A CASE OF INAPPROPRIATE MODESTY

The OKEH MELODY STARS

by K.-B. Rau

When preparing my article on trumpet player June Clark (see Frog Blues and Jazz Annual Vol. 4) I searched for possible recordings with Clark on trumpet/cornet. Although Clark was a respected trumpeter among Harlem musicians in the mid 1920s, he disappeared suddenly from public view, probably due to seriousr trouble with his lips after stressing them with too many high notes.

He gained his greatest fame as leader of "June Clark and his Creole Band", the house band in Smalls' Sugar Cane Club on 2212 Fifth Avenue, New York, Harlem. His band, also known as "J. C. and his Creole Stompers", was built around the brass duo of June Clark and Jimmy Harrison, the latter the rising star of jazz trombone.

When in October 1925 Edwin Smalls opened his very famous "Ed Smalls' Paradise", business at the "Sugar Cane Club" came to an end, thus finishing June Clark's career as a band leader with a firm engagement and a steady working band. Around this time the band had a couple of opportunities to record under the names of "Blue Rhythm Orchestra" and "The Gulf Coast Seven". But Clark also recorded with members of his band for a number of vaudeville/blues singers, mostly hidden behind various band names. These hidden appearances I hope and believe to have detected and published in my above named article.

But after some years of tackling other themes in early Harlem Jazz it appears that there is to be added an additional recording session that I did not list in my article on Clark.

When on my way to Hamburg in 2004 to pay a visit to the well-known German collector, the late Klaus-Uwe Dürr – who, by the way, provided me with the first documented material on June Clark – I listened to the beautiful "Big Charlie Thomas" CD on Timeless in my car. (I do not follow Richard Rains' denial of this trumpeter's personal identity as stated in the Frog Blues and Jazz Annual Vol. 1!) Riding the "Autobahn" can be very boring, but also very refreshing when listening to good music without being interrupted by anybody. And looking forward to a very interesting day at Mr. Dürr's home I listened even more intensively.

Earlier on I had discovered that the first three items of the said CD, Sara Martin's session of November 23, 1925 ('I'm Gonna Hoodoo You', 'Your Going Ain't Giving Me The Blues', What More Can A Monkey Woman Do') certainly did not have Big Charlie Thomas – or whatever his real name was – as trumpet player, but June Clark instead. This assumption was later confirmed by Clark's own testimony!

But I really was surprised to hear Mr. June Clark again, on the one title by the Okeh Melody Stars, 'Look Out Mr. Jazz'. Here Clark was together with Big Charlie who plays the very beautiful cornet breaks in the second half of the last chorus – together with the trombonist and the clarinettist. (When listening while driving I listen only intuitively, but not the worse for that. I have observed that this way of listening very often achieves better results in finding out the performing musicians than sitting in front of the loudspeakers at home eager to achieve my end.)

But Klaus-Uwe Dürr would have none of it when confronted with my find. I nevertheless added the session to my June Clark list which I then sent to some well-known record researchers to get to know their opinions on these probable or possible Clark sides. The reaction to my assumption was that Clark's possible presence on the Okeh Melody Stars was denied in favour of Jimmy Wade. For me, they were the pundits, and so I obeyed and erased the item from my list.

Only recently I happened to listen to these sides again, and it immediately dawned upon me and became obvious and undeniable that this was June Clark on first trumpet when measured against his playing characteristics as stated in my article on Clark in the Frog Annual Vol. 4. I simply had been inappropriately modest and reserved. So, this is a beautiful occasion to tackle this little-known, but certainly rewarding

OKEH MELODY STARS New York, August 23, 1926

June Clark, Big Charlie Thomas - cnt; Charlie Irvis - tbn;

unknown – alt, clt; unknown – ten;

Porter Grainger (or Vivian Wright?) - pno; Buddy Christian - bjo;

Clarence Todd - voc

Look Out, Mr. Jazz 74310-A OK 8382 not on LP/CD? 74310-B Look Out, Mr. Jazz OK 8382 ? Timeless CBC 1-030 74311-A A Glass Of Beer, A Hot Dog And You OK 8382 not on LP/CD A Glass Of Beer, A Hot Dog And You OK 8382 74311-B not on LP/CD

Note: The Timeless CD booklet gives matrix-number 74311-A for 'Look Out, Mr. Jazz'

As stated above, it is definitely June Clark here on first trumpet/cornet with his strong tone, his permanent irregular vibrato and his very personal fiery and hasty attack.

On second trumpet/cornet – and thus mainly in the background – is the mysterious, but beautifully poetic "Big Charlie" Thomas. (I make no attempt to repeat what his mystery is and what is known about him. This can be easily read in the booklet to the Timeless CD CBC 1-030 bearing his very name.) Listen to his breaks in the last chorus of "Look Out, Mr. Jazz". Mr. Thomas displays a very light and slim tone with a wide vibrato and a phrasing very close to Louis Armstrong's recordings of the time, using wide interval jumps. And I am fairly certain that he leads the band in the out chorus of 'A Glass Of Beer, A Hot Dog And You'.

The trombonist has finally been identified as Charlie Irvis in Rust*6, and this is certainly correct. Irvis plays with his usual vigour and legato style and is easy to identify.

