

A CASE OF UNQUESTIONED CERTAINTY

The Little Chocolate Dandies

One of my earliest acquisitions after the start of my collecting life was an LP "Jazz Sounds of the Twenties, Vol. 1 – Big Bands" on German Odeon 83 247. This record contained a couple of early big bands, but also bands that you would never describe as such, like King Oliver's Jazz Band or Piron's New Orleans Orchestra. From the Harlem period only two titles by Clarence Williams' Orchestra were present, and one of the titles of the Little Chocolate Dandies, 'That's How I Feel Today'.

Very probably, this latter title was the start of my life-long interest in the music of the Harlem period, and it certainly was the beginning of my likewise love of Benny Carter's music in all its variations and aspects.

When working recently on my list of Rex Stewart's pre-Ellington recordings (in www.harlem-fuss.com) I came to listen to this beautiful title and its companion again, this time with my today's ears. And as so often: what I heard did not correspond with what was listed in the discographies. So, let's see what we hear on these sides.

I have compiled all the personnels for this session listed in the discographies at hand, and in the LP cover texts and the CD booklets - see below - just to show what has been thought of this recording session in earlier years. As you can see there are a couple of common names present that have been taken as granted for many years now: Leonard Davis, Rex Stewart, J.C. Higginbotham, Benny Carter, Don Redman, Coleman Hawkins, Fats Waller. The three rhythm players do not seem to be as certain as the afore-named players.

It first becomes apparent that the main soloist of this particular recording session is Benny Carter. He solos on alto in the third chorus of 'That's How I Feel Today' (the middle-eight part of the chorus arranged for three saxes in harmony) and in the second chorus of 'Six Or Seven Times' in his very own inimitable way, playing phrases of the melody and connecting them with highly virtuoso and artistic runs. Furthermore, he probably improvises his instrumental phrases in his interplay with Don Redman's vocal in call-and-response fashion in the fourth chorus of 'Six Or Seven Times'. These phrases certainly are ad-lib, if only as a procedure practiced before. But, Carter's main contribution has to be seen in his complete command over the proceedings. All apparently arranged passages are his work, arranging four-part harmonies behind soloists or in ensemble passages. At the date of the recording Benny Carter had just started an engagement at the recently re-opened Alhambra Ballroom (September 13, 1929 – see Storyville 24 cover) which would not last longer than to the end of November. Carter appeared there with his 'Savoy Play Boys' aka the 'Wilberforce Collegians'.

On lead trumpet we certainly hear the vastly neglected and underrated Leonard Davis, one of the great lead-trumpet players of the 1920s, first trumpet player at this time with the famous 'Charlie Johnson Paradise Ten' orchestra at Smalls' Paradise, performing with his majestic sound and his brightness of tone and phrase. He leads the band in all their ensemble parts.

The trumpet soloist in the first chorus of 'That's How I Feel Today' must then be Rex Stewart as listed ubiquitously. But is it really him? Close listening reveals that nowhere on these sides a second trumpeter can be discerned with certainty, playing along with the first trumpet. In all ensemble passages only one trumpet seems to be present, and evaluating the ad-lib trumpet solo on the first title it becomes apparent that this player very probably is Davis as well. Compare his tone, attack and his very strong final vibrato to Davis' recordings with the Eddie Condon Hot Shots session of February 8, 1929. His vibrato is distinctly different to Rex Stewart's. He may also be identified by his somewhat academic approach to trumpet playing, using rather simple rhythm, clear diction and strong tone – what is crucial for first-part playing in a big band – and little use of blue-notes or dirty tones. It should be added here that the Fletcher Henderson band were on a Western tour for the whole of September of this year, starting in August and not returning to New York before the end of October 1929 (Hendersonia, p. 234). As Stewart definitely was part of the Henderson trumpet section at this time there certainly is no reason to assume his presence at this particular session. The booklet author for the Media 7 CD, by the way, names Davis as trumpet soloist, but still keeps Rex Stewart in the personnel.

With the Henderson band on tour, Carter could not hire Jimmy Harrison as trombonist and engaged the number two trombonist in Harlem at this time, J.C. Higginbotham. His tone, vibrato, attack and style are almost unmistakable, complete with upward jumps and typical jumping trill. It seems a bit strange that the JSP CD lists the sober and academic Claude Jones as trombonist.

