

A CASE OF SUDDEN ENLIGHTENMENT

Lem Fowler's Favorites

by K.-B. Rau

For many, many years now I own the VJM VLP 18 LEM FOWLER, issued in the late 1960s. I have not listened much into it as the sound leaves much to be desired and the music is not what I love to hear from the Harlem bands of the late 1920s. Most of the tunes are quartet recordings in the style of the Bob Fuller recordings, which I take notice of, but not to my distinct enthusiasm. In addition to these sides Lem Fowler also recorded a couple of blues accompaniments for various singers and some 23 player piano rolls.

All the Lem Fowler band sides have been reissued then on CD in their integrity in 1995 by Johnny Parth of Vienna, Austria on his RST label, and later again, in 2007, by Paul Swinton on his wonderful FROG label. Ted Kandell's expertise remastering of the latter makes the whole affair a joy to listen to.

But different from these trio or quartet recordings we find - at the end of Fowler's recording career - two real band sides, recorded for Columbia, under the name of "FOWLER'S FAVORITES".

These two sides certainly are of a different quality and calibre than everything recorded before by Fowler and his companions. (At this early place of my little article I would like to ask as to who on earth had the idea of attributing the very limited trumpet playing on Fowler's Washboard Wonders Columbia 14155 of April 6, 1926 to a great master of the art of jazz trumpet playing as Sidney De Paris? This assumption really makes me freeze.)

The two FOWLER'S FAVORITES sides do not show the usual quartet of trumpet, clarinet, piano and washboard as the earlier sides, but they exhibit a well rehearsed band in dance band instrumentation of obviously very skilled and first class musicians, different from those on the earlier releases.

Checking the discographies of the past we find the following personnels:

Jazz Directory Vol.3 (1956): Lem Fowler (p, vcl); unknown tpt; tbn; ten; alt; clt; bj; tu; d.

*Rust*2 (1961): unknown tpt; unknown tbn; unknown clt/alt; unknown ten; Lemuel Fowler pno/vcl; unknown bjo; unknown bbs; unknown dms*

*Rust*3 (1969): unknown t; unknown tb; ? Ernest Elliott -cl -ss; ? Charlie Holmes -as; unknown -ts; Lemuel Fowler -p -v; unknown -bj; unknown -bb; unknown -d*

*Rust*4 (1978): t; tb; ? Ernest Elliott -cl -ss; ? Charlie Holmes -as; ts; Lemuel Fowler -p -v; bj; bb; d*

*Rust*6 (2002): unknown t; tb; ? Ernest Elliott -cl -ss; ? Charlie Holmes -as; ts; Lemuel Fowler -p -v; bj; bb; d*

FROG DGF 66 CD booklet (2007): ?June Clark, t; unknown tb; ?Ernest Elliott, cl-ss-as; ?Benny Waters, ss-ts; Lemuel Fowler, p-v; unknown bj; bb; d.

The reader now should know that I have been exceedingly interested in anything related to June Clark, one of the great masters of the 1920s trumpet playing. A large article on his life and playing still awaits publication in the FROG Blues & Jazz Annual Vol. 4, which is announced for the very near future.

When working on this above article some years ago I was surprised to find June Clark listed as possible trumpet player for the FOWLER'S FAVORITES session in the FROG CD booklet. To my ears then the FAVORITES' trumpet player had nothing in common with Clark's style and characteristics. June Clark owned a very fiery style, seemingly bursting from inner tension, with irregular vibrato on the whole note – not as final vibrato as with other trumpet players -, attacking the notes a split second before the beat, thus sounding hectic and erratic, and with a big and fat tone, but this could not be detected anywhere on these sides, and so June Clark could not be the trumpet man.

But it was very interesting to see Benny Waters name suggested for the tenor player. This seemed very feasible and I thought this to be a clue for further suggestions. On the other side did I find the following in the cover notes of the VJM LP: "The personnel of the larger band is almost a total mystery. On first hearing the two sides I was reminded of the Bennie Moten band. Odd phrases provide suspicions as to the presence of men like Thamon Hayes and Woodie Walder. It would seem, however, that Moten was still in Chicago at this time. 'Hot Strut' has a definite link with 'South' – Moten on the mind". I wonder!

