# DB

# The Story of Bix Beiderbecke's Davenport Blues

By Albert Haim

#### Introduction

On a very cold day on Jan 25, 1925, a number of musicians converged at Richmond, Indiana, to participate in a recording session in the Gennett studios, the Cradle of Recorded Jazz.



Gennett Studio, Richmond IN.

Bix Beiderbecke and Hoagy Carmichael drove from Indianapolis in a brand new Ford automobile, a present Hoagy had made to himself for the 1924 Christmas season. Trombonist Tommy Dorsey, clarinetist Don Murray, pianist Paul Mertz and drummer Tommy Gargano took an early train from Detroit and were in Richmond, waiting for Bix and Hoagy.

Banjoist Howdy Quicksell missed the early train from Detroit and arrived on a later train. In early 1925, Tommy Dorsey and Paul Mertz were members of Jean Goldkette's Book Cadillac orchestra, Don Murray and Howdy Quicksell were with Jean Goldkette's prestigious Victor Recording Orchestra, and Tommy Gargano was a free-lancer in Detroit at that time. He was born in Philadelphia in 1901 into a musical family and was with the Goldkette's Orange Blossoms in late 1925 and early 1926.

Let's go back a few months. In the Fall of 1924 Bix was playing with the Wolverines at the Cinderella Ballroom in New York when he was approached by Charlie Horvath, Jean Goldkette's business manager, with an offer to join the Victor Recording Orchestra. Bix accepted and moved to Detroit in mid-October 1924. Bix stayed only two months with Goldkette at this time and left Detroit on December 8, 1924. He visited Hoagy Carmichael in Indianapolis, and then went home to Davenport for Christmas.

Soon after, he got in touch with Ezra Wickemeyer, [1] recording director and audio engineer for the Gennett division of the Starr Piano Company, to arrange for a recording date [see Rick Kennedy's research on 'Gennet's Audio Genius' in the December 2009 issue]. Wickemeyer passed Bix's letter to F. D.

Wiggins of the Gennett Records Division. In early January 1925, Bix received, at home in Davenport, an encouraging response from Wiggins [2]:

"We will be pleased to give you a trial in making some test records any time convenient for you to come to Richmond. .. This work will have to be done on a straight royalty basis of one cent per record of the initial trial. You are to stand your own expenses to and from laboratory."

Bix got in touch with Tommy Dorsey, Don Murray, Paul Mertz, Howdy Quicksell, and Tommy Gargano. They all agreed to go to Richmond for the January 26, 1925 recording session and brought "three quarts" along. It is noteworthy that payment of royalties to recording musicians was rather rare in the 1920s. Ordinarily, a flat fee per recording or per session was made, in the case of Gennett, \$15 to \$50 per session. The question of royalties was raised by Tommy Dorsey in a February 28, 1925 letter to Doc Ryker, [3] alto saxophone player for the Goldkette band:

"I was sure surprised to learn that Bix is going with Charley Straight. I thought he was going back to school. I hope he dont [sic] forget that I'm living if he gets any royalty at all because that trip cost me sixty bucks."

Gennett records were sold for \$1. It would have taken the sale of about 30,000 records for all the musicians to recoup their expenses!

#### Bix cuts his first tune - as session leader

As seen in the copy of the Gennett files, four numbers were recorded on that day, LaRocca's *Toddlin' Blues* and Bix's own *Davenport Blues* [referred to later as simply *DB*] were recorded first, before Quicksell arrived. Three takes of each were waxed, but only one issue of each was released. All masters for the next two numbers, *Magic Blues* and *No One Knows What It's All About*, were destroyed.

Tommy Dorsey recollected, in October 1937, some of the circumstances associated with this recording session, [4]:

"What a crazy date that was! We all got blind on prohibition gin on the way down to the studios in Richmond, Indiana ...

Well, we may have been blind on the train coming down, but that was nothing compared to our condition once we started cutting some wax! All that I can recollect through the haze is that we did two tunes: "Davenport Blues," in which Bix played a chorus that's still considered one of the greatest in the annals of jazz corneting, and a tune that had something about "Toddlin" in the title.

I do remember pretty vividly, though, that sometime during the session Hoagy Carmichael walked in with a tremendous jug (filled) in one hand and a new manuscript in the other. After inspecting the jug, etc., we looked at the manuscript. It was his famous *Washboard Blues*! We must have fooled with that piece for hours, but we never could get to play it right."

