

# A Strickler Family Scrapbook—Epilogue

by Hal Smith

*Editor's Note: As the "Strickler Family Scrapbook" series of articles unfolded over the past three issues of The Frisco Cricket, the information contained therein, while answering many questions about trumpeter Benny Strickler's life, prompted new questions. These were posed to clarinetist Bob Helm, one of the last living musicians to have worked with Strickler. His answers were more than sufficiently interesting to warrant a formal interview with Helm and trombonist Bill Bardin, another veteran of the "wartime" Yerba Buena Jazz Band in which Strickler played. The results of this interview, conducted by Hal Smith, follow.*

On April 2, 2002, I spoke with two great musicians in the San Francisco jazz tradition, clarinetist Bob Helm and trombonist Bill Bardin. They're actual living legends of the music who played with another legendary San Francisco musician, the great trumpeter Benny Strickler. I believe these two gentlemen are probably the last two anywhere who actually got to work with Benny Strickler in the wartime version of the Yerba Buena Jazz Band. We spoke about Strickler's career, what brought him to San Francisco and his all-too-brief stay in the wartime version of the Yerba Buena Jazz Band.

It was a real pleasure for me to talk with two of my favorite musicians who participated in some of my favorite recordings of San Francisco music—the sides of Benny Strickler with the Yerba Buena band. I first heard them as a teenager and I've never gotten over it. I think it's some of the most thrilling music to come out of that entire style.

We're very fortunate that there are recordings of Benny Strickler. There were so many great trumpet players who didn't leave much at all from this or any style: George Sabback, Al Zohn, the Dotson Brothers—there's hardly anything by them, but we have recordings of Benny Strickler with the Yerba Buena band, with Bob Wills and Seger Ellis.

Bob Helm's relationship with Benny Strickler went back farther than Bill's, and it was with Bob that I went back in the "prehistory" of Benny Strickler.

## TRAINING, RESEMBLANCES AND INFLUENCES

**Bob Helm:** I think he went to music school like all of us, probably grade school and high school. He had a knowledge of the standard band chestnuts of that time—Sousa and the rest of the popular fare that most public schools taught and most everybody cut their teeth on.

Danny Alguire was actually the first person I talked to about Benny, in the late '70s. Chris Tyle and I went to visit him in Beaverton, Oregon, and he was a wealth of information about playing in the Wills band. I asked him at the time who he thought Benny sounded like. This was before I knew that you could sound like yourself—everyone had to sound like someone else. I said to Danny that Strickler's playing remind-

ed me of Yank Lawson with the Bob Crosby Bobcats.

I asked Bob and Bill if they ever heard anything in his playing that sounded like another player.

**Bill Bardin:** Sometimes he reminded me of Ward Pinkett.

**BH:** George Mitchell also.

You mention a similarity between him and Yank Lawson; well, there's a similarity between previous players—between Yank Lawson and them also. There's a connection there—I don't think you could call it a Mid-western style; the influences are primarily Southern, New Orleans, the rural South. Then there's a folk part of it and the Wills band reflects some of that too. The guys had to play all kinds of different folk tunes and old chestnuts from yesteryear that had become folk tunes, and I think all those things are influences too.

Danny mentioned that two of Benny's big influences were Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke, and told me one night they were playing some tune and Benny said "Hey, here's Bix," and he played a Bix chorus and Danny said he fell out of his chair because it sounded just like Bix.

I asked Bob and Bill if Benny had ever talked about who he liked.

**BH:** We all seemed to share the same love for Louis, of course, also King Oliver, Freddie Keppard and most all the great players.

There was a trumpet player I'd never heard of except from guys who were out in territory bands. His name was Red Bird, actually one word—"Redbird." (I never knew what he last name was—Redbird was a nickname. Maybe he'd done something awful and had gone into hiding.)

Benny mentioned him. He had heard him and said that he was a hell of a player. He played around Arkansas and Tennessee.

