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Linden Records: Seattle's "lost" post-war music company

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The larger-than-life personal saga of Seattle businessman, Adolph Frederik Linden (1889–1969), has long overshadowed the publicly known history of one of his numerous enterprises: the Pacific Northwest's most-prolific early music production company, Linden Records.

The son of a Swedish immigrant preacher, Linden grew up in Seattle, became a successful businessman and prominent collector of rare books, played a role in advancing commercial radio in the Northwest, and co-developed Seattle's swanky Camlin Hotel. But most notably, Linden also gained notoriety as a bank president -- one who was eventually convicted of financial embezzlement and who served a sentence at Walla Walla Penitentiary. It was there that he got the first kernel of an idea for a new post-incarceration business venture: the Linden Record Corporation.

The Banking Biz

When the Linden family first settled in Seattle at the turn of the century, the Reverend Frederik Linden served a congregation at the Swedish Baptist Church (820 Pine Street). By high school age, the pastor's son, Adolph, was embarking on a series of challenging jobs: laboring at a lumber camp, clerking at a grocery shop in the Colman Building (811 1st Avenue), and by 1906, working as a manager for the Swedish American Bank

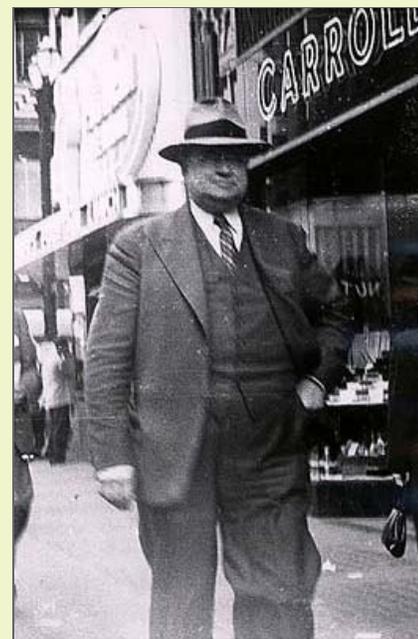
1910 saw Linden working at the Puget Sound Savings & Loan Association, and marrying the bank president's daughter, Esther Elizabeth Anderson. Then after Aaron Frederick Anderson died, Linden moved up from Vice President to take over his father-in-law's position in 1924. This swift advancing in the banking industry soon made him a wealthy man, and that same year Linden bought a notable mansion, "Cherry Acres," at the northern tip of Lake Washington (NE corner of today's Bothell Way NE and NE Ballinger Way in Lake Forest Park).

In 1925 he and a fellow executive at Puget Sound Savings & Loan, Edmund Campbell, formed the Camlin Investment Company, launched with a massive \$865,988 bank loan that financed the construction of what was to become one of the finest hotels in Seattle. The Camlin Hotel (1619 9th Avenue) opened to great media fanfare on October 31, 1926 and was the pride of its owners.

Yet, behind the scenes, trouble brewed: Amazingly, back in September, a sharp-eyed board member at the Puget Sound Savings



Adolph Linden, 1929
Courtesy Mary Linden Sepulveda



Adolph Linden, 3rd and Pike, Seattle, 1940s
Courtesy Mary Linden Sepulveda

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& Loan had noticed a disquieting pattern of significant withdrawals dating back to 1924 and apparently authorized by Linden and Campbell that included the Camlin advance, nearly \$200,000 lost by the duo's failed oil-field investments, and a \$27,850 loan to Seattle's premier radio station, KJR.

Northwest Radio Service

As 1926 passed into 1927, Linden founded the Northwest Radio Service, which bought up KJR as a local anchor for an envisioned nation-wide radio chain, and Linden invested a lot of money to upgrade the station's facilities and programming. Linden's lavish ways earned him the nickname "Daddy" Linden (in direct reference to the popular, deep-pocketed comic character, Daddy Warbucks), and he lived up to the moniker by turning KJR into a staff-heavy, all-live operation that featured in-house announcers, singers, a string quartet, a dance band, and a symphony orchestra.

