

The  
**TRUMPET**  
of  
**DONALD CLAYBORN  
SLEET  
“DON”**

Born: Fort Wayne, Indiana, Nov. 27, 1938  
Died: Hollywood, Dec. 31, 1986

*Introduction:*

Don Sleet is my most recent solography target. After listening to his recordings with Lenny McBrowne, I realized that here we had another fine white trumpeter, almost unknown. Good reason to change that.

*History:*

Moved with his family to San Diego, California when he was 10. His father headed a school system music department, and Don started studying with him at the age of nine, took piano lessons for four years, continued on trumpet in San Diego, and at 16, in Hollywood, had ex-Kenton trumpeter Buddy Childers as his mentor for a year. In addition he investigated harmony and theory over a five-year period with Daniel Lewis in San Diego and Shorty Rogers in Los Angeles.

Don's playing experience includes five big-band years, divided between the San Diego State College Jazz Band and Terry Gibbs, three years with the San Diego Symphony; and his own small group for three years. His band won the Easter Week Jazz Festival at the Lighthouse in Hermosa Beach on successive years (1956-57); he later played at Jazz City in Los Angeles opposite such stars as Billie Holiday and Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, and in the summer of 1960, was with Howard Rumsey's Lighthouse All Stars (ref. liner notes to LP: "All Members"). Played with Shelly Manne in the 1960s, recording session in 1964. In later years, fellow musicians said Don Sleet had 'personal problems', and that his illness kept him out of the music mainstream. He died from cancer in the lymph system.

*Personal comments:*

My heartfelt gratitude to David Sleet (younger brother) who supplied me with material for this solography.

## DON SLEET SOLOGRAPHY

**LENNIE McBROWNE & THE FOUR SOULS****LA. Jan. 2, 1960**

Don Sleet (tp), Dan Jackson (ts, arr), Terry Trotter (p), Herbie Lewis (b), Lennie McBrowne (dm), Elmo Hope (arr).

Seven titles were recorded for Pacific Jazz:

Soul Sisters	Soli 44, 6 and 6 bars. (M)
Invitation	In ens only. (SM)
Dearly Beloved	Soli 32 and 8 bars. (FM)
Lazinka's Tune	Solo 32 bars. (M)
Cerise	Solo 10 bars. (S)
I Married An Angel	Solo/straight 16 and 8 bars. (S)
McBrowne's Galaxy	In ens only. (FM)

My first encounter with Don Sleet's trumpet happened almost by coincidence. Looking for good but little known tenorsax players, I stumbled upon the excellent group led by Lennie McBrowne and Dan Jackson (more than just good!), but there was also a remarkable trumpet player! Confident with a beautiful open sound he played a series of high quality soli, the style more like the best of modern black contemporaries than typical white West Coast. The three items in (fast) medium tempo are all highly noteworthy, and the slow "Cerise" is so delicate and intense!

**GLORIA SMYTH VOCAL WITH****LENNIE McBROWNE & THE FOUR SOULS****LA. March 21, 1960**

Personnel as above.

Three titles were recorded for World Pacific, issued as "Like Soul!":

It Don't Mean A Thing	Obbligato parts (mute). (M)
Runnin' Wild	Solo 32 bars. (F)
Sometimes I'm Happy	Solo 32 bars. (M)

Two very fine trumpet soli on this vocal session, and on "... wild" DS shows he has no problems with upper tempi.

**LENNIE McBROWNE & THE FOUR SOULS****LA. Oct. 13, 1960**

Don Sleet (tp), Dan Jackson (ts), Terry Trotter (p), Jimmy Bond (b), Lennie McBrowne (dm).

Seven titles were recorded for Riverside (DS not present on an eight title "Tryin' And Cryin'"), issued as "Eastern Lights":

Saudi	Solo 24 bars. (M)
No Consideration	Solo 48 bars. (M)
I Don't Know The Melody	Solo 50 bars. (F)
Like Someone In Love	Solo 64 bars. (SM)
Eastern Lights	Solo 44 bars. (M)
Even Dozen	Solo 24 bars. (M)
Chicago Preferred	Solo 36 bars. (FM)

The very good impression from the first session is enforced here, all items have excellent trumpet soli, and in fact this amazing and highly competent modern group is not much known, probably because of the far West Coast and Riverside recording not well distributed. DS has no problem with the upper tempi, as evident in "... The Melody". The medium titles have him swinging lightly, with a strong tone he is not afraid of letting fly high, often not needing to fill in with unnecessary rapid phrases as so many do when they are out of ideas, but when he explodes, no lack of technique. Finally, "Like Someone ...", a brilliant, long trumpet solo with great conviction, enough to motivate for a solography, usually people who play like this have a great name in jazz history!

