

Was Bix Beiderbecke Poisoned by the Federal Government?

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I'm no fan of conspiracy theories. I believe that Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan, and James Earl Ray all acted alone. On 9/11, I walked to the Brooklyn Promenade and observed what appeared to be a volcano spewing ash and debris over lower Manhattan. I can remember saying to myself then that Osama Bin Laden was a dead man. Conspiracy theories tend to be as irresponsible as they are far-fetched, and false rumors have resulted in riots and even full-scale wars—the French Revolution being a case in point. So it's with a little trepidation that I raise this matter.

Not that I expect anyone to take to the streets based on what I say here about Bix Beiderbecke's untimely demise. But I do sympathize with those who would sneer at the idea of the U.S. government being in any way involved. And yet, a careful examination of the evidence shows that such a connection may indeed exist.

For a long time I've suspected that Beiderbecke's death was not simply the result of sustained excessive drinking. There's no doubt he over-indulged in alcohol from his late teens on. Nevertheless, Beiderbecke had sufficient self-control to hold down steady jobs, enjoy cordial and sometimes close relationships with both men and women, pursue his passion for sports (mainly baseball, golfing, swimming and tennis), not to mention performing brilliantly on scores of recordings, particularly in the two years leading up to his physical and emotional breakdown.

But the condition of his health would change drastically overnight. On the evening of November 30, 1928, Bix Beiderbecke suffered an episode unlike anything he experienced before or after, and from which he would never recover. The details are sketchy, but he apparently passed out onstage while performing with Paul Whiteman's orchestra at the New Music Hall in Cleveland. Later that night, in a fit of delirium, he fought a desperate battle with his personal demons. As trombonist Bill Rank, friend and fellow

Whiteman band member, put it, “He cracked up, that’s all. Just went to pieces; broke up a roomful of furniture in the hotel.”¹

Whiteman called for a doctor and nurse and ordered Beiderbecke back home to Davenport, Iowa. Instead the wayward cornetist took a train to New York the following morning. From that point on, until his death at 28, his health continued to decline and his short but brilliant career was virtually over.

This mysterious event left Beiderbecke, at the age of 25 and a half, with severe peripheral neuropathy affecting his legs and feet, as well as chronic pneumonia, which would ultimately cause his death. His kidneys and liver didn’t function properly. He appeared prematurely aged; his weight went down to 156 pounds; he complained of headaches, loss of appetite, dizziness, memory loss, blackouts, and extreme nervousness. He had to use a cane to get around.² His immune system had been severely compromised. “I have never suffered so continually without a letup in my life,” he wrote in a letter to his friend and colleague, saxophonist Frank Trumbauer.³

It seems all too obvious that Beiderbecke’s near fatal attack resulted not from prolonged use of alcohol, but rather sudden and acute poisoning caused by substances of far greater toxicity.⁴ But what, and why? The answer may lie in a desperate plan devised by the Federal Government to stem the tide of bootleg liquor.

By the mid-twenties the government’s attempts to enforce Prohibition were clearly failing. Local authorities in New York and Chicago, and a host of other major cities where the 18th Amendment had never been popular, refused to aid the Feds in ridding their municipalities of illegal liquor. Yet at the same time, federal enforcers had been largely successful in eliminating the flow of

¹ Richard M. Sudhalter and Philip R. Evans, *Bix: Man & Legend* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1974), 264.

² There are two vague accounts attributing Beiderbecke’s difficulty walking to injuries suffered in some sort of altercation on his way back to New York. I agree with Bix biographer Jean Pierre Lion that this was a cover story Beiderbecke invented to disguise the fact that his problems were self-induced, and perhaps irreparable. A medical examination of his body at the Keeley Institute in 1929 indicated there were no signs of any significant scarring. See Jean Pierre Lion, *Bix: The Definitive Biography of a Jazz Legend* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 229.

³ The full text is reprinted in Philip R. Evans and Linda K. Evans, *Bix: The Leon Bix Beiderbecke Story* (Bakersfield, CA: Prelike Press, 1998), 433.

