

A CASE OF CONTINUED CONTROVERSY

Jimmy Harrison with the Duke Ellington band

by K.-B. Rau

The recent release of FROG 78 "The Washingtonians" has brought us – yet again – Duke Ellington's earliest band recordings. These early Blue-Discs, Pathés and Gennetts seem to be the most published Ellington recordings on LP, probably because the rights of these early recording companies were not existent anymore in LP times or difficult to spot and therefore easy to neglect. And they all seem to stem from the same source. But now all these early titles can be enjoyed in much better quality than ever before. And it really is a treat to listen. Unfortunately only the personnels are listed in a way leaving much to be desired. They are either incomplete or out-of-date, but this should not keep you from purchasing a copy of this otherwise very beautiful disc.

Alas – as seems to be a rule with FROG CDs – discographical notes regarding personnels leave much to be desired. Apart from some minor mistakes and omissions in the personnels (I have compared them to the great articles "Birth Of A Band" by Frank Dutton in Storyville) there is one session which certainly merits a closer look.

I refer to the Duke Ellington and his Orchestra session of c. April 01, 1926 issued on Gennett 3291.

From my very early collecting days I own a RIVERSIDE Jazz Archives LP RLP 12-129 (the one with the NYC subway entrance on the cover) which contains this very session together with other early Ellingtons and Hendersons. On this LP the personnel listed for the above mentioned session is: Harry Cooper, Leroy Rutledge, trumpets; Charlie Irvis, Jimmy Harrison, trombones; Otto Hardwick, Prince Robinson, Don Redman, George Thomas, saxes; Ellington, piano; Fred Guy, banjo; "Bass" Edwards, tuba; Sonny Greer, drums; G. Thomas, vocal on *Wanna Go Back Again Blues*; J. Harrison, vocal on *If You Can't Hold The Man You Love*. This in accordance with all the issues of RUST except RUST*6 which lists Harrison as the only singer.

After quite a number of reissues on LP labels like VJM, BYG, JOKER and probably a bunch of others – mainly retaining the above listed personnel and differing only in minor detail – the FROG people still list it although we should know better today. But they are in good company with the otherwise very knowledgeable producers of the French MASTERS OF JAZZ CD series. I refrain from listing all the wrong personnels and their several variations. But the matter should be set straight. The titles are as follows:

DUKE ELLINGTON and his ORCHESTRA,

Gennett session of c. April 01, 1926.

X-57-A (You've Got Those) Wanna Go Back Again Blues Key of Gm / Ab / Bb / Ab Gennett
(Intro ens 8 bars Gm)(A1 Chorus 32 bars Ab AABA bar / 2clt 16 bars – brass + 2clt 8 bars – bar / 2clt 8 bars)(Verse ens 8 bars)(A2 Chorus Bb tbn 16 bars – reeds 8 bars – tbn 8 bars)(A3 Chorus Ab voc)(A4 Chorus Ab ens)(tag 2 bars ens)

X-58-A If You Can't Hold The Man You Love Key of Bb Gennett
(Intro 4 bars ens)(A1 Chorus 32 bars ABA'C ens)(Verse 16 bars ens)(A2 Chorus voc)(Vamp 8 bars tpts)(Vamp 8 bars tpts)(Vamp 8 bars bjo)(Vamp 8 bars tbn)(A3 Chorus ens – clt breaks)

The personnel positively is that of standard big band instrumentation of the time: 2 tpts, tbn, 2 altos/clts, ten/clt, pno, bjo, bbs, dms. But then there arise a couple of problems:

1. The singer(s): as stated above, for years George "Fathead" Thomas has been listed as the singer on the first title, Jimmy Harrison as the singer on the second title.

If compared to the rather strange sound of George Thomas' voice familiar from the McKinney's Cotton Pickers recordings ('deep, barrel-chested' as Joel O'Sickey describes it, I would say 'squeezed') the singer on the first title has a much lighter sound and approach. And from his own testimony we know that Sonny Greer was the singer here. This sounds quite reasonable. From 1925 until 1930 George Thomas was a member of the MKCP (Chilton, McKinney's Music) playing the Detroit's Graystone Ballroom. He was not one of the Harlem bunch of musicians, certainly not known in Harlem as the MKCP had not recorded yet (Don Redman took over the band as front-man in the summer of 1927 – first recordings in July 1928 - and certainly would not have promoted a singer/saxophone player whom he did not know in early 1926). So, the presence of George Thomas can easily be ruled out.

The singer on the second title has hitherto been listed as Jimmy Harrison. Here as well, in an interview Sonny Greer claimed his own responsibility as singer. The FROG CD notes say that Greer was adamant on this claim. This writer feels unable to prove the contrary, but comparing the first singer – Greer – to the second, it is my firm belief that the second singer shows better timing and more looseness in his singing – and a different kind of off-beat. Here I opt for Jimmy Harrison. The voice on the FROG CD sounds much crisper than it did on earlier issues – thanks to the great work of Nick Dellow – but when comparing it to Harrison's voice on the recent Coleman Hawkins issue on MOSAIC there seems to be accordance.

