

Album produced by Larry Carr

Recording engineer: Marty Greenblatt

# THE BING CROSBY STORY

VOLUME I: THE EARLY JAZZ YEARS, 1928-1932

Was there really ever a time when the familiar, friendly voice of Bing Crosby wasn't a part of our lives and memories? Most of us, who've grown up listening to Bing for what seems to be always, find it hard to remember such a time. But it existed—and very different it was, too. A look back at the music world before Crosby entered it reveals some startling, forgotten facts that are difficult to believe ever existed in a world that today is so dominated by popular singers of every description.

Popular singing can quite literally be divided into two periods, "B.C. and A.C." (i.e.—"Before Crosby and After Crosby"). A sweeping statement? Yes, but true. Research of the music world of the '20s, '30s and '40s show that no other singer of any description ever had such a wide, far-reaching influence as Crosby did.

Let's look back at singing B.C. Then, "Before Crosby," the popular male vocalist as we've known him the past 30 or 40 years just didn't exist. During the '20s, the music world's divisions were pretty clear: opera had its Carusos and Tibbetts, the concert field its John McCormacks, Broadway its Jolson, Richman and John Steele, and record favorites were Irving Kaufman, Seger Ellis and, especially, Gene Austin. In 1929, with the expansion of radio, Rudy Vallee had a spectacular but short-lived singing vogue (although his excellent personality-showman career has persisted).

The advent of talking pictures gave musical personalities the opportunity to broaden their horizons, as did the big radio shows of the '30s. Jolson, Tibbett, John Boles, Vallee, Eddy, Dick Powell, etc., were all very popular, but the biggest impact was made by Crosby, who became the national singing idol. His unprecedented success launched a flood of imitators so influenced by him that the whole style of pop singing was changed. One can immediately think of Como, Colombo, Dick Todd, and later, Sinatra, Dean Martin, and John Gary, who owe their style to Crosby.

Before Crosby, there were no "band singers" as we came to know them. Until Bing's success, the guy who sang with the band was a musician who put down his instrument just long enough to croak a fast chorus, then hastily pick it up again. There were no girl band singers either; Paul Whiteman inaugurated that phenomena in the '30s with Mildred Bailey. Bing first helped to focus attention on the band vocal spot and, because of his success, other bands then hired singers in hopes of achieving another Crosby.

Remember those terrible tenors of the '20s, the operetta school of over-precise diction with much rolling of the r's, usually a little off key? And the dramatic baritone, florid and theatrical? After Bing's down-to-earth style was heard, most of them mercifully disappeared and nearly all singers adapted a more natural and simple style.

Crosby reached his musical maturity, fortunately, at just the right time when radio, with its home intimacy, could properly air his warm voice, nonchalance and low-keyed charm. The new "talkies" illumined the image even further, which, with a third success on records, built Bing an audience that quickly grew from national to world-wide. He was the right man at the right time, but he came well-prepared after a long apprenticeship.

What did he have in such abundance that set him apart and that initiated one of music's most enviable and durable careers? This collection of Crosby during those formative years will answer that question quite succinctly. Three sides are devoted to what can rightfully be called "The Whiteman Era," those years that Bing spent under the tolerant tutelage of Paul Whiteman, who gave him such full exposure to everything that the music world then had to offer. This education was one of the main reasons for Bing's continued success after the initial springboard; his preparatory experiences with Whiteman included dance band, radio, records, vaudeville, concerts, and finally films, with the 1930 spectacular, *The King of Jazz*.

He was able to develop all his facets—his highly individual, pleasing style of singing, his easygoing manner and ready wit, the intuitive gift of phrasing, and a poised, relaxed manner of presentation. His voice developed color, nuance, tone and shading as he grew into a romantic singer capable of conveying to his audience the mood and meaning of the songs as he felt them.

Bing was a product of the era and the band that spawned him. The "Roaring '20s" was the jazz age of prosperity and prohibition, Clara Bow flappers and John Held, Jr., "sheiks." Tabloids headlined monkey trials, gangster murders and trans-Atlantic flight, while Lindbergh, Texas Guinan, Al Smith, the Prince of Wales, Rudolf Valentino, Gloria Swanson and the Marquis, Babe Ruth, Bill Tilden, and Notre Dame's Four Horsemen caught the national fancy.

