"BIXING"

Myths, Lies, and Political Correctness in Jazz Research

By Malcolm Shaw

Discographer-General's Warning

This article on bixing may contain noxious quantities of hearsay, romantic rumor, conjecture, tall stories, political correctness and trace quantities of trash. Bixing may impair your ability to discern reality from conjecture and truth from twaddle. Severe cases may be harmful to mental health.

Who was that lady I saw you with … ? That was no lady, that was:

Bix at eight with his mother …
(Bix, Man & Legend, by Richard M. Sudhalter and Phillip R. Evans, Arlington House, 1974. Photo credit: Wayne Rohlf)

Bix, age 8 with a neighbor, Nora Lasher …
(Bix, The Leon Bix Beiderbecke Story, by Phillip R. and Linda Evans, Prelike Press, 1998. Photo credit: Beiderbecke family)

Bix… poses with the tutor his family hired to help him keep up with his school work …
(Bix Beiderbecke, Jazz Age Genius, by David R.. Collins, Morgan Reynolds Inc, 1998. Acknowledgments credit Davenport Public Library, Rich Johnson, Kay Runge, Rochelle Murray)

Note: all photos show the same nicks, creases and scratches, so they presumably share a single original source within the Beiderbecke family.

So, what's bixing? It's a common habit in jazz history both written and oral, of passing off rumor and opinion as fact. It's named for Bix Beiderbecke because people have probably used more smoke and mirrors to augment and glorify his particular legend than anyone else's. The harm that results is usually minimal and often risible, but bixing creates a folklore tradition that newcomers to our music hear and believe, at the expense of truth.

Many if not most of us catch the jazz addiction through one of three figures; Armstrong, Morton or Beiderbecke. In my own case, a friend at boarding school brought his dad's copy from home of "The King of New Orleans Jazz," bearing 14 classic Jelly-Roll Morton tracks from 1926-27 Victors. A minute into "Black Bottom Stomp," I was hooked for life at the age of 13. High on Jelly-Roll, I then began to seek the same euphoria from other similar sources, and soon found Bix, Louis Armstrong, Johnny

Dodds and other seminal figures. I also started to look for information about them, beyond just the music. This is what I gleaned as a 14-year-old from friends, liner notes and books of the day, about my new hero, Bix Beiderbecke.

Bix started life as Leon Bismark Beiderbecke, *(in spite of the fact that both his birth and death certificates name him as Leon Bix.)* Look in jazz books written before 1960, like "A Pictorial History of Jazz," if you don't believe me. Bix took to the cornet from the age of 3, though he never read a note of music all his life. Nick LaRocca, of the ODJB, taught him everything he knew. He put together a band called the Wolverines, but the other players were lousy compared to him. This upset him so much, it drove him to drink, which eventually killed him.

He left the Wolverines to work for Gene Goldkettle's band (*sic*, in similar early jazz books) but they only played highly-arranged dance music, which he hated. The other musicians were way below his standard, inferior yet, and playing this stuff drove him crazy with artistic frustration, which eventually killed him. *(According to Rex Stewart, Fletcher Henderson's trumpet lead, the Goldkette band won a "Battle of the Bands" contest hands down against the Henderson orchestra in 1927, on Henderson's home turf at Roseland in New York. Inferior musicians?)*

He then joined the autocratic and repressive Paul Whiteman *(known to his orchestra men as "Pops")*, who didn't understand his genius, making him play nothing but syrupy arrangements. *(Now, in order to play Whiteman's syrupy arrangements, Bix had to be able to fathom the score, so he had at least the rudiments of music theory; he'd also had piano lessons as a kid.)* Having to play syrupy arrangements was what eventually killed him.

