

DAVENPORT DAYS

Vera Cox reminisces

THE NAME of Vera Cox crops up again and again in the early life of Leon Bix Beiderbecke. She appears - if briefly - in the accounts of Larry Andrews, to be read elsewhere in this issue. The charm and good looks of the young girl from Davenport, Iowa, caught the eye of young Bix long before his emergence as perhaps the most extraordinary figure ever to play jazz on the cornet. The following are some of her recollections of those fairy-tale days....

BY VERA COX (Mrs Ferd Korn), as told to Art Napoleon.

He played his first cornet solo in public in the Davenport High School auditorium - I don't remember the year exactly, but it must have been about 1920. It stunned everybody - nobody realised how good Bix had become since he'd started playing. He was quiet, you know - never made a show about things.

I remember feeling almost embar-

rassed, afraid he'd make a mistake and everybody would laugh at him. I don't even remember what he played. But I do remember how reluctant he was ever to talk about himself. He really thought he didn't have any talent, and was honestly surprised when he got to be famous.

Our families had known each other for a long time. When Bix was 12 he'd come over to our house in the afternoon and play the piano - he knew lots and lots of tunes, and we would all sing....

He bounced up and down when he played, and I remember his fingers were always very straight, not the way I'd thought piano players played; my mother always had to shoo him out in order to get him home in time for supper.

My, but he was shy. He often followed me home from school - but on the other side of the street, usually half a block behind me. But

he was very charming in those years; his eyes sparkled, he was always very charming and witty, and never that I can recall got angry.

The first time he ever asked me out on a date...my, when was it now... he asked my mother first if it would be alright. His father came to call with him to make sure our parents had no objections; I think he was still in grammar school, perhaps the eighth grade, at the time. After that he was always asking me out to parties and things....

In those days, dating wasn't quite what it has come to mean today. The most important thing was to have fun together, often in large groups - in fact, very often Bix's sister, who was a few years older than he, would date Ferd Korn, the son of a local grocery store owner, while he - Bix, that is - took me out. We never thought it possible then that Ferd would become my husband. (Ferd Korn died in 1958 - ed.)

In high school, he became more and more interested in music. If we were on a date, and there was an orchestra playing, chances are I'd be left high and dry while Bix ran off to listen to the band.

At the same time, he seemed captivated with the idea of fraternities and sororities and all of collegiate life. I remember he came over once wearing both his brother's and his sister's pins....my, how we laughed.

I have to say that in those days Bix didn't always take great interest in his appearance; sometimes he'd go for weeks and weeks needing a haircut. I think he just forgot about it most of the time; didn't enter his mind.

But he was so handsome, with big brown eyes and clear complexion. He loved his family very much and they were terribly proud of him particularly his mother. Sometimes he'd come to see me with a big box of chocolates - he worked for a short time afternoons at a neighbourhood drug store - he'd come and tap at

the window because he was too shy to come to the door.

It's hard to say whether things would have become a romance - I waited for him, as young girls will for their beaux, when he went off to Chicago - but you know how those things are....

He came back to Davenport once after he'd been in the orchestra of Paul Whiteman; he was depressed, and when we walked together he told me he didn't really FEEL famous. He told me "I don't know where I'm going from here...."

It was almost as though he longed to be just a young boy again, riding his bike no hands down the hill near our house to show off for me, or sledding near the school. One time he and Larry Andrews got the janitor - his name was "Putzi" Trinkle - to let them pour water on the hillside and let it freeze for skating.

I remember so many things, like the first time he kissed me. It was on our front porch, heaven knows how old he was. His big brother, Burnie, had been joshing him because we'd been going out on dates and he "hadn't made any time" with me. Well, here I was sitting on the porch swing. He just came walking up to me with a sort of mischievous smile on his face. All of a sudden Bix leaned over and gave me just the smallest peck on the cheek. He whooped for joy and bounded off the porch shouting "I did it, I did it" and tore home.

Now here he was, back from New York, with a funny little moustache, and looking kind of fat and not at all healthy. He kept saying he felt he'd reached the top and was on the way down, and that he was afraid sometimes.

I'd married Ferd Korn in the meantime. He, Bix that is, insisted on seeing our baby; he always called me "Lorry", my middle name, even then. He thought "Lee" after Leon and Lorry went nicely together. He said, I think trying just a bit to impress

me, that he'd dated Ruby Keeler, but that he'd lost out to Al Jolson.

Funny thing, recently I began a typing class at Davenport High School and strangely enough, walking those corridors again brought Bix back very vividly. I found I could go straight

to his locker after all the years.

