Sentimental Journey

By Paul Edward Johnson

There's something about how a gold horn lifts my spirit. Whoever created the simple lines of the trombone had to have been an angel sent to us from God. Maybe the angel with the trumpet.

And there's the mellophone. And the French horn, too. But perhaps my favorite has always been the saxophone. Especially the hefty tenor.

The tenor sax is the sexiest. I seldom call it a saxophone. It's a sax. Its versatility, in the right hands, takes me from the sensations of hearing the honey-purr of my first girlfriend's voice to hearing the voice of a burned-down alcoholic trying to bum a cigarette in a strip joint.

The sax can be either one of the sweetest of ladies or one of the sleaziest. And all the other ladies in between. The sax became my favorite during the first time I saw and heard with my parents what they called a dance band.

My parents had a sudden urge one night to go dancing. But they could not get a baby sitter for my sisters Sue and Sylvia and Larry and me. I wasn't old enough yet to be in charge whenever Mom and Dad were away from home. I was about to become age ten and still dangerous as hell with matchbooks. But wait. That's another story. This story is about horns and dance bands.

Mom and Dad packed us into our Sunday clothes and took us to the Automobile Club.

The Automobile Club overlooked manicured lawns with flower gardens spread out above a lush valley with the Minnesota River flowing below. And above the valley a pink and blue haze extended toward the distant horizon.

We were ushered to a round table with a white linen table cloth and a crystal vase centerpiece filled with red roses. And when Dad opened the French doors near our table we inhaled scents of the garden flowers, freshly cut grass, and enjoyed the vast vista of the river valley.

Near our table was an expanse of shiny floor. Not big enough for a basketball game, but at least enough space for volleyball.

Over on the far side of the floor was a stage where several men standing next to a piano were opening suitcases that held golden horns; the kind of horns my fourth grade teacher, Miss Sklater, had tried to get me to memorize before my classmates went on our first field trip to hear a symphony and chew soft candy from concealed boxes of Dots, Crows, and Nibs.

After the guys in the band had tuned their instruments, they filled the ballroom with finger-snapping music.

Mom and Dad went straight for that open floor, along with about thirty other couples and soon there were so many people dancing we lost sight of Mom and Dad.

On the stage was a piano player, a trombone player, a man with a trumpet, a guy with a big bass fiddle, a guitar player and a man playing drums.

Standing in front of them under a spotlight was a man blowing a horn that spun out from his lips and curled down below his waist and then arched up like a horse's neck to the opening of a golden bell at about belt level.

My younger brother Larry, who knew everything, told me it was a saxophone.

I couldn't believe how this little man could get his horn to fill the ballroom with pleasant melody.

Mom and Dad came back to our table after dancing to one of their favorite tunes, a tune we would often sing around our piano: "Sentimental Journey."

I let them know how impressed I was by the saxophone player. They told me he was the son of a Minneapolis newspaper sports writer.

Mom took me over to the stage when the musicians were taking a break between songs and introduced me to him. His name was George Barton, Jr.

He reached down from the stage, shook my hand, smiled at me, and I could see muscles in his cheeks. His golden saxophone hung from a strap around his neck.

While I stood there below him, he released the strap and placed the saxophone upright in a stand so that it was eye level to me. The horn had a red plastic transparent mouthpiece, and as my wide eyes gazed at the horn's curves I was impressed by all the gizmos, pads, pearl keys, the holes and complicated plumbing that went from top to bottom and then back up one side of the bell. It seemed too complicated for an ordinary person to play.

Before we went back to our table George Barton squatted down and said, "If tonight you want to stand here by the stage and watch us play, that's fine with me, Paul."

I gulped down my French fries and spent the rest of the night standing next to the bandstand, right below George Barton. Every now and then he'd switch to a smaller saxophone that had a sweeter sound. But most of the time he played the hefty one, the one I liked the best, the full-sounding one, the tenor, me admiring how he could get all those people to dance when he played it.

Mom and Dad loved him. We drove to the Automobile Club to hear George Barton and his dance band five or six times that summer.

Mom taught me how to waltz. She told me to keep my shoulders tall and still, to not bounce them up and down to the rhythm of slow tunes. To take short steps. To lead. And, most important, to always be proud of the lady with whom I was dancing: "my partner."

When I danced with Mom sometimes George Barton winked at us while playing his sax and I would smile back at him, feeling George had to be feeling pretty good while doing his business at the Automobile Club.

On Sundays after church my family would go to an Italian restaurant in downtown Minneapolis, the Cafe di Napoli, for spaghetti and meat balls.

Then on one snowfall sparkling night during Christmas vacation, Mom took me on a streetcar into downtown

Minneapolis, to treat me to yet another spaghetti and meatballs dinner at the Café di Napoli and a movie at the city's grandest theater, Radio City, to see a new movie: *The Glenn Miller Story*.

We stepped down from an old yellow street car into almost a foot of snow on Hennepin Avenue, and then high-stepped across the street toward the frosted and warmly lighted windows of the Café di Napoli.

I was struck by the silence of the city, how the softly falling snow had transformed its normal bluster into a kind of pleasant ghostliness.

It seemed there were no cars moving, no pedestrians. Just Mom and me in downtown Minneapolis.

Beneath the thin layer of frost on the glowing glass door of the restaurant there was a color poster of a man holding a golden trombone, a promotion for the movie we were soon about to go see.

While we stopped to admire the poster, Mom told me again that Glenn Miller had been one of her favorite band leaders when she was in high school during the 1930's.

Inside the cozy restaurant, sitting in a booth with our elbows on a red and white checkered table cloth, I gazed past the empty straw-covered wine bottle holding a lighted red candle and gazed into Mom's dancing eyes as they seemed to move to the music of her melodic voice, almost singing a story about how Dad and she had once spent a night together dancing to a band that played Glenn Miller's music.

"It was just after Pearl Harbor, Paul, when you were not yet a year old. One of our best friends, Larry White, had enlisted in the Army Air Force. Larry was to depart for pilot training the next day."