The only time it was any fun at all, was in the studio with his Gang and Frankie Trumbauer's Orchestra. There, he could choose his material, so he played only top-flight jazz tunes (*like "Wait Till You See Ma Cherie"; "Lila"; "High Up On A Hilltop"?*). Bix would show up, take his horn out of that brown-paper bag he always used to carry it, (*one of two hand-built Vincent Bach "Stradivarius" models, probably two grand each by today's standards; who needs a case?*) and hit every note with a "bell-like tone." He never used a mute (*so who's that on "Sweet Sue", "You Took Advantage Of Me" and "I Like That"?*). He also never made a bad record nor hit a wrong note (*give "Sugar" a listen. And if you say "well, <u>that</u> can't be Bix…" then hear him hit the wrong chord half way through the solo on "Since My Best Girl Turned Me Down," where his presence is undeniable.*)

His trade-mark was the ability to bend notes by pressing the valves half-way down, a trick nobody else knew how to do. (*Pardon me, but: boloney. It's one of those stunts every kid learns on the cornet, like blowing pedal notes or making horse-whinnies. But it's also a stunt that gets you a rap on the knuckles from your brass teacher, if you're properly taught valve and tonguing technique. Bix didn't have one, so he didn't tongue the way most players do, he didn't use the valve combinations taught classically, and he half-valved, a technical no-no. He played what he thought sounded cool. For him, it was right. Oh boy, was it ever!*)

He sent home a copy of every record he made, which his parents hid away in the original packing boxes in a second-floor cupboard, without opening them, because they hated his music. Home on a visit, he went to the cupboard to get some clean underpants.

To his surprise, he found all his records there, still in the parcels. That was the last straw: it broke his heart and eventually killed him.

Then again, he drank too much and ran around with bad company. Always one to put business before charity, nasty old Paul Whiteman fired him, and in his weakened state, Bix went for a ride with Eddie Condon and Bud Freeman in an open car on a winter night and caught pneumonia, which eventually killed him.

Or… wasn't it Isadora Duncan who died from doing the open car thing? Wasn't Bix's talent first acclaimed as a piano prodigy? And isn't the "cupboard" (marked as such by the present owners) a linen-closet big enough to hold maybe a dozen or two boxed records out of the 200+ he made? Didn't he regard Whiteman (who kept Bix's chair open and Bix on the payroll while he was repeatedly drying out) as a father figure, and the opportunity to play in his band as the success of a lifetime? Wasn't the winter night he died in August, 1931, and excruciatingly hot? And didn't he make his exit leaping around, screaming that there were Mexicans under the bed with long knives, rather than heading heavenward from a tranquil pneumonic coma?

Bix's death has more in common, symptomatically, with Jimi Hendrix's and Jim Morrison's *exeunts* (also, technically, pneumonia) than with those of the languishing consumptives in Brontë novels. For certain, those who attempt to evoke memories of the pale, fevered face expiring on the bedstead in the garret were not actually there.

Undoubtedly also, some of his friends helped him kill himself, which is the other popular explanation for his downfall. Credible first-hand accounts tell of Condon, Freeman and others, who thought going on a bender with Bix to be high adventure. But his parents, other friends, and his employer; this same, coldhearted Paul Whiteman; loved him and tried repeatedly to help him back up when he fell. He was never abandoned; he died with a friend in the room. His big problem also wasn't poor choices in friendships; we're all capable of that. It was that he insisted on falling, however much the people who cared for him to the last helped him back up.

His muse didn't cause his self-immolation. Maybe being the indulged and reportedly rather willful son of a wealthy family, who was denied little in his youth, helped. Those who say his stern German parents did him in, are wrong. His parents went to Whiteman concerts and his mother visited the Russo Oriole Orchestra venue in Chicago with Bix, even immediately after he was slung out of Lake Forest, when his parents probably weren't overjoyed with him.

Some even now want to claim it was latent or overt homosexuality. But Sudhalter and Evans, his principal biographers, document him as quite capable of being a ladies' man; Hoagy Carmichael refers to several relationships with girls, and one of his last letters home (June 16, 1931) names a girl, Alice O'Connell, as his future wife. More tellingly, in the very different world of the mid-twenties, had there been any hint of such leanings, none of the other Goldkette bachelor band members would have been as happy to room with this reputedly fun-loving and likable slob at Hudson Lake and on the road, as they were.