⁴ Two eyewitnesses to this event, Trumbauer and trumpeter Charlie Margulis, described it as an attack of DTs, or Delirium Tremens. The problem with this evaluation is that DTs are caused when a chronic alcoholic stops drinking abruptly. This was not the case with Beiderbecke’s breakdown. As Margulis stated, “Bix had too much to drink before the concert [on November 30th] and he ended up passing out as we were playing.” Evans and Evans, 418.

illicit alcohol from Canada and other countries. With these supply routes closed, crime syndicates switched tactics: they stole vast quantities of industrial alcohol, used in paints and solvents, fuels and medical supplies, and hired chemists to redistill these poisonous substances into a potable product.

The government's reaction to this turn of events proved even more dangerous. As author Deborah Blum explains in her article, "The Chemist's War: the little told story of how the U.S. government poisoned alcohol during Prohibition with deadly consequences":

Industrial alcohol is basically grain alcohol with some unpleasant chemicals mixed in to render it undrinkable. The U.S. government started requiring this 'denaturing' process in 1906 for manufacturers who wanted to avoid the taxes levied on potable spirits. The U.S. Treasury Dept, charged with overseeing alcohol enforcement, estimated that by the mid-1920s, some 60 million gallons of industrial alcohol were stolen annually to supply the country's drinkers. In response, in 1926, President Calvin Coolidge's government decided to turn to chemistry as an enforcement tool. Some 70 denaturing formulas existed by the 1920s. Most simply added poisonous methyl alcohol into the mix. Others used bitter-tasting compounds that were as lethal, designed to make alcohol taste so awful that it became undrinkable.⁵

The idea of purposely poisoning alcohol originated with dry advocates in Congress, who persuaded President Coolidge to adopt it as official policy. They felt that, by flooding the market with deadly and foul tasting liquor, the public would abandon it forever. In addition, the government wanted to create a mixture so noxious that even chemists working for the crime bosses couldn't save it. So began an "arms race" between chemists working for the government and those in the employ of the underworld. Hence the "Chemist's War," with the drinking public its unwitting victims.

As Blum continues:

By 1926 federal chemists had devised ten new formulas dedicated to deterring bootleggers and their customers. But the black market chemists proved able in countering these moves. In the spring, formula number six, which included mercury bichloride, was overcome. In September, numbers three and four had to be discarded. Formulas one and five—which contained the most methyl alcohol (plus some benzene and pyridine)—remained dangerous, but that was mostly because, as one

⁵ Deborah Blum, "The Chemist's War," *Slate*, February 19, 2010, 2, http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2010/02/the_chemists_war.html

government chemist told reporters, no one had figured out how to completely detoxify wood alcohol.

By mid-1927, the new denaturing formulas included some notable poisons—kerosene and brucine (a plant alkaloid closely related to strychnine), gasoline, benzene, cadmium, iodine, zinc, mercury salts, nicotine, ether, formaldehyde, chloroform, camphor, carbolic acid, quinine, and acetone. The Treasury Department also demanded more methyl alcohol be added-- up to 10 percent of total product. It was the last that proved most deadly.⁶

It was estimated that a mere two tablespoons of undiluted methyl alcohol could kill a child; a quarter cup an adult.

Meanwhile, hospitals began seeing the lethal consequences of this strategy. In 1926 alone, 585 people succumbed to alcohol poisoning in New York City, with similar statistics reported throughout the country. The next year, that number exceeded 700.⁷ By 1930, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company estimated that deaths due to alcoholism had risen 600 percent among its policyholders (largely drawn from the respectable middle and upper classes) since Prohibition had been enacted a decade previously. That same year Prudential reported 5,000 fatalities from tainted alcohol.⁸

Some courageous individuals openly denounced the government's misguided policies. Charles Norris, Chief Medical Examiner of New York City (and the first ever to hold this position) issued a public statement that read:

"The government knows it is not stopping drinking by putting poison in alcohol. It knows what the bootleggers are doing with it and yet it continues its poisoning process, heedless of the fact that people determined to drink are daily absorbing the poison. Knowing this to be true, the United States Government must be charged with the moral responsibility for the deaths that poisoned liquor causes, although it cannot be held legally responsible."⁹

In 1928 Norris warned that, "Practically all the liquor that is sold in New York today is toxic." During that year's presidential campaign, taking place just as Bix Beiderbecke made his fateful journey to Cleveland, candidate and soon-to-

⁶ Deborah Blum, *The Poisoner's Handbook: Murder and the Birth of Forensic Medicine in Jazz Age New York* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), 154.

