

A Case of Simple Rectification

FIVE MUSICAL BLACKBIRDS

In the late 1960s Historical Records issued their LP 5829-11 'Collector's Items', including three titles by a band called 'Five Musical Blackbirds'. These titles were recorded and originally issued by Pathe Actuelle in New York in early 1926, a fourth title 'Carolina Stomp' was cut, but remained unissued. The cover-notes of this LP – authored by well-known early jazz connoisseur Carl Kendziora, Jr. – comments: "*Tracks 3, 4 and 5 are the three issued titles of the Five Musical Blackbirds' four-tune date in February 1926. Here we have the Brown Brothers, of Detroit (Ted – alto, clarinet, leader and Herb – banjo) with Tom Morris, Bob Fuller and Louis Hooper. The band was playing at a Broadway restaurant in New York at the time of this date. Interesting arrangements and lots of Morris horn. And nice work, again, by the unsung Fuller and Hooper.*"

Before this reissue - in June 1966 - Record Research Vol. 77 had first listed a personnel for these sides included in a great discographical article on pianist Louis Hooper by Canadian collector Jim Kidd. In it, Hooper named a personnel of Morris, Fuller, Ted Brown (alto), Herb Brown (banjo), and Hooper for the Five Musical Blackbirds, with the annotation: "*The following identifications are based on Louis' (Hooper's – KBR) aural study of the records in question. Only those on which he is pianist or a probability or those of interest with other pianists are included.*" Most surprisingly, Louis Hooper states earlier in this article: "*I'm quite sure I never recorded with Tommy Morris (research has proven otherwise) (sic! but No!) although I knew him well. I arranged his 'Charleston Strut' for publication.*"

Subsequent reissues on CD were managed by French Jazz Archives No. 131, commenting on these sides: "*Thomas Morris, a New York veteran of somewhat stiffer style than his younger colleagues, was nevertheless a good blues player who enjoyed a healthy reputation in the 'twenties, recording alongside Sidney Bechet in the Clarence Williams orchestras as well as with Fats Waller in his own group called the Hot Babies. He is heard here as member of a studio outfit that suits him well, and the unpretentious 'Hot Coffee', '16th Street Strut' and 'Black Horse Stomp' prove enviably hot.*"

The last reissue on Frog's lovely CD DGF 73 'Frog Spawn – The Second Batch' contains the sides unsurprisingly with the best sound yet, and still the same personnel given, only, that they have found out that there also is a violin on one of the three sides. The booklet tells us that "*The three recordings of the Five Musical Blackbirds (a fourth, Carolina Stomp, was not issued) are believed to stem from a band led by the journeymen Brown brothers, Ted and Herb whose sole recordings these are. Were it not for these sides little seems to be known about them. They presumably recruited the better-known Morris, Fuller and Hooper for this Pathe Actuelle session of March 1926. A violinist who has a short solo on Hot Coffee has been missed by discographers. The boxy acoustic makes a muted and very clipped Morris sound different from what one hears of him on his Victor recordings made only a few months later. Louis Hooper, who recorded from time to time with them and accompanied a number of blues singers, has a romping solo on Black Horse Stomp.*"

Although these recordings of the 'Five Musical Blackbirds' certainly do not belong to the significant and musically important recordings of the music of Harlem, they are yet part of the regrettably too small number of the recordings of the time. They are not classic recordings, but they should be regarded as examples of what was possible in the large scope of Harlem music, alongside with Henderson, Ellington, James P. Johnson, Waller, and all the small bands of little fame and endurance, and all the vaudeville blues singers with their accompanying bands.

But as very often in the past, they have been treated with the same carelessness and nonchalance when they were listened to and checked to find out the personnel as with the many other recordings I have reported on in my earlier articles.

