

JOHNNY KNORR ORCHESTRA CELEBRATES 'GOLDEN' ANNIVERSARY

Sylvania Advantage / September 2009

by Michael Drew Shaw

Johnny Desmond, the great vocalist with the Glenn Miller Orchestra, once told Johnny Knorr, "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.

JUST THE WAY YOU LIKE IT, Johnny's first CD in over 10 years is a tribute to the Johnny Knorr Orchestra 50th Anniversary. It is a collection of some of their greatest renditions of hits songs from the 1930s and 40s under the direction of 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 40s with hit records that included "Green Eyes" and "Tangerine." Ironically, "Tangerine" is one of the outstanding and most energized tracks of this twenty-two track, 44-song album that has just been released by US20 Records.

From Libbey High School in Toledo, Johnny went on to Ohio Northern University on a music scholarship, trading in his violin for a tenor sax along the way. 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 he formed his own band. He went on to share the marquee and perform with Tex Beneke, The Four Aces, Lawrence Welk, Bobby Vinton, Bob Crosby and Bob Hope to name just a few.

It is unlikely there is a Baby Boomer anywhere who doesn't have some memory of their parents talking fondly about some ballroom somewhere in time, like the Trianons in Toledo, Chicago, Philadelphia, Seattle, Cleveland and even in Croweburg, Kan. There were other ballrooms with enchanting names like the Rendezvous in Balboa, Calif., the Ritz in Bridgeport, Conn., the Trocadero in Boise, Idaho, the Blue Moon in Aurora, Ill., the Cinderella in Appleton, Wisc. and the Hippodrome in Oakmulge, Okla.

For decades ballrooms were the heart and soul of social life in America and the Big Bands were the main attractions. Johnny Knorr has played thousands of gigs in places like the Indiana Roof Ballroom, Cedar Point, historic Centennial Terrace and the famed Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island. With featured vocalists Gay Hobbs and Howard Hills and Johnny's son Jerry - who holds the longest tenure of any member - the band has always played the music "just the way we like it".

Johnny Knorr has helped keep big band music at the forefront for 50 years and has received many awards along the way. 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! Yet Johnny Knorr is one of the most humble guys I know.

I had the pleasure of enjoying a memorable lunch with Johnny recently and I mostly just sat there and listened as he reminisced. It was a rare experience and a real honor.

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

Just the way we like to hear it, I thought to myself. On behalf of your many fans, thanks Johnny, for all the great music and for all the wonderful memories.

Copies will be sold at all band appearances and on his web site JohnnyKnorr.com.

The price for the CD is \$15.