Gene Lees
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93024-0240

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Where's Georgie?

Gerry Mulligan is trying to find the Georgie Auld band book, so that he can catalogue it. If anyone knows where that library is, please drop me a line and I'll pass it along to Gerry.

Bix and Bill

One afternoon in 1958 I sat in a Paris cafe with the French critic and composer Andre Hodeir, author of *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence.* Americans incline to be flattered by European praise, and Hodeir's book caused a stir in the jazz intellectual community in the United States -- not the musicians, to be sure, but editors and writers on the subject.

Alan Jay Lerner, who lived extensively in France and spoke the language, said that the French considered themselves the cultural Supreme Court of the world. If they did not discover something first, then it could be of little value. Hence the passion, shared with the English, in their claim that they discovered jazz before the benighted Americans appreciated its value. To like the music, they had to be its discoverers. Actually, the French are slow to accept the new in art to the point that Pierre Boulez went to live in Germany in protest against their conservatism.

Hodeir said to me that sunny afternoon, "No white man ever contributed anything to the development of jazz." I accepted this passively enough. It was the conventional wisdom, held by any number of writers not just in England and France but in the United States too. It was only much later, when I got into conversations -- not interviews, but easy and off the record conversations -- with the likes of Coleman Hawkins and Ben Webster that I began to have an uneasy feeling that the conventional wisdom was not the whole truth. Gradually I came to feel, on the testimony not of white critics but of black musicians, that a number of white musicians had exerted important influences in the development of jazz.

The huge preponderance of inventive exploration and influence has been by black musicians: Bechet, Morton, Armstrong, Ellington, Hines, Waller, Basie, Hodges, Redman, Carter, Fletcher Henderson, Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, Parker, Gillespie, Monk, Bud Powell. They made the massive cultural achievement of jazz in less than 30 years.

However, a hypothesis of the total irrelevancy of white jazz musicians can be sustained only by the willful denial of historical record and the testimony of any number of black jazz musicians. Anthony Braxton lists Paul Desmond as one of his early influences. Herbie Hancock speaks of the influence of Bill Evans on subsequent jazz pianists, and only the deaf could fail to notice it. Art Tatum said that one of his influences was the Chicago radio pianist Lee Sims. Since many writers on the subject seem unfamiliar with Sims' work, which we know today chiefly from his compositions, they ignore what Tatum said. Lester Young stated firmly that he was influenced by Frank Trumbauer (who, we should note for the sake of strict accuracy, was part Indian) and Jimmy Dorsey. The influence of Bix Beiderbecke on Miles Davis seems obvious during the *Kind of Blue* period of his career, in the spaced selective way of playing, and even in the curious sense of joy undercolored by darkness. When I asked Miles, famed for purported militancy, if he had listened a lot to Bix, he, far from being offended, answered, "No, but I listened a lot to Bobby Hackett. And *he* listened to Bix." Furthermore, according to Gil Evans -- whom Miles once described to me as his best friend -- one of the influences on Miles was Harry James who, when he turned away from lugubrious ballads and broad vibrato, was a hot and hard and dazzling jazz player. Rex Stewart, a writer as well as a cornet player, had much to say on the impact of Bix Beiderbecke. Saxophonist Billie Mitchell told me that his big early influence was Artie Shaw. Artie Shaw told me that he spent his early days trying to play like Bix on a saxophone. The statement of one English critic that Bix made history but did not influence it becomes dubious indeed.

Then there is the matter of what Jack Teagarden and Tommy Dorsey did to trombone playing and the influence of Scott LaFaro on bassists.

One read too that white bands had to bring in black arrangers -- Fletcher Henderson with Benny Goodman and Sy Oliver with Tommy Dorsey -- to give them some soul and make them swing. I accepted that, too, not bothering to reflect that writing won't swing without players who swing. Basie, who knew a thing or two about swing, used a number of white writers, among them Neal Hefti, Sammy Nestico, and Chico O'Farrill. But three white writers -- Will Hudson, Russ Morgan, and Bill Challis -- wrote for Fletcher Henderson's band several years before Benny Goodman commissioned arrangements by Henderson, and incidentally Don Redman wrote for Paul Whiteman and Goldkette. Challis and Morgan were alumni -- along with Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, pianist Itzy Riskin, and lead trumpeter Fuzzy Farrar -- of a Pennsylvania dance orchestra called the Scranton Sirens. They were from coal country, and knew each other early.

Dance bands were burgeoning all over America to supply the music required by the dance craze catalyzed by Vernon and Irene Castle and their famous black music director, James Reese Europe, after World War I. Given the quality of the musicians who came out of it, the Scranton Sirens must have been a very good band. Not very far to the north, Spiegle Willcox was playing in local bands in pavilions and dance halls. He and Challis did not know each other then. They still live only an hour or so of driving time apart.

Challis began writing for the Jean Goldkette band in 1926. His arrangements were far ahead of their time, harmonically and rhythmically, and highly admired by musicians. A strange thing happened to those Challis charts for Goldkette.

The Goldkette arranging staff included Russ Morgan and a violinist named Eddy Sheasby. Sheasby, who at one point shared conducting duties with Frank Trumbauer, was a volatile, temperamental drunk, and even the musicians, tolerant though they often are of human vagary, didn't like him. Something set him off. Nobody seems to know what. In a fit of rage he disappeared just before an important engagement in St. Louis. The band's library, including the Challis arrangements, went with him. Goldkette saw him several years later, but the

band's book was never recovered. Its loss contributed to the orchestra's eventual collapse.