While I was in the Army during World War II, we were on maneuvers in Tennessee and went to this town and I asked one of the civilian musicians playing there whether he'd heard of Redbird. He says, "Yeah, he lives down the street here." So I went down and introduced



myself and made his acquaintance. I talked to him on a couple of occasions when we were bivouacked in the area and he told me some stories. He'd heard the Oliver band. He still had his trumpet and blew a few notes. It wasn't enough to convince you that he was a great jazz player but he evidently was in that category.

Danny also mentioned that Benny was a very big fan of Lu's playing after he got to know Lu and to sit in a few times. Lu told me that they may have played at Sweet's Ballroom with the big band. I can see where someone who liked Oliver and Armstrong and the New Orleans style would have been taken with Lu's playing. On those recordings of the Yerba Buena Jazz Band with Benny I can hear some Lu Watters in the playing – the phrasing and specific licks.

**BB:** My impression was that Benny was doing what the occasion called for. That if a certain right-on-the-beat type of playing would have made the band sound its best, that's what he would do.

**BH:** He was definitely a band player, exactly as Bill describes it. I never heard him play a note clowning around at all. He was always making things sound as good as they could, or better than they could.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

*Were you aware of Benny Strickler's reputation before he came to San Francisco?*

**BB:** I heard the guys in the Yerba Buena band talking about him and how good he was and hoping they could get him. I just would overhear from the sideline.

**BH:** I heard about him through the jazz grapevine. There were many musicians in the Middle West that

we'd heard about on the Coast here. Some of them came west with traveling bands and we got to know a few of them, but until I

*Benny was doing what the occasion called for-*

went to Oklahoma City I had not met Benny. That would be 1935, June or July.

Benny was playing with Ralph Britt's band, and some of the guys at the hotel we were staying in (a jazz musician's hotel, you might say—you could cuff your drinks and cuff your meals and cuff your bills) had talked about the young brass team with Ralph Britt. Britt was opening a club in Oklahoma City, I think the name was The Tropics. They said, you gotta go catch these guys, they're hot. So we did and got to meet Benny and also Danny Alguire, I'm pretty sure, trombonist Bob Logan and Woody Woods, the clarinet and saxophone player. They were hot players. Strickler, Alguire and Logan were a good brass team.

Later, I was touring with Fred Wolcott's Californians—a big band, twelve pieces. We were playing a hotel in Bartlesville, and I got this call; it was Benny asking if I could join the Bob Wills band for a one-nighter on the fairgrounds that very night. I finished the hotel about seven and went out to the fairgrounds, a few miles out of town. The same brass section was playing, but now with Wills. Woody Woods was with Wills too, but had to take a night off so I was filling in for him. So I got to play one night with the Bob Wills band and it was much fun.

I didn't see Benny again for a couple of years, until he came out to Los Angeles and toured up and down the Coast.

A lot of guys got to hear him play with Carlos Molina and several other bands playing one-nighters up and down the Coast at hotels and at ballrooms like Sweet's in Oakland and McFadden's in San Francisco. I got better acquainted with him and played a few sessions with him. Lu and Turk became acquainted with him, as did many other musicians—Scobey and others, most of the guys that played around San Francisco. The jazz fans here got to meet him and hear him too.

*I never heard him play a note clowning around at all*

*Bob and Benny had a session at the beach once.*

**BH:** Benny, Turk and I went out to the beach and played. There was no club available at that time. We were sitting around Lu's place and said let's go out and blow at the beach.

## WINGY MANONE

*Bob talked about playing with Strickler in Wingy Manone's big band, and the fact that he shared a house with the Strickler family in San Diego.*

**BH:** This would be 1940, '41. At that time I wasn't working. Turk and I had both quit the Yerba Buena band—well, Turk quit and I just walked off at the end of a Saturday night. We had a beef about dynamics. On Monday we heard that Lu was rehearsing another band with Hy Gates and Ellis Horne in our places. That's when Benny called me and asked me to join the band that he was rehearsing in L.A. for Wingy.

Wingy had just finished that *Rhythm on the River* picture with Bing Crosby, and was playing the Hollywood circuit at that time. Through Bing and other people he became quite popular and in demand because of the picture. Jack Teagarden had a big band at that time and Wingy says, "Well, Jack's got a big band, I'm gonna have a big band too!" So he got together with Benny and asked Benny to put a band together and run and rehearse



it.

