

It all began with Netflix. Mark and I were sitting around one rainy afternoon looking for a film to watch that we hadn't already seen 20 times. Loving older films, we decided to order a 1940s musical called "Broadway Rhythm" from Netflix. When we put the disc in our DVD player and started watching this delightful wartime film from MGM we were immediately taken with one of the secondary characters who sang and danced and mugged his way through the story. He was wonderful. He cheered our souls and brought a broad smile to our lips. As soon as the movie ended we rushed to our computer to find out more about him. But, alas, there was scant information available on either the Internet Movie Database or the Internet Broadway Database.

His name was Kenny Bowers. He had been in three movies and two Broadway musicals. The dates of his birth and death were given – and that was it.

Who was this Kenny Bowers? Where had he come from? What had happened to him? We were mystified but intrigued, and we immediately enlisted the aid of one of our friends to find the answers. Using just the resources offered by the Internet, the members of our newly formed "Kenny Bowers Fan Club" were able to piece together the following story of this entertainer who was born, we suspect, twenty or thirty years too late.

In many ways Kenny Bowers could have been the poster boy for the thousands of talented youngsters who, over the years, make their way to New York City or Hollywood seeking a career in Show Business. Although some of them, like Kenny, find success rather quickly, and a very few go on to stardom, most are doomed to become short footnotes in the chronicles of entertainment. In the end, older but wiser, almost all of them eventually go back to their hometowns and end up telling stories about "what might have been".

Here, then, is the Show Business career of Kenny Bowers pieced together from information mined from the Internet. I hope you enjoy it and, perhaps, even find something compelling in the tale.

Kenny Bowers

Kenny Bowers was born in Jersey City, New Jersey on March 10, 1923. He lived in a working-class neighborhood at 51 Park Street with his parents, his grandfather, and an uncle. His father, William Bowers, Jr., sold life insurance. His grandfather, William Bowers, Sr., was a night watchman and his uncle, William Lundis, worked as a buffer in a foundry. His mother's name was Mary.

Sometime after 1930, the family moved and Kenny attended Memorial High School in West New York, New Jersey. We know that he worked in an embroidery factory during that time. He also organized a swing band while attending high school.

He had distinguished himself as a comic before high school audiences and was a star athlete on the high school baseball team. He graduated in January, 1941. That same year, he piled five friends into his orange and black checkered Model T Ford and traveled to New York City to try out for the Dodgers. The car had a sign that read, "Don't let your daughter drive with us." After the tryout, Leo Durocher offered him a contract with the Dodgers farm team in Newport News, Virginia.

From the baseball tryout, he and his friends went to the theater where auditions were being held for George Abbott's new show, *Best Foot Forward*. According to a later biographical sketch, Bowers had been encouraged by composer Richard Rogers to audition for the play. Bowers sang, danced, and played his clarinet. Abbott handed him a contract to do the juvenile lead in the musical.

Suddenly, Bowers had to decide between signing a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers or with Broadway producer George Abbott. He put in much thought that evening and decided to take the acting job.

Best Foot Forward – the Broadway Musical

Best Foot Forward opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on October 1, 1941 and ran for 326 performances. The opening night cast included Nancy Walker, June Allyson, Kenny Bowers (as Hunk Hoyt), Tommy Dix, Jack Jordan, Stanley Donen, and Rosemary Lane. Gene Kelley was the choreographer.

Best Foot Forward is a musical comedy set at a prep school in Winssocki, Pennsylvania. One of its songs, *Buckle Down Winssocki* sung in both the Broadway and MGM movie versions by Tommy Dix, was a big hit and was the tune used for the public service announcement song *Buckle Up For Safety*.

The *Playbill* for the Broadway production of *Best Foot Forward* included the following biographical sketch on Kenneth Bowers, "Starting at the age of five, he has played in vaudeville houses and night clubs, and has had numerous radio engagements. He is a native of New Jersey."

Best Foot Forward closed on July 4, 1942.

