

A Case of a Rediscovered Legend

The recordings of Harry Smith

By Michael Rader and K.-B. Rau

Veteran jazz collectors might remember the “Historical” LP label of the 1960s and 70s. Unless they were very discerning or lucky, HLP 14 would have been the first opportunity to hear Rosa Henderson’s strangely titled “Strut Yo’ Puddy”, originally issued on the Ajax label (Ajax 17055, also on Pathé Actuelle 7506 and Perfect 106), and recorded in New York City in around September 1924. In common with the standard discographies of the time (Rust, 3rd edition, and Godrich-Dixon, 1st edition), the quite prominent and active cornet player was listed by Historical as “probably Louis Metcalf”.

Later editions of these works have settled on Harry Smith as the man responsible, although neither an intensive research in the literature nor a query with Howard Rye, who is now responsible for Godrich and Dixon’s “Blues and Gospel Records” were able to reveal what the source for this change is. It extends to the previous session of c. July 1924 and, as we shall see, might point to more sessions involving Harry Smith. So, who was Harry Smith and why do we suggest that he is a legend?

A search through Bernhard H. Behncke’s invaluable index to “Storyville” magazine produces three references to Harry Smith, but none to a cornet player of that name. In the “Storyville” annuals 1996/97 and 2002/03, produced after regular publication as a periodical, we do indeed find references to our man, usually in connection with various Gonzell(e) White revues (both spellings were used, but we will be using the version without the final “e”).

Thanks to Franz Hoffmann’s various documentations of the Afro-American press, we can gain an impression of the activities of White’s revues. The Baltimore Afro-American of November 11 1921 contains an advertisement for Ed. Lankford and Gonzell White’s Versatile Players, who were playing at the Star and Regent Theatres during this period. Mentioned by name is “Harry Smith, Wonder Jazz Cornetist”. Smith is regularly listed as a member of the band with the White revue from this point until 1926, when Count Basie joined the revue, mentioned as “Baisy” in a review of the “Regent Vanities of 1926” by the White organisation. Early personnels of the band usually list Gus Aiken as the other cornet player, Freddy “Rastus” Crump as a trick drummer and Jake Frazier, like Aiken an alumnus of Jenkins’ Orphanage, as the trombone player. A personnel is given in the “Chicago Defender” of 20 September, 1924, announcing that the band is a “standout feature with Ed A. Daley’s “Runnin’ Wild” Company at the Olympic Theater, Randolph at Clark St., next week. They are: Edward L. Lankford, manager, Earl Frazier, Rastus Crump, Smithy Frazier, Curley Brooks, Gus Aiken, Harry Smith, Johnnie Anderson and Gonzell ‘huh-self”.

Source: St. Louis Argus, 20 October, 1922, p. 4. We assume that Harry Smith is the man standing at left. Lankford and Gonzell White are holding saxophones and Jake Frazier stands at right.

The band is mentioned as the “Jack Frazier Jazz Band” in the New York Age of 23 October 1926 (on p.6). Ed. Lankford was Gonzell White’s husband, played C melody saxophone and managed the revue. They had married in Leavenworth County, Kansas, on September 22, 1920. He died suddenly in December 1926 while Basie and Harry Smith were in the band, but Gonzell White continued touring after about a week and carried on until the show broke up in Kansas City in 1927 (Basie, Count as told to Albert Murray: Good Morning Blues, originally 1985, London etc. :paperback edition by Paladin 1987, p. 26). Basie and Smith stayed “right on up to the end”.

It is Basie who gives us most information about Harry Smith: “Harry Smith was the trumpet player in the show, a hell of a trumpet player, and he also did a great dance routine. He was always doing something comical, especially after he had had a little taste of something, which he had quite often” (Basie, p. 27). Smith had originally informed Basie of an opening in the White revue and Basie joined after an audition at Gonzell White’s apartment on New York’s Seventh Avenue. The second trumpet player by this time was O.C. Gary, the other musicians were still Lankford, Frazier, Crump and Gonzell herself. Basie describes Smith as his oldest friend in the group. “He could act straight parts, and he was also a very funny guy” (123). He introduced Basie to the phrase “every tub”. Finally, Basie tells us that Smith had a brother, or half-brother, named Ray Dorsey (196).

Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix (Kansas City Jazz, Oxford University Press, 2005, p.80) describe Smith as a “veteran hooper, Smith traveled the country in 1919 with a street carnival, defending his title, ‘Champion Buck and Wing Dancer of the World’” (ibid) “against all comers” (Kansas City Sun, 12 April 1919, quoted in Driggs/Haddix, p. 80).

The first mention of Harry Smith in the press.

Source: Kansas City Sun, April 19, 1919. An identical advert appeared in the issue of April 12, 1919

By 1930, after leaving Gonzell White, Smith had played with Chauncey Downs and Jap Allen in addition to hitting the road with Victoria Spivey’s show. “Back in Kansas City for a big celebration at Paseo Hall, Smith left Spivey’s revue for the Blue Devils, succeeding Lips Page. An apt replacement, Smith, earlier on, had greatly influenced Page’s style and stage manner (interview by Kay C. Thompson with Page in Record Changer, December 1949, p. 8, 18-19). With the band for less than a year, the trumpeter reportedly died on his knees in the Booker T Hotel on December 29, 1931, of acute alcoholism. Walter Page, Smith’s third cousin, lost a relative, close friend, and the band’s main get-off soloist” (Driggs, Haddix, 107f.). Page had described Smith as “my third cousin” in an interview with Driggs for the Jazz Review (Vol. 1, No. 1, November 1958 12-14).

In his biography of Hot Lips Page, “Luck’s in My Corner” (New York: Routledge, 2008), Todd Bryant Weeks picks up the lead given by Kay C. Thompson and discusses the likely influence of Harry Smith on Page: “In the summer and fall of 1924, Harry Smith recorded as a cornetist in a straightforward, heavily blues-inflected style backing the singer Rosa Henderson with her New York-based group, the Choo Choo Jazzers. Of interest in Smith’s playing are several stylistic elements that support his influence on Hot Lips Page. In particular, there is Smith’s use of plunger growl and wah-wah effects on the tunes “Strut Yo’ Puddy” and “Hard Hearted Hannah” and his use of extended blue notes in “I Can’t Get the One I Want”, all of which are reminiscent of Lips’s later work” (Weeks, p. 38).

As indicated at the outset, other trumpeters have been credited with the work on the Choo Choo Jazzers sides, including Louis Metcalf, who probably did not play wa-wa at the time (cf. Lawrence, A.H.: Duke Ellington and his World, New York: Routledge, p. 97) and, most recently, Rex Stewart in a

reevaluation of the Choo Choo Jazzers in VJM by Bob Hitchens. However, since Harry Smith was scarcely a household name when the discographies substituted him for Metcalf, we can assume that there was some evidence for his participation at the time (e.g. an interview with Cliff Jackson or Rosa Henderson?).

Barring evidence from an interview with one of the participants, what is there to prove Smith's attendance? The main pointer would be the presence of Jake Frazier on many blues accompaniments at around the same time. Frazier, who was with Gonzell White throughout the period of Smith's membership in her band, could have acted as a door-opener for any of his bandmates. His recording activity suggests that the White organisation returned to New York frequently enough for musicians to participate in recordings. If we can find recordings by Frazier around the time of the Henderson sides, we can assume that Smith was also in New York. The description by Count Basie of his audition suggests that White was based in New York and lived in an apartment in the city. In fact, Gonzell White was enumerated in the 1925 census, living as a lodger in New York city. She is described as age 26 and black. Living in the same lodging were Ed. Langford (sic, her husband), Harold Smith, age 26, and Sarah Small, age 21. Sarah Garret, age, 31, is listed as the owner of the lodging. White, Langford and Smith are listed as "actors". Since Harry Smith performed in sketches in the revue, Harold Smith is presumably Harry.

A passenger list for the SS Guantanamo from July 5, 1923, also lists Gonzell White as aged 26, born in 1897, suggesting that she kept her age static. Harry Smith is also listed as being 26, indicating a date of birth in 1897. Harry E. Smith, a single musician living as a lodger at 1413 Eighteenth Street in Kansas City, is listed as being 33 in the 1930 census, confirming the 1897 birth date.

