

# THE RECORDINGS OF THE FIVE MUSICAL BLACKBIRDS

## An Annotated Tentative Personnel - Discography

This personnel-discography is based on RUST, JAZZ AND RAGTIME RECORDS 1897 - 1942.

Personnel 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: **Ted Brown**
- Probable, generally agreed, but not documented identifications are listed in italics, thus: *Ted Brown*
- 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: (*Ted Brown*)

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.

### FIVE MUSICAL BLACKBIRDS

#### 001 **FIVE MUSICAL BLACKBIRDS**

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

*Louis Hooper* – pno; Herb Brown – bjo

106633 Hot Coffee

106634 Carolina Stomp

106635 18<sup>th</sup> 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

- 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.

After all, I do not believe Mrs. Morris and Fuller to be capable of playing these arrangements at a recording session like this one, without much of a rehearsal as usual.

This is what our listening team had to say about this session a couple of years ago:

**DB:** This is a strange session with an almost white sound. The cornet is very stiff but I think we have arrangements here which might account for that. Not possible to exclude Tom but, if so, untypical. The Bros. Brown I reckon to have been extracted from a hat by Hooper when his memory failed.

**JO:** The standard personnel identification - with Morris and mysterious brothers (?) Brown - seems to have originated with the Louis Hooper Discography in Record Research 77 (June 1966), which states: "*The following identifications are based on Louis's aural study of the records in question.*"

However, the "personal recollections" section presents a contradiction. Exactly as printed: "*I'm quite sure I never recorded with Tommy Morris (research has proven otherwise) (I don't think so! - KBR) although I knew him well... I arranged his Charleston Strut for publication.*"

Now, an obvious question: what "research"? One simple explanation would be that Hooper listened to the sides and identified - or agreed upon - Morris. In any event, firm identification of otherwise "unknowns" Ted and Herb Brown suggests either a clear recollection, or some sort of documentation. A closing capsule bio of the author, Jim Kidd (born 1935), has him living in Canada and working as Production Manager at CFCF.

I think these sides may have been recorded a bit slow: sounding a little fast when played back at 78rpm, making identification more difficult. Morris rarely recorded at such consistently bright tempi: the cornet's rather clipped delivery and tight melodic lead seem somewhat anomalous - yet these are found (along with tonal similarities) on *The Chinch* (session 069, 36963-2). The breaks and embellishments on the FMBs seem typical of Morris. On *Black Horse Stomp*, one hears much of the same tone and phrasing he used on his breakout *Original Charleston Strut* (session 003) (the theme of *Black Horse Stomp* employs a similar progression). In a comparison of Morris's solo at 1:30 on *Original Charleston Strut* to the cornet lead beginning at :54 on *Black Horse Stomp*, the tone and phrasing seem almost identical.. Listening to Harry Cooper's Pathé session with Ellington the same month reveals a few similarities, also some incongruities... nothing really conclusive, I think.

On a confirmed Morris date with Evelyn Preer in September (session 062), she exclaims "Hot coffee, get off of them grounds", during an ensemble passage (36099-2). I don't think I'd heard this expression before. "Hot Coffee" is a title from the FMB session; had she heard the record?

Anyway, I'd recommend: *Thomas Morris - cnt*

**MR:** Agree that this is not Morris.

**KBR:** For this session Thomas Morris has formerly been listed as cnt player, but this probably is not a Th. Morris item! Yet, Jim Kidd in his discography on Louis Hooper (Record Research 77) lists this item as a Thomas Morris accompaniment which I (KBR) think impossible. It is my firm believe that Hooper's identification is wrong here, or, more so, that Morris' name is listed not because of Hooper's recollections but because of generally listing him up to that time (1966).

Notes:

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

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

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

041 **ROSA HENDERSON** Four Musical Blackbirds

New York,

Mar. 31, 1926

Rosa Henderson - voc;

*Thomas Morris* - cnt; 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.

This is what our listening team had to say about this session a couple of years ago:

**DB:** nothing to indicate Tom but there is little exposed cornet. Tom’s normal intros are not there but I would not totally exclude as possible. Clt sounds more like Fuller.

**MR:** Morris is possible, but were the other Musical Blackbirds related to session of the Five Musical Blackbirds? There is gaspipe clt.

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.*

K.-B. Rau

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