Apart from Carter we certainly have a second (or third) alto saxophonist in Don Redman here. We do not hear him distinctly on alto, but on clarinet playing an obligato to Len Davis' trumpet solo in the first chorus of 'That's How I Feel Today' – a Don Redman co-composition, by the way – and scattering copying the phrases Carter plays on alto in the fourth chorus of 'Six Or Seven Times'. Brian Rust in his cover text to the British Parlophone LP (see below) writes about this session: "It was nearly a year before Don Redman reassembled a group that was eventually labelled 'The Chocolate Dandies'. This time he brought young Benny Carter, soon to record with the Cotton Pickers along with the irrepressible Harlem pianist, Fats Waller, then appearing in 'Connie's Hot Chocolates' at the Hudson Theatre on Broadway. With Luis Russell's superb trombonist J.C. Higginbotham, and two cornet – trumpet players from Harlem bands, Rex Stewart and Leonard Davis, this was an impressive front-line, enriched, as if this array was insufficient, by Fletcher Henderson's tenor man, Coleman Hawkins, another McKinney alumnus in the making." Without attempting to compete at the least with Brian Rust's expertise I doubt Redman's responsibility for assembling this group of musicians in New York. He was the leader of McKinney's Cotton Pickers in Detroit from the summer of 1927 on, and might have been in New York, outside of any documented engagements there, to settle a contract with the RCA Victor people which would result in a three-day recording session for McKinney's Cotton Pickers in early November 1929, with a band consisting almost entirely of New York personnel, and not the usual McKinney's men. Benny Carter had just been discovered as a successful band leader on his job at the Alhambra, and might therefore have been contacted by the OKeh people. Alternately, I also think it possible that Redman had been contacted as he had led the first Chocolate Dandies session one year before with the complete McKinney's Cotton Pickers unit hidden behind a pseudonym, handing the responsibility then over to Carter now. As a musician, Redman does not show off here at this session. His only solo performance is copying Carter's alto phrases with his voice in scat-vocal style, very funny and amusing. Also in 'Six Or Seven Times' he probably is not performing on sax in the introduction and the coda, but on celesta. This catchy melody, which later became famous as a riff in Count Basie's 'One O'Clock Jump', is played by two saxophones only, Carter and the tenor sax player.

This, then, leaves us with Coleman Hawkins on tenor sax. But when listening it becomes apparent that there is no tenor sax on these sides outside of the reed section. There definitely is no solo tenor sax anywhere! Can you imagine: Hawkins, the undisputed tenor sax star of the era, at a star-studded session, and not playing any solo spot at all? The booklet to the JSP CD (see below) states: "The pick-up band (well, no

band containing Don Redman, Rex Stewart, Benny Carter and Coleman Hawkins can truly be described as 'pick-up') does a great job – with the Hawk charmingly characteristic. Fats contributes as a equal, rather than as leader – a measure, perhaps, of the company he is in.” Now, what does this mean? Did this writer really listen? Where does he hear a charmingly characteristic Coleman Hawkins? As I said, the Henderson band was in Kansas City at the Pla-Mor Ballroom, and Hawkins is not documented anywhere to have taken a holiday in New York. The tenor player heard in the ensemble – and only there – must have been a secondary player. Carter might have brought him from his Savoy Play Boys. His name would then be Robert Carroll, of later Don Redman band fame. (Could this have been their first encounter?) Most surprisingly you will not find Hawkins mentioned in the personnel of the Swaggie LP cover text, although this in general is a copy of the Parlophone LP cover text. Did the Swaggie people simply forget to list him, or did they really listen, as I hope? But, on the other hand, you will even find Hawkins listed in name-discographies dedicated to his work as those by Jan Evensmo or Jean-Francois Villetard! And also W.C. Allen mentions this session as including Hawkins. And now, please, listen yourself!

There certainly is no reason to attribute any leadership to Fats Waller as noted above, as he was under contract with RCA Victor. But he is the pianist without any doubt. And with gusto and style! He was his own bandleader-soloist at the time.

When Redman was in New York, perhaps to arrange the November recording sessions under the McKinney banner, he might have brought Dave Wilborn, McKinney's banjo player, with him, as he was the only original band member of the Cotton Pickers besides Redman himself to participate in these sessions. The banjo player's style on these sides is Wilborn's, with his very straight ahead four-four rhythm without any gimmicks all around, just like on Dec. 05, 1928, when he and Redman were members of Louis Armstrong's Savoy Ballroom Five – the 'Save It, Pretty Mama' session. Charlie Johnson's banjo player Bobby Johnson, as listed in Mr. Berger's Benny Carter biography, does exactly this: play with gimmicks, trills and glissandos. Stylistically, Carter's banjo player from the Savoy Play Boys, Talcott Reeves, might also be considered.

