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THE REAL JAZZ

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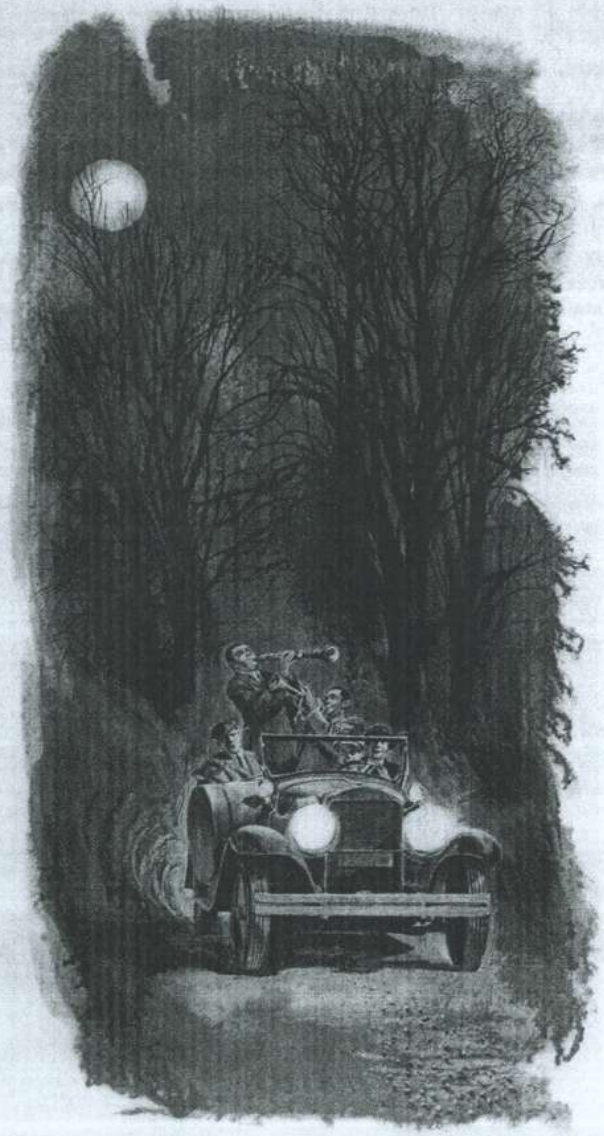
"PLAY IT FOR ME, DADDY"

The Story Of Bix Beiderbecke



Bix and the boys thought nothing of holding a jam session at the side of the road.

Everybody loved Bix. He played the horn like he had invented it, and if the music didn't come out the way it was written, it sounded even better

By STEPHEN LONGSTREET

NOBODY knows how folk heroes grow. How we came to accept Daniel Boone as the symbol of the pioneer and Mike Fink as the king of the riverboat men. Sometimes, like Paul Bunyan, it's just folk talk that gets solid and somebody puts it in a book and claims credit; sometimes it's pure invention, like George Washington and the cherry tree, and John Smith being saved by an Indian princess. They sound so good we can't throw them away. The folk hero can be anybody—a baseball player, a cowboy actor who chews gum and cracks wise, or a lady like Lizzie Borden who did a murder or two in an interesting way.

Bix Beiderbecke became a folk hero early and he has remained the symbol of the jazz player who wanted something better and died trying to get it. He's the man they say Maurice Ravel, the great modern French composer, came to New York to see. They say he and Bix sat around and talked modern music, and that once when the society people were giving a big party for Ravel, they looked for him and found him hidden in a bathroom rewriting Bix's *In A Mist* so he could catch the ideas behind it. That's the legend. Certainly Ravel was in New York when Bix was, and they may have met, and Ravel did say he was impressed by the music. But did he come just to see Bix or rewrite *In A Mist*? Well, you can't prove it, either way. They don't build legends around nothing. They know these legends from the Peckerwood belt and the home of the gully low music, to the dives where there is always someone having a ball; in Harlem and the Chicago South Side and the *Le Jazz Hot* joints in Paris. They all talk of Bix Beiderbecke. There have been a couple of just-fair novels

about him, and once a very lousy movie, not much above simple razzmatazz and the Hollywood idea of jazz.

