

KINO LORBER

REPERTORY

Presents



BIX: “ain’t none of them play like him yet”

- Louis Armstrong

A Film Produced and Directed by
Academy Award® winner Brigitte Berman
Bridge Film Productions Inc.

Canada | 1981 | 116 mins | English

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Synopsis:

Cornetist / pianist / composer Leon "Bix" Beiderbecke (1903-1931) was jazz's man who got away - the James Dean, Jim Morrison and Kurt Cobain of his day. Born in Davenport, Iowa into an upper middle-class family, Beiderbecke became a legend even in his short lifetime, bringing an amazing new energy and unprecedented maturity to the music and influencing generations of musicians. After a bout battling alcoholism, Bix died in Sunnyside, Queens on August 6, 1931. The cause of death was lobar pneumonia. He was 28 years old.

Using archival photographs and rare footage (including the three sole momentary fragments capturing Bix on film) and interviews with friends and colleagues (including jazz greats Hoagy Carmichael, Doc Cheatham, Artie Shaw, et al.), Oscar® winner Brigitte Berman's acclaimed documentary paints a vivid portrait of a vanished era and brings to life the only cornetist Louis Armstrong regarded as an equal (the quotation in the film's title was once spoken by Armstrong).

INTERVIEWEES:

Hoagy Carmichael	Composer/Pianist/Vocalist
Mary Louise Shoemaker	Bix's sister
Helen Bettendorf	Beiderbecke family friend in Davenport, Iowa
Fritz Putzier	Friend since Bix's youth, in Davenport, Iowa
Vera Korn	Bix's first girlfriend in Davenport, Iowa
Charlie Davis	Bandleader/Pianist/Composer
Reagan Carey	Saxophonist, Charlie Davis Orchestra and Friend
James Regester	Jazz Enthusiast from Bloomington, Indiana
Bill Challis	Jazz Arranger with the Jean Goldkette and Paul Whiteman Orchestras
Al Duffy	Jazz Violinist
Spiggle Willcox	Trombonist, Jean Goldkette Orchestra
Paul Mertz	Pianist with the Jean Goldkette Orchestra
Fred Bergin	Pianist with the Jean Goldkette Orchestra
Dave Wilborn	Banjoist/Singer with the McKinney's Cotton Pickers
Doc Cheatham	Jazz Trumpeter/Bandleader
Artie Shaw	Big Bandleader/Clarinetist
Jess Stacy	Jazz Pianist
Edwin "Squirrel" Ashcraft	Pianist/Jazz Researcher

Al Rinker	Vocalist, The Rhythm Boys Paul Whiteman Orchestra
Matty Malneck	Jazz Violinist with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra
Jack Fulton	Vocalist/Trombonist with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra
Kurt Dieterle	Violinist with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra
Izzy Friedman	Clarinetist with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra
Herb Weil	Drummer
Esten Spurrier	Cornetist/friend from Davenport
Roy Maier	Saxophonist with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra
and the voice of Louis Armstrong	Jazz Trumpeter/Vocalist

MAIN CREDITS:

Narrated by	Richard Basehart
Produced by	Brigitte Berman
Directed by	Brigitte Berman
Written by	Brigitte Berman, Val Ross
Camera	Mark Irwin, Ed Long, Vic Sarin
Sound recording	Ian Challis
Edited by	Brigitte Berman
Sound remastered by	Daniel Pellerin
Picture remastered by	Oren Edenson
Line Producer	Don Haig
Post Production	Film Arts, Toronto
Paintings	Edward Hopper
Animation Camera	John Derderian, Visual Arts, Hollywood
Re-recording	Joe Grimaldi
Background cornet	Richard Williams
Background piano	Dill Jones, Earl French
Research consultants	Norman Gentieu, Gerry Jest, Joe Giordano, Paul Hutcoe, Bill Challis, Bob DeFlores, Duncan Schiedt, Paul Mertz, Frank Driggs, Jim Grover

Official Selection:

London International Film Festival

Bronze Hugo Winner - Chicago International Film Festival

Honorable Mention - San Francisco International Film Festival

Filmex Los Angeles International Film Festival

About the Production and Original Release:

The film first screened in New York City on August 6, 1981, on the 50th anniversary of Bix Beiderbecke's death. The film title is a tribute to Bix Beiderbecke by Louis Armstrong, expressing Armstrong's opinion that no cornet player had yet been able to fill the void left by Bix Beiderbecke in all the years since Bix's passing.