KJR's listenership skyrocketed and all may have seemed well on the surface, but it was later discovered that between 1927 and 1928, Linden had taken an additional \$50,000 from Puget Sound Savings & Loan to keep the station rolling -- and by mid-1929 his American Broadcasting Company (ABC) had grown to include Portland's KEX, Spokane's KGA, San Francisco's KYA, and a half-dozen others from here to Chicago -- not to mention a handful more along the East Coast that ABC was eyeing for inclusion.

American Broadcasting Company

In 1929 Linden's ABC also promoted a popular series of outdoor summer concerts "under the stars" on the University of Washington campus. Meanwhile, secretive negotiations with a Washington state savings and loans supervisor began between the Puget Sound Savings & Loan Association and the two execs (who long maintained their innocence, pointing out that each withdrawal had, in fact, been logged into official bank records). At the bank's insistence, a binding agreement was finally signed that called for restitution for about \$1,500,000 -- including turning over the ownership of "Cherry Acres" and other valuable properties, including the Camlin Hotel.

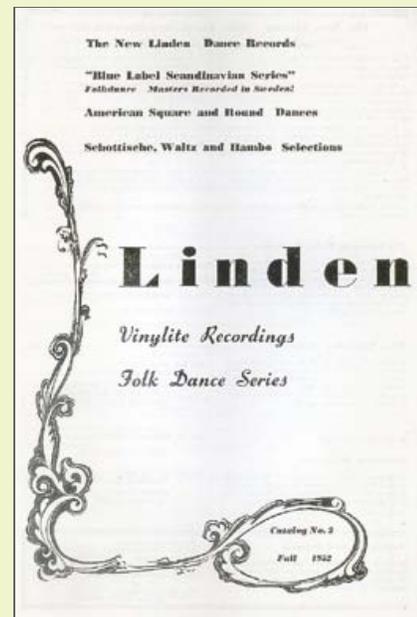
Finally, in March 1928, Linden submitted his resignation to Puget Sound Savings & Loan. Somehow though, Campbell was allowed to take over the Presidency -- a board decision that would later cause even *more* troubles for the bank. Meanwhile, in August 1929, Puget Sound Savings & Loan crashed into bankruptcy and struggled until finally closing down on February 7, 1931.

Facing the Music

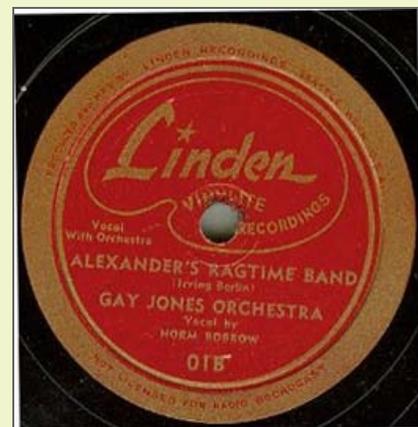
Then on February 17, 1931, Linden was arrested while in New York City. He was taken back to Seattle, where one periodical noted, using an interesting metaphor, that before long he would "face the music" (*Argus*). But before Linden's music-related career would begin, he first faced a future that involved a grand jury investigation



Jim Linden with radio talent, KOL radio studios, 1940s
 Courtesy Mary Linden Sepulveda



Linden Folk Dance Series record catalog, 1952
 Courtesy Mary Linden Sepulveda



Linden Records (No. 1), Gay Jones Orchestra, ca. 1946
 Courtesy Peter Blecha

of Puget Sound Savings & Loan's tangled financial affairs, three court trials -- the first two ended with hung juries -- a conviction on grand larceny charges, and a sentencing on March 11, 1932, where he received 5 to 15 years.

On March 28, 1933, Linden entered the Walla Walla State Penitentiary. There he made the most of his time. By getting assigned the unique job of recording the parole pleas of his fellow inmates onto flimsy "instant discs" made of fragile acetate material (this was in the days before magnetic recording tape existed), he discovered an interest in the recording process that would ultimately lead to his next career.

