

A Case of Serious Attempt

Bessie Smith's 'St. Louis Blues' Film

By K.-B. Rau, David Brown, Michael Rader, Jörg Kuhfuss, and the 'Harlem Fuss' group

In 1973, following the completion of the reissue of Bessie Smith's studio recordings on a 5 double-LP set produced for Columbia/CBS by Chris Albertson, Dick M. Bakker, editor and publisher of "Micrography", issued a magnificent 10-inch LP: Empress 10006, 'The Bessie Smith Recordings Volume 6' on the Dawn Club label. Obviously intended to complement the Columbia/CBS series, the Empress LP contained a number of "fine alternate-takes and the whole soundtrack of 'St. Louis Blues'", which had previously only seen partial release. The aural quality had been improved by restoration work by the famed John R. T. Davies.

The film itself had previously been seen by few people and was believed lost until a copy had been found in Mexico. It has since been released partially on video cassette and DVD by Shanachie and complete on a "Storyville" DVD. It is now also available for all to see in the internet on YouTube. The soundtrack itself was reissued complete on an 8 volume Frog set of Bessie Smith recordings, which added material to the complete CBS set and was also restored by John R. T. Davies, fulfilling a long-held ambition.

This widespread availability provides the opportunity to revisit the film and make a serious attempt to identify the musicians involved both visually and aurally and to find a reasonable answer to the often asked question: Who really does play in Bessie Smith's 'St. Louis Blues' film, visibly and aurally?

Starting with the first reissue on Riverside, various musicians have been proposed as being members of the band audible on the soundtrack. These have ranged from the full Henderson band of the day, to a band including such members as James P. Johnson, Buster Bailey, Joe and Russell Smith, Harry Hull, Bernard Addison and Kaiser Marshall. The leading question is whether the musicians seen on-screen are identical to those heard on the soundtrack.

THE FILM

The "St. Louis Blues" film was directed by Dudley Murphy, who had previous experience in directing music films, although not jazz but classical music. According to Murphy, he approached W. C. Handy, who sold him the rights and did a special arrangement of the number.

Bessie Smith played the role of the "St. Louis Woman", contracted on account of her 1925 recording of the tune with Louis Armstrong and Fred Longshaw. Murphy wrote a story line suggested by the lyric of the number.

The setting of the plot was a Harlem night club and its building. Rehearsals took place in a Harlem loft and the set of the film itself was "more or less a duplicate of a Harlem night club (...) peopled (...) with the real people who frequented this Harlem night club..." These presumably included the members of the Hall-Johnson choir, who accompany Bessie on-screen, although it is possible that more singers are involved than are visible.

The film was not targeted at a "race" audience but principally white viewers who wanted to do the equivalent of "slumming" without having to physically visit Harlem. While Bessie herself is treated with a minimum of respect, most of the other characters closely follow the racial stereotypes prevalent in the period. For a long time, it was rumoured that the film had been banned as demeaning and there was an initiative by white liberals in 1950 to have what was then believed to be the single extant copy of the film destroyed (cf. Albertson pp. 193-196).

The film was produced at Grammercy Studios of RCA Photophone in Astoria, Queens, New York City in June 1929, supervised by Dick Currier. The cinematographer was Walter Streng, editing by Russell Shields (sic) and recording by George Oschmann (from the credits on the film).

The film was made using four cameras synchronized to the master sound track. It is not entirely clear whether the sound track was linked directly with one of the cameras or recorded separately by optical sound technology. In either case, there was a need to synchronize sound and motion at the editing stage, e.g. when what is visible on-screen moves from the night club setting to Bessie's face or body.

The bottom line of this discussion is that we are probably seeing the band which made the recording on-screen during the film. While it is conceivable that some of the participants in the recording might be off-screen in the same studio (e. g. James P. Johnson with all or part of the Hall Johnson choir), there is no real reason why this should be the case. However, since there are inconsistencies in the synchronization of sound and visuals, there is still the possibility that the filming took place in synch with a previously recorded soundtrack.

THE MUSICIANS

Mark Cantor, who operates the Celluloid Improvisations Film Archive, rates the film as important since it is the "only film in which the Fletcher Henderson band, or at least a portion of it, appears on both soundtrack and screen."

Let's bury the idea of the Fletcher Henderson band on screen! No, this definitely is not the Henderson band, but yes, two of Henderson's ace musicians of the 1920s are easily identifiable on the screen, and there very probably is a third player. Yet, there is absolutely nothing to remind us of the real Henderson band here – neither visually, nor aurally.

It would be most interesting to know who the initiators of the identification of the musicians were. Were they the Circle people who issued the soundtrack for the first time? Or were they Orrin Keepnews and Bill Grauer who at least had a hand in re-issuing the soundtrack on Riverside and the 'London Archive of Jazz' Series 3530? Or who else? Quite obviously, the originators judged from watching the movie, not from hearing the sounds, as they recognised the easy-to-identify musicians Kaiser Marshall and Joe Smith. They were not as certain as before in identifying Charlie Green and Bernard Addison, but they obviously suspected to recognise their features. And they completely failed to identify the solo trumpeter and the three reed players. Finally, who gave them the certainty to name James P. Johnson and Harry Hull?

