

THE RECORDINGS OF THE BLUE RHYTHM ORCHESTRA

A Tentative Personnelo-Discography

The 'BLUE RHYTHM ORCHESTRA' was a pseudonym on Pathé Actuelle Records for 'June Clark and his Creole Band' – as per the band's promotional photo (see this web-site's front page) or 'June Clark and his Creole Stompers' as per the booklet of Columbia's extraordinary and wonderful LP set 'The Sound of Harlem'. The band played (Ed) Smalls' Sugar Cane Club' located on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 135th Street in Harlem, New York, most of 1925. They were an immediate success in Harlem in the mid-1920, as their leader June Clark and his companion on trombone, the great Jimmy Harrison, had met a few years ago in Chicago, where they listened intently to King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band and tried to copy Oliver's and Louis Armstrong's most famous interplay on their cornets. They copied their duet dialogues, Clark imitating Oliver's role as lead-trumpet player, and Armstrong's role as second-part player in a New Orleans call-and-response pattern. Their kind of music was so much enthusing and novel for this period of Harlem-Jazz that other musicians crowded into the club only to hear their duets.

The band also recorded in their entirety, but with a slightly alternate personnel, under the pseudonym 'The Gulf Coast Seven' for Perry Bradford on November 05, 1925, also accompanying Bradford – and Clarence Williams - on several blues/vaudeville singer's recordings with parts of their personnel. Keepnews' and Grauer's 'Pictorial History of Jazz' has a photograph of the band under the heading "Perry Bradford, like Clarence Williams, was pianist, publisher and an organizer of record dates." The musicians are the June Clark Creole Stompers/Band, with Clark, Harrison, Charlie Smith, 'Splivy' Escoffery, and – perhaps substituting for Leonard Fields – Eugene Kennedy. Bradford stands in the back, leaning over the piano. Additional members of the working band were Bill Benford on tuba and Joe 'Jazz' Carson on drums.

This was a very exceptional band for their time, and it is hard to accept that they did not find a record company to record them under their true band-name. At least we have to be most happy that they left us their little but most enjoying inheritance in their 'Blue Rhythm Orchestra' and 'The Gulf Coast Seven' sides (see 'The Gulf Coast Seven' elsewhere on this web-site).

This personnelo-discography is based on RUST, JAZZ AND RAGTIME RECORDS 1897 - 1942.

Personnels are taken from this source, but modified in the light of earlier or subsequent research or on the strength of my own listening, discussed with our listening group or other interested collectors.

- Documented, most certain and aurally absolutely obvious identifications are listed thus: **June Clark**
- Probable, generally agreed, but not documented identifications are listed in italics, thus: *June Clark*
- Not attributable identifications – although the musician in question might be an otherwise well-known person – are listed thus: **unknown**
- If a possible identification for an otherwise unknown musician is suggested by the author without the possibility to prove the factual evidence, it is listed thus: (*June Clark*)

When feeling certain without a musician's documented presence, I have not refrained from altering Rust's statements without using italics. In any case, my statements are open to discussion and I would appreciate any contribution - pro or contra!

As always in my discographies on this website I have written recording sessions with their headings, dates, titles and names of musicians in italics, whenever I am convinced that the eponymous musician of this discography is not part of the accompanying group of this session! Documented names of musicians if known – in recording ledgers or on record labels – are listed in bold letters.

This discography still is - and will certainly be - a work in progress for a long time, if not eternally. Yet, on the way to a definite discography of all jazz recordings before 1942 - which certainly will never be possible - it is intended to fill some gaps that have not been treated before.

BLUE RHYTHM ORCHESTRA

Buster Bailey – clt; Leonard Fields – alt;
 Charlie “Smitty” Smith – pno; Will “Splivy” Escoffery – bjo
 106358 Keep Your Temper
 Composer credit: Willie Smith.

PA 36364, Per 14545, Frog DGF 73

Because of the obvious correlation of this and the following session – the only ones under the ‘Blue Rhythm Orchestra’ name - I have taken my liberty to discuss both sessions together under the following date.

