



### **Brother Vincent Lopez: Anatomy of a Band Leader**

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A few men are born with exceptional talent, but that is not sufficient to guarantee financial success and public acclaim. Those must be earned by adding great dedication, business acumen, and vision to plan for marketing talent. Only a mere handful are equipped to accomplish that successfully. One such rare individual was orchestra leader, Vincent Lopez. Unfortunately, he was cursed with a self-destructive tendency to thwart financial success, by fueling an extravagant lifestyle with a lack of personal discipline in the management of his affairs. He compensated for those deficiencies with a remarkable resiliency which enabled him to rise from the ashes of failure to achieve even greater goals than before. He was a brilliant survivor and a lifelong Freemason worthy of note.

Within the context of popular music, Lopez was a cutting-edge pioneer. His sterling musical performances, coupled with a blend of tasteful arrangement and big band instrumentation, marks him as one of a select handful of innovators who created the road map for the Big Band Era. Musical history has virtually forgotten that genre. However, Lopez and his peers crafted a musical renaissance in America's fine hotels which blunted the agony of the Great Depression, if only for an evening.

The purveyors of those magical musical interludes were the hotel-style and society orchestras who formed the vanguard of the Big Band Era. The vehicle for their pioneering efforts was an orchestra of ten or more well-groomed musicians who performed in a pleasing dance tempo. The music was an integral part of any social gathering which offered food and entertainment. The orchestra was obligated to satisfy the standards set forth by the hotel or club management who hired the musicians, and it existed only at the pleasure of the patrons. If not, the band had a brief life expectancy.

Probably, the most historically-important orchestras to make their debut during the time, frame of World War I, or immediately thereafter, were Paul Whiteman, Art Hickman, Meyer Davis, Paul Specht, and Vincent Lopez. A common thread ran through His histories of those bands, by virtue of the pioneering efforts of their leaders. With some variations, those leaders created the parameters for modern dance music, which established the rules for syncopation, rhythm,

arrangement, musical styling, and instrumentation. One indispensable element of their music was discipline, both in performance and personal deportment. This narrative focuses on the career of Vincent Lopez, the Portuguese American maestro who became a household name in the decade of the 1920s by virtue of two words-"Lopez speaking."

Lopez became an example of the quintessential orchestra leader by the mid-1920s, eclipsed only slightly by the reputation of the immortal Paul Whiteman, the "King of Jazz." Like Whiteman, Lopez' emergence as a musical icon required many years of preparation and experience, which began in early childhood.

Vincent's father was Antonio Lopez, a native of Portugal, with a reputation as a distinguished musician and mentor. Antonio immigrated to New York City as a young adult and became established in Brooklyn as a successful piano teacher. He met the Baroness Gonsalvo, a native of Lisbon, at a dinner hosted by the Portuguese ambassador in New York City. The result was a courtship and eventual marriage between the 47-year-old musical mentor and the titled lady, known to her family as Virginia.

The first child born to Antonio and Virginia was christened Vincent. His date of birth has been disputed on occa-

sion. In some records the birth date was reported to be December 20, 1895, and three years later in others. The 1898 date may have been the result of a publicity release intended to shave three years from Vincent's age, a practice widely employed in the entertainment industry. The youngster grew up in a household dominated by a dictatorial father and religious zealot. Antonio nurtured a consuming ambition that young Vincent must become a Roman Catholic priest.

When Vincent displayed an aptitude for music at a tender age, his father introduced him to the mandolin and guitar. The youngster soon exhibited a preference for the piano, and Antonio transferred his son's training to that instrument. By the time the boy was six years of age, he was compelled to devote at least six hours daily to instrumental practice and mastering the skills of harmony, composition, and arrangement. Antonio's cold, dictatorial personality tolerated no respite from piano practice, unless it was to attend the altar-boy duties to which Vincent was assigned at the parish church. Living in a world limited to music and the church, Vincent fully expected to enter the Catholic clergy. His younger sister Marie was exempt from the rigorous discipline required of her older brother. As a girl, she was expected to become a wife and mother. Antonio never realized that Vincent was playing ragtime tunes on the piano by the time he was eleven years old. He was frequently away from home on business, and a portion of that time was spent badgering the local bishop to waive the age limit for enrollment in a monastery and to admit Vincent. Antonio's persistence finally paid off. Vincent was only 12 years of age when he became a confrater at St. Mary's Monastery in Dunkirk, New York, four years below the normal age for enrollment. His youth excluded the boy from many of the leisure activities of the older student body. Thus, to occupy himself, Vincent played ragtime piano. Almost immediately, he became, the entertainment star of the monastery. He soon concluded that he was not destined for the priesthood but rather, for the world of musical entertainment. He abandoned the monastery after three years, with the blessings of the officials at St. Mary's. Antonio never forgave his son for thwarting his parental goal.