Producer/Director Brigitte Berman's personal passion for Bix Beiderbecke's music sparked the production of the film: "Ever since I first heard Bix play, I was hooked. His music has a freedom of spirit, an abandonment, a striving for perfection that intrigued me – it contains the spirit of someone pouring his heart into everything he played."

"Bix was the embodiment of creativity. Whenever he played, he created new phrases, new harmonies. He composed on the spot, either on the cornet or on the piano. He created brilliant lyrical improvisations, and he never sold out. That's why I consider him to be one of the few truly great artists of all time," says Berman. And it is this artistic spirit that inspired Berman to make this film.

The documentary brings Bix Beiderbecke's personal life into perspective with his professional life. As is so often the case, Bix's personal life, in sad contrast to his success musically, was a tragic one. He died at a young age, on August 6, 1931, barely five months past his 28th birthday, of lobar pneumonia. After his passing, one musician friend is quoted as saying: "Bix didn't die of a cold, he died of everything."

At the start of 1978, while working full time as a CBC television producer, Berman decided that this would be her first independent feature documentary. Over the next four years she spent almost all of her "free" time – evenings, weekends and holidays – creating the BIX documentary. For months, in the pre-internet days, she researched every aspect of Bix's life and compiled a list of his professional associates, relatives and friends and began contacting them by letter and by telephone. She visited most of them in person, queried them at length about Bix, recorded the conversations on audio tape

and arranged to film them at a later date. Speed was of the essence, since a number of key figures in Bix's life were already gone and those still living were no longer young.

Among those interviewed in the film are: composer/pianist Hoagy Carmichael, who was a close friend of Bix; Bill Challis, jazz arranger for the Jean Goldkette and Paul Whiteman Orchestras who transcribed the four Bix Beiderbecke piano compositions; Charlie Davis, pianist, composer and bandleader who procured jobs for Bix and the Wolverines, and who became a close friend of Bix; Mary Louise Shoemaker, Bix's sister and the only surviving member of Bix's family; Artie Shaw, big band leader and clarinetist who played several gigs with Bix and also roomed with him for a short time; Trumpet player Doc Cheatham, who performed with various big name black bands and who knew Bix in the Chicago days; Vera Korn, Bix's first girlfriend; Fritz Putzier, Bix's schoolmate and friend who sold Bix his first cornet; Esten Spurrier, cornetist and a life-long friend of Bix from Bix's hometown Davenport, Iowa; Paul Mertz, pianist for the Jean Goldkette Orchestra who played and recorded with Bix; Matty Malneck, Roy Maier, Jack Fulton, Kurt Dieterle, Izzy Friedman and Al Rinker, all of whom played with Bix in the Paul Whiteman Orchestra – and others..., including the voice of trumpeter Louis Armstrong.

After interviewing Bix's friends and associates, Berman was astounded by the extent of Bix's power to inspire and influence those around him. "All who knew him, even if only for a short time, had not been able to forget him, after almost fifty years. Virtually everyone greeted the idea of a Bix documentary with warmth and enthusiasm. All felt that the time had come for such a project if it were to be done with the reminiscences and co-operation of those who had actually known him."

It took almost four years to complete the film. Filming took place in many locations throughout the United States, including Davenport, Iowa; Indianapolis; Detroit; Oswego, New York; Palm Springs; New York City and Los Angeles. Berman and her small film crew travelled across the United States from Davenport, Iowa, to Old Orchard Beach, Maine – filming along the way.

BIX: "ain't none of them play like him yet" was finally completed in late July 1981, just in time to have its first screening in New York on August 6, 1981, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Bix Beiderbecke's untimely death.

The film went on to screen at a number of international film festivals – London International Film Festival; Filmex, Los Angeles; Chicago International Film Festival where it won the Bronze Hugo; San Francisco International Film Festival where it won

an Honorable Mention. It was theatrically released in Scandinavia, screened on Channel 4 in England, on CITYtv in Canada.

About the Restoration:

New 4K restoration by Oren Edenson with fully remastered soundtrack by Daniel Pellerin.

About Bix Beiderbecke:

Leon Bix Beiderbecke (cornetist/pianist/composer) was born in Davenport, Iowa on March 10, 1903. He was the youngest son of German immigrant parents, an upper middle-class family for whom “good music” was a loved and fostered art. His mother was an accomplished pianist, a lover of classical music and Bix began playing the piano before he was five years old. His parents and teachers soon discovered that he was a musical prodigy and it’s been reported that one of his piano teachers stopped teaching Bix with the admission that he “couldn’t teach the boy anything, that Bix had an innate talent that came from deep within”.