Please, note, that ‘Keep Your Temper’ on Frog DGF 71 does in fact play the ‘Keep Your Temper’ of the ‘Gulf Coast Seven’ session of Nov. 05, 1925. The ‘Blue Rhythm Orchestra’ ‘Keep Your Temper’ has then been correctly reissued on Frog DGF 73 as shown here!

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New York, c. Nov. 04, 1925

June Clark – cnt; Jimmy Harrison – tbn;
 Buster Bailey – clt; Leonard Fields – alt;
 Charlie “Smitty” Smith – pno; Will “Splivy” Escoffery - bjo
 106381 Santa Claus Blues
 106382 Hold ‘Er, Deacon
 Composer credits: *Straight – Kahn (106381) / Will C. Skidmore – Marshall Walker (106382)*

PA 36350, Per 14531, Frog DGF 71
 PA 36364, Per 14545, Frog DGF 71

The quotations below urge us to conclude that the sides of the ‘Blue Rhythm Orchestra’ are in fact by ‘June Clark’s Creole Stompers’, augmented by Buster Bailey on clarinet, if this is in fact he. The below mentioned characteristics of the alto player and the piano player are easily recognized on the records, so that the personnel have to be thus:

- June Clark: aurally the cornet player is the same man as on the Gulf Coast Seven and not ---- Thomas or (presumably Big Charlie Thomas), as given in Rust, Jazz Records, all editions. Clark owns a fat tone and a very fiery approach and attack, although sometimes retarding the opening- notes of some phrases (lip trouble? or uncertainty what to play next?), whereas --- Thomas has a lighter tone, uses a more lyrical style with high interval-jumps, very much like Louis Armstrong at that time. Furthermore, Clark owns a rather erratic approach to time/rhythm, which results in a kind of hectic succession of notes.

- Jimmy Harrison: it is most interesting to hear Harrison’s new concept of trombone-playing, like a second cornet as cited below. And mind his tone, vibrato, and attack, completely unlike any other trombone player at that time.

- Buster Bailey: although there is no reliable source for this suggestion known to me, the style seems to be Bailey’s. Bailey is not known to have been a permanent member of the group. There is no soprano-sax as given by all Rust editions to be heard anywhere.

- Leonard Fields: this man’s playing is exactly as cited below in ‘Sources’. Mentioning his name at the appropriate places in Tom Lord ‘Clarence Williams’ p. 146/147 seems quite reasonable! (See my Leonard Fields listing elsewhere on this web-site!)

- Charlie ‘Smitty’ Smith: Rust and all other discographies list Willie “The Lion” Smith as pianist. This pianist here shows nothing of “The Lion’s” characteristics. The pno-breaks at the end of “Hold ‘Er Deacon” with their simple “oom-pah” would exactly apply for “Smitty” Smith as quoted below. Therefore - and because Clark’s piano player at the time is documented as “Smitty” Smith - I think that “Smitty” is much more probable than “The Lion”. Maybe “the Lion’s” name was listed in early discographical times, because “Keep Your Temper” is “the Lion’s” tune and “Smitty” was practically unknown!

- Will ‘Splivy’ Escoffery: Rust and all other discographies list Buddy Christian. To me, Buddy Christian does not seem to be the banjo player on these sides, comparing this man’s style to that more straight-forward approach of Buddy Christian on the Clarence Williams Blue Five or the Gulf Coast Seven session of Nov. 05, 1925 (see below). This man is said to be “Splivy” Escoffery (see below) - as mentioned in ‘Jazz Information’ No. II/16 of 1941 - as regular member of the June Clark band. He plays in that Ragtime derived banjo style common in Harlem in the early days as opposed to the straight 4/4 “Western” style of Buddy Christian. William “Splivy” Escoffery, who is not listed in Rust 6th ed., may yet be found in the Rust Artist index under “Spivey, -- (bj), having made recordings with Eliza Christmas Lee and with Lavinia Turner in 1921. He even is the same man, who played bjo/gtr in Duke Ellington’s first group at Armstrong High School in Washington DC in 1916, although named William Escoffery here (Lawrence, D. Ellington and his World, p. 12). He is said to be of Portugese origin.

