

SWINGING THE MAELSTROM

Malcolm Lowry and Jazz

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WHEN DURING THE COURSE of treatment a psychiatrist asked Malcolm Lowry to free associate “anything that comes into your head that begin with *B*”, Lowry instantly replied, “Bix Beiderbecke.” For some reason the psychiatrist would not accept this answer; if he had, he would have learned a great deal about his patient in a short time. Had the therapist been a jazz fan himself, he would have known that Beiderbecke, one of Lowry’s lifetime idols, played a brilliant trumpet and died an alcoholic at age twenty-eight. One short step, and he would have understood that in many ways Bix was to jazz what Lowry was to literature: an American counterpart, in fact, only a year older (Bix was born in 1903, Lowry in 1904), a restless student with a middle-class upbringing, an alcoholic, a rebellious adolescent who left home to pursue an unconventional career, a musician/nomad who was forever dissatisfied with his work. Both young men had a propensity for seeking out father figures in their respective fields: Bix found his mentor in Frank Trumbauer, a saxophone player who took the young trumpeter under his wing, developed the young man’s talent, and improved his technique; Lowry’s “literary father” was Conrad Aiken, who — as it is by now well known — sheltered, fed, and unstintingly assisted the budding novelist.

Beiderbecke, the archetype for *Young Man With a Horn*, was an extremely intelligent musician, a man familiar with literature who, after dipping into a musical career at about the same age Lowry set out to sea, attempted to return to college, but whose restless inability to cope with regulations and routine, drove

him away eighteen days after enrolling; here the young English amateur jazz musician fared better (even during the darkest hours of his life, Lowry somehow managed to draw Herculean draughts of discipline from some underground source) for he emerged from an unhappy stay at Cambridge with his classical tripos, armed and ready to write. Like Lowry too, it was at this age that Bix took up the drinking that was eventually to kill him.

Had the psychiatrist allowed his patient to free associate further, he might have learned that Lowry was an avid jazz fan as a youth at Cambridge, that he played the ukelele — or, as he called it, “taropatch” — described by Margerie Lowry as: “a long-range uke with more strings and frets, and that’s what he played in later years though he started with a regular small ukelele”, that he composed songs and worshipped Eddie Lang, a virtuoso jazz guitarist who, with his lifelong friend, violinist Joe Venuti, played with Beiderbecke and Trumbauer in the late twenties and early thirties. Lowry loved this essentially “white” sound of the classically trained jazzmen of the period — the controlled, formal tone of Bix Beiderbecke and the brilliant, driving rhythm of Lang. During the last few years of his life, however, Lowry’s love for jazz abated; he decided to “leave it to the young” and turned his interest to classical music instead. But music, and especially jazz music, the psychiatrist would have learned had he proceeded further, had been one of the great loves of Lowry’s life. A friend during the Cambridge days, Dr. Ralph Case, recalls:

His sense of rhythm and phrasing was impeccable — he had that subtle something which every true jazz fan instantly recognizes. . . . Where jazz was concerned, his taste was, in my view, impeccable. . . . I would say that Bix was Malcolm’s chief love among jazz musicians of the time . . . Closely linked with Bix, of course, was Frankie Trumbauer . . . ‘Clarinet Marmalade’, ‘Singin’ the Blues’, ‘Ostrich Walk’, ‘Way Down Yonder in New Orleans’, ‘River Boat Shuffle’, . . . all of these were like manna from heaven to Malcolm . . .

Lowry also favoured another all-white jazz group, The Memphis Five (active between 1923 and 1928) in their recordings of “Lovey Lee”, “How Come You Do Me Like You Do?”, “Beale Street Blues”; and later, a group of Toscanini’s symphony musicians who called themselves The New Friends of Rhythm, and their recording of “Bach Bay Blues.”

Dr. Case continues:

. . . his [taste] was unerring in picking out the gold from the dross — he had no time for corny or pretentious numbers . . .

And Gerald Noxon, writing in the Lowry issue of *Prairie Schooner*, says:

[Lowry] was passionately fond of jazz . . . I had a phonograph; a small but respectable collection of jazz records . . . mostly blues, for which Malcolm and I shared a particular fondness.