Determined that Vincent would become established in some respectable vocation, he enrolled the 16-year-old youngster in a local business school to learn bookkeeping and stenographic skills. Vincent graduated in a year and began working for a Brooklyn milk company in a job arranged by his father. The salary was \$8 a week. Unknown to the elder Lopez, Vincent was playing the

piano in the predominately Irish honkytonks abounding in Brooklyn. The gigs paid \$2 a night. Before he reached his eighteenth birthday, he quit the milk company for a fulltime job at Clayton's, a singing-waiter saloon and restaurant. His duties included playing piano and conducting patron sing-alongs. Clayton paid him \$28 a week, plus 25 per cent of the waiters' tips. Lopez moved out of his father's house and never returned. He had taken the first step on a musical career which would lead to over whelming success. Before he could enjoy the fruits of national fame and fortune, he was obliged to serve an apprenticeship in the rough-and-tumble world of saloon life in Brooklyn's teeming melting pot. Clayton's was the first in a succession of piano-playing saloon jobs, before Vincent was sufficiently established to begin working in Broadway's more refined watering holes.

During the years of 1915-1916, Vincent became acquainted with many aspiring young musicians and theatrical personalities who frequented the saloons where he played. That long list included Jimmy Durante, W. C. Fields, Mae West, Sophie Tucker, and Fanny Brice. Most of them knew him as the "Piano Kid," a sobriquet he carried to Broadway. During those same years, Lopez devoted a great deal of attention to his romantic life. He settled on a young Irish girl named Phyllis O'Connor, and proposed marriage. Unfortunately, she died suddenly from pneumonia before they could assume the marital vows.

Lopez found a new romantic interest in Mae Kenney, another Irish girl he soon married. She bore him a daughter they christened Kay, but the marriage quickly deteriorated. Mae, an ardent Roman Catholic, disapproved of Lopez's musical activity and the fact that he was away from home so much. However, they lived together until Vincent landed his first Broadway musical employment at the Pekin, an upscale saloon-restaurant. He was hired as pianist for Ed Frischelli, leader of the house orchestra at the Pekin.

The new pianist was an instant success. His deft piano style was both pleasing and impeccable, and his technical musical skills were obvious immediately. Lopez's instrumental mastery was supplemented by an impressive ability to manage administrative details related to a musical organization. His early business education and experience had equipped Lopez to be an able administrator when he chose to devote attention to that role. His father had trained him well, and experience in the outside world provided the poise and personality to be a successful public performer. The only impediment to great financial success rested in his personality quirks. Within a few months, he was leading the band.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Lopez was well established. as the house orchestra leader at the Pekin. His job performance had improved the quality of the music there, and his reputation on Broadway was well established. Nevertheless, he rushed to volunteer for military duty. Short and stocky, the young Portuguese American had a tendency toward obesity. His physical examination disqualified him from service. The doctor diagnosed his problem as lithemia (gout), a chronic disorder. Vincent had a voracious appetite and habitually consumed enormous meals. The absence of a responsible diet regimen seriously compounded his health problems. Back on Broadway, Lopez continued to advance his musical career. He and Mae had separated permanently but would never divorce because of her religious convictions. Nevertheless, Lopez pursued an active and lavish social life, which created continuous financial problems. He was enamored with chorus girls and the theatrical personalities who frequented the Broadway night spots. Among the eclectic clientele at Bustanoby's, where Vincent worked frequently, were George Raft and Rudolph Valentino. The attraction for the two struggling "dance instructors" was the free bar lunch.

Lopez struggled to keep the chairs of the Pekin house orchestra manned with competent musicians, as thousands of young men were taken into military service in 1917. He was compelled to hire female musicians to fill the vacancies. Lopez also devoted time to demonstrating musical compositions for Broadway music publishers, to augment his own income during the war. One of his brief stints was to demonstrate show tunes for Earl Carroll's investment prospects. The song-demonstration activity was secondary to his primary job, leading the house orchestra at the Pekin.

Musical entertainment for America was dramatically uprooted by the adoption of the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Prohibition became the law of the land on January 16, 1920. The sale of alcohol was prohibited, and the law spelled the end of every establishment dependent upon such business-the Pekin included. The day of the bootlegger had arrived in America. As 1920 dawned, Vincent Lopez was out of a job. Immediately, he formed a Dixieland combo and went to work for Perry's at Coney Island, while he prospected for something more lucrative. Constant personal indebtedness, and financial obligation to his estranged wife and daughter, made it imperative he generate adequate, income. Fortunately, Lopez's reputation as a fine pianist and leader earned a break in a new theatrical production.

When playwright Edgar Allen Wolfe began casting his new stage show, "Rings of Smoke," he required a musical group. Lopez landed the job. He called his small ensemble "The Kings of Harmony." They traveled the entire eastern seaboard with the production company, following a very successful run on Broadway. Lopez and his band were,

featured stars of the "Rings of Smoke" company, and their popularity generated musical offers from virtually every eastern city. By the end of 1920, Vincent Lopez was a highly successful band leader in New York and was destined for even greater accomplishments.

