

BENNY STRICKLER— A LEGENDARY TRUMPET STYLIST

by Hal Smith

"I enjoyed playing with him...he was devoted to the right kind of jazz and could certainly execute it." —Lu Watters¹

"..People who play ensemble would pray for a lead such as played by Benny Strickler." —Turk Murphy²

"I could tell by looking at him he was a good musician." —Bob Wills³

Trumpeter Benny Strickler died before he was 30 and his professional career spanned only about 10 years. But to Strickler's musical associates and those who heard him play, his stature is as legendary as Bix Beiderbecke's. There are numerous parallels to Beiderbecke in Strickler's tragically short career: both were natural musicians; they were able to inspire any musician to play "over his head"; their presence in a band always resulted in a team spirit; even during desperate times their high musical standards could not be lowered; both lived to play music

and would do so to the detriment of their health. However, Beiderbecke's relations with his family were strained; he had few close friends and his self-destructive tendencies frequently led to missed work. Strickler, by contrast, was a devoted family man with many friends, who rarely drank and never missed a job until a serious illness forced him to stop playing

Strickler and Beiderbecke recorded relatively few commercial sides. But both were truly great artists. In Strickler's case, he was certainly one of the most promising musicians of the New Orleans Revival and he deserves to be mentioned prominently in any history of that musical movement.

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YOUNG MAN WITH A HORN

Benny Strickler was born Jan. 9, 1917 in Fayetteville, Arkansas. He took music lessons at an early age, played in the town band and decided to become a professional musician after graduating from high school in 1935.⁴ Sometime during his musical training, he learned to sightread.⁵ He also played

1. Letter to author, Apr.28, 1977.
2. Jim Goggin, *Turk Murphy: Just For The Record*, San Leandro, San Francisco Traditional Jazz Foundation, 1982, p.4.
3. Charles Townsend, *San Antonio Rose; The Lift And Music Of Bob Wills*, Urbana, University Of Illinois, 1976, p.199.
4. *Benny Strickler and the Yerba Buena Jazz Band*, Good Time Jazz EP-1001 (notes by Lester Koenig).
5. Danny Alguire, *interview* with Hal Smith and Chris Tyle, Beaverton, Oregon, Apr.16, 1977.

along with records of King Oliver, Bix Beiderbecke, Red Nichols and Louis Armstrong.⁶

After deciding to become a professional musician, Strickler and his wife Frances migrated to Los Angeles. Even with his considerable musicianship, there were some lean times, especially after the family expanded to include daughters Diane and Janet. Though he played jobs with Ben Pollack, Joe Venuti, Seger Ellis, Vido Musso and Wingy Manone,⁷ some of the work was with "sweet" hotel-style bands. Strickler's longtime friend and musical colleague Danny Alguire recalled one such job:

"Benny loved jazz...but his first thing was his family....so that's why he played with a bunch of...guys who couldn't play anything...it was a hotel-style band...he stuck it out as long as he could, cause they needed the money, but when he got a little money ahead...one night he just quit. He came home and said, 'I'm sorry, Frances. I just couldn't play with that band anymore. I just couldn't do it.'"⁸

Alguire added that Strickler turned down an offer to work with Artie Shaw, saying "I don't bend notes for anybody."⁹ Alguire recalled, "Benny'd play anything, you know, but he'd have to do it righteous."¹⁰

AS GOOD AS HARRY JAMES

During his stay in Los Angeles, Strickler played and recorded with Seger Ellis' Choirs Of Brass; a big band with an unusual, experimental instrumentation: four trumpets, four trombones, three rhythm—and one clarinet! Irving Fazola was the lone reedman, surrounded by a formidable lineup which included, at various times, trumpeters Nate Kazebier and Don Anderson, trombonist King Jackson, pianist Stan Wrightsman and drummer Fred Higuera. The Choirs Of Brass recorded only six sides for DECCA, but reportedly made "large batches of transcriptions."¹¹ While the DECCA sides have never been reissued, the 78s circulate among collectors. On these recordings, Strickler's only solo is heard on *Bees Knees*.¹² However, on the transcriptions he played superb choruses on *Clarinet Marmalade*, *I Would Do Anything For*

