

# Big band sound of the '50s heard in new Sky Club

The big-band era hit its popularity peak from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s, but even through the 1950s, the big-band sound still attracted keen audiences. At the same time, the recording ban of the early '40s on instrumentalists had shifted the pop focus onto singers. Accordingly, the Brant Inn booked a mixture of bands and solo entertainers through the '50s.

In 1950, for instance, individual acts such as harmonica virtuoso Larry Adler, pianist/xylophonist Jan August and piano-playing comedian Victor Borge took the Brant spotlight along with singers

Evelyn Knight, who specialized in novelty songs such as *A Little Bird (Told Me That You Loved Me)* and *Brush Those Tears from Your Eyes*, Don (I'm Yours) Cornell, Bobby Colt, who would make a movie that year called *Catskill Honeymoon*, Sophie Tucker with her rambunctious repertoire, the vocal Ink Spots and the smooth accordion-guitar-organ sounds of The Three Suns.

The big deal of 1950 was the grand opening of



• Victor Borge - a piano-playing comedian.



• Evelyn Knight specialized in novelty songs.



• *The Morgan Thomas Orchestra as seen in 1950: front row, left to right, Jim Begg, alto and clarinet; Barry McGeary, trombone; Don Ker, guitar and vocals; Morgan Thomas, clarinet and tenor sax; Joan Case, vocals; Charlie Decker, trumpet; Bob Gordon, tenor sax; Sam Taylor, bass; back row, Bud Hall, piano; Jack Stout, drums; Paul Page, alto/tenor sax.*

a revamped Sky Club in June. Not only was the outdoor dance facility expanded to hold 1,700 people, but the bandstand, which had previously backed onto Lake Ontario, was relocated on the opposite side of the dance floor and now faced the lake. And it was equipped with a new hydraulically operated “disappearing” lower stage that could be extended beyond the bandstand for feature acts.

A gala four-hour advance opening on June 1 saw the Morgan Thomas Orchestra accompany acts from Toronto’s Casino Theatre and the Barclay and Prince George Hotels. The entire evening was carried on radio by CHML, raising \$2,000 to \$4,000 for Winnipeg Flood Relief. Ironically, the Burlington show was delayed half



• *It was a happy occasion as Murray Anderson poses here with Xavier Cugat and Abbe Lane during their engagement at the Brant Inn.*



• *Abbe Lane sings as Xavier Cugat leads his colourful orchestra in the Sky Club in this 1951 photograph.*

an hour by heavy rain.

Apart from an April stint by the Mart Kenney Orchestra, Morgan Thomas continued as the house band during the winter and spring of 1951, backing the Nat “King” Cole Trio on the Lido Deck in May. Oshawa’s Boyd Valleau took over the summer baton in the Sky Club, giving way for four nights in July to the “Royal Rajah of the Rhumba,” Xavier Cugat and his 20-piece orchestra.

Years later, many veteran Brant Inn patrons still remembered the Cugat band as the Brant’s most colourful and action-packed attraction.

“When Xavier Cugat arrived, it was the first time where everybody in the orchestra moved,” said Jim Turcotte of Grimsby. “You went to dance but nobody danced. They’d congregate by the bandstand and eyeball each individual in the band

and see and hear music that was just unheard of anywhere else in this world. The colour was absolutely amazing.”

At the time, Cugat, 51, was romancing his singer, Brooklyn-born bombshell Abbe Lane, who was 18. (They would marry a year later.)

“Everybody wanted to go and see her and have a look at him, too. There was such a gap in their ages,” added Jim Turcotte’s wife, Dorothy.

It wasn’t just the paying customers who wanted a glimpse of Abbe Lane.

Eric Prosser of Hamilton was an usher at the Brant Inn at the time:

“When Abbe Lane came down into the Sky Club after the first night, the ushers would all be standing on the stairs waiting to see her. Boy, she was just poured into that dress she was wearing!”

Ed Preston was a program operator for remote



• A fierce Lake Ontario storm in the late 1940s persuaded Brant Inn owners to renovate the outdoor Sky Deck for 1950, moving the bandstand away from the lake to the opposite side of the dance floor.

broadcasts carried by CHML and relayed to the CBC in those days.

"Daryl Wells used to announce a lot of those broadcasts and Daryl tried to let everyone know he was really 'in' with the bandleaders," Preston pointed out.