In school, he was less than ardent about academic subjects, however musically Bix excelled. Anything he heard he could play, and anything he could play he could figure out the parts for and teach others to sing in chords. It soon became his parents’ greatest hope that their youngest would become a concert pianist – but that was not to be. Bix early on became acquainted with and captivated by jazz music through the bands that played on river boats plying the Mississippi from Memphis and New Orleans. The boats would dock at Davenport’s riverfront levy and the jazz music of King Oliver and of Fate Marable’s Group with Louis Armstrong, quickly caught Bix’s attention. These sounds, mixed with the recordings he heard of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, decided his destiny.

At age 16, Bix bought his first cornet and taught himself to play with an unconventional fingering that was to characterize his unique playing throughout his musical career. His parents however were soon concerned about Bix’s growing addiction to jazz music and after high school, they sent him to Lake Forest Academy, hoping that the Academy would “straighten him out”. They wanted their son far away from the “evil influence” of jazz, considered by any respectable family to be the devil’s music. But Lake Forest was 35 miles north of Chicago and Chicago at that time was the first city of jazz – a fact that sealed Bix’s fate.

In 1923, he joined a band called The Wolverines, and carried them to stardom. Bix’s reputation was traveling fast and far, and offers came from several bands – Charlie Straight’s Orchestra, Frankie Trumbauer’s Orchestra, several Jean Goldkette units and finally – The Paul Whiteman “King of Jazz” Orchestra, the most popular American band of the 1920s.

But by sad contrast to his musical success, as is often the case, Bix’s personal life was totally off balance. He drank heavily, slept and ate rarely, and deep into the night he was

surrounded by scores of admirers who wanted to hear him play. "Ain't none of them play like him yet," said trumpeter Louis Armstrong about Bix, and Louis continued to decry the fellow musicians and hangers-on of Bix, who would ply Bix with gin so that he would continue playing until dawn. On August 6, 1931, Bix Beiderbecke died of lobar pneumonia. After his death, clarinetist Pee Wee Russell who was a close friend is quoted as saying: "Bix didn't die of a cold, he died of everything."

After Bix's death, the Davenport Democrat paper paid the following tribute to one of their own: "...he taught the cornet to laugh by unexpected thrills, to moan by sudden perky blares, to do stunts, and to hold its head up high..."

Though his career was brief, Bix left behind a legendary legacy. He inspired and influenced a growing circle of white jazz musicians, many of whom were jealous of Bix while he was still alive, most notably Red Nichols.

Bix Beiderbecke was individuality personified. As such he defies imitation. Everything he played was perfect. He had a sense of harmonic structure that cannot be learned, and which few are born with. He had perfect pitch and a pure tone and was a complete master of the cornet.

Today Bix has become a legend, one of the most influential jazz soloists of the 1920s and for many he symbolizes the golden days of jazz. But Bix himself would probably be uncomfortable with this stardom, he never saw himself as a "star" – the music was the star.

About the Filmmaker:

Brigitte Berman is an Academy Award®-winning producer, director, editor and writer who was born in Frankfurt, Germany, and graduated from Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, where she studied English and Film. Her work in the film and television industry encompasses more than thirty-five years. She has produced and directed over two hundred documentaries, both independently and at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

With her independent production company, Bridge Film Productions Inc., Berman has directed and produced two feature documentaries **ARTIE SHAW: Time Is All You've Got** and **BIX: "ain't none of them play like him yet"**. Both have been showcased at numerous international film festivals. **BIX** won her the Bronze Hugo at the Chicago International Film Festival, and **ARTIE SHAW: Time is All You've Got**, won the **Academy Award** for Best Feature Documentary, as well as **First Prize** at the Valladolid International Film Festival. Subsequently she wrote, directed and produced her first dramatic feature **The Circle Game**, which had its world premiere at TIFF, as well as showcasing at a number of international film festivals.

Berman has continued to work as a writer, director and producer both in theatre and in film, making documentaries and dramas to the present day. Berman and Victor Solnicki's controversial and award-winning **Hugh Hefner: Playboy, Activist and Rebel** (2010) feature documentary has been shown at over twenty-five International Film Festivals. It showcases Hefner's role as a pioneer during the civil rights movement. The 42nd NAACP Image Awards nominated **Hugh Hefner: Playboy, Activist and Rebel** for Outstanding Feature Documentary.