Musicians we see and recognize with certainty are Joe Smith and Kaiser Marshall, former key members of Fletcher Henderson and his Orchestra.

These two musicians are sufficiently known and are the only recognisable link to the Henderson band of the time – although it had factually disbanded only some weeks – or days - ago, after its 'Great Day' debacle (see W.C. Allen, 'Handersonia', p. 230 ff). But, to be accurate: Joe Smith had left the band in 1928, at least half-a-year before the production of the film, and Kaiser Marshall shortly before the start of shooting. The only other distinct Henderson alumnus would be Charlie Green, vaguely discerned behind the guitarist in the café sequence.

The identity of the three reed-men seems to be the biggest problem, as none of them could be identified by viewing the film in its entirety, the only way to watch it in earlier years. Yet, at this point, the inferences of John Clark, author of 'Experiencing Bessie Smith', reached us as a surprise, but are worth of considering even more, as you shall see.

THE VISIBLE

- The prominent trumpet player on screen – the player of the solo-part of the score – is generally named as Russell Smith, but his facial features have nothing in common with Russell Smith's as known from photos. Russell Smith, Joe Smith's brother and his band-mate in the Henderson unit of the time, is always shown bespectacled – with a thick frame in 1927 and with a thin frame in 1932. Also, he looks rather square-faced, whereas our man in the film has a rather upright rectangular face and does not wear glasses. Thus, Russell Smith certainly is not present on the screen.

Alternately, trumpeter Sidney de Paris is also named as trumpet soloist, and he – also – does not facially fit with his eponym. De Paris has a rather flat and round face (see Vitaphone short ‘Don Redman and his Orchestra’ with ‘Yeah Man’, de Paris playing a hot chorus in its progress) which does not correspond with the picture. Consequently, he also has to be excluded.

Definitely, this player is neither identifiable as Sidney de Paris, nor as Russell Smith, neither from their physiognomies nor from their trumpet styles. Our man has a slim – yet not lean – face. He was tentatively identified visually as probably Thomas Morris some years ago. Unfortunately, we are unable to find/name the source/publication of this identification, but it is cited in the John Oliver list of Morris’ recordings in ‘Storyville 2002/3’. Some alert person (who?) had compared the features of the trumpet soloist in our film with the two photos known of Thomas Morris: one a portrait of Morris wearing a bowler hat on the cover of French RCA LP ‘Thomas Morris’ or Frog CD DGF 1 new edition, and another, wearing a round straw boater and holding a trumpet (!) on the cover of the British Fountain LP ‘Thomas Morris with his Past Jazz Masters’, and discovered the possible/probable identity of the persons on film and photos.

- One of the Henderson key musicians in this band is Joe Smith, unmistakably recognisable by his moustache and his physiognomy.

- Of the trombone player we can only see the rather massive head, his hands and part of the trombone for a very short moment, sitting behind the guitarist. He is looking aside at the pianist, which initially makes his face invisible. From the shape of his head – and his hair-cut – we assume that this man is Charlie Green (see ‘Hendersonia’ Figure 8 and 13 after p.176). He is one of the only musicians not seen frontally – together with the pianist. But, might this also be caused by Green’s eye ailment? (He is known to have had one eye directed sideways and the other one forward, which irritated many people when meeting him.) At the very moment of Bessie’s words: “*I hate to see ...*”, starting her performance with the band (sequence 4), the trombonist’s face can be seen for just a second, perhaps, and it becomes apparent that this must be Charlie Green.

- The first alto saxophonist – on the picture’s left – shows a rather sharp-cut slim and flat face and might possibly be – also deduced from his documented simultaneous membership of the ‘Great Day’ band – Harvey Boone (compare with photo of Noble Sissle Band in ‘Storyville 63-101’, with moustache here). This player also doubles on clarinet in ensemble parts as seen (sequence 4), but does not solo. He is visually not Arville Harris at all – as proposed by Mr. Clark in his book ‘Experiencing Bessie Smith – A Listener’s Companion’ (compare photos of Cab Calloway’s band of the early 1930s, i.e. in Calloway, Rollins, ‘Of Minnie The Moocher And Me’, pp. 107, 172 – third sax player from right). No way! Unfortunately, we only know of one single additional photo of Harvey Boone, this time handling a C-melody-sax in Lucille Hegamin’s Blue Flame Syncopators of 1921 (Charters, Kunststadt, ‘Jazz – A History of the New York Scene’, p.99), but this photo only very vaguely supports our assumption – notice the lapse of time. Dave Brown observes a similarity to Albert Socarras (Storyville 90, cover photo, pp.221, 223) which cannot be denied (the musician identified as Socarras in Storyville 15, p. 20, definitely is Carmelo Jari, and not Socarras!).