But let us first check the tunes and the instrumentation! What we hear is the usual dance band instrumentation of the Harlem scene: a trumpet, a trombone, two reed players, alto and tenor sax, and four part rhythm, a piano, a banjo, a brass bass, and drums.

The tunes are:

144627-1 Percolatin' Blues (Fowler) Key of Bb / Eb Columbia 14230-D

(Intro 4 bars clt - ens) (V1 Verse 16 bars AA' ens (tpt, tbn, clt, ten)) (V2 Verse 16 bars AA' clt/tbn 8 bars – clt 4 bars - tbn 2 bars – clt/tbn 2 bars) (A1 Chorus 32 bars ABAC tpt/ten 16 bars – sop/clt 16 bars) (A2 Chorus 32 bars ABAC voc – acc tpt/tbn) (V3 Verse AA' 16 bars ens (tpt, tbn, clt, ten)) (Bridge 4 bars ens modulation Bb to Eb) (B1 Chorus 18 bars AA' tbn) (B2 Chorus 18 bars AA' alt/ten in harmony) (B3 Chorus 18 bars AA' ens) (coda 2 bars cymbal)

144628-3 Hot Strut (Fowler) Key of Bb / Eb Columbia 14320-D

(Intro 4 bars ens) (A1 Chorus 18 bars AA' ens (tpt, tbn, clt, ten)) (A2 Chorus 18 bars AA' ten) (V1 Verse 16 bars AA ens) (V2 Verse AA clt/ten 8 bars – tbn 8 bars) (A3 Chorus 18 bars AA' ens) (Bridge 4 bars pno) (B1 Chorus 16 bars AA alt/ten 8 bars – ens/alt 8 bars) (B2 Chorus 16 bars AA pno) (B3 Chorus 16 bars AA ens) (Coda 8 bars ens – ten- clt – tpt – ens)

The trumpet player of the FAVORITES shows a very exact and clean-cut, no-nonsense playing, with good and clean tone and a good range, but little vibrato. He plays very secure and seems to be a good reader as these two titles certainly were not recorded by a working band – at least there is no known as Lem Fowler's. At the time of working on the June Clark article I tended to attribute this trumpet work to Clarence Wheeler who can be heard on the Fowler's Washboard Wonders sides of August/September 1925. Clarence Wheeler recorded with Alex Jackson's Plantation Orchestra on September 16, 1927 in Richmond for Gennett, thus only less than three months after the Fowler's

Favorites session. He certainly would have been capable to lead the FOWLER'S FAVORITES through the arrangements. As an alternate possibility I noted Leonard "Ham" Davis in my files, taking into account the very clear, strong and legitimate style of this player. Only the rather thin – or subdued – tone made me wonder and this would not fit to Davis' style of performance (compare Eddie's Hot Shots, February 8, 1929!).

On trombone we hear a musician with a rather shallow growl tone – not as voluminous and deep as Nanton's or Irvis' – and a nearly motionless expression and phrasing on the first title, whereas very agile and technically profound on the second title, yet here playing without mute, but with good range and speed, although fluffing a note.

Although Rust has three reed players in his editions from *3 on there certainly are only two of them, just as you might expect: an alto player who obviously doubles on clarinet, and a tenor player who doubles on soprano. There might even be the possibility that in the second half of chorus A1 of "Percolatin' Blues" the clarinet is played by the tenorist and the soprano played by the altoist! Be that as it may, the altoist is a hell of a reed player, very advanced – more so on alto than on clarinet, and it is unbelievable that Rust listed so limited a player as Ernest Elliott as clarinettist. As I see it did Rust find himself in a dilemma when he became aware that the altoist was much too good to be Elliott, and so he had to invent a third reed player – on alto – and gave him the name of Charlie Holmes, obviously of stylistic reasons. Only that Charlie Holmes moved to New York (together with Harry Carney) in early 1927 – at about the time of this session – and it is to be questioned whether he would have been engaged for a recording session at that early stage of his career – the more so for only one half-chorus. (His earliest documented recording being with Oliver's Dixie Syncopators in November 1928 – his questioned participation with James P. Johnson's Orchestra of June 1928 seems to be unfounded.) At no place of these two sides can you hear clarinet and alto played simultaneously, which certainly is further proof that both reeds are played by one player.