There is an alto player who doubles clarinet throughout on "Look Out, Mr. Jazz". I feel unable to identify this player as there is too little to judge, and his performance lacks recognizable stylistic characteristics. On alto, which he plays throughout the second title, he only plays set parts, which makes him even more undistinguishable. So, no assumption here.

It might be possible to find a name for the beautifully driving tenorist, but I do not know which one. He plays powerfully in a simplified Hawkins manner, but still using strong staccato technique, getting rather old-fashioned at the time, and he has a good and strong tone. He is not Caldwell, nor Prince Robinson, but Benny Waters from the Charlie Johnson band might be a reasonable possibility – and a possible clue to the altoist? Or, perhaps, one of the youngsters, such as Arville Harris or Elmer Williams. Judging from the other musicians he must have been an accomplished musician. And: there were not so many respectable tenor saxophonists in Harlem at the time. (Will reed specialists, please, listen carefully and let me know what they think?)

Both titles are Porter Grainger's compositions. Thus it would be appropriate to assume Grainger's presence on piano here. Yet, after listening to his vocal-group accompaniments (Harmony Hounds, P. Grainger's Three Jazz Songsters, Buddy Christian's Four Cry-Babies, P. Grainger's Jubilee Singers) I have been unable to find anything compatible with what can be heard from the pianist on the Okeh Melody Stars. Grainger here employs desperately simple piano comping and chording behind the singers, almost without any melodious alterations contrary to what is heard in the vocal chorus of "Look Out, Mr. Jazz". His own probable accompaniment to these same titles recorded by Sara Martin on September 05, 1926 (this is not Clarence Williams!) may give a hint to his possible presence on the Okeh Melody Stars session. With Martin and other singers Dolly Ross or Clint Jones he shows a little more melodious style which may correspond with what can be heard on 'Look Out, Mr. Jazz' in the background to the vocal chorus: a simple eighth-note chordal arpeggiation. So, Grainger's presence cannot be ruled out, but may be probable rather than definite.

Storyville 1998/9 p.195 lists a quote from the Baltimore Afro-American: "Vivian Wright, former pianist with Sammy Lewis". She obviously "herded with OKeh Stompers, noted recording artists" (sic). (BAA25/9/26 6/3) Her former activity as noted here might possibly be proof of her possible presence. But lacking any musical information on Miss Wright nothing can be said about her stylistically. So, Porter Grainger's possible presence seems to be more reasonable and probable.

The very strong and straight banjo player probably is Buddy Christian, pianist and banjo player from New Orleans, as noted in the Chicago Defender 16/4/27 p.6: "Buddy Christian, banjo with Clarence Williams Blue Five, Okeh jazz band, playing with Charles A. Watson's (sic) Dreamland Orchestra on West 125th Street, New York, every evening." We are familiar with his very sober four-to-the-bar strumming from many Clarence Williams recordings.

As singer Clarence Todd is listed on the record label.

Notes:

- Rust*2: Clarence Williams (pno) dir. unknown group; Clarence Todd (vcl)
- Storyville 21, p93: Clarence Todd (vcl) acc 2 unknown cnt, tbn, alt, ten, pno and bjo (Bob Graf says that his copy is in rather poor shape and he is unable to determine whether bass or drums are present. One of the reedmen doubles clarinet on the first side. He says that although the record doesn't have a Clarence Williams sound it is still a very fine record.)
- Rust*3,*4: 2c/tb/cl-as/ts/p/bj/Clarence Todd -v
- Rust*6: Charlie Thomas and another, c / Charlie Irvis, tb / cl, as / ts / p / bj / Clarence Todd, v
- L. Wright, OKeh Race Records: vocal chorus by Clarence Todd (Bob Graf owned a copy of this record which used take –a on both sides, but he kept no record of label type or stampers. Jazz Records shows take –B used for each side. The only copy inspected is as above (74311-a /74310-b)).

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June Clark, Big Charlie Thomas – cnt; Charlie Irvis – tbn; unknown – alt, clt; unknown – ten; Porter Grainger (or Vivian Wright?) – pno; Buddy Christian – bjo; Clarence Todd – voc

4310-B Look Out, Mr. Jazz key of C (or Bb?)

OKeh session

(Chorus 1 32 bars ABAC ens JC lead – nice BCT in bars 16-21) (Verse 16 bars ens) (Chorus 2 32 bars voc – ten, pno in background) (Chorus 3 32 bars ens JC lead – cnt, tbn, clt breaks)

(CD plays B natural, but that would be a very uncommon pitch. Sara Martin on her recording sings in C, not Db as given by Tom Lord)

74311 A Glass Of Beer, A Hot Dog And You key of G (or F?)

(Chorus 1 32 bars ABCA' ens JC lead) (Chorus 2 32 bars ten 16 – ens 8 – ten 8) (Verse 16 bars ens) (Chorus 3 32 bars voc – ens in background) (Chorus 4 32 bars ens BCT lead 16 – saxophones 8 – ens 8)

(record probably plays Gb. Sara Martin on her recording sings in G, not Ab as given by Tom Lord)

My thanks to Michael Rader again for his help, advice and services.