

THE MUSICAL LIFE OF ARTIE SHAW

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BY

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Arthur Jacob Arshawsky (1910-2004), also known as Artie Shaw, was an American clarinetist and bandleader during the Swing era of the 1930s and 1940s. Shaw rose to stardom with his big band arrangements of popular songs of the early twentieth century along with many of his own original tunes. The media, at the time, even professed Shaw to be the rival of the “King of Swing” Benny Goodman. Upon closer examination of Shaw’s life, one can see that he detested his fame and was in a constant struggle between pleasing the masses (for monetary reasons) and pursuing his own goals, both musical and otherwise. Shaw’s long music career featured different creative periods that were driven by either of these two pursuits. Aggravated with the music industry and tired of his fame, Artie Shaw retired from performing in 1954 to focus on his literary writing. He lived another 50 years and followed many other activities away from music.

Arthur Arshawsky was born in New York to Jewish immigrants Harold and Sarah Arshawsky; he was an only child, and his parents were not well-off. His mother was a seamstress, and his father pursued different business ventures, none of which were successful. When Arthur was eight years old, his family moved to New Haven, Connecticut. Due to his family’s socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, Arthur had a hard time fitting in with other kids his age and, in turn, became somewhat of a troublemaker. His mother, Sarah, sought to remedy her son’s bad behavior. “The Arshawskys got a piano, and Sarah arranged for lessons for Arthur from a woman nearby.”¹ Arthur soon came to realize that “Music was a way to fit in and stand out.”²

¹ Tom Nolan, *Three Chords for Beauty’s Sake: The Life of Artie Shaw* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 7.

² Nolan, 7.

The piano did not keep Arthur's attention for long. He regularly skipped school and one day saw a performance at a local vaudeville theater by some unfamiliar stage musicians wearing "blue-and-white-striped blazer(s)." One of them "came down to the footlights, knelt down on one knee (looking sharp as a tack and rakish as all get-out to me as I sat entranced in my stolen seat), and played a tune named *Dreamy Melody*."³ This stylish performance by an unknown saxophonist had a profound effect on young Arthur. After weeks of convincing his parents and a whole summer working to earn the money, Arthur bought a saxophone from a local music shop for \$40. The salesman also offered Arthur five free lessons on his new instrument, but Arthur only took two as his teacher "was too insistent on practicing scales before trying more ambitious musical adventures."⁴

Arthur learned how to play by listening and playing along with popular saxophone recordings at the time, and soon he began playing with other local boys in the "Peter Pan Novelty Orchestra." Arthur's mom, Sarah, made Peter Pan costumes for the group, and eventually, Arthur led "a six-piece high school band playing for school dances and after basketball games."⁵ His hard work gained him recognition when the drummer of Johnny Cavallaro's Orchestra heard him playing and arranged an audition for Arthur with Cavallaro himself. Arthur won the job, and during this time with the Cavallaro Orchestra he made some impactful life decisions. First, the fifteen-year-old Arthur Arshawsky, now a professional musician, changed his name to "Art Shaw" because "In those days, you had to be a Gentile in America, to work."⁶ In addition, he had to learn how to double on the clarinet.

³ Artie Shaw. *The Trouble with Cinderella: An Outline of Identity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1952), 55.

⁴ Vladimir Simosko. *Artie Shaw: A Musical Biography and Discography* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 18.

⁵ Nolan, 10.

⁶ Nolan, 11.

The Cavallaro Orchestra had a winter-long engagement during the 1926-1927 season in Florida, and Art began to learn the clarinet on the trip there. “Clarinet called for a whole different embouchure: the way you held your mouth and applied lip pressure, how you tensed your face and throat. The fingering was different from the saxophone’s. And the horn was finicky: get one thing wrong and you produced an awful squeal,” but by the time Art had returned to Connecticut from the Florida gig “he wasn’t bad.”⁷ This period in Art’s life was the nexus of a decade long career, from about 1926-1936, as a sideman doubling on clarinet and saxophone; he toured the United States with various bands and eventually found himself mostly in the recording studios of New York City.