You, After You've Gone and especially *Bugle Call Rag and Copenhagen*.¹³ Strickler's sound, attack and beat on these solos is very similar to Harry James; a natural reference during the flowering of the swing era. Some years later, a friend asked Strickler if he thought he would ever be as good as Harry James. Strickler responded, "Hell, I'm as



Hal Smith Collection

One of the few known photographs of Benny Strickler, and probably the best.

good as James right now!"¹⁴

A MEETING OF THE MINDS

While Strickler continued to toil in Los Angeles, a musical development was taking place which would shortly have a great impact on his career. It occurred when bandleader Bob Wills added brass, reeds, piano and drums to the Texas Playboys—formerly a string band. The resulting "Western Swing" amassed a huge following in the Southwest, where the band performed live. Their fan base spread as the Playboys' hit records and their daily broadcasts carried the music to Dust Bowl migrants who moved west during the Depression. Wills continued to add horns and hot tunes and his musicians interests were drawn towards the popular songs and big bands of the day. By the early '40s, the Texas Playboys included sidemen who had worked with the orchestras

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, Townsend, *op. cit.*; Koenig, *op. cit.*; *down beat*, Aug. 18, 1950; Danny Alguire, "Tribute To Benny," *Jazz Record*, November, 1960.

8. Alguire, *interview*.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. (Anonymous) notes to Seger Ellis' Choirs Of Brass, Alamac LP QSR-2408.

12. Decca 1350 (cassette tape of 78 rpm; author's collection).

13. Alamac QSR-2408.

14. Richard A. Oxtot, "The Story Of The Yerba Buena Band," *Jazz Music*, n.d., p. 12.

of Red Nichols, Jack Teagarden, Gene Krupa and Ben Pollack. The Playboys could still play frontier fiddle breakdowns for small-town crowds, but with brass, reeds and a swinging rhythm section, they could also play the most up-to-date pop songs. Wills himself said, "We're hep. We're the most versatile band in America. Sure we give 'em western music...but we give 'em rhumbas, too. And when there are jitterbugs in the joint we get 'em so happy they can't stay on the floor."¹⁵ On Apr. 16, 1940, the Texas Playboys recorded two revolutionary sides: *New San Antonio Rose* became a popular mega-hit. Neither "Rose" nor its session-mate *Big Beaver* contained any identifying "western" markings, besides Wills' spoken comments.¹⁶ But *Big Beaver* did feature smooth section work, Wayne Johnson's fine sax chorus, Tubby Lewis' fiery trumpet solo and driving rhythm which opened musicians' eyes and ears across the country. Danny Alguire said, "It was a hell of a record. I realized I was not aware of how far western music had come."¹⁷ In Los Angeles, Benny Strickler was also knocked out by the superb musicianship, hot solos and swinging beat. He decided that he wanted to play trumpet with the Texas Playboys, and the sooner, the better.¹⁸ When he found out that Wills and the band were in town, staying at the Hollywood Plaza Hotel, he quickly went to the hotel and managed to corner Wills in the lobby. He said, "Mr. Wills, I'm Benny Strickler and I want a job in your band!" Wills made a characteristically quick but sound decision and hired Strickler on the spot.¹⁹

Strickler soon became a force in the Texas Playboys, helping to keep the jazz content high in the Playboys' performances²⁰ and even contributing to the band's theme song, *Let's Ride With Bob*, which is based on the 11th and 12th bars of the second theme of Kid Ory's *Savoy Blues*.²¹

Late in 1941, he was also able to recommend several musicians to Wills, including cornetists Danny Alguire and Alex Brashear, trombonist Neil Duer and clarinetist

"Woody" Wood.²² Alguire wrote,

"...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...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 Neil on trombone playing the traditional small group things. This was Benny at his best, a delight to hear...Here, too, was an insight into Benny himself. His concern was the general overall 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...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."²³

Later, Alguire said that when Strickler wanted to discuss the best way to play a certain number, or passage, he would tell the band, "Let's have a meeting of the minds."²⁴

