Nick LaRocca

THAT NEW ORLEANS HORN

In which the writer clarifies the influence of New Orleans on modern trumpet styles

By CHARLES EDWARD SMITH

From being a word of condemnation, *corn* has come to be applied to anything outmoded. There are musicians glib enough to dismiss LaRocca and Joe Oliver with this agronomic appellation. Others look upon them as museum pieces, interesting to the student in stylistic sources. An increasing minority, however, turn to these cornet-playing grandsires of the modern trumpet not merely for documentation but by way of homage to profoundly moving jazz. The LaRocca statement, "We played from the heart, what we felt," summed up two decades of cornet-playing and in those two decades the scarecrow of ragtime jerked its last, the harbingers of hot "blew in" an epoch and Tin Pan Alley's doleful steam-roller made a mercenary and somewhat successful attempt to level the musical taste of the public at large.

The confusion that exists as to whether Leon Beiderbecke (Bix) was influenced by LaRocca of the Dixieland or by Louis Armstrong is a contemporary dilemma. Eight years ago it was known that Bix was a great cornet player whose apprenticeship consisted in playing records by the Dixieland Band (of their own hallowed pieces) until he could repeat LaRocca's choruses note for note. There were some who believed that Joe Oliver had inspired Bix, but his main schooling was admittedly the horn of Dominick James LaRocca. A survey of the hot collectors in a typical university town, Princeton, revealed

at this time only one Armstrong fancier, a collector who had been introduced to Louis' work by Langston Hughes.

Louis and his Hot Five pressed *Put 'Em Down Blues* and what was said was that on this record Louis was doing a Bix chorus. Certainly the pattern of this chorus suggests Bix. But many of Louis' early choruses—cf. *King of the Zulus*—were modelled with a rising fall. Despite the characteristics each had in common, each was himself. Then the Armstrong style changed, the deep nostalgia of his early work gave way to a blunt display of force, something very positive was being said. The source of any style is its substance. The new Armstrong was defiant and great, an American negro trumpeter. To try to find much in common between Louis' *Tight Like This* and Bix's *Way Down Yonder* is as sully as it is futile. But to trace both of these men to the ear-music of New Orleans may clarify the background for future historians and stimulate an interest in the old masters of the jazz trumpet.

Both LaRocca and Joe Oliver were pioneers in the land of jazz. Both were native to New Orleans, both played cornet. With so much in common it was natural that their bang-away talents should exhibit similarities. These similarities were the points of contact between otherwise dissimilar approaches to jazz expression and it is the differences, more than anything else, that interest specialists. To explain these differences on the basis of race as such is not satisfactory, yet this may be the clue to a sound analysis. Joe Oliver was a negro, LaRocca a white man. In view of the situation of the negro in the United States, and particularly in the south, this meant that each was conditioned by a different environmental background. Thus, despite the fact that they lived in the same city, each inherited his own folk tradition, modified constantly by surroundings, it is true, yet always distinguishable.

With anthropologists at a loss to inform us authoritatively, it would be foolish to speculate on whether or not an ear for rhythm is hereditary. For our purposes it is sufficient to note that, living in the same city, two men could be heir to very diverse traditions. The blues, taking over the thematic material of spirituals and worksongs, expressed the lot of the urban negro in insistent melodic lines and sanguine rhythms. The early pieces played by Joe Oliver —and sung by Louis Armstrong—followed the repetitive pattern of genuine folk blues. Instrumentally, the same freedom from the diatonic scale was to be noted. Meanwhile, LaRocca's Dixieland Band, organised in 1909, was banging away at something critics called cacaphony but what was in reality a species of improvised counterpoint. As LaRocca said, they got their set-up from brass bands, military bands. They themselves constituted a street band and, minus Ragas, they actually played on the streets of New Orleans. They were a kitchen racket come to the big city—influenced by, but not submerged by, the blues tradition that was more especially the inheritance of the negro.

Every hot fan can now familiarise himself with Joe Oliver's cornet style and only the uninformed will compare it with the developed (full-bell) style of Louis Armstrong. The measure of Oliver's contribution is the solo on the muted cornet, the best examples of which he recorded for Gennett. Restrained and very blue, these off-scale choruses fill the listener with a happy nostalgia. The figures and the material derive from blues; the melodic line is purposely blurred; the resultant expression is mature and completely satisfying.

