


THE LEGENDARY BIX BEIDERBECKE 1924-1925

ALL HIS RECORDINGS ON BENNETT WITH
THE WOLVERINE ORCHESTRA - SIOUX CITY
BIX & HIS RHYTHM JUGGLERS

Leon Bismarck Beiderbecke was born in Davenport, Iowa, on March 10, 1903, to a musical family of German descent. His very sharp ear was observed even when he was a young child, but he never had any formal musical training.

He taught himself to play the cornet, which resulted in a rather unconventional technique, especially in the use of the valves. As a boy he played the records of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, trying to play with them on his horn. This was his first, and of course very formative, introduction to jazz music. Perhaps he also heard some Negro bands, playing on the riverboats. But the year 1921, in which he attended Lake Forest Academy in Chicago, gave him every chance to hear the Oliver band and other colored groups. When the King Oliver recordings were issued some years later, he played them often, following with his cornet as he had done earlier with the O.D.J.B. records. In this way he became acquainted with New Orleans jazz in the Negro tradition directly, while indirectly the same influence reached him through the New Orleans Rhythm Kings and their records. Meanwhile he had a school band at the Academy; after leaving this school (his stay there did not last longer than a year) he played odd engagements around Chicago.

In 1923 he and some friends from the school band formed the Wolverine Orchestra. They had some engagements around Chicago and in Indiana, the most important of which were a series of weekend gigs on the Indiana University campus where they had been introduced by an enthusiastic jazz lover named Hoagy Carmichael. In the same year, 1924, they made their first recordings — those we offer you on this LP. After that came some months at Gary Beach, Indiana, where they spent a time that was great fun for the band and for some listeners with a discerning ear. From reports of this period we know that Bix not only played his cornet but also, especially at late hours, would turn to the piano to improvise.




In September 1924 they played at the Cinderella Ballroom on Times Square in New York City. The band was a sensation; it sounded different from all the many dance orchestras which played sweet and heavily-arranged music: the difference was that it played jazz. This fact was in itself something extraordinary, but all the credit goes to Bix who made the music go and inspired the other (much less talented) musicians with his never-failing drive. He was twenty one, but he already had great influence and was a much admired master of jazz. During this period the band also recorded some sides in the Gennett New York studio and those numbers are included here.


At the end of December 1924 Bix left the Wolverines and was replaced by an admirer and pupil, a young man who had never seen Bix before but knew his music from his recordings by heart: Jimmy McPartland.

Bix went to Davenport, worked for a short period with Charlie Straight's Orchestra in Chicago, and then went to a group led by Trumbauer in St. Louis. In this period, as well as later in New York, he often went to symphony concerts; he preferred modern music. With Trumbauer and some of the other men he joined the great Goldkette band, touring the country, playing around Chicago, or, during a short but historical period, in the Roseland Ballroom in New York, opposite the Henderson band. This was in 1926. The following year, along with his friend Trumbauer, Bill Challis, the arranger, and some other members of the Goldkette band, he joined the famous Paul Whiteman Orchestra. Even in the Goldkette band they often had to play sweet dance music in the more commercial way, but at times they had an opportunity to play it the way they wanted to. But with Whiteman these chances were rare indeed: the daily routine was the heavy and difficult arrangements that had made the band popular. Only now and then could Bix blow something of his own, but seldom more than eight bars.

Around 1931 Whiteman sent him away for a cure because of his heavy drinking; after a short period at home he came back, but never again to play in a regular band. He died in New York of pneumonia, on August 7, 1931, and his legend, already started while he still lived, really began to grow.

The Bix story is not a happy one: a great musician forced to play in orchestras that did not fit him, playing music not worth hearing, and much drinking which almost certainly caused his early death. Besides a few of the later sides done by recording groups, only the records we present here, all made for Gennett, really convey and make us understand his greatness: they form his real musical testament. He also left some scores of piano music, among them his fine composition "In a Mist"; this work, however, has little to do with jazz, being more in the tradition of such modern composers as






Debussy, Holst, and Edward MacDowell. Bix's story is one of frustration, of human failure to reach a goal which all his talents entitled him to reach.

