

# **Les Brown Sr. Biography**

## **Les' Boyhood**

Les Brown was born in March of 1912 and raised in Tower City, Pennsylvania, the son of R.W. Brown, a baker and musician. "My father's love was music," said Les, during an interview conducted in April of 1996, "but he was a baker so we could eat." R.W.'s instrument of choice was the trombone, but with his three brothers he played soprano sax in a sax quartet that performed the most popular music of the day, the marches written by John Phillips Sousa. And since Sousa was known as the "March King," R.W. Brown earned the sobriquet, "March Prince."

As the son of the March Prince, young Les Brown was playing music almost as soon as he could walk. His father, who taught music to all his sons as well as to other people in the neighborhood, introduced him first to the cornet. But Les preferred the smooth sound of his dad's soprano sax, and it was on that instrument that he excelled. "I took to it right away," he said, "like fleas to a dog." By the age of nine, Les joined his pro band, hindered only by his lack of proper attire: "The only problem was that I didn't have any long pants at the time," he recalled. "A guy who lived next door to us who was 16 and very short, and I borrowed his pants so I didn't have to play in short pants."

By the age of 14, Les Brown was already a seasoned professional, and he started what would be the first of many bands, The Royal Serenaders. Playing the pop hits of the day, like "Barney Google," the seven-piece ensemble would perform mostly at school dances. Les was inspired by the music to make it his living, and also by his desire to escape the drudgery of his father's bakery, where he toiled from 5:30 am to 7:30 am before school, and then for many more hours after.

Recognizing Les' abundant musical gifts, father asked son if, rather than going to the public high school, he'd like to study music at the Ithaca Conservatory of Music. "I said 'Yes' right away," Les remembered, "because I loved music, but I wanted to get out of that bake shop, too."

## **Les at Ithaca**

The Ithaca Conservatory, besides being a first-rate music school, also boasted the presence of The Pat Conway Band, which – with the exception of the Sousa band – was the most popular military band in the country. Conway – as Les would do in later years – tired of constant touring, and took a job that would enable him to stay in one place long enough to raise his children. Les happily joined the band, quickly establishing a reputation as a serious, gifted and ambitious musician.

Though sax remained his main instrument, Les also studied and mastered the classical clarinet while at Ithaca. When informed that the school needed a second bassoonist for the school orchestra to play Mozart and Beethoven, and that whoever fulfilled that role would receive a full scholarship, he immediately purchased a second-hand bassoon, and started studying it in addition to the sax and clarinet.

By 1927, his second year at Ithaca, Les felt the need to lead his own band, and a new group, The Rainbow Men, was born. The colorful name of the band was reflected in their apparel – like Duke Ellington, they wore sashes across the front of their tuxedos, but theirs were striped with all the colors of the rainbow. “Well, as many colors as we could squeeze into six inches,” Les qualified. This was the first real big band Les would lead. “Big for that time, anyway,” he said. “Four saxes, four brass, four rhythm. I did all the arranging and rehearsed the band for what few jobs we got.”

In the summer of '29, after graduating from Ithaca, Les ran into a friend who would change his life. Bob Alexy was an exceptional trumpet player who went on to play with the Jimmy Dorsey band, as Les recalled: “He was at the New York Military Academy and told me that he could get me a scholarship there. He called the bandmaster and said, ‘Hey, I got a kid here that can play clarinet.’” Les was granted a full scholarship because of Alexy’s recommendation, as well as Les’ ability and inclination to play the small, oddly tuned E-flat clarinet. He loved the instrument because “it was very light, so it’s great in parades. I used to joke with the tuba players who had these huge tubas around their necks, and here I am with my little E-flat clarinet.”

Though the academy was devoted to all things military, Les never lost sight of his reason for being there, and his reason for being in general – music. So at night he’d sneak out of the barracks to go to a nearby frat house where he could catch the sounds of the big bands on the radio. “We’d hear Paul Whiteman, and Mildred Bailey, who was with Whiteman then, and we’d listen to Coon Sanders,” he recalled fondly. “It was great.” Despite these evening escapades, however, Les was a superb student who was named class valedictorian, and offered a full scholarship to attend West Point. He didn’t take it. “By then I had enough of military school,” he said

### **Les Joins The Duke Blue Devils**

Hungry to get on the road with a good band, Les and The Rainbow Men left town for a concert tour of New England. It was at Revere Beach, outside of Boston, that members of the Duke University big band – the notorious Duke Blue Devils – caught Les’ act. Recognizing greatness in their midst, they immediately invited him to attend Duke in order to join the Blue Devils.

