

A ST. LOUIS MYSTERY RECORD - OKEH?

by Mark Berresford



As a record dealer I'm used to seeing weird and wonderful discs on a regular basis, but every now and then one comes my way which, for a number of reasons, makes me look again. Or, more importantly, listen.

One such disc that fits this category is the one shown above - at first glance a normal Truetone Okeh, until one notices the issue number - Ambassador Record 1-A. The band credit is to Trimp's Ambassador Bell Hops Orchestra - quite a mouthful I know - and the titles are *What A Man* and *Reaching For The Moon*. Putting the record on the turntable I made an amazing discovery - *What A Man* is a memorably hot performance by a very fine band, the trumpeter clearly under the influence of Bix Beiderbecke. Not only that, but the trombone player is no slouch either, showing off licks and phrasing that would have impressed Miff Mole himself! Also, all too noticeable, was the fact that the music, when played at 78 rpm, sounded positively funereal; it was obviously recorded at a much higher speed than 78 rpm! It was plain that more was needed to be known about this fascinating record and the band that made it back in the summer of 1926.

Two breakthroughs happened almost simultaneously; I had mentioned the record to my old friend in San Diego, Ken Swerilas, and he mentioned that he not only had a copy himself, but forwarded a copy of an article that he had been given by John R. T. Davies that mentioned the record. The article, 'White Jazz in St. Louis,' which appeared in 'Jazz Record' magazine in July 1946, was written by Dr. Bartlett D. Sims, and in it he provides a personnel, given to him by the band's leader and trumpeter, Freddie Laufketter. The second breakthrough was the discovery in Brian Rust's papers of a folder that had been sent to him by an American collector, full of original material about the Ambassador Theatre in St. Louis.

Armed with these two important sources, I was able to start to piece together the story of this unusual record and the musicians who made it. More importantly, it rapidly became apparent that this record had more than a passing connection with Bix Beiderbecke and the time he spent in St. Louis, from August 1925 to May 1926, when he was a member of Frankie Trumbauer's Orchestra at the Arcadia Ballroom.

Frederick Clement Laufketter (his name is sometimes shown as Laufkoetter, but all Census, Social Security and Military Draft documents clearly show it as Laufketter) was born in St. Louis on March 11, 1905, which would make him almost exactly two years younger than his idol, Bix Beiderbecke. There are few details of his career prior to 1925 available, but in that year he was leading the house band, billed as The Missouri Cotton Pickers, at Trimp's Dancing Academy. The term 'Dancing Academy' frequently turns up in relation to dance halls in early 20th century America. Actually it was a ruse by unscrupulous owners and managers to circumvent increasingly stringent fire safety and licensing regulations - dance halls were subject to these regulations; 'dancing schools' or 'dancing academies' were classed as 'educational institutions' and were thus exempt.

Trimp's, located at 4458 Delmar Boulevard (Dick Sudhalter in 'Bix, Man & Legend' erroneously calls it Trempp's), was already by 1925, something of a St. Louis legend - Harry W. Trimp, a dancing teacher, had opened its doors at the close of the 19th century and by 1926 it was owned by Flora Trimp Grahl. It was the venue for many social gatherings by the great and good of St. Louis, as is testified by advertisements and reports in contemporary local newspapers. More importantly, it was well known as an after-hours hangout for musicians, and in 1926 St. Louis was certainly brimming with talent. Bands such as those led by Gene Rodemich and David H. Silverman held the top theatre and hotel jobs, dispensing a blend of smooth and hot music, whilst at the Chauffeurs' Club the likes of Charlie Creath, Dewey Jackson, Zutty Singleton, William Thornton Blue and Albert Wynn, provided music of a more earthier, vibrant kind. Over at the Arcadia Ballroom on Olive Street, Frankie Trumbauer's Orchestra - with Bix Beiderbecke and Pee Wee Russell - had been the feature band there since September 1925. There they shared duties with The Arcadian Serenaders, a six-piece jazz band of youngsters from New Orleans that featured the young trumpeter Sterling Bose who, like Freddie Laufketter, had fallen under Bix's spell in that autumn of 1925.

