

“Begin the Beguine”--Artie Shaw & His Orchestra (1938)

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Artie Shaw

One of the most popular American recordings of the twentieth century was never expected to be a hit.

“Begin the Beguine”--the three-and-a-quarter-minute, 78-rpm disc that catapulted bandleader-clarinetist Artie Shaw (1910-2004) to international stardom in the autumn of 1938, and by the 1960s was estimated to have sold some six and a half million copies--was released as the B-side to a swing-era update of Rudolf Friml’s old operetta favorite “Indian Love Call.”

Shaw’s cheeky arrangement of Friml’s number, with a scat-tinged vocal by saxophonist Tony Pastor, had been prompting strong reactions during the band’s live performances. “‘Indian Love Call’ was the one that got all the applause in the ballroom,” Shaw said; Artie was all but certain it would be a sensation on disc.

But before waxing “Indian Love Call” on the afternoon of July 24th, 1938, Art had another number he wanted to record: a smooth, propulsive styling of an all-but-forgotten three-year-old song from the unsuccessful 1935 Cole Porter show “Jubilee.”

That didn’t sound like a good idea to the folks at RCA, who said Shaw’s notion was “a complete waste of time.” The record-men only agreed to let him record “Begin the Beguine,” Artie wrote, “when I insisted that it would make a nice, quiet contrast to ‘Indian Love Call.’”

Cole Porter was already one of Shaw’s favorite show-composers; in the course of Artie’s career, he’d record more tunes by Porter (19 total) than by any other songwriter. He liked

the inventive way Porter shifted between major and minor chords, and he loved those gorgeous melodies.

“Begin the Beguine” had an especially beguiling tune--one that went on and on and on. At 108 measures, it was (according to composer-scholar Alec Wilder) “the longest popular song ever written.”

It was one-of-a-kind in other ways, too. Most pop songs were built on an AABA model: an eight-bar strain (A), repeated; an eight-bar bridge (B), then back to the first (A) strain for a final eight bars. “Beguine,” though, had (as Porter himself described): “one theme of 16 bars repeated endlessly and then finished off with a new theme which is repeated twice.” The tune had no introductory verse and no bridge.

No one knew what to label it. There was a dance in Martinique named “the beguine,” but Porter’s tune was inspired by a folk number he’d heard in New Guinea. Though “Beguine” wasn’t a rumba, it had a Latin-Caribbean feel.

More to the point, how might Porter’s melody best be arranged for a swing-era American dance-band while still retaining its exotic essence?

Other US band-leaders had wrestled with similar problems in the past few dance-happy years.

“Some of the best exponents of Spanish rhythm strongly accent the tango four beats to a bar in the manner of a fox trot,” Enric Madriguera wrote in 1936. “Then if the dancers do not know the steps, they get up and do a modified fox trot anyway.”

“Try starting your rumba with nothing but the rhythm for two whole bars,” Ronald Hunt advised in 1938. “Let your lead sax or brass take the pick-up. You will find this an excellent intro.”

Such approaches would be part of Shaw’s eventual treatment of “Beguine,” the arrangement of which he assigned to Jerry Gray, a violinist he’d first hired in 1936. “Jerry and I worked very closely in those days,” Art would write, “like, say, Duke [Ellington] and Billy Strayhorn. I would give him sketches or ideas and he would score them.” Like Shaw, Gray was a great admirer of such European composers as Debussy, whose rich harmonies he combined with his own jazz sensibilities. “I had something,” he’d recall years later, “I guess I’d call it finesse.”

When Shaw told Gray he wanted him to come up with “something really special” on “Beguine,” the arranger took the song with him to his parents’ home in Boston. “They didn’t have a piano,” Gray said, “but ... I actually hear it all in my head--the structures, the sections, everything. A piano slows me down ...”

“We rehearsed it one afternoon,” guitarist Al Avola told a journalist many decades later, “and it wasn’t even part way through when Artie stopped us. It was arranged in a

beguine rhythm--*bhum bhum, bhum pah bhum*--and Artie wouldn't stand for that. He was always figuring how a song would play at the Waldorf and that wasn't the sort of stuff he thought they wanted. So he said, 'Let's do it in four-four time,' so we changed the time but kept Jerry Gray's chords."

"Begin the Beguine," thanks to Artie Shaw's instrumental version (chosen by disc jockeys in great preference to "Indian Love Call"), and to several later vocal recordings, would become a popular-music standard and one of Cole Porter's most often-performed songs. When the composer met the clarinetist at a party during the first year of Shaw's record's success, he shook his hand and said, "Happy to meet my collaborator."

"Did that involve royalties?" Shaw asked.

"No," Porter replied.

"I wasn't trying to be a 'collaborator,'" Artie said of "Beguine" a few years before he died. "I tried to play the song the way I thought it would sound good.... When you do something that does go off on its own, and it's a standout thing -- you don't *mean* it to *do* that; you just play a particular song, and you happen to hit a way of doing it that for some unknown reason the public buys, en masse."

His "Beguine" record "took off," Shaw guessed, because "it's the first time that anybody played a real melody down with a jazz beat. That's what that was -- after the fact. I couldn't have known ahead of time. And it still holds up; that [record] goes on and on and on. You'd think that's the only thing I ever did."

It became almost the bane of Shaw's 20-year band-leading career: the most-popular, most-requested number in his several orchestras's repertoire. For a great many listeners, all over the world, it encapsulated personal memories and epitomized the sound of an era.

Artie Shaw's "Begin the Beguine"--that endlessly appealing dance-record dominated by Shaw's silken, soaring, sublime clarinet--accrued a number of surprising cultural associations.

It was, for instance, the record playing on the phonograph in a Hollywood photographer's studio in 1949 when the 23-year-old Marilyn Monroe posed for a memorable series of nude calendar portraits.

And, perhaps even more impressively, it was the recording that symbolized the transition from defeat to recovery for one of America's foes in World War II.

"The culture shock that followed Japan's surrender to the Allies changed the Japanese completely ...," Sam Kusumoto, president of Minolta, would say (as quoted by William McBrien in his 1998 biography of Cole Porter). "The first music we heard was 'Begin the Beguine' by Artie Shaw's band. If you talk to Japanese of my generation and

mention 'Begin the Beguine,' everybody will rise and smile because that song represented a new era for the Japanese."

Tom Nolan is the author of "Artie Shaw, King of the Clarinet: His Life and Times" (Norton, 2011).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.