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Bix: What Made Him Unique?

Bix Beiderbecke was one of the early innovators in the field of jazz. His playing style on cornet evolved from his study of the styles of the many cornet players he had heard on the riverboats that traveled through Bix's hometown, Davenport, Iowa, during his childhood. Jimmy McPartland said of him, "He got his style from Emmit Hardy coming up from New Orleans on the riverboats. . . He was influenced by him. You have to be influenced by someone."[1] Emmit Hardy was an unrecorded cornet player from New Orleans who had a playing style very similar to Beiderbecke's. But what was Bix Beiderbecke's style and what made this style unique?

There are many diverse opinions and ideas on Bix's playing. Mark Gridley states "(Bix) can be classified with neither the New Orleans groups nor the Chicago groups. . . He and Armstrong were the leading trumpeters during the late 1920's and early 1930's."[2] Jimmy McPartland stated it simply, "He used harmony."[3] Andy Van Sickle, a drummer with Hoagy Carmichael, said, "He was not a great technician but he played pretty."[4] There are many different ways of describing Bix's playing style.

This paper will concentrate on the period of time Beiderbecke played with the Wolverines. The Wolverines was the first group with which Bix played and recorded. It was through his association with them that Bix became widely known as a jazz soloist. There are only fifteen recorded examples of Bix Beiderbecke's work with the Wolverines. The Wolverines was a different and exciting group of the time, but what made them different? When Jimmy McPartland was asked that question, he answered, "Bix. Bix influenced the Wolverines and made them what they were."[5]

Much that has been said and written about Beiderbecke's playing centers around his use of harmony and how "pretty" he played. From looking at transcriptions of his solos, one can discover that the singularity of his style comes from his use of scale tones not commonly employed for his time period. Three solos will be discussed in an effort to point out some of Bix's unique playing style.

"Copenhagen" is a tune that was recorded by the Wolverines on May 6, 1924. The Wolverines heard this tune played by the composer, Charlie Davis, at the Ohio Theater in Indianapolis, Indiana. They learned the tune from the composer and adapted it to their repertoire.

Beiderbecke's solo on "Copenhagen" is sixteen measures long, twice through the eight bar chord progression. The solo begins uncharacteristically for Bix. He bends into an e^{b}" from a c". Bix seldom used the vocal inflections common among the brass players of the time.

A large number of "blues" notes see use in this short solo, especially the e^{b} which is the flat third in the key of C. Repeatedly here the flat third of the key has a different function in the chord being played, but the tone fits into the chord. Beiderbecke uses this e^{b}" as a flat seventh in measures 1,2, and 10, as a flat fifth in measures 4 and 12, and as a flat ninth in measure 13. The e^{b}" is used as an upper extension of the chord in measure 6. It is used as a flat thirteenth in this measure. An e^{b}" is used as a flat third only in measure 15.

Non-chord tones are used regularly in this solo. Some of these tones are used as neighboring tones, as in measure 12, or as passing tones, as in measure 4. Others are not so easily explained as in measures 5, 6, 13, and 14. In measure 5 the three tones used are the tonic, the thirteenth, and the eleventh of a dominant seventh chord. Continuing in measure 6, Bix skips up to the flat thirteenth of the next chord also using the tonic and proceeding to the thirteenth and the eleventh but extends the pattern to the flat ninth. Measure 14 uses the eleventh and ninth extensively.

If one takes measures 5 and 6 together, it appears Beiderbecke is pushing the chord changes back one bar to arrive at the tonic chord early. Instead of a progression of D^7, G^7, C, C, with the two C measures occurring the clarinet break, the progression would be G^7, C, C, C, with the cornet arriving at the tonic before the clarinet break. Either interpretation is an antipation of the way future soloists would approach a solo.

This solo is a good example of how Bix Beiderbecke reworked melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic ideas through the solo. The two choruses are very similar. The first measure of each chorus has the same rhythm. Measures two and three of each chorus concentrate on the pitches of $e^{\flat}$" and c". Measures 5 and 13 begin exactly the same, rhythmically and melodically, but in measure 13 the syncopated pattern continues outlining the upper partials of the D^7 chord. After this departure, the similarity dissappears.

