

MAN WITH THE BLUE GUITAR

By HERB SHULTZ

IN PLOT Number 2022-G of Philadelphia's Holy Cross Cemetery, there is a ten-foot granite monument with the beautifully sculptured bas-relief of a young man and his guitar. For visitors with long memories it will evoke thoughts of a vanished musical era. The stone marks the final resting place of a jazz pioneer known as Eddie Lang, who died suddenly at the peak of his fame and ability just twenty-five years ago this month.

Lang's real name was Salvatore Massaro. He was a dark-haired, good-looking Italian boy from South Philadelphia who was a colorful jazz personality—a classy pool player, a sharp dresser, a man who made records with Teagarden and Armstrong at nine o'clock in the morning sitting around a gallon jug of whiskey. He also was the man who invented the art of playing hot guitar. In his hands, it was transformed from a simple, four-beat rhythm instrument into a pulsing jazz voice, vibrant and alive with creative musical ideas.

Looking back with the perspective of a quarter century, it is a little surprising that his tragic death did not stir up a splendid jazz legend. All the storybook elements were present. Potentially, Lang could have made a superb lost-generation hero, with a faint halo lingering round his brow, like Bix, Teschemaker, Rapollo, and the other early jazzmakers whose careers were cut off in prime.

The legend of Eddie Lang—for better or worse—never materialized. But his musicianship was always highly esteemed, and his brief life story was solidly flavored with the yesterdays of jazz.

It was in 1922, according to an interesting theory proposed by Lang's boyhood friend Joe Venuti, that the first jazz concert in history took place. It was held in the men's room of a hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey, before an audience which included gentlemen in white ties, a bootblack, a wash-room attendant, waiters, policemen, and stray drifters in off the street. Admission was free and there were no ladies present. Among the musical performers were Eddie Lang, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, and Venuti himself on violin.



Eddie Lang—"the legend never began."

Venuti's story bears repeating if only to show that the young jazzmen of the East had their own whimsical memories to rival those of New Orleans, Chicago, and Kansas City. Furthermore, the tale is based on fact. It was in Atlantic City that Venuti and Lang, playing a hotel date with a straight dance orchestra, first discovered "hot" music through the Dorsey boys, who were working a job across the street.

This contact marked the start of young Lang's true musical career. Soon afterwards he commenced playing dance dates and making records with his new-found friends.

The very mention of these recording groups is enough to recapture the aroma of the early jazz era. There were the Mound City Blue Blowers, the Charleston Chasers, Red Nichols's Five Pennies, the Cotton Pickers, Miff Mole and His Little Molers, and many others. A year or two later there were records with the big bands of Jean Goldkette and Paul Whiteman, a series of Venuti-Lang duets—and the sides labelled Tram-Bix-Lang, made with Beiderbecke and Frank Trumbauer.

Although it has become current practice in some circles to snigger at the music produced by these white recording groups, the importance of their records in jazz history can scarcely be overestimated. They were sold and distributed widely, in this country and abroad as well. To a considerably greater extent than the rec-

ords of such New Orleans heroes as King Oliver and Jelly-Roll Morton, they helped create an avid, worldwide audience for what was then called "hot music." Those of us who collected these records, shuffled through junk shop piles for them, learned their solos and breaks by heart before we knew the names of the musicians who played on them, cranked the wind-up handles of our old machines to replay them until our elbows ached, will always keep them wrapped in tender remembrance. This is true even if our jazz tastes later evolved along other lines.

Replaying these jazz originals, the listener finds that many are flawed in one way or another but that, in general, they show a surprising freshness, good humor and sparkle. Lang's work in particular comes across the years pure as gold. His single string choruses have a genuine hot accent; his chording and harmonies are ingenious. There is no question he was an artist of the first rank.

Eddie was born October 25, 1904, in the family home near 15th and Fitzwater Streets in South Philadelphia. He was the youngest of ten children. There was a strong musical tradition in the family; his father, Dominick Massaro, had been a guitar maker in the old country and all the children played instruments of one sort or another. Young Ed—Salvatore in those days—was strumming on a home-made miniature guitar, fashioned by his father from a cigar box, before he was old enough to go to school.

