

BOOK REVIEWS

by Gilbert M. Erskine

Remembering Bix, by Ralph Berton. New York: Harper & Row, 1974, 428 pages, \$10.00.

Bix: Man & Legend, by Richard M. Sudhalter and Philip R. Evans, with discography by William Dean Myatt. New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1974, 512 pages, \$12.95.

In the middle 1950s, after a decade and a half of languished interest, Bix Beiderbecke's star began to rise again in the jazz world. There were many clear, positive affirmations by respected musicians on the quality of the Beiderbecke influence, and there were new appraisals and warm commentaries from such writers as Charles Edward Smith, Ralph Gleason, Nat Hentoff, and George Avakian. A number of research projects were started, and, slowly and haltingly, the omissions and errors in Edward J. Nichols' sketchy chapter on Bix in *Jazzmen* (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1939) were respectively filled in and corrected. By the early 1960s, a number of important biographical facts in direct conflict with what had been known and accepted about Bix were appearing in scattered publications, and the belated discovery was made that the nascent Kansas City style had strong roots in the Beiderbecke-Trumbauer alliance of the middle 20s.

A new, full-scale biography was clearly in order. As early as 1962, jazz researcher Phil Evans had gathered, checked, and collated virtually all of the pertinent biographical data on Bix. But, because of a number of problems, his work — which needed only assistance in shaping and in critical direction — was delayed in publication until this year.

Musician-writer-critic Richard Sudhalter was Evans' choice for co-author of **Bix: Man & Legend**. The book is a qualified success. Concrete facts about Bix's work-a-day life are, thankfully, faithfully listed and described in detail. The gap between the time Bix left the Wolverines in October 1924 and his joining the Arcadian Serenaders in September 1925 is fully explained. Reasons for the enigmatic behavior of the man — the seemingly deliberate wasting of health and talent in excessive alcoholism — are broadly sketched. There is an enormous amount of detail on all phases of Bix's life, all carefully checked and rechecked, that will be a boon to researchers and scholars in jazz history.

Sudhalter's critical commentaries on Beiderbecke's recordings are lucid, to-the-point, and, though one wonders how such a superb Bix chorus as on *Just an Hour of Love* (Frank Trumbauer, OK W-81499, 9-30-27) goes unmentioned, the preponderant criticism is right on track. Sudhalter, moreover, provides an extremely interesting appendix on Bix's unorthodox cornet fingering, showing how the Bixian sound on certain phrases could never be duplicated by ordinary cornet fingering because of the physical properties of the instrument.

But the overall presentation in this biography, for all its completeness, is disappointing. Bix had a great gift, like John Keats, like F. Scott Fitzgerald, and there is no attempt in this book to show such things as the drama of the supercharged energies in Beiderbecke's creative imagination in taking the ordinary sludge of the *Singin' the Blues* section of the ODJB's *Margie* (Victor 18717, 12-1-20) and turning it into a vehicle of exquisite expression. (*Singin' the Blues*, Frank

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Trumbauer, OK 40772, 2-4-27). In Charles H. Wareing and George Garlick's 1958 biography, *Bugles for Beiderbecke* (London, Sidgwick & Jackson, Ltd.), there is the unforgettable picture of Bix, after a night of playing at Judson Lake, being lulled to sleep by Izzy Riskin, playing Debussy, MacDowell, and Eastwood Lane on an old Knabe piano in a dim, red socket-light, and Bix "groaning at delight" at the harmonies and the melodic turns. This, in the summer of 1926, when Bix was making giant strides in his development, tells volumes about the phantom shapes of musical ideas acting and interacting on Beiderbecke's highly creative imaginative processes, yet the incident is not included in the Sudhalter-Evans book.

Sudhalter and Evans have wisely avoided the controversy over the possible influence New Orleans cornetist Emmett Hardy might have had on Beiderbecke. Raymond Burke has said that Bix indeed sounded like Hardy, but Paul Mares' claim that Hardy's playing was superior to Beiderbecke's best work does not merit serious consideration. Hardy died in 1925, and the broad symmetry of extended phrases in jazz improvisation, so magnificently developed and used by Louis Armstrong and Beiderbecke, are almost nowhere found in jazz recordings before 1925. Hardy did not record, but if he was using sweeping, symmetrical, extended phrases, the practice would most certainly have been borrowed and used by other musicians before 1925.

