

Essay Outline

Outline

Thesis: Frank Trumbauer contrasts Bix and other musicians of his day, musically, personally, and methodologically; this contrast is easily visible in his classic “Singin’ The Blues”.

1. C-Sax

- a. Was able to get the right balance between Tenor and Alto
- b. “Besides Trumbauer, the only other early jazz saxophonist to use the C-Melody with any distinction was Jack Pettis, first heard on records in 1922 as a member of the Frairs Society Orchestra. Later, as a member of Ben Bernie’s reed section, Pettis recorded extensively, showing good rhythmic sense and command of his instrument. But unlike Trumbauer, he seemed stuck fast between his horn’s alto and tenor identities.” (447)
- c. “It found its major pioneer jazz voice in Trumbauer, who converted its weakness to strengths: rather than struggle with the C-melody’s inconsistencies of pitch, he finessed them by eliding and glissing; rather than resist the bovine tone quality, he often exploited it for humorous effect. The result was a style and tone uniquely his, uniquely recognizable, neither faux-alto nor emasculated tenor -- or even typical C-melody. Just trumbauer. (447)

2. Prepares differently from other artists (method-book exercises, doesn’t like jam sessions)

- a. Different from Bix. Tries to contrast him.

- b. "The key to this persona is Bix, and Trumbauer's reaction to him. The cornetist's every recorded solo, regardless of length or setting, seems to project a range of identifiable emotions: a bittersweet yearning; a fresh, almost girlish innocence; even, though admittedly at a stretch, something foredoomed, more than a little fey. On a purely reactive level, Trumbauer seems to seek contrast, to balance attic with antic. Where Bix is metaphorical Trumbauer is matter-of-fact; when Bix plays Hamlet, Trumbauer gives us Polonius; Bixian high seriousness fetches whimsy from his musical partner." (451)
- c. "I thought he was the most original of all the saxophonists, very inventive. He never copied anybody." (461)
- d. "At one point he prefaces a printed jazz solo with the observation that it "is based on exercises. In fact, practically every phrase used is part of some exercise. You cannot spend too much time on these exercises as they are the foundation of improvising. Constructing an improvised chorus without them is almost impossible." With this declaration Trumbauer locates himself at a quite different spot on the musical map from that occupied by a Beiderbecke or a Pee Wee Russell. Other players might have 'routined' choruses, but the use of exercise book formula and device in their construction is quite another matter. In a certain distant sense it has much in common with a far later jazz development: introduction of almost formal, modally based pattern playing by John Coltrane and others in the early '60s. (464)

3. Manner

- a. "In a 1942 Down Beat interview, Trumbauer summed up his own musical credo by declaring that if music, whatever its style and orientation, "has tone, style, and beauty in phrasing, it will live". There seems no better evaluation of Frank Trumbauer's' unique musical presence than that.
- b. "Trumbauer's stance on most records of the late '20s is elegant, debonair, a little above it all, commenting on the proceedings rather than participating in them directly. Even in ostensibly rhythmic situations --"Ol Man River" and "China Boy" with Whiteman' for example -- he floats on the beat, never attempting to drive it, using it mainly as a point of reference. (450-451)
- c. "But even at this early stage, a split can be discerned in Trumbauer's musical persona. He often exhibits a sense of devices: phrases, "licks," clever in conception but unrelated to any emotional sense of song or moment, seem to have been fitted together for maximum effect. "This'll wow 'em" he seems to be saying -- and wow 'em he does. At bright tempos, moreover, he reels off strings of eighth notes, which often emerge sounding like method-book exercises. Yet running parallel is another, at times contradictory, track: an ability to plasticize and smooth out a melodic line, lending it grace and coherence with long held notes, gentle arcs of phrase, and a logic of development rare in hot music of the early '20s. (449)
- d. "The creation of jazz is a more mysterious process than the mere pouring out of spontaneous idea. The requirements of "improvisation" can be satisfied, in jazz terms, if an identical sequence of notes is played with the subtlest alteration in rhythmic emphasis, the slightest change in the use of dynamics or vibrato, the

almost imperceptible raising or lowering of the emotional temperature. Likewise, “originality” in jazz lies not only in the pattern of notes that is produced,, but also in the instrumental tone or ‘voice’ in which it is uttered” (459)

- e. “I tried to get the sound of a C-Melody on a tenor. That’s why I don’t sound like other people. Trumbauer always told a little story. And I liked the way he slurred the notes. He’d play the melody first and then after that, he’d play around the melody. (459)
- f. “Cash seems to view Trumbauer’s frequently discussed “influence” on yYoung as more a matter of tone and execution than of substance. It’s productive line of thought, but he doesn’t follow it far enough. What young seems to have derived from Trumbauer is the stance, the emotional positioning, a way of viewing himself in an aesthetic looking-glass --like the “method actors” of a later day. (460)

4. Personal difference

- a. Married at age twenty, he spent the rest of his life with the same woman, saved his money, did not drink,always showed up on time for work, looked responsibly after family and friends”. (446)

5. Singing the blues

- a. “singing’ the blues, a masterpiece of legato attack and logical phrase-building” (450)
- b. “Without doubt, Singin’ the blues brought the bix-trumbauer parntership sharply into focus and wrought a permanent change in the way musicians everywhere, whatever their race, thought about playing jazz solos. With unconcealed wonder, the clarinetist Kenny Davern has told of a day when tenor saxophonists Eddie

Barefield and Don Byas dropped by the New York workshop of reed repairman Saul Fromkin. “They all stood out in the hall, got their tenors out, and in a unison played Trumbauer’s “singing the blues” chorus -- and perfectly. When they walked in, I asked how it happened that they knew it. “everybody knew that chorus” was all that was said. (451)