

Martha Tilton, 91, Strong Voice of the Swing Era

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Martha Tilton, who died Friday at 91, was a band singer who worked for two years with Benny Goodman at the height of his fame and at his groundbreaking Carnegie Hall concert of 1938. Tilton, who appeared on radio — where she was announced as "The Liltin' Miss Tilton" — also had a brief but important career as a solo vocalist in the early postwar years.

As the singer Mel Tormé later wrote: "Tilton was as fresh as a breath mint. She had a girl-next-door quality that college boys responded to. But she was more than a pretty face. She could sing and sing well."

Tilton grew up in Hollywood. While still a student at Fairfax High, she joined a singing group that was heard on the radio, where she attracted the attention of a talent agent. Soon she had a stint at the famous Coconut Grove. She sang for one engagement with Jimmy Dorsey's band and also in a nightclub scene, uncredited, in the 1937 classic comedy "Topper."

Later that same year, Tilton was part of a vocal group on the "Camel Caravan" radio program alongside Goodman and his orchestra. Goodman was on the lookout for new talent because his longtime "girl singer," Helen Ward, had recently left the band over what today might be labeled "creative differences." Goodman walked out in the middle of Tilton's audition, leaving her in tears, but she got the job anyway.

Tilton sang for Goodman for roughly two years between 1937 and 1939, and appeared on about 45 records with the group. Like Ward before her, Tilton had the sound that Goodman demanded from a singer: not fancy or extravagant, but simple, straight ahead, and tuneful. She used her light, flexible voice in a subtly swinging approach and developed a talent for making a song sound good singing it right on the beat (for the benefit of dancers), making it swing without changing the melody.

On January 16, 1938, Tilton participated in a watershed event in American music: Goodman's legendary Carnegie Hall concert, which proved a vital step in jazz taking its place beside European classic music. Tilton sang two of her best-remembered tunes with Goodman, both adaptations of material from ethnic sources: arranger Claude Thornhill's jazz version of the traditional Scottish song "Loch Lomond" and the Yiddish adaptation, "Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen."

Tilton later said a "lot of what I recorded with Benny were lousy songs," but she recorded a handful of all-time swing classics with the band. The most popular of all Tilton-Goodman sides was "And the Angels Sing," which had begun as a traditional Jewish "Frahlich" that was transformed by trumpeter Ziggy Elman into a swing number, and from there into a hit love song by lyricist Johnny Mercer. "We spent so much time on that one song," Tilton later told an interviewer, "I said to [trumpeter] Harry James, 'I don't think that song is going to amount to anything.' He never let me forget that I was no good at picking hits!"

Few singers lasted longer than two years with Goodman, even though his chain of succession in the vocal department included four of the absolute greatest in Ward, Tilton, Helen Forrest, and Peggy Lee. Tilton's departure, she later said, came because she was worn down by the band's relentless touring. Tilton freelanced between 1939 and 1942, recording with bandleaders Bob Crosby and Artie Shaw. Most famously, she supplied the singing voice for movie star Barbara Stanwyck — whom, coincidentally, she closely resembled — in the Howard Hawks classic comedy "Ball of Fire," singing "Drum Boogie" with the band of another Goodman vet, drummer Gene Krupa. She also sang on screen (but uncredited) in the Fred Astaire vehicle "You'll Never Get Rich" and played the lead in a 1944 B-musical called "Swing Hostess."

In 1942, Tilton was signed by Mercer as the first artist on his Capitol Records; her first recording was Mercer's own "Moon Dreams," with music by Glenn Miller's pianist, Chummy MacGregor, that was later immortalized by Miles Davis. She recorded 43 masters for Capitol going up to 1949, nine of which were chart hits. The most successful was the lovely, World War II-themed song of separation, "I'll Walk Alone."

During the war, Tilton entertained GIs both at home and overseas. On the radio, she co-starred with bandleader Paul Whiteman and comic Milton Berle. In 1948, she was a regular on crooner Jack Smith's popular show, but the year before that, she served as female singer on the most popular of all musical radio shows, "Your Hit Parade," the "American Idol" of its day.

After 1950, she continued to broadcast and record intermittently, although she hosted a show on local Los Angeles TV. She also occasionally reunited with Goodman over the next 30 years, including the film "The Benny Goodman Story" (1955) and a 40th-anniversary re-creation of the classic Carnegie Hall concert in 1978. She performed for the last time in the mid-1990s and enjoyed the remaining 10 years or so of her life with her five grandchildren. Thankfully, nearly all of her classic work — both with and after Benny Goodman — was reissued and available on CD well in time for the lady herself to rediscover it.

Martha Tilton

Born November 14, 1915, in Corpus Christi, Texas; died December 9 at her home in Los Angeles; married three times, last to Jim Brooks, a World War II ace and later a test pilot; survived by two of her three children and five grandchildren.

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