- The other – third – alto saxophonist, who is also the clarinet soloist throughout (Hendersonia, p.230: “*Harvey Boone, Arville Harris?*”), might in fact be Cecil Scott as proposed by John Clark, author of the above cited book on Bessie Smith (with compliments for finding out!). After complete disbelief we are now cautiously following his assumption although this player’s facial features are only recognised as possibly faintly resembling Cecil Scott’s. But this only, as we do not know any other reed-player who may be our man’s equal (compare A. McCarthy, Big Band Jazz’, p. 43, 44; Driggs/Lewine, ‘Black Beauty, White Heat’, p.132; and Keepnews/Grauer, ‘Pictorial History of Jazz’, p.110). Photos of Cecil Scott with his bands of the late 1920s only show him wearing a top-hat which obscures his hair-cut. Yet, KBR’s wife declared – when asked to compare the soloist’s facial features with Cecil Scott’s on the Teddy Hill band photo of 1937 (on the HEP CD 1033 booklet) – that she would positively think these two images to be identical – the hair line! (One point to the left photo of McCarthy’s ‘Big Band Jazz’ p.43: the identification of the musicians should rather be – left to right: ?Buddy Burton, Gus McClung, ?Earl Horne, Dave Wilborn, Lloyd Scott, Don Frye, Cecil Scott.)

- The tenor sax player is given as Happy Caldwell by Mr. Clark – and others – with the addition of “*identifiable by comparison with contemporary photographs*”. However, any photo known of Happy Caldwell (i.e. Storyville 99, frontispiece; Rex Stewart, Boy Meets Horn, photo of W. Gant’s band, after p.148) shows a head and face completely different from the man seen in the film. This tenor sax player on screen definitely is somebody else and does not remind us of anybody else we know visually. He also doubles on clarinet in the sequence 4 ensemble parts, along with the altoists. His visual features are so unfamiliar among the many musicians we know from photos that we could even imagine this man to be an actor, not a musician. There certainly is nothing to recognise Happy Caldwell in any way here, neither visually nor musically!

- The pianist is only seen very dimly and cannot be recognized from his back, sitting at the piano in the background, turned away from the observer. He does not look like we have imagined James P. Johnson – as a big and massive man (F. Levin, ‘Classic Jazz’ p.99: “*A very large man, he possessed a massive face dominated by a great lower lip that protruded sharply and glowed pink against his black features. The large instrument (piano – KBR) dwarfed by Johnson’s bulky frame.*”). But this person’s shape is rather that of a medium-sized slim man. And as Johnson’s frame in front of a piano is documented on a photo in the above cited book, we would rather assume that this is not James P. Johnson. Assuming that the sound of the film was synchronised, it may well be possible that the pianist is an actor, and not James P., just like the tenor sax player above. Or, perhaps, just another pianist of medium-size dragged at random from the Rhythm Club’s “stocks”?

- The slim young guitarist may be identified by his dark complexion and his sharp-cut face as Bernard Addison. Although he holds a guitar in the opening sequence of the second reel (sequence 4), a banjo is heard throughout the proceedings. The performer is never seen holding his banjo. Most interestingly, Bernard Addison seemed to have preferred black-enamelled guitars as seen on screen and on a Henderson band-photo (‘Hendersonia’ Figure 16 after p.176).

- Our string-bass player is not visually identifiable because he always stands in the shadow of the background, with no light on his face, or his head even out of the frame of the picture. The player seems to be an elderly, medium sized or even small man (Hull’s features are not known to us as we were not able to find any documented photo of him!). He does not play tuba here as often listed, but string-bass throughout.

- Kaiser Marshall is the first musician visible on screen in the initial panorama view of the cabaret scene. For skilled lovers of classic jazz who also know their books it should be easy to recognise Marshall by his facial features (protruding lower lip in a round face). Marshall at this time was no longer a member of the Fletcher Henderson band! And he never rejoined later.

Summing up, what we see and recognise: with certainty we recognise trumpeter Joe Smith (with moustache) and drummer Kaiser Marshall. And we see a trumpet player who could possibly be Thomas Morris, a trombonist who looks like what we would expect of Charlie Green seen from the side, three – for the time being – still unknown reed-players, who might possibly be identified as Harvey Boone, first alto sax, and perhaps Cecil Scott, third alto sax and clarinet soloist, plus an unknown tenor sax player. The guitarist seen – the sound-track has banjo only – might be young Bernard Addison, later with the Henderson band for some years. The pianist’s and string-bass player’s faces are obscured by shadows or plainly not shown and thus unidentifiable. The tenor sax player might possibly and hopefully have been identified by distinguished experts in the USA like the late Frank Driggs, but whose possible assumptions we do not know. He might possibly have been one of the younger sax men who later worked in the big bands without leaving any impression as soloist – or no musician at all.

Congruence of film and sound is surprisingly good, but differences can easily be discovered. This would suggest that the sound-track was not recorded simultaneously with shooting the film as expressed somewhere else, but definitely synchronized. There are some instances where the differences are very obvious:

- Bessie’s oral movements often do not correspond with the succession of the sound-track.

- Bessie sings a 12-bar blues chorus which is interrupted by the change of film-reels, but kept closely together musically.

- The band is shown with a guitar player, but we hear banjo throughout.

