

Harry Rasky's The Spies who never Were

"When knowledge comes, memory comes too. Knowledge and memory are one and the same thing."

This quote, spoken by narrator Harry Rasky at both the beginning and the end of his latest two-hour documentary, *The Spies Who Never Were*, is central to the film's intellectual and structural conception. Through an intricately woven montage of living memory and frozen images of the past, the film chronicles the ironic tragedy which befell 3000 German, Austrian and Italian (mostly Jewish) refugees from Hitler's fascist regime. They fled to England, a country they considered to be their ally. Instead, they were suspected of being "spies and troublemakers," and Churchill ordered his authorities to "collar the lot." They were detained on an empty holiday resort, the secluded Isle of Wight, until it was seen fit to deport them to internment camps in Canada and Australia.

Like Alain Resnais' 1955 documentary on the horror of the Nazi death camps, *Night and Fog*, Rasky's is structured to draw more upon personal memory of these allied internment camps than the camps as they actually existed. As some of the 900 men who were eventually interned in Canada recount their bitter-sweet memories before the camera, a mental image of the time builds in the viewer's mind.

The film cuts back and forth from World War II film clips and still photographs, to contemporary colour footage of the remains of the camps; to other places which, now benign, were once fraught with unhappier circumstance; and to the vessels of memory, the men themselves.

The memories are real and present within the minds of the men who lived them. These highly perceptive and intelligent men have that peculiarly acute awareness and sensitivity born of suffering. They are beyond bitterness and reproach for the injustices dealt them.

Instead they are filled with a sense of the irony and absurdity of life, while at the same time guided by an inner moral strength.

As they recall the ironic, bureaucratic blundering which forced them to become prisoners in the very countries they had hoped would give them refuge, their memories translate to knowledge in the viewer's mind. We understand how fear and hatred breeds ignorance, particularly poignant in a democratic country such as Canada - a country which prides itself in being tolerant.

It is essential that these memories, as well as the memories of Japanese-Canadians who suffered parallel circumstances during the same war, should be brought forth now and become documented chapters of Canadian history. They do not belong to the dead past; they are a part of our living present. The fear and hatred which breeds ignorance has not gone away. The uncaring anonymity of bureaucracy is with us more than ever.

We are first introduced to these rememberers in their contemporary Canadian context. For the most part, they have thrived to become some of the most distinguished Canadians of the post-war era. Among them are Rabbi Emil Fackenheim, professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto; Joseph Kates, ex-chancellor of the University of Waterloo; Roman Catholic theologian Gregory Baum; Helmut Blume, ex-dean of the Music Faculty at McGill University; Jack Hahn, industrialist; the renowned pianist John Newmark; and comic novelist and television broadcaster Eric Koch.

When these men disembarked in Quebec City, one fine summer day in 1940, they were full of hope that they would be granted the freedom to start a new life. Instead, they were greeted by insulting Canadians and the now-familiar barbed wire and armed guards. The anguished disappointment led one youth among them to commit suicide. They were herded off to prison camps in Quebec, Ontario and New Brunswick, where they were to remain for two and a half years. Many of these refugees found themselves thrown together with actual German prisoners of war, who taunted the Jews with anti-Semitic

songs.

Canadians had been notified by British authorities that these "enemy aliens" were potentially dangerous, and strongly suspected of being spies. Fackenheim remembers overhearing two Canadian guards discussing the refugees. "They seem to speak English well," said one guard. The other replied, "Those are the most dangerous."

Much of the film deals with memories of internment camp life. The mental anguish the refugees endured at being imprisoned by their perceived allies was transcended in part by a spirit of community and a commonality of conviction amongst the refugees. They organized sports teams. Trees were planted and work was divided up accordingly. The more educated among them taught classes in their specialties. Notebooks were fashioned from the rough and durable camp toilet paper. This kind of self-motivated activity looms larger in the memories of the ex-internees than does idleness or boredom.