It started a train of thought that had been dormant for so long, I almost expected to find him there, waiting for me outside the classroom door just as he used to so many years ago.

BILL CHALLIS SPEAKS OUT

An interview

Bill Challis, pioneer arranger for the Jean Goldkette and Paul Whiteman orchestras during the Bix - Trumbauer tenancy, was the musical mind behind many of the Beiderbecke - flavoured arrangements and section choruses which brightened the recorded output of both groups. He lives alone in a comfortable suburban home in Massapequa, Long Island, about an hour's drive from New York City. The interview reproduced below took place during the summer of 1958 and is here published for the first time.

Q: Was Bix really the "character" the stories make him out to be?

A: I wouldn't say that. He was a nice guy - a bit naïve, like a big lovable kid - but really decent. I can't remember him saying anything really nasty or snide about anybody. But these stories kept springing up. George Avakian wanted to know about Bix when he was preparing those Columbia LPs (the three - volume "Bix Beiderbecke Story" - Ed.). So I told him a story about the guy...I had this apartment in the city. My sister was staying with me - she was teaching school out on the Island. She used to get up early and come home late. Well, Bix and I were working on some of his numbers and of course he'd bring a bottle, with gin. That was just his nature - he didn't want

my sister to know that he was drinking...although it wouldn't have bothered her any had she seen it there...she knew he drank. But he just didn't want to offend her, didn't want her to know. "Hide that bottle somewhere." he'd say. He'd usually put it behind the curtain in the bathroom so she wouldn't see it...well Avakian makes a good deal about it, as if it were a funny story. Maybe it is, for all I know; but I never looked at it quite that way...it was just the way he was, that's all.

Q: What about Bix as a practical joker?

A: Not him - no more than any other guy. But take a guy like (alto saxophonist) Chet Hazlitt...there was a real practical joker - a corker he was. I remember one time when Eddie King (RCA Victor A & R Man), the fellow who didn't like the bands to do any improvising - he was responsible for the Whiteman band's going from Victor to Columbia when he went over. We were making a record one time, of SILENT NIGHT, HOLY NIGHT, and another side - both Christmas records...nobody felt like making things like that; but King wanted to put 'em out, and he went right ahead...started off the record with sleighbells...then an organ...the whole works. Well here he's playing the organ himself, then turns around and

the band's supposed to start playing; but nothing worked right, and the boys were losing their patience. You know there's a point where you get almost to exhaustion, where you can't go any further. Everything's funny...you just burst out laughing - everybody laughs - you can't do a thing. Best thing to do is break things up - try it another day. Well, here he is with his sleigh-bells and his organ and just before he's ready to turn around and give the down beat for SILENT NIGHT Chet breaks everything up with a great big horse whinny...there was another time when he kept dashing in and out of the control room...you should have seen this King - he looked like a bull, a short bull, with a bull-like head coming down to this huge can. He used to sit out in front of the whole band with a gripe and a grouchy look on his face. Well, on this particular day there was nobody in the control room, so he was running back and forth, starting the band, then dashing behind the glass, back and forth, back and forth - it was getting ridiculous. Well, in those days they had a great big weight they used to make the turntable turn evenly while they were recording...it looked kind of like the big weights they used on horses during the horse-and- buggy days. It kept going down and down on a pulley, and when it reached the bottom, that was the end of the record. While King wasn't looking, Chet and a couple of the guys tied

this weight to his trousers...almost pulled 'em right off. That broke up another day, you can be sure.

Q: But what about Bix - personally? What do you remember?

A: You know, the guy would stay up all night with you to get an arrangement finished if you were working with him. I remember making an arrangement of OSTRICH WALK - we made it from nothing...we wanted a couple more Dixieland numbers in the (Goldkette) band. Goldkette had this music school, and some offices. We went up there at night - did it quite often to practice or work things out. So there we were one night, all night, working on this thing, tired and no drink at all. There's not much wrong with a guy who has so much tenacity of purpose...it's tough enough for an arranger to do that when he has to.

Q: Did you ever know him to get angry?

A: Oh, he'd get annoyed...impatient, if he felt that things that should have taken a short time were taking too long. If we were writing something and I didn't get it down fast enough, he'd say something like "Jeez, haven't you got that yet?"; I'd have to argue with him, tell him I couldn't get it right off because he played it a little different each time. Another thing - he'd get annoyed if people gave him credit for something he didn't do, or failed to for something he did; or sometimes he'd get upset if they told him he played like Red Nichols.

Q: He didn't like Nichols' playing?

