way to Chicago, where they recorded *Arkansas Blues* and *Blue Blues* under the sobriquet Mound City Blue Blowers. They moved to New York, where McKenzie showed considerable ingenuity in snagging record dates for which he sometimes used as many as ten musicians. At one time or other, Eddie Condon, Coleman Hawkins, Gene Krupa, Pee Wee Russell, Muggsy Spanier, Jack Teagarden, and Glenn played with him. Obviously McKenzie liked Glenn and when he put together an impressive band — including Krupa, Hawkins, Condon, and Russell — Glenn was the only trombonist on the date. Years later, asked what he considered to be the best playing he'd ever done on records, Glenn said, "Those two sides I did with the Mound City Blue Blowers, *One Hour* and *Hello, Lola*."

Glenn did not particularly like Red Nichols, but Nichols gave him work. Nichols was engaged by George Gershwin for the pit band for his *Strike Up the Band.* The show opened in Boston on December 25, 1929, New Haven on January 6, 1930, and the Times Square Theater in New York on January 14. According to Howard Pollack, in his book *George Gershwin, His Life and Work* (University of California Press, 2006), Nichols augmented the orchestra with Charlie Teagarden, Jimmy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Pee Wee Russell, Babe Russin, Gene Krupa, Glenn Miller, and possibly Tommy Dorsey. Gershwin conducted the opening night in New York, as he had that in Boston. Nichols hired Miller again for the Gershwin show *Girl Crazy* later that year.

Gene Krupa, fresh into New York from Chicago, said later of the experience:

"I couldn't read anything then. But Glenn sat right in front of me. He was so great to me."And Benny Goodman testified: "Hildy Elkins was the conductor in *Girl Crazy*. And it was amazing how well Gene followed him — thanks to Glenn, of course."

The same group was hired for a revival of *Strike Up the Band*. Pollack writes:

"Robert Russell Bennett worked with Gershwin on the orchestrations, many of which survive to reveal that Broadway's evolving sound, in some contrast to the more delicate sonorities of the 1920s, paralleled popular dance-band trends in its emphasis on saxophones and trumpets — a development related not only to the hiring of the forenamed jazz musicians (Glenn Miller might even have helped prepare some of the arrangements), but also to Gershwin's music itself."

Glenn continued to record with Nichols and wrote the arrangement for the ballad *Tea for Two*. He also worked with his friend Benny Goodman, who was recording under different names, as was the custom of the time. He also wrote the verse for Jack Teagarden's classic *Basin Street Blues,* the line that begins, "Won't you come along with me, down the Mississippi."

Goodman said years later, "Things were going good for

me then. I was making as much as $80 a day in the Paramount Studios out on Long Island and I used to recommend Glenn all the time. He was such a dedicated musician and always so thorough."

The major employers for musicians were the radio networks, CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) and NBC (National Broadcasting Company), which actually operated two networks. Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, and Artie Shaw and others were earning sums that were enormous for the time, in Shaw's case $500 a week. It was probably during this period that Shaw conceived a lifetime jealousy and contempt for both Miller and Goodman which smouldered on until his death in 2004. The record companies also provided employment, but after the Wall Street crash of 1929 and with the deepening of the Depression, they stumbled toward — and some fell into — bankruptcy. A public that worried about the price of bread didn't buy many records, turning instead to radio, which was free, for entertainment, and to movies, which were inexpensive and even gave away dinnerware as an inducement to attend. These were the golden days of radio, both network and local. Because it engaged your imagination in such dramas as *Lights Out* and *Mr. District Attorney*, Steve Allen once said, "Radio was theater of the mind. Television is theater of the mindless."

Then Smith Ballew, who hadn't forgotten Glenn's kindness to him, turned up again. He had been doing moderately well, leading his own band. But it was only a routine band, and Ballew thought he would do better fronting a really good band. He called Glenn to propose that he put together a new band.

He recalled: "I asked him if he would play trombone, arrange and rehearse the band for two-fifty a week plus a fifty-fifty split of everything over a thousand dollars a week that I might make. Glenn agreed and the first musician he contacted was Ray McKinley. I had known him as a kid in Forth Worth back in 1925, and I had even admired him then."

McKinley, like Ballew and Teagarden, was a Texan, born in Fort Worth on June 18, 1910. He and Glenn had recorded five sides in two sessions for the Brunswick label with Red Nichols in the spring and early summer of 1931. McKinley told George Simon:

"Ballew was a nice, pleasant guy, but he knew nothing about leading a band and he didn't pretend to. He was extremely handsome. He looked like one of those old Arrow Collar ads. He had perfect symmetry. Somebody once called him a singing Gary Cooper. But he had too easygoing a personality to make a successful leader.

"Glenn, on the other hand, had a lot of energy and, of course, he knew exactly what he was doing all the time." This description of Glenn came from everyone who knew him, throughout his life.

"Glenn was really the main reason I wanted to join the band. I was very much flattered — I guess he hadn't forgotten that night when I sat in with the Pollack band out in Chicago.

"I know Glenn was supposed to have arranged for the band but I don't remember him bringing in many arrangements that he had actually written. I have a feeling the budget didn't permit it. What he did instead would be to take a printed stock arrangement and make cuts in it for a particular broadcast, and on the next night he'd take the same stock and make a different cut and it would sound like a different arrangement of the same tune. Then sometimes he'd write a short introduction or something of its own. I don't remember his ever coming in with a completely original arrangement."

