

LOUIS AND BIX FROM WORLD RECORDS

The Louis Armstrong Legend. Vol. 1: 1925-26; Vol. 2: 1926-27; Vol. 3: 1927-28; Vol. 4: 1928-29. Compiled by Chris Ellis; annotated by Brian Rust. World Records: Retrospect Series, SH 404-407.

Bix Beiderbecke: The Studio Groups. Vol. 1: 1927, with Frankie Trumbauer & his Orchestra. Vol. 2: Late 1927; Broadway Bellhops, Bix and his Gang, Chicago Loopers, Frankie Trumbauer & his Orchestra. Vol. 3: 1928, Bix and his Gang, Lou Raderman & his Orchestra, Trumbauer. Vol. 4: 1928-30, Bix and his Gang, Irving Mills Hotsy Totsy Gang, Trumbauer. Compiled by Chris Ellis; annotated by Brian Rust. World Records: Restrospect Series, SH 413-416.

Two series (available singly) from England that could well serve as models for reissuing classic jazz in every way but one: the sound quality is not state-of-the-art. The standards set for transfers by John R. T. Davies in England and Jack Towers hereabouts are not approximated, especially when one considers that Okeh, the source for 98% of the material, was matched only by Victor for quality recording in the '20s. Not that the level here isn't decent, especially considering that three of the Armstrong and six of the Beiderbecke sides contain nine tracks (the rest have eight--LP standard for 78 material). It is, and commendable results have been obtained from the acoustic Louis masters. It's only because everything else is so close to perfection that the issue is raised, and I might not have focused on it at all but for the disappointment of finding my favorite Bix item, Sorry, marred by an engineering defect.

That having been said, on to the meat. Here, neatly laid out in discographical sequence, are some of the key recordings in jazz history, by two legendary figures. Handsome (the Louis albums have different cover photos, each a gem, though only two are from the period represented; the Bixes have identical cover portraits, a painting copied from a photo, but different colors) and compact (all requisite information and notes fit on the back covers--no double-folds or printed inner sleeves, thankfully), these sets are made to order for the serious collector/historian, the novice, or the fan.

In the case of Armstrong, there are no surprises: one finds here all the Hot Five/Hot Seven/Savoy Ballroom Five, of which no alternate takes, alas, have ever surfaced; Weatherbird; the two 1928 Carroll Dickerson sides; Chicago Breakdown, the sole surviving evidence of the big band Louis fronted at the Sunset Cafe in Chicago in 1927, and, as a concluding bonus, Knocking a Jug (but not, as would have been logical, Mahogany Hall Stomp). Thus, the repertoire is less inclusive than on the now extinct V.S.O.P. series (Odeon, French C.B.S., etc.), which added in the Lillie Delk Christians from this period. These were also included in the excellent French C.B.S. four-volume series of vocal accompaniments (now out-of-print), which however omitted the Seger Ellis items. These were included on a fifth catch-all volume (Louis

Armstrong Special), but the Butterbeans&Susie He Likes It Slow eluded the net. One hopes that Chris Ellis will continue with Louis on Okeh and wrap up everything in style. The recent Smithsonian issue of the Armstrong-Bechet collaborations, some Fletcher Henderson items, and some blues accompaniments from the New York period is welcome. But to complete Armstrong in the '20s, we also need an all-inclusive Fletcher Henderson set, alternate takes and all, (which would be most instructive), and a systematic presentation of the material (Dodds, Tate, Bradford, Bertrand, Lil's Hot Shots) available to M.C.A. One should ask for no less when it comes to the greatest single figure jazz has produced; Ellington's followers have done much better by their man.

It has been claimed--and still is, by almost all but Hugues Panassie, Stanley Dance, Martin Williams and yours truly--that Louis reached his artistic acme with his 1920s recordings. This is reflected by Brian Rust in his excellent notes, albeit by indirection. It is a seemingly chronic hangover from the era in jazz criticism when small groups and so-called collective improvisation constituted the Holy Grail, but Armstrong's full flowering as a trumpet virtuoso and as a creative improviser were yet to come--never mind the settings or the material.

It is too seldom pointed out that Louis, throughout the period covered here, worked mainly as a big-band featured sideman and leader. The small groups existed only in the studios (the Hot Five made just one public appearance, at a benefit). Thus only the three big-band sides contained in this series and the Tates and the Hendersons reflect Louis' day-to-day musical activity in the post-Oliver years of the decade, up to the prophetic I Can't Give You Anything But Love.

The music of the first Hot Five and the Hot Seven still bears the New Orleans-Oliver stamp, and all of the assisting players were Louis' seniors (save Pete Briggs and John Thomas, and perhaps the mysterious Henry Clark, who allegedly replaced Kid Ory on the 11/27/26 session). As the cliché has it, Louis was breaking the traditional ensemble mold. Certainly that's true, but up to a point only; to the end of his days, Louis was a peerless lead player, in a small group or a big band. The Hot Fives contain some of the most spirited ensemble playing ever captured by a recording device.