The thoughtlessness started with the recording companies – as almost permanently before 1932 – not to note and name the artists who played the music with their expertise and knowledge. Later, when most of the musicians were still living and jazz music became fashionable, only a very small number of jazz aficionados world-wide really cared enough to check out the coloured musicians they loved to hear play on the discs. It has to be added yet, that only a very small number of persons had a sufficient number of recordings at their disposal to be able to gain an adequate synoptic survey of the whole body of jazz recordings as we have today with the help of LPs and CDs. Yet, among these aficionados only few cared about the differentiating individual aspects of the player's styles, and a number of common favorites crystallised whenever a musician with a special attitude was searched for. And when their names had found their way into the several editions of Rust, they had become gospel and were not scrutinized anymore.

Among trumpet players, Thomas Morris and Bubber Miley were such persons, named far too often for unknown blues accompanists or early hot players. Of the trombonists, Jake Frazier had to be responsible for performances outside his personal style when the actual players on the records were not recognised. Also, reed-players Bob Fuller and Ernest Elliott were carelessly named as substitutes for unidentified and actually unknown players. And this phenomenon has often been imposed on older musicians when they were questioned by young jazz lovers about participating players on early jazz records. All this obviously happened to the recordings of the Five Musical Blackbirds, as will be shown below.

So, let's see what we hear!

- The only players not generally known are the two Brown brothers, who, yet, are definitely listed as early as in Record Research 77. I assume that they are known from recording ledgers or any other documents of the recording company, or maybe they are imprinted on the record labels. As I am not a collector of 78 originals, least of all an owner of these very records, I am unable to report on the label inscriptions. But as their names are given so definitively, I assume them to be correct. (Unfortunately, You Tube do not show their original labels!) Mr. Kendziora, Jr. – see above – reports them as being from Detroit. In my books on Detroit jazz of the twenties I was unable to find their names. Only in Barclay Draper's life story (David Griffith in Storyville 87-101) a violinist and saxophonist Ted Brown is mentioned as working with Ford Dabney doing society work in the early 1930s. (B. Behncke in his Storyville Index lists another person Teddy Brown as identical with 'our' Ted Brown. This Teddy Brown is a bandleader in Paris in March 1929 and most probably not the same person.) Most interestingly, the society bands named in B. Draper's story seem to have worked and played in some parallel world to the jazz scene of the time, as only a few of the names mentioned are known to jazz collectors, not from records, yet, but only from being named in articles in Storyville and earlier specialist jazz magazines. The musicians employed by these bands had to be perfect sight-readers and thus legitimate musicians with good tone and technique. On the other side, they did not have to be good hot players and soloists. The unknown musicians on the Five Musical Blackbirds might possibly be drawn from these society band circles. The Brown brothers obviously need not to be discussed and can be accepted as given. Accordingly, Ted Brown is the alto-sax player and his brother Herbert (Herb) Brown is the strong and swinging banjo player.

- Our trumpet player is not a “Western” player, nor does he try to be. He owns a slim tone and his hot-playing is stiff, rather academic, with a somewhat hectic 6/8-phrasing, a bit influenced by Johnny Dunn. A restricted improviser. He is of the kind of trumpet player needed in dance bands: sight-reader, exact and reliable and not necessarily a competent improviser. His use of the straight-mute throughout might be required by the arrangements or by the acoustics in a restaurant.

He definitely is not Thomas Morris as permanently listed. I am convinced that Morris’ name only appears for the reason described above. Although Thomas Morris is a New York born trumpet player, his playing is not or only very little affected by the Johnny Dunn school of jazz trumpet playing. His playing is blues oriented and rather tends to the “Western” style of trumpet playing as performed by the New Orleans and later Chicago musicians. As can be observed, his playing is marred by his technical inabilities from lacking legitimate training. His tone is clear and strong, but very often disturbed by his lack of lip power and embouchure. He seldom uses mutes, but prefers a cup mute when doing so. He displays a rather slight and medium vibrato with little difference of amplitude. Morris’ time is not urgent, rather tending to be laid-back, but still swinging. His phrasing is simple, very often repeating phrases three or even four times and always singable and filled with blue-notes.

There definitely is nothing in our player’s performance that would remind of Thomas Morris!

