

The phrases "champagne music" and "ah-one, ah-two" bring to mind the musical career of Lawrence Welk. Dismissed by his critics as uncreative, Welk was in fact an astute businessman who spent his life performing wholesome music suitable for the whole family.

Lawrence Welk was born to German-Russian immigrants Ludwig and Christina Welk in Strasburg, North Dakota, on 11 March 1903. Music was a part of everyday life in the rural community, where Ludwig Welk, an avid accordion player, performed at many local events. Young Lawrence Welk had no interest in becoming a farmer like his father and brothers and left home at age twenty-one to find his fortune as a musician.

By 1927, Welk had formed a small musical group called Lawrence Welk and His Novelty Orchestra. Traveling south to New Orleans to search for work, the group stopped in Yankton, South Dakota, the home of WNAX, the region's most powerful radio station. After meeting with WNAX owner Chandler Gurney, Welk's orchestra made the first of what would be many performances before the station's microphones.

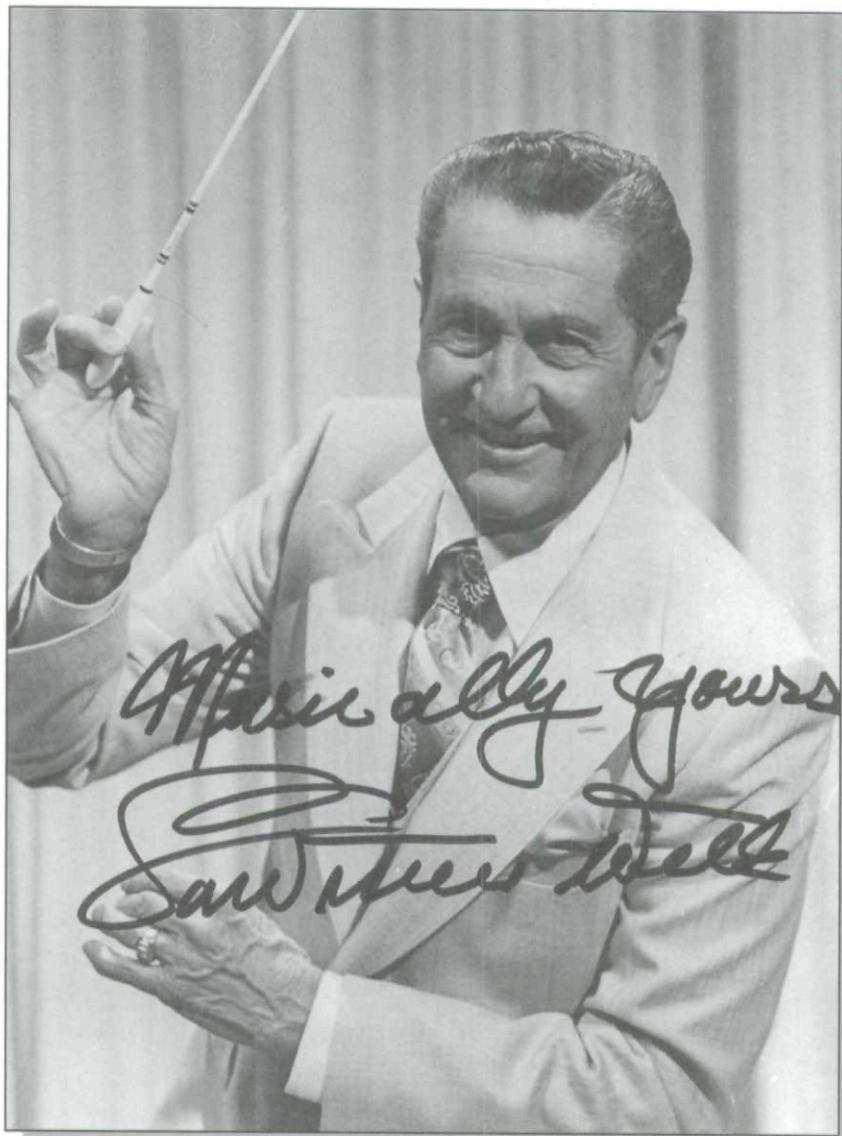
Welk and his musicians spent the next several years building a strong following in the region. They continued to make appearances in South Dakota, including the Corn Palace in Mitchell, Japanese Gardens in Flandreau, and the Arkota and Neptune ballrooms in Sioux Falls. In 1937, the group signed on with the nationally syndicated radio station WEAC in Saint Paul, Minnesota, increasing their exposure and popularity. Welk moved his orchestra to Chicago in 1940, where their show was broadcast nationally from the Trianon Ballroom.

Welk's band made a smooth transition from radio to television with its first appearance on KTLA in Los Angeles, California, in 1951. Four years later, Welk signed up with the Dodge Motor Company and the American Broadcasting Company to produce the *Dodge Dancing Party*, a television show that featured a twenty-seven-piece band and a resident cast that gave solo and ensemble performances. Renamed *The Lawrence Welk Show* in 1959, the program went into syndication in 1971 and continued until Welk retired in 1982.

Welk stayed busy in retirement, acquiring the royalty rights to twenty thousand songs and accumulating a real-estate empire. He died in Santa Monica, California, on 17 May 1992 at the age of eighty-nine.

by Christopher Leatherman

Dakota Images



Lawrence Welk

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