

MARCH 2017



BIG BAND NEWS

by Music Librarian **CHRISTOPHER POPA**

SYMPOSIUM IN SWING, NO.3:



Since there already was a “King of Swing,” publicity for legendary musician Artie Shaw [1910-2004] called him the “King of the Clarinet.” And that seems to have been an appropriate choice, for Shaw played the clarinet brilliantly, as well as (or better than) anyone else. He was, with a beautiful, full clarinet tone, not only a master of a melody, but, with that intelligent, probing mind of his, a master of music.

While I’d pick among my own all-time personal favorite recordings Shaw’s swinging *Softly As in a Morning Sunrise* [Bluebird, 1938], the uplifting *My Heart Stood Still* [Bluebird, 1939], the consummate *Out of Nowhere* [Bluebird, 1939], and splendid *Tabu* [Victor, 1945], I like just as much his eloquent and elegant ballads such as *Moonglow* [Victor, 1941] and *Dancing in the Dark* [Victor, 1941].

In *New York Notes: A Journal Of Jazz In The Seventies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), critic Whitney Balliett, of the *New Yorker* magazine, wrote that “His [Shaw’s] solos, whether embellishments of the melody or full improvisations, were faultlessly structured. He had a way of playing the melody that invariably suggested that *this* is the way it should sound. And he was right. If the melody had any excess weight he eliminated a note here, a note there. If it was on the skinny side he added flourishes or moved down to the chalameau register, which tends to make every note sound wise. He impressed his melodic approach so thoroughly on certain tune that when they surface anew one automatically hears Shaw’s rendition.”

So it is with Artie Shaw's extraordinary record of *Moonglow* (*Claro de Luna*), arranged by Lennie Hayton [1908-1971] and including, along with Shaw and the 13-member conventional big band, a 9-piece string section. To me, it's a perfect rendition — unlike so much music from the Swing Era, it's not a series of riffs, but, instead, a majestic, lyrical performance.

It opens with a dreamy, 4-bar introduction by the strings and the trombone section. Then Shaw plays a ravishingly beautiful statement of the theme, touching everywhere from introspection to joy, for about 24 bars. Then the saxophones come in, punctuated by the brass, at first open and then muted. The saxes (steered by Les Robinson) play a sweeping 16-bars, followed by memorable solos from a piano (Johnny Guarnieri) and trombone (Jack Jenney). All the while the bass (Jud DeNaut), guitar (Al Hendrickson), and drums (Nick Fatool) usher things along, but, again, this is a high-class ballad treatment, not a swinging, riff-laden instrumental. With a key change, the ensemble and Shaw finish things off taking the dynamics from a shout down to a sigh.

“Each of Shaw's bands had a different face,” Balliett observed. “The ‘Begin the Beguine’ outfit was tight and springy; it was a snappy Ford coupe. The ‘Frenesi’ band, with its bouffant strings and walk-along tempos, was gentle and subtle, and it had an unmistakable jazz persuasion. It was also a peerless *dance* band. The 1945 band, with Roy Eldridge, was the closest Shaw came to an out-and-out jazz group. It was a disciplined, swinging, straight-ahead band.”

Shaw himself might disagree on that last point, naming his '49 band among his best, too, though the public evidently did not support its existence.

Yet, throughout his entire musical career, he left a recorded legacy that, while smaller than some other bandleaders, holds up remarkably well. The music from all of his bands remains Shaw's gift to all of us.

“You put something on a record, in a studio, and it's going to follow you around for the rest of your life,” he remarked, decades afterwards.