As time wore on, it became increasingly evident that these men presented no threat to the security of Canada nor to any other Allied country. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a group of people within the Allied world who were more committed to the destruction of Hitler's Germany. Nevertheless, it was a tiresome, lengthy process convincing Canadian bureaucrats to give them refugee status. No one wanted to admit that a mistake had been made. Two and a half years after they set foot in Canada, all the men had finally been released. They went on to repay their inhospitable treatment with major contributions to Canadian society.

No official apology was ever offered by the Canadian government. The last words of Rasky's narrative are: "By the way, the internment process did not catch a single German spy."

Lyn Martin ●

THE SPIES WHO NEVER WERE

d./p. Harry Rasky d.o.p. Kenneth W. Gregg, C.S.C. asst. cam. John Maxwell ed. Paul Nikolich asst. ed. Marie Lyons sd. Eric Hoppe mix. Clark Deprato narr./sc. Harry Rasky graphic design Geoff Chesbrough consult. Eric Koch p.c. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation colour 16mm running time 112 min.

Brigitte Berman's Bix - "Ain't None of them Play like Him Yet"



● Bix and his cornet

Brigitte Berman's reverential documentary on the legendary white jazz cornetist of the '20s, Bix Beiderbecke, is crammed with evidence of the musician's greatness, but one is left with the incomplete feeling that the man has eluded us. Perhaps that is because he was an elusive character in life. Bix was his music, and from a very early age, he let his music speak for him. In 26 on-camera interviews with Bix's fellow musicians and friends, they speak worshipfully of his genius. Describing him as quiet, dedicated, conservative and considerate, they are ultimately unable to bring him to life for the film. This, ironically, in spite of the fact that he has never really died for them.

Compounding this problem of elusive characterization is the fact that most photographs of Bix - and Berman must have unearthed virtually all in existence - are static group shots. The camera centres on the group, picks Bix out, then zooms in on him (this technique is used with almost every still in the film). Bix's expression doesn't change much from shot to shot. The camera reveals a sensitive, almost-angelic face, with a shy smile and big, glistening brown eyes.

There is also precious little film footage of the jazz great, although all that is available is contained in the film. Given these limitations, Berman has done an

● Even in Canada, the grey prisoner-of-war camps



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extraordinary job of piecing together the various elements of Bix's short but significant life (he died in 1931, at the age of 28, of lobar pneumonia aggravated by alcoholism).

Considering Berman's self-admitted obsession with Bix and his music, the film has a surprisingly detached and unemotional tone. Berman does virtually no editorializing, and deliberately plays down Bix's alcoholism. In fact, she seems to imply that Bix only started drinking heavily toward the end of his life, when he was touring the country with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra. Granted, the relentlessly demanding schedule which the orchestra followed — a town, sometimes two, every day — was inducible to heavy drinking, but Bix was drinking regularly and heavily as early as high school. Although Berman chose not to make Bix's alcoholism a major theme of the film, the subject could have been broached more insidiously, rather than introducing it all at once toward the end of the film.

Nevertheless, Berman's research is exhaustive. Not only did she read everything ever written on Bix, but she contacted and filmed every living relative, friend or professional associate. The interview included such "witnesses" as his sister Mary Louise Shoemaker; friend and admirer Hoagy Carmichael (composer); life-long home town friend Esten Spurrer; first girlfriend Vera Korn; and fellow musicians Charlie Davis (bandleader); Dave Wilborn (banjoist and vocalist with McKinny's Cotton Pickers); Bill Challis (arranger with the Jean Goldkette and Paul Whiteman orchestras); Spiegle Willcox (trombonist with Goldkette); Paul Mertz (pianist with Goldkette); Doc Cheatham (trumpeter); Matty Malneck (violinist/arranger

with Whiteman); and Artie Shaw (clarinetist/bandleader). Since the completion of the film, eight of the men interviewed have died, including Hoagy Carmichael.