When Paul Whiteman hired Challis, he asked the arranger to reconstruct his Goldkette pieces. Challis adapted the charts to Whiteman's larger instrumentation. All the Challis charts for Whiteman are in the Williams College library. In 1975, a Carnegie Hall concert resurrected some of the Goldkette music. Then a young New York bassist named Vince Giordano, who had studied arranging with Challis, urged his mentor to recreate some of his Goldkette charts with their original instrumentation. Withdrawing some of the Whiteman versions of the charts from Williams College, Challis went to work to scale them back down to the size of the Goldkette band, thirteen men. Giordano put together a band to record the material, made up of musicians sympathetic to the music of that earlier era, including Bob Wilber and the late Dick Wellstood. One of the trombonists had a special affinity for the music: Spiegle Willcox had first played it with Goldkette sixty years before.

The resultant album is called *Bill Challis' The Goldkette Project*. It deserves the attention of students of arranging and researchers in the history of jazz. (It is on the Circle label. It is available from the Graystone Society, 374-376 E. Market St, Wilkes-Barra PA 18702 for $12.90, postage included.) The album should inspire a re-evaluation of the place in jazz history of Bill Challis.

Even without it, such a reassessment seems inevitable because of the reissue on CDs of all sorts of significant material that has been hidden away for decades. The new technology of sound processing is making it possible to hear details of writing that were previously all but inaudible. In the case of Robert Parker in Australia, he has been able to turn the sound into quite creditable stereo.

One of the discs in the Columbia Records release list is devoted to Bix Beiderbecke, with emphasis on the band called Frankie Trumbauer and His Orchestra, which recorded for OKeh in 1927. Several charts are by Challis, including *Ostrich Walk*, from the repertoire of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, Hoagy Carmichael's *Riverboat Shuffle*, *Three Blind Mice (Rhythmic Theme in Advanced Harmony)*, and two with the eerily awful vocals of Seger Ellis, *Blue River* and *There's a Cradle in Caroline*. The album also contains the famous *Singin' the Blues*, whose impact on musicians was comparable to that of Armstrong's *West End Blues*. The Columbia annotation attributes this chart to Fud Livingston. But it is the work of Challis. Dan Morgenstern in his annotation of a Fletcher Henderson reissue on the Bluebird label attributes the chart to Challis. Furthermore, yet another reconstruction of the chart is heard in *The Goldkette Project*.

One might suggest that Challis, for some obscure reason, lied in claiming the chart was his. But, as we shall see, Challis from his earliest days was a man in whom modest self-effacement amounted almost to a serious defect of character. Challis wouldn't lay claim to what he did do, much less take credit for what he didn't. He says he wrote that chart. It is interesting to compare the original Trumbauer-Beiderbecke 1927 version of the tune on Columbia, a previously unissued take of a 1931 Fletcher Henderson recording of the Challis arrangement (with Rex Stewart reproducing the Bix solo) now out on Bluebird, and the version in *The Goldkette Project*.

The Robert Parker albums include a compilation of New York recordings from the 1920s, one of which is Paul Whiteman's *San*, another Challis chart, recorded January 12, 1928. The CD reissues should also cause a re-evaluation of Whiteman, a dartboard for jazz buffs for lo these many decades. That Paul Whiteman could not play jazz and merely stood there and waved a stick is not necessarily relevant. Dizzy Gillespie has repeatedly attested that Lucky Millinder, who was not a musician, was a first-rate bandleader. Cab Calloway, a singer, not an instrumentalist, had a crackling great band.

To be sure, Whiteman's band could be ponderous, but not always and certainly not in all its recordings. The personnel on *San* is only ten men: Charlie Margulis on trumpet, Beiderbecke on cornet, Bill Rank on trombone, Jimmy Dorsey on trumpet and clarinet, Trumbauer on C-melody saxophone, Min Leibrook on bass sax, Matty Malneck on violin, Carl Kress on guitar, and Harold McDonald, drums. The pianist is Challis, who didn't consider piano his instrument. *San* is a delight to this day, and one of the reasons is the quality of the writing. And it swings.

There is something else we should note at once about Challis. He was the man who transcribed the five Bix Beiderbecke piano pieces, *In a Mist, Candlelights, Flashes, In the Dark,* and *Davenport Blues*. Without him, we would not have those pieces, and perhaps not even Beiderbecke's piano recording of *In a Mist.*

We wouldn't have them without Whiteman, either: Whiteman made the deal with publisher Jack Robbins to put these pieces out, whereupon Bix and Challis went to work to get them on paper. Nor would we have the Challis charts for Goldkette without Whiteman, either. He was a natural target, with that rotund face with its pencil mustache, so easily caricatured, he was later mocked by the jazz writers for that press agent's title King of Jazz. He was privately modest on the subject of jazz, but he was a perceptive appreciator of the music, hired some of its best white players, and made the public pay some attention to it. I have never met a musician who worked for him, or even knew him reasonably well, who didn't like and admire him. That includes Bill Challis, who lives in quiet retirement in the little community of Harvey's Lake, Pennsylvania.