There are several reasons for this failure. Commercialism has almost completely pervaded the field of music, excepting only the classical "long-hair" concert tradition. Jazz does not fit into the pattern of popular or dance music, nor does it belong to the classical tradition. This often gives jazz an isolated position, the more so because it bears the stigma of being born in socially low regions, in the Negro ghetto. Popular music has drawn much inspiration from jazz, resulting in the queer fact that jazz musicians are often the best commercial artists. Besides their talent, it is their serious approach to music that makes them better, not to speak of the fact that their playing is fresher, livelier, and stronger. This subjects them to a severe conflict: there is seldom an opportunity to play their own music, for which the demand is very limited, while there is always the strong temptation exerted by the chance of making good money by going commercial. So more often than not the semi-professional, who does not make his living solely by playing, is in the better position — many of the New Orleans jazz men were only part-time musicians.

Bix, with his probably not very strong character, was certainly the victim of this situation, even if he may not have been tempted much by the money. He loved to play, but the jobs in which he could do so in his own way were very scarce, the more so because only a few of his white friends were willing to take the hard, unprofitable road of the uncompromising jazzman. Since jazz had originated in the colored world of the U.S.A., the situation was less strenuous for a Negro — he could always fall back on the folk art of his own people, as Johnny Dodds often did, for example. But the times were not ripe for a man like Bix to play in a colored group, even if he had no racial bias himself. So Bix had to play with men who admired him greatly, sometimes understood his great devotion to a real cause, but who were unable to play either his kind of music or on his level. Most of the time he played in entirely commercial outfits like the Whiteman band. This must have been a real frustration, and he was not strong enough to avoid seeking an escape through drinking, which only made his situation worse and finally killed him.

A second reason for Bix's frustration was his lack of a real musical education. Many stories are told of his constant difficulties with reading scores, how he had to rely on men like Challis for help when he wanted to put down piano compositions like "In a Mist". Dreaming of making a synthesis of jazz and music in the Western art tradition must have made his technical shortcomings even more frustrating.





Like many jazz musicians he started early and reached considerable heights within a short period, making it even more difficult to find the time and the courage to start anew as a beginner. In February 1925 Bix enrolled at the University of Iowa to study music, but he didn't stay.

Bix was a white man, and he never denied his cultural background. His own playing, very clean, very tasteful in the sense of European traditions, testifies to this. This made his other dream, of playing jazz as the colored people did naturally, more difficult to attain. And if his fellow musicians did not fully understand this ideal, they were much less inclined to follow him in trying to blend jazz with the classical tradition. This was completely outside their scope, and perhaps even dangerous to their commercial possibilities.

Bix was an amiable man, but he missed the character of a leader. He took his world for granted, accepted the place open to him, even though it hardly ever gave him a real chance to work according to his ideals. Occasionally there was a fine jam session (there are many legends of his playing with Armstrong, Bessie Smith, and the young Chicagoans) or work with a good recording unit. Probably the only time Bix played regularly in a somewhat congenial group was his short period with the Wolverines, not purely by chance his earliest band: he still had his young enthusiasm, he was not yet a big enough name to be a star in a commercial group, and the frustrating situation did not make itself felt so sharply. Therefore, the recordings on this LP present the real Bix: Bix the fine jazz-cornetist, the greatest and most serious white jazz-player of the twenties.

The titles speak for themselves and need no comment. They are a great improvement over the work of the older white bands. It is easy to criticize the vo-de-o-do rhythm, but the music is considerably more relaxed than the high-tensioned strain of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band's recordings. There is more real power and assurance, more genuine liveliness. It is not difficult to point out the weaknesses of the band as a whole, but whatever we might say, the real historical importance of this influential pioneering group cannot be denied. The intrinsic qualities of Bix as leader of the ensemble and the lasting beauties of his solos and breaks remain a joy forever.

H.R.R.

