

The  
**ALTOSAX**  
and  
Clarinet  
of  
**HENRY SMITH**  
**“BUSTER”**

Born: Ellis County (near Dallas), Texas, Aug. 26, 1904  
 Died: Aug. 10, 1991

*Introduction:*

An alto saxophone artist repudiated to be the main influence of Charlie 'Bird' Parker, could anyone be more suitable for a solography??

*History:*

Brother of pianist Boston Smith. Began playing piano and organ, then switched to clarinet in late teens. Began working in Voddie White trio (ca. 1922), began doubling on altosax. 'Gigged' with many bands in Dallas, then to Oklahoma City in 1925 as a member of the Blue Devils (then lead by trombonist Emir Coleman), remained to work under Walter Page's leadership. Remained with the Blue Devils until late 1933, then to Kansas City to join Bennie Moten-George E. Lee band. Worked briefly with Ira 'Buster' Moten (1935), then with Count Basie co-led 'the Barons of Rhythm'. Later led own band, left Kansas City late in 1936 to join Claude Hopkins (then in Iowa). Returned to work with Count Basie as staff arranger, worked briefly with Andy Kirk, then returned to Kansas City to lead own band. Worked with trumpeter Dee 'Prince' Stewart early in 1938, then from summer of 1938 led own band at 'The Antlers', Kansas City (which included Charlie Parker). Left Kansas City in September 1938, moved to New York, worked as an arranger for Gene Krupa and Hot Lips Page, also extensive 'gigging' on alto and clarinet. Led own band in Virginia for a while in 1939, then worked in New York with Don Redman, Eddie Durham, Snub Mosley, etc. Returned to Kansas City in 1942, formed own band which played long residency at Club Shangrila. Later lead own band in Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas – in 1959 his band recorded an LP at Forth Worth, Texas (ref. John Chilton).

## HENRY "BUSTER SMITH" SOLOGRAPHY

**WALTER PAGE'S BLUE DEVILS****Kansas City, Nov. 10, 1929**

Hot Lips Page, James Simpson (tp), Dan Minor (tb), Buster Smith (cl, as), Ted Manning (as), Reuben Roddy (ts), Charlie Washington (p), Reuben Lynch or Thomas Owens (g), Walter Page (tu-612, b-613, dir), Alvin Burroughs (dm), Jimmie Rushing (vo-612).

Two titles were recorded for Vocalion, no altosax on 612 "Blue Devil Blues" but:

613 Squabblin' Possibly soli 22 and 8 bars. (F)

These pretty staccato but competent altosax soli seem to be played by the same man, although the brief one at the end seems more relaxed than the first one. Impossible to know for sure whether they are played by HBS or not.

**DON REDMAN & HIS ORCHESTRA****NYC. May 18, 1939**

Tommy Stevenson, Robert Williams, Sidney DeParis (tp), Quentin Jackson (tb, vo-36964), Gene Simon (tb), Henry "Buster" Smith, Tapley Lewis (as), Don Redman (cl, sop, as, vo-36962,65, dir), Eddie Williams (ts, vo), Gene Sedic (ts), Nicholas Rodriguez (p), Bob Lessey (g), Bob Ysaguirre (b), Slick Jones (dm), Laurel Watson (vo-36962,63, The Three Little Maids (vo-ens-36962).

Four titles were recorded for Victor, one reported to have HBS:

36963-1 Igloo Possibly solo with orch 16 bars. (M)

This competent altosax solo in the beginning of "Igloo" has been reported to be played by HBS. It has a nice sound, but it is really not much to compare it with.

**PETE JOHNSON****& HIS BOOGIE WOOGIE BOYS****NYC. June 30, 1939**

Hot Lips Page (tp), Buster Smith (as), Pete Johnson (p), Lawrence Lucie (g), Abe Bolar (b), Eddie Dougherty (dm), Joe Turner (vo).

Four titles were recorded for Vocalion: Classics 656.