Art Shaw gave his first performance as the leader of a professional group on May 24, 1936, at the Imperial Theatre for “New York’s First Swing Music Concert.”⁸ Leading up to this performance, Shaw may have been jealous of his unofficial rival, Benny Goodman, who was already leading a successful orchestra. Shaw had been mulling over the thought of his own orchestra “because if Benny Goodman could do this – Benny, who probably never read a book in his whole *life*; Benny, the *second*-best alto player in New York City (and just maybe, in Art’s opinion, the second-best *clarinetist*) - why then, so could Art Shaw.”⁹

The Imperial Theatre concert was Art’s chance to prove to most of his peers, who made up almost the entire audience, that he could put on a show just as good as Benny’s, if not better, and do it in his own way. Shaw was having “jam sessions” with a string quartet at a friend’s apartment which mostly involved rehearsing the Brahms and Mozart quintets; Shaw came to enjoy the sound of clarinet and strings together. This gave the idea to write a piece using this

⁷ Nolan, 13-14.

⁸ Nolan, 59.

⁹ Nolan, 57.

instrumentation as a jazz combo.¹⁰ The result, and what he showed off at the Imperial Theatre, was his “Interlude in B-flat.”

Shaw’s new piece featured him on solo clarinet along with a string quartet and a three-piece rhythm section. “Interlude in B-flat” was unique for its time in that it blended elements of jazz and classical music, before Third Stream (which worked the same way) came around. Jazz historian Richard Sudhalter called Shaw’s composition “an essay in contrasts” and noted its influences from Maurice Ravel to Tommy Dorsey.¹¹ Shaw wanted to offer “something just a tiny bit different” from the other, more standard acts of the concert.¹² It was this decision and this piece that launched his career as a bandleader.

Immediately after the Imperial Theatre concert, Art was approached by several music agencies wanting to sign the budding clarinet star; he ended up signing with the Rockwell-O'Keefe Agency, and within a few weeks, Art was recording for Brunswick Records.¹³ His group was billed as “Art Shaw and His Orchestra” but had nicknames such as “Art Shaw’s String Swing” or “Sweet Swing.” Art quickly became aware that working with big music companies meant that he had to make certain concessions with his music. Namely, he was obligated to have a vocalist, preferably a woman, for a number of tracks he recorded. Art begrudgingly agreed but that did not stop him from voicing his opinion on the matter; Simosko quotes Artie from an interview he had with *Down Beat* magazine, “I’m not interested in lyrics... used vocalists only because it was commercially necessary, and whenever possible, it was a put-on...”¹⁴

¹⁰ Shaw, 294.

¹¹ Nolan, 60.

¹² Simosko, 39.

¹³ Simosko, 44.

¹⁴ Simosko, 237.

The first vocalist that Art hired was Peg La Centra. “Originally from Boston and still in her teens, [she] already was a veteran of many years in commercial radio,” having sung in another group Art was a sideman for in 1934.¹⁵ One of the most popular tunes recorded by Art Shaw and His Orchestra with Peg La Centra was “There’s Frost on the Moon” recorded with Brunswick on October 30, 1936.¹⁶ In addition to Peg, Art increased his instrumentation for the Brunswick records to include two trumpets, trombone, tenor saxophone, piano, string quartet, rhythm section, and Shaw on clarinet. The beginning of “There’s Frost on the Moon” features the lead trumpet and Art on clarinet for the melody with the rest of the winds and strings providing accompaniment; Peg La Centra only comes in on vocals for the middle third of the song. The rest of the song features improvised solos by Shaw and his friend Tony Pastor on tenor saxophone.¹⁷

Art Shaw and his “String Swing” had gigs mostly in New York City, but they also traveled to Dallas for what became a disastrous engagement. Most of their shows failed to bring in big crowds, and Art realized that his “sweet swing” was not as popular as the louder swing bands like Goodman’s. Shaw wrote in his biography about a realization he had after being scolded by a venue manager for failing to draw in customers with his music, “It doesn’t matter what you do, or how good you are – as long as you can earn money for the fellow who hires you.”¹⁸ Art further elaborated his reaction to the manager’s beratement to Simosko, “Shaw said this speech came as a shattering disillusionment, as he finally realized he wasn’t in the music business; he was in the entertainment business.”¹⁹ After only a few months, Shaw disbanded his

¹⁵ Simosko, 44.

¹⁶ Simosko, 171.

¹⁷ Art Shaw and His Orchestra, “There’s Frost on the Moon,” Fred Ahlert and Joe Young, recorded October 1936, Brunswick Record Company, 20169, Br7771, 1936, 78-rpm record disc.

¹⁸ Shaw, 304.

