Jazz Impressions..

★ *By JIM MOYNAHAN*

My first impression of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band—or of any jazz whatever — was of going to a fellow office-boy's house to hear a new record he was wild about. I can still remember my astonishment that musicians could use such an outlandish instrument as a cow-bell!

My first impression of the Wolverines was waiting with them outside the stage door of the Hippodrome in New York City. The previous night they had gone in a body to hear Miff Mole who was then with Ray Miller's band. I knew Miff, and it was my privilege to introduce the boys to him. Their delight and enthusiasm was something to see! It was so great the previous night that when the boys, who had been sitting through the show, waiting for Miff to play his first break, finally heard him in person, they let out such a cheer that the management requested them to leave immediately!

I recall going one night with Bix to hear a little coloured band in a place called the Club Kentucky. It was a little cellar off Broadway in the forties, and the band's originality made it a musicians' hangout after hours. George Brunies agreed to come along with us. We all sat in, and George, to my surprise, played not trombone, but trumpet. The band was called the Washingtonians, and Bix didn't lie when he said they were good. The drummer who was kind enough to let me sit in was an unknown by the name of Sonny Greer. You've guessed it—the band was Duke Ellington's. Next time I heard them in Cambridge, Mass. A new man had joined the band—on soprano saxophone, and he did wonderful things with it. Bechet was the name—Sidney "Pops" Bechet.

Bix's taste in music was perfection, his judgement of a new band always reliable. Many a night he and I have sallied forth together, to catch some obscure band playing in a dive as yet undiscovered by the other boys, maybe because Bix's interest in music extended a hell of a lot beyond jazz. To accompany Bix on these occasions was a very delightful privilege, and one typical evening still stands clearly in my recollection. "Where'll we eat?" I said. Bix gazed ruminatively up Broadway. "The rest of the guys have gone down to the Cabin," I suggested, "We can grab a bit there and . . ." Bix looked up; "I don't suppose you'd . . .," he stopped. "I'd what?" I said; "Keep it clean." "Well," he hesitated, almost abashed, "There's this little joint downtown I sometimes go to—Hungarian. But there's a cymbalom player that's something, boy! And they'll let you fool around the piano when they're not playing." "It's in," I said.

We went down in the subway. The place was a little basement joint, dim now in my memory except for the wine-spotted tablecloths, the low ceiling, and the musicians, grouped around the cymbalom player—his hands fluttering over the strings of his instrument like white butterflies.

Bix pulled out a chair at a table near the orchestra, dropped into it without taking his eyes off the cymbalom player. The music was deft, delicacy swirling into abandon as the hammers chased over the pinging strings, scattering tones as quaint as a spinet's.

The music quickened to a crescendo, broke off in a dazzling arpeggio of colour: I picked up the menu absently, the mood of the music still on me.

Bix had arisen from the table, crossed to the piano with a questioning look at the orchestra leader. Receiving permission, he sat down at the piano, settled the stool. The musicians glanced over idly. I wondered how they'd received my friend's playing. Not that he wasn't good—but Hungarian restaurants and American jazz,

(Courtesy of Jim Moynahan)

A recent shot of our correspondent, Jim Moynahan.

especially after the lovliness of the last selection—seemed hopelessly irreconcilable.

Bix was hesitating. I tried to help him out with suggestions—"How about 'Boy in the Boat,' 'Bucket's Got a Hole In'?" He seemed not to have heard. He held up a warning finger, bent forward, touching the keys with intense concentration, the first chords resolving in the quiet room. I listened, disconcerted, then delighted. The music was not the pulsing rhythm which Bix excelled at; it was a tone-poem, new to me, whose modern harmonies my friend coaxed out with a rhubato touch that made the piano plead like a living thing.

