

# Under the Black Flag

by Taki Theodoracopulos

## Before the Cacophony

Can anyone today imagine a clarinetist as a superstar the size of, say, Mick Jagger? Or God forbid, the ghostly Madonna? Well, 60 years or so ago, the biggest star in Hollywood, as well as the biggest stud, was Artie Shaw, whose combination of good looks, extraordinary musical talent, and great intelligence made him the brightest star among the dumb (not all) celluloid ones under the California sky.

Why have very few of you ever heard of him? That's an easy one to answer. Most of you are young and think that the Rolling Stones and the Beatles are as old as Beethoven, if not quite as deaf. No, the reason Artie is unknown is because he quit the music business in the mid-50's, during his prime, retired, and stayed retired until his death at 94 four years ago. He gave up the clarinet in order to write books—a book, rather—and he wrote that book until the end, 10,000 chapters or so. It was, unsurprisingly, never published. Many of his articles about jazz, or the state of jazz, were, as were his articles about the state of the human condition. (Curmudgeonly, to say the least.)

He was born Arthur Jacob Arshawsky, the son of Jewish immigrants, and married eight times. Among his wives—and check this—were Ava Gardner, the smoldering beauty from the deep South that drove men mad, certainly yours truly; Lana Turner, the blonde that went through men like a hot knife through butter; Kathleen Winsor, the novelist (*Forever Amber*), who was more beautiful than her heroines and twice as sexy; Evelyn Keyes, Scarlett O'Hara's younger sister in *Gone With the Wind*; and four other beauties that Hugh Hefner would give away his equity in Playboy Corporation to possess. Oh yes, I almost forgot. He left Betty Grable at the altar for Lana Turner, a big mistake as far as I'm concerned, because for me Betty was the most deliciously wholesome as well as sexy movie star in America, when America still repre-

sented everything everyone desired. It was said at the time that she never got over it. Well, it sounds good, but get over it she did when she married Harry James, the great trumpeter, but she did stay loyal to the artist by marrying a man who played music almost as sweet as Artie's.

So much for Artie Shaw as Don Giovanni. Ava, Lana, Betty, Kathleen, Evelyn, and hundreds of others. Let ugly feminists rail against Lotharios. A Lothario is simply a man women say yes to. And a woman who says yes to every man is—well, we all know the answer to that one. Famous beauties may have added to Shaw's mystique, but it was raw talent that lay behind the myth. And he let it all go with a short note to Duke Ellington in 1955:

There is too much dishonesty, lack of dignity, and cheap compromises of every possible sort . . . a business bristling with names built solely on willingness to cater to cheapness, shoddiness and ignorance on mass tastes. I congratulate you, Duke, for functioning with integrity.

Now there was an honest man.

When Shaw retired he walked away from \$60,000 per week, a colossal sum in those days, days in which his band was number one in the United States. Talk about style, and then some. Artie Shaw was the greatest clarinetist of all time. He concluded all his concerts by hitting a cosmic high with his C at the end of his own creation, "Concerto for Clarinet." Here are some of his greatest hits: "Begin the Beguine," "Frenesi," "Star Dust," and hundreds of other recordings I was lucky to hear time and again while growing up. A friend was a fan. Shaw hired Billie Holiday, Roy Eldridge, Oran "Hot Lips" Page, Hank Jones, Tommy Potter, Mel Tormé, Billie Butterfield, Max Kaminsky, and Buddy Rich. He volunteered for the U.S. Navy



in World War II, served and performed under fire in the Pacific, and collected over 15,000 books. His great rival, Benny Goodman, was not a nice man, and in a band niceness and human relations count a lot. Duke Ellington's clarinetist Barney Bigard called Artie "simply the best," as did others in his field. He lived incognito the last 30 years of his life in Los Angeles but kept busy, spending his days investigating the possibilities of language. He was my idol when I was a very young man because of his music and his women, not necessarily in that order. I associate him with every young girl I danced with or kissed to his music. Now I love him for having walked away, Achilles-like, but unlike my fellow Greek, never making a comeback.