He had a gig, ten weeks in a ballroom in downtown San Diego. I can't recall the name of it, but it was very popular as a Navy hangout. I joined the band in Hollywood, played a couple of dates and went to San Diego from there.

Benny and his wife had taken a beach house in San Diego and asked me if I wanted to stay with them and share the rent. His daughters were with him, and I volunteered to babysit some of the time. I don't think they remember me when we stayed at the beach house in San Diego in 1941, but I babysat them while their mom and dad went shopping on several occasions.

The band sounded pretty good. It was a full band—full reed section, full brass, full rhythm and a very good girl singer, whose name I wish I could recall. She and Wingy did picture tunes and some duos together. Benny played the solos when Wingy was not on the bandstand, plus the solos in the stock arrangements and all the hot parts in the special arrangements that Wingy had.

Wingy had an interesting library at that time. Much of it came from Louis Armstrong's big band of about 1934–35. He had a bunch of that stuff. The arrangements were all good and we were all familiar with them. Whether he bought them or whether they were given to him I don't know, but it was a wealth of very good arranged material.

So I was staying at the beach with Benny's family and we were commuting back and forth, nine miles in I guess, and I was writing arrangements most of the daytime. Wingy asked me to do some pop tunes for him and write him and the singer into the band.

Benny was working on arrangements too; he was cutting up the latest stock arrangements of pop tunes and picture tunes of the day, doing a "cut-and-paste job" as we say. He knew what all the parts were about and the sound of all the parts and so forth. He had done quite a bit of it, probably some for the Wills band.

Most all bands at that time couldn't keep up with the stock arrangements of pop tunes. Some of them had an existence of maybe a couple of months anyway. Many of the picture tunes only lived a short time. Sometimes there was a selection of arrangements of the latest picture tune and you could pick an arranger that came closer to what you wanted to have as a swing band. Some of the arrangements that you bought were pretty square. Others had riffs and some of them were full of riffs like Jimmy Dale. We usually avoided those. There were some very tasty pop tunes, love songs and even waltzes that were tastefully arranged. We didn't play many waltzes, but we did play some.

All of this stuff had to be tailored to fit Wingy's band, with Wingy's approval of course. That's pretty much what Benny was doing, putting together stocks and writ-

ing Wingy into the introductions and the hot choruses. I don't know how many arrangements he wrote completely before that time but I don't remember him writing any for Wingy. I was doing most of that, and I never got paid for it either!

Wingy had a habit of going over to the bar, and then at the last minute he would jump on the bandstand for his chorus. He would finish off the tune and go back to the bar until his time came to go up again. Sometimes he got excited and came in right in the middle of a chorus that Benny was playing. Benny got pretty disgusted with that.

One particular night Benny was playing a very inspired chorus and Wingy jumped in the middle of it. Benny was fuming. After the set was over he went over to the bar and said to Wingy, "Listen, Wingy. I know you play good cornet. I like your trumpet. And I play good trumpet too, and I don't want you to jump into the middle of my choruses any more. You got that?"

Wingy said, "It's okay, man, okay. Okay, I understand."

## THE WARTIME YBJB

**BH:** The commander at the airbase in Alameda was a jazz fan and was a friend of Lu's. He asked at that time, "Would you be interested in joining up? I'll get you all—you can stay together like Artie Shaw and the rest of the bands if you all join up." So we all joined, or I wouldn't say "joined," I think it's "enlisted." They rejected some of us for various reasons, but they took Turk and Lu, so they couldn't come to the Dawn Club except when they were able to get off base.

When it became apparent that Lu and Turk were not going to be able to keep up the old band, there was a question about what to do. Augie Giretto, Bill Durkin, Bob Scobey and Lu, who were running the club, finally decided to recruit stand-ins.

**BB:** I was the official trombone player. But unofficially, I was a placeholder for Turk. I was the first of the Turk imitators.

Russ Bennett was the official leader of the Dawn Club band. He went up before the board of directors of the musicians' union to get them to let me work without the waiting out three month period. You weren't supposed to work a steady job for three months when you first joined the union.