She told me how they had brought a group of friends together to have a going-away party for him at the Nicollet Hotel where this band was playing Glenn Miller's music. At the end of the evening they requested Miller's "Chattanooga Choo-Choo," in honor of Larry.

Mom said they all stood around the stage and sang along with the band and their vocal group. She said she would never forget that moment, how they were all crying and smiling at the same time.

Then with tears in her eyes she said, “Before the war was over, Larry White died in a mission over Germany.”

Mom and Dad named their next son Larry.

They chose my name from a principal character in the popular radio serial “One Man’s Family,” Paul Barbour, the oldest of five children, a fighter pilot shot down over France during World War I, and after the war, he became a writer.

When we finished eating Mom said, “Before we walk down the street to see this movie about Glenn Miller, I must prepare you for something as sad as what had happened to Larry White.”

She told me about how Glenn Miller had also lost his life in the war while flying from England to France to play a concert for troops stationed there.

When we left the restaurant we had about fifteen minutes before the movie would start. But Radio City Theater was only a block away and while we walked among the silent snowflakes, I had a feeling this was going to be an important movie for Mom. And for me maybe even as stirring as John Wayne’s *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*.

When Mom bought our tickets there were very few people in the lobby. Yet when we went toward one of the first-floor doors to get a seat, an usher said the lower level was filled and he directed us toward the staircase to the balconies. Radio City Theater had a palatial marble lobby with a vast gold-gilded ceiling. And ornate glittering gold and crystal chandeliers and tall Roman statues.

At the end of the long lobby was a grand staircase of plush red carpet that led to a balcony that looked down upon the marble lobby. Several more staircases led up to more balconies. Each level had intimate nooks containing sofas surrounded by plush red velvet draperies.

We were seated by a uniformed usher in the top balcony a moment before the lights were dimmed. The place was packed. Maybe more than 2,000 people.

Where had they all come from? Just how long had they been waiting? This *was* going to be an important movie.

I don't want to bore you with all the details. But I say it still is among my favorite movies, as corny as it now seems. At the time, however, on that night, and during years that followed, it ranked as my all-time favorite.

First of all there was this skinny guy, Glenn Miller, played by Jimmy Stewart, who I could identify with right off the bat. And he had this pal (Harry Morgan) who seemed to stick with Glenn Miller through thick and thin. I like that in a movie.

These two guys put together a gang of guys so that they could have a band of their own. I liked that, too.

I especially enjoyed Robin Hood stories and all that comrade stuff about his merry gang. But Glenn Miller's gang seemed even better. What fun to be in a gang traveling all about the land making people happy with your music!

And then there was June Allyson. What she did to me in that movie was lay down all the "specifications" for my future wife. It amazes me how much this movie affected my attitudes and values regarding heroes, women, war, marriage, history, friendship, and who knows what else.

Less than a week after that movie, I was standing in George Barton's Music Store with Dad. He had agreed to buy me a saxophone, the same kind George Barton played at the Automobile Club. A tenor sax. And Dad even tossed in what would be a year's worth of lessons from George Barton himself.

I couldn't forget those nights at the Automobile Club watching George play the sax. And the thing that made the Glenn Miller Band so special was the searing sound he got from his saxophone section.

When those five sax players wound up those horns in that movie, they produced that special sound, something between wailing sirens and strings, something close to the sensation I'd get whenever I'd hear the sound of all the engines pulsing on the wings of a big airplane.

While watching *The Glenn Miller Story*, I knew before Glenn disappeared over the English Channel that I wanted to be a part of a big dance band.

I sensed that with the help of the tenor saxophone Dad bought me and lessons from George Barton, I would discover something important in life, maybe even another June Allyson.

But first there were the lessons: "Screech! Awwwk! Blat. Sqwack. Sqweeeeek. Honk. Honk." How did Mom or Dad or Larry, or Sue, or Sylvia allow it? The blasts from my sax made my baby brother Ricky cry in his playpen.

George Barton kept telling me that it would just only be a matter of time before I "developed my lip."

During the first few months my lower lip seemed to become raw hamburger. And I wasn't getting better.

There were, however, fewer fingernails-down-the-blackboard moments for my family to have to endure.

The tunes for my lessons were just dumb ones: "Etude in D Minor," "Rhapsody for B-Flat Tenor Saxophone," and "Finger Fantasy in G." I wanted to play Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade," "Tuxedo Junction," "In the Mood," or tunes played on the radio, like my friend Jerry Bender's favorite, "Skokian."

I hung it up. I apologized to Dad. Told him that I just couldn't get the thing to sound right, especially those last three or four low notes and three or four high notes.

He accepted it. Said he'd keep the sax around for awhile in case I changed my mind.

I bought Glenn Miller records and would play them over and over on this little 45-RPM record player by my bed:

“Elmer's Tune,” “Pennsylvania 6-5000,” and “String of Pearls,” and “Moonlight Serenade.”

And then a song titled “Melody of Love” became popular. It was a waltz. Easy to dance to. All the girls who went to the Pershing Park Field House for the Friday Night Dance would ask to have the record played three or four times during every Friday night.

Every time they’d get it played, I would ask slinky Linda Forsman if she’d dance with me.

She would always say yes. She wasn’t any June Allyson, but when we waltzed to “Melody of Love” we sure did agree on the pretty sax solo in the middle of the tune.

Mrs. O’Leary, our school music teacher, had told a friend of mine, John Tollefson, who was playing trombone in the junior high school band, that she wanted the band to play the song for the annual Spring Concert, but they didn’t have anyone who could play the sax solo.

I went to see her about it. She gave me the score and told me to take it home and work on it, and said it was never too late to join the band. So I dusted off the sax case, assembled the horn, and spent days trying to get my lip back into shape before tearing into “Melody of Love.”

For the next month I played nothing but “Melody of Love.” My lip and jaw muscles were taking hold. I was actually getting a decently sweet sound with even a little vibrato to go with it. Dad was proud. Said he was on the verge of selling the thing but glad he hadn’t.

