

“Singin’ the Blues”--Frankie Trumbauer and his Orchestra with Bix Beiderbecke (1927)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by David Sager



Frankie Trumbauer



Original Label



Bix Beiderbecke

Okeh Records; Recorded February 4, 1927, New York City

“Singin’ the Blues,” as played by Frankie Trumbauer and his Orchestra, and replete with profound yet understated musicianship, is one of the pivotal recordings that led to the acceptance of jazz as an art form while also directly steering the evolution of the modern jazz ballad. The recording has influenced countless musicians--both at the time of its first issue and ever since. It has created immortal places of esteem for both saxophonist Frank Trumbauer and cornetist Bix Beiderbecke in within the canon of great American music.

The recording was made during a brief period when both Trumbauer and Beiderbecke were members of Jean Goldkette’s Orchestra, a highly influential hot jazz ensemble that left little on record that illustrated its verve and excitement. Trumbauer, drawing on several of his Goldkette colleagues, arranged for a recording session under his own name with Okeh Records (Goldkette’s Orchestra recorded for Victor).

In an era when recordings of popular music, let alone jazz, were mostly predictable, with a vocal chorus, or at least an up-front statement of the melody, “Singin’ the Blues” stood out as an ear-opening beacon, inspiring musicians to push further the limits of their abilities.

It is also a testament to forward-thinking Okeh’s recording director, Tommy Rockwell, that “Singin’ the Blues” was made in the first place. Conventional belief at the time dictated that recordings of popular music needed to have commercial appeal to justify their existence. Also, a few rules had to be applied: a memorable lyric, a strong melody, and relevance—the tune should be new, and if not, then newly republished and in need of “plugging.” But, suddenly, here comes a recorded performance that breaks all the rules. The song was over a half-decade old and largely forgotten. There was no vocal. And, there was no initial exposition of melody; the actual tune of “Singin’ the Blues” was not heard until the final chorus.

Bix was the one who chose the forgotten tune, recalling it from a 1920 recording by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, whom he greatly admired. Actually, the ODJB just recorded one chorus as an interpolation (a common practice by record companies to satisfy publishers) on their record of “Margie,” which became an enormous hit. The composers of the latter—Con Conrad and J. Russell Robinson—also wrote “Singin’ the Blues,” along with lyricists Sam M. Lewis and Joe Young. Other recordings of the song made in 1920 were vocal treatments made by stage star Nora Bayes and by vaudeville-style vocalist Aileen Stanley. Aside from these versions, the song received very little attention until 1927.

“Singin’ the Blues” begins with a gentle, but clarion, introduction, foreshadowing the kind of lyricism that is to follow. Frank Trumbauer, or “Tram” as he was known, sails into his chorus, providing only a vague notion of the song’s real melody. He and his instrument, the now nearly-extinct C-melody saxophone, provide a cool, almost offhand approach; the timbre of his sax is nearly without vibrato. Tram also plays with the metronomic concept of time, using rhythmic figures that are quite unusual for that era, giving the whole performance a kind of “floating” effect. Tram’s original melody is filled with whimsy—a humorous, carefree approach that accurately foreshadows the sound of Lester Young a decade later. Young, of course would often cite Trumbauer, and this recording, as among his major influences.

Part of the magic in Tram’s chorus is due to the guitar accompaniment by Eddie Lang. He provides just enough harmonic information, much of it played single-string, choosing the best notes of the chord to support the saxophone, thus delighting our eardrums.

The next 32 measures belong to Bix, whose crisp attack and shining, sincere tone offer a contrast to Tram’s more light-hearted approach. Bix further eschews the melody, building his solo on interlocking phrases. As jazz musician and scholar Randy Sandke notes, “The two opening one-bar phrases combine to become a two-bar phrase. These phrases are combined to form a four-bar phrase that is perfectly answered by the next four-bar phrase.” Bix claimed that this type of “correlated chorus” was inspired by the work of Louis Armstrong, whom Bix greatly admired and whose playing style was nearly diametrically opposed to Bix’s.

Set apart from Armstrong’s soaring declamatory soloing, Bix’s “Singin’ the Blues” is introspective and shifts the listeners ear away from the four-square type of phrasing that typified popular songs of the day. Like Tram, he plays with the rhythm, filling in the spaces that were originally intended for a singer to take a breath. Also, different from the Armstrong’s approach are Bix’s note choices. Beiderbecke reached for the extended notes of a chord, going beyond the 7th and 9th, creatively using 11ths and 13ths. By using these extensions in the middle-register of his horn, Bix melodies seem as though spun from a cornucopia rather than the bold, majestic statements we might expect from Louis Armstrong.

Frank Trumbauer’s “Singin’ the Blues” made an enormous impact upon its release in April 1927; word quickly spread amongst musicians that something revolutionary in music was afoot. Portions of both Trumbauer’s and Bix’s solos turned up verbatim on various recordings. Fletcher Henderson’s orchestra played and recorded, on three occasions, a note-for-note transcription of the Trumbauer recording. On the Henderson versions, Trumbauer’s solo is

harmonized for the entire saxophone section. Bix's chorus is replicated by Rex Stewart, who knew Bix when both the Jean Goldkette and Fletcher Henderson orchestras were performing at New York's Roseland Ballroom.

However, the magic was lost on many. A reviewer of dance band records in the May 1927 edition of "The Phonograph Monthly Review" offered praise for several well-peppered, sprightly dance records on the Okeh label but dismissed "Singin' the Blues" and its reverse side "Clarinet Marmalade" as "rather disappointing." Whatever the reviewer's biases were, one thing is for certain—he missed the point that the two soloists on "Singin the Blues," Frank Trumbauer and Bix Beiderbecke had recorded a milestone in American music, a timeless statement that would be just as beautiful and relevant nearly a century later.

David Sager works in the Recorded Sound Research Center of the Library of Congress. He is also known as a classic jazz trombonist and jazz historian. Sager has been twice nominated for Grammy awards for his album notes for historical reissues.