Tommy Dorsey's account of the group playing Carmichael's *Washboard Blues* is confirmed in a piece published in the February 15, 1939 issue of the Lima (Ohio) News.

"It was in a recording session of the old days of swing, 15 years ago, that Hoagy dropped in on a small pickup band that included both Tommy and the famous Bix. The band was recording *Davenport Blues*, and between choruses Hoagy played over for the boys two new melodies that had been running thru his head. One was already named, *Washboard Blues*—one of Tommy's most successful recent recordings. The other strain had no name at the time but later became the famous *Stardust*, one of the popular tunes of American music and the composition for which Hoagy is best known."[5]

A spirit of camaraderie, well lubricated by the gin that was flowing freely, prevailed in the recording session. Hoagy recalls in his autobiography [6]:

"We got to the studio in the smoking weather, met the boys, and sat around a while exchanging stories. We all felt warm and intimate. The bottles got near sea level. Bix started doodling on his horn. He seemed to find a strain that suited him. By that time everybody took a hand in composing the melody and the true friendship of musicians began: with the music."

Toddlin' Blues and Davenport Blues were released as by Bix and His Rhythm Jugglers on Gennett 5654-A and 5654-B, respectively.



Gennett 5654-A.

The recording of *Davenport Blues* was a milestone in the annals of jazz: it was the first Beiderbecke composition to be recorded, his only orchestral composition, and the first time that Bix's name appeared on a record label. When Gennett 5654 was issued, it was prominently highlighted in the Davenport papers.

Two now-famous photographs of the Rhythm Jugglers in the Gennett studio were taken. In one of the photos, we see the musicians lined up, some of them holding their instruments. Bix,

in a friendly gesture, wraps his arms around the shoulders of his buddies Don Murray and Tommy Dorsey. Photos such as this help dispel the myth that "Bix remained a being apart." [7] In the other photo, we see that Bix and Tommy are standing up with their left legs crossed over their right legs in a seemingly rather uncomfortable position. As noted by several witnesses who saw Bix play, Bix holds his cornet (a Martin) at about a 45 degree angle toward the floor.



Gennett 5654-B.

#### Davenport Blues: The Composition

How was DB conceived? As mentioned before, according to Hoagy Carmichael, DB is a collective composition by all the musicians present. On the other hand, Paul Mertz wrote to Philip Evans on June 25, 1958, "I wrote out a hasty arrangement of "Davenport Blues" using an intro and ending as outlined by Bix, and setting the rest to harmony." Dorsey's biographer Peter Levinson stated that Davenport Blues was written on the spur of the moment. [8]

It seems to me that DB is too coherent to be the result of an impromptu composition or the collective improvisation by several rather loaded musicians. Musician, author, and jazz historian Randy Sandke points out [9]:

"The arrangement does seem to be too involved for a pick up band to play from memory with little rehearsal, especially given their intoxicated state."

I would think that Bix had already conceived the principal melodies and harmonies and, as was the case with the Wolverines, he would show at the piano the parts he expected each musician to play. As a matter of fact, in another account of his recollections, [10] Paul Mertz stated: "The records were strictly head arrangements. Bix simply taught us the melody and harmony and we added our own individual touches."

It is likely then, that *DB* is basically a Beiderbecke composition (really, not a blues), that crystallized in the recording with a little bit of help from his friends.

Randy Sandke's analysis of Davenport Blues follows, [9]: The tune consists of a four bar introduction, a 16 bar verse llowed by a 32 bar chorus, after which the verse and chorus are peated with a 2 bar extended ending. Two things are unusual out this piece."

"First of all, Bix uses the same melody for the verses, but both noruses have different melodies (though nearly identical chords.) nly on the last refrain of the chorus do we hear the familiar elody which we identified as Davenport Blues. The second nusual feature of Davenport Blues is the way both choruses end different chord progressions. In the first chorus Bix plays reaks over chords reminiscent of a similar spot in Jazz Me Blues. n the second chorus Don Murray plays the breaks on clarinet ver a chord progression more like Ostrich Walk."

Here is a breakdown of the recording in tabular form and with ne instrumentation listed, [11]:

Davenport Blues (A-B-A-C stucture in 32 bars)

2 bars of the band, 1 by Bix, 1 by clarinettist Murray.

16 bars by the band. erse

32 bars, Bix erse

ntro

1)

2)

Coda

16 bars, band

14 bars, band, 2 featuring trombonist Tommy Dorsey,

8 bars with the band, 4 bars with Murray's clarinet,

4 final bars by the band.

