



NOTES FROM THE BANDSTAND

Bing Crosby, the Big Bands And All That Jazz

BY KARL PEARSON

Last Fall MCA Records released a lavish 4-volume compact disc set titled "Bing Crosby: His Legendary Years." The set presents a representative slice of Der Bingle's recorded output for Brunswick and Decca Records and spanned the years of 1931 to 1957. Many of the recordings have been unavailable for quite some time, and a number of previously unissued performances were thrown in for good measure. While listening to this set I was reminded of how frequently the "Old Groaner" recorded in a big band or jazz setting.

To this day Bing Crosby is recognized as a major force in American popular music. Tin Pan Alley songs, holiday numbers, Hawaiian music, cowboy songs and many other kinds of music were given the Crosby treatment in motion pictures, on radio, records and television. But upon listening to the MCA boxed set one is amazed with Bing's big band/jazz performances. They contain a typical degree of Crosby casualness. Although referred to often as "The Crooner," Bing truly swung out on his jazz outings. Crosby, who had a true love of jazz, featured many of the best musicians on the scene on both his recordings and broadcasts.

Bing Crosby's first big break in the entertainment field came in 1926, when he and partner Al Rinker were hired by bandleader Paul Whiteman. Whiteman, one of the first bandleaders to hire a vocalist to interpret song lyrics in a dance band, had employed tenor Morton Downey three years earlier. "The King of

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Jazz," as Whiteman was often referred to in those days, took Crosby and Rinker and teamed them up with another young singer named Harry Barris. The trio, known as "The Rhythm Boys," became an integral part of the Whiteman orchestra, and Bing was also featured as a soloist with the band. Crosby and the Rhythm Boys made a number of memorable recordings with Whiteman, including "I'm Coming, Virginia," "From Monday On," and "You Took Advantage Of Me." During Bing's three and a half year tenure with the Whiteman band he also sang with backing by some of the country's finest musicians, including Red Nichols, Joe Venuti, Eddie Lang, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, and the legendary Bix Beiderbecke.

The Rhythm Boys left Whiteman in 1930 and eventually hooked up with West Coast bandleader Gus Arnheim. Once again Crosby was featured with The Rhythm Boys and as featured soloist and was heard on broadcasts from the Coconut Grove of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

In 1931 Bing parted company with Arnheim, Rinker and Barris and went out on a solo career of his own. After appearing in several Mack Sennett comedy shorts and making a few recordings for Brunswick he landed a radio contract with CBS. Within a short time Bing Crosby replaced Rudy Vallee as the most popular singer in the nation.

As his popularity skyrocketed Bing's



BING CROSBY appeared on the Kraft Music Hall with Jimmy Dorsey and his orchestra.

record sales climbed, even in the depths of the Depression. Once again Crosby was backed on broadcasts and recordings by many of the finest New York and Hollywood musicians. Bing even hired the great jazz guitarist Eddie Lang as his permanent accompanist. Many of the Crosby recordings of this period were backed by studio orchestras led by Lennie Hayton, Georgie Stoll and Victor Young, but Bing also found time to make recordings with established bandleaders like Duke Ellington, Isham Jones, Don Redman and Guy Lombardo.

Bing had several radio sponsors during his first few years, including Cremo Cigars, Chesterfield Cigarettes and Woodbury Soap. The sponsor he is most often associated with was Kraft Foods. The "Kraft Music Hall" first opened its doors on NBC's Red Network in December of 1935. The one-hour music-variety program, heard on Thursday nights, featured Bing and comedian Bob Burns along with music supplied by Jimmy Dorsey and his Orchestra.

Crosby made a number of relaxed recordings with Jimmy's band, including "I'm An Old Cowhand" and "Peckin." Both Crosby and Dorsey were under con-

tract to the new Decca label, which had been formed by Brunswick's Jack Kapp in 1934. Priced at 35 cents, the Crosby Decca releases sold extremely well, while the Decca roster of stars grew over the next few years. Kapp used a number of his Decca stars (including Crosby) in various recorded pairings, figuring that two stars could sell twice as many recordings as one.

Over the next two decades Bing made some of his best sides with a number of great big bands and jazz artists. In 1936 Bing shared the Decca microphone for the first time with Louis Armstrong, idol of many jazz musicians. The Crosby-Armstrong alliance was a productive one, and over the next twenty years there would be a number of Armstrong-Crosby encounters on records and radio. In later years Bing featured both Louis and his All Stars on a number of his radio shows. When swing bands became popular with the record buying public Jack Kapp had Decca's roster of dance bands appear on record with Bing. Jimmy Dorsey's band made several more records with him, and the orchestras of Jack Teagarden, Woody Herman and Lionel Hampton were also used, along