

“Eddie Condon”

Making music is a game of negotiating a few basic rules. Some follow below: If you've got your head about you at all, you are constantly aware that you have to glean insights not only from what is pleasing to yourself and your peers (and even these two don't always square), and what is pleasing and recognizable to regular people as good. However affectionate history may be to innovators; the here-and-now world rarely rewards them handsomely. You may miss some

meals between when you do the good work and when you are recognized for it. The press will invariably use you to their own ends. Usually not even in so satisfying a way as “playing chess” with reviews of your work according to fashion. Often the only ulterior motive a reviewer will subject you to is that of making the reviewer him/herself seem more correctly tasteful or intelligent than they really are. Rarely are writers really looking to risk much, especially in high places. But if you take risks,

musicians will like you. Musicians, as a rule tend to not have money. Your peers generally have only their respect to offer.

These rules aren't anything new, as this piece reflects. What follows is a passage from Eddie Condon's biography which features such icons as Gene Krupa and Bud Powell scraping together change to eat, while none of the music halls in New York city in the late twenties would give them

the time of day. The strange thing to keep in the back of your head, is that to us now, he's not talking about some way-out shit. He's talking about jazz, a genre where you can buy a significant amount of its canon in stores where they primarily sell coffee, not CDs. But if people never struggled and sweat, more often than not becoming impoverished or dead in the process, most of us wouldn't know what Eddie Condon (and countless others) were trying to put us on to.-AHTT



From Eddie Condon's We Called it Music (1947 with Thomas Sugrue).

We checked in at the Forrest hotel on Forty-ninth Street west of Broadway. It was a Sunday night in May 1928. McKenzie took me to the window and pointed to St. Malachy's Church across the street. "A very historical place", he said. "They held the Rudolph Valentino funeral there." I was impressed, but I wanted to see Fifth Avenue. "It's folded until tomorrow,"

McKenzie explained. "It hasn't any joints; just stores." I made him take me anyhow, and we looked at St. Patrick's Cathedral. "That's Saks Fifth Avenue," he said, pointing to a building on the next corner. "It's a clipjoint for dames."

On the way back we stopped at a speakeasy. "Pink any place without lights and knock at the door," McKenzie said. "It's a saloon." I was surprised when the bartender put the bottle on the bar and walked away. "Are we allowed to pour our own?" I said. In Chicago under the Capone system the bartenders and waiters did the pouring. "This is a gentleman's town," McKenzie said. "Very honorable."

Next morning I noticed garbage cans on the street; Red explained that New York has no alleys. "Everything is right out front, very honorable, like I said. In Chicago all this stuff is put in the alleys. You never know what kind of a town you are living in." We walked up to the mayflower at Sixtieth Street and Central Park West to see Jimmy MacPartland and Bud Freeman. They were surprised to see us, and glad. Their unpaid rent was up to their ears; Pollack's band was idle, waiting to open at the Brooklyn theater with Bee Palmer, the singer, and her husband, Al Siegel. The Whiteman band was in Brooklyn at the moment; we jumped in a subway—it was my

first ride in a sewer—and went to visit Bix. We found him in his dressing room. Three hundred dollars a week hadn't changed him; he still needed a suit that would fit him. We had a few drinks and played a little—Bix found a saxophone for Bud and a Cornet for Jimmy; I played drums on the dressing table with two empty pint bottles until one of them exploded. "That was a wonderful effect," Bix said.

We went back again to Brooklyn to hear Pollack and the boys with Bee Palmer. "She's heard our records," Bud told us. "She thinks they're sensational. She wants us to work with her." Bee was a Chicago girl; I had met her at the College Inn. She was a beautiful

blonde, sang superbly, and had the advantage of a husband who was not only an accompanist but a fine vocal coach. Backstage we talked with her; she had a plan.

"Lou Schwartz is opening a new nightclub," she said. "He wants me to go into it. I'd like to take your band with me. I'll introduce you to the audience and explain your music. When people hear it they'll like it."