AT THE age of nine Eddie began serious music lessons—first on violin and later on guitar, studying long and faithfully under a Professor Luccantonio. He practiced hours daily, though at the start his fingers were scarcely large enough to stretch across the frets and form chords on the six-stringed Spanish guitar. These facts dispel the notion, reported in many jazz books, that Eddie could not read music. The truth is that he scorned written arrangements, preferring to create his own harmonies. But his improvisations sprang from a background of strict musical training.

Music aside, his main boyhood interests were basketball and shooting pool. He made a name for himself in both fields. As a young basketball player he patterned his style after an older local star named Eddie Lang, and this was the name he adopted a few years later when he became a professional guitarist.

Everyone who knew Eddie remarks on his pool-playing ability. His brothers and the old family friends still living in Philadelphia take pride in recalling the exhibition matches he

played with Willie Mosconi, Ralph Greenleaf and other stars of the billiard parlor world. Bing Crosby, with whom Lang toured toward the end of his life, devotes a long section of his autobiography, "Call Me Lucky," to his skill. "It's my guess," said Bing, "that he made more money at pool than he did accompanying me."

By the time he was eighteen, Lang was immersed in the world of jazz. The Mound City Blue Blowers, with whom he made his earliest records, provided one of his first regular jobs. Lang accompanied this four-man group of Red McKenzie's on one of the pioneer overseas jazz expeditions—playing eight weeks in London at the Hotel Piccadilly. They were a smash success.

Shortly after his return from London, Eddie began a period of drifting with other good hot men from one to another of the big bands of the mid-1920s. At various times he played with Ray Miller, Roger Wolfe Kahn, Goldkette, and, slightly later, with Paul Whiteman. He was a featured member of the Whiteman band when the movie "The King of Jazz" was filmed.

Frankie Trumbauer, the creamy-toned hot saxophone player who worked with Lang on many of these jobs, described how Eddie carried his parts for the entire Whiteman library of tunes on a small business card in his breast coat pocket. Trumbauer's remarks are quoted in the excellent jazz book by Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, "Hear Me Talkin' to Ya."

"There would be some intricate modulation to play," Frank recalled, "and rarely in radio rehearsals would we have time to set these things, so Whiteman said one time 'You take the modulation, Eddie.' During the program that night, just before the modulation, the excitement of the entire band could be felt because it hadn't been rehearsed and the boys were wondering if Eddie remembered. All he had were a few marks on that little card—marks that meant nothing to anyone but Eddie himself.

"Came the modulation—and the master played it from another world. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief and, from that day on, when Eddie would say 'I got it' everyone realized he knew what he was talking about."

The very best of Lang's recorded work came from this same period of the latter Twenties—but not with the big bands. He made a series of guitar solos, "April Kisses," "Eddie's Twister," and many others of his own compositions. Transcriptions of these arrangements are still in print and are studied today by advanced guitar students. Lang also played for many of the leading vocal artists of the record world—Bessie Smith, Victoria

Spivey, Sophie Tucker—and accompanied such men as Tommy Dorsey and Boyd Senter in a number of "hot" instrumental novelties. Perhaps most colorful of all were the Okeh "race" labels Lang recorded under the pseudonym "Blind Willie Dunn." Some of these were guitar duets with the old New Orleans blues man, Lonnie Johnson. On others, Eddie recorded with King Oliver and Clarence Williams as "Blind Willie Dunn's Gin Bottle Four."

It is generally agreed that the first jazz records to include both white and Negro performers were made one day when Jelly-Roll Morton sat in with the New Orleans Rhythm Kings at a session for Gennett in Richmond, Indiana. The next ones to break the color line, despite a contrary theory in the new book "The Jazzmakers," which picks a February 1929 date of Eddie Condon's, were quite probably these Okeh sides of Lang's. He produced many dozens of them, starting in the summer of 1928 and playing regularly with a wide variety of Negro vocalists and musicians.