- In the 4-bar introduction into the up-tempo band part (sequence 4 in ‘The music’s structures’ below) the solo trumpeter’s finger movements are completely unfitting to what can be heard. The soloist plays a sober phrase of ‘c-d-f-f-f-f-eb-d-c-Ab-A-C’ where he holds a final C, while – simultaneously – his fingers on screen show rapid and erratic movements on his valves, certainly achieving only chaotic arpeggiated sequences of notes. These chaotic sequences the listener might know from Fats Waller and Morris’ ‘Hot Babies’ ‘Fats Waller Stomp’ and ‘Savannah Blues’ from the Victor session of May 20, 1927. This conformity, by the way, might be proof of the assumed identity of Thomas Morris as first trumpeter on the screen.

- At the same time the above noted phrase is played by the trumpeter without rhythm by the band, the rhythm section on screen, yet, is playing in its entirety.

THE AUDIBLE

We used the sound-track of the film as reissued on Frog CD DGF 46, remastered by the great John R.T. Davies. We have arranged the whole soundtrack in easily identifiable portions, thus (see also 'The Music's Structures' below):

Sequence 1: the music behind the opening credits, determined by solo trumpet and solo clarinet accompanied by the entire band, playing simple sustained chordal scores (chords of strain C), obviously written down - or rather sketched - by the arranger.

Sequence 2: Bessie Smith unaccompanied: this part has Bessie alone singing one 12-bar chorus composed only of the line of strain C "*My man's got a heart like a rock in the sea*", sung four times. The chorus has an undetermined sequence of the blues chords (not I-IV-I-V-I), which might be explained by the fact that this part is spliced together from the synchronization material and stretched upon the switch of film-reels.

Sequence 3: has Bessie singing the usual words of W.C. Handy's composition (strains A, B, C), chordally accompanied by the band and by the over-powering choir, started by a 4-bar solo introduction of the pianist.

Sequence 4: The band playing ten choruses in double-tempo, accompanying - first, the dancing waiters in their tray-number - and second, "no-goeder" Jimmy Lee dancing. This arranged sequence features the reed section on clarinets throughout, accompanied by riffs of the brass section.

Sequence 5: starts with Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue' introduction by the solo trumpet, followed by Bessie singing the minor 16-bar strain B and the major 12-bar strain C of the composition, accompanied by the band throughout.

It has generally been assumed that the musicians seen on screen were taken from a band that Fletcher Henderson had assembled and expected to be part of the pit-band for the 'Great Day' show - the additional part being white string players. The musicians were Russell Smith, Bobby Stark, Rex Stewart, and Louis Armstrong (!) on trumpets, Jimmy Harrison and Charlie Green on trombones, Harvey Boone and Arville Harris, alto saxophones/clarinets, Coleman Hawkins and possibly another tenor saxophonist, Clarence Holiday on banjo/guitar, and Walter Johnson on drums. The bass player of the Henderson band at that time is not certain. Henderson himself was appointed conductor of the show. But a newspaper report of June 29 in the Pittsburgh Courier said that the show left "*much to be desired in the way of polishing up, editing and rehearsing*" (Hendersonia, p.232), and Variety of July 3 (ibid.) reported that Paul Lanin (sic) had replaced Fletcher Henderson in the show. Thus, we have to consider that the musicians of the regular Henderson band might not have been obtainable in their entirety for the production of Bessie's film, as the Henderson band was "on the loose", and the show was not staged in New York with the Henderson musicians participating.

Although some well-known Harlem musicians are shown in the film, it is uncertain that we really hear these musicians in the sound-track, the more so as we know the styles of the soloists-on-screen in 1929 only approximately! Thomas Morris - in 1929 - was a man of the past in Harlem jazz circles, and - beyond that - not a distinctly expertised one. And Cecil Scott - in case it really is he - only played on a limited number of recordings before, displaying great virtuosity some years later only - listen to him behind Billie Holiday in Teddy Wilson's 'What A Night, What A Moon, What A Girl', or any of Clarence Williams recordings of the early 1930s.

- There is a strong and full-toned trumpet part played by the man who is still listed as Russell Smith in Rust*6! Russell Smith is not known to have recorded any ad-lib parts, and the man seen definitely is not Russell as shown above. He is not Sidney de Paris, either, as de Paris has a somewhat lean and sharp tone, fitting to his habit of beginning a phrase with a little tonal downward peppery "jump" or appoggiatura. Our man on the screen has a full, "bluesy" tone, possibly a little weak sometimes, that would properly correspond to what we know of Thomas Morris in later years, yet lacking many of his earlier inaccuracies. As is stated above, we believe Thomas Morris to be this solo trumpeter. (Morris is never noted as trumpet player in discographical personnels, but as cornetist only. But this might have been caused by Brian Rust's peculiar way of attributing these instruments to their assumed users. Only Delaunay lets Morris have a trumpet and a cornet, but at the unsuitable dates, of all possibilities.) Here, at least, Morris plays a trumpet, using a ball- or knob-mute - as does Joe Smith - when playing chordal accompaniment for Bessie in sequence 3, and a cup- or plunger-mute in sequence 1.

- Second trumpet: one of the Henderson key musicians in this band is easily recognisable as Joe Smith, famous for his sensitive and melodic playing and known for his mutual understanding of Bessie Smith's music. He only plays second trumpet parts here, audible faintly behind the first trumpeter, with no soloistic exposure, but recognised by his soft tone and wide vibrato. You may hear him a little exposed only at the end of chorus 10 in sequence 4, and possibly a few other minor spots.

