

Excerpts from
Bix: Man and Legend

Note by Don Hassler: The excerpts below are quoted from the book, *Bix: Man and Legend*, by Richard M. Sudhalter, Philip R. Evans with William Dean Myatt (Schirmer Books: New York, 1974), pp. 143-162. This material describes Bix's brief stay in St. Louis from Sep 1925 to May 1926. He was playing with Frankie Trumbauer's Orchestra. Attention is drawn to the information about Damon "Bud" Hassler whose early musical career was closely entwined with the rise of jazz and swing music. Bud Hassler, and my father Earl Hassler, were first cousins. Their grandfather was Thomas B. Hassler, b. 1840.

"The Arcadia Ballroom, a hangar-like wooden building with a stone facade, had begun life in the early days of the century as Dreamland and adopted its new name shortly after World War I. Its recessed dance floor, one step down, ran the entire length of the hall and was ringed by what Ruth recalled as "a kind of banister." Across the north end of the room, opposite the front entrance, was a large stage. Here the ballroom's featured band played from 8:30 to half past midnight every night but Monday, and did a Sunday matinee for younger dancers. Off to the left was a second, smaller bandstand for the relief band, a six-piece dixieland group from New Orleans which had opened as the "Crescent City Jazzers" but soon become the "Arcadian Serenaders" for obvious reasons.

The band had opened on Tuesday, September 8, 1925 after a flurry of rehearsals and a few preliminary personnel changes. Ray Thurston had replaced the teenager Irving Kordick on trombone at \$80 a week, third highest salary in the group next to Bix's \$90 and Tram's \$125 leader's fee. Other St. Louis sidemen, including Charles "Pee Wee" Russell on clarinet and alto sax, got \$75. Trumbauer, Spaeth and Russell were the reed section, with Lou Feldman at the piano, Wayne Jacobson on banjo and Edgar "Eggie" Krewinhaus on drums, later replaced by Pee Wee's friend Dee Orr, from Texas. Trumbauer had been unable to find a suitable tuba player, so he brought in Anton "John" Casertani, of the St. Louis Symphony, on string bass.

On Wednesday, November 4, (year?), Bix and Sterling Bose moved into room 608 at the Coronado Hotel, just three blocks from the Arcadia and a lot closer to the Sheridan apartments than the Majestic had been. The week also brought two other developments. First, Anton Casertani left to begin the winter symphony season. His replacement was Dan Gaebe, a tall, shambling, good-natured St. Louisian whose chief instrument was a tuba but who had started to develop on string bass as well.

Karl Spaeth, too, decided to go. "It was purely a matter of domestic problems," he said. "I had a mother and a home in Detroit. I couldn't live in two places on the \$75 a week Tram was paying me." He returned to Detroit and joined Ray Miller. His replacement was Damon "Bud" Hassler, a classically-trained musician who had worked in the violin section of the St. Louis Symphony and knew the theoretical side of music. He had met Bix on dates with Jansen and Gill and taken an immediate interest in him, all the more so after discovering their shared interest in modern concert music.

Hassler had met Pee Wee Russell earlier in 1925 while the clarinetist and his friend from Texas, pianist Terry Shand, were with Herb Berger's orchestra at the Coronado Hotel. Around that time Berger's trombone chair became free, and Shand wrote to a trombonist he knew in Texas who, he said, could more than fill it. Less than a week later Weldon "Jack" Teagarden rolled into town - only to find himself trapped in the same union bind which was nearly to prevent Trumbauer several months later from using Bix.

Teagarden had not bothered to come in quietly and work the obligatory "casuals" first, but instead showed up ready to join Berger - only to be turned down flat by the union. Predictably, he did a few jobs with Jansen and one or two others, then he and Shand elected to move on. Hassler recalled that "neither of them could read music, and after a few trial jobs they couldn't get an work. So a gang of the local dance band men took up a collection so they could buy gas to get back down South. They had come with their wives and were stranded in a cheap rooming house, but they had this Model T Ford which eventually got them back to Texas."

