

THE RECORDINGS OF LEROY SMITH AND HIS ORCHESTRA

An Annotated Tentative Personnelo-Discography

SMITH, Leroy, violinist, bandleader

born: Romeo, Michigan, 1888; died: 1962

Born in Romeo, violinist and bandleader Leroy Smith grew up in Detroit. His father was employed as a cornetist for Finney's Orchestra, and in time, Leroy would also become a member. Classically trained, he was slow to warm to the improvisational nature of jazz, and although his records feature a jazz element, they often employ a more symphonic approach to the popular music form. After his experience with the Finney Orchestra, the young Leroy Smith founded his own orchestra and booked units of varying size throughout the region. From 1914 through 1919, the Leroy Smith Orchestra – sometimes numbering as many as 16 pieces – enjoyed a five-year engagement at Detroit's Pier Ballroom. Leroy Smith's Orchestra, along with those of Finney, Finzel, and (Charles - KBR) Stone, were best regarded as a "society" orchestra. In smaller units, sometimes considered a salon orchestra, capable of rendering the latest music best suited to dancing and dining. Leroy Smith and his Orchestra had benefited greatly from their popularity and reputation. By the early 1920s, the band sought to gain national attention and moved on to New York City (summer of 1921 – KBR), where they soon became the house band at Connie's Inn (1923 – 1926 – KBR). Smith returned to Detroit permanently in 1938. He had success leading bands, recording, and acting as musical director for shows in New York, but with the responsibility of caring for his widowed mother, Smith needed to find work in a Depression-ravaged Detroit. Realizing his inestimable value, the government named him supervisor of the WPA musicians aid program. (He was active well into the 1950s - KBR.) (the Hackley Collection)

This personnelo-discography is based on Rust, Jazz And Ragtime Records 1897 - 1942.

Personnels are taken from this source, but modified in the light of earlier or subsequent research or on the strength of my own listening, discussed with our listening group or other interested collectors.

- Documented, most certain and aurally absolutely obvious identifications are listed thus: **Leroy Smith**
- Probable, generally agreed, but not documented identifications are listed in italics, thus: *Leroy Smith*
- Not attributable identifications – although the musician in question might be an otherwise well-known person – are listed thus: *unknown*
- If a possible identification for an otherwise unknown musician is suggested by the author without the possibility to prove the factual evidence, it is listed thus: (*Leroy Smith*)

When feeling certain without a musician's documented presence, I have not refrained from altering Rust's statements without using italics.

In any case, my statements are open to discussion and I would appreciate any contribution - pro or contra!

As always in my discographies on this website I have written recording sessions with their headings, dates, titles and names of musicians in italics, whenever I am convinced that the eponymous musician of this discography is not part of the accompanying group of this session!

Documented names of musicians if known – in recording ledgers or on record labels – are listed in bold letters.

This discography still is - and will certainly be - a work in progress for a long time, if not eternally. Yet, on the way to a definite discography of all jazz recordings before 1942 - which certainly will never be possible - it is intended to fill some gaps that have not been treated before.

The following statements and the resulting list of recordings only reflect the opinion of this writer/listener and are open to discussion. More so, discussion is eagerly invited. Corrections, amendments and controversial opinions are much appreciated.

Albert McCarthy, Big Band Jazz: "Leroy Smith and his Band: ... its connection with big band jazz is only peripheral. It was very popular for many years, however, and Smith is an interesting example of a coloured musician of the older school who took a long time to come to terms with jazz, if in fact he ever did."

LEROY SMITH AND HIS ORCHESTRA**001 LEROY SMITH AND HIS ORCHESTRA**

New York,

c. Jun. 24, 1921

Leroy Smith – vln, ldr;

Frank Belt, Pike Davis – tpt; TeRoy Williams – tbn;*Emerson Harper* – alt, clt; *Harold Henson* – alt; *Stan Peters* – ten;*Harry Brooks* – pno; *Sam Speed* – bjo; *Fred Peters* – bbs; unknown – dms

7639

Saturday

Voc 14218

not on LP/CD, but held

With regret I have to note that five of the few 13 titles/takes of the entire output of Leroy Smith and his Orchestra are not reissued on LP or CD. This is one of them.

But: I have just recently been lucky to receive a down-load of this title by e-mail from a well-known and most respected – and very generous – European jazz scholar. (My heart-felt thanks!!!). Thus, I am able to describe this title as an entirely straight rendering of the tune's syncopated themes, played from contemporaneous scores in early 20s dance band manner.

