

THE RECORDINGS OF TROMBONE RED AND HIS BLUE SIX

An Annotated Tentative Personnelo - Discography

TROMBONE RED AND HIS BLUE SIX

Arthur 'Pappy' Williams – tpt; Robert 'Red' Freeman – tbn, voc; *Lean Spruell* – alt;
unknown – pno; *Earl Tryce* – bjo; (*Eugene Hill?*) or (*Freddie 'Rastus' Crump*) – dms
151615-2 Greasy Plate Stomp
151616-2 B Flat Blues

New York, Jun. 18, 1931
Col 14612-D, Frog DGF 38
Col 14612-D, Frog DGF 38

When attempting to find out the musicians of 'Trombone Red and his Blue Six', a band recorded in New York by Columbia and thus part of the large Columbia catalogue of New York recordings, it seems that I had been led on a track of uncertainty when tempting to find and follow facts on Robert 'Red' Freeman and his circle. While itineraries and time-tables of the established bands of Harlem can rather easily be pursued, the where-and-when of the vaudeville/tent-show bands are mostly obscure and hard to track, if at all. And to this latter genre of bands the 'Blue Six' seem to belong, as I have accepted to know. With the study of the music of the 'Red' Freeman band and any material possibly related to this topic to find out who the hitherto unknown musicians were, I had to consider that these musicians very probably were from a traveling band that accompanied vaudeville tent-shows all over the country, with little musical prestige and with little pay and quality of life.

- Trombone: with Robert 'Red' Freeman as distinct bandleader and trombonist – and probable singer – we do not have to search for his identity. He led a band that existed independently, becoming part of vaudeville shows, as luck – or demand or request – had it. 'Red' Freeman and his band are noted to have accompanied the vaudeville duo 'Butterbeans and Susie' from at least 1926 on, and were still with them on February 1st 1930, when Butterbeans & Susie – and adjacently Louis Armstrong with the Luis Russell band - recorded for Okeh in New York in the same studio.

On trombone Freeman uses a rudimental blues-based style, with little melodic invention and frequent repetitions of distinct notes. But he can be very sensitive and 'singable' in slow tempo, and he owns a beautiful medium vibrato coupled with nice sound when sustaining notes. He likes to use growl technique when trying to be dramatic. Freeman also must be the singer, as his vocal is accompanied by the whole band, with the trombone silent.

- Trumpet: everyone who knows Ellington's Okeh recording of 'Black And Tan Fantasy' of November 03, 1927, with Jabbo Smith deputizing for Bubber Miley, understands that the style of the trumpet player on the Trombone Red sides had to be assumed to be Smith's. And thus, it was established in the early Rust editions. This assumption stuck in my mind for years, although I was aware that the trumpeter on the Trombone Red sides lacked a great deal of technical facility and finesse as related to the real Jabbo. But Jabbo on a bad day ...? But the Arcadia LP cover clearly says that Jabbo was in Chicago or Milwaukee in 1931 (Source -1). And Jabbo himself, in a conversation during a British concert tour, denied his presence on these sides. Thus, I had to look elsewhere for the person of the trumpeter.

When compiling my Louis Metcalf list for my website "Harlem-Fuss" in 2018, I assumed Louis Metcalf to be the trumpet player, as related to Metcalf's presence on the Bessie Smith Columbia session of June 11, 1931 – just one week earlier, where he proves to be able to play in a style not otherwise attributed to him. "Yes, I have to admit it, that is me. Only excuse I can make is that I was playing in the style of the time. The first thing they would ask you when they called you for a date in those days was, "Can you growl?" (L. Metcalf in conversation with Al Vollmer, ca. 1970 – Source -4). And as 'Red' Freeman was declared to be the trombonist on this very session at various instances, I trusted in the notes to Frog DGF 38 listing "*possibly Metcalf*" on the 'Blue Six' sides, trying out on Jabbo Smith's style. This assumption I have to withdraw, now.

