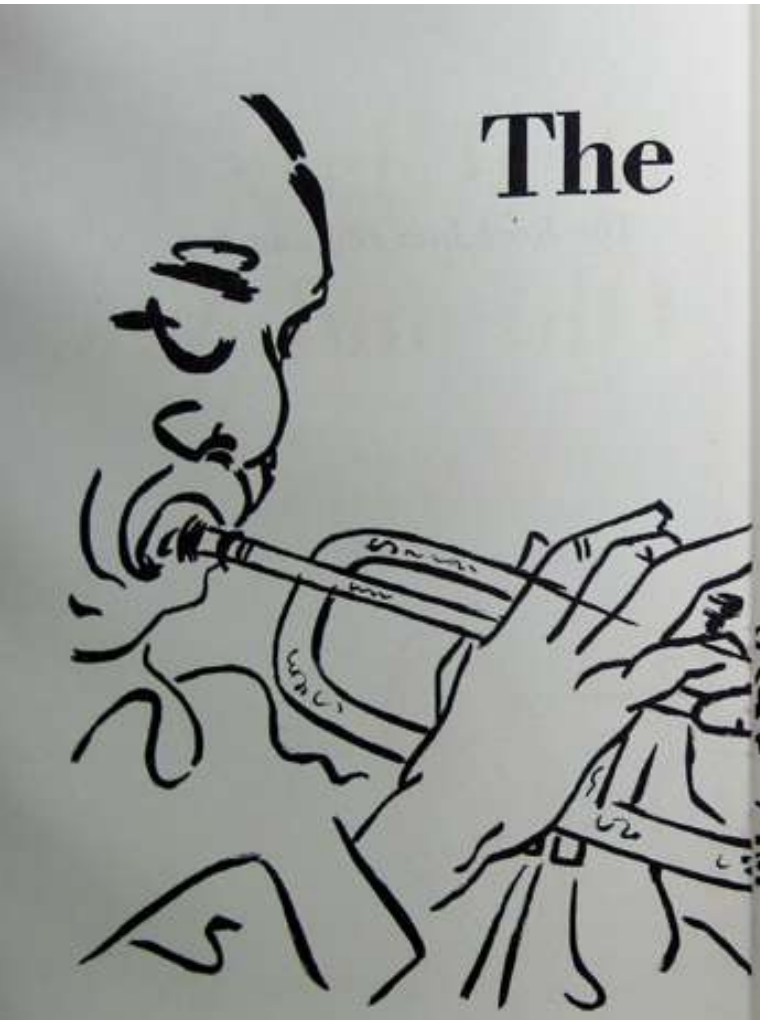

The Real Jazz Old and New

Written and illustrated by

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Introduction

I didn't *write* this book. I *heard* it. Almost all of it was told to me by many jazzmen over a period of years when I was drawing and painting the jazz life in New Orleans and New York and Chicago and Los Angeles. The jazzmen of the stone age of jazz are dying off fast, and this book is a record of their talk, of the things they had to say about jazz and its inventors. Some few of them were educated enough to have been to college and most of them had learned about life the hard way, but what they had to say was in most cases important, and when they were gone their knowledge and their comments would be gone with them. They were not writers, and few of them were famous. But they had been there, and they had grown up with it. So this book is theirs, several hundred of them whom I listened to and whose words I put down in my sketch books.

This is a collection of their words, of voices and of sounds. It is *not* a history of jazz in the formal sense, and it certainly is *not* an appraisal of jazz from the critics' viewpoint.

I have done my part of making this book by selecting a part of the thousands of drawings I have made in the jazz joints, among the jazzmen, and in trying to fit together the voices of the jazzmen under chapter headings and under topics that make this an honest journey

to jazz that can no longer be made, as most of the voices here heard are gone. I have left it in their words. This should be a book of fun and fury and sounds and taste of what jazz was, and is. I don't know of another book like it—that lets the jazzmen tell their own story in their own words. I have tried to show in black and white what it looked like and felt.

