

## ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



[This is the twenty-sixth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

### **BIX BIEDERBECKE**

How many musicians are ever honored by having an asteroid named after them? L23457 Beiderbecke is a main-belt asteroid discovered in 1989 by M. Geffert at the European Southern Observatory. It is named after the 1920s American jazz artist Bix Beiderbecke, born in Davenport, IA, on March 10, 1903.

Young Leon Bismark Biederbecke received a couple of piano lessons, but he soon picked up a cornet (a type of trumpet) and taught himself how to play. He listened to jazz and Dixieland records, playing along with them, sharpening his chops. But his family tried to dissuade Bix from pursuing his interest in jazz and sent him to a private school near Chicago in his late teens. Bad mistake! Chicago in the early 20s was a hotbed of jazz and the temptation to often play hooky from school to hear the stars of the day was too much. Bix was asked to sit in with the bands, since he was really that good, even on a borrowed horn. So, he would take his cornet mouthpiece, stay out all night, and come to classes half-asleep, and often hung over. As a result, he was quickly expelled. He also began drinking ...more heavily.

Staying in Chicago, he found work with the Wolverines, Frankie Trumbauer's band, and eventually joined Paul Whiteman's Orchestra. He developed a pure, distinctive and original tone that many said sounded like a bell. It was Hoagy Carmichael that said it best, opining that it reminded him of a chime being struck by a mallet. Being self-taught, Bix used some unorthodox fingering, leading to some pretty interesting tones; overtones, actually. It produced a timbre that often set his playing apart from his contemporaries.

He gained an excellent reputation among his peers, black and white alike, but he remained largely unknown to the general public. I first heard of him when, as a teen, I ordered a three-LP set called, I believe, *The Encyclopedia of Jazz*. His sound was very different from that of Louis Armstrong, having a more precise tone. Even Louis was impressed. *Davenport Blues*, still played today, was Bix's first recorded composition. Beiderbecke recorded some jazz classics, such as *Jazz Me Blues* in 1924 with The Wolverines and then in 1927 with Whiteman, which included his most famous solo on *Singin' the Blues*.



Because of his relentless recording and touring schedule with Whiteman, his alcoholism became worse and in late 1928 in Cleveland, he went berserk and broke up a roomful of furniture. For the next couple of years, Bix was in and out of rehab, but never really conquered the demon rum. His health worsened, he returned to New York, but never rejoined Whiteman and performed only sparingly. On the evening of August 6, 1931, in

his apartment, his screams brought neighbors running to help him, only to find Bix in the middle of a bad case of *delirium tremens* whereby he claimed two men with long daggers were hiding under his bed. He died moments later. At just age 28.

Think of a short-lived, doomed jazz genius and Bix immediately comes to my mind. But that scenario has been repeated so many more times in Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday and many others. He was an important innovator in early jazz, had his music featured in half a dozen movies and TV shows, but remains largely out of the mainstream. Surely, had he lived, he most likely would have achieved superstardom.

In 1993, Beiderbecke was inducted into the International Academy of Jazz Hall of Fame. Three of his recordings are in the Grammy Hall of Fame. You can hear his unique stylings on, available on Amazon on the SBME label released in 2008 (ASIN: B0012GMVYE). And don't forget that asteroid named after him!

*Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054, or at [www.JustMeLiveMusic.com](http://www.JustMeLiveMusic.com). See them on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic](http://www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic)*