

MAY 2017



A FRESH BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

BOBBY HACKETT

“MELLOW MAN WITH A HORN”

by Music Librarian **CHRISTOPHER POPA**

with comments by Bobby's son **ERNIE HACKETT**

VITAL STATS

given name Robert Leo Hackett

birth January 31, 1915, Providence, Rhode Island

father William F. Hackett, a railroad blacksmith

mother Rose A. (*nee* Mulvaney) Hackett

siblings six sisters and two brothers

education Commercial High School [now Central High School], Providence, Rhode Island (he left school at age 14)

spouse Edna Lillian (*nee* Lee) Hackett, b.April 7, 1915; m.July 26, 1937; d.April 15, 2000

son Ernest “Ernie” Hackett, b.April 6, 1949

daughter Barbara Traynor

grandchildren two

physical description “a short, trim man who sometimes wore a thin mustache”

death June 7, 1976, Chatham, Massachusetts, heart attack

grave Seaside Cemetery, Chatham, Massachusetts

Bobby Hackett's own big band didn't last very long; he made a much greater musical impression as a sideman in such orchestras as Horace Heidt, Glenn Miller, and Glen Gray (not to mention his trumpet solos on various Jackie Gleason record albums afterwards).

Hackett had been playing music since he was about eight years old.

"His first instrument was the violin. Then on to banjo & guitar!," his son, Ernie, reminded me. "Later he switched over to trumpet & landed on cornet!"

Hackett played with various groups at restaurants, hotels, ballrooms across the northeast, and in 1935 received his Musicians Union card from Local 9-535 in Boston.

He formed his own group, a small band, not long afterwards, and in 1938 began recording under his own name for the Vocalion label, employing, on various dates, such sidemen as George Brunies (trombone), Brad Gowans (valve trombone), Pee Wee Russell (clarinet), Ernie Caceres (baritone sax), Eddie Condon (guitar), Johnny Blowers (drums), and Linda Keene (vocal).

"Dad always had such unique style - mostly based around his smooth tone!" Ernie reflected. "He was always a huge believer in the KISS method in his approach to music." And what might that mean? "Keep It Simple Stupid!"

Meanwhile, Hackett continued to work with a variety of others. For example, he earned \$25 for substituting one night in Cab Calloway's orchestra; was in the band backing The Andrews Sisters on their original 1937 version of *Bei Mir Bist Du Schon* for Decca; appeared as a guest soloist at Benny Goodman's Carnegie Hall jazz concert in 1938 and on Goodman's Camel Caravan radio show the following month; and made recordings with Claude Thornhill and Teddy Wilson.

With the backing of the Music Corporation of America (MCA), Hackett formed his own big band early in 1939, employing four saxes, five brass, and four rhythm.

Besides retaining some of the men from his small band (with Gowans now playing trombone plus writing arrangements), Hackett's sidemen included Max Kaminsky and Sterling Bose (trumpets), and, for a brief time, Nick Fatool (drums).

I asked Ernie how much credit the musicians of his dad's band deserved in the story of his career. He responded, "Equal to his credit!"

Together they did one-nighters in New England, played Monday nights at the Famous Door in New York City, and had engagements at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel in Philadelphia, the Totem Pole in Boston, and the Worlds Fair in New York City.

The Hackett big band's first two recordings, *King Arthur* and *World's Fair Shuffle*, made April 10, 1939 for Vocalion, were not released (and remain unissued to this day). But tunes that did come out on 78 rpm included *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Sunrise Serenade*, *Embraceable You*, *Bugle Call Rag*, *Jada*, and *I Surrender, Dear*.



PEER PRESSURE

publicist Ernie Andrews “In the trade [Hackett’s] talents were recognized by musicians, by agents, by impresarios. But every time they tried to sell him to the public the box-office died the death.”

trumpeter Max Herman “Bobby always played with restrained elegance and sensitivity, and his lovely improvisational journeys never veered far from the melody.”

jazz master Miles Davis “I heard a lot of Bobby and he heard a lot of Bix [Beiderbecke].”

legend Louis Armstrong “I’m the coffee, but Bobby’s the cream.”

Unfortunately, Hackett’s big band left him \$2,800 in debt to MCA, so he disbanded in late summer 1939 and joined Horace Heidt and His Musical Knights, a much more commercial dance band, on third trumpet. Discographies list Hackett as actually playing cornet on roughly 50 of Heidt’s 1939-40 Columbia recordings. Hackett was also permitted to make another session under his own name for Vocalion, but using some of Heidt’s men including pianist Frankie Carle.

Dissatisfied with the overall restrictive musical policy of the Heidt band, Hackett left him in June 1940.

This gave Artie Shaw the opportunity to invite Hackett to Hollywood to “ghost” for Fred Astaire on the soundtrack of the motion picture “Second Chorus,” when pre-recordings started in late July.

In 1941 his friend and former sideman Ernie Caceres, who was now working in Glenn Miller’s band, suggested Hackett to Miller, and it was Sy Shribman, Miller’s manager, who called and offered a job.

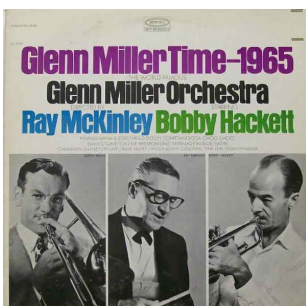


The full story was told in George Hulme and Bert Whyatt's Bobby Hackett: His Life in Music (Edinburgh, Scotland: Hardinge Simpole, 2015): "Hackett loved to recount the conversation: 'Don't forget the banjo,' said Shribman, who knew of the cornetist's dental surgery. Hackett's response was, 'What are you talking about? Nobody plays banjo any more; you must mean a guitar.' To this Shribman responded, 'Well, bring whatever it is'."