Together with Jack Teagarden and Joe Sullivan, he appeared on the first mixed date under Louis Armstrong's leadership. This was the now-famous record of "Knockin' a Jug," recorded at 9 a.m. one chilly morning of March, 1929. The boys had been making music together all night and they took a gallon jug of whiskey with them in a taxicab when they went to the studio. The record is a traditional twelve-bar blues, played in a well-loosened, relaxed style; it opens with Lang's chording, followed by a string of fine solos, and finally ending with some of Armstrong's nicest blues work. After it was over and the man

from Okeh records asked them what the title was, the boys were stumped for a moment. Then Armstrong, Lang and Kaiser Marshall, Louis's drummer, looked at the empty jug in the center of the floor. Louis was the one who named it: "Man, we sure knocked that jug of whiskey—you can call it 'Knockin' a Jug'."

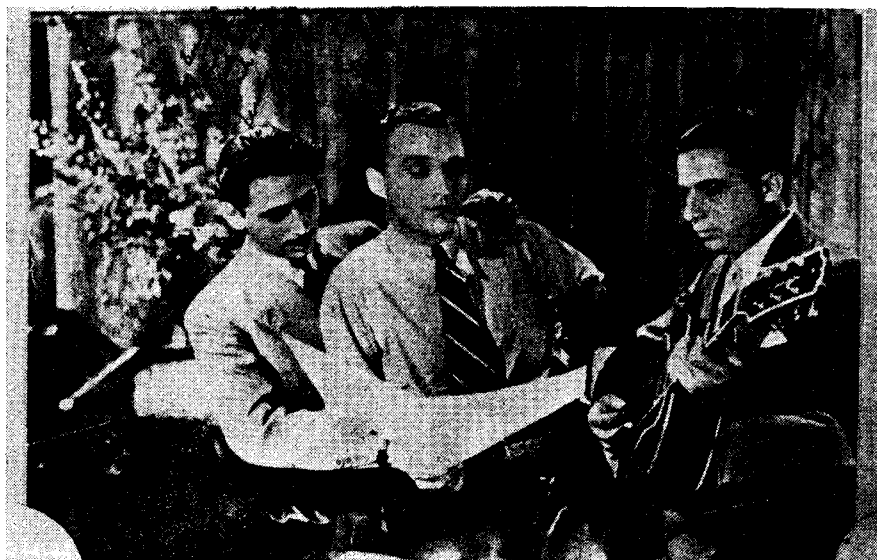
THE universal description of Eddie Lang by those who knew him is that of an easygoing fellow, a nice sort of guy to have around. But perhaps the gentlest picture of his personality are some warm words of Lonnie Johnson quoted in the Hentoff-Shapiro book:

"I well remember Eddie Lang. He was the nicest man I ever worked with. Eddie and I got together many a time in the old Okeh record studios in New York, and we made many sides together with just two guitars.

"Eddie was a fine man. He never argued. He didn't tell me what to do; he would ask me. Then, if everything was okay, we'd sit down and get to jiving. I've never seen a man like him since. *He could play guitar better than anyone I know.* And I've seen plenty in my day."

Johnson's opinion agrees with the general verdict of jazz historians. In 1951, many years after his death, Lang was picked in a leading jazz magazine poll as the "All Time—All Star" man on his instrument—this despite the emergence in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s of Dick McDonough, Carmen Mastren, Charlie Christian, Freddie Green, Teddy Bunn and a great many other really fine guitarists.

All of these men owed a debt to Lang's creativeness. Looking care-

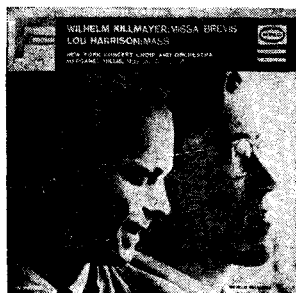


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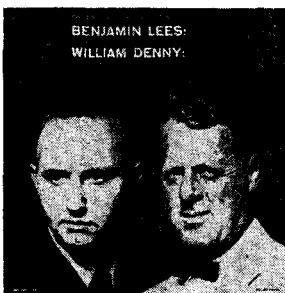
The star-studded Paul Whiteman Band of the late 1920s included, among other notables, the trio shown above, left to right: pianist Lennie Hayton, vocalist Bing Crosby, and guitarist Eddie Lang.

