

A Case of a Misunderstood Novice

Rex Stewart's earliest recordings – and a glimpse of the John Montague band PART 1

There are not many jazz musicians who have bothered to recount their lives to the public. Armstrong did, and Calloway, and Condon, Doc Cheatham, Garvin Bushell, Danny Barker, Ellington – in a very unique way, Mezzrow (oh, yes!), Sammy Price, Dicky Wells, and a couple of others. But none of them did it with a literary or journalistic pretension as Rex Stewart did. Rex Stewart authored a collection of biographies of some of his colleagues, “Jazz Masters of the Thirties”, and – with the help of a professional writer - an autobiography called “Boy Meets Horn”, the title of his feature number with the Ellington band, of which he was a member for eight and a half years.

Unfortunately, early jazz researchers and discographers did not have the good fortune of being able to use these biographies since they had not yet been written. “Heah Me Talkin’ To Ya”, a collection of musicians’ reminiscences published by Nat Hentoff and Nat Shapiro in 1955, was “the first history of jazz to be related by the musicians themselves” (Kernfeld, *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*). This certainly was crucial in building up a common knowledge of the early decades of jazz, but its content of reliable dates and statements was small.

The last fifty years then brought us a long list of publications on early jazz musicians in book form and in publications like *Down Beat*, *Jazz Journal* and *Storyville*, making research much more comfortable and rewarding. From these publications I search for statements as to musicians’ engagements and band colleagues, recording-dates, and their personnel.

In his “Boy Meets Horn” Stewart recalls fond memories of his time with the John Montague band, leaving the reader with regrets that this band never recorded. While this is true of the band in its entirety, we have reason to believe that several of its members did in fact record as accompanists to singers, frequently in small units drawn from the band. These will be discussed in the current article.

According to Rex Stewart’s own statement in ‘Jazz Masters of the Thirties’ he made his first recording in 1922 together with Louis Hooper on piano accompanying Rosa Henderson. Unfortunately, Rosa Henderson’s first recording accompanied by a single cornet/trumpet cum piano was waxed for Pathé Actuelle - in December 1923! Rust*6 lists this trumpet player as Thomas Morris. But close listening reveals this player’s identity as most probably Howard Scott, who had just recently joined Fletcher Henderson’s orchestra. Bob Hitchens refuted my own assumption as to Stewart’s first recording activity on this date with significant circumstantial proof.

Another statement is Rex Stewart’s mention of his stay with John Montague’s band in “Boy Meets Horn”, p. 46: *“After that I fell into one of the most pleasant associations I can recall in a band. I joined Johnny Montague, a piano man whose group was playing at a dance hall downtown on Columbus Circle. In his band there was my trombone partner Herb Gregory, George Taylor on drums and Cecil Benjamin on clarinet. On looking back, I can see why this combo made such a deep impression on me. First of all, there was so much togetherness. If one guy had a problem, he could count on its being shared by the other fellows. We were closer than most brothers, roomed in the same house, ate together and boozed together. We wore each others’ clothes and, on several occasions, fought together. From a musical standpoint, we were closer than peas in a pod and could anticipate each others’ breaks and so on, almost as if we were playing written scores. We had rehearsals every day, but usually these were a joke with lots of arguing about chords intermixed with one of us running downstairs to get another bottle from our friendly bootlegger.”* And on page 48 he recounts: *“Johnny Dunn was my first influence and, for his times, he was king with those tricks he did on his horn as well as for possessing a clarity and power that was virtually unmatched.”*

And in his “Jazz Masters of the 30s”, p.132, Stewart wrote: *“When Cecil Benjamin, our clarinetist with the Johnny Montague Band (of which I was then a member), took off without any warning, I called Harry (Carney – KBR) for the gig, which was a dancing school downtown on Twenty-third Street. This job didn’t last too long for either of us, and neither Harry nor I recall whether we quit or were fired. Harry is a bit hazy as to his exact activities following the Montague engagement, but I have the feeling it wasn’t too much later that he joined Duke, for what has probably become the longest engagement any musician ever had with any bandleader.”* Rex might have been a bit at odds when writing this, since Harry Carney must have been only 14 years old when he should have relieved the Montague band’s clarinetist! Carney seems to have first come to New York in April 1927 (“World of Duke Ellington”, p.72).

Unfortunately – as almost any time – date sequences are somewhat out of order or unsettled in the books, and so we do not get to know when exactly Stewart worked with the Montague band on Columbus Circle. But from the temporal context this would have been in late 1924 when the recordings for Vocalion listed below were made.