"The one that sticks out was when Xavier Cugat came. Daryl got to the point where he was calling him 'Cugie.'

"Well, Cugie," Daryl said, 'I see this next selection is called *Quizas, Quizas, Quizas* (Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps). What does that mean?'

"And Cugie, on air, said: 'Kiss ass, kiss ass, kiss ass.'"

The only other American barnstormers that summer were the Ink Spots, on a return visit Aug. 22-25. Two weeks later, a newly formed Hamilton

orchestra led by Gav Morton and Gordon Brown debuted as the house band in the Lido Deck, backing up organist Ethel (*Tico Tico*) Smith in October and crooner Dick Haymes in November.

The Brant Inn returned to a name band policy in 1952, the year King George VI of Great Britain died on Feb. 6.

Chief among the visitors was the Guy Lombardo Orchestra, starting what would become a yearly tradition. The Lombardos - Guy and Carmen and Lebert and Victor - will get their own chapter later. They were followed that summer by trombonist Tommy Dorsey, the "Sentimental Gentleman of Swing," and his band for four nights.

Meanwhile, Charlie Barnet brought his band in October to play *Skyliner* and other favourites and November saw the appearances in Burlington of



• A huge crowd presses up to the bandstand in this scene shortly after the Sky Club was renovated.

the Ted Weems Orchestra - without former vocalist Perry Como, now branched out on his own - and for the first time at the Brant Inn, the Duke Ellington Orchestra. New Year's Eve that year had pianist Earl Hines return as a solo artist with the Gav Morton band.

Elizabeth II of England was crowned on June 2, 1953, and the Brant Inn celebrated with a pair of Coronation Balls, the first on May 27 with the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, and the second on June 1, the night before, with Mart Kenney supplying the music.

Len Hopkins came down with his band from the Chateau Laurier Hotel in Ottawa for the summer in the Sky Club, where the emphasis was squarely on nostalgia, with a trio of bandleaders who all got their start in the 1920s.

For starters, Rudy Vallee appeared in June, fol-

lowed in July by Ted ("Is Everybody Happy?") Lewis and Guy Lombardo, each for four nights.

Bob Payne, who kept a vigilant eye on the Hamilton scene from his music store on King Street East, remembered when somebody stole Ted Lewis' trademark battered black top hat from his Brant Inn dressing room.

"Lewis was just livid," Payne reported.

The Brant kept up with the "sweet" bands the summer of 1954, bringing in orchestras under trombonist Russ Morgan, flashy pianist Carmen Cavallaro and Freddy Martin, with pianist/singer Merv Griffin, and the theme song, *Tonight We Love*, based on Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1*.

But things definitely closed on a jazzier tone on Dec. 31 when the highly respected quintet of trombonists Kai Winding and J.J. Johnson came up from New York City to welcome in the New



Year with the Gav Morton Orchestra on the Lido Deck.

Fifty years later, Jim Philip, a trumpeter with the Morton band, had vivid memories of the night:

"We played for half an hour, then they played for half an hour, alternating until midnight, and then Kai and J.J. sat in with our band for the last hour.

"I'll tell you how good these guys were. We used three trumpets and five saxes and didn't have any trombone music. Kai and J.J. stood between us and read the second and third trumpet parts which were in treble clef, transposed the music to the bass clef, played it note-perfect and took all the jazz solos. What an incredible evening!"

The parade of American entertainers at the Brant Inn in 1955 began with the gospel and rhythm-and-blues styling of the vocal quintet, the Deep River Boys, in February, followed that month by the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Lionel Hampton's band headlined a May 12 date on the Lido Deck.

The summer lineup in the Sky Club opened in June with the veteran clarinetist, Ted Lewis, and his revue. As with a previous appearance, Lewis got a mite perturbed.

Broadcaster Paul Hanover told the tale:

"Like all performers, Ted Lewis said, 'Good night,' and walked off, expecting the crowd to bring him back for an encore.

"Well, the fellow who was emceeing was Don Ker, the singer with the house band, and when Lewis walked off, Ker came out and signed everything off.

"In the wings, Ted Lewis was fuming, because he was supposed to come out and do a few encores."

A week later, the Count Basie band with singer Joe Williams arrived, followed by the Guy Lombardo Orchestra for four nights in July. The summer fare continued with the inventive jazz arrangements of the Sauter-Finegan Orchestra, the Ralph Flanagan band, the Les Elgart Orchestra and the Stan Kenton band. In December, trumpeter Ray Anthony played a one-nighter in the Lido Deck.

