

America's Music Man

MEREDITH WILLSON

BY BILL OATES

A small boy waits on a curb. Someone has given him an American flag on a stick and with natural instinct he notices that it is far more exciting when waved. His attention is divided a few minutes later when up from the distance comes the cadence of the local band. The high pitched snares quietly repeat the rum-pa-pum, until the drums signal by roll-off the march du jour, "The Stars and Stripes Forever" and the gathered crowd proudly cranes to see, hear, and beat with foot the six-eight tune that means it's Fourth of July in America. The approaching sound of the spit and polish brass section, the rifle bearers, drum majors, and that big bass drum mesmerize the listeners. Our young man's attention is taken away for a second by an older viewer wearing a G.A.R. cap and medals hard won in the War Between the States and who serves a shaky but most sincere salute to the colors passing by. One such boy, Meredith Willson, was so inspired that he too would salute in the musician's language, eventually with a hyperbolic collection of slide trombones blasting an invocation to the gods of march, just like when "W.C. Handy, the Great Creator, and John Philip Sousa all came marching into town on that very same day."

Idyllic turn of the century America was no better exemplified by the image that was Midwestern United States in 1912.

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Bands in the gazebo, picnics on the lawn, and a nation at peace in a new century that saw automobiles, telephones, and electronic messengers made up the picture that represented a country that was entering a century of rapid change. A part of this composition was individuals seeking their parts in an America that would evolve for the next ten decades and would create the portrait that was the twentieth century. Meredith Willson, born on May 18, 1902 in Mason City, Iowa, became absorbed in early twentieth century music, so much so that he would help shape the symphonic direction of its new medium, radio.

Small towns in the United States were blessed with opera houses and theaters in increasing numbers as the new century unfolded. If a city were on one of the numerous passenger train routes that were extent in the early years of the 1900's, the odds were that the best entertainment of the day would stop for an evening and play its boards. One of the most popular visitors from the East was the band conducted by the March King himself, John Philip Sousa.

The musical beginnings were not entirely easy for Meredith Willson. His natural instincts drove him to play circus and not the piano. However, because his mother gave him, his older brother and sister lessons, he relented. The real excitement came when a flute arrived mail order from Chicago. The younger Willson boy was disappointed after assembling it and seeing that it worked sideways. He believed that there had never been such an instrument in town and had to be



taught by a cornet player who kept one lesson ahead of his pupil. Yet from these humble beginnings would come a future player in Sousa's renowned band.

By age fifteen, Meredith Willson was adept enough to play in a summer orchestra at Lake Okoboji. Before he left for the hundred mile trip and eight weeks from home, he found out that he had to double on piccolo. His new instrument was hastily ordered from a catalogue, at exactly the amount he would receive for his summer's work. Undaunted, and with free room and board, he set off. Fortune shone on the teenager, for the orchestra leader was called away to the First World War and the young flautist from Mason City was drafted to take over the directing chores. When the band simultaneously finished the first song that Meredith Willson directed, he was so happy that he collapsed on his chair and subsequently, sat on and broke his piccolo.

A return to Mason City found Willson with a real flute teacher, one who suggested doubling on banjo. As the knowledge of different instruments broadened,

so did the opportunities to play in a variety of groups. Ultimately, after graduation from high school, the New York Institute of Art (now called Julliard School of Music) beckoned, so with "Papa's fried chicken, Mama's prayers, a mail-order flute...and a bent piccolo," Meredith Willson ended a chapter of his musical memories in Mason City, ones which would be lovingly recalled on stage several decades later.

It was in New York that Willson attempted to get his piccolo straightened and to be allowed to better his flute skills under the tutelage of famed teacher George Barrere. To bring in some cash, Willson appeared at the musicians' union hall where heavy foreign accents made communication difficult to a green Iowan. When told he would be a substitute flute player at the Winter Garden theater, Willson was overjoyed. But instead of the famed theater where Al Jolson often starred, the young Iowan arrived far away from Broadway in the Bowery at a combination picture house and burlesque theater of the same name. More rent paying experiences followed, but the best of these early gigs was a stint with John Philip Sousa.

When Meredith Willson wrote of his activities in the Sousa band, he did so with reverence. For three seasons the young man from Iowa was part of a six member flute section that tramped across the forty-eight states and from Ottawa to Havana. Not all of the performances were re-enacted musical religious experiences, for one stop in Montgomery, Alabama saw scenery pieces fall during a performance. The great sousaphones held up the canvas while the beat continued; the musicians regrouped and Sousa displayed no emotions as a result of the calamity. Other performances included official concerts for notables such as the President of the United States.

