

Bob Lee - from Woodie Wood 2-13-86  
DANNY ALGUIRE  
TRIBUTE  
TO  
BENNY  
BY  
DANNY ALGUIRE

I recently asked Paul Affeldt if I could write an article for Jazz Report about Benny Strickler, one of the great trumpet men I knew and admired - both as a musician and as a person. As far as I know, only one article was ever written about Benny -- a short piece by a Mr. Levin (or Levine?), which appeared about 1950 in an English Jazz magazine. The article was well done, and adequately set down Benny's musical ability. But, to me, there was more to be written about Benny.

It was my great pleasure to have played with Benny for eight months in what is now referred to as the first "big band" of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys (1941-1942). Now, before any reader mentions "Hillbilly Band", let me hasten to assure you this was a great, swinging band, consisting of four brass, four saxes, four rhythm, plus steel guitar, and two fiddles. Sure, we played western tunes and fiddled hoe-downs (and no one played them as well as Bob Wills). Particularly, if we played the smaller Oklahoma and Texas towns, the people got more than a few of the country tunes (and most of these will really swing, if done right!). But more than half of the dance numbers were filled with good big band and small band jazz and the great driving force of the band was spearheaded by the solid, spirited trumpet of Benny Strickler.

Benny had joined Bob Wills in Hollywood in the summer of 1941, when the band was in California making a picture. The story goes that Benny stopped Bob in the lobby of the Plaza Hotel in Hollywood and said, "Bob, my name is Benny Strickler. I play trumpet, and I want to play with your band." Benny had just heard a record release of the Wills' band on "Big Beaver" (Okeh label) and had been gassed by the beat of the band on this tune, so Benny just decided that's who he wanted to play with.

Well, Bob Wills is a great judge of character, so without even hearing Benny play, Bob said, "Okay, you're hired." And he never regretted it. Later, Bob remarked, "Hell, I could tell by looking at him that he could play good!"

I'll never forget the Tuesday night in Oklahoma City in November, 1941. I had come from Los Angeles to Oklahoma City to visit my folks. Well, I read in the local paper that Bob Wills was playing that night at the Trianon Ballroom. I had met Benny in California and as I had heard he had joined Bob Wills band, I was curious to know what Benny was doing in a western-type band. So I dropped down to catch it. What a crowd! It took me at least fifteen minutes to work my way up the stairs and thru the crowd to the bandstand. But all this time, I was hearing the band, and particularly Benny -- blowing great!

Well, it wound up that I joined the band that night too. It just happened that Bob Wills had decided to start his big band, and was augmenting. That same night Alex Brashear on trumpet and Woody Wood on clarinet and sax also joined the band. Both good jazzmen.

At this point I should list the personnel of this great band, for here was a musician's dream of a band, a "one in a million" coincidence that brought a bunch together that thought and played alike. On trumpets were: Benny Strickler, Alex Brashear, and Danny Alguire; on sax: Don Harlan, George Bailey, Woody Woods, and Louis Tierney; on trombone, Neal Duer; piano, Al Strickland; drums, Gene Tomlin, later replaced by Bob Fitzgerald; steel guitar, Leon MacAuliffe; standard guitar, Eldon Shamblin; string bass, Darrel Jones; vocals, Tommy Duncan; fiddles, Bob Wills and Joe Holly.

This band could play anything well. Alex Brashear made some wonderful big band arrangements. And for variety, many "head" arrangements were worked out, featuring Benny on trumpet, Woody on clarinet, and Neal on trombone playing the traditional small group things. This was Benny at his best, a delight to hear. Here was Benny playing with such a good taste, warmth, but still with a swinging drive. And in this connection, here, too, was an insight into Benny himself. His concern always was the general over-all sound of the band. Many times I heard him say, "Now, let's just make the tune sound good!" What he meant, of course, was to listen to each other, and play with the thought of contributing to the sound, not just what one person could get out of it for himself.

This, to me, is the essential thing in jazz, the striving for a meeting of the minds. Benny often said, "If you don't think together, you can't play together." And he proved it by his mental approach to his playing. He brought to the bandstand each night an enthusiasm that actually permeated throughout the band. It was a feeling that we were all going to play good. And we did. I never heard Benny play badly. He just didn't have an "off night". I recall a night that Benny had a split lip from a cold sore. Alex and I felt concern for him and wanted to trade parts with him to help him. But he said "Oh, it's okay. It only hurts when I take the mouthpiece away from my lips."

Benny was born in Fayetteville, Arkansas about 1917. I never knew just when he took up trumpet, but presume it was at a fairly early age, because he loved to play. Benny was an excellent sight reader, a talent I envied. I asked him once where he learned to read so well. He said "I don't know. I just never thought much about it." Probably it came as natural as did his improvising. He never questioned it, just accepted it.