Beiderbecke's solo on "Copenhagen" is a good example of some of the progressive ideas he used in his unique style. The emphasis of non-chord tones occurs frequently and these tones are used in ways other than passing tones or neighboring tones as was common for the time. His use of related ideas in this solo is also a technique that is revolutionery for the time.

On June 20, 1924, the Wolverines returned to the recording studio. Richard Sudhalter says this about Bix and this recording session, "His solos on "I Need Some Pettin'", "Royal Garden Blues", and even on the scrambling "Tiger Rag" show him already in motion while his colleges are standing still."[6] From this session comes the next solo to be considered, "Royal Garden Blues".

One finds Bix Beiderbecke's solo on "Royal Garden Blues" is somewhat surprising after studying his solo on "Copenhagen". One would expect many blue notes, but on this solo using the blues progression, very few appear. The only blue notes occur in measures 2, 8, and 9. One blue note, when on considers the key (of C), does happen five times. This note is the flat fifth (F# or $B^{\flat}$).

Again Beiderbecke uses the non-chord tones and the non-harmonic tones as something besides passing or neighboring tones. Measure 2 has a phrase beginning on the sixth tone of the scale which may be interpreted as a thirteenth. Phrases beginning in measures 5, 7, 10, and 11 also have a starting pitch on a non-chord tone. Bix brings attention to these tones by beginning his ideas with the tones.

After beginning his phrases with the non-chord tone, Beiderbecke uses them throughout this solo. For example, in the last two beats of measure 2, Bix uses the eleventh, ninth, and seventh in a descending arpeggio, returning to the eleventh before resolving to the third of the chord. The use of arpeggiated non-chord tones brings attention to these notes. He does this also in measure 10.

Another device Bix uses to accentuate the non-chord tones is playing them for a long duration on accented beats. In measures 8, 9, 10, and 11 he has the sixth scale step with a note value of one beat or more. Non-chord tones are played on accented beats in measures 2, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11. Although the non-chord tones form an important aspect of this solo, they do not constitute its only significant point.

Beiderbecke has more melodic motion in this solo than in "Copenhagen". More notes are played with smaller note values and with fewer repeated notes played. Much of the melodic movement is by steps and small skips; a good example of this occurs in measure 2. This more active melody does not decrease the effect of the non-chord tones. He approaches and/or leaves these tones by skips.

Richard Sudhalter[7] and Frank Tirro[8] discuss Beiderbecke's use of correlated phrasing in his solos. Such use is shown in this solo with Bix's repeated use of a four-eighth note pattern. This pattern is usually three notes stepwise in one direction then leaping in the opposite direction. In measures 2, 3, and 8, Beiderbecke uses a descending scale like pattern and follows with an ascending leap, with measure 3 having an augmented rhythm. Measures 6, 9, and 10 find a leap followed by the three notes moving stepwise. Sometimes the stepwise motion is an interval of a third instead of a second, but the same idea is retained.

Again Bix uses many non-chord tones in his solo. In this solo it is more evident that these tones are being used as upper extensions of the chords such as ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths. This manner of usage is not extensively used until Bebop flourished in the late forties and fifties.

Beiderbecke's solos in "Copenhagen" and "Royal Garden Blues" are short solos. By contrast, the solo he played on "Tiger Rag" is thirty-two measures which forms one chorus. Another manner in which this solo differs from the other two is that the tempo is much quicker. A wider use of different note values is employed on "Tiger Rag". Beiderbecke again utilizes more blue notes, as in his solo on "Copenhagen".

"Tiger Rag" has a more driving feel which leads Bix to play a solo with more force. He does not use the non-chord tones as extensively as in the previous solos. The two types of non-chords tones he does accent in this solo are the sixth (or thirteenth) in a major chord as in measures 1, 6, 15, 18, and 20 and the ninth in a dominant seventh chord as in measures 11, 14, 22, and 29.

