



Frisco Cricket

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FOUNDATION RELEASES CINEGRILL CD

Close on the heels of its release of the Turk Murphy Jazz Band *Live at Carson Hot Springs* (SFTJF CD-101) the San Francisco Traditional Jazz Foundation presents another, completely different, Turk Murphy CD. Titled *Turk Murphy Jazz Band in Hollywood*, this album covers Turk's band as recorded live at the Cinegrill in the Hollywood-Roosevelt Hotel during May and June of 1950.

As Hal Smith points out in his comprehensive liner notes, this edition of the band was very different from other Murphy bands, both in personnel and repertoire. Unable to recruit most of his San Francisco associates to join him on this engagement, Turk used Don Kinch on trumpet, clarinetist Bill Napier, Skippy Anderson (for many years the pianist with Pete Daily), banjoist Pat Patton, George Bruns on tuba and Stan Ward on drums. The band's book was also slanted

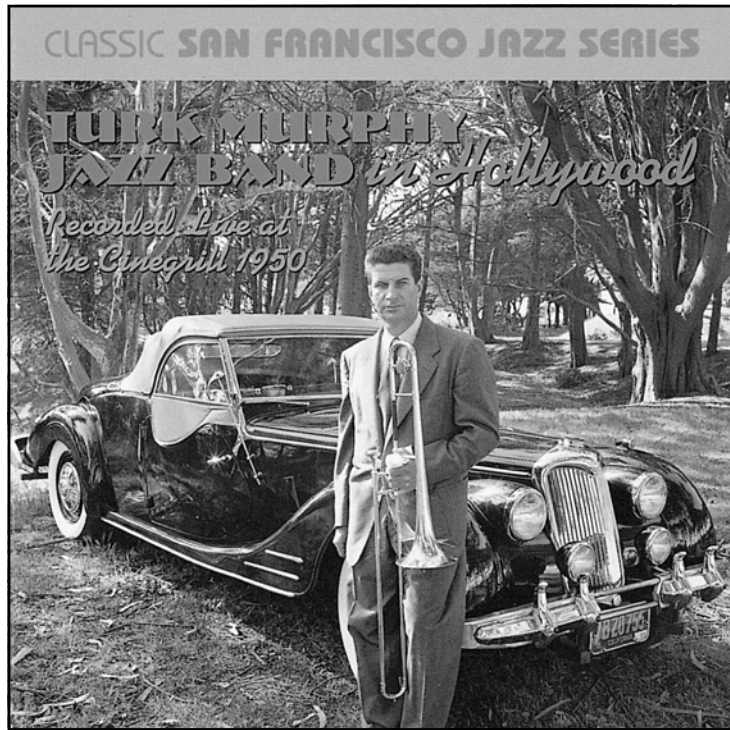
more in favor of Dixieland standards than any other Murphy group before or after. Nevertheless, to quote Smith: "With the release of this CD, we can now hear just how great this one-

of-a-kind band was. The driving rhythm section, perfectly-balanced front line and an infectious, free-wheeling spirit resulted in an ensemble with a totally unique sound. This is surely one of Turk Murphy's best lineups—ever!"

NOTE: the material on this CD has ap-

peared before, on two LPs, but all the tracks have been expertly remastered for this new release by Mike Cogan of Bay Records.

To order this or any of the many other fine Foundation products please see page 11.



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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.

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

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.

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training, he learned to sightread.⁵ He also played 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



Hal Smith Collection

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

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 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

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.

songs and big bands of the day. By the early '40s, the Texas Playboys included sidemen who had worked with the orchestras 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

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.*

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-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



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,

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 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

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.

By early 1959 I was dropping by Pier 23 regularly. Havelock Jerome, the boss there, was said to have been a bookie in a

previous life: he certainly gave off powerful intimations of what used to be called "the sporting world". I don't know when he began operating the Pier, or when Burt Bales started playing solo piano there. Before long I was among those being asked to sit in. A fine band pianist, Burt loved to play with other musicians. He drank a lot, but in the years when I knew him it rarely seemed to harm his playing much. He had a drinker's temperament: morose one minute, cheery the next, biting critical the one after that. You learned to take Burt all-in-all, but he wasn't someone you could stay mad at. "Shut up and play," was his basic philosophy.