Benny told me he learned jazz by listening and playing with records of Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, Red Nichols and others of his day, but then went on to develop his own style. I can't remember that Benny, like anyone else, although he could mimic any style. One night on a job he suddenly turned to me and said, "Here is the way Bix would play this", and played a chorus so close to Bix I almost fell out of my chair.

Benny married his wife Frances, and they came to California sometime in 1936. They had two daughters, Diane and Janet. Times were pretty rough then, and Benny had his ups and downs making a living for his family. But music was his life and he was determined to play. I must mention Bob Logan, a wonderful trombone player and one of Benny's closest friends. They worked together almost constantly through good bands and bad bands from 1936 through 1941 in California.

About 1937 Seger Ellis got together a group including Benny and Bob Logan, which he called "The Choir of Brass", consisting of four trombones, four trumpets, one clarinet, and four rhythm. They made several sides on Decca. I never heard any of these records, but I understand Benny played several solos on this session, the best one on a tune called "Bee's Knees". Someone should track these records down. I've tried but without success.

Benny also played in Wingy Manone's big band, Rube Wolfe's Paramount Theater pit band, and with Joe Venuti's Band. Times got rough enough that Benny even took jobs with certain nameless hotel-style bands to provide a living for his family. One such job got so bad that he quit. He came home to his wife and simply said,

"I'm sorry, I just couldn't play in that band." Frances answered, "It's all right, Benny, I understand" -- and then wondered how they would buy groceries the next day. But Benny always provided -- somehow.

Money, to Benny, was the curse of his life. To him, it was a necessary nuisance. He knew he needed a certain amount of it to provide for his wife and children, whom he loved dearly, so he was forced to be concerned with it. But, money, as such, meant nothing to him. Here was a human with a horn who wanted to play -- it was his life, and to have to be governed by monetary worries was to him an imposition on his time. He would turn over his checks to Frances, and let her budget the money, which she did. -- SOMEHOW!

The big trouble in Benny's life was that he lived at the wrong time. Too late for the flush years of the 20's and too soon for the more secure years that followed the last war. I OFTEN THINK HOW FAR BENNY WOULD HAVE GONE -- HAD HE LIVED THE FULL LIFE HE DESERVED!

In the summer of 1942, the Bob Wills band left Tulsa to come to California for playing dates and recordings. As I recall, about eight sides were recorded for Columbia records (Okeh label) with the big band. Three or four of these were never released (and I never knew why). The ones released were: "My Confession", "Ten Years", "Ride With Bob" (blues), and "Who's Heart Are You Breaking Now?". Unfortunately, Benny never took a solo on any of these sides except for a little dixie chorus on "Ten Years". Some collectors thought the trumpet solo on "Ride with Bob" was Benny. But this is not true. Alex Brashear played the solo on this. But Benny's horn is certainly there on first trumpet, swinging the band on all the releases listed above.

The Wills band began to break up in August, 1942, because of the war. About this time, in San Francisco, Lu Watters joined the Navy, and they were desperately looking for someone to replace Lu. At last, here was the perfect spot for Benny, and the best man they could possibly get. Now, Benny would be where he could play as he wanted to play, so Benny came to San Francisco and joined the band. In later years Bert Bales (Watters piano man) said to me, "What a talent. Benny was playing just great. He was an inspiration to all of us!"

Fortunately, about the first week in S.F., the band made an air check, and four tunes are preserved. They were released on G.T.J. "Cake Walkin Babies", "K.C. Stops", "Dipper Mouth Blues", and "Fidgety Feet".

But it wasn't to be. Benny had been in San Francisco hardly three weeks. One night on the bandstand, Benny suddenly became ill and started hemorrhaging. Doctor's verdict: Tuberculosis. Benny returned to Fayetteville to enter a sanitarium, where he remained for over two years. Then he began to get better, even started to play a little on his horn. I talked to him by phone Xmas, 1945. He told me then he felt good, and that he was starting to play again. But this, too, was not to be. A few months later, he had a relapse and died. Everyone lost a great musician, and I lost a wonderful friend. Benny Strickler! A fine musician, a warm, human soul, a gentleman.

\* GOOD TIME JAZZ LABEL (NOW SOLD TO FANTASY LABEL) The End

ED. NOTE- After reading the story above, there is only one comment I could make: "I wish I had written that!" This is the kind of story no jazz critic could have written. It is just a simple story about a warm, friendly musician, by a warm and friendly musician. It was written, not with a typewriter, but with a heart. You can't help but know when you read it, that Benny and Danny were friends, and that Benny's death hurt Danny a lot more than he'd ever say. I have an idea that knowing Benny is very much like knowing Benny, because the only possible way to dislike him, is to never meet him. Anyone who can read the above story without being moved, just can't read properly, and may as well quit. Thanks, Danny, it really "swings".....

Paul E. Affeldt