And he knew what he was doing. Rock music is the single most blatant stigma of the death of civilization, and Artie Shaw saw it coming before anyone else. In Dante's *Inferno*, deceivers are dispatched to the eighth circle of Hell enduring cruel enough punishment, but traitors are sent to the ninth, for even greater torment. Modern cacophony—I refuse to call it music—and those who have enriched themselves by it are both deceivers and traitors. Alas, 300 million morons in the United States alone, and hundreds of millions elsewhere, go weak at the knees at the sight of odious, untalented, ugly, hirsute, cacophonous so-called rock stars, as bitter an irony as the fact that Mozart died broke. Artie Shaw, a very good-looking man with great knowledge and even greater curiosity, decided to opt out at the top. Let's call him the Cincinnatus of sweet music. <

# La Plus Belle France

by Catharine Savage Brosman

*"If I were God and had two sons, the eldest would have to be God after me,  
but I'd make the second King of France."*

—Ascribed to Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor

## The Discovery of France

by Graham Robb

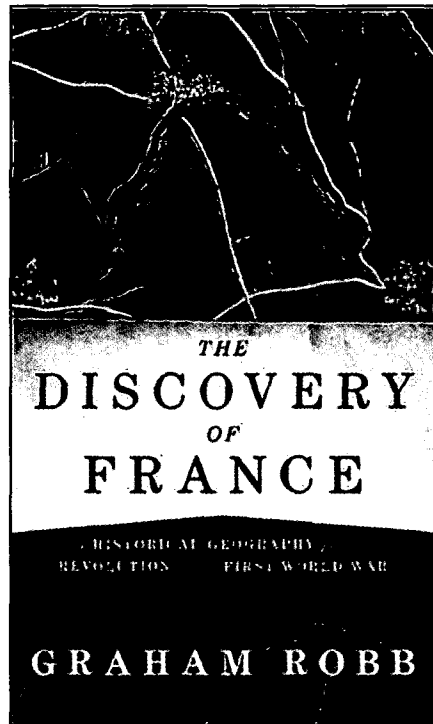
New York: Norton; 457 pp., \$27.95



The subtitle of this handsome illustrated volume, "A Historical Geography From the Revolution to the First World War," usefully indicates the book's historical dimension, which the title alone does not convey. While a quick glance at the work suggests more of its scope, only careful reading can reveal its enormous variety and interest of topics, wealth of detail, and stylistic liveliness.

Robb, an historian living in Oxford, has written previously on 19th-century French subjects, notably in biographies of Balzac, Victor Hugo, and Rimbaud, and his knowledge of the period must have been solid. The present work resulted from his determination to increase his personal acquaintance with France by bicycling through it—a journey, he writes, of 14,000 miles in the saddle. To create this book, his impressive odyssey was complemented by four years in libraries. The efforts were not misplaced.

Conceived as an historical guidebook, the volume is not a narrative of Robb's own travels, nor even orga-



Melanie Anderson

nized as an armchair tour of France, though, as he notes, it does identify locations of unusual interest. While the orientation is toward the past, the present is not neglected; he surveys, for instance, the current status of numerous groups, sites, trades, languages, and traditions examined first in an historical context. Even readers who know France well in one or more ways will make discoveries in these pages.

Robb's investigation shares certain principles with those of the school of historiography centered around the journal *Annales: Sociétés, Économies, Civilisations*, founded in 1929. Illustrated most famously by Fernand Braudel, the *Annales* approach emphasized *longue durée* and almost timeless, or slowly changing, social and historical features, sometimes geographical

ones—in contradistinction to histories concentrating on major figures, regimes, wars, and other events and the changes they brought about (a viewpoint seen by many 20th-century historians as reductionist and elitist). Asking different questions and putting aside the standard sorts of documentation used in political and military history, *Annales* historians and similarly minded researchers drew on other sources of information, usually at the micro level, such as village and church archives, additional lists and inventories, and personal records of ordinary (if literate) people. The long-duration approach thus came to involve what has been called the "worm's eye view" of history. They adopted as well somewhat different expository modes. While their approach has its own limitations, it can offer a large number of perspectives, and this multiplication of complementary vantage points, even modest ones, remedies partially the quasi-impossibility, to which contemporary philosophers and historians are particularly sensitive, of seeing the whole, broadly.

In the same spirit, Robb forgoes the features of standard political histories as well as traditional geographic surveys. His concern is with France as it was known and experienced by those who found themselves in her territory—natives, migrants, visitors—from the mid-18th century (in

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