Without much additional research, it is impossible to draw up an itinerary for the Gonzell White revues. We have been able to find advertisements in the New York Age for 10 May 1924 (at Gordon's Olympia Theatre in Boston), and the Baltimore Afro American of 11 November 1924 which indicates that Gonzell White and her Jazzers, formerly with the burlesque "Runnin' Wild" "are now touring Michigan".

Gonzell White and Co. are at the Olympic Theatre, Lynn, Mass (New York Age, Saturday, April 26, 1924: Theatrical Jottings) .Asbury Park Evening Press, Thursday 29 May, 1924: Gonzell White's Jazzers at Reade's Main Street Theatre as part of last 3 days of Jazz Carnival. The Ottawa Journal, Saturday May 31, 1924 announces that Gonzell White's Orchestra is the coming headline attraction for the Franklin Theater, next week. At Colonial Theatre, Utica NY, 14 June, 1924, at Majestic Theater, Elmira NY, June, 17, 1924. Binghamton Press, Saturday, June 21, 1924: "Tonight - Your last chance to see these acts this season, a.o. Gonzell White's Jazzers. In a conglomeration of singing dancing and harmony. Ten people. Each an exponent of some form of syncopation".

The Cincinatti Enquirer of Monday, August 11, 1924, has a review of the "Runnin' Wild" show, which "opened yesterday". They bring down the final curtain "with a hurrah". The Indianapolis Star of Wednesday, August 20, 1924 announces "Runnin' Wild" show for the Capitol Theater.

Storyville 1996/97, referring to the Chicago Defender, states that the Revue was in Cincinatti in Mid-August 1924, moving on to Chicago by the week of September 21, 1924. They also appear to have been in Chicago by 11 October, 1924 (Storyville 1996/97, p. 189).

If we look at the recording activities of Jake Frazier during the June to September 1924 period (cf. <http://vjm.biz/175-choochoojazzers-web-low.pdf>), recordings in New York would also have been possible for Harry Smith, although we mainly find entries for the period from 16 September to November, 1924, which would include the period when the band was in Chicago. This would seem to cast doubt on Frazier's participation in some of the Choo Choo Jazzers sessions, unless it involved frequent travels from Chicago to New York, or if the mysterious "Smith Frazier" mentioned as a member of the band by the Chicago Defender of September 20, 1924 is not Jake, but another Frazier.

Possible Harry Smith recordings are discussed in the following discography.

| | | | | |
|-------|--|----------------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| 001 | ROSA HENDERSON | the Choo Choo Jazzers | New York, | Jun. 21-26, 1924 |
| | Rosa Henderson – voc; | | | |
| | Harry Smith – tpt; Cliff Jackson – pno | | | |
| 31607 | | I Can't Get The One I Want | Ajax 17049, | Document DOCD-5402 |

On 19 August 2016 Bob Hitchens, author of the great investigation on the Choo Choo Jazzers and their recordings, informed me of a chapter in "Luck's In My Corner" – The Life and Music of Hot Lips Page - by Todd Bryant Weeks, concerning influential trumpeters to Lips Page. The author mentions two trumpet players of importance for Page in the "Territory" regions - Benno Kennedy and Harry Smith (p. 38). About Smith he says: *"In the summer and fall of 1924, Harry Smith recorded as a cornetist in a straightforward, heavily blues-inflected style backing the singer Rosa Henderson with her New York-based group, the Choo Choo Jazzers. Of interest in Smith's playing are several stylistic elements that support his influence on Hot Lips Page. In particular, there is Smith's use of plunger, growl and wah-wah effects on the tunes 'Strut Yo' Puddy' and 'Hard-Hearted Hannah' and his use of extended blue notes in 'I Can't Get The One I Want', all of which are reminiscent of Lip's later work. Smith's tone is dark, and he seems most comfortable in the horn's middle range. He also shows a marked King Oliver influence in his use of "crying" blue notes, typical for black jazz trumpeters of the day. And like that of Lips Page, Smith's playing also bears a striking similarity to that of the Ellingtonian master, James Wesley 'Bubber' Miley. This is evident especially in the manner in which he combines growls and smears while using the plunger on triplet figures of eighth-and sixteenth-note combinations. Examples of this type of figure appear in several places in Harry Smith's 'Strut Yo' Puddy' performance but are most prominent in measures fourteen through seventeen of Smith's cornet solo shown in Transcription 4.1." (Transcription on page 39 of the book.)*