The earliest pieces reflect Oliver--all the musicians had played under the King--not least in Louis' own work. He even uses growl and wa-wa effects, textbook wisdom to the contrary notwithstanding. And to touch upon another bit of critical mythology, there is a lot of blues and blues-related material here, and Louis' mastery of the idiom is unquestionable. Also notable is the percentage of originals contributed by the leader, even if one doesn't dispute Lil Hardin Armstrong's title to Struttin' with Some Barbecue (I certainly would; the law says it's hers, the music says it's Louis'). The composer credits, bereft of initials here, can be confusing, since Lil used both her maiden and married names, but the bulk of credits reading "Armstrong" are surely not hers. Lil was a fine writer in her own right, as she would prove

once the marriage broke up, but Louis continued to write songs as well, and his contributions in this area are too often ignored. Let us note also that he was responsible for Muskrat Ramble, he told me in 1965. ("Ory named it.")

The total effect of listening to these four LPs is overwhelming, even to a listener who already knows most of the music intimately. The leader's level of inspiration is unflagging, and we catch him in the act of creating the vocabulary that to this day constitutes the essence of the jazz language. (In late 1981, I interviewed Phil Woods, whom many Hot Five lovers would consider a modernist; in the course of discussing Charlie Parker's legacy, he observed: "And without Louis Armstrong, we wouldn't have any jazz licks at all; Bird would be the first guy to tell you that's the truth.")

While this body of "licks" has been reshaped, recycled and reinvestigated for more than 50 years, every note Louis plays on these records still sounds fresh and vital. Indeed, it is the vitality and joyousness of the music that continues to astonish even the seasoned listener, which may be just another way of saying that it is great music.

This is so in spite of the comparative shortcomings of the supporting cast. Andre Hodeir's now famous comments about Ory, Johnny Dodds and Lil Hardin angered many admirers of the New Orleans tradition. But while Hodeir perhaps lacked sympathy for the idiom, and certainly was unjust to Dodds (his playing alongside Louis is more strained than in company obviously more comfortable to him, but often reaches a very high level, particularly on the blues, and never lacks emotional content), he did cut through the haze of sentimental, uncritical adulation of players whose musicianship clearly was of a lesser order than Armstrong's. Yet this is never a serious handicap. Guitarist Lonnie Johnson's presence on the final session by the "old" Hot Five helps immeasurably, and Hotter than That is a fitting conclusion to the series, as is its session-mate, Savoy Blues. These masterpieces clearly point in a new direction, taken up six months later with the debut of the Savoy Ballroom Five.

Unlike its predecessor, this group was made up of musicians who worked together outside the studios, all hands being members of Carroll Dickerson's orchestra. If Jimmy Strong and Fred Robinson did not have the musical personalities of Dodds and Ory, they were more conversant with contemporary jazz usage. Though it may be unfashionable to say so, Strong was inspired by the Jimmy Dorsey-White Chicago clarinet school, while Robinson was a Miff Mole disciple. Several of the Savoy Five's pieces clearly show the influence of the Red Nichols approach to small-group jazz. The time is long overdue for a balanced reassessment of the so-called New York School of the '20s--once over-rated, to be sure, but long since underestimated in its pervasive (and by no means always negative) impact on black as well as white jazz of the day.

Those pieces, however, are not among the group's best efforts. West End Blues owes nothing to any precedents (though Oliver wrote the

piece) and sets new standards for jazz as an art music, in the best sense of the term. In Earl Hines, Louis found his first perfect soloistic partner (and nearly the only one!), and in Zutty Singleton he had his perfect drummer. Louis is no longer the only one to truly swing. What could happen when a fine arranger took a hand in the proceedings is shown on Beau Koo Jack (inexplicably not mentioned in Rust's notes), scored by Alex Hill, and several other pieces recorded with Don Redman present, both as player and arranger. The duet with Hines, Weatherbird, is a singular and stunning tour de force. We're lucky to have it at all; certainly this was not a commercially motivated recording. But what a pity that there were no more duets. This is music for the ages, but the Armstrong legend by no means ends here.

Bix Beiderbecke, on the other hand, is almost fully contained on these four records, lovingly and intelligently put together. They offer most of Bix's best recorded work, excepting only some early Wolverines gems and the handful of Jean Goldkette and Paul Whiteman items on which he gets away for more than a few bars.

It sometimes seems that Bix has had more influence on jazz writers and fans than on musicians, though it may be sacrilege to suggest it. His talent was great and unique, no doubt, but unlike Armstrong, his impact was largely confined to players who heard him live or worked with him, because records too seldom gave him a chance to fully unfold his gifts. The legend, however, persists, and it has resulted in the reissuing of every performance on which Bix as much as breathes.

In addition to the well-known and expected classics with the Gangs, Trumbauer, and the Broadway Bellhops, there are some genuine rarities here. The Ellis-Rust team's previous Beiderbecke efforts, on Parlophone, are fully eclipsed by this set, which includes the complete Chicago Loopers session, the still disputed Lou Raderman sides (I plump for Manny Klein and see no reason to doubt his word that it is his work), and the once debated but now generally accepted Mills Hotsy Totsy Gang date of June 6, 1930, with both takes of Loved One. Also on hand is an oddment, the "Russell Gray" (alias Trumbauer) Sugar, on which Bix surely is not the awkward cornet soloist, though he may be leading the final ensemble, as Rust claims.

