

THE RECORDINGS OF JOE WILLIAMS

An Annotated Tentative Personnel - Discography

WILLIAMS, Joe, trombone

Played with Willie Gant (c.1924); Billy Fowler (c. 1926); June Clark (1926-27); Ferman Tapp (c. 1928); recorded with Bessie Smith (Aug 1928); occasionally replaced Charlie Green in Fletcher Henderson band when C. Green could not make a date (recording with Bessie Smith was probably on C. Green's recommendation). Later with Freddie Moore (NY, Jun 1934); Trombone Joe Williams' Manhattan Syncopators (Rockland Palace, March 5 1936). (W.C. Allen, Hendersonia)

WILLIAMS, Joseph (trombone)

With the band (Jenkins' Orphanage) in 1910s and early 1920s. Moved to New York and worked with Willie Gant (1926), June Clark (1926-7), Billy Fowler, Bob Fuller, Freddy Moore, etc. Recorded with Bessie Smith in 1928. (J. Chilton, A Jazz Nursery)

STYLISTICS

STYLE

Williams used a bluesy expressive trombone style based on human vocal expression, as discernible from his recordings known. We do not know his style of performing in a strict jazz/swing range.

TONE

Very sharp, broad and strong

VIBRATO

Strong wide and medium fast vibrato.

TIME

Swinging and rhythmic, much off-beat, depending on the music performed.

PHRASING

As the only performances of Williams are those listed below, his phrases depend almost entirely on the call-phrases of the singers. We do not know his style of performing in a strict jazz/swing context.

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: **Joe Williams**

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

- 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: (*Joe Williams*)

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.

JOE WILLIAMS

001	GEORGE McCLENNON'S JAZZ DEVILS	New York,	May 07, 1925
	<i>(June Clark) – tpt; (Joe Williams) – tbn;</i>		
	George McClennon – clt; <i>(Leonard Fields) – alt;</i>		
	Eddie Heywood, Sr. – pno; <i>(Will 'Splivey' Escoffery) – bjo</i>		
73359-A	Home Alone Blues	OK 8236,	Jazz Oracle BDW 8022
73360-B	Anybody Here Want To Try My Cabbage?	OK 8236,	Jazz Oracle BDW 8022

For a long time now, I held the opinion that June Clark's band out of Smalls' Sugar Cane Club had been hired here to back McClennon.

Later insights make me think that the band here is a mixture of the Clark and Heywood bands.

June Clark had ties with George McClennon, having worked with him in 1922 in show business, and I see the strong possibility of his presence here. June Clark was an extremely forceful player seemingly bursting with inner power and drive. He possessed a fat tone, very strong, loud and urgent. Probably resulting from his relationship with Louis Armstrong, he tried to get a similar quality of tone and thus later ruined his lip. He uses a rather wide irregular vibrato, which is a crucial criterion for Clark's playing. His vibrato starts immediately with the beginning of the tone and, not, as very often the case with other trumpet players, developing out of a straight tone, loosening up into a "terminal" vibrato. Furthermore, he always plays just a split second before the beat, thus sounding hectic and erratic.

- Trumpet/Cornet: Judging from the above-mentioned stylistics this could easily be a subdued June Clark. On "Anybody Here ..." this trumpet player attempts to play growl trumpet with astonishing results, providing proof that he really is a top rank man.

- Trombone: At times, the trombone player, although very much in the background, sounds faintly like Harrison (tone, attack, vibrato), but this man's 12 bar solo in "Anybody Here ..." is just too crude to be by Harrison! Repeated listening reveals a strong similarity to E.

Heywood's trombonist on his Jazz Six session of October 1926, i.e. Jonas "Sweet Papa" Walker! Consultation with my listening friends supports my assumption here and makes Walker's presence very certain. Gunther Schuller in "Early Jazz" asserts that Jonas Walker from St. Louis was an important influence on Charlie Irvis and Tricky Sam Nanton and "to be the first to apply New Orleans 'freak' sounds to his instrument" (Schuller). ADDITION 25-01-2024: After frequent listening to these sides and those of the subsequent sessions, I now am convinced that the trombonist on these sides is not Jonas 'Sweet Papa' Walker as assumed before because of his relationship to Eddie Heywood, Sr. and his trombone style, but the enigmatic Joe Williams, documented only with his three sides made with Bessie Smith on August 24/25, 1928, where he can be heard and recognised with a somewhat evolved style.

