

SOME REMARKS ON THE EARLY CHICK WEBB BAND

by K.-B. Rau

The recently issued Mosaic CD set of all the Decca recordings of Chick Webb and Ella Fitzgerald is fantastic! Never before have you heard Webb's unequalled drumming so clear and with all its facets as you can do here, except for on clear 78s. But I do have a little quibble, allow me. The producers of the set – although usually very attentive with such things – simply copied Rust's personnels for the early Jungle Band recordings. So some small corrections should be appropriate here:

- Following my remarks about trombone player William Paris in my article on the Original Jazz Hounds (see elsewhere in this issue) the personnel for Chick Webb's Harlem Stompers of 25 August 1927 in Rust*6 should certainly be: Bobby Stark – tpt; William R. Paris – tbn; Johnny Hodges – alt; Elmer Williams – ten; Don Kirkpatrick – pno; Benny James – bjo, gtr; Leon England – bbs; Chick Webb – dms. This is the common dance band instrumentation of the period in Harlem when not augmented for larger premises. Arrangements were written for this basic personnel with possible parts for additional musicians. A personnel of tpt – 2 altos – ten – rhythm as listed in Rust*6 would have been very abnormal at the time, Frankie Newton used it ten years later, and possibly others, too. No William Paris is mentioned anywhere as altoist, but certainly as trombonist.
- The personnel for the Jungle Band should have Hilton Jefferson and Joe Garland as altoists – according to Elmer Williams' testimony. In 1929 Louis Jordan hadn't even moved to Philadelphia – where he became part of the Charlie Gaines band in 1932 – and was somewhere in the south at that early time. He joined the Webb Band not earlier than late 1935. The clarinet solo in *Jungle Mama* is by Garland (Johnny Simmen in Coda 11-1975). As always these facts could have been common knowledge for a long time now, but I am sorry to say that the writer of the CD booklet has none of it and uses Rust's mistakes for his article.
- It is definitely wrong that Webb is omitted on *Jungle Mama*. At the very end of the tune you can clearly hear Webb on his hand-cymbal with some sort of final cymbal stroke. Obviously the band's placement in the studio was different from the one of the *Dog Bottom* session so that Webb cannot be easily heard. So Webb definitely is present on his own recording here! How else?!
- When listening to *Dog Bottom* you can beautifully hear Webb on his hand-cymbal – very clear and close to the mike, but only the hand-cymbal. Had he used his whole drum-kit he would certainly have been placed far from the mike in those days. But we cannot hear a bass-drum or a snare-drum anywhere on the record. So I assume that he stood or sat close to the mike to play only his solo cymbal parts with the band – and maybe conduct the band. (Listen to Fletcher Henderson's *Come On Baby* and *Easy Money* where you can hear the same thing: Kaiser Marshall with choked cymbal close to the mike, but no other drum sounds.) Obviously Webb did only use the hand-cymbal on this record. On *Jungle Mama* he might have used a snare-drum, but far from the mike, so that it cannot be heard. For the final cymbal stroke he used his hand-cymbal – which was very fashionable at the time, being a recent invention of the Zildjian company – also far off the mike.
- A very beautiful photo of the early Chick Webb band with Stark and Hodges can be found on the cover of Harlequin HQ 2038 *Black Bands on Film 1928 – 1935*, which to my knowledge has never appeared anywhere else in recent years. It very clearly shows Webb's Zildjian hand-cymbal, and the personnel is (from left to right): prob. *Bobby Holmes* – alt; unknown – tpt; Elmer Williams – ten; Bobby Stark – tpt; poss. *William Paris* – tbn; Johnny Hodges – alt; John Trueheart – bjo; prob. *Lawson Buford* – bbs; Don Kirkpatrick – pno; Chick Webb – dms. I only wished we had some records of this band!
- The Webb band of 1929 also performed in an early sound short called "After Seben" (*sic*) which can be easily watched on You Tube (see Meeker "Jazz In The Movies" for details). A still from this film had been issued in an early German pocket book jazz guide "Die Jazz Diskothek" by G. Elmenhorst and W. von Bebenburg in 1961, and it clearly shows the following personnel l. to r.: prob. *Elmer James* – bbs; John Trueheart – bjo; Chick Webb – dms; Benny Morton – tbn; Ward Pinkett – tpt; prob. Don Kirkpatrick – pno (hidden); Edwin Swayzee – tpt; Bobby Holmes – clt; Elmer Williams – ten; Hilton Jefferson – alt. The same photo can be found in Driggs/Lewine "Black Beauty, White Heat". The musical sound-track of the film had first been issued on John R.T. Davies' elusive Ristic SAC Special and later on the above mentioned Harlequin HQ 2038. It consists of three snippets of *Sweet Sue, Just You* (3 single choruses – fitted together on the Harlequin LP), 2 choruses of *Tiger Rag* and 8 bars of *I Ain't Got Nobody*. All this music is played ad lib, without recognizable arrangements, but shows the amazing discipline a big band of capable players was able to play with. The LP issues do not contain the music introduction to the movie – *I Ain't Got Nobody* – of which I doubt that it is the Webb band. The sound seems to belong to a studio band (and may even later be added to the version shown on You Tube ?). And they also do not contain a vocal by star performer James Barton with nice accompaniment by the band's pianist who very probably is Don Kirkpatrick: *I'm Sitting On The Inside, Looking At The Outside, Waiting For The Evenin' Mail*. Very much worth watching, and maybe Mark Cantor might be willing to write more about it?