According to prominent jazz critic Marshall Stearns, jazz is associated with protest and rebellion and identification with the underdog. Bix and his fellow white, Midwestern musicians “. . . sacrificed ease and relaxation for tension and drive. . . . They had read some of the literature of the twenties . . . and their revolt against their own middle-class background tended to be conscious.” Across the Atlantic, the young Lowry, engaged in similar turmoil, set to writing as Bix had turned to his music. *Ultramarine*, what later became *Lunar Caustic*, *Under the Volcano*, “Elephant and Colosseum”, all feature the protagonist’s identification with the dispossessed, the “philosophers”, the “poor in spirit,” the gentle animals, the *borrachos*, and the peons who bear the entire burden of civilization on their backs. Love of jazz was really another facet of Lowry’s romanticism which extended later to his fondness for the simple lives of the Manx fishermen, their unsentimental faith, and their hymns. “But I was attached romantically to those days,” says the musician-hero, recalling “Prohibition” and the “Jazz Age”, in “The Forest Path to the Spring.” For the older man jazz came to represent youth itself. So much for the psychological value of free association.

AS A WRITER, Lowry often attempted to put prose to work as music. In fact, he compared his novel to “a kind of symphony . . . a kind of opera . . . hot music . . . a song”, and referred continuously to “chords being resolved”, “contrapuntal dialogue”, and the like. One chapter, he says, “closes with a dying fall, like the end of some guitar piece of Ed Lang’s . . .” And, “the best kind of novel” — he confides to friend James Stern — is that which is “bald and winnowed, like Sibelius, and that makes an odd but splendid din, like Bix Beiderbecke.” So that when he told his wife that “the early records had tremendous influence on his style of writing,” he apparently knew what he was about. Only the slightest familiarity with music is necessary to see that his works are shot through with such purely musical techniques as reiterated refrain, aria, and the particular influence of Debussy on the alliterative, rhythmic, and onomopoeic effects used to describe nature, the sea, wilderness. From the earliest

writing on there is a consistent identification between music, sound, and word. In *Ultramarine*, for example, “. . . down in the engine room three submarine notes floated up and were followed by the jangling of the telegraph, while the engine changed key.” Bells on a ship’s bridge — “*tin-tin: tin-tin*” — recall the memory of goat bells, “tinkle tonkle tankle tunk”, and pure young love, which is soon to be pitted against the lure of sin at a port whose name itself is musically related to the young hero’s thoughts: “Tsang-Tsang.” Memory, love, fear — all are associated with sounds, the creaking music of the ship’s winches, the bells, the engines, a violin’s notes blown in the wind from another ship docked nearby. And since Lowry’s writing was all so closely autobiographical, the young sailor hero of *Ultramarine*, not surprisingly, plays the “taropatch”.

Music has its demonic aspects: the young boy’s first encounter with a prostitute is accompanied by a jazz number ironically entitled “Dead Man Blues”, for Dana Hilliot/Malcolm Lowry was then virtually obsessed with the fear of death by venereal disease.

Over and over again we find countless references to jazz — even tiny “inside” favours to jazz fans are interspersed throughout; tidbits like “Trumbaugh: named after Trumbauer — Frankie. Beiderbecke, et al.” in “Through the Panama,” or the nickname for his hero’s wife in “Elephant and Colosseum”: “Lovey (her nickname came from Lovey Lee, an old recording by the Memphis Five)”, or in “The Forest Path to the Spring”: “One evening on the way back from the spring for some reason I suddenly thought of a break by Bix in Frankie Trumbauer’s record of Singin’ the Blues that had always seemed to me to express a moment of the most pure spontaneous happiness . . .”¹

And so it goes in story after story, novels, manuscripts for future stories and novels — innumerable allusions to jazz which finally culminate in a discernible pattern wherein the chaos and despair in the minds of Lowry’s protagonists suddenly merge into order during a brief moment of illumination and joy. Like the pattern of Dixieland music itself, each story in *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* begins slowly, almost mournfully, and builds in its sorrow until it seems almost too much to bear — then just as suddenly, it explodes in a climax of joy and hopefulness. This stylistic signature is best illustrated in its earliest and therefore its crudest form at the end of *Ultramarine*, Lowry’s first novel:

And all at once the maelstrom of noise, of tangled motion, of shining steel in his mind was succeeded by a clear perception of the meaning of the pitiless regularity of those moving bars; the jiggering levers began to keep time to a queer

tune Hilliot had unconsciously fitted to their chanting, and he saw that at last the interdependence of rod grasping rod, of shooting straight line seizing curved arms . . . had become related to his own meaning and his own struggles. At last there dawned upon him a reason for his voyage . . .