The publicity Lopez enjoyed from "Rings of Smoke" provided an offer to supply the music for the Sigmund Romberg-Max Wilner stage production, "Lovebirds," during the winter of 1920-1921. By spring, Lopez enlarged his band and accepted a summer engagement at the plush Ross Fenton Farms resort at Asbury Park, New Jersey, a popular vacation area. The engagement proved to be another musical success for the personable little pianist. One highlight of the stay was meeting and making friends with Vincent Youmans, a budding music composer destined for international fame. However, a friendship with Raymond Schindler, which began during his stint with "Lovebirds," provided the break Lopez needed to put him over the top.

Schindler's recommendation was sufficient to earn Vincent Lopez and his "Kings of Harmony" a long engagement at the Hotel Statler's Pennsylvania Grill. In the fall of 1921, a salary of \$850 a week was a handsome stipend for a seven-piece band. The sound was an instant hit. Realizing that his fortunes depended on improving his small band to fit the public image of the opulent Hotel Statler, Vincent hired arranger J. B. Lampe to create a new arrangement book for a larger orchestra. The band was expanded to include a full reed and brass section, playing in a refined and reserved style which showcased the facile Lopez piano beautifully. The age of the formal arrangement, with instrumental sections orchestrated to perform in perfect harmony, had arrived. Impeccable rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and strict musical discipline, were demanded now to become a successful society-hotel orchestra.

By the end of the year, Vincent called his band, "The Hotel Pennsylvania Orchestra." The popularity of the Pennsylvania Grill in society circles increased the reputation of the Hotel Statler substantially. The credit went to Vincent Lopez, and it earned a powerful personal friend with deep pockets in E. M. Statler. On November 27, 1921, Vincent reached another milestone in his

burgeoning career when he made a pioneer radio broadcast.

In Newark at WJZ, one of the earliest radio stations, they had a last-minute cancellation of a scheduled program. An immediate solution was to broadcast the music of a popular orchestra. Vincent Lopez was selected, and he accepted with enthusiasm. Surprised when instructed to greet his radio audience to begin the program, the maestro opened with those memorable words, "Lopez speaking." It became his permanent radio greeting and America's most enduring musical introduction. Inasmuch as there was no rigid schedule, the Pennsylvania Hotel Orchestra continued to broadcast music for an hour and thirty minutes. Lopez's radio debut was so successful that the station installed a permanent broadcast wire into the Pennsylvania Grill. Before long, Lopez virtually equaled the great Paul Whiteman in popularity.

Vincent was besieged with theater and ballroom offers. He was approached by the Edison Phonograph Company and was delighted to sign his first recording contract. One of his most precious mementos became the letter of congratulations he received from Thomas A. Edison, the famous inventor who employed him.

The band's recording contract was soon transferred to the Okeh Recording Company, when it presented a superior marketing opportunity for Lopez records. Within a couple of years, their popularity was sufficient to see Vincent Lopez music distributed by several other new and successful recording companies. Among those featuring Lopez records over the next two decades were Brunswick, Regal, Perfect, Conqueror, Melotone, Oriole, Pathe, Domino, and Bluebird. The sale of records became a major factor in advancing the fame and public adulation of Lopez music. Thanks to the lenient contractual arrangement with E. M. Statler, Vincent was enabled to take advantage of many new business opportunities. He became bold and impulsive in his business decisions. One of his new and expensive gambles was to underwrite the purchase of stage costumes, portable scenery, and to hire the performers to produce a stage show centered about the famous steamboat race between the Natchez and the Robert E. Lee. When everything was ready for debut, Lopez persuaded Eddie Darling of the Keith Circuit to book the production into New York's famous Palace Theater. They opened on August 7, 1922.

The steamboat race reenactment was a dramatic success for Vincent Lopez. The "barnburner" musical climax was the band's rendition of the famous song, "The Natchez and the Robert E. Lee." The show was widely acclaimed, and Lopez enjoyed an eleven-week run at the Palace. The company went on a vaudeville tour for the rest of the summer, extending the success for many months. By that point in his career, Lopez was so overwhelmed with engagement offers that he had begun to sign other orchestras to perform under his management, advertised as "Lopez Presents." At the peak of his popularity in the early 1920's, Vincent had 51 bands working under his banner. One of the those Vincent tried to recruit as a satellite band was the Guy Lombardo Orchestra. He heard them perform while the Lopez band was on tour in Cleveland, Ohio. Although struggling to become established, Lombardo declined to become part of the Lopez organization. As time passed, the Royal Canadians did pretty well on their own.

By the end of 1922, the competition between Paul Whiteman and Vincent Lopez reached a climax. They both had large satellite organizations, which collectively numbered about 100 bands. Both were firmly entrenched in the finest venues in New York City. The competition was keen, and for Lopez very personal. As time passed, both became determined to reap the benefit of a highly-publicized jazz concert at some prominent New York auditorium. Whiteman won that race. On November 4, 1924, Whiteman assembled an enormous orchestra for a concert he termed "An Experiment In Modern Music," introducing George Gershwin's composition, "Rhapsody In

Blue." Whiteman performed in New York's venerable Aeolian Hall to a packed house. It was a tremendous musical triumph.

