

A HEYDAY OF JAZZ IN SAN FRANCISCO © William Carter 2014

"Hey, Oxtot! You guys want to keep working here or not?" The jazz joint fell into a hush. Emilio's phlegm-filled anger settled down with the smoke over the startled patrons and

to be linked to the mafia, eyed the transaction approvingly. After closing, the cop on the beat (Robert Mitchum) sometimes came in for a friendly free drink

wobbly tables.

If this was film noir, Emilio was Sydney Greenstreet. Perched In his wheelchair near the cash register, with that eternal blanket over his legs (he was widely thought to keep a gun under the blanket) he glared at us as cornetist Dick Oxtot (Peter Lorrie) led us quickly back onto the bandstand. At the piano Bill Erickson (Humphey Bogart) flashed me a covert sidelong smile as Oxtot stomped off Rosetta.

A drunken sailor staggered in from the sidewalk through the dangling beads that served as a door, then plopped onto a bar stool beside a sexy blonde who was showing him a lot of leg through a slit up the side of her tight skirt. The sailor bought them both a drink, and paid, before realizing she was a manikin. Emilio, generally believed



Vocalist Jimmy Rushing at Sugar Hill, San Francisco, circa 1960 Photograph © William Carter

while the bartender (Jimmy Stewart) topped up half empty whiskey bottles with a little extra water.

Everything was normal in San Francisco.

No one knew who had named the place Burp Hollow, but it fit. A seamy hole-in-the-wall on Broadway -- the booming entertainment strip of North Beach — this joint was near the bottom of the long list of jazz rooms flourishing in San Francisco around 1960. A few doors down was the modernist club, Jazz Limited. Across the street was Barbara Dane's folk music haven, Sugar Hill. Some blocks down, at 99 Broadway, Turk Murphy's first Earthquake McGoons opened in 1961 at the site of the former Sail 'N (where I had played a couple of years earlier, after having been on the road with Turk in 1955). Nearby, on

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Embarcadero, were Kid Ory's On the Levee (formerly the Tin Angel) and Pier 23. Farther away were the Club Hangover (trad jazz) and The Blackhawk (modern) and after-hours Fillmore joints (modern). Can't remember if the banjo-featuring Red Garter was still there, and think this was before most of the strip joints had sprung up. If the scene sounds extraordinary now, it seemed as normal then as that same policeman who I also saw after hours at Sugar Hill.

I think the Burp Hollow gig was Fridays. I worked it regularly for a string of months. Walt Yost was on tuba, Oxtot doubled on banjo and cornet, Erickson doubled on piano and trumpet. One or two others came and went — most of us living, like me, in Berkeley. Erickson didn't drive, so I often drove him across the bridge to the gig. I kept mostly on the periphery of these jazz circles, concentrating on becoming a photographer. But I did hang out a lot at Sugar Hill, where I took the photos on these pages of Jimmy Rushing.

I'm so glad Dave Radlauer has dug up the memories of Bill Erickson that form the backbone of this issue. Bill was a fine musician and one of the tenderest, soft-spoken, humorous, understated people I've ever known.

The Frisco Cricket

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Brownie McGee at Sugar Hill, San Francisco, circa 1960 Photograph © William Carter

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Spring 2014

ing an early Mozart

Tragically

REMEMBERING BILL ERICKSON, "WILLIE THE MASTER" (1929 - 1967)

by Dave Radlauer

"Erickson, usually erroneously labelled a Dixieland jazzman, was in every way a comprehensive modern *musician, performer and composer whose interests* ranged from the blues to Bartok." -- Phil Elwood, San Francisco Examiner, 12.1.67

rumpus room above Earl Scheelar's VW repair garage, where he frequently rehearsed.

Trombone player Jim Leigh showered glowing praise on Erickson in his jazz memoir, Heaven on the Side, calling him the best bandleader he ever worked for, and a musical genius able to write a score mimick-

LOSING A MASTER

When gifted jazz pianist, trumpet player, and bandleader Bill Erickson committed suicide in late 1967 it was a great shock to the San Francisco Bay Area jazz community. Known locally as Willie the Master, the soft-spoken popular musician, who had been running combos and jam sessions for about a decade, was suddenly gone.