**DON SLEET QUINTET****NYC. March 16, 1961**

Don Sleet (tp), Jimmy Heath (ts-except "... Company"), Wynton Kelly (p), Ron Carter (b), Jimmy Cobb (dm).

Seven titles were recorded for Jazzland, issued as "All Members":

Brooklyn Bridge	Solo 3 choruses of 32 bars. (F)
Secret Love	Straight 48 bars. Solo 96 bars to coda. (M)
Softly As In A Morning Sunrise	Straight 16+8 bars, (ts) on bridge. Solo 32 bars. Straight 16+8 bars, (ts) on bridge. (FM)
Fast Company	Straight 2 to solo 8 choruses of 12 bars. 6 choruses 8/8 with (dm). Straight 24 bars to long coda. (F)
But Beautiful	In ens 32 bars to solo 32 bars. In ens 8 bars to coda. (S)
All Members	Solo 5 choruses of 12 bars. (FM)
The Hearing	In ens 32 bars to solo 64 bars. In ens 32 bars. (M)

This session is the zenith of Don Sleet's musical career, and also the beginning of the downfall. To be a white young man, only 22 years old, and then be called to record with a group of the very best black musicians around, what an adventure! It should have resulted in new opportunities, international renown, because the session is very successful, and the trumpet playing is gorgeous! DS seems to feel completely at home in the studio, it is obvious that his inspiration also comes from black music, even Miles can be felt sometimes. He alternates with great ease between sections of moderate, pensive phrasing and explosive power exhibitions. Although there are some occasional less-than-perfect details, they do not matter at all, just tell us that this is a young man who hold nothing back but gives everything he has got. He obviously enjoys the uptempo, and "Brooklyn ..." and "... Company" are thrilling examples of his technical competence. However, although he knows his horn very well, the fact that he has his own individual voice is what is so fascinating. It is not necessary to go into details about all these tracks, because you will buy and listen to them on CD anyway. Sometimes one recording session is enough to make a jazz artist legendary, this is one of them.

#### **SHELLY MANNE**

#### **HIS MEN & ORCHESTRA**

**LA. July 28 & Aug. 3/4/6, 1964**

Don Sleet (tp), Charlie Kennedy (as), Russ Freeman (p), Monte Budwig (b), Shelly Manne (dm), supported by: Conte Candoli, Al Porcino, Ray Triscari, Jimmy Zito (tp), Mike Barone, Bob Edmondson, Frank Rosolino (tb), James Decker, Richard Perissi (frh), John Bambridge (tu), Justin Gordon, Paul Horn (reeds), Jack Nimitz (bar), Jack Sheldon, Irene Kral (vo).

Thirteen titles were recorded for Capitol, seven have trumpet soli, all by DS:

52540	With A Little Bit Of Luck	Solo 32 bars (open). (FM)
52541	I've Grown Accustomed To Her Face	Solo with orch 16, 4 and 2 bars (open). (S)
52561	Wouldn't It Be Lovely?	Obbligato parts (mute) (vo-IK). (S)
52592	Why Can't The English?	Soli 28 and 4 bars (open). (FM)
52600	You Did It	Straight 8 bars (mute) Solo 16 bars (mute). (M)
52601	I'm Just An Ordinary Man	Obbligato parts (open) (vo-JS). (S)
52607	Get Me To The Church On Time	Solo 32 bars (mute). (F)

The discography personnel listings are somewhat misleading, indicating that this is a bigband session. In fact, a quintet including DS forms the core of the session with an excellent backup orchestra (look at the personnel!) and exciting vocal contributions on several items. The DS highlights here are his open solo on "... Luck" and by all means his strong muted playing on "... Did It" and "... On Time". We can only regret that this is the last we ever will hear from Don Sleet, a great trumpeter.

At this point of time Don Sleet is only 26 years old (same as Clifford Brown when he was struck by tragedy), and we can only wonder and be sorry that this great trumpet talent did not make it.

No further recording sessions.