- The clarinetist displays a sober, technically adept, almost classical but not daring style. He knows the chordal changes. When soloing, he is not really hot and does not use blue-notes, playing phrases of eighth-notes in long sequences and in fast-changing register. His vibrato is wide and slow when recognisable in sustained notes. He does not bend his notes and does not drop notes in pitch as Fuller does. I assume that he might be one of the large numbers of legitimate clarinetists of Caribbean origin, imported to New York by Jim Europe to fill the ranks of his ‘Hell-Fighters’ band in 1918 at the end of the First World War. After all we have heard and know of Bob Fuller, this certainly is not he.

Fuller’s style on the contrary, is a mixture of straight-ahead jazz playing and the use of “freakish” musical devices. Fuller plays a strong and fast vibrato of narrow and regular frequency. He lacks advanced harmonic knowledge and sensibility which makes him play unfitting or even wrong notes in some cases. His changes of register are frequent, and he prefers to stay in a chosen register for a separated and defined order. His playing is rhythmically simple and mostly on the beat, his time rather erratic thus preventing him from swinging.

- Then there is the violinist, not detected earlier on - except for the liner-notes of Frog DGF 73 by Richard Rains - and thus not listed in the discographies. In Chorus 3 of ‘Hot Coffee’ a violin appears in solo – accompanied by piano and banjo – and this obviously is played by the alto player, who also solos in Chorus 2, is then relieved by trumpet and clarinet, and starts on violin for half a chorus to be then relieved by the clarinet. Accordingly, the violinist has to be Ted Brown.

- The pianist is identified by Louis Hooper to be himself in Record Research 77. As cited above, in the same article – which probably was written about an extended series of interviews held by Mr. Jim Kidd in Toronto in the 1960s – Hooper declared that he never recorded with Thomas Morris, although knew him well. Provided that Morris is not present here, Hooper might then well be the pianist. (If it was Morris, Hooper would have to be ruled out!) But cases are not a few that musicians erred heavily in recognising themselves or others in record-based interviews. As far as I can recognise, this pianist plays a blues-influenced style with a light left-hand, using single bass notes or left-hand figures as heard by blues pianists, not a hard-hitting oom-pah bass as heard from Harlem stride pianists. Accordingly, I see the possibility of Hooper’s presence on this date.

But probably, this whole bunch of musicians was a working-band from the start, the leading persons of which, the Brown brothers, only been recollected by others because of their lineage.

From these recognitions I’d say that the appropriate discographical listing should be thus:

FIVE MUSICAL BLACKBIRDS

unknown – tpt; unknown – clt; Ted Brown – alt, vln;

Louis Hooper – pno; Herb Brown – bjo

106633 Hot Coffee

106634 Carolina Stomp

106635 18th Street Strut

106636 Black Horse Stomp

New York,

Mar. 1926

PA 36404, Per 14585,

Frog DGF 73

PA unissued

not on LP/CD

PA 7508, Per 108,

Frog DGF 73

PA 36404, Per 14585,

Frog DGF 73

It has to be assumed that the Five Musical Blackbirds were a working band with a self-authored band-book of jazz tunes of the period. They certainly were not the nucleus of a dance band that had to be augmented by New York musicians to be able to record.

The three titles issued are played in arrangements probably worked out by the Five Musical Blackbirds, but depending on issues by other bands. ‘18th Street Strut’ is the Bennie Moten blues opus as recorded by the Moten band in May 1925, but without Harlan Leonard’s 16 bars alternative strain based on a non-blues chord sequence. ‘Black Horse Stomp’ generally follows Joe Tarto’s arrangement as recorded by Fletcher Henderson in January 1926 also using the whole-tone phrase in the middle-break. The ‘Hot Coffee’ title was recorded twice by British bands in 1932, but their identities with our title could not be checked.

Notes:

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

- *Jazz Directory Vol. 3*: “no details”.

- RR 77-8: Thomas Morris, Bob Fuller, Ted Brown (alto), Herb Brown (banjo), Hooper

- Rust*2: unknown, cnt; unknown, clt; unknown, alt; unknown pno; unknown, bjo.