On October 17, 1925, the Missouri Cotton Pickers appeared at the Arcadia Ballroom, sharing the bill with Frankie Trumbauer's orchestra. No doubt Freddie Laufketter was mightily impressed by Bix's style of playing, and over the next seven months his and Bix's paths were to cross on several occasions, including further gigs at the Arcadia. Two weeks later, on Saturday, October 31, the Trumbauer orchestra repaid the compliment by playing opposite the Missouri Cotton Pickers at Trimp's, and no doubt Bix and Laufketter got to talk - and even some after-hours jamming perhaps?



A weight-driven recording lathe as used at HMV in the early 1930s. Note the lead weights and cranking handle to the left.

It was whilst in St. Louis that Bix met a local girl, Ruth Shaffner, and for several months they dated, and it is not beyond the realms of imagination that on his nights off they would have gone off to other local dance halls, and Trimp's would have been one of their likely choices.

Another link between the Trumbauer and Laufketter bands was the hugely-talented eighteen-year old trombonist Vernon Brown. He had joined the Trumbauer orchestra at the Arcadia in February 1926, having previously worked in the band of St. Louis drummer Ted Jansen. He stayed with Trumbauer until the end of March, when he joined The Missouri Cotton Pickers at Trimp's Dancing Academy. Brown had a long and notable subsequent career, playing with Jean Goldkette, Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman and many other well-known bands until shortly before his death in 1979.

Other members of the Missouri Cotton Pickers included clarinettist and alto saxophonist Artie Gruner who, according to Laufketter, showed Pee Wee Russell some licks, pianist Ernie Jung, George Pedigo on banjo and guitar, Nadel Patrick, tuba, and drummer Art Gruner. The two sides made for Okeh also have another clarinettist doubling tenor saxophone.

In May 1926 Ralph Peer and a small team of engineers from the General Phonograph Corporation in New York arrived in St. Louis for a hectic two or three weeks of recording work. Their itinerary had initially taken them to Chicago in mid-February, then on to Atlanta before arriving in St. Louis. It appears that the whole trip had been beset with problems, most notably a troublesome recording lathe. From the outset the recording lathe was running fast, initially at around 82 rpm. At this date AC voltage varied considerably from city to city and state to state - some areas were still using DC well into the 1960s - and most rural areas not receiving mains until well into the 1930s with the formation of the Rural Electricity Administration in 1935. Consequently record companies relied heavily on mechanically-driven recording lathes well into the 1930s, mostly of the falling weight type drive (the major exception being Edison, who used huge spring motors to drive the recording turntable and lathe). By the time the Okeh team had reached St. Louis the recording lathe was running at about 84 - 85 rpm, and the problem was worsening. British vintage sound expert and modest electronics genius David Smith points out that the speed of the lathe would have been maintained by a weighted spring governor, held in check by a lubricated felt

or leather pad bearing upon a flywheel. If the pad was worn to its maximum point of adjustment by the time the Okeh team arrived in Chicago, subsequent use would abrade the pad even more, resulting in the record lathe gaining speed each time it was used. Another, external, influence that could have had exacerbated an already problematic recording lathe was the weather. May 1926 was very hot and humid, with a record 94 degrees Fahrenheit being set on the 21st May. In a pre-synthetic lubricant age, the grease used to coat and lubricate the main parts of the recording lathe would consequently become more viscous under such high temperatures, something that clockmaker John Harrison knew only too well when he was constructing his remarkable marine clocks in the mid-1700s.