It is a serious study and it treats jazz in a serious way. But, like jazz itself, it has tried to remain in its own backyard and get some fun, some of the fine feeling and some of the deep blue of jazz itself, into these pages. Reading about this music, frankly, is not to understand it fully. The perfect jazz book, besides the text, and the drawings and paintings, would have to hold in its index a pocket of about fifty recordings of the music that is the prime and basic stuff of jazz. Such a list—and no one of its followers would agree as to just what fifty sides to include—would take jazz from the church hymn turned blues, to the early work of Charles Buddy Bolden (if it exists on wax) through the whole Storyville era when jazz grew up in the canhouses of New Orleans, when King Oliver and Louie Armstrong were moving into Chicago, and when the music of Dixieland was making its part of jazz history. It would, perhaps, find room for Bix's *In A Mist,* and some of the newer experiments; stuff liked, or condemned, in bebop and cool jazz. It would leave out the concertos in pseudo-jazz form that aren't jazz, and most of the European stuff that is called concert jazz but isn't real jazz either.

Years of study and hard work went into this book, which shouldn't impress anyone as to its merits, but at least give it a deeper meaning than the usual casual approach to jazz. Old jazzmen are forgetful or great liars and so, in talking to them as to dates and titles, as to bands and music, it has always to be taken with a little doubt. If

there are legends here, they are labeled as such—not as facts. The facts are here, too. Care has been taken to check dates, names, spellings, but in such a confused world as jazz, neglected and unrecorded (even if not unsung) errors will creep it.

In the end jazz remains a lot of fun, and a little sadness, a collection of music certainly original and American, and if some of the fun, the sadness and the music gets through and adds up here, the author will feel rewarded for what has been a very exciting part of anyone's life.

Almost every word in this book came from the memory of old jazzmen. When I quote them directly I put their words in quotes. When I distill their talk and connect it I have often retained their way of saying it. They may sound too lyrical and too excited, but rather than tone them down and lose something I have stuck to their own words. At the end of the book will be found details as to when and how the material for each chapter was collected, and notes that explain certain details.

Now, hobo, oh, hobo, hobo, you can't ride this train.
Now, boy, I'm a brakeman, and I'm a tough man.
I ain't jokin', you can't ride this train . . .

HOBO YOU CAN'T RIDE THIS TRAIN

A Folk Hero

Nobody knows how folk heros grow. How we came to accept Dan'l Boone as the symbol of the pioneer. Or how Buffalo Bill came out of the dime-novels and turned out to be only a drunken old man who could stay on a white horse. Sometimes, like Mike Fink and Paul Bunyan, it's just folk talk that gets solid and somebody puts it in a book and claims credit; sometimes it's a lie, like George Washington and the cherry tree, and John Smith being saved by an Indian princess, that sounds so good we can't throw it away. "The folk hero can be anybody—a baseball player, a cowboy actor who chews gum and cracks wise, or a lady like Lizzie Borden who did a murder or two in an interesting way."

Bix Beiderbecke became a folk hero early and he's remained the symbol of the jazz player who wanted something better and died trying to get it. "He's the man Maurice Ravel, the great modern composer, came to New York to see and he and Bix sat around and talked modern music. Once when the society people were giving a big party for Ravel they looked for him and found him hidden in a bathroom rewriting Bix's *In A Mist* so he could catch the ideas behind it." Certainly Ravel was in New York when Bix was, and they may have met

and Ravel did say he was impressed by the music. But did he come just to see Bix or rewrite *In A Mist?* You can't prove it, either way.

"But they don't build legends around nothing. They know these legends from the home of the gully-low music to the dives where there is always someone having a ball and borrowing a blip, where the clinkers creep into the mist just before dawn. In Harlem and the Chicago South Side and the Le Jazz Hot joints in Paris where the dicty folk come to hear the bellychords they talk of Bix Beiderbecke. There have been a couple of just-fair novels about him, and once a very lousy movie, not much above simple razzmatazz and the Hollywood idea of jazz.

