

A Case of Astonishing Disregard

BILLY BANKS AND HIS ORCHESTRA

By K.-B. Rau

The last three issues of this very "Magazine for Discographical Research" brought us three articles on the career of Billy Banks by researcher Chris Smith, showing us that there was much more to the careers of many musicians and singers of the classic jazz years than was known. The discographies only showed what had been recorded, and everything else was left to interested persons to excavate from hard-to-find publications. The world-wide-web has done us an immense favour in providing access to hitherto inaccessible sources. But there still are a lot of doubtful items in the discographies that still await clarification – especially so in the several editions of Rust's 'Jazz and Ragtime Records'.

But: there is so much written and printed information at hand on the classic years of jazz music even today, that we only need to check through the publications of the last half-century to be able to clarify more features than assumed to be possible.

The above-mentioned articles on Billy Banks caused us to check Rust's list of Bank's recordings, only to find out that besides Bank's righteously famous 'Rhythmakers' sessions and the sides he sang with the 'Mills Blue Rhythm Band', there are two sessions – recorded and issued by Victor - still listed with entirely unknown personnels. Only two of these six titles of May and August 1932 had earlier been reissued – and largely over-looked - on an American LP Harrison K 'Jazzin' Around' in 1980. The unbelievably prolific French Chronological (sic) Classics series of jazz CDs then dedicated a complete CD to Billy Banks about two decades ago. This CD carried both these sessions, but still did not try to name any of the participating musicians, much in contrast to the conscientiousness and competence of its producers.

Tom Lord's online 'The Jazz Discography' still retains the unknown personnel for Banks' session of May 1932, but offers a first - assumed - personnel for the August 1932 session. This – at least – is a progress which will be discussed below.

Yet, there was a hint on these two sessions much earlier – in Storyville 109 of October/November 1983 – which nobody seems to have followed and which never found its way into Rust editions 5 or 6. It clearly says: "*In May and August of 1932 Billy Banks and his Orchestra recorded six titles for Victor, two of which we (the researchers for Storyville, obviously – KBR) have heard and which we thought were played by MBRB (Mills Blue Rhythm Band – KBR) band personnel. All six titles have been played to Crawford Wethington (reed- player with MBRB at the time – KBR), who confirms that it was indeed a group from the MBRB. However, since only a small group is involved rather than the full band, these sides are not listed here (article on MBRB in Storyville 109 – KBR).*" This evidence now needs urgent treatment and close listening!

BILLY BANKS AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Billy Banks – voc, ldr;

Ed Anderson – tpt;

Crawford Wethington – alt; Gene Mikell – alt, clt; Joe Garland – ten;

Edgar Hayes – pno; Benny James – gtr; Hayes Alvis – sbs; O'Neil Spencer – dms

72560-1

The Scat Song

New York,

May 10, 1932

Vic 24027,

Chronological Classics 969

72561-1

Mighty Sweet

Vic 23399,

Chronological Classics 969

72562-1

Minnie The Moocher's Weddin' Day

Vic 24027,

Chronological Classics 969

Given, that Crawford Wethington's confirmation in Storyville 109 (above) is correct – which seems to be without doubt for the first session, at least - a probable small-band personnel for this session would be: Ed Anderson – tpt; Crawford Wethington, Charlie Holmes – alt, clt; Joe Garland – ten, clt; Edgar Hayes – pno, arr; Benny James – bjo, gtr; Hayes Alvis - sbs; O'Neil Spencer – dms, according to the contemporaneous personnel of the MBRB. So, let's see what we can hear and recognize:

- The trumpet player plays a distinct southern trumpet style in Louis Armstrong's footsteps, and could very well be and should therefore be identified as Ed Anderson, during this period the hot trumpet soloist with the MBRB.

- Unfortunately, we do not have any solo performance by either of the two alto saxophonists on this session which could give us a hint as to his person. According to the known personnel of the MBRB of the day we have to assume the alto players to be Wethington and Charlie Holmes.

