WOLVERINE DAYS

BY GEORGE L. JOHNSON

No story of the Wolverine Orchestra would be complete without at least the mention of the group of musicians, in Chicago, from whom the final personnel of the band was drawn.

This group, with a few whose names have eluded me, played together in combinations of from four to eight or nine as the occasion demanded, for the period of a year or so before the first seven-piece combination, which later was named the Wolverines, started on its first steady engagement at Stockton Club at Stockton, Ohio.

The names of those musicians are as follow:

Piano: Dick Voynow.

Drums: Vic Moore, Jack Shargel, Bob Conzelman.

Saxes and Clarinets: Don Murray, George Johnson, Glenn Scoville, Jimmy Hartwell, Benny Goodman (then in short trousers), Abe (?).

Banjo: Bob Gillette, Chuck Cheney, Joe O'Neil.

Bass: Ole Vangsness.

Cornet: Bix Beiderbecke, Frank Cotterel.

These musicians were the first in Chicago to draw inspiration and gather understanding of "hot music," as played by the "New Orleans Rhythm Kings" at Friars Inn. Every evening found a few of them at Friars, much to that manager's disgust, as they spent little and stayed long. They were there to listen and learn, and to wait long hours until, late at night when the regular members in the band tired, they were permitted to sit in with the orchestra to give a member a few moments' relief. This was a privilege, of course, since the Kings were kings and we all less than that, excepting Bix.

In October 1923, Jimmy Hartwell, who had been playing near Cincinnati, Ohio, succeeded in obtaining a contract for a seven-piece combination to play at the Stockton Club, 17 miles north of Cincinnati. He called Dick Voynow at Chicago and Dick came down with the combination that started on the first extended engagement the orchestra played. That combination was as follows:

Piano: Dick Voynow.
Bass: Ole Vangsness.
Banjo: Bob Gillette.
Clarinet and Alto Sax: Jimmy Hartwell.
Tenor Sax: Abe (?)
Drums: Bob Conzelman.
Cornet: Bix Beiderbecke.

After playing a week or so, the tenor man turned in his notice, and I was called to join the band. I had just returned from playing an engagement in New York with Hoagy Carmichael.

Some time later, in November, Bob Conzelman left for a job in Chicago, and his place in the band was taken by a local drummer named Johnson. This combination continued until the engagement was ended by a riot at the club on New Year's Eve.

The Stockton Club was a type of café which could be found in almost any part of the country after the start of prohibition. A large part of the Club was devoted to gambling and the rest was a café where food and drinks were served and the guests could dance. The Club was located on a sparsely populated spot on the road between Hamilton and Cincinnati, Ohio, and was a rendezvous for people from all walks of life, high and low, who enjoyed gambling and dancing until the early hours. The manager, who was as tough a character as I ever hope to meet, was intensely loyal to the band and a great admirer of Bix. He took keen enjoyment in buying drinks for Bix, never ceasing to wonder at the fact that no quantity of alcohol ever made any difference in his playing.

The long playing hours, from 9 p.m. to 4 or 5 a.m., more than any other thing, succeeded in developing that ability of the melody instru-

ments to feel instinctively what the others were going to play next. When the fact is considered that of the recording group, only Voynow and Leibrock could read music, and that each time a number was played, it was played differently except for introductions and passages between choruses, it must be admitted that a complete and perfect knowledge of each other's style was absolutely necessary to prevent discordant harmonic effects and to attain the perfectness of a written orchestration.

To return to the Stockton Club, New Year's Eve found a capacity crowd, which, unfortunately, included part of the gangster element from Hamilton and Cincinnati, two groups between whom existed an intense rivalry and who were separated for the evening, on their promise of "no hostilities," in different rooms. About midnight, two of the party from Hamilton walked through the room occupied by their rivals, took exception to a remark passed, and started what developed into a general riot, open to all. This riot lasted for over an hour during which time the band played "China Boy," all of us so fascinated by the flying dishes and bottles that no one thought to change the tune. We were told to play, and we played. I have often wished since the day of wireless, that we could have broadcast that session. What a record that would have made!

That riot was important to us, aside from its entertainment value, because it meant the end of our engagement there, due to the closing of the club.