- Assumed that we have identified the trombone player correctly as Charlie Green, we do not hear him exposed on his instrument at any time, with the exception of a short 2-bar phrase at the end of chorus 3 in sequence 4. He can only be heard as part of the ensemble sound in chordal accompaniment. No instrumental sound is sufficiently recognisable.

- First alto, section clarinet: this player is visually identified as possibly Harvey Boone (or Albert Socarras?), but no instrumental sound is readily recognisable. Because of Boone's restrained personality, this reliable and unassuming legitimate musician is only little known, and it might have been the intention that the film people chose him as leader of the saxophone section. He was slightly older than his colleagues in the reed section. On the other hand, Socarras might as well be on screen and soundtrack because of his involvement in the Lew Leslie 'Blackbirds' company in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

- Second (third!) alto, solo clarinet: here Cecil Scott has been identified by John Clark as cited above, and we tentatively agree from the meagre fact that this musician plays his clarinet with a hard and rasping "growling" tone, the same Scott used in 'In A Corner', a recording by his own band of November 19 of this same year. (In my short list of "growl" clarinetists of the late 1920s and early 1930s in my article on Billy Banks in Names&Numbers 93 I forgot to name Cecil Scott. Shame on me! - KBR)

- Tenor sax, section clarinet: unknown person, without solo performance, plays only section work. Albert Happy Caldwell - as named in several publications - could certainly have been part of the studio band to record the soundtrack, but he is not aurally recognisable at all in its entirety and should thus be excluded from the probable personnel.

- The pianist is clearly heard playing the beautiful band introduction of Bessie's vocal performance with choir and band (sequence 3) using thirds, which definitely sounds like what we know of James P. Johnson, who - on the other hand - is the documented (?) leader of the band.

- Although a guitar is seen in the opening of the cabaret scene (start of second reel), a banjo is heard throughout the proceedings, starting with the band behind the opening credits and all along the cabaret scene. The player delivers a strong rhythm banjo with a slight tendency to drop in casual virtuoso solo phrases. This certainly sounds like a pre-view to Addison's later guitar style. But it definitely was not Charlie Dixon's style!

- String-bass: just as this player is not identifiable visually (Hull's features not known), he cannot be identified by any tonal, rhythmic or other musical quality, either.

- Only Kaiser Marshall lets us hear what his drum set with its big bass-drum and snare-drum really sounded like: very big but smooth, sonorous and warm. Of all the Henderson recordings of the 1920s I could not name one tune that enables the reader to hear Marshall's drum set. Only, in some exposed parts of the arrangements, there are little bits of isolated cymbal playing, the - at the time - fashionable Zildjian hand-cymbal, a sort of early high-hat device, yet not operated by foot and hands, but only manually, or choked cymbals played by one or both hands. But these cymbal breaks ('Come On Baby', for instance) are played very close to the microphone. For reasons of volume the drum-set usually was not installed at this place in the studio, but aside, and thus could only little be heard supplying the fundamental rhythm for the band, and not - in its integrity - used soloistically by the drummer. And a few breaks for wood-block or slap-sticks appear, but no snare-drum exposure anywhere, only, what was called "traps" at the time. Oh yes, and there are very few bars where Marshall hits his Chinese tom-tom, but these can only be found earlier in the 1920s. (There could well be found a small number of exceptions here, but we were not able to listen to the whole number of Henderson recordings of the 1920s lately! Please, excuse!) What can be heard from Marshall in the film corresponds to what - and how - he played with Bechet's King Jazz recordings in 1945, and what certainly was Marshall's business in the "live" Henderson band: fundamental band-drumming with bass-drum and snare-drum press-

rolls as well as cymbal work. And listen here to know how a bass-drum was played in a dance-band context when record producers still refused them to be recorded.

- A harmonica is played in a blues style in the three-and-a-half minutes after the band's "overture" during the craps game. Along with it we hear some mourning words sung by Bessie Smith, possibly accompanied or answered by a muted trumpet playing wa-wa notes, before Jimmy Lee enters the scene.

- "The choir is typical of the period's Europeanised spiritual singing – only Bessie imparts genuine blues feeling. But as with all her efforts over rich backgrounds, however unimaginative they may be, it works beautifully" (E. Brooks, 'The Bessie Smith Companion'). The choir's parts are beautifully adapted to the band scores which are restricted to deliver chordal background (not a regular big-band arrangement), and obviously the whole musical arrangement was a good co-operation of W.C. Handy and J. Rosamond Johnson as stated in the opening-credits. According to all former publications, James P. Johnson was the bandleader and accordingly should have had a strong influence on musical matters. Yet, with the exception of the nice piano introduction into the cabaret scene, we cannot identify anything of James P. Johnson of musical importance here.

With this lately gained new knowledge we could now constitute a visual personnel as: *Thomas Morris*, Joe Smith – tpt; Charlie Green – tbn; *Harvey Boone*, *Cecil Scott* – alt, clt; unknown – ten, clt; unknown – pno; Bernard Addison – gtr; unknown – sbs; Kaiser Marshall – dms.