When I played “Melody of Love” for Mrs. O’Leary she insisted I join the band. There were about thirty kids in it, grades seven and eight. She had this steel baton with a cork hand grip. It scared the hell out of me because she had this penchant for rapping it on things: her podium, chairs, my head.

I was terrible. I was always behind, always losing my place, often not in tune. And we seldom seemed to get around to playing “Melody of Love.”

But in spite of all that, a wondrous thing happened.

I discovered how five saxophones can often sound much better than one. And how, during short moments, maybe just for two or three measures of music, an entire band can all be playing the right notes, playing together as a unit. It was as thrilling as pulling off a fast break in basketball or scoring a touchdown on a sweep play with a pulling guard in football.

I was able to sense that all the agonizing practice, all the hours of clanging band rehearsals, and the risk of getting an eye poked out by Mrs. O'Leary's baton, it might all be worth it if we could just for a few moments experience that sublime pleasure of us all playing together as the composer meant us to play.

I played my solo on "Melody of Love" at the annual Spring Concert. Mom and Dad were there and I played it without making a single mistake.

A bigger event came a few days later. It was at some kind of a ceremony in the school gym, a couple of days before the end of school. Three eighth graders had put together a trio, Peter Chevalier playing accordion, Bob Carls on trumpet, and Lynn Thorkildson on drums.

The principal announced they would provide a musical interlude in this boring ceremony for the graduating eighth graders.

Their first piece was something stupid; maybe it was "Lady of Spain." But their second number knocked my socks off. It was "Peg O' My Heart" with Bob Carls playing the melody using a muted trumpet.

All the way through the tune all I could do was smile and wish I was up there playing that little ditty with them. Carls sounded good, real good. He had this classy jazzy style. He was showing all of us that he was a performer. And I was surprised, envious.

I joined a dumb summer band.

But except for "Melody of Love" there wasn't anything else I could sink my chops into.

And during the next winter I had torturous moments when Dad and Mom tied me into playing Christmas music, once at a small-town church in Riceville, Iowa.

But during the summer before I entered high school, the trombone player in Mrs. O'Leary's band, John Tollefson, he invited me to join him in a group that a Richfield high school band teacher had formed. They met in his basement every Saturday morning for a few hours.

What I discovered in that basement that first Saturday morning was seven sax players, six trombone players, eight or nine trumpet players, three drummers, two piano players, a bass player, and several guitar players. All packed into the small basement of a little two-bedroom house way out in suburban Richfield.

Everybody was about 12 or 13 years old. I shared a music stand with another tenor sax player.

With some of us doubling-up on the sax parts of the first arrangement I played with the band during that Saturday morning was a Duke Ellington tune titled "C-Jam Blues."

Within the first eight bars I almost wet my pants.

During the second eight bars, I was so happy I stopped playing and couldn't do anything but laugh out loud. I was sure I alarmed the guy I was sharing the music with.

But then he stands up and rips into a gutsy improvised solo punctuated by the brass section doing some "doooo waasszzz-do-wop, doooo waasszzzz-do-wops," and other jazzy sounds. And when he sat down, the sax section went into a repetitive, rhythmic, melodic line that I later learned is called a riff.

There I was. Me. Sitting among a gang of twerp kids all pretending to be grown-up big-band jazz artists.

What a gas, man!

Next up was "Moonlight Serenade." As we poured into the melody I couldn't believe I was playing Glenn Miller's music. Sure, I wasn't playing most of the notes, and sure,

I was getting lost, losing my place, losing my mind, but I'd get it right for a measure or so.

The man who ran these Saturday morning sessions was Harry Strobel. All these kids were his music students. The Saturday band was a bonus for his students. And I became his student, instantly.

He had twenty arrangements for us to play at our first public performance or first "job," as Harry called it.

It was for Dad's Boy Scout Troop 73. They were putting on a pancake supper for the Lake Harriet community at Lake Harriet Methodist Church. I had talked Dad into letting us play for it.

There were more than twenty-five of us when we set up our bandstands. We were on a little stage in the church basement, elevated about a foot or so.

Harry had us set up our bandstands at a 45-degree angle from all the people scarfing up their pancakes. He was afraid that if we faced all these people head on we'd blow them right on out of the church basement. Maybe clear on out of the church.

And that's about what we did. Eight saxophones, eight trombones, eight trumpets, three drum sets, a bass, and for whatever reason a piano too, can be more than an earful when placed in the hands of children who want to be heard. Especially in a church basement.

We were never invited back to play for another pancake supper. But Dad told me he was impressed by the kind of music we were trying to play.

Our next and last job or "gig" was across the street from Lake Harriet Methodist Church. It was at the place where I had first danced with Linda Forsman to the strains of "Melody of Love," Pershing Park Field House.

We had sort of "refined" our ability to play our twenty or so arrangements, and had somehow sensed we might be a bit too loud for anyone with hearing.

As with the Lake Harriet Methodist Church job, we were not being paid for this field-house dance, but that didn't matter at all. I was there to impress Bob Carls and my secret heart throb, Toni. I knew they would be there. They were always there on Friday night, never anything else happening on Friday nights. And this night they had a live band instead of just records.

I can't say how bad we were. But nobody left. And when we finished playing all of our arrangements we played some of them again until it was just before curfew and time for everybody to walk home.

My secret crush Toni was there. And John told me that she told his girlfriend that she liked our band. Even Bob Carls was surprised. He said so.

I spent nearly every day that summer of 1956 practicing in the basement, always keeping the basement windows cracked open in hopes that either Bob Carls would walk by, hear me practicing, and suggest we start up a band; and on the off-chance Toni would stop in, say she heard me playing while walking home, and ask me to marry her. But she never did.

So at the start of my sophomore year at Southwest High School, I got John Tollefson, then a freshman, to talk to Bob Carls. John and I agreed that Harry Strobel's kid band was something we could actually do on our own. All we needed were dance-band arrangements, some collapsible cardboard music stands, and musicians.