That night she took the four of us—McKenzie, MacPartland, Bud, and myself—to the Club Richman. We sat around a table and watched Schwartz become aware that he wasn't going to get Bee without accepting us. Every time he talked about the

new club, the Chateau Madrid, Bee countered with a eulogy of our records. George Olsen's band played background music while she talked. "You've heard these records?" she said. "Yes," Schwartz said, as if admitting he had beaten his wife. "Aren't they wonderful?" she demanded. "Wonderful," Schwartz said sadly. "You see," Bee said, turning to us.

The deal was set. Freeman and MacPartland left on tour with Pollack, prepared to return to New York in time for the opening. We were to use a New York bass player; I went to Chicago to get Teschemaker, Sullivan, and Krupa; McKenzie went to St. Louis to see his wife and

son. [Louis] Panico was amiable when I asked him for Sullivan without the customary two weeks notices. Nothing had bothered Louis since he learned to play the cornet in Italy. His instructor held needles against his cheeks; if they puffed out as Louis blew, the needles went into them. "Those needles hurt like hell," he told me once. "Naturally I learned to blow the right way."

"So do you want my piano player too?" he said, when I turned up unprepared to return to work. "Have you got a brother to replace him?"

"I'll send one of my sisters," I said. "Can Joe leave right away,

without notice?"

Louis waved his hand toward the band. "Take as many as you like," he said.

Teschemaker was working at the Triangle Club with Floyd Towne's band, which included Muggsy Spanier and George Wettling. The Triangle boss was Mickey Rafferty, who used to stand by the rail in front of the stand and do a dance. Once Mickey wanted Muggsy and Wettling to take a rest without pay. They protested mildly, so Mickey took them for a ride in his automobile, closed the windows, and exploded a tear-gas gun—a small weapon disguised as a fountain pen. After that the boys needed a rest,

and they didn't care whether they got paid or not. Towne was as amiable as Panico; he agreed to let Tesch go without notice. Krupa was working at the Wilshire Dance Pavilion with Eddie Neibauer's Seattle Harmony Kings; I got him off too. Then I heard the news. Al Siegel had left Bee Palmer and joined the DeMarcos, a dance team, as accompanist. He was in Chicago with them, at the Palace Theater. Bee was also in town at the Sherman House, visiting her mother and obviously hoping for a reconciliation with her husband.

The Palmer-Siegel marriage and business partnership had been through separations and reconciliations before; there had even

been a divorce and a re-marriage. With four tickets to New York in my pocket I found myself backstage at the Palace pleading with Siegel to talk to Bee. The DeMarcos were opposed to the idea, naturally, but I managed to persuade Al and between shows we went to the Sherman House. Bee was cordial and things went smoothly. At what I considered the psychological moment I withdrew and rounded up the boys. "Everything is set," I said. "They'll be in New York in a week." I wired McKenzie in St. Louis that we were leaving for New York. We stayed up all night at the Fullerton Plaza Hotel, packing, talking, and celebrating our success. In the morning we took the train. In New York

we registered at the Cumberland Hotel, across the street from the Chateau Madrid on Fifty-Fourth Street, just off Broadway. McKenzie came back from St. Louis, MacPartland and Freeman called us long distance from some road stop to ask how things were going.

"We're ready," I told them.
"Come on in."

"Fine," Bud said. "By the way, would you like to hear the greatest trombone player in the world?"

"Put him on," I said. "What's his name?"

"Jack Teagarden," Bud said.

"He's from Texas. Wait until we get some blues going; then Jack will play for you."

I listened for a while, then handed the phone to McKenzie. He passed it on to Tesch. Tesch gave it to Krupa. When we all had listened and Bud was back on the other end of the wire I gave him the consensus. "He doesn't bother us," I said. "Put a brand on his stomach and bring him in." "I can't get him now, Bud said, "but we'll snatch him later."