Chagrined but undaunted, Lopez countered with his own concert at the Metropolitan Opera House on November 24, 1924. His 56-piece orchestra featured a W. C. Handy composition titled "The 'Evolution of the Blues,'" as his musical centerpiece. That occasion also marked the debut of the brilliant harmonica star, Borah Minneville. Vincent found him working at a sales job for the Wurlitzer Company. The concert was a great musical triumph for Lopez, one which elevated his reputation to international status.

In spite of overwhelming success in his musical ventures, Lopez was in dire financial straits by 1924. While his income increased dramatically after 1920, it only served to fuel his extravagant life style. Vincent longed to be accepted as a member of high society and spared no expense to accomplish his goal. His social calendar also overflowed with female companionship from the theatrical community. Lopez wined and dined beautiful show girls continuously, further complicating his financial dilemma. He was so desperate for financial relief that he concluded his only escape was to schedule a tour to England for the Vincent Lopez Orchestra. He boarded a ship secretly to evade creditors, bound for an opening at London's Kit Kat Club on May 11, 1925. The band's grand opening in London was a rousing success, followed by a triumphal appearance at the city's Capitol Cinema Theater and an enthusiastic reception of their musical steamboat production at the Apollo theater. The "Natchez and Robert E. Lee" steamboat production continued to be a crowd-pleaser.

Vincent and the musical company returned to the states on August 2, 1925. Fully expecting an onslaught of irate creditors, he was delighted to learn that his ancillary business income had wiped out his indebtedness while the band was in England. The overwhelming expense of Lopez' usual jet set life style had been missing while he was away. That relief made it possible to satisfy his outstanding obligations. Unfortunately, the financial situation reverted to normal as soon as Vincent returned to New York.

Among the personnel additions to the Lopez band was violinist Xavier Cugat. He had joined soon after the Aeolian Hall concert. His duties included serving as relief conductor when Vincent was not on the bandstand. Cugat also became a popular attraction at the Statler with his cartoons of patrons.

Many other future bandleaders who gained national renown during the Big Band Era became members of the Vincent Lopez Orchestra over the years. Virtually every future bandleader who achieved spectacular success before World War II worked for Vincent Lopez, Paul Whiteman, or Paul Specht. Working for one of those pioneer maestros provided an indispensable apprenticeship, enhancing the value of their individual musical talent. Among that long list who worked for Lopez were Glenn Miller, Red Nichols, Artie Shaw, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, Charlie Butterfield, Rudy Vallee, Arthur Schutt, Buddy Morrow, Charlie Spivak, and the Hutton sisters, Betty and Marion. An even greater number of jazz and swing immortals played with Paul Whiteman, including the immortal Bix Beiderbecke. It was impossible to become a nationally-famous orchestra leader with nothing except musical talent. Success also required discipline, business acumen, and training with an established band.

Although Lopez returned to his normal location at the Statler Hotel upon his return from London, he immediately focused on his next project, building his own high-visibility nightclub in Manhattan. In order to obtain sufficient finances to launch the venture, Lopez took on a partner. He was a wealthy, albeit predatory, financial entrepreneur named Gene Geiger. Lopez

incorporated all his enterprises and began construction on a lavish building at 247 West 54th Street and Broadway. The structure included twin penthouses, one each for both Lopez and Geiger. No expense was spared to make "Casa Lopez" the most elegant bistro in Manhattan. It was a long way from the sawdust-floor saloons in which Vincent toiled a decade earlier. Casa Lopez opened on October 15, 1925, with all the pomp and circumstance Lopez and Geiger could muster-and it was spectacular. The opening-night audience was loaded with celebrities and society friends of the gregarious maestro. Singer Gene Austin sang "My Blue Heaven" for the first time, as one of the features. George Raft, dressed as an Arab sheik, accompanied by two gorgeous blonde "attendants," performed an elaborate charade, during which he criticized the food and demanded his attendants taste everything. There was continuous dancing, with Xavier Cugat directing a relief orchestra when the regular Lopez band was at intermission. The opening had all the bells and whistles imaginable. It was a glittering event, even for New York. Lopez left the Statler's Pennsylvania Grill forever, after playing New Year's Eve in 1926. He had benefited tremendously from the lenient relationship enjoyed with the indulgent E. M. Statler, but it was essential he devote full time to Casa Lopez. Statler released Lopez from his contract. The future seemed bright and promising, but disaster lurked in the near future. The Casa Lopez became a financial quagmire within a matter of weeks after opening. With an impossible operating expense burden, and Lopez' irresponsible personal spending habits, the business foundered. Upon advice from his financial advisor, Lopez was forced to declare corporate bankruptcy, although his personal assets remained intact. The Casa Lopez had not yet celebrated its first anniversary when it was destroyed completely by a fire which broke out in the afternoon. It was underinsured, making a similar replacement impossible. The solution for Lopez' dilemma was to seek new financing. Again, Gene Geiger filled that role, and construction began on a replacement Casa Lopez. It was a generic project, far less opulent than the original. Operating expense was rigidly controlled, with Geiger dominating the business. Salaries were slashed, and most high-salaried side men left the band, including the Dorsey brothers and Cugat. The opening of the new Casa Lopez on October 13, 1927, at 50th Street and Broadway, was far less spectacular than the original celebration a year earlier. The band, comprised of new personnel, lacked Lopez' traditional polish. After opening night, the new Casa Lopez was a dismal failure. The little maestro searched desperately for a solution to jump-start his latest venture. His next inspiration proved to be a foolish mistake in judgment. In an attempt to generate publicity for the new Casa Lopez, Vincent enlisted the help of dancer Simone Roseray to stage a suicide attempt. She admitted later that the reason she pretended to drown herself was to make it appear that Lopez had rejected her as a lover. New York columnists Walter Winchell and Mark Hellinger learned of the charade and exposed it in their news columns. After the expose, they refused to mention Lopez' name in their news columns or during their radio shows. It was a humiliating experience for Vincent. Vincent's problems were compounded during this period by strained relations with his partner, Gene Geiger, who controlled all business decisions. The end of the ill-fated Casa Lopez project was at hand. On March 18, 1928, after a stormy disagreement with Geiger, the Casa Lopez closed permanently. Vincent was penniless and mired in debt. Once again, one of Lopez' good friends came to his rescue. Joe Ribauld, well known as a band manager and talent agent, recommended Lopez to the ownership of the St. Regis Hotel in New York. The prestigious establishment was prospecting for an orchestra replacement, and Ribauld's passionate sales pitch persuaded them to offer Lopez a contract-with provisions. The hotel

