

On the Death of Artie Shaw  
Robert S. Griffin  
www.robertsgriffin.com

In the decade from 1935 to 1945, no musician was more famous and admired than Artie Shaw. Shaw--handsome, brilliant, outspoken--was a clarinetist and bandleader whose hit recordings sold millions. His biographer writes: "Shaw's lyrical solos evoked visual images: a bird in flight, a tree moved by the wind, a sailboat in the moonlight. On a ballad, his harmonically adventurous playing explored every gorgeous nook and cranny of a melody; on a rousing swing tune, his euphoric horn soared high and joyous enough to raise the roof." Shaw lived life to the hilt: his swinging personal life and marriages to several movie stars made headlines. He became an iconic figure of his time, and has drawn mention in the writings of such literary lights as P.D. Wodehouse, Jack Kerouac, and Philip Roth.

But now it is 2004 and Artie Shaw is over 90 years old. "The last year," a friend recounted, "Artie pretty much didn't do anything but just sit in that chair. And sleep. He'd get up to have a meal, but then towards the end he wouldn't even get out of the chair to do that.

"I think at the end Artie was just--lonely. I think all his life he kept hoping there would be that someone he never was able to find.

"Diabetes caused his eyesight to go. That's what really did him in, when he couldn't read, that was kind of the last straw."

"Good thing my mind is well stocked," Artie said at the time.

"Otherwise I'd go nuts. I can't read, not even big print. I can barely see your face. It's a blur. But what are you going to do, that's what it is. You ride the horse you're given.

"What I do now is mostly just--I look up at the ceiling and I think, why is there something instead of nothing? It'd be very easy for there to be nothing. Why are there so many things? And who did it? How did it come about? You can't say 'evolution' for the universe--although it might be. Makes one wonder.

"I asked Jerry Kern one time why a tune he wrote called 'Long Ago and Far Away'--nice song--that low note in the key of C, that

would be an F, I said why not a G? With everything that followed, why not? Jerry said an F sounded better.

Artie had abandoned a long novel he had hoped to write: "I recognized how long it would take, and I couldn't do it. It was that old line, 'Life is too much with him.' Life got in the way.

Though he didn't finish it, Artie had sketched out the book's ending: "Guy's in Spain writing a book about insects and he comes across a thing called the rectangular spider. It's a spider that makes a rectangle, roughly, and then joins the sides, radii, and more radii, and more, and when its done it's a web, which is the way this spider gets by, like a fisherman. Anything that flies into the web sticks to it. Really cunning when you think about it for an unrational creature to do, that's a pretty amazing feat.

"So my guy is watching this spider weaving this web and thinking the spider has no conception that he's there. He thinks to himself, what is watching me while I'm doing the equivalent of making my web? Maybe that is what we mean when we say 'God.'

"You take what you are given and make what you can out of it. I was given some sense of music. Where'd it come from? I don't know. Where does anything come from? Where does the spider's silk come from? I didn't know I was going to be one of the so-called immortals in that field. Had no intention. I knew I had to be better. Had to be better, better, better. It always could be better. I did honest work."

"Artie had bad arthritis," said the friend. "He was having a lot of pain in his right leg--his right hip and thigh--and he had swelling in his knee. Around Thanksgiving he became despondent. He sat and looked out into space and said, 'I don't know what to do.' We ordered in-home hospice care.

"Artie kept his sense of humor through the indignities. I remember one time Pattie [the caregiver] and I were changing his bedclothes, which was difficult and painful for him. Pattie said, 'Are you comfortable?'--and without skipping a beat Artie looked up at her and smiled and said, 'I make a living.'

"He went suddenly. Thursday morning [December 30, 2004], Pattie called me and said, 'I can't get a pulse.'"

Years before, Artie had written his own epitaph: "He did the best he could with the materials at hand."

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