The tune's order is: 4 bars introduction, 16 bars Strain A1, 16 bars Strain A2, 32 bars Strain B1, 16 bars Strain A3, 32 bars Strain B2. The two solo breaks each of trombone and piano in the B-Strains are not improvised but played from the score. The band is led by Leroy Smith's violin.

Notes:

*Rust*2: prob: Frank Belt, Charlie Gaines, Pike Davis (tpt); Leroy Williams (tbn); Emerson Harper (clt, alt, oboe); Harold Henson (alt, cello, sbs); Stan Peters (ten, bsn); Leroy Smith (vln, ldr); Harry Brooks (pno); Samuel Speed (bjo); Frank Peters (bbs); unknown (dms)*
*- Rust*3,*4,*6: prob: Frank Belt -Pike Davis -t; TeRoy Williams -tb; Emerson Harper -cl -as -o; Harold Henson -as -vc -sb; Stan Peters -ts -bsn; Leroy Smith -vn -ldr; Harry Brooks -p; Samuel Speed -bj; Fred Peters -bb; unknown -d*

- Garvin Bushell, Jazz From The Beginning: "Williams, Te Roy: trombonist. He recorded in 1921 with Leroy Smith, and in 1927 with both Leroy Tibbs and a group under his own name."

Solos (not necessarily ad-lib):

7639: No ad-lib solos or obligatos

002 LEROY SMITH AND HIS ORCHESTRA

New York,

c. Jul. 21, 1921

Leroy Smith – vln, ldr;

Frank Belt, Pike Davis – tpt; TeRoy Williams – tbn;*Emerson Harper* – alt, clt; *Harold Henson* – alt; *Stan Peters* – ten, clt;*Harry Brooks* – pno; *Sam Speed* – bjo; *Fred Peters* – bbs; unknown – dms

7753

Love Will Find A Way

Hom H-215

not on LP/CD, but held

7754

Love Will Find A Way

Voc 14218

not on LP/CD, but held

The second un-reissued title of the Leroy Smith Orchestra's output. An evaluation of its musical content is impossible, as well.

Just as with the title 'Saturday' above, I also received a down-load of both takes of this 'Love Will Find A Way'. The tune is played mainly straight and from score by the band, but has Pike Davis on his shiny and crisp trumpet playing a – for him - typical staccato obligato above the ensemble, in parts together with one of the reed players on clarinet, probably Emerson Harper. Take 7753 was hitherto unlisted!

The tune's order is: 2 bars introduction, 16 bars Verse, 8 bars Vamp, 32 bars Strain A, 32 bars Strain B, 32 bars Strain B (both rhythmically pepped up – swingingly), 32 bars Strain A. This is typical very early 1920s' dance music with a jazzy flavour. Again, the arrangement does not yet have the dividing of the band in sections, as usual in later years' dance arrangements. But it is a bit jazzy and syncopated.

And again my heart-felt thanks to the generous spender!

Notes:

*Rust*2: prob: Frank Belt, Charlie Gaines, Pike Davis (tpt); Leroy Williams (tbn); Emerson Harper (clt, alt, oboe); Harold Henson (alt, cello, sbs); Stan Peters (ten, bsn); Leroy Smith (vln, ldr); Harry Brooks (pno); Samuel Speed (bjo); Frank Peters (bbs); unknown (dms)*
*- Rust*3,*4,*6: prob: Frank Belt -Pike Davis -t; TeRoy Williams -tb; Emerson Harper -cl -as -o; Harold Henson -as -vc -sb; Stan Peters -ts -bsn; Leroy Smith -vn -ldr; Harry Brooks -p; Samuel Speed -bj; Fred Peters -bb; unknown -d*

- Garvin Bushell, Jazz From The Beginning: "Williams, Te Roy: trombonist. He recorded in 1921 with Leroy Smith, and in 1927 with both Leroy Tibbs and a group under his own name."

Solos (not necessarily ad-lib):

7753: PD o-tpt obl 32; PD o-tpt + ?EH clt obl 32 + 32

7754: PD o-tpt obl 32; ?EH clt obl 32; PD o-tpt + ?EH clt obl 32

Notable differences of takes:

7753: Trumpet obligato starts on second bar of first ensemble strain A (bar 28 of recorded tune), no notes in bar 27

7754: Trumpet obligato starts on first bar of first ensemble strain A (bar 27 of recorded tune) with one single eighth-note bb on measure 4 before the first triplet

003 LEROY SMITH AND HIS ORCHESTRA

New York,

c. Sep. 1924

Leroy Smith – vln, ldr;

Frank Belt, Pike Davis – tpt; Robert Lewis – tbn;*Emerson Harper* – alt, clt, oboe; *Harold Henson* – alt; *Stan Peters* – ten, clt, bcl;*Harry Brooks* – pno; *Sam Speed* – bjo; *Fred Peters* – bbs; *Edward Beeler* – dms

2016-B Indian Love Call

Ebs 1027,

not on LP/CD, but held

2017-A Harlem's Araby

GG 1283,

Jazz Oracle BDW 8038

2017-B Harlem's Araby

GG 1283,

Jazz Oracle BDW 8038

2020 Dixie Dreams

Ebs 1027

not on LP/CD

2021-B June Brought The Roses (waltz)

Ebs 1017

not on LP/CD

Morning (Won't You Ever Come Round?)