¹⁹ Simosko, 45.

group and vowed to give the public what they wanted, "I'm gonna get the loudest...swing band you ever heard – and then we'll see."²⁰

From 1937 to 1938, Shaw had his own big band titled "Art Shaw and His New Music," and though his new ensemble caused a stir in the music world, they were still left in relative obscurity to the public.²¹ In 1938, Shaw's contract was not renewed with Brunswick, and in the same year he signed with RCA Victor. Under this new label, Art once again changed his name. A record executive said that "Art Shaw" sounded like someone had sneezed, and so he would now be known as "Artie Shaw."²² Along with his new name, Artie's association with Victor marked perhaps the most severe turning point in his life.

One of the first songs recorded by Artie Shaw and His Orchestra for RCA Victor was the Cole Porter tune "Begin the Beguine." The song was from Porter's musical *Jubilee* (1935), which was produced at the Imperial Theatre, the same venue where Artie made his debut as a bandleader the following year.²³ Unfortunately, by 1938 *Jubilee* and its music were largely forgotten. The story is unclear of how "Begin the Beguine" came to be in Artie Shaw's repertory, but many of Shaw's band members from that time later claimed responsibility for the song's inclusion. Shaw brushed aside these accounts, "Everybody wants to get in on the act."²⁴ Nonetheless, the song's irrelevance at the time led the RCA recording manager to say it would be "a complete waste of time" to record it.²⁵ However, with some changes that made "Begin the

²⁰ Nolan, 72.

²¹ Simosko, 51.

²² Shaw, 349.

²³ Nolan, 93.

²⁴ Simosko, 63.

²⁵ Nolan, 93.

Beguine” more accessible as a swing tune, it became one of the most popular songs from that era. In fact, it was the number-one selling record of 1938.²⁶

Artie Shaw and His Orchestra went on tour following their recording session with Victor. Shaw recalled in a documentary on his life, *Artie Shaw: Time Is All You've Got*, playing for a dance at Indiana University. When the band played “Begin the Beguine” the crowd burst into cheers. Artie and the band thought “some of the dancers had been doing something spectacular, but the band couldn't see anything.” Later the number was requested again and was followed by wild cheering. Shaw turned to the band in surprise and said, “Looks like we've got a hit!”²⁷

One of the changes Shaw made to “Begin the Beguine” was switch the meter to 4/4 time, making it an easier dance tune. Shaw's instrumentation was more synonymous with other swing bands: three trumpets, three trombones, two alto saxophones, two tenor saxophones, piano and rhythm section, and Shaw on clarinet. The song begins with the trumpets and saxophones setting up a snappy groove, before Shaw enters with the melody on his clarinet. The saxophones pick up the melody from Shaw with interjections from the trumpets. Shaw plays a characteristic snappy figure, and the rest of the winds take up the melody. Tony Pastor again solos on tenor saxophone which is followed by another solo passage by Shaw. The winds take up the melody once more with Shaw soloing on top. The ending features unique “chirps” (short, syncopated notes) by Shaw and a “soon-to-be-patented upward glissando.”²⁸

With their recording of “Begin the Beguine,” Shaw and his orchestra became an overnight sensation, which led to more booked gigs and more frequent recording sessions (from

²⁶ Steve Hawtin et al, “Songs from the year 1938,” tsort, January 6, 2021, <http://tsort.info/music/yr1938.htm>.

²⁷ *Artie Shaw: Time Is All You've Got*, directed by Brigette Berman (1985; Bridge Film Productions), VHS.

²⁸ Nolan, 94; Artie Shaw and His Orchestra, “Begin the Beguine,” by Cole Porter, recorded July 1938, RCA Victor, 024079-1, BB7746, AXM2-5517, 1938, RCA Victor's Bluebird 78s.

every two months to once a month). Artie was soon confronted by the less-glamorous side of his celebrity status when crazed fans, or “jitterbugs,” would storm the stage, fight, and even create mobs to try to get close to him. These jitterbugs and the never-ending performances began to wear Artie down. “For Shaw, the pace was killing. It seemed he never stopped: going sometimes from *Melody and Madness* (a weekly radio show Artie played on) on Sunday night right into the Victor studio for a four-and-a-half-hour session ending at four in the morning, then getting ready to hit the road for another week.”²⁹

In April of 1939, Artie and his orchestra opened at the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles, but on the opening night Artie fainted on stage in front of a record crowd of over 8,000. After waking up in a hospital five days later, Shaw found out he was suffering from a high fever, strep throat, and a normally fatal blood disease called agranulocytosis, which he had unknowingly developed as a side effect from a medicine he was taking.³⁰ Artie took several weeks off from playing and spent much of his time with actress Judy Garland. “She was making the movie *The Wizard of Oz* at the time and was even getting criticism for taking so much time away from the studios to be with Shaw.”³¹ Impressed by Judy’s new house in Beverly Hills, Shaw bought his own house on Summit Ridge Drive where he lived next to the composer Leopold Stokowski.