Hamilton native Rick Wilkins, who became a highly respected arranger in Toronto, particularly remembered the Sauter-Finegan band:

"Bill Finegan (ex-Glenn Miller arranger) was one of my heroes. Eddie Sauter wasn't there, for some reason, just Finegan, and he had a whole array of microphones and he mixed the sound as they went along. That's the first time I'd ever seen that.

"I can remember they were playing some tune and the train went by at the back of the Brant. It was so loud that it drowned the whole band out, so they started emulating the train. After the train went by, you could hear Sauter-Finegan's band playing train music. That was kind of funny.

"I tried to corner Bill Finegan during the break and ask him about some of the Glenn Miller arrangements he'd done but I guess he'd gotten sick of that by that time and didn't even want to talk about them. But he was sure a big influence on me."

The Brant Inn went all out to attract dancers and big-band and jazz fans the summer of 1956, with a dozen headliners, virtually one every week.

May brought The Hamptones, a vocal group that had originated with the Lionel Hampton band. The Billy May Orchestra under tenor saxophonist Sam Donahue opened the outdoor season in June, followed by vocalist Pearl Bailey with her mischievous style. Ralph Flanagan paid a return visit the same week as the Richard Maltby Orchestra before Ella Fitzgerald came in for four nights in July.

Duke Ellington interspersed a pair of concerts at the Stratford Festival with two nights at the Brant Inn on July 19 and 21. This was just two weeks after the Ellington band's electrifying appearance at the Newport Jazz Festival, particularly on the tune, *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*, in which tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves blazed through 27 choruses, causing a near-riot. It was during this 1956 combined Ontario engagement that Ellington got the inspiration to write *Such Sweet Thunder*, his Shakespearean Suite that was unveiled in 1957 and, 50 years later, repeated by the continuing Ellington orchestra in the main

Festival Theatre at Stratford on Aug. 6, 2007.

The Brant Inn summer parade continued with the Stan Kenton Orchestra, jazz pianist Dave Brubeck, the Dorsey Brothers' band, singer Sarah Vaughan, and, undoubtedly the best known of all the dance bands, the Glenn Miller Orchestra under drummer Ray McKinley, more than 11 years after Miller had disappeared over the English Channel on Dec. 15, 1944.

Louis Armstrong came in with the All-Stars on Dec. 6 before the Morton band closed out an ambitious Brant Inn year with a New Year's Eve dance, complete with hot turkey buffet, at \$6 a person.

The Ellington band was back for one night in February, 1957, the lone "name" until the summer's lineup of the Lombardo orchestra, Glenn Miller band under McKinley, Count Basie aggregation, Ink Spots, Les Brown and His Band of Renown on a first visit, and the Benny Goodman Orchestra, 19 years after its initial Burlington appearance, though this time without its maestro, who had turned over the reins to trombonist Urbie Green.

Louis Armstrong led the 1958 guest list in January. Woody Herman and the New Third Herd followed in February, with trombonist Buddy Morrow's band in March and Count Basie in April. (As a sign of the times and changing musical tastes, on April 16, the same night Basie played the Brant, a pop music show at the Hamilton Forum featured Sam Cooke, Paul Anka, Frankie Avalon, Laverne Baker and Clyde McPhatter.)

Tommy Dorsey had died on Nov. 26, 1956, but his band continued touring under Warren Covington and kicked off the summer season at the Brant on June 11. Guy Lombardo followed two weeks later and then Liberace played a Monday to Wednesday stand on July 7, 8 and 9, followed by Sophie Tucker, Les Brown, Les and Larry Elgart, and the Miller orchestra under Ray McKinley.

Liberace came at a guaranteed price tag of \$6,000 for the three nights against 50 per cent of the gross receipts. Part of the deal included a con-



• *Duke Ellington: Inspired in Ontario.*

cert grand piano (preferably a Baldwin) "in perfect playing condition and tuned to 440 international pitch" and an orchestra of 15. (In fact, 18 musicians were hired for the engagement: four strings, four rhythm, five reeds and five brass.) The flamboyant pianist and showman brought an entourage of seven, including his sister, Ann Farrell, and they all stayed at the Brant Inn, Liberace in a suite.

Musicians in the Gav Morton Orchestra remembered the Liberace appearance well, particularly drummer Gus Figliola.