As Leonard Davis was from the Charlie Johnson band early record listeners might have assumed that he had brought his band-mate Cyrus St. Clair to this session to play his wonderful and majestic tuba (see Rust and Berger). But: At this time St. Clair was not with Johnson anymore and we know very little about his later whereabouts. But Johnson's current tuba player was Billy Taylor, Sr., who had joined the Johnson band together with Leonard Davis in mid-1928 coming from the Arthur Gibbs band. He may be discerned from St. Clair's playing by his rather coated tone and his attempts to play bass-lines rather than being satisfied with playing the chord notes. And this is what we hear. Furthermore, Billy Taylor is the tuba player on the McKinney's Cotton Pickers sessions of November 1929 for which this Chocolate Dandies session might easily be seen as a test performance.

On drums we certainly hear the great and unsung George Stafford, life-long drummer of the Charlie Johnson band. Taking the Eddie Condon's Hot Shots session of 1929 as an example, Stafford is easily recognized as the drummer here. His cymbal sound, his stick-work on the wood-block and on the early high-hat is exactly what I know him for. Only his work with brushes cannot be heard with the Johnson Band.

My only unanswered question is: who plays the chimes or celesta in both titles? The most likely candidate for the celesta parts would be the pianist – Waller at this session. As the celesta notes heard are very loud, I assume that the celesta stood close to the microphone. Waller might well have left his chair at the piano to play the celesta in 'Six Or Seven Times', as the piano is inaudible in the introduction and the coda. But Waller cannot be responsible for the celesta tones in the bridge of 'That's How I Feel Today', as he is starting his piano part leading into chorus 4 at this very moment. These notes would then have been played by Redman who seems to have played the celesta on a couple of McKinney's Cotton Pickers sides. He obviously may then also be responsible for the celesta part on 'Six Or Seven Times'!

It seems to be appropriate to see this Little Chocolate Dandies session as a test for the McKinney's Cotton Pickers sessions of November 5.-7., just seven weeks later. We have Don Redman and Dave Wilborn there, with the addition of Claude Jones the only McKinney's men participating in the November sessions. Leonard Davis, Billy Taylor and George Stafford of the Charlie Johnson band, in November augmented by Sidney de Paris and Stafford replaced by Kaiser Marshall. The latter together with Joe Smith and Coleman Hawkins from the Henderson band, recently returned to New York. And Benny Carter bringing along Ted McCord on alto from his own band, the Savoy Play Boys. Only Fats Waller appears as his own man, at the first November session probably replaced by Leroy Tibbs. (Re the order of saxophones, see my article on the early Chick Webb band in N&N 68!)

What has been said above then leads us to the following personnel:

THE LITTLE CHOCOLATE DANDIES		New York,	Sep. 18, 1929
Leonard Davis – tpt; J. C. Higginbotham – tbn;			
Benny Carter, Don Redman – alt, clt; unknown (<i>Robert Carroll?</i>) – ten;			
Thomas Fats Waller – pno; <i>Dave Wilborn</i> – bjo; <i>Billy Taylor</i> – bbs; George Stafford – dms; <i>Don Redman</i> – cel;			
J. C. Higginbotham, Don Redman, Benny Carter - voc-trio; Don Redman – scat voc;			
Benny Carter – arr			
402965-C	That's How I Feel Today	OK 8728,	Chronological Classics 522
402966-D	Six Or Seven Times	OK 8728,	Chronological Classics 522

Tunes:

- *That's How I Feel Today* Key of Eb OKeh
 (Intro 8 bars ens)(Chorus 1 32 bars AABA tpt LD – clt obligato DR / middle eight sax section)(Chorus 2 32 bars pno TFW)(Chorus 3 32 bars alt BC / middle eight sax section)(Bridge 6 bars / ens 2 – pno 4)(Chorus 4 32 bars ens – tbn JCH / middle and last eight ens)
 - *Six Or Seven Times* Key of Eb OKeh
 (Intro 8 bars ens 2 saxes!)(Chorus 1 16 bars ens)(Chorus 2 16 bars alto BC)(Vamp 4 bars pno TFW)(Chorus 3 16 bars vocal trio)
 (Chorus 4 16 bars alt BC chase with voc DR)(Chorus 5 16 bars alt BC alternating with ens)(Coda 8 bars ens 2 saxes)

Notes:

- *Jazz Directory, Vol.2, Vol.6: not listed (!)*
 - *DeLaunay, New Hot Discography 1948: Leonard Davis, Rex Stewart (tp); J.C. Higginbotham (tb); Don Redman (vo & s); Benny Carter (as); Coleman Hawkins (ts); Fats Waller (p); and others.*
 - *Rust*3,*4: Rex Stewart –c; Leonard Davis –t; J.C. Higginbotham –tb-v; Don Redman, Benny Carter –cl-as-v; Coleman Hawkins –ts; Fats Waller –p; unknown –bj; Cyrus St.Clair –bb; George Stafford –d*