The tenorist certainly is remarkable a player as is the altoist. And it is understandable that the author of the FROG CD-booklet assumed him to be Benny Waters. But this player here is a lot smoother and more swinging than Waters in his early years, and there is ample reason to suggest that this man is a "western" player. (When thinking of other jazz tenor players in Harlem of the time it is interesting to note that there were not many distinct tenorists - apart from Hawkins, Prince Robinson, Benny Waters and a small couple of others fewer than might be expected!)

On piano – and on vocal – we certainly hear Mr. Lem Fowler himself, he very probably hailing from the mid-west, judging from his piano style. (The FROG CD-booklet offers a couple of details known of his life that shall not be repeated here.)

In the rhythm section we hear a capable banjo player, a remarkably capable tuba player, and a drummer playing the traps that were allowed him to play in this early state of recording technology – Andrew Hilaire of J.R. Morton's Red Hot Peppers already used the bass drum clearly on the Victor recordings of half a year earlier.

These then are the players heard, not in any way those as listed in the discographies above! The most consistent name found in the discs is Ernest Elliott, and I have to report that after compiling a listing of all his recordings and non-recordings – yet listed in the discs to encompass him – I have found him not to be present on these sides. But then: who were these capable and impressive players?

And then I happened to experience a sudden enlightenment!

The cardinal point of my recognition was the trombone player. This one-dimensional growl playing I knew from George Washington, trombonist with the Charlie Johnson band of 1928/9 (see my articles on Charlie Johnson in N&N57 and N&N63), and later the Mills Blue Rhythm Band and Louis Armstrong's Orchestra of the late 30s and early 40s. On Ch. Johnson's "Harlem Drag" a very similar growl solo by Washington can be heard, and – as I have attempted to show in N&N60 – he can also be heard on a couple of Clarence Williams items of late 1929 – obviously borrowed from the Ch. Johnson band. This player certainly can be heard on these two Fowler's Favorites sides!

My second acknowledgement was that there weren't so many tenor saxophonists in Harlem at that time playing "western" style – as said above. Checking through the few names known I came to Mr. Happy Caldwell – he coming from the Chicago jazz scene of the early twenties and thus playing in a swinging western style, to be heard with Thomas Morris' Seven Hot Babies – not Elliott here! – and Eddie Condon's Hot Shots, as well as possibly shown in my article on the Georgia Strutters in N&N73.

In L. Wright's article on Caldwell – "Happy Horn" in Storyville 99 – Happy recalls: *"One of the bands I worked with in New York was Arthur Gibbs – that would be around 1927, or maybe 1926. I've played so many places ... night clubs and cabarets, that I just can't remember. I know we made records with Arthur Gibbs, that was in the Victor (sic!) studio downtown. We had Leonard Davis on trumpet, Gene Mikell and myself were the reeds, we had to double on clarinet and soprano sax. George Washington was the trombone player... Bob Bennett (sic!) on guitar and ... Billy Taylor, that's the father of Billy Taylor, on bass and tuba and Sammy Hodges on drums. He was no relation of Johnny or of Tommy. We also worked the Savoy, and the guys had made records before I joined them."*

With these two distinct players in mind I remembered a very interesting photo in Timme Rosenkrantz's beautiful book "Is This To Be My Souvenir?" of the Arthur Gibbs band of 1927/8, a band which is not commonly known, but which played the Savoy and Arcadia ballrooms in New York mid 1927 to mid 1928. (A different photo of this elusive band can be found in "theraisjazzbeforetrane.blogspot.de") Washington and Caldwell both were members of that band. This band's trumpet player then was Leonard 'Ham' Davis, a musician I had earlier assumed to be a candidate for the trumpet player (see above) on the Fowler sides. 'Ham' Davis can also be heard majestically on the Condon's Hot Shots sides, and with the Charlie Johnson band (also with Jackson's Southern Serenaders, a Ch. Johnson pseudonym). On this photo Davis shows a cornet, not a trumpet, as his instrument, and this might be a hint as to his rather thin tone on the Fowler sides. His tone is much more voluminous on the Condon's Hot Shots and the Charlie Johnson sides, where he plays a trumpet!