ON EPIC

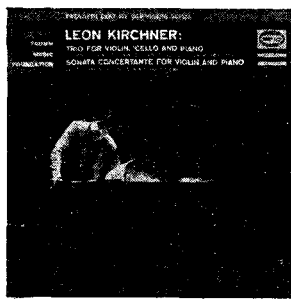
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fully at the range of his recorded work, it becomes clear that Eddie developed the modern guitar style, that he was responsible for edging the once-popular tenor banjo off somewhere in the direction of left field, and that he brought a new and exciting sound to the jazz world.

In the early 1930s Lang was working as hard and regularly as ever, but his production of better jazz records thinned out considerably. He made a few good sides with a recording band under his own name, and there was one memorable session in 1932 by a Venuti-Lang group of all-stars, including Benny Goodman, Tea-garden and other top men.

During these depression years, when many other jazzmen were out of regular jobs, Lang worked with Ruth



One of the pioneer overseas jazz expeditions was made by the four-man "Mound City Blue Blowers." This picture, taken in Hyde Park, London, in November 1924, shows from left to right: Ed Lang, Red McKenzie, Jack Bland, and Dick Slevin.

Etting and toured with Crosby, whom he had been close to since the White-man days. Shortly after appearing with Bing in the feature film "Big Broadcast of 1933," Eddie returned to New York and entered the hospital for a tonsillectomy, to clear up a nagging throat condition which had troubled him for months. He entered the operating room at noon on March 26, 1933, developed an embolism while still under anesthesia, and died at 3 p.m. without regaining consciousness.

They brought him back to his brother Tom's house in Philadelphia, only a short distance from where he had been born in obscurity twenty-eight years before. The funeral was attended by a large delegation of luminaries from the music world. Then they laid him to rest in Holy Cross Cemetery; a year later the handsome tombstone was put in place—the life history of Salvatore Ed-Lang-Blind-Willie Massaro was ended.

And the legend never began.



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Recordings Reports: Jazz LPs

