

The Davenport Blues

Written by Administrator
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Eddie Condon was as much a wisecracker as a guitar player, but when he met Bix Beiderbecke, his irony took the first train. "The players fell over themselves greeting Beiderbecke," he reported in his 1947 memoir *We Called It Music*. "How about sitting in, Bix?" one of them said. Beiderbecke smiled like an embarrassed kid and muttered something.... He sat down--at the piano. 'Clarinet Marmalade,' someone said. Bix nodded and hit the keys.

"Then it happened. All my life I had been listening to music.... But I had never heard anything remotely like what Beiderbecke played. For the first time I realized music isn't all the same, it had become an entirely new set of sounds....

"The next day we got up as the train came into Cleveland. With nothing to do but stare at the scenery from there to Buffalo, I began to wonder again about the cornet. I got out my banjo. Eberhardt dug up his saxophone and doodled along with me. Finally Beiderbecke took out a silver cornet. He put it to his lips and blew a phrase. The sound came out like a girl saying yes."

"It's hard to be somebody in your own hometown" That's fine, but who in the hell was Eddie Condon anyway? No, it actually took a pair of Italians to alert me to the fact that a musical genius had once lived down the street from me. What did Greg Brown once say? "It's hard to be somebody in your own hometown. You go away and the world says, 'Oh, this guy's cool.'" Jesus, ain't that the truth. You see, I was born, like Bix, in Davenport and grew up hearing his name and seeing his face everywhere. I hung out at the Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Jazz Festival only if nothing else was happening. I won six cases of Leinies in a bet by finishing the Bix 7 road race. But it never for a second occurred to me that this Bix fellow was anyone special, that his legend wasn't purely the product of inflated civic pride.

Then, by accident, I was cast as a fiddle player in Italian director Pupi Avati's 1991 film, *Bix: An Interpretation of a Legend*.

(Pupi's brother Antonio produced.) Shot on location in Davenport and Chicago, it tells the story of Bix's conservative, middle-class German-American family and how, when he began to show an interest in jazz, they reacted as if he had embarked on a life of crime. It follows him to a

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military academy in Lake Forest, Illinois, where he hardly reformed his wicked ways but instead spent most of his time blowing hot arpeggios, and then into the speakeasies of 1920s Chicago, where he finally discovered other castaways who considered jazz to be, in the parlance of the time, their bag, too.

It portrayed Bix as an introverted, modest, almost other-worldly kind of kid who didn't seem much interested in anything except music--well, music and whiskey. "It wasn't booze that killed Bix," Bing Crosby once told jazz critic Nat Hentoff. "He wasn't an alcoholic. He was an absentminded sort of fellow, sometimes quite jolly. Be he was so totally immersed that he never ate or slept properly. His health broke from exhaustion." Crosby performed plenty with Bix to be sure, but his view is in the minority. Instead, Pupi's movie, like most other accounts, portrays Bix as an inveterate booze-hound who, in 1931, drank himself to death at the age of 28.

Either way you go, however, Bix is a god-awful, self-important film. Leonard Maltin, with almost unnerving understatement, calls it "dramatically uneven." Its "stars"--if you can call them that--either have had the good sense to quit the business or, like Emile Levisetti, have found their niche in skin flicks like 1995's *Virtual Seduction* or this year's *Emmanuelle: First Contact*.

(He plays "The Drunk.") To be fair, my appearance in two scenes didn't much help. Without speaking a line or sounding a note, I still managed to look like an idiot. During my audition, Pupi (pronounced Pooooo-pee) interrupted one of my less-than-capable fiddle passages to wave his arms and shout, "Jesus-a Christ! Who are you to be in-a my movie?"

Fair enough. But that was exactly the sort of passion that hooked me. Here was this crazy, bearded Italian prone to quick and exasperated bursts of pidgin English, who had journeyed halfway around the globe with a whole crew of crazy Italians--all out of some strange and abiding love for Leon "Bix" Beiderbecke of Davenport, Iowa. Who would have guessed?

Pelvic dances & sinful mixing Bix's improvised solo two-and-a-half minutes into "Royal Garden Blues" seems to come out of nowhere, both literally and metaphorically. One critic has gone so far as to mention the "holocaust" of Bix's sidemen--various players over the years who were awarded jazz immortality for the burden of sharing the stage with a slouching but brilliant, self-taught cornetist who, without even being able to read music, made them sound like shit by comparison. It's only a slight exaggeration. On "Royal Garden Blues" Bix swings where the rest plod, dancing around the beat with a smooth grace and ultra-subtle lyricism that was as yet completely foreign to the idiom.