Bob Carls had never been one of my friends. He was a year older than me. When we were at Fulton Elementary School he was the last kid I got into a fight with. He combed his greasy blonde hair in careful ducktails and enjoyed throwing snowballs in my face.

But somehow John talked Bob into the idea of putting a dance band together. We both knew that if we couldn't talk Bob into the idea we had no real chance of having our own band. Not a real band.

Bob was such an accomplished trumpet player he alone could make a kindergarten rhythm band sound as if they were good enough to perform for a high school prom.

He had the rich tone of Harry James. The same vibrato, fluidity, and mature fullness. When Bob put a trumpet in his hands he even stood like Harry James; head tilted, his horn at an angle toward the ceiling.

He sounded like a forty-year-old pro. He sounded that good as an eighth grader playing "Peg O' My Heart." And anybody, even anybody with a tin ear, knew it. The only thing Bob Carls didn't have was a band to showcase his talent. The only thing John and I didn't have was a Bob Carls to play behind.

I still remember standing next to the baby grand piano in Bob's living room. I was wearing my purple cords and dirty white suede shoes. John did most of the talking, maybe because Bob and I had never hit it off. And John had set up the meeting.

But to my delight it was all falling into place. Bob and John were already trying to figure who they knew at Southwest High School who they could get to join us. And Bob had a girlfriend at Washburn High School who knew some guys that might be right. A piano player, a drummer, couple trumpet players, even a guitar player.

There were guys at Southwest who might be counted in: Al Bigot, an alto sax player who was good at reading music, something I had not yet learned to adequately do; and Dave Andersen, a science genius in Bob's class who was starting to learn how to play alto sax.

I was a little leery about those two, especially the genius. But Bob pointed out that the genius had a car and even though he had a lousy tone, he was bright and might learn quickly. Besides, when you get five saxophones playing together, if one guy has a bad tone, the other horns tend to cover him up.

Within an hour we had somehow agreed to put a band together. Bob's mother seemed to be as delighted as I was. She kept feeding us cookies and milk while we stood there by the piano trying to think of a name for the band.

The Blue Notes had already been taken by a band in Minneapolis, and because I was going to be paying for the band's arrangements and shelling out for the collapsible

cardboard music stands, I was not in favor of calling it The Bob Carls' Band, even though we all knew he was the only guy with pro-level talent.

John was a fine trombone player and could really rip on Buddy Morrow's arrangement of "Night Train," and I knew John would love having his own band. But Bob's ego and sheer ability wouldn't allow for a 14-year-old band leader, especially when Bob was already age 16.

I'd been listening to Glenn Miller's recordings religiously, and their vocal group's name, The Modernaires, entered my mind.

During the past year we'd been listening to what was for us a new form of music, something called modern jazz, which at first seemed to me to be only a dissonant clash of horns all played by musicians who most of the time seemed unable to play the right notes to a melody.

But one of our friends, Ben Lifson, also in Bob and Dave's class, introduced us to the recordings of Miles Davis and Charlie Mingus. Ben said if we wished to "be cool" and "hip" we had best learn to like modern jazz.

Between 5 and say 5:30 on that autumn afternoon in 1956, and between The Modernaires and modern jazz, there had to be a name for a band somewhere.

We settled on The Moderns.

Now, I blush. But at that moment it seemed perfect. You have to remember, I suppose, that anything during that period of the 1950's that was fashionable, anything that was unquestionably popular, was, without exception, labeled "modern." You name it. Furniture, architecture, clothing styles, food fads, such as a new dish named pizza pie, even popular music, if it was popular it was "modern." So why not go for instant acceptability?

Looking back now, perhaps The Anachronisms would have been most appropriate. While our teenage contemporaries were dancing to Bill Haley and the Comets' song "Rock Around the Clock," and buying a greaser's records titled "Hound Dog" and "Blue Suede Shoes," and now referring to this music as "rock and roll,"

we were calling their music “kid stuff,” another passing fad, like pink-and-black clothes, yo-yos, and the springing slinky and the hula hoops.

We knew Fats Domino’s “Blueberry Hill” and Chuck Berry’s “Maybelline” were damned catchy tunes, but we also believed that those guys were not doing material that had the staying power of say a Count Basie, an Artie Shaw, or a Tommy Dorsey big band arrangement.

We felt we were “growing up” while at the same time many of our musically illiterate friends were just wallowing in bubble-gum music performed on a hypnotic boob-tube show that some square dared to call *Bandstand*, when in fact no band deserving to be called a dance band never made an appearance on his after-school TV show.

We were convinced big-band music was superior in every way, and we were proud to be a gang of kids performing dance music that was popular during our parents’ youth.

If anything was going to make us popular with our fellow teens, it was the fact that they also, overwhelmingly, wanted to feel grown-up, to be seen by parents and teachers as young adults.

That meant dressing up in suits and dresses and to go to a high school gymnasium festooned with paper streamers and balloons, and dance to music their parents enjoyed. Becoming a “young adult” was “part of the program, man. Cool. “All in the game.”

So there we were, John, Bob and myself, all set to find “musicians” and blow The Moderns into Coolsville.

If it were not for the Chester E. Groth Music Store, I doubt there ever would have been The Moderns. This old dusty music store in downtown Minneapolis was the only place in Minnesota that sold music scores for big bands.

After I cashed a paycheck for sacking groceries at Red Owl, I was in the back of Chester E. Groth’s, at the wall of file cabinets that held what seemed to be thousands of arrangements performed by all the big dance bands that had reached their zenith in the Thirties and Forties.

Although one or two of the arrangements seemed to be recently popular, such as Buddy Morrow's "Night Train," and a thing called "The Bunny Hop," I couldn't help but feel I was born too late.

While opening the drawers of the file cabinets and beholding the authentic arrangements for Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade" and "A String of Pearls," I felt a sensation that I didn't belong in 1956.

I felt had I been born in 1911 instead of 1941, I would have been in my prime during the rise of the Big Band Era. Instead, there I was standing in a dusty music store that most people had never heard of, me "going ape" over moldering arrangements of music hardly anyone my age listened to anymore.