Altered tones used are mostly tones from the blues scale or chromatic passing tones. Examples of blue notes are found in measures 2, 6, 12, 18, and 22. In measure 16 a $d^{\flat}$ is found sounding against an F^{7} chord which is a flat sixth. This tone may be thought of as a flat thirteenth in a dominant seventh chord, as a flat third, a blue note, in the overall key of $B^{\flat}$. Chromatic passing tones are in measures 9, 10, 13, and 20. One interesting scale passage in measure 10 seems to contain a 'seventh' scale as described by David Baker in discussing Charlie Parker. This may have been an accident being no other scales such as this were found in Beiderbecke's solos, but it is an interesting little variation.

The rhythmic motion is quicker in this solo. The use of more consecutive eighth notes at a faster tempo causes this effect and also increases the drive or forward motion of the solo. At the beginning and end of the solo Beiderbecke does not make use of longer note values, but overall there is a more consistent use of smaller note values in this solo.

Bix uses embellishments more freely on this solo. At the beginning of the solo he uses a long bend into the note in measure 2 and utilizes two grace notes before the note in measure 3. A scoop is employed in measure 15, along with a 'ghost' or 'swallowed' note in measure 22. In measures 29 and 30 grace notes are utilized.

Jimmy McPartland said both, in a personal interview[9] and also in Richard Sudhalter's book[10] that Bix had showed him some "little figures" which he used "if your mind goes blank you can fill in with one of them". The figure in measures 9 and 10 and the figure in measure 13 fit into this catagory. They move in a rhythm faster than the rest of the solo and the motion is primarily stepwise. No other use of these figures was found in other solos transcribed, but the make-up and the sound of these phrases seem to have a quality that put them in that catagory.

"Tiger Rag" shows a hot side of Beiderbecke's playing but he does not abandon his use of non-chord tones in unique manners. Again he employs the blues scale for

his altered tones more often in this solo.

Up to this point, this paper has concentrated on the solos of Bix Beiderbecke to find his unique qualities. Another aspect of Bix's playing not always discussed is his lead playing in ensemble passages. This feature of his playing is explored on the transcription of "Susie". "Susie" was recorded on May 6, 1924, during the same session at which "Copenhagen" was recorded.

The transcription of "Susie" included here has the melody as played by George Johnson, the tenor saxophone player, in the opening chorus on the top staff and Bix's version of the melody played during the final chorus on the bottom. An overall view of Bix's rendition of the melody shows that Beiderbecke uses most of the basic melody notes but he rhythmically embellishes this melody rather liberally. One can also tell that the last eight measures are a previously worked out ensemble ending.

Beginning in measure 1, Beiderbecke starts and ends on the same notes as in the last notes. He also anticipates the final note of the measure by one-half beat. The next measure finds the use of eighth notes that emphasize c#" that is used in the melody. Then Bix plays the melody one beat early, e' to f', which he then leaves for a b'. Measures 5, 6, and 7 find Bix's statement of the melody changed only rhythmically. In measure 5 he anticipates the second note by one-half beat and measure 6 has two eighth notes on each of the first two pitches instead of one quarter note for each of the pitches.

Beiderbecke departs from the melody in measure 8. This measure is four beats of rest in the melody, but Bix has a three quarter note pick up. The c#" and the b' is the melody stated a measure early with the note values cut in half followed by the e", also stated a measure early. For the next seven measures, until measure 16, Beiderbecke wanders away from the melody with only oblique references to the pitches of the melody. When a melody note is stated, it is usually an anticipation as in measure 11. The 2' comes one beat earlier than the melody. In measures 13 and 14 he does not even approach sounding a note from the melody.

In measure 17 he comes back to a line that more closely represents the melody. Many more embellishing pitches are found in this section. Measure 18 is a prime example. The main pitch of c#" (or db") is emphasized by the half-step lower neighbor which is used twice, but Bix descends melodically to prepare for the sounding of f' in measure 19. The pattern in measure 20 is originally stated as a three pitch descending quarter note pattern starting on a b'. Beiderbecke initiates his pattern on b' also, but he ascends three pitches before descending to the g' in measure 21. The only departures from the melody in measures 21, 22, 23, and 24 are mainly rhythmic alterations with some neighboring tones added to add some motion to the solo.

