

SPOTLIGHT BANDS



Tommy Dorsey and his Orchestra with the Sentimentalists
1943 Coca-Cola *Victory Parade of Spotlight Bands* broadcast

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“The Pause That Refreshes On The Air”

First among the numerous commercial sponsors of musical radio programs were the tobacco companies. Bandleaders such as Glenn Miller and Harry James, and singer Perry Como came to be associated with Chesterfield; Kay Kyser and Frank Sinatra with Lucky Strike, Benny Goodman, Xavier Cugat and Bob Crosby with Camel and Tommy Dorsey with Raleigh-Kool. Tobacco advertising has long since been prohibited on American radio and television by the FCC. Although by 21st century standards, the tobacco sponsorships might seem quaint if not puzzling, the fact is that the tobacco companies wielded tremendous clout.

During the heyday of network radio, sponsors and their advertising agencies owned the programs and controlled content, unlike how television advertising and program production evolved and exists today. Other companies and products were also associated with bands and singers, including products that were meant to appeal to younger audiences and their consumption, including the Coca Cola Company of Atlanta, Georgia.

Beginning in 1941, the Coca Cola Company produced a program that would ultimately be the most involved and influential, if not the most important commercial musical radio property to air during World War II and immediately thereafter, *Coca Cola Spotlight Bands*.

During 1941, Coca Cola developed plans for a big band series to market their product. The series would feature various popular bands, as opposed to one specific band. They entered into an agreement with the Mutual Broadcasting System. The program would air over all of the Mutual stations six nights a week. Monday through Friday, a fifteen minute program would be broadcast nationally at 10:15-10:30 p.m. (Eastern). Each night, a different band would usually appear from a Mutual studio in New York, Chicago or Hollywood, although several programs were broadcast from other locations. The flagship Mutual stations WOR, WGN and KHJ generally originated the broadcasts. The New York programs originated from the stage of a new Mutual Theatre on West 39th Street. Mutual had renovated the former Maxine Elliott Theatre with state-of-the-art broadcast equipment. Then, on Saturday evening, a thirty minute program would be broadcast at 10:15-10:45 p.m. (Eastern). Whereas Mutual scheduled the bands for the Monday through Friday episodes, the Saturday evening program was reserved for the band that posted the largest nation-wide record sales for the previous week. The identity of the band was kept secret from the national audience until the program went on the air. This was bait to attract a larger audience, which succeeded.

Mutual “Silver Platter” Programs

Coca Cola and Mutual entered into a twenty six week agreement. Kay Kyser launched the series Monday, November 3, 1941. During those weeks, Tommy Dorsey would appear five weeks in a row Saturday evenings with the same tune, *This Love of Mine* and the voice of Frank Sinatra's. Harry James would then appear seven Saturdays in succession with Helen Forrest and *I Don't Want To Walk Without You*. In between, Alvino Rey would appear with *Deep in the Heart of Texas*. The band appearing on Saturday would receive a “Silver Platter” award. The first award went to Freddy Martin for *Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto* on Saturday, November 8, 1941.

Spotlight Bands would quickly become a popular program and conflicts with other sponsors occurred. Not surprisingly, Glenn Miller would win an early “champion of champions” award for *Chattanooga Choo Choo*. Miller was featured on the Spotlight Bands programs as weekly champion Saturday, November 22, 1941 and Saturday, December 6, 1941. The Mutual announcers thanked Miller's CBS sponsor, Chesterfield Cigarettes, for permission to allow Miller to appear. These appearances came to a quick halt as Chesterfield owner Liggett and Myers and their advertising agency withdrew permission. They apparently believed that the added exposure for Miller on the Coca Cola program undermined them. Miller would not appear on another Coca Cola program until September 26, 1942, following his final Chesterfield program before joining the Army. The Coca Cola broadcast would, ironically, be the final on-air performance by Glenn Miller and his Orchestra.

Starting with the February 2, 1942 program, Mutual moved *Spotlight Bands* to an earlier time slot at 9:30-9:45 p.m. (Eastern) Monday-Friday and 9:30-10:00 p.m. (Eastern) Saturday. The initial 26-week run ended May 2, 1942, featuring Harry James and famous announcer Ken Niles from the KHJ studio in Hollywood. For whatever reason, negotiations between Mutual and Coca Cola stalled and the popular program was not renewed. All concerned wanted the program to continue, so discussions continued into the summer of 1942. With the American war effort up and running, Coca Cola was interested in a format change to focus on service personnel and civilian war workers with live, remote broadcasts from military installations and war plants. Mutual was not necessarily prepared or able to provide the technical support to handle the proposed effort.