It was during Burt's tenure at the Pier that I learned Havelock's repertoire as a bar singer, consisting of two songs: *Many Happy Returns of the Day* and *I Had Someone Else Before I Had You (And I'll Have Someone After You're Gone)* Every night around midnight he would step up to the piano and hold forth, in a quite professional manner, with a few utterly traditional hand gestures, the right arm swinging halfway open at waist height, and the song delivered with many dramatic pauses to underline lyrical points. He always reminded me of George Jessel as an entertainer; he even resembled Jessel. I once asked him if he sang Jessel's anthem, *My Mother's Eyes*. When he'd shaken his head and returned to the bar, Burt snapped at me, "*For Christ's sake don't encourage him!*"

Burt's life could be somewhat disheveled, but he rarely lost a certain astringent humor. He didn't drive, and when I got to know him better, I often gave him a lift to and from the Pier. One night he opened the front door of his flat on Lily Street in the Haight perfectly naked. Even more strikingly, his cheeks, lips, jaws and neck were covered with tiny cuts, bleeding through little bits of toilet paper. "Whatever you do, don't ever borrow a razor blade from your wife," he said. "I Think Jeanie must have got this one from her dad."

One night early in 1960 Burt was knocked down by a car and seriously injured. Havelock hired Bill Erickson, Frank Goudie and Dick Oxtot so that the show could go on at the Pier. But Burt had no insurance, and on March 22, reedman/jazz critic Richard Hadlock organized a benefit at four clubs. Nearly a hundred musicians played for Burt that night. The benefit, referred to by some as 'bailing out Bales,' raised more than \$2000—not a trivial sum 38 years ago. That was what his colleagues in the Bay Area thought of Burt. By September he was back at work.

Jim Remembers...*Trombonist, author, and teacher, James Leigh shares his 55-year experiences of the Traditional Jazz Revival in an exclusive series for The Frisco Cricket.*

Part Five: THE PIER

But he and Havelock came to a parting of the ways in 1961. I don't know the exact reason, but I have a strong hunch that Burt failed to show up for work a few times, and Havelock wouldn't put up with it. In any case, Erickson came back in with a trio: Goudie again, and a fine drummer from New Orleans, James Carter. That would be the basic group there for the next few years, during which the Pier would become my home away from home.

Across the Embarcadero, Kid Ory had taken over the Tin Angel, re-naming it On the Levee. Even during Bales' days at the Pier, the regular sit-ins had provided competition which Ory didn't care for, to put it mildly. He protested to the union, but even when there might be a full band at the Pier (with only Burt getting paid) Business Agent Eddie Burns of AFM Local 6, the equivalent of the cop on the beat, could never seem to catch anyone in the act. When Erickson took over the gig, with a good drummer and clarinetist in place, the Pier became even more of a magnet for musicians looking for a place to work out.

Of those regulars whose appearance was hoped for nightly, two stand out in my memory: the trumpeter Ernie Figueroa and the tenor saxophonist Dave Clarkson. Though perhaps as different as any two men could be, they loved playing together. Fig had played with the Charlie Barnet and Stan Kenton big bands, and he was a great fan of Clifford Brown (to whose music he introduced me), but he was quite at home in more traditional groups, and played marvelously with small bands led by Earl Hines and Ralph Sutton, among others. Clarkson was an amateur, but of the very highest order. He played tenor in the classic Hawkins-Webster-Young vein, out of which he had synthesized his own ferociously swinging way of playing by the time I heard him. For me, playing with the two of them was an honor, an education, and—even when I was teetering dangerously at the far edge of my ability—an enormous pleasure.