Finally, I came about the trumpet player on the Butterbeans & Susie sessions of January 30th and February 1st, 1930, with the name of Arthur Williams. (In the index of Rust*6 he is listed for only these two 'Butterbeans and Susie' sessions, when considering that all other nominations of his name there relate to a British trumpet player of the early 1930s of the same name!) This trumpet player's style was modeled after Louis Armstrong's style of the time, was using high interval jumps with good melodic developments and advanced harmonics, and was surprisingly modern. I was tempted to believe that he may have been a disguised Louis Metcalf. In short, he was a very interesting player without any known popularity. Williams hailed from Denver and was part of Al Bronson's band of Wichita that played under King Oliver's name, touring the mid-West in 1931/32, thus after his time with 'Red' Freeman and Butterbeans & Susie. In an interview of 1967, Frank Driggs noted: "... he (King Oliver – KBR) was crazy about "Pappy" Williams" (L. Wright, "King" Oliver). I realized that Arthur Williams was part of 'Eddie Heywood and his Sons of Harmony', and thus of factual leader Robert 'Red' Freeman's band (Source -3).

With Jabbo in his ear, Arthur Williams probably would be able to play in Jabbo's manner when wanted or asked. And certainly, Jabbo was some sort of musical hero among musicians of the Chicago area at this time, a trumpeter worth to be copied by aspiring young players. So, I seriously assume "Pappy" Williams to be the trumpet player on the 'Trombone Red' session. And: he is addressed by the singer as 'Pappy' in the verse of 'Greasy Plate Stomp'!

(Arthur 'Pappy' Williams can visually be found as trumpet player of the Art Bronson band – under Joe King Oliver's lead – second from left, in L. Wight's "King" Oliver, p. 152. The player fifth from left is not Walter Thomas as given, but Emmett Adams, ?alt, and first from right is Jack Holt, alt! Storyville 154-148, B. Demeusy)

- Alto sax: The alto sax player owns a thin tone – or lean, if you'd prefer – and plays in a rather simple inflexible and un-daring style, sticking to simple harmonic chord changes and phrases, using a wide vibrato. He appears to be the same man as on most of the listed and checked sides below. This would then be Lean Spruell as listed in the Chicago Defender note of May 10, 1930 (Source -3), or Lem Spruell as in Rust*4/*6, or Leon Spruell as in BGR*3,*4. The first name 'Lean' seems to be this musician's only documented name, and might thus be his real name – a short form of the Greek name 'Leander', perhaps - but might also be a typographical error of Leon Spruell.

- Piano: The pianist is a rather weak player in a modest Harlem-stride style, having little left-hand technique and power, and also showing a modest capability in his right-hand performance. He might be found among a large group of second or third rank pianists in New York. He definitely is not Eddie Heywood, Sr., as on the Butterbeans and Susie sides.

- Banjo: The banjoist plays an unobtrusive soft four-four style, favouring single-string technique when soloing.

- Drums: Under the long-lasting impression of observing and listening to Freddie 'Rastus' Crump in the most interesting and hilarious Vitaphone short-film 'Harlem-Mania' with the Norman Thomas Quintette, I assumed Crump being the drummer here (the use of the hi-hat-cymbal in futuristic 'swing' manner, the rim-shots, and the use of the woodblock, yet with a somewhat diminished drum-set). 'Rastus' Crump also was part of the travelling show business, touring to Cuba with Gonzelle White in 1923 (with Gus Aiken, Jake Frazier, and Harry Smith), and later with the Norman Thomas Quintette (sic) before going to Europe in the early 1930s. He might have been engaged by 'Red' Freeman for recording purposes only, if at hand in New York at this time. There still is the possibility of Eugene Hill's presence (Source -3) – or any other drummer's from the lower ranks of Harlem musicians. But stylistically, I would opt for Rastus Crump. (Verifiably, Crump was with Norman Thomas in St. Louis, in July, and Utica, NY, in August 1931, and might well have been in the NY region in June.) If I'd be right with my assumption of Rastus Crump on these sides, this would be his only presence on record, as far as I know.