WORK, PERFORMERS, DATA	REPORT
Birks Works. Dizzy Gillespie Big Band "Jor-Du," "Umbrella Man," "Autumn Leaves." Verve MG V-8222, \$4.98.	"Jor-Du" is soulful but not unhappy. A combination of band vocal, Diz's inimitable personal touch via vocal and his wonderful trumpet chorus make "Umbrella Man" sound good, which isn't easy to do. Ernie Wilkin's arrangement of "Left Hand Corner" is something to hear, as is Diz throughout. The band plays, as always, with feeling and fantastic enthusiasm.
Buddy Rich Just Sings. "Cathy," "Devil and the Deep Blue Sea," "Over the Rainbow," etc. Verve MG V-2075, \$3.98.	Buddy Rich sings with the nice beat expected of him. Although he phrases as musically as he can, he has a little intonation trouble on the slow tunes. He seems comfortable on "Devil" and "You Took Advantage of Me." Ben Webster and Harry Edison play the greatest whenever they're heard. Fine backing by bassist Joe Mondragon and drummer Alvin Stoller.
Chick Willis Waits the Blues. "My Story," "I Feel So Bad," "One More Break." Epic LN 3425, \$3.98.	This is a rock-and-roll album. I don't know how it snuck in here.
Dixieland from the Deep North. Harry Blons and the Mendota Buzzards. "Til We Meet Again," "Do You Miss New Orleans," etc. Zephyr ZP 12008K, \$3.98.	The liner notes on this are pretty awful. For one thing, they don't list the soloists. Most impressive of the musicians were Thomas McGovern on piano, Harry Blons on tenor (I think) on "Keepin' Out Of Mischief." Trombonist Gerald Mullaney and one of the trumpet players (probably Bob Gruenfelder) contribute nicely. The musicians could undoubtedly have played more interestingly if they wanted to. Maybe they read the album comments before they recorded.
Easy Swing. Nat Pierce and Mel Powell Orchs. "Stomp It Off," "Ezz-May," "Firebug," "Constance." Vanguard VRS 8519, \$4.98.	Nat's expert writing and musical good taste should have paid off for him more than it has. The great rhythm section of Jo, Walter and Freddie, are on this. Not only does Nat add plenty but he never interferes with the fine choruses of Richie Kamuca and Doug Mettome. Very pleasant side. Mel's composition "Ezz-May," the humorous "Firebug" and Bob Wilburs "Easy Swing" make a lovely mixture of music. It's always a privilege to hear Mel. Why doesn't he come out of hiding?
Gee Baby Ain't I Good To You. Harry Edison. "Blues For Bill Basie," "Taste On the Place," "You're Getting To Be A Habit." Verve MG V-8211, \$4.98.	Harry Edison and Ben Webster make this album a treasure. They complement each other beautifully. A high groove is maintained throughout. Peterson plays some pretty piano.
Goin' To Chicago. Jimmy Rushing. "I Want a Little Girl," "Leave Me," "Sent For You Yesterday," "How Long." Vanguard VRS 8518, \$4.98.	If Rushing made an album all by himself, it would still bring joy to the world. As it is, he has Jo, Walter, Buddy Tate and Henderson Chambers doing a fine job of backing him up. The trumpet player, Pat Jenkins, should be heard more often. Pianist Sam Price plays better on this than he's ever done before or after. This is Jimmy's show and he's outstanding.
Hallelujah Hamp. Lionel Hampton. "Tenderly," "Foggy Day," "Honeysuckle Rose," "Indiana." Verve MG V-8226, \$4.98.	Of all Hamp's recent releases, this is the first really enjoyable session. Although the personnel is the same as the earlier albums, the accompaniment is just that, and no one interferes with the champ. "Hamp's Boogie Woogie" is the only track that reverts to the boiler factory scene. "Tenderly," "Hallelujah," and "Honeysuckle" are most listenable.
I Got Rhythm. Teddy Wilson. "Savoy," "Say It Isn't So," "All Of Me," "Blues For Daryl." Verve MG V-2073, \$3.98.	This is the way the trio played all night, and it was a drag when each set ended. Jo Jones is always a part of the song. He takes some wonderful solos. Gene Ramey is a very talented and much under-rated bassist. The dozen standards heard are all made to sound fresh and new. Anything Teddy plays is a classic. Four bows for Mr. Wilson.
Jazz Showcase. The Master Sounds. "Un Poco Loco," "Wes' Tune," "Lover," "Dexter's Deck." World Pacific PJM 403, \$4.98.	Well, here's another group that has achieved some sort of perfection as an ensemble, but insists on fitting every number into a cliché-ridden formula. Because they're fine instrumentalists, they get a lovely rhythm section sound, but the lack of variety in the solos makes their jazz conception questionable.
Dial J J 5. J. J. Johnson Quintet. "Teapot," "Barbados," "In A Little Provincial Town," "Cette Chose." Columbia CL 1084, \$3.98.	Mr. Johnson is a fine gentleman and a superb instrumentalist. He has assembled a group of compatible musicians unfortunately given to the kind of phrasing that makes one long for any cowboy singing a melody. There's not a track on the album that has any emotional value. This will not affect J. J. Johnson fans in the least, I am happy to say.
Night Mist. George Shearing Quintet with Voices. "Polka Dots and Moonbeams," "Darn That Dream," "Where Are You." Capitol T 943, \$3.98.	This doesn't hurt the ears at all. The expertly arranged, beautiful voices are those of the Jud Conlon Choir. Every now and then, Shearing breaks away from the block chords and plays a few lovely bars of jazz. Some very pretty melodies.
Soliloquy. Erroll Garner. "If I Had You," "I Surrender Dear," "No More Time." Columbia CL 1098, \$3.98.	This man has always loved melodies and improvisation. His individuality is the result of having absorbed all styles, from way back till now. Two of his own compositions "No More Time" and "Soliloquy," are brilliantly done. So is the rest of the album.
Sound of Jazz. Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Red Allen, Pee Wee Russell, etc. "Wild Man Blues," "Fine and Mellow," "Rosetta." Columbia CL 1098, \$3.98.	This album was made in conjunction with the CBS TV show of the same name. Since all the people who made the show are on the album, it's impossible to mention everyone. The Basie All Star band with Rushing was great, Pee Wee plays a blues with Guiffre and, in spite of Danny Barker's loud stiff guitar, manages to blow fine. If you love the late jazz, you saw the show. If you saw the show, you'll dig the album. The album is dedicated to Walter Page, one of the greatest bassists and human beings, ever. —RUBY BRAFF.