The River of My Dreams: A Portrait of Gordon Pinsent is the second collaboration for Berman and her late husband, producer Victor Solnicki. It had its world premiere at TIFF in 2016. The film features one of Canada's great icons – Gordon Pinsent. It was also showcased at the Atlantic Film Festival in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and was the Opening Night Gala at the St. John's International Women's Film Festival. Subsequently the film travelled across Canada with numerous festival and art house screenings, including a special presentation for Canada's 150th Birthday Celebration at Ottawa's National Art Centre in February, 2017.

Hugh Hefner's After Dark: Speaking Out in America, is the third collaboration for Berman and Solnicki and is the brainchild of her late husband and writing/producing partner, Victor Solnicki. The film was completed in August 2018 and world premiered at

the Telluride Film Festival and went on to screen at numerous other international Film Festivals. It won the 'Audience Choice Award for Most Popular Canadian Film' at the Whistler Film Festival in December 2018 and won the Best Documentary Feature Film Award at the Montana International Film Festival in 2019.

Currently she is in pre-production on her next feature documentary film. During the pandemic, she took the opportunity to restore her first feature documentary film **BIX: "ain't none of them play like him yet**. On August 6th, 2021, this newly restored film world premiered at the Film Forum in New York City where it received a New York Times 'Critics Pick' and several excellent reviews. On December 2, 2021 it had its Canadian Premiere at the Whistler Film Festival.

FILMOGRAPHY (select highlights):

2018 - Hugh Hefner's After Dark: Speaking Out in America

feature documentary – 101 minutes
director/producer/writer/editor

Awards:

Audience Choice Award – Most Popular Canadian Film
Whistler Film Festival

Best Documentary Feature Film Award – 2019
Montana International Film Festival

2016 - The River of My Dreams: A Portrait of Gordon Pinsent

feature documentary – 104 minutes
director/producer/writer/editor

2010 – Hugh Hefner: Playboy, Activist and Rebel

feature documentary – 124 minutes
director/producer/writer/editor

Awards:

Nominated for NAACP Image Award for outstanding theatrical
documentary of 2010

First Prize – Rhode Island Intl. Film Festival

Runner-up for audience award at the Whistler Film Festival and the London
Documentary Film Festivals

2008 – Valkyrie: The Plot to Kill Hitler

documentary – 90 minutes
co-producer

2004 – Light One Candle

documentary – 60 minutes
director/writer/editor

2002 - Ta Voix Dans La Nuit

drama – 30 minutes
director/writer/editor

2001 – Le Porte-Bonheur

drama – 30 minutes
writer/director/editor

1999 – Testing the Limits

dramatic MOW – 100 minutes
director/writer

1995 – The Circle Game dramatic

feature – 116 minutes
writer/director/producer/editor

1980 – 2003 – *wrote, directed and produced over one hundred documentaries both independently and for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation of various lengths up to 90 minutes*

1989 – The Break dramatic

short – 25 minutes
writer/director/editor

1989 – A Date

dramatic short – 10 minutes
writer/director/editor

1986 – Artie Shaw: Time Is All You've Got

feature documentary – 114 minutes
writer/director/producer/editor
Bridge Film Productions Inc.

Awards:

Academy Award (OSCAR) 1987

Best Documentary – Time of History
Valladolid Intl. Film Festival

1984 – Robert Bateman: A Celebration of Nature

CBC documentary – 30 minutes
writer/producer/director

Awards:

CHRIS Plaque Award Columbus Intl. Film Festival

1983 - The Osbornes: A Very Special Family

CBC documentary – 30 minutes
writer/producer/director

1982 – The Many Faces of Black

CBC documentary – 90 minutes
writer/director/producer

1981 – Bix: “ain’t none of them play like him yet”

feature documentary – 112 minutes
writer/director/producer/editor
Bridge Film Productions Inc.

Awards:

Bronze Hugo Award Chicago Intl. Film Festival
Honorable Mention San Francisco Intl. Film Festival

1979 – How Music Came To The Garden City

CBC documentary – 60 minutes
writer/director/producer

1978 – Elmira

CBC documentary – 60 minutes
writer/director/producer

B**I****X**

Thursday, April 15, 1982

**A Flourish of Cornets for Bix
Beiderbecke**By Charles Champlin, *Times Arts Editor*
Los Angeles Times**Los Angeles Times**

Screening rooms have personalities — ambiances might be the better word — from sterile to opulent. Nosseck's, entered from a parking lot behind a low commercial building at the west end of the Sunset Strip, has always felt to me like the underdog room.

