



## BIX — AS I KNEW HIM

By VIC MOORE

One of my most vivid memories of the Wolverines is that of the boys' amazement at the reception the public gave us in our first efforts. When we played our first college dance engagement, we actually thought we were getting a raw form of kidding, the applause was so unexpected and prolonged. The crowd shouted and clapped so, particularly when Bix took a solo, we thought they were really trying to drown our playing!

But I think I ought to say something of the band itself first. Bix, George Johnson, Min Leibrook and I had played around Chicago prior to 1923 in a vague sort of semi-pro group we called the "Ten Foot Band," from its five members. Bix, who was still a student at Lake Forest Academy, near Chicago, would sneak off from school to play one night stands with us. By 1923 we had formed a more definite outfit and soon we went into Doyle's pavilion in Cin-

cinnati with the bunch that really first comprised the Wolverines.

The name was Bob Gillette's idea, and the group was composed of Bix, Al Gande, trombone; George Johnson and Jimmy Hartwell, saxes; Dick Voynow, piano; Bob Gillette, banjo; Min Leibrook, tuba, and myself on the drums.

We played at Doyle's for some months, but we did not like the place and were not too popular with the patrons. In 1924, about the time we were thoroughly fed up with the place, Bix ("Bismarck" as we jokingly called him: his middle name) had a letter from Hoagy Carmichael, saying he had got us the chance to play the Butler College prom opposite Charlie Davis' band. We were keen to get away from Doyle's and play this engagement although it meant leaving a steady job, but when we talked to Doyle about it, he flatly refused to let us go on such short notice. This opposition we

overcame by the simple expedient of lowering our instruments out of our living quarters one night and following them ourselves, getting clear away by the light of the moon.

Although Al Gande did not go with us to play the prom job, the rest of the bunch made the trip and, as I said before, were literally amazed at the applause they got. I recall that we were forced to play one set an hour and a half long, so insistent were the dancers (or rather, listeners). After that date we were made, and had a hard time keeping up with offers from colleges all over the Middle West. Our records began to sell, and although we had made a trip to Richmond to record "Jazz Me Blues" and "Fidgety Feet" with the combination we had at Doyle's, all our other discs were made with the later outfit, without Gande. Before long, we hit Broadway, where we were again amazed at the fact that when we played the Movie Ball, alongside Henderson, Ray Miller, Lopez, and others, the men we most admired such as Miff and Armstrong, stood about to hear us play, instead of the reverse!

Bix, of course, was the soul, the moving spirit of the band. Everyone interested knows his talents and achievements, so I won't waste time by repeating what's been said before. But as an individual, I remember him as one of the kindest, most sympathetic men I have ever known. He was careless of himself, but the instant concern and helpfulness the misfortunes of others always aroused in him is perhaps my most cherished memory of him. Although he was temperamental, as most geniuses are, he rarely imposed his mild fits of temperament on us. And we were always ready to forgive him his forgetfulness and unreliability, because we knew he would never have deliberately done anything in the slightest degree to annoy or injure us.

**B**ix originally was interested in the drums, but eventually took to trumpet. Even at the time that Joe Oliver was considered by all the musicians in Chicago as the greatest of them all, Bix was devoted to Armstrong, and stubbornly contended that the pupil was greater than his master. Bix's unflinching comment when asked about Armstrong was, "Louis? My, he's God!" He was tremendously interested in piano, and one time when we laid off for a week or two, he went to Davenport to stay with his family. They hired a piano teacher for him, but Bix found learning the new technique rather distasteful and wound up by learning Eastwood Lane's numbers from his teacher merely by watching his fingerings! Although he was completely self-taught on piano, his playing was amazing. Ravel was greatly interested in his piano playing and I've heard

it said that Fritz Kreisler would sit on the piano bench beside him and watch him play for hours on end.

Bix's love for the classics is perhaps not so well known, but I know personally that he was at least as much interested in the classics as in jazz. While we were in Cincinnati at Doyle's, he, Johnson and I went nearly every Saturday to hear the Symphony Orchestra there, and later in New York we used to hear the Philharmonic. In 1929 when I made my first visit to New York in four or five years, I met Bix down town and almost the first thing he said was, "Come on, I've got seats for the Symphony to-night." After the concert, we went back-stage, where Bix was enthusiastically received by the musicians, who considered him a genius, and were proud of his friendship. His favourite classicist was Bach, with Wagner a close second.

**A**fter Bix left the Wolverines to join Goldkette's band, we realised there was little future for us without him. Nevertheless, we tried to fill his shoes by wiring Paul Maves in New Orleans to send us a good man if he wouldn't come himself. After we heard the man he sent play two numbers, we handed him his fare back to New Orleans. Then I thought of calling Jimmy McPartland in Chicago. I got him on the 'phone late at night and asked him if he would like to join the Wolverines, to which his reply was: "This is a hell of a time of night to play that kind of joke on a fellow!" After I pointed out that I was not making a long-distance call from New York to play jokes on anyone, he realised we really wanted him, and sat up all night and next day in a chair-car to get to New York at once. Jimmy played with us a month or two and recorded with us on our last record "Royal Garden Blues" and "I Need Some Pettin'" (Gennett 20062). We left New York to go to Miami, where we were not so well received, and the band gradually split up, the boys going back to Chicago or New York from there.

The memory of the Wolverines to-day means most to me through the association with Bix, although as a group the band was the grandest bunch of fellows I've ever worked with. But having known intimately and worked with the greatest musician of them all, a true genius even then known as one, means more to me than anything else in connection with the Wolverines. The memory of Bix as a friend, a sympathetic great-souled gentleman incapable of any meanness and always quick to encourage obscure and struggling musicians, is one I am proud and grateful to possess, and I hope I have been able to show something of the Bix of those great days.

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## THE WOLVERINES

LEFT TO RIGHT :

Vic Moore  
George Johnson  
Jimmy Hartwell  
Dick Voynow  
Bix Beiderbecke  
Al Gande  
Min Leibbrook  
Bob Gillette

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*We acknowledge, with gratitude, the kindness of Mrs. Beiderbecke (Bix's mother) in loaning us this photograph for reproduction.*