Having now found three musicians that were in an appropriate class as those heard on the Fowler sides – and who could very well be the musicians searched for – it became urgent to see who the clarinettist/altoist could be. As it was often the case with musicians of the Harlem scene who had contracts with recording companies, but no steady band, did they hire parts of other bands or even complete units to use them for recording under their own name. So it was necessary to check if one of the two reedmen on the photo – Edgar Sampson and Eugene Mikell – could be our altoist.

Eugene Mikell certainly is a very well known name in early big bands of the Harlem scene, but he is not distinctly known as a soloist or improviser. He seems to have been more a reliable section man, not so much of a soloist, and in his reminiscences in the Storyville yearbook 1998/9 he only talks about others plying the solos. I myself would get into trouble to tell the reader where Mikell could be heard soloing, except for the baritone parts on the Joe Steele Orchestra sides! But following Happy Caldwell's report above he very probably is the clarinet/alto player here on the Fowler's Favorites sides, and it is really astonishing how he handles the clarinet part and – even more so – the

alto solo breaks in Chorus B1 of "Hot Stuff". I have to admit that I thought of Sampson as alto/clarinet player because of this player's fine craftsmanship before getting aware of Happy Caldwell's remembrance.

On piano then we certainly hear the leader himself, Lem Fowler. The compositions are his, showing typical piano pieces which he played as piano solos otherwise, with a row of different strains. The Columbia people obviously were interested to attribute him a qualified band for his last recording session showing no further interest in recording him. And it is my firm suggestion that they made use of the just then forming Arthur Gibbs band, possibly offered by Gibbs himself, a way of recruiting musicians that was common in the 20s and – as I have shown in several cases (see also N&N 73, Georgia Strutters of May 23, 1927) – employed by Clarence Williams, Perry Bradford and others.

If I am right, the rhythm players would certainly also be found in the Gibbs band: Paul Burnett, banjo, Billy Taylor, tuba, and Sammy Hodges, drums.

Billy Taylor is no unknown, and this tuba player's characteristics accord with the tuba playing on the last Charlie Johnson session and the McKinney Cotton Pickers sessions from November 1929 on. He certainly was an experienced and attentive player, even that early in his career.

Paul Burnett on banjo and Sammy Hodges on drums are not unknowns, but their styles seem not to be documented on record anywhere as they are not listed in any editions of Rust.

Burnett, yet, is mentioned as banjo player with Earle Howard in 1923 (Storyville 88-135) and with Wen Talbert and Bubber Miley in the early 1930s (Storyville 87-98/9). Bob Bennett – as reported by Caldwell above – yet, was Stuff Smith's guitarist in 1936.

Drummer Sammy Hodges' naming in the Caldwell article is the only one I could find anywhere.

Concluding, I feel very certain to have found the FOWLER'S FAVORITES personnel as explained above. Happy Caldwell's remembrance of the Victor studio can safely be ignored as – very often in recollections of jazz musicians – their memories have suffered with age and the recording of two titles sometime between job and going home for a little rest is not as significant as to remember it exactly after so many years. Suffice it to say that it was one of the leading record companies. But Caldwell's naming Mikell – and not Sampson, the more famous one – seems to be important as this kind of remembrance certainly is correct.

Rust and any other discographies should then be amended as follows:

FOWLER'S FAVORITES

New York, July 5, 1927

Leonard Davis, cnt; George Washington, tbn; Eugene Mikell, clt, alt; Happy Caldwell, ten, sop;
Lem Fowler, pno, voc (1); *Paul Burnett*, bjo; Billy Taylor, bbs; *Sammy Hodges*, dms.

144627-1 Percolatin' Blues
144628-3 Hot Stuff

Col 14230-D
Col 14230-D

I hope that one of the persistent mysteries of jazz history has thus found a reasonable and logical solution! I have to look now for other recordings of this bunch of musicians before Happy Caldwell's joined them.

References:

Storyville 1998/9, p.88

Storyville 87, p.98/9

Storyville 88, p. 135

F. Büchmann-Moeller, Is This To Be My Souvenir?, Jazz Photos from the Timme Rosenkrantz Collection 1918 – 1969, Odense University Press, 2000

My sincerest thanks to Michael Rader again for persistent advice and help!