

BIX'S TONE - AND HOW IT RECORDED

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by Trevor Tolley

Bix's tone is one of the legendary wonders of jazz. While that tone is almost always recognizable, its quality varies from record to record. In his last year this was in part due to deterioration in his playing. However, the recorded tone clearly varies in his major period of 1927 and 1928, because of differences in the studios used and in the recording techniques.

In this presentation, portions of master pressings of his recordings will be played, using the same needle and the same setting of the phonograph in all cases. I shall comment on the differences in the sound of the tone on the various recordings, and also on the relation of sound to the studios used. The comments on the studios will be drawn from Jim Kidd's splendid research concerning the New York studios of the 78 era, which was the subject of an earlier presentation at CCC.

We shall be talking about four companies: Okeh; Columbia; Victor; and Brunswick. The Okeh company had its original New York studios in acoustic days at 11 Union Square. These continued to be used when electrical recording came in; but it is clear from the sound of some electrical recordings of 1927 that another studio was being used - one that had a notable echo. This might have been the studio at 55 5 Avenue, owned by Columbia. In the fall of 1926, Okeh had been sold to Columbia, at that time still owned by Columbia in Britain.

Columbia had its studios at 1819 Broadway at Columbus Circle. Columbia had re-fitted these studios for acoustic recording just before electrical recording came in around the beginning of 1926. This was the studio that produced the recordings issued on Harmony. Columbia electrical recordings may also have been made there. On the other hand, when Whiteman moved to Columbia, he may have been recorded at 55 5th Avenue; though it is not clear when 55 5th Avenue came into use.

Victor had studios at 155 24th Street East, where one of the Hoagy Carmichael sessions and the Beiderbecke session were recorded in studio 2 in 1930. However, Victor also used the spacious Liederkrantz Hall, where the Whiteman recordings and some of the Goldkette recordings were made. Victor also had studios at 28 West 44th Street and 16 West 46th Street, and in Camden, New Jersey.

Brunswick/Vocalion had studios at 16 West 36th Street for one year from 1930 to 1931, the period of the Hotsy Totsy Gang Session that we shall listen to. These were small studios, with a boxy sound, as we shall hear.

We begin our records with the Wolverines. Because we are committed to playing each record with the same setting and with minimum filter, I have been forced to pick

one that is in the best condition. This copy of "Sensation" from September 1924 has very little obtrusive sound. One can sense the golden tone, even through the acoustic recording; but the tone is thinner and lacking in treble and bass because of the recording. It was made in Gennett's New York studios, though the quality of sound is much the same as on the records the Wolverines made at the rather primitive studio in Richmond Indiana.

1. The Wolverines "Sensation" Claxtonola 40375 16/9/24
Acoustic Gennet Studios, New York

Far more recognizable, crisper and clearer, is the tone on this odd recording that was not issued until thirty years after Bix's death. My friend, the late Charles Waring, researching in the Victor archives, found this recording made in November 1924. It was done with Portable Equipment at the Detroit Athletic Club. Bix was playing with the Goldkette band on a try-out. At this session, they made three tracks. Bix played on only this one. He fluffs a note, and that was enough to end his time with Goldkette, until he rejoined two years later. This is the one recording not presented by a 78 rpm master pressing, as it was never issued on 78. The scratchy noise is due to deterioration in the original metal parts.

2. Jean Goldkette "I Didn't Know" (Never on 78) Vic LPM 2323 24/11/24
Acoustic Victor Portable Equipment, Detroit Athletic Club

Bix rejoined the Goldkette band in 1926, along with Frankie Trumbauer. Under Trumbauer's name they recorded for Okeh. From their first session, "Singin' the Blues" set the world by the ear with its relaxed sophistication and its wonderfully melodic solos - particularly that of Bix, with his unbelievable tone at last revealed. The recording was probably done at the old Okeh studios at 11 Union Square in New York.