And we could name a personnel from aural identification as: *Thomas Morris*, Joe Smith – tpt; unknown – tbn; unknown, unknown – alt, clt; unknown – ten, clt; James P. Johnson – pno; Bernard Addison – bjo; unknown – sbs; Kaiser Marshall –dms.

Bringing both personnels together the most probable one would then be:

BESSIE SMITH	J. Rosamond Johnson Choir / Hall Johnson Choir	New York,	c. Jun. 1929
Bessie Smith – voc;		RKO film soundtrack of "St. Louis Blues"	
<i>Thomas Morris</i> , Joe Smith – tpt; Charlie Green – tbn;			
<i>Harvey Boone</i> , <i>Cecil Scott</i> – alt, clt; unknown – ten, clt;			
<i>James P. Johnson</i> – pno; Bernard Addison – bjo; <i>Harry Hull</i> – sbs; Kaiser Marshall – dms			
NY-39	St. Louis Blues – Part 1	Circle J1016,	Frog DGF 46
NY-40	St. Louis Blues – Part 2	Circle J1016,	Frog DGF 46
NY-41	St. Louis Blues – Part 3	Circle J1017,	Frog DGF 46
NY-42	St. Louis Blues – Part 4	Circle J1017,	Frog DGF 46

Notes:

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

- *London AL 3530 (LP)(1955)*: Joe Smith (c); Charlie Green (tb); Buster Bailey (cl); Happy Caldwell (ts)

- BGR*2: "Acc by mixed Chorus and Orchestra: Joe Smith, cnt; Russell Smith, tpt; James P. Johnson, pno; Charlie Green, tbn; Buster Bailey, clt; Happy Caldwell, ten; Charles Dixon, bjo; Harry Hull, bbs; Kaiser Marshall, dms; with Rosamund Johnson and the Hall Johnson Choir, dubbed from the sound-track of the film 'St. Louis Blues'. Sidney de Paris and Bernard Addison are also alleged to be present."

- *Empress 10006 (LP) (1973)*: James P. Johnson p; Joe Smith c; Russell Smith tp; Charlie Green tb; Buster Bailey cl; Happy Caldwell ts; Charlie Dixon bj; Harry Hull brass-b; Kaiser Marshall dm.

- BGR*3,*4: Joe Smith, c; Russell Smith, t; Charly Green, tb; unknown, cl; unknown, ts; James P. Johnson, p; Charles Dixon, bj; Harry Hull, sb; Kaiser Marshall, d; with Rosamund Johnson and the Hall Johnson Choir, mixed v chorus. Sidney de Paris and Bernard Addison are also alleged to be present on this sound-track.

- Rust*2: not listed

- Rust*3: "Acc by J. Rosamond Johnson and the Hall Johnson choir (40 mixed voices) and James P. Johnson -p -dir. Joe Smith -c; Russell Smith -t; Charlie Green -tb; Buster Bailey -cl; Happy Caldwell -ts; Charlie Dixon -bj; Harry Hull -bb; Kaiser Marshall -d and on e more musician (a contemporary report refers to a ten-piece band, and rumour alleges Sidney de Paris -t and Bernard Addison -g were present. The more likely tenth man is de Paris."

- W.C. Allen, *Hendersonia*, p.495: "The Circles present most of the sound track of Bessie's movie of the same name (St. Louis Blues – KBR). This moviewas shot in late June 1929, with a band directed by James P. Johnson. It has often been suggested that this band consisted of Fletcher Henderson's men. Although Kaiser Marshall can be recognised in the film, and one of the trumpeters might be Joe Smith, the clarinetist could not possibly be Buster Bailey, nor does it sound like him, as Bailey was in Europe with Noble Sissle. In any event, Joe Smith had left in early June as a result of the GREAT DAY fiasco. The personnel's given in Rust and Dixon & Godrich are highly suspect; can't someone make a "still" from the movie, and show it around?"

- S. Brown, R. Hilbert, James P. Johnson: Hall Johnson choir (40 mixed voices); James P. Johnson's Orchestra: Joe Smith, Sidney de Paris, trumpets; unknown trombone; unknown clarinet; unknown tenor sax; Johnson, piano; poss Charlie Dixon, banjo; poss Harry Hull, brass bass; Kaiser Marshall, drums.

- J. Olivar, *Thomas Morris*, *Storyville 2002/3*: "The soundtrack has been reissued in various forms, and features Bessie Smith singing the title tune accompanied by (tentatively identified): Thomas Morris, Joe Smith, c; Russell Smith or Sidney de Paris, t; Charlie Green, tb; Buster Bailey or Arville Harris, cl; ?Bernard Addison, g; Harry Hull, sb; Kaiser Marshall, d. J. Rosamond Johnson and the Hall-Johnson Choir -v; unidentified others? -v."

- J. Clark, *Experiencing Bessie Smith*: Joe Smith, Sidney DeParis, t; prob Charlie Green, tb; prob Arville Harris, as; prob Happy Caldwell, ts; prob Cecil Scott, as, cl; James P. Johnson, p; prob Bernard Addison, gtr; Harry Hull, sb; Kaiser Marshall, d.