Mr. Weeks may be right and to the point, but it has to be added that all these named features were in common use by many Harlem trumpet players of the first half of the 1920s, originated – or at least diffused - by Johnny Dunn. And this would not only include Bubber Miley, but also very much so the early Joe Smith! Unfortunately, we do not know where Mr. Weeks received his information on this part of his book from and he was not able to remind the source on request, but he may nevertheless be right at this point. I certainly am unable to refute him here, and I will honestly name Harry Smith as trumpeter for this session with little reservation. Checking the Rust and BGR editions it becomes apparent that they all list Harry Smith on trumpet. The solution of this problem might be a task of the future.

But we have to state that the sessions listed here all feature the same trumpet player – a distinct stylist of his own - different from all other prominent players of the period in Harlem Jazz. His tone is soft – but not as much as Joe Smith's, he possesses a strong attack, and plays in a Johnny Dunn derived style of early New York, yet not as stiff as Miley's, but also using growl and dirty tones thus sounding very bluesy, often with a cup or plunger mute. He plays in a calm and unobtrusive manner – not exuberant – and tends to play legato phrases. Likes to end tunes on the ninth or other non-chordal notes. He makes frequent use of antiquated 6/8th rhythm (behind verse and first vocal chorus and later!), not very jazzy, but possibly resulting from a St. Louis (?) background.

The piano player does not seem to be Cliff Jackson to me as none of his characteristics are obvious on this side. Yet, as Jackson seems to have been used by Ajax more often, it might nevertheless be him. And the lack of his licks might be due to his youth at the time of recording. A comparison to Mike Jackson's style results in favour of Cliff! No clarinet on this side.

- Rust*3,*4: Bubber Miley -c; Jake Frazier -tb; Louis Hooper -p.
 - BGR*2,*3,*4: Bubber Miley, c; Jake Frazier, tb; Louis Hooper, p.
 - Rust*6: Bubber Miley, c; Jake Frazier, tb; Louis Hooper, p.
 - Scherman, Eriksson, Anderby, Wallen, Bubber Miley Discography: Bubber Miley (tp), Jake Frazier, (tb); Louis Hooper, (p).
 - VJM 175, B. Hitchens, Choo Choo Jazzers: Bubber Miley (t), Jake Frazier (tb), Louis Hooper (p). “? KBR insists not JF. John Montague (p) was Monette’s regular accompanist at this time.”

005 **ROSA HENDERSON** New York, c. Sep. 29, 1924
 Rosa Henderson – voc;
 Harry Smith – tpt; Jake Frazier - tbn;
 Arthur Ray or Louis Hooper – pno
 5651-3 Deep River Blues Ban 1452, Document DOCD-5403
 5652-3 The Basement Blues Ban 1437, Document DOCD-5403

Just like at the subsequent session below, Miley’s presence is seen as doubtful in the discos, and again I strongly suggest Harry Smith to be the trumpet player. The trombonist does not play enough legato notes to ascertain Gregory and so might be Frazier. The pianist plays a blues/boogie related style, but more differentiated than Hooper, and might thus possibly be Ray.

Notes:

- Jazz Directory Vol. 4: not listed
 - RR 77-6: not listed
 - Rust*3: prob Bubber Miley, c; ? Jake Frazier, tb; Louis Hooper or Arthur Ray, p.
 - BGR*2: Tom Morris, c; poss Jake Frazier, tb; Louis Hooper, p.
 - BGR*3,*4: unknown, c; poss Jake Frazier, tb; Louis Hooper, p.
 - Rust*4,*6: ? Bubber Miley, c; ? Jake Frazier, tb; Louis Hooper or Arthur Ray, p.

