

# A Real Charlie

## 'Big Charlie Thomas' Twenty Years On

by Dave Brown

Twenty years have now passed since Timeless released an album dedicated to the work of trumpeter and/or cornettist 'Big Charlie Thomas'. Twenty years on, it, and he, are still an enigma. Big Charlie was a phenomenon that emanated solely from the fecund brain of John R.T. Davies, musician, historian and first, premier and greatest restorer of historical jazz records.

Davies, over the years, identified a body of work which he considered to be that of a single unknown anonymous player. The CD was intended to bring to light the work of this 'epic cornettist' but it also had a further profound purpose :-

*'This album contains a lesson for discographers -- while a relatively small number of musicians reached the recording studios in those days, probably at least ten times as many as those whose names we know also recorded'.*

-- J.R.T. Davies notes Timeless Big Charlie Thomas.

There has always been the train spotting tendency for discographers to fill in gaps with known names and an anathema to leaving a blank, an unknown. Admirable as he was, and we are all still in his debt, Brian Rust carried this tendency to the level of extreme creativity. Working together with the team gathered by K.B. Rau for the Harlem jazz research project -- 'The Harlem Fuss' -- we have come to realise just how error ridden is Rust, the work on which all the cloned and parasitic discographies are still based. In the 'Glory Days' of the 'Golden Age' of Storyville and Record Research and large discographical columns in Jazz Magazines, discography was a living, breathing, developing organism. Sadly, we are now at the end of the road. Any surviving experts in this area are now almost all at least in their 70s and there is no future for discography, even if there might -- might -- be for the actual jazz of the 'classic' era.

JRT's Big Charlie Thomas was an attempt to redress the balance in favour of all those unknown, unsung musicians. Only a tiny minority of musicians ever reached the recording studio even in cities boasting permanent recording facilities. Outside these centres recording was even more serendipitous, dependent on the very occasional arrival of a mobile recording unit. I would

estimate that less than 1% of working musicians in any era recorded. JRT estimated that we know the names of less than 10% of those musicians who did actually record. This imbalance has distorted our view of Jazz History.

Also from JRT's notes *'others who have long merited recognition but have been passed over simply because their names were not remembered and may yet, given a name -- any name -- be recognised and appreciated'*

The 'any name' implies for me that JRT did not really believe the name he concocted. The 'Ah play that thing Big Charlie' at the end of a cornet solo on the Margaret Carter 'Come Get Me Papa' cannot be taken as certain evidence of the player's name. Early jazz sides are full of enthusiastic exhortations to add colour and 'Big Charlie' might be just that. How accurate we consider Eva Taylor's memory of 'something Thomas' is debatable. The additional embroidered detail of 'an older man' might add weight to our belief in the veracity although Eva's memory of other sessions from this interview has been doubted. The interview as regards Big Charlie runs :-

*Q: Can we move on now and ask you about some of your records- for instance can you recall who the trumpet player is on this record? This was made just after Louis Armstrong had left, but this man sounds surprisingly like Louis at times and some people have even suggested it was Louis. The same man appears on several other records about this time but so far we've been unable to place him. June Clark has also been suggested as a possible. (We then played the record, OKeh 8267 - SHAKE THAT THING/GET IT FIXED)*

*A: Well I don't know June Clark, but I know that man....his name was.... Thomas. Thomas, that was it, I can't remember his first name. (We fired a whole string of all the Thomases we knew, but Eva said no to all of them). He was a much older man than the rest of us. He did have a lot of Louis' licks and we did use him quite a lot. I don't recall what happened to him but I don't remember him much after that.*

JRT describes Big Charlie thus :- *'endowed with impressive facility and a beautiful sense of pitch, he made very full use of a range richly sonorous at he bottom, thrillingly light at the top: the manner of his attack and his breaking of his harmonics by changing capacity of his mouth rather than by lip-muscle suggest that he may have been a reed player earlier in life.'*

Doubling reed and brass is unusual and examples in jazz are few, Benny Carter, Pete Brown, Big Boy Goudie, George Dixon, Bob Enevoldsen, Ira Sullivan and, of course, John R.T. Davies, a fact which may add credence to his theory.

