

Pee Wee Russell: I first met Bix I'd say in the latter part of 1926. That was in the Arcadia Ballroom in St Louis. Frankie Trumbauer had the band there and he had brought Bix down from Detroit where both had been working with Jean Goldkette. This was a summer job and we worked the season at the Arcadia. After we finished the season we went to Hudson Lake. You see, this was a Goldkette unit. We had the book and Jean was at the office from where he sent bands out. I had heard Bix on records before—those Gennett records with Tommy Dorsey and Paul Mertz and the other guys—and I had heard him in Chicago. There used to be a band at the Rendezvous that Charlie Straight had. Those were the speakeasy days and Bix used to come late and play with that band. It would sometimes go to seven or eight in the morning. But I had never worked with Bix until St Louis.

Sonny Lee, who later played with Jimmy Dorsey, was playing trombone with this band at the Arcadia, and Sonny used to live at my home. I came home one afternoon and there was Bix with Sonny in the living-room playing Bix records. It gave me a kick—a big thrill to have Bix in my home. Among musicians, even at that time, Bix had a reputation. Very few of us understood what he was doing; even in Chicago only a limited number did. In fact, it was the guys like Krupa, Goodman, Sullivan, Freeman, Dave Tough and Tesch, naturally, that really appreciated him. The other musicians, like in St Louis, understood what he was doing on a much smaller scale. And as for the management, he wasn't even featured with the band.

The thing about Bix's music is that he drove a band. He more or less made you play whether you wanted to or not. If you had any talent at all he made you play better. It had to do for one thing with the way he played lead. It had to do with his whole feeling for ensemble playing. He got a very large tone with a cornet. Records never quite reproduced his sound. Some come fairly close but the majority don't.

Then there were the men he usually recorded with. He had a hard time with some of those records. I don't mean that the men he recorded with weren't musicians. I mean he wasn't in bad company, but they didn't belong in a jazz band and Bix had been raised in jazz. So it was all due to them that a majority of the records didn't quite catch what Bix could do. But Bix's disposition wasn't one to complain. He wasn't able to say, I don't like this guy, let's give him the gate and get so and so. He was never a guy to complain about the company he was in. Like I say, they were good musicians and they could make it with Goldkette where they were supposed to do certain things. But they weren't for jazz.

Without a doubt, music was all Bix lived for. I remember we used to have a Sunday afternoon thing at the Arcadia Ballroom. Ordinarily the band would complain about the extra work, but Bix would really look forward to it. He said he liked to see the kids dance on Sunday afternoon. He liked to watch them do things like the Charleston, et cetera. He said he liked it because the kids had such a fine sense of rhythm. And, in their way, the kids knew what Bix was doing. They knew he was doing something different because he made them want to dance.

We used to have little head arrangements, written by some of the men in the band. They were good musicians in the band. We had a bass player, for example, from the St Louis Symphony for a while. We would do little things once in a while so drastic or rather so musically advanced that when we had a damn nice thing going the manager would come up and say, 'What in God's name are you doing?' I remember on *I Ain't Got Nobody* we had an arrangement with five-part harmony for the three saxes and the two brass. And the writing went down chromatically on a whole-tone scale basis. It was unheard of in those days. 'For God's sake!' the manager would yell out—and naturally we couldn't explain it to him. That sort of music became more or less of a novelty with the people though. And they'd say at times, 'Play those awful things!' Bix was instrumental in things like that. Most of the writing at that time was done by Bud Hassler. He was a tenor player.

As for Bix's compositions, this is the background of *In a Mist*. Tommy Satterfield, who was working with the Skouras brothers at that time, I don't know if anybody knows this story—Tommy

had an office and did all the scoring for the large pit bands. Being an arranger, he took a liking to Bix and what he was doing and he took down *In a Mist* for him. You see, Bix played it for him on the piano. It was the first time that the song had ever gotten written down. I think Ferdie Grofe helped Bix with *Candlelights* later and some of the others.

Bix had a miraculous ear. As for classical music, Bix liked little things like some of those compositions of MacDowell and Debussy—very light things. Delius, for example. Then he made a big jump from that sort of thing to Stravinsky and stuff like that. There'd be certain things he would hear in some modern classical music, like whole tones, and he'd say, why not do it in a jazz band? What's the difference? Music doesn't have to be the sort of thing that's put in brackets? Then later it got to be like a fad and everybody did it, but they wouldn't know what the devil it was all about.

