

A CASE OF UNCOMPREHENSIBLE NEGLECT

Charley Skeete's Orchestra

The recorded legacy of the early Harlem big bands is dominated by the trio of the Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, and Charlie Johnson bands, followed by a second group of bands with shorter lifetimes like Luis Russell's, Cliff Jackson's, Cecil Scott's, the Savoy Bearcats, Fess Williams's, and a couple of others. But besides these name bands there were a much more numerous batch of bands which spent their time in smaller and less famed clubs, as well as in notorious dancing schools or taxi dance halls of bad reputation.

Most of these bands never had the opportunity to record, and we certainly miss an awful lot of great jazz music because of the neglect these bands had to suffer from the white dominated recording industry.

It is thus surprising that a small number of these bands were still able to gain a recording contract and be immortalized with their music. One of these few is Charley Skeete's Orchestra.

An unexpected but most welcome e-mail from a long-standing Dutch record collector brought this band to my mind – with still more unexpected consequences and results.

When in 1969 I first paid a visit to Dick M. Bakker of Deventer, the Netherlands, my approach to record collecting changed drastically. Here I found an unbelievable mass of LPs I had not expected. And as a student my monetary funds hit the bottom from then on. But – thanks to Dick Bakker's generosity – I only had to pay as soon as I was able to do so. One of the first LPs I purchased was John R. T. Davies' then recent Ristic LP "Big Band Jazz", containing the then unknown 'Jackson & his Southern Stompers', the 'Troy Harmonists', and 'Charley Skeete's Orchestra' sides, together with a couple of others. These sides later appeared on a LP by Dick Bakker's own label GAPS, coming from the same source as the Ristic LP.

But the 'Jackson & his Southern Stompers' titles were at the time the much more important items for me to discover. They have been discussed since then and their personnel is approximately settled. But the Charley Skeete titles are still being discussed and speculated upon. Now, that they have appeared on the internet it seems appropriate to analyse them and see what can be heard.

By close listening it becomes apparent that the personnel consists of one trumpet/cornet, one trombone, two saxes – alto and tenor, the alto player obviously doubling on bass sax – and the four-piece rhythm section of piano, banjo, tuba and drums. This is the usual personnel of a jazz/dance band in Harlem of the time in smaller and less well-known clubs or other similar premises.

Rust*2 already names some of the musicians quite correctly as he must have had some knowledgeable informants. John R. T. Davies identified the trombonist correctly as Jimmy Harrison on the Ristic LP sleeve, and so Rust*3 offered a personnel as before, but with Harrison, and adding a second trumpet and a second alto sax. Then Storyville 100 contained an interview of drummer Tommy Benford who named his colleagues in the Skeete band as present on the Edison coupling. But he obviously named the men he remembered as band mates of the time, and not exactly the musicians on the recording. Rust*6 transferred these names without real listening, as he left out Harrison in favour of an otherwise unknown trombonist without regarding the superb trombone playing of which at this time only very few musicians were capable, if at all. At present discussions are going on in the internet on the possible presence of Tommy Ladnier and Coleman Hawkins, as both men had been band mates with Harrison in the Henderson band. But this was at a later time. But who then is really on these Edison sides?

As stated above, there is only one trumpet player, and he is – judging from tone, vibrato and style, definitely Leonard Davis, one of the great "first" trumpet players of the 1920s and 30s. At the time of this recording he probably played a cornet as he did with the Arthur Gibbs band in 1927, documented on the Gibbs band photographs. In the second half of 'Tampeekoe' (choruses 9 and 10) a muted trumpet solo is played which certainly sounds somewhat like played by Tommy Ladnier, but we have documented certainty that Ladnier did not arrive back in New York from Europe earlier than August 02, 1926 (Vernhettes, Lindström, Travelling Blues, The Life and Music of Tommy Ladnier, p.112). It is obvious when listening that Davis grabs a mute while playing an open solo and then continues his solo muted. He continuously uses the same rhythmic figures while playing open or muted. Never on these sides can two trumpets be heard simultaneously.

Then we hear the undisputed master of early swing trombone, the immensely influential Jimmy Harrison, later one of the stars of the Fletcher Henderson band. He had modelled his style after Louis Armstrong whom he had heard in Chicago when touring together with June Clark in 1923, both trying to copy Oliver's and Armstrong's interplay. It was Harrison's duty then to play the Armstrong part as can be heard in the Blue Rhythm Orchestra and Gulf Coast Seven recordings of 1925. I dare say that Harrison with his very special tone, vibrato and phrasing cannot be mistaken for any other trombone player in jazz. John R. T. Davies was absolutely correct here with his assumption as documented on the Ristic LP sleeve. By the way, Davies knew how to play a trombone. Benford named a Tommy Jones as trombonist on these sides, but he certainly was in error here.