We quickly arranged for an engagement at Doyle's Dance Hall, in Cincinnati, to start in two weeks, and all returned to Chicago until that time.

When we returned to start the Cincinnati engagement, Ole Vangsness remained in Chicago to start his dental practice, and we engaged Al Gandee on trombone to replace him, partly because Bix wanted a trombone in the band due to his liking for a Dixie Land combination, and partly because no suitable bass player was available.

It was at this time that Vic Moore joined the band and a week or so later, Leibrock, who lived in Hamilton, Ohio, and who had been playing with a theatre band there, came to Doyle's, told us he was at leisure, and was engaged immediately. Min had played with us a few times at the Stockton Club and we were very keen to have him with us. His coming completed the first recording group which made "Jazz Me Blues" and "Fidgety Feet."

The addition of Moore and Leibrock immediately eliminated a weakness in the rhythm section that had, before their joining, prevented a perfect "Oneness" that was so evident in the playing later. Comment has been made by John Goldman in "Swing Music," that much of the swing attained by the orchestra was due to Bob Gillette. That is very true, but Mr. Goldman overlooks, and only naturally so, the drummer, Moore, whose perfect working with the bass and banjo created a powerful pulsating, steady, rhythm that never varied an iota from perfect tempo, and which by virtue of its perfection, allowed the clarinet, cornet and tenor to acquire that ability to play three-part harmony, by ear alone, on even the most difficult figures and passages.

The orchestra would have been lost without that background, and that fact was noted in a small way whenever a strange bass, drummer or banjo would sit in on various occasions. I am very sure that none of the present day drummers, keen though my admiration is of their superb work, could have replaced Moore on a competitive basis if the Wolverines could be assembled to-day, as they were then. What some do not realise, in listening to old recordings, is that drums did not record in any sense of the word when those records were made and, as a result, the records of the Wolverines give only a half-picture of the true band, with the bed-rock solidity of the drum background entirely missing.

It was during the engagement at Doyle's that we made arrangements to make our first record for Gennett. We left Cincinnati after the job, arrived in Richmond, Indiana, 125 miles distant, at about 3.30 a.m., and spent most of the night wondering how our first "play-back" would sound to us.

No amount of words could adequately describe the excitement and utter amazement of that first recording, played back to us for correction of positions around the recording horns.

Each of us was naturally listening to himself as the sounds came back to us through the horn, sounds that we had never heard before, in so detached and distant a manner. I honestly believe that at that moment, and not at any time before, was born in each of us the idea that as a unit, we had something different in the music line. I doubt if any of us realised until that moment how different in style and how dissimilar in effect our results were from the music of the Friars band that had thrilled us all so, barely months before. Coming to us in that way, out of a horn, the music sounded more

like that of another band, and entirely different than it sounded on the job.

I think it will be of interest to mention that we made three masters, at least, of each recording, and if those masters were available to-day, musicians over the world would have more to enjoy of Bix. We all took different choruses on each master record. In fact, Bix never repeated any chorus he played excepting that he had to learn the chorus he had played on the particular master chosen for printing because people requesting that particular number wanted it played as recorded.

Again, I digress from the story to mention a point concerning Bix, one that I have never seen mentioned before. Although I played with Bix for more than a year and a half, I can honestly say that I have never heard him make a mistake in playing. Knowing his style as thoroughly as we did, we could often detect, in one of his solos, that he had hit a note that he had not intended to hit, but by the time the phrase or passage was complete, he had angled and squirmed out of that difficulty in a run of notes that was so brilliant it would leave us almost breathless. Only his complete mastery, a mastery that was made up of unorthodox fingering, as unique as his ideas, could produce this result. Each chorus of his, every "break," could be depended upon to be new and different. Always exhilarating, his playing was so narcotic in its effect on susceptible listeners that I have seen some that were as truly doped by its effects that they had the manner of an opium addict blissfully happy after his pipe.

Others, like Hoagy Carmichael, in the days when we played at Indiana University dances, would be driven to tantrums of hysteria. We played many a jam session at the fraternity houses at Indiana, with the room packed to twice capacity, and Bix's efforts would produce shouts, the reverberations from which would have crumpled any but a stone house. Surprisingly enough, in spite of all this adoration Bix remained unimpressed, not in the least conscious that the playing he enjoyed so much, was the indication of genius, merely content to play and, of course, tip the cup. I honestly believe he thought all the commotion was homage rendered mostly to the group, when it was more often for him.