The Music Structures:

St. Louis Blues – sequence 1 – behind opening credits Key of F film soundtrack
(Chorus 1 12 bars ?JS m-tpt + CS clt over band)(Chorus 2 discont. 9 bars ?JS m-tpt + CS clt over band)

St. Louis Blues – sequence 2 - Bessie Smith unacc. Key of C film soundtrack
(Chorus 12 bars blues – uncertain chord structure BS voc 12 unacc.)

St. Louis Blues – sequence 3 – Bessie Smith and band Key of F film soundtrack
(Intro 4 bars JPJ pno)(Chorus 1 strain A 12 bars BS voc+ens+choir)(Chorus 2 strain A 12 bars BS voc+ ens+choir)(Verse strain B 16 bars BS voc+ens+choir)(Chorus 3 strain C 12 bars BS voc+ens+choir)(Bridge 2 bars ?TM o-tpt)(Chorus 4 strain C choir+BS voc+ens)

St. Louis Blues – sequence 4 – band up-tempo, dance-scene Key of G film soundtrack
(Intro 4 bars ens)(Chorus 1 12 bars ens)(Chorus 2 12 bars ens)(Chorus 3 12 bars ?CS clt+ens)(Chorus 4 12 bars ?CS clt+ens)
(Chorus 5 12 bars clts+brass riffs)(Chorus 6 12 bars clts+ens riffs+ dancer)(Chorus 7 12 bars ens ad-lib+ dancer)(Chorus 8 12 bars ens ad-lib+dancer)(Chorus 9 12 bars slow ens ad-lib)(Chorus 10 12 bars slow ens ad-lib)

St. Louis Blues – sequence 5 – Bessie and band, final scenes Key of F film soundtrack
(Intro 6 bars 'Rhapsody in Blue' theme ? TM o-tpt)(Verse 16 bars ens+choir)(Chorus 1 12 bars BS voc+ens+choir)

THE SOURCES

Biograph LP 1978: St. Louis Blues (1929)

Written and directed by Dudley Murphy

With Bessie Smith, Johnny Lee

Choral arrangement by W.C. Handy and J. Rosamond Johnson

Played by members of the Fletcher Henderson orchestra

(incl. Joe Smith, tp, Kaiser Marshall, d)

James P. Johnson, piano and musical director.

Song: St. Louis Blues

Sung by Bessie Smith and the Hall Johnson choir

The only film appearance by the legendary Bessie Smith was one of the early entries in the sound film revolution, having been recorded in Late June of 1929 by the RCA Photophone System. It is marked by imaginative staging and a story line which hits the title song's mood and lyrics – a better than average achievement among most of the jazz shorts of the period.

Johnny Lee plays a typical flashy gambler who is being supported by Bessie, but has a roving eye for any new girl that comes along – especially if she's a „yellow woman“ (light-skinned Negro) because „they're liable to do anything“. When Bessie catches him at it, he flees into a high dudgeon and leaves, telling her he's hit out of town „by the time the evening sun goes down“.

Bessie starts to sing, at first softly to herself in her room: „My man's got a heart like a rock cast in the sea“. The scene shifts to a café where she continues her blues, now joined by James P. Johnson on the piano, and soon the ten-piece orchestra and the rest of the café patrons (actually the Hall Johnson choir) also join in. At the height of the festivities Johnny Lee enters the café, the orchestra goes into a fast version of the title song, and he does a dance routine. Bessie welcomes him back with relieve, and the two of them dance to a slowed down version of the song; however, his only reason for returning was to take the rest of her money, and as soon as he gets it he leaves her flat again.

Miss Smith was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1895, and died in a car accident near Clarksdale, Mississippi, in 1937. Probably the most influential blues singer of her time, she started by touring with Ma Rainey, later stayed for several seasons at Philadelphia and Atlantic City nightclubs. She had a highly prolific recording career, starting in 1923, often accompanied by top jazz artists.

Among jazz devotees, there is a notable lack of consensus on the exact personnel which accompanies Bessie, and even if they were all Henderson sidemen. Although friends have recognized Joe Smith on trumpet and Kaiser Marshall on drums, the remaining eight members of the group have never been positively identified as they are seen in the film only in a very brief panoramic view.

The Fletcher Henderson Orchestra was at this time going through a major shake-up. Hired as a pit band for a Broadway musical (*Horseshoes*, later renamed *Great Day*) it was subjected to a great strain during rehearsals and was forced to engage several white musicians, such as violinists, which the producers specified. Some of the men were dissatisfied and left, including Buster Bailey, Kaiser Marshall, Jimmy Harrison and Charlie Green.

Since Marshall has been positively identified in the film, and Green is also probably in the cast, this would seem to suggest that the film's musical director, James P. Johnson, hired some of these men precisely because they were leaving Henderson at this time and so were free to take the job.

Of all the major black orchestras Henderson's is probably the only one that was almost entirely bypassed by the film medium. Outside of a few very brief glimpses of the band in Paul Robeson's vehicle *The Emperor Jones* (1932), and a rumoured appearance in a 1936 MGM short *Swing Banditry* which no-one has been able to outline. This is the only film in which at least a few members of the Henderson orchestra are definitely present.