In a few days Bee arrived in town. Siegel was still in Chicago with the DeMarcos. The panic was on again. "I'll show him," Bee said. "I've signed up Frankie Signorelli." Signorelli was a

fine accompanist and we all felt better. He went to the Mayflower, where Bee was staying, and rehearsed with her. Every day before leaving our hotel we looked across the street at the Chateau Madrid, which was being decorated for the opening. We felt that we ought to talk to Schwartz but our orders were specific—stay away and let Bee do the negotiating. Then one day she said, “I’ll show him”—she still meant Siegel—“I won’t open without him.”

We were sunk, but at least there was no reason now for us to stay away from Schwartz. We walked across the street and asked him if he would listen to the band. “Why not?” he said gloomily. He

knew what he wanted, and it wasn’t us. The plumbers, carpenters, and decorators were hard at work when we set up our instruments. “He’ll have to admit we’re good,” Bud said hopefully. “It’s a free country,” McKenzie said. “He can like Leo Reisman.”

Schwartz sat at a table and listened. We played “Clarinet Marmalade,” “Jazz Me Blues,” and “Nobody’s Sweetheart.” The noises of the carpenters and plumbers didn’t help. We could see Schwartz hadn’t the slightest idea what we were doing. He didn’t have to tell us we weren’t hired; we knew it. The Chateau Madrid opened with a fiddle outfit and was a success. We sat

in the Cumberland and watched the crowd go in on opening night.

We didn’t realize then how little chance we had in New York. Violins and soft saxophones were the fashion. Leo Reisman, Emil Coleman, Pancho, Meyer Davis, Mike Markel—these were the preposterous bandleaders. The only place we could play was in our rooms, at our own request. Krupa set up his drums and we played every night until the complaints began. Don Voorhees had a big band down the street at the station WOR; many of his men dropped in to see us and hear us play. They liked our music. One of them was Vic Berton, the drum-

mer. Red Nichols was another. When we saw Vic listening with admiration to Krupa, our faith in our future rose. If musicians agreed we were good, how could the public resist? Something would break soon; Bee Palmer was sending us to agent after agent—one of them was certain to get us a job. Bee was also taking us to parties, where we were introduced as celebrities from Chicago. “But we’re still loafing,” McKenzie muttered. “How long can we live like gentlemen and work like bums? Breakfast at Dave’s Blue Room for two dollars! We’re nuts!”

One day Pancho called and said he was sending Jolly Coburn to interview us about a job. McK-

enzie was worried. “What does Pancho want with us?” he wondered. “What will we do in the middle of those fiddles and accordions?” Coburn arrived and seemed glad to see us.

“Pancho is going to Newport to play for the debut of Princess Miguel de Briganza’s daughter,” he said. “He’d like you to come along as an alternate band; he thinks it would be an interesting novelty.”

“I think it will,” McKenzie said. “It will be the most interesting novelty Newport has ever had.”

The eastern seaboard must have been drained of blue blood for the Briganza party. Every name

was a foot long; I was surprised that anyone ate with his own hands. The affair was held in the country club; the only common things were champagne, caviar, and musicians. Even the servants were pedigreed. “Well,” McKenzie said, “what are you guys looking at? Those mugs have five fingers on each hand and one head apiece, haven’t they?”

I remembered the out-of-town doctors at Mayo’s in Rochester. The Briganza guests were all out-of-towners; those born in the United States were pretending it was a sordid mistake, an unhappy mischance. The musicians were supposed to help the pretense with Viennese waltzes.

I looked around; Krupa was adjusting a tom-tom. The artillery was ready. “Well,” I said, “let’s give out with some of that old world atmosphere—‘Clarinet Marmalade.’”

Eight seconds later everyone in the room was staring at us. Pancho was smiling; he liked it. So did his boys. The guests automatically began drinking more champagne. They couldn’t talk because we were playing too loud; between sets we pushed them out of the way to get at the champagne. “Extraordinary demonstration of the freed libido,” I heard one matron mutter. “Lady,” I said, “would you hold this glass while I get some caviar?” “Extraordinary crea-

ture!” she said, but she took the glass and held it while I got some eggs.