2. If we agree that the singer on the first title is not George Thomas but Greer, there is no need left to list him as a fourth reed player, the more so on tenor as mainly noted. Big bands in the 20s had three reeds – two altos and one tenor, the reedmen doubling on other reed instruments – and not four. Arrangements were made and sold for these three reed players. And it was only in the 1930s that reed sections were augmented. Armstrong/Russell had four reeds in 1935 (two altos, two tenors), Calloway added a fourth reed player – Eddie Barefield – in 1933 (a third alto!), Duke Ellington did so in 1932 (also a third alto with Otto Hardwick back in the band!), Goodman added a second tenor in 1934, Benny Carter used four reeds – two altos, two tenors apart from himself on alto in the Spike Hughes sessions of May 1933 and Fletcher Henderson had four reeds in 1934. So, a fourth reed player in a big band in 1926 would have been completely superfluous. There would not have been any parts for a third man to play. Which means, that we can safely rule out George "Fathead" Thomas as participant in this session of the Ellington band. It simply makes no sense whatsoever! If you listen to the first title *Wanna Go Back Again Blues* chorus A1 you will hear Hardwick on baritone alternating with clearly two clarinets – Redman and Robinson. If there had been four reed players it would have made sense to write the score for three clts against the baritone sax. But not so here! I only wonder who invented this tale or who absurdly misidentified the singer on the first title as George Thomas.

3. The trombonist(s): Certainly Charlie Irvis was trombone player with Ellington at that time. But Jimmy Harrison, the undisputed trombone star among Harlem musicians at that time, had just departed from June Clark's band at Smalls' Sugar Cane Club and every band-

leader of note wanted to hire him. So did Ellington. And we know that trombonist Harrison was part of a short tour of Connecticut with the Ellington band in early April 1926! And from April 12 to April 26 the Ellington band - with Harrison added to the band as recalled by Ellington, Benny Carter and Harry Cooper - played a two-week engagement doubling at Ciro's and the Lafayette Theatre (S. Lasker, VJM 157). I have contributed a note on the problems inherent in this session in VJM 155 Ate's Discographical Ramblings, which has been commented by Steven Lasker in VJM 157. As it seems does he agree with my thesis re the singer(s), but he does not concerning the trombonist ("Contrary to Greer's recollection - but in agreement to Mr. Rau - three friends of mine who've extensively studied Jimmy Harrison and his style - Brad Kay, Dan Weinstein and Jon Zeiderman - are of the opinion that the vocalist on *If You Can't Hold The Man You Love* is actually Harrison and not Greer (unlike Mr. Rau, however, none of the three contends he plays trombone on the date.)" Steven Lasker VJM 157).

It seems that I stand all alone against the world in stating that I hear Harrison as sole trombone player on this session.

So, let's see - and hear - what happens! In *Wanna Go Back ...* the trombonist plays solo in all three A-parts of the chorus with the B-part taken over by the reeds. Ellington scholar Mark Tucker writes about this solo: "... is a paraphrase solo by Irvis on muted trombone (one of the few extended examples where he uses this technique)" In my estimation this remark could only be interpreted that Tucker judges this solo as untypical for Irvis. This I can whole-heartedly underline and support. Irvis' style was above all a legato style and he used staccato notes only at the beginning of a phrase; exceptions to this statement might certainly be found on records, but as a rule he played legato with strong linear horizontal phrases and melody. His tone was rather straight, not much vibrato, with a rather antiquated punctuated phrasing. Nothing of this can be heard here. Instead, the trombone paraphrase of the theme melody is played staccato, in vertical manner and with a tone and vibrato owned by Harrison. Absolutely different to Irvis' playing. The difference is even bigger when listening to the eight-bar trombone solo in "*If You Can't Hold The Man ...*". Here we hear a short eight-bar solo on vamp-like changes, played staccato, vertical and in a definite preaching manner completely different to anything I know of Irvis. And just listen to the dramatic construction of the short solo: three slightly changing and developing phrases of acclamation and a resulting answer as a fourth phrase. This is completely beyond Charlie Irvis' power of imagination and capability. The third phrase contains a short jumping-lip-trill unheard in Charlie Irvis' solos. Furthermore a kind of solo like that could have been played by Louis Armstrong; and we know that Harrison formed his style (together with June Clark) after listening to Oliver and Armstrong in Chicago 1923, Harrison playing the Armstrong part in his duets with Clark! I played trombone myself a couple of years in my youth, and I am not at all unfamiliar with trombone playing. Mr. Lasker in his comment then concludes: "Thus, Harrison didn't join Ellington's ranks until a couple of weeks after the Gennett date on which some contend he took part." Now, if the Gennett date is given as c. April 01, the band toured shortly to Connecticut and then started at Ciro's on April 12, Mr. Lasker is wrong in maintaining that Harrison joined "a couple of weeks" after the Gennett date. There is only room for a couple of days. And certainly the Duke had negotiated the terms with Harrison in the meantime. And there certainly was an opportunity to take him into a recording studio as part of his band if only as substitute for Irvis. And the recording date is not securely settled and might also have taken place a few days later! So, the temporal aspect of this matter would certainly not rule Harrison out. From this background I am absolutely positive that this is Jimmy Harrison on trombone. And with repeated listening I am growing more and more positive about it. May I ask everybody who wants to make his own opinion to first listen really very carefully?! And do not rely on what has been published in the discographies! I suppose that many supporters of the Irvis side only rely on the given personnels without checking it out and because "it has always been listed like that". (By the way, Mr. Tucker, the Washingtonians do not "skip the verse" in *Wanna Go Back Again Blues!* They certainly play it just after the first chorus and before the trombone solo.)