All playing cited by JRT as Big Charlie has in common some, greater or lesser, similarities to Louis Armstrong and there are no glaring anomalies to make it immediately impossible for it not all to be the work of one man.

But this is 1925/1926 and early for Louis influence in NYC where most players were still deep in Eastern, ragtime originated style. Where did the player/players on this CD pick up their Louis ? Records are the strongest disseminator of style but the first Hot 5 session was 12 November 1925 and the first session on the CD was 23 November 1925 so direct influence from Hot 5 records so early can be discounted. I do not think that the Oliver Creole Jazz Band sides provide sufficient exposed Louis to provide a model. A personal exposure to the Creole Jazz Band in Chicago, as in the case of June Clark as reported in Jazz Information 1941, is also possible. The only other source would be the records with Henderson or the blues accompaniments or a personal exposure to Louis with Henderson at the Roseland an unlikely venue for a black musician to be present -- unless playing.

Most interesting is that Eva refers to him as *'a much older man than the rest of us'*. Eva was born 1896 and Clarence 1898 and 'much older' would suggest at least 10 years so a birth date of, at latest, mid to late 1880s. This is surprising for it would be expected that only the Young Turks of the music would so quickly embrace such modernism. As an older man, Big Charlie would have needed to reinvent his previously learned style. This raises the unlikely but striking and startling possibility that Big Charlie came independently to his 'light lyric' Louis-like style.

I shall now move on to discuss the records on which Big Charlie appears or is purported to appear. In this we are all indebted to Mr Richard Rains who rigorously reviewed the Big Charlie album in Frog Annual No 1. While I agree partly with Mr Rains' view I think he throws out the baby -- Big Charlie -- with the bathwater.

## THE RECORDINGS OF 'BIG CHARLIE THOMAS'

**SARA MARTIN** Clarence Williams' Blue Five New York, Nov. 23, 1925  
Sara Martin – voc; June Clark – cnt; Jimmy Harrison – tbn; Leonard Fields  
alt; Clarence Williams – pno, voc ; Buddy Christian – bjo

73773-B	I'm Gonna Hoodoo You	OK 8270
73774-B	Your Going Ain't Giving Me The Blues	OK 8270
73775-B	What More Can A Monkey Woman Do	OK 8283

By the documentary evidence of the Jazz Information article as outlined by Richard Rains and by all aural evidence this is not 'Big Charlie' so an inauspicious start for the CD.

**CLARENCE WILLIAMS' BLUE FIVE** New York, Dec. 15, 1925  
*Big Charlie Thomas* – cnt; Buster Bailey – clt; Leonard Fields – alt;  
Clarence Williams – pno; Buddy Christian – bjo; Eva Taylor - voc

73837-B	Shake That Thing	OK 8267
73838-B	Get It Fixed	OK 8267

This is the player identified by Eva. Note not, as in JRT's notes, forename or surname Thomas, but surname Thomas. I repeat the relevant passage from Storyville 15.

*Q. Can we move on now and ask you about some of your records - for instance can you recall who the trumpet player is on this record ? This was made just after Louis Armstrong had left, but this man sounds surprisingly like Louis at times and some people have even suggested it was Louis. The same man appears on several other records about this time but so far we've been unable to place him. June Clark has also been suggested as a possible. (We then played the record, Okeh 8267 - SHAKE THAT THING/GET IT FIXED)*

*A: Well I don't know June Clark, but I know that man....his name was.... Thomas. Thomas, that was it, I can't remember his first name. (We fired a whole string of all the Thomases we knew, but Eva said no to all of them). He was a much older man than the rest of us. He did have a lot of Louis' licks and we did use him quite a lot. I don't recall what happened to him but I don't remember him much after that.*

This would seem to dispel Mr Rains' theory of it also being Clark, neither does he have the forced, pinched, sour tone of Clark, a result of the high pressure system mentioned by Mr Rains. This player has a far softer attack and his phrasing is far closer to Louis, using Louis stock phrases in a way that Clark does not.