- W.C. Allen, *Hendersonia*, p.250: „On September 18, 1929, Coleman Hawkins recorded two titles for Okeh with a pickup group, *The Chocolate Dandies*.“
 - Berger, *Berger, Patrick, Benny Carter Vol. II*, p.39: Rex Stewart, Leonard Davis (tp); J.C. Higginbotham (tb); Don Redman, Benny Carter (as, cl, v); Coleman Hawkins (ts); Fats Waller (p); Bobby Johnson (bj); Cyrus St. Clair (tuba); George Stafford (d)
 - L. Wright, *Okeh Race Records, The 8000 Race Series: no personnel*.
 - L. Wright, *Fats In Fact*: Rex Stewart, c; Leonard Davis, t; J.C. Higginbotham, tb; Don Redman, cl, as, v (2); Benny Carter, as, v (2); Coleman Hawkins, ts; Fats Waller, p, cel (2); Bobby Johnson, bj; Cyrus St. Clair, bb; George Stafford, d. „Note that a vocal version of the first title was originally selected for issue, but the choice was later changed in favour of the non-vocal take. Both tunes were arranged by Benny Carter.“
 - Rust*6: Rex Stewart, c; Leonard Davis, t; J.C. Higginbotham, tb-v; Don Redman, Benny Carter, cl,as,v; Coleman Hawkins, ts; Fats Waller, p; unknown bj; Cyrus St.Clair, bb; George Stafford, d.
- LP/CD covers
- Folkways (US) FJ 2808 (LP), cover: Leonard Davis, Rex Stewart, trumpets; J.C. Higginbotham, trombone; Don Redman, vocal and saxophone; Benny Carter, alto sax; Coleman Hawkins, tenor sax; 'Fats' Waller, piano; others unknown or disputed.
 - Odeon (G) 83 247 (LP), cover: Rex Stewart, Leonard Davis (cornet and trumpet); J.C. Higginbotham (trombone); Don Redman, Benny Carter (alto saxophones); Coleman Hawkins (tenor saxophone); Thomas 'Fats' Waller (piano); unknown banjo, brass bass, and drums.
 - Parlophone (UK) PMC 7038 (LP), cover: Rex Stewart (cornet); Leonard Davis (trumpet); J.C. Higginbotham (trombone); Don Redman, Benny Carter (clarinets, alto saxophones and vocal duet on 'Six Or Seven Times'); Coleman Hawkins (tenor saxophone); Fats Waller (piano); unknown banjo; Cyrus St.Clair (tuba); George Stafford (drums).
 - Swaggie (Aus) S 1249 (LP), cover: Rex Stewart, cornet; Leonard Davis, trumpet; Jay C. Higginbotham, trombone; Don Redman, Benny Carter, clarinets and alto saxophones; Fats Waller, piano; unknown, banjo; Cyrus St. Clair, tuba; George Stafford, drums.
 - Jazz Archives No 67 (F) 157982 (CD), booklet: Rex Stewart (cnt); Leonard Davis (tp); J.C. Higginbotham (tb); Don Redman (cl, as, vo); Benny Carter (cl, as, vo); Coleman Hawkins (ts); Fats Waller (p); unknown (bjo); Cyrus St. Clair (tu); George Stafford (dm).
 - Media 7 (F) MJCD 22 (CD), booklet: Rex Stewart, Leonard Davis (tp); J.C. Higginbotham (tb); Don Redman (cl, as, voc, arr); Benny Carter (as, cl, voc); Coleman Hawkins (ts); Fats Waller (p); Bobby Johnson (bj); Cyrus St. Clair (tu); George Stafford (d).
 - JSP Records (UK) JSP 928A, booklet: Rex Stewart – trumpet; Claude Jones – trombone; Don Redman – sax, vocal; Benny Carter – alto sax; Coleman Hawkins – tenor sax; Fats Waller – piano; unknown – tuba, drums, banjo; unknown – vocal trio.

The above discussed session bore the name 'The Little Chocolate Dandies' as can be verified in L. Wright's 'Okeh Race Records, The 8000 Series, p. 177, which shows an advert from the Chicago Defender clearly carrying this particular name. This beautiful group of musicians very sadly only made the above two sides. The 'Chocolate Dandies' band name, yet, had also been used by Okeh records for a four-title session by the genuine McKinney's Cotton Pickers in October 1928. The last title of this session with a reduced personnel was also released under the 'Little Chocolate Dandies' name on Par R-365 without any relationship to the session discussed here, but for Redman's and Wilborn's presence as regular members of the McKinney's Cotton Pickers. The name 'Chocolate Dandies' was later used for a number of additional recording sessions by Columbia, also under Benny Carter's guidance.

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