A: Well, it's hard to say. He probably liked Red personally, but he thought Red was a pretty mechanical player: you know "doo-doo-wee-oo-wee oo" - stuff like that. That was Red - he'd hang on to stuff of that kind. Bix'd usually make some kind of remark if someone compared him to Red.

Q: Red does manage to sound very Bixian sometimes.

A: Yeah, but so studied. Always this precision - always shined up, sound-

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ing as though he'd read it. Bix would get annoyed at things like that. But basically he liked everybody, really did. I remember when Paul Whiteman came to Detroit and we were all in the (Goldkette) Greystone Ballroom band. He came in and all the boys came to meet him. Bix came up, shook his hand. For him, this was the great Paul Whiteman. He sorta smiled and asked "What should we call you? I don't know what to call you. Paul? Mr Whiteman?" and he really meant it. You know how Paul is; he had a lot of dignity and carried a lot of weight...and Bix didn't know how to address him - and said so. That's not the sort of thing you'd expect from just any musician...usually it'd be just "Hi ya Paul" and that's that.

Q: What about the drinking?

A: A lot of his so-called friends could have been better influences on him as far as that is concerned. I remember one time Joe Sullivan, Eddie Condon, Bix - seventeen of them in all, plus one girl, came up to my apartment. Bix brought them. He said they didn't know where to go on a Sunday afternoon and were looking for a piano. So I had to go out. I was working on arrangements for a show for Rubinoff at the time and had an arrangement to finish, so I left them all there. They were drinking when they came in. Joe was playing the piano and entertaining. When I got back there were four guys passed out on the floor, loaded. I don't know where the rest of the gang had gone. Most of them were from Princeton - there was this fella by the name of Bill Priestley, (guitarist and part-time cornetist - ed.) Condon was another. He was one of those guys who used to like to tell funny stories about Bix. He was one of the ones who used to drink with Bix. Before Eddie got started he was bumming around New York trying to get gigs. But he was apparently never all that successful at it. He was always

borrowing a guitar to do this or that recording date. He was always hanging around Bix - a real Bix fan, fanatic even. It was laughs, that's Condon's style, everything for laughs. He figured Bix was a real character, although Condon himself was as much a character as anybody. He was an operator. Bix shouldn't have been around with guys like that.

Q: Do you think Bix was done real harm by his association with such people?

A: Eddie, for one, could have been a better influence on him. Bix was in many ways still a kid, as I said, he was naive about some things. He was a trusting sort, he trusted everybody. He was well-mannered, and well-behaved, in fact, a very nice guy. He was well liked by most people. But these guys made fun of his drinking, they made fun of his remarks - everything was funny to them. This guy, Bix, made a serious contribution to American dance music - American music, for that matter. He'd sit for hours by himself playing the piano; beautiful stuff, everything voiced right. He was a fine pianist.

Q: Did he, as far as you know, do many record dates outside the Whiteman and Goldkette circles, especially towards the end? Doc Ryker (alto saxophonist with Goldkette) remembers a date by a Goldkette unit for Edison.

A: No....No. I don't remember much of anything, except that whoever it was that was supposed to play piano on the Whiteman record of SAN showed up late and I played piano in my simple "oom-cha" style. They set me off as far as they could from the microphones so I wouldn't bother anybody. About record dates, you know Bix would have been very cagey about just going out and playing second or third or fourth part on just any arrangement. He wasn't that good a reader. How many leaders would have given him a solo crack - even eight bars or so. He could have done some recording with Nat Shilkret; it's possible, but I just don't remember.

Q: What about the circumstances surrounding his death?

A: Hell, I don't know. So many people have asked me, and there are so many stories. I saw him, as I recall, about two weeks before he died. But I bumped into Boyce Cullen (Whiteman trombonist and drinking companion of Bix's - ed.) later and he said he'd seen him just a couple of nights before Bix died. One of the last times I saw him was after we were both out of the Whiteman band. He was living around New York and not doing too well. I tried to get him a job with the Casa Loma Band, but he didn't have much love for this organisation, it was a real precision polished group. Bix was not really a section man. Give him a third part and it was a real struggle. But I kept talking to him about it, telling him the band was using a lot of the arrangements I'd done for Whiteman while Bix was with Paul, and finally he agreed. He was doing mostly radio and record things,