I was still until the last echoes had died in the little room. The musicians nodded quietly. I turned to my friend. "Hell, Bix!" I'm afraid I said, "I had no idea you could play like **that!**"

My unconscious patronage—long forgiven I am sure, by one who has since been misunderstood by experts—brought only a look of bright interest from Beiderbecke. Perhaps he, too, inured to the obtuseness of sycophants, had been doing a little prejudging. "You really like it?" he persisted. incredulous, almost. "You're damned well right, I like it! What's the name of it?" "It's a thing called 'Land of the Loon,' by an American composer, name of Eastwood Lane. He's written more—want to hear some of it?" I nodded eagerly. Bix turned again to the piano, played the suite, went from that to Debussy, to Stravinsky, to Ravel, moving surely among the extraordinarily intricate harmonies of the moderns. I don't think he played a single hot number that night.

Walking uptown, I questioned him. "But how the hell did you ever learn to play stuff like that—by ear, did you say?" He nodded. "I used to work in a music store—picked it out from piano rolls."

And he went on to tell how he had sat down at the pianola, running the roll back and forth over intricate modulations until he had memorised the fingering.

Those were the days when cornet players everywhere were trying to play like Red Nichols. Red was smarter, but not smart enough. He still isn't. But then, who is? Louis? Well . . . Brad Gowans? Most people take Brad's playing on the Gennett "Fly to Hawaii" for Bix, but Gowans, for all his skill, is acrobatic. Bix is emotional. Nick La Rocca? Nick is tops for my dough, but in a different way. Nick plays the ideal lead cornet, as Bix (who idolised his playing) all too often declared —to the superior amusement of the then ubiquitous disciples of the Red Nichols school. But in that particular type of poignant improvising I can think of no white player who excelled Bix. Rapollo had it on clarinet, and if you don't know what I mean now, don't waste your time on Bix. There's always Henry Busse.

At this point, I'd like to digress a moment for the benefit of customers who give off those quiet hoots when the statement is made, and I'm always making it, that Bix really craved LaRocca's playing. Let's leave out the fact that Bix never tired of telling me that the Dixieland boys were tops, as far as he was concerned. Let's just look at the records. Do you suppose it needed anyone to stand over Bix with a pistol to make him record "Jazz Me Blue," "Fidgety Feet," "Toddlin' Blues," "Tiger Rag," "Royal Garden Blues," and "At the Jazz Band Ball"? Did you ever check the list to discover the percentage of Dixieland Band numbers? Bix made those numbers because he liked Dixieland music. LaRocca taught Bix, you know—gave him lessons when Mrs. LaRocca pleaded with him to give the little pest a break, he was just a music-crazy kid.

And while I'm singing the blues, we may as well drag out onto the mat that old headache and moot source of altercation—what makes good jazz? Hearken whilst I moot.

Let's get technical. Boys from big universities (and little ones, too) sit down and practice splitting tones on the saxophone so they may sound exactly like Hawkins. I've done it myself, still do. But the point to remember is this: Some elements of good hot music are indispensable; some are not. Before you start messing around with reeds, it's not half a bad idea to sit down and analyse this music you're trying to play, and try to find out just what makes it tick.

To musicians I shouldn't have to say more than that you can't have good jazz without syncopation. You boys who are falling into Benny Goodman's error of playing too many eighth notes, please tell me what you are going to supply in place of the syncopation you're taking out? It ought to be something at least as effective, remember. Have you got something? I'll bite—what is it?

And you chaps who get a tone just like Hodges, are you sure you've mastered as well, Hodge's knowledge of intricate harmonic modulations? Or do you, when "that change" comes in the release, go into a paroxysm of splitting notes, chromatic runs and riffs, noodles on the melody note or popping high ones or the thousand and one gags for covering up when you don't know the harmony? Don't blush; musicians put those things on records and intelligent boys in some of the finest schools and universities play them over solemnly and point to them as examples of the untrammelled expressional facility of the jazz artist. Like the time Red Nichols was playing over some masters for Jimmy Dorsey. He played them all, including one test pressing which had been marred by a "blue" note in the middle. Jimmy glanced slyly over at Red: "How about that note, Nichols? *How* about it?" Red lifted his eyebrows blandly: "Oh," he gagged,

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with an airy wave of the hand. "I meant it that way." Had that master been issued, cornet players all over the world would have been solemnly playing that chorus, note for note, and taking especial pride in the way they had succeeded in aping the "blue slur" or what ever name it would have been given by that time.

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