- Rust*3,*4,*6: Thomas Morris -c; Bob Fuller -cl; Ted Brown -as, Louis Hooper -p; Herb Brown -bj.

Tune structures:

106633 Hot Coffee key of C

Pathe Actuelle

(Intro 6 bars ens)(Verse 1 16 bars ens)(Chorus 1 18 bars ens)(Chorus 2 18 bars alt 6 – ens/pno middle-break 2 – alt 4 – ens 6)

(Bridge 3 bars ens)(Chorus 3 18 bars vln 6 – tpt 2 – clt 6 – ens 4+1)(Verse 2 16 bars ens)(Chorus 4 18 bars tpt 8 – clt 9 – ens 1)

(Chorus 5 18 bars ens 6 – bjo middle-break 2 – ens 10)(Coda 3 bars ens)

106635 18th Street Strut key of Eb

Pathe Actuelle

(Intro 4 bars ens)(Chorus 1 12 bars ens)(Chorus 2 12 bars ens)(Chorus 3 12 bars clt)(Chorus 4 12 bars alt)(Chorus 5 12 bars

pno)(Chorus 6 12 bars ens+tpt)(Chorus 7 12 bars ens+tpt)(Chorus 8 12 bars ens)(Chorus 9 12 bars clt)(Chorus 10 12 bars ens)

106636 Black Horse Stomp key of C

Pathe Actuelle

(Intro 4 bars ens)(Strain A1 20 bars AABAA’ ens)(Strain A2 20 bars AABAA’ pno 8 – reeds 4 – pno 8)(Strain B1 16 bars AABA tpt 8

– reeds 4 – tpt 4)(Strain B2 16 bars AABA tpt 8 – reeds 4 – tpt 4)(Strain C1 12 bars reeds)(Strain C2 12 bars reeds)(Strain D 16 bars

tpt 8 – reeds 4 – tpt 4)(Strain A3 20 bars AABAA’ ens)(Strain A4 20 bars AABAA’ tpt 8 – ens 12)(Coda 2 bars ens)

ROSA HENDERSON	Four Musical Blackbirds	New York,	Mar. 31, 1926
Rosa Henderson	– voc;		
unknown	– tpt; Bob Fuller	– clt;	
Louis Hooper	– pno; unknown	– bbs	
E-2713/14/15	Do It, Mr. So-So	Voc unissued	Document DOCD-5654
E-2716/17/18	Fulton Street Blues	Voc unissued	Document DOCD-5654

This Vocalion session – unissued on 78, but issued on a Document CD by Johnny Parth of Vienna – might possibly be seen in connection with the above session.

- The trumpet player owns a very fast and strong vibrato which Thomas Morris never showed. But this extraordinary vibrato unfortunately also rules out the trumpet player of the Five Musical Blackbirds above. So, we have to leave this player with Rosa Henderson as “unknown”. He is not Thomas Morris as in the Rust discographies.
- Clarinet playing is exactly what we have got to know from Bob Fuller.
- In relation with the above session the pianist very probably is Louis Hooper.
- The tuba player is impossible to identify.

Notes:

- *Jazz Directory Vol.4: unknown (cor); unknown (clt); unknown (p); unknown (tu)*
- *BGR*2,*3,*4: unknown, c; unknown, cl; unknown, p; unknown, bb*
- *Rust*3,*4,*6: Tom Morris, c; Bob Fuller, cl; Louis Hooper, p; unknown bb.*

To end this piece of criticism on wasted guess-work I would like to cite a passage on the Five Musical Blackbirds by one ‘Poutitechatte’ eleven years ago in the world-wide-web. It says: “*This great disc does justice to two soloists of that era fallen into oblivion: Tom Morris cornettist and Bob Fuller clarinetist.*” A pity only that exactly these two are not on the FMB sides. Here I have to ask: Did they really LISTEN? I still believe that the most important occupation with recorded jazz music should be: to listen!

Again, my sincerest thanks to Michael Rader for help, support and criticism!

K.-B. Rau