

A CASE OF INAPPROPRIATE MODESTY

The OKEH MELODY STARS

by K.-B. Rau

When preparing my article on trumpet player June Clark (see Frog Blues and Jazz Annual Vol. 4) I searched for possible recordings with Clark on trumpet/cornet. Although Clark was a respected trumpeter among Harlem musicians in the mid 1920s, he disappeared suddenly from public view, probably due to serious trouble with his lips after stressing them with too many high notes.

He gained his greatest fame as leader of "June Clark and his Creole Band", the house band in Smalls' Sugar Cane Club on 2212 Fifth Avenue, New York, Harlem. His band, also known as "J. C. and his Creole Stompers", was built around the brass duo of June Clark and Jimmy Harrison, the latter the rising star of jazz trombone.

When in October 1925 Edwin Smalls opened his very famous "Ed Smalls' Paradise", business at the "Sugar Cane Club" came to an end, thus finishing June Clark's career as a band leader with a firm engagement and a steady working band. Around this time the band had a couple of opportunities to record under the names of "Blue Rhythm Orchestra" and "The Gulf Coast Seven". But Clark also recorded with members of his band for a number of vaudeville/blues singers, mostly hidden behind various band names. These hidden appearances I hope and believe to have detected and published in my above named article.

But after some years of tackling other themes in early Harlem Jazz it appears that there is to be added an additional recording session that I did not list in my article on Clark.

When on my way to Hamburg in 2004 to pay a visit to the well-known German collector, the late Klaus-Uwe Dürr – who, by the way, provided me with the first documented material on June Clark – I listened to the beautiful "Big Charlie Thomas" CD on Timeless in my car. (I do not follow Richard Rains' denial of this trumpeter's personal identity as stated in the Frog Blues and Jazz Annual Vol. 1!) Riding the "Autobahn" can be very boring, but also very refreshing when listening to good music without being interrupted by anybody. And looking forward to a very interesting day at Mr. Dürr's home I listened even more intensively.

Earlier on I had discovered that the first three items of the said CD, Sara Martin's session of November 23, 1925 ('I'm Gonna Hoodoo You', 'Your Going Ain't Giving Me The Blues', 'What More Can A Monkey Woman Do') certainly did not have Big Charlie Thomas – or whatever his real name was – as trumpet player, but June Clark instead. This assumption was later confirmed by Clark's own testimony!

But I really was surprised to hear Mr. June Clark again, on the one title by the Okeh Melody Stars, 'Look Out Mr. Jazz'. Here Clark was together with Big Charlie who plays the very beautiful cornet breaks in the second half of the last chorus – together with the trombonist and the clarinetist. (When listening while driving I listen only intuitively, but not the worse for that. I have observed that this way of listening very often achieves better results in finding out the performing musicians than sitting in front of the loudspeakers at home eager to achieve my end.)

But Klaus-Uwe Dürr would have none of it when confronted with my find. I nevertheless added the session to my June Clark list which I then sent to some well-known record researchers to get to know their opinions on these probable or possible Clark sides. The reaction to my assumption was that Clark's possible presence on the Okeh Melody Stars was denied in favour of Jimmy Wade. For me, they were the pundits, and so I obeyed and erased the item from my list.

Only recently I happened to listen to these sides again, and it immediately dawned upon me and became obvious and undeniable that this was June Clark on first trumpet when measured against his playing characteristics as stated in my article on Clark in the Frog Annual Vol. 4. I simply had been inappropriately modest and reserved. So, this is a beautiful occasion to tackle this little-known, but certainly rewarding record.

OKEH MELODY STARS

New York, August 23, 1926

June Clark, Big Charlie Thomas – cnt; Charlie Irvis – tbn;
unknown – alt, clt; unknown – ten;
Porter Grainger (or *Vivian Wright* ?) – pno; Buddy Christian – bjo;
Clarence Todd – voc

74310-A	Look Out, Mr. Jazz	OK 8382	not on LP/CD ?
74310-B	Look Out, Mr. Jazz	OK 8382,	? Timeless CBC 1-030
74311-A	A Glass Of Beer, A Hot Dog And You	OK 8382	not on LP/CD
74311-B	A Glass Of Beer, A Hot Dog And You	OK 8382	not on LP/CD

Note: The Timeless CD booklet gives matrix-number 74311-A for 'Look Out, Mr. Jazz'

As stated above, it is definitely June Clark here on first trumpet/cornet with his strong tone, his permanent irregular vibrato and his very personal fiery and hasty attack.

On second trumpet/cornet – and thus mainly in the background – is the mysterious, but beautifully poetic "Big Charlie" Thomas. (I make no attempt to repeat what his mystery is and what is known about him. This can be easily read in the booklet to the Timeless CD CBC 1-030 bearing his very name.) Listen to his breaks in the last chorus of "Look Out, Mr. Jazz". Mr. Thomas displays a very light and slim tone with a wide vibrato and a phrasing very close to Louis Armstrong's recordings of the time, using wide interval jumps. And I am fairly certain that he leads the band in the out chorus of 'A Glass Of Beer, A Hot Dog And You'.

The trombonist has finally been identified as Charlie Irvis in Rust*6, and this is certainly correct. Irvis plays with his usual vigour and legato style and is easy to identify.

There is an alto player who doubles clarinet throughout on "Look Out, Mr. Jazz". I feel unable to identify this player as there is too little to judge, and his performance lacks recognizable stylistic characteristics. On alto, which he plays throughout the second title, he only plays set parts, which makes him even more undistinguishable. So, no assumption here.