Best Foot Forward – the MGM movie musical

According to the book *Greatest Musicals: The Arthur Freed Unit*, Columbia Pictures had bid \$50,000 for the film rights to *Best Foot Forward* but hadn't closed the deal. When Louis B. Mayer found out that Freed wanted to film the musical for MGM, he outbid Harry Cohn and then smoothed over the waters by giving Cohn \$25,000 and the services of Gene Kelly. Cohn had hoped to star Rita Hayworth and Shirley Temple in the roles eventually played, in the MGM version, by Lucille Ball and Virginia Weidler. MGM

bought the rights to the musical from Columbia Pictures for \$150,000. Kenny Bowers played Dutch Miller in the film version. Jack Jordon, Jr., who played Dutch in the Broadway version, played Hunk Hoyt in the movie. It would be interesting to know why they switched roles. MGM released the movie version on October 8, 1943.

Hedda Hopper (*Looking at Hollywood with Hedda Hopper*) mentioned Kenny in an article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* dated December 26, 1943. "Metro did it with *Best Foot Forward*. Five of this musical's original cast were transferred to Culver City – June Allyson, Kenny Bowers, Tommy Dix, Nancy Walker, and Jack Jordan. Which makes you feel the show's the thing, since none of these players had a big movie buildup, which yesterday was considered a must."

Broadway Rhythm – the MGM movie musical

Producer Arthur Freed originally bought the rights to the then Broadway hit *Very Warm for May* in 1941, after a vacation in New York City. He intended it as a vehicle for Judy Garland, but plans never materialized. It sat on the shelf until 1943.

With music by Jerome Kern and book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, *Very Warm for May* was the starting point for the film *Broadway Rhythm*. In typical Hollywood manner, by the time they were done, all the original songs except *All the Things You Are* had been dropped, replaced by material from other writers. Three of the original songs were sung, fragmentarily, by George Murphy sitting at a piano waiting for Ginny Simms to come out. The name of the original play is also mentioned in passing in one of the scenes.

The original project was intended to be the fifth film in the *Broadway Melody* series to be titled *Broadway Melody of 1944*, and was to star Gene Kelly and Eleanor Powell. Studio chief Louis B. Mayer decided instead to turn it into a vehicle to make a star out of Ginny Simms, who Mayer was dating.

Kenny Bowers was cast in the role of Ray Kent. Production on *Broadway Rhythm* began at MGM studios on June 16, 1943 and wrapped up on September 15, 1943. MGM released *Broadway Rhythm* on January 19, 1944.

From the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 1, 1944

"... *Broadway Rhythm* is chiefly Mr. George Murphy dancing, Miss Ginny Simms singing, Mr. Tommy Dorsey tromboning, Mr. Charles Winninger exploding and Miss Lena Horne, Mr. Eddie (Rochester) Anderson, Miss Hazel Scott, Mr. Ben Blue and several others doing the things they do..." The article continues with "... Miss Gloria DeHaven and Mr. Kenny Bowers being cute and cunning."

Kenny Bowers does a great job in the movie as Gloria DeHaven's dance partner. It is a typical Bowers' over-the-top, exaggerated performance and did nothing to advance his movie career or his prospects at MGM. The studio already had the amazing Mickey

Rooney under contract. Any suitable starring role for Bowers' talent would most certainly have gone to Rooney.

It is likely that Bowers bought up the remainder of his MGM contract and left the studio after production ended on *Broadway Rhythm*. He did this despite the fact that MGM had started offering specialty dancers seven-year contracts in anticipation of the demand for musical films after the war ended. In an article for Chicago's *The Daily News* in 1957, Bowers states, "I wasn't fired and my option wasn't dropped. But, I quit. I bought up my contract."

I'll Be Seeing You – movie produced by Dore Schary

From the book, *Heyday: An Autobiography*, by Dore Schary, we get some insight as to why Kenny Bowers was cast in the movie *I'll Be Seeing You*. Dore Schary was producing low-budget movies for MGM when Kenny Bowers was making his first two films at MGM. In November 1943, after having a falling out with Louis B. Mayer, Schary asked to be released from his contract. That request was granted.

At that time David O. Selznick wanted to create a division that produced low-budget films so that income would continue to come in while he was making his big-budget movies. He learned that Schary was available, and Selznick hired him with the understanding that Schary could film any script he wanted to film as long as the budget stayed under \$750,000. Schary chose the script for *I'll Be Seeing You* which Selznick hated. But a deal was a deal, and Selznick agreed to let Schary make the film with the understanding that Schary couldn't use Joseph Cotten, who was under contract to Selznick, or any Selznick player, and had to use only outside talent.