The inclusion of the Mills sides is quite a coup, since they belong among the Brunswick output controlled by MCA, but the tie-ins between international record cartels have become so complex that British EMI may indeed have access to them. (Their last legitimate issue, I think, was on Australia's Swaggie label, in a series of cute 7-inch LPs.)

Like Louis, Bix towers over his surroundings; the difference is that he was seldom given elbow room. In some ways, Frank Trumbauer was Bix's Earl Hines, with the cardinal difference that he was not a committed jazzman, usually the leader, and not inclined to take a back seat. A gifted, original and often interesting player, his vocalizing can be appreciated only by confirmed blackface fans, and instrumentally he rarely

rose to his own highest standards, as on Singin' the Blues, I'm Coming Virginia, and especially Way Down Yonder in New Orleans, possibly his greatest solo. When he did get serious, Bix responded magnificently.

Bix was incapable of corny playing. Trumbauer was not. The records cited above were made by studio editions of the sterling Jean Goldkette band, and some of the other great ones by the short-lived Adrian Rollini New Yorkers (recording under Trumbauer's name). But after Bix and Tram joined Whiteman, they were by and large restricted to using their colleagues only on record dates, even as leaders. Moreover, Tram developed increasingly commercial tendencies, though (or perhaps because) his records didn't sell well.

Unlike the shortcomings of Louis' recording mates, those of Bix's were a matter of orientation as well as capability, so while it's easy to live with Dodds, Ory, Hardin and even John Thomas, who was Ory's replacement more frequently than previously assumed, it is far more problematic to cope with the dire male singers, lame rhythm sections and cluttered arrangements that so often smother Bix.

On the other hand, posterity has not been very fair to such respectable participants as clarinetists Jimmy Dorsey, Don Murray and Izzy Friedman, trombonist Bill Rank, pianist Frank Signorelli and Lenny Hayton, and drummers Chauncey Morehouse and Stan King. They don't do at all badly, and even better is Adrian Rollini, master of the bass saxophone, who shows here why he was so much admired, not least by young Harry Carney. Eddie Lang's presence is also welcome, though he does better elsewhere. Murray's habit of echoing Bix's ensemble phrases can get annoying, but he proves himself on Sorry and Ostrich Walk, and was responsible for the splendid arrangement of Way Down Yonder. Friedman is fluent, with good tone and time and nice ideas. Rank, a Mole fan, lacked his idol's tonal variety, imagination and astounding flexibility, but was no mean technician. Signorelli studied the great Harlem pianists and had a good beat.

A major drawback is the absence of bass players; only Rollini can compensate, though old Wolverines colleague Min Leibbrook wasn't bad on the bass sax either. But Steve Brown would have worked wonders, and even Mike Trafficante would have been a great help. However, small-group jazz of the '20s was not noted for its use of bassists, brass or string, and the Hot Five did without them too. Perhaps it's the topheaviness of Trumbauer's groups, combined with the clumsy drummers.

Pee Wee Russell, whose grasp of Bix's musical essence exceeded that of any contemporary, is present on just one session, and got just one solo on it. But that one, on Cryin' All Day, stands out. Joe Venuti also does nicely on that outing, but those two, Rollini and the serious Tram aside, Bix didn't get to record with his peers until it was almost too late, in 1930. His playing on the Hoagy Carmichael Victor dates, excepting the brilliant outburst on Barnacle Bill, is almost subliminal, and that on his own Victor date sadly obscured by commercial trappings.

But with the Hotsy Totsy Gang, which includes Jack Teagarden, a fiery Benny Goodman, Gene Krupa and Venuti, he got to do two instrumentals (there's a not too disagreeable Dick Robertson vocal on the third number), and he thrives in their company, notably on the two takes of Loved One.

Had Bix lived, he would have spent more time in such stimulating surroundings. But his post-Wolverine environment was largely circumscribed by white dance music of the day, give or take a few jazz holidays, and dance music goes out of fashion while jazz does not. Period charm notwithstanding, it is often frustrating to listen to the bulk of his recordings, but when he was given a little air, he responded in a manner that continues to compel us to listen.

Rust's notes are involved and informative, but it was surely not Bill Challis, but Tom Satterfield (who plays piano on it) who arranged the excellent Jubilee, and one would like to know who the other arrangers were on the memorable date that produced Fud Livingston's Humpty Dumpty. Finally, it's a shame that Ellis didn't get hold of the alternate take of the Gang's Thou Swell, first issued on Wolverine 3 in 1978. Perhaps all "complete" issues are fated to fall just short of the mark.

Snap these up while you can; the job's not likely to be done better in the foreseeable future, and given the present regime at U.S. Columbia, they're not going to be picked up for domestic release, though both the Louis Armstrong Story and the Bix Beiderbecke Story (in catalog since the early '50s) are in need of refurbishing. Come to think of it, many of Louis' classics of the '20s have never been out of catalog. Statistics, anyone?

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