required that Vincent organize a hotel-style orchestra featuring a saxophone section with three violins, a cello, an accordion, rhythm instruments, and a single trumpet. Lopez was well qualified to assemble the required personnel and create a book of arrangements to accommodate the new band. The end product was a lush, low pitched sound, featuring precise reed section-work, with an emphasis on dynamics. The musical style pleased the St. Regis management and was extremely popular with their affluent patrons. Within a short time, Lopez was permanently entrenched at the St. Regis, and would remain for seven years. Lopez' 1928 version of that early hotel-type orchestra would provide the standard blueprint for many American supper club groups during the Big Band Era.

Lopez was still financially involved with Gene Geiger, who was entitled to 50 percent of his income. The partners were still sponsoring a few satellite bands, and Lopez was obliged to make token appearances. One was playing at the Woodmansten Inn at Pelham, New York, an important venue. During 1928 Lopez began playing Latin arrangements and helped to popularize the imported rhythm in the New York area. He was credited for introducing "The Peanut Vendor," a song which became very popular, because of the extensive broadcast opportunities Lopez and his satellite bands enjoyed. However, he was anxious to disengage himself from business dealings with Geiger after he landed his new contract at the St. Regis. Lopez had found another friend with deep pockets to help him financially.

J. J. Atkinson was the general manager at the St. Regis, and he was fond of the new house band leader. Atkinson loaned Lopez \$50,000 to buyout Gene Geiger's partnership interest. He arranged a 10 year contract, which guaranteed Vincent Lopez a million dollars, paid out at the rate of \$100,000 annually for the band's services at the St. Regis. Lopez was obligated to payoff the \$50,000 loan with 25 per cent of his total earnings until the debt was discharged. The contract also contained generous provisions to tour and accept ancillary engagements, while serving at the St. Regis as the house orchestra. It was a sorely needed windfall at a critical point in Lopez' career. As 1928 ended, Vincent was financially stable once more and able to focus on his primary responsibility-music. The band broadcast regularly from the St. Regis and continued to enjoy national radio exposure. Always on the scout for new musical talent, Lopez brought Pinky Perlstein, a new male vocalist discovery, to the St. Regis. Without explanation, Atkinson ordered Lopez to get rid of him. Nobody knew if there was an anti Semitic motive. Pinky left the Regis and eventually became a radio' singing star, using the name of Jan Peerce. Nevertheless, Vincent's appraisal of his new singing talent was vindicated.

The stock market crash in October 1929 marked the beginning of the Great Depression in America and produced an economic panic. While business ventures everywhere were floundering, the aristocratic St. Regis Hotel remained unscathed. Vincent continued to enjoy great professional success, but his personal life was once again taking an erratic turn. He began to gamble excessively, an expensive indulgence. He also started to study numerology. That soon became an obsession, which segued into astrology. Lopez eventually consulted his horoscope to assist in all personal and business decisions, attending seances frequently to assist in planning the future. Concurrent with that activity, he continued to lavish money on his social adventures among the rich and famous. Self-discipline was a character trait Lopez never had enjoyed. In spite of his erratic private life, he prospered.