Down the years it's the place I've watched the films — always earnest, sometimes brilliant, generally tributary to the mainstream — that will need plenty of luck to find distributors and exhibitors, let alone viewers.

They're the films that are such labors of loving commitment that you can, with no great stretch of the imagination, imagine the sprocket holes being punched by numbed and bloody fingers.

In the past the viewings have included films that pushed at the forward edge of public tolerance and were in legal trouble ("Quiet Days in Clichy") or celebrated the unpopular political fringe or were simply in violation of current commercial wisdom.

Nosseck's more than most is the room where you're (uncomfortably) aware of the film makers waiting in the untidy and threadbare foyer, pacing, smoking too much, hanging on a glimpse of body English that will hint whether the reaction was good or bad.

I went back to Nosseck's, after an absence, a few days ago to see a film that had been selected for Filmex, and whose subject matter was linked to my soul.

It is called "Bix," and it is a feature-length documentary about the legendary jazz cornet player, Leon Bix Beiderbecke, who crowded several lifetimes of glory and pain into the 28 years between his birth in Davenport, Iowa, in 1903 and his death by alcohol in Queens in 1931.

The film was made by a young Canadian film maker, Brigitte Berman, and the casting seemed startling because her own musical time was full of Beatles and Stones.

The film is, among other things, a triumph over adversity. There are a number of still photographs of Bix, although many of these are publicity and group shots, very static. There is almost no movie footage, none in which even an admiring relative could identify him.

There is the music, the glorious music, of course: "I'm Coming, Virginia" and "Davenport Blues" and "Clarinet Marmalade" and "Riverboat Shuffle" and those brief, singing breaks that shine through the swollen arrangements of the Paul Whiteman big band. The problem was to find images to match.

With some graphic help from the fine animator Richard Williams, Edward Hopper paintings to help evoke the period and the geography, Berman has made a film that captures Bix fully. (It makes him more interesting and more moving than the fictions of which he became a prototype.)

Her own relentless researches led Brigitte Berman to sidemen with whom he played, to musicians who knew him (like Artie Shaw, who was present, patriarchically bearded, at the Nosseck's screening) and to relatives. She turned up some incredibly poignant letters home Bix wrote from New York in his last months, vowing that things were going better.

His parents evidently found him a cruelly disappointing son, kicked out of Lake Forest Academy and, after only 18 days in residence, a university; all in favor of a gypsy life whose own achievements meant nothing to them.

(Bix came home and found all the records he had proudly sent them stacked in a closet, unopened and unplayed.)

There's no way to count how many of us, mastering the fingering of "My Old Kentucky Home" and trying to develop an embouchure, dreamed at 11 or 12 of being Bix, pain and all.

It all came back, watching Brigitte Berman's lovely, sad film. For me, beginnings had been inadvertent: the new music teacher at the high school, persuaded (I've since thought) by some real-life Prof. Harold Hill, starting a band from scratch and deciding that I would take trumpet.

If she had said clarinet, I would probably now be mourning Mezz Mezzrow or Irving Fazola. But destiny is destiny, and mine was to be terrible on the cornet.

At that, there may have been something in the stars. Reading the long entry on Bix in John Chilton's "Who's Who of Jazz" this morning, I discovered that late in the summer of 1924, Bix, having toured Indiana and Ohio with the famous Wolverines, took a brief holiday at Keuka Lake, Hammondsport, N.Y., before rejoining the band in New York.

Hammondsport! I wasn't there yet, by a matter of years, but I wonder if Bix stayed at Bessie Young's Keuka Hotel, watching the sailboats from the dock and sipping a little of the Prohibition brandy that I'm told was plentiful in town, or if he noodled around at the piano in the bar, or if F.M. Champlin, local wine maker and unpaid saloon pianist, heard him. Or if anybody knew just who the pale, round-faced visitor of 21 was, or whether he left a wisp of aura behind.

That's the trouble with history; we wait too long to ask questions, or learn too late the questions we should have asked.

In the end, "Bix" is about the artist—any artist, with a talent he can't contain or fully express. There's thus an audience far beyond those of us in the Bix brigade—and I hope Brigitte Berman and her film find it.