I passed Scranton on Interstate 81, heading southwest toward Wilkes-Barre, which is nineteen miles further down the Susquehanna River. My father, who was English, worked briefly in one of the coal mines in this area just about the

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time Challis left it to write for Goldkette. That was before I was born. He quit -- he said the Pennsylvania mines were terribly unsafe, far below the standards of those in England -- and went back to playing music for a living until the Depression and the arrival of the talkies dried up the work. My dad said that in those days, you'd see miners resting on their haunches along the roadside, waiting for their buses to work in the mornings, the same posture you saw in the mining country of England and Wales. It's the only way to rest in a narrow coal seam. It occurred to me on that freeway that my dad may well have heard the Scranton Sirens.

You don't see miners resting easy on their haunches in Pennsylvania any more. The pit mines are gone; the coal is extracted by the ruthlessly efficient process of strip mining.

It wasn't just the reissue of so many records with Challis charts that had set me on this quest into coal country. His name had been coming up more and more. Then Hank Jones expressed the view that Bix had exerted an influence on arrangers through Challis. And Benny Carter, who first wrote for Fletcher Henderson probably in 1926, when Challis was with Goldkette, had said to me in New York, "Bill Challis and Frank Trumbauer were my idols."

That alone gave him significance.

I pulled off at Wilkes-Barre, passed through the city, and headed out into the country, following directions from Evan Challis, Bill's younger brother, keeper of the flame and family historian. Evan pronounces his name "Even". He says there are two pronunciations of the name in Wales. The family is Welsh on the mother's side, Huguenot on the father's. Thus the name Challis is French.

I arrived at Harvey's Lake. It is a little lake, ringed by a road and rows of summer houses and boat docks. It was deserted on this April afternoon, not a boat in sight. I could not find the house. Bill Challis lives with Evan and Evan's wife Elizabeth. I telephoned and at last found the address. In a camel-hair topcoat, almost shyly holding up his hand to tell me I had come to the right place, he stood on the front porch, overlooking the road perhaps thirty feet below the house, and the lake that shone beyond it. As I climbed the steps and looked back, I saw, beyond the lake, among the houses that rim it, the skeletal form of a roller-coaster, from which no happy screams have emanated in years; it is abandoned. To anyone who grew up along the Great Lakes, as I did, a lake is a body of water you can't see across, and this one, Harvey's Lake, is a mere puddle, a postage stamp of water, narrow and a couple of miles or so long. Still, a sign by the highway as you approach it proclaims it the largest natural lake in Pennsylvania. It is not the largest in area but in terms of content of water: it is very deep.

Once upon a time, when you could get here on the interurban electric trolley from Wilkes-Barre, there were three dance pavilions around its rim, and two more between the two communities, five in all. You start to understand why Artie Shaw says that in the heyday of the bands you could play a month of one-nighters in Pennsylvania alone. But the trolley was long ago dismantled, and the pavilions died, and the sounds of bands no longer drift across this water in the evenings. Bill Challis played C-melody saxophone in bands that worked these pavilions. He was in high school then.

At the top of the stairs, I shook hands with him, having the curious sense -- this happened when I met Rudolph Friml, too -- that I was touching history. In Friml's case, the thought occurred to me that his hand had shaken that of Dvorak, which had shaken that of Liszt, which had shaken that of Beethoven, which had shaken that of Mozart. I was five handshakes from Mozart. In the case of Challis, I have no idea who all he shook hands with. Certainly with Fletcher Henderson and Bix. And no doubt Rex Stewart and Coleman Hawkins on the night of the legendary confrontation of the Goldkette and Henderson bands at Roseland. I looked into a face with clear skin, thinning white hair and, inside the one lens of his bifocal glasses, a dark eye-patch. As I learned, the sight in the right eye is going.

The four issues from April to July, 1929, of the British journal *Melody Maker* presented an extended analysis by Al Davison of Paul Whiteman's recording of *Sweet Sue*, a Challis arrangement. Davison, whose prose was tortuous, wrote that "modern rhythmic music has arrived at a stage where at its best it is worthy of being considered as a form of music which is by no means valueless even when adjudged with the highest of artistic standards in mind. In fact, at such a stage has it arrived that it is plain to see that it is more than likely that shortly the influence of the general atmosphere of modern dance music, and more particularly perhaps the subtleties of interpretation which produce what we broadly term dance rhythm, will have a strong effect on the work of the great master composers of tomorrow." With notated examples, Davison analyzed the orchestrator's harmony, including minor ninth and thirteenth chords, intimations of the whole-tone scale, and his voice-leadings, going through the chart almost bar by bar. The tone of the article, which in total covered eleven pages of the publication, is ecstatic. Bix got a copy of the article. He brought it to Challis and said, "Hey Bill, read this." What Bix had noticed was that Challis' name was never once mentioned. The arrangement is attributed to Ferde Grofe.

Another man came out of the house to join us. This was Evan Challis, whom I had talked to these several times on the phone. I apologized for the intrusion, but they dismissed this and said, "We want to take you to lunch." And so we left immediately for a little family restaurant part-way back to Wilkes-Barre and sat down amid a clink of dishes and soft string music from the Muzak. A Jobim tune.

Bill was born in Wilkes-Barre July 8, 1904, Evan August 29, 1916, the sons of a barber. There were two more boys and a girl in the family, but only Evan and Bill survive. You could sense immediately the friendship between these two brothers.

How did Bill get started writing?