Selznick bet Schary that Schary would never get a star to play either of the main characters in the movie. However, Schary sent the script to Ginger Rogers who loved the story and suddenly, because of her salary, the film's budget rocketed to over a million dollars. Then, when Alan Ladd agreed to be the other lead, Selznick put his foot down because he felt Ladd's price was too high and, Selznick insisted, he had Joseph Cotten under contract and Cotten could easily do the part. So the film was finally shot for \$1,300,000, and it turned out so well that Selznick decided to release it as a "Selznick International" film. The film got excellent reviews and had gross box office receipts of almost \$7 million.

Dore Schary and Kenny Bowers left MGM at about the same time. If they had met when they were at MGM, it would have made sense for Kenny to try to get a job with Schary after leaving MGM, especially since Schary was instructed by Selznick to hire outside talent. *I'll Be Seeing You* was filmed between late March and May 29, 1944. Bowers played a sailor on a train in *I'll Be Seeing You* which was released on January 5, 1945.

The New Moon – an operetta

In 1944, Bowers was photographed with Mary Ganley for the Los Angeles Civic Light Opera presentation of *The New Moon*. According to the souvenir program for *Annie Get Your Gun*, Bowers was a dancer in this operetta. I assume Mary Ganley was too. The Los Angeles Civic Light Opera's 1944 production of *The New Moon*, by Sigmund Romberg, and book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, Frank Mandel, and Laurence Schwab starred Helena Bliss, Walter Cassel, and Sterling Holloway. The production opened February 1, 1944.

Bowers states that, after his Hollywood experience, he went back home to West New York, New Jersey, to his father's soda fountain and "jerked sodas for awhile." He couldn't have been doing this very long, because he soon appeared in a play at the Shubert Theatre in Philadelphia.

Glad to See You – a stage musical

Glad to See You opened on November 13th, 1944 at the Shubert Theatre in Philadelphia. This musical marked the debut of composer Jule Styne. The show starred Jane Withers, Eddie Davis (who would be replaced by Eddie Foy, Jr. in Boston), and June Knight and featured Kenny Bowers (as Nick Lee), Joseph MaCaulay, Gene Barry, Nancy Donovan, Alexis Rotov and the Whitney Sisters. Actress Gloria McGehee played the part of Mr. Trotter's secretary.

This production featured the musical staging and direction of the legendary Busby Berkeley. Having established himself as one of Broadway's most talented choreographers, he accepted an assignment in 1930 to stage the dances for the 1930 movie musical "Whoopee" and soon Berkeley's name was synonymous with the lavish musical spectacles he staged for Warner Bros. Studios. This would have marked his first return to Broadway after a fourteen year absence. After the show arrived in Boston, Berkeley was replaced as director and returned to Hollywood.

From *Billboard* magazine, November 25, 1944, we read, "Musical comedy presented by David Wolper; staged and directed by Busby Berkeley; music by Jule Styne; lyrics by Sammy Cahn; book by Freddy Thompson and Eddie Davis."

Wolper financed *Glad To See You* in a "unique" way, selling more than 100% shares in the production. Columbia Records chief Manie Sacks invested in the show. Wolper spent lavishly on it according to *Billboard*. Some contend that this was the origin of the plot for Mel Brooks' musical comedy *The Producers*.

Glad to See You closed January 6th, 1945 at the Opera House in Boston, failing to arrive in New York.

From the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, dated December 11, 1944, Dorothy Kilgallen writes, "Kenny Bowers, the *Glad to See You* juvenile, and Gloria McGhee, daughter of the Congressman from Mississippi, are a heart toddy."

Gloria McGehee was the daughter of Daniel Rayford McGehee, U.S. Representative from the 7th District of Mississippi from 1935 to 1947.

Gloria was a beautiful and interesting person who always aspired to be in show biz. She was six when she disappeared and was found at the county fair where she was looking for employment with the carnival as a dancer.

She was a professional actress who was billed as Gloria McGhee on her agent's advice. On April 3, 1950, she appeared as “the talented actress” in the stage production of *The Man Who Came to Dinner* starring Monty Wooley at the Capitol Theater in Kennewick, Washington. She appeared on *Lux Video Theater* and in four episodes of *Broadway Television Theater* (1952), *Medic* (1955), and three episodes of *Gunsmoke* between 1956 and 1963. She had a short movie career as well, appearing in *The Boss* (1956), *Sierra Strangers* (1957), and her last film *A Child is Waiting* (1963) which starred Burt Lancaster. She died of a heart attack in 1964 at the age of forty-three.

