



Smithsonian

National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the Kenneth H. Sparnon Collection

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NMAH Staff

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Archives Center, National Museum of American History

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	Kenneth H. Sparnon Collection
Date:	1912-1961
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0064
Creator:	National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of Community Life (Collector) Sparnon, Kenneth H., 1895-1972 (Collector)
Source:	Sparnon, Arabella S. (Donor)
Extent:	0.5 Cubic feet (3 boxes)
Language:	English .
Summary:	Kenneth Sparnon, entertainer, musician and arranger was also an orchestra leader and musical director of radio station WSYR in Syracuse and WHEC in Rochester, New York. This collection includes scrapbooks of newspaper clippings, photographs of himself and other performers, advertising, programs, some correspondence, and broadcast transcriptions (acetate).

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Collection donated by Arabella S. Sparnon, February 18, 1981.

Provenance

Collection transferred to the Archives Center from the Division of Community Life (now Division of Cultural and Community Life) July 26, 1983.

Processing Information

Collection processed by NMAH Staff

Preferred Citation

Kenneth H. Sparnon Collection, 1912-1961, Archives Center, National Museum of American History. Gift of Arabella S. Sparnon.

Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

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Biographical / Historical

Kenneth H. Sparnon was born December 8, 1895 in Chatham, New Jersey. He was the son of the Reverend Robert O. Sparnon, pastor of the West Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church in Rochester, New York from 1913 to 1916.

Sparnon grew up in Rochester. He studied harmony and theory at the New York Conservatory of Music and he studied piano and organ under James W. Bleecker, founder of the New York Settlement School of Music.

At the age of 14 Sparnon gave a piano recital in Carnegie Hall. In 1912 he was a piano instructor in Bayonne, New Jersey and continued to teach piano when he worked in Dover, New Jersey. He also was the organist at the Rochester Emanuel Church in this year. His first professional engagement was as church organist in Orange, N.J. About 1913-1914, he directed the West High School Orchestra in Rochester and was leader of the boy's glee club.

At seventeen, Sparnon was the youngest orchestra leader on the Loew's vaudeville circuit, conducting the pit band in Loew's Palace in Brooklyn. In 1918 he started work at the Baker Theater in Dover, N.J. and remained in Dover until late in 1929. The Baker Theater showed movies, vaudeville, and legitimate stage plays. After December 1924 Sparnon conducted the New Baker Theater Orchestra. Sparnon played at all performances of vaudeville and movies calling his performances "Picture Play Concerts" or "Orchestral Photo Play Concerts." He played between the acts when legitimate plays were performed.

Before the "talkies" Sparnon specialized in synchronizing music to the silent pictures, newsreels, novelties, and features. Sparnon played overtures when talking pictures appeared in 1928.

During the summer of 1924 Sparnon was pianist on the Keith vaudeville circuit. He also directed the Metropolitan Concert Trio at the Estonia-Minot House, a resort hotel in Asbury Park where he played programs in the mornings for the guests.

In 1924 Sparnon helped to form and was director of a 45 piece band in Dover, New Jersey. The band played at charity concerts, parades and other occasions. It played on Sunday afternoons in the park, at Memorial Day parades, New Year's Eve, and for the hospital fund-raising. It played as Sparnon's Concert Band into 1929. While in Dover, Sparnon also directed music for the Elks' Memorial Services for several years and played for other events including the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club, and at the 1929 local rally celebrating a Republican victory. In 1929, Sparnon played at the Saturday night dances held in the Bergen Building.

In 1926, Sparnon joined Radio Station WJZ in New York where he conducted the "Master Musician's Hour" for several years.

In 1930, Sparnon went to RKO Keith's in Syracuse where he led a group of 12 men for three years. They were known as "Ken Sparnon and his merry gang of RKOLians". As of that year, he had a library of 5,000 pieces of music which he had gathered because of his synchronization of motion pictures. Also, as of May 11, 1930, Sparnon was an associate member of the National Academy of Music.

In Syracuse, Sparnon had a reputation for playing overtures with humor and novelty which were appropriate to the movie or the season. He did the unusual and the unexpected. One article described Sparnon's work as follows:

When Griffith made "Birth of a Nation", more than a tinkly, second-rate piano was needed to accompany it. So the theater orchestra was started. After that time, musical backgrounds (cueing) became essential for each film. Then came talkies which doomed the lavish orchestras. Some of the musicians went to work at the studios. Sparnon changed and when he went to Syracuse he gave the public what was almost an extra vaudeville act. His experience in synchronization was valuable for the vaudeville acts. His music also helped in the transition to the movie setting pace and mood.

In Syracuse, Sparnon played on Radio Station WSYR with the RKOLians from Keith's. On May 25, 1930, he also became Master of Ceremonies on Monday nights and Wednesday nights for the "Little Theater of the Air". Sparnon continued in radio for many years. When he started he went on radio to get wider exposure so

that the people would then come to see him in person. Perhaps because of his experience with the movies, he was famous for timing out every show in the plotted period.

In Sept. 20, 1931, Sparnon said that "...there will always be music in the theater... the public will always want to see artists in the flesh." This remark alluded to movie theaters with vaudeville shows.