But the fact that Stewart does not mention any record dates he participated in is even worse. In “Jazz Masters of the Thirties” he only mentions his first recording date ever – with Rosa Henderson – but with a lot of labour Bob Hitchens only could find out the possible recording studio involved. A fitting date was impossible to determine. Stewart’s only note was: *“I made several recordings with Monette Moore, Virginia Liston, and another one with Rosa Henderson.”*

Of the recordings with the Montague band no personnels are named on the record labels, but Rust and BGR list John Montague and Rex Stewart in all their editions. *Jazz Directory* Vol. 4 (1952) has no names for the Lena Henry records, and – since they ceased publication at letters ‘Lo’ - the Monette Moores are not listed at all.

It may thus come as a surprise that Rust and BGR list Montague and Stewart without any possible uncertainty from 1969 on, and it would be very interesting to know their source. But – frankly speaking – we know that Rust’s immense merits were rather on the book-keeping side, and that he was not really competent at identifying musicians. Unfortunately, he did not keep his books on what had been contributed to his discographies by others, and by whom and with what competence.

Consequently, it seemed to be most important first to check the reliability of Rust’s statements as to these sessions. With the great help of our editor I received knowledge from Björn Englund that he remembered having owned the Record Research Supplements containing details of recording dates and musicians on Vocalion records before November 1924, and that these were stated to have come from Eugene Williams, who as a Brunswick employee from 1943 to 1948 must have had access to the pre-November 1924 Vocalion recording ledgers. Howard Rye let me know that Rex Stewart clearly remembered these recording date(s).

This then would probably prove the reliability of Rust's stated personnel for these Vocalion sessions. I can thus list these Vocalion sessions involving Stewart and other members of the Montague band as follows:

LENA HENRY		New York,	Aug. 22, 1924
Lena Henry – voc;			
<i>Cecil Benjamin</i> -clt; John Montague – pno			
13594	Consolation Blues	Voc 14873,	Document DOCD-5513
13596	Low Down Despondent Blues	Voc 14873,	Document DOCD-5513

Although we do not hear Rex Stewart on these two sides, they may be the first documented recordings of bandleader John Montague, Stewart's employer at this time.

Montague is heard with a "plodding piano accompaniment" (Dr. David Evans, booklet to Doc. DOCD-5513), or better rather solid, but uneventful piano style founded in ragtime and early Harlem stride as common in New York at the time. We know his name from Stewart's recollections in 'Boy Meets Horn' (see above).

The more interesting player on these sides is the clarinetist. He was listed and named in Rust*2/*3 as Rudy Powell until 1981 when Storyville 98 brought a letter from Frank Owens relating Rudy Powell's statement, that he did not learn to play the clarinet until 1932. From then on the clarinetist firmed under "unknown". From at last 1991 on – publication of 'Boy Meets Horn' - it could have been known that a player with the name of Cecil Benjamin would have been a good choice for the clarinet chair on these sides. Rex Stewart remembered him fondly in 'Boy Meets Horn' as clarinetist of the Montague band. His clarinet style is mid-way between Western style – even showing distinct and clear Johnny Dodds elements – and the way early Eastern players like Ernest Elliott or Percy Glascoe played. But Benjamin – assumed that he is this player – owns much more flexibility in his style, better intonation, wider vibrato and more blues and jazz than the aforementioned clarinetists. He certainly is some sort of discovery here! Rudy Powell's misidentification for these sides might be explained by Benjamin's sharp and "*rasping tone ... geared, like his restless, angular phrasing, to generating heat*", as Humphrey Lyttleton characterized Powell's likewise clarinet work.

Notes:

- Rust*3,*4: Rudy Powell -cl; John Montagu -p
- BGR*2: Rudy Powell, clt; John Montagu, pno
- Storyville 98 p.68, F. Owens: "It was not until 1932, when he (Rudy Powell – KBR) was playing in Rex Stewart's Empire Ballroom Orchestra that Rex and Edgar Sampson convinced him that he should learn to play the clarinet."
- BGR*3,*4: unknown, cl; John Montagu, p
- Rust*6: unknown cl; John Montagu, p
- Rex Stewart, Boy Meets Horn, p. 46: see above

MONETTE MOORE		New York,	Sep. 03, 1924
Monette Moore – voc;			
John Montague – pno			
13641	Texas Man Blues	Voc 14903,	Document DOCD-5338
13642	Texas Man Blues	Voc 14903,	not on LP/CD

John Montague is one of the many pianists/band leaders working in New York in the first half of the 1920s. As stated above, he did not show a very distinct individual style. But it would be interesting to hear him playing with his band in his accustomed surroundings of a New York dance hall "*downtown on Columbus Circle*" (Boy Meets Horn, p. 46). Characterising him only as "ploddy" is unfair in my opinion. Following information from Bob Eagle his census documented name was Montague – not Montagu as listed in the discs - and born in about early 1902.