Loew’s Theatre – New York

On September 7, 1945 Bowers was performing at the Loew’s State Theatre in New York City. Movies were shown at these great theaters with big stage shows performed between screenings.

From *Billboard*, September 15, 1945: “Kenny Bowers, funny-looking young fellow reported as just released from the army, is an eccentric dancer and singer, and a clarinetist. His licorice-stick (clarinet) work and hoofery (dancing) are better than his warbling (singing). Kid has an appealing personality but he hasn’t jelled his act into anything definite. It’s too much this and that. Crowd brought him back for a couple of bows.”

This is a typical show-biz situation. Bowers worked at whatever jobs were available while waiting for the next big opportunity. That big opportunity came quickly for him.

Annie Get Your Gun – stage musical comedy

On April 2, 1946 Bowers was in the “out-of-town” opening production of *Annie Get Your Gun* at the Schubert Theater in Boston. He played the part of Tommy Keeler. This show was a hit and moved on to Broadway in New York. It opened on May 16, 1946 at the Imperial Theatre.

Annie Get Your Gun is a musical comedy and a fictionalized version of the life of Annie Oakley, who was a sharpshooter from Ohio, and her husband, Frank Butler.

Annie Get Your Gun was produced by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, II. Music and lyrics were by Irving Berlin. The book was by Herbert Fields and Dorothy Fields. It was directed by Joshua Logan with choreography by Helen Tamiris. The star was Ethel Merman.

A review of the show in *Billboard* dated May 25, 1946, is not too kind to Bowers. The review states, "Helen Tamiris' dance patterns pack plenty of imagination, particularly the Indian ceremonial ballet which climaxes the first act. Lubov Roudenko and Daniel Nagrin are her aces in this department and acquit themselves with distinction. Not so fortunate is the result of either the hoofing or clowning of Betty Ann Nyman and Kenny Bowers. The pair are too coy for comfort."

The souvenir program for *Annie Get Your Gun* has individual biographical notes for the leading actors. The following is what the program says about Kenny Bowers:

Kenny Bowers (Tommy Keeler) was on the point of signing up as shortstop with the Dodgers when Richard Rodgers suggested that his stepping would find a more appreciative audience if he joined the cast of George Abbott's *Best Foot Forward*. He took the composer's advice, and later did the comedy lead in the movie version. After cavorting with June Allyson in *Broadway Rhythm*, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy. Home on leave, he sported his bell-bottom trousers in *I'll Be Seeing You*. With his discharge in his pocket, he danced in the Los Angeles Light Opera production of *The New Moon* and in the short-lived *Glad To See You* on its pre-Broadway tour.

At some point during the run Bowers was replaced by his understudy, actor William Skipper. *Annie Get Your Gun* closed on February 12, 1949 after an astounding 1,147 performances.

The Silver Summer Review – WCBS radio show

Between June 17, 1948 and September 17, 1948, Bowers appeared in episodes of *The Silver Summer Revue*, a 30-minute summer replacement radio show on WCBS. A radio broadcast schedule from September 10, 1948 describes the show as a "Musicomedy" airing from 9:30 pm to 10:00 pm on New York station WCBS. Appearing on the show was the Raymond Paige Orchestra, Julie Conway, Johnnie Diamond, Kenny Bowers, and others.

An episode of *The Silver Summer Revue* called *Watch Dog* aired on September 17, 1948. It starred Kenny Bowers and Johnny Desmond.

School House – Television show on the DuMont Network

On January 18, 1949 Bowers appeared on the television show, *School House*. In *School House* Bowers sang and played the clarinet.

School House was a live musical comedy and variety series which ran on the DuMont television network on Tuesday evenings in 1949. Kenny Delmar hosted the show as the teacher. Students included Arnold Stang, Tommy Dix, Betty Ann Nyman, Kenny

Bowers, Aileen Stanley, Jr., Wally Cox (his television debut), Vilma Sherry, and Rudy Cardenas.

