

THE RECORDINGS OF BILL BROWN AND HIS BROWNIES

A Tentative Personnelo-Discography

BROWN, Bill, trombone, leader

no personal data known

This personnelo-discography is based on RUST, JAZZ AND RAGTIME RECORDS 1897 - 1942.

Personnels are taken from this source, but modified in the light of earlier or subsequent research or on the strength of my own listening, discussed with our listening group or other interested collectors.

- Documented, most certain and aurally absolutely obvious identifications are listed thus: **Bill Brown**
- Probable, generally agreed, but not documented identifications are listed in italics, thus: *Bill Brown*
- Not attributable identifications – although the musician in question might be an otherwise well-known person – are listed thus: unknown
- If a possible identification for an otherwise unknown musician is suggested by the author without the possibility to prove the factual evidence, it is listed thus: (*Bill Brown*)

When feeling certain without a musician's documented presence, I have not refrained from altering Rust's statements without using italics. In any case, my statements are open to discussion and I would appreciate any contribution - pro or contra!

As always in my discographies on this website I have written recording sessions with their headings, dates, titles and names of musicians in italics, whenever I am convinced that the eponymous musician of this discography is not part of the accompanying group of this session! Documented names of musicians if known – in recording ledgers or on record labels – are listed in bold letters.

This discography still is - and will certainly be - a work in progress for a long time, if not eternally. Yet, on the way to a definite discography of all jazz recordings before 1942 - which certainly will never be possible - it is intended to fill some gaps that have not been treated before.

Bill Brown and his Brownies obviously were one of the many bands in Harlem, New York, in the 1920s, that provided dance-music for the lesser-known clubs, ballrooms, taxi-dance halls/schools, shows, and/or private performances and events. Their two Brunswick records of 1927 and 1929 show that a couple of young musicians – better known later-on - found their way to prominence through the Bill Brown band.

BILL BROWN AND HIS BROWNIES

001 BILL BROWN AND HIS BROWNIES	New York,	Mar. 17, 1927
Billy Hicks, Charlie Johnson – tpt; Bill Brown – tbn;		
Ralph James – alt, clt; Malvin Wyatt – ten, clt;		
Bill Caine – pno; Harry Stevens - bjo; George DeLeon – bbs; Oliver Tynes – dms		
E-21986 Bill Brown Blues	Br 7003,	Frog DGF 31
E-21989 Hot Lips	Br 7003,	Frog DGF 31
E-21990 Hot Lips	Br 7003,	Frog DGF 31

Composer credits: E-21986 (Brown): E-21989/90 (Busse – Lange – Davis)

The little-known Harlem band 'Bill Brown and his Brownies' surprise with a tightly playing and swinging ensemble of young musicians in contemporary big-band instrumentation. Scored clarinet parts are played by two clarinets, only, and also saxophone parts sound as if played by two players only, lacking the middle part. So, there obviously is no second alto player at the session. The band is lead by a strong and secure first trumpet player, who probably is Billy Hicks, a little renowned trumpeter of Harlem, who later recorded with the Chick Webb band under Louis Armstrong's name in 1932, with Timme Rosenkrantz, Midge Williams, and his own group

'Billy Hicks and his Sizzlin' Six' in 1937. The muted solo trumpet seems to be played by Charlie Johnson, who went to Europe with Leon Abbey after his sojourn with the Bill Brown band, in company with reed player James, pianist Caine, banjo player Stevens, and drummer Oliver Tines. Johnson and Tines worked with Louis Armstrong's big band in Europe (the Armstrong concert broadcasts from Copenhagen, Stockholm, and The Hague).

Ralph James sounds a bit wooden in his solos, whereas there are no solos by the tenor sax. Pianist Caine and the banjo player – and the tuba player (!) – solo adequately and assured, and there is fine cymbal- work by Oliver Tines.

Not to forget bandleader Bill Brown, who blows a strong trombone with a good brass sound.

'Bill Brown Blues' seems to be an original by the bandleader (blues in G major), whereas 'Hot Lips' is the only performance of this title by a black band – except for Lizzie Miles' recording of this title in 1922! All other recordings being by white bands!

In short: these two sides of Bill Brown and his Brownies show what a mass of more-or-less un-known young musicians was to be found in Harlem, New York, in these years. And there were so many more that were not caught on record!

