

AND THE BANDS PLAYED ON...

The campus musicians
of the '20s and '30s
were very special people.

Admired and envied by
their dance-crazed classmates,
they worked their way
through college in style

by Kathryn Jenson White



Courtesy : Otto Norman

The 1934-35 Varsity Club on WNAD featured, from left, front, Baird Jones, Otto Norman, Joe Staedelin, Kenny Harris, Orville Smith; back, Carter Lutes, Virgil Estes, Harley Price, Gene Cunningham and Murvel Blake.



When The Boomers played, people listened.

And as they listened, they foxtrotted, two-stepped and waltzed. They foxtrotted to the music filling the large halls above two of the most

popular places for Coke dates during the '20s and '30s: the College Shop and the Teepee. They two-stepped in the stately rooms of the student union and in the fraternity and sorority houses. They waltzed their way through the University of Oklahoma to the sweet strains of The Sooner Serenaders, The Ramblers, The Varsity Club Band, The Boomers and many of the campus' lesser-known combos and orchestras.

Bonnie Spencer blew tenor sax with The Boomers from 1921 to 1925. Eugene Kendall guided the slide of his

trombone up and back for the same group from 1928 to 1932. Baird Jones tickled the ivories as a member of The Varsity Club Band from 1934 to 1938. Together, the musical careers of these OU undergraduates spanned the era of the campus dance band in Norman town.

"There was no other time like it," recalls Kendall, who at 82 is still active in the insurance business in Oklahoma City. "The music was so pervasive that it acted as a unifying force, drawing the

whole campus together. Dancing was our main social outlet, and the campus was a fun place to be in the '20s and '30s, I can tell you."

The experiences of these representative men cover 20 years—moving from the prosperous and glittering Roaring '20s through the depressed '30s to the beginnings of World War II. Yet all three sound certain themes again and again as they replay their pasts as members of the 10-piece bands that filled the campus with jazz, ragtime, the blues and the now-classic pop tunes of the age.

Spencer, 90 and living in Oklahoma City, retired in 1965 from the sales division of Oklahoma Gas and Electric after 40 years. He started The Boomers in 1923, when he jumped his five-piece combo to seven pieces and had to come up with a new name for what had been The Uni-

versity Five. The Boomer Band was his original choice, but chalk messages on campus sidewalks shortly began to read "Student Council Dance Tonight—Davis Hall—\$1 per couple—The Boomers." The Boomers they became and stayed until they disbanded in 1938.

Like most of the men who made up the bands, Spencer was not interested in a career in music. He was interested in a way to earn enough money to stay in school so that he could earn his bachelor's degree in business. He figured out quickly that playing for money rather than working for it was a more pleasant and efficient way to achieve his goal.

"When I met my wife during my first year, I didn't date her," he says. "I was washing dishes at The White House, and I smelled of dirty dishes half the time. I had a diary I'd write in: 'My dishwasher was really stinking today,' I'd write. When I started The Boomers, I finally got into the money. I quit dishwashing and got a date with Annabelle. She'd been dating other guys, but I had a better style. I was known."

All the dance band members were known. They were also wanted, and not just by coeds with a sense of style and rhythm. The fraternities rushed to

pledge those who played in the most popular bands. The brothers wanted some inside help when the annual spring booking session for the next school year rolled around. Two or three Sigma Nus in the band, and guess whose fraternity dance The Boomers were most likely to tune up for?

Kendall, who joined The Boomers several years after Spencer had moved to Oklahoma City and begun another orchestra, remembers his own campus standing well.

"It was a very satisfying, fun

says. "At that time, if someone was working, he made 25 cents an hour. When I first came to school, I washed dishes in the student union: one hour for one meal, two hours for two meals. If you worked in a boarding house, three hours a day washing dishes was room and board. And that was considered a great job. In the dance band, I was making \$5 for three hours."

Kendall and Spencer remember similar, relative affluence.

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and prestigious way to pay your college expenses," he says. "The band members were kind of special people on campus. They were an admired and envied group. The band brothers were actually closer—and the closeness lasted longer—than with fraternity members. I know where most of my band members are today, if they're alive, and I know where only a few of my fraternity brothers are."

