

Glenn Miller Orchestra swings into Shuler Theater

By Tim Keller – For the Comet | Posted: Thursday, October 23, 2014 5:00 am

RATON – Glenn Miller’s big band was wildly popular, charting history’s first gold record with “Chattanooga Choo-Choo,” when he abruptly joined the U.S. Army shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He led the Glenn Miller Army Air Force Band during World War II, flying to shows around the globe. At the end of 1944, his plane went down over the English Channel. His body was never found. All that remained were memories and the best-selling dance recordings of his two swing bands.

Nine years later, Universal Pictures released “The Glenn Miller Story,” with James Stewart portraying Miller. Demand for the bandleader’s music skyrocketed, leading Miller’s estate to approve the reformation of the Glenn Miller Orchestra under the direction of Ray McKinley, who had directed the Army Air Force Band after Miller’s sudden disappearance. No one could have foreseen the band’s success: it’s been touring the world for 58 years, averaging 300 shows annually in an endless tour of one-nighters.

Sunday afternoon, the show swings into Raton’s Shuler Theater for a matinee concert. Online reviews suggest that there will be dancing in the aisles as the 18-member ensemble purrs, punches, and growls its way through hits like “Tuxedo Junction,” “In the Mood,” “Bugle Call Rag,” “Little Brown Jug,” and its timeless theme song, “Moonlight Serenade,” written by Miller when he was a young music student.

Musicians have come and gone through the years, drawn from the ranks of America’s top band players. Some have stayed long enough to reach their 60s, but the majority are young. They come from all over, from Alaska to Florida, California to New Jersey. They perform the classic Glenn Miller sound characterized by a clarinet holding the melodic line, doubled or coupled with the tenor sax playing the same notes, with three other saxes playing harmonies while growling trombones and wailing trumpets add their oo-ahs.

With choreographed movements and red blazers, the excitement is both musical and visual, especially when joined by featured vocalists Nick Hilscher and Natalie Angst. Now doubling as band director, Hilscher joined as singer in 1998. Despite the group’s ceaseless tour schedule, Hilscher has managed to release two solo albums.

Natalie Angst first saw the Glenn Miller Orchestra just last year when her all-gal vocal group, The



Glenn Miller Orchestra set to perform on Sunday

Honeybee Trio, opened for them at a swing festival in Iowa. In February, she joined them on the road as their new female vocalist.

Countless bands have tried to make it on the road. There's only one way to last: success. Supporting an 18-member group requires a new town every night. From its first shows a decade after Glenn Miller's disappearance over the English Channel, the Glenn Miller Orchestra has followed its winning formula of making people swing in their seats until some just have to bust out and dance.

The Raton Arts & Humanities Council presents the Glenn Miller Orchestra Sunday, Oct. 26, at 3:00 p.m. Reserved seat tickets are available at the door or in advance at Old Pass Gallery, 145 S. 1st St., (575) 445-2052 for ticket prices.