Where the Creole Jazz Band was close-knit in its counterpoint and inevitable of pulse, the Dixieland Band was wide open in its patterns, staccato in rhythmic intent. Thus, the hallmark of the Dixieland was many-voiced melody floated on a rhythmic base, pointing to the influence both of the military band and the *breakdown* spirit.

Many people listen to LaRocca only as a foil for the great talent of Shields, remaining ignorant of the talent of LaRocca himself and of its implications in the jazz world.

The printer's dateline on the leaflet advertising the first "Jass" record by the Dixieland Band is conclusive enough proof that this record (*Dixie 'Jass' Band One-Step* and *Livery Stable Blues*) was grooved early in 1917. From then until their London venture the band recorded their own numbers, particularly on Victor, and it was this set of records that gave Bix his apprenticeship on the cornet.

Like Joe Oliver, LaRocca experimented with the horn but with different results. The edge of his tone was clear, the notes cut off sharply to permit of a succinct phrasing. Some of his breaks were elementary, others, like the "flying tackle" and the "ragtime shuttle," have never been duplicated. He also had a peculiar trick of "blowing in" a phrase with a stimulating volley of sound. Aside from these physical contours, LaRocca's cornet style had body; if one fails to remark the rightness of his slightly bland tone it is because it is so perfectly in keeping with the band as a whole.

So much of what is written about Bix and his early influences is hearsay that further clarification on this point should be of interest. First of all, Bix *could* read and write notes, though he preferred to improvise. We have his father's

word for it that he solemnly thumped out *Yankee Doodle* on the family piano at the age of two and subsequently played piano accompaniments for his companions in kindergarten. An ear for tone led him to seek out on the piano complements to factory and steamboat whistles, fire bells, and so forth. He got hold of a cornet and practised by ear, via the rigorous school of the gramophone. At the time when he was going to high school in Davenport, Iowa, Bix, in the words of LaRocca, "came all the way . . . just to see what we looked like. He was so impressed with the boys, seeing that we were normal in every way, he asked if I would show him some things on the instrument, which I did."

If further proof of this apprenticeship is necessary it is to be found on Bix's records of Dixieland numbers. There the pupil is himself a master, not so much in dexterity as expression. The distinguishing features of LaRocca's style Bix developed to the point where they might carry the burden of his own expression. In "blowing in" a phrase, in *breaks* and in clean-cut sock style, the influence of the Dixieland b a n d-master was apparent. Yet Bix was never a borrower; he assimilated every influence and moulded it to his own purpose. The rolling tone of molten silver was something unique, and only slightly less unique was the technical apparatus that supported it. The definite rendering of this material was the Bix chorus.

LEON "BIX" BEIDERBECKE

The Bix of the Gennett records was contemporaneous with the Louis Armstrong who was Joe Oliver's second trumpet man and just beginning to be heard in his own right as the star of Lil's Hot Shots and the New Orleans Wanderers. Between the Armstrong of these units and the Bix of the Gennetts there was much in common. Both men could sock it out; both had a happy disregard of the diatonic scale; even the difference in tonality was not as pronounced as it became later on. But where Louis's breaks, terminations, and even patterns of choruses derived principally from blues, Bix's melodic tendencies bespoke other influences as well. Here it is important to note a difference due to background, etc., not to evaluate; that Louis and Bix, at that stage, were equally great need hardly be stressed.

The swing of the Gennetts (i.e., of the good bands only) came to be known in hot circles as *classic swing*. Although the Dixieland made one record (Okeh: Toddlin' Blues) in this style, in form and substance the style was indebted most to the Creole Jazz Band whose playing rocked negro jazz out of the blues and into swing. It is obvious that these bands influenced each other and that the flowering of classic swing was a collective effort, so that what remained distinguishable were peculiarities of style rather than melodic heritage. As in folk music, the material became common property and all the hot men of the period were free to share in its adaptation.

Armstrong's accomplishments on the full-voiced trumpet are too well known to require analysis here; technically he seemed to exhause the possibilities of the instrument —in contrast to Bix whose technical command of the cornet was more unique (adapted to his special purposes) than extensive. It is interesting, at this point, to remember that Oliver's reputation rests upon his early solos on the muted cornet—a field in which he knew no superiors—and that Louis's mature style is inseparable with his greatness as an innovator. (An illuminating parallel is to be discerned between the screwy effects Oliver got with a mute and the sensational effects Armstrong got without a mute.)

