

A Case of Casual Insight

The Chocolate Dandies Session of 4th December 1930

By K.-B. Rau

On the fourth of December 1930 a bunch of key musicians of the Fletcher Henderson Band joined their forces to record just one single title under the name of the 'Chocolate Dandies'.

This band name had its origin in the title of a successful stage show called 'Chocolate Dandies', composed and texted by Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle, and put on stage in 1924. In 1928 the name was used as a pseudonym for the complete McKinney's Cotton Pickers, bound by contract to the Victor Recording Company at that time, to record for the Okeh Company. The name was subsequently also used for a two-title session recorded under direction of Don Redman with a medium sized all-star band called 'The Little Chocolate Dandies', a discussion of its results and problems I have published in Names&Numbers 81.

Thereafter the young Benny Carter took charge of this name to record a row of most interesting sessions, beginning in December 1930, and continuing in October 1933 with a mixed-coloured band of 8 musicians, continuing this series with a 6-piece unit of super-stars of the actual jazz in 1940. The sessions were concluded by a Buck Clayton-led session in 1946 for the French Swing label under the name of 'Benny Carter and his Chocolate Dandies'.

All these recording sessions are well documented, yet, there is one little unresolved detail of the first Carter-led Chocolate Dandies session of 4 December 1930 which rewards to have a close look at it and to discover an unexpected solution.

It would be interesting to know why and to what aim Carter – or one of the other participants – was approached by the Columbia people to record outside of the Henderson Band, which at that time was under contract to that same company.

And also, I wonder why this distinct group of top musicians contended to record one single title only on the fourth of December. W.C. Allen in 'Hendersonia' lists a possible subsequent matrix 404567 as a blank for the session of 4 December 1930, with the remark: "*possibly an unissued title by this group (The Chocolate Dandies – KBR); no information in Columbia files.*"

And third: why did they omit the drummer? Walter Johnson had taken over Kaiser Marshall's chair on the Henderson band's request (!) because Johnson "swung the band better" as remembered by Walter Johnson himself. Johnson was stylistically ahead of Marshall with his more modern use of the cymbals. It is my personal opinion that he developed the use of the hand-choked crash-cymbal into the way the high-hat cymbal was played as a "ride-cymbal" (the dotted eighth and sixteenth rhythm – actually a triplet with the middle note missing, and a subsequent quarter stroke) later on by players like Sid Catlett and Jo Jones in the 1930s. Johnson would have been the perfect drummer for this 'Chocolate Dandies' group with his very light and soft approach to drumming – and he would have been first-choice as the participating musicians' band-mate. But obviously, a drummer was not wanted as there is none at the consecutive 'Chocolate Dandies' session four weeks later, either.

In my estimation, these sides under the 'Chocolate Dandies' name were the first recordings in jazz in pure and uncompromising swing manner, played by everyone present in complete four-four rhythm, advanced harmonic shaping, emphasizing personal soloistic, and all this in a strict non-commercial way as opposed to the work of the big-bands at the time.

In a way, the 'Chocolate Dandies' recording of the December 4, 1930 date, together with its companions of the subsequent session, seems to mark the beginning of what is called Swing. But here we find a group of young and up-to-date musicians - we would call them "hip" today – trying out what could be done with the musical things they had in their minds. Harrison and Hawkins certainly were seniors of the young bunch – if only of a few years – but they were equally advanced musically, and equally equipped.

Aside of his phenomenal soloistic powers on the alto-sax, Benny Carter starts his "crooner" career here, but the high-spots definitely are the very beautiful solos of Harrison and Hawkins after Bobby Stark's 30 bars of an improvised sort of melody.

To my ears – and generally admitted - this would be Bobby Stark on trumpet here, having a very different vibrato from Stewart's, and a different and not so brilliant tone. This was my personal opinion after several listening sessions and laid down in my Bobby Stark list at www.harlem-fuss.com.

My opinion then was severely challenged when finding out that Walter C. Allen, Fletcher Henderson's bio-discographer "nonpareil", saw it different: W.C. Allen, Hendersonia, p. 264, says: "*Personnel is from standard discographical references, except that the trumpet soloist sounds more like Rex Stewart than like Bobby Stark, usually listed for this session (cf. 'Chinatown' by the Henderson band).*" Even more so when checking Berger, Berger, Patrick, Benny Carter, p.43, where we find: "*NOTE: Rust lists Bobby Stark (tp) for Stewart; Allen's Hendersonia suggests Stewart. Carter agrees that it is Stewart.*"! There we find what obviously is Benny Carter's own opinion, although given in what circumstances we do not know. I reluctantly had to bow to the inevitable. But, although I have the utmost respect for Carter's knowledge, experience and his genius – Carter is one of my favourite musicians - I still maintained my doubt as to his agreement for Stewart and still stuck to Stark as trumpeter.