25023-1 Cherry Red Obligato parts. Solo 8 bars. (SM)

25024-1 Baby, Look At You Solo 24 bars. (FM)

no mx Jump For Joy Obligato parts. Solo 24 bars. (F)

25025-1 Lovin' Mama Blues Obligato parts. (S)

After encountering this session, I understand Bird's comments about his debt to Buster Smith! Fine altosax soloing here! Particularly the eight bars on "Cherry ..." has very high class. Note that this is the only vintage session where we can be 100% sure that the altosax soli are played by HBS, thus it can be used a measure stick towards the other not so sure cases.

**DON REDMAN & HIS ORCHESTRA****NYC. Jan. 17, 1940**

Tommy Stevenson, Otis Johnson, Al Killian (tp), Claude Jones, Gene Simon (tb), Don Redman (cl, as, vo, dir), Scoville Brown, Tapley Lewis, Edward Inge (as), Robert Carroll (ts), Nicholas Rodriguez (p), Bob Lessey (g), Bob Ysaguirre (b), Manzie Johnson (dm), Bootsie Garrison (vo). Note: Quote Brian Rust: "This personnel is from the Victor files, Mr. Johnny Simmen claims Buster Smith is present and plays the alto saxophone solo on the first side".

Four titles were recorded for Bluebird, all have altosax, possibly one has HBS:

45946 You Ain't Nowhere Intro 8 bars. Solo with vocal comments 16 bars. Solo 8 bars. (M)

It is not too difficult to understand the claim, very good intro and later soli, pure tone and active improvisation in a style somewhat reminding of Tab Smith, but can anybody give more substantial information about this?

**HOT LIPS PAGE****NYC. Jan. 23, 1940**

Hot Lips Page (tp, vo-67091,67100), Buster Smith (cl, as), Jimmy Powell (as), Sammy Davis (ts), Jimmy Reynolds (p), Abe Bolar (b), Ed McConney (dm), Romaine Jackson (vo-67093), The Harlem Highlanders (vo-ens-67092).

Six titles were recorded for Decca, three have altosax soli, who?:

67092-A I Ain't Got Nobody Solo 32 bars. (FM)

67094-A Gone With The Gin Solo 14 bars. (F)

67099-A Walk It To Me Solo 8 bars. (M)

Three competent but not remarkable altosax soli, best is "... The Gin", most likely played by the same man, but how can we be sure that it is HBS and not Jimmy Powell?

**EDDIE DURHAM & HIS BAND** **NYC. Nov. 11, 1940**

Joe Keyes (tp), Willard Brown, Henry "Buster" Smith (as), Lem Johnson (ts, vo-68338), Conrad Frederick (p), Eddie Durham (g, arr), Averil Pollard (b), Arthur Herbert (dm).

Four titles were recorded for Decca, two have altosax:

|         |              |   |
|---------|--------------|---|
| 68337-A | Moten Swing  | Solo with ens 16 bars.<br>Soli 32 and 8 bars. (M) |
| 68339-A | Magic Carpet | Soli/straight 4 and 8 bars. (FM)                  |

"Moten ..." has quite a lot of altosax of very good quality (although a notable fluff at the beginning of the longest solo!). "Magic ..." has slight interest. All seem to be played by the same man, can we be sure it is HBS?

**BON BON & HIS BUDDIES** **NYC. July 23, 1941**

Joe Thomas (tp), Eddie Durham (tb, g), Buster Smith (cl), Jackie Fields (as), Jimmy Phipps (p), Al Hall (b), Jack Parker (dm), "Bon Bon" Funnell (vo).

Four titles were recorded for Decca, two have clarinet:

|         |                                |   |
|---------|--------------------------------|---|
| 69559-A | Sweet Mama, Papa's Getting Mad | Solo with ens 8 bars. Obbligato<br>28 and 8 bars. Solo 4 bars. (SM) |
| 69560-A | All That Meat And No Potatoes  | Obbligato 8 bars. (M)   |

The background playing on "... Mad" is very nice!

