

THE RECORDINGS OF CAROLINE JOHNSON

An Annotated Tentative Personnel - Discography

JOHNSON, Caroline, singer

no personal data known

This personnel-discography is based on RUST, JAZZ AND RAGTIME RECORDS 1897 - 1942.

Personnel are taken from this source, but modified in the light of earlier or subsequent research or on the strength of my own listening, discussed with our listening group or other interested collectors.

- Documented, most certain and aurally absolutely obvious identifications are listed thus: **Caroline Johnson**

- Probable, generally agreed, but not documented identifications are listed in italics, thus: *Caroline Johnson*

- Not attributable identifications – although the musician in question might be an otherwise well-known person – are listed thus: unknown

- If a possible identification for an otherwise unknown musician is suggested by the author without the possibility to prove the factual evidence, it is listed thus: (*Caroline Johnson*)

When feeling certain without a musician's documented presence, I have not refrained from altering Rust's statements without using italics. In any case, my statements are open to discussion and I would appreciate any contribution - pro or contra!

As always in my discographies on this website I have written recording sessions with their headings, dates, titles and names of musicians in italics, whenever I am convinced that the eponymous musician of this discography is not part of the accompanying group of this session! Documented names of musicians if known – in recording ledgers or on record labels – are listed in bold letters.

This discography still is - and will certainly be - a work in progress for a long time, if not eternally. Yet, on the way to a definite discography of all jazz recordings before 1942 - which certainly will never be possible - it is intended to fill some gaps that have not been treated before.

The following statements and the resulting list of recordings only reflect the opinion of this writer/listener and are open to discussion. More so, discussion is eagerly invited. Corrections, amendments and controversial opinions are much appreciated.

CAROLINE JOHNSON

001 CAROLINE JOHNSON	New York,	c. Mar. 30, 1926
Caroline Johnson (Alta Brown?) – voc;		
<i>June Clark</i> – cnt; <i>Charlie Green</i> – tbn;		
<i>Leonard Fields</i> – alt; <i>Harrison Jackson</i> – clt;		
<i>Charlie "Smitty" Smith</i> or <i>Perry Bradford</i> – pno, voc (1); (<i>Buddy Christian</i>) – bjo		
106751 Georgia Grind	PA 7503, Per 103,	Doc DOCD-5514
106752 Mama Stayed Out The Whole Night Long (But Mama Didn't Do No Wrong)	PA 7503, Per 103,	Doc DOCD-5514

These two titles by Caroline Johnson – whose real name might be Alta Brown – with their matrix numbers consecutive to a PA session by Mary Stafford were obviously recorded on the same day, what made me adapt this recording date to the adjacent Mary Stafford session. Bradford had already recorded for this label with Mary Jackson and his P.B Jazz Phoos in October 1923 leading a very competent unit of musicians from the West. His former association to this label might have led to a new recording contract as accompanist to this and Mary Stafford. But it might easily have been June Clark's association to Pathe Actuelle Blue Rhythm Orchestra sessions of October/November 1925 that brought this unit into the recording studio.

The whole performance starts with a singer who undoubtedly is not Miss Johnson. After some careful listening it becomes apparent that this is Perry Bradford himself with his very own unsecure and frail pitch singing one chorus of 'Georgia Grind' in Eb, the band then modulating to C for Miss Johnson's performance. The rest of the tune then stays in C.

Very clearly this is the same band/personnel as on the adjacent Mary Stafford PA-session. I would like you to hear and enjoy June Clark's heroic cornet playing. He certainly was one of the greatest cornet/trumpet players of the 1920s, and it is unbelievable that he could disappear into oblivion in the late 20s – at least as a musician.

- June Clark: All Clark's characteristics clearly audible!

- trombone: although the trombone player is more subdued than on the previous session, he nevertheless seems to be Green with his gruff tone and playing. Clark obviously has his new trombonist with him, namely the very famous – and rightfully so – but difficult and tough Charlie Green, who had just left the Fletcher Henderson band to go on his own. He did not stay long with Clark, but was soon on his way to his hometown Omaha because of marital problems. Green had a tremendous technique, great improvisational abilities connected with a certain earthiness, which made him a dream partner for Bessie Smith. Yet with her he mainly displayed his roughness and earthiness, but should not be depreciated because of it. He could do much more than that on the slide-horn. For me this sounds very, very much like Green with his gruff tone and playing on the Hendersons and Bessies.

- alto sax: although almost inaudible, there is an alto player here who has to be Leonard Fields. Although Len Fields comes to mind, this might possibly not be him, this man here lacking part of Fields' "correct" and singing style and tone. On the other hand, he plays a lot of chordal arpeggios, which could suggest Fields. I am not certain at all but dare to name Fields because of his still belonging to the band.

- clarinet/tenor sax: I assume Harrison Jackson on the Bb pitched reeds here. For a short couple of months this otherwise obscure musician was tenor saxophonist and clarinetist with the Clark band in late 1925 and early 1926. He did not stay long with the band, and probably for musical reasons he left the music business for good to become a lawyer. He can probably be heard on the Gulf Coast Seven session of Nov. 05, 1925 (see N&N 69 p 16) and these two PA sessions here, but his performances are not at all convincing. Buster Bailey certainly is far off the mark for this mediocre reed playing, and I wonder how his name could creep into the Rust editions. The clt playing definitely is not Buster Bailey's style (Bailey was much more virtuoso!), but typical for a saxophonist's clarinet playing. Furthermore, it is rather pedestrian and reminds of the clt playing on the Gulf Coast Seven. So, Harrison Jackson comes to mind, who still was a member of Clark's Creole Stompers.

