

LARRY ANDREWS' LETTERS

A rare glimpse of Bix

OTIS FERGUSON'S two pieces on Bix Beiderbecke, published as "Young Man with a Horn" and "Y.M.W.A.H. Again" in NEW REPUBLIC between 1936-39, are now universally acknowledged cornerstones in the history of Bixiana in print. In acquainting himself with his subject, Ferguson tapped many springs of information, including a boyhood chum of the cornetist's in Davenport, Iowa, named Larry Andrews. Andrews, as Bix, is now dead. But his recollections of their early life in the American midwest, and of how it felt to watch the young man with a horn pass slowly into legend, have been preserved through his correspondence with Ferguson.

"...Bix did not become Bix by name all of a sudden. He liked the name, yet his brother was at home, which would have caused confusion. So he became 'Bickey,' and it was not until we started high school that he became Bix Beiderbecke instead of Bickey..."

"...When I first met Bix he was in my class at Kindergarten, my dad was a hardware salesman, and while he was a good provider, we never dreamed of having the money available that Bix's folks had. Nevertheless, when I first went to Kindergarten, I had the same kind of suit as Bix, namely a velvet Lord Fauntleroy, with collar and flowing tie, etc. We immediately struck up a friendship that was really to endure...we had to stick together. We were odd sheep in the lot and there is always strength in numbers."

"I distinctly recall that after school we would go over to his house and he would play - yes, I said play - some band numbers and our songs on the piano as best his hands could follow on the big keys. We would sing

them and enjoy life until his mother would kick us out of the house. This was a usual practice winter, summer, rain or shine. Bix wanted to stay in and play the piano or listen to his own gramophone or play the piano and sing. His mother wanted him to get fresh air and grow up big and strong."

"...There follows a lapse of time...in the first part of the seventh grade I again caught up to Bix. By that time, his piano playing and singing was one of the talked-about things in the schools...Singing? Why sure - quartet, why not? Bix would sing the different parts through for us and we would learn them and then all we had to do was put them together...yes, we had our quartet. So good was our quartet that the vocabulary of songs as published in the song books wasn't enough. Many nights we sat out on the East fire escape (with augmented quartet, of course) and sang some that were good and some not so good. At least it was the not-so-good ones like THE OLD RED FLANNEL PANTS THAT NELLIE WORE that put a stop to the gathering on the fire escape. It seems a certain teacher had to stay late one night and whether she couldn't hear enough of the work to understand the song and got disgusted or didn't understand it when she heard it and got disgusted - or just got disgusted in general - is a question in my mind and probably always will be.

But the very next day the principal gave out orders to a certain group of names including Bix and I (sic) that the Romeo and Juliet scenes were to stop. And they did.

"However, our activities included many sports and when sliding on the hill at the north side of the school got too tame for us, we got the jan-

itor to flood the hill and about five of us nuts who had no brains got out our skates and did skiing stunts on skates down the hill."

"Boy, could Bix skate! He was an athlete, all right. Douglas Fairbanks was just starting his run of pictures then and Bix could do all the things he could do in climbing, jumping, etc. - and I mean do them. I don't believe he ever had an overcoat, or at least I never saw him with one. Stocky? Boy, oh boy..."

"It was about this time that we started to get interested in the gals - or should I say 'Gal.' Well anyway, we shared her evenings. He skated with her one evening, me the next. I took her to a show one night and he the next, and so on. Her name was Vera..."

"...actually there were two girls ...Vera Cox was the important one and Dorothy Allbright was the fill-in. We shared their time, but there was no question that Vera was the important one."

"We entered high school and of course our crowd was scattered all through the school, but I didn't sit so far from Bix and we still had the chance of walking home, which was quite a distance. Toward the end of the first year of high we became separated more and more...I believe it was during that summer vacation that Bix hit the riverboats with his trumpet (sic), because the first football game in September saw Bix and four other Dixie band protegés riding on the back of a truck for pep music for our football game. I believe those were the only poor tones I ever heard Bix play on a cornet - and a cornet it was. I do not believe it was over 10 inches long all told, and almost that high and it really must have taken effort to blow it."

"It was soon after this that I heard Bix had gone to Chicago and I suppose that he entered Lake Forest at that time. In November of that same year, which would have been 1919

as we graduated in February 1918, I was asked to join (as banjoist - ed.) a non-Union bunch known as Schaeffer's Syncopating Five..."

