

# ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



## **BENNY GOODMAN**

[This is the twenty-eighth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

For the past two and one-half years, I've resisted writing about my all-time favorite clarinetist simply because so much is known about him. First, there's the movie, *The Benny Goodman Story* starring Steve Allen. Second, his recordings, both single and albums, are ubiquitous. And then there's so many stories related by his musical sidemen.

But maybe we can learn something new about the man from the Ross Firestone's book *Swing, Swing, Swing: The Life & Times of Benny Goodman*, published in 1994 by W. W. Norton & Company (available on Amazon, ISBN-10: 0393311686. The inside cover states "From 'hot shot' clarinetist too young to wear long pants but old enough and good enough to find a place in the early dance bands of the 1920's, to 'King of Swing,' World Ambassador of popular music and classical supremo conveys a lot about Goodman the man, perfectionist, genius and who could be a nightmare to work for".

Two gigs put Benny at the top of the charts. First, after having won a regular spot on the 1934 coast-to-coast NBC radio program, "Let's Dance," there was "The Tour" in 1935. Goodman made his first huge success when all his young listeners came to hear him at the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles on August 21st. The swing era had arrived, and his successes followed. But the second booking put him beyond mortal reach: On January 16, 1938, the Benny Goodman band appeared in Carnegie Hall. Now no one would dispute that Goodman was truly the "King of Swing."

But with his place in Jazz history secure, were the stories about the eccentric, preoccupied, frugal and sometimes ill-mannered Benny Goodman true? The one you may have heard is when Benny jumped into a taxicab, looked at the driver and after a long moment of silence asked him, "What do I owe you?"

Or the time he and a friend (Jimmy Van Heusen, perhaps?) took a couple of girls to a nightclub and when the girls, apparently wanting to go to the ladies room, asked, "Will you excuse us, please?" Benny replied, "Why certainly," and got up and walked away.

I believe it was Helen Forrest who related the often told Goodman yarn that when she was singing with Benny's band, at breakfast one morning, as he put ketchup on his eggs, the bottle top fell into the eggs. Benny didn't pick up the top of the bottle; he just ate around it and left it there.

Then Helen Ward, another of Benny's singers, rehearsed with the band at Benny's home in Connecticut and complained that the room was cold. Benny reportedly said, "You're right," left the room for a minute, and retrieved a heavy sweater, put it on himself, and continued the rehearsal while the rest of the band shivered.

Was he really a perfectionist? Try these two tales. When he felt his band's timing was off, he would rehearse the group endlessly with absolutely no rhythm section; no drums, no guitar, no bass. If you've never experienced that nightmare, trust me – you'll get a headache from all the concentration needed. Also, disappointed after hearing the music prepared by Universal-International Pictures for his 1955 biopic, *The Benny Goodman Story*, he brought his band to a recording studio and recorded the entire soundtrack for the flick (also released as an LP – my favorite – *BG in HiFi*). One reporter claimed that when Benny was on the "Merv Griffin Show" in the 80s, Merv asked him how factual the movie had been. Benny just laughed and laughed. Finally, he responded, "The MUSIC was good!"



Yes, Dear Reader, Goodman had his quirks. Lots of them. But he was undeniably one of a handful of Jazz instrumentalists that was a game-changer. His music gave legitimacy to Swing. He integrated his Big Band, his Trio and his Quartet. He traveled world-wide to receptive audiences (in a rare show of respect, even Khrushchev told him. "I like real music. I don't understand jazz. I don't mean just yours. I don't even understand our own"). So deep was his mastery of the clarinet that he was a well-respected classical soloist, playing with some of the most prestigious symphony orchestras in the world. His tone, his phrasing, his technique – all perfection.

R.I.P. Benjamin David Goodman (1909 – 1986)

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