- On 'Mighty Sweet' we find a strong and urgent 16-bars solo of "dirty" clarinet which is not the work of one of the assumed reed players. Although Garland was responsible for most of the MBRB's clarinet work, this dirty tone soloing was not his – and neither that of the alto saxophonists listed. Yet, we read that Gene Mikell – Holmes' successor with the MBRB - remarks in his interview in Storyville 1998/99: "*See, in all those cassettes of the Blue Rhythm Band you sent me, I'm playing baritone and alto, but most of the clarinet work was done by Joe Garland.*" As we know that Mikell did not join the MBRB before August 1932, his presence on this session would seem to be unlikely. Charlie Holmes was the band's alto soloist until c. August 1932, and certainly, he played clarinet as well – it was generally required from a qualified reed player in a big band. He is identified by himself in soloing on clarinet on the MBRB session of 28 April 1932 in 'Cabin In The Cotton'. But this solo does not contain any 'dirty' playing. Quite in the contrary, Holmes plays with warmth and beauty, and even more so, he is not known for dirty notes on his alto saxophone either. But from Mikell's own statement in Storyville 1998/99, p.105 we know that he was one of the few clarinetists at the time playing "growl" clarinet, the other players being Edmond Hall with the Claude Hopkins Band, and William Thornton Blue who had disappeared from the musical scene by early 1931. Another clarinetist playing "growl" solos would be Rudy Powell, but he – by his own firm statement – did not learn to play the clarinet earlier than 1932. To strengthen this statement, I'd like to cite Gene Mikell via the late Johnny Simmen of Switzerland: "*Before I joined the MBRB, all clarinet solos were played by Joe Garland. When I came in the band, Joe and I got the clarinet solos about 50/50. After Buster Bailey came in the band, it was 80% for Buster and 10/10 for Joe and me*" (Coda Nov. 1975, p. 25). So, we cannot but assume that this is Mikell here, having had earlier relations to the MBRB/Irving Mills circle and having been asked by Billy Banks to participate in this recording session. Compare Mikell's growl solos in the MBRB's 'Let's Have A Jubilee' of October 04, 1934! Joe Garland is not known to play growl-clarinet, but rather straight-ahead hot and strong solo-work.

- Wethington also played clarinet, but he is not known as a hot soloist – neither on alto sax nor on clarinet – and can thus be excluded from the clarinet solo work. Instead, he is responsible for the beautiful silken lead-parts of the reed section.
 - The pianist definitely can be identified as Edgar Hayes on this session, recognizable by his very strong and mighty modified stride-piano style. And – of course – he was the musical leader of the MBRB.
 - According to these recognitions we can be quite certain of the presence of Benny James on his light and swinging four-string guitar, the powerful and unjustly under-recognised bass playing of Hayes Alvis (Duke Ellington with his distinct liking for capable bass players certainly knew why he hired Alvis in early 1935) and the young O'Neil Spencer on drums. In contrast to his contemporaneous recordings with the full MBRB he does not use his hi-hat rhythm nor press-rolls played with sticks, but he restricts himself to brushes. This might cause some irritation as to the person's identity, but the few audible cymbal sounds heard – hi-hat and crash-cymbals - are compatible with those heard on the MBRB sides, and would thus ascertain Spencer's presence.

Notes:

- *Delaunay, New Hot Discography, 1948: not listed*

- *Rust*2,*3,*4,*6: unknown tpt; unknown, unknown alt; unknown alt; unknown ten; unknown pno; unknown gtr; unknown sbs; unknown dms; Billy Banks vcl*

- *B. Rust, The Victor Master Book Vol. 2: t / 3s / p / g / b / d; vocalist: Billie Banks.*

- *RCA Jazz Tribune No 58: Shelton Hemphill (tp); Charlie Holmes (cl, as); Crawford Wethington (as); Joe Garland (ts, bar sax); Edgar Hayes (p); Benny James (g); Hayes Alvis (b); O'Neil Spencer (dm); Baron Lee (ldr)*

- *Tom Lord, Discographie: unknown tp, 2 as, ts, p, g, b, d*

- *Storyville 1998/99, L. Wright, Did You Know: "Two entries in the same column in the Defender (16/7/32 6/2) pose a small problem: The first notes Baron Lee and his Blue Rhythm band back at the Cotton Club in New York and the second reports Billy Banks leading his own orchestra at Connie's Inn. It goes on to say that his first phonograph record for the Victor company has just been released. It is 'Cabin In The Cotton' and 'The Scat Song' on the Reverse. This coupling is not known to me and it has been assumed that the Blue Rhythm band accompanied Banks on recordings from this time. This is most likely a piece of misreporting and refers to Victor 24027, but who was in Banks's orchestra at Connie's Inn?"*