Notes:

- Ch. Delaunay, *New Hot Discography*, 1948: not listed

- Rust*2: Billy Hicks, Charlie Johnson (tpt); Bill Brown (tbn); unknown (clt); Ralph James (alt); Malvin Wyatt (ten); Bill Caine (pno); Harry Stevens (bjo); George DeLeon (bbs); Oliver Tynes (dms)

- Rust*3,*4: Billy Hicks -Charlie Johnson -t; Bill Brown -tb; Ralph James -cl -as; Malvin Wyatt -ts; Bill Caine -p; Harry Stevens -bj; George DeLeon -bb; Oliver Tines -d

- Rust*6: Bill Brown, tb, dir; Billy Hicks, Charlie Johnson, t; Ralph James, cl, as; unknown, as; Malvin Wyatt, ts; Bill Caine, p; Harry Stevens, bj; George DeLeon, bb; Oliver Tines, d

Structure of Tunes:

E-21986 Bill Brown Blues Key of G Brunswick

(Intro 7 bars RJ clt 1 - ?CJ m-tpt 2 – ens 4)(Chorus 1 12 bars ?CJ m-tpt)(Chorus 2 12 bars saxes)(Chorus 3 12 bars ens)(Chorus 4 12 bars RJ clt)(Chorus 5 12 bars GDL bbs + ens)(Chorus 6 12 bars BC pno)(Chorus 8 12 bars saxes)(Chorus 9 12 bars ens) (Chorus 10 12 bars ens)

E-21989/21990 Hot Lips Key of A / Gb / A Brunswick

(Intro 8 bars clts 2 - ?CJ m-tpt 2 – clts 2 – ens 2)(Chorus 1 32 bars ?CH m-tpt 14 – BB o-tbn 2 – ens 16 mod.)(Verse 16 ens mod.) (Chorus 2 32 bars BB m-tbn + saxes 14 – RB clt 2+14 – ens 2)(Chorus 3 32 bars BC pno 14 – HS bjo 2+14 – ens 2)(Chorus 4 32 bars ens + clt 14 – ?CJ o-tpt 2 – ens 8 – ?CJ o-tpt 4 – ens 4)(Tag 2 bars ens)

Notable differences of takes:

E-21989: Last chorus middle-break: tpt starts with upward rip to quarter-note a, then down to quarter-note b

E-21990: Last chorus middle-break: tpt starts with eighth-note c, quarter-note c#, eighth-note c, quarter-note c#

002 BILL BROWN AND HIS BROWNIES

New York,

Dec. 26, 1929

Billy Hicks, Ovie Alston – tpt; Bill Brown – tbn;

Rupert Cole - alt, bar; Gene Johnson – alt; Hubert Thomas – ten;

Norman Lester – pno; Donald Tathim – bjo; John Kirby – bbs, sbs; Reggie Brown – dms;

Ovie Alston - voc

E-31743- Zonky

Br 7142,

Frog DGF 31

E-31744- What Kind Of Rhythm Is That?

Br 7142,

Frog DGF 31

Composer credits: E-31743 (Waller - Razaf); E-31744 (Easton)

As above, Bill Brown and his Brownies present themselves as a highly professional and experienced aggregation. It is a great pity that a band of this quality was so little known and estimated. I assume that their low position in the ranking order of Harlem bands was destined by the lack of adequate managing, and thus also the reputation of the localities of their appearances. This all would probably also have diminished their chances for being recorded.

So, this is their second and last recording. It starts with Fats Waller's – and Andy Razaf's – beautiful song 'Zonky'. The band's arrangement uses parts of Clarence Williams arrangement (or whose?), yet in different sequence. Ovie Alston sings and Gene Johnson plays the wonderfully swinging alto solo. We find both players later with the Claude Hopkins Orchestra. (John Kirby switches to his string-bass for the alto sax solo chorus.)

'What Kind Of Rhythm Is This?' seems to be a composition by one of the earlier band members, as this is the only recording of this very title in all my Rusts. The trumpet soloist is Ovie Alston in my eyes/ears. Then there is Don Redman's later alto sax warhorse Rupert Cole soloing on the baritone sax. John Kirby switches between brass and string bass for several times. And we can positively recognise his early potency on the bass instruments.

Summing it all up: both recording sessions of the Bill Brown band offer us beautifully swinging Harlem dancehall jazz of a high quality.

