Bix Beiderbecke: His Influences and Playing Style while with the Wolverines

by

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Much has been written about Bix Beiderbecke's life as the real-life model of an F. Scott Fitzgerald character. His lifestyle has been used as a symbol of the Jazz Age of the Roaring 20's by many writers. These comparisons have not given enough credit to his contributions in jazz music. Leon Bix Beiderbecke was the first and most influential white jazz musician of the 1920's. His legato and lyric style was an interesting antithesis to the prevailing style of the time as exemplified by King Oliver and Louis Armstrong. Beiderbecke's style also had a major influence on many jazz musicians such as Jimmy McPartland, Rex Stewart, and Lester Young.

The musical style of Bix Beiderbecke influenced many, but how was his style developed? To answer this question one must find out something of Beiderbecke's early life. Bix was born in 1903 in Davenport, Iowa, and grew up in an upper-middle class family. Piano lessons were begun before he reached the age of five and by age fifteen, Bix had added the cornet to his musical arsenal. He was completely self-taught on the cornet with most of his learning being done by ear. This lead Beiderbecke to develop fingerings that were unorthodox, which in later life allowed him to execute passages that are more difficult if one had used conventional fingerings.

Davenport was a major stop on the Mississippi River for the riverboats during Bix's early life. This afforded Bix a great opportunity to hear the great jazz musicians of the time when the showboats on which they were performing would stop on their way up the river. The music of the showboats gave Bix a good foundation on which to build his own musical style. Besides these first-hand influences, Bix also found an influence through the new medium of records. Nick LaRocca of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB) was a part of this influence. LaRocca influenced Beiderbecke through the solos Bix transcribed from some of the ODJB's early recordings. From the beginning Beiderbecke did not just copy the solos of LaRocca, he added notes of his own which Bix called "phrasing around the lead."[1]

Beiderbecke's low grades and frequent absences from school prompted his parents to send him to Lake Forest Academy in 1912 to moderate his interest in music, and to encourage him to find a more acceptable vocation. The Academy's close proximity to Chicago, thirty-five miles away, had an effect on Bix opposite to that intended by his parents. He would sneak to Chicago to hear the popular jazz groups of the day. On one of these excursions to Chicago, Beiderbecke encountered the New Orleans Rhythm Kings (NORK) at the Friar's Club. NORK was the next major influence on Bix. Several bands, including NORK, allowed Bix the sit in when he would appear at the performance.

These nightly excursions helped Bix to become known as a cornet player, which led to jobs with various area bands. This also meant more nights away from the academy, which led to Beiderbecke's dismissal from school. Bix played with various bands in Chicago, Davenport, and on the riverboats on the Mississippi until he received his union card on October 1, 1923.

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[1]Richard M. Sudhalter and Philip R. Evans, Bix: man and legend (Arlington House Publishers: New Rochelle, N.Y., 1974), p. 14.

In December of 1923, Beiderbecke was involved in the formation of the Wolverines, whose name was derived from the song, "Wolverine Blues". The group included Vic Moore, drums; George Johnson, tenor sax; Jimmy Hartwell, clarinet; Dick Voynow, piano; Bix, cornet; Al Gandee, trombone; Min Leibrook, tuba and bass sax; and Bob Gillette, banjo. The Wolverines' first jobs were in the Cincinnati, Ohio, area. As the group's reputation spread, they received many jobs throughout the midwest and eventually a recording contract with Gennet Records. Richard Sudhalter explains:

> "The Wolverines' new feeling owed equal debt to Bix's growing skill at turning even the dixieland lead into a flowing, melodic line, and to Bobby Gillette's rhythmic lift on the banjo, tighter and more thrusting than the relaxed timekeeping of the NORK's Louis Black. . . . But the music had a new feeling of urgency, smoother than the jerky syncopations of ODJB but crisper than the lilt of the NORK."[2]

During the time Bix was with the Wolverines, he continued to develop his original playing style. His style became well-known through the Wolverine records and their live performances. A job in New York City in September of 1924 afforded Bix and the Wolverines more exposure, which led to an offer by Jean Goldkette to Bix to join the Goldkette Band. In October Bix took this job, thus ending his association with the Wolverines.

Music of Bix and the Wolverines

Many of the tunes played by the Wolverines were first performed by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. The tunes were played in the same manner, but the Wolverines used more improvisation and had a looser texture with more variation. Even on the early recordings the Wolverines showed these attributes. Bix also showed he was influenced by the performers in the ODJB and the New Orleans Rhythm Kings (NORK) on these recordings, but the greatest influences are from the clarinetists, not the cornetists.[3]

On the recording of Jazz Me Blues, recorded in 1924, which was one of the first tunes recorded by the Wolverines, one can hear some characterists which made Bix such an important part of the group. He led the band well during the ensemble passages and added some fresh and interesting solos. The solo on Jazz Me Blues is one of the most original solos of the time.