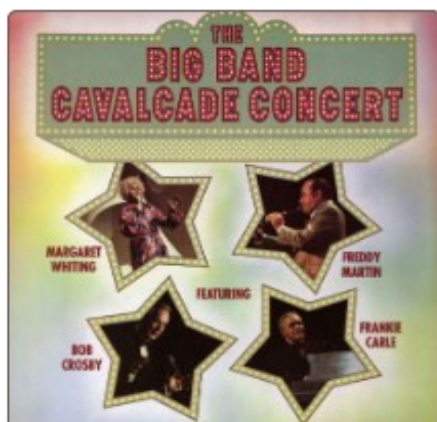
By the way, Artie Shaw himself called the ensemble that he made *Moonglow* with “a helluva band.”

And referring to his clarinet playing, he said “I wanted to make an instrument that *sang*.” It became a supremely musical voice that not only sang, but spoke to me on a variety of levels, and it still does!

The 1956 Shaw reissue compilation, “Moonglow” (RCA Victor LPM-1244), pictured above, was one of the first big band records that my brother, Jay, and I saw in our local public library's audio-visual department (thank you!), and as I recall, not long afterwards Jay found the original Shaw 78 rpm of *Moonglow* (Victor 27405) at a second-hand store.

REVIEW AND PREVIEW

COMPACT DISC OF THE MONTH

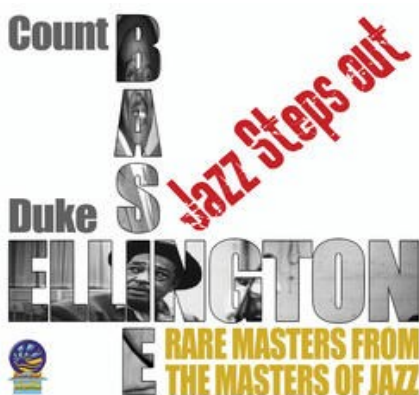


various artists

“The Big Band Cavalcade Concert”

Music Boutique CD-R

Well, since RCA (and now, Sony-BMG) showed no interest in reissuing this on a compact disc, My Music Boutique has granted our wish, and I thank them! Originally it was a 2-record set (RCA CPL2-0362) taped in 1972 during a nostalgic tour of one-nighters starring Freddy Martin, Bob Crosby, Frankie Carle, Margaret Whiting, and a group of veteran big band sidemen. Selections include some Dixieland jazz from Crosby, a bunch of classically-inspired hits from Martin (including a medley), and Carle’s own compositions *Sunrise Serenade* and a live performance of his *Carle Boogie* that Frankie once agreed with me he liked best of all of the versions of that tune.



various artists

“Jazz Steps Out: Rare Masters From The Masters Of Jazz”

Sounds of YesterYear (UK) DSOY 2054

These are recordings made as radio-only transcriptions by Count Basie and His Orchestra on December 2-3, 1962 and Duke Ellington and His Orchestra on March 27, 1959.

The Basie portion, mostly arranged by Dick Vance, includes *Basically Blue*, *Evil Weevil*, *Splash*, and *Wash*.

They were on the LP “Basie” (Sesac N-5101).

The Ellington tunes were on an album titled “Ellington Moods” (Sesac N2701~02) and include *Fat Mouth*, *Frou-Frou*, *Jamaica Tomboy*, and *She Was a Tinkling Thing*.



various artists

“Well Git It!”

Sounds of YesterYear (UK) DSOY 2055

Sure, it's sort of a nice, old-fashioned-looking cover, and, yes, I understand that some of the same sidemen are on each portion of the recordings, so there's some common links to all of it. But I don't think that there's any point in this release, as all of this material has been out on CD before. The Byrne-led performances are on “Hits of Glenn Miller and Tommy & Jimmy Dorsey in Stereo” (Sepia 1160), with great sound, the original artwork, and color photos from the sessions. The Oliver recordings were issued as half of an indifferent Montpellier CD (MONTCD 079) titled “Let's do it,” with Skip Martin given the balance of the disc. So if you buy this new release, it'll show that you aren't paying attention.

And neither is Sounds of YesterYear!

Now... since I was taught that “if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all,” here's my thoughts on the rest of Sounds of YesterYear's current releases: