

The

**TENORSAX**

of

**ELMER WILLIAMS**  
**“TONE”**

Solographer: Jan Evensmo  
Last update: July 9, 2015, Nov. 30, 2021

Born: Red Bank, New Jersey, 1905  
Died: Red Bank, New Jersey, June 1962

*Introduction:*

Elmer Williams was one of the early tenorsax players with personality and good qualities, known primarily for his works with Chick Webb, so definitely deserving to be remembered. He was included in my Jazz Solography Series Vol. 7.

*History:*

With Claude Hopkins (1926-27), then joined Chick Webb. Worked mainly with Chick Webb until 1934 (briefly with McKinney's Cotton Pickers in summer of 1931). EW continues to work with Chick Webb until Winter/Spring 1936. Regularly with Fletcher Henderson from 1936 until 1939. Joined Horace Henderson in June 1939. With Ella Fitzgerald in 1941, subsequently with Lucky Millinder (1944-45), Claude Hopkins (1946), etc. Toured with Herbert 'Kat' Cowens in summer of 1950, later in the 1950s worked in Milan, Italy, with tenorist Freddy Mitchell's band. In later life he suffered from diabetes; eventually he had both legs amputated, but continued to play 'gigs' in a wheelchair (ref. John Chilton).

## ELMER WILLIAMS SOLOGRAPHY

**CHICK WEBB AND HIS ORCHESTRA** **NYC. ca. March 1929**

Personnel includes Ward Pinkett (tp), Bennie Morton (tb), Elmer Williams (ts), John Truehart (g), Chick Webb (dm).

Paramount short "After Seben" set in a Harlem night club during a dance contest with music by Chick Webb, three titles, "Sweet Sue", "Tiger Rag" and "I Ain't Got Nobody", EW can be heard and seen in ensemble but no tenorsax soli.

**THE JUNGLE BAND** **NYC. June 14, 1929**

Ward Pinkett (tp, vo), Edwin Swayzee (tp), Robert Horton or William "Slats" Paris (tb), Hilton Jefferson, Joe Garland (cl, as), Elmer Williams (cl, ts), Don Kirkpatrick (p), John Trueheart (g, bjo), Elmer James (tu), Chick Webb (dm).

One title was recorded for Brunswick:

E-30039-A Dog Bottom Solo 14 bars. (F)

**NYC. June 27, 1929**

Same personnel. One title was recorded, no EW.

At this point in jazz history, the words "tenor saxophone" was almost synonymous with Coleman Hawkins and vice versa. It is therefore both correct and fruitful to try to obtain a more balanced point of view, at least to try to see if such exists. Elmer Williams is in my opinion a proof of the fact that several other musicians were creating good music on the instrument, perhaps even challenging the master. "Dog Bottom" is running in a fast tempo and is not an easy vehicle. Just the same, the tenorsax solo is a fine piece of work. The sound is strong and firm, somewhat Hawkins-like but with personal overtones which make Williams easy to identify. The technique is surprisingly well developed, and some of the passages are deftly executed. The recording quality is not quite satisfactory, but the preserved result can be considered quite interesting.

**CHICK WEBB AND HIS ORCHESTRA** **NYC. March 30, 1931**

Shelton Hemphill, Louis Hunt (tp), Louis Bacon (tp, vo), Jimmy Harrison (tb), Benny Carter (cl, as, arr), Hilton Jefferson (cl, as), Elmer Williams (cl, ts), Don Kirkpatrick (p), John Trueheart (bjo, g), Elmer James (b, tu), Chick Webb (dm, dir).