**BH:** I was one of the ones who recommended Benny.

**BB:** As I recall, some of the guys in the band were losing money by playing at the Dawn Club. They would give up higher-paying jobs in order to play there, which was just two nights a week—Friday and Saturday.

**BH:** It wasn't enough to support anyone. So this was a problem for Benny—how he was going to bring his

## Benny played all the hot parts



family and pay the rent? I know he was talking about bringing his wife and daughters up, and he was looking for a house.

He seemed to be pretty sure that he was going to get some extra work through other bandleaders. I think Augie knew some people who promised him some work.

## REPERTOIRE AND TEMPOS

**BH:** I don't think there was much announcing or anything. We just played. If somebody wanted to play a tune they'd make a suggestion.

**BB:** When Benny Strickler wasn't there, I'm under the impression that Russ Bennett did call the tunes pretty much.

**BH:** I seem to remember that he did start doing that too.

*The tempos on the wartime YBJB are really good. They really sock along and let the full value of the notes be heard. The band sounds very comfortable playing those tempos.*

**BB:** My impression is those tempos wouldn't have been nearly as good without Strickler. He just hit it on the head.

**BH:** Benny usually kicked off the tunes. He was the one who proposed the jazz tunes. We played things that Benny knew—there wasn't much rehearsal.

*I wondered if he had a fairly large repertoire of classic jazz before he came in the Yerba Buena band or if he had to read Lu's charts.*

**BH:** I don't remember if we ever read any charts on the bandstand. Do you remember, Bill?

**BB:** I had them. I had that little book of white on black [like a negative image photocopy]. I don't know if there was a trumpet book on the bandstand.

Although I had a book, I just knew the music from standing alongside Turk while he was playing, long before—it wasn't all that long actually, but it seemed that I'd been going to the Dawn Club and listening to the band for a long time before the war started.

**BH:** I think Benny did have a stand. I'm sort of vague on that because sometimes there was a stand, sometimes there wasn't. Sometimes we just decided to play the tunes that we all knew and were comfortable with. I don't think we tried to put in many new tunes.

**BB:** Of course there's the big pool of standards that everybody knows, and Benny Strickler must have known tunes that he had never played with us but had played elsewhere.

**BH:** Yes, he played with a wide variety of bands before that.

*He seemed to know Jazzin' Babies Blues, Dippermouth Blues,, Kansas City Stomp—some pretty classic material that's not jam session material.*

**BH:** He was familiar with the all of the Olivers and the Mortons that had been reissued at that time. Most of the Oliver Creole Band Okehs had been reissued by that time, and some of the Morton Peppers. He actually heard original issues of some of them that weren't reissued at sessions at Lu's house when he came through town.

## BOB WILLS INFLUENCE ON YBJB

*Bob talked about some of the numbers that the wartime edition of the band played, especially some of the Bob Wills repertoire that made its way into the band.*

**BH:** We played some of the Wills favorites there, which were favorites of the whole country. There were jazz versions of waltzes and other tunes from the Bob Wills repertoire. *Ready for the River* was one of them, then there was *Ten Years*, and of course *San Antonio Rose*.

## BENNY'S HEALTH IN SAN FRANCISCO

*Was Benny able to play a stand at the Dawn Club or did he sometimes have to take off on account of his health?*

**BH:** Once he started he didn't have any substitutes. But before him and after that, sometimes we played with just two clarinets, just Ellis and me.

*Was he in reasonably good health during his time at the Dawn Club?*

**BH:** No, his health was deteriorating. He had tuberculosis and he knew it. He was hoping that he might be able

*He said he was going to finish the night, but I don't think he did*

to sort of recover by taking it easy. The Wills band had traveled constantly, and that's a debilitating thing for anyone. I don't think he was aware that he was in that bad

of shape. I think he was feeling alright.

**BB:** I never knew he was sick until that last night.

**BH:** His last night he had a hemorrhage on the bandstand. He asked Augie to bring him this big pitcher of ice and pour some gin over it. He said he was going to finish the night, but I don't think he did. Then they put him on a train, accompanied by a doctor and a nurse, Fayetteville, Arkansas [and thence to a sanatorium in Booneville]. I think it was the following day, or it could be he was in emergency until he was able to make the trip. It was a short time, within a day or so that he was on the train.