Sparnon married his harpist, Arabella Simiele, in July 1935. He was one of the first radio orchestra directors to feature the harp with all types of music from classical to jazz.

In September 1932 Sparnon became director of the RKO Palace Theater Orchestra in Rochester. In June 1933, he accompanied Arthur Tracy, "the Street Singer," on tour. On June 8, 1933 Sparnon was made musical director of Radio Station WSYR in Syracuse.

He also conducted the "Ken Sparnon String Orchestra" which was carried on the NBC Blue Network coast-to-coast. He had the string ensemble in Syracuse from 1934-1937. He also played dinner music from Schraff's Restaurant in Syracuse three times a week which was carried over the NBC network.

Sparnon became program director of Rochester Radio Station, WSAY in 1937. Sparnon was made the musical director of Radio Station WHEC in Rochester on February 23. Between 1937 and 1941 Sparnon played the "Twin Keyboards" with Matt Pierce over WHEC. Between 1937 and at least 1944 Ken Sparnon and his string orchestra played over WHEC. From 1938 to Oct. 3, 1946 Sparnon was with Radio Station WHEC. Among his programs, he conducted the Gold and Silver Orchestra on Sunday nights at 6:45 p.m. for people celebrating their anniversary. On July 7, 1939, while he was still at WHEC (which was a CBS affiliate), Sparnon opened at the Hotel Seneca Grill in Rochester. In August 1940, Sparnon directed and produced "This is My Land", a new series from Rochester on CBS. During World War II, Sparnon produced shows for service personnel.

While he was in Rochester, Sparnon was a member and on the board of directors of the Rochester Musician's Association, Local 66, American Federation of Musicians.

On October 3, 1946 Sparnon joined the station relations staff of Broadcast Music, Inc. to provide special service to musical directors and managers of BMI-licensed stations. BMI set up a model radio station library. Sparnon was placed in charge of the course on the organization and maintenance of such libraries at the participants' radio stations.

In 1959, Mr. and Mrs. Sparnon moved to Roanoke, Virginia where he was Eastern Regional Director of Station Relations for BMI.

In May 1965 Sparnon retired from BMI and he and his wife moved to Sarasota, Florida. He died on June 16, 1972 after a 10 month illness.

Scope and Contents

The Sparnon collection consists of four scrapbooks, some loose news clippings, a music cue sheet for a movie, a script for the orchestra to follow in a "strike" comedy routine used in September 1931, a folder of programs for events at which Sparnon played, and articles written by Sparnon concerning his work.

The scrapbooks contain advertisements of movies at which Sparnon played, radio schedules and announcements, and newspaper write-ups of Sparnon. The movie and play reviews, while he was in both Dover, N.J. and in Syracuse, cover both silent films and the early talkies. The vaudeville announcements include personalities such as Kate Smith, Burns and Allen, and Edgar Bergen and his friend, Charlie.

The four scrapbooks within themselves are not in chronological order. However the first one, 1912-1930 is arranged in four sections: news clippings, announcements, school recitals and programs, and letters of reference and appreciation.

The Sparnon Collection is of value to those interested in: the early film years, the synchronization of music with film, musical programs on radio, and the biography of Kenneth H. Sparnon.

Arrangement

Arranged topically.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Musical arrangers
- Musicians
- Radio -- 1910-1970
- Theater -- 1910-1970
- Vaudeville

Types of Materials:

- Clippings -- 20th century
- Photographs -- 19th century
- Scrapbooks -- 20th century

Names:

- Sparron, Arabella S.

Places:

- Rochester (N.Y.)
- Syracuse (N.Y.)

Container Listing

Box 1, Folder 1	Articles by and about Sparnon and work sheets
Box 1, Folder 2	Correspondence, 1929, 1936
Box 1, Folder 3	Miscellaneous, undated Language: English.
Box 1, Folder 4	Press Clippings, 1931-1961
Box 1, Folder 5	Programs, 1924 to 1941
Box 1, Folder 6	Radio, 1932, 1936, 1940, 1941, 1943, 1946, 1955, 1960, 1961
Box 2, Folder 1	Scrapbooks, 1912-1931
Box 2, Folder 2	Scrapbooks, 1930-1943 (bulk 1930-1932)
Box 2, Folder 3	Scrapbooks, 1929-1940
Box 2, Folder 4	Scrapbooks, 1938-1946
Box 3, Folder 1	Helen and Agnes Harrington (with autograph), 1930
Box 3, Folder 2	Bob Hope (with autograph), 1931
Box 3, Folder 3	Lena Merkel (with autograph), undated
Box 3, Folder 4	Rae Samuels (with autograph), 1931
Box 3, Folder 5	Ken Sparnon Orchestra, undated
Box 3, Folder 6	Stage Stars, 1930, undated Notes: Includes: Kate Smith, Little Jack Little (1930), and unidentified group.
Box 3, Folder 7	Stage Stars, 1931, undated Notes: Includes: Nick Stewart; [Arthur Tracy]; [Geroge Arthur]; Olsen and Johnson; Sue Carol; Beth and Betty Dodge (1931).