Of the dozen or so episodes of this live series, only around 26 minutes of footage survives. Fortunately, the surviving episode (#10) has Kenny Bowers appearing. He performs with Betty Ann Nyman. The song is *Kenny, Clara, and Me*. They each sing. Then, Betty Ann does a dance routine while Kenny plays the clarinet. Immediately following this number, the teacher comments that he loves Ragtime. Kenny replies, "You know, Professor, it's not called Ragtime anymore. It's Bee Bop!"

Kenny then performs *Sunny Side of the Street*. He sings enthusiastically and plays the clarinet with great style and control. A variety of comedy skits follow, including a poem recited by Arnold Stang, a juggling act, and a rough sketch by host Delmar reminiscent of the early television skits of Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, and Ernie Kovacs. The show ends with the song *Buckle Down Winsocki* from the musical *Best Foot Forward*. This is performed by Tommy Dix who sang the song on Broadway and in the MGM movie version of the show. The final broadcast of *School House* was on April 12, 1949.

Sketch Book – stage show at Radio City Music Hall – New York

Bowers appeared in the stage show *Sketch Book* which opened at Radio City Music Hall in New York on September 28, 1950. This big stage review followed the premiere of the movie *The Glass Menagerie*. Also appearing in this stage review were the Four Macks, a roller skating act; Duval, a magician; the Ivanovs, a three-man act on parallel bars; the Radio City Music Hall Glee Club, Corps de Ballet, and the beautiful precision dancers the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes.

Six on a Honeymoon – musical stage show - Chicago

Sometime in 1951, Bowers, along with seven other actors; Grant Eastham, Kay Coulter, Pat Carroll, Dave Le Grant, Barbara Cook, Ed Begley, and Marianne D'Or, signed in New York to do a musical stage show in Chicago. The show was *Six on a Honeymoon*, written by Richard Adler and Jerry Ross.

Adler and Ross met each other in 1950 in New York. During the five years they collaborated, they wrote two of the most enduring musicals on Broadway, *The Pajama Game* and *Damn Yankees*. They also wrote songs that remain popular standards including *Rags to Riches*, *Heart*, and *Hey There*. Herbert Ross wrote the book for *Six on a Honeymoon*. He also directed and choreographed the show.

Six on a Honeymoon opened on April 9, 1952 at the Blackhawk nightclub in Chicago after a two-week "break-in" engagement at the Lake Club in Springfield, Illinois. The Blackhawk was a popular restaurant and nightclub owned by Don Roth. It was known for impressive stage shows.

Early in 1952, the New York stage comedy *Laugh It Off* was being presented. Health authorities in Chicago discovered that the restaurant was serving horsemeat and passing it off as steak. They shuttered the restaurant for two days, forcing the show *Laugh It Off* to close three weeks earlier than planned.

Staggering from that scandal, Roth began a heavy promotion campaign and a stepped-up entertainment policy to draw customers back to the club. He announced that a new show called *Six on a Honeymoon* would open at the Blackhawk.

Six on a Honeymoon was a hit with Chicago audiences. Performances at the Blackhawk ran from April 9, to July 29, 1952. It was the last musical stage production at the Blackhawk. When *Six on a Honeymoon* closed, Don Roth stopped having shows at the Blackhawk and only offered dining.

Kenny Bowers plays baseball in Chicago

There was a celebrity baseball game held on Sunday, May 25, 1952 on Diamond 6 at Grant Park. The *Guys and Dolls* team played the Shubert Theater's *Front of House* team. The pitcher was Maxie Rosenbloom. Kenny Bowers of the Blackhawk's *Six on a Honeymoon* played shortstop for the *Guys and Dolls* team.

Kenny Bowers Moves to Chicago - Television

On October 25, 1952 a *Billboard* article announced that Kenny Bowers had signed with Jack Russell and Associates. Jack J. Russell resigned as vice-president of Mutual Entertainment and opened his own agency, Jack Russell and Associates, on March 1, 1952.

We're not sure what Bowers did in 1953. He had turned thirty. In 1954, he was appearing on a television show called *Swingalong* on Chicago's WBKB. This show aired on weekday afternoons. Kenny was the show's emcee. Sometime in early March, the musicians and vocalists on the show were told they would have to join AFTRA (American Federation of Television and Radio Artists) because they also had speaking parts on the show. Someone from AFM (American Federation of Musicians) told them that it wasn't necessary. As a comedy spoof on the show that aired March 26, the musician-vocalists held up printed cards when it came their turn to talk. Some signs read "laryngitis" and others simply stated that they couldn't speak. Bowers denied that this was a protest and insisted it was merely a comedy bit resulting from the situation.

