

A CASE OF A SOLVED MYSTERY

THE GET HAPPY BAND

By K.-B. Rau

One of my first Jazz LPs – it must have been in the late 1960s – was a French CBS LP with some nice Sidney Bechet tracks different from the Pierre Braslavsky/Claude Luter output on Vogue which was rather common at that time in Germany. The No. 13 of the CBS ‘Aimez Vous le Jazz’ series brought us two titles by ‘The Get Happy Band’, contrasting strangely to the Noble Sissle and Clarence Williams Blue Five titles compiled on the LP as well. Yet, these titles have kept a prominent place in my aural memory all over the many years since, and it was only in early 2018 that I put them on my CD player to at last find out who really was playing on them. And this is what I have found out:

THE GET HAPPY BAND		New York,	Jul. 17, 1925
<i>Bubber Miley</i> – tpt; <i>Joe Nanton</i> – tbn;			
Sidney Bechet – sop; (<i>Otto Hardwick</i>) – alt;			
Porter Grainger – pno; <i>Sam Speed</i> – bjo; unknown - dms			
140773-2	Junk Bucket Blues	Col 14091-D,	Frog DGF 32
140774-1	Harlem’s Araby	Col 14091-D,	Frog DGF 32

I state that Mr. Porter Grainger, composer of three of the four recorded titles at these two sessions and probable pianist – and documented as such for the second session below – obviously assembled his recording bands just like a couple of other pianists in Harlem without working band units did: He drew musicians from well-known and respected working units of the day and had them record under his own name. Clarence Williams had this habit, Perry Bradford, Lem Fowler, and certainly many more. In this case Grainger very probably raided the recent Duke Ellington band and recruited Bubber Miley, Sidney Bechet and possibly Otto Hardwick for his own front line.

Sidney Bechet undoubtedly is identified by his own idiomatic and very individual soprano playing. As far as can be recognized, he does not use his clarinet here. We are in mid-1925 and know that Bechet was with the Ellington band on and off in this year.

For the trumpet the CBS LP sleeve suggests “possibly *Johnny Dunn*” and it has to be considered that Bubber Miley was a strict Dunn pupil in his early days, not changing his style essentially in his few later years. In this respect I am very thankful for Mr. Dave Dodd’s feelings as expressed in Storyville 1996/7 below. In relation to Bechet’s presence at this particular time Bubber Miley certainly is a good choice for trumpet player, the more so as his playing on the second side reveals his individual style. He may not have had his best day here, if it is him. And he was known for his love of the liquor and his notorious unreliability. There only was a written part for him to play at this session and the sound and time is recognisably Miley’s in the second title.

What can be heard from the alto player – there is no baritone on these sides as in Rust*6! – would be absolutely in Hardwick’s range and sound. And Hardwick was an anchor-man for the early Ellington band.

Sidney Bechet shares most of the solo work with the trombonist.

In my suggestion Joe Nanton is the only name appropriate and acceptable for the trombone part here. Nobody else at this time played like that and with that sound – and these devices. The only quibble is the fact that Nanton was not yet a member of the Ellington band at this time, joining in mid-1926. But he was around in Harlem at the time of this recording. He might have been around these circles – if not playing then at least drinking.

The band-leader plays over-unobtrusively, pounding simple and regular chordal fours on the keys – just like at the second session, for which he is documented in the Columbia files as “Porter Grainger & Five”.

The banjo player is generally given as Sam Speed, banjo champion of some sort of the Harlem scene (at least in early Rusts), and I lack distinct knowledge of banjo sounds to contradict.

The drummer can only be heard on a cymbal and a bit on wood-block, but lacking any distinct individual features.

Notes:

- Carey, McCarthy, *Jazz Directory Vol.3: unknown tpt; unknown tbn; poss Sidney Bechet (clt, sop); unknown alt; unknown p; unknown bj; unknown bs; unknown d.*

- Mahony, *Columbia 13/14000-D Series: Clarence Williams or Porter Grainger recording group; personnel uncertain.*

- Cover text CBS (F) 63093: *unidentified (possibly Johnny Dunn)(tp); Joe Nanton (tb); Sidney Bechet (cl & ss); Bob Fuller (as); unidentified (possibly Mike Jackson or Porter Grainger)(p); unidentified banjo, tuba and drums.*

- Rust*2: *unknown (cnt); Joe Nanton (tbn); Sidney Bechet (sop); Bob Fuller (alt); Mike Jackson or Porter Grainger (pno); unknown (bjo); unknown (bbs); unknown (dms)*

- Rust*3, *4: *unknown -c; Joe Nanton -tb; Sidney Bechet -ss; Porter Grainger -p; Samuel Speed -bj; unknown -d.*

- Rust*6: *unknown c; Joe Nanton, tb; Sidney Bechet, ss; unknown as, bar; Porter Grainger, p; Sam Speed, bj; unknown d.*

- Storyville 1996/7-241: “(The Columbia files) are silent on the first session but note “Porter Grainger & Five” for the second. Dave (Dodd) doubts Nanton on trombone (both sessions) but says that it sounds like the trombonist on a number of Henderson sides in mid to late 1924, i.e. Teddy Nixon. He also feels that the cornet on the first date may be Bubber Miley.”