The legends aren't very true but they have been growing and there isn't much you can do about it because the guy was good and even the kids who used to stand around under the bandstand and shout, "We want Bix!" are telling myths about him.

They didn't have to; the facts are plenty and sad and you don't fracture yourself laughing when you hear them. Leon Bismark Beiderbecke—not the legend—was born; that's a fact. The date was March 10, 1903, the place, Davenport, Iowa. The riverboats used to go that far with their bands—that's another fact. His older brother was called Bix, and Leon inherited it from him. No one seemed to mind. His folks had made their pile in lumber and they had culture besides money, and were all a little daffy about music. His sister knocked off a good piano; his mother had studied both piano and pipe-organ and when only ten, she had won a medal at it. His grandfather led German-American music in Davenport and his grandmother's father played an organ—Bach and stuff—in Europe.

Bix never amounted to much of a sight-reader, but he wasn't ignorant, as the legend said. He took some lessons on the piano from a Professor Grade, who seems to have been the real thing and not a parlor house professor. When only three, Bix could play the melody of the *Second Hungarian Rhapsody*. On the cornet that made him famous, he never took a lesson in his life. He never played it right, just good. He was surprised to find he was playing it not in B Flat, but a whole tone higher—in the same key as the piano . . . He couldn't read cornet parts very well and bumbled along with violin parts which he found easier reading. He loved the third valve on the horn. Everybody else used the first two keys most. Not Bix. It was all wrong according to the teachers, but he got a good flow into his horn chords in his own way. He liked the cornet, its full mellow charm, maybe because it was close to the human voice. Bix didn't put much mute in his legato styling and his round tones were all right without mutes.

Where did he get his style? From someone else. Every writer or painter starts by copying what he likes best and so did Bix. Bix did plenty of woodshedding, playing alone to some recording on the family Victrola. King Oliver, Louis Armstrong—he knew their recordings as a kid. And LaRocca, too, and maybe Emmett Hardy. Also Paul Mares, Fats Marable and Johnny Dunn. Bix was close to his mother, maybe too close, only the silver cord never pulled him back from his horn. She remembers him in his teens playing his cornet to LaRocca's recording of *Tiger Rag*. From Oliver and Louis came the off-scale tonality. The riverboats all carried music. There was Emmett Hardy, a white horn-man and the Strekfus lineboat, the *Capitol*, had Oliver and Armstrong. Maybe Bix liked jim-jam singing and moaning low and the real old blues. Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters he remembered, and their phrasing. He was a kid with a horn; a million kids must be like him every place, thinking of what they want to say and copying from hotstuff and other ways of saying it. Listening to the press-roll on snarls, the newer jumps of the short riffs, and even the rinky-dink bands that played jitney stops around the town. Bix played it all *boogity-boogity* and learned a lot, and then they sent him away to school to learn something besides music.

Bix did two and a half years in the Davenport High School, then in 1921 was put into Lake Forest Academy on the North Side of Chicago. New Orleans and Dixieland music was just hitting Chicago and Bix played in the school band. On the piano and then as a star on the cornet. He didn't get good marks, he hated to study and he was already as a kid (like General Grant as a boy) on the sauce in a charming schoolboy way. Everybody loved him and he drank gin and played music and was amiable, but didn't crack a school book. They kicked him out and instead of going home, he hung around Chicago, and just waited for the Wolverine Orchestra to start in business. He kind of knew his destiny and he never did much to change it. Something would happen and it did.

The "Wolverines"—bright-eyed and bushy-tailed—opened at the Stockton Club, a roadhouse near Hamilton, Ohio, late in 1923. They were popular and people liked them. Which only means that people who liked good jazz heard them. And there weren't a hell of a lot of them. But they knew what they liked, and it was the group around Bix, and Bix himself and his horn. It was a scuffle and had its salty moments and you buried your blues in King Kong, the cheapest whisky there was.

So there they were—the best white jazz-band in the country next to the "Original Dixieland Jazz Band" and the "New Orleans Rhythm Kings." Their playing was going to influence Chicago style and they *vo-do-de-o-doed* maybe a bit too much, but in 1924, it was all right to the early cats.

