## 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 'Bix, Man & Legend' erroneously calls it Tremp's), was already importantly, listen.

- at first glance a normal Truetone OKeh, until one notices the the venue for many social gatherings by the great and good of issue number - Ambassador Record 1-A. The band credit is to St. Louis, as is testified by advertisements and reports in Trimp's Ambassador Bell Hops Orchestra - quite a mouthful I contemporary local newspapers. More importantly, it was well know - and the titles are What A Man and Reaching For The known as an after-hours hangout for musicians, and in 1926 St. Moon. Putting the record on the turntable I made an amazing Louis was certainly brimming with talent. Bands such as those discovery - What A Man is a memorably hot performance by a led by Gene Rodemich and David H. Silverman held the top very fine band, the trumpeter clearly under the influence of Bix theatre and hotel jobs, dispensing a blend of smooth and hot Beiderbecke. Not only that, but the trombone player is no music, whilst at the Chauffeurs' Club the likes of Charlie Creath, slouch either, showing off licks and phrasing that would have Dewey Jackson, Zutty Singleton, William Thornton Blue and impressed Miff Mole himself! Also, all too noticeable, was the Albert Wynn, provided music of a more earthier, vibrant kind. fact that the music, when played at 78 rpm, sounded positively Over at the Arcadia Ballroom on Olive Street, Frankie funereal; it was obviously recorded at a much higher speed than Trumbauer's Orchestra - with Bix Beiderbecke and Pee Wee 78 rpm! It was plain that more was needed to be known about Russell - had been the feature band there since September this fascinating record and the band that made it back in the 1925. There they shared duties with The Arcadian Serenaders, summer of 1926.

mentioned the record to my old friend in San Diego, Ken Swerilas, and he mentioned that he not only had a copy himself, 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 by 1925, something of a St. Louis legend - Harry W. Trimp, a dancing teacher, had opened its doors at the close of the 19th One such disc that fits this category is the one shown above century and by 1926 it was owned by Flora Trimp Grahl. It was a six-piece jazz band of youngsters from New Orleans that featured the young trumpeter Sterling Bose who, like Freddie Two breakthroughs happened almost simultaneously; I had Laufketter, had fallen under Bix's spell in that autumn of 1925.

On October 17, 1925, the Missouri Cotton Pickers appeared but forwarded a copy of an article that he had been given by at the Arcadia Ballroom, sharing the bill with Frankie John R. T. Davies that mentioned the record. The article, 'White Trumbauer's orchestra. No doubt Freddie Laufketter was Jazz in St. Louis,' which appeared in 'Jazz Record' magazine in mightily impressed by Bix's style of playing, and over the next July 1946, was written by Dr. Bartlett D. Sims, and in it he seven months his and Bix's paths were to cross on several provides a personnel, given to him by the band's leader and occasions, including further gigs at the Arcadia. Two weeks trumpeter, Freddie Laufketter. The second breakthrough was later, on Saturday, October 31, the Trumbauer orchestra repaid the discovery in Brian Rust's papers of a folder that had been the compliment by playing opposite the Missouri Cotton sent to him by an American collector, full of original material 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.

and for several months they dated, and it is not beyond the have frequently been remastered at the wrong speed because realms of imagination that on his nights off they would have of this speed error. By the time of the OKeh team's subsequent gone off to other local dance halls, and Trimp's would have recordings in Chicago in June, the problem seems to have been 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 with recording material for OKeh's burgeoning 'Race Record' in February 1926, having previously worked in the band of St. catalogue, including the debut recordings of Victoria Spivey, Louis drummer Ted Jansen. He stayed with Trumbauer until the and Frankie 'Half Pint' Jaxon along with repeat sessions by blues end of March, when he joined The Missouri Cotton Pickers at guitarist and singer Lonnie Johnson. Surprisingly no records of subsequent career, playing with Jean Goldkette, Artie Shaw, musically-advanced orchestras in the USA at that date - were Benny Goodman and many other well-known bands until made on this occasion, or on OKeh's previous trip to St. Louis shortly before his death in 1979.

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 Gennett's portable recording lathe, St. Paul, MN, 1927. Although the a weighted spring governor, held in check by a lubricated felt just be discerned. Note the primitive playback facility!

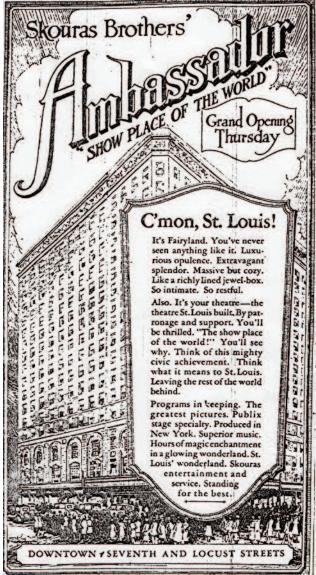
or leather pad bearing upon a flywheel. If the pad was worn to its maximum point of adjustment by the time the OKeh team arrived in Chicago, subsequent use would abrade the pad even more, resulting in the record lathe gaining speed each time it was used. Another, external, influence that could have had 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 It was whilst in St. Louis that Bix met a local girl, Ruth Shaffner, Gingersnaps sides and the St. Louis Levee Band's Soap Suds 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 Trimp's Dancing Academy. Brown had a long and notable Frankie Trumbauer's Orchestra - surely one of the most in October 1925, although The Arcadian Serenaders, who played opposite them, recorded several sides on the October Other members of the Missouri Cotton Pickers included 1925 visit. Among the relatively few jazz-oriented groups clarinettist and alto saxophonist Artie Gruner who, according recorded during OKeh's May 1926 St. Louis visit was the to Laufketter, showed Pee Wee Russell some licks, pianist Ernie Missouri Cotton Pickers, who made two sides around May



sound expert and modest electronics genius David Smith points masses of wires, headphones give the impression of a fully-electrified out that the speed of the lathe would have been maintained by system, the drive wire to the falling weight mechanism at the rear can