Notes:

- Mahony, Columbia 13/14000 Series: Robert 'Red' Freeman, tbn, with unknown tpt, alt, p, bjo, d.

- Rust*2: unknown (tpt); Robert Freeman (tbn); unknown (alt); unknown (bjo); Kaiser Marshall (?) (dms); unknown (vcl)

- Rust*3: Jabbo Smith -t; Robert Freeman -tb; Otto Hardwicke -as; Duke Ellington -p; Fred Guy -bj; Sonny Greer -d; unknown -v.

- Rust*4: Jabbo Smith -t; Robert Freeman -tb; Otto Hardwick -as; Duke Ellington -p; Fred Guy -bj; Sonny Greer -d

- Rust*6: unknown, t; Robert 'Red' Freeman, tb; unknown, as; unknown, p; unknown, bj; unknown, d

- Frog CD DGF 38, booklet: poss Louis Metcalf (trumpet); Robert Freeman (trombone); poss Otto Hardwick (alto sax); unknown (piano, banjo and drums)

Sources:

- 1 Jazz in Harlem, Arcadia 2008 LP, Dick Raichelson: "Jabbo Smith and members of the Duke Ellington band have been suggested as probable personnel for Trombone Red and His Blue Six. Although aural evidence suggests similarities, recent evidence advises otherwise. It appears certain that Jabbo was in Milwaukee or Chicago during 1931. It will be remembered that the Trombone Red date took place on June 18th, a Thursday. A check of the Philadelphia newspapers has verified that Ellington's band played a two week engagement at the Pearl Theater beginning June 6th and ending June 20th. It seems improbable that Duke and a few of his side-men would have travelled ninety miles to New York to record two tunes with an obscure trombone player, then return to Philadelphia to play two shows at the Pearl followed by a dance which the Pearl management held at the Shadowland. Who, then, comprised the personnel of this recording? Frank Driggs believes that the Freeman band was from Atlanta and, at the time, was touring with a show. Jack Butler remembered a trombone player from Georgia named "Red" but nothing else. We know that Freeman recorded with Butterbeans and Susie, in 1930, as part of Eddie Heywood's Sons of Harmony and may have also done so with Heywood's Blackbirds. From an aural comparison, it also seems certain that Freeman and not Charlie Green is the trombone player on the Bessie Smith session which took place one week prior to his own. The drummers sound the same and the trumpet-players are very similar. To complicate matters, Louis Metcalf told Al Vollmer that he was the trumpet-man and that Charlie Irvis as the probable trombonist on the Smith date. The exact personnel of the Trombone Red session must be left to further research. With its fluid rhythm, superb solo work and dynamic approach to performance, the band deserves a more detailed examination."

- 2 Storyville 29, John R.T. Davies – Laurie Wright, The Other Take: "In Louis Armstrong's seventieth year it is perhaps appropriate that his name will figure somewhat in our discussions and we will begin with a little story that was sparked off by Henry 'Red' Allen during what was to be his last visit here. After his concert at the Central Hall Westminster, Bill Frost (sadly no longer with us) went back stage and interviewed 'Red'. Bill had an idea that Allen had been on a blues accompaniment that he'd recently acquired and the conversation centered around singers that 'Red' had worked with. As it happened Allen denied being on the record Bill was concerned about but said, 'Did you know about the records we made with Butterbeans and Susie?' Bill said he didn't with some surprise and asked what 'Red' could remember of the date. Allen replied that it hadn't actually been a date but that the Russell band had been in the studio on the same day as Butterbeans and Susie and that he'd played on a couple of sides. As a parting shot he added, 'Louis was on one of them too'. ... 'What It Takes To Bring You Back' opens with an ensemble in which the trumpet is clearly the usual (as yet unidentified) Eddie Heywood man. The vocal is followed by a trombone solo by Robert Freeman, then a blistering trumpet entry which HAS to be Henry Allen. Mid-way through the chorus Allen is picked up by Louis swinging about the beat and playing in unmistakable fashion, another vocal and a band coda and the side is over. A copy of Okeh 8769 was on the shelves and was whipped on to the turntable to see what happened on the rest of the session, but on these there is only the usual 'Sons of Harmony' man in evidence. So far so good, but Henry Allen said records. This could mean that he played both takes or on the first take of one of the others (B take used on all three issued sides) or what about the preceding matrix numbers. Our files were blank on these and a call to Brian Rust confirmed that these (403708/9/10) were blanks in the Okeh files. ... Only a few bars each of Louis and 'Red' came out of all this, but it's not often these days that news comes of a vintage item by either of them that has not previously been noted, so our thanks to Bill and 'Red' for the lead that led to this discovery." ("John Chilton, who had been together with Red after this concert, denied this "nice" story, surely Red would have mentioned such a speech." - Franz Hoffmann, The Henry 'Red' Allen & J.C. Higginbotham Collection, p. 88/9)