People read *Three Weeks and Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, played mah-jongg, danced the Charleston and Black Bottom to the bands of George Olsen, Coon-Sanders, Ben Bernie, and Vincent Lopez,

listened to Helen Kane, Gene Austin, Ruth Etting, Helen Morgan, and Sophie Tucker. Bing liked Ethel Waters, Al Jolson, Mildred Bailey and the bands of Ilean Goldkette and Roger Wolfe Kahn. Particularly was he impressed with Paul Whiteman, as was just about everyone.

"The King of Jazz," as Whiteman was known then, was the biggest name in pop music. He and his vast organization towered over everyone else, innovated new trends and brimmed with the greatest talents to be found in music, for Whiteman hired the best musicians, soloists and top arrangers, and spotlighted them to every advantage. A generous and easygoing boss, he paid top money to his diversified talents: a January, 1928, payroll came to just under \$10,000 per week for talent (\$9,400 to be exact, and imagine what that would be today!).

Whiteman had started his own musical career at 16, playing first viola in the Denver Symphony. He branched into dance music while with the San Francisco Symphony, then became an Eastern sensation at the Ambassador Hotel in Atlantic City. For the Victor Talking Machine Co., he made a string of unprecedented hits, played the Palais Royale in New York City, leading to Broadway appearances in George White's Scandals and two Ziegfeld Follies. European and U.S. tours followed with concert and vaudeville presentations (13 straight weeks at New York's famous Palace Theatre, the first band ever to play there). Among other famous "firsts" was his Aeolian Hall concert in 1924, which introduced Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.

As his fame and fortune increased, so did his organization. His band became the largest, numerically, in the world, the best paid, the most listened to, and the most imitated. During the years that Bing was with him, it included such legendary names as Bix Beiderbecke, Joe Venuti, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, Frankie Trumbauer, Roy Bargy, Eddie Lang, Lennie Hayton, Matty Malneck, Charlie Margolies, Jack Fulton, Mike Pingatore, Charlie Strickfaden, Andy Secrest, the Mayhew Brothers, and the arranging talents of Ferde Grofé, Bill Challis, Tom Satterfield, etc. Crosby was considerably influenced by this nexus of talents and his singing always reflected this environment.

Prior to the Whiteman era, Bing's musical experience had been limited to the West Coast. He was born in 1904 in Tacoma, Washington, grew up in Spokane, entered Gonzaga College in 1920 to pursue law, but musical interests got him into a group called The Juicy Seven. In 1925, he and his boyhood chum, Al Rinker (Mildred Bailey's brother), left home to try their luck in Los Angeles where Mildred took them to Mike Lyman who arranged an audition for the Fanchon and Marco vaudeville circuit. Marco booked them into the Boulevard Theatre in L.A. where they made a hit and were signed for the rest of the circuit. In their act, the boys sang, Rinker at the piano, Bing beside him playing cymbals and sometimes using a kazoo for a trick trombone effect to augment the vocals. They were young, fresh and different. Booked by Paramount-Public into the Metropolitan Theatre in Los Angeles, Paul Whiteman heard about them from Jimmy Gillespie, who recommended them as a hot piano-singing novelty. Whiteman, who already had Skin Young, Jack Fulton and Chester Gaylord to sing, said "no!" (As I pointed out earlier, the band musicians did the vocals then; no one had ever hired someone who just sang!) But Gillespie insisted, so an audition was arranged in Whiteman's dressing room at the Million Dollar Theatre. Bing and Al had been hanging around the Whiteman band and Bing was particularly impressed with the singing of Skin Young.

The audition itself proved overwhelming! Whiteman, who then weighed over three-hundred pounds, was wearing a black silk dressing gown, fragrant with toilet water, and sat on a huge ottoman eating caviar and drinking champagne. He had a white piano in the dressing room on which the overawed team did a nervous audition for the great man. To their amazement, he not only liked them but offered them a job. Bing says they thought it incredible that Whiteman, "who stood out above all other American band-leaders as Mount Everest stands out above the other mountains," thought them good enough to join his organization.