Three months passed on the Doyle engagement without incident. We experienced mediocre success, attracting much attention from the musicians in the Cincinnati area but not being a big hit with the majority of the dancers at Doyles.

About the first of April we received a letter from Hoagy Carmichael. Hoagy had met Bix in Chicago over a year previous to this time. He was visiting me and came over to a dance we were playing. He was completely fascinated by Bix's playing and after the job we all went out to the Lincoln Garden to hear King Oliver and Louis Armstrong, who was playing with King at that time. Later, in January, 1923, Hoagy, Vic Moore and I spent the winter at Palm Beach, Fla., playing private parties and dances, adding local musicians to make 4 to 6-piece combinations. Still later, in the summer of 1923, Hoagy and I played together at a lake resort hotel in New York. During these jobs Hoagy had heard enough about Bix to make him very eager to hear him again.

Our first record intensified this desire, and the letter followed stating that he could guarantee two week-end dances during April, May and June at Indiana University, and at a larger amount of money than we were making at Cincinnati.

We immediately turned in our notice, which our employer would not accept, and we were forced to take "French leave," one of us remaining in the place after closing time, and lowering the instruments (which Doyle would not permit us to take out of the building) out the rear window. Cabs to the station and early morning found us in Indianapolis.

Gandee decided to stay in Cincinnati and from this time on we used no trombone in the band.

Charley Davis, whose orchestra was playing at a theatre in Indianapolis, invited us to a midnight jam session at the theatre after closing hours, and at this session, Charley played "Copenhagen" for us. We rehearsed it immediately and it became one of our best numbers and was the next of our recordings.

We played a double orchestra engagement with Charley at the Indianapolis Athletic Club as our first job in Indiana and realised almost at once from the reception that we were in the right spot.

We were disturbed at first by the fact that for the first hour or so, the crowd gathered immediately in front of the stand, few of them dancing, and only understood the reason when we were told that they were too interested in the style of music to dance. Later, as the rhythm became too intense, they all danced. We were soon engaged for the rest of our time, playing week-ends for Hoagy and the balance of the week at the Casino Gardens night club, in Indianapolis.