"The legends aren't very true but they have been growing and there isn't much you can do about it because the guy was good and even those who used to stand around under the bandstand and shout *We want Bix!* are telling myths about him.

"They didn't have to; the facts are plenty and sad and you don't fracture yourself laughing when you hear them."

Leon Bismark Beiderbecke—not the legend—was born; that's a fact. The date was March 10, 1903, the place, Davenport, Iowa, and the riverboats used to go that far with their bands. "His older brother was called Bix, and Leon inherited it from him. No one seemed to mind. His folks had made their pile in lumber and they had culture besides money, and were all a little daffy about music. His sister knocked off a good piano; his mother had studied both piano and pipe-organ and when only ten, had won a medal at it. His grandfather led German-American music in Davenport and his grandmother's father played an organ—Bach and stuff—in Europe.

"Bix never amounted to much of a sight-reader, but he wasn't ignorant, as the legend said. He took some lessons on the piano from a Professor Grade, who seems to have been the real thing. When only three, Bix could play the melody of the *Second Hungarian Rhapsody.* But on the cornet that made him famous, he never took a lesson in

his life. He never played it right, just good. He was surprised once to find he was not playing it in the same key as the piano. He couldn't read cornet-parts very well and bumbled along with violin-parts which he found easier reading. He loved the third value on the horn—everybody else used the first two keys most. Not Bix. It was all wrong according to the teachers, but he got a good flow into his horn chords in his own way. He liked the cornet, its full mellow charm, maybe because it was close to the human voice. It had just the sting he wanted and he stayed with it. It tongued easy and one simple mute was enough. Bix didn't put much mute in his legato styling and his round tones were all right without mutes.

"Where did he get his style? From someone else. Every writer or painter starts by copying what he likes best and so did Bix. Don't copy and you're doing the dooley-squat—nothing. Bix did plenty of woodshedding, playing alone, to some recording on the family Victrola, and any white man who didn't in those days is a liar. King Oliver, Louie Armstrong, Bix he knew their recordings as a kid. And LaRocca, too, and maybe Emmett Hardy. Also Paul Mares, Fate Marable and Johnny Dunn."

Bix was close to his mother, maybe too close, only the silver cord never pulled him back from his horn. She remembers him in his teens playing his cornet to LaRocca's recording of *Tiger Rag*. From Oliver and Louie came the off-scale tonality. The riverboats all carried music. There was Hardy, a white horn-man, and the Strekfus line-boat; the *Capitol* had bands with Oliver and Louie in them.

"Bix liked jim-jam singing and moaning low and the real old blues. Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters he remembers, and their phrasing. He was a kid with a horn; a million kids must be like him every place, thinking of what they want to say and copying from hot-stuff and other ways of saying it. Listening to the press-roll on snarls, the newer jumps of the short riffs, and even the rinky-dink bands that played jitney stops around the town. Bix played it all boogity-boogity and learned a lot, and then they sent him away to school.

"Bix did two years in the Davenport High School, then in 1921 was put into Lake Forest Academy on the North Shore of Chicago. New Orleans and Dixieland music was just hitting Chicago and Bix played in the school band, first on the piano and then as a star on the cornet. He didn't get good marks, he hated to study and he was already as a kid (like General Grant as a boy) on the sauce in a charming school-boy way. Everybody loved him and he drank gin and played music and was amiable, but didn't crack a book. They kicked him out and instead of going home, he hung around Chicago, did a few nights gigging and just waited for the *Wolverines* to start in business. He kind of knew his destiny and he never did much to change it. Something would happen and it did.

"The *Wolverines*—bright-eyed and bushy-tailed—opened at the Stockton Club, a dive near Hamilton, Ohio, late in 1923. They were popular and people liked them—which only means that people who liked good jazz heard them. And there weren't a hell of a lot of them. But they knew what they liked, and it was the group around Bix, and Bix himself and his horn. It was a scuffle and had its salty moments and you buried your blues in King Kong, the cheapest whisky there was.