After his near-death experience, Artie wanted to leave the business as soon as he could; he wrote in his autobiography, “...I arrived at my decision that enough was enough. As soon as I could finish up certain contractual obligations, I was going to get out of the whole thing... what was the point in going on making myself miserable in a kind of life I hated?”³² During one show

²⁹ Nolan, 114.

³⁰ Simosko, 72.

³¹ Simosko, 73.

³² Shaw, 350.

in New York City, a heckler in the audience pushed Shaw over the edge, although it would not have taken much given Artie's state of mind. He walked off the stage in the middle of the show, called his lawyer and said he was leaving; after a long night of pleas and threats of legal action against him, Artie left and went to Mexico.

Several quiet months went by in Acapulco. Artie spent most of his time at a local restaurant or on the beach, but his time in Mexico ended after he broke his knee while saving a drowning girl from the strong tides. Shaw told Nolan that while he was recovering, he got "discouraged" and decided to return to his home in Beverly Hills.³³ The last thing he wanted to do was return to the music business; but Artie still owed RCA more records, and he needed to make money.

He put together a rather large swing orchestra consisting of 32 members including six brass, four saxophones, bass clarinet, flute, oboe, French horn, 14 strings, four-piece rhythm section and Shaw on clarinet. He hired composer William Grant Still as an arranger, and the first piece recorded was another super-hit like "Begin the Beguine." "Frenesi" was "a tune Shaw heard played so often by an Acapulco-restaurant mariachi band that he had memorized it."³⁴ The record company called Artie's new style "deluxe swing," and his career was "back on track, in high gear – and on his terms."³⁵

In February of 1940, Shaw went on a date with actress Lana Turner in Hollywood that turned into an impromptu trip to Las Vegas where the two eloped. Almost as soon as they returned to Los Angeles, they could tell their marriage would not last. Artie saw Lana as a

³³ Nolan, 132.

³⁴ Nolan, 140.

³⁵ Nolan, 142.

“typical Hollywood actress,” and she claimed he was emotionally abusive. Shaw admitted to Nolan towards the end of his life, “I saw marriage as a long cat-fight...because that’s how I grew up.”³⁶ Lana left Artie near the end of June, four months after they married, but she did so quietly to avoid the press. After calling the jitterbugs “morons” and his abrupt departure from the music business months prior, Artie’s publicists begged him to avoid another controversy. In July, Artie asked Lana to accompany him to the debut of a new radio show he was on. She agreed and went with Artie, but after the show ended someone asked Lana to give Artie a kiss for the press to which she replied, “Kiss him! I’ve just left him.”³⁷

The following autumn, production began on the film *Second Chorus* starring Fred Astaire, Paulette Goddard, Burgess Meredith, and Artie Shaw. When the film was initially pitched, it was going to have a fictional story with a serious tone, and Shaw would play as himself. However, Fred Astaire was casted for the lead role, and the script changed to a comedy. Shaw and his new orchestra were still featured, and he composed a few of the pieces heard in the film.

The most enduring Shaw composition today came from his association with the movie *Second Chorus*. His “Concerto for Clarinet,” which he composed for the film, lasts just over nine minutes; although, only about three and a half minutes are heard in the film, upsetting Shaw.³⁸ He later recorded the whole work for RCA Victor. The piece is not in the classical concerto form but rather uses the twelve-bar blues featuring Shaw’s solos on top.

³⁶ Nolan, 145.

³⁷ Nolan, 146.

³⁸ Simosko, 88.