The trauma was worst among his closest musician friends in the East Bay: Bob Mielke (trombone, leader), P.T. Stanton (trumpet), Dick Oxtot (banjo, cornet, leader), Bill Napier (clarinet), Earl Schee-



Erickson at the piano, Monkey Inn, c. 1962. Photo by William Carter, courtesy Earl Scheelar.

and his music almost completely disappeared. But Bill Erickson's catalytic role in Bay Area music can now be reconstructed with tapes from the personal libraries of Dave Greer and Bob Mielke. For the first time an extensive **Bill Erickson** web page containing music, photos and memories brings his dynamic musical life into clear focus.

JOLLY TIMES AT THE BERKELEY JAZZ HOUSE

About 1956 Dave Greer sublet a room from Erickson, who was informally managing an old Victorian in Berkeley. A lifelong journalist and revival-jazz en-

lar (cornet, clarinet, banjo, leader) and Barbara Dane (singer, guitar, leader). Having recently interviewed some of them, it's clear that his passing still hurts, and it's understandable.

Erickson had been deeply involved in the East Bay jazz revival dating back to the late 1940s. In the late 1950s he co-hosted freewheeling jams and jazz parties at the "Jazz House" in Berkeley with his close friend, Dave Greer, who often had his tape recorder rolling. For years he led fine jam sessions at Pier 23 in San Francisco, and combos in the East Bay at Monkey Inn. He was participant at the musical parties in the

The Frísco Crícket

thusiast, Dave Greer's tapes and memories are key to unlocking Erickson's long forgotten story:

"I took to calling the place the Jazz House, this was the party place. It was big and it had a big back yard. There was another Victorian very much like it across Blake Street, and we used to have wonderful big parties that would involve both these houses. Sometimes we would have a band playing in the front room, in the big kitchen, and in the back yard. Then we'd spread across the street. They'd begin about 2:00 in the afternoon, and get rolling; they'd roll right through midnight into the morning hours."



Erickson and Mielke, from a golf-themed promotion Mielke tried in 1951, The Fairway Rhythm Kings. From the archives of SFTJF.

They were really amazing events. Many Bay Area musicians and most of the East Bay jazz crowd were there: Bob Mielke, Erickson, P.T. Stanton, Pete Allen. Oxtot lived a block over on Dwight, and Frank Goudie was there a good deal. They were the regulars."

Greer's tape recordings from the Jazz House transmit the effervescence of the music, personnel and spirits: "See See Rider," (probably Walter Yost, Goudie and Napier, Mielke, Erickson, Pete Allen).

"These were big and very jolly events. The women would cook up red beans and rice or spaghetti and meatballs, some kind of mass feeding, and big bowls of salad. We drank dollar-a-gallon Sergeant burgundy, which wasn't as bad as it sounds. We had many wonderful jazz sessions there."

Among the extant tapes are reels from parties with Bill on piano featuring Frank Goudie (clarinet) and P.T. Stanton (cornet), "Say Si Si." Or cornet player Ray Ronnei, heard with Erickson, Goudie and Bob Mielke (trombone): "Just Because," "Under the Bamboo Tree." But by about 1960 the Jazz House was torn down.

(Note: The recordings presented here were captured a half century ago at jam sessions, parties or live gigs. They're offered as one-of-a-kind historic artifacts despite musical and technical flaws.)

PIER 23 JAMS

Bill was probably best known for leading combos and jams at Pier 23 on the San Francisco Waterfront. He deftly assumed the piano bench there after Burt Bales was badly injured, running wonderful jam sessions through the early-1960s with a spectrum of the Bay Area's finest jazz revival musicians.

Writer, broadcaster and jazz musician, Richard Hadlock, who played reeds with Bill at Pier 23 said, "he knew where he was going and how to get there. He knew how to arrange and run a band and was totally reliable." Hadlock lists trumpeters Muggsy Spanier, Byron Berry, Jack Minger, and Ernie Figueroa (also bass), drummers Vince Hickey and Cuz Cousineau, Darnell Howard (clarinet), and Jerry Butzen (trombone) among those sitting-in.