Whiteman arranged for them at the end of their present contract to join him at the Tivoli Theatre in Chicago, where he introduced them as "a couple of boys I found in an ice cream parlor in Walla Walla." It struck exactly the right note and they were a big hit. As they headed east by way of Cleveland, they continued successfully until the band reached the Paramount Theatre in New York, where they bombed so badly that Whiteman was forced to put them in the lobby, playing between shows. The management disliked Bing's singing so much that a clause was inserted into the contract forbidding him to sing a solo for the rest of the engagement. Timing is an enigma! A few years later, Crosby, then the star of his own

CBS radio show, returned to the Paramount and made such a big hit that he starred as headliner at \$7,500 for 26 weeks.

About this time, Whiteman's dad had sent him a young singer-pianist-composer named Harry Barris, whose card read "Young Mister Show Business, Himself." The confident Barris watched the by now unhappy team of Rinker and Crosby and announced that he could fix the act. And so he did! He added himself, re-routed the songs, and The Rhythm Boys were born. The new act fractured the customers and they were starred at The Club Whiteman. 1927 was a big year for the whole organization and The Rhythm Boys sang in vaudeville, clubs and on records.

Then Whiteman caused a sensation in the music world by announcing that he was leaving Victor Records, where he'd reigned for years, to sign with Columbia Records, who offered him carte blanche for his expanding recording ideas. This change proved to be lucky for Bing as the deal included the right for Whiteman's soloists to record on their own. Bix and Tram, Venuti and Lang, and the Dorsey Brothers did a batch of solo records, sometimes using Bing as vocalist, which led ultimately to some single Crosby records.

And this brings us to the album at hand. The majority of sides (26) are being released on LP for the first time, while "SWEET SUE" is making its initial record debut. They are programmed chronologically so that Bing's early record career can be followed just as it occurred, and his development from band singer to star is enlightening and fascinating.

## RECORD 1, SIDE I

1. "MISSISSIPPI MUD" is the third version of this song that Bing made at the time. The other two were with the Whiteman band and with The Rhythm Boys, both on Victor. This version is with Frankie Trumbauer's studio band, a Whiteman group that included Karl Kress on guitar, Bix on cornet, Matty Malneck on violin and Bill Rank on trombone. Bing and Tram engage in some '28-style minstrel banter with Malneck's violin behind the vocal, then Bix's cornet solos to fine advantage. In these first few sides, Bing's voice is pitched higher than we are accustomed to hearing, but gradually drops into its proper baritone range.

2. "WA-DA-DA" is The Rhythm Boys' version of a Harry Barris trifle typical of that light-hearted period. Bing is on cymbals, Barris on piano. Usually, The Rhythm Boys performed with Rinker and Barris at two baby white pianos with Bing, center, playing cymbals. But this arrangement was awkward for recording so they all gathered around Barris' piano. They glide easily through the song, changing vocal parts to suit the harmony.

3. "TAIN'T SO, HONEY, TAIN'T SO." Whiteman's band opens with Bing's verse and chorus of Willard Robison's spiritual-type song at a bright, swinging tempo. Bix shares honors with his brilliant cornet in mid-section verse while Tram is featured on the unusual bassoon solo. Bing is developing into a smooth and personable vocalist.

4. "MY SUPPRESSED DESIRE." The Rhythm Boys again. Bing scats on the first chorus and he encourages Rinker ("tell it") during the verse with cymbal crashes. This side is a diverting romp throughout, with Bing scating the last bridge.

5. "MAKIN' WHOOPEE!" Whiteman's band with Crosby on verse and chorus, backed by Chuck Gaylord, Jack Fulton and Skin Young. Andy Secrest on trumpet and Trumbauer on sax are featured in this unusual orchestration of the '28 standard. Note Bing's clear, impeccable diction and smooth singing even at this last dance tempo.

6. "I'LL GET BY," another evergreen by The Ipana Troubadours, a radio and studio band led by Sam Lanin. Featured were Chuck Campbell's trombone, Manny Klein and Bob Effros on trumpets, Artie Schutt, piano; the Dorsey Brothers, with Hank Stern's tuba and Johnny Coli's banjo for that real '20s sound. Bing sings the guest vocal in excellent voice with the great enunciation and relaxed assurance that were to become his trademark.

7. "IF I HAD YOU." The Sam Lanin studio band is much the same group as The Troubadours. Bob Effros opens on trumpet, then Schutt's piano comes in for the bridge. Bing's chorus is warm and sympathetic, and includes one of his usual "ahs" ("Ah, if I had you") for dramatic effect.