On alto sax we hear Gene Johnson, a player who spent most of his professional musical life in Claude Hopkins' Orchestra in the 1930s and later with Chick Webb, Erskine Hawkins and Machito (Chilton, Who's Who in Jazz). He is also named by Tommy Benford (see below). In the same source Clifton Glover is named by Tommy Benford as tenor saxophonist. He later appears as tenor sax player with Ovie Alston and his Orchestra on Vocalion in October 1938. He should thus have been the natural candidate for the bass sax player, as bass sax and tenor both are tuned in Bb. But it is apparent that Benford attributed the bass sax to Gene Johnson, and he certainly is the much more jazzy player of the two saxophonists. The bass sax solo is very good for the time, so much so that collectors have attributed it to Coleman Hawkins, who used this impractical instrument frequently in the Fletcher Henderson band still as late as 1928. But according to W.C. Allen, Hendersonia, p. 171, the Henderson band was on tour from the first of June 1926, only to be back in New York City sometime during the summer. So, Hawkins may safely be ruled out as participant in this recording session. But Gene Johnson – otherwise hidden in the saxophone sections of the bands he worked with – shows himself as an unrecognized but workmanlike jazz improviser of the time.

Clifton Glover's very pedestrian and sour sounding tenor sax solo in both titles is proof that he certainly is not playing the bass sax solo. In 'Tempeekoe' he plays the first two 8-bar passages of the chorus, is then interrupted by the bass sax for the third eight bars, and enters the fourth eight bars while the bass sax is still soloing. So, Johnson is the obvious soloist on bass sax, as you can never hear three saxophones in the ensemble parts.

Mr. Charley Skeete on piano can not be heard exposed at any time. He is completely confined to leading his band and providing his men with the appropriate chordal accompaniment. He, yet, is said to have been a very respectable piano player.

Support by the rhythm section of banjo, tuba and drums is strong and swinging. Although I myself am a friend of strong four-four banjo playing – like Dave Wilborn of McKCP – I have to admit that the listed Joe Jones (no other mention of him in Rust) plays a beautiful and very supportive banjo in the Harlem mode. On tuba is Bill Brown, just as Joe Jones one of the great number of otherwise unknown and unsung musical workmen in the Harlem scene of the time.

By his own account, this was Tommy Benford's first recording session ever. As always on recordings of this time, you can only hear his cymbal crashes when suitable or required by the music. But two years later you can hear him with snare drum, high-hat and other devices on the June 1928 recordings of Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers. Without Benford we would know much less about Charley Skeete's Orchestra than we do now.

CHARLEY SKEETE'S ORCHESTRA

Leonard Davis – cnt; Jimmy Harrison – tbn;

Gene Johnson – alt, clt, bsx; Clifton Glover – ten, clt;

Charley Skeete – pno; Joe Jones – bjo; Bill Brown – bbs; Tommy Benford – dms

11031-A Tampeekoe

11031-B Tampeekoe

11031-C Tampeekoe

11032-A Deep Henderson

11032-B Deep Henderson

11032-C Deep Henderson

New York,

Jun. 08, 1926

Ed 51775,

www.dailymotion.com

Ed 51775,

Ristic 28, Palaeophonics 054

Ed 51775,

Rivermont BSW-1156

Ed 51775,

Palaeophonics 054

Ed 51775,

not on LP/CD/www

Ed 51775,

Ristic 28

'Tampeekoe' –B is listed on Ristic 28, so that both different takes as reissued recently on the world-wide-web are –A and –C accordingly. Jimmy Harrison's trombone solos on these two latter takes are much more related to each other than his solo on take –B. This same phenomenon appears in Harrison's solos on the three takes of Charlie Johnson's 'Walk That Thing', where the composition of the solos on takes -1 and -3 is very similar, take -2 being very different (Storyville 35: "It is perhaps interesting that Harrison's breaks should be so similar on the first and third takes, and it may be that the order of recording was not that suggested by the numbers allotted."). My conclusion is that take –A of 'Tampeekoe' contains Harrison's solo with the somewhat fluffed phrase in the middle break of his solo. Harrison seems just to be developing his solo. Later, this phrase is much better executed in the other take, thus probably take –C. And Harrison's solo on take –B is of different melodic material.