After the party a truck was sent from the hotel to pick up the instruments. I was placed on top of them and driven to the Viking Hotel. Next day I met Pancho in the lobby. “How did we do?” I asked. “You were a hit,” he said. Then he smiled. “One of the ladies told me it was just like having the Indians in town again. “She was old enough to know what she was talking about,” he added.

Back in New York our money ran out. Musicians came to see us and brought liquor but never food. It was then I discovered

a simple truth about modern society; you can drink yourself to death on your friends except for one thing—you’ll die of malnutrition first. When you’re broke you can get all the whiskey you want almost anywhere you go, but don’t ask for a sandwich; it lowers the social tone of friendship. The important thing is to have a can of tomatoes the next morning; they feed the body and break the hangover.

We discovered the Automat. We walked up and down Broadway, listening to the music coming from commercial bands in dime-a-dance halls. We went to see more agents. We lived on the olives from Martinis and the cherries from Manhattans

at the cocktail parties to which we were invited. We opened a charge account at a delicatessen for canned tomatoes, to be kept on ice until we called for them in the morning—or in the afternoon. We heard from Pancho again. Barbara Bennett had just left Maurice, her dancing partner, and was forming a new team with Charles Sabin. Sabin was from society; his mother was fighting prohibition. The team was scheduled to go into the Palace, and Pancho recommended us for background music. We auditioned for Barbara and she offered us the job. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” I asked. “Is this the kind of music you want for your class act?”

“It will be something new,” she said. “I’m delighted. We’ll start rehearsals tomorrow at Steinway Hall.”

By then it was July. We rehearsed for ten days in heat that melted everything else but our hunger. One of the dance numbers, a waltz, required a fiddle in the orchestra. Tesch had begun his career on the violin; we borrowed an instrument from Joe Venuti and handed it to him. After one rehearsal we took it away from him and gave it back to Venuti. We got a Violinist from the Meyer Davis office, a nice guy named Charlie Miller. Then MacPartland and Freeman were offered a job on the Ile de France. They considered taking

it.

“You mean you would rather play on a frog ferry than at the Palace?” McKenzie said. He was incredulous. “Thousands of men and women have died of old age on the road trying to make the Palace, and you guys want to sell your chance for a doily and a crepe suzette!” he roared.

MacPartland Fidgeted. “I was only thinking about it,” he said, “I’ll stay.”

“So will I,” Freedman said, but he looked unhappy. Bud loved culture.

We opened at the Palace on the 16th of July. We were nervous

and hot; the fiddle sounded strange and embarrassed in the middle of our mob. When Barbara and Charles ended their waltz they stepped back and bowed; Barbara's legs were shaking worse than mine. Here we go, I thought, she's going to fall on her face—what're we doing here anyhow? While the team was changing costumes we played "I Must Have that Man." When we finished there was silence. Then two, three, and finally four people applauded. "Musicians," Tesch whispered. At the end of the act the dancers got a good hand. Barbara and Charles waited impatiently for the reviews to appear in Variety and Billboard. We didn't care if we never saw them. When they appeared Bar-

bara was ecstatic. In Variety she was chosen as the "best dressed woman of the week" by the Skirt, Jr. The Skirt described in detail the clothes worn during the act. Barbara read the piece to us... "She appears again in a stunning orange chiffon gown with ragged hem reaching to the floor on one side with a huge spray of coque feathers on the other side and on one shoulder. This is for a weak blackbottom. After a pause in which their rather dreadful orchestra plays an off-key selection..."

She stopped. "Don't mind us," I said. "Go right ahead."

I'm sure that's just meanness," she said. "There's a review here

of the show itself, not of my clothes. Let's see what it says."

