

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown people and events that have shaped our history.

Leo Baxter



Leo Baxter was an enduring constituent of the Wabash Valley music scene for more than half a century. In fact, a contemporary version of the Leo Baxter orchestra survives into the new millennium.

Born near Carbon in northern Clay County in 1893, Baxter lost his parents when he was an infant and was raised by William and Martha Baxter, an aunt and uncle, in Clinton. Uncle Bill died and “Aunt Doll,” as Leo called Martha, moved to Terre Haute in 1901. Leo received his first music lessons from a coal miner in Clinton and then traveled by interurban to take lessons from Sister Mary Aurelia at St. Benedict’s Church, where he eventually went to school. Following his

move to Terre Haute, Leo studied classical piano and pipe organ under Hermann Liebing, who had a studio at 1001 N. Ninth St., a few blocks from Baxter’s home at 1314 N. Eighth St. By the time he was a teen, Leo was playing piano at Lawrence Fuher’s restaurant at 106 S. Fourth St. and selling pianos at Cornelius S. York’s music store at 422 Wabash Ave.

While attending Wiley High School, Baxter played piano at the Savoy and on the *Reliance* and *Reliable* riverboats owned by the father of Vern Brown, one of the talented musicians who later joined the Baxter Band. After serving in World War I, Baxter formed a theater orchestra at the Varieties vaudeville house on the southwest corner of Eighth and Wabash. It was renamed the Liberty when silent cinema came into vogue. When Baxter’s band finished performing at the theater each night, it moved to the Tokio Dance Hall on South Eighth Street or to the Trianon Dance Hall on east Wabash and band members played deep into the night.

Among many notables who played with the band were Clinton’s versatile Danny Polo, Linton clarinetist Izzy Friedman, Brazil cornetist Johnnie “Scat” Davis, banjo expert Freddie Kintz, drummers George Beebe and Punk Wisely, trombonist Gene McCormick and trumpeter Bert Woodward. Baxter invited prodigy Claude Thornhill, a Garfield High School student, to make a guest appearance with the orchestra. Thornhill was so popular, he became a fixture with the band until he moved away from Terre Haute.

The need for theater pit bands waned with “talkies,” but Baxter and his orchestra remained in demand at vaudeville houses like the Hippodrome, dance halls and roadhouses. Leo also became WBOW program director, a day job he retained for 27 years. Until a few months before his death at age 83 on Aug. 17, 1976, he continued to be musically active. Several musicians associated with Baxter’s orchestra still perform for special events. Leo’s devoted wife Hazel Lavon died Feb. 4, 1988, at 94. The Baxters are buried at Roselawn Memorial Park.

TERRE HAUTE

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