I bought about 20 big-band arrangements that day. Each one came in a folder filled with the individual parts for five saxophones, four trombones, four trumpets, a bass, a guitar, a piano, and drums. Sometimes they even had parts for violins.

I hadn't felt so much joy since I had bought the Cadico-Ellis All-Star Baseball Game several years earlier when I was about eleven or twelve.

Now, however, instead of having a cardboard Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Rogers Hornsby, Ty Cobb, and Mickey Mantle to play with, I had choice big band arrangements from Count Basie, Stan Kenton, Woody Herman, Artie Shaw, Les Brown, Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Ray Anthony, Duke Ellington, and, of course, Glenn Miller. And they only cost about two dollars each.

I had also chipped in for collapsible blue cardboard music stands, the same kind the pros like George Barton used. And had purchased little lights that fit on top of the music stands so that we could see the arrangements if we played in a dimly lighted ballroom.

I brought the music stands over to Bob Carls' house on 50th and Queen and within a week Bob's mom and his cute-as-a-button sister, Bonnie, had printed in glittering gold and silver letters *MODERNS* on the front of each music stand.

Near the descending letters were dancing musical notes, the eighth and the sixteenth notes waving their little flags.

We would debate whether or not to get matching blue suits. We came close to renting tuxedos. And in our wild imaginations we always believed we should wear red cummerbunds.

As we eventually grew into a big band, one of Dave's favorite lines to anyone who showed up late for rehearsal or had a hard time getting his part played right on a new arrangement was, "Turn in your cummerbund."

Before rehearsals I spent many hours practicing my part in each arrangement. We never called them songs. They were arrangements. For each part (mine was 2nd Tenor Saxophone) there were as many as three or four pages that would fold out, two and sometimes three-feet across the music stand, so you wouldn't have to waste time turning pages while playing.

They looked important. They had the same exact notes that were played on the recordings by the musicians who had made them popular. Even in those places within the arrangement where recorded soloists had performed their improvised solos. The notes played in those recorded solos had been penned in. Tex Beneke's sax solo for Glenn Miller's "Tuxedo Junction" was penned in just as he had played it on my record player in my bedroom.

Within a month I had "learned" them all, not so much "by heart" as "in my heart," along with the penned-in notes for each solo, where there were also inserted the chords for each bar or measure of music. And within no time at all I was improvising my own solos, thanks to a lot of help from my teacher Harry Strobel.

Now I can't pretend I knew much about music. I can never truly say I was "a musician." My problem with music, I rationalize, has always been that I love songs and orchestral music way too much; kind of like I loved women too much.

There are some guys like me who become so enchanted by women that they can't tell a good one from a bad one (if there really are any bad ones).

They simply can't concentrate on any other thing when they gaze at a woman's smile, especially a smiling woman paying attention to them.

I know this is true because I am speaking from personal experience.

The same is true for music. It hypnotizes me. When listening to a melody or anything that's lyrical or syncopated, I get lost in it and let it take me wherever it's going. No control. No discipline. And that has been my downfall while trying to be a musician. I couldn't and still can't bring myself to sit in front of a piece of sheet music and then mechanically analyze what should be done to perform it.

Oh yeah, I learned about chord structures, progressions, keys, modulations, and how to count out triplets and dotted quarter notes. I learned how to transpose sheet music written for piano to B-flat tenor sax. Or to E-flat alto sax. I spent my high school summers taking clarinet, flute, piano, and saxophone lessons, plus taking courses in music theory and how to compose band arrangements. But secretly? I was a flop.

I had it figured that the only way I would stand any chance at all with The Moderns would be through agonizing effort. In order for me to learn how to play a piece of music, I had to virtually memorize the sound and syncopation of it both in my head and in my fingers. My muscles had to memorize it. I could never pick up something I had never heard or seen before and play it. Sight read it.

Someone had to let me hear it first. Then I had to pour hours into practicing it so as to let my fingers latch on.

The problem, always, with no matter what instrument, but especially with the piano, was that just the sound of a few notes "sent me." Once "sent," I had a devil of a time trying to gain objective concentration.

It was, and still is, such a pleasure to play something that resonate the sounds of a piano or a horn. I begin to laugh uncontrollably. No one can hear this laughter. But that's what I am doing, inwardly.

It's hard to laugh outwardly and still play notes while blowing a horn. But when I play the piano I'm laughing all the time and not paying enough attention and "getting it right."

Now this has been a bit of a digression. All for the sake of confessing that I could hardly read music.

Musicians have a word for a guy like me: *Faker*.

I confess. That's all I was then. That's all I am now. Just "a faker." Maybe in my next life, if I choose to evolve, I will be a musician.

But I won't choose to be a musician if it means I must impair my joy of music. I have known some people who seem to have no sensitivity about the sound of a song or whatever it is they are playing. They coldly sit down at a piano and just like a machine manufacture sounds as they appear on the score in front of them. And all the while they never as much as smile. I would never trade their ability to do that for the laughter I enjoy every time I try playing a tune.

Our first rehearsal was held in Bob Carls' living room. We had three saxophones. We had Bob on trumpet, John on trombone, and two guys from Washburn High School, one on drums and the other on piano.

It was a disaster. If it weren't for the fact that Bob's mom and sister spent so much time on lettering *MODERNS* on each music stand, we would have trash-canned the whole idea of forming a dance band.

Dave Andersen was still learning the fingering on his el cheapo alto saxophone, and he could only produce a harsh sounding tone from it. The drummer was much too loud. And Al, the other alto sax player, didn't play loud enough. Al was six feet tall and all of 120 pounds. He was always smoking cigarettes, coughing, and looking so paper pale that I thought the effort of blowing into a horn was going to kill him. The only professional sounds in the group came from Bob and sometimes John.

We must have rehearsed more than a dozen times, adding two more saxophones and more brass and rhythm section players before agreeing we were ready to try to perform for someone.