Here in the young boy's soliloquy of reconciliation to the sea is the embryo of the dying Consul's — albeit illusory — "vision" of the perfect pattern of existence at the close of *Under the Volcano*, also rendered largely in musical terms.

Mozart was it? The Siciliana . . . No, it was something funereal, of Gluck's perhaps, from *Alceste*. Yet there was a Bach-like quality to it. Bach? A clavichord, heard from far away, in England in the seventeenth century. England. The chords of a guitar too, half lost, mingled with the distant clamour of a waterfall and what sounded like the cries of love.

Lowry peppered his works with references to Beiderbecke, Lang, Venuti and others, utilizing his expert knowledge of their musician's style to create metaphors, moods, even at times structuring his own stories within their formal influence. If the reader happened to be unfamiliar with analogies comparing a beautiful day to a Joe Venuti record (*Under the Volcano*) or a newsboy's cry to a piece of jazz mounting towards a break ("The Bravest Boat") so much the worse for that reader. This was part of Lowry's vocabulary (as were many other far more esoteric subjects like occultism, Indian legend, and the Blakean excesses of drink) so that ". . . to anyone who knew Malcolm intimately, it was inevitable that jazz should be tied with, indeed a part of his literary output" (Dr. Case).

Three of Lowry's literary hero-mouthpieces are in fact jazz musicians: the nameless narrator of "Forest Path", Bill Plantagenet of *Lunar Caustic*, and the Consul's half brother/alter ego, Hugh in *Under the Volcano*. Inevitably, some working knowledge of Lowry's jazz background is necessary in order to understand these characters, the conflicts presented and, in the case of *Under the Volcano*, the structure of the plot itself. "The Forest Path to the Spring" concerns a jazz musician who has given up the debilitating night life of the clubs for the wholesome life in nature — in other words, has exchanged death for life.

Before I had married, and after I left the sea, I had been a jazz musician, but my health had been ruined by late hours and one-night stands all over the hemisphere. Now I had given up this life for the sake of our marriage and was making a new one — a hard thing for a jazz musician when he loves jazz as much as I.

With the help of his old colleagues, the narrator obtains a piano and is thus able to earn a small living by composing and titling jazz tunes. Things go well for a time; the narrator learns how to cope with the rough ways of the wilderness — specifically, the fetching of water for the cottage from the source of a spring, which requires a rather long walk through the forest. Like other Lowry heroes, the narrator falls gradually into a state of despair, undergoes a dark night of the soul (embodied in the absolute loathing he conceives for his water-carrying task) and is very suddenly bolted by a recollection of a Bix Beiderbecke solo into a “moment of the most pure spontaneous happiness” and the desire “to do something good.” Goodness is synonymous with creation and the very Protestant emphasis on work, as evil is associated with torpor and neglect; so that our jazzman determines now to write “a symphony in which I would incorporate among other things . . . the true feeling and rhythm of jazz. . . . The theme was suggested probably by my thoughts of *cleansing* and *purgation* and *renewal*.” (Italics mine). Here the power of music assumes religious overtones, when the very core of suffering (in this case the initial abandonment of the so-called “jazz life”, and its resumption under entirely new circumstances) becomes a force for regeneration. Lowry was constantly placing his characters in hell so that they might reach heaven: compare Bix himself and countless other jazz musicians who were both exalted and destroyed by their work.

The hero of *Lunar Caustic* is not only a jazz musician but an alcoholic as well. As if things weren't bad enough, Bill Plantagenet is unemployed, an alien adrift in New York, and hallucinating. The breakup of his band in England is consonant symbolically with the breakup of his marriage and of his total personality. The inability to play, that is to work as a musician, is tantamount to disintegration.

“Bill Plantagenet and his Seven Hot Cantabs . . .” he introduces himself to the psychiatrist at Bellevue, where he has voluntarily committed himself, “We went a treat in Cambridge . . . we were all right with our first records, too, we took that seriously. . . . You know you people get sentimental over England from time to time. . . . Well, this was the other way round. Only it was Eddie Lang and Joe Venuti and the death of Bix . . .” that presumably brought this Englishman to America in the hope of patching up the pieces of his own life. But even here in the madhouse he is rejected by the only people who can understand his music: a Negro patient named Battle is infuriated when Bill sits down to play the piano. “Something in the rhythm of his [Battle's] blood, it seemed, did not like Bill's music; not because it was alien music, it was precisely because it

sounded too cognate that he would not conform to it." Bill's one attempt to communicate results in what was known in jazz parlance as a *cutting contest*, where two musicians "battle it out" for first place. Bill plays "In a Mist" and "Singin' the Blues." "He played Frankie Trumbauer's old version fast." The tension builds as the appropriately named Battle sets up a counter song about the sinking of the *Titanic*, and a discussion about black versus white whales ensues among the patients.

