

## Limelight America

by Michael Drew Shaw



Johnny Desmond, the great vocalist with the Glenn Miller Orchestra once told another Johnny, *“You play that sax the way I like to hear it.”*

Johnny Knorr coined that compliment as his trademark, *“The music you like, the way you like to hear it”* and has been using it ever since. Next year marks his 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as one of America’s most accomplished big band leaders.

When he was nine, Johnny was on stage at school playing violin solos. In junior high he performed with Lima-born Helen O’Connell, a big star back in the early 40’s with hit records that included “Green Eyes” and “Tangerine”.

From Libbey High School Johnny went on to Ohio Northern University on a music scholarship, trading in his violin for a tenor sax along the way and then toured with Jimmy Dorsey and Les Brown. After the War in 1945 he came home to play with the Sonny Dunham Band.

In 1960 Johnny answered the door when opportunity knocked and formed his own band. He went on to share the marquee and the Limelight with Tex Beneke, The Four Aces, Lawrence Welk and Bob Hope to name just a few.

I doubt there is a Baby Boomer anywhere who doesn’t have some memory of their parents fondly talking about some ballroom somewhere in time. For Park and Helen Shaw it was Toledo’s Trianon where they danced to the music of Tommy Dorsey, Artie Shaw (no relation) and Glenn Miller. And yes they were Johnny Desmond fans.

Many years later I discovered there were Trianon ballrooms in other places like Chicago, Philadelphia, Seattle, Cleveland and Croweburg, Kansas. And there were ballrooms with enchanting and intriguing names like the Rendevous in Balboa, California, the Ritz in Bridgeport, Conneticut, the Trocadro in Boise, the Blue Moon in Aurora, Illinois, the Cinderella in Appleton, Wisconsin and the Hippodrome in Oakmulge, Oklahoma.

For decades ballrooms where the heart and soul of social life in America. The 30’s and 40’s were the highpoint of the ballroom era and the Big Bands were the main attractions, but the Jazz Age in the 20’s is when many ballrooms got their start. Toledo’s Johnny Knorr has played thousands of gigs in ballrooms nationwide and is one of our most cherished local icons.

In 1996 the U.S. Postal Service honored the Johnny Knorr Orchestra by presenting an award to commemorate the Orchestra’s contributions to big band

music in conjunction with the American Music Series. Of all the people I've met I don't know anybody else with their own stamp!

Johnny Knorr is one of the most humble guys I know. I had the pleasure of enjoying a melancholy lunch with him recently along with my music partner Walter Guy. Walt and I just sat there and listened as Johnny reminisced. It was a rare experience. Absolutely wonderful and a real honor.

I own a small interest in an independent record company called US20 Records and we're going to do our share to help preserve some of the great music Johnny has given us through the years. It will be a collection of works performed by the Johnny Knorr Orchestra and will be released this fall.

I called Johnny at home before I started writing this article to check a few facts. He answered by saying, "You'll never guess what I was just doing. I was playing my sax."

Just the way we like to hear it Johnny, I thought to myself.

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