Our first "job" was set up by a friend of Dave's, Bruce Zemlin, who had a relative who had a friend who had a friend who owned a little tavern in downtown St. Paul.

The tavern owner had agreed to let us set up our stands and play before his regular night crowd came in. If he judged us to be any good at all, he would let us continue to play. If not, we were to leave at 7:00.

On the way to the job, I damn near totaled Dad's station wagon while trying to figure out how to drive it. I had received a driver's permit a few days earlier and because Bob had his driver's license it was legal for me to drive with him sitting beside me in the car.

By the time we arrived at the tavern, the guys in the car had given me a new nickname: Crash.

After we "set up" in the back of the little tavern and discovered how to attach the lights to the top of each music stand so that we could see our music, we led off with John's "Night Train."

We all wanted to be the band leader. But that night in the tavern we agreed whoever had the biggest solo on a particular arrangement would lead the band for that piece. "Night Train" began with John's trombone solo.

So as John launched "Night Train" with his trombone solo, our sax section backed him up with a punctuated Dat-Da-Dat-Da-Da-Da-Da-Dat rhythmic riff that imitated a train moving down a railroad track.

"Night Train" was a powerful piece of work. But way too powerful for a little tavern over in St. Paul. We damn near blew all the Grain Belt beer bottles off the bar and almost shattered the long mirror behind it.

The manager yelled at us to get the hell out of the place. He said that no one had told him that we were all just a

bunch of kids and he had no idea we would play so loud. Al Bigot just sat there, puffing on a Pall Mall, smirking.

All the way over to the tavern we had been telling Al that if he wanted to stay with the band he had better start playing loud enough to be heard.

Somehow Bruce calmed the manager down and got him to agree to let us play two ballads before we packed up. We then whispered through “Blue Moon” and “Harlem Nocturne” and then “split.”

That probably would have been enough for normal kids to have called it quits. But we were a determined gang.

Bob’s girlfriend, Cindy, got us our next gig a few weeks later, a sock hop at Washburn High School.

It was one thing to try and play in the darkness of a small tavern, but something totally different to be playing smack dab in front of several hundred hopping horny teenagers in a high school gymnasium.

Bob took this opportunity even more seriously than the rest of us. Bob’s rep was on the line. Along with his girlfriend’s. We had to be good. We had only worked up a dozen arrangements but figured we could get by playing them twice and maybe mix in a few easy rock and roll ditties we had practiced.

I secretly enjoyed the rock tunes because each one featured me doing long solos. The only problem with them was that I had to improvise each solo and I never knew how they would turn out and if the band would find its way back into the tune after I finished a solo.

This Washburn High School sock hop was on a Friday afternoon, right after school. We showed up around four o’clock and played until 5:30. Plowing through our old standards didn’t seem to get any reaction from the kids one way or the other, except requests to do songs we didn’t know how to play.

We were playing in a gym without microphones and didn’t have to worry about being too loud. And then, with about a half hour left, we launched our rock and roll set.

We started with a little mindless thing. A pop tune, something named “Tequila.”

The response from the dance floor was electric. Yeah. Like putting your thumb in an open light-bulb socket. Socks hopped. And when we finished the thing, pony-tailed girls were screaming, “Play it again!”

We played it three times in a row. My growling, sassy sax solo growing longer and longer each time while Bob and Dave kept laughing at the wide-eyed response from the dancing girls, who kept encouraging me to “keep it up.”

Squinting over the barrel of my horn, I could see through my fogged-up glasses that a crowd was forming around us, just like at a yo-yo contest.

And I felt a pleasure that I had never ever before enjoyed, what seemed to me to be massive injections of attention from cute girls who had never before paid such attention to me.

We finished with everyone dancing to “Rock Around the Clock” and “Swinging Shepherd Blues.” And applause. And screaming.

We were in business!

It’s sometimes remarked that no matter how bad a golfer you may be, once you hit the ball just right, just once, just right, and feel that thing golfers call “the sweet spot,” you are hooked; and if you should sometime hit the ball again just right, you are addicted to the game, regardless how inept all subsequent attempts may seem.

That evening, about three hours after we had played the Washburn High School sock hop, we played for a talent show at Southwest High School. We were allowed to perform three selections. Based upon what had happened that afternoon, we decided to go with our rock and roll material, even though Dave and Al dissented and made harsh comments about how we were “going commercial.”

Before that day, we had all taken great pride in the fact that we had not “sold out” to rock and roll.

But that afternoon's sock hop at Washburn High School had shown us the value of compromise.

And besides, we were aching to get a chance to impress the girls in our own high school, especially the ones who decided what bands would play for the dances.

As I was wetting my reed backstage, I stole a peek through the stage curtain.

The "Who's Who" of my sophomore class was sitting in the front row: Jinny Dale, Sue Foster, Phyllis Hall, Ann Gould, Judy Green, Sue Day, Mary Ellen, you name her, she was there.

Bill Lund, our "sound man" was up in the control booth at the back of the auditorium. Bill was in charge of the microphones and the spotlights. And the tape recorder.

I don't remember the talented groups or individuals who performed that night, except that we followed a girl who played an exquisite cello solo and only received polite applause while the curtain closed so that we could set up our bandstands.

I had just bought a new sport coat, a wool herringbone with black and blue stripes to go with a pair of black slacks. "Black Slacks" was the title of one of the songs in our rock and roll set. I had shined my black shoes so that they would send off a sparkle in the spotlight, and wore a pair of glittering silver and rhinestone cuff links, with a matching tie tack, in the style of Fats Domino.

When we were all set up, Bob signaled us to start playing before the curtain started to open. The idea or plan was to have the announcer declare who we were, and as the curtain started to open we would be playing our theme song, Ray Anthony's "Man with a Horn." A dramatic effect we had picked up from watching movies such as *The Eddie Duchin Story*, or *The Benny Goodman Story*, or *The Red Nichols Story*, or, anyway, someone's story.

It was "a trip" for Bob. The first 16 measures were pure lyrical trumpet solo. And he sounded as good as Ray Anthony himself. Right up there with Harry Strobel and Harry James any day, I'd say, or at least imagined.