- piano: as the singer in the first chorus of "Georgia Grind" is certainly Perry Bradford, it can be assumed that he is also acting as piano player. Bradford seems to have used a somewhat arpeggiated style, which can also be heard on Bradford's Gang of April 21, 1926. But the pno break at the end (Coda) of "Mama Stayed Out" is very much in the kind of Charlie Smith's breaks heard in "Hold 'Er, Deacon" of the Blue Rhythm Orch., and "When The Jazz Band ..." and "Just Blues ..." by Thomas Morris' Past Jazz Masters. I therefore tend to assume it is Smith on piano here, just as on the Mary Staffords. And, if I am right that it is the personnel of the Clark band of early 1926 here, Smith's presence naturally is of greater probability.

- banjo: The banjo player plays straight four-to-the-bar no-nonsense banjo and might therefore be Buddy Christian, who was successor of Will 'Splivey' Escoffery in the Clark band.

- male voc: this is certainly P. Bradford singing the first chorus with his characteristic frail and shaky intonation (compare with his session of his Jazz Phools of April 21, 1925).

Notes:

- Ch. Delaunay, *New Hot Discography, 1948*: not listed

- Carey, McCarthy, *Jazz Directory Vol.5*: unknown acc

- Rust*3,*4: unknown c; unknown p; or, according to some sources: unknown c; unknown tb; unknown cl; unknown as; unknown p; unknown bj

- Rust*6: ? Tom Morris c; unknown tb; unknown cl; unknown as; unknown p; unknown bj; unknown male voc(1)

- BGR*2,*3: acc by either unknown c; unknown p; or, according to some sources: unknown c; unknown tb; unknown cl; unknown as; unknown p; unknown bj

- BGR*4: unknown c; unknown tb; unknown cl; unknown as; unknown p; unknown bj; unknown male voc(1)

Recorded Tunes:

Georgia Grind Key of Eb / C Pathé Actuelle, Perfect
(Intro 4 bars ens – clt)(Chorus A1 12 bars voc (Bradford) + ens key of Eb, modulation to G7)(Chorus B1 12 bars voc + ens key of C)(Chorus B2 12 bars voc + ens)(Chorus B3 12 bars voc + ens)(Chorus B4 12 bars voc + ens)

Mama Stayed Out The Whole Hight Long (But Mama Didn't Do No Wrong) Key of Eb Pathé Actuelle, Perfect
(Intro 4 bars ens)(Vamp 2 bars ens)(Verse 20 bars voc + ens)(Chorus A1 18 bars AABA' voc + ens)(Chorus A2 18 bars AABA' voc + ens)(Coda 4 bars pno – ens)

Sources :

Interview Harrison Smith : "I had the first ten Black Pattis that were rolled off the press, and I gave them to a girl named Alta Brown who recorded as Caroline Johnson. Her name was Alta (sic!) Brown, and she was an ex-member of the Dixie Jubilee Singers. She made a record with Fats (Waller) for Gennett called Mama's Gonna Stay Out All Night Long, or some crazy thing. (Caroline Johnson cut this title for Pathe-Actuelle 7503 backed by Georgia Grind – see Godrich-Dixon – no personnel given – D.S-B). But you see that was the aftermath of a session. They recorded these spiritual songs for a little church in Harlem called Little Mount Zion Baptist Church. So they recorded the spiritual selections, and afterwards Fats got the organ jumpin' because he was thirsty and wanted to get out and get a shower of booze, and she fell in line and cut the only blues she ever recorded. She was a girl from Panama ... A very beautiful girl." (STORYVILLE 47, p 169)
As can be seen above, the quoted title was not recorded with Fats Waller, but accompanied by the above named band. So Harrison Smith must have mixed the whole thing up. But now we know her real name and that she was a very beautiful girl!

CD-booklet to DOCD-5514: „Caroline Johnson is another singer who is more obscure than she deserves to be. She pitches her voice too low on ‚Georgia Grind‘ and really should have made a second take, but after one awkward chorus she recovers and jumps an octave. The fine jazz band really romps on these two selections. Later in 1926 she recorded two more tracks with Fats Waller on piano, only to disappear from sight after that.“ Oh, oh, oh, they should have listened closely first (see above)!

002 CAROLINE JOHNSON

Caroline Johnson (Alta Brown?) – voc;

Thomas Fats Waller – pno

X-99-B Ain't Got Nobody To Grind My Coffee

X-100 Mama's Losin' A Mighty Good Chance

New York,

Apr. 23, 1926

Gnt 3307,

Chronological Classics 664

Gnt 3307,

Chronological Classics 664

Miss Johnson certainly is a cabaret/vaudeville singer of medium quality with a somewhat shallow voice. Her performance is straight throughout, with little personal jazzy/bluesy ad-libs interjected.

Thomas Fats Waller's accompanying is youthfully strong and ahead, with recognizable ragtime influence, but on his own way already to later fame and master-ship. He plays the whole accompaniment as a slightly retained piano solo, with nice introductions and codas and surprising and charming little licks. Very beautiful.

Notes:

- Ch. Delaunay, *New Hot Discography, 1948*: acc by Fats Waller (p)

- Carey, McCarthy, *Jazz Directory Vol.5*: Fats Waller (p)

- BGR*2,*3,*4: acc by Fats Waller, pno

- Rust*3,*4: acc by Fats Waller -p

- Rust*6: no acc given

K.-B. Rau

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