"So there they were—the best white jazz-band in the country next to the *Original Dixieland Jazz Band* and the *New Orleans Rhythm Kings*. Their playing was going to lead to Chicago style and they *vo-do-de-o-doed* maybe a bit too much, but in 1924 it was all right to the early cats.

"There was a guy named Hoagy Carmichael, who was later going to get rich and write popular stuff for the squares and live in Hollywood on a hilltop like a millionaire movie-actor, but in those days he was a big gun on the campus of Indiana University. He got the *Wolverines* hired for a frat-dance without hearing them. Hoagy had a band of sorts of his own on the campus and talk of Bix's boys excited him.

"The music they played that night was enough to bring them

back to the campus for ten weekend dances. After that they played Casino Gardens in Indianapolis, and a summer-theater tour. Bix was really on the booze now, but the idea the legends plant that he could play drunk or sober isn't so. Real drunk, he could only fall on his face and snore. Mildly plastered, he could reach a piano and play, but when he got the bang-up choruses out of the brass, he had only hung a few on and was, for him, slightly sober. Late at night it had to be the piano because standing to take a horn solo was often a problem. He was getting deeper in to the hunt for what it was on the other end of the secret door of jazz. And the piano chords rode up and down and somebody ran out to get another bottle of crack-skull. And the chippie he was dating hitched up her rolled stockings and said, 'Play it, Daddy.' There were a lot of cute pigeons always around and Bix liked the dames as much as the booze and the piano. Bix had manners, something they don't hand out to jazz players, and he looked clean-cut even when seedy, before he put on the fat. So the girls liked him. But the truth was, Bix was fixed on his mother in some way nobody ever tried to explain. She meant more to him than any of the girls."

Later Bix did a season at the Martinique in Indiana Harbor. "He played the horn like nobody and crowds came to hear him. He was the star of the Wolverines and everyone knew it. They didn't play much of a repertoire, mostly the old corny stuff that they made good in their own way. As they couldn't read music, except for two men, they didn't add much to their list of numbers. They played it over and over again for the people who liked it, maybe ten choruses of a number. They didn't appeal to the thousands of people who just want an excuse to dance to something, so in time they had to break up and look around on their own. It was the peak for the band, they had done their job. And for Bix—only he didn't know it—the beginning for him was over. He'd go higher before going lower, but it would never be the same as it had been in the early days—Bix taking it clear, good, just the way he wanted it, better and better."

In the novels they wrote about him, he was always looking for some new blue note and killing himself trying for it, tearing his heart out for it. But that wasn't it at all—and no girl drove him to it, and anyway there wasn't any girl, just girls. In that period when the band was still together he made music the way he wanted it. "He wasn't unhappy; he wasn't happy. He just drifted and played. There was home he could go to and he could still hold his likker and he wasn't fat yet: The music was still easy." It was the golden weather of his work and his time on earth. Only of course he didn't know it. He went to Chicago and got a job with Charlie Straight's orchestra.

"Bix didn't bother to read the orchestra score, just played by ear and read a wild-west novel he had open on his music-rack. Later, when almost everyone had gone home, Bix and the boys would blow it free and the jam was on. It was a job but he left when he found out the rest of the band was paying half his salary to keep him as their drawing-card. He began to hang out in the black-and-tan dives, the hot Negro places. Oliver and Louie, Bessie Smith he heard, and they sent him, really made him jump. Bix used to toss his salary on the floor to keep Bessie singing all night. He played in theaters and played wherever he could pick up a night's work, and he listened to Bessie give out with *I'll See You in My Dreams*. He forgot to eat, drinking shakeups and whatever booze the bootleggers were giving out with. He mixed with vipers on the reefer-trail, with studs shying a toy of opium. But there isn't much record that he went for tea-sticks or the smoke himself. Booze was enough.

"It was a tough go for real jazz players because the big sweet combos were coming in to cater to the tastes of the housewives and the office-help, dancing respectable as they could the Charleston and Lindy Hop, and even trying the Black Bottom and Big Apple. Bix played lake-boats and hung around spaginzy sessions jamming New Orleans style. He rattled around with the zooty mob and the yard-dogs sitting in dives and always he carried in his pocket the mouthpiece of

his cornet, taking it out and fingering it while he listened to others playing."