- Clarinet: George McClennon He is the leader, and you hear his gas-pipe clarinet all the time. As he seems not to be a distinguished part of the ensemble, I assume, that he just hired part of the Clark band playing their own repertoire, with him participating somehow. He does not sing!

- Alto sax: No definite style discernible. But the sweet and singing tone seems to be the same as with the Blue Rhythm Orch., which made me think of Len Fields, but other characteristics of Fields (arpeggios, double tongue work, etc.) are lacking. However, in "Home Alone Blues" this musician starts a solo with a 3-bar sequence not obeying the changes but staying harmonically in the tonic, which can be heard elsewhere in Fields' playing and seems to be a characteristic though negative part of his style. Yet, Fields did not join the Clark band before the summer of 1925, replacing Benny Carter! I do not dare to think of Carter!

- Piano: Eddie Heywood Sr. His name is credited on the record label as the piano soloist. He is clearly the same man accompanying McClennon on earlier recordings (May 02, 1925). Listen to his octave runs which obviously are characteristic of his style!

- Banjo: unknown No suggestion as to the banjo player's identity! He plays a rather unusual and dated 6/8 style, not heard before on McClennon's recordings. He may thus be Will 'Splivey' Escoffery from June Clark's band – or possibly also Bernard Addison from the Seminole Syncopators, in case they had been in New York at this date.

There are no drums as given in Rust*6!

Notes:

- Record Research 66, p.5: probably Tom Morris (cnt); Charlie Irvis (tbn); George McClennon (clt); unknown (alt); Clarence Williams (pno); Buddy Christian (?) (bjo); unknown (dms)

- Rust*2: Tom Morris (cnt); Charlie Irvis (tbn); George McClennon (clt); unknown (alt); Clarence Williams (pno); Buddy Christian (?) (bjo); unknown (dms); George McClennon (vcl)

- Rust*3,*4,*6: unknown -c; unknown -tb; George McClennon -cl, v; unknown -as; ?Eddie Heywood -p; unknown -bj; unknown -d

002	GEORGE McCLENNON'S JAZZ DEVILS	New York,	Jun. 11, 1925
	George McClennon - voc;		
	<i>(June Clark) – tpt; (Joe Williams) – tbn;</i>		
	unknown – alt, clt;		
	<i>(Eddie Heywood) – pno; (Bill Benford?) - bbs</i>		
73425-D	Everybody But Me	OK 8337,	Jazz Oracle BDW 8022
73426-C	Bologna	OK 8337,	Jazz Oracle BDW 8022

George McClennon was adopted by the great comedian Bert Williams in his childhood. Consequently, he also started a stage career very early. On these titles here he attempts some kind of a Bert Williams copy.

The band plays a rather subdued straight accompaniment, with some hot tones here and there, but mainly playing written parts. Therefore, identification of the musicians is nearly impossible, but the overall sound is very similar to the sides of May 07, 1925, and I cautiously tend to ascribe these sides to June Clark and Joe Williams as before. The tuba player might then be Bill Benford.

Furthermore, the accompanying trumpet player uses triple-tongue at the end of "Bologna", which is also used on "Stolen Kisses" of the session of June 18, 1926.

Notes:

- Record Research 66, p.5: probably Tom Morris (cnt); Charlie Irvis (tbn); George McClennon (clt); unknown (alt); Clarence Williams (pno); Buddy Christian (?) (bjo); unknown (dms)

- Rust*2: Tom Morris (cnt); Charlie Irvis (tbn); George McClennon (clt); unknown (alt); Clarence Williams (pno); Buddy Christian (?) (bjo); unknown (dms); George McClennon (vcl)

- Rust*3,*4,*6: unknown -c; unknown -tb; George McClennon -cl, v; unknown -as; ?Eddie Heywood -p; unknown -bj; unknown -d