**MARGARET CARTER** New York Aug. 1926

Margaret Carter – voc; Big Charlie Thomas – cnt; Charlie Irvis – tbn; unk–  
clt; unk, sop; Mike Jackson – pno; Buddy Christian - bjo

107041 I Want Plenty Grease In My Frying Pan PA 7511

107042 Come Get Me Papa, Before I Faint PA 7511

**BUDDY CHRISTIAN`S JAZZ RIPPERS** New York Aug. 1926

Big Charlie Thomas – cnt; Charlie Irvis – tbn; Happy Caldwell clt; Bob  
Fuller– sop; Mike Jackson or Louis Hooper – pno; Buddy Christian – bjo

107043 South Rampart Street Blues PA 8518

107044 The Skunk PA 8518

We have moved on eight months, a long time in the Jazz context of NYC mid 20s, and the player may well have developed. He is not dissimilar from the player of the previous session but the vibrato is wider, the sound even softer and fuller, he uses the high register more and the phrasing is more relaxed. This is an extremely individual player and for me the real 'Big Charlie'. The style is substantially amended Louis not Louis licks regurgitated.

**THOMAS MORRIS AND HIS SEVEN HOT BABIES** New York,  
Aug. 17, 1926

Thomas Morris, Big Charlie Thomas – cnt; Geechie Fields – tbn; unknown –  
alt, clt; Happy Caldwell – ten, clt; Mike Jackson – pno, voc; unknown – bjo;  
Bill Benford – bbs

36047-3 Georgia Grind Vic 20180

36048-2 Ham Gravy Vic 20179

36048-3 Ham Gravy Vic 20179

Always the most contentious item on the CD. As early as Rust-1, 1961, Jabbo Smith is listed as 2nd trumpet. I have been unable to find Rust's source but possibly an article on Jabbo by Dick Holbrook in Record Research magazine no 35, June 1961 in which he reports :-

*'In November 1951 Ken Hulsizer drove from Columbus Ohio to Milwaukee with about 100 records to play for Jabbo at Herb Thrune's house. In every case the record sounded to Ken like Jabbo's trumpet or voice. Herb wrote 'we had an all night session Jabbo wasn't on any of the records He would say " it sounds like me but it ain't me."*

At the least this would suggest that Jabbo was not apt to claim records that were not his.

Holbrook continues *'Ham Gravy' -- was Jabbo's first record, Herb Thrune says 'He did play second trumpet on 'Ham Gravy'. I played it for Jabbo several times. But Jabbo said he was not on other numbers recorded at that session'.*

Only one other title was in fact recorded at that session 'Georgia Grind' and indeed the playing on that is even less reminiscent of Jabbo than 'Ham Gravy'. However, the titles from this session were not issued together but each was issued with a title from the previous Morris session :-

*THOMAS MORRIS AND HIS SEVEN HOT BABIES New York, Jul. 13, 1926*

*Thomas Morris, Ward Pinkett – tpt; Geechie Fields – tbn; unknown – alt, clt, bar; Happy Caldwell – ten; Marlow Morris – pno; Lee Blair – bjo; Bill Benford – bbs*

<i>35762-3</i>	<i>Lazy Drag</i>	<i>Vic 20483</i>
<i>35763-1</i>	<i>Jackass Blues</i>	<i>Vic 20179</i>
<i>35763-3</i>	<i>Jackass Blues</i>	<i>Vic 20179</i>
<i>35764-2</i>	<i>Charleston Stampede</i>	<i>Vic 20180</i>

'Ham Gravy' was issued with 'Lazy Drag' Vic 20179 and 'Georgia Grind' with 'Charleston Stampede' Vic 20180. We may assume that Jabbo was played both records and this may be the reason Thrune refers to 'other numbers' - plural. It is also obviously the reason for Happy Caldwell's following mistake :-

Happy Caldwell: *'The first electrical recordings I made were with Tommy Morris – I remember we had a microphone instead of those big horns. Ward Pinkett and Tommy were on trumpets, Geechie Fields on trombone and Marlowe Morris – he was Tommy's cousin, er no, his uncle, he was on piano. I remember we did Ham And Gravy (sic) and Jackass Blues" (Storyville 99).*

However, it is surely the July session to which he is referring as having Pinkett. I have considered the possibility of Pinkett also being on the August session but have discounted although, if all Rust Pinkett entries are correct, he was capable of Louis-like playing as on the Joe Steeles of 4 June 1929.