The Sudhalter-Evans book has a first rate discography. Mrs. Ellen Rust did the indexing, and, sorry to say, it is incomplete and sometimes inaccurate. Jazz researchers and historians will be using this book extensively; they will have to develop their own indexes.

Ralph Berton's *Remembering Bix* also has mixed results. Mr. Berton is a talented writer, has extensive interests, and had

the good fortune to have met Beiderbecke in 1924 through his brother, jazz drummer Vic Berton. In no sense is this book a biography of Beiderbecke; it does not pretend to be, and has, indeed, extensive portions autobiographical to Ralph, and extraneous to Beiderbecke material.

Nevertheless, Ralph has a keen appreciation of the Beiderbecke psyche; it is expressed in a depth not found in Sudhalter-Evans, and one senses he is right on target. Bix loved his family, and was not loved much in return. Both Sudhalter-Evans and Berton tell of the incident where Bix discovered a package of Whiteman records that he had sent home lying unopened on a shelf closet, but in the Berton telling we feel with painful clarity the shock and anguish Bix must have felt at his discovery.

I've always felt that Mr. Berton has good instincts as a jazz critic. His comments on the aesthetic effect of Bix's playing are excellent, and while Sudhalter-Evans has many valuable technical references on what Bix was doing, and on what arrangers Challis and Satterfield and Malneck were doing with Bix's phrases, Berton is more satisfying in his descriptions.

As a bonus, the Berton book tells us much about brother Vic's experiences in the development of jazz drumming, all of which ring true. The sock cymbal and the ride cymbal, universally adapted and used in jazz drumming were inventions of Vic Berton. Eddie Condon, Louis Armstrong, and Red Nichols have all asserted that Vic Berton was a first rate drummer, and one only has to listen to the Louisiana Rhythm Kings' *Ballin' the Jack* (Vocalion 15828, 4-23-29) to see what a propelling beat he had.

But Ralph Berton, unfortunately, and perhaps under pressure from his publisher, who in turn has his eye on the cash register, has chosen in this book to cast Beiderbecke in a mold calculated to

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appeal to today's youth. With every sentence Bix utters, blunt and studded with expletives, he is made to resemble the hero-type character created by Eric Segal. It's been reported to me that Hoagy Carmichael, who perhaps knew Bix as well as Ralph Berton did, said bitterly on reading *Remembering Bix* that "that's not Bix at all!"

And there is another facet to Berton's writing that should be discussed: he apparently is using, at least in part, the technique commonly used in journalism today where the presentation is faithful to the subject without being factual at all. The description in Sudhalter-Evans of the September 1924 trip by the Wolverines to New York for the Cinderella Ballroom gig is so much at variance with Berton's account that I decided to do some personal investigation. The Sudhalter-Evans version was supplied by Wolverine drummer Vic Moore, who says that jazz enthusiast Lloyd "Babe" Jones accompanied them from Miller Beach (Gary, Indiana) as far as the Jones' summer house at Keuka Lake, New York. The Wolverines were guests there, perhaps for more than one night, and continued on to New York City. In the Berton version the Wolverines, after getting lost twice in Pennsylvania, found themselves at Slate Run, above Williamsport, where Min Leibbrook phoned Babe Jones at Keuka Lake and asked for help. Jones invited them to be his guests, and Berton then gives us a vivid account of their stay at Keuka Lake.

According to Berton, the Jones' home was a 30 room, 4 storied ancestral mansion on terraced grounds on the lake, and Babe lived alone there with his grandfather and house staff. It had old, polished furniture and a piano. I was able to locate Mr. Lawrence Jones, Babe Jones' surviving brother, who, along with Babe Jones' son, Lloyd Jr., kindly consented to

be interviewed and have the Sudhalter-Evans and Berton accounts read to them. The facts are these: (1) Babe Jones' paternal grandfather was killed in the Civil War, and his widow, far from being rich and established in the area, had quite a struggle bringing up 3 boys. Babe's maternal grandfather, who, at least with his beard and hair, resembled Berton's "grandfather," died before 1900. (2) Both Babe's parents were alive and well in September 1924, living in the family home at 219 E. Stueben St., Bath, N. Y. (3) The home at Keuka Lake, visited by the Wolverines, is a 2 storied, 8 room, summer cottage. It did not have a phone, and there was neither a piano there, nor one at the 219 E. Stueben Street home, some 6 miles away in Bath, N. Y.