A possible personnel may be: Joe Smith, Russell Smith, Bobby Stark, trumpets; Happy Caldwell, Arville Harris, reeds; Charlie Green, trombone; Harry Hull, tuba; Charlie Dixon, banjo; Kaiser Marshall, drums; James P. Johnson, piano and leader.

Walter C. Allen, Hendersonia:

„St. Louis Blues“ – This famous short featuring Bessie Smith is often cited as featuring a Fletcher Henderson unit; although Kaiser Marshall, and perhaps Jor Smith, can be visually identified in the cabaret scene, the band was actually led by James P. Johnson and was cut „last week“ (Chicago Defender, July 6, 1929, p. 6). At this time, Marshall had left Henderson because of the „Great Day“ fiasco.

Scott E. Brown, James P. Johnson – A Case of Mistaken Identity:

„After an initial tryout in Baltimore, „Messin' Around“, a show with music by Johnson and lyrics by Perry Bradford, opened at the Hudson Theater (44th Street east of Broadway) on April 22, 1929. The production was conceived and staged by Louis Isquith, the dances were staged by Eddie Rector, and the orchestra was directed by James P. Johnson. The show received fair reviews, and ran for a little over a month. Virtually the only aspect of the show most reviewers praised was the music. One song in particular was singled out as a certain hit, „Your Love Is All I Crave“. ... Although the tune was used in the film „Show of Shows“, Johnson never recorded it, and it seems to have faded from memory, along with the show. ...

In June, Johnson recorded the soundtrack to one of the better short films of the day, St. Louis Blues. The film starred Bessie Smith and Jimmy Mordechai as Bessie's „Nogooder“. It was written and directed by Dudley Murphy, who later directed the film version of „The Emperor Jones“, and employed a wealth of musical talent to construct the score.

A mixed chorus of 40 voices and an orchestra accompanied Bessie's superb voice. The chorus, which plays the role of café patrons, is actually the Hall Johnson choir. W.C. Handy and J. Rosamond Johnson arranged the choral parts. James P. Johnson was the musical director and assembled a band containing a few former members of the Fletcher Henderson orchestra.

The exact personnel has not been definitely identified, although a possible roster may have included: Joe Smith, Sidney de Paris, trumpets; Happy Caldwell, Arville Harris, reeds; Charlie Green, trombone; Harry Hull, tuba; Charlie Dixon, banjo; Kaiser Marshall, drums; James P. Johnson, piano and leader. Only the last two and the trumpet players have been positively identified.“

Mark Cantor, St. Louis Blues:

„Second, this is the only film in which the Fletcher Henderson band, or at least a portion of it, appears on both soundtrack and screen. True, Fletcher is not there – his place is taken at the piano by James P. Johnson – but the rest of the band is either drawn from Fletcher's band from the period, or are musicians who had played with him. The band is in fine form, and the instrumental sequence in the middle of the film, in which the band plays an accompaniment to dancing waiters and featured performer Jimmy Mordecai, is one of the finest examples of the Harlem sound of the late 1920s to be found on film.“

J. Clark, Experiencing Bessie Smith:

„The breakup of the Henderson band freed up several musicians who were then hired by James P. Johnson to fill out his band in the film, though not as many as has sometimes been suggested. Alto saxophonist Arville Harris and drummer Kaiser Marshall were both members of the group that was involved with „Great Day“, and Marshall was later vocal about his disappointment in Henderson., for whom he never worked again. The trumpet section can be identified both aurally and visually as Joe Smith and Sidney DeParis: Smith had left the Henderson band at some point at the end of 1928 and was freelancing around New York, while DeParis was featured with Charlie Johnson's band. Smith's broad tone is recognizable in the film itself, but especially during the musical portion of the opening credits, where DeParis's unique plunger-muted style is also prominent. Both trumpeters (as well as Marshall) recorded with McKinney's Cotton Pickers later that fall before going with other groups. The trombonist is likely Charlie Green, although he is only on camera for a few seconds. The saxophone

section is probably Harris on alto and Happy Caldwell on tenor (identifiable by comparison with contemporary photographs). Identifying the third saxophonist (who also plays clarinet solo in the fast portion) is more problematic; I believe it is Cecil Scott, who had played with Henderson occasionally in the middle 1920s and who at the time was leading his own band. The guitarist is probably Bernard Addison (he is also the only musician heard during the first reel of the film) and the bass (not tuba) player is Harry Hull; both Addison and Hull played with Johnson later in the year. Contrary to the assertion of Chris Albertson, there is no string section in the band."

Finally, we have to sincerely thank the partly unknown row of researchers active in this topic, recently and in the past: the unknown who recognised the solo trumpeter's similarity - or possible identity - to Thomas Morris, Mr. John Clark for nominating Cecil Scott as clarinet soloist, Walter C. Allen for naming Harvey Boone as member of the Henderson 'Great Day' pit-band personnel, and all the nameless 'aficionados' eager to catch a short and hasty glimpse of the band scenes in the film to recognise the players in pre-PC times.

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