"We had a band here called Guy Hall's Orchestra," Bill said. He spoke softly and slowly. "He wrote *Johnson Rag*. He wrote a couple of other things too. I was just a kid, in my

junior year in high school. He had a guy who played tenor sax in the band. The saxophones were just new. I got a hold of a C-melody sax. I was a good saxophone player. Russ Morgan was around then, nine miles down the road from Wilkes-Barre. He played trombone. Jimmy Dorsey and Tommy too, their father was a teacher."

"They were from the lower coal fields," Evan said. "Shenandoah." Jimmy in fact was born the same year as Bill Challis. Evan said there had always been a strong brass-band tradition in this area.

"I think the miners and their gals used to like to dance," Evan said. "They'd dance at the drop of a hat. Every night, there was a dance with somebody's band playing. In all these towns, Plymouth and Nanticoke and Wilkes-Barre and Scranton. The outside dance pavilions and then, in the winter time the halls, there was dancing going on all the time."

"Where did you study arranging, Bill?" I asked.

"I didn't study. I more or less just picked it up. I was a faker, a real faker. I studied with a fellow here named Fritz Anstette. Czechoslovakian. He taught clarinet. Most of the guys around here that were talking saxophone at the time said, 'Go down to Old Man Anstette.' I went down to him. It was a buck a week or something like that. He had a son who was an oboe player, another son who was a trumpet player, and I think some of the girls played piano.

"He started on me, showed me all about the saxophone. I had a very good tone. I figure he was the one who taught me to develop a tone. Long whole notes and low tones. Sooner or later I came up with a pretty good tone. That's what got me my job with the Scranton Sirens. Russ Morgan was in the band, playing trombone.

"I went with Guy Hall's band. He had five guys. Sometimes he expanded to three trumpets, two trombones, three saxes, and the rhythm section, with string bass, piano, and banjo. Guy was the drummer."

Evan said, "Bill wrote an arrangement of *Blue Room*. That arrangement had a history. Guy Hall had all those men for an occasion. They'd play the top club in town, the Westmoreland Club, where all the coal barons were members. They'd have a ball there. Playing gigs around town, it was five pieces, but they augmented it for big occasions. Bill wrote the *Blue Room* arrangement for that larger band. Bill was still going to high school. He'd play summers with Guy Hall."

"We'd play the pavilions around here," Bill said.

"After high school I went to Bucknell, about 65 miles down the river at Lewisburg. I took pre-law. I was going to go to law school at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

"At Bucknell I wound up with my own band in my second, third, and fourth years. As the band augmented -- and I did my best to augment it -- I had to write for the extra instruments.

"The guy who had the band before me had five pieces. In my first year I was the second saxophone. The guy who played trombone doubled on saxophone. When I got the band in my second year, it got to be six guys. Then I got another saxophone player and a trumpet when they came to school. The band began to build up. It got to be three saxophones and trumpet and trombone and piano. We had no bass. Then a guitar player came to school. We did a little rehearsing, putting some tunes together. I had to write out the extra parts for the three saxophones. I wrote for the C-melody, the alto, and the tenor. Then I got another trumpet player and a bass player. So I had a rhythm section, three saxophones and three brass. We wound up with eleven or twelve pieces. It was practically a complete band.

"By my senior year, we had some harmony in the band. It sounded like a bigger band. If necessary, I would write the trombone, which was closest in the register, so that the guy had to play the melody. If we wanted four parts, the saxophones would play the other three. We always had a band that sounded like it had a lot of guys. Itzy Riskin wrote th[illegible] I was the one who brought that around.

"We played mostly for the girls in the sororities. They squawked a little about raising the price on them, but they paid it, and we had no problem. Each time we got another guy in the band, I had to write the part."

Challis graduated from Bucknell, his mind on going to law school. "I sent in my tuition money," he said. He returned home for the summer and played for Guy Hall, then joined a band led by Dave Harmon out of Williamsport, Pennsylvania. "Dave Harmon's band played battles of music with the Wolverines," Evan said.

"I heard Bix then," Bill said. "I liked him. I didn't know him.

"Jean Goldkette had a lot of bands out in Detroit, including the band at the Book-Cadillac. When I was with the Dave Harmon band, I visited Detroit. I had a brother there, Lew.

"While I was there, these guys I'd played with in the Scranton Sirens, Fuzzy Farrar, Itzy Riskin, and Russ Morgan, were with Goldkette. I talked to Russ. Russ took me over to Charlie Horvath, who was the manager of the band. Russ said to Charlie, 'Why don't you have this guy make a coupl[illegible] arrangements? He arranges, too.'"

The Goldkette band comprised three trumpets, two trombones, three saxophones, and four rhythm, including banjo. For recordings it used a violin-guitar duo. Goldkette did not lead the band and only occasionally appeared with it. He was a concert pianist by training who organized bands as a business. Whiteman too had several units. There was another band in the Goldkette stable: the stunningly excellent McKinney's Cotton Pickers, whose music director was Don Redman, one of the major architects of big-band jazz arranging.

Bill returned home to Wilkes-Barre, still intent on law school, but he turned in a couple of charts to the Goldkette band. "I made an arrangement of *Baby Face*. They sorta liked it. They asked me to make another one, so I gave them *Blue Room*. It was pretty much the one I'd written, updated. The Goldkette band came through Wilkes-Barre. A friend of mine and I went down to the Cinderella Ballroom to hear the arrangements. Bix and Frank Trumbauer had joined the band. The band sounded great. They'd leave open a space for the cornet and saxophone and Bix and Trumbauer would fill it in

like you wouldn't believe."