Western Recording Studios

Linden was paroled on March 19, 1938, and upon his return to Seattle, he told *The Seattle Times* that he intended to get back into business. He soon identified an opportunity: entering the emerging custom recording field by cutting discs for vanity projects for local wannabe singers, songwriters, and poets who wished to have their performances documented on disc.

Members of the Linden family believe it was as early as 1939 that he launched his new recording service from an office located just off the lobby of the Hotel Earl (between 3rd and 4th avenues). Linden also occasionally hauled his disc recorder over to Seattle's Veterans Hospital and Tacoma's Fort Lewis, where he provided a service to wounded soldiers who could record spoken messages on discs that were then mailed off to their families. In addition, he also set up his gear at area department stores where parents would pay to have a disc made of their children talking to Santa Claus. Then, by 1943, Linden founded his Western Recording Studios which was based for about a decade in a storefront at 2417 2nd Avenue.

Linden Record Corporation

The end of World War II in 1945 brought the return of many troops who'd been away serving in the military. The good times were back, reunited couples went out dancing, and the talent roster of many bands began to fill out with returning musicians. It was after serving four years that Seattle's former big jazz impresario, Norm Bobrow, came home and was soon heard over the Queen Anne Hill-based KRSC station doing a 15-minute weekly news-commentary radio show, and seen back on the nightclub scene reconnecting with old pals including the popular pianist/band-leader Gay Jones.

By early 1946 Bobrow met up with Linden and they agreed to make a record together. By that time Linden's son Jimmy (1914–1972) was working as an audio engineer over at the KOL radio studios in the basement of the Northern Life Towers (1220 3rd Avenue) and a session was booked there. The result became Linden Record Company's commercial debut -- and perhaps the first locally recorded, locally issued, popular jazz record: a 78 rpm single featuring two Irving Berlin songs "The Dark Town Strutter's Ball" and "Alexander's Ragtime Band," as performed by Jones' Orchestra



Linden Records (No. 139), Mercedeses, ca. 1952
Courtesy Peter Blecha



A typical red vinyl Linden disc (No. 163), ca. 1953
Courtesy Peter Blecha



Former site of Linden Records Broadway and Pike, Seattle, n.d.
Courtesy Mary Linden Sepulveda

with vocals by Bobrow.

But it was another historically significant early Seattle record -- Ray Charles's 1949 debut disc "Confession Blues" -- that holds out a possible connection to the Linden family tale. What little is known about the circumstances surrounding that record is this: Charles and his trio (who were hosts of a weekly KRSC radio show where they advertised their upcoming nightclub gigs) were discovered in town by a traveling Los Angeles-based music exec. A deal was struck and, according to Charles's autobiography, they proceeded to "a little recording studio in Seattle." It is the exact name of that studio that has remained a puzzle all these years -- but it seems quite likely, given the paucity of studios existing at the time, that Charles's session took place at KOL with Jimmy Linden participating.

What is known for certain is that around that time a local timber heiress, Dorothy Bullitt, launched her KING radio station, and then acquired the pioneering KSRC-TV station, converting it to KING-TV. Meanwhile Linden -- perhaps inspired by Ray Charles's meteoric career arc (from obscure nightclub performer, to radio show host, to recording neophyte, to national touring star) -- saw an opportunity and ended up signing a few other local radio and TV talents to deals.

Linden's Talent Roster

In the fall of 1949, KING-TV began scouting for local talents and discovered UW student and "Scandihoovian" humorist/accordionist, Stan Boreson, who had cut tunes like "Yon Yonson's Wedding" for Linden at the KOL studios the previous year. Now Boreson was partnered with a young pianist/band-leader named Art Barduhn and KING-TV was so impressed by their zany antics and musicality that the station proposed a half-hour TV show to be called *College Capers*. Instantly popular, the show attracted a willing sponsor -- the Clipper Gas Co. -- and was quickly revamped as *Clipper Capers*.

