

## Young Man with a Horn

IN THE field of popular art (notwithstanding the movie versions of "Anthony Adverse" and "The Green Pastures"—of which more when there is less to talk about), the best thing at this time is the reminder that the brief obscure history of jazz music also has its great dead. And the greatest of these—the greatest of all, one is sometimes bound to think as some old scratched record is put on the machine and that vibrant tonal attack arches suddenly out over the band, unmistakable and perfect—the greatest of these was a young man from the corn belt, Leon (Bix) Beiderbecke, who played the horn.

The recent popularization of the best popular music has been tardy and responsible for much faddish nuisance: radio announcers with voices you might spread on a muffin suddenly trying to go barrel-house, young squirts all over the place in crew haircuts yelling Swing gate, send the cats! as though to do so were to do something very desirable and deep indeed. But the main results have been for the best and many things have been made possible. For instance, the Victor company has made several repressings of numbers that have long been cut out and now brings thoughtfully forward an album of twelve ten-inch sides from its back files. The album features Beiderbecke solos that up to now could not be had for love or money—which is such cheerful news that I can't help saying a few words to the folks.

Bix Beiderbecke lived very briefly and in what might be called the servants' entrance to art, dying in 1931 at the age of twenty-seven. His story is a good story, quite humble and right. He had a background of ragtime and riverboats and five and six-piece jazz bands, the changes and speeding up in America after the War. He seems to have been fooling around with music from the time he could walk, learning piano while he was still a kid in Davenport, later getting himself a cornet and learning to play it, turning by aptitude and instinct to music—especially to the raw spirits of music being distilled in the land around him.

For his talent there were no conservatories to get stuffy in, no high-trumpet didoes to be learned doggedly, note-perfect as written, because in his chosen form the only writing of any account was traced in the close shouting air of Royal Gardens, Grand Pavilions, honkeytonks, etc. And yet when Bix turned to the jazz cornet, he perfected a straight tone and absolute fluency which bow to no classical technique whatever, and which for that matter would be the despair of most brass sections to be found today.

An analysis of his music as a whole would amount to a statement of most of the best elements in jazz—which is a little too much for this spot. Briefly, he played a full easy tone, no forcing, faking or mute tricks, no glissando to cover unsure attack or vibrato to fuzz over imprecisions of pitch—it all had to be in the music. And the clear line of that music is something to wonder at. You see, this is the sort of thing that is almost wholly improvised, starting from a simple theme, taking off from that into a different and unpredictable melodic line, spontaneous, personal—almost a new tune but still shadowing the old one, anchored in its chord sequence. Obviously, without lyric invention and a perfect instinct for harmony, this is no go for a

minute, let alone chorus after chorus, night after night. And yet here is this fantastic chap, skipping out from behind a bank of saxophones for eight measures in the clear and back again, driving up the tension with a three-note phrase as brash and gleeful as a kid with a prank, riding down the whole length of a chorus like a herd of mustangs—everywhere you find him there is always this miracle of constant on-the-spot invention, never faltering or repeating, every phrase as fresh and glistening as creation itself.

Just as characteristic was the driving rhythm against which he played, the subtle and incisive timing that could make even a low and lazy figure of syncopation explode like blows in the prize ring. Bix had a rhythmic invention that seemed inexhaustible, variety without straining; and in all his cross-rhythms and flights of phrasing, retarding the beat or flying on ahead of it, there was always the insistent implication of the steady one-two-three-four drive that usually has its base in the rhythm section, particularly in the riding beat of a solid swing drummer.

Still and all, these things were part of it, not the whole—something would have to be said about the spirit behind all this, the man in the music, before the music was explained: the candor, force, personal soundness, good humor and sheer love of the thing. Bix appears to have struck too fast a pace in the years after he was brought to New York by Jean Goldkette—an immigrant boy then burning up the East with the best big band of his time—drinking himself gradually out of the picture in the last years with Whiteman, becoming less and less productive and worrying his friends. But there is no evidence in his music that he ever got up-stage or did a small thing.

But talk about music is pretty generally doomed to be sterile and dull, because the only way to catch music is out of the air—to be listening to the heavy motion of the band as it comes down to the taking-off point in, say, "Slow River" (one two three four *one*—stop) and hear those clear trumpet tones spring up over the iron of the band chords, boundless, exuberant of attack, as pure and easy as anything. They are there and then they are gone and the orchestra is back in its heavy stride. Patently, what is there to say about that? Or take another old one, "After You're Gone," where they get off with the expected wealth of arrangements and everything, and then as the violins are working them out of the vocal, and bad going at that everything is suddenly an airy structure with trumpet notes falling down through it like showers, and Mr. Bix Beiderbecke is playing his fluent reckless little tune, this time with restraint and an instinctive sweet sadness, no doubt in deference to content: "After you've gone, babe, after you've gone away." Same thing in a recording Hoagy Carmichael made of his own tune "Georgia," where if you play it you will hear (directly following that beautiful eight-bar creation from Jack Teagarden's trombone) the Bix cornet still swinging free and bold, but sensitive now to the shadings of a foolish and eternally lovely tune about how "just a little song keeps Georgia on my mind."