Either just before or during his stay with the Texas Playboys, Strickler developed an admiration for the playing of Yank Lawson, the featured trumpeter with Bob Crosby's Orchestra.²⁵ Coincidentally or not, the Texas Playboys soon took on a distinct Crosby sound. The Crosby influence—particularly that of his eight-piece "Bobcats" unit—was widespread. Tommy Dorsey inaugurated the "Clambake Seven," Woody Herman fielded a Bobcats-like group, Benny Goodman occasionally brought a six-piece Dixieland unit "down front" to spell the big band and in Oakland, a young trumpeter named Lu Watters fronted an Orchestra at Sweet's Ballroom which played the Crosby style in both big and small-

15. Townsend, *op. cit.*, p.152.

16. *Bob Wills Discography*, Vol. 6 (Frontier Music cassette).

17. Townsend, *op. cit.*, p.198.

18. *Ibid.*, p.199.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Alguire, *interview*.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, Alguire, "Tribute To Benny," *op. cit.*; Townsend, *op. cit.*, pp.198-200.

23. Alguire, "Tribute To Benny," *op. cit.*

24. Alguire, *interview*.

25. *Ibid.*

band settings. Alguire said that the band played "a lot of Bob Crosby Dixieland...Of course Bob Crosby was going real good then and we all liked him."²⁶ Comparisons between the Wills and Crosby bands appeared, even in such publications as *down beat*.²⁷ In July, 1942, the Texas Playboys recorded with the "dream band" Danny Alguire described. Unfortunately for hot jazz fans, the A&R man insisted on featuring strings, reeds and vocals as the brass players cooled their heels. *Let's Ride With Bob*, Wills' theme song (largely written by Strickler) was waxed, but Strickler generously handed the solo to Alex Brashear. However, Johnny Bond's *Ten Years* made the whole



Photograph from the Rosetta Wills Collection, Courtesy of Tom Morley
Benny Strickler in a previously unpublished photograph of Bob Wills' Texas Playboys (Cain's Dancing Academy, Tulsa, Oklahoma, ca. 1942). Benny is the trumpet player closer to the vocalist.

session worthwhile. Brashear's arrangement includes a "sweet" opening chorus, but the hot jazz bubbles just below the surface. Following Leon Huff's second vocal, the "Dixieland band" comes flying out of the chute like a bucking bronco, sparked by Strickler's take-no-prisoners trumpet.²⁸ And—best of all—there are *two* takes! On the second take Strickler plays an entirely different lead on the "Dixieland" passage.²⁹ Also recorded, but unissued at the time, was *When It's Honeysuckle Time In The Valley*, which features an almost identical arrangement, complete with another Strickler-led "Dixieland" chorus.³⁰ To say that Strickler was merely imitating Yank Lawson on

these sides would be an oversimplification, but the Lawson influence is unmistakable.³¹ Still, Strickler retained an interest in other hornmen. Danny Alguire remembered that once, on a Wills dance job, Strickler turned to him 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."³² Alguire also mentioned that Strickler was a great admirer of Lu Watters' trumpet playing.³³ He had worked with Bob Helm in territory bands during the '30s.³⁴ And Watters himself thought that Strickler may

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26. Townsend, *op. cit.*, p.200.

27. *down beat*, Oct.15, 1942.

28. *Bob Wills Discography*, Vol.9 (Frontier Music cassette).

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. To hear the Lawson approach, listen to *Mourn in' Blues* (Billy Butterfield, trumpet, with Bob Crosby's Bobcats, *Strange Enchantment*, Halcyon DHDL-127); and *Bing Crosby And Some Jazz Friends*, Decca GRD-603 which includes trumpeter Cappy Lewis with Woody Herman on *I Ain't Got Nobody* and Lawson himself sounding remarkably like Strickler (!) on *When My Dreamboat Comes Home* (with Bob Crosby).