Jones, who also lives in Oklahoma City, is one of the relatively few band members who had chosen music as a career. His education prepared him to teach high school band, which he did for three years. Citing salaries too low to support a growing family as one reason, Jones quit after only three years to become a professional musician. But another reason is that Baird loves performing. He has worked with the Ice Capades Orchestra, the Gridiron Club, and, as he says, with just about anybody who will give him a bench at a keyboard. At 74, he owns part of a recording studio and plays three or four times a week. He agrees with Kendall that band members in school were given special status.

They also were given something else that helped make them BMOC: money.

"People were green with envy," he

Oklahoma City or somewhere else in the state," Kendall says. "We each got \$10 a dance. In a good month, we'd make \$100. When I started selling insurance in '32, I concentrated on seniors who were about to get out and make some money. Graduating engineers were starting at \$125 a month, if they could get a job. A lot of them were working in filling stations."

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: Members of the 1931-32 Boomers orchestra pose on the Sigma Nu fraternity house porch, from left, front, Chet Stinnett, Claude Whiteman, Claude Kennedy, Everett "Red" Goins, John Railey; back, Gene Kendall, Byron McFall, Truman "Pinky" Tomlin, Jimmie Godlove and Ralph Wright.

BOTTOM LEFT: With only a year of law school remaining, dance band alumnus Larry Cotton, right, departed OU for show biz. A former vocalist with Horace Heidt, he had his own radio show in Hollywood with guest stars such as Jimmy Stewart, left, and Paulette Goddard.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Sooner musicians Otto Norman, left, George Allen, Baird Jones, Charles Eddins and Murvel Blake, on board the German liner "Bremen," played their way to Europe and back again in 1937.

TEA FOR TWO

PIANO DUET

VINCENT YOUMANS
Arr. by J. Louis Merkur



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Continued



Gil Jain

In March 1990, Baird Jones, left, and Bonnie Spencer shared musical memories of the campus dance era at the Centennial Celebration event, "100 Years of Music."

Spencer is proud to say that he, too, averaged \$100 a month. "That was more than enough to go to school," he says. "When I graduated, I had money out all over the fraternities, \$1,500 in cash and a new Ford roadster."

The band members had to invest in a special wardrobe, since they were surrounded by those who took their look as well as their dancing seriously. With part of their earnings, the bands bought outfits appropriate for their

engagements. Tuxedos were *de rigueur* for the big dances on campus and in such places as Blossom Heath, the Trianon Ballroom and the ballroom at the Skirvin Plaza in Oklahoma City, all places that the dance bands played when they were not booked on campus. For less formal occasions, Kendall remembers The Boomers dressed in gray, three-piece flannel suits with snappy, black and white sport shoes. The suits had knickers, too.

Louise Hoyt, who earned a bachelor's degree in French and English in 1932 as Louise Green, was one of The Boomers' most ardent fans. She claims to have danced a million miles in her life, at least 250,000 of those in Norman, where, she says, she never missed a dance.

"The men wore dark suits, and we dressed up in very fancy evening clothes," the native Oklahoma City resident recalls. "I remember a beautiful black dress and a red one and a lovely mauve one, mostly all satin. They were all ankle-length and bare at the top. That was the age of bias, so the skirts were pretty fitted, sleek. It was all very formal. But of course, women wore suits, heels and hats to class then.

"A friend of mine had gone to Smith and came down to OU for her junior year. She pledged Theta, and when she wore bobby sox, saddle oxfords, skirts and sweaters to class, we had to straighten her out. We explained that she looked cheap and just couldn't go to class looking like that."

Hoyt cannot remember how many dance gowns she owned, but she does remember that as the country slid into the Great Depression, not everyone could afford to dress well. "When things got really bad about 1929, and many were struggling just to stay in school, we shared our gowns," she says.

Not all the dances were elegant. Slightly less formal than those held in the dance halls and fraternity houses were the Sunday afternoon dansantes the sororities put on. There, calf-length dresses were acceptable. Of course, the fraternity boys were always looking for ways to liven up the campus. Theme dances provided them great opportunities, according to Kendall.

"The Betas had their Barn Dance, with bales of hay all over the front yard and a cow or two, and everyone dressed in gingham and overalls. The Sig house had its Bowery Dance, complete with derbies and cigars, and the KA house had a Southern Party. I guess it was Confederate. They all wore Confederate uniforms complete with swords. It was amazing," he says.