Bowers had a children's show on WBKB called *Jolly 7 Gang Show*. The show premiered at 5 p.m. on February 29, 1954. Two articles in *The Daily Tribune* give a description of the show.

Chicago Daily Tribune - February 28, 1954
"20 Kids Will Cut Up on Jolly 7 Gang Show –

Jolly 7 Gang with Joe Kelly and Kenny Bowers premieres over WBKB at 5 p.m. tomorrow. Twenty children will be invited to participate in stunts and games on the half hour weekday show. Bowers will play the part of a mechanical robot, Kelly, whose best known role was quizmaster on Quiz Kids, will emcee the competition.”

The second article included an interview with Bowers.

Chicago Daily Tribune - May 9, 1954

“Kenny Bowers has ‘Hottest’ Job of Jolly 7 –

“It’s a real pain in the neck and the hottest job in town,” complained Kenny Bowers, incognito member of the Jolly Seven Gang, the other day. ‘But,’ he added with a twinkle, ‘when I hear the kids laugh I don’t care.’

Kenny, unknown to his kiddy following, plays the “Friendly Robot” on WBKB’s 5 p.m. weekday program conducted by “Jolly” Joe Kelly. Costumed in what looks as heavy as armor, Bowers says it feels as hot as if it were. Actually, the robot suit is fashioned of a tricky combination of cardboard, wood, wire mesh, glass, fabrics, and metallic paint.

“I’ve always wanted to be a clown,” answered Kenny when asked what qualifications were necessary to play a robot. “I suppose a feel for pantomime helps, too.”

A look at Bowers out of his clown suit and as song and dance man on WBKB’s afternoon *Swingalong*, the first impression is of a fellow who would look equally at home on the baseball field.

After two years in the Navy, he appeared in MGM’s *Broadway Rhythm* and other films. He returned to the theater in *Glad to See You*, which he calls his greatest part although the play closed before reaching New York. Vaudeville followed and then more than two years as the juvenile lead in *Annie Get Your Gun*. He did radio shows and directed TV shows at CBS in New York. In 1952 he played the Chicago Blackhawk in *Six on a Honeymoon*.

According to another article from Chicago’s *The Daily Tribune*, Bowers was in the TV show *Danger*. *Danger* was half-hour dramatic anthology that premiered on CBS on September 19, 1950. The series focused on stories of psychological suspense and murder. The series aired live on Tuesday nights and ran until May 31, 1955. It was the starting place for a number of directors and actors who would later go on to fame in Hollywood. These included Yul Brynner, John Frankenheimer, Sidney Lumet, John Cassavetes, James Dean, Grace Kelly, and Charlton Heston.

In 1954 Bowers had a show on WBKB in Chicago at 8 p.m. called *Show Room* which is described as a musical show.

It seems Kenny moved from WBKB TV to WNBQ TV sometime between May, 1954 and April, 1955. In April, 1955, *Billboard* magazine mentioned, “Kenny Bowers, musician-comedian-showman, does a one-week guest shot on Howard Miller’s *Close-Up* show beginning next week.” This show aired at 5:30 p.m. on WNBQ TV in Chicago.

On April 22, 1955, Herb Lyon, in his regular column *Tower Ticker* in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* wrote, “NBC’s Kenny Bowers says he’s trying to land the steadiest singing job of all – understudy to Mario Lanza!” This is a difficult quote to understand. But, it might help to realize that Mario Lanza had been signed to an MGM contract by Louis B. Meyer. And, like Bowers, Lanza had worked with Dore Schary. After recording the soundtrack for the film *The Student Prince*, Lanza walked out on the project after an argument with producer Dore Schary over his behavior on the set.

There was an interesting mention of Bowers in a *Chicago Daily Tribune* article on May 5, 1955. The article was about the state Parent Teachers Association. “Forest Road – Annual PTA spring festival at Forest Road school, La Grange, will be held from 6 to 9 p.m. tomorrow, featuring a circus theme. Entertainment will include games, carnival booths, and a puppet show. Guest star will be Cousin Kenny Bowers, television personality, who will appear at the school at 7:30 p.m.”

