

Jimmy McPartland: Bix Beiderbecke—he had just about everything that I looked for in a musician. And when he came up on those Wolverines records, why, me and the rest of the gang—we just wore the records out.

We copied off the little arrangements, and what was going on in the ensembles. One thing was definite that we would never do—copy any solo exactly.

We didn't believe in copying anything outside of the arrangement. An introduction, ending, a first ending or an interlude, we would copy those, naturally. But never a solo. For instance, if Bix would take a solo, I wouldn't copy that. I would just play the way I felt.

But I was tremendously influenced by Bix, and hearing the Wolverines was a step forward for all of the gang. We got their numbers off, and added them to our repertoire.

My brother had found a job for the band, with Tesch, Bud, Lannigan, Dave North and no cornet, at radio station WGN. They called the band the Blue Flyers, and they were doing great.

I was going to join the Flyers when I received a wire one fateful day from Dick Voynow, pianist and manager of the

Wolverines. It read: CAN YOU JOIN WOLVERINES IN NEW YORK REPLACING BIX BEIDERBECKE AT SALARY OF EIGHTY-SEVEN DOLLARS FIFTY PER WEEK QUERYMARK STOP ANSWER IMMEDIATELY STOP.

I learned later that Bix had received an offer from Goldkette.

Of course, I showed this wire to everybody. Though I patted myself on the back, I was feeling doubtful. Was it a gag? Was someone playing a joke on me?

All the guys said, 'No, you're crazy! Sure, it's real. Take it; it's the greatest honour in the world.' So I said I would. They advised me to wire right back, and I did: SEND TRANSPORTATION STOP I ACCEPT THE JOB STOP. MCPARTLAND.

The rail fare was thirty-two fifty from Chicago to New York; that was third-class coach, no Pullman or anything. And that was exactly the sum Voynow sent me. Dick Voynow was handling all their business, and he said to leave immediately.

Well, I left that same night—with just my bag and my little beaten-up cornet. It *was* beat-up, too, and getting worse and worse. As I pressed the valves it would go clank, clank, clank. Gee! A noisy affair!

Taking Bix's place was the biggest thing that had happened to me. The Wolverines were *the* jazz band in the country, so far as we were concerned. And Bix—as I say, I had never met him, but just hearing him play was enough.

I've heard many great trumpeters since those days, but I haven't heard another like Bix. Somehow or other his style, the cleanliness and feeling, was lovely.

Let's call him the master and leave it at that.

I finally got into New York about six in the morning. It was the first time I'd been there in my life, and a beautiful hour to arrive. From the station I called up Dick Voynow, who said, 'Hop in a cab and come to the Somerset Hotel.' I got over there and started talking to Voynow. He 'phoned Bix, who was just coming in, pretty high.

So I met Bix.

The Wolverines were rehearsing that afternoon, and by the time I got there I was very nervous. Of course, I had memorised all the arrangements from the band's records, and when Dick asked what I wanted to play, I said: 'Anything. *Jazz Me Blues*, *Farewell*, *Riverboat Shuffle*, *Big Boy*. Anything.'

They said, 'Do you know all those tunes?'

I said, 'Sure.'

So Voynow said, 'Okay, let's go!' And he beat off and I just started right in. I knew all Bix's lead parts—so BOOM! I must have surprised those guys; their chins dropped, and everything else.

I played their routine, took my solo where Bix used to take his. And when the number was finished they patted me on the back and said, 'Great, kid,' and all that stuff. It made me feel good; I was no more nervous—got my cockiness back.

We went through some more tunes and I was in, right then and there.

Now Bix, from the first, had been very reticent. He didn't say anything until the rehearsal was over. Then he came over. 'Kid,' he said, 'I'll tell you what you do. You'll move in with me. I like you.'

That was what he said. So I moved in with Bix.

As we roomed together, he was able to show me the different tunes and arrangements the band had, coach me in certain little figures he used in his playing. Then, at night, we would go to the job—the Wolverines were working at the Cinderella Ballroom on Forty-eighth and Broadway—and play the tunes together.

Yes, for about five nights we both played in the band. First Bix would take the lead, then he'd play second in with me to break me in. He was an enormous help and encouragement, and I got to admire the man as much as the musician.

I must tell you about his generosity to me, a complete stranger to him until I took his place in the Wolverines. After a few days he asked me, 'How can you blow a horn like that? It's a terrible thing.'

I've told you that my cornet was beat, had leaks in it and everything. But I had not realised how horrible it was until Bix took me over. At that time, he was using a horn called the Conn Victor cornet—a long model cornet and a beautiful thing. He had me blow it and it sounded great.

Said Bix, 'You need a horn like this, Jimmy, come on out with me.' Out we went to see Voynow, who gave Beiderbecke some dough. Then we went over to the Conn company, where Bix picked up four or five horns and tried them out. Finally he said, 'This is the one, Jim, for you.'