Until now, most of Bix's spare time musical occupations had been with jazz. When he wasn't seeing Ruth, he and Pee Wee sought out black musicians active on the other side of town. Over at John Estes' Chauffeurs' Club at 3133 Pine Boulevard, the regulars included the trumpet -saxophone doubler Charlie Creath, who had been active for more than a decade on Streckfus riverboats with the Kentucky-born pianist Fate Marable. St. Louis, a major port of call for the big boats, had always been a musical way-station for black jazz men.

Among musicians either resident or often in town were the trombonist Alber Wynn, clarinet men Horance Eubanks and William Thornton Boue, cornetist Dewey Jackson and trumpeter Leonard Davis, later a mainstay of Charlie Johnson's big band at Samll's Paradise in New York. They played a rough-hewn but vigorous kind of jazz, directly descended from the New Orleans beginnings but not as refined as what was happening on the South Side of Chicago. Thornton Blue's spiky, acid clarinet typified the style and was itself a standout. St. Louis was pretty segregated at this time," said Hassler, but the common interest in jazz that we had with the Negro musicians dissolved many of the social barriers. We wouldn't have dared play in public with them, but after hours was another story."

After the symphony season began, Bix and Pee Wee expanded their activities to include Friday afternoon matinee concerts at the Odeon Building. Bud Hassler found out about it and started going along as musical tour guide and walking encyclopedia. "I had explained to Bix about some of the works he'd heard, and he decided he wanted me to go with him from then on. I guess we went to a half a dozen concerts during the season this way. Bix with a jug in his jacket pocket and a straw sticking out of it. 'Big Red' Schiezer - Bix, for some reason, called him Ponzi - wasn't only the bouncer, but a bootlegger too, and Bix always left the ballroom with a couple of pints.

“Bix had a really remarkable ear, jazz or no. He had perfect pitch and could distinguish A-440 from A-444 without preparation. There were two such tuning bars in a local music store, and he could easily tell one from the other. If you struck a handful of notes on a piano, at random or not, he could call every note at once. Apart from this talent, which he sort of took for granted, Bix was just another ordinary guy, with a keen sense of humor. Liked to date girls, even liked to play a bit of golf (when he was sober enough to get up during the day) and would have certainly laughed at the thought of ever becoming the almost legendary figure that he is today.”

Ironically, said Thurston, Bose was the only member of the Serenaders who could read music while Bix, his idol, was the only man in the Trumbauer group who could not. “When we rehearsed, the rest of us would use music but Bix would have to learn the melodies by memory. Before we played anything on the job that was not a jam tune, he always asked me what the first tone was . . . but once he started a number his memory was perfect and his playing unerring. Hah! When you started to tell him about notes, he’d say, “Talk to me in concert; it’s the only way I understand.” He thought only in terms of concert pitch, thought of his horn as a concert instrument, with valves one and three as “C” instead of “D” the way most trumpet players think of them. Partially because of this, he rarely played open tones; instead he’d rely to a marked degree on the first and third together and third alone. This produced a sort of ‘jug tone’ effect, and gave his phrasing and articulation to a different effect from the orthodox players, and beautiful it was to hear.

“He had no range at all High ‘G’ concert - played, by the way, with third valve rather than the standard one and two - was about the limit and not too many of them. But his playing was remarkably accurate. He never sounded strained or lost. He could play anything that he could think. As for music itself - aside from saying he liked Ethel Waters’ singing, he never talked about it with me.”

But he did with Bud Hassler. The more often they attended concerts, the more Bix wanted to know about the theoretical side of what he was hearing. By this time, said Hassler, Bix had formed distinct, if somewhat one-sided tastes within the symphonic repertoire. “His favorite composers were Debussy, especially for the Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, Ravel for the Daphnis and Chloe suites, and Stravinsky for the ballets, especially Petrouchka and The Firebird. He felt that Beethoven, though heroic in stature, lacked the same sense of intricate cadence and resolution in harmonic structure; in other words, he felt that he could hear many missing parts in Beethoven’s orchestration.”