In truth, neither society, nor the music, nor other people, nor the times caused Bix's demise. It was Prohibition gin Bix bought for himself. A reasonable definition of addiction is indulgence regardless of any type of consequences. Not one drop went down his throat by accident. Tragedy implies an inevitable development of events, and this was not preordained. Bix could have lived a full threescore and ten, had he followed good

advice from Mother Beiderbecke (anecdotally an imposing woman) rather than his whim, and made better choices.

So that's what bixing is. Bixing serves the purpose of portraying someone or something in a biased light, whether for better or worse. Whether it consists of puff, fibs or whoppers depends on the bixer. Applied to Bix Beiderbecke, it's generally benevolent. It seeks to portray him as a frustrated artist, an introvert who died a classic artist's death at a young age, after a life of tragedy. It chooses to ignore, for example, that he was vicious and unpleasant when drunk, which both Paul Mertz and Bill Challis have said clearly he was. That's also not a good plot for romantic tragedy. It's much more uplifting to the audience, for our hero waste away from artistic frustration, than to choke during a self-inflicted fit of DTs. Unpleasant facts interfere with rosy legend. So they have to be tacitly or explicitly suppressed.

Bixing began in the later 30s, with a desire to confer heroic status on favorite performers, especially those who came to sticky ends, like Bix and Bessie Smith. It persisted through the following decades, making legends of Charlie Parker, Chu Berry, Billie Holiday, and in other genres, James Dean and Jim Morrison.

The pop-music world of the 1960s bixed Robert Johnson into the world's best-known blues singer by acclamation. This was largely because of yet another mist-shrouded, agonizing death, and the legend that he had to die because he sold his soul to the Devil at a crossroads. Owing his fame to the fervor of people like Eric Clapton and Keith Richards, he's the only pre-war blues singer most people under 50 have heard of. He was voted "greatest bluesman" by a readers' poll in "*The Blues*" magazine in 1976. Peter Guralnick, rightly respected and admired for his writings in the rock/R&B field, described him in *"Feel Like Goin' Home,"* as "perhaps the most accomplished and certainly the most influential of all bluesmen…" But most knowledgeable early-blues enthusiasts probably would say he's not even the greatest bluesman from Mississippi. Other names have their champions among people who know the music of the Delta in minute detail, but even that narrow-spectrum, regionally-restricted title is probably most often awarded by savants to Charley Patton.

Bixing continues unabated. Inspiration, divine revelation, emotion-based deduction and wild-assed guessing still occupy an unassailable place alongside fact-based research, eyewitness corroboration and the scientific method. Unfortunately, the injection of romance into historical study serves to enhance readability, but does nothing for credibility.

The version of Bix's life I first learned, quoted at the beginning of the article, only changed for me by applying the knowledge that writers and enthusiasts across the decades have used their particular brand of grease on the historical lens to cast events in the soft or harsh light they desire to throw. As a result, all too often, romantic notions have become "facts" that "everybody knows…"

Staying with Bix one moment longer, it's interesting that the visual image most Bix books and reissues have used to typify him in the past is the studio shot of a slightly lost-looking 18-year-old (though one book I have does a bit of bixing itself, giving 1923 as the date) in his first tux, holding his cornet on his knee, on his way to one of his early semi-pro gigs before he even left Davenport: a perfect *ingénu.* Far from being the pale, Byronic introvert such histories would have us envisage, his own blood relatives have stated that young Bix was extroverted and gregarious. He was clearly good at sports,

going out for football, basketball and baseball at Lake Forest. His correspondence both as a youth and as a professional musician shows him to have been forthright and assertive, in some cases all but demanding. The letters are at times ebullient; the voice that comes off the page is loud and clear. As for grammar and spelling, they show he had no time for rules. Now, when you think about it, isn't this exactly in character with what we hear in most of his music?