This is in keeping with a comment by Woody Herman, one of Glenn's friends. "Glenn," he said, "was a great fixer."

Ballew got the band a job in the pit of a Broadway show which, according to Ballew, "included everything from comedy to opera and we even got an assistant musical director of the Metropolitan Opera Company to work with Glenn. But our first week's check bounced and the producers said to deposit it again, that it must have been a mistake. But it bounced the second time too and I contacted the manager of the theater, who told me the rent hadn't been paid."

When the show closed after ten days, Ballew got stiffed for the musicians' salaries. Ballew said, "All the guys refused to accept a nickel — all except the string players." This will come as no surprise to musicians: string players are like that. Charles Munch, in his book *Je suis conducteur*, urged other conductors to be kind to string players, since they were mostly embittered virtuoso soloists *manqués*.

In November the band was booked into the Lowery Hotel in St. Paul, Minnesota, with Jimmy McPartland replacing Bunny Berigan. Chalmers (Chummy) MacGregor came in on piano, and made yet another friendship with Miller.

John Chalmers MacGregor was born in Saginaw, Michigan, on March 28, 1903. He played with the band of Jean Goldkette, the nursery of many major jazz musicians. Then he worked for Irving Aronson. When the Aronson band passed through Cleveland, Chummy and some other musicians went to a restaurant called the Golden Pheasant to hear a young saxophonist and clarinetist named Artie Shaw with the Austin Wylie band. Shaw held exactly the same position

with Wylie that Miller did with Smith Ballew. He was playing in the band, writing for it, and running it, the same sort of disciplinarian that Miller was. MacGregor and some of the others urged Shaw to come with the Aronson band. Shaw consulted his friend in the Wylie band, pianist Claude Thornhill, who urged him to take it. He was told he could learn a lot from Chummy MacGregor. Shaw joined the band in California.

The manager of the Lowery Hotel, according to Ballew, wanted them to do novelty numbers in the manner of Ted Weems. Glenn and Ballew hated the idea but decided to try it. The musicians, however, rebelled, and the band was terminated, giving Glenn an education in what novelties and "showmanship" (a term Artie Shaw hated) could do. They were replaced by Red Nichols, who by now had a band of fifteen men.

The band went to several more hotels, then to the Club Forest in New Orleans where, Ballew said, the band played "a simply sensation arrangement by Glenn of *Stormy Weather*, which Harold Arlen had just written and for which he gave me one of the first lead sheets." This would not mean as much in our day of ubiquitous copying machines. But in those days music had to be copied by hand, and for Arlen to give Ballew an original lead sheet — a lead sheet comprises a melody line with chord symbols written above it — was a mark of no little respect.

The band was so successful that the New Orleans engagement was extended to six months.

But as the Depression deepened, engagements for the band became intermittent. Morale in the band flagged. On the New Year's Eve at the end of 1933 the band was playing the Muehlebach Hotel in Kansas City.

Ray McKinley said:

"All kinds of things had been happening. Chummy had been in the lock-up with the d.t.'s. And Glenn got juiced — it was the only time I ever saw him like that. He could be a bad drunk, too. Nobody knows exactly how it started, but I understand Glenn . . . got into a real fight [with the lead trumpeter], right on the bandstand and they were rolling around on the floor and Frank Simeone, the little sax player, was trying to separate them and he was taking more blows than anyone."

By late 1933, the Ballew band was almost finished. Its quality was falling. Glenn didn't play its last important engagement, which was at the Cosmopolitan Hotel in Denver. Miller's family lived nearby.

McKinley said, "Glenn didn't want his friends to see him in such a poor setting. The band was beneath his dignity or something. Anyway, he stayed on as manager. He'd rehearse the band for shows, and of course, he'd show up on payday. He had begun to act more like a tough business executive and less like a musician. He was getting more headstrong than ever, and less easy to get along with."

Smith Ballew said, "He was a tough taskmaster, often to the resentment of men in the band. He was stiff. He had no social amenities and he preferred to remain in the background. He was definitely an introvert. He was hard to know. He never bared his soul to anyone. I felt I knew him then, but now I have my doubts."

Smith Ballew gravitated to Hollywood where he had an entirely new career as a singing cowboy in B movies. Later he left the film industry and went into public relations for the aviation giant General Dynamics. He retired from the company in 1967 and died in his native Texas in 1984. He was eighty-two.

The Ben Pollack band also began to fade away in 1933, when Jack Teagarden left it, and the other members followed. They formed a co-operative band, with Bob Crosby elected to sing and act as nominal leader. Pollack formed another band, but it never achieved the success of his earlier organization. He was by now married to vocalist Doris Robbins. He tried other ventures, including restaurants on the Sunset Strip in Hollywood and in Palm Springs, and appeared as himself in those two exercises in inaccuracy, *The Benny Goodman Story* and *The Glenn Miller Story*. Succumbing to despair, he committed suicide by hanging in Palm Springs in 1971.

Paul Weston, who became the chief arranger of the Tommy Dorsey band, told me, "Tommy went through his life regretting that he wasn't Jack Teagarden." So when Glenn and Tommy met, they could have and perhaps did commiserate with each other about their intimidation. Glenn could not have been the trombonist of his self-deprecation or Tommy, who never suffered fools gladly and was acutely choosy about the quality of musicians, would never have hired him.

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