The solo shows many of Bix's solo qualities: his lyricism, his swing, and his beautiful, golden cornet tone.[4] Through the shole solo, Bix capitalized on these three aspects of his playing. The swing is especially noticeable on the break in m.7 and m.8 (Figure 1) and in the stop-time section in m.13 through m.16. The whole solo never becomes monotonous because of the changes in rhythm. Some of the measures are similar (m.3,4,6,13,14,15), but none are exactly the same.

Although there are a variety of ideas in the solo, Bix does tie the solo together with two melodic motives and two rhythmic ideas. One of the motives is in m3, m.4, and m.11. The other motive is a triplet figure in m.10 and m.16. In m.16, the last three beats are changed, but the measure starts with the ascending chromatic triplet.

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[2] Ibid., p. 98.

[3] Max Harrison, liner notes for the album Bix Beiderbecke and the Chicago Cornets, (Milestone Records: Berkleye, CA. 1974).

[4] Gunther Schuller, Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development (Oxford University Press: New York, 1969), p. 188.

This figure is used quite frequently by Bix throughout his career. The use of the rhythm of four eighth notes (♫♫) on beats one and two of a measure is used five times (m.3,4,6,13,15) in this solo. Sometimes Bix continues with other rhythms, at other times he stops. The other rhythm Bix uses is the eighth-quarter-eighth-quarter figure (♫♩♪) starting on beat one- This happens in m.8, m.14, m.17, and m.18. These motives and rhythms help give a cohesive quality and help show how he held his solos together.

Another tune recorded by the Wolverines, "Tiger Rag," helps show the lead qualities of Bix. "Tiger Rag" was a tune taken at a quick tempo, ala ODJB. The rhythms swung more and there was more independent-polyphonic playing by the band.

This song also shows some of the orchestrations employed by the Wolverines. Bix had a major input in developing these orchestrations. The orchestrations are riff-ensembles which were anticipations of arrangements by Don Redman and Jelly Roll Morton. The riffs are most evident when backing solos and between breaks. They are definite, rhythmic patterns that were harmonized. Even with the arranged sections, the 4/4 beat swung as the music of few white bands had before.[5]

One Characteristic of "Tiger Rag" which is unique for white bands of the period is the breaks. They are not just a held note or a rhythm section break, they have motion. The clarinet breaks in the first chorus show this very well. Jimmy Hartwell plays an eighth note arpeggiated passage that keeps the beat and excitement of the song going. Bix adds a good break just before his solo which has much spirit and movement, even though he misses some notes.

After Bix's solo comes the best example of harmonized riffs. The first riff ( ) is repeated nine times with different pitches and with different harmonies and a two bar harmonized break at the end. The next riff( ) is repeated seven times. The texture opens for the last chorus. The cornet plays the lead with the clarinet and the tenor sax playing the background. Each of the instruments has an improvised part in the final chorus. The final chorus is close to the polyphonic style of the black New Orleans groups in Chicago in the 1920's.

The drive and excitement created on "Tiger Rag" give one an idea why the Wolverines were such an influential group. They took older songs, put their own stamp on them, and made them swing. Riverboat Shuffle was a song written especially for the Wolverines by Hoagy Carmichael in 1924 and shows how the Wolverines could blaze trails with new materials.

This tune was played at a slower tempo, and it still had some harmonized passages, most notably in the introduction. It also has some harmonized breaks, as before in the solo by Bix. The other solo breaks are more restrained, although they still swing.

The solo by Bix shows some of the motivic ideas used by Bix to give a cohesivness lacking in the music of many of the other in the Wolverines. The idea in the first two measures ( ) going between two different pitches appears again in m.10 and m.22. (Figure 2) The sliding "blue" note in m.5 occurs in m.17 and m.18, also, Another "blue" note motive happens in m.1 and m.31. This motive is not as "dirty" as the previous time it was played. This is because the note is not glissed.

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[5] Ibid., p.193.

The solo in "Riverboat Shuffle" shows the number of times Bix used dissonances in his solos. In the thirty-three measure solo, he uses fifty-two dissonances. Some of these are used as passing tones without giving much feeling of dissonance, but others are heard and felt more strongly. There are thirteen notes of one and one-half beats in length and seven notes of longer than two beats' duration. Four of these notes are flatted thirds in a major chord, and two are ninths. The last is sixth in a major triad.

These dissonances were a preview of some of the things Bix would do later, especially in his piano works. With these new chord tones, Bix gave jazz new and fresh solos. Bix was probing new harmonic areas in jazz.

Bix was a unique and gifted performer throughout his career. This writer has tried to show how the Wolverines and Bix Beiderbecke brought a new dimension to jazz. Bix gave a lifetime to jazz starting with the Wolverines. As said by Tirro:

> "Beiderbecke stands apart as an important historical figure. . . for three reasons: the consistently high level of performance, the innovation of musical thought within the context of historical framework, and the influence he had upon other jazz musicians who shaped the course of the music they played,"[6]

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[6]Frank Tirro, Jazz: a History (W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.: New York,, 1977), p.207.

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