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'These Foolish Things: The Decca Years' Review: Remembering and Regretting Artie Shaw's Early Retirement
A collection of some of the jazz clarinetist's final sessions before he walked away from music at age 44.

The most familiar kind of tragedy in American music is that of the great artist who dies young, like Bix Beiderbecke or Charlie Parker. Then there's the artist who does all of his major work only in the early part of his career, as critics once said of Louis Armstrong (though hardly anyone would agree with that assessment anymore). Artie Shaw represents a unique kind of cultural tragedy: the major artist who gives it all up at the peak of his powers for reasons that seem baffling to everybody else.

A new double CD reveals what an irreparable loss it was to music when Artie Shaw stopped playing the clarinet at age 44. (That he lived another 50 years only adds insult to injury.) "These Foolish Things: The Decca Years" (Sepia) collects 47 tracks recorded between 1949 and 1955, including all of his final big band sessions made before, as he later bragged, he "made a lamp" out of his clarinet.

As Shaw later told me—and many other interviewers—he hated the business aspects of the music world and cringed at the thought of being forced to replay his "Begin the Beguine" and "Frenesi" every night. Yet these swan-song tracks show that the bandleader was making brilliant music right up until his last note.

For most of those tracks, Shaw does what he did best: playing sumptuous arrangements of the classic songs that he helped define as standards, graced by his own passionate and moody clarinet solos, as on "Where or When" and "Love Walked In." There are also stylishly swinging original works played by his group the Gramercy Five (actually a septet here), among them "Crumbum" and "The Shekomeko Shuffle."

Yet new ideas abound as well: While earlier tracks (like both "Beguine" and "Frenesi") had alluded to Pan-American styles, "Orinoco" and "Mucho de Nada" here are much more authentically invested in the Afro-Cuban idiom, featuring a full four-piece percussion section. "He's Gone Away" and "Foggy Foggy Dew" indicate that Shaw was paying attention to the nascent folk-music boom. And Tadd Dameron's "So Easy" and Gene Roland's arrangement of "I Get a Kick Out of You" are rich in the harmonic language of bebop. All of these developments—Latin jazz, traditional songs, modern jazz—were new colors in Shaw's musical palette.

As part of his contract with Decca, Christopher Popa's liner notes explain, Shaw was obliged to collaborate with other contract artists and arrangers, not all of whom were to his liking. Ironically, his biggest hit on Decca was "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles" with an arrangement for strings and choir that represents Gordon Jenkins at his most rococo. It seems uncomfortably campy in a way that Shaw's other music never was.

Many years later, Shaw delighted in telling me that he didn't think much of nearly all of the singers he worked with. Still, most of those heard here are eminently worthy of sharing the mic with the great clarinetist, especially Connee Boswell and Dick Haymes; alas, the two songs assigned to Boswell are forgettable, but the Haymes-Shaw duet on "Count Every Star," a lovely French song that ought to be better known, is a highlight of both careers.

Maybe Shaw was inspired by Gioachino Rossini, who composed all of his classic operas before he was 40 and then retired. In the end, it's insignificant that the music in "These Foolish Things—The Decca Years" represents some of Shaw's last. It only matters that it's some of his greatest.

—Mr. Will Friedwald writes about music and popular culture for the Wall Street Journal.

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