There was a guy named Hoagy Carmichael who was later going to get rich and write popular stuff for the squares and live in Hollywood on a hilltop like a millionaire movie actor, but in those days, he was a big gun on the campus of Indiana University. He got the "Wolverines" hired for a fraternity dance without hearing them. Hoagy had a band of sorts of his own on the campus and talk of Bix's boys excited him.

The Kappa Sig house was imposing and important and when Bix and the boys drove up in a broken-down jalopy with crummy horns and bundles hanging over the sides, they weren't very impressive. Bix was a little high, his jug was with him, and a battered cornet he had bought for eight dollars in a junk-shop.

But the music they played that night was enough to bring them back to the campus for ten weekend dances. After that they played Casino Gardens in Indianapolis, and a summer-theater tour. Also the Gary Municipal Beach Pavilion where they did a great two-months' job. Bix was really on the booze now, and the idea the legends plant that he could play drunk or sober isn't so. Real drunk, he could only fall on his face and snore. Mildly plastered, he could reach a piano and play, but when he got the bang-up choruses out of the brass, he had only hung a few on and was, for him, slightly sober. Late at night, it had to be the piano, because standing to take a horn solo was often a problem. He was getting deeper into the hunt for what it was on the other end of the secret door of jazz. And the piano chords rode up and down and somebody ran out to get another bottle of crack-skull. And the flapper he was dating hitched up her rolled stockings and said, "Play it for me, Daddy." There were a lot of cute pigeons always around and Bix liked to punish the dames as much as the booze and the piano. In the novels

Illustrated by Paul Calle

they wrote about him, he gets connected with a lot of long-haired dames who drive him into almost blowing his cap. But in real life, he followed the advice of the old-timers in the bands . . . love 'em and leave 'em. Bix had manners, something they don't ordinarily hand out to jazz players, and he looked clean-cut even when seedy, before he put on the fat. So the girls liked him. One of them followed him all over the country. And in St. Louis, there are said to be two middle-aged women who remember their youth. But the truth was, Bix was fixed on his mother in some way nobody ever tried to explain. She meant more to him than any of the girls.

The legend about the gangster's girl doesn't seem to be true, and certainly not the dreadful and fearful story of the gangster's revenge on Bix, that is supposed to have led to his death. The method was certainly not new in gang-happy Chicago but it never happened to Bix; a coke bottle and someone breaking it with a baseball bat. But the legend is still around and there are guys who remember the night and time, and the place; one or two even saw it happen. They will beat their chops and repeat it better every time. Just legend.

Later Bix did a season at the Martinque in Indiana Harbor. Bix was an early union man in Local 802 and carried a card and gin bottle around with him. He played the horn like nobody and crowds came to hear him. He was the star of the Wolverines and everyone knew it. They didn't play much of a repertoire, mostly the old corny stuff that they made good in their own way. And, except for two men, they couldn't read music, so they didn't add much to their list of numbers. They played it over and over again for the people who liked it, maybe ten choruses of a number. They didn't appeal to the thousands of people who just want an excuse to dance to something, so in time they had to break up and look around on their own. It was the peak for the band, they had done their job. And for Bix, only he didn't know it, the beginning for him was over. He'd go higher before going lower, but it would never be the same as it had been in the early days in broken-down crates, running up frosty roads with no brakes and the likker low, the white frost on the corn-tops and the sugar maples losing their last leaves. Maybe they'd pull up out of gas, or too fuzzy to drive, pull out the horns and do a little jamming in some old cabbage field. And the good nights remembered: on the stand and playing it their own way and a whole bunch of faces, dancing forgotten, looking up—and Bix taking it clear, good, high high and just the way he wanted it, better and better.

In the novels they wrote about him, he was always looking for some new blue note and killing himself trying for it, tearing his heart out for it. But that wasn't it at all—and no girl drove him to it, and anyway there wasn't any girl—just girls. In that period when the band was still together he made music the way he wanted it. He wasn't unhappy; he wasn't happy. He just drifted and played. There was home he could go to and he could still hold his likker and he wasn't fat yet. The music was still easy. It was the golden weather of his work and his time on earth. Only of course he didn't know it. He went to Chicago and got a job with Charlie Straight's orchestra.

