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## **Genius of Early Jazz**

There were a number of geniuses in the early evolution of jazz, which is a uniquely American form of music. It originated in the bars, bordellos and marching bands of the polyglot New Orleans culture. In 1917 a federal law shut down the bordellos. With that loss of prosperity, jazz moved onto riverboats and up the Mississippi, on the way to Chicago and Davenport, Iowa. The latter produced Bix Beiderbecke a true genius in composing and playing the new and evolving music. Coming out of Chicago, Eddie Condon played banjo and then guitar, but his genius was in getting musicians together; always insisting upon improvisation. Gregarious, he was the opposite of Bix who was nihilistically introspective. Beiderbecke died of alcoholism at age 28 on August 6, 1931. Condon with raconteurial skills published a book *We Called It Music* in 1948, within which we get to know both characters.

Later generations may consider Eddie as “lippy” but he knew his presence in the new music and in first meeting Beiderbecke in 1923 was not impressed. Pee Wee Russell who played clarinet had phoned from Davenport raving about Beiderbecke. Eddie described the meeting at the train station: “[I] watched Pee Wee come at me with three other guys. One was a dude, one was an ordinary human being. The third one was a kid in a cap with the peak broken.” With this, Condon thinks he has made a mistake in getting stuck with a “clam digger”. In a later sentence he uses “corncobber”, solely on his appearance and demeanor.

He can't even stand walking with him as they go to some clubs to hear some hot bands. Worried that they could not get in, he is impressed with the bands' enthusiastic greeting of Bix. Bix had never taken any music lessons and taught himself how to play piano and cornet. And then to compose with some saying in piano he was inspired by the impressionists. Without formal training, he was different and his legacy lasting.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zO86nFQ9b68>

A famous white band, the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, invited Bix to sit in with them and he went to the piano. And Condon wrote *“For the first time I realized that music isn't all the same...”* Later when he is in his upper berth on the train he wonders *“[W]hat about the cornet, can he play that too?”*

And ironically wonders if wearing a dreadful green coat and cap would improve his status?

The next day and still on the train he got out his banjo and others in the band joined all hoping Bix would play his horn. Finally Beiderbecke took out his sliver cornet and warmed up with some notes. Condon described it as equivalent *“to a girl saying yes”*.

<https://www.bing.com/search?q=bix+beiderbecke+i%27m+coming+virginia&filters=ufn%3a%22bix+beiderbecke+im+coming+virginia%22+sid%3a%227b1d7350-7b98-6ab7-84fa-1bcc37476fcd%22&autoplay=1&FORM=SNAPST>

Beiderbecke was from a responsible family and at times tried to stop drinking but couldn't. Eddie describes him as cheating on the cure and that "His feet were swollen and dragged when he walked." He didn't have the stamina to go back to Paul Whiteman's band, that in playing pseudo-jazz was commercially popular. At a recording session he ruined 28 masters in trying to get the solo right. Eddie was distressed.

On August 6, 1931 Beiderbecke died and the next day Condon got the bad-news phone call from a friend. "***Bix?***" "***I hung up.***" "***No more Bix.***"

Condon went on in his gregarious way putting together musicians at bars, clubs and recording sessions. Eventually organizing a series of jazz concerts at New York's Town Hall. He ran his own successful jazz club from 1945 to 1967. Some of Condon's recordings from the 1950s are well worth listening to.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvNNSaVDCLI>

Eddie's description of the characters and night life of the day are, in way, still alive. He started at the famous Stork Club in 1931 and describes this and another club: "***In order to enter the Bath Club you had to be sober, rich, and somebody; you came out somebody. You only had to be sober and rich to get into the Stork Club, and you came out neither.***"

Although for most during the Depression money was scarce, but for some it was not. "Red" was one of the guys in the band who was concerned about not having enough for his clothes let alone wife and small child. In pacing around he noticed a man looking at him, who was dressed "like an Oklahoma horse trader". The guy asked how much money he needed: "***Five hundred dollars,***" the musician said, "***Do you sing here too?***"

The man pulled out a wad of bills and in handing it to Red said "***Take a thousand***". Red cautioned him about showing so much money. Maybe he wouldn't get out of the club with the bank roll intact. The guy's name was Billingsley who says "***I think I'll stay. I own the place***" and "***The customers enjoy your music.***" Which seems like part of a Damon Runyon story.

Jazz and drinking had flourished in the evil days and nights of Prohibition. Condon writes of partying and playing in Harlem, when on one evening going into Christmas they were late for a gig at the Stork Club. In rushing in and fearful of a reprimand they discovered that club was being taken apart by "federal prosecution agents". It was a shambles, men with axes were hacking up the mahogany bar and chopping up the tables.

As Condon wrote: "***Billingsley was impersonating an honest saloon keeper. The government couldn't allow it.***"

With the end of Prohibition in 1933, the entertainment business suffered a sudden loss of prosperity and many musicians, including Eddie, endured hard times. But when it was time for his piano player, Joe Sullivan, to have a birthday they bought an upright for ten

dollars. It was on its last legs, but a tuner was able to get it in playable shape. In order to get more volume they removed the front panel.

Then when Condon got up the next day he looked at the wreckage and recalled that Fats Waller's left hand was so strong that a hammer broke off and flew past his head. As Condon wrote it: ***"Now I saw piano hammers all over the floor....The boys had literally beaten the upright to death."***

Then in 1935 a form called "Swing" evolved and with bigger bands became hugely popular. Clubland sorted itself out, ballrooms were built, huge theatres were filled, which with radio and records brought jobs back to musicians and singers.

But Swing is another story and Condon continued having fun with his small improvisational groups. Passing away on August 4, 1973 at age 67.