As observed earlier, measures 25 through 32 are a previously worked out ending. This fact is more evident when one compares the ending with the alternate take of "Susie" which was recorded on the same date. The only difference occurs beginning in measure 30 and continues all the way to the end. A different stock tag was used in these measures on the alternate take. Measure 25 has the largest difference with Bix adding some lower neighbors and repeating this pattern (e", d#", e") three times. The second repetition is displaced an octave lower. Measure 30 inaugurates a stock ending which was common for groups of the time.

In addition to everything previously stated about "Susie", Bix treats this 'out' chorus differently than most cornet players of his time. Usually on the last chorus, the cornet player stays very close to the melody and the clarinet player takes more liberty with the melody. On "Susie" Bix plays more in the style of the clarinet player of the time. His liberties with the melody and the flowing rhythms show that

some of Beiderbecke's early influences were clarinet players.

With the examples stated, this paper has attempted to point out some of the things Bix Beiderbecke did in his playing. The melodic and harmonic playing style as described by Jimmy McPartland[11] were explored in each of the solos discussed. His inventive use of non-chord tones, especially the ninth and thirteenth, in these solos is a precursor of the style of some of the artists who followed him. Bix also used blue notes as pointed out, which added more "pretty" notes to his arsenal of sound.

One point stressed in many books which discuss Bix Beiderbecke is his use of correlated or corresponding material in his solos. That is, Bix used or reused ideas that were closely related either melodically, harmonically, or rhythmically. All of the solos show this, but the solo on "Royal Garden Blues" provides the best example.

The reason for including the example of Beiderbecke's playing on the shout chorus on "Susie" is to show his lead playing ability and his ability to play 'hot'. Jimmy McPartland said, "Bix was the Wolverines. He made them different and exciting and he was the musical leader. After he left, the Wolverines were just a group like many others of the time."[12] It was not just his solos, but his musical leadership and overall playing in all situations that made the group outstanding.

Bix always played with groups possessing ability inferior to his. Leonard Feather states, "though often surrounded by musicians of inferior stature. . . Bix nevertheless left a legacy of performances unmatched in subtelty and finesse, blended with a sensitive jazz feeling."[13] Beiderbecke never stopped growing nor stopped striving to find an outlet for his music.

This paper has dissected, analyzed, and studied Bix Beiderbecke's playing recorded while with the Wolverines to find the qualities unique to him during this period. As this paper demonstrates the use of non-chord tones not as passing tones or neighboring tones but as extensions of the chord, the use of blue notes in different contexts, and the use of correlated ideas used throughout a solo as points unique to Beiderbecke's style which were new approaches for his time. He led the way in the use of non-chord tones as upper extensions of chords and the use of 'pretty' playing thus producing a style subsequent jazz soloists have emulated which has given Bix a lasting musical testimony to his status as a jazz innovator. Nothing can be phrased any better about Bix Beiderbecke the man and the musician than Hoagy Carmichael's comment:

> "That's the thing about him that's been lost. He was charming, could be talkative, witty - sometimes even biting. But there was a gentle quality about him. That's what came across most."[14]

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ENDNOTES

[1] Interview with Jimmy McPartland on November 6, 1983.
[2] Mark C. Gridley, Jazz Styles (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), p.63.
[3] McPartland interview.
[4] Interview with Andy Van Sickle on September 13, 1983.
[5] McPartland interview.
[6] Richard M. Sudhalter, Philip R. Evans, with William Dean Myatt, Bix: Man and Legend (New York: Schirmer Books, 1974), p. 112.
[7] Ibid., p. 101.

[8]Frank Tirro, Jazz: A History (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977), pp. 204, 205.
[9]McPartland interview.
[10] Sudhalter, p. 120
[11]McPartland interview.
[12]Ibid.
[13]Leonard Feather, The New Edition of the Encyclopedia of Jazz (New York: Horizon Press, 1967), p. 132.
[14]Sudhalter, p. 110.

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