

Glenn Miller and Music During the War

Alton Glenn Miller was born 1 March 1904 in Clarinda, Iowa. His family eventually settled in Fort Morgan, Colorado, in 1918. Young Glenn became active in music early in life, while the family was living in Grant City, Missouri; he began to play trombone in 1916. He started college at CU in 1923, but dropped out after failing three of five courses in a single semester, having missed a number of classes for gigs and auditions. Miller left school and pursued music full time, finding success in the jazz big bands of many prominent band leaders of the time. He achieved star status with his own band in 1938.

Between 1938 and 1942, Miller led one of the most successful bands in the US. His recordings were among the top sellers in America, eventually earning him the distinction of having been awarded the first ever Gold Record for “Chattanooga Choo-Choo.” At the height of his success and, with the US entering World War II, Miller decided he wanted to serve his country as an Army band leader. Too old to be drafted, Miller convinced the Army to allow him to modernize their service band. In 1944, he formed his 50-piece Army Air Force band and toured England. Following over 800 performances around Great Britain, Miller prepared to fly to Paris to play for soldiers there four months after the liberation of the French capital. On 15 December 1944, Miller departed from an RAF base in Clapham, England, to fly over the English Channel. His plane never arrived in Paris. To this day, the exact cause of the crash is not known, though current research suggests that a combination of weather and mechanical failure was to blame.

Items on loan from the Glenn Miller Archives, part of the University of Colorado American Music Research Center.

Cigarettes and Case

Before the negative effects of smoking were known and tobacco companies were restricted in their advertising, companies would routinely sponsor radio programs, such as the *Chesterfield Hour*. This show aired from 1939-1944 and featured popular big bands, including those of Glenn Miller and of fellow Coloradan and band leader Paul Whiteman. Perhaps because of the exposure on the show, Miller was a loyal Chesterfield man. Following Miller's successful gig at the Glen Island Casino in New Rochelle, New York, which had an opening night attendance of 1,800, casino manager Mike L. De Zutter presented him with this case, engraved on one side with the opening bars of "Moonlight Serenade." It was this performance that marked the beginning of Miller's rise to fame. Note: The unopened pack of Chesterfields was not Miller's. The health warning clearly marks it as dating after 1985, but it does illustrate the classic Chesterfield logo.

Glenn Miller Archives, University of Colorado American Music Research Center

Transcription Discs and V-Discs

Part of the US Military's effort to boost morale, the commissioning of Transcript Discs and V-Discs provided US service men and women the chance to enjoy music from back home. The larger record is a Transcription Disc and has a 16-inch diameter, much larger than the standard LP. These discs were made by the US Armed Forces Radio Service and were sent all over America and the world – wherever Americans were serving – and were broadcast on Armed Forces radio for the entertainment of the troops. The smaller disc is called a V- Disc. These standard 10-inch discs were produced by private companies for distribution by the US government for the troops overseas. The discs seen here are recordings made by Glenn Miller: the transcription disc, a program with his Army Air Force Band and the V-Disc, a recording he made with his civilian group prior to his enlistment.

Glenn Miller Archives, University of Colorado American Music Research Center

Capt. A.G. Miller Desk Plate

Captain Glenn Miller sometimes faced a tough road when requesting that musicians be transferred to his band. The directors of other Army groups were reluctant to see their top musicians depart for the famous band leader's group. Captain Miller found his path was easier when he submitted his transfer requests under the name "Capt. A.G. Miller," utilizing his initials for "Alton Glenn." This was the desk plate he used from 1942 until 1944, when he was promoted to Major, just before he departed to tour the European theatre.

Glenn Miller Archives, University of Colorado American Music Research Center

“Moonlight Serenade”

Arguably Glenn Miller’s signature tune, “Moonlight Serenade” was first written while he was studying composition under Joseph Schillinger in New York. Beginning life as a sketch called “Miller’s Tune,” the song underwent many title changes before finally being released as “Moonlight Serenade” in 1939. It quickly became a hit; Miller’s recording from ’39 was released as a V-Disc by the War Department in 1943. This is a reproduction of Miller’s sketch for the tune made from the original sheet music, which is on display in the CU Heritage Center in Old Main, along with many other Glenn Miller artifacts.

Glenn Miller Archives, University of Colorado American Music Research Center

A Commemorative Flag

This flag was flown over the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Miller's disappearance, 15 December 1994.

Glenn Miller Archives, University of Colorado American Music Research Center