Though Les greatly preferred leading his own band, this was the Depression, and it was an offer too good to pass up: “They talked me into going to Duke because by going there and playing a concert every night at the student union, you got free room and board. And in 1932, believe me, free room and board was very good.” Tuition at Duke that year was only \$200 yet it was still a struggle, leading Les to pawn instruments. “That’s how bad the depression was. My dad managed to come up with the money most of the time, and when he couldn’t, I had to sell the bassoon.”

Les enrolled at Duke and performed with the Blue Devils for four years, taking over as leader in his junior year. They were such a hot band that Decca records gave them a record deal, unprecedented for a college band. It was the first of a great many records that Les Brown would record. Later ones, however, were more successful in terms of sales: “It was 1936, the first year I ever recorded anything. Sales were not too hot – there were twelve guys in the band, and we found out that twelve parents bought the record.”

After he graduated, Les took the band on the road for an extended tour, despite the fact that many of the members had yet to finish their studies. When their parents implored them, after more than a year on the road, to return to school, the group disbanded. Les headed to New York in the band car, a second-hand '32 Ford, with no regrets. "I was happy to be done with the Blue devils, because it was what we called a 'cooperative band,' which meant that the leader does all the work and all the guys share in the money. So I was happy to break it up. I started my own band in New York, so if there were any profits – and there weren't any for about three years – I'd get them."

The final performance of Les and the Blue Devils, as fate would have it, was in 1936 at Budd Lake, New Jersey, the hometown of Georgia Claire DeWolfe. Two years later, in September of 1938, Claire and Les became husband and wife, and they made their home in Manhattan. In 1940, a son – Les, Jr. – was born

### **Les' First Break**

To support himself at first in New York, Les took jobs arranging for the bands of Isham Jones, Larry Clinton and others. But he was keen to lead his own band again, and with the help of two "angels," a new Les Brown band was soon born.

The first angel was Eli Oberstein of Victor Records, who enlisted Les to form a band to play at the Hotel Edison on Broadway. As there were more than enough good musicians in New York at the time looking for work, Les had no problem constructing a powerhouse ensemble. "We were there for four months with a wire, an NBC wire," he said, referring to the live radio link that enabled bands of the time to play simultaneously for the audience in the ballroom with them, and for the radio audience around country. It was invaluable exposure, and it led to the first of many record deals, this one arranged by the agent Joe Glaser, Les' second "angel." "Joe Glaser got us on Bluebird records, a subsidiary of Victor," Les said. "It was known as the '35 cents label.' Same one Glenn Miller was on. He did a little better than we did at the time, but later on we caught up."

At the time, Les had a couple of different vocalists fronting the band, including Miriam Shaw. but it was in 1940 that Les would hear a singer that he felt was the perfect vocalist for his band, the one that would put them over the top. Her name was Doris Day.

"A song-plugger told me that there was a great singer I had to hear who came into town with the Bob Crosby band named Doris Day," Les remembered. "They found out that she had given her notice. I went and saw the show, went backstage and hired her. I thought she was great. She was a natural." And Les wasn't the only one who thought that she was great. "The public loved her," he said. "wherever she went and whatever she sang, the public liked. It was a turnaround for us that really helped. The band started cooking, you might say."

But, as often happens, romance got in the way. Doris was in love with her high school sweetheart from Cincinnati, Al Jordan, who was now the trombone player with the Jimmy Dorsey band. He encouraged her to return to Cincinnati to settle down, which she did, leaving the band.

Not one to be easily derailed, Les replaced Doris with the singer Betty Bonney, and got back to work. It was then he had his first big hit, a novelty tune written by his arranger

Ben Homer and the deejay Alan Courtney. Based on Joe Dimaggio's amazing 56 game hitting streak that had the entire nation talking that summer of '41, it was called "Joltin' Joe Dimaggio," and it became an enormously popular hit for the band. "It was just a simple ditty," said Les, "but that was the charm of it. And having that hit helped the band a lot. But we still weren't in the black, so to speak."

Joe Glaser continued to get good bookings for the band, always making sure that they had a live radio wire. They spent an entire summer in Armonk, New York, broadcasting live seven times a week. They went straight from that gig to the venerable Black Hawk restaurant in Chicago for a one month job that was extended for four months due to the enormous demand. "That's when we finally started making money," Les said. "But then the war came."

