

The Big Band Era

The “Big Band Era” of the 1930’s and 1940’s, led by Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, Woody Herman, and others led the country out of the grip of the “Great Depression” and left a permanent mark on American popular music. Not only was this true nationally, but locally as well. One of those individuals who made a significant and lasting impact on the local music scene was Lynn Kerns, a well known and respected musician with a multitude of musical talents.

Kerns was born in Amboy, Minnesota, in 1908. He took guitar lessons at a young age. He later moved to Sherburn with his family in 1922. Kerns became interested in the printing business while in high-school and, after graduating from high-school, he got a job as a printer’s devil. He eventually became the night linotype operator at the Fairmont Sentinel. During that time he continued pursuing his love of music by teaching himself to play the banjo when he was off work.

So, how did Lynn Kerns become involved with the “Big Band Era?” An opportunity arose when he jumped at the chance to fill in for another musician with Al Menke’s group. He later joined Gordon Cole and Eva Benton in starting a lounge trio that would eventually evolve into an eleven piece orchestra in 1934 known as the “Rhythm Club Swing Band.” A 1937 *Fairmont Sentinel* article describes the group as “...a strictly home town organization that developed from the melting pot of lodge dance trios, ‘old-time’ aggregations and the like, into a popular 11-piece organization.” As they were all employed in or near Fairmont, the orchestra’s cooperative agreement stated that they would not play anywhere that would jeopardize any band member’s regular job. The article went on to quote one of the band members as follows: “We do pretty good. We don’t play every night, you know, and we do a tall job of sleeping Sundays. Also, we sleep in the bus on the way home after dances. If you work in the daytime and play a program in the evening, you can sleep almost anywhere, you know. We usually get to bed by 2 or 3 o’clock and snatch five or six hours, even after playing.” “You see, we have a business of our own, and it’s a serious business with us, not just an idle hobby. Yes, we have tolerant wives and girl friends.”

The band at that time in the late 1930’s played Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, and in the summers they also played Sundays. They used a thirteen passenger bus previously used by Al Menke’s orchestra with Frank Van Draska serving as the driver. In 1937, the group included Vern Nolte, Gordon Cole, Lawrence Nelson, Ed Vollrath, Merle Malherek, Serle Zalesky, Lynn Kerns, Jack Furtney, Robert Wickstrom, Bill Schliecker, Fritz Williams, and Frank Van Draska. Some of the jobs held by the members of the band included the McCarthy Grain Commission Company, the Ford

Garage in Truman, Peerless Cleaners, among other types of employment. An itemized earnings statement for 1936 showed that their gross earnings from playing at 160 dances to be \$6,140.03, with the highest paid member of the group grossing \$433.60 for the year.

In addition to Lynn Kerns and the Rhythm Club Band, other local groups included the Al Menke Band, Amby Meyer and his Orchestra, and Fred Kielblock of Freddie Frederic and his Orchestra. These bands played at Interlaken Ballroom, Fox Lake, Storm Lake, Spirit Lake, and many other locations within about a 200 mile radius.

Besides the popular and talented local groups, nationally known groups also performed in this area. According to a November 15, 1991, *Sentinel* article, "Interlaken Park hosted Lawrence Welk, Count Basie, Glen Miller, and even the patron saint of swing himself, Duke Ellington." Also of interest is the fact that Dick Dale, of Lawrence Welk fame, got his start with the Rhythm Club playing tenor sax just out of high school. He also played for a short time with the Six Fat Dutchman in New Ulm before going with the Lawrence Welk Orchestra for thirty-two years. He is now retired and lives in Algona, Iowa.

By 1940, as the band became ever more popular, Kerns was faced with a decision. As written in the February 16, 1960, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel*, the managing editor of the *Sentinel* at that time gave him an ultimatum of sorts. "Either you fiddle or set type. You can't do both." This was not a reflection on his performance at the newspaper, as he was doing an excellent job; however, the managing editor felt Kerns was overworked doing both jobs. Kerns decided, after being reassured that he could return to the *Sentinel*, that he would go full-time into the dance band business. According to this article, Kerns became the part-owner, leader, soloist, and emcee of the Rhythm Club Orchestra. In addition, he was the father of three girls who became the featured singing trio with the band. They were Betty, who is Mrs. Ken Thate, Marcia, who is Mrs. Harold Leverson, and Barbara Meyer, all presently living in Fairmont.

Eventually, after twenty-seven years, in 1960 Lynn Kerns hung up his baton. He continued working at the *Sentinel* until 1963 when he and several colleagues formed the Fairmont Photo Press. He was married to Katherine Krumholz in Shakopee in 1928. He passed away in 1996 at the age of 87.

The era in which Lynn Kerns was a well known, respected, and talented musician is certainly nostalgically recalled by many yet living in Martin County. The music, the dance halls, the entertainers, the bands, and that era have long since passed.

However, there are likely many vivid and fond memories of those times that linger on in the hearts and minds of those lucky enough to have experienced those days gone by.

For more information about Lynn Kerns and the Rhythm Club Orchestra, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.