After a fanfare-like introduction, Shaw enters with a soothing solo above the string section. The rest of the ensemble leads to a cadence, and the pianist sets up the twelve-bar blues. Shaw returns soloing on top of the chords, which leads to solos by the tenor saxophone, trombone, and trumpet. Shaw interrupts the last solo with the first cadenza of the piece. This cadenza features Semitic scales above the strings' tremolos.³⁹ Following the cadenza, the drummer sets up a tom-tom groove, and Shaw continues to improvise on top. The saxophones enter with a melody, interjected by the trombones. Shaw returns, improvising, and his characteristic upward glissando soars above the ensemble. The orchestra moves to another cadence setting up the final cadenza by Shaw, lasting an entire minute. Shaw uses more Semitic scales and climbs the altissimo to high C, which he holds for five seconds. A three-note conclusion from the orchestra brings the piece to an end.⁴⁰

Shaw wrote about an encounter he had following a performance of his "Concerto":

A well-known clarinet player came into my dressing-room after a show I'd just played in a theatre (we did five or six shows a day in those days, seven days a week, sometimes for months on end); I used to play my 'Concerto for Clarinet' at the end of every one, and he said, 'Artie, do you end every show with that piece?' I said, 'Yes, why?' He said, 'You mean you always end on that top C?' I said, 'Of course. That's how the piece ends.' 'I know,' he said, 'But aren't you ever afraid you'll miss?' I said, 'Put your hand on the table.' He did, and I said, 'Raise your index finger.' He did. I said, 'Were you afraid you'd miss?' 'Well, no,' he said, and then, 'You mean, it's like that?' 'If it isn't,' I said, 'don't mess with it.'⁴¹

Shaw faced a number of hardships from 1941-1953. He disbanded his orchestra when the United States entered World War II and joined the Navy. Artie was placed in charge of a service band called "The Rangers" that performed for the Armed Forces throughout the Pacific

³⁹ Nolan, 156.

⁴⁰ Artie Shaw and His Orchestra, "Concerto for Clarinet," recorded August 1940, RCA Victor, AFRS BML, Hep CD19, HSLP -404, ASC-7, J3004, 78-rpm record disc.

⁴¹ Nolan, 157.

Theater.⁴² Seeing the effects of war close hand, Artie suffered psychologically and was medically discharged in late 1943. After being released, he fell into a deep depression and required over a year of psychoanalysis to recover. Shaw eventually formed a new orchestra and continued to record and perform until he retired in 1947.

During this 12-year period, Shaw went through four marriages and was with his seventh wife by 1953 (two of the marriages were annulled). Artie wrote about his marriages in his autobiography, “I made an unholy botch of every last one of them. Of course, I believe I can also state, equally accurately, and with complete dispassion and objectivity, that I had a good bit of help in making these various unholy botches.”⁴³

Shaw’s retirement in 1947 only lasted for about a year, and in 1949 he began touring as a classical orchestral soloist, playing with various orchestras in the United States. Following this tour, he again formed another orchestra with which he toured and recorded until 1953. In the same year, Shaw was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee for his alleged Communist leanings.⁴⁴ Officially, he was cleared by the committee, but Artie soon faced an IRS bill of \$82,000 in back taxes.

In September of 1953, Artie revived his “Gramercy 5” which was a small ensemble of musicians he originally formed out of his 1940 orchestra. His Gramercy 5 was named after a New York telephone exchange. The 1953 group consisted of Shaw on clarinet, Joe Roland on vibraphone, Hank Jones on piano, Tal Falow on guitar, Tommy Potter on bass guitar, and Irv Kluger on drums, making the Gramercy 5 a sextet.⁴⁵ The combo played in the “cool jazz” style

⁴² Simosko, 99.

⁴³ Shaw, 361.

⁴⁴ Simosko, 127.

⁴⁵ Simosko, 208.

and performed in jazz clubs across the country. Shaw disbanded the group in July of 1954 and, aside from a brief tour in Australia, never performed again.

Many today only remember Artie Shaw as a star clarinetist and band leader from the Swing era, but this is a rather ambiguous description of his complex life. The traumas he faced as a child (an abusive father, sickness, poverty, discrimination) followed him throughout his life and affected how he viewed the world. Literary minded, Shaw struggled with his lifelong goal of becoming an author because of financial difficulties (at times) and the pressures he faced as a star musician— pressures that nearly cost him his life. In total, Shaw had eight marriages over a 53-year period, the longest being with actress Evelyn Keyes from 1957-1985. When he retired from performing in 1954, Artie Shaw spent the next 50 years being an author and following other, nonmusical, pursuits such as architecture, marksmanship, and different business ventures.

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