⁷ Blum, "The Chemist's War," 3.

⁸ Blum, *The Poisoner's Handbook*, 198.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

be President Calvin Coolidge referred to Prohibition as a “noble experiment” and vowed to uphold it. Norris bitterly retorted: “Prohibition is a joke. I invite both Presidential candidates to see the noble experiment in extermination.”¹⁰

The presidential campaign provoked a flurry of editorial comment from around the country decrying the unintended consequences of Prohibition. Heywood Broun, noted journalist and founder of the American Newspaper Guild, wrote in the *New York World* that, “The Eighteenth is the only amendment which carries the death penalty.” The *Evening World* called the federal government a “mass poisoner...undermining the health of its people.” In Chicago, the *Tribune* declared, “Normally, no American government would engage in such business ... It is only in the curious fanaticism of Prohibition that any means, however barbarous, are considered justified.” And in Cleveland, the conservative *Plain Dealer*, which had formerly championed the 18th Amendment, assured its readers that it had no desire to “inflict punishment on those who persist in violating Prohibition laws.”¹¹

Bix Beiderbecke’s punishment for imbibing a poisonous cocktail in Cleveland would last an agonizing two and half years before his system finally gave out. Blum graphically describes the effects of renatured alcohol on the human body:

A few drinks rapidly led to headache, dizziness, nausea, a staggering lack of coordination, confusion, and finally an overpowering need to sleep ... Unlike grain alcohol served before Prohibition, methyl (wood) alcohol is not easily broken down in the body. The enzymes in the liver that neatly dispatch ethyl alcohol struggle with methyl. As a result, the more poisonous version lingers in the system, simmers longer in the organs, and metabolizes away very slowly. As it stews it becomes more poisonous. The primary by-products of methyl alcohol in the human body, as chemists had discovered, are formaldehyde and formic acid.

Formaldehyde is a known irritant poison, capable of causing severe internal damage...People poisoned by methyl alcohol would often seem to recover from that first bout of dizzy sickness, feel better while the alcohol was being metabolized, and then ten to thirty hours later be poisoned again by breakdown products.

First, their vision would blur. The optic nerve and retina are acutely vulnerable to formic acid salts...Methyl alcohol and its by-products caused similar damage in the parietal cortex, a region of the brain essential in processing vision. It concentrated as well in the hardworking

¹⁰ Ibid., 191.

¹¹ Ibid., 159-60.

lungs—the breakdown of pulmonary tissue was what usually killed people.”¹²

These symptoms are eerily similar to what happened to Beiderbecke. Charlie Margulis, Whiteman’s first trumpeter, recalled the events of November 30th: “Bix had too much to drink before the concert and he ended up passing out as were playing. He was seated on my right, and I am normally left handed, so I was able to play the trumpet with my left hand and hold him upright with my right. Bix sort of snapped out of it for a moment, and was uncertain of where he was and what was happening. He took a poke at me, missed, and sort of settled back into his haze.”¹³ Some hours later the violent episode in the hotel room occurred.

When Whiteman learned that Beiderbecke had disobeyed his order to return home and instead went back to New York, he arranged to have his cornetist admitted to the Rivercrest Sanitarium in Astoria, Long Island. Bix stayed there for two weeks and was diagnosed with pneumonia and polyneuritis.