Three titles were recorded for Vocalion, all have EW:

E-36432 Heebie Jeebies Solo 18 bars. (FM)

E-36433-A Blues In My Heart Solo 16 bars. (M)

E-36434 Soft And Sweet Solo 4 bars. Several brief breaks. (M)

The best item on this session is "Heebie Jeebies". Here we can study his style closely, and we note how successfully he alternates between rather simple figures and quick, flowing runs. His fingering technique was in fact well developed, this can also be heard clearly on several occasions in "Soft ...", where it is used effectively in the arrangement. His sound is personal, perhaps somewhat edgy, but quite attractive and not unlike that heard several years later from Herschal Evans. "... Heart" however is somewhat disappointing, it is rather straight and pompous.

**BILLY BANKS AND HIS ORCHESTRA** **NYC. May 10, 1932**

Possibly Louis Bacon (tp), (as), (as), probably Elmer Williams (ts), (p), (g), (b), (dm), Billy Banks (vo).

Three titles were recorded for Victor:

72560-1 The Scat Song Soli 4, 4 and 4 bars. (FM)

72561-1 Mighty Sweet Solo 6 bars. (FM)

72562-1 Minne The Moocher's Wedding Day Brief break. (M)

In the old issue of the 1917-1934 solography, I write: Brief soli of uncertain origin but Joe Garland seems to be a good suggestion. Note: Gunther Schuller states in his excellent book *The Swing Era* that these are Coleman Hawkins items and also "my ears tell me in addition to Hawkins there is definitely present Henry "Red" Allen, Fats Waller, Al Morgan, Zutty Singleton and probably Benny Carter

(as alto and arranger)". After repeated listening I cannot find any evidence for this statement". However, Norwegian jazz researchers Arne Bryn and Ola Rønnow argue that this have to be EW, comparing "The Scat Song" with Louis Armstrong's "Hobo, You Can't Ride This Train" (below) and Chick Webb's "Heebie Jeebies" (above). The trumpeter sounds like Bacon, and possibly this is accompanying band is a group from the Chick Webb orchestra?

**LOUIS ARMSTRONG  
AND HIS ORCHESTRA**

**Camden, NJ. Dec. 8, 1932**

Louis Armstrong (tp, vo), Louis Bacon, Louis Hunt, Billy Hicks (tp), Charlie Green (tb), Pete Clarke (cl, as), Edgar Sampson (as, vln), Elmer Williams (ts), Don KirkPatrick (p), John Trueheart (g), Elmer James (b, tu), Chick Webb (dm), Mezz Mezzrow (bells-74821).

Four titles were recorded for Victor, three have EW:

74820-1	That's My Home	Soli 3 and 2 bars. (SM)
74820-2	That's My Home	As above. (SM)
74821-1	Hobo, You Can't Ride This Train	Solo 16 bars. (FM)
74821-2	Hobo, You Can't Ride This Train	As above. (FM)
74823-1	You'll Wish You'd Never Been Born	Solo 16 bars. (F)
74823-2	You'll Wish You'd Never Been Born	As above. (F)

With Louis' inspiring comments, EW produces some attractive soli on this date. "You'll Wish ..." is a particularly good example, in a fast tempo the solo swings easily and is put together with musical taste. Note for example the opening phrase on take 1. Also "Hobo ..." is important, while the two takes of "... Home" have soli which are too brief to be interesting.

**CHICK WEBB'S SAVOY ORCHESTRA**

**NYC. Dec. 20, 1933**

Mario Bauza, Reunald Jones (tp), Taft Jordan (tp, vo), Sandy Williams (tb), Pete Clarke (as), Edgar Sampson (as, arr), Elmer Williams (ts), Joe Steele (p), John Trueheart (bjo, g), John Kirby (b), Chick Webb (dm, ldr).