2 bars of the band.

Bix dominates the recording, he leads, solos, and is audible hroughout. His solo here rates, with a few others, as one of his ongest on record.

Richard Hadlock's detailed analysis of DB is highly

complimentary, [12]:

"Davenport Blues is another matter. In this, Bix's first known composition, many of the best and most characteristic Bix lourishes can be heard throughout some one hundred measures of orilliant improvising. There is the ingenious use of accents, in one nstance placed on every fourth note in a twelve-note figure made up of four triplets. Also notable is the whole-tone scale ascending from the flatted fifth of the underlying chord. And further, we find wide interval skips, in which almost any harmonic alteration may occur, such as in the figure where Bix attacks an F diminished chord and comes out with something resembling a G-thirteenth with a flatted ninth."

"But all these delightful events occur with no disruption in the smooth, orderly flow of the melody and with no slackening of rhythmic thrust. With this record, Bix left his formative period as a jazzman, requiring now only a final polishing to reach his creative apex."

Frank van Nus, music teacher and Jean Goldkette / Bill Challis specialist, noted that the opening strain in the introduction to DB appears in the coda of Jean Goldkette's April 23, 1926 recording (Victor 20031) of Gimme a Little Kiss, Will Ya? Huh?

This is remarkable, particularly when it is realized that Bix was not in the band at that time, he joined Goldkette (for the second time) several months later. I speculate that Paul Mertz, who was a member of Goldlkette's orchestra and had been the pianist in the recording of DB is responsible for the interpolation of the fragment from DB in Gimme a Little Kiss, Will Ya? Huh?

A fragment of DB is interpolated twice in Cliff Edwards' [also known as Ukulele Ike] December 1926 recording (Pathé 25203/Perfect 11634) of Since I Found You. I believe that Red Nichols, who accompanied Edwards in the recording, is responsible for the interpolation. As will be seen below, Nichols was very fond of Bix's DB.

Davenport Blues is so closely identified with Bix that when premier Bixophile Bill Donohoe (who for several years in the 1960s held an annual Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Stomp in his home in Long Valley, NJ) with his Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Jazz Band decided to go to Davenport to pay homage to Bix on the 40th anniversary of his death, his foremost desire was to play DB at Bix's gravesite in Oakdale Cemetery in Davenport.

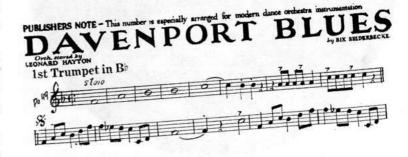
The DesMoines Register of August 7, 1971 reported, "The jazz band, composed of East Coast musicians dedicated to the style of music that skyrocketed the talented Davenport musician to fame, played DB while the Rev. C. H. Meyer, pastor of St. Mark Lutheran Church gave the eulogy at Beiderbecke's grave." With 1,500 persons in attendance, the visit of the Bix Memorial Band to Davenport in 1971 was the needed catalyst to establish the Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Society in Davenport.

#### Copyright

Davenport Blues was copyrighted on February 7, 1927 in the name of Robbins Engel Inc, number E658002. The copyright was renewed, number R125432, on February 8, 1954 by Charles Burnette Beiderbecke and Mary Louise Shoemaker, Bix's brother and sister, respectively. Arranger and close Bix friend Bill Challis wrote a transcription of DB for piano. The sheet music shows dates of copyright by the Robbins Music Corporation in 1927 and 1937.

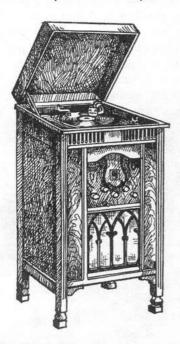
Bill Challis recollected, "Davenport Blues - I put that down. I got that from the record. I had to write the final four bars-I had to do that. And I had to do an awful lot of the tune itself-not of the tune, not of the melody, but of his rendition. I had to correct it and make it the same. That was you might say, that was mine. But the others [the four piano compositions] were his [Bix's]." [13]

Arrangements of DB for orchestra were published in 1927 and 1934 by Leonard 'Lennie' Hayton and 'Jimmy Dale' respectively.





# Recordings of *Davenport Blues* in the 1920s and 1930s



Bix and His Rhythm Jugglers. January 26, 1925 Gennett 5654

Red and Miff's Stompers. February 11, 1927. Take 2. Victor 20778.