A month or so later Bix described his lingering ailment in the letter from Davenport to Frank Trumbauer:

Dear Frank:

How are you, boy? I’ve been having a hell of a time. I am writing this flat on my back as I have been since my arrival home...It seems I had a touch of pneumonia at one time and that our doctor thinks it wasn’t discernable because of its slightness. He also said that because of the wonderful doctor and care that Paul arranged for me in New York, the pneumonia didn’t get a chance to show itself. But here at home, he noticed a light infection in the lower right lobe of my lung. It seems that after all this trouble, the poison in my system has settled in my knees and legs ... My knees don’t work. I try to stand and fall right on my face. I am taking walking lessons and I am improving every day, but with great pain.¹⁴

Nearly a year after his breakdown in Cleveland, Beiderbecke checked into the Keeley Institute, a pioneering treatment facility for alcohol abuse. He remained there for five weeks. Thanks to Elizabeth Beiderbecke Hart, Bix’s grandniece, I have been able to obtain the unpublished medical records pertaining to his care. They reveal that he had been a chronic alcoholic for the

¹² Ibid., 161-2.

¹³ Evans and Evans, 418.

¹⁴ Ibid., 433.

preceding nine years, and he also smoked up to twenty cigarettes per day. At the time he was admitted, his heart beat was faint with a high pulse rate of 120 (normal not exceeding 100); his pneumonia persisted with breath sounds “very harsh” and accompanying shortness of breath. His urine was amber and cloudy; tongue coated and flabby; pupils large, reacting slowly to light; and he suffered from “chronic nasopharyngeal congestion.” Knee-jerks could not be obtained and the patient showed difficulty in the use of his lower limbs. He also experienced hand tremors, dizziness, memory loss, and digestive problems.

For his final examination, conducted on November 18, 1929 just prior to his release, the doctor noted: “heart action easily excited...considerable tremor in extended fingers...gait with eyes closed unsteady. No stability.”

Beiderbecke’s own statement was much more optimistic, perhaps because he was tired of being a sequestered invalid and simply longed to get out: “I feel fine, have a good appetite & sleep well, no stomach trouble, no heart trouble. Not nearly as nervous. Not so much neuritis. Mind & memory better, no dizziness. Smoking 6-7 pipes daily & inhale a little of the smoke. No craving for liquor & satisfied with my treatment.”¹⁵

His death certificate, issued a year and a half later on August 11, 1931, lists the cause of death as “lobar pneumonia.” There were stories circulated by guitarist and bandleader Eddie Condon, among others, that Bix caught a cold returning in an open sedan from a date in Princeton. He lay in bed for two days, bed sheets soaked in water and fans blowing on him to overcome the August heat. According to this account, his cold developed into pneumonia. As Frank Norris, a friend who knew Beiderbecke from both Lake Forrest Academy in 1921-2 and Princeton in 1931, famously stated: “Bix didn’t die of a cold. He died of everything.”¹⁶

We now know that pneumonia wracked Beiderbecke’s system ever since the Cleveland incident in 1928. Ironically, in September of that year, Scottish scientist Alexander Fleming chanced upon a bacteria-destroying mold he named “penicillin.” This discovery earned him the Nobel Prize and led directly to the creation of other antibiotics, now commonly used in the treatment of pneumonia and a host of other bacterial diseases. But all of that came much

¹⁵ 4-page unpublished report prepared by the Keeley Institute covering Beiderbecke’s treatment from 10/14/1929 through 11/18/1929. These papers are currently stored in the archives of the Illinois State Historical Society in Springfield, Illinois. Copies were kindly obtained for me by Elizabeth Beiderbecke Hart.

¹⁶ Quoted by George Avakian in his notes to *The Bix Beiderbecke Story, Volume 1*. Columbia LP CL844.

too late for Beiderbecke. It wasn't until the Second World War that penicillin became available to the public at large.

Was Bix's demise the result of some sort of lethal concoction created and distributed by our very own government? Or was it something crime bosses cooked up in response to the "Chemist's War?" We'll never know for sure, but we certainly can't rule out governmental complicity. Here we have a cautionary tale involving an attempt to fight perceived evil with even greater evil. It is a lesson we should all take to heart.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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