Whiteman, Paul (1890-1967) Encyclopedia Article

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Denver-born bandleader Paul Whiteman is inseparable in American musical culture from George Gershwin's enduring classic, *Rhapsody in Blue,* which he famously commissioned, conducted at its sensational 1924 New York premiere, and recorded the same year. The most popular of all bandleaders prior to the Big Band era, Whiteman was called The King of Jazz, but this was not strictly accurate, despite the jazz-based *Rhapsody in Blue,* his association with several jazz musicians and vocalists, and his discovery and continued espousal of legendary trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke. Whiteman's disciplined arrangements left true jazz musicians little chance for improvisation and, as Wilder Hobson wrote, he "drew very little from the jazz language except for some of its simpler rhythmic patterns." A former violin and viola player with the Denver and San Francisco Symphony orchestras, Whiteman formed his band in 1919 with pianist/arranger Ferde Grofe and trumpeter Henry Busse, and over the next couple of decades unrolled a prodigious and unprecedented number of hits, well over 200 by 1936. The band appeared in Broadway shows and five films, of which the first, *King of Jazz* (1930), featuring *Rhapsody in Blue,* was a creative landmark in the early history of the Hollywood musical. He hosted several radio shows, including his own, during the 1930s, and a television series as late as the 1950s. By 1954, he was ranked second only to Bing Crosby (with whom he worked and recorded) as a best-selling recording artist. Eventually superseded by big band jazz artists such as Fletcher Henderson, Paul Whiteman's Beiderbecke compilations, along with his Gershwin and Crosby recordings, remain his lasting memorial.

Further Reading:

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