- *Storyville 1998/99, Afterthoughts No 742: "Billy Banks, late of Baron Lee's orchestra, is now heading his own band at Club Madrid, Cleveland." (PC 15/10/32 7/4) Is this a clue to the accompanying band on Victor of 18 August 1932?"*

Tunes:

72560 *The Scat Song* *Key of Eb*

Victor

(Intro 4 bars ens)(Verse 16 bars BB voc + ens)(Chorus 1 32 bars AABA BB voc + ens)(Chorus 2 32 bars AABA BB scat-voc + ens 16 – EA o-tpt 16)(Chorus 3 32 bars AABA JG ten 4 – ens 4 – JG ten 4 – ens 4 -EH pno 8 – JG ten 4 – ens 4)(Chorus 4 32 bars AABA BB voc – ens)(tag 2 ens)

72561 *Mighty Sweet* *Key of F*

Victor

(Intro 4 bars ens)(Verse 4 bars ens)(Chorus 1 32 bars AABA BB voc + ens)(Vamp 4 bars ens)(Chorus 2 32 bars AABA GM clt 16 – EA o-tpt 8 – JG ten 8)(Vamp 4 bars BJ gtr)(Verse 16 bars AB BB voc + ens)(Chorus 3 32 bars AABA BB voc + ens)(Coda 4 bars BB voc + ens)

72562 *Minnie The Moocher's Wedding Day* *Key of Ab*

Victor

(Intro 4 bars ens)(Verse 16 bars BB voc + ens)(Chorus 1 32 bars AABA BB voc + ens 16 – BB voc + chorus 8 – BB voc + ens 8)(Interlude A 18 bars ens 1 – JR ten 1 – EA o-tpt 2 – ens 2 - EA o-tpt 2 – ens 10)(Interlude B 20 bars BB voc + ens)(1/2 Chorus 2 16 bars BA BB voc + ens)(tag 4 bars BB voc + ens)

BILLY BANKS AND HIS ORCHESTRA

New York,

Aug. 18, 1932

Billy Banks – voc, ldr;

Wardell 'Preacher' Jones – tpt; Harry 'Father' White – tbn;

Crawford Wethington – alt; Gene Mikell – alt, clt; Joe Garland – ten, clt;

Edgar Hayes – pno; Benny James – gtr; Hayes Alvis – sbs

73306-1 Oh! You Sweet Thing

Vic 24148,

Chronological Classics 969

73307-1 It Don't Mean A Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)

Vic 24148,

Chronological Classics 969

73309-1 You Wonderful Thing

Vic 23399,

Chronological Classics 969

The only discography at hand listing part of a personnel for this session is Tom Lord, 'The Jazz Discography'. It is assumed that Lord got his information on participating musicians from the Bruyninckx discography. And we assume that the Bruyninckx informant got his inspiration from Storyville 107, where there is a nice photo of the Luis Russell band of 1932, showing Bill Coleman as one of the trumpeters, together with drummer 'Cripple' Joe Smith. This photograph was shot in Philadelphia, but nothing is known of Banks' presence there at this time. Instead, we know that Banks appeared at the Lafayette Theatre „leading Luis Russell's great band“ (New York Age, Sat. July 16, 1932). Also at this time Banks is reported to „making a hit with his own orchestra at ‚Connie's Inn' in Harlem“ (Pittsburgh Courier, Sat. July 16, 1932). Storyville 1998/99 p.217 has a note that „Billy Banks, late of Baron Lee's orchestra, is now heading his own band at Club Madrid, Cleveland“ (Pittsburgh Courier Oct. 10, 1932). His last recording session with the MBRB had been of August 17, 1932, and it might therefore justifiably be assumed that he still used MBRB men for his own recording session.

A reasonable small-band personnel for this session would be: the MBRB rhythm section as before, Gene Mikell on alto sax having replaced Charlie Holmes since the prior session, and two of the MBRB brass players, but not Ed Anderson, for stylistic reasons.

