

** Souvenir of Glenn Miller's appearances in Ontario, Canada, in 1942 **

Glenn Miller (1904-1944) and his orchestra were just finishing an exhaustive week out in Detroit by late January of 1942 while completing their Chesterfield sponsored broadcasts from the Michigan Theater.



Mike Filey

After a quick transit through customs, the Miller band members took the Canadian Pacific Railway right through to Toronto preparing themselves for one of two concert events ever on the Canadian territory.

The **Mutual Street Arena** was their destination for this Friday January 23rd, 1942. The arena was packed to 6000 local attendees waiting to see and hear the most popular band of the era. All seats had been sold out. Ticket scalpers were able to obtain \$5 for a \$1.50 ticket.



Billy Livings was there that night. He was able to be escorted to a prime spot behind the band as arena officials thought he was with the press carrying his large speedgraphic camera with flash. Billy was able to capture four photographs of Glenn on stage with the band.

Out in the parking lot however, CBC employee and announcer **Elwood Glover** (1915-1990) was stationed in a small van trying to record on disc part of the concert. Was he successful? No one really knows to this day. Later on, at intermission, Glover would be able to carry out a recorded interview with the maestro.

While Glenn was the main attraction, Canadian union rules



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** Glenn Miller - Mutual Street Arena - Toronto **

Billy Livings

made it necessary for a local artist to share the stage with him. For this occasion, Toronto based bandleader Gren Hobson and his orchestra performed a number of songs, one of them being « Alone, watching the lights on the Hudson ».

The next day, the Miller band set sail for London, a 125 miles bus ride west of Toronto. Their engagement for that day was twofold: (1) a 5 to 6 pm broadcast to service officers in Canada and the US and (2) an evening dance concert to local and district residents. The place was the **London Arena**, Canada's finest dance hall facility. Located at the corner of Bathurst and Ridout streets, the arena was a converted hockey rink. With its hard wooden seats and a capacity close to 7000, the arena offered space for dancing at the back close to the entrance. Nicely decorated, the arena lobby held a number of chalk portraits of bandleaders having performed there. Was one of Glenn drawn after his visit? No one can confirm this.

The arena was fully equipped for broadcasting over the airwaves. No speakers or amplifiers, only pure sound could echo within these massive walls. On stage were the house music stands that all bands would use while performing. The arena also possessed two very nice-looking white glass-topped grand pianos.

« Sunset Serenade » broadcast

The temperature was just below freezing on this late afternoon of January 24th, 1942. Glenn and the band were all set for another broadcast in a series called « **Sunset Serenade** ». Those shows were usually at Glenn's own expense. Military personnel from various camps, training schools and depots were invited free of charge, as long as you were in uniform, to attend a special 1 hour program dedicated to them. Emcee and CBC announcer **Elwood Glover** was present and had travelled down from Toronto to host the show.



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**** Harry Warren Metzler - Glenn Miller ****
London Arena

Donald Gordon McLeod

RCAF serviceman **Tom Brownlie** (1921-2012) from N°4 Bombing and Gunnery school at Fingal was there. He would also later buy a ticket to attend the evening performance.

RCAF Flying officer **Harry Warren Metzler** (1914-1944) was Glenn's guest of honor, exchanging dialogues over the Mutual broadcasting system and CBC affiliated station CFPL.

Photographer **Donald Gordon McLeod**⁽¹⁾ (1914-1993) was there to snap a number of photographs. He was able to immortalize Metzler and Miller together at the microphone. Unfortunately, both men were to lose their lives while on duty just two years later.

It seems that no civilians were allowed in the arena for this particular event. There is also no evidence that photographers from the London Free Press were able to attend and take pictures.

Victor Elias Aziz⁽²⁾ (1923-2008) was another amateur photographer who was there that afternoon and was able to snap a number of photographs of Glenn and the band. School friends **Neil McKay** (1924-2016) and **Margaret Mowat** (1924-2016) were later provided with prints of shots taken by Victor for 75 cents a copy.

While the band was playing, **Don Haynes** (1907-1971), Glenn's manager, was looking over the recording that was being made of this broadcast. Upon returning to New York, Don recalled that the recording « **was perfect, in every detail** ».

There are contradicting figures as to how many servicemen were present that day. Two separate observations, one from a reporter and another from attendee **Wilfred Abdallah** (1923-2005) said that there were over 10 000⁽³⁾ active servicemen from different countries in attendance. This is way over the arena's known capacity.



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**** Marion Hutton - Glenn Miller - Bill Conway ****
London Arena

Victor Aziz

⁽¹⁾ Donald Gordon McLeod joined the Army in June of 1942 (service number A86046)

⁽²⁾ Victor "Elias" or "George" Aziz enlisted in the RCAF in London, Ontario on December 1st, 1942 (service number R205878)

⁽³⁾ To help support this attendance figure, when Montreal Canadiens hockey great Jean Béliveau played for the Aces of Quebec before moving to the NHL, he played at the Quebec Colisée that could accommodate no more than 10 034 seated fans. However, on April 26th, 1951 during the Memorial Cup, **16 806 fans** crammed into the arena to see the game.