Red and Miff's Stompers. February 11, 1927. Take 3. Jazz Archives JA-21 (LP).

The Charleston Chasers. February 25, 1927. Columbia 909-D.

Miff Mole and His Molers. March 7, 1927. OKeh 40848.

Jimmy Lytell. February 1928. Pathe-Actuelle 36775, Perfect 14956.

Adrian Rollini and His Orchestra. October 23, 1934. Decca 359.

Tommy Dorsey and His Orchestra. November 29, 1938. Victor 26135.

Bunny Berigan and His Men. November 30, 1938. Victor 26121.

Red Nichols and His Orchestra. June 21, 1939. Bluebird B-10408

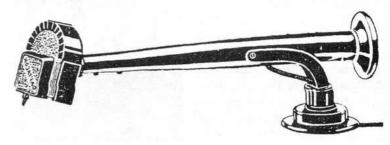
There is also a version by Woody Herman's Orchestra, recorded exclusively for radio, at Liederkranz Hall, in November 1936. World Transcriptions 2253 / 2264. In a letter to his parents, part of it published in the March 13, 1927 issue of the *Davenport Democrat and Leader*, Bix mentions that *DB*, his own composition, will be released on Victor, Brunswick, Okeh and Columbia in the very near future." The Victor, Okeh and Columbia records are those of Red and Miff Stompers, Miff Mole and His Molers, and Charleston Chasers, respectively. The Brunswick record mentioned by Bix cannot be the re-release of his own (Rhythm Jugglers) recording of Davenport Blues on English and French Brunswick 02206.



Brunswick 02206.

The Brunswick reissues of 1920s Wolverines and Rhythm Jugglers recordings did not occur until the mid 1930s. I have not been able to locate a Brunswick record of *DB* issued around 1927.

In view of the importance and significance of *DB* – the only Beiderbecke jazz / orchestral composition – it is perhaps surprising that so few recordings of the tune were made in the 1920s and 1930s. Two of these, Rollini's and Dorsey's, were by Bix's friends who had recorded extensively with him. Rollini's recording is notable in that his "version of *DB* adds an introduction and a coda which immediately became standard features of all performance." [7] Berigan's recording was part of a two-day session when Bunny Berigan and His Men recorded all of Bix's compositions, a tribute to Bix's genius for composition. Note that almost half of the recordings in the 1920s and 1930s are associated with Red Nichols. As can be seen in the record label, the Columbia recording by the Charleston Chasers displays, under the name of the group, the phrase "under the direction of 'Red' Nichols."



Even in the 1940s, only five recordings of *DB* were made. It is not until the 1960s that several bands recorded it. Lord's discography online lists 127 recordings of *DB*: 80 % were recorded in the 1960s and later. But it is in the last four decades that *Davenport Blues*, has been widely recognized as a Beiderbecke classic.



Two of the versions in the 1950s and 1960s are worthy of mention: the late 1959 version by Gil Evans (below, left) in the album *Great Jazz Standards*, World Pacific WP1270, and that of July 19, 1966 by the Gerry Mulligan Quintet in the album *Something Borrowed, Something Blue*, Limelight LM82040 (period Mulligan, below, right).

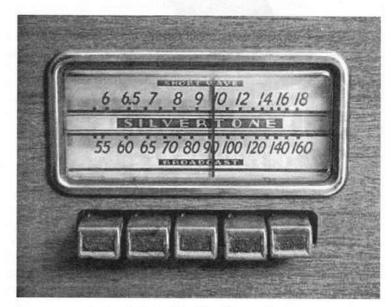


A review of Evans's album in the March 1963 issue of *The Gramophone* tells us: "Davenport Blues in a way that reminds us just how modern Bix sounded in his day." The magazine also reviewed Mulligan's LP in 1967, "This is the best new Gerry Mulligan LP for some time. Recorded last year it features Mulligan and



Zoot Sims with a rhythm section. "Davenport Blues" proves (a) how timeless were the compositions of Bix Beiderbecke and (b) what a fine sense of tradition is possessed by both Mulligan and Sims." The comments in the above reviews attest to the agelessness of *DB*. The accelerated pace at which it was recorded in the last forty years is a recognition of Bix's genius for composition and of the importance of this jazz composition.

Red Nichols was the first musician to include DB in one of his broadcasts. We will discuss this presently.