Two titles were recorded for Columbia, both have EW:

152658-1	On The Sunny Side Of The Street	Solo 2 bars. (SM)
152659-2/4	Darktown Strutters' Ball	Solo 18 bars. (F)

**NYC. Jan. 15, 1934**

Same personnel. Two titles were recorded, one has EW:

152687-2	Let's Get Together	Solo 8 bars. (FM)
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The attention is of course heavily concentrated upon "Darktown ...", which has two takes. Heard separately they are very fine soli, forceful and mature with an easy swing and a developed technique, although the sound may perhaps seem a little rusty. However, a comparison shows the two version to be rather similar, and this is of course a disappointment. I do not feel in a position to draw any conclusions from it. "... Together" is good but not particularly noteworthy. In fact, it is the brief break on "... Sunny Side ..." which really deserves attention. This shows a glimpse of a very fine musician, having a good portion of musical inventiveness and at the same time real authority and self assurance. Postscript of Nov. 30, 2021: In fact, the so-called take 2 of "Darktown ..." on CBS LP, and the take 4 (in the wax) on British Columbia 78 are, as pointed out by Charles Iselin, identical. Probably -2 is the original take number, while -4 is a dubbing sent to England (such things have happened before).

**CHICK WEBB'S SAVOY ORCHESTRA**

**NYC. May 9, 1934**

Personnel as Dec. 20, 1933 + Chuck Richards (vo-152734).

Three titles were recorded for Columbia, all have EW:

152733-2	I Can't Dance	Solo 8 bars. (FM)
152734-2	Imagination	Part of intro 2 bars. (SM)
152735-4	Why Should I Beg For Love?	Solo 4 bars. (SM)

**NYC. May 18, 1934**

Same personnel. One title was recorded:

152740-2 Stomping At The Savoy Solo 8 bars. (FM)

Here the most prominent solo is to be found on "Why Should I ...". Brief but clever and elaborate and with a fine technique, it demonstrates EW's usefulness in the Webb Orchestra. In "... Savoy" and particularly in "Imagination" one notes his big, personal sound, almost like a baritone sax. "I Can't ..." is more ordinary.

**CHICK WEBB'S SAVOY ORCHESTRA NYC. July 6, 1934**

Personnel as Dec. 20, 1933 except Bobby Stark (tp) replaces R. Jones, Fernando Arbello (tb), Wayman Carver (ts, fl) added. Charles Linton (vo-152772).

Four titles were recorded for Okeh, three have EW:

152770-2 True Solo 16 bars. (M)

152771-2 Lonesome Moments Solo 16+8 bars, (cl) on bridge. (M)

152772-2 If It Ain't Love Solo 12 bars. (M)

Possibly this session may be considered as the best Williams did with Webb. His solo on "Lonesome ..." is definitely one of my favorites. To a "modern" ear the style may perhaps at first seem archaic, but repeated listening reveals a colorful musician, whose musical capabilities were far from unimportant. Particularly the first eight bars of the above mentioned solo are truly excellent. Also "... Love" is a very fine example, where a technique not readily found in 1934 on the tenor sax is demonstrated. At last "True", a charming piece almost comparable to "Lonesome Moments".

**ETHEL WATERS ACCOMPANIED BY NYC. Sept. 5, 1934**

Taft Jordan (tp), Sandy Williams (tb), Edgar Sampson (as, vln), Elmer Williams (ts), unknown (vln), Joe Steele (p), John Trueheart (g), John Kirby (b).

Three titles were recorded for Decca, two have EW:

38549-A I Ain't Gonna Sin No More Solo 2 bars. (M)

38550-A Trade Mark Solo 4 bars. (SM)

Both items are too brief to make any lasting impression, but in "Trade ..." his personal style is presented with a good sound.

**CHICK WEBB AND HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. Sept. 10, 1934**

Mario Bauza, Bobby Stark (tp), Taft Jordan (tp, vo), Sandy Williams, Claude Jones (tb), Pete Clarke (cl, as), Edgar Sampson (as, arr), Wayman Carver (fl, ts), Elmer Williams (ts), Joe Steele (p), John Trueheart (bjo, g), John Kirby (b, tu), Chick Webb (dm, ldr).

