

# Meet <sup>the</sup> Band

*our history*



## Blue Moon Big Band 1998

**A**fter more than three years of managing and playing in a Baltimore-based big band, trumpet player Rob Leonard decided it was time to step out and start his own swing orchestra. Rob wanted to do things a little differently from what he was accustomed to with his former group. He wanted to charge a lower fee to customers and audiences, so more people could enjoy the great music of the swing era; he wanted to compensate his band members more generously than what he was accustomed to receiving as a side man; and he wanted to search for, and acquire, musical arrangements that more closely resembled the originals, written during the great American swing era. He also wanted to have a band that didn't try to be all things to all people; rather, his band was going specialize in one thing -- big band music.

To Rob, the clear and sensible way to start a new band was to attract the finest musicians available. One element of the classic big bands that defined the swing era to Rob was a great, versatile, dynamic vocalist. Teresa Piermatteo, a Pennsylvania native, had been singing with the other group for about six months. In Rob's opinion, she wasn't getting the best charts or the spotlight she deserved, considering her talent. Teresa was the first official member of Rob's new band. The two then invited other musicians from their former band to join the new venture. Trumpet players Scott Stansfield and Randy VanEpps, and drummer Steve Conaway, quickly signed on. Rob also tried to pry saxophonist George Wright from the other band, but George's loyalty to the group kept him from joining Rob's band full-time.

The new band members convinced Rob that his band would soon boast 18 great musicians from the Baltimore, Washington DC, Virginia, and Pennsylvania area. The band's first rehearsal took place at a dance club in Annapolis, MD called Club Hollywood. Eight musicians showed up, including Craig Fager, who would go on to become the lead trombone player in the new band. Rob was concerned with the low turnout for rehearsal, especially since, in his confidence that his new orchestra would be a tremendous success, he had already booked the band's first job for June -- just two months away. Believing that the Annapolis site was not central enough geographically to attract the caliber of musicians he sought, Rob contracted with a small church in Ellicott City, MD for rehearsal space. The new location was closer to Baltimore, and easier to get to from Washington DC and Northern Virginia. One week later, at the second rehearsal, the band comprised a dozen members.

By now, traveled musicians such as Chris Poole, Andrew Mitroff, Frank Thibeault, and John Pritchett had joined the group, which was at this time still without a name. Additional musicians that Rob had performed with joined as well, including trombonist Todd Clontz, trumpet players Mark Kelly and John Wagner, and guitarist Jason Marsheck. Other players followed, including tenor saxophonist Geoff Stewart and trombonist Gretchen Hopper. In preparation for the first job, now less than two months away, the band read down more than 75 charts over the course of the next two rehearsals, discarding the arrangements they didn't like, and keeping the best of the bunch. By the end of April, the band's first client needed a contract for the June performance. Rob was asked what name was to appear on the billing. In a phone conversation, he thought quickly about a name, a logo, and a possible theme song. He also recalled his favorite bandleader, Glenn Miller, once saying, "A band should have a personality all its own." With this in mind, Rob concluded that his band should be associated with something special -- something that is so rare that it only happens once in a blue moon. And thus, with confidence, he told his client, "Our name is Blue Moon Big Band."

On May 1, 1998, Rob officially established the band, depositing \$500 into a checking account at a

local bank. With design help from childhood friend and artist Tommy D'Aquino, Rob created the Blue Moon Big Band logo -- a caricature moon playing a trumpet through moon beams. The band has never changed its logo.

Rob wanted to start the band out right, so he took out a second mortgage on his newly built home in Carroll County, MD, in order to buy sound equipment, music stands with the band's logo, and approximately 300 new music arrangements. Before the band took the stage for its first performance, Rob had sunk the extent of his personal savings into his new venture. The investment would eventually pay off.

The band was a tremendous success, and the performance schedule quickly filled with engagements. County fairs, dances, and in August, the band's first wedding reception. Musicians came and went during the first several months. Frank Thibeault left the group due to the demanding schedule of outside performances, which opened the door for tenor saxophonist Brendan Carniaux to join the group. Shortly afterwards, a seasoned pianist from Virginia named Dave Witherspoon joined, and Geoff Stewart left the sax section due to an overly demanding work schedule. Jason Marsheck was forced to leave the group as well, due to health concerns. Shannon Loy stepped in to fill the newly vacated tenor sax chair and Craig Brackins, a Tennessee native who grew up on bluegrass music, joined as the new guitarist. At about the same time, bassist Kevin Taylor joined the band. By the Fall of 1998, Blue Moon Big Band had earned a small following in the greater Baltimore area. Rob's next goal was to break into the Washington DC swing market, where several talented bands had been performing for years.

At an October 30 masquerade ball at the historic Spanish Ballroom at Glen Echo, just outside of Washington DC, Blue Moon played to a packed house. Several hundred dancers had to be turned away, as word of this new Baltimore-based swing orchestra had spread. Even today, many of the band members recall the Glen Echo performance, where the Blue Moon dance was ranked as the area's #1 Lindy event for the week, to be the most exciting and energizing performance the band has ever had.

The final key step that Rob felt the band needed to complete before the end of the year was a recording, to show that the group planned to make its mark in the Mid-Atlantic region quickly. And so, after just three sessions at the Sound Works recording studio in nearby Hanover, PA, Blue Moon Big Band completed its first CD, a 16-song collection of standards, ballads, and classic swing tunes. The project was completed on November 1, exactly 6 months to the day of the band's official inception. Phil Piermatteo, father of the band's vocalist, purchased the first Blue Moon Big Band CD ever sold. Following the CD release, vocalist Teresa Piermatteo was contracted for the first of several studio recordings for radio jingles in the Maryland and Pennsylvania areas.

With the release of the "*Things Ain't What They Used to Be*" CD, Blue Moon followed with three live television performances, including an appearance on the now defunct "Rodricks for Breakfast" Christmas special, filmed at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Jazz legends Ethel Ennis and Cyrus Chestnut shared the stage with the band, and Cyrus even sat in with the band on "*The Way You Look Tonight*." After a handful of additional dances and wedding receptions in Baltimore, Northern Virginia, and Central Maryland, Blue Moon Big Band finished out the year with nearly a dozen performances under its belt, and was rolling toward 1999 on a very good note.

In 1998, the band adopted "*Blue Moon*" as its closing song at performances.