working little, living, if I recall, in a 44th Street hotel. I was living by then up in Greenwich, Connecticut, but I was often down in the city. Well, on this particular day, I picked him up and we set off, driving through the traffic up Fifth Avenue. The Casa Loma Band was playing somewhere in Connecticut. Well, we're stopping for traffic and things, and Bix has a chance to think. I could feel the tension, as he thinks "Where the hell am I going, what am I going for, what am I going to do, what's this all about?" We got as far as Central Park. He says, all of a sudden, "I don't think I want to go out tonight." So out of the car he got. That was that. But I was sure he'd be interested. I figured he wasn't doing anything but hanging around drinking at the time and had to have some money. So I kept talking it up to him and finally, a little later on, he decided to go. Went up alone one time, because I couldn't make

it. He had no self-control - if I'd gone with him and had a chance to be with him a while, it would have been okay, I'm sure of it. But they had a bunch of real tough drinkers in that band. There was a singer, for example, who could down a bottle of whiskey one night and come back for another the next. Bix; well, a couple of sniffs of gin and he was on his way - then there goes the whole bottle. After those first few had gone, the rest didn't make any difference. Those guys - the Casa Lomans - just rehearsed and rehearsed. After full rehearsals they'd get off by themselves and

rehearse. Bix couldn't take this. He got griped, so they'd take him out drinking. He thought that was just great, going out drinking with them. That went on for four days, and then it was all over. Maybe it wasn't the proper band for him, I kept telling myself. There was nobody of his calibre. He would have been so much by himself, musically speaking. But I was just trying to help him out with some kind of a job. It just didn't work out. Then he started freelancing around again. It was shortly after that, in August of 1931, that I heard he'd died. Poor sweet guy.

A BAND LIKE NOTHING YOU EVER HEARD

Stanley 'Doc' Ryker & the Goldkette Band

THE FACE that smiled out when the door opened had changed slightly if at all in 30 years. A bit greyer in the moustache and around the temples, perhaps, but that was all. Even the decades old pictures in common circulation were enough to introduce "Doc" Ryker, alto saxophonist of the legendary Jean Goldkette Orchestra of Detroit.

We talked over drinks. He introduced his wife, Norma, a bright, fast-talking woman whose smile and ready wit belied her years. It wasn't long before they both got to reminiscing about the Goldkette band in the days when Bix, Tram, Steve Brown, the Dorseys and other hot men formed its jazz nucleus.

"Bix joined the band in the summer of 1926 - I remember it very well because it was the summer we were married," Ryker said. "They had

dropped briefly into the Greystone at the end of the 1925 winter season, they'd been playing together in Trumbauer's band in Detroit and came up to Detroit to try out. That summer we went to Hudson Lake, in Indiana, 20 miles from South Bend. Jean hired all the men he could use of the Trumbauer band to fill in because he also had a place at Island Lake, Michigan, and needed extra men.

He took Tram, Bix, Dee Orr on drums, Dan Gabey on bass, Pee Wee Russell on tenor and clarinet to go with the rest of us - Fuzzy Farrar on trumpet, Sonny Lee on trombone and myself on alto and baritone. Usually Frank took the lead on the hot stuff and I on the sweet. It just worked out that way."

Ryker got out of the music business in 1937. He and Norma live quietly in suburban Beechhurst, Long

Island, where they run a family liquor store.

"It was a wonderful summer," Norma interjected, sounding nostalgic. "On a balmy night, you could hear the music out over the lake; Fred Farrar had this beautiful tone for waltzes. On Sundays, all the fellows from Chicago used to come up. Benny Goodman was one of them. The band was so outstanding, they could really cut loose."

Back to the "Doc" and Bix. "After that summer was over, Bix and Frank joined Goldkette in Detroit. They stayed with us all winter. Some of the fellows knew them, at least they knew Trumbauer because they'd played Chicago when he was around there (with Ray Miller - ed.). I don't know how much they knew about Bix, but everybody liked his playing and liked him so he stayed. He was a nice fellow, easy to get along with. He couldn't read well but he could fake - he could always find another note. No matter how many notes were played he'd always find one that somebody else didn't have. He had an uncanny ear."

"That was when the band started using more than two trumpets. In order to play our arrangements we had to hire a man to play the second trumpet parts. Bix would fill in where he could and take the hot solos. Every now and then they'd split the band into smaller groups, just like Benny Goodman did later. Bix and Tram would play the hot stuff, and the rest of us would do the waltzes."

He relaxed in a chair, sipping a cold glass of ginger ale. The memories started to come more easily.

"Funny - when we came to New York most of the bands there were using two trumpets. Here they saw this band with three, and not knowing the reason why, they all went out and got an extra trumpet so they could have three trumpets."