So Jabbo confirmed his presence on 'Ham Gravy' -- but **not**, nor by extension, 'Georgia Grind' -- some time between 1951 and 1961, for unfortunately the date of Thrune's report is not given.

*K.B. Rau reports 'Marc van Nus of Almelo, The Netherlands, a friend of mine from the old days and a great trumpet player in the classic style himself, just recently told me of the days he had hosted Jabbo Smith in his home for several days in 1971. In the -- among jazz musicians usual -- "listening-sessions" Jabbo had denied his presence on the Buddy Christian Jazz Rippers, now believed to be the above noted "Big" Charlie Thomas. But when hearing the Morris' Seven Hot Babies sides he had spontaneously remarked that it was he himself on trumpet.'*

Richard Rains reports Jabbo also gave this as his first session when asked in 1977. However, an interview with Eddie Cook published in Jazz Journal, April 1984 includes *'My first ever recording was with Clarence Williams when I was 17 years of age. Charlie Johnson's trombone player got me the date.'*

To quote B.S.Johnson from another context 'you always remember the first time' so it is hard to account for this discrepancy.

In Jabbo's last interview in 1987 in Benjamin Franklin's 'Jazz & Blues Musicians Of South Carolina' we have :-

*Q. (unfortunately a leading question !) Was your first record with Thomas Morris in 1926 ?*

*A. I can't remember but that's what everybody seems to remember. I don't remember. At that time my first record was with Clarence Williams. Charlie Irvis he was playing trombone with Clarence Williams. So he got me the date'.*

So who is the 'everybody' who 'seems to remember' and what does he mean by 'at that time' ? This can be interpreted as meaning that Jabbo was influenced by the memories -- or rather opinions -- of others, fans, researchers or collectors and that 'at that time' -- i.e. at the actual time -- his first session was with Clarence.

I can construct a scenario wherein Jabbo, having been played these sides in the 1950s with the possibility he was on them, eventually embraced them as his own, for it is very fine playing. However, I feel that at the end, in his final testament, the 1987 interview, he sought to set the record straight despite being led into accepting the Morris session as his first.

I suggest that with this conflicting documentary evidence we are thrown back on our ears to decide and to my ears this is not Jabbo. The keening tone is absent, here it is far fuller, the attack is softer, the style much more legato, and the construction less hectic, tidier. Despite Mr Rains' claim, Jabbo can never be heard, at this time, as 'light and lyric.' Jabbo also used pressure method learnt at the Jenkins Orphanage as we read in Balliett's interview of Jabbo in 'Jelly Roll, Jabbo & Fats' :-

*'I've always had lip trouble. We were taught to use a lot of pressure when I started out -- pressing the mouthpiece against your upper lip real hard -- which cut off the circulation and made all kinds of problems.'*

The player on 'Ham Gravy' is not using this method but more, as JRT says, 'breaking his harmonics by the capacity of his mouth rather than by lip-muscle'.

**OKEH MELODY STARS**                      New York, August 23, 1926

June Clark, Big Charlie Thomas – cnt; Charlie Irvis – tbn; unk alt, clt; unk – ten; Porter Grainger – pno; Buddy Christian – bjo; Clarence Todd – voc

74310-A	Look Out, Mr. Jazz	OK 8382
74310-B	Look Out, Mr. Jazz	OK 8382
74311-A	A Glass Of Beer, A Hot Dog And You	OK 8382
74311-B	A Glass Of Beer, A Hot Dog And You	OK 8382

We are indebted to K.B.Rau for correctly identifying June Clark here together with Big Charlie. Mr Rains also suggests Clark but in the 'fiery breaks' so I presume those actually played by Big Charlie.