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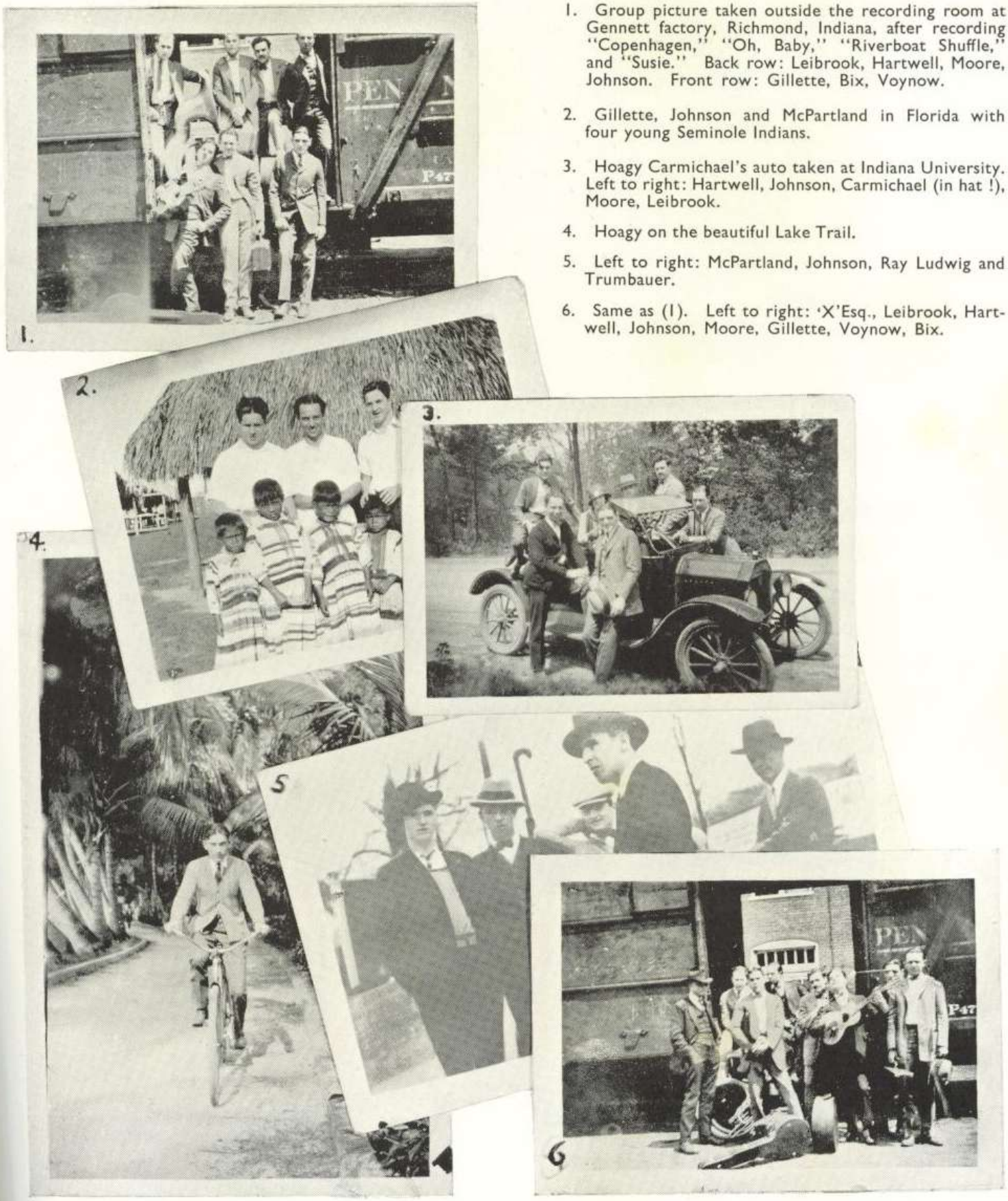
FROM
GEORGE JOHNSON'S SCRAPBOOK



1. Group picture taken outside the recording room at Gennett factory, Richmond, Indiana, after recording "Copenhagen," "Oh, Baby," "Riverboat Shuffle," and "Susie." Back row: Leibrook, Hartwell, Moore, Johnson. Front row: Gillette, Bix, Voynow.

2. Gillette, Johnson and McPartland in Florida with four young Seminole Indians.

3. Hoagy Carmichael's auto taken at Indiana University. Left to right: Hartwell, Johnson, Carmichael (in hat !), Moore, Leibrook.

4. Hoagy on the beautiful Lake Trail.

5. Left to right: McPartland, Johnson, Ray Ludwig and Trumbauer.

6. Same as (1). Left to right: 'X'Esq., Leibrook, Hartwell, Johnson, Moore, Gillette, Voynow, Bix.

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At this time Hoagy had the leading dance orchestra at Indiana University and naturally had his own engagements on the same nights as ours. However, he found time to come whenever we were playing, between numbers, and there was always a jam session after the dance at his fraternity house.

During the afternoon of our first engagement there, he played over a song he had written, called "Free Wheeling." We liked it, rehearsed it and later recorded it under the name "Riverboat Shuffle." The name was a composite of suggestions from the members in the band, Bix liking the "Riverboat" part and Bob Gillette suggesting the "Shuffle."

That summer was time spent in Utopia. Enthusiastic dancers to play to, dancers who understood our music as well as we did, whole days spent playing golf, and a full purse to supply anything we wanted.

Before we left Cincinnati we had all met the cast of the "Abie's Irish Rose" show that was playing in that town. We met nightly at one of the restaurants and with two of the cast in particular, George B. Nolan, who played the part of Abie, and Billy Fay, who played the Irish father, we all planned to play lots of golf when the weather moderated. Fortunately, the show moved to Indianapolis for the summer at the same time we did, and five of us, Bob Gillette, Vic Moore, and I from the band, and Nolan and Fay from the show, engaged rooms at a private home, just a mashie pitch from No. 1 tee at the golf club. All summer we played from never less than 36 to sometimes 72 holes in a day, most of the time under a special ruling allowing a five-some to play.