Berman skillfully interweaves these relaxed and articulate interviews with hundreds of still photographs; the only available film footage on Bix; vintage jazz documentary footage; contemporary colour footage of Bix's Davenport, Iowa, home; places where he once played his music; and some dramatic recreations of Bix, as a boy in his Davenport home, and as a young man in New York toward the end of his life.

A series of Edward Hopper paintings are introduced in the final sequences of the film to evoke a feeling of the Midwest geography and period to which Bix belonged. These atmospheric paintings are more expressive of the sense of loneliness, isolation and suppressed angst beneath the calm middle-class surface of Bix's life, than any of the other photographs or documentary footage. They might have been more evenly distributed throughout the film, but Berman juxtaposes them with commentary on the growing storm within Bix's psyche, and this is consistent with her choice not to introduce the tragedy of Bix's life until the end.

The most important element of the film, the music, flows through the course of the film in an almost-continuous stream of excerpts from old recordings. Like a haunting spirit, one feels Bix's existence within those solos. The more one hears, the more apparent his genius becomes, the more obvious his unique phrasing and tone. It is, after all, only through his music that Bix lives on. Even those who remember him seem to remember the way he played more than

anything else.

The film's subtitle, "Ain't none of them play like him yet," was spoken in tribute to Bix by the great Louis Armstrong. Bix's unorthodox fingering of the cornet and his unique, lustrous tone (some musicians said it was "like a bell;" one said it was "like a woman saying 'yes'") began to set other jazz musicians on their ears as early as 1923, when he was only 20 years old. He was already beginning to punctuate his choruses with unusual intervals, and excursions into the 6th and 9th chords, in a way that was truly innovative and exciting for that time.

An outgoing Hoagy Carmichael recalls the first time he ever heard Bix play. "I was playing piano at the University of Indiana, when I heard this horn player playing behind me. The tone was so overpowering, so perfect. I had to lie down on the couch; I couldn't take it."

Bix was emotionally in touch with his music. He played spontaneously and freely, uncircumscribed by the 'approved' fingering systems of symphonically trained trumpeters of his day. In fact it was due to his lack of formal training (he couldn't even read music) that he worked out his unique fingering system. Bix had an uncanny ear for perfect pitch, and the ability to relate pitch to key, harmony and timbre in ways that normal people were unable to hear.

When Bix at one time approached the master musician-scholar Joe Gustat with the expressed hope of "maybe developing some legit technique," Gustat told Bix, "Why change what you have developed? Compared to you, I am a musician in a cage."

It was Bix's music that inspired Berman to make a film about him. "Ever since I first heard Bix play, I was hooked.

His music has a freedom of spirit, an abandonment, a striving for perfection that intrigued me. More than that, what really got me was the tone of his music — the spirit of someone pouring his heart into everything he played."

The result of Berman's obsession is a labour of love which took four years to deliver. She worked at it nights and on weekends and holidays, while remaining employed as a CBC television producer. Originally, she received \$27,500 from the Ontario Arts Council. But the film expanded from a projected one-hour length to almost double that, and the final cost was \$250,000, obtained principally from private investors.

Berman's timing couldn't have been more appropriate. She realized that if the film were ever to be made, it was to be made now, while some of Bix's key contemporaries were still alive.

The only jazz documentary in existence on Bix, it is a gift to jazz lovers and musicians everywhere. However, it is doubtful the film will receive more than a specialized interest, due to its inability to achieve a coherent, emotionally charged portrait, either of the man or his times.

Lyn Martin ●

BIX, "AIN'T NONE OF THEM PLAY LIKE HIM YET"

p./d. Brigitte Berman narr. Richard Basehart sc. Brigitte Berman, Val Ross line p. Don Haig consult. Richard Williams mus. Bix Beiderbecke add. mus. Richard Williams (cornet), Dill Jones (piano), Earl French (piano) cam. Mark Irwin, Ed Long, Vic Sarin sd. Ian Challis anim. cam. John Derderian ed. Brigitte Berman sd. ed. Bruce Griffin paintings Edward Hopper (1882-1967) p.c. Bridge Film Productions Inc. colour/b&w 16mm running time 116 min.

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