003	GEORGE McCLENNON'S JAZZ DEVILS	New York,	c. Jun. 18, 1926
	<i>June Clark – cnt; Joe Williams – tbn;</i>		

George McClennon – clt; Leonard Fields or (Joe Garland) – alt, bar; (Charlie “Smitty” Smith) – pno; (Will ‘Splivey’ Escoffery) – bjo; (Bill Benford) – bbs		
74177-A Stolen Kisses	OK 8329,	Jazz Oracle BDW 8022
74178-A While You’re Sneakin’ Out Somebody Else Is Easin’ In	OK 8329,	Jazz Oracle BDW 8022

The above listed personnel is my assumption after close listening to this recordings, together with the knowledge of June Clark’s whereabouts in the course of 1926. As with a lot of vaudeville artists of the 1920/30s, the artists did not employ a steady working band for their accompaniment, but depended on theatre or house bands for their background. Accordingly, for recording purposes they were accompanied by bands of the company’s choice, often including young and little-paid musicians on their way up.

Here, we seem to have June Clark’s band of mid-1926, possibly with Joe Williams on trombone, who was Clark’s partner after Charlie Green had left his band in c. May 1926. This is a fantastic and inspiring band if we concentrate on the band and ignore Mr. McClennon, but his playing obviously was the taste of the day.

- Trumpet/Cornet: June Clark - There are a lot of Louis Armstrong’s phrases and licks in this trumpet player’s style, which makes me cite pianist Joe Turner: “Then I joined the red hot band of trumpeter June Clark, who was a carbon copy of Louis Armstrong. June and Jimmy Harrison were known as the greatest brass team of that wonderful period.” If any record of this period is “a carbon copy of Louis Armstrong”, then it is this one. For me June Clark in full flight.

- Trombone: Joe Williams - If this is the Clark band, the trombonist might be Charlie Green’s successor in the Clark band, Joe Williams. We only know three documented recordings of his, accompanying Bessie Smith, but he was a trombone player with a good reputation in Harlem. He played with a series of name bands, i.e. Willie Gant’s band at Smalls Paradise, Billy Fowler and others, and even subbed for Charlie Green with the Henderson band because of their similarity of style. The style seems to be more Williams’ (“an extra touch of tension and nastiness” G. Schuller, Early Jazz) than Green’s, judging from the Bessie Smith recordings, but they have often been confused (on Williams see also Storyville 87/98). However, it is not known when exactly Williams succeeded Green in the Clark band! We, yet, know that Green only spent a little time in the Clark band before returning to his home-town Omaha, out of family trouble, as is reported.

- Clarinet: George McClennon, who else.

- Alto sax, baritone sax: Leonard Fields or Joe Garland - probably this still is Leonard Fields, but no characteristics discernible, except for the tone and the smooth linear phrasing. Joe Garland played with June Clark, presumably after Fields left, and he is known to have played baritone and alto before concentrating on tenor sax.

- Piano: Eddie Heywood’s characteristics (octave runs) are not discernible as before. If this really is the Clark band the pianist at this time could be Charlie “Smitty” Smith as on the Blue Rhythm Orchestra recordings.

- Banjo: the Jazz Oracle CD says “possibly Buddy Christian”. Maybe there is a Buddy Christian specialist somewhere, who might comment? But because for stylistic reasons I tend to ‘Splivey’ Escoffery, the Clark band’s original banjo player with his ragtime-derived banjo style. Buddy Christian from New Orleans played a simpler 4/4 banjo style.

- Tuba: possibly Bill Benford who was tuba player for some time in the June Clark band.

Notes:

- Rust*2: Tom Morris (cnt); Charlie Irvis (tbn); George McClennon (clt); unknown (alt); Clarence Williams (pno); Buddy Christian (?)(bjo); unknown (dms)

- Rust*3,*4: unknown -c; unknown -tb; George McClennon -cl -v; unknown -as; ?Eddie Heywood -p; unknown -bj; unknown -d

- Rust*6: unknown -c; unknown -tb; George McClennon -cl -v; unknown -as; ?Eddie Heywood -p; unknown -bj; unknown -d

- Jazz Oracle CD BDW 8022, George McClennon, booklet: unknown (c), possibly Jimmy Harrison (tb); unknown (as); Eddie Heywood, Sr. (p); unknown (bj); unknown (d)

004 BESSIE SMITH

New York,

Aug. 24, 1928

Bessie Smith – voc;

Joe Williams – tbn (6); Bob Fuller – clt, sop (4), ten (3,5,6); Ernest Elliott – clt, alt (3,4,5);