- Even more so, the trumpet man here has none of Bill Coleman's (as in Tom Lord disco!) sharp and crystal clear intonation, nor does he have his high reaching phraseology and his downward ending notes. This man, instead, prefers to perform in a growl style using a cup-mute. In the Mills Blue Rhythm Band Disco- and Solography in Storyville 108 / 109 the authors attribute all growl solos to trumpeter Wardell 'Preacher' Jones, second-chair trumpet player in the MBRB. We do not know the source of this identification, but we assume that the authors had information in this respect. And certainly, a second trumpet player of the MBRB had a high degree of solo ability, even if he did not have to show it excessively. Only, that we do not know the very characteristics of his personal style. Our man here plays in an „Eastern“ style, with fast fingering and more fluent phrases, this in contrast to Ed Anderson on the above session.

- The trombonist with his shallow growl tone could well have been George Washington, as can be heard on his earlier recordings. He was just about to join the ranks of the MBRB. But after intensive listening to the MBRB recordings of this year we now firmly think to have identified Harry 'Father' White, who at that time still was a member of the MBRB. We do not agree with Jan Evensmo's identification of Henry Hicks for these sides in his excellent 'Jazz Solography'. Hicks certainly could be seen as a possibility, but he had a rougher and more exuberant yet conservative style – and more staccato - not that elegant and Swing oriented one heard here. Unfortunately, we only have little and uncertain knowledge of White's trombone style, and 'Storyville's' great Discography/ Solography of 'Mills Blue Rhythm Band' has a weakness in not consequentially trying to distinguish White from Hicks. Storyville 140, p.80, says: "Léon Demeuldre writes that although Messrs. Dutton and Townley in their solography gave the trombone solo on MBRB 'Doin' The Shake' as by Henry Hicks, Hugues Panassié

said in a pre-war 'Jazz Hot' that it was by Harry White who also wrote the arrangement." This then would give us one of the few firmly known solo efforts recorded of Harry 'Father' White – and crucial for our evaluation.

- Then there are some most interesting clarinet solos, not dirty as on the session before, but strong, melodious and expertly played, yet a bit academical, and they are congruent with the little solo outing of the alto saxophonist in the last chorus of 'Oh! You Sweet Thing'. Style-wise, they obviously are played by a saxophone player, and should thus be the work of Gene Mikell as well – not "growling" here - whose work on the 'Fowler's Favorites' of some years before had been incorrectly identified as that of Charlie Holmes in the discographies (see KBR's article in N&N 74!). We would not attribute this clarinet work to Joe Garland.

- In contrast to Mikell's style we hear the alto playing at the start of the first title, which might then be played by the otherwise nondescript Crawford Wethington, he sounding a bit like Charlie Holmes, which might be due to the two men's working side-by-side in the MBRB for some time before.

- On tenor sax we hear Joe Garland again, a bit rough, but strong and energetic. The third title features a clarinet duo all along which probably is composed of Gene Mikell and Joe Garland, and arranged by 'Father' White, who showed a favor for the combination of trombone with clarinets in other titles of the MBRB.

- On piano we still have the most energetic stride style of the Mills Blue Rhythm Band's piano man Edgar Hayes. Listen to him taking over for the last chorus of 'Oh! You Sweet Thing', where he modulates to the final key and swings along like crazy.

- The sound of the guitar is that high-metallic sound of Benny James's four-stringed instrument heard on other MBRB recordings of this time. I cannot hear anything that would make me assume that this player is Will Johnson of the Luis Russell band, as listed in the Tom Lord disco.

- The bassist certainly is not Pops Foster as in Lord's disco. Foster kept his sharp wooden slap-bass sound for all his life, and it is also heard on Luis Russell's recording session of August 1934 and all the subsequent recordings under Louis Armstrong's name. The player heard here also plucks his strings with two fingers, but he performs slap-bass technique only moderately, emphasizing a big tone and putting a minor stress on the wooden slap. He plays totally in accordance with Hayes Alvis of the MBRB, and should thus be identified as such.

- Although Rust's Victor Master Book, Vol. 2 lists a drummer, there is nothing that would indicate any at this session, no bass drum, no cymbal crashes, no brushes, and no high-hat. And 'It Don't Mean A Thing' has a strong final G from the piano, not a final cymbal-crash!