Tune structures:

140773-2 *Junk Bucket Blues key of F / Bb / F* *Columbia*
 (Intro 4 bars ens)(Verse 1 12 bars blues ens final break 2 sax)(Verse 2 12 bars blues ens -final break tbn)(Chorus 1 16 bars AABC ens -breaks tbn)(Chorus 2 16 bars AABC ens -breaks sop)(Verse 3 12 bars blues ens)(Coda 2 bars ens)

140774-1 *Harlem’s Araby key of Eb (Cm) / Ab / Eb* *Columbia*
 (Intro 4 bars ens)(Strain A 16 bars ens -break alt)(Strain B1 32 bars AABC ens -breaks alt)(Chorus 1 16 bars ens -breaks sop)(Chorus 2 16 bars ens -breaks sop)(Strain B2 32 bars AABC ens –breaks tpt)(Coda 4 bars ens)

Composer credits:

140773: (Grainger); 140774: (Grainger, Trent, Waller)

THE GET HAPPY BAND

Harry Cooper – tpt; DePriest Wheeler – tbn; (Walter Thomas) – alt;
Porter Grainger – pno; Buddy Christian – bjo; (Leroy Maxey) - dms
141024-3 Puddin' Papa
141025-2 On The Puppy's Tail

New York,

Sep. 21, 1925

Col 14099-D,
Col 14099-D,Frog DGF 32
Frog DGF 32

The personnel on these sides of September 1925 definitely is entirely different from those of the first session, although early discographies attribute identical personnel to both sessions.

Sound-wise, the band reminded me of the early Cotton Club Orchestra, particularly the trombonist. And certainly, the trumpet player is not Thomas Morris as assumed in Rust's all editions. He lacks all of Morris' idiosyncrasies - and flaws. And our listening-group's Thomas Morris investigation of a few years back convinced our team that he is not Morris! Yet, he is not R.Q. Dickerson either. He uses a wide and open vibrato and can securely be identified as Harry Cooper, first trumpet man with the Cotton Club Orchestra of the day.

The trombone player certainly is DePriest Wheeler. His trombone-style and sound were the first reason to suggest members of the recent Cotton Club Orchestra: a loud and unpolished Western bluesy staccato style with clear tone, often using a trombone Harmon mute, probably without the insert.

There is nothing of Bob Fuller's style and vibrato here, so, his name can securely be rubbed out. On alto we most probably find Walter Thomas who is documented in the 'Baltimore Afro-American' of October 1925 as saxophone player besides David Jones. Jones owned a legato Southern style and preferred to play the c-melody-sax, what makes me assume this saxophonist to be Thomas. He plays with a slight slap-tongue embouchure and a beautiful and light tone. (This Walter Thomas is not to be confused with his name-sake Walter 'Foots' Thomas who curiously became the fore-named Walter Thomas' successor with The Missouriians.)

The pianist stylistically is Porter Grainger, displaying a little soloing with very sparse right-hand embellishments in the fourth chorus of 'Puddin' Papa'. The banjo player sounds like Buddy Christian with his softly ringing banjo. Charley Stamps of the Cotton Club Orchestra displays a much sharper sound.

The drummer owns a nice cymbal and may be Leroy Maxey who probably uses this same cymbal at the Cotton Club Orchestra session of 10 November 1925.

There certainly are no musicians of this Get Happy Band session playing on the respective Sam Manning session of the same day as suggested elsewhere in the past.

Notes:

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- Mahony, Columbia 13/14000-D Series: Clarence Williams or Porter Grainger recording group; personnel uncertain.

- Rust*2: Tom Morris (cnt); Joe Nanton (tbn); Bob Fuller (sop); Mike Jackson or Porter Grainger (pno); unknown (bjo); unknown (bbs); unknown (dms)

- Rust*3,*4: Tom Morris -c; Joe Nanton -tb; Bob Fuller -ss; Mike Jackson -p; ?Elmer Snowden -bj; unknown -d.

- Rust*6: Tom Morris, c; Joe Nanton, tb; Bob Fuller, ss, as; Porter Grainger, p; ? Elmer Snowden, bj; unknown d.

- Storyville 1996/7-241: "(The Columbia files) are silent on the first session but note "Porter Grainger & Five" for the second. Dave (Dodd) doubts Nanton on trombone (both sessions) but says that it sounds like the trombonist on a number of Henderson sides in mid to late 1924, i.e. Teddy Nixon. He also feels that the cornet on the first date may be Bubber Miley."

Tune structures:

141024-3 Puddin' Papa key of Eb Columbia
(Intro 4 bars ens)(Chorus 1 16 bars AA' ens – middle-break alt)(Chorus 2 16 bars AA' ens – middle-break bjo)(Verse 1 8 bars ens - breaks alt)(Verse 2 8 bars ens – breaks alt)(Chorus 3 16 bars AA' ens – middle-break tbn)(Chorus 4 16 bars AA' ens + pno – middle-break alt)(Chorus 5 16 bars AA' ens + tbn – middle-break tbn)(Coda 2 bars ens + tbn)

141025-2 On The Puppy's Tail key of Eb / Ab / Eb Columbia
(Intro 4 bars ens)(Strain A 16 bars AA' ens)(Strain B1 16 bars AA' ens)(Strain B2 16 bars AA' ens – breaks tbn – middle-break bjo)(Chorus 1 16 bars AABA ens – breaks alt)(Chorus 2 16 bars AABA ens – breaks tbn / tpt)(Strain B3 16 bars AA' ens – middle-break bjo)(Coda 4 bars ens)

Composer credits:

141024: (Gray); 141025: (Grainger)

These then would be reasonable solutions for the personnel of the Get Happy Band sessions, and I certainly hope for your approval. If not, please, let me know – with any better suggestions you might have.

As always, I have to thank my good friend Michael Rader for his great help, advice and linguistic support!

K.-B. Rau
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