Blue Network “Victory Parade of Spotlight Bands”



In August 1942, Coca Cola entered into an agreement with the Blue Network to launch the revised *Spotlight Bands* series. The Blue Network was the former NBC Blue Network. As of January 1, 1942, NBC began to operate Blue as a quasi-independent entity. The FCC had ordered NBC to divest Blue from its Red network and other operations as the result of a lengthy and expensive anti-trust action. NBC would continue to operate Blue from its technical facilities and using its personnel until 1945 when Blue became the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) after its purchase by Edward J. Noble. Blue offered Coca Cola arguably more local affiliate stations and audience reach than Mutual, but also perhaps a better ability to host remotes from all over the country. Coca Cola and the Blue Network entered into a new 26-week agreement. The name of the program was changed to *The Victory Parade of Spotlight Bands*. The weeknight programs were extended from fifteen minutes to twenty five minutes, airing at 9:30-9:55 p.m. Eastern War Time. The last five minutes of the half-hour to 10:00 p.m. was devoted to news. The listening audience became directly involved with the selection of the bands. A combination of two polls replaced record sales to determine which bands appeared. One poll was conducted with the civilian audience and another was conducted with service personnel and war workers at defense plants. The second series was launched on September 21, 1942, with Harry James performing at the Marine Barracks, Parris Island, South Carolina. The Blue Network recorded and saved the programs in numeric sequence. The popular James ended the first series and launched the second. Three days later, on September 24, 1942, James would appear with Glenn Miller on Miller's final CBS Chesterfield program in New York. James would succeed Miller on the CBS Chesterfield program beginning September 29, 1942.



Harry James and his Music Makers, *Spotlight Bands* 1945.
Vocalist Kitty Kallen is seated to the right of Harry James

SSD and AFRS Transcriptions

The new format was a success. In March 1943, Coca Cola renewed its agreement with the Blue Network for two years. At the same time, the Special Services Division of the War Department became interested in rebroadcasting the programs for service personnel overseas. The SSD was already taking commercial network programs, editing out commercial content and sending out 16-inch transcription discs to overseas radio stations (see our "Armed Forces Radio Service" overview). The SSD started to record and edit the network programs from direct feeds. They cut the programs down to a fifteen-minute format without commercial content. They dubbed new musical introductions and covering announcements using SSD announcers. The results were initially awkward but as the effort progressed, the editing became cleaner. The *Victory Parade Spotlight Bands* programs became an important feature of the packages of programs that SSD was sending overseas from their Los Angeles headquarters. SSD began to renumber the program series using their own sequence.

Today, music collectors know both the commercial episodes in the series and the rebroadcasts by their respective serial numbers, which do not match. Commercial program #157 was SSD program #1. Throughout the remaining programs, there was a difference of 156 and then 155 between the respective series. For some reason, there is no episode #177 in the military series. The surviving programs offer historians a rich insight into which bands were where during the course of the series. In October 1943, the SSD was renamed the Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS). The *Victory Parade of Spotlight Bands* would run until commercial program #858 and AFRS program #703. The final program in the series was Saturday, June 16, 1945, when Coca Cola ended its six nights per week series and its relationship with The Blue Network, which by then had become ABC.

Return to Mutual

On Monday, June 18, 1945, Coca Cola resumed the programs with Mutual. They cut the series to three nights per week from six; Monday, Wednesday and Friday. The first program featured Tommy Dorsey. The third iteration of the series continued until March 29, 1946, with commercial program #979 and AFRS program #826. The name of the program returned to *Spotlight Bands* after August 20, 1945, as hostilities had ended August 15, 1945.

The fourth version of the program was launched on April 1, 1946. The new format dropped the variety of bands presented and consisted of three specific bands. Monday would feature Guy Lombardo; Wednesday, Xavier Cugat and, Friday, Harry James. Mutual retained the programs and AFRS continued to rebroadcast them. Mutual stopped numbering them but AFRS kept doing so. This arrangement continued until November 22, 1946, with a final Mutual program featuring Harry James. AFRS would continue the series in a 15 minute format for another year or so by first recycling the Lombardo, Cugat and James programs; and, then, using non-*Spotlight Bands* material by numerous bands. The last known AFRS issue would be program #1217.

During its run from 1941 to 1946 under four auspices, *Spotlight Bands* had an incredible track record and the surviving, preserved programs offer us a rich history of the war years. The Glenn Miller Archive holds hundreds of Coca Cola *Spotlight Bands* episodes and rebroadcasts in our collections.

Acknowledgment

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