And thinking of all these many wonderful young musicians playing every night in all the clubs, halls, and joints, and how little of all this wonderful music through the years has come over to us.

Notes:

- Ch. Delaunay, *New Hot Discography*, 1948: not listed

- Rust*2: Ovie Alston (tpt, vcl); Billy Hicks (tpt); Bill Brown (tbn); Rupert Cole, Gene Johnson (alt); Hubert Thompson (ten); Norman Lester (pno); Donald Tathim (bjo); John Kirby (bbs); Reggie Brown (dms)

- Rust*3,*4,*6: Ovie Alston -tp -v; Billy Hicks -t; Bill Brown -tb; Rupert Cole -as -bs; Gene Johnson -as; Hubert Thompson -ts; Norman Lester -p; Donald Tathim -bj; John Kirby -bb -sb; Reggie Brown -d

Structure of Tunes:

E-31743 Zonky Key of Ab (Fm) / Bb / Ab (Fm) Brunswick

(Intro 8 bars ens)(Chorus 1 32 bars AABA ens)(Chorus 2 32 bars AABA OA voc 30 – ens 2)(Bridge 2 bars ens)(Verse 16 bars ens) (Bridge 8 bars JK bbs 4 – ens 4)(Chorus 3 32 bars AABA GJ alt 16 – NL pno 8 – GJ alt 6 – ens 2)(Chorus 4 32 bars AABA ens 16 – OA o-tpt 8 – ens 2)(Tag 2 bars ens)

E-31744 What Kind Of Rhythm Is That? Key of Ab Brunswick

(Intro 10 bars ens)(Chorus 1 32 bars AABA OA o-tpt 16 – saxes 15 – NL pno 1)(Tag 1 bar NL pno)(Interlude 8 bars NL pno)(Bridge 10 bars ens)(Chorus 2 32 bars AABA RC bar 16 – brass 8 – RC bar 7 – JK sbs 1)(Chorus 3 32 bars AABA saxes 16 – OA o-tpt 8 – ens 8)(Tag 2 bars ens)

SOURCES:

Played a function at the New Renaissance Casino. (Pittsburgh Courier 26/9/24) (Storyville 2002/03)

Bill Brown and his ten Brownies are at the Alamo cabaret 125th St., New York. (CD 12/9/25)(Storyville 2002/03)

Furnished the music for Pullman Porter's May Frolic and a Barn Dance at the New Star Casino, New York City. Cecil Smith is noted the Leader. (Ad NYA 8/5/26)(Storyville 2002/03)

Played the Swanee Club, Harlem, 253 West 125th Street, between 1925 and 1935.

One of five bands at Savoy Ballroom, NYC on 5 July 1926. (NYA 3/7/26)(Storyville 2002/03)

Working at the Cotton Club, Philadelphia. (CD 19/2/27)(Storyville 2002/03)

Storyville 47, p. 164: Harrison Smith talks to D. Stewart-Baxter: "1913 I started in the jazz field. I was only 18 years old at the time. My first band was Cordy Williams, who later made records ... his first record, with Ethel Waters, was on the Black Swan label. My second orchestra was Bill Brown and his Brownies. I had several other orchestras, but the most important one I had was the great Jack Hatton. He worked like Louis Armstrong before we ever heard of Louis!"

Storyville 73, p. 10: Leon Abbey: "Saxophonist Ralph James was a member of the new band and remembered the circumstances of his joining Leon: "I was working with Bill Brown at the time. He was a fine gentleman, but four of us broke away from him and went with Leon ... I figured it would be just six weeks, but you know how musicians were then, always jumping from band to band, never satisfied. Bill Brown had an offer to go into the Cotton Club before Duke Ellington, but turned it down because he had no band when the four of us jumped." The New York Age of 28 January 1928 actually named six men quitting Bill Brown: Charlie Johnson, trumpet; Fletcher Allen, Ralph James, reeds; Billy Caines, piano; Harry Stevens, banjo; Oliver Tines, drums"

A photo of the Bill Brown band – probably of an earlier date – can be found in the Internet under 'Bill Brown and his Brownies'!
But be aware: the first photo shown under this address is that of a white band by the name of 'Original Santa Fe Five'! And then there are a number of photos of 'Milton Brown and his Brownies'. This is not our band!

K. – B. Rau
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