The Frísco Crícket

Newly available tapes of Pier 23 sessions led by Erickson 1960-63 validate its reputation as the foremost session bar for jazz musicians of pre-bop tendencies in the Bay Area. The music varied in style according to the sensibilities of the line-up: horn players Ray Ronnei, Amos White and Robin (Bob) Hodes; clarinetists Frank Goudie and Bill Napier; Jim Leigh and Bob Mielke (trombones), Dave Clarkson (tenor sax); Pete Allen, Squire Girsback or others (string bass); Jimmy Carter (drums):

- "Sweet Sue" (White, Hodes, Goudie, Erickson, Carter)
- "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (Ronnei, Goudie, Leigh, Erickson, Allen)
- "Has Anybody Seen my Gal" (White, Hodes, Leigh, Goudie, Clarkson, Erickson, Girsback).

Directing from the keyboard, Erickson's manner was low-key but firm. When necessary he kept sessions on track with a wilting glare not unlike the infamous "Benny Goodman ray." Attentive listeners may notice that jazz at the Pier was neither San Francisco Traditional, nor New Orleans-revival. Bill's jams generated a swinging musical hybrid encompassing a range of styles and eras, from New Orleans and Kansas City, to the cusp of Bop:

- "L-O-U-I-S-I-A-N-I-A" (Ronnei, Goudie, Erickson, Allen, Carter)
- "You're Driving Me Crazy" (Goudie, Erickson, Carter)
- "The King" (Hodes, Leigh, Goudie, Clarkson, Erickson, Girsback, Carter).

(Note: The roster of Pier 23 personnel above is based solely on available documentation.)

SWING COMBO AT MONKEY INN, 1961-62

The Monkey Inn tapes are Crown jewels of Erickson performances. Drawn primarily from Bob Mielke's personal collection, the quartets and quintets are extraordinary in performance and sound quality. Featuring Mielke (trombone), Frank Goudie (clarinet), and sometimes Jerry Blumberg (cornet) -- they are marred only by a poorly tuned piano. These artists never sounded happier. Bill lays down a strong bass line supporting the ensemble with drummer, "Wonderful Don" Marchant: "Love Nest," "Breeze," "Ice Cream."

Retired trombone player Mielke recently confided to me that much of the music he and Bill were playing, "was really Swing, but most people didn't know it." Bob learned a lot from Goudie and Erickson on that job, and reports that in a band Bill had "two manners:"

"One was when there was a bass player present in the group, a light Teddy Wilson sort of style. But if there were no bass player present, then he came on like gangbusters with a strong left hand. He was trying to be a real rhythm section unto himself. When I first heard these after many years I was astonished by how good Erickson sounded."

The Monkey Inn combo featured Frank "Big Boy" Goudie playing clarinet, repatriated after three decades abroad. The six-and-a-half-foot Louisiana native was never more eloquent, stretching out on expressive solos in his distinctive New Orleans Creole style. Recorded in stereo this is the highest quality sound pickup we have of his rich personal tone: "My Blue Heaven,"



Recovered contact prints of Earl Scheelar (cornet), Bret Runkle (washboard) and Bill Erickson at Monkey Inn. Shot for Earl Scheelar by William Carter, 1962.



In a trio with Barbara Dane and Dick Oxtot c. 1957, Bill explored folk, blues, gospel and other genres. It may have been Dane who dubbed him, Willie the Master.

Photo from Bob Mielke: A Life in Jazz, Jim Goggin.

"Petite Fleur," "Old Spinning Wheel."

Likewise, Erickson was providing an excellent forum for cornet player Jerry Blumberg. Originally a protégé of Bunk Johnson, he later came under the influence of New York Dixieland-swing stylist, Bobby Hackett. But he appeared on very few discs before leaving music for other pursuits in the late-1960s. Recalls Mielke: "He was a somewhat delicate player I suppose . . . not a powerhouse. But he played a beautiful lead that was fun to work around, he was very inventive."