The other day, just by casual listening when getting some other things done, I heard the trumpet solo finishing this title, and I immediately recognized Rex Stewart's playing as opposite to the Stark solo beginning the procedure. I recognized his sharp tone, his linear phrasing, his work with tonal colours, and his dramatic recital.

Possibly, it would have made sense for Carter in a recording group like this one to have two trumpets, as the arranger would be able to write a four-part harmonic accompaniment for every soloist present. I thus was convinced that there must have been Stark and Stewart on the session. But after re-hearing the whole title it became apparent that it was Stewart, too, in the first chorus, as tone, vibrato and thematic concept of the solo are not Stark's with his arpeggiated vertical way of improvising. I definitely now identify Rex Stewart as cornet/ trumpet player on this first 'Chocolate Dandies' session under Benny Carter!

The other participants obviously are as given, with the exception of the guitarist. I definitely do hear a banjo on this side, very much in the range of Clarence Holiday, who was banjoist/guitarist with the Henderson band at this time, and would have been first choice for the session. He has the same slim and even banjo sound as Holiday on other Henderson recording sessions of this time. A Benny Jackson as listed in the discos for years was a guitarist with the mid-Western bands of Oliver Cobb's Rhythm Kings and Eddie Johnson's Crackerjacks, whose presence in New York at this time would be rather doubtful and unlikely. There is no significant reason to doubt Clarence Holiday's presence at both sessions, the more so, as Rex Stewart himself told Esben Kr. Aamot of Norway (letter in Storyville 57): "*He (Rex Stewart – KBR) praised Clarence Halliday (sic) (the father of Billie Holiday he told me ... a fact which was not common knowledge in Norway at that time) for his guitar work, especially on the 'Comin' And Goin' ' session. ... He did not mention (and I'm sure of this even now) that anybody else played guitar on the Chocolate Dandies records, which we also played through.*"

Regarding what is said above, this then would be the exact personnel of this first 'Chocolate Dandies' session under Benny Carter's aegis:

THE CHOCOLATE DANDIES	New York,	Dec. 04, 1930
Rex Stewart – cnt; Jimmy Harrison – tbn;		
Benny Carter – alt; Coleman Hawkins – ten;		
Horace Henderson – pno; Clarence Holiday – bjo; John Kirby – sbs;		
Benny Carter – voc		
404566-A Goodbye Blues	Col 35679,	Chronological Classics 522

This composition by Benny Carter obviously is no blues, but a combination of a 32-bar AABA chorus in G, improvised by Stewart, and a succession of 16-bar AABA choruses in F with different changes from the afore-named chorus. Carter on alto takes over and loosely delivers the theme of his composition in his own inimitable way by inserting a few virtuoso phrases. It is Harrison then exquisitely on trombone, followed by Carter's vocal, and by rhapsodic Coleman Hawkins on his tenor, who also delivers the modulation for Stewart to end the title with 8 bars of his initial 32-bar chorus. All solos are accompanied by Carter's beautifully voiced instrumental riffs.

I have to thank Han Enderman of the Netherlands for his notice that the original release of 'Goodbye Blues' was on British Parlophone R882 as by "Chocolate Dandies"! The American issue on Columbia as listed above then carried the personnel on its label with: "Trumpet - Bobby Stark" under the title "The Chocolate Dandies". This personnel, together with the most improbable guitarist Benny Jackson, lived on until today (see Notes below).

Notes:

- Ch. Delaunay, *New Hot Discography, 1948: Bobby Stark (tp); Jimmy Harrison (tb); Benny Carter (cl & as); Coleman Hawkins (ts); Horace Henderson (p); Benny Jackson (g); John Kirby (tu & b)*
 - Carey, McCarthy, *Jazz Directory Vol. 2: Bobby Stark (tpt); Jimmy Harrison (tbn); Benny Carter (alt, clt, vcl); Coleman Hawkins (ten); Horace Henderson (p); Benny Jackson (g); John Kirby (bs, tu)*
 - Rust*2: *Bobby Stark (tpt); Jimmy Harrison (tbn); Benny Carter (clt, alt, vcl); Coleman Hawkins (ten); Horace Henderson (pno); Benny Jackson (gtr); John Kirby (bbs)*
 - Rust*3: *Bobby Stark -t; Jimmy Harrison -tb -v; Benny Carter -cl -as -v -a; Coleman Hawkins -ts; Horace Henderson -p; Benny Jackson -g; John Kirby -sb*
 - Rust*4,*6: *Bobby Stark -t; Jimmy Harrison -v (sic); Benny Carter -cl -as -v -a; Coleman Hawkins -ts; Horace Henderson -p; Benny Jackson or Clarence Holiday -g; John Kirby -sb*
 - Berger, Berger, Patrick, Benny Carter, *A Life in American Music: Carter (as, v, arr, comp), Rex Stewart (tp), Jimmy Harrison (tb), Coleman Hawkins (ts), Horace Henderson (p), Benny Jackson (g), John Kirby (b)*

