

Artie Shaw: a remarkable twentieth-century American life

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One of the more interesting lives in recent American culture ended on December 30, 2004, when clarinetist and bandleader Artie Shaw passed away at his modest book-filled home in the Los Angeles suburb of Newbury Park. He was 94 and apparently died of the effects of old age.

Shaw was one of the most popular figures of the “Swing Era,” the period from roughly 1935 to 1945 when large dance orchestras dominated American popular music playing tightly arranged jazz with a strong rhythmic punch. Despite his fame and fortune—among his eight wives were actors Lana Turner and Ava Gardner—Shaw complained bitterly about the crass commercialization of music he considered to be a high art form. He abruptly stopped performing in 1954, and spent the last 50 years of his life reading books and dabbling in fiction writing.

Born May 23, 1910, in New York City of Jewish parents who had recently immigrated from Russia and Austria, Arthur Jacob Arshawsky grew up poor in New Haven, Connecticut, where he began his musical career as a saxophonist, playing professionally in a variety of ensembles beginning in his teens.

By the mid-1930s, Shaw had developed into a proficient jazz improviser on the clarinet. In 1934, he was recorded playing “hot” jazz with racially mixed groups under the leadership of trumpeter Wingy Malone and vibraharpist Red Norvo. Sharing piano duties were the legendary Jelly Roll Morton, soon to fade from the scene, and the delightful Teddy Wilson, who would remain a jazz mainstay for 50 years. Shaw’s playing on these dates is satisfactory, but not unlike that of at least a dozen other clarinetists of the period.

Shaw’s breakthrough occurred during a 20-act May 24, 1936, swing concert in New York sponsored by Local 802 of the musicians’ union. Given a slot among far more established players, the Arthur Shaw String Swing Ensemble played an intricate Shaw arrangement entitled “Interlude in B-flat.” Shaw soloed on clarinet over a classical string quartet augmented by standard jazz instrumentation. The performance generated a huge ovation (Shaw would later claim that he responded by playing the piece a second time) and critical praise.

This performance led to the formation of Shaw’s first regular ensemble, using the same unusual combination of classical and jazz instrumentation. Shaw asserted that he formed the band solely to make \$25,000 to finance his career as a writer. Shaw’s band was different—tonally more complex and nuanced than the other swing bands—and it was a commercial flop. Shaw reorganized with more conventional instrumentation, noting in his typical blunt way, “I thought, ‘if that’s what they want, I’ll give ‘em the loudest goddamn band in the world.’ ” This conflict between Shaw’s aesthetic sense and the demands of his public would surface repeatedly over the next 18 years.

Shaw frequently spoke about commercial pressures. In a 1993 interview with Richard Sudhalter for *Lost Chords: White Musicians and their Contribution to Jazz*, for example, Shaw explained, “I’m convinced that the major problem for the artist is the disparity between what he’s trying to do and what the audience perceives. The very nature of an artist is that

you are thinking of value; the very nature of an audience is that you are thinking of amusement. Entertainment versus art. But art was never meant to be entertaining.”

There is more than a bit of the misanthropic cynic on display here. There are, in fact, audiences for art, and the experience of aesthetic cognition certainly can be “entertaining” in the most profound sense of the word. As Shaw himself frequently observed, he had the good fortune to mature as a musician just as jazz music itself was growing out of its folk roots into a more universal art form, while capturing the public’s fancy in a way it never had before or would again.

In any event, the recordings of Artie Shaw and his Orchestra display a superbly disciplined, albeit more conventional, swing band fronted by the leader’s increasingly distinctive clarinet improvisations. In 1938, his recording of Cole Porter’s “Begin the Beguine,” intended as a “B” side, became one of the biggest hits of the swing era and transformed Shaw into a superstar.

With the drumming of a very young Buddy Rich propelling the rhythm section, and Helen Forrest as his “girl singer,” Shaw’s band became wildly popular. By the end of 1938, it had displaced that of fellow clarinetist Benny Goodman as number one in most music polls.

Comparisons between Shaw and Goodman are inevitable. To my ears, Shaw’s playing has always been far superior to that of the “King of Swing.” I find Goodman’s tone somewhat harsh and abrasive and his melodies somewhat superficial. Shaw played with a deeper sonority, and constructed his improvised solos with more care and design for their overall aesthetic impact.

Shaw liked to tell about a conversation he had with Goodman, who kept asking his opinion about other clarinet players. Shaw said, “‘Come on, Benny, quit it. You’re too hung up on the goddamn clarinet.’ ‘But that’s what we play, isn’t it?’ he said. And I said, ‘No—I’m trying to play music.’ ”

Despite Jim Crow segregation, which made touring with racially integrated bands practically impossible, Shaw courageously took his band on the road with Billie Holiday as his female vocalist. Unfortunately, the results were often highly unpleasant, as this giant of American song was forced to eat her meals on the bus while the other musicians enjoyed a restaurant, and she frequently lodged in someone’s home while the rest of the band stayed in a hotel.

During 1939, as both the musicianship of Shaw’s band and his clarinet virtuosity reached new peaks, Shaw began lashing out at his audiences. “Jitterbugs are morons,” he famously announced to the *New York Post*, insulting the flashy, athletic dancing popular at swing concerts. Shaw complained about signing autographs and being “catnip for all those mobs of overexcited girls.” He later said that despite earning \$5,000 per week, “I was as utterly miserable as a fellow can possibly be and still stay on this side of suicide.”