Blumberg cleverly incorporated several contrasting horn styles into his own fresh sound. Full of surprising little tricks, he skilfully asserts leadership without aggressiveness: "Over the Waves," "Japanese Sandman," "Clarinet Marmalade."

Bill directed other fine Monkey Inn combinations such as this one with Walter Yost playing very good cornet (though he's much better known for playing tuba), Earl Scheelar (clarinet), Mielke (trombone), and Bret Runkle (washboard), February, 1962:

- "1919 March"
- "When Erastus Plays his Old Kazoo"
- "You Always Hurt the One You Love"
- A word from the recordist (Dave Greer).

Over the years Erickson's valued piano, trumpet and organizing skills were called upon for various recording sessions: Jack Sheedy and Bob Mielke (early 1950s), an unissued project of Hadlock's, and the notable Sam Charters Washboard Band, Plays the Music of Clarence Williams (1957-58, first released in 2009).

PIANO SOLOIST

There were plenty of occasions when Bill was piano soloist, or playing with only a rhythm instrument or two. Sometimes at Monkey Inn he held forth without horns: Earl Scheelar playing banjo or Bret Runkle washboard. In this mode he played a broad and rollicking style with flashes of Jess Stacy and Arthur Schutt: "Big Butter and Egg Man," "After You've Gone," "Wabash Blues," "Sister Kate," "Winin' Boy," "When You're Smiling," "Robert E. Lee."

Dave Greer once prevailed upon Erickson for a solo session taped in Scheelar's rumpus room. He describes Bill's initial perspective on jazz as "Bixian," and requested a couple of tunes associated with Beiderbecke. Multiple variations, edited here into composite takes, offer insight on his musical process: "Big Boy," "Tia Juana," "I Used to Love You." With an Ericksonian flourish, he added this witty ode to a popular condom brand of the day, "Green Light."

ELUSIVE TRUMPET STYLE

Only a limited set of examples of Erickson playing trumpet survive on tape or disc. Equally proficient on horn or keyboard during the Fifties, he gradually played more piano and less trumpet in the Sixties. The musicians I've asked to characterize his trumpet style find it elusive to define. His earliest horn on disc was a straightforward lead for Mielke's 1951 band, with Bill Napier (clarinet), Jerry Stanton (piano), John Schuler (string bass) and Jack Lowe (drums): "Crazy Chords," "Charleston,"

As a trumpet man Erickson was neither selfish nor shy, never showed off, and tastefully supported the ensemble. Dave Greer suggests that Bill evolved from his initial Bixian stance, was highly adaptable, and gradually developed his own style. A Pier 23 session with Bill leading the front line in tight formation, is a rousing demonstration of his trumpet sound: "Love Nest," "Original Dixieland One-Step," "Darktown Strutter's Ball" (Erickson, Mielke, Napier, Oxtot, Allen, Carter).

For a while around 1959 Erickson played piano or horn at Burp Hollow: a dive on Broadway in San Francisco owned by a thoroughly unpleasant former Chicago mobster. One outstanding tape from this gig contains the quintessence of East Bay players: Erickson on trumpet, Napier, Mielke, Oxtot and Pete Allen. Drummer Max Leavitt was not part of this coterie. The tradingfours and paired-up riffs played behind soloists were emblematic of Erickson-led sessions. Blending well with the ensemble, Bill's sound was muscular and sometimes beautiful: "Darktown Strutter's Ball," "Origi-nal Dixieland One-Step," "L-O-U-I-S-I-A-N-I-A." Sung by an unknown vocalist, "Blues at the Hollow" is a rare and satisfying example of his blues on horn.



Erickson, trumpet at Burp Hollow, San Francisco, 1959. L to R: Mielke, Erickson, bassist Pete Allen barely visible, Oxtot, Napier. Photo from Bob Mielke: A Life in Jazz, Jim Goggin.

"SOME KIND OF GENIUS"

Trombone player Jim Leigh who ran with Erickson's crowd after about 1960 wrote it up in his colorful jazz memoir. Fascinated by his wit, intelligence, and vast musical gifts, he titled a chapter about Bill, Some Kind of Genius:

"Erickson was one of the best leaders I have ever played for... He led by example, he led by temperament (but without being in the least temperamental). He wanted to play honest music in a relaxed and congenial environment. He enjoyed pleasing listeners regardless of their level of jazz expertise.