Mr. Larry Jones and his nephew, Lloyd, Jr., both enjoyed Berton's lengthy story about the unusual and attractive "grandfather," but neither had the slightest idea who he could have been, saying that there was no family friend or anyone else in the area even remotely similar to Berton's character. Apparently Berton's "grandfather" was a creative fiction, established because of the dominating mystic reading of Beiderbecke's nature and future. It was well done, but Bix has already had such an abundance of nonsense written about him that he needs no more.

The connection between Babe Jones and the Wolverines was this: in the summer of 1923 Hoagy Carmichael led a band at the Keuka Hotel, where Babe used to sit in on tenor banjo. Hoagy and the other musicians were frequent guests at the Jones' cottage on the lake. The following year, Babe visited Carmichael, and they both went to Miller Beach to hear Bix and the Wolverines. It is likely that Jones returned east with the Wolverines, but Lloyd, Jr. was unable to confirm this.

Both the Sudhalter-Evans and the Berton book have many new photos of Bix.

I've previously mentioned that Sud-

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halter-Evans have fully accounted for Beiderbecke's moves after leaving the Wolverines. It was long thought that he left to join Charlie Straight's band in Chicago; we now know he went to the Goldkette orchestra in Detroit, and was fired in a traumatic episode with Victor recording director, Eddie King. There was, strangely, another traumatic fall-out from the event of Bix's exit from the Wolverines, and one that had a happy ending that effected the fortunes of the New Orleans Jazz Club in its first year. Sharkey Bonano was hired to replace Bix, fired after one set, and publicly humiliated in later years in a magazine article by the Wolverine's George Johnson. In the summer of 1948, after two superb concerts by Johnny Wiggs, the Club hired Sharkey for its 3rd concert. Much to everyone's astonishment, Sharkey almost blew the house down; he was an amazing success and put the Club well on its way. Lester Bouchon said afterwards that the Wolverine experience had always eaten Sharkey inside, that he was keyed up for this concert, to show everyone what he could do with his horn.

Finally, there is the great enigma of the Bixian style which both S. Halter-Evans and Berton attempt to deal with, in different ways, neither with any more success than anyone else had. Bix's initial orientation in jazz was the ODJB, and the grip was so firm that in later years, even after he had developed a lovely, sweeping, symmetrical style of phrasing, absolutely new and unique in jazz, and used in a romantic way with the 32-bar lyrical song (as opposed to the structures of the stomps, rags, marches, and blues that were the repertoire of the original jazz bands), he continued in favor, where he had the freedom of choice, to play and record the ODJB tunes. In February 1927, he made *Clarinet Mollade* (Frank Trumbauer, OK 4077) in three months

later, *Ostrich Walk* (Frank Trumbauer, OK 40822), and in the following October, in quick succession, there was *At the Jazz Band Ball* (Bix Beiderbecke & His Gang, OK 40923), *Royal Garden Blues* (Bix Beiderbecke & His Gang, OK 8544), and *Jazz Me Blues* (Bix Beiderbecke & His Gang, OK 40923). It has often been remarked how the black style of jazz, so essential to the development of all other white jazzmen, was lacking in Beiderbecke, yet we know how much Louis Armstrong and Beiderbecke admired and studied one another. Possibly someone will come along who will explain Bix's continuing propensity for the ODJB, and where the Bixian romantic style came from.

One last observation: the closest and most obvious influence that Beiderbecke had on Armstrong is on Armstrong's 1929 *Mahogany Hall Stomp* (OK 8680). It is, like Bix's magnificent work on *Clementine* (Jene Goldkette, Victor 20994, 9-15-27), and on *Lonely Melody* (Paul Whiteman, Victor 21214, 1-4-28), highly reflective and wistful, and in vivid contrast with the direct, immediate, impassioned outpouring of Louis on such things as *Wild Man Blues* (OK 8474, 5-7-27), *Muggles* (OK 8703, 6-27-28), and *Tight Like That* (OK 8649, 12-12-28). On *Clementine* and *Lonely Melody* the rhythm is in two until Bix's choruses, when it changes to a straight-ahead four; highly effective for Bix's solos. On Louis' *Mahogany Hall* exactly the same thing happens, and in spite of the contrivances on the record — Louis' held high C for an entire chorus, for one — it could be easily argued that this record ranks as one of the 15 or 20 top jazz records of all time. Louis is so overwhelmingly surprising and perfect, taking a Bix device and making it so completely his own.