I think he was keeping himself going with gin and probably Benzedrine, which was a very popular thing in



all the bands that had to travel in those days. In fact, it was given to the armed services too.

**BB:** Regarding his attitude toward alcohol as a drug—as a cure: I had a bad cold one weekend, and he said, “What you want to do is get a glass of whiskey and drink it down.”

## THE DAWN CLUB AFTER BENNY

**BH:** I don’t recall what happened after Benny left, but I know it didn’t last very long, because I took a job at the Club Lido. It must have been between the fall of ‘42 and February ‘43 because I went in the army in ‘43, February.

**BB:** I remember, in late ‘42, finding a padlock on the front door of the Dawn Club—something about taxes.

**BH:** That happened more than once at the Dawn Club. It happened again in 1946.



SFTJF Archive

The “wartime” YBJB, probably after Strickler’s departure: Burt Bales, piano; Bill Coonley, sousaphone; Clancy Hayes, drums; Ellis Horne and Bob Helm, clarinets; Russ Bennett, banjo; Al Zohn, trumpet; Bill Bardin, trombone.

## OTHER YBJB SIDEMEN

*I know Turk is on Trombone Rag, on a private acetate that’s since been reissued, and Bill Dart is on drums on at least one session. Do you remember any other people who were in and*

*When he blew  
a note you  
were captured*

*out of the band during that time?*

**BH:** Yes, there were quite a few in and out.

**BB:** I remember Bill Coonley was on tuba.

**BH:** There was a procession of people, including trumpet players: Al Zohn, George Sabback, Byron Berry I think.

## BENNY’S SOUND AND THE YBJB RECORDINGS

*I’ve always thought of those YBJB recordings with Benny Strickler are some of the most exciting of the whole jazz revival. They’ve really changed the way I think about the music and are still among my desert island disks. I’m so glad that somebody had the presence of mind to record that band and to keep reissuing it through the years. I think it’ll continue to influence younger players as we move along.*

**BH:** I think they featured Benny at his best, even though he was not in good health. I don’t think you can hear as much of Benny listening to all the Wills records or any

other recordings as you can on the ones with the Yerba Buena band. I’m really happy that they got issued because of that, because Benny’s was a unique sound. I would say—well—captivating. When he blew a note you were captured.

**BB:** He had the ability to make the band bounce along. He had a bouncy way of playing, and without him, that was not the bounciest of bands. In fact, when that band sounded good it was because of him. Some people down through all the years have had that ability. Some players, when they start to play, just lift the band up, and he was one of them. He had both talent and skill. I was lucky enough to have played with him, and what a wonderful player he was.

*When that  
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*My thanks to Bob and Bill for taking part in this interview. Thanks also to Leon Oakley, another great jazz trumpeter, for hosting and videotaping the interview.*

*With the publication of excerpts from the Strickler family scrapbook in The Frisco Cricket and now this interview, it would seem that there are no more avenues left to explore in our search for details on the life and career of Benny Strickler. Then again, that’s what we thought two years ago, before the scrapbook surfaced!*



## A Few More Strickler Items

In the course of preparing this issue, some Strickler-related items surfaced in our own Archive. At least some of this information appears to be previously unpublished, so we offer it now for the sake of completeness – that is, as of this moment.

1. On the back of a photocopy of a photograph of Strickler found in a binder compiled by SFTJF founder Jim Goggin is the the following notation, in what appears to be Goggin's handwriting:

Benny roomed with Augie Giretto at the Palace [Hotel, located very near to the Dawn Club].

Augie's bill ran up to three hundred dollars and he did not have the money to pay it so the members of the YBJB came in wearing tuxedos and got his luggage out of the hotel. One of the band members was Burt Bales.

Augie said, "No one ever questions a man wearing a tux."

2. A photocopied clipping of Ivan Paul's "Around Town" column from the *San Francisco Examiner Sports*, dated November 14, 1942, which says,

"Worth noting is a benefit dance to be held next Thursday at the Dawn Club for Benny Strickler, ace trumpeter. He's been stricken with an ailment that necessitates about a year layoff. Benny is married, has two children, and no dough, so Augie Giretto cooked up the party, which local musicians are backing up."