On January 27, 1930, Vincent Lopez and his orchestra debuted on a national radio program sponsored by the Pure Oil Corporation. It was a tremendous career enhancement, and his weekly show brought his music into every home with a radio for 26 weeks. The publicity from the Pure

Oil broadcasts made Lopez a nationally-famous orchestra leader and brought him many opportunities beyond the St. Regis, which he was able to accept. Among those highprofile gigs, was the selection of the Vincent Lopez Orchestra to play at the dedication of the Empire State Building on March 2, 1932. New York Governor Al Smith was the featured speaker from the Observation Roof, where the gala affair was broadcast over radio station WOR. Naturally, "Lopez speaking" was part of the program, along with "Nola," the maestro's renowned radio theme. Lopez accepted a month-long engagement at the swanky Urban Room in Chicago, with a replacement band substituting at the St. Regis. He opened at the Urban Room on October 1, 1932, and enjoyed a highly successful stay, in spite of heavy competition from some fine bands entrenched in the city. Lopez was back at the St. Regis' when Prohibition ended in December, and the sale of alcohol became legal on May 14, 1933. The St. Regis enjoyed an increase in business immediately. Vincent could have no way of knowing that the Great Depression would catch up with the St. Regis in the next 12 months, and his own fortunes would be caught in the disaster. In September 1933 Lopez returned to Chicago's Urban Room, but it was a different story that time. The engagement was a dismal failure. Heavy competition from other outstanding orchestras playing in Chicago denied Lopez a second triumph at the Urban Room. The orchestras of Hal Kemp, Wayne King, and Kay Kyser were all drawing huge crowds, draining off many usual Urban Room patrons. However, Lopez proved resilient when he opened at the Chez Paree, Chicago's famous theater restaurant, on October 6, 1933. He enjoyed a very successful month in the popular venue.

The Lopez band was back in the St. Regis by New Year's Eve in 1934 and enjoying their usual public approval. Vincent introduced a new performer with his band; the blind whistler, Fred Lowry, a popular addition to the company. However, the economic depression had finally caught up with the St. Regis, and they were in serious financial difficulty. The hotel closed forever, in bankruptcy, on July 4, 1934. Lopez and his generous benefactor, J. J. Atkinson, were unemployed. Lopez was obliged to begin touring with his band, because there was no alternative. A torturous cross-country tour to the West coast ended with disappointing results. Vincent opened at the elegant Gold Room of Beverly Hill's Wilshire Hotel in September 1934. They remained until November 4, ending a stay which produced indifferent success. The hotel opted to replace Lopez with the sensational new Orville Knapp Orchestra, a sign that the Portuguese pianist was paying the penalty for his extracurricular distractions outside of music. Lopez' music had become stale and somewhat outdated. By 1934 a score of highly-stylized bands were attracting national attention while Vincent consulted his horoscope.

Resorting again to touring, he took a southern route east, signing to play New Year's Eve 1935 at Miami's Club Deauville. The band bombed in Miami. The stars and numerical prognostication provided no solution for a situation which was now desperate. Lopez was virtually penniless, and the stars and numbers held no silver lining. He kept the band together until the end of March 1935 by playing at the Miami dog race tracks, a humbling experience for the great band leader. They headed north on April 1st, hoping that an unexpected engagement to play the opening of the Trianon Room at New York's Ambassador Hotel would signal a revival of their fortunes. However, the economic depression had not yet bottomed out, and business was dismal at the Ambassador. Lopez had a 14-piece orchestra on the stand, and regardless of their efforts, the result was disappointing.

The crowning disaster was a deserted Trianon on New Year's Eve 1936. The room was closed forever on May 2, 1936, and Lopez' contract was ended. One cannot fail to note the melancholy

significance of a song Lopez recorded on April 6, 1936, for Okeh Records. It seemed to set the tone for his dismal situation throughout 1935 and well into 1936. It was the melancholy song, "Gloomy Sunday," a widely-publicized Hungarian import, which was reported to have triggered a number of suicides. It was banned from radio as a result of the publicity. One of the most successful recordings of the song was that of Vincent Lopez, which was distributed by Conqueror, Melotone, Oriole, and Perfect, in addition to Okeh Records.

The autumn of 1936 brought a ray of sunshine to Vincent Lopez. He signed a contract to broadcast a national weekly radio show for the Nash Automobile Company. In addition, Lopez was engaged to open in the elegant Hotel Astor Grill Room at the same time. He had reorganized his orchestra, hired some brilliant, fresh talent, and changed his musical style to reflect the public approval of the new swing-era music. Prominent among his new recruits were trombonist-vocalist Buddy Morrow, trumpeter Charlie Spivak, and most important, Glenn Miller, arranger nonpareil. There was a new swingy lilt to Vincent's music, and his great piano performance was leading the charge. Miller was a gifted arranger with an intuitive sense of public taste, and the charts he arranged were precisely what the band needed.

Nash decided suddenly to take the radio show to the West coast and add singer Grace Moore to the cast. Nash instructed Vincent to take only two men along and recruit new musicians in California. Lopez tried to persuade Glenn Miller to make the trip, to no avail. Glenn had decided to begin organizing his own orchestra in New York. Lopez arrived in Los Angeles on April 28, 1937, and successfully completed a 26-week contract with a new band. By that time, Nash's major advertising campaign to renew their sagging fortunes had proven disappointing. They dropped the radio show.