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The mature talent of a Bix or an Armstrong should conceivably reflect environmental factors. As influences, however, these talents were accessible to all and although there are no negroes out of the Bix school there are several white men who play Armstrong trumpet, a few, like Muggsy Spanier, who play it well. This may be due to accident alone. A prominent negro trumpeter, for instance, revealed that he had heard of Bix but had never listened to him or to a record by him. Yet it would be hard to find a trumpet player who had not heard of Armstrong, either in person or on record.

Some of the inheritors of the LaRocca style may be spotted for the archives. A mission of this sort has its hazards and may be subject to revision but the usefulness of a tentative check seems obvious. Thus, we have Bix, influenced chiefly by LaRocca; Phil Napoleon, influenced chiefly by LaRocca; Red Nichols, influenced by Napoleon and Bix; MacPartland, influenced by Bix; Charlie Teagarden, influenced by Bix and Armstrong; and Bunny Berrigan, influenced by Bix and Armstrong.

The bang-away counterpoint of the Dixieland was again heard in the emergence of the Swing of the Chicagoans. The hot output of Red Nichols and His Five Pennies taught them urbanity but the Chicagoans went back to Bix and LaRocca for freshness of approach. Compare the MacPartland cornet of *China Boy* with Bix's Okeh record of *At The Jazz Band Ball* and with LaRocca's Victor record of the same number. Then, as pleasurable sequels, play the record of *Loveless Love* by Jack Teagarden's band on which the trumpet is Charlie Teagarden, and any good, recent chorus of Berrigan's. Throughout, the school of LaRocca is apparent.

At the threshold of modernity there were many sound negro trumpets, not as good as Armstrong or Oliver, but comparable to them in technique and choice of material. Before long Armstrong had outdistanced his contemporaries, achieving a complex vehicle to convey an expression that was powerful and unique. The exact substance of that expression need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that the vehicle had importance only in so far as it supported that burden. The spectacle of Louis *coasting* was nothing more than a species of gymnastics in which the important thing seemed to be to hit the ceiling. Unfortunately it was this, the least important aspect of his work, that was to influence his followers so much that, for a time, you couldn't see the hot choruses for the high c's!

There were some men who went through this influence more or less unscathed. Henry Allen, Jr., and Taft Jordan have blown a lot of high notes but each, as well, has assimilated much that was good from Armstrong's work and each has revealed an individual talent of merit. The crisp, clean, and subtly rhythmic patterns of Henry Allen, Jr.'s early work on Victor (after he had been "discovered" in New Orleans) should be studied in connection with his later work. These exhibit a clarity and a contact with reality to which Mr. Allen seems of late to be returning.

Taft Jordan is less known to the writer. He was, of course, in the Chick Webb outfit that supported Louis *after* Louis' Hot Five period. Then, for a time he was chiefly famous for doing pleasant take-offs of Louis' throaty vocalising and scaling the heights on trumpet, a la Louis. My first electric impression that Taft Jordan was estimable on his own merits came when Chick Webb was playing the Apollo in Harlem. To close the programme Chick and the rhythm section jammed a background and Jordan jammed chorus after chorus, neither high of note nor particularly complicated in technique, yet mighty fine music, all the same. With Chick Webb's outfit constantly improving and spending more time on swing, the future looks bright for Taft Jordan.

An interesting study in contrasts was afforded jazz fans prior to Freddy Jenkins's illness. At one hang-out, Freddy was to be heard, at another, Wingy Mannone. Both played muted trumpet, both revived licks by Joe Oliver, yet Freddy was distinctly of the Oliver-Armstrong school and Wingy of the LaRocca school, though influenced by others to some extent. Incidentally, the new New Orleans Rhythm Kings discs suggest not so much the original band of that name as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band!

Within the compass of a short article it is not possible to include all who might be worthy of mention—Kaminsky, Spanier, etc.—but it is essential to say something about Bunny Berrigan, the cornet player who has assimilated some of the traits of both Louis and Bix. Eloquent in fulness of tone, having a command of his instrument, Berrigan is successful in getting across his melodic and rhythmic message. How prolonged or developed his success will be remains to be seen. The tendency of the jazz world to-day seems to be to divorce the musician from the world of reality, contact with which it is essential if his work is to have any content whatsoever. The bulk of popular jazz is miles away from it and sometimes, driven slightly cuckoo by this mass production of inanity, hot men turn to the construction of effete and cleverly-contoured vessels, but vessels that hold no wine!