"Glancing at Battle for approval", Bill launches into "Clarinet Marmalade" — only to be eyed "stonily" by the Negro. " 'Say listen,' Battle demanded, 'let's have some truckin' — don't you know any truckin' . . .'" (i.e. backing up a soloist on the piano.) Suddenly Bill is pushed from the piano by a "mental defective" who somehow manages to bring all the patients, even the truculent Battle, together in a symphony of discord. Symbolically defeated, the lonely alcoholic Englishman is soon after dismissed from the hospital as an alien. His moment of self recognition comes when, once again down and out on the street, it suddenly becomes clear that two pathetic creatures left behind, a senile old man and an angel-faced schizophrenic boy, are his only friends in the world. His music rejected even by the insane, Plantagenet stumbles out drunk and ironically "free," into the streets of the city.

In contrast to "The Forest Path to the Spring", jazz in this novella is used to depict the lonely distintegration of an unsuccessful artist and — by extension — the isolation of all men. *Lunar Caustic* is perhaps the closest Lowry came to presenting a written tribute to the tragedy of Bix Beiderbecke's life and his own.

IT IS GENERALLY AGREED that Hugh and the Consul are fictionalized versions of the young and older Malcolm Lowry. In fact Hugh's musical shenanigans, the Bolowski music publishing fiasco, and the songwriting, are thinly veiled autobiography stemming from a period during his Cambridge career when, according to Dr. Case, Lowry and a friend named Ronnie Hill "wrote a number called 'I've Said Good-bye to Shanghai' which was actually printed but was never sold. . . . I think, though I am not sure, that Malcolm and Ronnie did pay for the printing or 'publishing'."

Biographically interesting details such as these can only furnish half the story behind so brilliant a novel as *Under the Volcano*. Still more fascinating, however, is the way in which such a complex novel was put together. Each time I

read it I found some new skein to trace. In my book on Lowry and the Cabbala I pointed out that the construction of *Volcano* with its twelve chapters is based to some extent on the Zohar with its emphasis on the mystical number twelve. Here I would like to note that the blues form in jazz is also based on a twelve-bar construction. Being a connoisseur of blues and an amateur song writer himself, Lowry could really have meant it when he referred to his book as a jazz tune. Introduced in the slow blues manner, the first chapter of the novel is devoted to a lament for the dead — the Mexican souls abroad on the Day of the Dead, and more specifically, a lament for the dead Consul. To remind us in the old manner of the Negro mourners in New Orleans, Lowry has Laruelle hear “a despondent American tune, the ‘St. Louis Blues,’ or some such . . .” This first chapter states the “blues” or tragic theme of the novel as the Dixieland musicians playing a mournful tune on their way to a funeral state the theme of death. Dr. Vigil and Laruelle provide the chorus (they are choral in the classical Greek sense, too) and the rest of the novel unfolds as a series of variations and explanations of their commentary.

Geoffrey’s, Yvonne’s, and Hugh’s individual “stories”, their points of view, might be compared with the improvisations of soloists, but the theme is resolved, in the final chapter, on the same note that ends the first chapter: *dolente, dolore* — the ringing of the bell for the souls of the dead.

Under the Volcano is in many ways a catalogue of human suffering, much as the blues are. The harmony in the novel is provided, however, not by the crude stringing of guitars (although fictional guitar stringing occurs consistently throughout) but by stream of consciousness techniques and by the imposed contingencies of the outer world on the mind: Peter Lorre cinema posters, overheard snatches of conversation in a bar, recurring advertisements for sporting events, etc. The final chapter of the novel is the closest possible literary version of a complicated harmonic piece of jazz music (Malcolm used to play one of his songs on the piano in “the advanced and improbable key of six flats!”), says Dr. Case) that drives to a terrifically charged “hot” finish. Lowry also had the musician’s knack for establishing a theme — for example, the bull throwing at Tomalin — very early through Geoffrey’s eyes, say, and then picking it up again from Yvonne’s point of view. This is similar also to the jazz soloist’s variation on a melody; with the Consul playing lead trumpet throughout, Hugh, Yvonne, and Laruelle function as “sidemen” who act and react to his signals.