Erickson was particularly fond of string bassists, and the list of those who played at the Pier, if the big names were included, would impress all but the terminally blasé. The two who showed up most often at the Pier were Squire Girsback, of whom I have already spoken at length, and a skillful, if saturnine, escapee from Southern California named Harry Leland. As far as I could tell, Harry still had the sort of chops which had allowed him to play in L.A. with such as Kenny Drew and Hampton Hawes. Once he

accepted the fact that the Pier band was not going to play *Night in Tunisia* or *Anthropology*, he seemed pleased enough to go along with the program.

Whenever he was in town, Squire would drop by, early or late, once or twice a week, and he always came to play. But if another bassist was in place he was happy to sit at the bar and listen. That other bassist might have been Bob Marchessi, or Ray Durand or Jim Cumming. If there was a resident jazz aristocracy in San Francisco during the early 60's it would have to have been the Earl Hines All-Stars, who had a long stand at the Club Hangover on Bush Street. Hines himself never came in, but the great New Orleans bassist George (Pops) Foster showed up several times, was *always* invited to sit in (usually by whoever was playing bass at the time), and never said no. He might play only half a set, and never more than a whole set, but he made his presence instantly felt: playing with him was like catching a ride on a hurricane—a hurricane with perfect time. (He also wrote—dictated to Tom Stoddard—his autobiography, one of the great jazz books of all time. Pops doesn't mention the Pier in the book, but, trust me, he was there.)

A scarcely less memorable guest was *another* great New Orleans bassist, Wellman Braud, for many years a mainstay of the Duke Ellington Orchestra. In 1961 he showed up at Sugar Hill, Berkeley blues singer Barbara Dane's new club on Broadway, in the company of a formidable pianist/trumpeter named Kenny Whitson. Back in the 1950's Paul Lingle had brought word of a blues pianist in Honolulu—the name slipped his mind—who played the trumpet simultaneously. We imagined some sort of vaudeville freak.

It had been Whitson, and we were dead wrong. He was one of the best blues pianists I ever heard in my life, black or white. (Whitson was the latter.) The trumpet playing was plenty good enough, but still it seemed a sideline. And when we heard Whitson sing, we all thought it was a crying shame that Mose Allison had made it big while he hadn't. Still, when he was healthy, he and Braud made up no doubt the finest two-man trio any of us had heard. To my knowledge he never showed up at the Pier; perhaps—like all the other pianists in town—he knew better than to trespass on Erickson's turf. For it had become his turf without anyone ever having to say so.

Erickson never showed off, had no dazzling specialties; 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. If he had a

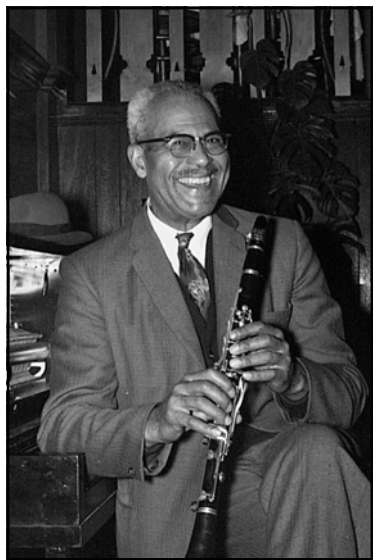
single model it must have been Teddy Wilson, but he admired pianists ranging from Jelly Roll Morton to Horace Silver. (The record of Bob Mielke's band at the Sail 'N, on Chris Strachwitz's Arhoolie label, shows Erickson in his Mortonesque mode.)

Over several years at the Pier, Erickson's philosophy of how to play such a gig had gradually become the unspoken code which we all tried to obey. Rule No. 1 was: if someone knows the melody and someone knows the chords, *we can play any tune we decide to play*. Rule 2: with regard to tunes or keys we do our best to accommodate guest vocalists, and we never try to make things difficult for guest musicians. ("This isn't some kind of fraternity initiation," Erickson said—though in fact for me it was just that, though of the most benign sort.) There really were no other firm rules. The rest was up to Erickson, whom everyone trusted. Now and then, without hesitation, he would quietly but firmly corral someone who had gotten momentarily lost in space. One night, after listening to the Miles Davis record of *But Not For Me*, I had been foolhardy enough to start my solo on the same A-natural as Miles, a flatted fifth. Erickson turned around instantly, looked at me, said, "No," and went on playing. He was right. In our context the note was a pretentious disaster. I didn't even think of arguing with him.