The front page of my ‘Harlem-Fuss’ web-site presents a hitherto unknown photo of ‘June Clark and his Creole Band’ (courtesy of Keith Miller, Toronto, Canada) which shows exactly this Blue Rhythm Orchestra personnel, except for Buster Bailey missing, and Bill Benford, Jazz Joe Carson, and probably Harrison Jackson added, and completing the ‘Creole Band’ personnel.

Now, just look at the notes below re the personels as listed in the various editions of Rust and other discographies! That’s what I would call some development!

Notes:

- *VJM VLP 5 (LP) Cover text: probably Louis Armstrong and another (cornets); Charlie Irvis (trombone); Buster Bailey (clarinet and soprano saxophone); unknown (alto saxophone); probably Clarence Williams or Dan Parish (piano); Buddy Christian (banjo),*

- *Rust*2: June Clark ? (tpt); Jimmy Harrison ? (tbn); Buster Bailey (clt, sop); Prince Robinson (ten); Willie “The Lion” Smith (pno); Buddy Christian (bjo)*

- *Rust*3: ? --- Thomas -c; Jimmy Harrison -tb; Buster Bailey -cl -ss; Don Redman -cl -as; Clarence Williams or Willie “The Lion” Smith -p; Buddy Christian -bj*

- *Rust*4: June Clark or --- Thomas -c; Jimmy Harrison -tb; Buster Bailey -cl -ss; Prince Robinson -ts; Willie “The Lion” Smith -p; Buddy Christian -bj*

- *Rust*6: Charlie Thomas -c; Jimmy Harrison -tb; Buster Bailey -cl -ss -as; Prince Robinson -ts; Willie “The Lion” Smith -p; Buddy Christian -bj*

- *Tom Lord, Clarence Williams: June Clark or ---- Thomas (tpt); Jimmy Harrison (tbn); Buster Bailey (clt, sop); Prince Robinson (ten); Willie „The Lion“ Smith (pno); Buddy Christian (bjo). „The following sessions (Blue Rhythm Orchestra – KBR) are tempting examples to list as Clarence Williams sessions because of the sound of the group and the fact that all three compositions are owned by CWMPC (Clarence Williams Music Publication Company – KBR).*

Tunes Structures:

*Keep Your Temper Key of F / Bb / Eb / Bb Pathé Actuelle, Perfect
 (Intro 8 bars ens)(A1 Chorus 32 bars ABAC alt + ens)(Bridge 4 bars ens)(B1 Chorus 16 bars AA’ (tbn 6 bars, reeds 2 bars, tbn 7 bars, ens 1 bar))(B2 Chorus 16 bars (clt 6 bars, reeds 2 bars, clt 7 bars, ens 1 bar))(Bridge 4 bars ens)(C1 Chorus 32 bars AA’ (clt 28 bars, ens 4 bars))(Vamp 2 bars ens)(B3 Chorus 16 bars (ens 6 bars, reeds 2 bars, ens 8 bars))*

*Santa Claus Blues Key of Eb Pathé Actuelle, Perfect
 (Intro 4 bars ens)(A1 Chorus 32 bars ABAC tbn + ens, tbn middle break)(B1 Verse 16 bars ens)(A2 Chorus 32 bars alt + ens, alt middle break)(A3 Chorus 32 bars ens, cnt middle break)*

Hold 'er Deacon *Key of C* *Pathé Actuelle, Perfect*
 (A1 Chorus 20 bars ens, clt breaks)(B1 Verse 16 bars ens)(Bridge 4 bars ens)(A2 Chorus 20 bars alt + ens)(A3 Chorus 20 bars ens, ens middle break, bjo breaks)(A4 Chorus 20 bars ens, pno middle break, pno breaks)(A5 Chorus 20 bars ens, tbn middle break, cnt + tbn + alt breaks)