"At the rehearsal, I'm setting up on a Sunday afternoon," Figliola recounted.

"The musical director - a fellow named Dr. Gordon Robinson - said: 'Gentlemen, who's the drummer?'"

"I put up my hand.

"He said: 'You're going to be the busiest S.O.B. on this bandstand, so you watch me!'"

"We had a three-hour rehearsal. I hit the sizzle cymbal and he stopped the band and said: 'Get rid of that cymbal! I don't want to hear it any more!'"

"The charts were so long that I was having trouble turning the page. So he said: 'Stop the band! Where's the manager? Get this guy a decent music stand!'"

"Opening night, what do you think happened? It rains. So we can't play out in the Sky Club. We've got to play indoors. And because they had added extra strings for this appearance, we were really crowded on the bandstand.

"So where do you think the conductor was? He was an arm's length from me because there was no room down front.

"Of all the aggravation: It rains and now this guy is standing two feet from me!"

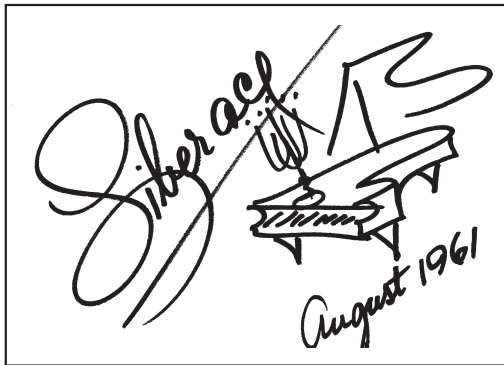
"Anyway, we're doing the show and after three or four numbers, he is giving me the OK sign. And then, by the end, on the final two numbers, he's saying: 'Gus, nail it to the floor!' Or he'd say: 'OK Gus, take us home!' He's a professor of music and he's coming out with this stuff and I tell you, it sure relaxed me. After that, it was a cinch!"

Liberace performed outdoors in the Sky Club the next two nights and that meant the nightly visit of the whistle-tooting CNR freight train from the Niagara Peninsula.

"We had it timed so that the train would go through about 20 minutes after 10 and we would take an intermission so it wouldn't interfere with the show," said trumpeter Jim Philip.

"However, the train was late and we were doing the show and the engineer was honking the horn and the bell and making so much noise you couldn't hear a thing.

"Liberace quit playing. He stopped and waited, and once the train had gone by, he looked out into the audience and said: 'That was a long mother,



• *Liberace's autograph - complete with piano.*

wasn't it?"

One who would never forget Liberace's appearance was Debra Roberts of Burlington, whose father, Floyd, played trombone in the Brant Inn band of Gav Morton.

"I grew up just adoring Liberace's sound and his brother George and everybody on the TV show," Debra recalled. "I must have been four or five at the time, because I wouldn't go down for my bath unless I heard them.

"When Liberace came to the Brant Inn and Dad was in the band, it was the perfect time to meet him. Dad and Murray Anderson set it up so that I could.

"I had this Pony Tail autograph book. It was a girl thing, very girl.

"Liberace literally drew this grand piano with the candelabra and signed it: 'To Debra Jean from Liberace.' It was just great."

This was the only time Liberace performed at the Brant Inn, but he became good friends with owner John Murray Anderson and manager Harry Parker and returned for visits when his schedule permitted.

The Glenn Miller Orchestra played two dances at the Brant Inn in 1959. The first was indoors in the Lido Deck on Wednesday, April 22. The second was outdoors in the Sky Club on Aug. 20, a Thursday. It's interesting to compare the two dates, based on the Brant Inn's copies of the contracts and correspondence regarding the appearances.



Both times the band was under the direction of former drummer and sometime vocalist, Ray McKinley, the man chosen in 1956 by Miller's widow, Helen, and the Miller estate to direct the band, something he did for almost 10 years.

Contracts were fairly standard documents. In each of these cases, the Miller band (16 musicians and one vocalist) would play from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. for a guarantee of \$1,250 against 50 per cent of gross receipts less taxes. Half of that fee - \$625 - would be paid in advance to Miller's management company, Willard Alexander, Inc. of New York, with the remainder paid at the conclusion of the engagement.