8. "SUSI ANNA" is by Sam Lanin's band at the same recording session. Jimmy Dorsey's sax and Bing's excellent vocal are outstanding.

## RECORD 1, SIDE II

1. "LET'S DO IT." The Cole Porter perennial is given a rousing treatment by the Dorsey Brothers' studio band. After the chorus and verse, in which Jimmy is prominently heard, Bing "ahs" in for

a superior vocal with Dick McDonough's tasty guitar behind him. Tommy's trombone is heard in the bridge of the last chorus.

2. "THE SPELL OF THE BLUES." The Dorsey's again from the same date with a seldom-heard but pretty blues. Charlie Margolies opens on trumpet, then Bing's verse and chorus, again with McDonough's guitar, and, of course, Jimmy's clarinet and Tommy's trombone. "Gee, but it's hell!" was a daring lyric then, but Bing's reading seems just right.

3. and 4. These next two sides are Bing's very first solos, made in March, 1929. His performance on the records we've already heard had aroused interest at Columbia Records and it was decided to give him a chance on his own, a rare occurrence in those days when solos were by stars of name value from Broadway, vaudeville and the movies. However, to hold down costs, in case the records didn't sell (and they didn't—apparently, the public wasn't ready for Crosby yet!), only a small trio was budgeted for accompaniment. The personnel is probably Rube Bloom on piano, Venuti on violin, and Karl Kress or Lang on guitar. Bing seems to miss the big band that usually bolstered him, and though they are a nice effort, the sides didn't make too much noise in the crowded '29 recording business. However, they were a step forward.

In "MY KINDA LOVE," Bing sings the verse and chorus in legato style but throws in some glissandos that were a decided departure then. He and the trio jazz up the tempo of the second chorus for some unusual effects, à la Bee Palmer, before the special lyrical and musical ending.

"TILL WE MEET" is a pretty song by Ted Fiorito with Bing's usual distinct enunciation. He begins the verse in a high voice but drifts into his baritone range. The second chorus has the melodic variations that were standard procedure then.

5. and 6. Two versions of "LOUISE," the Chevalier hit song. The first, Whiteman's dance band, opens with the violins, then Andy Secrest's fine trumpet leads to the verse and Bing's vocal. Notice that he gets his usual "ah" into even this and how he hits "it had to be" for unusual effect. The Rhythm Boys' version is pure delight—a romp from start to finish with Bing the star performer. It's a complete rewrite of the song with dialogue and sound effects; Barris answers the phone and then Bing takes over for verse and chorus. When the boys "get a bit frantic," he sings a dramatic solo that shows off his voice and style. This was and is a hit record.

7. and 8. Here are the second Crosby solos, recorded in May, 1929. He is again accompanied by the small trio as he sings "I KISS YOUR HAND, MADAME," a European import hit. Bing sings in easy style with the humming and whistling effects that became so identified with him later. Ben Selvin, then recording manager at Columbia, recalls that Bing filled in the song this way because he felt the lack of a full orchestra behind him. After a reasonably "straight" chorus and verse on "BABY OH WHERE CAN YOU BE," Bing takes off (again, with traces of Bee Palmer), for a jazzy treatment of the second chorus, gliding and scatting for a version that was, indeed, different. Bing had his own "sound" even then, as this amply demonstrates.

#### RECORD II, SIDE I

1. "CAN'T WE BE FRIENDS?" displays a much more confident Crosby than the earlier solos. He sings with plenty of heart and a touch of that ole throbbing sob in his voice. Ben Selvin, who supervised this session at the old Union Square studio, and Bob Effros, who played trumpet, think Rube Bloom was the pianist and Joe Venuti the violinist in the small, studio band.

2. "WITHOUT A SONG" is a Whiteman version of Vincent Youmans' great standard. Bing sings it robustly, hitting each note in manly fashion and using the long-breathing technique (later used by Sinatra) to attack the climactic note at the end of the bridge and carry through into the next phrase of the last eight bars.

3. "GAY LOVE." A tango by Oscar Levant from an early talkie, *The Delightful Rogue*, starring Rod La Rocque. Bing sings it with the sob he borrowed from Skin Young and seems in better voice than on the earlier March and May solos. His voice has more of the baritone quality that was to distinguish his later work.