- 3 Storyville 40, p. 14: "Butterbeans and Susie. ... A further interesting piece of information has been forwarded by Walt Allen: From the Chicago Defender of May 10, 1930, p. 10: Eddie Heywood & 5 Masters of Syncopation on tour with Butterbeans and Susie are at Grand Theater, Chicago, this week. Personnel is given as: Arthur Williams, tpt; Robert 'Red' Freeman, tbn; Lean Spruell, sax; Eddie Heywood Sr., pno; Earl Tryce, bjo; Eugene Hill, dms. (In view of the fairly close date proximity and our aural identification of Freeman this may have been the group which accompanied Butterbeans and Susie as Eddie Heywood and his Sons of Harmony – L.W.)"

- 4 Storyville 51, p. 87, Al Vollmer, Some Notes on Clarence Jones ... and Others: "In 1968 Hayes Alvis brought Louis Bacon out to my house and I started right in with the Bessie Smith session of 11 June, 1931 ... 'In The House Blues', etc., and to my surprise, he said, "Who is that on the trumpet?" "It's supposed to be you", I answered. "Oh, no," he said, "that's not me, that trumpeter is better than I am, he's doing things I never could do." He then readily identified himself on the 27 March 1930 Bessie session, and pointed out how Louis Armstrong was always his idol, and that he sought to play exactly like him. If you compare the two sessions it is readily apparent that different trumpet men are involved. Since that time, I have been intrigued by the identity of the second man, and after much deliberation decided that Louis Metcalf was the best bet. Recently Louis came over and I played the whole session for him and he admitted that it was he. He did not think much of his work saying, "Yes, I have to admit it, that is me. Only excuse I can make is that I was playing in the style of the time. The first thing they would ask you when they called you for a date in those days was, "Can you growl?" He identified Irvis as the

trombonist, saying it was not Green, as Green was a superior trombonist with a fine tone and a real jazz background, who did not have to resort to the gimmicks used by the man here.”

- 5 *Storyville* 144, p. 219, Mark Smith: “During the course of this engagement (as above – KBR), on 15 May, Hill took a quintet consisting of trumpet or cornet, alto saxophone, piano, banjo, and himself on drums to the Gennett studios in Richmond, Indiana, where they accompanied the Scare Crow (Willi Owens) on four titles, three of which were issued. On the labels of the issued titles, the Scare Crow’s accompanists are named variously as Gene Hill’s Chicago Rhythm Boys or Gene’s Rhythm Boys. The identities of the musicians involved, apart from Hill himself, are unknown. The old idea that Punch Miller may have participated on trumpet has been firmly discredited. Over the years, various names have been suggested for the saxophonist, most recently that of Baldy McDonald in *Storyville* 124 p. 127. Rather less attention has been devoted to the pianist and banjoist. As far as I am aware, no one has yet considered the possibility that Eugene Hill may have drawn all or a part of his Rhythm Boys from among his colleagues in the Five Masters of Syncopation, the group with which he was working regularly at the time of the Scare Crow recordings.”