### **The War Years - A Sentimental Journey**

In rapid succession came the news of Pearl Harbor and the birth of Les and Claire's second child, a daughter, Denise. And as happy as Les was about his expanding family, he was distressed by his diminishing band, as members left to fight in the war. Les' brother Warren, who played trombone in the band, left to join the Navy, and their first trumpet player joined him. Many of the others were drafted. It wasn't easy, but Les continued to find new musicians to replace them, and he kept the band alive.

In 1943, Doris Day had divorced her husband, and Les persuaded her to return to the band by paying her extra so that she could bring her son on the road with her, as well as her mother to care for him." They played all over New York and the East Coast, at the Paramount, The Capitol, The Strand, The Chicago Theater, and other venues.

In 1944 Les got a call from Ben Homer, who said he had a tune he was working on that Les should hear. They got together, and Les listened to the melody. "I liked it right away," he recalled. "It was simple, but it had promise." Les changed the rhythm of the verse slightly to make it more singable, added a bridge section, and within a half hour the tune was complete. He got it to his publisher, Edwin "Buddy" Morris, who allowed three lyricists to have a crack at it before he got a lyric he approved of. The accepted lyric, written by Bud Green, (who wrote "Flatfoot Floosie With The Floy Floy") was based on the title of a book that Buddy Morris had been reading, *Sentimental Journey*.

"Buddy was reading a travel book written by an Englishman," Les said, "and it was called Sentimental Journey, about this guy going all over Europe. He mentioned the inns he was staying in. Buddy liked the title of the book and suggested it for the song, and Bud Green wrote a nice lyric. He even had to make up a word to rhyme with 'journey:' 'Never though my heart would be so *yearny*...'"

Les wasn't able to record the song for two years, however, due to a recording ban imposed during the war. It was completely a twist of fate that linked up this song with the end of the war. As soon as the recording ban was lifted, Les and the band recorded 'Sentimental Journey' with a great vocal by Doris Day, and it became the perfect theme song for all of the young men returning home from the war. It became the record that shot the band to the top. The Number One song in the country for some sixteen weeks, 'Sentimental Journey,' stayed on the Hit Parade for months, and has since become an undeniable standard in the lexicon of the American popular song.

It was the hit Les had been waiting for, and now that he had it, he was ready for more. The song not only made the band famous, it made Doris Day a star, and life for everyone got better. "Having the Number One song for all those months certainly helped us. It helped business, it helped our reputation, we got to do more recordings. And sell more records. It put us over the top."

### **How The Band of Renown Got Its Name**

By this time the band was now known as "Les Brown and the Band of Renown." The name was born on the spot one night when the band was about to perform live on the radio from the Palladium. "We were about to go on the air in Washington and the announcer was ad-libbing because our trombone player, Sy Zentner, wasn't in his place.

And our theme song at the time featured the trombone, so we couldn't go on the air, and we were sweating. So we finally found Sy and put him on, but in the meantime the announcer was saying things like, 'from the nation's capitol, where we have cherry blossoms...' He was ad-libbing like mad and sweating too. I finally gave him the okay and he said, 'Here's that band of renown, Les Brown' and we latched onto that."

Soon Hollywood came calling for Doris Day, and she left the band to star in movies. Les was also attracted to Hollywood, but for a different reason – the allure of the Hollywood Palladium. "It then was the hottest place around," he recalled. "After the war, in the ballroom there, it was like New Year's Eve every night with all the servicemen in town."

To get to the West Coast, Les and the band would travel piecemeal, in tiny DC-3s, two at a time, until the whole band reached California. New York was their home base until 1945, at which time Les decided to permanently move the band to Los Angeles. "I told the guys that I was taking six months off, but if they wanted come out, they had a job. It turned out only to be three months because I didn't know I had a contract to go into the Palladium three months later. They insisted on it. So rather than have a lawsuit, I got a band together." Five of the original band members made the move, but the others had their roots in the New York area and decided to stay. Les put together a new band in California, a band that has remained, with few changes, to this day, still performing some 50 years later.