After all, in those early days, jazz was about a lot of things, but subtlety wasn't one of them. For starters, its name comes from the '20s slang for "fuck," as in "jazz me, baby" or another tune Bix recorded, "Jazz Me Blues." It's also worth mentioning that this lowdown association with jazz originated with white people and not the black folks who actually invented it. "For them its associations were just as much with Sunday mornings in church, funerals, and quiet evenings on the front porch, as with tonks and whorehouses," pointed out Ralph Berton in his wonderful 1974 memoir *Remembering Bix*, re-released in June in paperback by Da Capo Press. "But for most whites it was inextricably interwoven with alcohol, loose ladies, pelvic

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dances, and the sinful mixing of races after dark."

Which reminds me that, apart from servants periodically refilling a lemonade glass, there's not a single black person in Pupi's Bix. White Americans, even as they dismissed jazz as no better than screwing music, also loved it and listened to it and mainstreamed it and happily and unthinkingly de-colored it (just like rock 'n' roll). So that now you can have a whole bio-drama about Bix Beiderbecke--who worshipped King Oliver and Louis Armstrong and who, along with his peers, understood the phrase "they played like niggers" to be the highest praise imaginable--without black people!

Eventually, jazz would become too white for some blacks. (Watch Spike Lee's *Mo' Better Blues* to see

his characters complain about that, or listen to *The Roots' Things Fall Apart*

to hear the same observation made about rap.) For Bix's family back in Iowa, though, it was still too black, and they exiled him because of it. Bix, ironically enough, was searching for something altogether different, even from jazz. He was "cool" to Armstrong's "hot," and his four gorgeous, startlingly modern compositions, all for piano, owed more to Debussy's whole-toned Impressionism than to anything the Creole Jazz Band could ever cook up. Meanwhile, his only Dixieland piece bore the kind of title that sadly seemed to sum things up for him: "Davenport Blues."

"The family ignored and deplored Bix's musical career"

Ralph Berton, who died in 1993, was in his early teens when Bix's musical flower was just beginning to blossom. In 1923, his older brother Vic took over as manager of Bix's band the Wolverines, engaging the unseasoned crew across the Midwest and cutting the first of Bix's many classic recordings. Ralph insinuated himself onto the scene as much as he could, openly idolizing the round-faced cornet player who was always getting lost or forgetting to eat or sleep. There were times when Bix would crash at the Bertons' Chicago apartment and then wake up to discuss with young Ralph the intricacies of Debussy's "Ibéria"--snobby and thus verboten material for most other jazzmen. A ruffled Bix would then seat himself at the Baby Grand and by ear work through the standards of the day, blending his love for classical with his lust for swing, lending otherwise drab ditties with unheard-of depth.

"Then, and often thereafter, I observed that this delving into new musical depths brought Bix no visible satisfaction," Berton recalled. "On the contrary, he seemed to experience mostly a deep sense of frustration. He scowled, winced, exclaimed in muttered bursts of self-disgust and exasperation. It did not matter that what he was finding struck the listener--me, for example--as charming, arresting, beautiful. Listeners not only didn't count; they simply weren't there--I often had that sense."

Berton's *Remembering Bix* is ever rich with this kind of sadness. A new prologue by the author's son John recalls his own childhood, "awaking at three a.m. for a glass of water and wandering down the dim hallway toward the comforting tapping of the typewriter keys." As it would happen, the resulting memoir has a late-night feel to it, pumped as it is full of so much emotion: gushing admiration, nostalgia, regret, even anger. The latter is directed exclusively at

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the buttoned-down Beiderbecke family back in Davenport. "The family ignored and deplored Bix's musical career when he was alive," Berton charges, "but after his death had belatedly apprised them of his fame in the outside world, they all developed a tendency to make a prudent buck out of it by exploiting his memory, shedding crocodile tears over his genius, his sweetness, &c."

Berton, who was a professor of jazz history and editor of *Down Beat* magazine, indulges, here and there, in what-ifs. What if Bix had been supported early on in his music? What if he had been given the opportunity to slow down for once and explore his muse instead of seeming to always run from it? "Who can say where the road might have led then?" wrote Berton. "America might even have produced what it never yet has, a major classical composer; and Little Bickie might have still been with us, full of years...."

And who knows? An otherwise musically literate fellow like myself, growing up with the purloined letter right in front of his face as it were, might have understood so much earlier what the name Bix Beiderbecke has meant to music.