The assumed take –C as on Rivermont BSW-1156 is also presented on www.youtube.com by "Onkel Greifenklau".

Of 'Deep Henderson' I had the opportunity to hear and check take –B from an original Edison 78, although via telephone only. The trombone part in bar 28 of the tbn solo is different from the corresponding part on Palaeophonics 054 or on Ristic 28. Consequently Palaeophonics 054 has take –A of 'Deep Henderson', take –C being listed on Ristic 28. Accordingly take –B obviously has not been reissued. Take –A as reissued on Palaeophonics 054 can also be heard in www.youtube.com from Music Box Boy, but this is played too slow, so it is in the key of E instead of F, although the sound is much better.

As it was the custom of Edison Records to cut three takes of each title and mostly issue all of them, we now have knowledge of all three takes of each title. We can only hope that the still unreissued take –B might eventually crop up some day on the world-wide-web or – even better – on a carefully produced CD. I am hopeful.

Dick Bakker's LP GAPS 160 was made by John R.T. Davies and still contains the same takes as Ristic 28, and Bateau Chinois AA, and Audubon ABE!

Notes:

- Rust*2: Leonard Davis (tpt); Tommy Hodge (tbn); Gene Johnson (alto); Clifton Glover (ten); Charlie Skeete (pno, ldr); Joe Jones (bjo); unknown (bbs); Tommy Benford ? (dms)

- Ristic 28 LP: tpt, tbn, clt/ten/bsx; clt/alt/bar; pno; bbs; bjo; ds. "The trombone appears to be played by Jimmy Harrison, and in other respects previously published personnels seem at variance with aural evidence."

- Rust*3: Leonard Davis and another - tpt; Jimmy Harrison - tbn; Gene Johnson - cl -as -bsx; unknown - cl -as; Clifton Glover - cl -ts -bsx; Charlie Skeete - p -ldr; Joe Jones - bj; Bill Brown -bb; Tommy Benford - d.

- Al Vollmer in Storyville 100, Have Drum, Will Travel, Tommy Benford interview: "After that I went with Charlie (sic - KBR) Skeete in Brooklyn at the Strand Ballroom at Fulton and Levins. I stayed with him for two or three years, and while I was with him I made my first records, and we also made a movie with Jean Harlow and Lewis Stone, but we were only on the soundtrack. (I played the Edison coupling to Tommy and he came up with the following personnel: Leonard Davis, Tommy Hodges, t; Tommy Jones, tb; Gene Johnson, cl/as/bsx; Clifton Glover, cl/as/ts; Charlie Skeete, p; Joe Jones (brother of Tommy), bj; Bill Brown, bb and himself on drums – AV). Kenneth Roane was originally on trumpet and was replaced by Leonard Davis, who played all the solo work. Jimmy Archey came in the band after Tommy Jones left, and we had another guy called Tommy on trombone too. Bobby Sands on sax was with us for a time too. Eventually, we left Brooklyn and went to Duprees Hall in Asbury Park. When that closed, I joined my brother, who had just formed his own band. In fact, he took some of Skeete's guys as well as myself."

- Rust*4: Leonard Davis and another - tpt; Jimmy Harrison - tbn; Gene Johnson - cl -as -bsx; unknown - cl -as; Clifton Glover - cl -ts -bsx; Charlie Skeete - p -ldr; Joe Jones - bj; Bill Brown -bb; Tommy Benford - d.

- Rust*6: Leonard Davis, Tommy Hodges, t; Tommy Jones, tb; Gene Johnson, cl, as, bsx; Clifton Glover, cl, as, ts; Charlie Skeete, p, dir; Joe Jones, bj; Bill Brown, bb; Tommy Benford, d.

Tunes:

- Tampeekoe: (Intro 6 bars ens)(Verse 1 20 bars saxes)(Verse 2 20 bars ens)(Bridge 2 tpt modulation F – Db)(Chorus 1* 12 bars Db tbn)(Chorus 2 12 bars Db tbn)(Chorus 3 12 bars F bsx)(Chorus 4 12 bars F bsx)(Chorus 5 ens)(Verse 3 20 bars ens)(Bridge 2 bars ens modulation F – Db)(Chorus 6 12 bars Db clts)(Chorus 7 12 bars clts – brass)(Chorus 8 12 bars free ens)(Chorus 9 12 bars muted tpt)(Chorus 10 12 bars muted tpt)(Chorus 11 12 bars brass – clts riff)(Chorus 12 12 bars brass – clts riff)(Chorus 13 12 bars free ens)(Coda 2 bars ens)