Porter Grainger – pno

146887-2	Yes Indeed He Do	Col 14354-D,	Frog DGF 45
146888-2	Devil’s Gonna Get You	Col 14354-D,	Frog DGF 45
146889-3	You Ought To Be Ashamed	Col 14399-D,	Frog DGF 45
146893-2	Washwoman’s Blues	Col 14375-D,	Frog DGF 45
146894-2	Slow And Easy Man	Col 14384-D,	Frog DGF 46
146895-1	Poor Man’s Blues	Col 14399-D,	Frog DGF 46

It really is a sad fact that trombonist Joe Williams – a very under-rated and much-respected musician of the Harlem scene of the 1920s – is given the opportunity to participate on one title only on this session. Was he too late on the date? He, yet, is the ace-accompanist on this session, much more jazzy and bluesy than both reed-players. With his sharp and gutsy trombone style, he perfectly completes Bessie Smith’s vocal expressions. His style is less technical than Charlie Green’s, but his abilities must have been astonishing as can be judged from the fact that he deputised for Green in the Henderson band on several occasions.

On ‘Yes Indeed He Do’ we hear the reed men both on clarinets, with Elliott playing first part in the intro, then leaving the field open for Fuller, who bears most of the following accompaniment with his fine and warm clarinet. Only at the end we hear both musicians together again, difficult to discriminate. Judging from tone, loudness and vibrato, Elliott seems to lead the ensemble of ‘Devil’s Gonna Get You’ on first clarinet throughout, but this again is difficult to discriminate. The rudimental arrangements seem to come from P. Grainger. On ‘You Ought To Be Ashamed’ it is very obvious from tone, vibrato and smears that Elliott plays the alto sax and Fuller the tenor. On ‘Washwoman’s Blues’ we hear Elliott again on alto, Fuller on soprano. Elliott with his antiquated time and phrasing and Fuller as the much better jazz man on soprano, unlisted up to now! ‘Slow And Easy Man’ has Elliott on alto again and Fuller on tenor. Fuller sometimes plays very high, which might lead to a sound of seemingly two altos. This is apparent here. ‘Poor Man’s Blues’ has – apart from the great Joe Williams on trombone – Bob Fuller on tenor, again sometimes very high, and Elliott on clarinet.

Throughout my whole investigation in Ernest Elliott, nowhere have I found Ernest Elliott to play tenor sax. This session again is proof to this fact!

Porter Grainger is the ever-retained dependable piano accompanist.

Notes:

- Ch. Delaunay, New Hot Discography: Ernest Elliott, Bob Fuller (s); Porter Grainger (p)

- Mahony, Columbia 13/14000-D Series: trombone and piano acc.

- E. Brooks, The Bessie Smith Companion p. 145ff: 6th title: “Albertson states that ‘Poor Man’s Blues’, the final side from the 24th August, 1928 session is ‘considered by some to be the finest record she (Bessie Smith) ever made. Although I do not rank the performance that high, (neither presumably does Albertson) it is certainly one of her best and a considerable amount of the credit must go to Joe Williams whose fine trombone has the vital effect of pushing the reeds into a subordinate role, one they are capable of coping with.” ... “Joe Williams’

trombone fits in better with Bessie's style here than even Charlie Green's would. At first hearing they sound similar but as Schuller says, Williams' observations have 'an extra touch of tension and nastiness'. Above all though, Williams is technically more proficient and subtle. His antiphony to Bessie's first line of the second chorus, 'While you livin' in your mansion, you don't know what hard time mean'. Is a good example. Charlie Green's reply would no doubt have been stimulating but rough hewn, and would never have tailed away in understatement as Williams' does. ... Even the reeds, relieved of their melodic and antiphonal duties are not unpleasing; their organ-like harmony, richer now, hangs as a stable backdrop in front of which Bessie and Joe Williams display their art. Williams can now be seen to be the flux necessary to join effectively the disparate talents of Bessie and the reeds. Not that they are blameless – that the performance falls short of the higher quality is due intirely to the saxophone's uncertain harmonies behind Bessie's first words and the unobtrusive tonguing of both reeds in the second chorus."

