

It's been almost eight years since the death of Bob Cornfoot, who often graced these pages with his sly, droll, humor. This column, from the April 1991, issue is one of my very favorites: I call it, "Art Fern, Forgotten Figure of Jazz" – *Ron Piekielek*

Those of you familiar with Rob McConnell's Boss Brass' repertoire will be familiar with his "Tribute to Art Fern." Followers of the Johnny Carson Show may recall that Art Fern is the name of Carson's alter ego huckster of the Midnight Movie Matinee. McConnell has a puckish turn of mind and always introduces this number as a salute to Art Fern, the legendary jazz trumpeter. When he does, I wince because I know that for the next month, I will have a steady stream of people looking for recordings by Art Fern.

From experience I have learned it does no good to explain the identity of Art Fern or the humor of McConnell. They have heard on radio, TV, or in person this musician's dedication of this tribute to the legend, so it must be so. They leave in varying states of despair or fury at the ignorance of record shop personnel. After several attempts at revelation, I adopted the policy of a lady I worked with. When faced with a customer's lack of comprehension or acceptance of plain truth, she would create an outlandishly fictional explanation of the cause of the customer's distress. The customer would unhesitatingly embrace the unreal and depart satisfied.

So now, when I face a request for some sonic remembrance of Art Fern, I commiserate with the seeker and explain that Art Fern was never recorded. What a loss to posterity! The harmonic inventiveness of a Gillespie, lyricism of a Bix, intensity of an Armstrong, range of an Eldridge, tone of a Hackett – God, he had it all. He was really ahead of his time. Why, I am asked, are there no recordings of his playing? International trade restrictions. Art Fern was a Canadian. When Edison invented phonograph recordings in 1877, there was an international agreement between Canada and the United States. Inventions of a nation of one country could not be utilized by the other or its citizens for a period of sixty years. Mind you, Canada could press records, but under no circumstances were they allowed to record. As a result, Art Fern, who died in 1935, just two short years before the expiration of the ban, went unrecorded. It was a terrible blow to the history of jazz.

The next question is – how did he die? He was with a small group on a trans-Canada tour. They experienced car trouble while crossing the Rockies and the closest garage was on the other side of the mountain. Art, a tall, heavysset man of great strength, volunteered to push the car, heavily laden with instruments to the crest, then they could coast the rest of the way. He was about a thousand feet up the thirty-five degree grade when he stopped to spit on his hands. The car was in neutral and before he could brace himself, it rolled back, knocking him to the ground, passed over his prostrate form, and inflicted mortal injuries. In this tragic manner ended the career of the greatest unrecorded jazz trumpeter of all time. How ironic that, just two years short of his being able to leave us a legacy of his recorded genius, he should be struck down by a 1938 Airflow DeSoto.

I icily reply that I also said he was ahead of his time. They ponder this a moment and leave, satisfied that there are no recordings of the immortal Art Fern.

An interesting sidelight to Fern's history is that his jazz compositions, also lost to us, always fell just short of other compositions that became staples of jazz. Only the titles remain from his index to demonstrate the fickle nature of fate – East End Blues, Honeysuckle Iris, Chuckston, Mood Lavender, Queen Porter Strut, I'm Coming Appalachia, Romping at the Savoy, For No Reason At All in B-Flat, Mississippi Crud, and possibly his most ambitious work – a suite titled Basic Black (which included Jellyroll Morton's "Pearls"). Lost, lost, suffering the same fate as the harpsichord improvisations of Pinetop Featherstonehaugh – but that's another story.

*Bob Cornfoot*