

“In the Mood”—Glenn Miller (1939)

Added to the National Recording Registry: 2004

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Glenn Miller



Original release label



“Sun Valley Serenade”

Though Glenn Miller and His Orchestra’s well-known, robust and swinging hit “In the Mood” was recorded in 1939 (and was written even earlier), it has since come to symbolize the 1940s, World War II, and the entire Big Band Era. Its resounding success—becoming a hit twice, once in 1940 and again in 1943—and its frequent reprisal by other artists has solidified it as a time-traversing classic.

Covered innumerable times, “In the Mood” has endured in two versions, its original instrumental (the specific recording added to the Registry in 2004) and a version with lyrics. The music was written (or written down) by Joe Garland, a Tin Pan Alley tunesmith who also composed “Leap Frog” for Les Brown and his band. The lyrics are by Andy Razaf who would also contribute the words to “Ain’t Misbehavin’” and “Honeysuckle Rose.”

For as much as it was an original work, “In the Mood” is also an amalgamation, a “mash-up” before the term was coined. It arrived at its creation via the mixture and integration of three or four different riffs from various earlier works.

Its earliest elements can be found in “Clarinet Getaway,” from 1925, recorded by Jimmy O’Bryant, an Arkansas bandleader. For his Paramount label instrumental, O’Bryant was part of a four-person ensemble, featuring a clarinet (played by O’Bryant), a piano, coronet and washboard.

Five years later, the jazz piece “Tar Paper Stomp” by Joseph “Wingy” Manone, from 1930, beget “In the Mood’s” signature musical phrase. It was released on the Champion label, credited to Barbeque Joe and his Hot Dogs, Manone’s name for his performing group.

Meanwhile, “In the Mood’s” catchy, repetitive bass line was first heard in Fletcher Henderson’s “Hot and Anxious” from 1931. Henderson’s tune, as played by his popular orchestra, was arranged by Fletcher’s brother, Horace Henderson. “Hot and Anxious” would also be recorded by Don Redman and his outfit in 1932. The Redman version contains scattered bits of scat singing, but no lyrics, per se. (Additionally: in 1938, Joe Marsala and his Chicagoans recorded a song titled “Hot String Beans.” It featured a young Buddy Rich on drums and it, too, bears more than a passing resemblance to “In the Mood.”)

Finally, Joe Garland, a sax player mainly, would sit down and take all these various strands and weave them together into a work he titled “There’s a Rhythm in Harlem.” Garland and his band, which included J.C. Higginbotham, Henry “Red” Allen, and Edgar Hayes, recorded this

particular joint for Columbia in 1935. A little later, when Garland and Hayes broke away from their earlier group to form another orchestra, Garland brought “Rhythm” with him eventually refining it and expanding it into the work we know today as “In the Mood.” Garland copyrighted the new tune in June 1938, the same year it was recorded by Edgar Hayes and his Orchestra for the Decca label.

(An interesting, side-by-side audio comparison of “Tar Paper Stomp,” “Hot and Anxious,” and “There’s a Rhythm,” along with “In the Mood,” can be found on Youtube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KkQQPfpqQoo>.)

As pointed out by music historian Dennis Spragg, up until this time almost all the fragments of “In the Mood” had been composed and performed by African-American artists, thereby limiting their radio airplay and record sales. Eventually, seeking wider exposure, Garland would begin to pitch the memorable tune to various white bandleaders. Originally, he approached music maestro Artie Shaw but the new work’s length—running about six minutes in total—prevented Shaw from being able to record it (three and half minutes was then the norm for 78rpm records). Shaw did however occasionally play it on radio, though at a slightly slower tempo than Glenn Miller would eventually reproduce it.

With Shaw largely taking a pass, Glenn Miller came to “Mood” next. He assigned it to arranger Eddie Durham who toyed with its arrangement until he arrived at a final, shortened but souped up version. In his thorough biography of the Glenn Miller, author George Thomas Simon deconstructs some of Miller and company’s augmentation of what would become their signature tune:

The Shaw version starts off with the familiar twelve-bar sax riff, played twice. Then follows the next theme, which in the Miller version consists of two similar eight-bar phrases repeated.... But in the Shaw version those sixteen bars comprise only the first half of a full thirty-two-bar chorus, which, following those sixteen bars, goes into another eight-bar theme as a release and returns to the original eight bars. What Glenn did was cut out the eight-bar release and the final eight bars, reducing that thirty-two-bar chorus to a series of simple sixteen-bar phrases.

