

Frankie Trumbauer

“Singin’ the Blues”

Music 145

Joe Puccio

11/8/12

Schematic of “Singin’ The Blues”

- 0:00 Introduction - The Cornet and Saxophone play in strong unison over the drums played in the background. A cymbal is struck at the and end of the first two measures.
- 0:07 Saxophone Solo - Trumbauer plays the C-melody saxophone over a strumming guitar that breaks periodically. For these measures, the guitar seems to either follow the saxophone’s rhythm, lead it, or complement it by playing low notes while the saxophone plays many octaves higher. A cymbal is played after each break in the guitar’s playing. He employs a technique James Lincoln Collier calls “correlated chorus”.¹
- 1:03 Cornet Solo - The Saxophone spirals downward and is replaced by the cornet for an equally long solo. The guitar plays in the background similarly as to how it did during the saxophone’s solo. The cymbal once again follows pauses in the guitar’s playing while the cornet
-

- 1:56 Transition - The Cornet ends its solo and plays together with the Saxophone in the background behind the guitar and piano both playing chords rather than individual notes and melody.
- 2:02 The cornet and the saxophone play together loudly above the piano and guitar.
- 2:08 The cornet and saxophone break apart their unison.
- 2:13 Clarinet Solo - The clarinet echoes the past few measure of the cornet and saxophone.
- 2:28 The cornet, saxophone, and clarinet all play together over the piano in a disjoint manner (they all seem to play simultaneous solos). The cornet stands out above the rest.
- 2:44 All the instruments break to let the guitar rip up the range of the guitar and let a cymbal clash.
- 2:46 All of the instruments resume to play their final notes.
- 3:02 Song ends.

Outline

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

1. Personal and methodological differences between Trumbauer and Jazz artists of his time.
 - a. Sober, married early, punctual, thrifty, responsible.
 - b. Jam sessions
 - c. Exercise book
2. Instrumental and stylistic differences corroborated by “Singin’ The Blues”
 - a. C-Melody saxophone
 - b. Originality
 - c. Style
3. Contribution of “Singin’ The Blues” to jazz
 - a. Experience of Kenny Davern
 - b. Trumbauer’s analysis and final words

Born on May 30th, 1901 in Carbondale, Illinois, Frank Trumbauer was eccentric for even a jazz artist (Evans and Kiner). In his personal life, his resistance to engulfment by alcohol is only (albeit, a substantially significant) one of many characteristics that set him apart. Trumbauer was married at age 20 to the same woman he would spend the rest of his life with, demonstrated financial responsibility, arrived at work on time, and was responsible with looking over both his family and friends (Sudhalter). In a word, Trumbauer was stable.

Trumbauer's peculiarity relative to the rest of the jazz community was not limited to his personal life, however. Trumbauer "locates himself at a quite different spot on the musical map from that occupied by a Beiderbecke or a Pee Wee Russell" by basing his solos on exercises. In fact, an analysis of all of Trumbauer's solos reveals that "practically every phrase used [in his solos] is part of some exercise." This sets Trumbauer apart from Bix Beiderbecke, Pee Wee Russell, and numerous other jazz artists because they might have 'routined' choruses, "but the use of exercise book formula and device in their construction is quite another matter" (Sudhalter).

In addition to atypical personal and methodological traits, Trumbauer's instrument choice was set apart from the rest. Trumbauer played what is called a C-melody

saxophone, which is “a tenor saxophone in C instead of the usual B flat” (Merriam-Webster). “Tonally the C-melody often seemed to moo, achieving neither the muscularity of the tenor nor the unique singing quality of the alto” (Sudhalter). While the C-melody saxophone was quite popular during the 1920’s due to its accessibility because an amateur player could use the C-melody saxophone to play piano music with ease, it was scarcely found in professional circles (Frankie). Thus it was Trumbauer who pioneered the C-melody saxophone in the Jazz community.