So devoted were the bandmen, that, at the end of the season super bash at Madison Square Gardens, over 400 ex-members filled

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the stage. The reunion heralded the best of the day's musicians dressed in band uniforms from their active days, and when they rallied around "The Stars and Stripes Forever" few dry eyes were extant. This memory of unusually large numbers in the various band sections was recalled when the thirty trombones playing the countermelody grew to seventy-six in *The Music Man*.

In the off-season Willson had to find work, so he played in the Rialto Theatre orchestra. Once there he played under the direction of Victor Herbert. It was during this time period that Meredith Willson became a composer. His "Parade Fantastique" was severely criticized by his then (1923) mentor Dr. Riesenfeld, and instead of condemning the young composer to another occupation, he sent the writer to an experiment. Willson was assigned to play the scales on his flute while recording equipment was adjusted. Eventually, several other orchestra members joined in to accompany a girl dancing before a moving picture camera. This little combo was partaking in what *Saturday Evening Post* dubbed a "Magnificent Failure," but a few years later was identified as Dr. Lee DeForest's early tests of a talking picture.

The 1920's saw Meredith Willson move up the musical chain of prominence. His most active role of the decade was with the New York Philharmonic, then under the direction of Arturo Toscanini. By 1928 he met a man who was trying to create a radio network that could broadcast as easily from West to East as NBC was doing from East to West. The plan was a figure eight shaped scheme and it failed. What was not a wash was Willson's baptism into radio music, for after his arrival at KJR in Seattle as a flute player, he was named musical director, a position he would assume at numerous locations for the next two and a half decades. However, finances doomed the network and Willson returned to New



York. Soon thereafter, because the Seattle network founder had not paid some New York musicians that Willson suggested to go West, the young music man found it expedient to flee to California.

Friends from New York who had already gone to the West coast helped Meredith Willson find work. As early as 1929 he was scoring films like *Peacock Alley* and *The Lost Zeppelin* for poverty row studio Tiffany. They weren't memorable for the flickering image, nor the music, but these early talkies kept the composer fed until he found a more permanent job as musical director at KFRC in San Francisco. At this key West coast station in those days, performers such as Nelson Eddy, Kay Kyser, Al Pearce, Bill Goodwin, and Phil Harris made appearances before the microphone. The force behind the station was Don Lee, but before long he found out that Los Angeles held more potential as a radio headquarters and shifted southward to KHJ.

Willson stayed in San Francisco for a while, working on *The Carefree Carnival*

(with, among others, Vera Vague, Pinky Lee, and Jerry Lester), *America Sings*, *Chiffon Jazz*, *Waltz Time*, and *House of Melody*. It was an active time for radio in northern California, as well as a time for the building of one of the world's greatest bridges, The Golden Gate. Looking down from the twenty-second floor of the NBC building, an inspired Meredith Willson wrote his first important composition, *The San Francisco Symphony*. He fell in love with The City by the Bay, but in 1937 he was drawn to the City of Angels to direct the music on the popular Maxwell House radio show.

The *Maxwell House Showboat* first came on the air from New York in 1932 and was a reflection of entertainment one might find on a paddlewheel steamer of long ago. Its hour long format was hosted by Charles Winninger as Captain Henry for the first two years and Lanny Ross, off and on, until the format changed. With a permanent shift to Hollywood in 1937, a film capital emphasis ultimately was in the brewing. By 1938 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer hoped shore up the show's sagging ratings by showcasing its talent on the newly renamed *Good News* program. Fanny Brice and Frank Morgan became regulars. Robert Young hosted and Meredith Willson took over the musical chores. One early contribution to the show was the writing of its theme song, one which had lyrics added in 1940 and climbed the *Hit Parade* entitled "You and I." (Willson had already written the theme "Smile with Me" for the *Carefree Carnival*.) Even though Maxwell House dropped the sponsorship of the show during the 1941-42 season, the band leader stayed on to what would be called the *Frank Morgan-Fanny Brice Show*.

Another triumph paralleled Meredith Willson's tenure with Maxwell House when he scored two very notable motion pictures. Charles Chaplin was reluctant to yield to talking pictures, preferring instead to score his own music and sound effects to late, essentially silent films,

such as *Modern Times*. However, by 1940 the handwriting was on the wall and his next film, *The Great Dictator*, became the first talking Chaplin film. After hearing Willson's *The San Francisco Symphony*, the Little Tramp contacted its composer and invited him to score his current film's music and then recorded it. The result was a collaborative effort, one which was remembered fondly and respectfully by Willson years later. Though he appreciated the creative genius of the star in *The Great Dictator*, the composer made sure that Willson distanced himself politically from Chaplin in the 1949 autobiographical work *And There I Stood with My Piccolo*.