B I X

Wednesday, August 12, 1981

Bix (Canadian-Docu-Color B&W)

Variety

VARIETY

Outstanding documentary on a jazz legend

No distributor set. Produced, directed and edited by Brigitte Berman. Screenplay, Brigitte Berman, Val Ross; camera (color and black-and-white), Mark Irwin, Ed Long, Vic Sarin; animation cameraman, John Derderian; sound recording, Ian Challis; background instrumental, Richard Williams, Dill Jones, Earl French; line producer, Don Haig; sound editor, Bruce Griffin; paintings, Edward Hopper; narrator, Richard Basehart. Reviewed at Prevue 9, New York. Aug. 6, 1981. (No MPAA Rating). Running time: 116 MINS.

Interviewees: Mary Louise Shoemaker, Hoagy Carmichael, Bill Challis, Esten Spurrier, Vera Korn, Fritz Putzier, Charlie Davis, Reagan Carey, James Regester, Spiggle Willcox, Dave Wilborn, Jess Stacy, Fred Bergin, Doc Cheatham, Matty Malneck, Al Rinker, Izzy Friedman, Kurt Dieterle, Jack Fulton, Roy Maier, Artie Shaw, Squirrel Ashcraft, Herb Weil, Al Duffy, Paul Mertz, and the voice of Louis Armstrong.

The subtitle to this Canadian-made tribute to the late Leon (Bix) Beiderbecke, who died in 1931 at the age of 28, is a comment by Louis Armstrong — "ain't none of them play like him yet." Although Satchmo's tribute was made in the 1930's, it still stands. While there have been several superb cornetists in the ensuing years, none of them captured the aural magic that the midwestern youth produced in his brief career of making magical sounds.

Producer-director Brigitte Berman, a television producer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corp., who has been obsessed with Beiderbecke's performances for years, spent four of those years researching and filming anything and anyone she could find who had the remotest connection with Bix's life and career. That included film interviews, the incorporation of Beiderbecke and his jazz contemporaries with hundreds of still photographs and the recording or reproducing of most of the music recorded.

Public interest may be more or less dependent on its interest in jazz, which does appear to be re-emerging in the field of music. Certainly, as pure motion picture, it is an excellently filmed version of a musical legend, with the added impact of a tragedy and wasted life. The surprising thing is that, unlike such figures as Janis Joplin, it is not a tale of self-destruction but of an innocent figure, fantastically gifted with everything but worldly wisdom. Friends and admirers had as much to do with Beiderbecke's demise, encouraging him to "burn his candle at both ends," as did the musician himself. Beiderbecke was the inspiration for Dorothy Baker's novel, "Young Man With a Horn," badly filmed in 1950 with Kirk Douglas.

Amazingly, Berman was able to round up many surviving associates of Bix (although three have died since she completed filming). Their generally fascinating reminiscences, joined by documentary footage on the look of those times, a master achievement in itself, provide, along with those golden musical memories, the body of the film. It is also dramatic in the coldness of his immediate family toward his achievements, even when his name had become nationally known. A tragic touch is the disclosure that the packages of his recordings which he faithfully sent to his parents were never opened.

A great cinematic touch is the use of numerous Edward Hopper paintings to serve as a colorful depiction of the times and to constantly renew the fact that Beiderbecke was a product of his times — a midwestern boy who never quite grew up except in his music.

The film has been entered in the London Film Festival and has been offered to the New York Fest. It would be wise to accept it. —*Robe*

B I X

January 22, 1982

Film biography relates simple fact: Bix was one of the best

By Michael Anthony, Staff Writer
Minneapolis Tribune, Minneapolis, Minnesota

"Ain't None of Them Play Like Him Yet" is the subtitle of Brigitte Berman's subtly crafted, often moving documentary film biography of the jazz cornetist Bix Beiderbecke, which the Walker Art Center will show at 8 p.m. Saturday.

The subtitle is a quote that has long been attributed to Louis Armstrong. Whether Armstrong meant that no other of the *white* jazz musicians of the early 1920s played as well as Bix did, or whether the reference was to all jazz players of the time — this we probably never will know. Berman never directly addresses the question that arose among the jazz historians in the 1960s, as to the white musicians' role in jazz: Were there among their ranks real innovators or were they simply copying black styles?