Some Beiderbecke judgments, he said, were far more categorical. Mozart? “Childish.” Brahms? “Pedantic and repetitive.” Chopin and Liszt were “beer and chocolate soda, respectively.” In the main, said Hassler, only the impressionist and modern tonal composers captured Bix’s imagination, especially harmonically. “I tried to explain the classical masters and what they were driving at, but he wasn’t much impressed. Tchaikovsky as an orchestrator could hold his attention, but not, for example, Mendelssohn. In fact, one Friday night after we had heard the ‘Italian’ Symphony Bix started faking in the themes of the last movement into some dixieland thing we were

playing. I gave him a funny look and said, 'Hey, you feel pretty long-haired tonight, don't you?' and he laughed and said, 'Mendelssohn doesn't sound any better to me even in the 'Jazz Me blues.'"

Perhaps as a result of his friendship with Hassler, Bix announced one November day that he was going up to see Joe Gustat, first trumpet with the symphony, about taking lessons and "maybe developing some legit technique." Gustat, said Hassler, was well-known to jazzmen as "a scholarly guy, a profound musician, a great technician, one of the best - and a good guy along with it. He headed the Gustat Institute of Music in downtown St. Louis, where most of the first -chair symphony men taught."

The old man greeted Bix warmly. He had heard the Wolverines' records and had even gone to see the Arcadia band. He more than reciprocated Bix's admiration for him. "Play for me," he said, settling into a chair in a studio cluttered with instrument cases and trumpets of more sizes and shapes than Bix Beiderbecke had ever seen before. Bix played. They talked. He played some more and Gustat demonstrated some technical points for him. "Look, Bix," he said at length, "let's not kid ourselves. From a symphony man's viewpoint you play all wrong. Totally and completely. Your fingering is all backwards - I'm not sure I even understand how you get some of those notes to come out in tune. I certainly couldn't that way. Your whole way of phrasing wouldn't fit in a symphony orchestra. Your attack is completely unconventional, and you use vibrato in a way - well, you'd have to abandon it altogether if you studied legitimate playing. Frankly, I don't think it would be worth it to you. Trying to change someone like you would be putting a wild animal in a cage - and to what end?"

Bix's face betrayed his discouragement. "But I want to learn to play properly. And I want to learn how to read. And -" Reading you can learn anywhere. All it takes is work. But why change what you've developed? Look at me - I'm a musician in a cage." Bix started to interrupt, but Gustat waved him aside. "No - I mean it. I've been trained that way all my life, and I've been playing the trumpet a good many years. All I know is what's written on the page they hand me - portions of Beethoven or Brahms or whoever. I'm on their leashes. You won't believe this, maybe you'll never understand it, but I envy you. You have a great, God-given gift, and many of us would easily consider trading what we have for what you have. Be proud of it, my boy, don't try to change it."

What passed through the mind of Bismark and Agatha Beiderbecke's son in that moment will never be known, but it is hardly difficult to guess. Here was Joseph Gustat, a man the Beiderbecke family would have instantly admired, directly contradicting one of the most basic articles of their musical and social creed. He was saying that Bix's jazz, far from being frivolous or degenerate, represented a new form of virtuosity, perhaps deplored under the values of the middle class but deeply admired by the practitioners of the very music the Davenporters found acceptable. Gustat's endorsement could only feed Bix's growing sense of conflict between conditioning and personal inclination, a conflict which was to reassert itself far more strongly in his association with the Paul Whiteman orchestra and subsequent personal disintegration. But here were the ingredients: the

shaping of attitudes by family and education, pitted against a direction dictated by talent and interest; this, with Bix's gradual realization of how severely his theoretical and technical shortcomings as a self-taught musician could impede his development within his chosen idiom, presented a dilemma which proved, in the end, insoluble.