Bixing is open to all comers, of course, not just Davenport's most famous son. But an aura of romance and *Schadenfreude* is essential. Bix's close friend and session-mate, Don Murray, for example, died a horrible and tragic death even before Bix did, but he does not carry the "doomed by his art" stamp of a Beiderbecke, Billie Holiday or Charlie Parker, so he isn't lionized in the same way. And who now weeps for Mario Perry, Eddie Lang, even Frank Teschemacher? Their shortened lives, for reasons of their own, don't fit the necessary criteria for Harlequin Romance musical history.

In the realm of blues singers (another heavy-laden field, emotionally) "everybody knows," or at least everybody has been told at some time, that Bessie Smith bled to death when the ambulance called to the scene of her auto accident took her to a whites-only hospital, where the personnel would not treat her. The myth, for such it is, was positively and indisputably dispelled in the seventies, in Chris Albertson's excellent book, *Bessie.* But there still exist diehards who quote the legend ferociously as gospel.

It persists because it makes an excellent parable. Set in 1937, it fits a mental image of the times; Pa Joad scrabbling in the dust-bowl dirt, our grandparents' tales of childhood spent finding the way to the outhouse in the dark through the snowdrifts, and the Southern Trees Bearing a Strange Fruit. This is a subset: PC bixing. So if it reinforces a truth about race relations in the 1930s by perpetuating a little white lie, who suffers? The truth is, we all do, for PC bixing seeks to perpetuate ignorance, not enlightenment.

Examples of similar "factual" legends go back into the mists: the Armstrong cylinders for the Melrose company; the Keppard test in 1916 for Victor; the Buddy Bolden cylinder; the personalities of Frankie Dusen and, most legendary of all, Emmett Hardy, who supposedly changed the course of musical history. Some of it came from people who were actually around in the early days, like Jelly Roll Morton, who sought to burnish his already-legendary status. For any and all of it, there is a shred of truth somewhere. But for those of us who heard the rediscovered Bunk Johnson, a similarly-reputed New Orleans "founder of the style," who was pulled from obscurity, fitted with new dentures and resuscitated to produce some pretty forgettable music in the forties, a level of skepticism about them all must persist.

A couple of years ago, Ken Burns did a great service to public awareness of this music, by making his documentary, "Jazz". It undoubtedly engaged many converts, and if you're one such reading this, a heartfelt welcome. It also provided new avenues for bixing in the form of personal opinions expressed as fact, from the director, hosts and guests. Perhaps there is an argument that the gain for popular knowledge of the music offsets the loss of factual credibility, but not totally so for me. In Episode 4, Louis Armstrong's erstwhile manager, Tommy Rockwell, is referred to as "a tough-talking booking agent with mob connections;" an ugly enough insinuation. It makes him sound like a shady, dishonest, hustling, greedy opportunist, to my ear. I know a bit about him. The reality is somewhat different.

Rockwell managed the Chicago OKeh Records division of the Consolidated Music Publishing Company in the mid-20s, and later OKeh's New York office, when Columbia took over the operation. He was personally responsible for giving Louis Armstrong his break in 1925 (on Richard M. Jones's recommendation) to record for the first time under his own name. The Hot Fives, Hot Sevens and subsequent Armstrong combinations for OKeh, effectively launched Louis' career as the first virtuoso bandleader in the true jazz idiom.

This was no small gift to Louis or to us. Rockwell became, essentially, a guide and mentor for Louis' career from then on, and to a greater or lesser extent, a contributor to Louis' success for the whole time he was with OKeh. This history and its contribution to where Louis was by 1929 goes unmentioned in Burns' documentary.

The commentary also doesn't mention that in 1929, when Rockwell summoned Armstrong to come to New York, Armstrong thought enough of this man to drop everything and do it. Could this, perhaps, be because that fact doesn't fit the film's *Leitmotiv* of racial exploitation and the hijacking of black people's music by white "operators?" Blacks made the music and whites made the money. Isn't this just more PC bixing?