But “Man with the Horn” was just a theme song. You never play the whole theme song. At some point after Bob’s solo, he’d stride, as he did for the first time that night, to the mic, while the rest of us continued to play as softly as we could, consumptive Al being best at that.

After adjusting the mic to show the audience that he was a real pro with microphones, he would say into the thing, in honey-soft tones, that he was so glad we could find time to appear tonight before such a wonderful audience, or some such bullshit like that, and while introducing our first song, turn to us, somehow get our attention, and signal for us to stop playing.

Then, if everything went according to plan, and Norm Larson, our drummer, was paying attention, we’d kick into the rock and roll favorite, “Black Slacks.”

That was the plan and we stuck to it, and how we started our first performance at our own high school, and how during the next fifteen minutes I found the “sweet spot” for the second time in one day.

I had spent much of the previous summer listening to the recordings made by jazz sax players and trying to imitate their tonal qualities and their “ideas.”

My favorites were Zoot Simms, Duke Ellington’s Paul Gonsalves, Glenn Miller’s Tex Beneke, Count Basie’s Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis, and Jimmy Dorsey. And I was just getting to know Ben Webster, John Coltrane, Lester Young, and Sonny Rollins.

The closest I could come to imitating any of those pros was the Paul Gonsalves’ and his marathon solo on Duke Ellington’s Newport Jazz Festival record.

I had played it more than a 50 times and had the thing to the point where I could play all the licks in Gonsalves’ solo right along with him. Most of the lines in his solo were perfect for driving rock and roll tunes.

When it came time for me to stand up for my first solo, I walked up to the mic and let her rip.

Toward the end of the first sixteen bars, I looked down at the front row, into the eyes of my school's opinion leaders: Jinny, Judy, Sue, Ann, Phyllis. And to my relief they were wiggling in their seats, applauding, in the same way that audiences do at jazz concerts. Right there in the middle of a rock tune!

When I came back for my second solo on "Tequila," and was getting set by adjusting the mic down to the bell of my horn, the front row started to shout encouragement.

Norm had this wild rhythm established. The guys had bought into it with a catchy rhythmic riffing pattern that had the audience moving and clapping, creating the same moment my dreams were made of.

As I moved into the first four bars of my solo, I was miraculously playing in the right key and remembering the Paul Gonsalves tricks.

Toward the end of my solo I was making my sax growl and snort and spit in ways you can only hear in a smoky strip joint.

As I finished my solo and turned to go back to my chair, the girls in the front row stood up and screamed.

I looked at Bob and John and Dave. They were laughing, while Norm kept on pounding his wild drum rhythms.

They yelled at me to go back to the mic and continue playing. So I kept on wailing for what seemed like another three minutes, remembering more and more and more of the Paul Gonsalves licks.

It was wild, screaming material. With Norm's drumming and the band's punctuated riffs, it all became sinfully infectious. And for me? Heaven on stage.

My only regret was my parents weren't there to see what a monster they had created.

I had suddenly and unexpectedly established an instant rep as a dirty gut-bucket sax player.

Later that night we gathered up in the control booth to hear Bill Lund play back the tape. We listened to it over and over. I'd give a lot to hear it again. As Count Basie would say, "Just one more once."

After the talent show Jinny Dale and her girlfriends asked if I could get the band to play for our next sophomore class dance. She said the Dance Committee couldn't pay us much, only about $50.

I bluffed. Said I might be able to talk the guys into it.

We went on from that sophomore dance to expand to five saxophones and more trumpets and trombones and even got an Elvis-type guitar player.

As we moved into our second year we found ourselves playing for more Southwest High School dances, including homecoming dances. Except for our school's Junior-Senior Prom. Dave and Bob and John wanted to actually get dates to take to that dance.

Within another year we reached the point where we were playing for many high school and college dances, and almost every Saturday night we performed for adult groups such as The Arthur Murray Dance Schools.

On Sunday nights we performed for Mormon Church dances (they began each dance by standing in a big circle and saying a prayer for the band).

We had developed a repertoire of arrangements to satisfy anybody's taste in dance band music, from waltzes to polkas to fox trots to mambos to tangos to sambas to Lindys to you name it.

We were approached by agents representing the Everly Brothers to go on a regional concert tour with them, as one of their opening acts.

For several weeks we had our parents agonizing over the possibility we might seriously want to do such a thing. It meant suspending high school, hiring tutors, and signing contracts that would leave us with little control over our future as "musicians."

We had played on each of the four local TV stations' versions of Dick Clark's *Bandstand*, we playing "live" whereas hot rock and roll personalities like Bobby Vinton appeared to only lip sync their hits before the cameras.

We were making a name for ourselves from as far south as Eden Prairie High School to as far north as Onamia High School, where 80% of the band once showed up more than an hour late for their Junior-Senior Prom.

Bob and I and our drummer, Norm, were forced into improvising their grand march and by the time the rest of the band showed up, many of the horny teenagers had found their way out "to the bushes" and were doing what the adult chaperons then told us was often traditionally done at Onamia High School proms.

Our fame had even spread to the hard-of-hearing elderly folks who invited us to their nursing homes to watch us wail on the jazz arrangements of Woody Herman and Stan Kenton, while they sat up close to us in their wheelchairs, tapped their canes, and waved their hands.

We became so cocky we often thought it great fun to arm ourselves with squirt guns and use them on whomever was hot-dogging it while playing a solo in front of the band. This was especially fun when we missed our targets and squirted a couple waltzing by the bandstand, or when a soloist would stop playing, turn around, whip out his own squirt gun, and fire back at the band.

We were a great show, we were.

Our crowning moment came in the spring of 1959, toward the end of my senior year.

Bob had enrolled in a music school, Dave was a freshman at Hamline University, and his friend, The Modern's best friend and benefactor since getting us our first gig at the St. Paul tavern, Bruce Zemlin, was now a sophomore at Hamline University.