006 **LOUELLA JONES AND JAZZ CASPER** New York, c. Oct. 29, 1924
 Alberta Perkins, Billy Higgins – voc duet;
 Harry Smith – tpt;
 Louis Hooper – pno; Elmer Snowden – bjo;
 Joe Davis – chimes (4,5)
 5695-1 Who Calls You Sweet Mama Now? Ban 1467 not on LP/CD
 5695-2 Who Calls You Sweet Mama Now? Ban 1467 not on LP/CD
 5695-3 Who Calls You Sweet Mama Now? Ban 1467, Document DOCD-5528
 5696-1 Sweet Mandy Ban 1467, Document DOCD-5654
 5696-2 Sweet Mandy Ban 1467, Document DOCD-5528

This is not Miley, and I assume Harry Smith with his tone – a bit sharper here, yet, his phrasing and the very typical 6/8th rhythm. I think that the other musicians are obvious: Hooper and Snowden. Thomas Morris, as suggested by Louis Hooper in Record Research 77, is far off the mark.

Notes:

- RR 77-9: Thomas Morris; Louis Hooper; Elmer Snowden, unknown chimes.
 - BGR*2,*3,*4: Bubber Miley, c; Louis Hooper, p; Elmer Snowden, bj; unknown chimes..
 - Rust*3,*4,*6: Bubber Miley -c; Louis Hooper -p; Elmer Snowden -bj; ?Joe Davis -chimes.
 - Scherman, Eriksson, Anderby, Wallen, Bubber Miley Discography: Bubber Miley (tp); Louis Hooper (p); Elmer Snowden (bj); unknown (chimes).
 “Dixon-Godrich and Rust have the above personnel, except that both indicate the chimes player’s presence after the wrong title, and Rust identifies him as ?Joe Davis.”

007 **CLEMENTINE SMITH** Kansas City Five New York, c. Nov. 24, 1924
 Clementine Smith- voc, kazoo;
 Harry Smith – tpt; unknown – tbn; unknown – clt;
 unknown – pno; unknown – bjo
 5740-5 Everybody Loves My Baby Re 9760, Document DOCD-5518
 5740-6 Everybody Loves My Baby Ban 1464 not on LP/CD

The trumpet at times sounds like Miley but is not brilliant enough to be Miley or Dunn, and is too much in the Dunn mould to be Morris. After finding out about Harry Smith in the immediate past I am now convinced that this is our trumpet player here! Although he is only difficult to identify here he appears on the other sides recorded on this very date (see below). Lack of interpretational exposition might be caused by the need of playing from music which might be the same on the next two sides waxed on this date.

There certainly is a trombone very clearly heard, but the musician cannot be identified for lack of exposed playing. He plays some sort of tailgate style without the glissandos and delivers bass notes only after the introduction. The clarinet player shows similarities to the legato player of the Edisons before. He definitely is not Fuller. The pianist plays a two-fisted piano accompaniment unheard of from Hooper. The banjo player lacks Snowden’s exuberance and plays functionally only. Most interesting: this seems to be the first recording ever of kissing noises on ‘... Baby’! The whole performance seems to be modelled on Clarence Williams’ Blue Five recordings. So - as in the foregoing session(s) – I hear a band of more “Western” style.

Notes:

- BGR*2,*3,*4: prob Louis Metcalf or poss Bubber Miley, c; Bob Fuller, cl; Louis Hooper, p; Elmer Snowden, bj; unknown kazoo
 - Rust*6: Louis Metcalf or Bubber Miley, c; Bob Fuller, cl; Louis Hooper, p; Elmer Snowden, bj.

008 **JOSIE MILES AND JAZZ CASPER** New York, c. Nov. 24, 1924
 Josie Miles, Jazz Caspar (Billy Higgins) – voc duet;
 Harry Smith – tpt;
 unknown – pno; unknown – bjo
 5741-1 Let’s Agree To Disagree Ban 1499 on LP/CD ?
 5741-2 Let’s Agree To Disagree Ban 1499 on LP/CD ?

Note: one of the takes listed has been issued on Document DOCD-5403

This seems to be the same Miley disciple as before, but not Miley himself - nor Metcalf, but Harry Smith (the 6/8 phrasing!) as before. And I do not hear Hooper and Snowden here. The Plaza people apparently engaged musicians different from the Ajax stable, not to mention the Edison men. Yet, the Miley influence is there – and probably wanted. And there is a slight similarity to Hooper, but not to Snowden.