We lost track of Nolan and Fay after we left Indianapolis in July, and you can imagine my surprise nine years later, while attending a movie, when the familiar face of George B. Nolan appeared on the screen, unexpected, because he had dropped his last name and was now called George Brent, the latter being his middle name. I often wonder if he enjoys life as much as he used to when he made $150 a week and had nothing to worry about but a nasty slice.

About the 15th of May we returned to Richmond and recorded "Oh Baby," "Copenhagen," "Susie," and "Riverboat Shuffle," using the same combination as before, excepting trombone which we no longer used.

It may be interesting to note that the commercial orchestration of "Copenhagen," used by orchestras everywhere, was taken note for note as well as could be, from the record we made, chosen before release, as on all other recordings, from the three masters made. Here, more than any other recordings we made, was the vast difference in each of the three masters. If either of the remaining masters has been chosen for pressing, the tune "Copenhagen" as it is known to-day, would have been very different. This number was made up almost entirely of individual choruses, and we all used different melodies and ideas on the three masters.

Within the next 30 days our records had become generally known, by musicians particularly. Vic Burton, who had just finished playing with a Chicago theatre orchestra, came down to Indianapolis about July 15th with an offer to engage the band, without Moore, for the month of August, to open the new Gary (Ind.) Municipal Dance Pavilion on Lake Michigan.

This offer was a good one and filled in the time until our engagement at Cinderella Ballroom, already booked, to start early in September.

We all decided to take a voluntary cut in salary to keep Moore with the band for that month, and after playing a few vaudeville dates, while Moore took a vacation, we started the Gary job with two drummers. Vic Burton led the band for half of the evening, with Moore playing the drums, and the other half Burton played the drums while Vic Moore rested from the strain of watching a band led by a drummer.

During this five-week period many of our friends from Indiana University who lived nearby, drove over to dance and, as was the custom at that time, each brought a bottle of gin, usually of his own mixing. On one such night I can remember a friend from Indianapolis, crouching behind Bix's chair, holding that worthy's coat collar to the chair-back to prevent Bix from taking a tumble. And still the notes rolled out, twice as slippery as ever, due, no doubt, to the lubricating oils in the juniper berries. Those were merry days, with no end of gin to drink, horses to ride, and a grand lake to swim in.

We made no recordings from the time we left Indianapolis until we had been in New York for almost a month, that is, from June until October.

The Gary job ended about the 5th of September, and we all left for New York and the Cinderella engagement.

The Cinderella was one of the finest dance halls in New York, located at 48th and Broadway, in the heart of all that is worth while in the amusement line in that city. Opposite us, playing alternately was Willie Creager's orchestra, the first of four orchestras that played opposite us during the four months we played there.

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It was only natural that we in the band looked forward with great pride and no little doubt to out next job at the Cinderella.

Pride, because in less than a year as a definite organisation, we were to play in a first-rate spot on Broadway, an achievement rarely attained by any orchestra; doubt, because all our playing had been to audiences decidedly different in the matter of musical appreciation. This, in spite of the fact that Red Nichols, Miff Mole, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, Frank Trumbauer and others were playing with different orchestras in the New York district.

There were a few Dixieland combinations in the smaller dance halls and cafés but no combination similar to ours, nor any with a similar style, and for this reason we all looked forward with great anxiety to our opening.

The day before we opened, several of us attended the Hippodrome Theatre, where Ray Miller's orchestra was playing a short booking before their opening at the Arcadia Ball Room, just two blocks from the Cinderella.

Miff Mole, Ruby Bloom (whom I had met the year previous in Chicago), and Frank Trumbauer, my personal choice for saxophone royalty, were with Ray. It was our first opportunity to hear them in person. You will understand our enthusiasm when I mention that we all let out a yell that all but drowned out the band when Miff took his first break, and were all summarily ejected from the theatre.

We went around back stage, where I asked for Ruby and where we were introduced to Frank and Miff. The latter was very surprised to learn that we were the cause of all the noise in the theatre. He had thought someone was giving him the bird.

From then on, during our stay in New York, we rarely missed the opportunity of hearing Miller's band on the nights when we started and finished early and they played late, and they came to the Cinderella as frequently.