And even these fragments and snatches are only side issues, for Bix Beiderbecke is to be found at his highest and best in a few of the early Goldkette and Whiteman tunes ("Clementine," "San," etc.) and especially in the small all-star outfits he and Trumbauer used to get together from larger personnels. Here he is irrepressible, with licks

*July 29, 1936*

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full choruses, constant background work, all with the throttle wide open and devil take the highmost, but never a false move, never getting tired. The energy alone is something to marvel at, but when it comes to the complexities and lilt of music and rhythms, there is no way of describing it. If you would be patient with me I could mutter and whistle the general idea of the big full solo in "Riverboat Shuffle," which was on the back of "Ostrich Walk," which coupling just about represents the peak of a high and wonderful career—but why waste time with words and poor copies? One hears it, and is moved and made strangely proud; or one does not, and misses one of the fine natural resources of this American country.

OTIS FERGUSON.

## Young Man with a Horn Again

IT IS ALMOST TEN YEARS since Bix Beiderbecke died, shortly after his twenty-eighth birthday; it is at least twelve years since he played the bulk of his music. But he is as new and wonderful now as he was in those fast days on the big time, the highest expression of jazz when jazz was still young, the golden boy with the cornet he would sometimes carry around under his arm in a paper bag. Columbia has just reissued some of the famous recordings (Album C-29; 8 ten-inch sides, \$2.50). They aren't the half of it, not the tenth of what was recorded, of course; and most of them aren't even among the best. But Columbia has acquired some of the masters of the old Okeh company, and now resurrects "Royal Garden Blues," "Goose Pimples," "Thou Swell," etc., for those with ears.

I suppose the kids growing up in the belief that Glen Miller is what it really takes to blow the roof off would wonder, in the midst of this rather dated small-band clamor, what they were listening to and why. Well, it's just jazz, kids, and as far as the groups in general go, not the best of its period. But Bix, the fellow riding above and ahead and all around with that clear-bell horn, Bix had swing before the phonies knew the word. He had it at its best and purest, for he had not only the compelling lift of syncopation, the ease within an intense and relentless rhythm; he had music in a way of invention that is only found when you find a good song, inevitable, sweet and perfect. He could take off out of any chord sequence, any good or silly tune, and wheel and lift with his gay new melodic figures as free of strain in the air as pigeons. He had a sense of harmonic structure that none can learn and few are born with; he had absolute pitch and absolute control of his instrument—in fact, no trumpet player I've ever heard could be so reckless and yet so right, so assured in all the range from tender to brash, from sorrow to a shout; his tone was as perfect without artifice as water in the brooks, and his lip and tongue and valve-work so exact in all registers that he could jump into a line of notes and make it sound like he'd slapped every one of them square in the face. With this technical assurance, he never had to cramp and plan and fuss himself: he could start at any point, and land on a dime.

This makes it sound too tossed off. He worked on his music, and worried always. Any jealous little stinkfinger (and there were plenty around to envy and fear his talent) could always bring him down by low-rating the thing he'd just played; any musician who had something was the object of his admiration. He never got over feeling uneasy about his lack of facility in sight reading—but it was too natural and easy to play it by ear. He had a memory in music like nobody's business, and could and at certain hilarious times did imitate a corny solo just preceding his, so closely note for note that the only one who wasn't holding his sides was the soloist himself, who figured that young feller was rarin' to go.

I don't know anybody who did more in the way of opening up the set rhythm of jazz. Everything is written in four-four time, and the pace can be said to vary through twelve or fifteen standard tempos, from slow-drag to fast-jump. But Bix as he went along actually wrote his

own time signature over the implied beat for dancing, by subtleties of phrasing, by delayed attack or a quick rush on ahead, and by the varying duration of a note.