The older jazz form concentrates on statement of the chorus, solo improvisation, and often a kind of counterpoint that occurs between two instruments, the

clarinet and trumpet perhaps; these instruments will "talk" to each other or sometimes against each other after the solos, building up toward the final chorus when all the musicians play ensemble. This is neatly accomplished by Lowry in chapters ten, eleven, and twelve, which culminate in the frenetic climax of the novel. In chapter ten the competing "instruments" are Hugh and Geoffrey locked in an argument ostensibly about Communism. Hugh is trying to explain why he believes in it while Geoffrey tries to describe his own drunkard's plight.

"See here, Geoffrey —"

"See here, old bean . . . to have against you Franco, or Hitler is one thing, but to have Actinium, Argon, Beryllium, Dysprosium" etc., etc.

"Look here, Geoff —"

"Ruthenium, Samarium, Silicon," etc., etc.

"See here —" etc., etc.

The musical nature of this "cutting contest" strikes one immediately with Hugh's "Look here" and "See here" punctuating in short blasts Geoffrey's long, rhythmic enumeration of the elements. The Consul is "playing" hot and fast; even Cervantes, the cafe owner, joins in with the traditional pattern of *call and response* that underlies all jazz forms.

"Cervantes . . . you are Oaxaqueñan?"

"No, señor . . . I am Tlaxcalan, Tlaxcala?"

"You are . . . Well, hombre, and are there not stricken in years trees in Tlaxcala?"

"Sí, sí, hombre. Stricken in years trees. Many trees."

Suddenly a man with a guitar appears and begins to play. Geoffrey, who has not finished his solo", says: "Tell him to go away . . ." And then, as if to confirm the underlying musical foundation of the scene, the Consul actually "sees" his performance in terms of:

. . . a piece on the piano, it was like that little bit in seven flats on the black keys . . . like that little piece one had learned, so laboriously, years ago, only to forget whenever one particularly wanted to play it, until one day one got drunk in such a way that one's fingers themselves recalled the combination and, miraculously, perfectly, unlocked the wealth of melody . . .

The theme of the final chapter opens on discord: a mixture of "*I'm just a country b-boy*", drunken references to Mozart, the imagined plaintive cries of Yvonne through her letters, a fiddler playing "The Star Spangled Banner", "It's a Long Way to Tipperary", builds to a simulated resolution in order when the Consul "hears" Bach as his life ebbs away, and finally ends in a very literal dying fall (cf. Ed. Lang's guitar) as Geoffrey is flung down into the ravine.

Corroborating these musical intentions in his *Letters*, Lowry sums up by saying: "Is it too much to say that all these chords, struck and resolved, while no reader can possibly apprehend them on first or even fourth reading consciously, nevertheless vastly contribute *unconsciously* to the final weight of the book?"

Since jazz is not at all intended to be "weighty", yet is nonetheless both gay and tragic at once, and since the same can be said of Malcolm Lowry, I will close with a humorous musical anecdote. It was a warm summer night in Dollarton. Malcolm and Margerie Lowry were seated on the platform of their shack that led to the water; they were feeling fine after a few drinks, and were enjoying the lovely night. Malcolm began to play hot jazz on his taropatch, then he started dancing to his own music, which grew hotter and hotter, until he "finally danced right bang off the end of the pier and into the water, uke and all."³

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ "In fact this solo is usually considered one of the three most celebrated solos in jazz history. . . . It is a solo of intense, brooding beauty, carefully built up to a typical tumbling break in the middle with a surprise explosion after it. There was hardly a contemporary white musician of jazz pretensions who didn't learn it by heart." George Avakian, Liner Notes on *Bix Beiderbecke Story*, Vol. II, Columbia Records.
- ² "He said many many years ago . . . that Bach was the background for all classical jazz." (Margerie Lowry)
- ³ I am indebted for this anecdote to my friend Margerie Lowry, to whom I express my general gratitude for her help in gathering information for this article; I express my gratitude also to Dr. Ralph Case of London for his full and generously transmitted recollections of Malcolm Lowry's "jazz days".