

MUSIC IN THE BIG BAND ERA

An Opportunity of a Lifetime

Hank and Sheila Zachow

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Born in Tacoma, WA in 1919, I, Henry “Hank” Zachow, was the youngest of six children. All were under the working age of 16. Times were particularly hard for my family as Dad died before I was born.

I don’t recall exactly when my interest in music began, but when I was around five, I started finger exercises and scales on a paper keyboard which my sister cut out of the newspaper. A local music store offered lessons at no charge on the paper keyboard. (I’m sure this was to give families the incentive to purchase a keyboard that had some music to go along with the fingering exercises.) About six months went by, and my mother and sister agreed that I had musical talent that should be pursued.

We purchased an old upright piano, and a piano instructor began tutoring me weekly when I was 6 years of age. (Do you remember when music lessons were only \$1.00 for an hour?) I learned a great deal from this instructor including reading music, chords, and chord progression. For two years, I studied classical music. Playing the piano just seemed to come naturally to me. Some said I had an inborn talent, and today I believe I have indeed been blessed with a musical gift.

I became the pianist with the school orchestra, and by the time I was 10, several friends and I formed a band. The band instructor encouraged and allowed us to use the school facilities to practice, as our parents were not very enthused about hearing the “noise” in any of their homes.

Our band consisted of a banjo, accordion, trumpet, drums, and yours truly on the piano. As proud young kids, we thought we were accomplished enough to start getting paid jobs. Surprisingly, we did! The Grange Hall in Eatonville hired us to play every Saturday night for six months.

The drummer was the only one in our group old enough to drive. He had a four-door Model T Ford. Every Saturday night, the five of us and all the instruments jammed into his car, and we went to work. It was a very proud day when I was able to give my mother \$6 (my earnings from the Saturday night show) toward the family income. Not bad pay for a 13-year-old boy in 1932!

Venues and the pay varied. One occasion netted us only 40 cents when we agreed to play on a percentage basis. Only 10 people attended, and the admission fee was 10 cents. However, on one New Year's Eve at the Willows Dance Hall, each of us netted about \$30.00.

Three years later, the group disbanded, and I began playing in clubs in the Tacoma area. Music had become a big part of my life by then, and although I could read music extremely well, it was also very easy for me to play from memory.

Continuing my education and playing at various clubs in the Tacoma area consumed most of my time. My love for music was so great that I never considered giving it up or taking a break from playing piano.

One evening in 1939 when I (at the age of 19) was playing piano at the 1518 Club in Tacoma, a gentleman approached me and introduced himself as the talent scout for one of the biggest bands in the country. He said that the bandleader wanted to see me that night. I told the scout that I would not be through playing my job until 1:00 a.m. I agreed to go to the Century Ballroom when I got off that night and meet with the leader of the band.

I was immediately hired and had to be on the bus with the rest of the band by 3:00 a.m. to head for the East Coast. People often ask me if I slept. How could you sleep when you had just been hired by one of the greatest bands in the country? My opportunity of a lifetime had just begun!

The sun was coming up over the horizon, and I hadn't slept a wink on the bus all night. I had just signed a one-year contract with one of the biggest bands in the country! I got acquainted with the band members, who were comprised of musicians who played four trumpets, four trombones, four saxophones, piano, guitar, bass fiddle, and drums. (The bandleader also played trombone.) Another budding young artist was the band's vocalist. He and I shared a hotel room while traveling. He was 21 and I was only 19, so he would buy the beer! Later, the vocalist became part of the "Rat Pack." (Can you guess who he was?)

The first venue we played was the Pavilion in Denver, CO. I never get nervous when I perform. It doesn't matter whether I am playing for friends or strangers, on camera, at the microphone, or on location. My head and heart are filled with music, and that's always been my focus.

Sleep was a rare commodity while we were on the road. An average day included rehearsal, a recording session, a little nap, and then playing four to five hours in the evening.

Big Band music was written and scored for each individual instrument. Chords, runs, and progressive chords were used, resulting in full-sound music of perfection. Today's music, in most cases, only uses three or four basic chords.

The vocalist with our band was gaining national popularity and was frequently hired to sing at other engagements apart from the band. I became his personal accompanist when he performed. Some days his voice would be slightly higher, sometimes slightly lower. Fortunately, I had the capabilities and skills to change keys by half a note up or down, which is something not every pianist is able to do.

I remember one night when we were scheduled to play at the RCA Music Hall in New York City. Benny Goodman was also playing that night, which made our vocalist a little nervous. Once our vocalist appeared on stage, he received a tremendous ovation. He heard Benny Goodman say, "Who in #+%x is that?" From that time on, our singer felt at ease.

Some people have asked me if it was a hassle loading and unloading the bus with instruments and cases of music. As a piano player, I experienced both the good and the bad. I did not have to carry my instrument or my music. All I had to do was put on my bow tie, sit down, and begin playing. The bad part was that I had to play on some pretty raunchy pianos!

The pay scale for a piano player during the late 1930s was about \$60.00 a week. When I joined the big band, the pay scale was \$100.00 a week. That sounds like a good increase.

However, I had to pay for my meals and the upkeep of my uniforms. Hotel rooms and travel were provided for me.

My contract with one of the biggest bands in the country expired March of 1940, when I chose not to renew. Maybe you danced or listened to some of my music. Some of the locations I played included RCA Music Hall, New York; Paramount Theater, Waldorf Astoria, New York; Cocoanut Grove, Los Angeles; Trianon, Seattle; Jansen Beach, Portland, Oregon; and Century Ballroom, Tacoma, WA.

My "Opportunity of a Lifetime" gave me the exciting experience not many 19-year-old boys get, helped pay for my education to become a Design Engineer, and prepared me for a lifetime of wonderful music and friends.

Today at age 81, I am actively entertaining seniors and some of the younger crowd who appreciate "our" type of music. Even our cat, Nizhona, appreciates my playing and sits on the keyboard when I play.

The question I am most frequently asked is "Were the singer's eyes really blue?" My response? "As blue as the bluest sky."

Hank and Sheila Zachow live in Beaverton, OR. Hank is now realizing his lifelong ambition to play Big Band music for seniors. Sheila books his engagements and drives their motor home for out-of-town trips to play piano and do a little fishing. Hank occasionally lectures on Big Band music versus today's music.

Editor's Note: *If you haven't guessed who Hank played for, see the article on page 38 about the same person. CF*