Evening performance

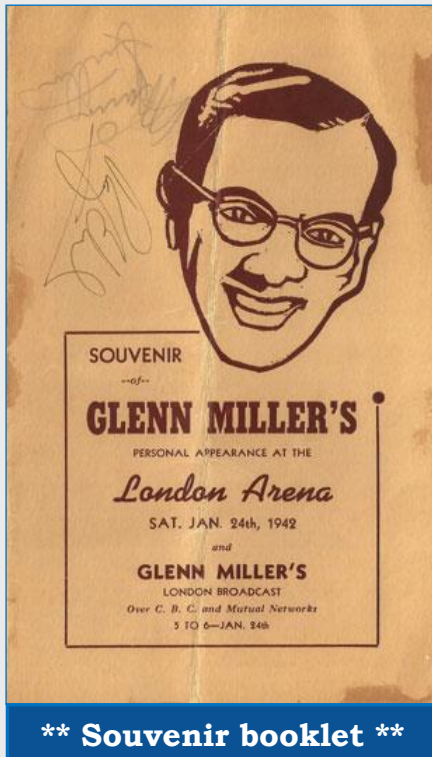
"I was at that concert at the London Arena and its one time in my life that I cherish and will never forget"

Wilfred Abdallah, London, ON

"I still get goose bumps when I recall the thrill of seeing and hearing the orchestra for the first time"

Al Shakleton (1924-2011), Chatham, ON

It was a crisp and starry night as **Sam McCoy** (1923-2009) of the RCAF walked to the arena with his date at about 7 pm that evening. People were rushing into this huge « palace » at that time. Souvenir booklets were being distributed at the door. Tickets were \$2 but \$1.50 if you had the chance to purchase them in advance before 6 pm at Heintzman & Co. Record department, the Embassy Grill, the Hotel Ridout or the Arena box office. Doors opened at 7:30.



Jack Walters (1926-2006) and **Neil McKay** were both attending this performance. Just prior to the dance, they met up for a brief chat with Glenn Miller at the Hotel London where he was staying.

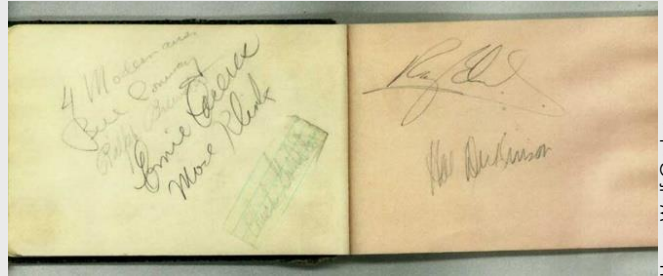
Curtains rose at 8 pm sharp with the band opening with their signature theme "Moonlight Serenade".

The whole Miller gang was there in front of that excited crowd. Band personnel were wearing sky-blue jackets with gray trousers. Miller, on the other hand, was dressed in a white tuxedo. The arena was packed shoulder-to-shoulder. It was almost impossible to move. People were like sardines in a can. They could only dance at the back near the entrance otherwise they had to stand to watch and listen. When **Eileen Foran** moved out of her seat to get closer to the stage, she would never find her way back. Arena officials had oversold the number of tickets,

perhaps an attendance record. Two separate counts, one by the Miller organization and the other by the Arena management reported an attendance of 6497 youngsters.

Reaching halfway through the evening, this is when the ladies started dropping like flies. With all that excitement, girls were starting to faint one by one. Twenty-four accounts were reported. One lady was carried on top of the crowd all the way to the stage where Glenn came to assist in the rescue. Once revived, most simply returned into the fray.

At intermission, **Hope Wolf Garber** (1924-2005) was busy getting autographs from band personnel while **Bobby Hackett** (1915-1976) was picking up his cornet to play a few tunes accompanied by substitute players. **Marjorie Liebner** (19xx-2015) felt privileged to have had her ticket stub autographed by Miller.



Hope Wolf Garber

« If we play String of Pearls now, you'll all go home... » Glenn Miller with his sense of humour addressing the crowd. Glenn would also respond to the requests of his fans. Could we believe that « Chattanooga Choo Choo » was played 4 times! Yes indeed!

The band played until midnight. Glenn Miller's sole trip to Canada was now history. **Sam McCoy** and his date returned to his date's house. He then got back on his bicycle riding home across the city.

The next day, the Miller band returned to New York by train. The London arena was demolished in 1977 after having been declared unsafe by the city council. The cement foundation is still visible right to this day. Sounds of the big bands no longer echo where was once Canada's finest combo arena with a 14 400 square feet surface area.

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University of Western Ontario Archives

The London Arena