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That Nice Boy

BIX: MAN AND LEGEND by Richard Sudhalter and Philip R. Evans with William Dean-Myatt (Quartet, £4.95 and £1.95)

Early in February 1922, the Principal of Ferry Hall Girls' School wanted a band from the neighbouring Northwestern University to play at their dance. The leader, one Jimmie Caldwell, wanted to bring a trumpeter:

> I told her about this nice boy from Lake Forest, and how well-mannered he was, etc., and she said he would do . . . At the intermission [said Caldwell] the old girl grabbed me and marched me behind the palm plants. She said, 'That *nice boy* of yours is exciting my girls! Make him stop.' I told her he was playing what he felt and it would be hard to calm him down. 'Do it,' she said.

Bix Beiderbecke was 18 at the time and had 10 years to live, years in which he established himself as the greatest white jazzman and demolished himself with alcohol. Born in 1903 in a handsome tree-surrounded house in Davenport, Iowa, his prosperous German-American background seemed sufficient insulation against the rowdy dialect of Storyville, but in 1919 his ex-serviceman butler brought home some records, including the Original Dixieland Jazz Band's 'Tiger Rag'. Almost immediately Bix borrowed a cornet from a schoolmate. In August of the same year (for Davenport, after all, was on the Mississippi) he heard Armstrong on a riverboat with Fate Marable. In September he bought his own cornet for $35.

From then on, legend took over. The marvellous boy, self-taught and unable to read music, spiralled up through the campus dance field and into

the Chicago jazz scene: no one who heard him ever forgot it. A dozen or so Gennett recordings with a home-grown group called the Wolverines led to the big time with Jean Goldkette's orchestra and, when Goldkette failed, to the biggest of all time, Paul Whiteman. His unique ringing sound, at once assertive and unworldly, became the voice of the WASP Twenties, the era of Gatsby and Julian English. After his death in 1931, legend fragmented into anecdote: even the records generated rumour and uncertainty. Which solo was by the master, which by one of his numerous pupils? Was Bix present, but too drunk to play? Could any more unissued test pressings possibly come to light?

Thorough documentation has long been overdue. The present work represents devoted research since 1957 by a distinguished and unselfish team of collaborators—Richard Sudhalter, journalist and cornet player in the Bix tradition, and two Bix scholars and discographers, Philip Evans in America and William Dean-Myatt in Britain. It is hard to think that anyone still alive who knew Bix has not been cross-examined, any date he played on not verified in the appropriate newspaper files, any extant building where he lived or played not reverently contemplated by one or other of this dedicated trio. Sudhalter, well-known in British jazz journals as 'Art Napoleon', did the writing, but his drafts were relayed to the others for checking and amplification. The result is an exhaustive 340–page life, with a 60–page day-to-day summary of Bix's musical and personal itinerary, and a 70–page discography, much fuller than anything easily available before.

It is fair to say that although the wealth of detail so assembled is nearly all unfamiliar, it doesn't substantially alter the legend as we know it. Bix was a genius: the *Davenport Democrat* called him, at seven, 'the most talented child in music that there is in this city'. He had perfect pitch and total musical recall: one of his tricks was to name each note in any ten-fingered chord you liked to strike. At the same time, he wouldn't, or couldn't, become a proficient reader: he had trouble getting into the union, and it was a measure of his renown that orchestras would engage him as 'featured soloist' (the legend of the Western novel open on his music desk is apparently well-founded). At times this worried him: when he approached Joe Gustat, the first-chair symphony trumpet declined to take him on. 'I envy you,' he said. 'You have a great, God-given gift . . . don't try to change it.' At the same time he said that Bix's fingering was 'all backwards', a verdict substantiated in detail by Sudhalter, who says that nonetheless it accounted for his explosive intonation.

The authors' somewhat hagiographical approach eschews 'revelations', but valuable reminiscence comes from Ruth Schaffner, whose affair with Bix is patiently documented. Though their relationship ultimately failed, she insists on his considerateness, his undeniable—even if rather absent—'niceness'. There is a typical story of his buying cigarettes when, a celebrity, he played on the Camel Hour programme. Bix didn't like Camels, but he always asked for them, then adding that he would also take a packet of the kind he really smoked.

On the central Bix question—whether he played with the wrong people, and ruined his talent by becoming a piece of jazz icing on the large, tasteless Whiteman cake—the authors are firm. A generous defence of the Whiteman orchestra asserts that Bix was in better musical company there than he would have been with

> less complex men such as Eddie Condon, Muggsy Spanier or Jimmy McPartland. As his weeks with Whiteman stretched into months, he turned increasingly to the piano, and to the possibilities inherent in modern harmony.

Given a normal musical life, it's conceivable that he might have settled in the 'Rhapsody in Blue' territory, neither in jazz nor out of it, but whether he would have taken his admirers (of whom Condon was one) much of the way with him is doubtful. Nor is it easy to square this hypothetical Bix with his seeming indifference to musical theory. In any case, it was not to be. Little is said about his drinking, nor is there much to say: the authors suggest that he had passed from conviviality to addiction by October 1928, and after that the descent was steep. One element, again, was his niceness: he hated to say no. Another was surely the poisonous and uncertificated Prohibition booze. In the end he was drinking three bottles of gin a day. When the Depression lifted, Bix, and the world of white jazz he had inspired, were gone: the future lay with Goodman and his Henderson scores. Only the indestructible delight of his records remains.

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