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## ARTS & LETTERS

JAZZ

### Bix's Tone Made Eddie Condon Think of 'A Girl Saying "Yes."'

Speculating on what Beiderbecke, who was born 100 years ago today (on March 10, 1903) might have achieved is a favorite parlor game of jazz fans. The most famous book on the Bix legend, Dorothy Baker's fictionalized "Young Man with a Horn" of 1938 — its title swiped from Otis Ferguson's 1938 essay on the real Bix in *The New Republic* — suggests that he turned to drink out of frustration, because the sounds he wanted to make were forever out of his grasp. It's an idiotic notion. What Bix actually achieved in his short lifetime was spectacular: After Louis Armstrong, he is the individual musician most responsible for perfecting, and popularizing, the jazz solo.

Like Armstrong, Bix played with a driving force, but there's an element of introspection that's completely unprecedented in the work of earlier musicians. It's been said that Bix was the first major jazzman to not have an element of blues influence in his playing, but his bell-like tones surely contain echoes of New Orleans, the Deep South, and the great black jazz and bluesmen who preceded him.

Others suggest that Bix was the first jazz player to be influenced by classical music. But, the work of Jelly Roll Morton and the great Harlem stride players, not to mention Armstrong, is steeped in 19th-century operatic traditions. What you can say is that Bix was the first jazz musician to draw on the innovations of the French modernists like Ravel and Debussy.

Some have even described Bix as jazz's first primarily intellectual player, yet his contemporaries appropriately described their initial reactions to his music in the most extreme emotional and physical terms: Hoagy Carmichael said it made him leap in the air and turn a back flip, "like a monkey." Eddie Condon, in an oft-quoted line, said Bix's cornet tone made him think of "a girl saying 'yes.'"

There's some of all that in Bix's music, but ultimately it doesn't belong to either Old Europe or the Old South, anymore than it can be explained in racial or geographical terms. Musicians everywhere and from every race took his playing to heart: Bobby Hackett and Lester Young, Miles Davis and Chet Baker. Still, there's that undefinable element of Bix's playing, which generations of disciples have failed to replicate and which can't be rationalized through almost any conventional criteria.

Leon Bix Beiderbecke was born to a middle-class family in Davenport, Iowa, and from the age of three was a piano prodigy. (The best books on Bix are the definitive biography, "Bix: Man and Legend," by Richard Sudhalter and Philip R. Evans, and Mr. Evans's exhaustive diary of the cornetist's life: "Bix: The Leon Bix Beiderbecke Story.") His parents viewed his musical leanings with benign amusement until the teenaged Bix discovered jazz around 1917 via the very successful 78s of The Original Dixieland Jazz Band from New Orleans — the first widely available recordings of the new music.



**BIXOLOGY**  
Bix Beiderbecke (in center, holding the cornet) with Jean Goldkette's Orchestra in October 1926; in a family photograph, c. 1922, bottom right.



MOSAIC RECORDS

Emulating the ODJB's Nick LaRocca, the 14-year-old Bix taught himself to play the cornet.

His parents, in a Midwestern version of "The Jazz Singer," regarded music, especially this low class saloon stuff, as a waste of time for a decent young man and did everything in their power to prevent him from playing it. But he persevered.

Bix joined his first important band, The Wolverines, in 1923, and when the group began recording using the acoustic horn technique of the day, the news was trumpeted that a major new soloist had arrived. In 1926 and 1927, Bix served as featured soloist with Jean Goldkette's

Detroit-based band, establishing that orchestra as one of the hottest units in the country.

In these years, he also formed a loose partnership with the jazz's first virtuoso saxophonist, Frank Trumbauer — Tram is easily overlooked today, but he was a huge influence on reed-players, most famously on the even-greater Lester Young. At the end of 1927, Bix joined the Paul Whiteman band and spent most of his remaining career playing for Whiteman, the most popular musical figure of the jazz age.