Hackett joined Miller July 10, 1941, playing fine cornet choruses on such ballads as *This Time the Dream's On Me*, *Serenade in Blue*, and *Rhapsody in Blue*, as well as, most famously, his immortal trumpet solo on *A String of Pearls*.

When Miller disbanded in September 1942 to enter the Army Air Forces, Hackett quickly found work with others, playing in jazz clubs, concerts, and on radio broadcasts around New York City.

But for the rest of his life he was associated with Miller's band. In 1957 he joined other Miller alumni for a tribute on the Grand Award record label, and in 1965 he made an album with The Glenn Miller Orchestra under Ray McKinley's direction, led the group while McKinley took a vacation that year, and made his own LP salute to Miller.



Then on a 1974 NBC-TV "Today" segment marking the 30th anniversary of Miller's disappearance, Hackett played cornet with The Glenn Miller Orchestra directed by Buddy Morrow, and he and author George T. Simon shared reminiscences with host Jim Hartz.

Hackett's next big band job came starting on October 2, 1944, when he joined the brass section of Glen Gray and The Casa Loma Orchestra at the Hotel Stevens in Chicago.

They moved on to such engagements as the Hotel Pennsylvania in New York City, the Palais Royal in Toronto, and Casino Gardens Ballroom in Ocean Park, California.

Hackett stayed with them until September 1946, then went on staff at the American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) for about 15 years. As with his earlier NBC job, he was allowed to work elsewhere and he remained busy in innumerable settings, most often clubs, broadcasts, or recording sessions.

In fact, that versatility would help him sustain his career for decades to come. As son Ernie observed, "Constantly staying active across many styles of music!" But did that success change him? "Never—always extremely down to earth & VERY grateful of his talent!"

After Hackett and Ernie Anderson went to see Louis Armstrong and his big band in Philadelphia, they expressed a desire that he do a concert with a small band playing some of the jazz tunes he had recorded in the 1920s and '30s. Hackett was allowed to choose the musicians, rehearse the band, and play his cornet as part of the group, and the idea reached fruition on May 17, 1947 at Town Hall in New York City. Armstrong soon thereafter junked his orchestra and formed his small All-Stars band, with which he would work the rest of his life. Hackett regarded the concert and his participation in it as one of the greatest musical events of his life.

He also never failed to express his admiration of Armstrong as his musical idol.



From the late 1940s-on, Hackett worked or recorded with an endless number of famous musicians and singers, including, to name only a very few, Frank Sinatra (*I've Got a Crush On You, Body and Soul*), Will Bradley, Tommy Dorsey, Frankie Laine, Benny Goodman, Tony Bennett, Billy Butterfield, Maxine Sullivan, and Lawrence Welk, as well as, perhaps most notoriously, the comedian Jackie Gleason.

For a 1951 recording project titled "Music for Lovers Only," as well as subsequent similar ones during the early '50s, Gleason chose Hackett to play ballads accompanied by a large orchestra consisting mainly of stringed instruments. The romantic albums became huge sellers for Capitol, which signed Hackett to additional LPs under his own name, typically with a small band, that became successful in their own regard.

When later asked what Gleason had brought to the sessions, Hackett supposedly quipped, "The checks!"

BOBBY HACKETT IN HIS OWN WORDS

On Adolph Hitler "Well, he was the best in his field."

Offering one of his trumpets for sale "It's a good buy . . . In the upper register it's absolutely brand new!"

After a Canadian customs agent pointed to his trumpet case and asked "Is that a musical instrument?" "Sometimes."

No wonder when I asked Ernie what personal qualities his dad had that helped him do well, he replied, "His extremely dry sense of humor!"

And what was there about Hackett that is not generally known, Ernie told me, "His generosity with friends & family!"



Ernie [above, at a 2013 ceremony inducting his father into the Rhode Island Music Hall of Fame] occasionally played drums for his dad, starting with some gigs in 1967.

"After my three year stint in the Army band at Ft. Monroe, VA I worked quite often traveling with Dad! - From 71- 76 when he passed. That was really quite an education!," Ernie reported.



Out of the hospital on June 4, 1976, after suffering from some health issues, Hackett accepted an invitation to play the next evening with a seven-piece band led by Tom Booras at the Wequesatt Inn in East Harwich, Massachusetts, only a few minutes' drive from Hackett's home. But early the following Monday morning, he got up before 5 a.m., collapsed and died of a heart attack.

I was delighted that when I asked Ernie if he would respond to some questions about his dad's life and career, he kindly consented. Below are more of his remarks:

What did he think dad's very greatest achievements in music were? "Every note he ever played!"

If it's not too personal, what is his favorite memory of his dad? "Simply just being his son! - Way too many to even try to list!"

How much did he personally enjoy his dad's music? "Being that my teenage years took place in the 60's - My first preference was always Rock & Roll! Played guitar in a R&R band while in HS. Later switched over (or back to) drums! Dad broke me into his musical style & that became my profession for about 30 years in & around NYC! I tell people I had a 30 year party! - Condon's, Ryan's, Crowdaddy, Red Blazer II - Stayed very active for quite some time!"

How often does he hear a record by his dad? What are your favorite performances by him? "Quite often & all of them!"

How long does he think that his dad's performances will continue to be enjoyed? "Forever! - When what you produce is pure, it will last forever!"

Lastly, how does he think that his dad would like to be remembered by the public? "As a serious musician with a great sense of humor!"





“Hope this was sufficient for you Christopher - - - I’ve never been much of a talker on this subject!,” Ernie commented.

I think he did just fine, and his father would be as proud of him as Ernie still is of his dad.

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