- And, please, pay attention to the last chorus of 'You Wonderful Thing' which is beautifully arranged for two clarinets – Mikell and Garland probably - and 'Father' White's muted trombone. The arranger very probably is Harry White himself – „with his glasses on“!

The first and the third titles obviously are transcribed to CD too fast, so that they sound like played in E natural, which would be most unusual for a jazz ensemble. They most probably were played – and arranged – in Eb major.

Notes:

- *Delaunay, New Hot Discography, 1948: not listed*

- *Rust*2,*3,*4,*6: unknown tpt; unknown tbn, unknown clt, alt; unknown alt; unknown ten; unknown pno; unknown gr; unknown sbs; unknown dms; Billy Banks vcl*

- *B. Rust, The Victor Master Book Vol. 2: t / tb / 3s / p / g / b / d; vocalist: Billie Banks.*

- *RCA Jazz Tribune No 58: Shelton Hemphill (tp); Charlie Holmes (cl, as); Henry Hicks (tb); Crawford Wethington (as); Joe Garland (ts, bar sax); Edgar Hayes (p); Benny James (g); Hayes Alvis (b); O'Neil Spencer (dm); Baron Lee (ldr)*

- *Tom Lord, Discographie: Billy Banks (vcl); Bill Coleman (tp); unknown (tb); unknown (cl, as); unknown (as); unknown (ts); Edgar Hayes (p); Bill Johnson (bj, g); Pops Foster (b); Joseph Smith (d)*

- *Storyville 1998/99, Afterthoughts No 742: "Billy Banks, late of Baron Lee's orchestra, is now heading his own band at Club Madrid, Cleveland." (PC 15/10/32 7/4) Is this a clue to the accompanying band on Victor of 18 August 1932?"*

Tunes:

73306 Oh! You Sweet Thing Key of Eb / F Victor
(Intro 4 bars ens 2 – CW alt 2)(Chorus 1 32 bars AABA BB voc + CW alt obbl 30 – WPJ m-tpt end-b 2)(Chorus 2 32 bars AABA WPJ m-tpt 16 – EH pno 8 – WPJ m-tpt 8)(Chorus 3 32 bars AABA BB scat-voc 16 – BB voc 14 – HFW m-tbn bk 2)(Chorus 4 32 bars AABA HFW m-tbn 16 – GM clt 8 – GW m-tbn 14 – EH pno bk modulation to F 2)(Chorus 5 32 bars AABA EH pno 16 – GM alt 8 – ens ad-lib 8)

73307 It Don't Mean A Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing) Key of Bb (Gm) Victor
(Intro 10 bars WPJ m-tpt)(Chorus 1 32 bars AABA WPJ m-tpt 16 – HFW m-tbn 8 – WPJ m-tpt 8)(Chorus 2 32 bars AABA BB voc)(Chorus 3 32 bars AABA BB voc 4 – WPJ m-tpt 4 – BB voc 4 – WPJ m-tpt 4 – BB voc 2 – WPJ m-tpt 2 – BB voc 2 – WPJ m-tpt 2 – BB voc 4 – WPJ m-tpt 4)(Bridge 12 bars JG ten + ens)(Chorus 4 32 bars AABA BB voc 4 – GM clt 4 – BB voc 4 – GM clt 4 – BB voc 2 – GM clt 2 – BB voc 2 – GM clt 2 – BB voc 4 – GM clt 4)(Coda 16 bars WPJ m-tpt + BB voc chase)

73306 You Wonderful Thing Key of Eb Victor
(Intro 4 bars GM clt + ens)(Chorus 1 32 bars AABA BB voc + 2 clts 16 – BB voc + EH pno 8 – BB voc + 2 clts 8)(Chorus 2 32 bars AABA WPJ m-tpt + BB scat voc 16 – HFW m-tbn + BB scat voc 8 – WPJ m-tpt + BB scat voc 6 – EH pno 2)(Chorus 3 32 bars AABA BB voc + 2 clts 16 – BB voc + EH pno 8 – BB voc + 2 clts 8)

As always, I have to thank my good friend Michael Rader for his great help, advice and linguistic support, and supply of un-possessed material!