

An Unlikely 'Prince of Pop'

Mitch Miller '32E, who died in July at the age of 99, helped shape the sound of American popular music.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

AN ACCLAIMED CLASSICAL OBOIST, A PIONEERING producer of popular music, a shrewd businessman, and the infectiously upbeat host of the early 1960s television show *Sing Along with Mitch*, Mitch Miller '32E "had so many facets that his soul must resemble one of his productions," the music critic Will Friedwald once wrote. "Only by multitracking could he superimpose all these identities on top of each other."

In a 1999 interview in the studios of Rochester's National Public Radio affiliate, WXXI, classical music host Julia Figueras asked Miller to comment on the striking breadth of his musical career. "Whatever I'm doing at the time, I love!" he responded, with a touch of incredulity.

At one time he was considered one of the finest oboists in the world, creating a sound the composer and critic Virgil Thomson called "round without being oily, warm and laughing and sensuous, fawnlike and wholly without acidity." And according to Eastman School dean Douglas Lowry, "his recordings of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *American in Paris* are still widely regarded as the best ever."

But as Miller told *Time* magazine in 1951, he grew tired of playing to "blank faces," and longed for a more visceral connection with his audience. A serendipitous move to Mercury Records convinced Miller to switch genres, as well as audiences.

In a few short years, the oboe virtuoso would become an icon in the popular music recording industry. When Eastman classmate Goddard Lieberman '35E, '74 (Honorary), then the executive vice president of Columbia Records and head of its classical division, hired Miller as head of arts and repertoire for the label in 1950, Miller "transformed himself into the prince of pop," according to Friedwald.

As the "A & R man," Miller selected the songs as well as the artists, often matching the two. But to a degree unheard of at that time, Miller crafted the sound that ul-

timately emerged from the studio. A pioneer of multitracking and the echo chamber effect, he was among the first to see the potential crossover of country and pop. Artists such as Rosemary Clooney and Tony Bennett, both of whom Miller signed, were initially skeptical, but later credited Miller with making their careers.

Miller was often maligned as the peddler of gimmickry—a claim he didn't deny, commenting once, "You've got to work out a gimmick that'll get people's attention and hold it." But one person's gimmick is another's innovation, and Miller's introduction of unorthodox instruments—an electrified harpsichord, French horns, and bagpipes, for example—earned him admiration over time.

Ultimately it was the television program *Sing Along with Mitch* that clinched his celebrity. Miller earned a spot for the show on NBC in 1961, after he had produced several bestselling *Sing Along with Mitch* albums, with a Columbia house orchestra he conducted and called Mitch Miller and the Gang. The show, which ran for three seasons, featured Miller leading a chorus of middle-aged men in familiar tunes such as *The Yellow Rose of Texas* and *Song for a Summer Night*, inviting the audience to sing along to the lyrics as they appeared at the bottom of the television screen.

As the news of Miller's death in July spread, columnists as well as visitors to online stories in the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, and elsewhere recounted the ways in which Miller's show had become an integral part of their family lives, uniting grandparents and grandkids in festive and unself-conscious singing. That was the case for a broader cross-section of America than its old fogey reputation would suggest. Sev-



eral observers recalled that Miller's show was among the first to include a black woman as a regular—solo singer Leslie Uggams. In 1995, the civil rights group Congress of Racial Equality honored Miller with a lifetime achievement award for promoting Uggams over the protests of many network executives and Southern stations.

Perhaps Miller was adept at melding artists into the American mainstream in part because he was an outsider himself. The son of Jewish immigrants and the man *Time* called "a jolly Shylock" specializing in "schmalted milk," Miller understood the American mainstream through listening, observing, and insight.

A life trustee of the University, Miller

▲ **SING ALONG:** Perhaps best known for the TV show *Sing Along with Mitch*, Miller was an influential music producer and business executive as well as a noted oboist.




was born in 1911 in a crowded immigrant neighborhood near present-day Upper Falls Boulevard. He was the third of what would eventually be the five children of Abraham, an ironworker, and Hinda Rosenblum Miller, a seamstress. The family would be an integral part of the community and the University for decades. Miller's brother, Leon, is a professor emeritus of biochemistry and biophysics at the Medical Center. And an Eastman building at 25 Gibbs Street was renamed the Miller Center, in honor of Miller's parents, in 2004.

As a student in Rochester city schools, Miller benefitted from the first public music education in the country, courtesy of George Eastman, who, before he established the Eastman School, had provided free musical instruments for city schoolchildren. Miller took up the oboe because it was the only instrument still available when he showed up late for the program.

His father taught him how to make his own reed, saving the family \$2.

Only once in his career did Miller appear to miss the beat. A lover of many forms of music, Miller hated rock, and he either didn't see, or actively resisted, its increasing hold on public taste. By 1964, he had been eased out of his role at Columbia and NBC had cancelled his show.

In his later years, Miller returned to classical music as a guest conductor. But the irony remained, as Friedwald said on a recent radio tribute to Miller, that "what Mitch had done as a producer was essentially to create the precedent for rock 'n' roll production. All the techniques that Mitch used were used by Berry Gordy, by Quincy Jones, by Phil Spector," he said, referring to three "superstar producers" in rock music.

As Tony Bennett said, "He was the one who showed everybody how to be a producer." 

In the News

STACEY PLUMMER '94 WINS NATIONAL MATHEMATICS TEACHING AWARD

Stacey Plummer '94, a math teacher at Hollis Brookline High School in Hollis, N.H., has received a Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching. Only two teachers from each state, as well as the District of Columbia and the U.S. territories, are selected for the award each year. Winners are determined by a panel of distinguished mathematicians, scientists, and educators. Plummer, who has been at Hollis Brookline for 11 years, teaches calculus, geometry, and consumer math.

SIMON SCHOOL ALUMNI HONORED FOR RESEARCH

Patricia DeChow '93S (PhD), **Richard Sloan '92S** (PhD), and **Amy Hutton '86S** (MBA), '92S (PhD) have received the American Accounting Association's first Distinguished Contribution to Accounting Literature Award for their influential paper, "Causes and Consequences of Earnings Manipulation: An Analysis of Firms Subject to Enforcement Actions by the S.E.C.," published in the journal *Contemporary Accounting Research*. DeChow is the Donald H. and Ruth F. Seiler Professor of Public Accounting and Sloan is the L. H. Penney Professor of Accounting, both at the University of California at Berkeley. Hutton is a professor of accounting at Boston College.

ISAAC COLLINS '94 NAMED WIDENER UNIVERSITY'S HEAD FOOTBALL COACH

Isaac Collins '94 is the new head football coach at Widener University in Chester, Pa. Previously the defensive coordinator at the Citadel in Charleston, S.C., he's also served on the coaching staffs at the University of Delaware, Lehigh, Hobart, Columbia, and the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. As a running back for the Yellowjackets, Collins was conference offensive player of the year in 1992. After graduation, he completed coaching internships with the New York Giants and the Philadelphia Eagles as part of the National Football League's Minority Fellowship Program. As Widener's head coach, he's one of only five minority head football coaches in the NCAA's Division III.