We would often order a score of a new classical work, study it, and then request it from the St Louis Symphony. And we'd get ourselves a box for those concerts when they did a programme we all liked. It would be Bix, Hassler and I. We'd haunt them to play scores that we wanted to hear. Stuff like the *Firebird Suite*.

Rudolf Ganz was conducting at that time. We got to know him. We had the connection through Trumbauer's bass player. There was a soloist clarinet in the St Louis Symphony, Tony Sarlie. I used to try to get him to teach me, and I studied with him a little. I wish I had studied more.

Anyway, we'd get those requests in. We weren't exactly like jitterbugs. It was on a different scale. I guess you could call us a different type of jitterbug. At least we were trying to learn something. And we wanted to hear these scores played well. You see, we knew what was supposed to happen because we had taken the scores with us and followed the work with them. Later on, Don Murray, Bix and I used to go to concerts in New York. Murray was a very, very clever arranger. He and Bill Challis.

Pee Wee Russell: I think Paul Whiteman will bear me out on this story. Anyway, we were all living in the Forty-fourth Street Hotel in New York and there was a concert at Carnegie Hall. I forget what the programme was. Whiteman had a box for it, and on that night his band was doing the Chesterfield House. Whiteman invited Bix and Murray, and Bix invited me and, at the last minute, Whiteman said he couldn't make it. So the three of us were quite despondent and we ordered some more whisky. Whiteman called back and said, 'Bix, I called the place and told them it was okay for you to use the box.' So we stopped in to celebrate our new thing and we drank some more whisky. We were feeling pretty good. We were dressed for the part and enjoying it immensely.

When we were in the box, I remember Don Murray was sitting right on the edge of his chair. There were lorgnettes all around us. We smelled awful bad, but we looked good. So Murray was sitting on the edge of his chair—remember we had all been celebrating—the chair slipped and Murray fell off. Bix and I were gentlemen enough to not notice anything. We were on our best behaviour. Murray quietly got up and sat down again on the edge of his chair. At intermission, Don apologised profusely. After intermission, in the middle of the next movement, Murray became excited—the chair slipped again—and he fell off. Bix and I didn't say a word. Neither did Murray. We pulled apart the curtain that led into the box and we left. None of us saying a word to each other. We went into a bar and stood there drinking. You see, we were ashamed and were conscious of the other people at the concert. It was no fault of Murray either. But at that bar at first we still didn't say a word—we didn't want it to be any more embarrassing for him that it already was. Finally, Murray started berating himself so we told him not to.

Pee Wee Russell: As for what caused Bix to destroy himself, well, in that era, naturally where he started, around Indiana, there was that thing with the hip-bottle and the gin—the 'twenties and all that stuff. Later, when he had acquired a name, he could get a bottle of whisky any time of day or night. Now Bix enjoyed a drink but he was human too. Everybody likes privacy. Privacy enough to sleep and eat. But it was impossible for him to get any. There were always people in his room. They would knock on the door

even at 6 a.m., and it was impossible for him because of the kind of person he was to insult anybody, to say get out of here.

I remember how, at one hotel, he used to leave word that he wasn't in. So some fellows would check into the hotel, take a room on the floor below Bix's room; then they'd come up and rap and pound on the door and you'd have to answer. He even had a piano in the room, and, when he had a spare moment, he'd try to get a composition started, but with all those people always hanging around he didn't have a chance. In a sense, Bix was killed by his friends. But I think the term is being used loosely. Because they weren't his friends. They were the kind of people who liked to be able to say, 'Last night I was up at Bix's and oh, was he drunk! Gee, you should have seen his room!' You know that type of people. They wanted to say they were there. I don't think I have to say any more about that type of people. And Bix couldn't say no. He couldn't say no to anybody.

I remember one Victor date we did. Bix was working in the Whiteman band at the time. He had hired me for the date but rather than hurt anybody's feelings he also hired Jimmy Dorsey and Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey and everybody.

Every time somebody would walk into the door at Plunkett's, the bar we hung out at, Bix would say, 'Gee, what am I going to do?' So he'd go up to the guy and hire him for the date. He didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings. So he went way over his budget and we had to scrape cab fare to get back from the date.

Bix came from a good home life. He had the best. His people were very well-to-do. Anything more I could tell you about Bix is all history anyway and has been written about.