- Deep Henderson: (Intro 8 bars ens)(Strain A 32 bars ens, middle8 tpt)(Strain B1 32 bars tpt, middle8 saxes)(Strain B2* 32 bars tbn, middle8 saxes)(Strain B3 32 bars ten, middle8 bsx)(Bridge 4 bars ens modulation F – Db)(Chorus 1 32 bars Db clts – ens)(Chorus 2 32 bars Db free ens, middle8 ens)

Discernible differences of takes *:

- Tampeekoe: Chorus 1 tbn middle break: -A leighth break, 3 eighth notes leading to quarter downward slide which gets out of rhythm, then eighth note and quarter note

-B constant row of: eighth note, quarter note, eighth note, quarter note, eighth note, quarter note, eighth note, 2 quarter notes syncopated

- C 3 eighth notes upbeat leading to break, with 1 quarter note, 3 eighth notes leading into downward slide in rhythm, eighth note, quarter note, eighth note, quarter note.
- Deep Henderson: Strain B2 tbn break bar 28: -A three times of equally shaped succession of eighth and fourth notes with the tonal succession F# G – Eb F – A C
- B differs from takes -A and -C, but could not notated accurately. It is akin to take -A.
- C one octave downward arpeggio F F, last two (low) Fs syncopated.

In concluding I would like to list the very few notations found on Charley Skeete:

- The W.C. Allen Interviews in Storyville 147-90: Interview with James Archey: “10. Recalled playing with Charlie Skeete – Thought around 1923-24, and said he’d made “20” sides with Fats Waller (playing organ on some). T. Morris on them.”
- Edison Revisited, Storyville 132-228: “Charlie Skeete This band is entered in the Payments Ledger as Charlie Skeetes (*sic*) and his Hot Spillers. Although these two sides were passed and issued, at least two members of the Selection Committee didn’t entirely approve. In reviewing *Tampeekoe*, a Mr. Shearman stated: *Sounds like a jumble of music, not much rhythm*. His colleague Mr. Ehricke declared: *Lacks some sort of a tune or a melody. Might pass as a novelty*. Small wonder so few real jazz items got out from the Edison studios!”
- Ovie Alston, *The Ghosts of Harlem*, p. 131: “I went to New York in 1926 with Billy Taylor (the bassist); we were the same age and used to work together. ... We could read and we could play. I played with local bands led by people like Charlie Skeets and Johnny Montagu and then hooked up with Arthur Gibbs for a while.”
- Tommy Benford, *The Ghosts of Harlem*, p. 108: “My brother Bill had a nice band. He’d taken over Charlie Skeets’s band, and it was the same band Jelly Roll Morton used to make some of those Red Hot Peppers records. Jelly Roll Morton never played with that band outside the recording studio, but the band stayed together, and we played in dance halls all over the city, uptown and downtown.”
- New York Age 30-11-08: Brooklyn Lodge 32 “Music by Charles Skeetes and his Aristocrats of Jazz”.
- New York Amsterdam News 32-11-02: Charity Ball Rockland Palace “Charlie Skeete and his Whispering Skeeters”
- New York Amsterdam News 32-12-14: Benefit Breakfast Dance Savoy Ballroom “Charlie Skeets”
- Bobby Booker in Storyville 101-172/5: “I know that Tab Smith obtained a job right away with, I think, Charlie Skeets in a taxi-dance hall. During this period, the late twenties, I worked a short spell with Dave Nelson at the Savoy Ballroom and on some dancing gigs for a couple of months.”
- Ibid. p. 176: “Later (*after 1933 – KBR*), I joined Charlie Skeet’s band at the Circle Dance Hall at, I think, 66th and Broadway. I was on trumpet, Al Robinson on alto, Charlie on piano, and Puss Johnson and Freddie Moore played drums with us at various times. The job lasted four or five months, but after a while you would get tired of those kind of jobs and get another one.”
- Roger Boyd in Storyville 85-27: “During 1941 I played for USO shows with Eubie Blake. Later, I returned to Washington and played at the Crystal Cavern for three years. I came back to New York City and used to gig around. I worked with Charlie Skeets at the Majestic Ballroom on the corner of 50th and Broadway, this was a ‘dime-a-dance’ hall. I was on Skeets’s payroll for six months and, when he left, I took over leadership of the band. I was there for about eleven months.”
- Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing*, p.143: “In 1930, after a period with a black touring show, (*Claude*) Hopkins took over a New York taxi dance hall band led by Charlie Skeets and began to move it up the band pyramid.”

(All notations of Mr. Skeete’s name are as *sic*!)

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