Four titles were recorded, two have EW:

38594-A On The Sunny Side Of The Street Solo 2 bars. (M)

38595-A Lona Intro. (S)

**NYC. Nov. 19, 1934**

Same personnel. Four titles were recorded, two have EW:

39140-A Don't Be That Way Solo 16+6 bars, (as) on bridge. (FM)

39141-A What A Shuffle Solo 8 bars. (FM)

The most prominent solo is "Don't Be ...", not particularly flashing but easily swinging in a typical and personal way. The solo on "... Shuffle" is rather ordinary, while the slow intro in an otherwise fast medium "Lona" is among the highlights of Williams' recordings.

**TAFT JORDAN AND THE MOB NYC. Feb. 21, 1935**

Taft Jordan (tp), Ward Silloway (tb), Johnny Mintz (cl), Elmer Williams (ts), Teddy Wilson (p), Bobby Johnson (g), John Kirby (b), Ed Dougherty (dm).

Two titles were recorded for Melotone, both have EW:

16906-2 Night Wind Solo 8 bars. (M)

16907-2 If The Moon Turns Green Solo 8 bars. (SM)

**NYC. Feb. 22, 1935**

Same. Two titles:

16914-2 Devil In The Moon Solo 8 bars. (M)

16915-2 Louisiana Fairy Tale Solo 8 bars. (M)

Note: The reported 16906-1 on Meritt LP 8 is in fact the usual take 2.

This is Elmer Williams' only small band appearance, but it does not quite live up to expectations. Something seems to be lacking, maybe he does not quite thrive in the easy and informal atmosphere of the session, with Wilson as the foremost exponent. All soli are also rather brief and do not give much opportunity to show off. This does not mean that he plays badly, "Devil ..." and particularly "If The Moon ..." are in fact quite nice. The two other are not quite as satisfactory, they seem to lack cohesiveness.

**CHICK WEBB AND HIS ORCHESTRA** **NYC. June 12, 1935**

Mario Bauza, Bobby Stark (tp), Taft Jordan (tp, vo), Claude Jones, Sandy Williams (tb), Pete Clark (as), Edgar Sampson (as, arr), Wayman Carver (fl, ts, arr), Elmer Williams (ts), Don Kirkpatrick (p), John Trueheart (g), John Kirby (b), Chick Webb (dm, ldr), Ella Fitzgerald (vo).

Four titles were recorded for Decca, three have EW:

39614-A	I'll Chase The Blues Away	Solo 8 bars. (M)
39615-A	Down Home Rag	Solo 8 bars. (FM)
39617-A	Love and Kisses	Solo 4 and 4 bars. (FM)

**NYC. Oct. 12, 1935**

Personnel as June 12, 1935, except Bill Thomas (b) replaces J. Kirby.

Five titles were recorded, three have EW:

60056-A	I'll Chase The Blues Away	Solo 8 bars. (FM)
60057-A	I May Be Wrong But I Think You're Wonderful	Duet with (tp) 16+8 bars, (tp) on bridge. (M)
60058-A	Facts And Figures	Solo 8 bars. (F)

The last recording sessions with Chick Webb do not contain anything sensational, and we must admit the fact that the solography of Elmer Williams has almost come to an end, although he still takes part in recording sessions during the coming years. Easiest to remember here is probably the duet on "I May Be Wrong ..." where Williams plays straight in his personal way with trumpet interweaving. The soli on the two versions of "I'll Chase ..." are also quite attractive, and note how different they are!

The exact date when Elmer Williams left the Webb orchestra is not known. However, he is certainly not present at the Decca session on April 7, 1936 as stated by Rust. The brief tenor sax solo on "When I Get Low I Get High" is definitely by Ted McRae. Neither is he present at the February 1936 session issued on Polydor. Also here McRae's presence is undisputable.

Elmer Williams left Chick Webb in Winter/Spring 1936 to join Fletcher Henderson. The decision turned out to be fatal from a soloist point of view. From being the tenor sax soloist in a famous orchestra, he now quickly was reduced to a sideman's sideman.