4. "IF I HAD A TALKING PICTURE OF YOU" is a standard from the Gaynor-Farrell film, *Sunnyside Up*, by the Whiteman band. Bing's vocal, sung with great *joie de vivre*, has a simple background with notable Lang guitar after which Venuti and Lang swing in their inimitable style.

5. "AFTER YOU'VE GONE." By this time, Bing's experience is showing in his consistently capable vocals; his chorus here shines with a light, lively touch coupled with Eddie Lang's brilliant guitar. Venuti then joins Lang for a duet done with their customary verve and effortless perfection.

6. "SWEET SUE, JUST YOU." A hitherto unreleased side with Lennie Hayton on piano in which he and Bing reminisce musically of the Whiteman days with Beiderbecke. Both borrow generously from Bix's famous solo on the concert record of "SUE." After his first chorus, Bing scats at a faster tempo utilizing his knowledge

and love of jazz. This recording, from a 1932 session, is included here because of the association with the Whiteman era and shows Bing at his relaxed best.

7. and 8. The next two songs were from a Maurice Chevalier-Claudette Colbert film, *The Big Pond*. "YOU BROUGHT A NEW KIND OF LOVE TO ME" has become a standard of sorts which Bing sings with great polish and swing. Lennie Hayton's celeste and Eddie Lang's apparently indispensable guitar add luster to the background. "LIVIN' IN THE SUNLIGHT, LOVIN' IN THE MOONLIGHT," was a personality song for Chevalier to which Bing brings his own insouciance and jaunty style. Trumbauer's sax, Bill Rank's trombone, and Andy Secrest's trumpet share honors. The Crosby style is now very assured and confident, a forerunner of the young star to emerge on the fourth side of this album.

#### RECORD II, SIDE II

This last side presents the Bing Crosby of early 1932—the new, hot sensation of the airwaves. During the period which ensued from the preceding side, Whiteman dropped Crosby and The Rhythm Boys, who then joined Gus Arnheim's band at the Coconut Grove in Los Angeles. Bing added to his following with Arnheim's record and radio exposure but was fired by the Grove management over a disagreement. He sang briefly in Doug Fairbanks, Sr.'s film, *Reaching For The Moon*, and in *Confessions Of A Co-Ed* with Phillips Holmes and Sylvia Sydney, wherein Holmes said "Hello, Bing," just before he sang. A series of comedy shorts for Mack Sennett followed, climaxed by a radio offer from CBS. William S. Paley, head of CBS, told me that, on an ocean liner trip to Europe in 1931, someone in the cabin next door kept replaying the Gus Arnheim record of "I SURRENDER, DEAR." Paley was impressed with the vocalist, asked his name, and wired instructions to Ralph Wonders, head of CBS Artists Bureau to locate and sign Crosby. Wonders replied that Crosby had a reputation for being irresponsible and undependable, but Paley insisted on having him. (Bing's contretemps with the Grove had resulted in a ban against him by the Musician's Union, so he was unable to work in theaters, clubs or radio and was forced to sing with only records for accompaniment in his Sennett films.) Crosby came to New York and an agreement was worked out with the Union and the Grove that permitted him to resume singing and start work for Paley. On September 2, 1931, he began a 15-minute evening series, five times a week, on the CBS network which, after six long years of learning his craft, made him an "overnight success!"

The next step was the Paramount Theatre booking which assured his new fame. Everyone realized that "a star" had arrived. Hollywood beckoned and Paramount put him in *The Big Broadcast*, starting another sensational facet of his career, which is treated in the *Bing Crosby In Hollywood* album. The majority of his 1932, '33 and '34 recordings, with his greatest successes of that period, will follow in Volume II of this series.

1. and 2. Here are two versions of "ST. LOUIS BLUES" by Crosby and Duke Ellington—a rare opportunity to hear both the A and B takes from a memorable recording session made early one morning after Bing had finished his last show at the Paramount Theatre. Although he was not only doing four shows a day, but rehearsing and singing a five-night-a-week radio show, his voice shows no fatigue and has an attractive huskiness and appealing warmth.