In both cases, the Miller orchestra agreed it would not appear within 75 miles of the Brant Inn during the 30 days before or after the engagement. The lone exception was the ballroom at Crystal Beach, Ontario. Apparently the Brant Inn management felt attendance in Burlington would not be adversely affected by any booking there.

The Brant Inn also sought permission to broadcast half an hour of the band's performance over radio station CHML, something the Willard Alexander office granted.

As for the two dates themselves, April 22 was fair and mild, according to the Brant Inn summary. A total of 672 tickets were sold at \$2.50 apiece for a sum of \$1,680, which more than covered the band's fee. Of course, the nightclub made additional revenue from food and drink sales, cloakroom and photographs. It was a successful enough night to warrant booking the band again that summer.

However, Brant Inn manager Harry Parker sounded one cautionary note in a letter the same night to bandleader McKinley.

"We are not equipped with enough staff to load your bus with instruments etc," Parker wrote. "Your driver had four of our boys helping him at the end of the evening when they were needed to direct the patrons out of the parking lot.

"I was slightly annoyed with the driver as these boys are high school students and we like them to get the premises cleared and leave immediately, as they do have to go to school the next day.

"We don't want this to have any reflection on our business association as we have always enjoyed your orchestra at the Inn, and are looking forward to a mid-August date."

As it turned out, August 20 was hot and humid, with 910 paid admissions of \$2.75 for a total of \$2,502.50. However, the increased attendance was subject to an Ontario Hospital Tax of 25 cents per person, so the box office take was actually \$2,275.

There were other name bands in 1959: Count Basie played the Lido Deck in May, followed the same month by Lionel Hampton and Stan Kenton in June.

Tommy Sands, 21-year-old teen idol, who had yet to marry Nancy Sinatra, arrived for a three-day \$4,000 engagement June 18-20. The Thursday was cloudy and cool and drew just 176 people but fair and warmer weather on Friday brought 413, and, after a Saturday matinee watched by 176, the closing show that night drew a respectable 860.

After Louis Armstrong and the Les Brown band played July dates, the Brant tried something different: the Harding and Moss Revue, with singers and dancers, for two weeks.

"It was a Follies-type show," recalled Bob Gaspari of Burlington, who was an usher and busboy at the time.

"It was a fairly large company and they didn't have enough dressing rooms for everyone. So they used an extra room that was on the route from the inside kitchen to the Sky Club.

"So these young busboys would look over and here were these ladies in all stages of dress or undress and it was quite something."

August brought the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra under Warren Covington, at a \$1,000 guarantee for the night. The 16 musicians and one singer returned in December for the cut-rate price of \$700.

With four hit records - *Chances Are*, *It's Not for Me to Say*, *The Twelfth of Never* and *Wonderful! Wonderful!* - under his belt by 1959, pop singer Johnny Mathis, 24, was a big-ticket attraction for the Brant Inn Nov. 12-14 at \$7,500 for three nights and one matinee in cold weather that included rain and snow.

The Brant recouped its investment and then some. More than 3,000 people paid over \$15,000 to see the Columbia recording star. More than 1,000 crammed into the Lido Deck for Mathis' Saturday night closing.

"Johnny Mathis did a terrific job," said Jim Philip, a trumpet player with the Gav Morton band that fall. "We didn't see him at rehearsal. His conductor came and rehearsed us in the afternoon."

Saxophonist Harry Waller added to the story: "About five minutes before show time, two burley policemen would escort Mathis to the bandstand.

"His manager gave all the members of the band a little lapel pocket watch that looked very expensive. Bob Almas was in the band and he took it to a jeweller friend to be appraised and it was worth about \$4.50." (Or \$2.50 or \$1.25, depending on which musician you asked about the value of the watch.)

The timepiece couldn't have been so bad. Almost 50 years later, drummer Gus Figliola said his watch was still ticking. "My wife, Iris, put it on a chain in later years and wore it around her neck."

"Of all the acts I played for," Harry Waller said, "Mathis was the only one who took the time to come down and do anything for the band."

"Listen," said trumpeter Bob Almas, "I'm not belittling Mathis. He was a strange one but he's the only one I can remember who said: 'Thank you very much.' He didn't say it himself - his manager did - because Mathis wasn't great with words. He was great with songs but bad with words."



• *Johnny Mathis: Great with songs, bad with words.*

One year later, the word-shy Johnny Mathis was appearing before 3,000 people at Toronto's O'Keefe Centre. For the Brant Inn, it was a sign of things to come.

