

Cover Story:

TEX BENEKE

By KARL PEARSON

When Gordon Lee Beneke stepped into a New York studio in April, 1938 for rehearsal with a new band led by then-unknown bandleader Glenn Miller, little did he know that landing that particular job would bring him fame and popularity that still remains to this day.

It was at that first rehearsal for Miller's new band that "Tex" Beneke, as he is now known, got his famous nickname. After driving from Detroit in a blinding snowstorm, Beneke wearily arrived at the studio and climbed the three or four flights of stairs leading to the room. Upon entering, Glenn spotted him and called out "Hi there, Tex!"

Born in Fort Worth, Texas on February 12, 1914, young Gordon began playing soprano saxophone at age nine. As a teenager he began playing professionally with territory bands and in 1935 landed a job with Ben Young, a local leader who had a fine band. The Young band got a job at the Texas Centennial Celebration in Dallas in 1936, where it became better-known. Because of this Dallas engagement the band began a tour of the mid-western states, eventually settling in Detroit.

In early 1938, while the Young band was still in Detroit, drummer Gene Krupa came through town looking for men for his new band. Although Krupa wound up taking some of Ben Young's sidemen he didn't take Tex as he already had a fine tenor saxist in his band: Sam Donahue. But when Gene returned to New York he

ran into Glenn Miller, also forming a band of his own. Glenn had had a band the year before but it had failed. After a few months of part-time work for Tommy Dorsey he had decided to give it another try, form a new band and begin looking for new men. Krupa told Miller about Beneke and Glenn, needing a tenor saxist contacted Tex. Miller told Beneke the pay was not much — only \$50.00 a week. But Tex held out for \$52.50! Miller, usually a tough businessman, met Tex's price and Beneke joined the Miller band in April, 1938.

At that first rehearsal, tenor saxist Beneke also became a vocalist. While going through the "charts" in the Miller library, Glenn called for "Doin' The Jive," a number recorded by Miller's previous band. The tune called for a vocal exchange between Glenn and Jerry Jerome, Tex's predecessor. Glenn gave Tex Jerome's part and the rest is history.

Prior to his association with Miller, Tex was basically a tenor man, not a vocalist; although Tex later confessed to having "sung a few choruses of the blues, somewhat on the shady side" with Young's band!

Those first few months with the Miller band were rough; the band was not doing well, but Tex stuck it out. Finally in the spring of 1939, the band struck pay dirt with its recordings for RCA-Bluebird and with its late-night broadcasts from such places as Frank Dailey's Meadowbrook and the Glen Island Casino. The money began pouring into the Miller band coffers with lucrative theater dates and location jobs.

Tex was part of the reason for the Miller success. As a star soloist, he was featured heavily on many uptempo and ballad numbers (where he had, and still has, a wonderfully warm sound). He was also an asset as a vocalist, at first paired in vocal/dialogue exchanges with Glenn, later on numbers with Marion Hutton, and also on numbers with Hutton and the Modernaires, for which he is best remem-

CHUCK SCHADEN'S
NOSTALGIA DIGEST AND RADIO GUIDE

OCTOBER + NOVEMBER, 1984



TEX BENEKE

bered. Tex soloed and sang on many of the band's hit recordings such as "Ida, Sweet As Apple Cider," "Chattanooga Choo Choo" and "Kalamazoo." He also appeared on the air and in the movies with the band. Tex recalled that "I had one or two lines of dialogue" in one of the movies.

As World War II began the Glenn Miller band was at the height of its popularity. But even with all his success, Glenn felt that he wanted to do his part in helping the war effort and enlisted in the U. S. Army. On September 27, 1942 the Glenn Miller Orchestra played its last engagement at the Central Theater in Passaic, New Jersey, and then the band broke up. Glenn was hoping to put a service band of his own together and wanted to get many of his civilian sidemen in it, including Tex. He told him to be patient and not to enlist until Glenn

called him, so Tex kept busy by going out on a theater tour with Marion Hutton and the Modernaires.

While patiently waiting for word from Glenn, Tex received "Greetings from his draft board. And in February, 1943 he once again became Gordon Beneke when he was drafted into the navy. By the time that he was discharged some two-and-a-half years later, Beneke had risen to the rank of Chief Petty Officer and was in charge of two navy bands.

At the same time that CPO Gordon Beneke was in the navy, Major Glenn Miller was stationed in England and was now leading his great Army Air Force Band. In the little time that Glenn had between personal appearances and broadcasts, he had begun to make his postwar plans. Miller figured he had gone as far as he could with his "civilian band sound" and decided on leading a larger band

similar to his Air Force Band, complete with strings. He would offer jobs to many of the men in his Air Force Band and also wanted Tex to return.

But Glenn was never able to return and fulfill his dream. On December 15, 1944, on a routine flight to Paris, his plane disappeared while over the English Channel. He was never heard from again.

At the war's conclusion several people including Glenn's widow Helen felt that Glenn's plans could still be carried off, even without him. And the most logical replacement for Glenn was Tex. And so, on January 17, 1946 the Glenn Miller Orchestra under the direction of Tex Beneke made its debut at New York's Capitol Theater (A sideline: on that same bill under the words "extra added attraction" were then-unknown performers Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis.)

The band did follow along the lines of Glenn's Air Force Band and included a string section and french horn, in addition to the usual big band lineup. Consisting of some 40 musicians and singers, approximately two-thirds of the members had played in the Miller AAF Band. Its repertoire consisted of many of the old civilian band hits, numbers from the AAF band's book, new songs in the Miller style and some brand-new bop-influenced instrumentals. Arrangers such as Jerry Gray, Norman Leyden, Billy May (who had all worked with Glenn) and young Henry Mancini supplied charts for the band. And Tex was, of course, featured heavily on sax and vocals, in addition to being leader.

The Beneke-Miller band was an immediate success also landing a record contract with RCA Victor, Glenn's old label. The band had several big selling records, including one using the AAF Band's arrangement of "St. Louis Blues March." It made many broadcasts and appeared in a few film shorts. The band



did well wherever it played. On opening night at the Palladium in 1947 it set the house record with 6,750 admissions!

The band continued to do well, but eventually there were problems. Tex became discouraged; he felt that had Glenn returned he would have tried new things, and that the band should continue in different directions. But the band's management wanted Tex to stick with the Miller style; yet RCA would not let the band re-record any of the original Miller hits as the originals were still selling well and RCA didn't want any competition with those originals. In addition to this, the band business had begun to drop off; attendance was down, ballrooms closed all over the country. And there were fewer and fewer large ballrooms that had bandstands big enough to hold the large Beneke/Miller organization. So finally, in December, 1950 Tex and the Miller estate parted company.

Since then Tex has led bands on a semi-permanent basis and throughout the years has worked with many of the Glenn Miller band alumni.

And Tex still plays many of the Miller hits.