It was no mere gut-bucket, emotion without control, virtuosity without pattern, louder and faster and higher. He sweat, and for all the ease of his solo in flight, the men around him would see the lines tighten in his face every time he stood up. One of the easy remarks in jazz is: He played it fifteen times, every one different. Bix played it different, all right. But when he got just the note of the chord, just the intervals, just the main line the way he wanted—that was his structure and there couldn't be a better, so why go off into new scales and razz-mah-tazz? At times—and you can hear it proved on half a dozen records—he would get a way of playing for the brass section and have the arranger leave that chorus blank; then he would get the boys together outside and play a phrase and then another, and then go back and play it in chords, patiently, carefully, just as he used to do with the glee club back in grade school in Davenport, note for note and chord for chord, until that part of the arrangement was a section in solo, established in the book and no need for writing. It couldn't be written anyway.

And all of this makes him sound too perfect, as well, like a church-going cousin always being thrown up in your face. He was perfect only in music, and in the simple goodness and loyalty that was always there under the rusty tux with the soup stains, the underwear and sox you never could get off him for sending to the laundry until they fell off, and he'd borrowed them from you in the first place, like as not. As a kid he had wanted to be Douglas Fairbanks; he kept himself in trim and was great at skating, swimming, jumping over walls and the like, an all-around first in his neighborhood, and so generally hardy that an old sweater was all he found necessary for an Iowa winter. But music as it became a profession and almost a religion shut out his concern for just about everything else. Things were always happening to him, partly because he couldn't spare the time to study about them—missing the train, losing his tie, falling off the stand in a whirlwind of music racks, getting thrown out of the hotel.

Of his considerable achievements as a rumpot, people still speak with wonder and endlessly, and there were indeed some funny times, before the dark days. But one of his troubles was a capacity rare in brass men: he could tie quite a handsome one on without going technically fuzzy and lip-numb, so that he could stand up and get off those clear round notes as innocent as pie, and then solemnly take his seat in the middle of the whole boilerworks of a drummer's outfit. He lacked a natural brake in that; and his constitution was so good to start with that he wasn't retarded physically until he'd blown the fuse on the whole works. Also, he could make as big money as you want without having a dime, a very rough man on a dollar bill. Also, while no one ever suffered musical fools more gladly, stood by for and worked over them, he had no use for any stuffed shirt in music or anything else, except as a target for a slingshot. He'd run into any such rich spreading trees as quick and head-on as the horse in the fable: he wasn't blind, he just didn't give a damn.

The story of his musical career is outlined in the book "Jazz Men" about as well as it can be. The dates, the cities,

the things done, the people met are established enough by now for a pattern, if only in fragments. But he had started in music early, and there is not so much known about that. His family was well off; his father was a good solid lumber merchant; his mother an amateur musician. There was always a piano in the house and there was a phonograph when few people had them. Bix (his real name was Leon Bismarck, for it was a family of German-American extraction) was a perfectly normal boy, except that he was always fussing around with music. He had a sister and an older brother, who was enough a hero to him so that he swiped the nickname Bix from him, and would not part with it. He lived in a big house across a sloping playground from the school, and the school was more a center of life than schools usually get to be.

There was the playground, the sliding and skating and wrassling, but there was also a lot of singing: the kind of spontaneous thing where a whole grade of kids will enjoy their cantatas and what-not so much that they not only start a ball rolling through the classes in general but work at it and get pretty good. They used to have the run of the school at night for rehearsal; they used to have a barber-shop quartet out on the fire-escape. In one grade they wanted a piano for their own room, so they arranged a local concert, which was so successful they gave another, and before the year was out they had the piano, bought and paid for. One of those happy things that cannot be incubated, taught or fostered.

Anyhow, Bix went through all the grades without being kept back, and in this social-musical atmosphere he was the number-one boy. Anything he heard he could play on the piano; anything he could play he could figure out the parts for, and teach the others to sing in chords. He liked music and music liked him and gave him a place, and the world was very young. Then on top of that, first off the crank-winding phonograph and later up the river from New Orleans in boats, came jazz, with horns. He got a cornet and taught himself to play it, for that was the kind of instrument it took to blast out this new thing in music. He got quite a little drunk on the excitement of it and did not want to be Douglas Fairbanks any more. His family began to worry about him, for it was one of those happy families that enjoy their group with pride and a fierce concern that it shall have the best. They sent Bix from high school to Lake Forest Military Academy, thinking to get him away from the bad balance of nothing but music. But Lake Forest was near Chicago, and Chicago was jazz then. It was as though jazz were a house that had been built just for him. And he moved in.

I was no intimate, but I think I could say in general why he blew up. It was partly the pace, of course, and taking it too fast. He began to see little fellows with green beards walking up and down on his chest, and Whiteman sent him back to Davenport, to get squared up. He was too far gone for any working band at that time, which was 1928. At home, he came out of it. He was shaky but still good, and he jobbed around with his old friend from grade-school, Larry Andrews, and watched his hand when he held it out every morning to see if it still looked as though he were waving at somebody. He had been at the top but somewhere along the line, some time or other, he'd taken a fall. And he wasn't sure in his own heart he

would fit back there again, even if he stayed off brass rails. He was honestly anxious. Was it just liquor that had pulled the knife on him? Maybe it was something else too?