Note:

- Rust*3,*4,*6: John Montagu -p.
- BGR*2,*3,*4: John Montagu, pno.

MONETTE MOORE		New York,	Sep. 15, 1924
Monette Moore – voc;			
Rex Stewart – cnt; John Montague – pno			
13692	I Wanna Jazz Some More	Voc 14903,	Document DOCD-5338
13693	I Wanna Jazz Some More	Voc 14903,	not on LP/CD

This obviously is Rex Stewart's earliest issued recording. He was trumpet/cornet player of pianist John Montague's band at this time, as can be found in his book 'Boy Meets Horn', p. 46. He is not on his Armstrong path, yet, but obviously is a Johnny Dunn/Bubber Miley follower at this time, as were many trumpet players in Harlem. Stewart recalls in his book: "*Johnny Dunn was my first influence and, for his times, he was king with those tricks he did on his horn as well as for possessing a clarity and power that was vitually unmatched.*" And being influenced by Dunn also means that at this period of his life his playing must have been similar to Bubber Miley's, who also was a strong Dunn adept. And accordingly, we do hear cornet playing in an exact Miley style, a bit uneven, yet, and not as secure and shining as expected by Miley. My first assumption when hearing these sides was: Bubber Miley intoxicated! Rex Stewart is so much in a Bubber Miley mode here that the authors of the great Bubber Miley Discography, issued in the bulletin of the 'Duke Ellington Society of Sweden' of 1999/2000 misidentified his playing as that of Miley without any suspicion and hesitation. As a matter of fact, I did so, too!

And listen to the otherwise almost unknown John Montague on piano: a very adept pianist of the Harlem school, one of the many unknowns of this period. Very sensitive with nice bass figures behind the cornet in Stewart's solo in the first half of the last chorus.

Note:

- Rust*3,*4,*6: Rex Stewart -c; John Montagu -p.
- BGR*2,*3,*4: Rex Stewart, cnt; John Montagu, pno.
- Rex Stewart, Boy Meets Horn, p. 46: see above
- Scherman, Eriksson, Anderby, Wallen, Bubber Miley Discography: Bubber Miley (tp), John Montagu (p) "Dixon-Godrich and Rust have Rex Stewart on trumpet for the above Monette Moore session, but it is aurally Bubber Miley."

LENA HENRY		New York,	Sep. 15, 1924
Lena Henry – voc;			
Rex Stewart – cnt;			
John Montague – pno; unknown - whistle			
13695	Family Skeleton Blues	Voc 14902,	Document DOCD-5513
13697	Sinful Blues	Voc 14902,	Document DOCD-5513

Again, Rex Stewart is exactly in Miley's style, with short growl phrases, Dunn-like double-timing, and staccato phrasing. This would mean that Stewart must have listened carefully to Johnny Dunn as well as to Miley, displaying ragtime derived staccato phrases, triplet military phrases and the occasional growl and double-time, as he sounds more like Miley than like Dunn, although he does not acknowledge any Miley influence in his "Boy Meets Horn". There is no sign of his later inclination to Louis Armstrong's trumpet style as yet. On piano we hear Johnny Montague, again, of whose band Stewart wrote in highest praise for their togetherness.

Notes:

- *Rex Stewart, Jazz Masters of the 30s, p.132!*
- *BGR*2,*3: Rex Stewart, cnt; John Montagu, pno.*
- *BGR*4: Rex Stewart, cnt; John Montagu, pno, unknown, effects*
- *Rust*6: Rex Stewart, c; John Montague, p.*
- *Scherman, Eriksson, Anderby, Wallen have left this item out of their Bubber Miley Discography!*

LENA HENRY		New York,	Sep. 25, 1924
Lena Henry – voc;			
<i>Cecil Benjamin</i> – clt;			
John Montague – pno; unknown – train effects (1), whistle (2)			
13762	Freight Train Blues	Voc 14910,	Document DOCD-5513
13764	Ghost Walkin' Blues	Voc 14910,	Document DOCD-5513

According to the above recordings we certainly hear the same clarinetist here, in my opinion the said Cecil Benjamin, clarinetist of the Montague band. He does not display a Western flourishing ensemble style here, but rather a clarinet style of early Harlem manner, a trumpet Mode, containing fashionable freak elements.