Sources:

- "The Sound of Harlem" Columbia C3L33 LPs, booklet: "Small's Sugar Cane Club: Pianist Charlie Smith had a band at the Sugar Cane in 1923. Cornetist June Clark took it over and featured Jimmy Harrison, trombone; Benny Carter, C-melody-sax; Jazz Carson, drums; Prince Robinson, sax; Will "Splivy" Escoffery, banjo; and a fellow named "Stone" on clarinet."
- Don Redman/Frank Driggs: Martin Williams, *Jazz Panorama*: "June Clark and Jimmy Harrison used to have a band uptown at Connor's on 135th street, and all of us used to practically live in there. June was very good, but he couldn't read. They used to play some great jazz together. When Jimmy was in Fletcher's band later on, he was the best around"
- Rex Stewart, *Boy Meets Horn*, p. 65: "Most likely we met at Smalls' Sugar Cane on Fifth Avenue. That would be about right because I also met Jimmy Harrison and June Clark there. They were the only musicians in town playing "Western" style with the exception of Happy Caldwell, who had grown up under the influence of Joe Oliver and Louis Armstrong. Hap started teaching me the Western "get-off" style of playing, which had a heavy accented back beat on the second and fourth bars. When you soloed, it was called "taking a Boston"."
- "The Sound of Harlem" Columbia C3L33 LPs, booklet: "Bamboo Inn: June Clark's Creole Stompers: Clark, cornet; Jimmy Harrison, trombone; Len Fields, alto sax; Harrison Jackson, tenor sax; Charlie Smith, piano; Buddy Christian, guitar; Bill Benford, bass; Joe "Jazz" Carson, drums, January 1926."
- "The Sound of Harlem" Columbia C3L33 LPs, booklet: "During the fall of 1925 the most exciting jazz band in Harlem, according to the many musicians who heard it, was June Clark's Creole Stompers at Ed Small's Sugar Cane Club (up until October 22nd when Small's Paradise opened on Seventh Avenue with Charlie Johnson's band). The main attraction was the brass duo of Clark and trombonist Jimmy Harrison, who modeled their choruses after the two-cornet style of King Oliver and Louis Armstrong."
- Freddie Skerritt, *Storyville* 95, p.183: ",I remember that in the early 'twenties, "Smalls'" was located on the south-west corner of 135th Street and 5th Avenue. Trumpeter June Clark was the band-leader and Leonard Fields (sax) and Jimmy Harris (sic) (trombone) were in the band, but I don't remember the other names. I do remember that Basie was across the street with a four-piece combo."
- Bobby Booker's *Life Story*, *Storyville* 101, p.176: "Leonard Fields was on alto; I never heard anybody play like him, he was really fast and used to do double and triple tongue work on the saxophone."
- Leslie Carr *Looks Back*, *Storyville* 139, p. 28: "We would go to cabarets and dances to hear the better players as Jimmy Harrison, trombone; Leonard Fields, alto sax;"
- Count Basie/Albert Murray, *Good Morning Blues*: "I used to go into Small's Sugar Cane Club quite often..... They had a piano player that they were just crazy about. His name was Smitty, and he was also known as Fat Smitty. He knew all the songs and all the keys and everything, and he played a lot of comp. No matter how much piano anybody else played, nobody could comp for June and Jimmy like Smitty could. So far as they were concerned, he was it. Smitty would just be there with that oompa, oompa, oompa right there behind those cats, laying it on heavy. Oompa, oompa, oompa. That's what made Smitty so great. That's why those guys liked to play with Smitty so much. Oompa, oompa, oompa. Beautiful. Just beautiful."

'June Clark and his Creole Band' also recorded for Perry Bradford under the name 'The Gulf Coast Seven' and a small number of other groups with Bradford or Clarence Williams (see my June Clark list elsewhere on this web-site).