Notes:

- BGR*4: poss Bubber Miley or prob Louis Metcalf, c; Louis Hooper, p; Elmer Snowden, bj
- Rust*3,*4,*6: ?Bubber Miley or ?Louis Metcalf, c; Louis Hooper, p; Elmer Snowden, bj.
- Scherman, Eriksson, Anderby, Wallen, Bubber Miley Discography: Bubber Miley (tp), Louis Hooper (p), Elmer Snowden (bj).

| | | | | |
|--------|--|----------------------|-----------|--------------------|
| 009 | CLEMENTINE SMITH - BILLY HIGGINS | the Kansas City Five | New York, | c. Nov. 24, 1924 |
| | Clementine Smith- voc, kazoo; Billy Higgins – voc; | | | |
| | Harry Smith – tpt; | | | |
| | unknown – pno; unknown – bjo | | | |
| 5742-1 | I'm Done Done Done With You | | Ban 1483 | not on LP/CD |
| 5742-3 | I'm Done Done Done With You | | Ban 1483, | Document DOCD-5518 |

Once again, the trumpet player sounds a bit like Miley, but in my opinion a definitely different man following Miley's model, Harry Smith again. No trombone and no clarinet on this recording as on matrix 4750 above of the same date. BGR and Rust are obviously wrong in listing a full band for this title!

Notes:

- BGR*2,*3,*4: prob Louis Metcalf or poss Bubber Miley, c; Bob Fuller, cl; Louis Hooper, p; Elmer Snowden, bj; unknown kazoo
- Rust*3,*4,*6: ? Louis Metcalf or ?Bubber Miley, c; Bob Fuller, cl; Louis Hooper, p; Elmer Snowden, bj.

| | | | | |
|-------|--|-------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| 010 | JOSIE MILES AND BILLY HIGGINS | Choo Choo Jazzers | New York, | Nov. 23- Dec. 03, 1924 |
| | Josie Miles, Billy Higgins – voc duet; | | | |
| | Harry Smith – tpt; Bob Fuller – clt (1); | | | |
| | Louis Hooper – pno | | | |
| 31725 | I'm Done, Done, Done With You | | Ajax 17080, | Document DOCD-5467 |
| 31727 | A To Z Blues | | Ajax 17080, | Document DOCD-5467 |

Now – with Ajax – we seem to be with Louis Hooper again! But this certainly is Harry Smith on trumpet again! Essential, but not exuberant piano playing by Hooper. And Bob Fuller with his distinct vibrato and phrasing on the first title.

Notes:

- BGR*2,*3,*4: Bubber Miley, c; Bob Fuller, cl; prob Louis Hooper, p
- Rust*3,*4,*6: Bubber Miley, c; Bob Fuller, cl; prob Louis Hooper, p

| | | | | |
|-------|--|-------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| 011 | JOSIE MILES AND BILLY HIGGINS | Choo Choo Jazzers | New York, | Nov. 23- Dec. 03, 1924 |
| | Josie Miles, Billy Higgins – voc duet; | | | |
| | Harry Smith – tpt; Bob Fuller – clt (2); | | | |
| | (Louis Hooper) – pno | | | |
| 31733 | Satisfied | | Ajax 17083, | Document DOCD-5467 |
| 31735 | Picnic Time | | Ajax 17083, | Document DOCD-5467 |

In the past I heard Bubber Miley here, and certainly Bob Fuller on the second title. But after discovering Harry Smith as possible participant in Ajax recordings in the second part of 1924 I hear this distinct musician here. I am not content with Hooper. This pianist may be one of the other players around - Arthur Ray or Edgar Dowell, or even the man of the Edison/Plaza sessions of before. Very nice the waltz-strain at the end of the first title.

Notes:

- W. Bryant, Ajax Records: no personnel per Hooper.
- BGR*2,*3: Instrumentation uncertain
- BGR*4: Bubber Miley, c; Bob Fuller, cl; prob Louis Hooper, p
- Rust*3,*4,*6: instrumentation uncertain.
- Scherman, Eriksson, Anderby, Wallen, Bubber Miley Discography: Bubber Miley (tp); Bob Fuller (cl), Louis Hooper (p), "Dixon-Godrich have the above personnel, and we agree, Rust has 'instrumentation uncertain'."

I would recommend any reader/listener attempting to check these recordings to listen in the given sequence in order to clearly recognize this trumpeter's characteristics.

K.-B. Rau – Michael Rader 25.06.2018