After clarifying Rex Stewart's distinct presence on this first session, the second session of "these" 'Chocolate Dandies' should also be listed here as a matter of completeness and close relation to the first:

THE CHOCOLATE DANDIES	New York,	Dec. 31, 1930
Bobby Stark – tpt; Jimmy Harrison – tbn;		
Benny Carter – alt, clt; Coleman Hawkins – ten;		
Horace Henderson – pno; Clarence Holiday – gtr; John Kirby – bbs;		
Jimmy Harrison – voc (2); Benny Carter – arr (2,3,4)		
404596-B Cloudy Skies	Col 35679,	Chronological Classics 522
404597-B Got Another Sweetie Now	Col 36009,	Chronological Classics 522
404598-B Bugle Call Rag	Col 2543-D,	Chronological Classics 522
404599-B Dee Blues	Col 2543-D,	Chronological Classics 522

These are the same musicians from the Henderson band, in fine fettle and showing the way ahead in the development of jazz music, with Bobby Stark now on trumpet instead of his band-mate Rex Stewart. Throughout the whole session we hear Holiday on guitar and Kirby playing a strict four-four rhythm on the tuba. Very beautiful!

The first title is a Hawkins composition in AABA form, in which the master himself presents the theme chorus. He is followed by a solo chorus split between Stark on trumpet – the three A parts – and Jimmy Harrison on trombone taking the B part. The last chorus brings some disorderly ensemble parts – possibly arranged by Hawkins – with Horace Henderson soloing on the second A part and Carter soloing on the B and final A part. 'Got Another Sweetie Now' was written by Jimmy Harrison the night before this recording date, and he himself sings the vocal chorus in his charming style. Hawkins improvises the 4-bar introduction and continues his solo performance after the arranged melody chorus in all his rhapsodic splendour. It is Bobby Stark then in his highly efficient vertical style with large interval jumps and high-note shakes. Pianist Horace Henderson takes over eight solo bars in the middle of the last – harmonized – chorus. 'Bugle Call Rag' is a string of soloistic pearls by everyone on this modified blues chorus, until Benny Carter switches over to the 'Ole Miss' chord scheme for his clarinet solo, followed by Harrison, Hawkins and Stark improvising on these same chords. Harrison displays his very beautiful and forward-looking velvet vibrato, which is taken over by Dicky Wells and others later. On 'Dee Blues' Walter C. Allen cites John Schacht in *Jazz Information 1939: "The story of that date and that side was told to me, several years ago, by Horace Henderson. The band thought they had finished when they were told by the engineer that they had one more side. No one could think of what to play until someone suggested the blues. Hence Dee Blues, one of the rare unrehearsed, unarranged, spontaneous, completely improvised recordings."* Benny Carter solos on clarinet twice and displays an even more exemplary taste here than on alto. He had to retain on clarinet because of less technical proficiency than he had on saxophone. His two solos are essential classic jazz improvisations without technical exuberance and fire-works, but with exemplary warmth, soul and beauty.

Gunther Schuller in 'Early Jazz' writes: "*On Dee Blues' and 'Bugle Call Rag' with the Chocolate Dandies, Harrison plays his two most perfect solos. The one on 'Dee Blues' consists of only one chorus of twelve-bar blues, but is so simple and concisely constructed, so clean*

and relaxed rhythmically, that one is forced to make comparisons with trombonists of at least two decades later. Particularly in the first four bars, Harrison caught hold of a relaxed swing which until then only Armstrong had achieved. His lead-in notes to the solo are only four repeated b flats, but their pure tone and swing can only be described as sublime. The more agitated response (in the second bar) to the four note "call" makes a perfect two-part phrase structure, one of those fleeting moments in which a jazz musician transcends himself and his instrument."

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- Rust*2: Bobby Stark (tpt); Jimmy Harrison (tbn, vcl); Benny Carter (clt, alt); Coleman Hawkins (ten); Horace Henderson (pno); Benny Jackson (gtr); John Kirby (bbs).

- Rust*3: Bobby Stark -t; Jimmy Harrison -tb -v; Benny Carter -cl -as -v -a; Coleman Hawkins -ts; Horace Henderson -p; Benny Jackson -g; John Kirby -bb.

- Rust*4, *6: Bobby Stark -t; Jimmy Harrison -v (sic); Benny Carter -cl -as -v -a; Coleman Hawkins -ts; Horace Henderson -p; Benny Jackson or Clarence Holiday -g; John Kirby -bb.

- Berger, Berger, Patrick, Benny Carter, *A Life in American Music*: Carter (as, v, arr, comp), Bobby Stark (tp), Jimmy Harrison (tb, v), Coleman Hawkins (ts), Horace Henderson (p), Benny Jackson (g), John Kirby (tuba)

What else is there to say? These are exceptionally classic recordings of the art of improvising in jazz.

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09-2019