Erickson was one of the best leaders I have ever played for. (Another is Clint Baker.) He led by example, he led by temperament. He never tried to embarrass, let alone humiliate, anyone. He wanted to play music in a relaxed and congenial environment. He enjoyed pleasing listeners regardless of their level of jazz expertise. Theories and critical judgments were for after the gig, if, indeed, they were necessary at all. What's more, he believed that almost any tune could be made fun to play and a pleasure to listen to. If he had any passionate beliefs about the history of jazz, I never heard them. Another one of the blessed "shut up and play" breed.

We didn't play ragtime at the Pier, and we didn't play bebop, but anything in between was considered fair game. Most important for me was the tacit expectation that anyone playing there would be trying his best at all times to get with and reinforce whatever sort of "motion" was on the table. This meant a great deal of learning-by-playing; it meant that one set you might be playing Bunk Johnson tunes with Jerry Blumberg, who had taken lessons from Bunk, and could demonstrate any trumpet style from Bunk to Miles; the next set, if the wonderful rhythm guitarist Edd Dickerman

(Continued on page 10)



Photograph by William Carter

STRICKLER (Continued from page 5)

that Strickler may 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 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

*Decades later,
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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.

(Continued from page 8)

[Watters]...he was sick then. He would play some of these things that he played with his head down trying to

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

—Turk Murphy

keep himself together." 44 Playing under extreme circumstances was nothing new for the trumpeter. 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.

The author wishes to thank Frank Powers, Tom Morley and Chris Tyle for their assistance with research and Rosetta Wills for use of the previously-unpublished photo.

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.

Jim Remembers *(Continued from page 6)*

showed up, you would be on a steady diet of Basie and Ellington tunes. The set after that, if Erickson was feeling frolicsome, you might be doing all Shirley Temple tunes, or half a dozen selections written in honor of Charles Lindbergh's Transatlantic solo flight. It was all fun, even if in the course of the evening, pardon the expression, I got my ass kicked by Jimmy Archey or Bob Mielke or Jerry Butzen, or someone else with more chops than I possessed.

If, over the years, I developed a firm notion of what a professional was, I think I learned the first half from Squire Girsback and the second half from Bill Erickson. A good friend once told me: "Musicians have quite a lot in common with real people." So I also learned a good deal about how to be a halfway-decent human being, from too many people to name here, though I dare not leave out Jim Borkenhagen, Squire Girsback, Bob Helm, Ellis Horne, Wally Rose, Norma Teagarden, or Rowland Working.

And there are the stories, but hardly room to tell them. Like the night that Ernie Figueroa lent his car to someone, who brought it back, parked it, left the keys

with Fig, and vanished. At 2 A.M. several of us spent more than an hour looking for it in vain. We finally gave up, and decided to wait for daylight to resume the search. Fig and I both lived in the Mission district, so I drove him home. The next morning we found his car parked on the Embarcadero almost in front of Pier 23. "I thought I saw it there last night, you know," Fig said. "I just liked seeing all you guys out there looking for it. To me, that's real friends, man."

The Pier was really a kind of dive, albeit a colorful, atmospheric and non-violent one. (In maybe 250 nights there I never saw a blow struck in anger, though once or twice I did watch Havelock, though an aging welterweight, giving someone the bum's rush—expertly.) He doubtless made some money from the place, but nobody else did, certainly not Erickson, who seemed contented enough living hand-to-mouth. It was never a case of the money not mattering: Erickson lived from it, Goudie and Carter relied on it, and when I occasionally got paid for a night or two I never turned it down. But the music, and the mostly pleasant company of those gathered to play it and listen to it, were the point, and that's all there was to it. Pianist Pete Fay, my old friend from the El Dorado band, had put it best: "Oh, we don't make very much money but we have a lot of fun." (He would do a

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