

A LITTLE LATE, FOR BIX

By Michael Ventura

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March 10 passed in a fever -- banner headlines, shrill broadcasts, protests, threats, and lies. Everyone knew what was coming and pretty much knew what it meant (whether for or against): This war announced a changed America that would invade where and when it wished, its justifications flimsy, its goal simple -- empire. So that day, few noted that 100 years ago in Davenport, Iowa, there was born a white boy named Bix Beiderbecke.

The column I'd planned to write on Bix's 100th anniversary gave way to the global issues of the moment. Bix would be used to that; in his short life his name reached print three times, briefly. Critics in those days didn't cover his kind of music. As for today ... *The New York Times* ballyhooed the 100th anniversaries of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, but ignored Bix's. If he'd been black would he have received, by now, the credit he deserves? Surely. But even Ken Burns' *Jazz*, a generally excellent documentary, served up nothing but misinformed pap about Bix. For reasons as understandable as they are suspect, jazz scholarship is loath to elevate a white musician to its pantheon. Bix is treated less as an artist than as a cautionary legend: the half-saintly self-destructive genius, fated (because he was white) to perform with lesser (white) talents, dying of liquor early (age 28) -- at best, a lyrical parenthesis in the history of America's music. Most writing about Beiderbecke veers between sentimental twaddle and dismissive condescension.

Bix Beiderbecke's private demons are none of my business. To pretend to decipher them would be psychobabble at its worst. I cannot imagine what it meant to be born into a respectable German immigrant family in Davenport, Iowa, in 1903, just a rail stop between Chicago and St. Louis ... Davenport, which in 1835 constructed the first bridge across the Mississippi River (to Rock Island), but which by Bix's birth had long been as commonplace as Sinclair Lewis' Main Street or James Stewart's town in *It's a Wonderful Life*. I cannot imagine what it was to play tunes on a piano by ear before the age of 5 and then to teach yourself piano and cornet so that you could play both professionally by your late teens (though his ability to read music was never more than rudimentary). And I can barely imagine the thrill, in the days just before popular radio, to discover the first recorded jazz by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, and King Oliver's great Creole Jazz Band (with young Louis Armstrong on second cornet). As he began to play their music, was Bix surprised and maybe a little disturbed that from the very first he sounded like no one else? For when your style is like no one else's there's no help for you -- you must make *all* your own discoveries in order to grow. I cannot imagine the inner tensions that might create in a young, immature, insecure, impractical man.

We know he was a lonely man, in a state of dreamlike detachment even with his pals, a man incapable of making close contact except through his horn. More importantly, we know he had a bell-like tone that comes through with tender clarity even on the primitive recording equipment of the time -- a tone that caused guitarist Eddie Condon to say, "Bix played like a girl saying 'yes.'" And speaking of girls: Historians can piece together Beiderbecke's life in some detail -- where he was, what he did, and when; but,

though we have many eyewitness testimonies, they don't include the confirmed name of even one girl- (or boy-) friend. Very unusual for a musician as fussed over as Bix was during his brief heyday. His intimates, as far as we know, were music and alcohol.

His would be only a vague legend but for a handful of recordings made in 1927 when Bix was 24. He wasn't the leader on any of them. ("Bix" and "leader" are contradictions in terms.) A 26-year-old sax player named Frankie "Tram" Trumbauer, whose playing was much influenced by Beiderbecke, took the Davenport kid under his wing and organized what jazz history calls the Bix & Tram sessions. One recording date in February, two in May, one in August, and one in September constitute the core of Bix's contribution, the height of his genius, and can be listened to in less than 30 minutes. Yet they indelibly influenced American music, and remain the only fundamental innovations any white musician has contributed to jazz. *Fundamental* is the word.

Feb. 4, 1927: "Singin' the Blues" is not a blues. Arranged by 21-year-old Fud Livingston, and accompanied brilliantly by Eddie Lang (the first great jazz guitarist) and Chauncey Morehouse (a remarkably "modern" drummer for the era), both 25 years old, "Singin' the Blues" is credited as the first jazz ballad. (Slow jazz before "Singin' the Blues" was ... blues.) It isn't only that Bix's solo incorporates harmonies new to jazz (which he probably learned from his devotion to Debussy); and it isn't only that Bix's solo is the first fully realized improvisation on the chords rather than the melody of a tune -- creating something utterly new out of its subject matter (Louis Armstrong would inevitably have come up with that on his own, and soon); it's also that this is the first instance of what came to be known as "cool." Bix explores a turf where Armstrong hadn't been and would never go. Armstrong expresses ... well, everything -- his music cascades from his soul into yours. Geniuses like Charlie Parker and John Coltrane would do the same. Beiderbecke's strategy is fundamentally different, even opposite: With the purest of tones he is talking to himself and letting you listen -- the method that Lester Young, Miles Davis, and their followers would favor. In fact, this is one of the few recordings that Lester Young cited as an influence. (Young was the prime influence on Charlie Parker and on what came to be known as "modern" jazz.) As the critic and jazz musician Benny Green would write in 1962, Bix's passage on "Singin' the Blues" is "the most plagiarized and frankly imitated solo in all jazz history."

On May 13, they recorded the second great jazz ballad "I'm Coming Virginia," arranged by 23-year-old Don Murray, a more fully realized conception of the same innovations. Bix adored Ethel Waters' rendition of the song recorded the previous December and cited her as a deep influence. (She, too, is drastically underrated, even though she's black; the singing innovations Bing Crosby gets credit for were done by Waters earlier and better.) "I'm Coming Virginia" and "Singin' the Blues" would be the template for much of the jazz that followed: a loose, free rhythm, featuring intricate and intimate solos based on the melody's chords rather than on the melody itself, nuanced in a kind of blue, gentle way. It was Bix who first understood the full implications of what we now take to be obvious: that jazz lost no power when played softly.

In the arts it always takes a genius to discover the obvious.

We have many hours worth of Charlie Parker's and John Coltrane's greatest music; days, even weeks, of Duke Ellington's -- and thank god we do. But "Singin' the Blues" and "I'm Coming Virginia," combined, last less than eight minutes. Bix was that kind of guy. It's a miracle we have even those recordings -- without Tram's firm and generous guiding hand they would not exist. But their influence is way out of proportion to their number and length. Which testifies to the strength of his gift: Bix was a weak

man, hardly a man at all, but his depth, subtlety, and delicacy reached far beyond his limits to change music for multitudes who've never heard his sound or his name.

As for other Beiderbecke recordings -- it would be generous to call them uneven. The solos are often marvelous; the company he keeps is often not. Before 1927 he was building his gift; after 1927 the gift dissipates. By 1929 his playing was erratic. He recorded last in 1930, on Hoagy Carmichael's first rendition of "Georgia (on My Mind)." His tone is darker, his solo loses its way, ends vaguely. He died the next summer, drunk and alone in a cheap room, his last work a few incomplete piano compositions. People in need of saints have romanticized that, but I've been alone often enough and drunk often enough to despise them and pity Bix. And then I hear again his exquisite tone, his solos that continue to surprise no matter how often you listen, music that leads to a place no one had been before nor has gone to since -- who should pity whom? Bix knew something I don't. I can listen to it, even *get* it, but I still don't know it. He did. For a while.

March 10 I played Bix for my high school class. I neglected to write his name on the board. The kids thought I was talking about "Bicks Spiderbeck." But they were generous with their patience, and a few really got him. Lizzie wrote: "So we *do* have a culture, if we search for it." ■

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