3. Frankie Trumbauer "Singing the Blues" Parlophone (E) R1838 4/2/27
Okeh Studio 11 Union Square, New York

Trumbauer and Bix made quite a lot of records for Okeh during their last weeks with Goldkette; but those made after that first session have quite a different aural quality. They were undoubtedly made in a different studio - one that produced a resonant, echoing effect. Which studio was used is a bit of a mystery. The echo effect is also heard on the Goofus Five recordings made for Okeh at that time. The studio might have been at 55 5th Avenue; though the records Whiteman made after he switched to Columbia in 1928 - a year later, admittedly - may also have been made at 55 5th Av., and the echo

does not show up on those Whiteman Columbias. So far as Bix's tone is concerned, the change to the different studio, wherever it was, was dramatic. On "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans" especially, we encounter that cold, sharp, ringing, bell-like sound that knocked us all over, along with an iron intonation. The intonation was part of the musicianship; but the tone was clearly enhanced by the change of studio.

4. Frankie Trumbauer "Way Down Yonder..." Parlophone(E) R2687 9/5/27
Okeh at a different studio - 55 Fifth Avenue, New York ???

The Goldkette band made its finest record close to its dissolution - "Clementine", made in New York for Victor at the great Liederkranz Hall on the 15th of September. What a contrast again. The sound is much warmer, replete with soft overtones. Bix's tone no longer comes forth with the cold, ringing effect that we encountered on the Okeh recordings. It too is warmer and rounder and the intonation seems softer; yet the recording is only four months after "Way Down Yonder" and only three weeks after "Three Blind Mice" by Trumbauer, made in the same echo-ey Okeh studio.

5. Jean Goldkette "Clementine" Victor 20994 15/9/27
Victor at Liederkranz Hall, New York

Now, here is Bix's solo from "Three Blind Mice", made only three weeks earlier in the Okeh studio on August 25th. There is a startling contrast. Clearly the difference in tone must be due to the recording - and the place of recording.

6. Frankie Trumbauer "Three Blind Mice" Parlophone PO56 25/8/27
Okeh at 55 5th Avenue, New York ???

A record made two weeks after "Clementine" offers another contrast, again due to the studio. This was made with the acoustic apparatus still used by Columbia at their studio at Columbus Circle for their cheaper Harmony label. Sam Lanin organized a session, using musicians from the disbanded Goldkette orchestra. One can recognise Bix, but the tone is rather emaciated. Yet even through this, the virtuoso control of sound is evident, Here is "There Ain't No Land Like Dixieland" from August 29th

7. Broadway Bellhops "There Ain't No Land..."Harmony 504-H 29/9/27
Acoustic, at Columbia's studios at Columbus Circle, New York .

On the dissolution of the Goldkette band, many members joined Whiteman. These included Bix, Frankie Trumbauer, Bill Rank and bassist Steve Brown. Whiteman was then recording for Victor. Once again, on this record of "Lonely Melody", made at

Liederkrantz Hall, Bix's tone sounds decidedly different - softer, warmer, less ringing. This may have been a little because of the way he chose to play on this record: in the last eight bars he draws the tone with remarkable effect. Incidentally, "Lonely Melody" was widely bought in America, because it was on the back of the popular "Ramona", but was very rare in Britain, being backed by Johnny Johnson's "Just Across the Street from Heaven". This is take 3, issued in the Bix Album in 1936.

8. Paul Whiteman "Lonely Melody" (3) Victor 25366 4/1/28
Victor at Liederkrantz Hall, New York

When Whiteman moved to Columbia in May 1928, the orchestra sounded different - flatter and less warm. The recordings were possibly made at 55 5th Avenue. In keeping with the effect of the changed recordings, Bix's tone seems harder and more metallic, as on "Because My Baby Don't Mean Maybe Now" from June 18th.

9. Paul Whiteman "Because My Baby..." Columbia (E) 5007 18/6/28
Columbia at 55 5th Avenue, New York ???

By 1929 many of Bix's solos were played with the Derby Hat mute. Sudhalter suggests that this was to disguise technical shortcomings. However, on Trumbauer's "Futuristic Rhythm", made on April 15th, Bix plays 24 bars on open horn. The intonation is not what it had been, and the tone seems thinner. Was this recording for Okeh also made at 55 5th Avenue? Wherever it was, the change in sound was almost certainly due to a decline in Bix's playing.

