

Pynchon and Glenn Miller

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We noted in passing in a recent article a subtle musical allusion in *Gravity's Rainbow* to Glenn Miller¹—actually a cluster of allusions we would like to expand on here, for they are of more consequence than might first appear. When Slothrop penetrates the Potsdam Conference, he hears “a dance band with a mammoth reed section” (382) playing “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree.” The vocals the band accompanies are a close cover of the Andrews Sisters’ Top-20 recording from the 1942 film *Private Buckaroo*, but the reed-dominated melody line derives from Glenn Miller’s Spring 1942 Number-1 hit (Bluebird 11474).² Later in *Gravity's Rainbow*, aboard the *Anubis*, Slothrop hears another famous Miller song: “the saxman is playing ‘Chattanooga Choo Choo’” (468). By 1944, that song and Miller were synonymous; the Miller version (Bluebird 11230) charted Number 1 for nine weeks in 1941, and became the first certified million seller in American recording history.

The *Anubis* scene yields other allusions to Miller’s musical magic. Bianca’s hair is “swept up elaborate and flawless and interwoven with a string of pearls” (463); later, loosened, it appears “salted with the string of little seed pearls” (467). This double reference to pearls evokes another hallmark Miller recording, “A String of Pearls” (Bluebird 11382), a 1942 chart-topper featuring Bobby Hackett’s immortal cornet solo. In the novel’s very next sentence, a mulatto girl fondles Slothrop’s erection through his “loosely-pleated tuxedo trousers” (467); the aristocratic passengers then join in an elaborately interconnected orgy. Could Pynchon be evoking yet another Miller hit, “Tuxedo Junction” (Bluebird 10612), a Number-1 song from 1940—the year Miller placed an amazing total of eight Number 1’s on the charts?

In *Gravity's Rainbow*’s constant parade of composers and performers, Miller remains the great shadow figure, the innovator who is barely heard through the subtle, almost subliminal allusions. Miller’s reed-dominated arrangements (he carried four saxophones and a clarinet) and the highly choreographed visual showmanship of his band place him in the company of other musical innovators mentioned in the novel—Hugo Wolf, Anton Webern, Charlie Parker—who were also, like Miller, cut down in their prime. Thus Miller is yet another exemplar of one of the major motifs of *Gravity's Rainbow*: the innovative artist who

seems destined for Election but suffers a Preterite death instead. Of these innovators, Miller is by far the closest to the wartime events of the novel, and the implicit biographical connections are just as improbably Pynchonesque as the musical allusions identified above.

The genius who dwarfed all other popular-band leaders of the wartime era (129 charted singles, including 23 Number-1 hits) formed his first band in 1937. Miller's first one-night engagement (the Hotel New Yorker) ran into the early morning hours of 8 May 1937—the day Pynchon was born, and eight years to the day before V-E Day. Miller's plane disappeared over the English Channel on 15 December 1944, but was not reported missing for a week—the same week that opens *Gravity's Rainbow* and begins the cycle of Christian festivals and pagan celebrations that, as Steven Weisenburger points out, shape the chronology of the novel.³ But Miller's musical career and innovative dominance of the swing era do more than simply span the war years that serve as preamble to the novel. His life is woven into the fabric of the war's events and even into the symbols that define the war's terrifying technological climax.

Miller's sudden decision to dissolve his band, join the Army Air Force, and take his music to the European Theatre of Operations is best understood in terms of his control-oriented personality—a character trait Slothrop encounters at every turn in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In the early years, Miller had displayed the patience to transform young and gifted musicians into the dominant musical force of the time; however, his development of *visual* as well as *aural* showmanship—musicians up and down, front and center, whole sections keeping time with swinging brass and woodwinds—was the beginning of his military approach to *everything*. Miller in England, in uniform, shaping a new band, is a musical analog to Pointsman, Rózsavölgyi and the other Pavlovian acolytes at the White Visitation. And, like so many characters in the novel, Miller became a target for the ultimate weapons—his escape as fantastic as any of Slothrop's adventures.

Miller slept in a bomb shelter beneath BBC London for weeks before his newly enlisted musicians arrived from the States in June 1944.⁴ The band's first day in London was punctuated by a deadly buzz-bomb explosion just a few blocks away. Miller soon learned that he and his musicians were billeted in "Buzz-bomb Alley," so named by Mexico-like statisticians who had calculated that 90 percent of the V-1's came through that quadrant of the city. Miller finally convinced SHAEF to let the band record on a remote BBC feed from the English countryside. On 2 July, he moved the band out of London; the next day, a direct hit on the band's London quarters killed twenty-five American MP's and buried seventy-eight others alive. Miller had saved

his band from this technological nightmare, but his own traceless disappearance five months later was even more terrifying for the survivors, who had no agent to blame or to hate for the loss of a cultural icon. It was almost as if some Pynchonesque They had made Glenn Miller Their victim.

Glenn Miller's gigantic but implicit presence in *Gravity's Rainbow* appears indirectly through the cavalcade of composers, musicians and actors heard, seen, remembered and mimicked by various characters throughout the novel. Pynchon brings these visual and aural sensations together most effectively in musical film allusions, and none plays better across the entire range of *Gravity's Rainbow* than MGM's *Wizard of Oz*. From Albert Krypton's yellow-brick road to the V-2's rainbow trajectory, Pynchon's allusions skillfully orchestrate the chaos that is Europe at the end of the Second World War. But in those years, the Oz film was not a classic by any means, for the movie's great popularity had to await the television era yet to come. During the war, the movie and its wonderful Harold Arlen melodies were best known through the Number-1 recording of "Over the Rainbow"—arranged and performed by Glenn Miller in 1939 (Bluebird 10366).

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Notes

¹"A Plea for Interdisciplinary Study: A Supplement to A 'Gravity's Rainbow' Companion," *Resources for American Literary Study* 19.1 (1993): 104.

²Discographic references throughout this article were compiled from *Billboard* and *Hit Parade* charts of the period by Joel Whitburn in *Pop Memories 1890-1954* (Menomonee Falls, WI: Record Research, 1986).

³Steven Weisenburger, *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988) 9-11.

⁴For biographical information, we have drawn on George T. Simon, *Glenn Miller & His Orchestra* (New York: Crowell, 1974) 87-88, 363-67.