14th. Two titles were recorded; What A Man (by Chicago As well as the main film, and in line with contemporary trends, banjoist and bandleader Ralph Williams, with lyrics by the ever- a vaudeville-style show was also presented, featuring a cast of dependable Walter Donaldson), and Reaching For The Moon, 45, plus singer and comedian Ed Lowry as Master or the latter being a straight dance band performance. What A Ceremonies. *Man* is of great interest to jazz enthusiasts, featuring a superb trombone solo from Vernon Brown, as well as Laufketter's Bixinspired lead trumpet; although he does not get to solo, he opening are sparse to say the least, but it seems that the plays an open horn break in the introduction and dominates Missouri Cotton Pickers, in the guise of Trimp's Ambassador the ensembles. Played at 78 rpm What A Man sounds like a Bell Hops Orchestra, were on hand, either as part of the live dirge, but when pitched into E flat springs forth into joyous life, entertainment, or playing for dancing. It also seems likely that albeit revolving at an astonishing 88 rpm! Obviously the woes their Ambassador Record was given away to the first patrons that had befallen the OKeh engineer's recording lathe had got to arrive on the opening day. This was not uncommon; worse over the duration of their trip. Vince Giordano, ballroom manager Mervyn Sorensen told me that he contracted bandleader and avid collector of 1920s and 1930s band Gennett to produce 300 pressings by Joe Kayser's Novelty arrangements, kindly checked the stock arrangement of What Orchestra (he also played violin on the record) to give away to A Man and confirmed that it is pitched in E flat. Comparison the first 300 patrons attending a special event at the ballroom with the most notable version of What A Man - the 1926 he ran in Rockford, Illinois in 1922. Other bands regularly sold Brunswick recording by Charley Straight and His Orchestra - or gave away their records as prizes at engagements, and shows that both use doctored versions of Frank Skinner's stock several small companies, such as Orlando Marsh's Autograph arrangement, and both are pitched in E flat.

At least ten further matrices were cut after this session, two the excessively fast recording lathe continued to affect these at Trimp's Dancing Academy. subsequent recordings - can anyone with the ability to pitch records confirm the speeds of the two Cora Perkins sides (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.

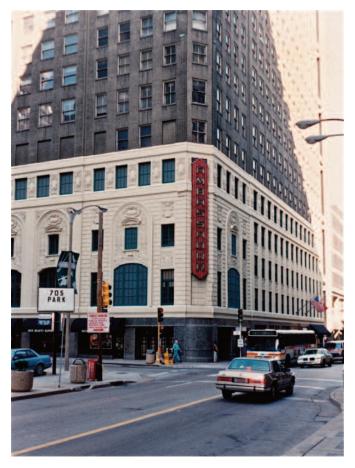
Excitement and interest in the forthcoming opening was maintained by a clever series of daily advertisements in the St. Louis Post Dispatch in the week prior to its opening. The first advert showed a girl lifting the letters AM onto a billboard; the following days' advertisements showed more children 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!

Local newspaper reports giving details of performers at the label, thrived on such business.

How long the Missouri Cotton Pickers stayed at the of those that immediately followed being unaccounted for - Ambassador is not known, but presumably after the initial could they be also by the band? Presumably the problems with euphoria died down they returned to their old stamping ground

Freddie Laufketter remained active in music for many years 9698/9699) and the two sessions by Alma Rotter (mxs 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.

leading a band that played on the Streckfus Line's Mississippi assistance.

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.

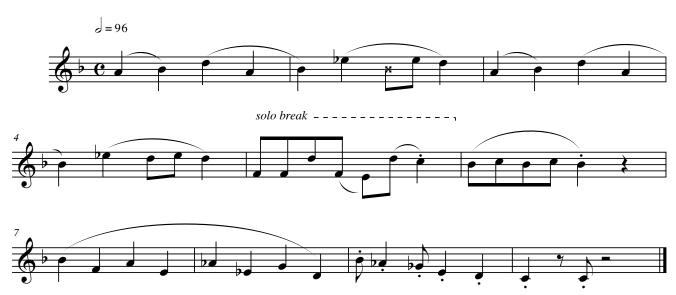
south-east of Chicago), where they played alongside many Thanks to Nick Dellow, Vince Giordano, Frank van Nus, Robert notable bands from The Windy City. By the mid-1940s he was Rothberg and Ken Swerilas for their contributions and

### WHAT A MAN!

Trumpet in Bb

### Fred Laufketter intro & break

**Donaldson-Williams** 



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."