The resulting recordings from this Okeh field trip have given both collectors and transfer engineers headaches for years - many jazz and blues classics that were the result of this mammoth trip, such as several Louis Armstrong Hot Fives, the earliest Victoria Spivey recordings, the wonderful Cookie's Gingersnaps sides and the St. Louis Levee Band's *Soap Suds* have frequently been remastered at the wrong speed because of this speed error. By the time of the Okeh team's subsequent recordings in Chicago in June, the problem seems to have been cured to some degree, presumably by a temporary repair, but the lathe was still spinning at about 82-83 rpm.

Much of the Okeh engineers' time in St. Louis was taken up with recording material for Okeh's burgeoning 'Race Record' catalogue, including the debut recordings of Victoria Spivey, and Frankie 'Half Pint' Jaxon along with repeat sessions by blues guitarist and singer Lonnie Johnson. Surprisingly no records of Frankie Trumbauer's Orchestra - surely one of the most musically-advanced orchestras in the USA at that date - were made on this occasion, or on Okeh's previous trip to St. Louis in October 1925, although The Arcadian Serenaders, who played opposite them, recorded several sides on the October 1925 visit. Among the relatively few jazz-oriented groups recorded during Okeh's May 1926 St. Louis visit was the Missouri Cotton Pickers, who made two sides around May



Gennett's portable recording lathe, St. Paul, MN, 1927. Although the masses of wires, headphones give the impression of a fully-electrified system, the drive wire to the falling weight mechanism at the rear can just be discerned. Note the primitive playback facility!



14th. Two titles were recorded; *What A Man* (by Chicago banjoist and bandleader Ralph Williams, with lyrics by the ever-dependable Walter Donaldson), and *Reaching For The Moon*, the latter being a straight dance band performance. *What A Man* is of great interest to jazz enthusiasts, featuring a superb trombone solo from Vernon Brown, as well as Laufketter's Bix-inspired lead trumpet; although he does not get to solo, he plays an open horn break in the introduction and dominates the ensembles. Played at 78 rpm *What A Man* sounds like a dirge, but when pitched into E flat springs forth into joyous life, albeit revolving at an astonishing 88 rpm! Obviously the woes that had befallen the Okeh engineer's recording lathe had got worse over the duration of their trip. Vince Giordano, bandleader and avid collector of 1920s and 1930s band arrangements, kindly checked the stock arrangement of *What A Man* and confirmed that it is pitched in E flat. Comparison with the most notable version of *What A Man* - the 1926 Brunswick recording by Charley Straight and His Orchestra - shows that both use doctored versions of Frank Skinner's stock arrangement, and both are pitched in E flat.

At least ten further matrices were cut after this session, two of those that immediately followed being unaccounted for - could they be also by the band? Presumably the problems with the excessively fast recording lathe continued to affect these subsequent recordings - can anyone with the ability to pitch records confirm the speeds of the two Cora Perkins sides (mxs 9698/9699) and the two sessions by Alma Rotter (mxs 9700/9701 and 9706/9707) that followed?

It is at this point that the story takes an unusual twist - the resulting two sides were eventually released, but not in the general Okeh catalogue, nor even under the Missouri Cotton Pickers' name! The two sides were released ostensibly on the Okeh label, but in fact it is a private issue, Ambassador Record 1A and 1B and labelled as by Trimp's Ambassador Bell Hops Orchestra. So what was going on?

The big news in St. Louis in the summer of 1926 was the construction of a huge new 3000-seat movie theatre at the corner of 7th and Locust Streets by local Greek immigrants made good, Charles, Spyros and George Skouras. The three brothers would have long and honourable careers in the movie industry, Spyros becoming President of 20th Century Fox, as well as extensive shipping interests, George, President of United Artists Theatres and Charles, President of Fox Coast West. Renowned Chicago-based theatre and cinema architects Cornelius and George W. Rapp were commissioned to design the building, which included seventeen storeys of offices above the theatre. No expense was spared, and by the time of the opening, on the 26th August 1926, the Skouras' were \$5.5 million poorer.

