

# **BIX: "ain't none of them play like him yet"**

**Louis Armstrong**

The film first screened in New York City on August 6, 1981, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bix Beiderbecke's death.

Documentary produced, directed and edited by Brigitte Berman Canada, 1981, running time: 116 minutes

New remastered restoration of the film completed in July 2021 for a special event screening at New York's Film Forum on the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bix Beiderbecke's death.

The film title is a tribute to Bix Beiderbecke by Louis Armstrong, expressing his 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.

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 - bringing Bix to life. 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 Davies, pianist, composer and bandleader who procured jobs for Bix and the Wolverines and became a close friend; Mary Louise Shoemaker, Bix's sister and the only surviving member of his 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 from 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 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 also drove 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 late July 1981, just in time to have its first screening in New York on August 6, 1981, on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> 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.

Select reviews of the film from its initial release in 1981:

"Certainly, as pure motion picture, it is an excellently filmed version of a musical legend, with the added impact of a tragedy...it is not a tale of self-destruction but of an innocent figure, fantastically gifted with everything but worldly wisdom." **Variety** August 12, 1981

"Berman has made a film that captures Bix fully...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." **Charles Champlin, Los Angeles Times**, April 15, 1982

"A masterful job of evoking the 1920's zeitgeist...superb soundtrack..." **Leonard Feather, Los Angeles Times**

"Berman's splendid film evokes the time and the milieu in a way that few documentaries have done...a documentary so well-researched as to be awe-inspiring." **Bill Warren, The Enterprise, Simi Valley, California**

"A truly entertaining and exhilarating documentary..." **Laurence Green, GO Magazine, London, England**

"It's a film that wins you over..." **Martyn Auty, Film Critic, Sight and Sound Magazine**

"Impressively stylish and evocative documentary ... fascinatingly poignant."

**Brian Lambert, *Twin Cities Reader*, Minneapolis, Minnesota**

"It is a remarkable piece of work."

**Richard Sudhalter, *New York Post***

"A true jazz film masterpiece. Yes, it's true...Bix lives...in that film."

***Jazz*, Minneapolis, Minnesota**