After Armstrong, Bix was the greatest jazzman of the 1920s, but rather than follow Armstrong's example and present himself in a series of small and big bands built around his horn, Bix essentially buried himself in the elephantine Whiteman aggregation. The leader featured him as much as he could, and many of the Whiteman sides spotlighting the cornetist are wonderful, but it's still disappointing. Bix should have been the featured attraction in his own ensemble. The comparable giants of the 1920s — such as Armstrong, Teagarden, and Sidney Bechet — managed to do it, even if it did take them years to get there.

Perhaps if Beiderbecke had lived longer. ... As it happened, he was unable to keep up with the constant touring and drinking that was a musician's life and quickly burned himself out. Growing sicker and sicker as the years went by, he died of lobar pneumonia (his condition worsened by constant drinking) in August, 1931.

While some of Bix's recordings have been continually in print for the last eight decades, it wasn't until now — for the centennial — that his entire output has been made available. All too typically, there are two comprehensive packages, both of which feature Bix's music in the best possible sound (as prepared by the two best audio restoration teams in the world). Doug Pomeroy engineered Mosaic's seven-disc Bix box: "The Complete Okeh and Brunswick Bix Beiderbecke, Frank Trumbauer, and Jack

Teagarden Sessions (1924-36)" (Mosaic 211, only available direct from the label, [www.mosaicrecords.com](http://www.mosaicrecords.com)) while "Bix Restored," packaged as a set of four three-CD boxes (Sunbeam 1-3, 4-6, 7-9, and 10-12) is the work of John R. T. Davies (and producer Michael Kieffer).

The Mosaic package, which was nominated for a Grammy, focuses equally on Bix's longtime collaborator, Frank Trumbauer. (As the somewhat unwieldy title indicates, there are also later sessions spotlighting the remarkable trombonist Jack Teagarden.)

The best examples of Bix's art at its purest were done under both his and Trumbauer's name for Okeh Records, and all of those are in the Mosaic box. The only really great Bix records missing from this set are the early sides by his first band, The Wolverines. There is, of course, also some wonderful work with Jean Goldkette, Paul Whiteman, and the other bands whose work is controlled by BMG, who could and should put out a two or three CD "Best of Beiderbecke." This would complement the Mosaic offering — and please everyone.

Contrastingly, every single note Bix ever recorded is included in the 12-CD Sunbeam series, as are quite a few notes he never recorded — by which I mean lots of sessions by the full Whiteman orchestra on which Bix is sitting in the brass section but not soloing. This is a set for extreme completists; Paul Whiteman was the most popular bandleader of the 1920s, and his copious recordings range from the best to the worst of the era.

Moreover, "Bix Restored" is laid out in a strictly chronological fashion — which generally is ideal, but here you can get a movement from Gershwin's classical piano concerto (in F) sandwiched between two great hot small group numbers. But if you have to hear everything Bix ever did — and then some — here it is.

Even though Lincoln Center has so far failed to celebrate the Bix centennial — which to me undermines the credibility of their ambition to be the central institution of the entire jazz world — there has already been one tribute concert.

Last Monday night, Vince Giordano and his New Orleans Nighthawks (who normally perform on Monday at the Cajun Restaurant in

Chelsea) mounted a concert of Beiderbecke recreations hosted by jazz historian Phil Schaap at Merkin Hall. While it would be morally satisfying to see Lincoln Center honoring Bix, their jazz orchestra would have a hard time outdoing Mr. Giordano's band of 11 player-scholars. These are master instrumentalists and amazing sight-readers, all thoroughly schooled in the early jazz idiom. I've heard The Nighthawks play such seminal Bix pieces as "My Pretty Girl" many times at the Cajun, but they sounded even more perfect in Merkin's splendid acoustics. The highlight of the evening was a new transcription of a rare, late Bix effort, "Deep Harlem."

Mr. Giordano is a virtuoso on all the bass instruments (tuba, string bass, and the more obscure bass saxophone), and many of his Nighthawks figure prominently on the new "Celebrating Bix" album (Arbor Jazz 19271). There have been Bix tribute albums before, but this fresh and imaginative homage has them all beat.

The arrangers, generally co-producer and multi-reed player Dan Levinson and cornetist Peter Ecklund, have transcribed Beiderbecke and Trumbauer's best-known solos had them played by a trio of cornets and saxophones. The cornet and sax choruses then become the basis for new charts, which feature improvisations, themes, and variations on their own.

