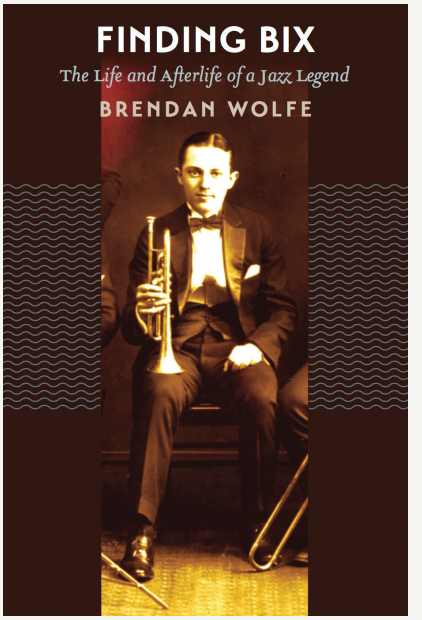
The Many Rosebuds of Citizen Bix



In ***Finding Bix: The Life and Afterlife of a Jazz Legend*** **(University of Iowa Press), Brendan Wolfe** takes a Wellesian ride through nearly 90 years of journalistic underbrush to find his Citizen Bix. After chasing down not just one but many rosebuds, Bix still remains something of a mirage, just like Charles Foster Kane.

So this is not a biography of Bix Beiderbecke. It is a biography of the biographies of him and the myths they have imagined. It rolls along with a stimulating intellectual verve and attitude. But do all the rosebuds lead Wolfe to his Citizen Bix? Heed his early warning on page 7: "The closer I got … the more he retreated."

The Beiderbecke legend is unique in American pop culture in that it emerged posthumously. His only parallel is Robert Johnson. Billie Holiday, Judy Garland and Charlie Parker died famous and well documented. But the world didn't pay attention to Bix until it was too late. History enjoys a puzzle but cannot tolerate a vacuum, which is why in any biography of Bix, he will always co-star alongside his own legend.

Wolfe's journey starts in the Davenport, Iowa, home of the Beiderbecke family. That's also where the first of the major Bix biographies—1974's *Bix: Man and Legend* by Richard Sudhalter and Phillip Evans—picks up. Early death made him the first tragic romantic in jazz history, the Keats or Shelley to a young music struggling to assert its value. But to Sudhalter and Evans, Bix had become lost in the poetry. They wanted the facts. In Wolfe's view, they reduced his life to a timeline and lost its "story." That same year came Ralph Burton's memoir, *Remembering Bix*. It presented a view of Bix that Wolfe first embraced, then questioned as he was steered to *The Leon Bix Beiderbecke Story*. This was a 600-page breakaway bio by the same Phillip Evans who had worked with Sudhalter but severed the partnership over various disputes of Bixology. The Great Bix Myth contained many warring cults, Wolfe found. So he began his own search.

Through 49 discursive but elegantly written chapters (one a mere four lines in length, barely a clarinet break on the prose), he pulls from the dueling testimony and tackles the many angles of the Bix legend. Some seem trivial, as in whether Bix and Louis Armstrong ever met. But this trifling issue soon grows into a shootout between the left and right wings of jazz history. Can a white man be a jazz musician? Never, say LeRoi Jones/Amira Baraka and Stanley Crouch, who regard Bix or any white player as a "great white thief." Absolutely, say Sudhalter and Terry Teachout, with an assist from James Lincoln Collier.

Then there's the matter of who killed Bix, other than Bix himself. Here Wolfe takes on the art vs. commerce issue and whether the Paul Whiteman period stimulated or suffocated him. Otis Ferguson, one of the early literary potentates of jazz criticism and the first to write about Bix in the late '30s, said Whiteman did him in, a theory fleshed out about the same time in Dorothy Parker's roman à clef, *Young Man With a Horn*. But Wolfe believes Whiteman is too easy a target. He attacks Burton's attack on Whiteman, scolding the scolds who scolded Bix for selling out his "art" to the Whitman conglomerate. What Wolfe is really talking about, though, is the complex, often ironic feedback loop between high- and low-art myths in the vast gathering place of the middlebrow mind.

The most eye-opening stuff comes in chapters 36–39, when we get into a possible child molestation incident in 1921, Ralph Burton's suggestion of a homosexual side to the Bix myth and, conversely, an aborted pregnancy in the mid-'20s. Wolfe warns us against jumping to conclusions, however, saying that the evidence is sketchy and inconclusive at best. But he also says that secrets may still be buried in the boxes of research that Evans left behind. **DB**

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