Without a contract or a band, Vincent returned to New York and reassembled virtually the same organization he had released the year before. In order to settle into a musical groove again, he departed on a shakedown tour of the Midwest. Although Lopez presented a band with a good swinging format, which was pleasantly dance-oriented, he had lost ground to younger leaders with progressive musical ideas. Lopez was a man divided between music and his astrological obsession. However, on a brief stay at the Book-Cadillac Hotel in Detroit, Vincent discovered an energetic young girl singer whom he hired immediately. She was Betty Hutton. He also hired her sister Marion, who was not destined to remain long with Lopez. She soon went on to the Modernaires, and eventually, with Glenn Miller.

When Lopez appeared at the Gibson Hotel in Cincinnati in the summer of 1937, Betty Hutton was beginning to mature into a polished singer, and the patrons liked her style. She and Fred Lowry, the blind whistler, became popular features with the band. Lopez called her "America's No.1 jitterbug" because of her volatile, aggressive style. A romance blossomed briefly between the 43-year-old band leader and his 16-year-old singer. It was an unnatural and stormy relationship. When Betty approached bandleader Eddy Duchin, prospecting for a singing job, the relationship exploded in a shoving scene with Vincent on the dance floor at the Claridge Hotel in Memphis. Betty left the band in October 1938.

On the west coast in 1939, Lopez added stamp collecting to his nonmusical pursuits. He also had a brief career writing a news column for a San Francisco newspaper, in which he predicted future events with a numerology method he devised. In a burst of patriotic fervor, he wrote new lyrics for the "Star Spangled Banner." A little later he began dabbling in metaphysics. In February 1940, Lopez began to tour eastward, ending up in New York City. He opened in Billy Rose's Aquacade on May 11, 1940, at the New York World Fair. The Lopez band appeared for a time on

the NBC broadcast, as a feature of their "Show of the Week."

Overall, though, he was losing ground rapidly in the musical mainstream. When he opened with the band in the summer of 1941, at the new Hurricane Club on Broadway, the venture failed in a week. Lopez had not been paid and was penniless once more.

With a personal indebtedness exceeding \$30,000, Lopez was desperate. Determined to establish a permanent arrangement, he signed a contract with the Hotel Taft to play in their grill room.

Vincent was paid double the union wage for musicians, and his men earned the union hourly rate.

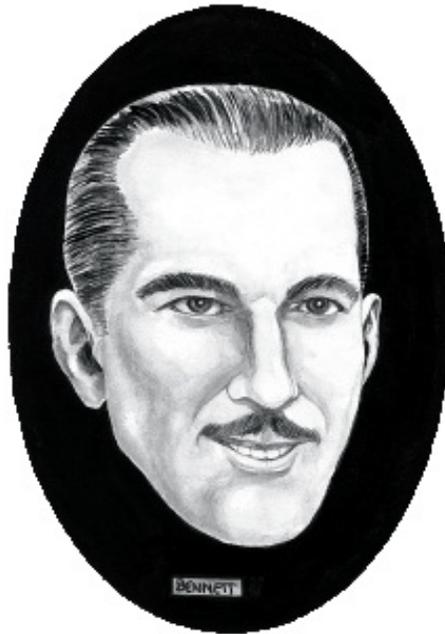
He opened on June 29, 1941, in the somewhat austere, tiled grill room, which was to be his musical home for seven years. It had one redeeming virtue. The Taft Grill opened at noon and closed at nine in the evening. Many fine studio musicians were available during those hours, and Lopez hired them consistently to staff his band, even though they had regular night commitments. The Taft Grill became a popular stopping place for military personnel, as the draft began to bring a great many young men into New York as transients. After Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7, 1941, business boomed at the Taft Grill.

Lopez was so successful at the Taft that he was able to survive a world-class boner related to his astrological predictions. In a column written for the American Astrological Magazine, released on December 6, 1941, he predicted that the United States and Japan would enter World War II as allies! Lopez was obliged to endure a great deal of ridicule. His long-estranged wife, Mae Kenney Lopez, died during the year, freeing the erratic pianist from further marital obligations. In retrospect, however, World War II proved to be a lifesaver for Vincent, inasmuch as it offered an opportunity to revive his musical fortunes.

Never in robust health, Lopez' physical situation deteriorated steadily during the war years, and he was obliged to limit his non-business activity. It became a stable financial period as a result. Vincent was compelled to curtail his lavish social life. The band continued to receive extensive radio coverage during the Taft Grill years, enjoying a permanent radio wire and 'widespread popularity beyond the confines of their normal venue.

Another of Vincent's profitable ventures turned out to be the song, "Bell Bottom Trousers," a musical hit of the war years. He collected substantial royalties during a period when "war" songs enjoyed great popularity. The Vincent Lopez Orchestra made numerous appearances at military installations during the war, playing for a generation of soldiers who had never enjoyed his music. The publicity paved the way for radio and television work coming in the genesis for the band leader who many in the musical community had written off as a relic of the past.

