

■ HOW I ■ SPENT ■ MY ■ FRIDAY ■ NIGHT



Listening To Dick Bishop On WFUV

BY TOM ROZNOWSKI

The event has been the subject of speculation and discussion for over 80 years. With each day that passes, it moves further beyond fact into the realm of mythology. At this point, it's safe to say even Wikipedia won't resolve the lingering uncertainties. And that would be a good thing.

To set the scene: Game 3 of the 1932 World Series between the New York Yankees and the Chicago Cubs played at Wrigley Field. During his fifth inning at-bat against Cubs pitcher Charlie Root, the legendary Babe Ruth steps away from the batter's box. He gestures in the direction of center field. He then assumes his stance and hits Root's next pitch an estimated 440 feet into the center field bleachers. Thus began the myth of the mighty Babe calling his shot.

Many bar arguments would ensue over the following decades. Some fans would claim Ruth was simply challenging some heckling from bench jockeys in the Cubs dugout. Others maintained he was gesturing at Root for what he considered a quick pitch. Maybe he had a strain in his right shoulder.

There are two facts we know for sure. The capacity of Wrigley Field at that time was 38,396. And anyone still alive who bore witness to the event would have been a child then, reaching the end of their lives now. So, much like the last remaining World War I veteran, when that final witness is laid to rest we will have reached the threshold of total myth. It is then that a visceral connection with what we are imagining will be permanently lost.

In preserving the great myth of Ruth's Called Shot, we've had a good running start. If everyone who said they attended the game that day had actually been there, Wrigley Field would have held over a million people. Personal perceptions, embellishments, and outright lies are all ways to give an event the presence needed to carry it forward into myth. The story is always there to be told. The message and the meaning determine just how long it survives.

This is exactly the type of long-winded, long-winding tale that my friend Dick Bishop would enjoy over a drink. Not that he is prone to tell them himself. In person and on-air, he is economical in his speech. He values the spaces between words as much as he does the words themselves. Translate

that equation into music, and you have jazz.

Dick's keen awareness of sound and space and his ability to share it with listeners have characterized his radio career, one that spans 57 years, all spent with one station: WFIU, broadcasting from our beautiful campus in Bloomington.

Listeners will recognize that last phrase as a signature of Dick's weekly show. It's part of how he balances the familiar with the newly-discovered. Every Friday evening at 9:00 p.m., first on *Afterglow*, more recently on *Standards By Starlight*, Dick Bishop has invited us to explore a rich period in American culture – focusing on the compositions of the Great American Songbook, a time period ranging from about 1925 to the Beatles first single.

Dick consults these sources as a biblical scholar would ancient texts: repeating, reviewing, re-examining. Those compositions, and the vocal and instrumental versions of them that Dick favors, were created within the lifetimes of many who are still with us. They document the past as carved stone tablets or official box scores might. They cast long shadows that we still find ourselves measuring today.

Between *Mad Men*, the quest for the perfect manhattan, and Frank Sinatra's centennial this coming December, there is a currently a deep fascination with mid-century American popular culture. Unlike many who tune in to his show, Dick Bishop was actually there. He started playing LPs from his personal collection on WFIU as a sophomore at IU. You might say he had a box seat for all the proceedings. From the first inning on, he was completely focused on the field of play. I think he knew he was witnessing something special.

I've been listening to him on Friday nights for years. I've probably learned as much about music from Dick Bishop as from anyone I can name. With the environment he creates on the radio, Dick makes the process of learning as memorable as the lessons themselves. No surprise, then, that his doctorate from I.U. is in education. He certainly turned out to be a great teacher.

I remember one lesson especially. Trisha and I had just purchased our

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Tom and Dick at the Malibu Grill (photo credit: John Bailey)

house. It was still completely empty on that Friday. All I brought with me was a radio and the front door key. I just sat on the porch, listening through an open window to Dick's show. I remember he played a recording by Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald: *April in Paris*. You can guess what followed: A sweet reverie where the world seems to expand and come together all at once. Bliss.

Back in the day, Dick played drums in a number of jazz ensembles.

He would likely dismiss any suggestion that he was a fine musician. Let me offer, though, that the job of any musician is to touch the heart and soul with music. By that measure, I would fall short in calling Dick Bishop anything else.

Every week, Dick reaches far and wide to embrace people, places, and experiences while reserving a

special reverence for what is found a little closer to home: like the rich heritage of fellow Hoosiers Hoagy Carmichael, Cole Porter, and the Four Freshmen. And yes, occasionally their songs do sound like artifacts. Yet, they somehow resonate with the present. They tell us something vital about those who preceded us and the ground we stand on - a sure sense of place in an increasingly rootless and global society.

Passing time cannot help but alter people and places. While Dick consistently cites the backing musicians on various sessions, he will also occasionally mention the date that someone "left us." Weaving through all the musical selections and Dick's brief commentaries is the thrill and privilege of being alive back then and also right now. His gentle presence is there "to accompany you on this weekend evening." You relax at home, taking that hour to unwind from the past week. You contemplate where you are. And wherever that happens to be on a Friday night, the music always seems to help.

What Dick Bishop knows, what he conveys in those treasured spaces, is that life is precious because it is not guaranteed. It's an unspoken theme shared with listeners every week but perhaps never more powerfully than on Friday, May 29, 2015. That's the date Dick has chosen for his last broadcast.

DICK BISHOP'S KEEN AWARENESS OF SOUND AND SPACE AND HIS ABILITY TO SHARE IT WITH LISTENERS HAVE CHARACTERIZED HIS 57-YEAR RADIO CAREER.

Sad? Sure. I'm going miss listening to his broadcasts. But my time spent with Dick Bishop has taught me about the lasting gift of memory. As anyone who ever related the account of Babe Ruth on that October day knows: Just tell the story the best you can - the way you can - with what you can. For yourself, for your listeners, it's just like being there, whether you were or not.