The major politics in his next picture was Willson's attempt to keep much of his music off the cutting room floor. He was asked to score the music for the Academy Award winning *The Little Foxes*, a Samuel Goldwyn production directed by William Wyler. The Willson written spiritual "Never Feel Too Weary To Pray" was all but cut from the film, but the end result was an Oscar nomination for the best dramatic film score of 1941 and the release of the song as a successful single.

As World War II was warming up in Europe, Meredith Willson was active trying to raise money or goods for a variety of relief agencies. Not long after the United States entered the fray, the boy from Iowa volunteered to do his part. The result was Major Willson guiding the music for about seven or eight Armed Forces Radio Services shows a day, starting with *Melody Round-Up* at 8:00 A.M. and continuing with *At Ease*, *Intermezzo*, *Jubilee*, two *Personal Albums*, and by late night *Command Performance* and *Mail Call*. In his autobiography, Meredith Willson felt that the greatest *Command Performance* was the February 15, 1945 show "Dick Tracy in B Flat." The star-studded cast included Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra and many more, but Willson was eager to correct those who believed that was the

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first time that these two singers duelled on air, for a *Command Performance* of a few months earlier held that distinction.

Shows numbered 122 and 123 were to be recorded on the same day (the schedule was one behind), and Crosby and Sinatra were scheduled with Bob Hope to play for a first audience, the return to "disrupt" an all-female show that was to follow. Willson related how these three bad boys got carried away and nearly destroyed serious singer Lotte Lehmann with their off-mike high jinx. It was up to Meredith to glare at the GI audience, so that they would not think that her version of "Brahms Lullaby" was a joke. He saved the potential disaster, and Madame Lehmann's solo appeared unscathed to the radio listeners.

Although full of mixed feelings about V-J Day, happy about victory but unsure of a job, Meredith Willson headed for a good meal at the Brown Derby restaurant. After talking to Chester Lauck of *Lum and Abner* and fellow musician Ray Nobel, two offers to be musical director came forward, one at MGM and the other at the Hollywood branch of NBC. Willson felt that after his experiences in radio during the War that there were many creative possibilities for musical programs that were untapped, so he refused both offers. He wanted to see musical variety compete in the Hooper ratings, and so he decided to try his own show. And nobody bought the idea because of its cost.

Fortunately for Meredith Willson, Maxwell House had just bought the *Burns and Allen Show* returning them to NBC. George wanted Willson as his musical director, and Willson was happy to be back with Maxwell House. He quickly fit into the cast and routine of the show, so much so that after the first year on the program, George and Gracie asked their orchestra leader to be their summer replacement. The ratings were weak, but Canada Dry bought the show, now named *Sparkle Time*, for the fall on CBS.

Meredith Willson's new show remained on the air for two years with Canada Dry and continued as the *Music Room* through 1953. (He even hosted a fifteen minute day time show entitled *Everyday* during the 1952-53 season.) It was on the early shows that his "Talking People" began delivering the commercials. With only a few singers, it was devised that they would speak the commercials in unison, Greek chorus style. The result was a polished delivery that won the New York City College award for the best in radio advertising.

Not only was his musical show (under several names, times, and networks) continuing through the 1940's, but also was Meredith Willson's association with George Burns and Gracie Allen as a cast member. Several of radio's musical directors, such as Ray Nobel and Phil Harris, were talented enough to assume recurring roles in the scripts. Meredith Willson's home town naivete was a good character to listen to Gracie's illogic or to represent an innocent different to skirt chasing Bill Goodwin. And frequently, when Goodwin and Willson got together, the integrated commercial percolated into some of the best over the airwaves.

The "good to the last drop" of Maxwell House was the result of a perfect blending of a variety of beans (monezales, metalins, and bucaromangas), and to underline this harmony of flavors Goodwin would often work with the conductor to parallel wonderful songs (such as "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning" or even a Willson hit like "Iowa") part by part until the tune became a merger as masterful as General Food's best coffee. The result was a commercial that rivalled the show for entertainment value.

During the 1949 season changes were in the offing. Meredith Willson left Burns and Allen, while the rest of the cast looked toward television. The band leader hosted a summer television show in 1949 with the help of future Lawrence Welk Champagne Lady Norma Zimmer. Willson's



next important venture into the one-eyed medium came when Bill Goodman and Mark Todman created a game show counterpart to their successful *What's My Line?* entitled *The Name's the Same* on ABC. The Robert Q. Lewis hosted program ran for four years starting late in 1951, and Meredith Willson was a regular panelist until 1953.