There was now little doubt in anyone's mind that Bix Beiderbecke was a major, even revolutionary, jazz talent. Hassler, working beside both men nightly, compared him and Trumbauer. The saxophonist had achieved a widespread following through his work with Ray Miller and the Benson Orchestra. His solo on the 1924 record of "Sam" with the Mound City Blue Blowers had become a set piece initiated note-for-note by any saxophonist aspiring to recognition as a jazzman. Trumbauer, not Bix, was the attraction of the Arcadia band. Yet for Hassler and many others, Bix was the more interesting figure.

"Tram, as great as he was, played mostly 'prop' stuff - in other words, the same licks, however original, a million times over. Formulae, attractive because they were different, but formulae nevertheless. But not Bix - he played a million things that will never be repeated. . . To get a perspective on the guy, you had to hear the way the trumpeters played before him and after him. The criterion for a jazzman before him was how many mutes he carried. Hell, Bix didn't even own a mute. He made them all change - and that includes Louis, Red Nichols, Oliver, Louis Panico, Frankie Quartell, and all the others. They just followed the road Bix built."

Vernon Brown waxed no less ecstatic, and rather more vivid, on his reaction to playing alongside Bix: "I don't mean to be dramatic, but it was like a bud opening up its petals into a flower. It was a shock to have heard, for the first time, anyone with that kind of natural ability.

Even allowing for a certain amount of hyperbole in such paeans, it seems safe to say that Bix was making a substantial impact on the jazz and dance music fraternity. Both Hassler and Tommy Satterfield, house arranger at the Missouri Theater down the street from the Arcadia, were intrigued by the constant musical push-pull going on within him, and by his attempts at the keyboard to incorporate elements of one music into another. Satterfield, too, later joined Paul Whiteman, and tailored many outstanding scores to reflect ideas he and Bix had discussed during St. Louis days.

After several sessions with Gustat, Bix resolved to do something about his reading. He started with an ultimatum to Bud Hassler, who by now was doing most of the Trumbauer band's arranging; no more parts written in concert. "Give me regular Bb parts. I've got to learn to read properly." Many of Hassler's arrangements came about in bits and pieces, usually the result of routines worked out on the stand. Someone would throw out an idea, another would pick it up, and it developed from there. Trumbauer had been deeply impressed by some of Rube Bloom's "advanced" scores for the Ray Miller band, and he and Hassler began to experiment with five-part voicing incorporating major seventh, ninth and eleventh chords. Bud remembered one arrangement of the pop tune "I Ain't Got Nobody", built around descending whole-tone scales voiced in five parts for two brass and three reeds.

With Bix as unofficial ringleader, the band was just as quick to toss out popular conventions of the day if they didn't fit the "advanced" thinking. No more ending tunes on tonic seventh chords, a commonplace with jazzbands since the heyday of the ODJB. Bix, said Hassler, dismissed such trite devices as "corny" or "cornfed". He was a great one for inventing terms like that. "Cornfed" was a special favorite of his; I'd never heard the term used like that before, but I can't say it actually originated with him. I'd not be surprised, though." Other jazz slang, such as calling wrong or muffed notes "clams," also appear to have begun with Bix, according to musicians who worked with him. One of Ray Thurston's fondest memories was of Bix expressing his contempt for a given piece of "corn" by sticking his tongue out, hayseed-style, rubbing his thumb up and down against it while going "ts-ts-ts" or "a-zick-a-zick-a-zicka . . ." Sometimes as a gag he would play deliberately corny choruses, "and he was damned good at it, funny as all getout."

Then, as now, jazzmen were among the first to develop new "in" words and phrases unfamiliar to the general public. Eventually they would find their way into common usage - by which time the musicians had long since discarded them and moved on to new ones. Marijuana, brought up the Mississippi by musicians and riverboat roustabouts and still all but unknown to the general public, was "muggles" or "gage" or "mouta" shortened to "mout." Wingy Manone, said Hassler, was one of several who had a regular supply brought up to St. Louis on the Streckfus boats. Use among musicians was widespread, though far more casual than was the case in later years. Even in 1925, regular smokers took to addressing one another as "Lindbergh" to indicate that they were flying high. And "mout" was cheap; the average price per joint in the speakeasies around the riverfront was about a dime.

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