That *Blue Room* chart is in *The Goldkette Project* album. Let's note that Bill said he'd updated it for Goldkette. But in its essential outlines, it was written when Bill was in high school. He was graduated from high school in 1921.

"About a week or two later," Bill continued, "I was going to go down to the University of Pennsylvania." He had spent four years at Bucknell, and this was September, 1926, the opening of the school year. Bill was 23. "I got a call from Ray Lodwig. He wanted to know if I wanted to join the band. I said, 'I'm going to go to school.' He said, 'Well, we'd like you to join the band.' They wanted me to be the fourth saxophone. They told me to come up to a place in Hillsborough, Massachusetts. The band was staying there. I went up there. I knew a few of the other guys besides Bix and Trumbauer. Spiegle Willcox had joined the band."

In fact, the Goldkette personnel was now remarkable: Fuzzy Farrar, Ray Lodwig, trumpets, and Bix Beiderbecke, cornet, Bill Rank and Spiegle Willcox, trombones; Doc Ryker, Don Murray, and Frank Trumbauer, reeds; Itzy Riskin, piano; Howdy Quicksell, banjo; Steve Brown, string bass; Chauncey Morehouse, drums; Joe Venuti, violin; Eddie Lang, guitar; and Paul Mertz, arranger and at times pianist.

Bill continued, "Charlie Horvath told me, 'I can get a million saxophone players. They're a dime a dozen. I only have seven arrangements.' One of the things wrong with the Goldkette band while I was with it, they never had anyone to say, 'I want you to make an arrangement of this or that.' Horvath didn't do it, Goldkette didn't do it. Goldkette didn't even conduct. Ray Lodwig handled the band on the road. We didn't have a systematic way of building up any arrangements."

The 1926 New England sojourn of the Goldkette band has been well-documented by Richard Sudhalter and Phillip R. Evans in their biography of Biederbecke, as well as in other books. The promoter, a man named J.A. Lyons, had lodged the band at a place called the Hillcrest Inn, a country house -- perhaps what would today be called a bed-and-breakfast establishment -- at Hillsborough. The band arrived there September 21. It was to play gigs around New England and get ready for an opening October 6 at the Roseland Ballroom in New York, opposite Fletcher Henderson. Spiegle Willcox has a photo of the band on a wall in his home. The men are seated on the roof of a mini-bus on the side of which a banner proclaims: Jean Goldkette Orchestra New England Tour J.A. Lyons Mgr. Wherever the band played during that New England tour, the place was packed with musicians, such was the band's reputation -- and Beiderbecke's.

"Up at Hillcrest, Bix and Trumbauer and I used to take some walks together. I went out on one or two dates to hear the band." No more. That's how little Challis claims for himself. But Richard Sudhalter, whose father, also a musician, several times heard the band during the New England stay, said that the arrangements "that really knocked us out were *Baby Face* and *Blue Room*, both of them advanced, beautifully written, and played with enormous spirit." Chip Deffaa, in his book *Voices of the Jazz Age*, wrote, "Virtually no one had heard this new Goldkette orchestra; it had not yet cut any records; but on (the) New England tour, the band dazzled listeners night after night. And with the hiring of Bill Challis as a full-time arranger, all the pieces came together. Challis's work was downright inspired. His music was graceful, ahead of its time, and he knew how to showcase Beiderbecke and Trumbauer. They played Challis's charts with panache."

Bill said, "We gradually worked our way down into New York and the Roseland Ballroom.

"They said, 'You'll have plenty to do when you get down to New York.' Jesus. It was all, 'Have this out by eight o'clock.' Most of the tunes I got to do were lousy. Then we'd go down and record. Things like *Hushabye*. It was quite a while before we got a lot of arrangements together."

Lunch ended. Evan and Bill and I left the restaurant to drive back to Harvey's Lake. Bill continued talking in the car.

"When we came to the Roseland, I had made a few arrangements for Goldkette. Fletcher Henderson was opposite us. The story about what kind of trumpet player Bix was was put out by the trumpet players in Fletcher's band. They were sitting in Fletcher's band, Bix was sitting in the Goldkette band. They would have their time up on the stand, and then the Goldkette band would have its set.

"I was there the night it happened. Fletcher had a hell of a band. Don Redman was the arranger and first alto. Rex Stewart was in the Henderson band. Fletcher wanted to exchange arrangements. Ray Lodwig exchanged a few. They listened plenty to Bix. Matter of fact, they tried to get some of our players. They copied a lot from Goldkette."

There was more to it than that. At first the Goldkette band played its commercial material, eliciting titters. Trumbauer, according to Sudhalter, cupped his hands around his mouth, and called to the band, "Okay, boys, let's give 'em the business." They went into *Tiger Rag*, then the Challis charts, one after another.

Rex Stewart wrote in his *Jazz Masters of the Thirties*, "We were supposed to be the world's greatest dance orchestra. And up pops this Johnny-come-lately white band from out in the sticks, cutting us . . . . We simply could not compete . . . . Their arrangements were too imaginative and their rhythm too strong . . . . We learned that Jean Goldkette's orchestra was, without any question, the greatest in the world . . . .