Bowers introduced a new show on WNBQ in July, 1955. A *Chicago Daily Tribune* article stated, “Every now and then a local television show opens its eyes and blinks at the world outside. A new combination of talent spreads its wings, and then flops or flies. One of the latest is WNBQ’s *Contact* – a musical effort featuring Kenny Bowers, Milwaukee born Tom Mercein, Joseph Callicchio’s orchestra, and a different feminine vocalist every few weeks. The 5:35 p.m. week day show began with Betty Johnson, member of the WLS Breakfast Club family with one of the most pleasant voices in the business.”

The article gives us a good look at Bowers. It continues, “The fate of the new show rests largely on a young man with considerable experience. Kenny Bowers has been in Chicago about 1 ½ years, and he’s developed a warmth for the place that borders on eccentricity. “I love it here,” he said, assaulting the sentence the way a dog does a bone. “It’s quiet. It’s friendly. New York television can be pretty frightening at times. They really grind it out.”

Bowers is wild about the future of television in Chicago. “Anything that can be done in New York can be done here,” he said firmly. “In fact, I think New York is jealous of the way Chicago has built good shows out of just spit, gum, glue, and elastic bands.” He directed early TV programs for WCBS TV in New York City and made guest appearances on such shows as Milton Berle’s, *Studio One*, *Toast of the Town*, and *The Web*, and *Danger*.

Bowers fits into the pattern of Chicago TV because he does many things – he sings, he dances, he plays the clarinet, he tells jokes, and he mugs. He calls himself a “sketch comic – like Art Carney, for example. You know, a funny guy with a straight guy, only it takes an actor to do it.”

You've got to be versatile to exist in the show world, he says. He's always been that way. As a youngster he was the high school clown who drove an orange and black model T with the sign, "Don't let your daughter drive with us." His idols – Chaplin, Bert Lahr, Joe E. Brown, Walter Huston, Ray Bolger, Jimmy Savo. From high school he went into musical comedy, playing the juvenile lead in *Best Foot Forward* on Broadway and in the movie with Lucille Ball.

"What I like about *Contact*," said Kenny, "it has pace. There is no ad libbing. Absolutely none. Every lead is set, and the thing is tied together tight as a drum. There is nothing like pace. It's what makes a good stage revue."

After several stage revues and movies, Bowers turned toward TV – then away from everything. He went back to New Jersey, where he was born, and worked in one of his father's ice cream parlors. Kenny had retired. "Being a director was too much responsibility. I got tired. I started talking to myself."

In 1952 he was in Chicago playing in, *Six on a Honeymoon*. WBKB signed him, and early this year he went to WNBQ. *Contact* is new; his noon time show, *Cartoonland*, is several months old. It's a show for kids, and in it Kenny doesn't say a word. "And the mothers like the show – because it's quiet."

The versatile Bowers had done considerable song writing in his day. The latest, his first commercial type tune, has just been recorded by Nat King Cole. It's called *I've Got Half a Mind to Kiss You, But the Other Half Says No*. "It started as a gag" Kenny recalled. "Then it was a comedy tune, and now it's a ballad. I didn't even know it had been recorded until the string section of the NBC orchestra here walked into rehearsal and told me."

Bowers was mixing television performances and song writing. In a publicity ad in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* dated January 1, 1956, there is a photograph with the caption *Watt's Doing?* The copy reads: Blinky, the light bulb, gives Kenny Bowers a "volt" of confidence on *Kenny's Klub*, telecast daily at 12:30 p.m. over WNBQ. (photo)

In 1956, as WNBQ began to covert from black and white to color broadcasting, *Kenny's Klub* was among the first shows to be broadcast in color.

Herb Lyon, in his January 4, 1956 *Chicago Daily Tribune* column *Tower Ticker*, wrote "TV star Kenny Bowers and Director Dan Schuffmon are writing a new musical comedy and hope to [present it] in Chicago."

It was about the same time that Dan Schuffmon wrote the seasonal song *Christmas is Love*. For the most part, the song was unseen for some 50 years, until September, 2009 when it was recorded and put on YouTube by Schuffman's son-in-law, Tom Waselchuk of Madison, Wisconsin.

Schuffman said it just came to him when he drove one Thanksgiving Eve in 1956 from Chicago to New Castle, Ind., to be with family. When he returned to Chicago, where he was a producer and director for ABC Television, he asked Kenny Bowers to help him with the bridge. The song was wonderful, the timing not so great. Trying to get it published wasn't helped by the growing popularity of rock 'n' roll. A "song plugger" he knew sent it to Nat King Cole, but the legendary singer had recorded a Christmas song the year before.