B-D 1001,

Frog DGF 79

Stop And Listen

B-D 1001,

Frog DGF 79

Composer credits: 2017 (Trent - Waller)

'Indian Love Call' starts with some military signals, probably played by Pike Davis with his sharp and strong tone. The remaining parts of the tune are played straight from scores, without any improvised solos. I am un-certain whether we hear a piccolo-oboe after the alto sax solo.

'Harlem's Araby', a Fats Waller composition, has some improvised parts by trumpet, bass-clarinet and banjo, but mostly features straight playing by some very skilled musicians. The band plays with a very strict and strong rhythm. In the rhythm-section we find banjo player Sam Speed. This is a name used very often for unknown banjo players in the discographies, when a definite player could not be found out. (I - KBR – would wish somebody to check all these Sam Speed notions in the discos to discover their veracity.) But his presence in the Leroy Smith band at least indicates his instrumental abilities and his qualification for advanced big band playing.

'Dixie Dreams' and – as I assume – 'June Brought Roses' are without any jazz content, and therefore probably not re-issued in any form.

'Morning' has trumpet soloistic by Pike Davis using a bucket mute. The tenor sax solo is straight, only, followed by an oboe solo by lead player Emerson Harper, probably. He fittingly cites the 'Morning Mood' from Edward Grieg's first Peer Gynt suite.

'Stop And Listen' restricted piano parts by Harry Brooks and equally so by banjoist Sam Speed (here is documental material to compare!). And again, Pike Davis plays into the 'bucket'.

Notes:

*Rust*2: prob: Frank Belt, Charlie Gaines, Pike Davis (tpt); Leroy Williams (tbn); Emerson Harper (clt, alt, oboe); Harold Henson (alt, cello, sbs); Stan Peters (ten, bsn); Leroy Smith (vln, ldr); Harry Brooks (pno); Samuel Speed (bjo); Frank Peters (bbs); unknown (dms)*

*- Rust*3,*4,*6: prob: Frank Belt -Pike Davis -t; Robert Lewis -tb; Emerson Harper -cl -as -o; Harold Henson -as -vc -sb; Stan Peters -ts -bsn; Leroy Smith -vn -ldr; Harry Brooks -p; Samuel Speed -bj; Fred Peters -bb; Edward Beeler -d*

Solos (not necessarily ad-lib):

2016: PD o-tpt 20; HB pno 4; HH alt 30; EH ?piccolo oboe 16; EH oboe 14

2017: FB o-tpt 16; RL o-tbn 8; FB o-tpt 8; ? ten 15; SP bcl 16; SS bjo 8; SP bcl 8; PD o-tpt 32; HH alt 4; FB m-tpt 16; HH alt 4; ?EH clt 8+8+2

Morning: PD o-tpt 1 + 1; PD m-tpt 16; SP ten 8; EH oboe 8

Stop And Listen: HB pno 4; HB pno 6 + 6; SS bjo 8+8+6; alt 18; LS vln + HB pno 18; FP bbs 6 + 6; PD o-tpt 2 + m-tpt 4

Notable differences of takes:

2017-B: In bar 16 of first chorus o-tpt plays 3 hard syncopated quarter-notes eb-eb-eb, immediately before trombone starts

2017-2: In bar 16 of first chorus only the rhythm section plays before trombone starts

004 LEROY SMITH AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Camden, NJ,

Feb. 23, 1928

Leroy Smith – vln, ldr;

Frank Belt, Charlie Gaines – tpt; Wilbur de Paris – tbn;

Emerson Harper, Harold Henson – alt, clt; Stan Peters – ten, clt;

Leroy Smith, John Long – vln;

Harry Brooks – pno; Sam Speed – bjo; Fred Peters – bbs; Edward Beeler – dms,

43428-2 Rhapsody In Blue

Vic 21328,

Frog DGF 8

43429-2 St. Louis Blues

Vic 21328,

Frog DGF 8

Composer credits: 43428 (George Gershwin); 43429 (W.C. Handy)

The first title, 'Rhapsody In Blue', is a very dexterously condensed version of George Gershwin's piano concertino, without the piano solo part, yet arranged for a dance band. It is known that every band of fame had to feature this composition of 1924 in their programs. This title bears no hot solos.