32. Alguire, "Tribute To Benny," *op. cit.*

33. Alguire, *interview*.

34. Chris Tyle, notes to "A Tribute To Benny Strickler," Stomp Off SOS-1235.

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have sat in with the Sweet's Ballroom Orchestra.³⁵

The time Strickler spent with the Texas Playboys was rewarding for him in a number of ways. However, the constant playing became a detriment to his health. Alguire said,

"Benny was always thin and he never ate right. He was just so busy playing that he didn't think about eating. Every once in a while he'd say, 'Gee, I'm hungry. Let's get a hamburger or a bowl of chili'...He just lived to play, you know. So that lead to TB, I'm sure. He never could get any meat on him. God, he was just a beanpole. About six feet tall and I don't think he weighed 135 pounds."³⁶

MAKING EVERY NOTE COUNT

The good times with the Texas Playboys came to an abrupt end as World War II and the draft depleted the ranks of Wills' band. By August, 1942, the Playboys were temporarily disbanded. But an offer came to Strickler to work with the Yerba Buena Jazz Band at the Dawn Club in San Francisco. When Strickler arrived in town, Yerba Buenans Lu Watters, Bob Scobey, Turk Murphy and Wally Rose were already in uniform. The wartime YBJB consisted of: Bill Bardin-trombone; Bob Helm and Ellis Home-clarinets; Burt Bales-piano; Russ Bennett-banjo and Clancy Hayes-drums. Bob Helm, at least, was familiar with his playing. Others in the group were likely aware of Strickler's reputation, even if they had not heard him play. Any questions about his ability to play the San Francisco style were soon put to rest. Decades later, his Yerba Buena colleagues were still raving about the way he played with the band.³⁷ He brought along a huge repertoire from his stint with the Texas Playboys—western tunes, blues, novelty numbers—and was able to not only read the YBJB charts, but to play them flawlessly, with great feeling. One writer who heard Strickler with the band wrote, "...Benny's feeling, direct attack and wealth of ideas made Strickler an immediate success...Strickler's short stay at the (Dawn) club produced

some of the best jazz ever heard by the faithful, in particular one evening in September when Watters and Murphy drove over from their naval base and sat in..."³⁸ Lu Watters wrote, "I have nothing but fond memories of him as a person and a player. I enjoyed playing with him on a few sessions...he was very fond of the two trumpet thing."³⁹ On the few surviving acetates of Strickler with the Yerba Buena Jazz Band, he played a style which was a wonderful blend of Louis Armstrong, King Oliver and Lu Watters.⁴⁰ Turk Murphy described Strickler's playing during his brief stay with the Yerba Buenans: "My first recollection of Benny was a tremendous one. He was a musician capable of playing most anything. He was, in a corny term, all heart. He had the knack for playing a very simple lead line and making every note count...Benny could play just a very few sparse notes and make them mean so much."⁴¹ Murphy also said that a jazz fan, Bill Colburn, played a recording by Strickler with the YBJB for Bunk Johnson, who was convinced that it was King Oliver.⁴² Colburn may have been the person who convinced Strickler to donate one of his unused mouthpieces to Bunk Johnson.⁴³

Unfortunately, Strickler had been with YBJB only a short time before he became seriously ill and was diagnosed as having tuberculosis. Turk Murphy recalled, "He was ill on all the things that you

*Decades later,
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band.*

might hear [the airshots from the Dawn Club]. He didn't die from that, but he died from the effects of it—weak lungs; he died of pneumonia. But when he came in to replace [Watters]...he was sick then. He would play some of these things that he played with his head down

35. Letter to author, Apr.16, 1977.

36. Alguire, *interview*.

37. Goggin, *op. cit.*, pp.3-4; Alguire, "Tribute To Benny" (quote from Burt Bales); Tyle, *op. cit.*

38. Oxtot, "The Story Of The Yerba Buena Band," *op. cit.*

39. Letter to author, Apr.16, 1977.

40. Lu Watters' Yerba Buena Jazz Band, *The Complete Good Time Jazz Recordings*, Good Time Jazz 4GTJCD-4409-2; Goggin, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

41. Goggin, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Mike Hazeldine, *Bill Russell's American Music*, New Orleans, Jazzology Press, 1993, p.13.

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trying to keep himself together.”⁴⁴ Playing under extreme circumstances was nothing new for the trumpeter.