Herb Lyon, in his *Chicago Daily Tribune* column *Tower Ticker* wrote on October 3, 1956, "Kenny Bowers, local TV comic, landed a top role in the new Broadway musical version of *Dead End*. Goes into rehearsal next month and it's our town's loss." There is no record of a musical version of *Dead End* ever playing on Broadway. The play *Dead End*, written by Sidney Kingsley, opened in October, 1935 at the Belasco Theatre in New York and ran for 687 performances.

We do know Bowers appeared on April 23, 1957 in an episode of the hour-long NBC television drama series *The Kaiser Aluminum Hour*. The episode was called *A Man's Game* (season 1, episode 21) in which Bowers played a character named "Bud." Also in the cast were Nanette Fabray, Paul Ford, Fred Gwynne, Gene Nelson, Bibi Osterwald, Lew Parker, and Steven Shaw.

In 1957, Kenny Bowers was thirty-four years old. He had spent the previous five and a half years in Chicago doing nightclub and television appearances. He had several variety shows and children's shows on two different Chicago television stations. It is easy to understand that, after starring on Broadway and in two MGM musicals, he was thinking his career hadn't gone as he had once hoped.

It was then that he had a chance meeting with an old friend, singer Tony Bennett, who was passing through Chicago. Bennett told Bowers it was a shame he was buried in Chicago. Bennett suggested Bowers see his manager, Lloyd Leipzig, and take another shot at the big time.

Leipzig liked Bowers and made a promotional record which he took to Mitch Miller at Columbia Records. Miller, who was the executive at Columbia who decided who was offered recording contracts, listened to the recording and said, "Okay, we'll record him." Later Miller said that he thought Bowers was the most exciting thing to come along since Johnnie Ray.

In July, 1957, Columbia released a promotional recording of Bowers. The song was *How Come?* Another song, *Half a Mind*, was on the flip side. Columbia also released a promotional Long-Playing record *Known Faces, New Faces, Going Places*, promoting various Columbia recording artists. Track number 6 on side one is Kenny Bowers singing a comedy Christmas song called *Weach for the Wafters Santa*. As with most of Bowers recordings, the instrumentals were by the Jimmy Carroll Orchestra.

When these songs didn't get traction on the radio, Columbia tried using Bowers to narrate an album called *The Little Star of Bethlehem*. That recording was not a critical success.

In 1958, Columbia released another 45 rpm record by Bowers. This had *Honeysuckle Rose* on side one and *My Only Prayer Was Answered* on side two. Bowers' version of the standard *Honeysuckle Rose* is actually very good. The flip side is not an easy listen. The problem seemed to be that Bowers couldn't find his strong style. *My Only Prayer Was Answered* sounded too much like Johnnie Ray. Bowers natural talent was toward the popular ballads of the 1930s and 1940s. At this time, rock 'n roll was taking over the recording industry and popular culture.

Bowers returned to singing and sketch comedy in Chicago's nightclubs. On May 19, 1959 Herb Lyon, in his column for *The Daily Tribune*, wrote, "Best Bet for Tuesday: Clever Kenny Bowers, former WBKB video star, opening at Pedicone's Gold and Diamond Club."

Two months later, Bowers was appearing at the Aragon Ballroom as a comic, with Florian Zabach, a violinist, in a show produced by Allen David.

In 1960, Bowers joined the cast of a nationally syndicated television show produced by the National Lutheran Council. The show, *Light Time*, was produced in Chicago. It was essentially a variety show with puppets, animated cartoons, and live action. It was distributed weekly for free to 150 key stations around the country. The target audience for the show was children ages 12 to 18, who did not attend church regularly. In announcing that Bowers would be joining the cast, the writer mentions that Kenny Bowers is "a veteran Chicago actor now located in Detroit."

Kenny Bowers died in New York City on July 26, 1991. He is buried in Kensico Cemetery in Valhalla, New York. He shares a grave and marker with another actor, Wilfred Reynier (1852-1928), in the Actors Fund plot. This cemetery is known for its celebrities. Others buried there include Billie Burke, Danny Kaye, Florenz Ziegfeld, and Tommy Dorsey.