

Bix Fest 2006

by Richard Regent

Plans were running smoothly for the 17th annual Bix Fest to be held on March 11, 12 and 13 at the Racine Marriott, 7111 West Washington Avenue, Racine, Wisconsin. Bix Fest, open to the public through purchase of event tickets, is a tribute to **Bix Beiderbecke**, an early cornetist and great jazz legend of the 1920's.

A week before the Bix Fest, not according to plans, *Buddy West and His Paradise Dance Orchestra* reported that they could not attend to perform their two hour program. **Phil Pospychala**, organizer, quickly hired the **Dixie Doodlers Dixieland Jazz Band**, a 7-piece group from southeast Wisconsin, as a replacement group to play Dixieland tunes.

The three-day Fest starts on Friday and includes something for every jazz lover. There are record sales of new and used singles, albums, CDs and DVDs. Some rare collector's items like old sheet music, books and screenings of films featuring early jazz legends. There is also promotion of jazz events through information, conversations and lectures on jazz, jam sessions, plus a Jazz Site Bus Tour of Southeast Wisconsin.

On Saturday morning, on the weekend nearest March 10 (Bix's birthday) musicians and fans in Davenport, Iowa, Bix's hometown, gather to visit Bix's grave site in Oakdale Cemetery. They honor Bix's memory, celebrate his 103rd birthday, and play the music he made famous. People in Wisconsin celebrate his life with Bix Fest. Later that day in Racine, fans get ready for concerts to be held from 8:00 p.m. until midnight. Over 300 people, sitting around dozens of white cloth covered round tables, settle back in their chairs to enjoy the music. Banks of colored spotlights shine on the musicians on the stage while a dozen microphones carefully pick up musical sounds for the audience speaker system and the radio broadcast.

Announcer **Lou Rugani** comfortably sits in a chair near the stage, with his legs crossed, one hand on a table and the other holding a microphone. Lou's old-time announcing voice gives quips, pizzazz, visual highlights and commentary for the audience and live radio broadcast on WLIP-AM (1050 Kenosha). For some listeners with good transistor or car radios, the 250-watt nighttime signal can be heard as far as Milwaukee and Madison. Lou announces, "Everyone in the Dixie Doodlers has matching shirts and they all have smiles except for that fellow in the back." Musicians are: **Gary Lavann**, trumpet; **Richard Regent**, clarinet; **David Bock**, trombone (who just turned 18); **Mark Kranz**, tuba; serious **Jack Clark**, washboard; **John Knurr**, piano; **Jason Schreiber**, banjo and vocals; and **Andy Schumm**, who fills in on trumpet. Andy composed the first tune, *Dixie Doodler Stomp*. Other tunes are: *Sidewalk Blues*, *Somebody Stole My Gal*, *Mandy Make Up Your Mind*, *Chattanooga Stomp* and *Kansas City Kitty*. The music-smart audience correctly guesses the 1935 clarinet tune *Louisiana Fairytale* from the *This Old House* television show. During intermission a jazz historian guesses the two other names for the 1909

Whiffenpoof Song (Shall I Wasting and Mavourneen). More music is played: *Milenburg Joys, Mahogany Hall Stomp, Tia Juana*, another clarinet tune *Take My Hand Precious Lord, San, Coney Island Washboard, New Orleans Joy* and *Take Your Tomorrow*

There was even a kazoo duet, a Frumpet (combination of French horn and trumpet), a breath-operated keyboard called a *Melodica*, and an Alto Horn. Three musicians rotate to different instruments for the Dixie tune *Here Comes the Hot Tomale Man* (Jason on megaphone). John moves to trombone, Dave to tuba, and Andy to piano, amazing the audience by playing just as lively. The Doodlers certainly are well received and Phil announces that he is pleasantly surprised at how things worked out. Besides applause for solos, snappy endings and upbeat tunes, there is standing ovation after each Doodler program.

The shared concert includes the **Alan Gresik's Swing Shift Orchestra** with hour programs starting at 9:00 and 11:00 p.m. For the last five years this 15-piece Orchestra plays every Thursday starting at 9:00 p.m. at the Green Mill Jazz Club, 4802 N. Broadway in uptown Chicago. The first hour is broadcast on WLIP-AM. The Orchestra plays unique, vintage arrangements from the 1930's and 1940's. They have been granted exclusive and unlimited access to the Balaban and Katz Theatre Orchestra Collection of 26,000 stock arrangements. Tonight **Alan Gresik** delivers fox trots, tangos, waltzes, ballads, and of course Swing with an authenticity and vibrancy which has not been heard since the golden age of American dance music.

The music of the **Doodlers** and **Swing Shift**, besides being entertaining and educating, inspires a dozen couples to vigorously tackle various dance styles of the early 1900s. A jam session follows the concert. Unfortunately, Bix Beiderbecke died at 28 years old, but "Through his music, Bix is alive."