Bix didn't bother to read the orchestra score, just played by ear and read a Wild West novel he had open on his music-rack. Later, when almost everyone had gone home, Bix and the boys would blow it free and the jam was on.

After the place had closed, the "dream session" would start with anybody who felt he could keep up with Bix.

It was a job but he left when he found out the rest of the band was paying half his salary to keep Bix as their drawing-card. He began to hang out in the black-and-tan dives, the hot Negro places. Oliver and Louie, Bessie Smith—he listened, and they sent him, really made him jump. Bix used to toss his salary on the floor to keep Bessie singing all night. He played in theaters and played wherever he could pick up a night's work, and he listened to Bessie give out with *I'll See You In My Dreams*. He forgot to scoff (eat, that is), drinking shakeups and whatever booze the bootleggers were giving out with. But there isn't much record that he went for dope. Booze was enough. It was a tough go for real jazz players because the big sweet combos were coming in to cater to the tastes of the housewives and the office-help dancing as respectable as they could the "Charleston" and "Lindy Hop," and even trying the "Blackbottom" and "Big Apple." Bix played lakeboats and hung around jazz sessions jamming New Orleans style. He rattled around from one dive to another and always he carried in his pocket the mouthpiece of his cornet, taking it out and fingering it while he listened to others playing.

For a year, he played in Frank Trumbauer's band at the Arcadia Ballroom in St. Louis. He was pulling down good money—a hundred bucks a week—but he never held on to it or spent it on himself. A third rate hotel was good enough, and running up stuff on the slate in the speaks. Two- or three-hundred dollar tabs for unpaid likker. He didn't dress in the smart-set of threads as some jazzmen did; when he left town, he had on a borrowed pair of pants, and a friend's coat. His tuxedo trousers had gone shiny and given way in center field, and so he never let the customers see him anything but front face.

It was in St. Louis that he went daffy over modern music, the new concert stuff, new to him (*Continued on page* 67)

"Play It For Me, Daddy"

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anyway: Ravel, Debussy, MacDowell and Stravinsky. The whole-tone scale and the whole-tone chords he was to work into his stuff came from here. He had a recording of *The Firebird Suite*, and he wore it out in no time.

He spent more time on the piano, woodshedding and playing over and over again improvisations that built to new melodic content for him. Maybe he figured if he was a genius, this was the stuff that was going to make him come out true and real. But, meanwhile, there was a world outside of these new piano cords. There was a job and a kind of fame. The Indiana U College newspaper voted him in 1926 "the most efficient exponent of 'dirty' trumpet playing in jazz circles." They put quotes around "dirty" as if not sure just what the word meant.

A short time later Trumbauer and Bix joined Jean Goldkette's orchestra. Goldkette's band was a hot and sweet pop band and its main purpose was to make money. It did. It also indirectly made jazz respectable to a lot of people and sent others on their own to discover the real thing. The hot section that Bix played with was Trumbauer, Pee Wee Russell, "Sonny" Lee, "Itzy" Riskin and Ray Ludwig. They hit the Blue Lantern at Hudson Lake and Bix played cornet, piano and a few times the drums. It was a high-priced band and when bookings got tough, Bix went over to Paul Whiteman. Whiteman was said to be worried over Bix as not being the kind of character that would fit into the sleek King of Jazz setup. But he took Bix on. Paul Whiteman was a kind-hearted man and, while he may have muffed any idea of what classic jazz was, he wasn't bad to work for. When Bix got sick, he took care of him and when Bix got to the D.T.'s and the heebies set in, Whiteman treated Bix to a drunk cure.

Bix played the sweet flash stuff, the modern concert music, but little by little, people came to stop and watch Bix go into a solo. Bix was getting fat now and there weren't many moments when he was feeling in key with the world. But he could still play the horn. When the band played Los Angeles, Whiteman used Bix only in the hot group with Goldfield, Margulies and Busse.

Back in Chicago, Bix used to start his night after the places closed and a dream-session would start with anybody who felt they could keep up with Bix: Bud Freeman, the brothers Dorsey, Benny Pollack, Joe Sullivan. At white dives, or Negro places in the South Side. Just enough reeking air to breathe, a blue piano and a place to stache the bottle. By this time, Bix was getting $300 a week and looking like a Loop hobo unless his friends tied his clothes on him properly.