The First Radio Broadcast

The two dominant Chicago radio stations in the second half of the 1920s were WMAQ ('We Must Ask Questions') and WGN ('World's Greatest Newspaper'). Interestingly, both stations were associated with Chicago newspapers –WMAQ with the *Chicago Daily News* and WGN with the *Chicago Tribune*. Furthermore, the studios that originated the broadcasts were located in highly prestigious hotels –the La Salle Hotel for WMAQ and the Drake Hotel for WGN.

At the end of 1926, the Radio Corporation of America purchased radio station WEAF in New York as well as several other stations, and created the first major radio network in the United States: NBC, the National Broadcasting Corporation system. The first network broadcast, with 24 stations on the lengthy chain of telephone wire, took place on November 16, 1926. In January 1927, WMAQ also became an NBC affiliate and carried programming obtained by line from WEAF in New York. WMAQ discontinued its affiliation with NBC in September 1927 and became associated with CBS, the recently incorporated Columbia Broadcasting System.

On the next page is part of the daily program of WMAQ for Friday, December 2, 1927. Note that from 9:00 pm to 10:03 pm, WMAQ was transmitting the programs from CBS. Specifically, between 9:31 pm and 10:03 pm, Red Nichols and His Student Band played *DB*, credited to 'Biderbecke' [sic].

The participation of Red Nichols's band in CBS broadcasts was announced in the September 1927 issue of *Radio Digest*.

#### WMAQ

### The Daily News Radio Station

#### DAILY PROGRAM

	DAY AND DATE Friday, Dec. 2, 1927 ANNOUNCER Ceisa  STUDIO DIRECTOR Van Horne OPERATOR
TIME	ITEMS AND PERFORMERS
9:00	Chorus  Beulah Land  Chorus and orch.  Finale  CORUBBIA BROADCASTING SYSTEM (CONT.)
9:31	Red Nichols and his Student Band  Red Nichols and his Student band  Heebie Jeebies
10;03	WMAQ off - NOTE - Chair overtime again
10:03	WQJ on with
10:20	Talk - Will Mussolini last.  Voice (D)  Talk (D)  WOJ CHALBER MUSIC PLAYERS (N plus)  Paul Vernon - first violin  Sarah Shatz - second violin  William Cheesman - viola  Beulah Rosins - violincello  Harold Van Horne - piano
10:50 10:36 10:44 10:46 10:52	String and plane arrangement ————————————————————————————————————

## COLUMBIA SYSTEM READY TO GO

MAJ. WHITE ASSEMBLES PERSONNEL

Beginning Sunday afternoon September 18, the competitive element in nation-wide broadcasting enters by way of the 16 carefully selected high powered radio stations included in the Columbia Broadcasting System's network, which covers the United States east of the Rocky Mountains.

In spite of the fact that this is still a day of pioneering in radio, the new Columbia chain enters as a lusty full strided youth, and a well manned organization, and a wealth of musical and entertainment experience as a background.

Don Voorhees, who has the record for the longest unbroken orchestra run on Broadway, and who has been musical director for Earl Carroll since the second edition of the Earl Carroll Vanities, has been put in charge of a dance and specialty orchestra. Red Nichols, popular for his phonograph record and Radio work, heads a specialty musical group.

(Major J. Andrew White, vice-president of CBS)

Clearly, Red Nichols was a great admirer of Bix and of his composition *DB*. As a matter of fact, when Red recorded *DB* in 1939, Blue Bird B-10408 BB, he coupled it with his theme song *Wail of the Winds*. Nichols continued playing *Davenport Blues* throughout his long career.

According to Red Nichols's specialist Stephen Hester, "The Red Nichols' network radio broadcast of September 2, 1939, originating from KDKA, was interrupted for war news when Germany invaded Poland. They cut away right after the theme and came back in the middle of the last number, *Davenport Blues*. Red Nichols and His Orchestra were appearing at the Willows, Oakmont, PA, outside Pittsburgh."

#### Bix and the Starr-Gennett Walk of Fame

Louis Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke were, by far, the dominant cornet players in the 1920s, not only because of their unique creativity, but also because they introduced the solo in jazz and because of their seminal influences on other musicians. Coincidentally, Louis and Bix started their recording careers in Richmond IN, for Gennett, Louis in 1923 with Joe 'King' Oliver, and Bix in 1924 with the Wolverine Orchestra.

