

Leon “Bix” Beiderbecke

Leon Bismark (Bix) Beiderbecke was one of the greatest jazz musicians of the early twentieth century and has a connection to Lake Forest.

Bix was born in 1903 in Davenport, Iowa. His father Bismark was a manager of a lumber and coal company and his mother Agnes was a musician who played piano and was the organist for the First Presbyterian Church in Davenport. While he had training on the piano, and could play several instruments, it was the cornet on which he excelled. He taught himself to play the instrument by ear and experts believe his non-standard fingering contributed to his unique sound.

He was influenced by the original Dixieland Jazz Band and began to explore this style of music. Bix attended Davenport High School until 1920. In September 1921, his parents sent him to Lake Forest Academy hoping that this would help to curb his musical endeavors and encourage more focus on academics. On the contrary, his time at Lake Forest brought him closer to the thriving jazz community in Chicago. He would sneak out of school to take the train to Chicago and visit the speakeasies and jazz clubs there, including the predominantly African-American clubs on the South Side.

Bix Beiderbecke joined the school band and he and a classmate (drummer Walter "Cy" Welge) organized the music-for-hire group, the Cy-Bix Orchestra. The orchestra played at several school dances and it was noted in the 1922 yearbook, “Bix” Beiderbecke... and his orchestra furnished music which was declared to be unexcelled by his fellow students.” It is believed that during his short time at Lake Forest Academy, Bix composed what would become his most famous song, “In a Mist”.

Bix’s adventures into the City often lasted overnight and his disregard for curfew and his illegal drinking got him into trouble at the Academy. He was caught trying to sneak back into his room on the morning of May 20, 1922 and the faculty voted to expel him the next day.

After leaving Lake Forest, he played in several bands around the Midwest including the Wolverines, where he was the star cornet player, and The Jean Goldkette Orchestra. He joined Paul Whiteman's Orchestra where he had the chance to tour nationally and play Carnegie Hall. There are several recordings of his music with these groups.

His gift for improvisation—which was very original—and his distinctive tone, set him apart from other cornet players. Bix is considered one of the pioneers of jazz music. His ballad style had similarities with what became known in the 1950s as “cool jazz”.

An alcoholic, he died on August 6, 1931 at age 28 of pneumonia. He is buried in his hometown of Davenport where an annual jazz festival is held in his honor. His death at such a young age led to his fame as a “martyr for his music” and ultimately a jazz legend.