

A Case Of Sheer Excitement

by K.-B. Rau

The attentive reader of *Names & Numbers* might remember my article *A Case Of Bitter Disappointment* in No. 55.

It certainly is not very amusing to write a piece like that. Now I have to report just the opposite side of collecting Jazz recordings: sheer excitement!

And it happened like this: I received – out of the blue – a note from an esteemed and well-known Scandinavian collector and researcher thus: “Did you get knowledge of the discovery of Charlie Johnson’s *Mo’lasses*?” Just like that! It nearly hit me out of my arm chair.

As the attentive reader might also remember, I published an article on the Charlie Johnson band recordings in *Names & Numbers* 57. As I have collected every material accessible on and by this elusive band I was rather certain that there would be little to add to this topic.

And now the discovery of *Mo’lasses*.

Of the 14 recorded titles by this band only 12 had been issued in the 20/30s. Two of these 14 titles had never seen the light of day. Of the 12 issued titles 10 alternate takes were issued in later years, mainly on the Victor ‘X’ label. So we had 22 tunes on record to prove the extraordinary quality of one of the top bands in Harlem in the 20s. And now I was more than surprised by the existence of one of these two unissued titles, namely *Mo’lasses*. Only that it was not issued on CD but on the world-wide web!

With my daughter’s essential help I was finally able to get access to the website, duly registered my name, ... and listened to a very, very beautiful additional title of the Johnson discography. It left me drunk and exited for three happy days.

So, the interested reader is asked to add the following data to my article in *N&N* 57:

CHARLIE JOHNSON AND HIS ORCHESTRA, Victor session New York, May 08, 1929
Leonard Davis, Sidney De Paris – tpt; George Washington – tbn; Ben Whitted, Edgar Sampson – alt, clt; Ben Waters – ten, clt; Charlie Johnson – pno; Bobby Johnson – bjo; Billy Taylor – bbs; George Stafford – dms; *Benny Carter – arr*

53600 **Mo’lasses** **Key of C (Am) / F / C (Am)** **Victor unissued**
(Intro ens 4 bars) (A1 Chorus 32 bars AABA ens 16 – saxes 8 – ens 8 bars – alto break in bars 7/8) (bridge ens 8 bars modulation to F) (B1 Chorus 24 bars AAB Waters ten 6 – ens 2 – Waters ten 6 – ens 2 – tbn + saxes 6 – ens 2) (B2 Chorus 24 bars Whitted clt 6 – ens 2 – clt 6 – ens 2 – ens 8 modulation back to C (Am)) (A2 Chorus 32 bars AABA De Paris tpt2 14 – Sampson alt 2 – Washington tbn 8 – De Paris tpt2 6 – Sampson alt 2) (tag 6 bars Sampson alt 2 – ens 4) (A3 Chorus 32 bars AABA ens 16 – L. Davis tpt 6 – ens 2 – ens 8) (tag ens 2)

Now, what do we hear: we hear one of the hottest bands in Harlem at the end of the 1920s, very compact here, smoothly swinging their way with an arrangement which certainly is not by Benny Waters, as with most of the other band recordings. Waters’ style was more down-to-earth – more rudimentary, in three-part harmony. Here now we hear an arrangement very much pointing forward to Swing-style Jazz. Certain elements of the arrangement – the rhythmic conception, the augmented chords – are very similar to the two titles by Joe Steele’s Orchestra, of which we know that their arrangements were the work of a youthful Benny Carter. The young arrangers at that time made the rounds through the dancing establishments to sell their latest works to the bands and earn some money and reputation. But as Carter had been a long-serving member of the Johnson band – now with Fletcher Henderson’s band – he probably also had been an important contributor to the Johnson band book. We know that Johnson bought every arrangement suitable for his band. With Johnson’s band Carter had made the earliest recordings of his arrangements (*Charleston Is The Best Dance After All* and *You Ain’t The One* of January 24, 1928). The rhythmic approach, the chords, the chord-progressions and the four-part harmony, force me to the conclusion that this has to be a Benny Carter arrangement.

As soloists we hear a rather smooth – or tame – Benny Waters on tenor, then 6 bars of a very unusual – for its time – saxophone section led by trombone in close four-part harmony (who would have thought of something like that but Benny Carter ?) (B1), then a short clarinet solo by the band's clarinet man Ben Whitted (B2), then unmistakably Sidney de Paris with his peppery hot style for one chorus (A2). In between and just after De Paris we hear two alto breaks by what must be the young Edgar Sampson. The style is very much like what we know of Benny Carter, and certainly Sampson was – as successor to Carter in the Johnson band – influenced by the growing giant Carter. This then supports very unexpectedly my claim in our Clarence Williams series, part 3, session 096 in *N&N* 60, that Sampson might actually be the altoist of Williams' *Zonky* and *You 've Got To Be Modernistic!* There aren't any further recordings of Sampson that early. The "middle-eight" of the tpt chorus is filled by a beautiful melodious trombone solo by Washington, not in his usual growl manner. He certainly was one of the many sadly overlooked great musicians of the Jazz Age. In the last chorus (A3), again in the "middle-eight", we hear as soloist the majestic – and clear – Leonard Davis, he too one of the sadly neglected greats.

Furthermore I'd like the reader – and listener – to take notice of Billy Taylor Sr.'s 2 octave tuba glissando in bar 8 of the last chorus (A3). Marvelous! (He was Duke Ellington's bass player in the late 1930 – another unsung master of Jazz.) And what I love to notice is the very amiably nonchalant inaccuracy of the band playing the music. Quite different from white bands of the time. But I love that! And the band swings like hell!

The title *Molasses* is a tune by the great Harlem pianist C. Luckeyth 'Lucky' Roberts, one of the fathers of Harlem stride piano. He composed the tune for his show *Go! Go!* in the early 20s. He also recorded this tune on piano-roll QRS 2306 in August 1923, reissued on LP Biograph BLP 1001. Words were by Alex Rogers. The tune has a chorus in C, starting in minor chords in AABA form 32 bars, then goes – after a bridge – into a very unusual structure of 24 bars AAB in almost immovable harmonies. Then again it goes back to the chorus of the beginning. The Johnson recording (Carter arrangement?) follows this structure, yet expanding it harmonically, according to the possibilities of the band and in contemporaneous style.

That's it about the tune. Where can you hear it? It might be a bit complicated for older collectors, because you have to use the world-wide web, what is not to anybody's liking. (I had my problems!) But it certainly is most worthwhile!

Just go to: <http://soundcloud.com/audio-oddities/molassessolid3>. You have to register, but this should not deter you from hearing a phantastic addition to the Classic Jazz library! Details of the test-pressing used are listed on the website and can be learned there (the website people obviously do not really know what they have found and issued here!).

At last we can only hope that the tune might be issued in a better way – on CD – for the enjoyment of the jazz fraternity in due course! Until that moment enjoy the tune in the web!

I will be waiting now for another 80 years to hear the second unissued title by the Johnson band *Getting' Away From Me*.

My sincerest thanks to Jan Evensmo and Michael Rader for making this article possible!