The Starr-Gennett Walk of Fame was established in 2007 to honor artists who recorded for Gennett, 'The Cradle of Recorded Jazz'. The Walk is found on South 1st Street in Richmond, where the Star Piano Company was located at one time. Each honored artist is represented by a medallion made of bronze and colored tile mosaic and shaped like a 78 rpm record. The classic

Gennett record label is in the center. The first inductees were selected in 2007 and they include, among others, Louis and Bix.

Bix recorded 13 sides for Gennett (nine in Richmond, four in New York City) as cornetist with the Wolverine Orchestra, two sides in New York under the name of Sioux City Six and two more in Richmond under the name of Bix and His Rhythm Jugglers. These 17 Gennett recordings represent part of Bix's musical legacy. As such, it is quite appropriate that his memory be preserved in the Starr-Gennett Walk of Fame.

The extraordinary impact of Bix Beiderbecke's music around the world and the importance of *Davenport Blues* is illustrated by Gösta Törner's composition *Bix' idé*. Recorded in Stockholm on August 12, 1941 by a Swedish jazz orchestra under the leadership of bass player Thore Jederby, the tune includes several passages that are variations on *DB*'s themes.

Thore Jederby's orkester: Gösta Törner, tp; John Björling, cl as; Carl-Henrik Norin, ts; Thore Swanerud, p; Sven Stiberg, g; Thore Jederby, b; Gösta Hedén, dr. August 12, 1941 820 BIX' IDÉ (Gösta Törner) Scala 395b

Several of the musicians in the band had been part of the Swedish jazz scene in the 1920s. Gösta Törner played Sweet Sue with Sune Lundwal's Palais Orchestra on February 18, 1935 and recreated, almost note-for-note, Bix's solo in the 1928 waxing of the tune by Paul Whiteman's Orchestra, Columbia 50103-D.

It may have been wartime, but the Jederbys band knew their jazz history - the flipside of the Scala disc is Carl-Henrik Norin's *Buster' idé* ... a tribute to Buster Bailey. I am grateful to Fredrik Tersmeden for calling my attention to the recording of this rare 78, and to Rob Rothberg for kindly scanning the strikingly scarlet label, shown below in monochrome.





#### Davenport Blues Acknowledgments

Several of the images are from the Bixography website, http://bixography.com, and were provided by various contributors to the site. I am indebted to Ricky Bauchelle, the daughter of Doc Ryker, for giving me a copy of Tommy Dorsey's letter to Doc Ryker. The scans of Gennett's ledger and of the Gennett record labels were supplied by Hans Eekhoff. The WMAQ radio listing is courtesy of Stephen Hester. Thanks also to Enrico Borsetti.

- [1] For biographical information, see *Waxing Poetic Ezra Wickemeyer*, *Gennett Audio Genius* by Rick Kennedy, *IAJRC Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 4, Dec. 2009.
- [2] Bix, The Leon Beiderbecke Story by Philip R. Evans and Linda K. Evans, Prelike Press, 1998.
- [3] Kindly made available to the author by Ricky Bauchelle, Doc Ryker's daughter.
- [4] Simon Says: The Sights and Sounds of the Swing Era, 1935-1955 by George T. Simon, Arlington House, 1971.
- [5]: http://bixbeiderbecke.com/HoagyDavenportBlues.jpg
  [6] Sometimes I Wonder by Hoagy Carmicahel with
  Stephen Longstreet, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1965.
- [7] Jimmy McPartland to Richard Sudhalter in Lost Chords White Musicians and Their Contribution to Jazz, 1915-1945, by Richard M. Sudhalter, Oxford University Press, 1999.
- [8] Tommy Dorsey: Livin' in a Great Big Way, by Peter J. Levinson, DaCapo Press, 2005.
- [9] Bix Beiderbecke: From a Musician's Perspective, by Randy Sandke, Annual Review of Jazz Studies, 9, 1997-98, Institute of Jazz Studies/ Scarecrow Press, 2000.
- [10] The Des Moines Register, July 25, 1976, 45 years after his death, Bix lives on, by Paul Vandervoort II.
- [11] The Bix Bands: A Bix Beiderbecke Discobiography, by Vittorio Castelli, Evert (Ted) Kaleveeld and Liborio Pusteri, Raretone, Milan, Italy, 1972.
- [12] Jazz Masters of the Twenties, by Richard Hadlock, McMillan, New York, 1965.
- [13] In the Mainstream: 18 Portraits in Jazz, by Chip Deffaa, Institute of Jazz Studies/Scarecrow Press, 1996.