"Same thing happened with Steve Brown on bass. At that time, all

bands were using tubas, but when they heard him they all switched to string bass. None of them could equal Steve slapping the bass. He had a really distinctive style and uncanny sense of rhythm. He'd get out in front of the band for some feature number or other and everybody, all the dancers, everyone, would gather around the bandstand and watch. He was even better known to more people at that time than Bix was; in a way he was the star of the band, although the people who knew Bix knew how good HE was. Steve told me one time that if I wanted to take up bass he'd teach me his things, but he said I was the only he'd show them to."

"What struck you most about Bix was his 'sweet-hot' style. I mean, although he played hot, it was this beautiful tone, everything sounding so sweet, although it was never schmaltzy or anything. I liked the harmony he would play. Very often when he'd take a chorus I'd be listening so intently I'd almost forget to come in. He was way ahead of all of us in the things he was playing."

"One time we played an afternoon dance at Roseland, in New York. Bix had this pivot tooth he was always losing. Sure enough, this day he dropped it and couldn't find it. So he had to take off and go to the dentist to have it replaced so he could play. In the meantime, the manager of Roseland, Charlie Something or other, went to a carpenter shop and had him make up a large peg tooth out of wood, about 2½ inches square. He brought that down to Bix, who got a big laugh out of it. But by evening he had his tooth again, so it was alright."

"Trumbauer, you know, had a style all his own. He didn't learn things as fast or spontaneously as Bix did, though. He'd take a thing home with him and practise it, then come back and play some interesting thing on it, but seldom varied it a lot. Once
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he had it, he had it."

Norma had re-entered the room unnoticed and taken a seat. It was clear that she had her own memories of the band.

"I remember one hilarious thing." She put in. "At Hudson Lake, all the bachelors, Pee Wee, Bix, Dee Orr and Irving Riskin lived in one cottage. They weren't too careful about keeping things up. They'd let everything slide and it'd get so dirty that Edith Horvath (the wife of Charles Horvath, the band's manager and its former drummer - ed.) and I would go in there once a week just to clean up. Well, they had all sorts of sardine cans and dozens of half-empty bottles of milk on the porchthey'd just let them stand there and go sour. One day Edith dumped all the sour milk into a huge wash basin she was carrying....intended to carry it off and dump it all in the lake, but don't you think she slipped with it as she was going down the rickety stairs of that old cottage? What a mess...."

"Bix, you know - well he wasn't very clean. Neither was Pee Wee. The fellows in the band could never get either of them to take baths regularly so they'd take them forcibly out on the lake in a rowboat and dump them in - this happened pretty regularly. Nevertheless, there'd always be some girl waiting for Bix by the bandstand, you'd be astonished how good-looking he was and the girls never seemed to mind. He'd just slick his hair back with water, and get to looking pretty decent. Whenever the band went on the road, they'd always have to get someone to watch out for Bix to make sure he'd show up at the station when they left. He'd be off somewhere with his horn under his arm in a paper bag."

According to Ryker, the Goldkette men were more than fond of a good time, no matter what the circumstances.

"Just before we were supposed to do

some records for Victor," Ryker goes on to say, "I asked Horvath if he'd mind if I took some rehearsals. There was so much cutting up most of the time that I felt a lot of the talent was going to waste. Anyway, at the first rehearsal I sent the brass section down to the musicians' room with their part of the arrangement, the saxes into the ladies' room where the acoustics were just great. The rhythm section was on the stand. The idea was that each section would work out part of the arrangement and then we'd put it all together. That way a part of everybody's style would be sure to get into the arrangement. One would suggest one figure, another something else - everybody had something to do. That way, there was no cutting up during rehearsals...."

"I'd tell Don Murray to write an introduction or an ending, then we'd put the arrangements together - some wonderful things were born that way. Most of them never got on record, because ol' Eddie King (A & R man at Victor - ed.) wouldn't let us record stuff like that, thought it wasn't commercial enough. He thought only old folks bought phonograph records.

"He wanted it strictly stock, commercial....I don't really know why he hired the band at all. The stuff he didn't want, why that was our style. We didn't get a chance to do anything we wanted until right at the end, when he let us put down CLEMENTINE and MY PRETTY GIRL. Both of those were worked out in the manner I described. But there were so many other gems - SPANISH SHAWL was one, BABY FACE another...."

What about other recording dates?

"Bix and Tram were always going out to make records for Okeh and things....I remember one time we went to the Edison studios to do a couple of sides. I don't remember who was on the date exactly or what we did. But it was Bix and Trumbauer, and at Edison - I'm sure of that."

TO BE CONTINUED