

# Andy Kirk

Bandleader  
1898-1992

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by David Conrads

Andy Kirk was never a topnotch instrumentalist, composer, arranger or personality, yet he parlayed his musical talent, organizational skills, and a series of lucky breaks into an enormously successful career as a bandleader. Although his musical legacy is not as great as that of rival bandleaders Benny Moten and Count Basie, Andy Kirk's Clouds of Joy was one of the most popular big bands during the heyday of jazz in Kansas City and one of the first regional orchestras from the southwest to achieve national prominence.

Andrew Dewey Kirk was born in Kentucky and raised in Denver, where he played the tuba and bass saxophone with a local orchestra. In 1925 he moved to Dallas and joined the Dark Clouds of Joy. Kirk took over the band in 1929, which became known as the Clouds of Joy. After hearing the Clouds in Tulsa, bandleader George E. Lee recommended Kirk to the management of the Pla-Mor Ballroom in Kansas City. For Kirk, who had a knack for being at the right place at the right time, this proved to be a turning point in his career.

The band moved to Kansas City in 1929 and made its first recordings that same year. This was followed by successful engagements in New York City, which established the group as a national ballroom attraction. In 1936 the Clouds relocated to New York and recorded their biggest hit, "Until the Real Thing Comes Along," one of more than one hundred titles they recorded for Decca Records.

Much of the group's success was due to its appeal as a dance band, relying heavily on ballads, waltzes, and pop tunes. Over the years, Kirk counted many important players among his band members, including pianist Mary Lou Williams, violinist Claude Williams, and, briefly, saxophonist Charlie Parker.

Kirk dissolved his band in 1948. Afterward, he worked occasionally with pick-up bands, ran a hotel in New York, and served as an official in the Musician's Union.

Sources

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