

Dean Benedetti, Jazz Ethnographer

Joey Skee (May 20, 2009)



Vilified for decades, Dean Benedetti is now lauded as a “true jazz hero.”

I have turned/tuned my ears again to [Phil Schaap's "Bird Flight,"](#) [2] the radio program committed to the informed listening of music innovator Charlie Parker. Recently, the jazz historian dedicated his morning show on WKCR-FM to Dean Benedetti's late 1940s field recordings of “Yard Bird.”

Dino (Dean) Alipio Benedetti was born June 28, 1922 in Ugden, Utah, the son of Amadeo Benedetti, an immigrant from Torre del Lago (a hamlet of Viareggio, Lucca province, Tuscany) who worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad. (I was unable to find anything about his mother.) Benedetti attended the University of Nevada, where he excelled in baseball and basketball, and began playing the tenor



saxophone. In 1943, he moved to Los Angeles where he formed the band “Dean Benedetti’s Baron of Rhythm.”

Like many, Benedetti came under the sway of Parker’s pioneering sounds and set out first to transcribe his solos (as did Jackie McLean and Sonny Rollins) from studio recordings and then to record club performances. With Parker’s permission, Benedetti conducted recordings of three club dates in Los Angeles and New York in 1947-48, a particularly creative and productive period in Parker’s life. Benedetti used first a 78 r.p.m. disk-cutting recorder and later a tape recorder to capture Bird’s solos.

For decades no one knew the whereabouts of these legendary recordings, which had achieved the status of the Holy Grail among jazz aficionados. In 1988, Dean’s brother Rigoletto (Rick) of Burbank, California, who owned the recordings, came forward and offered them to [Mosaic Records](#) [3], which issued a seven CD set entitled “[The Complete Dean Benedetti Recordings of Charlie Parker](#) [4]” (#129) two years later. It was Schaap, along with engineer Jack Towers, who salvaged the highly distressed recordings. The seven hours of music Benedetti recorded, which has increased the amount of live music by Parker by a third, has been likened to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. “Imagine if someone were to find a third more Bach, a third more Shakespeare plays, a third more prime Picasso,” Schaap stated.

Stories about Benedetti himself also took on mythic qualities. Benedetti was excoriated as a sycophantic leech, the prototypical “white Negro” (a possible inspiration for Kerouac naming his protagonist Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*?), who was blamed for contributing to Bird’s demise, in part, as the great jazzman’s supplier of heroin. It was Ross Russell’s now infamous biography *Bird Lives* (1973) that crystallized this false narrative that would be recycled by subsequent jazz writers. Schaap has written that Ross’s falsehoods “destroyed his credentials as a historian.”

**Listen to Phil Schaap on Dean Benedetti, WKCR, April 27, 2009 broadcast:
Part I**

Part II

Part III

In 1949, Benedetti began to experience the first symptoms of [myasthenia gravis](#) [5], a rare muscle disease, which soon affected his playing. In 1953, his parents returned with Dean to Torre del Lago in attempts at various cures. In Italy, the ailing Benedetti continued with music, writing arrangements for such artists as the great Neapolitan musician [Renato Carosone](#) [6], a working relationship we know very little about. On January 20, 1957, Dean Benedetti died at age 34.

This June, Torre del Lago will sponsor the tenth annual “[Dean Benedetti Jazz Festival](#) [7]” in honor of this Italian-American musician, musicologist, discographer, and jazz ethnographer, who the [Jazz Institute of Chicago](#) [8] has proclaimed a “true jazz hero.”





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