3. A photocopy of an undated letter from Strickler to Burt Bales. Significantly, the letter gives a return address in Fayetteville rather than Booneville, over ninety miles away, where the sanatorium was located:

Dear Burt –

I just can't put down on paper how good it was to hear from you. I know though, that if I had written you back while I was in the San.

[sanatorium] that I would have been hearing from you all the time.

I'm playing some now. I don't have much range[,] about [two octaves, low A to high A, sketched in musical notation] but outside of this handicap I sound pretty good. I never practice but my lip seems O.K. Laying off playing for 2 years has sure made me like to play now though. I get kicks when I play now that I haven't gotten in years except when I was playing with you fellows in Frisco.

I think a lot about you fellows and am really looking forward to seeing and playing again.

It will still be some time before I can work steady but I wish you would look around for some job that was just 2 or 3 nites [sic] and that I could loaf a little on. If you run into anything like this let me know and maybe I could come out.

Tell all the fellows hello and please write soon.

Your Friend,  
Ben

P.S. Give my best to your wife.

4. The September, 1950, issue of *Jazz Journal*, containing an article about Strickler by Floyd Levin titled "A Legend is Born." It cites information from trombonist Bob Logan (whom Bob Helm mentioned as one of the brass players he met along with Benny) about various territory bands, including the Larry Kent band which was based in Salt Lake City. The article also contains excerpts from Strickler to Turk Murphy in which he mentions leaving the sanatorium for brief periods, his great desire to resume playing and his disappointment in the progress of his recovery.



Bob Helm and possibly others have said they thought Strickler did leave the sanatorium and that he even played with bands again briefly before his death, but no concrete evidence of the latter appears in the scrapbook or elsewhere. The issue is clouded by the fact that the term "playing" could mean playing in public with a group or simply working with one's instrument, even if only practicing. From his distinct usage of the terms "playing" and "practicing," it appears that Strickler did indeed find music work of some kind. A reasonable hypothesis would be that



SFTJF Archive

he didn't go back on the road, but sat in with visiting bands and played with some local groups before his health took a final turn for the worse. Strickler's own clearly stated desire to return to music at least fits in with this interpretation.

We are thankful that Benny Strickler's daughter, Diane Strickler Breazeale, found and shared with us the family's scrapbook on him. Still, the information on Benny Strickler's life, like his known recordings, remains both sketchy and tantalizing. The one clear fact shining through what little we do have is that he was a jazz musician of the highest order, truly deserving of the term "legendary."

## About the San Francisco Traditional Jazz Foundation

### What is the Foundation?

Created in 1981 as an archive of several thousand items relating to the jazz revival begun in San Francisco about 1939, the Foundation now seeks to enhance that collection and extend its uses. A wider aim is to help foster live, high quality traditional jazz, regionally and worldwide.

### What does the Foundation do?

Current activities include archival preservation, supporting live events and broadcasts, collaborating with other jazz and educational institutions, and developing new products and media applications.

Although the Foundation lacks the funding to open its archive to the general public, other means are being found to make its resources available. For example, historic recordings and documents are being made available to radio stations; and consumer products such as posters, books and tapes are being publicly offered.

### Who is involved?

You are. Membership is \$25 per year and is **dated on a calendar year basis**...Benefits include this quarterly newsletter, invitations to special events and availability of Foundation products (often at exceptionally low prices).

### Donations welcomed

The San Francisco Traditional Jazz Foundation accepts gifts and grants in many forms, including historical items which shed further light on the history of traditional jazz on the West Coast, such as recordings, music, newspaper clippings, photographs and correspondence. Contributions of materials or funds are tax-deductible under IRS ruling status 509(a)(2).

### SF Jazz on the Web

The San Francisco Traditional Jazz Foundation has an ever-expanding web site. The site includes sound files and photos of many San Francisco (and other) jazz figures from the 1930s to the present. Please visit us at [www.sftradjazz.org](http://www.sftradjazz.org).