Linden created a special *Clipper Capers Stars* sub-series that featured such provincial delights as the "Red Headed Swede." Sales were great -- one published account mentioned that they "sold many thousands of copies" -- and it was clear that the label's strategy of signing and recording artists who came aboard with the built-in advantage of having their own television shows had been a wise one.

Linden Records proceeded to sign two additional musicians who had weekly shows on KING-TV. One was, Seattle's enigmatic '50s folk troubadour, Walt Robertson (1928-1994), and the other was a bluesy jazz musician who worked under the name, Merceedees. Linden issued two 78s by Robertson, "Life Is A Toil," and "Wanderin'" -- the theme song to his TV program, *The Wanderer*.

Merceedees Welcker (1913-2000) was a popular African-American singer/pianist who performed at the Sorrento Hotel's Top of the Town lounge where she won many fans and a chance to host her own show on KING-TV. For several years her program was sponsored by Amana brand appliances, which she slyly acknowledged by singing a tune called "It's So Nice to Have a Man Around the House." With Linden, Mercedes went on to cut three discs including "Do You Know What It Means To Be Lonely?," "The Craziest Thing I Do," and "I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate."

A Pressing Issue

As his label grew, the ever-ambitious Linden hired his son to

engineer their many sessions and also established a record-pressing plant in his 2nd Avenue shop where translucent red "Vinylite" discs could now be manufactured locally instead of being pressed in California and shipped back.

But around 1950 -- after offering to sell off his record pressing machines to a cross-town firm, the Morrison Music Co. -- Linden finally found a willing buyer, and then moved his offices and recording studios up to 824 E Pike Street. The pressing of all subsequent discs was contracted out to another company.

During the label's lifespan, it released nearly 200 different 78 rpm and 45 rpm records and the Linden talent roster ended up with a wide variety of artists, including Olympia's aging internationally renowned major label recording star (Theo Karle), local hotel and nightclub orchestras (the Trianon Ballroom's Curt Sykes & his Orch., the Show Box's Bob Harvey & his Orch., the Town & Country's Wyatt Howard & his Orch.), piano bar/lounge acts (Tideman & Olson, Frank Chidester, Freeman Clark, Eddie Clifford), jazzers both local (Elmer Gill Trio, Milt Green Trio) and national (New Orleans' icon, Kid Ory), popular Italian accordionists (Frank Iacolucci, Eddie Spanno), local Scandinavian community talents (Alf Sundvall, Tideman's Scandinavian Trio, "Happy" Jones & the Nordic Rhythm Boys), and country roadhouse bands (Lee Workman & the Circle Ranch Hands, Billy Oudeen & his Harmony Ranch Boys).

Linden also launched a few new sub-series of recordings for specialized markets: the American Square and Round Dance series (Bob Hagar with Hilda Smyth's Orch., and Roger Crandall & his Barndance Boys); the religious series which featured ensembles like the Light and Life Hour Chorus, the King's Evangels, and Seattle Youth for Christ, as well as individual Christian singers (Wesley Ebey, and Clara Sandvig); and the Scandinavian Series that Linden contracted to have recorded -- by the Egerstam String Orchestra, Gösta Cederberg's Folkdance Orchestra, and Allen Ericksson's Orchestra -- in Sweden.

Around 1953, Jimmy left Linden Records to work as a tech lab engineering aide at Boeing. The label foundered without him. The following year Adolph closed up shop and took on a job first with the *Polk Directory* and later as a bill collector for the Merchant's Collection Agency.

Linden Records vs. Linden's Record

Though his life's path had seen some bumps, Linden's final years were peaceful and he greatly enjoyed the attentions of his four grandchildren, Jim, Kathleen, Christine, and Mary.

Adolph Linden is most often remembered for his checkered past as a banker/businessman, but we shouldn't let his prison record obscure his remarkable track record of success with one of the Pacific Northwest's first commercial record labels. Not only could Linden Records boast of having issued some of the earliest local jazz and folk discs, it also launched Seattle's first foreign music division, and operated the town's first record pressing facility -- pioneering achievements by any measure.

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By Peter Blecha, June 08, 2006

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