### **Les Joins Bob Hope**

It was at the Hollywood Palladium in the Spring of 1947 that Les got a note sent to him backstage that said that Bob Hope's agent, James Saphier, wanted to buy him a drink. "We got to talking," Les said. "At that time, Desi Arnaz was Hope's bandleader. I asked if he was happy with Desi Arnaz, and he said, 'he doesn't even know how to read music.' I said, 'yeah, I knew that, that's why I asked.' He said, 'we're changing.' I said, 'well, I'd like to put my hat into the ring.' He said, 'no, you can do much better on the road.' I said, 'I want to stop traveling. My children are school age and I want to settle down as much as I can.'"

The Les Brown Band joined up with Bob Hope in September of 1947. Les and Hope didn't meet until their first show together, and their collaboration continues to this day. At first they spent most of the year in town, doing the radio show and later the TV show, and spent the summers on the road. "It was a great break for us. It kept the band's name

in front of the public, through radio and television, and then we had a little hit in 1948 with 'Love To Keep Me Warm.'

### **Les Gets "Pitched" By Irving Berlin**

Les had the distinction of having a song pitched directly to him from the legendary Irving Berlin. Berlin was Hope's special guest on the show one night, and when the songwriter came out on stage, Les played 'Love To Keep Me Warm' – one of Berlin's newest songs – to usher him out. Rather than walk over to Hope, Berlin instead walked straight to Les, shook his hand, saying, 'what a great rendition of that song!' Hope, never to miss a comic opportunity, said, 'excuse me, Irving, but I'm the star here!' He totally disregarded Bob," Les said. "It was hilarious. Once a song-plugger, always a song-plugger."

It was a ploy that worked, however, as Les later had a huge hit with his recording of the song. When an executive of his record company at the time, Columbia, heard Les and the band playing the song on a Hope broadcast a few months later, he called Les and told him to get into the studio immediately to record the song. Les informed the exec that they already had the song in the can, and he'd find it if he'd look into the archives. Les was right, of course; the recording was found, and it became one of the band's biggest hits.

Bob Hope brought Doris Day back into the fold, and with Les, their combined star power was staggering. It was 1949, and Hope had the Number One movie, *Pale Face*, Les had the Number One instrumental with 'Love To Keep Me Warm,' and Doris Day had the Number One vocal tune with 'It's Magic.' They went on a national concert tour that broke sales records wherever it landed.

At the onset of the Korean War in 1950, they switched the tour to the military bases that Hope was famous for visiting. The first trip, to a bitter cold Korea, lasted 35 days and was the first of eighteen Christmas tours that Les and Hope would share.

"They were the greatest audiences in the world," Les recalled. "To hear anything from back home, for them, was great. You didn't have to be good, you just had to be there. The tours were very tiring, but also very exhilarating. And interesting."

The only drawback was leaving his family, something Les never liked doing, but which was worse at Christmas. But he made up for it by being able to stay in town working for much of the rest of the year by playing on many different TV shows.

He got his own local show in Los Angeles called "Bandstand Review" as well as doing the Hope shows, doing the Steve Allen show for two years, and performing on the variety show, 'The Hollywood Palace.' And in 1961, he started what became eight years of performing on 'The Dean Martin Show.' "I was working all the time," he said. "I was young and dumb. And I had fun.

### **Putting The Grammys On Television**

When his friends, the songwriters Sonny Burke and Paul Weston, told him about the Recording Academy they had founded (which became NARAS, the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences), Les became involved. Not only was he elected President of the LA Chapter, he also enabled the Academy to televise a Grammy Awards program for the first time.

Told by NBC that the show could only be accepted if they were able to land one of three stars, Hope, Sinatra, or Crosby. Everyone but Les felt that they were defeated. "I knew they could only say no," Les said. He invited all three stars, all three accepted, and the Grammys was brought to TV for the first time. "Then we used to take the winners and made a show out of it. Later they started opening envelopes and making it like the Oscars."

Since the sixties, Les Brown and His Band of Renown have never stopped performing, appearing on TV as well as private parties, fund raisers and corporate events, and accompanying Bob Hope on his concerts and all of his television specials. They have continued making records, including *Les Brown and His Band of Renown Live at the University of Wisconsin*, *Whitewater* on the Koss Classics label, and Les' last studio recording, *Session 55* (his 55<sup>th</sup> studio project), featuring guest vocalists Jane Monheit and Lou Rawls.

Asked about the secret of their longevity, Les joked, "I guess I'm just too dumb to give it up!" In April of 1996, a few days after we interviewed him for this story, the *Guinness Book of World Records* awarded Les with the distinction of being the leader of the longest lasting musical organization in the history of pop music.

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