**BOONE'S JUMPING JACKS** **NYC. Oct. 16, 1941**

Chester Boone (tp, vo), Buster Smith (cl), George Johnson (as), Chauncey Graham (ts), Lloyd Phillips (p), Vernon King (b), Shadrack Anderson (dm), (vo-ensemble-69827).

Four titles were recorded for Decca, one has clarinet:

|         |            |                         |
|---------|------------|-------------------------|
| 69828-A | I'm For It | Obbligato 32 bars. (FM) |
|---------|------------|-------------------------|

Also here good background playing.

**SNUB MOSLEY** **NYC. Feb. 11, 1942**

Courtney Williams (tp), Snub Mosley (slide-sax, vo-70309), Buster Smith (as, arr), Hank Duncan (p), John Brown (b), Joe Smith (dm), Hazel Diaz (vo-70306, 07).

Four titles were recorded for Decca, two have altosax:

|         |                           |                  |
|---------|---------------------------|------------------|
| 70306-A | 'Deed I Do                | Breaks. (M)      |
| 70309-A | Between You And The Devil | Solo 8 bars. (M) |

The solo on "... The Devil" is pretty sweet and quite modest.

**BUSTER SMITH** **Dallas, ca. 1951**

Buster Smith (as), others unknown.

Two titles were recorded for Torch 6900, not available.

**BUSTER SMITH & HIS ORCHESTRA** **possibly Memphis, 1953**

Buster Smith (as), others unknown.

Two titles were recorded for Meteor 5010, not available.

**BUSTER SMITH & HIS ORCHESTRA** **Forth Worth, Texas, June 17, 1959**

Charles Gillum (tp), Clinton Smith (tb), Buster Smith (as, g-3567), Eddie Cadell (ts), Leroy Cooper (bar), Herman Flowers (p-except 3567), Boston Smith (p-3567), Josea Smith (b), Robert Cobbs (dm).

Seven titles were recorded for Atlantic, issued as "The Legendary Buster Smith" (note also a guitar solo on "Late Late", 24 bars to 24 bars with (p)):

|      |                       |                                  |
|------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| 3561 | September Song        | Soli 32 and 16 bars to coda. (S) |
| 3562 | Kansas City Riff      | No solo. (M)                     |
| 3563 | E Flat Boogie         | Solo 12 bars. (M)                |
| 3564 | King Alcohol          | Solo 24 bars. (S)                |
| 3565 | Organ Grinder's Swing | Solo 24 bars. (M)                |
| 3566 | Buster's Tune         | Solo 24 bars. (M)                |

3567 Late Late

Solo 24 bars. (S)

This session is of course very important, since it is the only example of HBS really having the opportunity to show what he was good for, and his age is only 55, so not yet an old man. First, the session as a whole is somewhat disappointing because it is not as expected a Kansas City swing session with guitar as a fundamental tool in the bottom, this rhythm section is heavy and unswinging. Second, the blowing co-musicians are only on an ordinary level. Now what about HBS himself? Yes and no. I find him most pleasant and quite pretty on the ballad "... Song", far from KC music, and the slow blues on "... Alcohol" and "... Late" is also well worth noticing. However, when taking the medium blues as "... Tune", "... Boogie" and "... Swing", there is not much more than an almost amateurish attempt to sound like Bird. HBS had everything to win by writing the story of his father-son relationship to Bird. Quoting Don Gazzaway's LP liner notes: "The extent of Buster's influence during Bird's formative years in Kansas City can only be guessed at, but he is known to have said, "Buster was the guy I really dug". Indicative of their affectionate relationship is Buster's comment on Parker, "He called me his 'musical dad' and I called him my boy"". I would definitely like to give Buster Smith a key role in the development of modern jazz, but musical evidence seems to be lacking. The highlight on this session is paradoxically his groovy guitar playing!!

No further recording sessions.

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