And it's just as well she doesn't. She has Bix's story to tell, and she tells it well. Bix is still considered, in any case, the first important white jazz player. And his first great band, the Wolverines, which he formed at the age of 20, is still regarded as the one of the pioneer ensembles of white jazz. We do have, moreover, the testimony of Doc Cheatham, a black musician, and one of the many players whose reminiscences appear on screen: "We all wanted to play like Bix."

Matters of race didn't seem to concern Bix, and it never has concerned jazz musicians much. He admired and played with black musicians, and they admired him. What they heard in Bix's music — what *anyone* who was listening heard in Bix's music — is sort of a leitmotif running through the film, as each person tries to define that unique Beiderbecke sound.

For the late Hoagy Carmichael, Bix's sound moved him so when he first heard it, that he had to lie down right away. Carmichael literally couldn't stand it. "Bix had soul," said Carmichael.

Said Paul Whiteman, whose band, then the top draw in all of American popular music, Bix joined in 1927: "Bix plays more in three notes than most play in an entire chorus."

An old girl friend, whom Bix dated during his youth in Davenport, Iowa, echoes Armstrong's comment about Bix's sound: "It was so different. Nobody had heard anything like it."

Everybody tried to imitate him, says Artie Shaw, and Shaw names Red Nichols as one of those imitators. "But he (Nichols) didn't have the sound." Another early associate of Bix's says, "If there was anybody who could actually compose while playing, it was Bix." The late Eddie Condon, the aphorist of jazz, perhaps described Bix's sound best: "It was like a girl saying 'Yes!'"

Berman tells Bix's story through these interviews and through a clever juxtaposition of old films (some supplied by Twin Cities film archivist Bob De Flores), still photographs and voice-over quotes (narration by Richard Basehart). And, on occasion, there are set-up scenes wherein we imagine that the figure playing the piano or walking the streets of New York is Bix.

Berman was lucky she completed the film last year, because the number of survivors of Bix's era is dwindling. A number of people — Carmichael, for one — have died since the film was released. (Would that Joe Venuti, jazz's great ractonteur, who died in 1978 and was a colleague of Bix's in the Whiteman band, had lived to be a part of this film.)

Berman also makes sensitive use of paintings by Edward Hopper: his rural and countryside landscape during Bix's early years (and his years on the road) and some of his more famous urban scenes for Bix's big-city life. While the paintings don't relate in any literal way to Bix's life, the special sense of loneliness and isolation, the sense almost of terror beneath calm surfaces that is so much a part of Hopper's work, conveys a visual and tonal correlative to Bix's troubled life.

The film conveys, too, a feeling of time and place and certainly the spirit of what is known as the Jazz Age. More than any other of its artists, America's jazz musicians most fit the stereotype of

the alienated, lonely, uncompromising artist who is ultimately done in not just by the demons within but by the forces without — commercialism and standardization in Bix's case. Trying to find work in New York in 1929 and 1939, after spending time in a sanitarium for his alcoholism, Bix finds that the music business has changed; there is no place for him any more. It was all radio by then. "The individuality went out of music with radio," says one of the interviewees.

As for Bix's demons, the theory Berman stitches together is that he lived (and died) trying to please his parents, trying to fit in. It's as good a theory as any.

One of the musicians who worked with Bix in the Whiteman band was plain-er: "The work was so hard you *had* to drink." Bix died, officially of pneumonia, in 1931 at the age of 28. The comment at the time, however, was that "Bix died of everything."

Berman, who produced, directed and (with Val Ross) wrote the film, will introduce it Saturday night at the Walker.

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November, 1981

Bix

By Laurence Green
Go! Magazine, London, England

Showing in the London Film Festival at NFT 1 on Thursday 12 November at 11.00 am and 6.15.

Produced and directed by Brigitte Berman.

Born in 1903 to German immigrant parents, the film charts Bix's rise to fame as a cornetist, pianist and composer, against the wishes of his mother and father who wanted him to take up a profession, and against the background of the big band era and the misery and poverty of the Depression. Eventually the overwork and strain of life on the road — he travelled thousands of miles and covered almost every State within a matter of weeks — took its toll and Bix became addicted to drink, living in a twilight world of hallucinations, seedy hotel rooms and empty gin bottles, until he died tragically at the age of 28, in 1931.