**FLETCHER HENDERSON  
AND HIS ORCHESTRA** **Chi. March 27, 1936**

Fletcher Henderson (p, arr, dir), Dick Vance (tp, arr), Joe Thomas, Roy Eldridge (tp), Fernando Arbello, Ed Cuffee (tb), Buster Bailey (cl, as), Scoops Carey (as), Elmer Williams, Chu Berry (ts), Horace Henderson (p, arr), Bob Lessey (g), John Kirby (b), Sid Catlett (dm).

Four titles were recorded for Vocalion, but no EW.

**Chi. April 9, 1936**

Personnel as March 27, except Omer Simeon (cl, as), Israel Crosby (b) replace S. Carey and J. Kirby.

Four titles were recorded for Victor, three have EW:

100360-1	I'm A Fool For Lovin' You	Solo 8 bars. (M)
100361-1	Moonrise On The Lowlands	Lead 6 and 6 bars. (M)
100362-1	I'll Always Be In Love With You	Solo 8 bars. (M)

**Chi. May 23, 1936**

Personnel as April 9, except Jerome Pasquall (cl, as) replaces O. Simeon. Ted Lewis (vo).

Four titles were recorded but no EW.



**Chi. July 13, 1938**

Same. Thirteen titles, three have EW:

You Go To My Head	Solo 4 bars. (M)
Music, Maestro, Please	Solo 4 bars. (SM)
Don't Wake Up My Heart	Solo 8 bars. (FM)

**Chi. July 20, 1938**

Same. Six titles, one has EW:

(SM) You Go To My Head	Solo 4 bars.
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This is a quite incredible discovery! Never did I believe I should be listening to one hour with "Smack" from Grand Terrace in Chicago!! Therefore I shall not complain by the fact that the dates are too late for the eternal Roy/Chu combination, even a few months too late for Frog. Also I shall not complain by the fact that this is a dance orchestra with Fletcher at the end of his career as a band leader, and that the music generally is simple and not very exciting. Because by its very existence it **is** very exciting and teaches us an important lesson about jazz of the late thirties, how dance music was a part of a jazzman's life. Finally, this is good dancemusic with fine soli interspersed. Concentrating upon tenorsax, there are two performers, and EW is by far the most prominent one. His few soli at the recording sessions are, as you will have read, rather uninteresting. Here, however, he has several contributions of very high quality. You should particularly note the delicious "Cathedral ..." and "... My Heart", as well as a fine "... Be That Way" reminding of Ted McRae. EW was certainly not as "terminated" as I believed before listening to this unique discovery!!

Regularly with Fletcher Henderson from 1936 until 1939. Joined Horace Henderson in June 1939.

**HORACE HENDERSON AND HIS ORCHESTRA Chi. Feb. 27, 1940**

Emmett Berry, Harry Jackson (tp), Ray Nance (tp, vln, vo), Edward Fant, Nat Atkins (tb), Dalbert Bright (cl, as), Willie Randall (as), Elmer Williams, Dave Young (ts), Horace Henderson (p, arr), Hurley Ramey (g), Jesse Simpkins (b), Oliver Coleman (dm), Fletcher Henderson (arr, dir), Viola Jefferson (vo).  
Four titles were recorded for Okeh, but no EW.

**Chi. May 8, 1940**

Same personnel. Five titles were recorded, two have EW:

3048-A You're Mine, You	Solo 3 bars. (SM)
3049-A Honeysuckle Rose	Solo 10 bars. (F)

**Chi. July 12, 1940**

Same, except Gail Brockman (tp), Mosey Gant (ts) replace Nance and Young.  
Three titles were recorded, one has EW:

3188-B Do-Re-Mi	Solo 8 bars. (FM)
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**Chi. Aug. 13, 1940**

Same as Feb. 27, 1940, except Joe McLewis (tb), Leroy Harris (g) replace Atkins, Ramey and Simpkins.  
Five titles were recorded, one has EW:

3271-A I Still Have My Dreams	Intro, soli 6, 6 and 6 bars, coda. (SM)
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These brief pieces demonstrate that Williams still solos competently. Particularly "... Dreams" is typical of his style.