Miller and company played their incarnation of “In the Mood” for the first time on July 26, 1939 at a casino ballroom in Rochelle, New York. They would come to record it about a month later, at the Victor Studios in New York City, on August 1, 1939. Miller’s version utilized his trademark trombone punctuating, echoing, the song’s signature refrain. It would be a bouncy combo—perfect to accompany the jitterbug.



B-10416-A), when released in July of 1940, and no doubt aided by its high energy feel and slightly risqué title, became a success with audiences. It would go on to be broadcast on 62 occasions by Glenn Miller and his Orchestra on their CBS program "Chesterfield Moonlight Serenade," on "Coca Cola Spotlight Bands," and on remote broadcasts for NBC and Mutual.

"In the Mood" proved to have staying power even then. Soon after its debut, everywhere you turned, Americans were awash in the "Mood." Though Miller never recorded the song with the Razaf lyrics ("Who's the lovin' daddy with the beautiful eyes/What a pair o' lips, I'd like to try 'em on for size."), other bands did. The first was, interestingly, also for RCA Records. In November 1939, that label released a version with singing provided by the Four King Sisters. Meanwhile, songstress Paula Kelly sang "In the Mood" accompanied by Al Donahue and his Orchestra also that same year for a Vocalion (Columbia) release. By the end of 1940, there would be six major label versions of "In the Mood" somewhere in circulation.

After its inaugural release, Miller's "Mood" would pop up again in the film "Sun Valley Serenade," a Sonja Henie extravaganza released in 1941 in which Miller and his band are featured. And the song would—remarkably—climb back up various music charts in 1943.

Though the music was strong enough to stand on its own—and it did—the occasional addition of the song’s lyrics only lengthened “In the Mood’s” life.

Big and brassy with a high-octane beat that prefigures rock and roll, “In the Mood” is one of those songs that manages to be both of the era yet oddly timeless. When listened to today, while it sounds very big band, it also retains a stunning modernity. Certainly the song’s universal appeal is attested to by the variety of artists who have covered (and continue to cover) it, with or without lyrics. Some of them: the Andrew Sisters, Brian Seltzer, Bette Midler (during Miss M.’s “vintage” period which also saw her cover of “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy”), Benny Goodman, Gene Krupa, Taco, Jimmy C. Newman (a Cajun/country mix), Ernie Fields (whose 1959 version peaked at #4 on the charts), and Roy Conniff, not to mention every latter-day big band orchestra ever to strap on some suits and a sax. Country song parodist Ray Stevens (posing as The Henhouse Five Plus Two) had a hit with “In the Mood” when he recorded a group of “chickens” who “clucked” their way through its bars in 1977. Also known as “The Cluck-Cluck Version,” Steven’s endeavor reached number 40 on the Billboard charts in February of that year.

Along with often being on the charts, “In the Mood” has often been heard in the movies too. Besides “Sun Valley” and beside figuring prominently—and not surprisingly—in the film “The Glenn Miller Story” starring Jimmy Stewart and June Allyson from 1954, “In the Mood” has also been worked into a variety of other big screen and small screen endeavors. For a time, the selection seemed to be the go-to tune for any movie or TV show wanting to invoke the 1940s--which has, at times, brought it close to cliché. To wit: “In the Mood” can be heard in Woody Allen’s “Radio Days” as well as in “Hope and Glory”; “The Philadelphia Experiment”; “Wild at Heart”; “The Radioland Murders”; “Shining Through”; “The Black Dahlia”; “1941”; “The Way We Were” and even in such surprising places as “90210,” “Dr. Who,” “The Simpsons,” and “Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader.” Obviously as well it was heard throughout the film “In the Mood,” the slightly enhanced story of infamous “Woo-Woo Kid” Sonny Wisecarver, which starred a young Patrick Dempsey.

If “In the Mood” made Miller hugely popular—to the point where he and his band almost got sick of playing it--it did not make him rich. Still bound by an old “no-royalties” clause in his recording contract, Miller earned only \$175 for his often-resurrected rendition. Years later, however, his estate was able to wrangle a revised royalty agreement, allowing Miller’s heirs to reap some of the song’s ample proceeds.

Unfortunately, Miller’s career was an abbreviated one. An active member of the war effort during World War II, Miller was flying from England to France to do a show for servicemen in December of 1944 when his plane disappeared over the English Channel. His body has never been recovered. In 1945, Miller was posthumously awarded a bronze star for his service to his country.

Despite a tragically short life, Miller’s legacy is a cache of popular and timeless tunes. They include: “Chattanooga Choo Choo,” “Tuxedo Junction,” “Moonlight Serenade” and “Pennsylvania 6-500.” And, of course, “In the Mood,” a song which has proved to be as enduring as it is evocative.

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