Benny could play just a very few sparse notes and make them mean so much

—Turk Murphy

Danny Alguire told of an occasion with the Texas Playboys, where Strickler was afflicted simultaneously with a monstrous fever blister and a split lip, but continued to play lead and all his assigned solos.⁴⁵ However, in the still-

medically-primitive '40s, there were no cures for TB. Strickler returned to Arkansas and entered a sanatorium. Eventually he regained some strength and began to practice the trumpet again. He kept in touch with friends such as Alguire and Burt Bales and made plans for a return to San Francisco.⁴⁶ But he was unable to survive the ravages of the disease and he died on Dec. 8, 1946.⁴⁷

THE LEGACY

Benny Strickler's musical legacy was preserved through performances by his Texas Playboys section-mates Danny Alguire and Alex Brashear. Alguire recorded with T. Texas Tyler's Western Swing band in the late '40s.⁴⁸ His later recordings with the Firehouse

Five Plus Two—especially *San Antonio Rose*⁴⁹ illustrate Strickler's traditional jazz concept—playing simply and directly with a compelling beat.⁵⁰ Brashear stayed in the Western Swing field, becoming an indispensable part of the Bob Wills ensemble between 1944 and 1949. He made dozens of commercial sides, transcriptions, airshots and films with the Texas Playboys, in addition to arranging for the band. His thrilling solo on Wills' 1949 record of *Boot Heel Drag*⁵¹ is redolent of Strickler's big, full tone, driving lead and incomparable beat. Brashear came out of retirement in the '70s to record with Merle Haggard⁵² and Bob Wills' brother Johnnie Lee.⁵³

In the late '40s, Lu Watters' playing occasionally recalled Strickler's⁵⁴ and even studio trumpeter Mannie Klein played a similar style on the hit record of Tex Williams' *Smoke, Smoke, Smoke That Cigarette*.⁵⁵

More recently, Chris Tyle has produced and played on a tribute to Strickler.⁵⁶ Hopefully, recordings such as this, plus CD reissues of the 1942 Dawn Club airshots, Danny Alguire with the Firehouse Five and Alex Brashear with Bob Wills may stimulate an interest in Benny Strickler's music. If a new Strickler disciple emerged in the current jazz scene, that would be the greatest tribute of all to a legendary trumpet stylist.

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Note: All recordings cited in the footnotes are CDs unless otherwise noted.

44. Goggin, *op. cit.*, p.3.

45. Alguire, *interview*.

46. Alguire, "Tribute To Benny"; Letter from Benny Strickler to Burt Bales (n.d.; author's collection).

47. Koenig, notes, GTJ EP-1001.

48. T. Texas Tyler, *Cowgirlboy Records LP-5020; King CD-721; Bronco CD-9012*.

49. *Firehouse Five Plus Two Story*, Good Time Jazz GTJCD-22055.

50. Alguire is in especially Strickler-like form on *South (Firehouse Five Story)*; *Birmingham Papa (Firehouse Five Plus Two Goes South, Good Time Jazz GTCD12018-2)*; *I Can't Believe That You're In Love With Me (Firehouse Five Plus Two Plays For Lovers, Good Time Jazz GTCD-12-14-2)*; and *When My Dreamboat Comes Home (Firehouse Five Plus Two Goes To Sea, Good Time Jazz GTJCD-10028-2)*. When the Firehouse Five played *Kansas City Stomp* in the 1960s, Alguire used to play Strickler's solo as heard on the Dawn Club airshot (private tape; author's collection).

51. *Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys Anthology, 1935-1973*, Rhino R2-70744. Brashear also is heard on many of the Bob Wills "Tiffany Transcriptions" which have been reissued on CD on the Rhino label.

52. Merle Haggard, *My Tribute To The Best Damn Fiddle Player In The World*, Capitol LP ST-638.

53. Johnnie Lee Wills *Reunion*, Flying Fish LP FF-069.

54. *Kansas City Stomp (Lu Watters' Yerba Buena Jazz Band At Hambone Kelly's, 1949-50, Merry Makers MMRC CD-10)*; *How Come You Do Me Like You Do?, I Never Knew I Could Love Anybody (Lu Watters' Yerba Buena Jazz Band Live At Hambone Kelly's: 1950, GHB BCD-93)*.

55. *Tex Williams And His Western Caravan*, Capitol 7248-36184-2-2.

56. *Chris Tyle's New Orleans Rover Boys: A Tribute To Benny Strickler*, Stomp Off SOS-1235.