It was bad for all of us: "The class act was Charles Sabin and Barbara Bennett, nite club dancers. The nite club they were in may have had a steady trade of 750 people. Of these 600 are now out of town. And of the 600 not 50 would care to see either of the dancers anywhere other than at their homes or in a club ballroom....The couple are no stage dancers of any kind, with the poorest 7-piece orchestra on earth....As a side remark, Mr. Sabin and Miss Bennett neglected to bow to their musicians when exiting. No one could blame them, but it is customary."

“That does it,” Tesch said.

“Local boys make good in big city in large way,” Joe Sullivan said. “I can see the headlines in the Chicago Tribune.”

“Well at last I’ve played the Palace,” I said, “Now I owe Cliff for my banjo.”

The next day Krupa turned up with a copy of Billboard. “Look at this,” he said. “Maybe we’re not as much a failure as we think.”

The review said: “Charles Sabin and Barbara Bennett closed the first half in an exhibition of ballroom dancing, assisted by a commendable 7-piece musical unit...

the act was heavily applauded but the hurrahs were not for the terpsichorean talents. They are both graceful, but far removed from being world beaters.”

“Who wrote that?” Tesch asked. “That man is a genius.” Krupa read out the name—Elias E. Sugarman. “He’ll go down in history,” Tesch said.

At least the musicians were with us. Johnny Powell, the drummer went twice a day every day during the week; in the general applause we spotted isolated patches of enthusiasm for our numbers. But we were about as far from being a popular success as it was possible to be. Jazz was still a special taste.

In the middle of the week Bud announced that he was going to take the job on the Ile de France. It was sailing the next day. McKenzie was in favor of violence. I told Bud that if he went we would collect his pay at the end of the week and split it among ourselves.

“I don’t care,” he said. “I’m going to France.”

“I will also not pay you that fifty dollars I owe you,” I said.

“I still don’t care,” he said, and he went.

When we finished the run Sabin refused to pay us for Freeman,

contending that Bud had forfeited his salary by deserting the act.

“I have had enough trouble, Charles,” McKenzie said, “but if necessary I will make some more, all by myself, and give it to you. If you don’t pay Freeman’s salary I will really louse you up at the union—remember we rehearsed with you for ten days without pay.”

“Oh Charles, shut up!” Barbara said. “Let’s not quarrel about trifles.” She reached into her stocking, took out a roll of bills, and handed McKenzie Bud’s money. We used it to cut down the bill at the Cumberland. McKenzie went to St. Louis to see his family again.

There were five of us now in the two rooms; Mezzrow and Josh Billings, a jazz fan, had come in from Chicago. Very quickly we were back on the olive and cherry diet, with canned tomatoes for breakfast. One day the clerk handed me our bill and added a meaningful look. We owed an interesting sum, ninety-nine dollars. We had to do something.

The Jimmy Noone records were out under Brunswick’s Vocalian label and were selling well. I took one of them and went to see Tommy Rockwell at Okeh.

“See how you like this small ensemble group,” I said. “I can get you one like it—Teschemaker,

Krupa, and Sullivan.”

Rockwell listened to the record and nodded agreeably. “Let’s make a date,” he said.

“Let’s make it for tomorrow morning,” I said.

“I think we ought to have a vocal on one side,” Rockwell said.

I swallowed hard. “I’ll sing,” I said.

We were at the studio ahead of time. We set up and made “Oh Baby,” from Rain or Shine. The second side was “Back Home in Indiana,” and I sang a chorus. Before the wax was cool on the master I was in Rockwell’s office.

“Tommy,” I said, “do something about this.”

I gave him the hotel bill.

“Why didn’t you say something before?” he said. He took a wallet from his pocket and handed me two fifty dollar bills.

“There will be fifty dollars more,” he said, “I’ll send it to you.”

I walked out of the room eighty pounds lighter than when I went in. Back at the hotel I paid the bill. The clerk gave me a dollar.

“What shall we buy with it?” I asked the boys. The vote was unanimous—canned tomatoes.

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