In conclusion, the personnel for Duke Ellington's session of April 01, 1926 should be:

DUKE ELLINGTON AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Leroy Rutledge, Harry Cooper - tpt; Jimmy Harrison - tbn, voc (2);
Otto Hardwick - alt, bar, Don Redman - alt, clt; Prince Robinson - ten, clt;
Duke Ellington - pno; Fred Guy - bjo; Henry "Bass" Edwards - bbs; Sonny Greer - dms, voc (1);
Bob Haring - arr (1)

(Note: I have put Rutledge on the first chair, because he was a 'straight' man and therefore certainly played the lead/first trumpet part. Cooper was a 'hot' man thus on second part. Redman's presence is reported by Ellington and by himself.)

George "Fathead" Thomas' case - as shown above - needs to be continued into the McKinney's Cotton Pickers discographies as by Rust, John Chilton and Bernhard Behncke.

They all have Thomas on tenor sax in the personnel. This would imply that the band had four saxophones in their reed section: Redman and Senior on altos and Thomas and Robinson on tenors. But: George Thomas was an alto man - and not a tenor man (see photo in Chilton, McKinney's Music, p. 11). And nowhere in the other photos do you see four musicians in the reed section! And the contemporary arrangements did not have a second (fourth) tenor part! I suggest that the authors or their informers and contributors thought that Redman and Senior made two altos, so Thomas could only have been added on tenor. But: Redman was always front man as can be seen in several movies of his own band and on p. 18 of Chilton, McKinney's Music. As such he certainly played some solos, sang some songs and MCed the whole affair, but did not play in the section!

Accordingly, the MKCP personnel of the sessions July 11/12, 1928 should read:

Don Redman - alt, clt, bar, voc, arr, ldr;
Langston Curl, John Nesbitt - tpt; Claude Jones - tbn;
Milton Senior - alt, clt; George 'Fathead' Thomas - alt, clt, voc; Prince Robinson - ten, clt;
Todd Rhodes - pno, cel, Dave Wilborn - bjo, gtr, voc; Ralph Escudero - bbs; Cuba Austin - dms, vib.

(Note: Langston Curl was the lead/first tpt player - as later in Redman's own band - and John Nesbitt second/"hot" man)

All other sessions with George Thomas accordingly.

And while we are at it: the three sessions of New York Nov. 05/06/07 1929 have the same problem: Theodore McCord was an alto player, not a tenorist (see Louis Armstrong's Orch. of April 05, 1930!). These MKCP personnels should read:

Don Redman - alt, voc, arr, ldr;
Leonard Davis, Joe Smith, Sidney de Paris - tpt; Claude Jones - tbn;
Benny Carter, Ted McCord - alt, clt; Coleman Hawkins - ten, clt;
Leroy Tibbs (on first session only) or Thomas Fats Waller - pno, Dave Wilborn - bjo; Billy Taylor - bbs; Kaiser Marshall - dms

The same applies to the early Mills Blue Rhythm Band and the King Carter Royal Orchestra recordings:

Wardell Jones, Shelton Hemphill, Ed Anderson - tpt; Harry 'Father' White, Henry Hicks - tbn;
Crawford Wethington (later Charlie Holmes), Ted McCord - alt, clt; Castor McCord - ten, clt;
Edgar Hayes - pno; Benny James - bjo; Hayes Alvis - sbs; Willie Lynch - dms

The Ollie Shepard session of May 02 1941 obviously does not have Ted McCord on tenor, but Joe Thomas instead – and Carl Lynch on gtr instead of George Francis (Storyville 90/213).

And a last note: It is not Coleman Hawkins on the Jack Purvis session of April 04 1930, but Ted McCord's brother Castor on tenor. Although this fact has been notified a long time ago Rust*6 prefers to persist in Hawkins. The Jazz Oracle CD booklet lists McCord correctly but gives April 03 as recording date.

*Sources: B. Rust JR*2 -6; M.Tucker, Ellington, the early Years; St. Lasker, D. Ellington's Mystery Vocalist, VJM 157; Notes to Jazz Oracle CD Jack Purvis.*

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