Take A starts with Cootie Williams' trumpet growling those famous blues until Lawrence Brown's trombone takes over the minor strain. Bing comes in, performing with polished humor and style, playing with the melody and varying it as only he could, singing with a great beat that makes this one of his top performances. After a band interlude, he edges back in for a scatting chorus, imaginative—full of fun—that shows his love and feeling for jazz. Take B has an entirely new and different sort of ping-pong intro—apparently the Duke's men were using "head arrangements." After Cootie and Brown's solos, Duke's piano arpeggio sets Bing's entrance with Freddie Guy's guitar outstanding on this chorus. Take B is even more relaxed, if possible, than the first, and two such contrasting performance are a unique treat.

3., 4. and 5. These next three sides were made with a studio band conducted by Victor Young and featuring Tommy Dorsey and Eddie Lang. "HOW LONG WILL IT LAST" is a lovely song sung originally by Joan Crawford in *Possessed*. Bing does the verse softly and romantically, then sings a husky, tender chorus. "MY WOMAN" is a song that Bing helped write. He sings it with great understanding and compassion, as his voice runs the full gamut from soft passages to a strong climax. "PARADISE" was introduced in the 1932 film, *A Woman Commands*, by the singing and whistling (yes!) of Pola Negri. This record was the beginning of a simpler Crosby, one who stuck more closely to the music as written. He was encouraged in this by the late Jack Kapp, then Bing's recording director and, later, founder of Decca Records. Bing does his famous whistle on the second chorus before a softer, slower finish.

6. "LORD, YOU MADE THE NIGHT TOO LONG" is the Crosby

excerpt from an elaborate two-sided concert arrangement with Don Redman's band and The Boswell Sisters. During the Depression, this sort of "all-star" recording was made to lure back the buyer with several names for his money's worth, and is included to show the variety of Crosby's recordings at the time. If Bing's voice sounds a bit fatigued, it's certainly understandable when one remembers his heavy schedule.

7. "SWEET GEORGIA BROWN" is Bing at his rhythmic best. After a swinging chorus by the band, led by Isham Jones, Bing sings his first chorus in blithe, buoyant voice. Manny Klein and Tommy Dorsey do their turn with Lennie Hayton, then Bing returns, hearty and debonair, to scat the last refrain.

8. "CABIN IN THE COTTON" starts with some explosive pyrotechnics by Jimmy Dorsey's sax before Bing's first chorus sung with Lennie Hayton's band. Bing's delightful melodic variations, aided by Lang and Dorsey, round out this last side.

I hope you've enjoyed this collection of the early, young Crosby: it's noteworthy that there's not a single "Boo-boo-boo" by Bing in the entire album, which refutes the legend. Maybe there'll be some in VOLUME II.

— Larry Carr,  
December 20, 1967

#### PAUL WHITEMAN'S ORCHESTRA

The personnel on the sides changes a bit from song to song but usually included:

Trumpets:	Charles Margolies Harry Goldfield Andy Secrest Ed Pinder Nat Natoli
Trombones:	Boyce Cullen Bill Rank Wilbur Hall Jack Fulton
Alto sax, Clarinet:	Irving Friedman
Tenor sax, Clarinet:	Fud Livingston
C-Melody sax:	Frank Trumbauer
Tenor saxes:	Bernie Daly Roy Maier Rube Crozier
Baritone sax:	Charles Strickfadden
Pianos:	Lennie Hayton Roy Bargy
Guitar:	Eddie Lang
Banjo:	Mike Pingatore
Tuba:	Min Leidbrook
Bass:	Mike Trafficante George Marsh
Violins:	Joe Venuti Kurt Dieterle Charles Gaylor Mischa Russell Otis Landau Ted Bowen
Violas:	Matty Malneck John Bowman
Arrangers:	Bill Challis Tom Satterfield Lennie Hayton Ferde Grofé (concert and symphony)

At this time DUKE ELLINGTON'S BAND consisted of:

Trumpets:	Arthur Whetsol Cootie Williams Freddie Jenkins
Trombones:	Lawrence Brown Joe Nanton
Alto sax:	Johnny Hodges
Baritone sax:	Harry Carney
Tenor sax, Clarinet:	Barney Bigard
Guitar:	Freddie Guy
Bass:	Willman Brand
Drums:	Sonny Greer
Piano:	Duke Ellington