"You can believe me that the Goldkette band was the original predecessor to any large white dance orchestra that followed, up to Benny Goodman. Even Goodman, swinger that he was, did not come close to the tremendous sound of the Goldkette repertoire, not in quality and certainly not in quantity . . . . "

And in an interview, Stewart said, "It was pretty humiliating for us, and when the time came for us to go back on, we didn't really know what we should play. They'd covered it all, and they were swingin' like mad. Everything. Bix, for Pete's sake. You know, I worshipped Louis at that time, tried to walk like him, talk like him, even dress like him. He was God to me, and to all the others cats too. Then, all of a sudden,

comes this white boy from out west, playin' stuff all his own. Didn't sound like Louis or anybody else. But just so pretty. All that *tone* he got. Knocked us all out."

Fats Waller sat in with Henderson's band that night; Miff Mole sat in with Goldkette. *Orchestra World* wrote, "Most everyone who is anything at all in the music business was present . . . . Whoever is responsible for the Goldkette arrangements should be elected to the hall of fame. They are nothing short of marvelous."

The Goldkette boys were anxious to record the Challis charts. It wasn't to be. If we owe it to Whiteman that those arrangements still exist, we owe it to a man named Eddie King -- the archetype of the tin-eared record producer -- that we do not have the Goldkette performances of them. King didn't like jazz, and he specifically disliked Bix, objecting to his harmonic innovations, his "wrong note" playing. His attitude foreshadowed one that Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker would encounter.

Challis was working hard, turning out charts on tunes King thought would sell, material Bill referred to as "crap."

"Fletcher began to play at Connie's Inn up in Harlem," Bill said. "I was living in Greenwich, Connecticut, then. When I'd go back home to Greenwich, I'd stop in at Connie's Inn. Fletcher and I became good friends. He began to commission some arrangements from me. I wrote a lot for that band. They paid me well. Buster Bailey and Coleman Hawkins and Don Redman and Jimmy Harrison were in the band. It was a great band.

"Don Redman had been the music director of McKinney's Cotton Pickers. He'd been writing for that band and for Fletcher. He also wrote for the Goldkette band, and also the Whiteman band.

"Fletcher said, 'I want you to hear this piano player sing.' After the band played a set, they would have this guy play organ or piano and sing. It was Fats Waller.

"After I had been with Goldkette about a year, the word got out that it was going to break up. Whiteman came down to Atlantic City with Bing Crosby. Bix and I were in the band room. Bix asked Whiteman to conduct the band. Whiteman said, 'I don't know any of the arrangements.' I said, 'You don't have to know the arrangements. Just give a down beat." Bix went up there, and said, 'What do you want to hear?' Whiteman said, '*Tiger Rag*.' He turned around to the band, and said, 'One, two . . . ' And Bix started it off. He played the lead. And while he was doing that, who was down at the door? Goldkette. He never stood in front of the band. Very very seldom. I didn't see him, but I was told he was down there watching the whole thing.

"That was our first introduction to Whiteman. He said, 'You can join the band now, if you want. Or you can wait and see how it goes.' Whiteman asked me if I wanted to come directly to the band, or if I wanted to wait around New York. Fuzzy Farrar and some of the guys wanted to wait around New York, do records, and make money. Farrar was a great trumpet player. He could read anything, play anything. He had no trouble finding work. He worked with several bands. But other guys, guys like Ray Lodwig, didn't work much at all.

"Trumbauer and Bix got into a band called the New Yorkers, which was run by Adrian Rollini. That band played at a place called the Whiteman Club, but they were together only about ten days. I went to see Trumbauer and Bix. They were going to join Whiteman when the band got to Indianapolis. They were in the band within a couple of weeks -- a very short time. As far as I was concerned, I wasn't in the band yet, but I was traveling around with them. They were playing theaters. While we were in Indianapolis, I think, Jimmy Dorsey took Paul out to wherever Hoagy Carmichael was. They brought Hoagy up to my room. I had a little organ. It belonged to the Whiteman orchestra. They always dumped it in my room, in case I got any ideas. They said, 'I want you to hear this.' Hoagy sits down and plays *Washboard Blues*.

"Whiteman was taken by it right off. Hoagy sang it and played it on the organ. Hoagy traveled around with us. We got together fairly often, talked. I got to know the tune. Two weeks later, we were in Chicago, and we recorded it. That was my first arrangement for Whiteman. That was the number, and *Changes*, both my arrangements, that we recorded that day."

We arrived back at the house on Harvey's Lake and settled in a sun porch that overlooks the water. I asked Bill about the Whiteman instrumentation. As he recalled, there were seven brass -- four trumpets and three trombones -- and six saxes.

Bill continued, "After that Ferde [Grofe, Whiteman's chief arranger] gave me a couple of arrangements to do. He gave me *Old Man River*. I began to get good tunes, nice tunes. And they began to get some nice results. With Goldkette, we weren't an important enough band, it seemed, that we'd get nice tunes to do.

"Bix and I were good friends, but he was a drinker. And didn't drink." Bix began playing his little piano fantasias for Challis, who was impressed by them.

"He had a very creative mind," Bill said, "and when he played his own music, the second time he played it, he played it differently.

"Paul went to Jack Robbins, the music publisher, about publishing Bix's pieces. Robbins told Bix, 'You have to have this written down, so you have to play it the same way.' Even *In a Mist*, he played a little differently on the record. I had to insist, when we went over anything, that he play it again, play it again, the same way. We went through all the things that he did, and I'd say, 'Play it the same way again.' We got the things out."

Challis transcribed *In a Mist, Flashes, In the Dark, Candlelights*, and one he took off a record, *Davenport Blues*. They are all that remain of Bix Beiderbecke's piano inventions.