Could it also be for the same reason, that Louis' recording the same year of "Knocking A Jug," one of the most important fully-integrated studio recordings of the decade, goes unmentioned? Whites and blacks were involved at all levels in the creation of this music. Clarence Williams, Armand Piron and W. C. Handy ran companies which profited from jazz music, from its inception. They were black and successful. Jazz performers broke race barriers 30 years before American society made it law. Anyone who knows the music can think of five examples without racking brains; Coleman Hawkins, Lonnie Johnson, Clarence Williams, Fats Waller and a good many early blues singers either led or performed with white musicians and bands, many in sessions set up by Tommy Rockwell.

I can't see why a program built heavily around Louis and especially the music he played would ignore all this, absent an agenda Tommy Rockwell made Louis Armstrong a household name with both white and black audiences. To find out how much Louis felt he owed Rockwell, read his own words, it's in his books; but it's also in personal letters I have seen from him to Rockwell.

Now to the mobster innuendo; that Rockwell booked bands into venues owned or operated by crime figures is indubitable. That was where the gigs were. Agents everywhere had deals to make in a public entertainment network permeated by organized crime. That same entertainment network, moreover, usually ran on alcohol, an illegal substance, whose manufacture and distribution took place substantially under the aegis of organized crime. So anyone doing business in the industry did business with the mob. It was true for Rockwell, true for Irving Mills, Joe Glaser, Sam Lanin, anyone big or small. In that sense, they all had "mob connections". By its choice of words, the film's phraseology insinuates a mob-*insider* role for Rockwell, which neither the film nor the book then clarifies, sources or substantiates. No-one of my acquaintance who knew or worked with him, including his former employers and a close relative of his, has voiced this idea as even a possibility, let alone confirmed it. I've had to write a page here to rebut seven words, but I do have a problem with bixing ill of the dead.

The bixing beat doesn't only go on, it grows, and it isn't even limited to "our" music. A collector I revered in the 1960s told me as gospel that he had "a friend who knew the guy who wrote the melody and lyrics for 'Yesterday', which he then sold to Paul McCartney for five pounds." Yes, friend, I have this lovely bridge for sale ... Walk across it from Manhattan, and there you are, in Brooklyn …

At around the same time, I heard of a prominent collector of the era who had discovered "a warehouse full of Paramounts." And the story still persists, that a collector "somewhere in the East" has a mint copy of the "Zulus Ball/Working Man Blues" Gennett on his shelf, waiting for the right moment to come clean.

What might have been jazz collecting's equivalent of Jan van Megheren's scam of the century, faking Vermeers for the Nazis, took place in April, 1963, forty years after the legendary Oliver session for Gennett on April 4/5 1923.. Laurie Wright and John R. T. Davies assembled a "fudged" label photograph of Gennett 5276, complete with the title: "That Sweet Something, Dear." They then co-conspired with the "Storyville team," a gang of volunteer loonies who assembled *Storyville* magazine in England in the 60s, and which at one time included your humble servant, to include the photo of the "unissued" Oliver Gennett in the magazine. On the page was the footnote "April 1 1963" in Univers Bold type, large enough to give the observer a black eye. This notwithstanding, such was the desire among the readership for the April Fool joke not to be so, that Laurie and John received several inquiries about the possibility of hearing or buying the item.

Japesome excursions such as this, of course, gain strength and credibility from true miracles, like the reappearance of unissued Tommy Johnson test pressings from a ditch, or the emergence of the third J. C. Johnson's Five Hot Sparks title. Bixing carries on because, like these discoveries, it describes a world we hope for, just beyond the edge of reality.

New examples show up every day. Auction sites are a goldmine of innovative bixing. Consider, for example, the advertiser who quotes the personnel of one of the records he has at auction as including one "William McKinley, who later went on to found his much-more-famous Cotton Pickers." Or the one who states of a hill-and-dale Edison for sale, that: "In spite of what the collectors say, you can play these on a regular Victrola; they just don't sound as good." (Nor, perhaps, do they thereafter sound much like anything at all…)

Bixing is fun. All it takes is a combination of ignorance, mental laziness and reckless enthusiasm, sometimes combined with an agenda, political or personal. It's fun to search out, it's common enough and it can give you a laugh on a rainy day. There's probably a book in it, somewhere. When you come across them, send me *your* examples, and I'll acknowledge them!