For a year, he played in Frank Trumbauer's band at the Arcadia Ballroom, St. Louie. "He was pulling down good money—a hundred bucks a week—but he never held on to it or spent it on himself. The rat's-nest of a crumb-bum hotel was enough, and running up stuff on the slate in the speaks. Three- or four-hundred-dollar tabs for unpaid likker. He didn't dress in the smart-set of threads as some jazzmen did; when he left town, he had on a borrowed pair of pants, and a friend's coat. His tuxedo trousers had gone shiny and given way in center-field, and so he never let the customers see him anything but front face.

"It was in St. Louie that he went daffy over modern music—the new concert stuff, new to him anyway: Ravel, Debussy, MacDowell and Stravinsky. The whole-tone scales and the whole-tone chords he was to work into his stuff came from here. He had a recording of *The Firebird Suite,* and he wore it out in no time.

"He spent more time on the piano, woodshedding and playing over and over again improvisations that built to new melodic content for him. Maybe he figured if he was a genius, this was the stuff that was going to make him come out true and real. But, meanwhile, there was a world outside of these new piano-chords. There was a job now out there, and a kind of fame. He went into Jean Goldkette's Orchestra, and the Indiana U College newspaper voted him in 1926 the greatest "dirty" trumpet-player in jazz circles. . . .' They put quotes around 'dirty' as if not sure just what the word meant.

"Goldkette's Band was a hot and sweet pop band and its main purpose was to make money. It did. It also indirectly made jazz respectable to a lot of people and sent others on their own to discover the real thing." The hot section that Bix played with was Trumbauer, Pee Wee Russell, Sonny Lee, Itzy Riskin and Ray Ludwig. They hit the Blue Lantern, at Hudson Lake, and Bix played cornet, piano and, a few times, the drums. But it was a high-priced band and when bookings got tough, Bix went over to Paul Whiteman. Whiteman was said to be worried over Bix as not being the kind of character that would fit into the sleek King of Jazz setup. But he took Bix on anyway. Paul Whiteman was a kind-hearted man and, while he may have muffed any idea of what jazz really was, he wasn't bad to work for. When Bix got sick, he took care of him and when Bix got the D.T.'s and the heebies set in, Whiteman treated Bix to a drunk cure.

"Bix played the sweet flash stuff, the modern concert music, but little by little, people came to stop and watch Bix go into a solo. Bix was getting fat now and there weren't many moments when he was feeling in key with the world. But he could still play the horn.

When the band played Los Angeles, Whiteman used Bix only in the hot group with Goldfield, Margulies and Busse.

"Back in Chicago, Bix used to start his night after the places closed and a dream-session would start with anybody who felt they could keep up with Bix—Freeman, the brothers Dorsey, Benny Pollack, Joe Sullivan—at white dives or Negro places in the South Side with just enough air to breathe, a piano and a place to stash the bottle. By this time, Bix was getting three-hundred a week and looking like a Loop hobo unless his friends tied his clothes on him properly.

"By 1929 Bix was on the way down—not yet on the skids, but the good time and the big time was behind him. He didn't like Whiteman's band any more. It was real commercial now and the radio dates were murder—the real classic corn. Radio meant twenty numbers in an hour, six of them usually new, and the tricky arrangements were sterile but tough for a man who was never much of a reader. The pressure, the tension, didn't help his frayed nerves and the whisky moved in for keeps. He was sick, everyone said. Not maudlin drunk, not jerky, just sick. After his cure, he went home to see the folks and explain to his mother some ideas he had.

"In 1931, he was out of Whiteman's band and picking up radio one-spots like the Camel Hour. Casa Loma wanted him but he could take only four nights of the exacting arrangements and tricky ensembles. He did a little recording with Tommy Dorsey, Joe Venuti, Eddie Lang, Bud Freeman, Bubber Miley, Gene Krupa and some others, and was his old self in part of the records.