- BGR*2,*3,*4: Bob Fuller, clt,alt; Ernest Elliott, clt,alt,ten; Porter Grainger, pno; with Joe Williams, tb
 - Rust*3: Bob Fuller -cl-as; Ernest Elliott -cl -as -ts; Porter Grainger -p; with Joe Williams -tb as noted (6)
 - Rust*4,*6: Bob Fuller -cl-as; Ernest Elliott -cl -as -ts; Porter Grainger -p; with Joe Williams -tb added

005 BESSIE SMITH		New York,	Aug. 25, 1928
Bessie Smith – voc;			
Joe Williams – tbn; Porter Grainger – pno			
146896-2	Please Help Me Get Him Off My Mind	Col 14375-D,	Frog DGF 46
146897-3	Me And My Gin	Col 14384-D,	Frog DGF 46

Here, Williams is Bessie's sole accompaniment, and he plays strong and urgent his part in the call-and-response manner stated by Bessie Smith. He has a strong, sharp and expressive sound on his trombone, with slight but distinct growl sounds underlining his dramatic performance.

Porter Grainger on piano is much busier here than on the preceding session where he was retaining because of the many musical voices present.

Notes:

- Mahony, Columbia 13/14000-D Series: trombone and piano acc.
 - E. Brooks, The Bessie Smith Companion p. 150: "Although Joe Williams sometimes plays phrases identical to those in the previous number (Please Help Me Get Him Off My Mind – KBR), he sounds more at home with this lighter-weight material. And for the first time he has the chance to show us if he has a sense of humour. The lyrics allow Bessie to take a detached view of her problem: they contain an element of self-awareness sometimes bordering upon face. But whilst Williams' work here is fine and congruous with much of Bessie's mood, he does not respond to the admittedly few opportunities for humour given to him. His reply to Bessie's 'I'll fight the Army, Navy, just me and my gin' at the end of the second chorus makes no reference to the hyperbole."
 - BGR*2,*3,*4: Joe Williams, tbn; Porter Grainger, pno
 - Rust*3,*4,*6: Joe Williams -tb; Porter Grainger -p

006 CLARA SMITH		New York,	Jan. 26, 1929
Clara Smith – voc;			
Joe Williams - tbn; Porter Grainger - pno			
147889-2	Daddy Don't Put That Thing On Me Blues	Col 14398-D,	Document DOCD-5368
147890-3	It's Tight Like That	Col 14398-D,	Document DOCD-5368

The pianist seems to be Porter Grainger as assumed by others. But as for my knowledge of Charlie Green: this trombonist here is somebody else. Green is much more cultivated at this time of recording. Being trombonist of the Henderson band, he possessed a well-founded technique with a deeply rooted full tone and a middle vibrato. Our man here has a much shallower tone and less technique, but he certainly tries to copy Charlie Green with his gruff blues style. And he certainly is not so far from his model. But he is rougher and uses more growl tones. Thus, I'd prefer to identify this player as the much under-rated Joe Williams, known from a few Bessie Smith sides of August 1928. He sounds more "primitive" than Green, but uses the same style. No wonder that he was misidentified as Charlie Green for many years.

Notes:

- Mahony, Columbia 13/14000-D Series: trombone and piano acc.
 - BGR*2,*3,*4: Charlie Green, tbn; poss Porter Grainger, pno
 - Rust*3,*4,*6: Charlie Green -tb; ?Porter Grainger -p

SOURCES:

- Storyville 87, Barclay Draper, His Life Story as told to David Griffith: "I left Fess (Williams – KBR) and went to work with Bob Fuller. The only fellow in that group that I can recall is Joe Williams, one of the best jazz trombone players that I ever knew. Nobody ever speaks of him. He was a trombonist out of Jenkins Orphanage and could play more jazz trombone than many of the other trombone players. The dancing school we played at was called the Dreamland on 125th Street between Seventh Avenue and Lenox. Bob Fuller, our leader, was a very good clarinet player." "I worked with Bill Benford as well. Now that had to be in the early thirties, too. We played for six months at the Star Ballroom on 42nd Street. Buddy Murphy and I were on trumpets, Joe Williams on trombone, Norman Thornton and Roy Bumford were on reeds, Gene Rodgers on piano, Bill Benford on bass, and Steve Wrigth on drums."