10. Frankie Trumbauer "Futuristic Rhythm" Parlophone R2625 15/4/1929
Okeh at 55 5th Avenue, New York ???

That record was the Parlophone issue, put out in 1939, when interest in the lesser Trumbauer Okehs had declined. There had been no contemporary British issue of "Futuristic Rhythm", and the Parlophone, deleted three years or so after issue, when shellac became short, is probably much rarer than the Okeh.

We come now to Bix's last record with Whiteman, made on the October 25th 1929. The tune was, somewhat ironically, "Waiting at the End of the Road". Bix found himself unable to continue after a rejected take of the next number, "When You're Counting the Stars Alone", and his imitator, Andy Secrest, took over the solo part. Bix left the band. Whiteman remained ready to have Bix back, but Bix never felt able to return. Here are the final bars of "Waiting at the End of the Road" - Bix's last recorded notes with Whiteman. Bix's playing is a noticeably stiff.

10. Paul Whiteman “Waiting at the End of the Road” Columbia (E) 5675
25/10/29 Columbia at 55 5th Avenue, New York ???

We come now to 1930, to Bix's last sessions, and to a session that was not recognised as a Beiderbecke session in Bix's hey-day - the session that produced "Loved One" by Irving Mills and His Hotsy Totsy Gang. It was done at the Brunswick Studios at 16 West 36th Street New York on June 6th 1930. When I was a youth we could get only two of the titles from this session, "Strut Miss Lizzie" and "Deep Harlem" on British Brunswick 02821. "Deep Harlem" is a rather stagy number, and it would be hard to tell who played the cornet on it. On "Strut Miss Lizzie" we thought it was Red Nichols. This, I believe, is still understandable. The recording does not seem to capture the overtones of Bix's sound, leaving it rather bare and cold. What also made us say it was Red Nichols in those days in the early forties, before there were extensive discographies, was the stiffness of the playing on "Strut Miss Lizzie" - a sign of the deterioration of Bix's command of the instrument. Indeed, it was only after hearing "Loved One", where the rolling phrasing of the initial middle eight seems so characteristic of Bix, that I became convinced that it was him on these records. The tone seems somewhat bleak - partly, perhaps, because of the studio; but, as we have seen, Bix's tone had lost some of its roundness and its mellowness.

11. Hotsy Totsy Gang “Strut Miss Lizzie” Brunswick (E) 02821 6/6/30
Brunswick Studios 16 West 36th Street, New York

Here now is "Loved One" - take "B". The middle eight in the opening chorus is convincingly Bix; but one would not easily spot that it was him from his main solo, where the tone is thin and undistinguished. He is not well recorded, though Teagarden's tone comes through powerfully.

12. Hotsy Totsy Gang “Loved One” (B) (Vinyl 78 master pressing) 6/6/30
Brunswick Studios 16 West 36th Street, New York

Bix played on three other sessions in 1930, two with Hoagy Carmichael and one under his own name. The first by Carmichael, which gave us "Rockin' Chair" and "Barnacle Bill", was done at Leiderkranz Hall. The other two sessions were at Victor Recording Studio 2 on 24th Street. Almost all his solos on these sessions are with Derby Hat mute, which somewhat disguises the tone. Bix was free of having to record only with members of the Whiteman band, which was one of the conditions of working for Whiteman; so that the rhythm section, with Gene Krupa in all cases, is

more up-to-date and swinging. However, the slant of the session under Bix's name was commercial. "I'll Be a Friend With Pleasure" is the best known and most attractive number from that session, but the solo is in hat. On "Deep Down South" he plays open horn. The tone is a bit rough compared with earlier days.

13. Bix Beiderbecke "Deep Down South" 8/9/30
Victor Recording Studio 2, 24th Street, New York

We close with, Bix's last recorded solo, the end of Hoagy Carmichael's "Georgia on my Mind", played with Derby hat mute, on September 8th 1930.

14 .Hoagy Carmichael "Georgia" HMV(E)B6133 (Victor) 15/9/30
Victor Recording Studio 2, 24th Street, New York