

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



[This is the fifteenth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

ARTIE SHAW

OK, who was better? Benny Goodman? Artie Shaw? Perhaps, Woody Herman? The correct answer is D: all of the above. Each of those clarinetists found their niche, their specialty, their forte. Goodman was a precise, technically-perfect master of the clarinet, staying mainly in jazz and swing. Herman fronted excellent bands, known as his “Herds” (the Third Herd, for example); and although extremely competent, let his Herds do the talking. Shaw, on the other hand, knew how to sell popular music for the dancing crowd. He will forever be associated with his “Begin The Beguine,” and he hated that!

Born Arthur Jacob Arshawsky in NYC on May 23, 1910, he grew up in New Haven, CT, where he became quite introverted by local anti-Semitism of the day, according to his autobiography *The Trouble With Cinderella; An Outline Of Identity* (Farrar, Strauss and Young, 1952; DeCapo Press, 1979). It was natural, then, for him to leave his hometown, and tour with a band, landing in New York City once again. He traded his saxophone for a clarinet. And he never looked back.

At age 25, he received rave notices for his own *Interlude in B-flat*, where he was backed only by a rhythm section and a string quartet. This was an early example of combining classical music with jazz, and became known as the Third Stream (which we'll investigate in next month's article). Shaw was always the innovator. In 1940, he formed a small group from within his big band, known as *Artie Shaw and his Gramercy Five* (*Gramercy* was his home telephone exchange). In this group, his band pianist played harpsichord and his band guitarist played an electric guitar, unheard of in previous jazz combos. My favorite tune from this group is *My Blue Heaven*, which I often play when I perform.



During WW2, Shaw enlisted in the U.S. Navy and formed a band playing in the Pacific theater. His band played for 18 months for Navy personnel with as many as four concerts a day, directly in battle zones, including Guadalcanal. He returned to the U.S., suffering from exhaustion and received a medical discharge from the Navy.

Through the mid-50s, Artie drifted in and out of music because he felt he became successful for the wrong reasons. He wanted people to listen to his music, not dance to it. His songs *Stardust*, *Frenesi* and *Summit Ridge Drive* had all been huge commercial successes, but Shaw hated it when his audiences demanded he play them over and over again. On some of his frequent sabbaticals, he studied Advanced Mathematics, wrote fiction and non-fiction, including his (still unpublished) 1000-page, 3-volume autobiographical novel, *The Education of Albie Snow*. Then finally in 1954, he put away his clarinet and never performed in public again. Here's a man who, during the height of his popularity, was making (according to some close friends) \$60,000 per week, while Burns and Allen were each only making \$5,000 per week in the year Shaw provided the music for their radio show.

Many reasons have been offered for his early retirement: Shaw's own perfectionism was killing him; he had dental problems and, to a woodwind player, a strong jaw and good teeth are everything (without which your tone changes greatly; or (according to Mel Torme) Shaw hated being a performer, out in front of crowds. Mel said "... if he could have played the clarinet in his living room just for himself, I think he would have been just

as happy as pie.” No one really knows – Artie took the real reasons to his grave in 2004 at age 94.

In his highly-publicized personal life, he married and divorced eight times. He was a self-proclaimed “very difficult man.” Two of his wives, Lana Turner and Ava Gardner, painted Shaw as extremely emotionally abusive and controlling. Shaw had many sides to him. Most folks didn’t know that Artie was a precision marksman in the early 60s. He pursued film and theater production. He lectured at colleges and universities. In addition, he gave occasional interviews, which kept him in the limelight. He even emerged in 1983 to organize a new Artie Shaw Band, but appointed clarinetist Dick Johnson as bandleader and soloist, rather than to perform himself.

Yes, Shaw was a, enigma; hugely talented, and greatly disliked by many. But to rediscover his musical artistry, have a listen to his 2001 compilation, *Artie Shaw Self-Portrait*, a 5-CD Boxed Set (RCA), available on Amazon ASIN B00005PJBJ. But be forewarned the set is rather pricy, and the reader may wish to check the local library first.

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as “Just Me 2”, a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com.