Shaw abruptly quit in November 1939, prompting a *New York Times* article about “the Shakespearean sweep of Mr. Shaw’s exodus.” He

moved to the still relatively undeveloped seaside Mexican village of Acapulco. The retirement did not last, however. Returning to Los Angeles in 1940, Shaw still owed his record label, RCA Victor, several sides. He scored a second huge hit with “Frenesi,” a catchy melody written by Mexican composer Alberto Dominguez. Shaw formed a new band, again including a string section, and recorded definitive versions of Hoagy Carmichael’s swing classic “Star Dust,” and Jerome Kern’s harmonically complex “All the Things You Are.”

During this period, Shaw recorded for the first time with a quintet he called the Gramercy Five. Keyboardist Johnny Guarneri played a harpsichord, giving the group a chamber music feeling.

After marrying Kern’s daughter, Betty, in 1942 Shaw enlisted in the United States Navy. Although he said he saw combat, Shaw spent most of his tour leading a military band to entertain US troops in the Pacific theater.

Discharged in 1944, Shaw formed a new band, which included the fiery trumpeter Roy Eldridge, the superb arranger Eddie Sauter, the fine pianist Dodo Marmorosa and vocalist Mel Tormé. The emerging bebop revolution in jazz, which incorporated increasingly complex harmonic and rhythmic conceptions, was capturing the imagination of younger players like Marmorosa. Recordings from this period reveal that a gulf was developing between the modernism of the band and Shaw’s relatively conservative clarinet solos. Although still a virtuoso, Shaw’s playing seemed to lack the passion of his pre-war solos.

Better were his recordings with a second version of the Gramercy Five, although his clarinet still sounded somewhat dated next to the more modern playing of Marmorosa and guitarist Barney Kessel.

Shaw’s post-war band was not able to duplicate the popularity of his earlier years. Nevertheless, he remained very much in the public eye. Ava Gardner, in her autobiography *Ava: My Story*, wrote about meeting him during that time. “Artie was handsome, bronzed, very sure of himself, and he never stopped talking. It was a way of life with him. Artie could go on about every subject in the world, and for that matter, a few outside it as well.”

A voracious reader and intellectual, Shaw recorded the modern classical music of Milhaud, Gould, Kabalevsky and Shostakovich. When attacked by a Hearst newspaper columnist for playing “Red” composers, Shaw retorted, “Anybody who plays a program of modern music and doesn’t include the Russian composers is scratching his left ear with his right hand.”

Shaw was among the “fellow travelers” drawn to the Communist Party because of its campaigns against racism in the United States and fascism abroad. According to divorce papers filed by Kathleen Winsor—wife number six—Shaw briefly was a member. Shaw would later claim that he attended party meetings under the name “Witherspoon” and asked so many “impertinent questions” that he was told, “Witherspoon, you’re not communist material.”

Shaw was on the executive committee of the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of Arts, Sciences and Professions (HICCASP), which included Frank Sinatra, Orson Welles and Katharine Hepburn from the entertainment world as well as Albert Einstein and Max Weber. The organization was accused of being a front for the Communist Party, and at the July 2, 1946, meeting, a minority introduced a resolution condemning communism as tantamount to fascism. In response to a statement by Ronald Reagan in support, Shaw declared that the Soviet Union was more democratic than the United States and offered to recite the Soviet constitution to prove it. After the resolution’s defeat, Reagan resigned from the organization and became a spokesperson for red-baiters within Hollywood.

Shaw was among hundreds of American entertainers and intellectuals who would ultimately pay the price of both political disorientation and right-wing victimization because of his involvement with Stalinism. He

was denounced in the blacklist organ *Red Channels* and appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1953. This political persecution no doubt contributed to Shaw’s premature departure from public life.

In August 1949, Shaw decided to launch a modern big band, similar to those of Boyd Raeburn, Woody Herman and Stan Kenton, anchored in the most recent innovations of modern classical music and bebop. Arrangements were provided by modernists Al Cohn, George Russell, Tadd Dameron and Gerry Mulligan.

Shaw was devastated by the public’s reaction. Audiences would scream for “Begin the Beguine” and “Frenesi” during concerts of the new music. Shaw disbanded in disgust and briefly fronted a more conventional swing band, playing the old favorites. But the huge swing audiences were gone, rhythm and blues was on the rise, and that band folded as well.

Shaw’s final attempt at performing music was a 1954 version of the Gramercy Five, featuring the superb modern guitarist Tal Farlow, who had just left the Red Norvo Trio featuring Charlie Mingus on bass, and the elegant bebop pianist Hank Jones. (Jones remains active in music today at age 86.) The result was a series of elegant recordings, many of which remained unissued for decades. Shaw played well, but he never fully incorporated the inner logic and passion of bebop, and as a result he sounds somewhat dated next to Farlow and Jones.

Shaw retired from music for good in 1954, claiming that the clarinet had become “a gangrenous right arm” that had to be amputated if he was going to survive. Although he lived another 50 years, he would never again play the clarinet in public, record, or lead a band. Instead, he continued to read voraciously and published several short stories. Critically, his creative writing is considered somewhat self-indulgent, and mediocre compared to his musical accomplishments.

In 1952, Shaw published an autobiography, *The Trouble With Cinderella*. For the last several decades of his life, he worked on a multi-volume semi-autobiographical novel, provisionally titled *The Education of Albie Snow*, which has never been published.

What kind of later career would Shaw have had in a society more supportive of cultural achievement and less interested in commercial profits? One cannot say with certainty, and there were undoubtedly personal limitations and internal demons contributing to Shaw’s artistic frustrations. But at the same time, one can see in Shaw’s abandonment of music a tragedy that mirrors the general cultural decline of the last 50 years, as well as the political disillusionment of a generation that emerged from World War II with great hopes for humanity.



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