"But it didn't hold for long. He was on the town. No dough in sight, he didn't really mooch, but it was a hard pickup every morning to go through the day." He was careless with things now, and himself most of all; the dream was going out of Bix, the wonder and awe of life, and he didn't seem to care. "If you didn't give a damn for him you said he was just a lush and anything happened to the bum, he asked

for it. But if you knew him—he was still kind and full of charm and some place was the lost artist, mislaid, bricked up, buried away. What the hell can happen to a guy in a world where there isn't too much for the lug who wants to be different? The head-doctors can give it big words and speak of his family and how much he was still mother's boy. But they couldn't explain why there wasn't one lousy corner where he could have sat playing his kind of music, working out his own ideas of it. It might have been great, or it might have been nothing much. We'll never know now.

"One thing he got down on paper. He and Challis worked over three months on *In A Mist*. It was good, but you couldn't really say great. Bix had done it too close to the end. He was tired. He still played the piano for his friends and chiselers and hangers-on in his Forty-fourth Street hotel. That's about all he did. Play the piano and punish the whisky. He was always improvising on themes out of what he got from Debussy, and he sat there playing and it was all right. But it had no thread long enough to make something to play in a band and he didn't give a damn. He was on the wagon now, of course, and what he drank was with a wink and shake of the head. Everybody who knew Bix came to hear him, and Babe Ruth came, and a lot of horn and piano men who felt there was a little good stuff to lift here.

"Bix and his mother had talked it over, and what he was dreaming of was to tour Europe with some boys and show them the real white jazz. It needed backing and not too much at that. He had an audition, not with mugs, either, but the Dorseys, Krupa, Sullivan, Freeman. But the backing never came. He didn't care much after that. He didn't keep warm or well-fed. He got a bad cold and went out in a dismal night to blow his horn at a Princeton Club date. He knew they didn't want the band without Bix. So he went and let the college boys and their dates stare at him, sick and sweating, his head on fire and blocked off from air and the world. But he played.

"It came around to pneumonia and Bix tried to suck in air and he lay there and after a while went drifting." Nobody knows what

sounds he heard. In the novels written about him, it was horn music, louder, better and rarer than any he had ever played before, or dreamed of. But that was literary corn. Most likely he just didn't care and inside his head, the horn was still. On August 7, 1931, he died. He was twenty-eight.

STEPHEN LONGSTREET — JAZZ NOTES
notes made in New Orleans 1951

RAVEL AND BIX

Both Mac Hedrick and Marty Klein are sure this meeting took place. Some claim to have talked to people who said they were there, but there are no documents or newspapers ~~[illegible]~~, no press interviews. This is an interesting addition to the large Bix legend. ¶ I have never heard it, and I have known some of Bix' acquaintances (he had few friends, being a pleasant but vaguely distant sort of guy). It may be true but demands some sort of authority, even in a casual reference.

BIX'S HORN PLAYING

Bix thought the horn in concert pitch, but did not play it a whole tone higher. That would have been rough even on his ears, and he could tolerate a fair amount of dissonance. After all, the guy held down a chair with Whiteman, didn't he? Stumblebums or naive spasm band Negroes from Basin Street didn't do that.

BIX AND WOMEN

The people I have talked to do not paint Bix as a woman chaser.

BIX'S STYLE

Emphatically Bix did not play high. He couldn't and apparently did not want to. This is sterotyping of jazz as a screaming trumpet. Bix played cornet, mostly middle register, and not excessively loud. He was remarkably clean in tone, and with a great subtlety in arpeggio. Listen to the records and see if you can find a note above high Bb. High trumpet is from there on up. Louie played high, and so did Berrigan, ~~but neither~~

BIX AND VO-DE-O-DO

Bix coupled with vo-de-o-do? The connection is tenuous, Vo-etc. was a vocal sound, just like the later mop-mop, or boop bop she bam, and comes closer to Bix's friend Crosby, of the Whiteman band. Certainly hard to put with the Wolverines, who were a bunch of kids trying to play Dixieland.