He just gave me the cornet—period. So that I would have a good instrument to play. I remember him saying, 'I like you, kid, because you sound like I do but you don't copy me. You play your own stuff; you're a good guy.'

That was nice, you know, coming from him. I had patterned my playing after his, but had tried to develop my own self at the same time. That was what we believed, in the Austin gang in Chicago: play the way you feel, yourself!

Jimmy McPartland: The next time I saw Bix was when I'd become the leader of the Wolverines and the group was now composed mainly of the Austin High gang. It was quite a combo, and everybody came around to hear us, especially Louis Armstrong.

Louis was playing then over at the Sunset Café, which started later than us and went on till 4 a.m. or so. He came over two or three evenings a week and sat in back of the band, listening to us and chuckling all over the place. He was about twenty-five then.

Pee Wee Russell, Bix and Frankie Trumbauer were working down at Hudson Lake, about eighty miles south in Indiana. Every Monday, their night off, they would come up to hear us. When we got finished, we would all go off together and catch Louis or Jimmie Noone—another of our favourites. Sometimes we sat in with Louis at the Sunset, or with Noone at the Apex. The Apex Club was one of the regular stops.

Bix also made a point of taking me to hear Ethel Waters. It was 1927, I think, and she was in a show called *Miss Calico*. She sang, man, she really sang. We were enthralled with her. We liked Bessie Smith very much, too, but Waters had more polish, I guess you'd say. She phrased so wonderfully, the natural quality of her voice was so fine, and she sang the way she felt—that knocked us out always with any artist.

Jimmy McPartland: Bix didn't talk much, and there was certainly no conversation when a record was on. After it was over, we'd talk about how the chords resolved and, in Stravinsky or Holst, how different and interesting the harmony was.

He did like to talk about Stravinsky, Holst, Eastwood Lane, Debussy. I remember, about 1929 in New York, he took me to a Stravinsky concert at Carnegie Hall given by the New York Philharmonic. We used to talk about writing a jazz symphony. The plan was to give the soloists a terrific background with a good beat and then let them take off. Nothing ever came of the idea, but, as you know, he was very interested in writing. I wish he'd put down on paper more of what I know was in his head.

At sessions he'd often show me sections of what he'd written

—things that later became *In a Mist*, *Flashes*, et cetera. He'd play a section and ask what I thought of it and then would play it another way to see if it could sound better.

In his own cornet playing, Bix could read well enough but was never a quick sight reader. He'd practise a part over by himself and then play it skilfully with the large band. Actually, he could create better than those guys could write.

As for why he never switched to trumpet, he used to say that the trumpet had a 'pee-wee' tone. One thing about his jazz records is that I think it's remarkable he sounded as good as he did, carrying all that dead weight he had for accompaniment.

Bix contributed a lot to jazz. I think he helped bring it polish. He made it more musical. His technique was excellent, his intonation was great. So was his harmonic sense and his application of it on the cornet and piano. He was the first man in jazz I heard use the whole tone or augmented scale. I think almost any jazz musician—besides all the brass men—have one way or another been influenced by Bix.

One thing we talked about a lot was the freedom of jazz. People used to ask Bix to play a chorus just as he had recorded it. He couldn't do it. 'It's impossible,' he told me once. 'I don't feel the same way twice. That's one of the things I like about jazz, kid, I don't know what's going to happen next. Do you?'

Jimmy McPartland: Sometime before I began to travel with Ben Pollack, Bix had already joined Paul Whiteman. They were on a tour and were heading for Chicago. I got a call at eight one morning from Bix. He'd left his tuxedo at the cleaners in the last town, and he asked if he could borrow mine. Then and always he could have anything I had.

All during the date at the theatre, a troupe of us gathered between shows and at night at the Three Deuces and jammed. Bing Crosby would play the cymbals or the drums if there were no drummer. Bix always preferred to play piano at a session, and this time he asked me to play his new Bach cornet, the best horn he'd ever had.

I fell in love with it, and Bix asked, 'Would you like to have a horn like this?' He took me over to the Dixie Music House after the next show, put down one hundred dollars and said, 'That's all the money I have with me. But I guess you can scrape up the other fifty. You can give it back to me sometime.'

I'll never forget that week. We played almost all the time he wasn't on stage. I never did see the tux again. Do you think I cared? I still have that horn, by the way. Bix warmed it up at the theatre for a few shows, then I used it for some time. Now my four-year-old grandson, Dougie Kassel, has it.

People have asked me often what Bix was like as a person. Well, he was very reticent. His main interest in life was music, period. It seemed as if he just existed outside of that.

I think one of the reasons he drank so much was that he was a perfectionist and wanted to do more with music than any man possibly could. The frustration that resulted was a big factor, I think.