Excitement and interest in the forthcoming opening was maintained by a clever series of daily advertisements in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* in the week prior to its opening. The first advert showed a girl lifting the letters AM onto a billboard; the following days' advertisements showed more children lifting, in turn, a B, A, S, S, then finally A-D-O-R.

For the opening, Charles Previn, later to be a renowned film score composer, was drafted in as leader of the pit orchestra, to accompany the first film to play there - the utterly forgettable 'Pals First' starring Dolores del Rio, whilst organist Stuart Barrie played the might Wurlitzer - a huge beast with over 1000 pipes and lit with so many bulbs that it needed its own power supply! As well as the main film, and in line with contemporary trends, a vaudeville-style show was also presented, featuring a cast of 45, plus singer and comedian Ed Lowry as Master of Ceremonies.

Local newspaper reports giving details of performers at the opening are sparse to say the least, but it seems that the Missouri Cotton Pickers, in the guise of Trimp's Ambassador Bell Hops Orchestra, were on hand, either as part of the live entertainment, or playing for dancing. It also seems likely that their Ambassador Record was given away to the first patrons to arrive on the opening day. This was not uncommon; ballroom manager Mervyn Sorensen told me that he contracted Gennett to produce 300 pressings by Joe Kayser's Novelty Orchestra (he also played violin on the record) to give away to the first 300 patrons attending a special event at the ballroom he ran in Rockford, Illinois in 1922. Other bands regularly sold or gave away their records as prizes at engagements, and several small companies, such as Orlando Marsh's Autograph label, thrived on such business.

How long the Missouri Cotton Pickers stayed at the Ambassador is not known, but presumably after the initial euphoria died down they returned to their old stamping ground at Trimp's Dancing Academy.

Freddie Laufketter remained active in music for many years after - in the late 1920s Jean Goldkette booked his band into Madura's Danceland in Hammond, Indiana (twenty-odd miles



The Ambassador Theatre, c. 1992, not long before its demolition.

south-east of Chicago), where they played alongside many notable bands from The Windy City. By the mid-1940s he was leading a band that played on the Streckfus Line's Mississippi

pleasure boats, playing jazz trumpet as well as ever.

Freddie Laufketter died in March 1987, aged 81. The Ambassador Theatre struggled on into the mid-1970s, ultimately as a rock music venue, but was razed to the ground in 1996 despite many protests. Trimp's Dancing Academy faded from all but the most diligent and arcane historian's memory decades ago. All that seems to remain of a glorious moment of musical history in St. Louis is a rather rare Okeh record...

A sound file of *What A Man* together with a pdf file of this article is available at www.vjm.biz/articles.htm

TRIMP'S AMBASSADOR BELL HOPS ORCHESTRA

Freddie Laufketter, t / Vernon Brown, tb / Art Gruner, cl, as / unknown, cl, ts / Ernie Jung, p / George Pedigo, bj/ Nadel Patrick, bb / Carl Maus, d.
St Louis, c. May 14, 1926

9694-A What A Man! (Donaldson - Williams)

Okeh Ambassador Record 1-A

9695-A Reaching For The Moon (Davis - Greer)

Okeh Ambassador Record 1-B

Notes.

Dr. Bartlett D. Sims, "White Jazz in St. Louis," Jazz Record, July 1946, pp 4-6.

Thanks to Nick Dellow, Vince Giordano, Frank van Nus, Robert Rothberg and Ken Swerilas for their contributions and assistance.

WHAT A MAN!

Trumpet in B \flat

Fred Laufketter intro & break

Donaldson-Williams

$\text{♩} = 96$

solo break ----- ,

4

7

Introduction to *What A Man!* and Laufketter's break transcribed by Frank van Nus. Frank remarks that "In bar number 2, there's a small cross instead of a note. Here, Laufketter hit a B flat instead of a D (they're both played with the 2nd valve depressed). He gets it right in bar 4."