"The harmonic thinking was radical," Bill said. "It fit in with what I expected from him. Our thinking was very much alike, harmonically.

"Ferde was a very good friend of Eastwood Lane's. Bix used

to play parts of some of that music over."

I asked, "Is it true that Bix couldn't read? Or that he just read very badly?"

"I think he read badly. I don't say he couldn't read. He'd just sit down and he had to work it out. I would write a chorus for him, or a half chorus. I'd write the harmony. Harmony didn't bother him at all. He could certainly hear it. He knew everything. What the next chord was. And I supplied it to him. The same way with Trumbauer. He could read really, I would say, a little better than Bix. But Bix could read. When he sat down alongside of Fuzzy Farrar and Ray Lodwig, he had no problem following those guys.

"He'd come to a rehearsal. He'd go over the thing. Ferde would be there. If another trumpet player was there, they'd go over it together. He could read that. No problem reading that. Especially if he was doing it with another guy who could read. He could read some. Some."

Bill made an interesting observation. He said that he had never been too swift a reader, either, adding, "I can't read too well *now*." I have known several composers who wrote with facility but could not read well; Gary McFarland was one of them. Resuming on Bix:

"There was always a gin bottle alongside the chair. On the bandstand. Usually a bottle. He didn't get loaded or anything like that. He'd have a nip. Like Harry Barris. He'd take the cork off, put it back down. He'd do that how many times, Jesus.

"He liked guys he could drink with. Frank Trumbauer didn't drink much. Trumbauer was quiet. Bix was a quiet guy too. He certainly was not a talker." (Trumbauer's widow, Mitzi, once amplified on this point. She said, "Frank was an Indian and would never use one word where none would do.")

Bix was listening to Debussy, Stravinsky, Delius, Macdowell, and Eastwood Lane, among others. "He could play most of them by ear," Bill said. "He just did it.

"I'd listen to a couple of things of Bix's and put them in an arrangement."

I remembered what Hank Jones had said about the influence of Beiderbecke on arrangers through his influence on Challis. I wanted to verify the point. "He influenced your arranging?"

"Oh yeah!" Bill said. And you can certainly hear it in the chart on *San*. Even in the ensemble passages, he has the band phrasing and thinking like Bix. It is an early and classic example of an arrangement shaped to the abilities of the musicians who are going to play it, rather than generalized ideas of the character of instruments derived from European orchestration treatises. There was no precedent for what Challis, Ellington, Carter, and Redman were doing. They had to explore this form of orchestra, saxes, brass, and rhythm. In *San*, we hear true jazz writing, shaped to the idiosyncrasies of the players, and it's brilliant. And it swings.

Bill said, "In those days we did an awful lot with interludes, modulations, and Bix had the whole book, it seemed to me. I don't know where he got that stuff. He knew *Afternoon of a Faun* backwards."

"What do you think would have become of him if he hadn't died?" I asked. It is a question that has tantalized everyone who has ever given consideration to the short meteoric life of Bix Beiderbecke.

"We talked a lot about writing piano numbers," Bill said. "He wanted to put it down on paper. He wanted to do a lot more than the five numbers."

The days of Bix, Trumbauer, Bill Rank, Venuti and Lang in the lush and largely happy traveling circus that was the Whiteman band, were coming to an end. Whiteman did all that he could for Bix, keeping him on the payroll for many months when Beiderbecke couldn't even play. Whiteman was no puritan about booze, being a toper of proportions himself. But Bix was steadily destroying himself, abetted by hale fellows whose assistance was bitterly resented by Louis Armstrong, among other friends of Bix. "Ain't nobody played like him yet," Armstrong said when Bix was dead. Long afterwards, musicians who knew and admired Bix were protective of him when they were asked about his alcoholism.

"Whiteman started to play a different kind of music," Bill said. "When we went in the band, we made a lot of records. As much as the band played theaters, whenever we'd get the chance, we made records. When we were doing so much recording, Bix and Trumbauer and a lot of the guys were in the band. But when the band started to play concerts and things like that, Bix's spot wasn't so important. It was a lot of written music. And Bix was a great faker. You'd write the background for him, and all he had to do was hear the harmony and know the tune.

"Oh. He was the greatest. All the way around."

"The band broke up in 1930, wasn't it?" I said. "The Depression was on, and Whiteman was having financial problems, and fired a whole bunch of guys."

"I was one of them. That was while we were in the Roxy. The band appeared there with George Gershwin. Eight of us got let out. There was Lenny Hayton, Joe Venuti, Bill Rank, me, a lot more.

"Then Bix died. When Bix died it was . . . too bad. We were in New York, the guys who got let out. I was free-lancing. I was working a lot with Nat Shilkret, Willard Robison, Don Voorhees, different guys like that. They'd call me. And I always had the Casa Loma I could write for.

"The Casa Loma was a band that came out of Detroit, patterned after the Goldkette band. But they picked up a few things of their own. Gene Gifford was their chief arranger. They were well managed. Cork O'Keefe was their manager. He and Spike. Spike Knoblaugh. That was Glen Gray's real name, Glen Gray Knoblaugh. We used to call him Spike when he played with the Orange Blossoms in Detroit. They were on the stand opposite the Goldkette band. They were the relief band. Most of their guys were from around Detroit."

In 1927, Goldkette had formed the Orange Blossoms, which soon became the Casa Loma Orchestra. Given the collective influence of the Goldkette band, McKinney's Cotton Pickers, and the Casa Loma Orchestra, a case could be made that the swing era began in Detroit.