These orchestrations will be conducted live by Randy Sandke at a second Bix Memorial concert this June at the JVC Jazz Festival. A third tribute concert will be held a few weeks later during the 92nd Street Y's "Jazz In July" series.

Like the solos of Armstrong, Parker, or Young, Bix's work withstands the scrutiny of successive generations, and thoroughly justifies Armstrong's description of Bix as a "born genius."

Sadly, the two facts that even most jazz fans know about Bix are that he was white and that he died very young from inhaling too much bootleg gin, neither one of which illuminates our understanding of his "born genius." What matters is the fire, the emotion, and the charisma of his playing. Sheer magic then, now, and for at least another hundred years.



### Bix's Top 7 Solos (A Personal Listing)

**"SINGIN' THE BLUES"** (Frank Trumbauer's Orchestra, February 4, 1927) An obscure song — not a blues — by Original Dixieland Jazz Band pianist J. Russell Robinson, transformed by Bix and Tram into their equivalent of Louis Armstrong's "West End Blues." Like that classic of the following year, the two epochal solos — filled with energy and imagination, yet at the same time contemplative, even tranquil — have been canonized, lionized, memorized, orchestrated (and, in some cases, vocalized) by hundreds of musicians in the last seven decades.

**"BORNEO"** (Frank Trumbauer's Orchestra, April 10, 1928) and **"YOU TOOK ADVANTAGE OF ME"** (Paul Whiteman's Orchestra, April 25, 1928) Where "Singin' the Blues" shows what Tram and Bix could achieve by soloing successively, these two 1928 tracks show the art of the chase chorus, with Bix playing a couple of bars, Tram answering him with a couple of bars in response, Bix coming back with a further statement, and Tram answering that one — and so on for 32 of the most glorious bars in jazz. The first (with Bix playing open) is an ephemeral novelty, the second (on which Bix plays with a mute) is a future Rodgers and Hart standard, with the added bonus of a great vocal by American pop's first truly modern singer, Bing Crosby.

**"IN A MIST"** (Piano solo, September 9, 1927) Bix wrote several compositions for the piano, but this is the only one he lived to record — he also played it at Carnegie Hall under the aegis of Paul Whiteman. This piece, heavily influenced by contemporary classical writers like the Syracuse-based Eastwood Lane, has always been somewhat controversial among hardcore hot jazzers, but is actually no more European than some of the works of Harlem's Willie "The Lion" Smith. Both men's writing anticipates the lyrical, postmodern piano of Bill Evans.

**"GLEMENTINE"** (Jean Goldkette's Orchestra, September 15, 1927) Thanks to the presence of Bix and Tram, the Goldkette Orchestra was one of the hottest in history — even beating the legendary Fletcher Henderson in a battle of the bands at New York's Roseland Ballroom. Oddly, the Goldkette recordings feature Bix less than the best Whiteman tracks, but this red hot instrumental from the band's last session certainly shows what all the excitement was about.

**"I'M COMIN' VIRGINIA"** (Frank Trumbauer's Orchestra, May 13, 1927) How much jazz changed in the next 40 years: In the postwar era, even the greatest jazzmen seemed to need two choruses just to warm up. Yet 64 bars is the sum total of the longest solo that Bix ever put on records. Never one to waste a note, Bix uses the extra time to build one of his most memorable constructions. Just imagine what he could have done with "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue" or "My Favorite Things."

**"GOOSE PIMPLES"** (Bix and his Gang, October 25, 1927) Bix plays the blues. When fronting his own recording unit, Bix alternated between his favorite New Orleans good-old-good-ones ("At the Jazz Band Ball," "The Jazz Me Blues") and hip renditions of contemporary showtunes ("O! Man River," "Thou Swell"). Both of his two best solos on blues material were done with his "Gang," the King Oliver-associated "Royal Garden Blues," and especially "Goose Pimples." The cornetist's own solo is fine, but it's what he does at the end of the record that really grabs you, letting fly with a wildly emotional rip that seems to shout, "Are you listening, Satchmo?"

— Will Friedwald