'St. Louis Blues' offers hot solos by Emerson Harper on clarinet, Wilbur de Paris on muted trombone, then a trumpet solo – played into the derby hat - on a minor blues chord scheme which I'd attribute to the first trumpet player, Frank Belt, played with a beautiful range. The following trumpet solo – played with a plunger mute – obviously is by Charlie Gaines, and shows his straight ahead linear and horizontal style, swinging, bluesy and jazzy.

Very interesting is the writer's and interviewer's comment on this recording of 'St. Louis Blues' in IAJRC 10 – 2: "He (Ch. Gaines – KBR) also has a 1927 recording of the "St. Louis Blues" he made with Leroy Smith. His short plunger-muted outburst at the end of the work is the only saving grace in a hopelessly chaotic arrangement, reminiscent of Paul Whiteman." No, no! That arrangement is not chaotic! Not at all! But it is not of the kind jazz aficionados like. And the drummer, Beeler, doubles on bell-tambourine.

The band plays very professionally and exact and verifies their excellent reputation. And: what a marvellous tuba player they have! And: this band offers the only really documented performances of banjo player Sam Speed. And mind his very exact and strong rhythm.

I hear two violins, contrary to the discographies.

Notes:

- Jazz Information 2/2-28: John Long, violin and front; Frank Belt, first trumpet; Charlie Gains, second trumpet; Pike Davis, third trumpet; Leroy Williams, trombone; Emerson (Geechy) Harper, alto sax, clarinet, oboe; Stanley Petrs, tenor sax, bassoon; Harold Henson, alto sax, -

*Rust*2: prob: Frank Belt, Charlie Gaines (tpt); Wilbur de Paris (tbn); Emerson Harper, Harold Henson – alt, clt; Stan Peters – ten; Leroy Smith – vln; Harry Brooks – pno; Sam Speed – bjo; Fred Peters – bbs; Edward Beeler – dms*

*- Rust*3,*4,*6: prob: Frank Belt, Charlie Gaines (tpt); Wilbur de Paris (tbn); Robert Lewis – frh; Emerson Harper, Harold Henson – alt, clt; Stan Peters – ten; John Long – vln; Harry Brooks – pno; Sam Speed – bjo; Fred Peters – bbs; Edward Beeler – dms*

Solos (not necessarily ad-lib):

43428: ?EH clt 4+20+1; FB m-tpt 4; HB pno 2; FB o-tpt 3; FB m-tpt 8 + 4; WdP o-tbn 7; HB pno 2

43429: HB pno 4; SP ten 14; EH clt 12; WdP m-tbn 12; FB m-tpt 11; CG m-tpt 12; HB pno 2

005 LEROY SMITH AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Camden, NJ,

Apr. 02, 1928

Leroy Smith – vln, ldr;

Frank Belt, Charlie Gaines – tpt; Wilbur de Paris – tbn;

Emerson Harper, Harold Henson – alt, clt; Stan Peters – ten, clt; John Long – vln;

Harry Brooks – pno; Sam Speed – bjo; Fred Peters – bbs; Edward Beeler – dms, bells, xyl

43432 I'm Riding To Glory (With A Glorious Girl)

Vic unissued on 78,

Frog DGF 12

43433-2 I'm A Broken-Hearted Blackbird

Vic 21472,

Frog DGF 8

Composer credits: 43433 (Dorothy Fields – Jimmy McHugh)

And again, a very professional and smooth performance. A first-class orchestra – cultivated and expert, yet not as hot as I would have wished. The bell notes at the beginning of the introduction of the first title are played on orchestra bells, the bell like notes after the brass phrases – still in the intro – a little later are probably played by the drummer – or the pianist? – on a xylophone.

There might be a flute in the introduction to the second title, which also features a rather strange clarinet solo.

Unfortunately, we do not hear any hot solos in these titles.

Notes:

- Jazz Information 2/2-28: John Long, violin and front; Frank Belt, first trumpet; Charlie Gains, second trumpet; Pike Davis, third trumpet; Leroy Williams, trombone; Emerson (Geechy) Harper, alto sax, clarinet, oboe; Stanley Petrs, tenor sax, bassoon; Harold Henson, alto sax, cello, string bass; Harry Brooks, pinao; Sam Speede, banjo; Fred Petrs, bass; unknown, drums (from Leroy Harris, sen.)

