

BILL ERICKSON

by Dave Greer

Bill Erickson was an extraordinary musician who played in the San Francisco Bay Area for many years. Like so many other fine jazz performers, he died young and without the recognition he deserved.

Bill played piano and trumpet, and at the time of his death in 1967 he was teaching himself guitar. (He was about 38 years old at this time.) He was probably best known for playing piano at Pier 23 in San Francisco in the 1960s alternating gigs with the late great Burt Bales. The Pier was a popular waterfront bar where Bill also lead small groups and many musicians came to jam.

Bill accompanied Barbara Dane, then a rising blues and folk singing star at *Jack's Waterfront Hangout* in San Francisco for several years in the mid-fifties. Barbara recalls that bill was, "open to new ideas and supportive. He was always there with the right thing and the right swing." She believes it was she who dubbed him "Willie the Master," a name which caught on quickly.

The *Monkey Inn* on Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley was another popular jazz club where bill played for some years and where these unissued recordings were made live in January and February of 1962 by jazz fan Alvin Bryant. Earl Scheelar accompanied Bill on the banjo for the first set of these evenings, and on the second and third sets played cornet and clarinet with Brett Runkle on washboard.

Bill's piano playing was also recorded on a job in 1958 with Bob Mielke's Bearcats, the East Bay's premier traditional jazz band. These live recordings were released on Arhoolie Records (#1099) *Bob Mielke's Bearcats Live at the Sail'N*. Mielke, a trombonist, recalls Bill was, "Inspiring to play with," a pianist, "who gave horn players ideas."

Originally impressed by the iconic cornetist, Bix Beiderbecke, Bill developed his joyous sprit and the same flawless musicianship which characterised his piano work. He played trumpet with various groups which often included Mielke, Bill Napier or "Big Boy" Goudie on clarinet, Dick Oxtot on banjo, and Peter Allen on bass.

Jazz critic and musician Dick Hadlock, who played reed instruments with Bill, said that he, "Knew where he was going and how to get there. He knew how to arrange and run a band and was totally reliable."

Bill had studied composition and had some of his works performed by the music department of San Francisco State. He was also an avid chess player and built his own electronic equipment. His old friend Oscar Anderson recalls that Bill constructed a radio which functioned on one tube instead of the usual five. although Anderson has a degree in electrical engineering and a Phd. in physics, he was unable to understand how Bill did it.

Bill was a kind of Renaissance man who also possessed the talented writer's ability to find humor and underlying human truths in everyday life. His narrations of such events could have been printed as short stories with little or no editing.

The recordings on the CD are clean, precise, and swinging. While being scrupulously faithful to the tune, Bill's flow of improvisations upon it seem as much a part of it as do sails unfurling on the spars of a ship. By the time he finishes a tune, we have the feeling that everything that ever needed to be said about it has been said.

Earl Sheelar's light, swinging banjo adds to the forward motion which Bill generates on the piano. The banjo solos and breaks are crisp and occasionally lyrical as on "Wabash Blues."

Bill Erickson will long be remembered as one of the finest of the many musicians who helped to make the 1950s and '60s a golden age of traditional jazz in the San Francisco Bay Area. Those of us privileged to know Bill will never forget his remarkable mind, his insightful humor, his kindness, and his enjoyment of life which he shared so generously both on and off the bandstand. Vaya con Dios, old friend.

Dave Greer

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