**BESSIE BROWN**                      New York,                      Aug. – Sep. 1926

Bessie Brown – voc; unknown – cnt; *Charlie Irvis* – tbn; Bennie Morton – clt; Clarence Williams – pno; unknown – bjo

6813-1	Nobody But My Baby Is Getting My Love	Ban 1859
6813-2	Nobody But My Baby Is Getting My Love	Or771
6814-2	St. Louis Blues	Ban 1859
6814-3	St. Louis Blues	Or 756

This player has a much more pinched tone than 'Big Charlie', his phrasing is choppy and he shows less Louis influence. His fills on 'St Louis' are almost identical and standard but owe something to Louis. Mr Rains hears similarities to Charlie Gaines on Elvira Johnson's 'How Could I Be Blue'. I do not. Gaines, at that time, shows no Louis influence and is playing in standard East Coast style. It is hard to hear any Louis in him till his personal exposure to Louis when playing in the backing band for 'Hot Chocolates' in 1929. Mr Rains tacitly admits this himself when he observes in his article that '*Gaines was demonstrably more advanced in 1929/30 than he was in 1925/26.*' His sides with Waller in 1929 show no Louis influence whatsoever.

**ROSA HENDERSON** New York, Aug. 1926

Rosa Henderson – voc; Big Charlie Thomas – cnt; *Bob Fuller* – clt;  
*Louis Hooper (or Mike Jackson ?)* – pno

6781-4	Papa, If You Can't Do Better	Ban 1882
6781-5	Papa, If You Can't Do Better	Ban 1882
6852-2	I'm Saving It All For You	Ban 1882

I can do no better here than to quote K.B.Rau:- *'These two takes of the first title show very intensely the features of this player's individual style: a style surprisingly close to Louis Armstrong's of the time, feather-light phrasing with large interval jumps, a slim but beautiful tone and a strong and wide vibrato with the end altitude of the vibrato amplitude often rising upwards uncontrolled, and often using unfamiliar chord tones in his phrases. This is NOT Charlie Gaines!'*

**DIXIE WASHBOARD BAND** New York, Oct. 21,1926

unknown – cnt; *Prince Robinson* – clt, ten; Clarence Williams – pno; Bruce Johnson – wbd; Clarence Todd - voc

W142852-3	Dark Eyes	Col14188-D
W142853-1	Gimme Blues	Col14188-D

**DIXIE WASHBOARD BAND** New York, Oct. 22,1926

unknown – cnt; unknown – tbn; unknown (*Prince Robinson*) – clt, ten; Clarence Williams – pno; unknown (*Leroy Harris*) – bjo; Bruce Johnson – wbd; unknown (*Clarence Todd*) – tom tom; Clarence Todd – voc; Cl. Williams – Cl. Todd – dialogue

W142856-3	King Of The Zulus	Col14171-D,
W142857-3	The Zulu Blues	Col14171-D



## CONCLUSION

My vision of Big Charlie is a personal one based on what I hear in the aural evidence but, in reality, there is no such thing as aural evidence, only aural opinion, except perhaps, and only perhaps, when a player's individual stock phrases or licks are repeated on different sides. But then, even here on this CD, there are Louis licks not played by Louis. However, it can be observed that in the posited collected work of the posited Big Charlie on the CD the only repeated stock phrases to be heard over the various sides are Louis'.

It is therefore my conclusion that the playing credited by JRT to Big Charlie is in fact the work of several players, apart from June Clark, unknown. For me, the real Big Charlie 'epic cornettist' appears only on the Rippers/Margaret Carter, the Okeh Melody Stars, the Thomas Seven Hot Babies and the Rosa Henderson of August 1926 and probably the Eva of December 1925.

And although this seemingly negates JRT's thesis of this being all the work of one man it does totally uphold JRT's alternative and more important thesis that of the existence of an army of players *'who have long merited recognition but have been passed over simply because their names were not remembered and may yet, given a name -- any name -- be recognised and appreciated'*

### *Bibliography*

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