Notes:

- *Rust*3,*4: Rudy Powell -cl -as; John Montagu -p*
- *BGR*2: Rudy Powell, clt, alt; John Montagu, pno*
- *BGR*3: unknown, cl, as; John Montagu, p. "The unknown clarinetist on two of the above sessions has often been listed as Rudy Powell, who, however, has stated that he did not take up the clarinet until 1932."*
- *BGR*4: unknown, cl; John Montagu, p; unknown, effects. "The unknown clarinetist on two of the above sessions has often been listed as Rudy Powell, who, however, has stated that he did not take up the clarinet until 1932."*
- *Rust*6: unknown cl, as; John Montagu, p*

MONETTE MOORE		New York,	Sep. 25, 1924
Monette Moore – voc;			
Rex Stewart – cnt; <i>Cecil Benjamin</i> – clt;			
John Montague – pno			
13767	I'm A Heart-Broken Mama	Voc 14911,	Document DOCD-5338
13768	Death Letter Blues	Voc 14911,	Document DOCD-5338

Same as at sessions above. The clarinetist again as given above. Rudy Powell did not start to play clarinet earlier than ca. 1932, by his own testimony (see Storyville 98 -68). In the Cliff Jackson Crazy Kats he only played alto sax, not clarinet. But our clarinetist here owns a distinct sharpness which might have been the cause for mistaking him to be the Rudy Powell of later years. Benjamin plays in a strongly blues-drenched style here. Again, the Swedish Bubber Miley discography gives persistently Miley as trumpet player. (Even so I greatly respect the immense knowledge and big ears of its authors!)

Note:

- *Rust*3,*4: Rex Stewart -c; John Montagu -p, with Rudy Powell -cl where shown (2).*
- *BGR*2: Rex Stewart, cnt; John Montagu, pno, with Rudy Powell, clt (2).*
- *BGR*3,*4: Rex Stewart, c; unknown, cl (2); John Montagu, p.*
- *Rust*6: Rex Stewart -c; John Montagu -p, Rudy Powell -cl added.*
- *Rex Stewart, Boy Meets Horn, p. 46: see above*
- *Scherman, Eriksson, Anderby, Wallen, Bubber Miley Discography: Bubber Miley (tp), John Montagu (p) "Dixon-Godrich and Rust have Rex Stewart on trumpet for the above Monette Moore session, but it is aurally Bubber Miley."*

Rex Stewart's early band memberships:

Danny Doy's Melody Mixers (early 1921): Rex Stewart – cnt; Danny Doy – tbn (later in Europe with Claude Hopkins); Ernest Hall – clt; Ollie Blackwell – tbn; Bernard Addison – bjo; or Reggie Martin – bjo; Ralph Dorsey – bass; Jack 'Rags' Richardson - dms

Ollie Blackwell's Ragtime Clowns (1921): Ollie Blackwell (21) – pno, ldr; Rex Stewart (14) – cnt; Ernest Hall (19) -clt; Tommy Edlin (19) – horn; Jim Blair (?) – kazoo, tbn, vln; Bernard Addison (18) – bjo; Tommy Woods (?) – dms; later replaced by 'String Beans' – dms

The Musical Spillers (late 1921 – 1923): Willie Lewis – alt; Seymour Todd – cms; Isabelle Spiller – ten; Rex Stewart – ten, cnt; Fred Pinder – bar, bsx; William Heseekiah Spiller – bsx; George 'Dinah' Taylor – dms

Charlie Smith's Band (early 1924) at Ed Smalls' Sugar Cane Club: Rex Stewart – cnt; Herb Gregory – tbn; possibly 'Stone' (Perry Smith ?)

- alt, clt; Charlie Smith - pno, Will "Splivey" Escoffery – bjo; "Jazz" Joe Carson (Williams ?) – dms. (June Clark and Jimmy Harrison being on tour with Stanley 'Fess' Williams.)

Green Parrot Band (1924): Rex Stewart – cnt; unknown – pno; Bobbie Johnson - dms

Johnny Montague's Band (1924): Rex Stewart – cnt; Herb Gregory – tbn; Cecil Benjamin – clt; John Montague – pno; George 'Dinah' Taylor - dms

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