With Ella Fitzgerald in 1941 and participates in a recording session in Los Angeles, July 31, 1941, but all tenorsax soli are by Ted McRae.

Subsequently with Lucky Millinder (1944-45). Participates in a **LUCKY MILLINDER** recording session in NYC. May 26, 1944, four titles but no tenorsax soli.

Worked with Lucky Millinder in 1944-45. Participates in the AFRS Jubilee Shows No. 113 - 116 and in a recording session with **LUCKY MILLINDER AND HIS ORCHESTRA** on June 22, 1945, two titles for Decca but no soli. Then a recording session with **BULL MOOSE JACKSON AND HIS BAND**, which in fact is the Lucky Millinder orchestra, Aug. 1945, four titles for Queen, but no EW soli.



With Claude Hopkins in 1946, but no recording sessions.

**LIL GREEN VOCAL ACC. BY**

**Chi. July 23, 1946**

Howard Callender, Alonzo Fox, Frederick Neely, Julius Brooks, Ben Stroud (tp), James Whitney, Henry Stratham, Stanford Grier (tb), Richard Fox, Richard Overton, Elmer Williams, Howard Robertson, Vince McCleary (reeds), Jimmy Nelson (p), Walter Johnson (b), Red Saunders, Morey Feld (dm).

Two titles were recorded for Victor, no tenorsax on "It's Bad With My Man And Me", but:

2522-1      Blow Top Blues      Intro 4 bars. (S)

Good oldfashioned intro, rarely to be heard these days!

**LIL GREEN VOCAL ACC. BY**

**Chi. July 31, 1946**

Howard Callender (tp, ldr), Richard Overton, Richard Fox, Elmer Williams (reeds), James Nelson (p), Walter Johnson (b), Albert Saunders (dm).

Four titles were recorded for Victor, no EW on "That Old Feeling" and "No Good Man" but:

2557      How Come You Do Me Like You Do?      Solo 16 bars. (M)

2559      Last Go Round Blues      Solo 12 bars. (S)

Expressive and oldfashioned, this music has got something missing in the modern developments, dig these soli!!

**NOBLE SISSLE & HIS ORCHESTRA**

**NYC. late 1947/early**

**1948**

Bigband personnel including Elmer "Tone" Williams, Gilbert "Gil" White (ts).

Featured in the film short "Bob Howard's House Party" (courtesy of Mark Cantor). Three titles, GW solos on two, EW on one:

(M)      Unidentified Tune      Solo 4 bars.

I enjoyed this very much, EW can be seen playing, and his style just like before. Four bars do not make jazz history, you might say, for me it is jazz archeology at its most exciting!

**same**

Same. Film "Murder With Music", same source as above, GW solos on one title, EW on three:

Running Around ?      Solo 12 bars. (FM)

Geeshee ?      Solo 16+8 bars, (tp) on bridge. (M)

Too Late Baby      Solo 16 bars. (M)

And there is more! Interesting and personal tenorsax playing from a bygone era, dig particularly "... Baby".

Toured with Herbert "Kat" Cowens in summer of 1950.

**IVORY JOE HUNTER**

**NYC. 1950-1953**

Personnel given for first session: Ludwig Joe Jordan, Ronald Jones (tp), Leo Williams (tb), Joe Evans (as), Budd Johnson, Elmer Williams (ts), Ivory Joe Hunter (p, vo), Harold Holmes (b), Chuck Walker (dm).

Large number of titles recorded for MGM on several sessions, many have been available, but no EW soli found yet.

Later in the fifties worked in Milan, Italy with Freddy Mitchell's band. In later life he suffered from diabetes, eventually he had both legs amputated but continued to play gigs in a wheelchair.

No further recording sessions.