Not only was Trumbauer able to introduce a new instrument into the professional Jazz community, he was able to do so with uniqueness:

“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.” (Sudhalter)

It was Trumbauer who was able to take advantage of the C-melody’s position between alto and tenor saxophones. Trumbauer was not defeated by the C-melody’s inconsistencies in pitch. He championed the C-melody saxophone by employing its qualities to slide through his notes, and rather than “resist the bovine tone quality, he often exploited it for humorous effect.” This combination led to a style he could claim as his own. He had a voice that was unique in the jazz community. He used the C-melody

saxophone so that it was “neither faux-alto nor emasculated tenor” it was just Trumbauer (Sudhalter).

Finally, the essential component of Trumbauer: his style. More than his personal life, his approach to solos, or his instrument choice, Trumbauer demonstrates a style unlike no other jazz musician of his day. Rosy McHargue, a freelancer Trumbauer played with in Chicago, believed that “he was the most original of all the saxophonists, very inventive. He never copied anybody.” (Sudhalter). Surely a strong statement to make, but the evidence is resounding.

In order to properly identify the validity of this statement, we must first define what it means to be “original” in the context of jazz. Sudhalter explains that “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.” So we should refine our analysis to the “instrumental tone or voice” with which an artist speaks through their instrument. Therefore, in our examination of style, it is preferable to focus on some of the less explicit qualities of Trumbauer’s performances and consider more the inflections he inflicts, the stress or void of stress on given notes, and the slurs that he would sometimes place on a series of notes.

Trumbauer has a unique musical persona. Trumbauer “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 is evident in “Singin’ the Blues” during Trumbauer’s solo at the start of the song during which he demonstrates little to no emotional or attitudinal consistency between phrases or even sets of phrases. Trumbauer Additionally, Trumbauer will spin off a string of eighth notes

at bright tempos, which often resemble method-book exercises. This attribute of uniqueness is a result of his peculiar methodology in practicing for solos and improvisation, and is seen in “Singin’ the Blues” when Trumbauer signs off to Bix between 0:59 and 1:01. Lastly, Trumbauer seemed to have a proclivity to first play the melody, and then play around the melody as Lester Young put to Eddie Barefield after first hearing “Singin’ the Blues”. Trumbauer’s “playing around the melody” is most evident between 2:30 and the end of the song: Trumbauer seems disorderly relative to Bix and the fellow musicians (the guitarist, pianist, and clarinetist).

A final but important comment on Trumbauer’s style is Trumbauer’s musical interaction with Bix. Independent of length or setting, every one of Bix’s recorded solos appears to project a multitude of recognizable emotions. Bix attempts to speak deeply with his music; he does not settle for provincial listening. However, it is evident that Trumbauer achieves (and therefore seems to seek) contrast against Bix. When Bix plays seriously, Trumbauer plays frivolously. This striving for antithesis is seen in “Singin’ the Blues” when Trumbauer spins off of Bix and the main line repeatedly between 2:03 and 2:13.

Trumbauer was known very well for his “Singin’ the Blues”, which is described by Sudhalter as “a masterpiece of legato attack and logical phrase-building”. “Singin’ the Blues” put the spotlight on Bix Beiderbecke (Trumbauer’s cornetist in producing this track) and Trumbauer and resulted in permanent change in how musicians everywhere, independent of race, thought about solos in jazz (PBS). It’s because of Trumbauer’s unique style, and appropriate, likely intentionally induced contrast of Bix in the song and

that enabled "Singin' the Blues" to become well known enough for Kenny Davern to testify: "tenor saxophonists Eddie Barefield and Don Byas drop 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.

In the end, Trumbauer may have been able to sum up his genius better than any jazz critic every could: In a 1942 Down Beat interview, Trumbauer described his personal belief in music by explaining that if music, regardless of its style and orientation "has tone, style, and beauty in phrasing, it will live."

Bibliography

Evans, Philip, and Larry Kiner. *TRAM: The Frank Trumbauer Story*. New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 1994. Print.

Sudhalter, Richard. *Lost Chords*. 1st. New York: New York Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.

"c melody." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2012. Web. 8 Nov 2012.

"Frankie Trumbauer." *Frankie Trumbauer*. N.p., n.d. Web. 08 Nov. 2012.

<<http://www.redhotjazz.com/trum.html>>.

PBS. PBS, n.d. Web. 08 Nov. 2012.

<http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_trumbauer_frankie.htm>.