

Western Connection with Traditional Jazz Benefited Both

by Hal Smith (adapted from an article in the AFCDJS Jazz Rambler)

In the past I have played and recorded Western Swing numbers with my band and also with John Gill's and Chris Tyle's groups. Western tunes work very well in a San Francisco-style jazz band. But occasionally some audience members have made disparaging comments when these numbers are announced. They have indicated that the tunes are "not jazz" and should not be played.

But many "Western" numbers are in fact popular songs which happen to have been recorded by Western musicians. *San Antonio Rose* is considered "Western," but it became one of the most popular tunes of all time after being recorded by Bing Crosby. The traditional jazz repertoire has always included popular music. If a vintage pop tune sounds good played by a trad band, does it matter if the composer is Bob Wills instead of Fats Waller? (To anyone who remains unconvinced: listen to the 1951 Good Time Jazz recording of *San Antonio Rose* by the Firehouse Five Plus Two. Then tell me that's "not jazz.")

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Western - Jazz Connection

There is a definite connection between Western Swing and jazz. Many of Bob Wills' recordings, in particular, have an equal amount of "jazz" and "western" content. His repertoire always included standards like *South, Darktown Strutters' Ball, Basin Street Blues*, and *Trouble in Mind*. Several of his sidemen, including pianist Al Stricklin, guitarist Eldon Shamblin, reedman Wayne Johnson and Woody Wood and trumpeter Tubby Lewis played straight-ahead jazz.

So did the musicians who played non-traditional jazz instruments, such as steel guitarists Leon McAuliffe and Herb Remington, violinists Jesse Ashlock, Louis Tierney and Joe Holley, and mandolinist Tiny Moore. It is no accident that recordings by Bob Wills' Texas Playboys are

often eagerly sought by hard core traditional jazz collectors.

One of Bob Wills' sidemen is largely responsible for the cross-fertilization of Western Swing and traditional jazz. In 1941, Wills hired a young trumpeter named Benny Strickler, who had graduated from working with Southwestern territory bands to playing with "names" -- Ben Pollack, Joe Venuti, Wingy Manone and Seger Ellis. Strickler's idols included Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke and Lu Watters and in turn he became a major influence on Danny Alguire and Alex Brashear, his Texas Playboys trumpet sectionmates.

Strickler introduced the Playboys to trad tunes and composed Wills' theme, *Let's Ride With Bob* (based on Kid Ory's *Savoy Blues*). Strickler's positive jazz contributions are most evident on Wills' Columbia recording of *Ten Years*. This side features a small-band jam chorus led by Strickler's take-no-prisoners trumpet. It shows that the Texas Playboys could play first-rate Dixieland, comparable in quality to Bob Crosby's Bobcats.

When World War II broke up the Wills band, Strickler went to San Francisco to lead the wartime version of the Yerba Buena Jazz Band. After bringing traditional jazz tunes to the Texas Playboys repertoire, Strickler reversed the process by playing Western tunes with the Yerba Buenans. (Later, Danny Alguire continued the practice, playing in Strickler's style and introducing Western numbers to the Firehouse Five.) This swapping of Western and jazz

numbers continues today in a number of bands.

The "Western Connection" reciprocity has benefited both Western music and jazz by augmenting the repertoire and talent pool of each style. Hopefully, after reading this article, those who dismiss Western Swing will want to find out what they



Photo by Unknown

Benny Strickler

have been missing. They are in for a treat when they hear vintage "cross-over" music, with great hot choruses played on both traditional jazz instruments and strings.