Lopez' health declined steadily after WWII, frequently confining him to bed in his own apartment. Among his physical complaints were chronic gout and vision irregularities. Realizing he must hire an assistant band leader to assure stability in his musical obligation at the Taft Grill, Lopez began prospecting for a qualified man. It turned out to be a lifelong New Yorker with a fine musical background. He was Johnny Messner, a successful New York band leader during the prewar years, just recently returned from military service.



Messner and his Music Box Band had been a fixture at the plush Marine Grill Room of the Hotel McAlpin for years. His elegant alto saxophone and clarinet performances qualified Johnny to fill the lead chair in any reed section. In addition, he was also an excellent singer with a fine formal musical education the perfect choice for Vincent Lopez.

The new assistant leader relieved Vincent of a great many responsibilities. He called and conducted rehearsals, became the band's featured vocalist and instrumental soloist, and served as leader when Lopez was absent. Most important, he provided the freedom necessary for Vincent to prospect for opportunities in the newest entertainment medium-television.

Lopez was convinced there were great opportunities in pioneer TV programming, similar to those in radio two decades earlier. His public image had been sustained during the war years by virtue of the radio audience who listened to the band's continuous broadcasting from the Taft Grill. The strains of Lopez' piano theme "Nola" continued to be a familiar musical radio identification well into the decade of the 1950s. It was as much a part of the Lopez persona as the cryptic greeting, "Lopez speaking." A number of recorded live broadcasts survive to confirm the quality of Vincent's tasty musical offerings. Regardless of ill health and his eclectic business responsibilities, Vincent Lopez still provided the musical image necessary for his band. His presence at the keyboard, playing a musical specialty like Zez Confrey's venerable "Kitten On the Keys," never failed to delight the patrons. His strong piano lead continued to anchor the arrangements, as always.

By the late 1940s, Vincent's health had declined to an alarming level. He needed a full-time nurse to monitor his medical needs and provide necessary home care. The obvious candidate was Betty Long, a registered nurse and longtime Bible student. Her resume included credits as a song composer and clothes designer, in addition to her qualifications as a nurse. Betty was the ideal medical attendant for Vincent. Almost immediately, she took over the management of the maestro's personal life, which included a generous dose of social discipline. Before long, they

were married. Lopez settled into a structured domestic routine for the first time in his life. Within a brief period, his health improved dramatically, and he began to enjoy a level of contentment he had never achieved in his adult life. Healthy and mentally rejuvenated, Lopez made many early television appearances over the DuMont TV network. He was also an honored guest on Ed Sullivan's nationwide show.

Before long, DuMont signed Lopez to a 15-minute daily TV program. He played the piano, chatted with show business guests, and interviewed audience visitors in an informal, personal style. The program grew into a national weekly television show, which included a guest list with more than 200 famous entertainment personalities. A Dinner Date With Vincent Lopez" enjoyed two and a half years of national popularity.

Johnny Messner departed at the end of 1958. Lopez disbanded his orchestra to devote time to a scaled-down musical agenda. He played a number of engagements in Las Vegas with a small band and was very successful. However, his chronic eye problem plagued him after World War II. By 1960 it became acute and required a series of surgical procedures. In spite of his vision difficulties, Vincent was able to continue his musical appearances on a limited scale and to participate in a number of ancillary business ventures. Secure financially for the first time in his life, he was contemplating retirement as the decade of the sixties ended.

Vincent and Betty retired to a quiet life in Florida, where the little Portuguese maestro lived out his life in tranquil contentment. As his health eroded, he was eventually compelled to live in a private nursing home. Lopez died quietly in a North Miami hospital on September 20, 1975. He was 85 years old. His demise occurred two years after his 50-year recognition from the Grand Lodge of New York, on August 21, 1973. His symbolic membership was in the venerable St. Cecile Lodge No. 568 in New York City, as was that of Paul Whiteman.

St. Cecile was founded after the Civil War as a daylight lodge catering to the working habits of the entertainment community. Its membership rolls over the years have reflected the names of countless distinguished musical and stage personalities. Among the most prominent names "on its rolls are those of Vincent Lopez and Paul Whiteman.

Lopez received his E.A. Degree on June 5, 1923, his F.C. Degree on August 7, and the M.M. Degree on August 21, 1923, Author William Ray Denslow lists Lopez as being a member of "Cabellerus de America Lodge" in Buenos Aires, Argentina. That lodge, no longer listed on the international register, may have been one simply listed as "America Lodge No. 32" on the current record. However, the archives of the Grand Lodge of New York are silent in regard to Vincent's membership in Argentina.

When Lopez died in 1975, he left a record of half a century devoted to memorable musical entertainment. Over those five decades, he carved a niche in the pantheon of popular musical giants which will endure for all time. He earned and squandered vast sums of money, but in the end, he managed to close his career in financial security. Nevertheless, his legacy as a founding father of the Big Band Era is unblemished. We, as Freemasons, are obliged to revere his memory as a faithful and distinguished member of the Craft. Vincent Lopez alone suffered the consequences for his personality flaws during his long life, and we are not privileged to pass judgment on any of his actions. It behooves us, as Freemasons, to wrap his faults and foibles in the mantle of Masonic charity. Our own frailties demand it. (THE END)

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