

Finding Bix: The Life and Afterlife of a Jazz Legend

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hone his writing skills in terms of the working-class subject matter he later used in his novels.

Prout brings to his topic the unusual perspective of a corporate executive: he was from 2000 until 2013 the vice-president of government and public affairs for FMC, the Fortune 500 Corporation he joined in 1979. However, when *Coxey's Crusade for Jobs* was published in 2016 the author was visiting professor of political science at Marquette University. He does not reveal how or why he became interested enough in the Coxey phenomenon during his time as a business executive to write a book about it, yet Prout clearly has produced a highly informative and entirely satisfying study of the contribution of Coxey's "Industrial Army" to the history of American protest.

By the way, the author includes 24 pages of highly informative chapter notes; however, they appear densely compressed by type so small that my aging eyes needed a magnifying glass to study them. Yet it would be a mistake for serious readers to ignore them: the notes contain valuable additional details on the Coxey phenomenon and its context in Gilded Age America.

Finding Bix: The Life and Afterlife of a Jazz Legend, by Brendan Wolfe. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017. ix, 235 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95 paperback.

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Simultaneously pitied and idolized, jazz cornetist Bix Beiderbecke acquired an increasingly discordant legend after his premature death in the summer of 1931. The 28-year-old Davenport native, a noted alcoholic, was likely at the peak of his career when he succumbed to sudden and still highly debated causes. Despite having worked for both Jean Goldkette and the presumed "King of Jazz," Paul Whiteman, Beiderbecke was scarcely a public figure in his own time. The ensuing decades, however, saw heightened admiration for and musical imitation of his recorded solos, bringing about a decidedly cult-like "Bixophilia."

More than a biographical profile of a famous musician, Brendan Wolfe's *Finding Bix* chronicles the author's navigation through a subject fraught with misinformation and polarizing opinions. Including topics of discography, bibliography, myth-making, and musical canonization, Wolfe presents a synthesized reinterpretation of what he calls the "Great Bix Myth" (11). He also updates the Beiderbecke discourse with new interviews and accounts from internet forums. Although not an ideal source for historians and music scholars—Wolfe himself is "not

normally a huge fan of academic papers" (103) — the book's light, accessible nature is perfect for casual readers and jazz enthusiasts.

Perhaps of greatest interest to readers of the *Annals of Iowa* is the book's overt connection to the Hawkeye State. A text by an Iowan, about an Iowan, and published by the University of Iowa Press may inherently reflect its surroundings, yet *Finding Bix* provides more than mere references to Iowa. With a particular focus on Davenport, Wolfe recontextualizes the famously agricultural state in terms of regional modernity and challenges the established story of a seemingly provincial cornetist's "emerg[ence] from the cornfields" (11). By no means a "cultural backwater," claims Wolfe, Davenport was not "entirely the caricature that many historians and biographers have rendered" (22). A prominent river and railway center since the mid-nineteenth century, it was a thriving industrial metropolis during Beiderbecke's formative years. Much like New Orleans, Davenport, with its historically intemperate sensibilities toward alcohol and adult entertainment, created its own burgeoning jazz scene that attracted musicians on the Mississippi's riverboat circuit. Wolfe's subsequent presentation of Beiderbecke's early performance opportunities and musical encounters in Iowa mocks the flawed perceptions of previous biographers, a theme that recurs throughout the book.

Finding Bix is not without concerns, however. With mostly short, sporadic chapters, the book lacks an effective organizational cohesion. The modest page count, encompassing nearly 50 discrete chapters, is forced into sections that are too brief for adequate development. The resulting string of arguments is regularly interrupted and left open-ended, thus stifling rhetorical momentum and requiring repeated backtracking. Instances of disconnected thoughts could have been mitigated by longer, sustained chapters with plainly defined criteria. Secondly, Wolfe's writing, while refreshingly lively and conversational, suffers from hyper-colloquial idioms that distort his otherwise clear authorial voice. Phrases such as "artsy-fartsy" (25), "up pops a band of Johnny-come-latelies" (85), and "gotten all Hoagy Carmichael about it" (10), even when used sarcastically, color the text as unnecessarily campy.

Critiques notwithstanding, *Finding Bix* is an entertaining narrative that addresses the ambiguous and rather convoluted nature of jazz historiography. By organizing dissonant sources and, at times, subverting prior inaccuracies, Wolfe formulates a new, personal sketch of the late jazz musician. Readers will undoubtedly glean valuable historical contexts for Beiderbecke's life and musical output, Iowa's urban development, and the ever-mythologizing culture of jazz fandom. "Bix is a specter," claims Wolfe, "flitting in and out of the snaps and pops of a wax record. . . . He is a shadow" (8).