- Rust*2: prob: Frank Belt, Charlie Gaines (tpt); Wilbur de Paris (tbn); Emerson Harper, Harold Henson – alt, clt; Stan Peters – ten; Leroy Smith – vln; Harry Brooks – pno; Sam Speed – bjo; Fred Peters – bbs; Edward Beeler – dms

- Rust*3,*4,*6: prob: Frank Belt, Charlie Gaines (tpt); Wilbur de Paris (tbn); Robert Lewis – frh; Emerson Harper, Harold Henson – alt, clt; Stan Peters – ten; John Long – vln; Harry Brooks – pno; Sam Speed – bjo; Fred Peters – bbs; Edward Beeler – dms

Solos (not necessarily ad-lib):

43432: SP ten 15; FB m-tpt 8; HB pno + FB m-tpt 16; LS vln 8; HB pno + FB m-tpt 7; LS vln 7

43433: LS vln 14; ?EH clt 14

OK! This is not really hot and blue big band jazz, but it is expertly played hot dance music by a band of black musicians, who really knew how to do it. And also this music was a distinct part of the music of Harlem in the 1920/30! So, be tolerant, liberal and open-minded, and enjoy!

SOURCES:

Albert McCarthy, Big Band Jazz: “Leroy Smith and his Band: ... its connection with big band jazz is only peripheral. It was very popular for many years, however, and Smith is an interesting example of a coloured musician of the older school who took a long time to come to terms with jazz, if in fact he ever did.

The story of the Smith band was recounted to Bertrand Demeusy during the late 'sixties by Emerson 'Geechie' Harper, one of its two surviving members. Smith was already leading a dance orchestra when Harper first met him in Detroit in 1917. A year later, Harper joined its band. The first New York engagement was at Reisenweber's on 8th Avenue in autumn 1921. From 1924, the band worked at Connie's Inn where it was often resident in the following years. It went on tour with a road production of the Connie's Inn revue 'Hot Chocolates' around 1933. During the next two years the band went out for a second season and had residencies in Cleveland, Philadelphia, and again, Connie's Inn. Soon afterwards, the depression arrived and the band broke up. Smith returned to Detroit, where in subsequent years he led small dance orchestras and conducted concerts in public parks. After several years of ill health, he died of cancer on 23rd November 1962.

Though Smith came from a musical background which frowned on ad-libbing and led what was strictly a show band, he was forced to make some musical concessions. After coming to New York, he added trumpeter Clifton 'Pike' Davis to his group. Charlie Gaines, Bill Dillard (trumpet), Wilbur de Paris (trombone), Louis Jordan, Arville Harris (saxes), Lloyd Phillips (piano), Kaiser Marshall and Walter Johnson (drums) were some of the jazz stylists who worked with him in later years. Mr Harper has said that Smith always featured improvisation sparingly, and only allowed the musicians he considered proficient in the style to take ad lib solos. The band recorded on four occasions. 'Rhapsody In Blue' and 'St. Louis Blues' released in 1928 best reflect its style. It also appeared in a short film titled 'Flying Fists' that featured Benny Leonard.”

Lars Bjorn with Jim Gallert, Before Motown: “Detroit's best known black society band was led by Leroy Smith. Smith was born in Romeo, Michigan, in 1888, but his family moved to Detroit while he was a baby. His father was a cornetist with the Finnie band, and Leroy's violin training “was put in the hands of the best private teachers in Detroit”, according to a 1939 'Detroit Tribune' interview with Smith. Smith favorably contrasted the fundamental musical training that he and other young black musicians received in the second decade of the twentieth century to that of “the youngsters of today who only have swing on their mind.” According to Emerson 'geechie' Harper, who worked with him prior to 1920, “Smith always insisted on musicians what was written, havin been taught himself by European musicians. He was rigid as to reading, improvisation, ad-libbing and 'getting off'. It was not until several years later that he gave in to the modern trend and even then only featured improvisation sparingly. ... Smith's longest engagement in Detroit was with his 16-piece band at the Pier Ballroom from 1914 to 1919. ... In the summer of 1921 Smith went to New York City, making records, and enjoyed an extended engagement at Connie's Inn (1923-26). But by 1938 Smith was reestablished in Detroit and, according to his trumpeter Russell Green, “played for all the millionaires”. He was active well into the 1950s and died in 1962.”

See also: Jon Milan: Detroit, Ragtime and the Jazz Age.

And a very big thank to Ate van Delden of the Netherlands for knowledge of hitherto unknown delights!

K. – B. Rau
16-10-2024
15-04-2025