



Remembering Glenn Miller: The U.S. Air Force Band in the Studio

December 1998 by Karl Winkler

It was towards the tail end of the Second World War and Glenn Miller's Army Air Corps band had been scheduled on a European tour. Glenn himself scheduled a flight from England to Paris with plans to set up some of the gigs for the troops who were fighting in Europe at the time. No trace was ever found of his single-engined plane after it went down over the English Channel. Throughout the remainder of the 1940s and well into the 1950s, Glenn Miller's music was among the most popular sounds of the day. 50 years later, to commemorate the historic tour planned by Miller, the U.S. Air Force Airmen of Note big band out of Washington, D.C.'s Bolling Air Force Base designed a tour of their own. The Airmen of Note, formed in 1950 to carry on the Glenn Miller tradition, toured through an impressive 22 cities the first summer, and another 18 the second year. Highlights of the tours included stops at the San Francisco Symphony Hall, the Boston Esplanade on the Fourth of July, the Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson field in Ohio and New York City's famous Carnegie Hall.

An album entitled "We Remember", narrated by Peter Graves, was completed during the Spring of 1995. For the sessions, the goal was to have all the recordings done in one room so that the sound was consistent. This room was used normally as a rehearsal space and it didn't have the greatest acoustics. But the band knew how to play together really well in there. My second engineer for the dates, Tony Beardslee, and I chose the mics to compliment the band. The Air Force band has a great mic locker - just about everything you could want. We selected the mics we felt would give us an accurate picture of the band. The director, Peter Barenbregge, didn't want a 'vintage sound' so we went with the best mics we could find for each instrument. Since the saxophone blend was such an important part of the Miller sound, we put U 67s on the saxes, except for the baritone sax, which got a TLM 170 for the extra clarity.

The trumpets proved particularly challenging due to fact that the dynamic range of this section in big band music is quite huge. We ended up selecting the TLM 170 for each of the four trumpet players to get their sound as accurately as possible without overload. TLM 170s were also chosen for drum overheads and acoustic bass. The session was recorded using the band's studio equipment, which included a 32 channel Soundcraft TS24 and two Alesis ADAT multitrack units. One of the greatest obstacles to overcome during the sessions was that we had only 16 tracks to work with, which meant that we had to have only two tracks for all four trumpets, two tracks for all four trombones, and three tracks for all five saxes.

We had to do a fair amount of mixing to tape, which always limits your options later in mixdown. The outboard equipment included Drawmer and Urei compressors along with Lexicon LXP-15 and model 300 units for reverb. The Air Force band has a live plate but unfortunately, it wasn't hooked up at the time. The most challenging day of the sessions came when a full orchestra was required for two of the cuts on the recording. With only 16 tracks and 32 inputs total, the studio was completely strapped. My assistant and I were scrambling to find the last few inputs as some of the tie lines from the panels didn't work. We ended up using every single XLR cable they had to get the mics hooked up, but miraculously, the session happened and one of the most dramatic songs on the album came together quite nicely.

Stormy Weather, with vocalist Nita Desazior, was done all at once, live, in one room. For her vocals, we used a U 67, a mic which seemed to match Ms. Desazior's voice perfectly. There were 22 strings, a big band, and the vocalist. I've always been an advocate of live musicians playing together in a room where they can see and hear each other. The energy on this session (not including the stress of finding enough working mic lines!) was amazing. I think my favorite song on the record is He Wears a Pair of Silver Wings with Bobbie Coonin on vocals. She just has this velvety voice that sounds so right for songs of this era. The mic we used may seem odd to many engineers, but for this song it worked perfectly: a KM 140. Small diaphragm mics like this are usually very prone to wind noise, so we used a pop screen. The results were sublime. For the first live concert, which was held in Constitution hall in Washington, D.C., we used a TLM 170 on Bobbie. The sound was fantastic but due to the extraordinary sensitivity of this mic, it was a bit difficult to control feedback in such a live hall.

For the tour, we ended up using a Sennheiser 431, and with it, Bobbie just slayed the audience with her velvety ballads each night. Some other people I want to thank are the guys who made up the crew on the tours; they were the best. The systems guy, Joe Dougherty, is at Clair Brothers now. My second engineer, Joe Korgie, the guy who put 22 lavalier mics out every night on the strings without fail, is working at Dorian Records. The only unfortunate thing is that these recordings aren't for sale. But if you happen to hear that the Air Force Band is coming to your town, put them on your calendar. The shows are free and the quality of music is outstanding.