Although television was the entertainment buzz word for the 1950's, NBC made one last gallant attempt to keep an audience. On November 5, 1950 *The Big Show* premiered as radio's greatest variety show offering to date. Tallulah Bankhead introduced her first guests (Fred Allen, Jimmy Durante, Jose Ferrer, Ethel Merman, Paul Lukas, Danny Thomas, Russell Nype, and Frankie Lane) with the proven assistance of musical director Meredith Willson. Not only did Willson lend his down home presence and musical skills to the proceedings, but he also wrote the theme song "May the Good Lord Bless and Keep You." It is curious to hear all of the cast members sing a line from this church-like song (inspired by what Will-

son's mother told her exciting Sunday school pupils) as they closed the ninety minute program. Even broadcasting from Europe did not help radio's last extravaganza and it expired in 1952.

Most of the 1950's found Meredith Willson directing his energies into his greatest project, *The Music Man*. The sapling of an idea that grew into the immensely popular musical found root somewhere near the Winnebago River and Willow Creek in north central Iowa. The fictitious River City was a reflection of the real Mason City, where Meredith Willson's musical life came full circle. Suggested by songwriter Frank Loesser as the subject for Willson's oft told stories of Iowa, the musical begins when a con man invades "the territory" to bilk the locals out of their hard earned wages with the promise that their potentially wayward sons would find themselves out of harm's way as members in a band. From 1949 to its opening on Broadway on December 19, 1957, what became one of the top ten attended shows on the Great White Way, as well as an ever popular offering for aspiring thespians, found a number of curves and bumps before its success. During the musical's revision period Willson wrote the novel *Who Did What to Fedalia* (1950) and his first two autobiographical works: *And There I Stood with My Piccolo* (1949) and *Eggs I Have Laid* (1955), before being able to tell the challenges of making *The Music Man* in the third part of his life story in *But He Doesn't Know the Territory* (1959).

In order to have a successful play on Broadway, the author needs to have a script, a cast, audiences, and probably critical acclaim. Strangely enough, what writers fear most in New York, the critics, was the least of Meredith Willson's problems. The script evolved after years of work and the inspiration for the plot might have come from an unpublished short story written by sister Dixie Willson (a prolific writer of the 1920's and 30's and

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contributor to his Ford commercials in the 1940's). Once a script doctor fixed the libretto and financing was established, a key performer had to be found. By the early 1950's Meredith Willson had endeared himself to many leading candidates, but Danny Kaye did not feel that the part was right for him, Dan Dailey did not respond to an interview, Phil Harris did not send an answer, Gene Kelly was not interested, and the idea of Robert Preston as Professor Harold Hill did not impress Willson. The play had everything but the Music Man himself.

Of course, not only did Preston convince Willson, but he was also one of the few stage members to carry their parts into what would be nominated for the Best Picture of 1962. This musical is unusual because the lead does not really sing, but rather talks the songs. Prior to taking the title role in *The Music Man*, Bob Preston had been known more as a supporting actor primarily in action films. Once the cast was established, funding was procured after some arduous salesmanship. Rehearsals began and instead of panning this folksy tale from the Midwest, *The Music Man* won the New York Drama Critic's annual award for Best Musical, Best Music, and Best Lyrics. It was also named "Best Musical" by *Variety* and *Sign* magazine, while winning five Tonys. Famed critic Brooks Atkinson called *The Music Man* a bit of Americana that "translated the thump and razzle-dazzle of brass-band lore into a warm and genial cartoon of American life."

After numerous accolades were given to Meredith Willson, he set to work on his next musical, the raucous toe-tapper *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*. He turned down the chance to put Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness* to music, opting instead to write the music for a true story of an Irish

woman immigrant who rose from poverty to wealth in the West and survived the Titanic disaster. This musical was not treated as kindly by the critics as was its predecessor, who in some instances unjustly compared it to the composer's more sedate first production. After a respectable run and a good movie adaptation for *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, Willson wrote two more musicals. First *The Miracle on 34th Street* was turned into a Broadway offering entitled *Here's Love*. Although it opened strong, it is generally remembered for the song "It's Beginning To Look a Lot Like Christmas," which places it as somewhat more prestigious than Willson's next musical *1492*.

Tributes were presented to Meredith Willson throughout his final years. Schools honored him with degrees, charity organizations thanked him for his work with groups such as The Big Brothers, colleagues from radio and music honored him, and three presidents called upon him for his expertise (President Kennedy had Willson write a march for his fitness campaign, President Johnson appointed him to the Council on the Arts and Humanities, and President Ford asked for an anti-inflation song.) One final tribute came when a summer band camp organized seventy-six trombones in tribute to the man who wrote the rallying song for anyone who ever played in a marching band.

After he died in 1984 Meredith Willson was brought home to his beloved Mason City, Iowa. To this day, his home town hosts a high school band festival where hundreds of teenagers gather under posters with the image of a trombonist whose bespectacled face closely resembles that of Meredith Willson, assuring that there will be no "trouble... for the kids in the knickerbockers, shirt tailed young ones" if they just join a band, as did Iowa's Music Man decades earlier. ■