By 1929 Bix was on the way down. Not yet on the skids, but the good time and the big time were behind him. He didn't like Whiteman's band any more. It was real commercial now and the radio dates were murder—the real classic corn. Radio meant 20 numbers in an hour, six of them usually new, and the tricky arrangements were sterile but tough for a man who was never much of a reader.

The pressure, the tension, didn't help his frayed nerves and the whisky moved in for keeps. He was sick, everyone said. Not maudlin drunk, not jerky, just sick. After his cure he went home to his folks.

In 1931, he was out of Whiteman's band and picking up radio spots like the Camel Hour—a one-shot. Casa Loma wanted him but he could take only four nights of the exacting arrangements. He did a little recording with Tommy Dorsey, Joe Venuti, Eddie Lang, Bud Freeman, "Bubber" Miley, Gene Krupa and some others. He was his old self in his part of the records. But it didn't hold for long.

He was on the town. No dough in sight, he didn't really mooch, but it was a hard pickup every morning to go through the day. He was careless with things now and himself, most of all; the dream was going out of Bix, the wonder and awe of life, and he didn't seem to care. If you didn't give a damn for him you said he was just a lush and anything happened to the bum, he asked for it. But if you knew him—he was still kind and full of charm and some place was the lost artist, mislaid, bricked up, buried away. What the hell can happen to a guy in a world where there isn't too much for the lug who wants to be different? The head-doctors can give it big words and speak of his family and how much he was still mother's boy. But they couldn't explain why there wasn't one lousy corner where he could have sat playing his kind of music, working out his own ideas of it.

It might have been great, or it might have been nothing much. We'll never know now. One thing he got down on paper. He and Challis worked over three months on *In A Mist*. It was good, but you couldn't really say great. Bix had done it too close to the end. He was tired. He still played the piano for his friends and chiselers and hangers-on in his 44th Street hotel. That's about all he did. Play the piano and punish the whisky. He was always improvising on themes out of what he got from Debussy, and he sat there playing and it was all right. But it had no thread long enough to make something to play in a band and he didn't give a damn. He was on the wagon now, "of course," and what he drank was with a wink and shake of the head. Everybody who knew Bix came to hear him and Babe Ruth came and a lot of horn and piano men who felt there was a little good stuff to lift here.

Bix and his mother had talked it over, and what he was dreaming of was to tour Europe with some boys and show them the real white jazz. It needed backing and not too much at that. He had an audition, not with mugs, either, but the Dorseys, Krupa, Sullivan, Freeman. You would think the endowed great, the ones who are always tossing their cash around for ballets and recording bird-calls, would back the tour. Bix waited and the backing never came. He didn't care much after that. He didn't keep warm or well-fed. He got a bad cold and went out in a dismal night to blow his horn at a Princeton Club date. He knew they didn't want the band without Bix. So Bix went and let the college boys and their dates stare at him, and he was sick and he was sweating. His head was on fire and blocked off from air and the world. But he played.

It came around to pneumonia and Bix tried to suck in air and he lay there and after a while went drifting. Nobody knows what sounds he heard. In the movies written about him, it was horn music, louder, better and rarer than any he had ever played before, or dreamed of. But that was literary corn. Most likely he just didn't care and inside his head, the horn was still. Then it was nothing on August 7, 1931. An unfulfilled artist was dead. He was 27. . . .

★ THE END

"Those poor devils are dying"

BULKY and calm, Jack Philip stood on the bridge of the U.S.S. *Texas*, watching his gunners pour fire into the Spanish men-of-war fleeing Santiago harbor.

Only a few days before, another American ship had accidentally fired at the *Texas*. Philip had responded by signalling: "Thanks, good line, but a little over."

Now enemy shells whistled over his head from vessels doomed to destruction. As the *Texas* raced past the flaming, riddled hulk of the *Vizcaya*, that Spanish battleship exploded.

Instantly, a great victorious shout sprang up. But Philip quickly silenced it: *"Don't cheer, men; those poor devils are dying."*

A bold captain who ran a happy ship, Jack Philip was already something of a friendly hero to his men. But this one sentence made him a hero of the Spanish-American War to millions of Americans.

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