- 6 *Jazz Journal* 5/86, p. 13, C. Hillman, Roy Palmer & Honore Dutrey: “While on the subject of forgotten trombonists, I would like to make a small correction to Greg Murphy’s piece about Charlie Green. Although not yet indicated so in the standard discographies, it is clear that the trombonist on Bessie Smith’s *Shipwreck Blues* session is not Green, but Robert ‘Red’ Freeman, an obscure musician who was associated with Eddie Heywood Snr. and recorded with him in accompaniment to *Butterbeans and Susie*. Comparison with Trombone Red’s own Columbia session of around the same time indicates a similar personnel on the Bessie Smith item with, on aural evidence, Louis Metcalf;

Robert ‘Red’ Freeman

(by Michael Rader)

Robert Freeman was not the only musician known as “Trombone Red”, so caution has to be exercised when trying to trace his career through the press. There was a Trombone Red whose real name was Devore Graden working with Prof. E. Nelson and the Florida Blossoms company in 1925 (cf. *Lynn Abbott & Doug Seroff: Ragged But Right*, p. 378). A newspaper search also turned up a Trombone Red who worked with Al Schenck and his orchestra at least until 1942.

Chicago Defender March 07, 1926 (Storyville 2002/2003) notes: „Eddie Heywood and his New York Orchestra with O’Delle’s Musical Comedy Co., City Auditorium 22 June. Includes Gladys Robinson, c; Trombone Red and Eddie Heywood.“

The 2002/2003 issue of “*Storyville*” has a separate entry on Robert “Red” Freeman which quotes the *Chicago Defender*. The first entry finds Freeman at 149 W 131st Street in New York City (10 April 1926). Dave Peyton describes him as the “Trombone King” and a personal friend “in a class by himself”, now touring as a single in vaudeville (*Chicago Defender, April 17, 1926, p. 6*). One show was Tell ‘em About Me Harmony Kings”, which was in Hot Springs Ark. In May 1928. He was stabbed while there. The May 12 1928 *Chicago Defender* carries a note: “Robert Freeman, musician, who was recently stabbed during an altercation says he is rapidly improving”, giving an address in Hot Springs for mail. Despite this optimistic note, he was in hospital until at least June 9, 1928“ (*Chicago Defender, cf. Storyville 2002/2003, p. 164*).

Following a tour and the recording session with *Butterbeans and Susie*, both Freeman and Eddie Heywood were shown as “resting” (*Chicago Defender, May 17, 1930*). A week later, Bob Hayes quotes Freeman as reporting that Rector’s Knickerbocker Girls was a turnaway hit at the Pythian Theater in Columbus and the Roosevelt Theater in Cincinnati (*Chicago Defender, May 24, 1930, p. 10*). Freeman subsequently joined Roscoe Bowman’s Green Cap Orchestra which opened at the Rose Danceland in New York City with Fred Longshaw as director (*Chicago Defender, cf. Storyville 2002/2003, p. 164*).

After recording with his own Blue Six in New York on June 18, 1931, we find a notice in the New York “Daily Worker” of October 30, 1931 advertising a Halloween Hop at New Webster Manor, New York with music provided by Trombone Red and his Blue Six Orchestra. The dance was being run by the Office Workers’ Union.

We can find items in various newspapers referring to Trombone Red and his Red Hot Aces, which might well be Freeman. The band is listed for broadcasts over WGBB Freeport in September 1933, and as playing Red Hot Music (Herald News, Passaic NJ, October 26 1936) at King’s Hollywood Bar and Grill in Passaic (December 12, 1936). The Al Schenck Broadway Stompers featuring Trombone Red are advertised in the Passaic, NJ, Herald News of March 8, 1941. These could all be our man, but we cannot be certain.

I gladly thank my good friend Michael Rader for his support, help and contribution, Dave Brown for important information, Mark Smith of Northmoor, Oxon., without whose great work as documented in *Storyville* 144 a large part of this article would be missing, and all enthusiasts who have attributed in any way to find out about the above tackled problems (see ‘Sources’ above).

K.-B. Rau
15.12.2021