Then, too, there were the decidedly informal Boomer serenades at the sorority houses each fall and spring. Hoyt remembers these as very romantic,

especially for the girls interested in one of the band members. Kendall says many men who were just lovers rather than music lovers followed the flatbed truck carrying The Boomers from house to house, eager to catch a then-rare glimpse of a demurely nightgowned beloved leaning out an open window.

"The serenades were highlights of the campus year," Kendall says. "The girls had to be in at 12:30, and the dances were over at midnight. While they were getting in, we set up on the truck. We'd pull up, and the windows would fly open. We had 18 houses on campus. We'd play a few tunes at each, and by the time we finished, the sun would be coming up."

After the continuous dances, serenades and rehearsals of the school year, some campus bands would disband for the summer. Members would hook up with traveling bands booked into dance pavilions and fancy hotels all across the country. Other groups stayed together and sought bookings of their own.

The summer after my senior year, The Boomers were booked by the Music Corporation of America to play across the Midwest," Kendall says. "We followed Duke Ellington's band into a tremendous hall in Akron, Ohio. Bands were kept there by popular demand; how long you stayed depended on the dancers' reactions. Duke stayed two weeks. We stayed a month.

"I know we weren't the musicians his band members were, but I think our youthful enthusiasm spilled out over the dancers, and they had more fun than when the professional bands were up there."

Kendall does not think the particular combination of musicians making up The Boomers that summer in Ohio was the best, however. Every spring, of course, senior members would graduate; every fall, freshman members would be added. The freshman crop that rotated in for the fall of 1931, according to Kendall, was a dandy.

"Two brothers from Little Rock, Arkansas—Claude and Ranny Kennedy—came in. They had obviously cut their teeth on the coronet and the

piano. About the same time, a tall, skinny, freckle-faced kid came up from Durant. His name was Pinky Tomlin, and he brought with him a piece he had written called 'The Object of My Affection.' We played that for four years before the world ever heard it."

The world finally did hear it when Tomlin went to California in 1935 and convinced Jimmy Greer, a well-known bandleader in Hollywood, to listen. The



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song—written while Pinky was driving a truck—became a classic, according to Spencer.

Although, as Spencer says and Kendall seconds, most band members were intent on becoming lawyers, engineers and businessmen rather than musicians, OU was the rehearsal hall for some musicians who made names for themselves.

In addition to Tomlin, The Boomers produced Les Jenkins, who played with both Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, and Grady Watts, who played all over the country with Gene Goldkett. The Ramblers sent George Leeman to New York to become a highly respected arranger for everything from big dance bands to orchestras, and Larry Cotton to Horace Heidt's Musical Knights, who played at the Waldorf for years. Others became parts of various nationally known orchestras, pit men at theaters or musicians with staff orchestras at grand hotels.

Whether they left school to take a position on stage or in a law office, OU dance band members were, as Kendall says, a close-knit group. In 1987, an article in *OU People* focused on a get-together of Baird Jones, Otto Norman and Buddy Joseph on the 50th anniversary of a cruise ship engagement they had played as a trio. The article

sparked the idea of a reunion of all those who had played in dance bands at OU.

The first Oklahoma University Campus Dance Bands' Reunion, which took place during Homecoming 1988, drew 80 members. In 1989 and 1990, attendance inched up to almost 90, with participants coming from as far away as Connecticut and Florida. Jones now has a mailing list of almost 200,

and he looks forward to Homecoming 1991 with anticipation.

"Those who want to play tell us on their registration slips," he explains. "Rehearsal is as much fun as the concert we give Sunday afternoon, when most of the activities are over. We had 18 pieces last year: five saxes, nine brass and a big rhythm section. Some of the guys don't play much all year. After one or two tunes, some of the horn players have to step down. Some are really active weekend musicians, though, and we sound good enough to give a public concert."

The '20s and '30s live again each year on campus thanks to the OUCDBR.

As the real '30s ended, the boom of the big guns in Europe slowly began to drown out the sounds of "Star Dust," "The Sheik of Araby," "Them There Eyes" and "Avalon." Two, three, even four members at a time would trade their tuxes for uniforms and leave town. Soon, the task of finding replacements became too difficult; what Bonnie Spencer calls OU's reservoir of talented musicians dried up. The era ended, but its participants clearly have not forgotten. They name a song and sing a few bars. Their feet begin to tap, and 60 years fall away.

Music is still magic.