It was, all right. He lifted his horn over the sixty-odd dancers or the beer tables of this cover-your-expenses circuit, and the other musicians (if no one else) would shake their heads and marvel; and it was the same as in the first days when he showed up in an Indiana town where the boys had thought they were really going, and played a few sets, and as one of them reports today, a day in which he is pretty famous, "I tell you the tears stood in my eyes, I couldn't get out the next number in the book."

He stayed on the wagon and the music was as good as ever—which he proved later on the last recording date he had before he died, with Hoagy Carmichael's pick-up band. But what he couldn't see, the nameless thing that was his trouble, had got him down. First he'd wanted to be "as good" as the men out front whose music had excited him. Then he wanted to stay good, and be if possible better. This was a preoccupation to bridge the years from the rusty clangor of the Wolverines to the bright lights of the Goldkette and Whiteman shows; this and the handy gin pitcher kept him assuming that if he felt low and the road ahead was flat and lonesome, it was just a hangover, just feeling low, let's sick a hare on the hound that bit me. Actually something else had been creeping up, something he never saw clearly. He had come to the top like a cork, and he had no more place to go.

And still he had to be going, he had to travel, so completely a musician that music was his ticket and there was no other line. He didn't go much for women. He was loyal, true and happy in his friendships with men, even self-effacing, but his friends were, after all, musicians. It had to be music for him, and as far as he could see when he could see, he wanted neither the money, nor the place, nor the show. But what else? He dreamed of being a composer. He had written some piano pieces and he wanted to do something even more ambitious. But what? He had no equipment, not the kind of equipment that a so-called legitimate musician acquires from study of the great body of Western music, which has had its best time in other times, and is now gone fairly sterile. He didn't know what to do, and listened with awe to Debussy records (Debussy is for some strange reason a great favorite of good jazz men), and would sequester himself and sit morosely at the piano, fingering the chords of a new music without being able to reconcile the old, which he didn't comprehend, with the new, which was in him as natural as a voice in your throat and which he had spent his brief lifetime tuning for song.

From the top of folk music as folk music, there is no place to go, actually. Jazz is a folk music, but Bix had never taken time out to think of things like that: jazz was the country where he grew up, the fine high thing, the sun coming up to fill the world through the morning.

He never heard about what was troubling him and only knew it was trouble. He came back to the big time eventually, but he could no longer stay on it, he played here and there, hole and corner, but he was too unreliable now for the standard type of show—and the big time was letting jazz go underground quietly by these days, for whatever life there had been in bands like Pollack, Goldkette, Whiteman in 1927-28 was no longer in demand by 1930, and

even the great jumping Negro outfits were either breaking up or hightailing off to Europe. Bix played for dances and recordings, and went back to the bottle and was not seen in the better places; and even moped around fearing he had lost his sense of perfect pitch; but when he lifted that stumpy dented cornet at the fraction of the second after the release, for dancing or just for the record in a dead studio, it came tumbling and leaping out as complete and lovely as ever. What he could always do he could still do, from the jazz-band tone to sadness. But what he had was more than enough, and he didn't know where to put it.

Perhaps you will have to hear him a lot; perhaps you won't have any ear for the jazz music that grew up around you and in your time, and so will never hear the voice, almost as if speaking; but there is something in these records that goes beyond a mere instrument or the improviser on it, some unconquerable bright spirit that leaves no slops even in confusion and defeat and darkness gathering; some gallant human thing which is as near to us as it is completely marvelous, and which makes only just and apposite that end of a career so next to the heart of all who would like this country to be a country of happy people, singing. In the summer of 1931 Bix Beiderbecke got out of a sick bed, and against the best advice, to ride a rickety bus to a place some fellows were playing a dance. He had promised the fellows he would go for the date, which would fall through if there were not some stubby cornet lifting over the boys and girls on the floor, and through the close air to the roof, some special glad thing to dance by. So he went, walking up to the bus and from the bus to the band room with that peculiar purposeful air of walking a straight line to some immediate destination, eyes going neither left nor right. He had promised to play; he played, and music was around him like rain falling once more. That was all.

He got pneumonia out of it, of course, and died of that a few days later. That is, they buried the body. For those who had been around and those to come after there was something, grown in this country out of the Iowa dirt, that didn't die and could not be buried so long as there should be a record left in the world, and a turntable to spin it on.

OTIS FERGUSON