At that time Ray Miller's orchestra was the first of the large bands to mix a little hot music with the general run of heavy orchestrations, and their hot music would have been a great hit at the present time.

Our contract at the Cinderella was for 30 days, with two options of 90 days and one year. From the very start we were well received, and the word got around Broadway that the Wolverines at the Cinderella were something new and different. Famous musicians came to listen and were eager to sit in, just as we had been in the days at Friars Inn in Chicago. Most frequent of these was Red Nichols, who at that time was just coming under the influence of Bix's genius. Red probably will not like this statement, but it is my personal opinion that much of Red's playing to-day is the direct result of the absorption of ideas gained from, listening to and playing next to Bix, together with the learning, note for note, of Bix's recordings. Even before we had landed in New York we had heard a recording of Red's called "You'll Never Get to Heaven With Those Eyes," in which he used Bix's chorus in "Jazz Me Blues" note for note.

Bix was a fountain of ideas that were spontaneous, as unexpected to himself as they were to us, while Red's playing has ever been methodical and carefully thought out, with each note planned ahead. Each was an artist, but Bix had the natural flow of ideas which, once played, were discarded and never used again. There were too many as yet unplayed to bother with repeating.

Our first month was replete with new experiences, being the first trip to New York for any of us. Well received, our option was taken up and we knew we were set until January 1st. We rehearsed new numbers and made our first New York recordings, "Big Boy," on which Bix played a piano chorus for the first time on record, and "Tia Juana," about which the less said the better.

Bix spent most of his time after working hours sitting in with some of the Dixieland combinations in town. He always claimed that the five-piece combination was the ideal one.

When we had been in New York a month, Bix gave his notice and joined Frank Trumbauer in St. Louis. I am hazy about this fact, always having believed that he went direct to join Jean Goldkette, but I have since read that he played first with Frank. Our affairs were of primary importance to us and this lack of certainty can be overlooked.

Our first task was to replace him, once he had determined to go. Red Nichols wanted to

join us, but we were doubtful, not because of his playing, because we would have been more than pleased to have him, but because of his unreliability at that time. We knew that on his record for the year previous one could never be sure of his being on the job if he happened to feel a bit temperamental. This story might have a different ending if we had.

Paul Mares, in New Orleans, recommended a cornet player there, and we sent him transportation. Mr. Sparky Banano arrived in all his glory, red underwear and all, played one number, which for his convenience was an old New Orleans song that babies are weaned on in Louisiana, and was given transportation back immediately. I doubt if any man ever made a faster round trip. Nothing but a rubber ball could get to and back as fast as he did, leaving within two hours of his arrival.

A friend of Vic Moore's suggested Jimmy McPartland in Chicago, and Vic called him on on the phone, as previously related in *Swing Music*.

Jimmy at that time could play only in three keys, but in those keys he knew all our recorded numbers, and between many rehearsals and playing with us until Bix left, things went smoothly, with Jimmy fitting right in, shaky at first, but a better substitute for Bix than any cornetist at that time.

Two or three days after the departure of Bix we were invited to play at the Artists' Ball, sponsored by Loew Metro Goldwyn at the Astor Hotel.

This affair is one of the musical high lights of the season, being an invitation affair, featuring about 25 of the leading orchestras playing for the dancing.

Each orchestra was scheduled to play four numbers as their contribution. We were slated to appear late, about 1 a.m., and were to follow Sam Lanin's orchestra from Roseland Ball Room, with whom Red was playing. We planned to play "Copenhagen" and "Riverboat Shuffle," neither of which had been published as yet, and which, because of our original recording of them, we considered as our exclusive property.

Imagine our surprise when Lanin opened his offering with the one and finished with the other. He had had one of his arrangers sitting at the Cinderella, unknown to us, and had our arrangements almost note for note.

We hastily changed our choice of numbers and played our four, greeting with, as we were told later by N. T. Grantland, the master of ceremonies, the largest reception of any of the orchestras. The dancers, led by the many musicians who had waited since their turn, kept up a steady applause which only abated when N.T.G. promised them that we would play for them again after the remaining bands had appeared. We did play again for several hours and were the only orchestra to play more than our scheduled four numbers.

Our three months' option was taken up and we immediately began to receive offers to leave the Cinderella. Sophie Tucker, Bee Palmer and many others made offers of more money than we were getting.