"Ever since I first heard Bix Beiderbecke's music I was hooked," said the producer/director Brigitte Berman. "His music had a freedom of spirit, an abandonment, a striving for perfection that intrigued me. More than that what really got me going was that in the tone of his music I heard the spirit of someone who poured his heart into everything he played. Bix played melodies that no-one else had thought of, melodies that were spun from the mind of a quiet man, who poured all his feelings into an astonishing music, and he did it all in such a short time."

This enthusiasm by the filmmaker for her subject certainly manifests itself in the finished product. Interviews with great jazz artists such as Hoagy Carmichael, Artie Shaw and Louis Armstrong, as well as Bix's sister, girl friend and fellow musicians, are interwoven with newsreel shots, and the atmospheric paintings of Edward Hopper, so that the film not only provides an illuminating insight into the man and his music, but also the times in which he lived.

Bix's dedication to his music is conveyed in a fascinating reminiscence by one of his associates. The band had to catch an early train to travel to another stop on their long and arduous tour. Bix by mistake caught the wrong train, but fortunately remembered the next town in which they were due to appear, and spent 100 dollars of his money chartering a plane to be in time for the concert. Arriving a few hours earlier than the rest of the band, he booked into a hotel and, tired from the journey, fell asleep, waking only when the concert was over.

The golden musical memories are made even more vivid by the selection of numbers chosen to illustrate Bix's life and career. These include: "Davenport Blues"; "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans"; "Riverboat Shuffle"; "Royal Garden Blues"; "In a Mist"; "Tiger Rag", and "I'll be a Friend with Pleasure".

A truly entertaining and exhilarating documentary that is well worth a visit.

Playing like a bell — that was Bix

By John Blake
The Standard, London, England

Though the phenomenon of hugely successful young musicians drinking and doping themselves to death would seem to have arrived with Jimi Hendrix and Brian Jones, it goes back far further than that.

Jazz musicians, in the Forties and Fifties killed themselves with drugs and booze just as enthusiastically as today's rock stars.

And before that there was Bix Beiderbecke, the self-taught jazz cornetist and pianist who, by 1931, had drunk himself to death at the age of 28.

On Thursday the National Film Theatre is showing a meticulously researched two-hour dissection of Beiderbecke's life and decline as part of this year's London Film Festival.

Beiderbecke was refused union membership because he couldn't read music, but he turned his heavy drinking band on to Debussy and Ravel. Towards the end he slept though gigs, being woken only for solos.

On tour the rest of the band would cruelly load his suitcase with metal bars. "Gee," said Bix, "It gets heavier every day."

But his playing was legendary. "Like a bell," was one description. "Like a girl saying yes" was another.

November 10, 1981

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Wednesday, March 24, 1982

Los Angeles Times

'BIX' (Canada, 1981)

By Leonard Feather
Los Angeles Times

Today at 6 p.m.

Brigitte Berman, who produced, directed and edited this 116-minute documentary on the legendary cornetist Bix Beiderbecke, has done a masterful job of evoking the 1920s *zeitgeist*. Although Beiderbecke died in 1931 and there is virtually no film footage on him, the superb sound track of old records is combined with countless rare still photos and interviews with everyone from Bix's sister and girlfriend to the late Hoagy Carmichael and Louis Armstrong to create a film that sustains interest and examines with sympathy Bix's 28-year life.

Filmex — some more reel stuff

By Bill Warren
The Enterprise, Simi Valley, California

"Bix," Canadian, color and black and white, 1981, 116 minutes. To be shown Wednesday at 6 p.m.

This must be one of the outstanding films at Filmex this year. It's a moving, engrossing documentary (produced and directed by Brigitte Berman) about Bix Beiderbecke, one of the most famous jazz musicians of all time. He died 50 years ago, not even 30; but his cornet playing, his composing and the tragedy of his short life have made him immortal.

Berman's splendid film evokes the time and the milieu in a way that few documentaries have done. She's clearly passionately devoted to her subject, and the passion and devotion have resulted in a documentary so well-researched as to be awe-inspiring.

Richard Basehart's narration is perhaps a little too fatalistic, but the images tell the story. There are interviews with many who knew and loved Bix, including his sister, other musicians — notably the late Hoagy Carmichael. Also interviewed are Charlie Davis, Matty Malneck and Artie Shaw.

The most astonishing feat of "Bix" is that it makes you regret the loss of a man 50 years dead, but you experience that loss in a personal way — a friend has died. If you are at all a jazz buff, this is must viewing. If you are interested in films as an art form, you also should see "Bix."

March 21, 1982