He landed us a job playing Hamline University's Spring Prom. At the Automobile Club! The very same ballroom where as a little lad I had danced with Mom to the music of The George Barton Dance Band.

During 1958 we had performed for the University of Minnesota's Homecoming Dance in the North Star Ballroom and at the Dykeman Hotel for college fraternity dances, but to be given the honor to play the Automobile Club was, in Minnesota, a dance band's equivalent of playing Carnegie Hall.

For the Automobile Club job we rehearsed our ballroom arrangements at my family's house with windows open. Neighbors up and down the block came out of their homes and sat on the curb to listen to us. Some danced on the sidewalks.

My little brother, Ricky, sat in the wing-backed chair in the living room, wearing his white ruffled shirt, red vest, and black string tie, staring, wide-eyed, as we wound up the "airplane-engine" sounds of five saxophones, trombones, trumpets, and complete rhythm section.

My brother Larry, who had become a photography bug with his own stinking darkroom next to the bedroom we shared in the basement, moved about during rehearsals shooting photos from the living room, and the sun room, getting "interesting angles" while "blinding us" with his camera flashbulbs.

During the rehearsals Mom and Dad often went for walks around nearby Lake Harriet and would, upon returning, proclaim that we could be heard from as far away as the Queen Avenue Beach.

Once, in the front hallway, Mom and Dad turned off the ceiling light, and they danced together while we played "Sentimental Journey."

When we drove up to the Automobile Club on that clear May evening, it was just exactly as I had remembered it from the times our family went together to dance to George Barton's band. Except tonight the young ladies strolling the lawns and gardens overlooking the vast valley were flowing in formal gowns, pastel shades of blue and yellow and pink. The young men escorting them were wearing white tuxedo coats and cummerbunds.

Dave remarked while we were unloading the instruments from our cars, “I told you guys we should have worn our cummerbunds.”

As we finished our first set, all ballads, the aura of playing the Automobile Club started to dissolve into a realization that this job was easier than any of the other jobs we had played over our three years together.

We were playing romantic music almost impeccably. We were no longer a loud kid band, a novelty.

We had developed the ability to attack notes at precisely the same moment, had even developed the ability to get all the guys in the sax section to play with the same vibrato, and to appreciate sectional modulations, moving from whispers to crescendos in sweet mellow tones.

Dave was playing his alto sax with a clear crisp tone, especially on “Harlem Nocturne,” where he soared through his haunting mournful solo.

Al had dropped out of the group, I can’t remember why. The best I can recollect is that it was either because his parents were punishing him for smoking too much, or it had something to do with the fact that Bob had become our official band leader, and he had asserted his rage for perfection to a degree that didn’t fit Al’s personality.

Al’s replacement, a Woody Allen look-a-like from Roosevelt High School, Howard Popkins, had been personally recommended by George Barton himself, as his protégé, and he was every inch another George.

We had become a well-oiled, fine-tuned music machine.

But as the prom moved on toward midnight, I all at once found it all seeming to be somewhat depressing while we played our last set of dance band arrangements upon that bandstand.

For seven years I had dreamed of someday being there on top of the Minnesota River Valley at The Automobile Club, with me there upon the stage playing with a big dance band I had helped create.

But now, while we were sounding in my mind and heart as being better than George Barton's Dance Band, I now, all at once, felt a casket door closing over me.

Perhaps I admitted that this was as good as we would ever get. Certainly as good as I could ever hope to be. Perhaps I was beginning to admit for the first time that Bob and Dave and Norm and the rest of us were soon to be on our way to new and other adventures. But none perhaps as glamorous, yet, by necessity, more practical.

I knew that when the time would soon come to enroll at the University of Minnesota in the fall, I would need all the time I could find to learn the things I should have learned in high school so that I might stand a ghost of chance at surviving. And Bob was talking about joining the Navy. And Dave was looking forward to studying college physics. And our drummer, Norm, talked about going to Notre Dame to become a doctor.

By the time we played the last dance of the evening, "Dream," a lush ballad that we always finished each dance with, my dreams were over, and I was left with Peggy Lee's question, "Is that all there is?"

It was our last job as a unit.

I spent the summer unloading trucks of watermelons and bananas and cabbage.

Bob went into the Navy and hooked up with a Navy band. The rest of us never again bothered to get together for even a single rehearsal.

Then, on an approaching autumn night, John phoned me and asked if I still had the band arrangements and all of the music stands. I told him they were all stashed in my family's basement.

John said his girlfriend and Toni had told him how Southwest High School's Dance Committee wanted the Moderns to play for their Football Opener Dance.

I reminded John how we had not rehearsed during the entire summer.

But John said he had been able to get everyone except Bob and Norm to agree to play for the dance if I would show up at the high school with the band arrangements and the music stands.

John said Bill Wolf, a talented drummer who had played with us on several occasions, would be glad to join us, seeing as how Norm was now at Notre Dame.

It was a splendid reunion. We didn't have "Harry James" backing us up, but we discovered Bob had taken us far enough so that we didn't need him that night. And as far as high school standards went, we proved we didn't need a rehearsal to provide an enjoyable evening of "grown-up" dance music for teenagers.

During that "last dance" and while playing the last dance arrangement of the evening, "Dream," we gave them all we had within us.

And after the dance I gave John the band arrangements and the music stands.

Now I thank John again, and Bob and Dave and Al and Bruce and Mom and Dad and Glenn Miller and Harry Strobel and George Barton, and all the others, especially Mrs. O'Leary; thank them all for giving me the memories.

"My Big Band Era" constituted one of the most vibrant moments in my life.

Have I been doing something wrong since then that now makes me say that?

I try to console myself by rationalizing how nothing lasts forever, and how *becoming* something is often far more exciting and more important than *arriving*.

The Moderns gave me glimpses at a slice of truth I now perceive again more clearly.

As I grow older and beloved folks leave me, the victories they helped me achieve have left me forever indebted to them, and departing these folks along "the path of life" is all part of a price I must pay for the experience of living a most memorable life with them … and to grow again.