"...from that time on I hardly saw anything of Bix...It was either that summer or the next Christmas vacation, which would have been the Christmas of 1920, that I met Bix and he invited me out to his house for a jam session. I went of course, and took my trusty banjo with me. I believe Bix could have played twice as much as I did on this old kettle of mine, but we got together about one in the afternoon and after we had played banjo, piano and cornet for some time Bix got out one of those tin records and we made a record together. I do not remember the number but I do know that Bix and I played it through once and he played the melody in his inimitable way and then I played the piano and he played a second part on the cornet. and then as we played it through the third time he added the third part harmony."

"Just about that time a B-flat tenor man dropped in. It seems that he had come home with Bix from Lake Forest and was visiting him... Big Bix (Charles 'Burnie' Beiderbecke, Bix's elder brother - ed.) told me recently - I had forgotten - that it was Don Murray, who has since deceased..."

"...When Bix returned (to Davenport in 1930 - ed.) from playing with Whiteman...I met him in a cigar store downtown. He was smoking a pipe and we went over to a chair in the corner and sat down and started to discuss the situation...he told me about hitting the bottle pretty hard and that he lost the band in Detroit and woke up in Dallas, Texas, and the band was someplace else and he found he had been flying all over the country looking for the outfit. On that particular day one of our local orchestra leaders by the name of Trave O'Hearn came into the cigar store and asked us both if we would like to

play a job. I thought he had a lot of guts to ask Bix but was even more surprised when Bix said 'sure, if Larry can play too.' Can you imagine anything like that - a musician who would play a job with a local dance band so even a punk musician friend of his could play with him? ...It just goes to show Bix's thoughts for his friends - and as far as the money was concerned he didn't seem tremendously interested in what he would receive...

"We got on the platform and Bix told Trave right off the reel that he expected to sit next to me, so we sat together right in front of the piano ... Bix and I discussed many things about his playing ... I mentioned that there were several pretty good looking girls there that evening for the pan-Hellenic dance and he said, 'Well, I'll tell you Larry, after you play behind the Follies where they pick the most beautiful girls out of thousands of them and then ride on a train from New York to California with them, you get so the girls don't interest you much...

"Our next part of the conversation turned to Vera. He asked me what had become of Vera and I told him she had married the local baker's son... no sooner had I gotten the words out of my mouth than she danced out on the floor with her husband. Bix looked at me and I at him and we both quit playing and started to laugh. What would you do under similar circumstances?

"...I had several jobs lined up for my own band and I asked him if he would like to job with me and he said of course he would. Well, on the next 10 or 12 jobs he played with me, the last one being the Elk's Club in Rock Island, Illinois, for New Year's Eve. Just one little incident of a great many that happened was a cornet player that I had in my outfit who was more of a German band type player ...but he had a very good tone and was a good spot man. He was not shy

and one night while playing a job in the Flame Room of the Fort Armstrong Hotel he took a chorus. Corny was no name for it. It floored Bix and he asked me if I would mind and if I thought Harry would mind if he imitated him. The result was beautiful. I don't believe that it could have been more perfect had a record been made of it and replayed, except that Bix's tone was that same bell tone he used in all playing...

"It was soon after that New Year's Eve job I mentioned that Bix left for New York and I left for northwest Iowa...the next thing I knew I saw some of his records floating around in the music stores. Soon after I saw these, my mother sent me an item from our local paper announcing his death... on the morning of the day he was being buried I recall distinctly listening to one of these selections with him and his orchestra being played from radio station KFAB at Lincoln, Nebraska...

"When I went up to northwest Iowa, the depression hadn't hit yet. I was in the insurance business...and had 18 agents under me and several collection agents in several towns around there. There was a spiritualist medium who was a member of our organisation who chanced to be at the collector's house one day when I called on her in Storm Lake, Iowa.

"I dodge such things myself ... but this one told me she had something to tell me. She said there was a young fellow who had recently passed on and told me to tell 'Helen' that he couldn't understand why that had to happen now. I laughed and said 'Well, I don't know any young fellow and right offhand I don't know any Helen to which he might refer.'

"Imagine my utter astonishment... when she told me this young fellow says his name is Dix - no, he shakes his head and writes the letter 'B' and what could he mean by that? In my astonishment I said Bix and she informed me that that was correct

and that he also wanted me to tell his folks the same message as Helen ... this name Helen does not seem correct to me but you could probably check it out with some of the boys in New York..."

"That incident happened shortly before Christmas, and when I came down here to Davenport at Christmas I came within one of calling his

folks and telling them about the incident, but finally decided against it. But I did find out that Bix had found a girl when he returned to New York that really started to put him straight, and he was contemplating matrimony with her when his death occurred..."

(Her name, as recollected by Hoagy Carmichael, was Helen Weiss - ed.).