

Remembering the Scranton Sirens

Creative Treatment by
 Greg Matkosky
 February 27, 2009

Introduction

Remembering The Scranton Sirens is a one-hour WVIA original documentary film that celebrates the exceptional musical legacy of one of the most significant but unheralded “territory” dance bands in American musical history—The Scranton Sirens. During its ten-year existence, the Sirens reached a performance pinnacle by playing in the major dance emporiums in the United States.

Within its east coast niche, the band commanded both huge crowds and the respect of the finest bandleaders of the dance-band era, such as Ted Lewis. Most importantly, the Sirens introduced iconic artists such as Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Russ Morgan, and Bill Challis, whose phenomenal musical innovation presaged their international fame and profoundly influenced the Big Band era. The Scranton Sirens reputation reflected the vivacious mood of post-World War One America and the “work hard, play hard” spirit of the city from which the band took its name.



The Scranton Sirens in 1921

districts drew thousands from outside the city by train and car. Scranton was an urban petri dish in which suffrage and the flapper were compounded with prohibition and the speakeasy. In this era of sociocultural experimentation, before the proliferation of vinyl records, jukeboxes and radio broadcasts, the Scranton Sirens was born.

By the end of the First World War, Jazz had grown from its blues and Ragtime musical roots to produce evolving styles for expanding audiences, including young people who socialized at dance halls. Violinist Billy Lustig (left, third from the right) formed the Sirens in 1918 to capitalize on a burgeoning demand in northeastern Pennsylvania for the danceable “sweet” Jazz sound.

The bands that performed in dance venues at this time were not as large as those created a decade later by bandleaders such as Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller. A territory band was commonly led by a violin, and rarely had more than a dozen instruments. Musicians often made only about seven dollars a performance.

However, the low pay did not deter some of the finest musicians of all time from joining Lustig’s band. 17-year-old saxophonist Jimmy Dorsey, from Shenandoah, became a member in 1921 alongside Nanticoke trombonist Russ Morgan. When Morgan left the band, he was replaced by Jimmy Dorsey’s 15-year-old brother Tommy. From this unheralded beginning, these three incipient musical artists would rise to become among America’s most recognizable musicians. Another Sirens alumnus, Wilkes-Barre native Bill Challis, became a pioneer in the fledgling craft of music arranging. He achieved professional acclaim through his innovative



Jimmy Dorsey in 1919

The Story

In 1920, Scranton, Pennsylvania, was a place that helped put the roar in the “Roaring 20s.” The city’s diverse industrial base produced commodities the nation coveted, from anthracite coal to Nottingham lace. Its dynamic immigrant population portrayed the forward-looking face of modern American society. And its darling red-light and gambling



Russ Morgan in 1919

arrangements for seminal bandleaders Paul Whiteman, Jean Goldkette and Artie Shaw, and worked closely with numerous Jazz luminaries, such as cornetist Bix Biederbecke, songwriter Hoagy Carmichael and singer Bing Crosby.

The Presentation

Remembering The Scranton Sirens recreates the band's music to reflect a facet of Jazz's stylistic



evolution in the early decades of the 20th century. Musical Director and Creative Consultant Vince Giordano studied arranging under Bill Challis, and authentically performs much of the music heard in the film with his 11-piece band "The Nighthawks."

Giordano's tonal recreation sonorously relives the early careers of Challis, the Dorsey brothers and Russ

Morgan, and introduces viewers to the exquisite craft and art of playing Jazz music.

The film identifies how the individual careers of Morgan and Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey helped bring about Jazz's commercial acceptance. In their careers the Dorsey's would combine to sell more than one hundred million albums, while "Music In The Morgan Manner" was heard by millions of radio listeners across America and Russ Morgan's tune "You're Nobody 'Til Somebody Loves You" has been recorded by nearly 300 artists. Bill Challis demonstrates the significance of this music's arrangement—an essential musical refinement that would contribute to catalyzing the Big Band sound.



forces shaping the United States in the Roaring 20's. A vibrant immigrant population promoted industrial vitality, while a thriving backroom domain of brothels and speakeasies

served bathtub gin in teacups to both Polish, Slovak and Italian laborers and their Anglo supervisors.

The film visits the venues where the Sirens attracted dancers of all ethnicities, such as the South Main Street Armory, Crystal Gardens at Rocky Glen amusement park, the Westmoreland Club and the Poli Theater (where the band sublimely shared the stage with ridiculous vaudeville acts).



The documentary profiles other Sirens members from northeastern Pennsylvania who also went on to prominent musical careers,

including piano player Irving "Itsy" Riskin, and trumpet player Fred "Fuzzy" Farrar. Other notable musicians from outside the Scranton area who played in the band include trombonist Jack Teagarden and guitarist Eddie Lang. Band life is also explored in the film, revealing the relentlessly demanding schedule of practice, rehearsal and performance. For many musicians the experience was a simply a job. For some it may have been a passion. And for a select few, it was truly the call to a destiny.

America's Foremost Ballroom
ROSELAND
 DANCING B'way at 51st.

Conclusion

The Scranton Sirens disbanded in 1928, as would much of American culture when the Great Depression began the next year. But in the following two decades, the musical talent this band nurtured in coal country dance halls would reunite at the apex of musical artistry.

Throughout their achievement, however, these musicians never forgot their roots. They were not from New Orleans, or Chicago, or Kansas City—key locales commonly considered where Jazz was born and raised. These artists were from northeastern Pennsylvania, and in this regard, Scranton can lay claim to contributing to the evolution of Jazz as a uniquely American art form. *Remembering The Scranton Sirens* melodically revisits our region in the Roaring 20's, and celebrates its little-known artistic legacy that defined a nation as powerfully as King Coal.



Tommy Dorsey in 1919