

Sun Valley Serenade Orchestra Wives

It's funny how music can define an entire era, and Glenn Miller's unique sound did just that. It is not possible to think of World War II without thinking of the Miller sound. It was everywhere – pouring out of jukeboxes, radios, record players. Miller had been struggling in the mid-1930s and was dejected, but knew he had to come up with a unique sound to separate him from all the others – and, of course, the sound he came up with was spectacular and the people ate it up. His song “Tuxedo Junction” sold 115,000 copies in one week when it was released. Miller's concerts were instant sellouts, and his popularity kept on soaring. Whenever there's a film about that era, there are always those Miller classics on the soundtrack because it does instantly define that era.

It was no surprise when Twentieth Century Fox snapped up Miller and his band for the movies. He only did two (he was slated to do a third, but he went in the Army and it never happened), but they were perfect vehicles. While no actor, he had a low-key, charming personality and he photographed well. The movies were cleverly built around him, and he was surrounded by excellent actors, singers, and dancers. The stories were simple, they didn't overstay their welcome, and the music was superb.

SUN VALLEY SERENADE

First up was *Sun Valley Serenade* (1941), which featured Norwegian figure skater Sonja Henie, John Payne, Milton Berle, Lynn Bari, Joan Davis, Dorothy Dandridge, the amazing The Nicholas Brothers, and, of course, Glenn Miller and his orchestra, along with The Modernaires. The director was the reliable H. Bruce Humberstone, and the screenplay was by Robert Ellis and Helen Logan. The story revolves around a band pianist (Payne), being convinced by his manager (Milton Berle) that it would be good publicity if the band adopted a foreign refugee child. When they arrive at Ellis Island to pick up the young girl they discover that she's not a child but a young woman (Sonja Henie). She sets her cap for Payne, Payne's girlfriend (Lynn Bari) is not happy about it and quits the band, and amusing complications occur until everything ends happily.

In addition to some Miller classics (“Moonlight Serenade,” “In the Mood”), the movie also featured a few great songs by Harry Warren and Mack Gordon, including a song that would be-

come one of Miller's biggest hits, “Chattanooga Choo Choo,” which, in the film, is a spectacular production number with Dandridge and The Nicholas Brothers. Another great new song, “At Last,” was also recorded for the film, but wasn't used, except as background music for several scenes. The song itself would end up in the next Miller film.

“Chattanooga Choo Choo” hit number one on the Billboard chart in December of 1941 and stayed there for nine weeks. The song was nominated for an Oscar for Best Song, but lost to “The Last Time I Saw Paris” from *Lady Be Good* (there were nine Best Song nominees that year). But “Chattanooga Choo Choo”'s consolation prize was being the first song to ever win a Gold Record.

The entire film has the Twentieth Century Fox luster and sparkle and that Glenn Miller sound is the stuff dreams are made of.

ORCHESTRA WIVES

Sun Valley Serenade proved to be so popular, that Fox immediately put another Glenn Miller vehicle before the camera, this one entitled *Orchestra Wives*. *Orchestra Wives* was a bit more serious than the light and airy *Sun Valley Serenade*. This time the cast included George Montgomery, Ann Rutherford, Lynn Bari, Cesar Romero, Marion Hutton (sister of Betty), The Modernaires, and, of course, The Nicholas Brothers.

The director was Archie Mayo (*The Petrified Forest*, *The Adventures of Marco Polo*, *Charley's Aunt*, *A Night in Casablanca*), and the screenplay was by Karl Tunberg and Darrell Ware.

Connie Ward (Rutherford) meets Bill Abbott (Montgomery), a trumpet player in the Gene Morrison (Glenn Miller – they kept the initials the same so they could use the GM music stands Miller had), and, in true Hollywood style, impulsively marries him. She joins the other wives who accompany their band member husbands across the country. Of course there are jealousies, flirtations, and eventually Connie walks out on Bill, things become so tense that Gene Morrison breaks up the band, but, never fear, eventually all works out, the band reunites and Connie comes back to Bill.

The film opens with Miller's signature tune, “Moonlight Serenade” playing over the credits.

We also get some wonderful Harry Warren and Mack Gordon songs, including “At Last” (the castoff from *Sun Valley Serenade*), “Serenade in Blue,” “People Like You and Me,” and the instant classic, “I've Got a Gal in Kalamazoo.” The latter was, like “Chattanooga Choo Choo,” nominated for an Oscar for Best Song. It lost to a little Irving Berlin song called “White Christmas.”

George Montgomery's trumpet playing was dubbed by Miller band member, Johnny Best and Miller pianist Chummy MacGregor dubbed Cesar Romero's piano playing. As in *Sun Valley Serenade*, Lynn Bari was dubbed by Pat Friday. And there are three uncredited appearances in the film by three people who would go on to have long and illustrious careers: Jackie Gleason plays Ben Beck, the band's bass player, Harry Morgan plays Cully Anderson, and Dale Evans plays Hazel. Interestingly, Harry Morgan would play pianist Chummy MacGregor a little over a decade later in the bio-pic, *The Glenn Miller Story*.

Sadly there were to be no more Glenn Miller films. Right after *Orchestra Wives*, Miller joined the Army. Two years later, he and two others were to fly from England to France, but the plane disappeared over the English Channel and the voice of one of the great geniuses of popular music was lost forever at the age of forty. But his music and his sound has lived on, thanks to many reissues and its use in just about any film set in the 1940s. It's music that seems to resonate with every generation.

This is the first time *Sun Valley Serenade* and *Orchestra Wives* are being released complete, each CD close to eighty minutes in length. Previous LP and CD releases only featured the Miller Orchestra tracks, but for this release the master film recordings — all of the songs, incidental scoring, plus bonus material and everything featured on prior releases — have been lovingly restored by Mike Matessino from the original Fox vault elements. It should be noted that while the films were given a synthesized stereo treatment in the early 1990s for home video, all of the original music elements are, in fact, monaural. Yet they remain as clear and vibrant as the day they were recorded.

— Bruce Kimmel