We were informed by the management of the Cinderella that we were all set for the next year, that our next option would be taken up. They also threatened to use legal means to prevent our playing until the end of that year if we left one by one and reorganised, as we considered doing. The result was that we were forced to refuse these offers and in the end were the victims of as neat a double-cross as was ever given anyone.

At about the time we started at the Cinderella, a famous dance team featured at one of the shows in New York a new dance called the Charleston. It is not generally known that this dance started its country-wide popularity at the Cinderella to the music of the Wolverines.

The dancers found our particular rhythm perfectly suited to the Charleston, and the management did everything in its power to forward the popularity, offering prizes for the best team and in many other ways helping to make it the craze it became. For us and the management it finally became the holding of a bear by the tail, lots of fun while you hold, but devilish to let go.

Because of its very characteristics, the Charleston, while a big success, reacted unfavourably to us. Those who did not dance it, and some of those who did, found a crowded floor a disadvantage, objecting to the danger to life and limb

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in the shape of flying feet, and soon the situation changed; the Charleston dancers came to the Cinderella and the rest of the dancers who liked less violence went elsewhere.

Towards the last we were even ordered to play sweet tunes, and only two to a set, which threw double work on Dave Harmon's orchestra, who played opposite us.

Two months before our three months' option expired no renewal in writing was forthcoming, and we suddenly realised that the assurances given even as late as 24 hours before, that we would be at the Cinderella for the whole of the coming year, were a deliberate double-cross given us because we had thought to leave previously, and due in small part to the uncontrollability of the Charleston situation.

Our offers no longer open, we were out of a job, and suddenly we decided, urged by Vic and myself, to go to Florida for the winter. We left January 3rd and from then on bad luck seemed to dog us. We arrived in Miami, were offered a job almost immediately at a night club, and the night before we were to open, it was closed by padlock by the government for violation of the Prohibition Act.

We played now and then, making expenses and enjoying a well-earned holiday. Vic Moore, in the meantime, went to Palm Beach, where his family had been living for three years, and where his father had a very successful real estate business. Vic worked for his father for a few weeks and finally opened an office of his own, made over $100,000 in the next year and lost it one evening when the banks closed overnight with all his cash on deposit.

While in Miami we made arrangements to go back to Indiana for the spring dances, with Dusty Rhodes as drummer and singer. Advance notices were mailed and we left for Chicago the last of March to replace Jimmy Hartwell, who remained in Miami, and Min Leibrock, who joined Arnold Johnson shortly before we left.

In Chicago we reorganised with Rip Logan, a balmy clarinetist, and a bass player, Morganthaler, from Min's home town, Hamilton, Ohio.

We played college dances from April 1st until the closing of school, and played other dances on open dates, leaving Thursday, Saturday and Sunday for the Casino Gardens, our old stamping grounds at Indianapolis.

Dissension in the ranks resulted in Dusty leaving, and we returned to Chicago, replacing him with Ralph Snyder, on drums, and using Jimmy Lord on clarinet in the place of Logan, whose balminess became too hard to handle.

We opened at the Montmartre Café in Chicago the first of July, played there five weeks and left after experiencing trouble in properly playing the floor show. From the Montmartre we moved immediately to the Valentino Café in down town Chicago, a spot frequented by the underworld element, even as our first job at Stockton Club had been.

The Valentino was operated, as we later learned when we read the names of our bosses in the papers, by the Aeillo Brothers, who were later disposed of in the gang wars.

This last engagement lasted five weeks, until September 5th, and during this time a rapid series of changes took place in the personnel of the band. Morganthaler left to start law practice, Bob Gillette left to start in the oil business in Oklahoma, Jim Lindsay on bass and Jimmy McPartland's brother on banjo replacing them.

This left Dick Voynow and myself as the remaining original members of the band, and I think, for each of us, the joy of playing had gone with the many changes. I left shortly after and soon the band broke up completely.

As I think back on those years, the only sad thought is that we allowed the band to pass out as it did, like an old man dying with a weak heart. I'd like to remember that we all disbanded one time, then I would not have the memory of those last few weeks.

The most enduring memory I have is the pride at having known and played with the greatest artist of all times—Bix the Beiderbecke.

— End —