Erickson himself never showed off at the keyboard; he played no dazzling speciality numbers. He always played very, very well, and always served the band in all respects. As a soloist he was neither greedy nor shy, and he rarely if ever repeated himself." Jim describes Bill composing for an octet around 1963; his complex music was played by top-notch local musicians who gathered weekly: "a rehearsal band . . . just for the fun, the exercise, and to give him a chance to work off some of his musicianship."

Leigh once encountered a music professor Erickson had studied with at San Francisco State in the 1950s. Bill had come to him with the score of a Mozart symphony, saying he could write one. The prof demurred suggesting, "someday you might." But darned if Bill didn't do it. "He got the whole thing. It was just an early symphony . . . [but] Mozart could have written it. I really do believe . . . that he was some kind of genius." Jim Leigh could only agree.

Erickson was broadly engaged in music beyond revival-jazz, and was often heard at parties with Dave Greer and wife Rae, or others. Local musicians would bring him solos on record they wanted transcribed to sheet music, and he kept abreast of modern developments in jazz. Toward the end he was teaching himself



Bill Erickson, c. 1966. Photo by, and courtesy of Dave Greer.

guitar.

Bill had numerous interests outside music. He was a decent cook, played chess, and was a popular raconteur who composed stories of great humor and wit. He was avidly fascinated with electronics and had a workbench full of experimental projects.

SUDDEN EXIT, 1967

Why did it all come to a sudden and shocking end with Erickson's suicide at age 38? There may not be a simple answer. Emotional depression, frequently associated with suicide, cannot be ruled out. Dave Greer has, if not an explanation, some thoughts on the matter:

"I think Erickson wanted to go beyond where he was musically. He played the same kind of piano in the same kind of places many years. I think he was tired of it. He would have liked to have gone on to something else, but I don't think he could find it.

That was probably a great frustration to him; it might have a been a major contributor to his exit from this world. Although the immediate cause was some slutty waitress, it was maybe a sense he was going nowhere."

After Erickson died, the Bay Area jazz community mounted a enormous memorial concert in December 1967. Held at Earthquake McGoon's and Pier 23, it f funded a music scholarship in Erickson's name for San Francisco State University music students.

Organized by Bob Mielke, it was the final chapter of Erickson's life. The vast roster included the jazz bands of Mielke, Napier, Wally Rose, Earl Scheelar, Burt Bales, Ted Shaffer, Ev Farey and Red Gillham. Special guests included pianist Joe Sullivan in a combo featuring Byron Berry (trumpet); singers Pat Yankee, Carol Leigh and Claire Austin; pianist Norma Teagarden; Dick Oxtot, Bob Helm, Amos White, Vince Cattolica, and others.

RECALLING A LOST MASTER

For about a decade, Bill Erickson was catalyst in the Bay Area area for good times and great jazz; his Jazz House parties, jam sessions and gigs provided

a congenial setting for musicians to freely express themselves. But the scarcity of recordings and reverberation of his pointless suicide have long obscured understanding of his dynamic role and authoritative musicianship.

Erickson was part of a second wave of revival-jazz musicians, active during the Fifties, Sixties and beyond, who are underrepresented in biography and reissue. Distinct from the San Francisco Traditional style that preceded and inspired them, this generation of talented players created a unique regional music of great charm and swing. I hope this article and related web pages may help renew interest in the legacy of these musicians among whom Bill Erickson, Willie the Master, stood first among equals.

My great thanks to Mr. Dave Greer who generously provided access to his rich trove of tapes, memories, and artifacts, as did Bob Mielke. Thanks also to Earl Scheelar and Richard Hadlock for corroboration and assistance.

You're invited to further explore this story at the Jazz Rhythm web site where you'll find collected for the first time an extensive Erickson archive celebrating this gifted musician and his contemporaries.

(continued on page 10 for sources and credits)

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Erickson's fine Bach Stradivarius trumpet, kept in working order all these years by Dave Greer.

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