Bill said, "I remember I was on the street when I heard Bix was dead. I heard it from the trombone player Boyce Cullen, one of the guys in the Whiteman band. I was up around Seventy-second Street on the west side. I ran into Boyce. He said, 'Did you hear that Bix died?'

"It shocked me."

Bill stayed on in New York, writing for studio orchestras and the Casa Loma.

As an arranger, Bill was largely self-taught, although this term is dubious: formal teaching to a large extent involves guiding a student to the right books, and some of them find their way without that advice. He said, "I was looking at the orchestration books, particularly Forsythe. I could find a lot of material there. If I wanted to find out how to divide fiddles, of what the fiddles consisted, I found it out of the Forsythe book. Later on I went to Schillinger. Over at Columbia they had practically a Schillinger group. Several of the guys, Glenn Miller, Lyn Murray, Gus Levine, studied with Schillinger.

"Schillinger changed everything around. He was very arithmetical, and I could understand that. Most of the other guys could too."

A lot of musicians were making transcriptions for distribution under pseudonyms to 400 or so radio stations, Benny Goodman and the Dorseys among them. Bill recorded as Bob Conley and His Orchestra. In 1983, the Circle label issued two albums of this transcription material by Challis. The string section comprised ten violins, three violas, and a cello. The sax section (which included Artie Shaw and Larry Binyon), interestingly, was five men, including a baritone. Charlie Margulis and Manny Klein were in the trumpets, and Jack Jenney and Will Bradley among the trombone players, with Frank Signorelli on piano, Dick McDonough on guitar, Artie Bernstein on bass, and Chauncey Morehouse on drums. Not even that illustrious group could make the Challis chart on *Clarinet Marmalade* swing: the orchestra was too big. The music might be described as pre-Muzak, thick and sweet.

Bill freelanced through the rest of the decade and into the '40s, writing for Charlie Barnet (for whom he arranged, improbably enough, *Ave Maria*), Mark Warnow, Nat Shilkret, Willard Robison, Lennie Hayton, Raymond Paige, and Glenn Miller. The chart on Miller's *Guess I'll Go Back Home This Summer* is Bill's. He went on staff with Artie Shaw, for whom he arranged *Blues in the Night, This Time the Dream's on Me*, and *Make Love to Me*.

"With Artie, you seldom made an arrangement by yourself," he said. "He usually worked on the tune with you. He was right there."

The cordial and even casual mixing of black and white musicians that went on in private and in the recording studio and certainly for arrangers -- with Don Redman writing for Whiteman and Bill writing for Fletcher Henderson -- still was unacceptable in public performance. Bill said, "The trumpet player we had -- Hot Lips Page -- Artie cancelled a whole trip through the south because they didn't want to have Page. Guys in the band told me that Page once walked around all night because he couldn't find a place to stay." Shaw too tells of the hardships endured; traveling with a white band was hard on Roy Eldridge, too, and particularly Billie Holiday. The segregation of bands came not from the musicians but from the public and, more to the point, the people who booked the bands. The bigots of the Bible Belt would ultimately get Nat Cole's TV show knocked off the air.

In 1936, Bill returned for a time to the Whiteman band, but there was really no place for Whiteman in the Swing Era, when the public expected each bandleader to be an instrumentalist, ideally a hot jazz player. The last of the 185 arrangements Bill wrote for Whiteman was *Sitting on a Rainbow*.

He continued with the Casa Loma, by now billed as Glen Gray and His Casa Loma Orchestra. He said, "We got Bobby Hackett in the band for a while, and Red Nichols. Red was a great studio man. If he had a chorus to do, he'd even write the notes out and play them exactly. He was meticulous about what he put down for records. I liked Red. He was a great guy to work with. A great studio man. He wasn't a Beiderbecke, by any means."

The war years came. Bix had been dead ten years. Trumbauer, who had been in the navy in World War I, was now a test pilot. He went back to music briefly after the war, then gave it up and returned to aeronautics. He died in 1947.

Something sad happened to Bill Challis along the way. He was married for a time. How and when his marriage ended I do not know. And I sensed, in my conversation with Evan Challis, that the subject was a sensitive one. I pressed no questions about it.

I stayed overnight in Harvey's Lake, then had lunch again with Evan and Bill. We drove into Wilkes-Barre. Evan and Bill still own the building on a street corner in which their father had his barber shop. Where the barber chairs and mirrors once were are filing cabinets and shelves holding the memorabilia and some of the music of the life of Bill Challis that Evan has collected. I felt strangely moved as I examined charts written in Bill's young neat hand in the early 1920s on printed score paper laid out for three trumpets, two trombones, three saxes, and rhythm section. Bill seems almost indifferent to his place in history. Evan, a salesman by profession and archivist by default, is not.

We shook hands and parted on that street corner in a modest neighborhood where these two soft, gentle men had grown up.

Not long after I got back to California, I received an envelope from Evan and Bill. It contained the transcriptions of *In a Mist* and the other piano pieces that Bill had made for Bix so long ago. I copied them and sent them to Hank Jones.

Once more I was talking to Benny Carter about Bill. I asked him again about Bill's influence. He repeated what he said in New York, his voice inflecting italics, "Bill Challis was my *idol*." And he added, "Will you be talking to him?"

"Yes."

"Please give him my love."

I did.