

The
TENORSAX
of
JOHN W. RUSSELL
“JOHNNY”

Solographer: Jan Evensmo
Last update: May 14, 2012

Born: Charlotte, North Carolina, June 4, 1909
Died: NYC. July 26, 1991

Introduction:

Johnny Russell had a very personal tenorsax style, one of the most original voices of the 1930s. I was quite fascinated and his solography was part of Vol. 2 in my Jazz Solography Series (1975).

History:

Raised in New York, mother played the organ. Began studying violin at nine, taught by David Martin Sr. at the Martin Smith Music School. Began doubling on tenor sax. First professional work at 17 in Albany, N.Y., with drummer Jimmy Campbell's Band (on violin and tenor), played summer season in Asbury Park, then joined Earle Howard's Band at the Strand Danceland, New York (late summer 1926). Left Howard in late 1927 to join band led by trombonist Billy Kato, then worked in Harry "Father" White's Band at Nest Club, Lenox Club, etc., also gigged with the Cass Carr Orchestra. Rejoined Billy Kato in 1930 for residencies at Broadway Danceland and Savoy, worked in Charlie Matson Orchestra, then joined Benny Carter's Orchestra (replacing Chu Berry). With Benny Carter until joining Willie Bryant (1935-36), then to Europe with Bobby Martin's Band. After playing Paris (June 1937) the band did widespread touring in Europe. Joined Willie Lewis early in 1939 and remained in Europe with Lewis until September 1941, moving to Switzerland, playing last residency in Lisbon, Portugal. Returned to the US, played in Philadelphia in Garvin Bushell's Band (1942), then called up for service in the US Army. Led the 93rd Division Military Band, then became assistant leader of Russell Wooding's 115th AGF Band. Overseas service in France and Belgium with the 115th (then directed by Billy Graham). Demobilized in 1945, joined Cecil Scott at the Savoy Ballroom, worked with Eddie Cornelius before leaving music to work as a salesman in the liquor business. Continued to play freelance club engagements (ref. John Chilton: Who's Who of Jazz).

JOHNNY RUSSELL SOLOGRAPHY

BENNY CARTER AND HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. Oct. 16, 1933**

Eddie Mallory, Bill Dillard, Dick Clark (tp), J.C. Higginbotham, Fred Robinson, Keg Johnson (tb), Benny Carter (cl, as, dir), Wayman Carver (as, fl), Glyn Paque (as), Johnny Russell (ts), Teddy Wilson (p), Lawrence Lucie (g), Ernest Hill (b), Sid Catlett (dm).

Four titles were recorded, two have JR:

265160-1	Devil's Holiday	Solo 32 bars. (F)
265160-2	Devil's Holiday	As above. (F)
265162-2	Symphony in Riffs	Solo 16 bars. (FM)

Our first encounter with Johnny Russell through the Benny Carter Orchestra is definitely pleasant. We meet a tenorsaxophonist with a pronounced personality and musical talent. Already at this time his style is far developed, and it is impossible to mistake him for any of his contemporaries. His phrasing is similar to that of Coleman Hawkins, and shows the same lack of economy, they both overplay their instruments somewhat at this time of their musical careers. On the other hand, Russell is technically more than able to master his chosen style. His sense of melody is very good, and the sentimental flavor is absolutely charming. Both soli here are good examples of Russell's style even if they show that he still has not matured completely. Postscript: A second take of "... Holiday" is quite different from the original master and shows a well developed talent for improvisation.

MEZZ MEZZROW AND HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. Nov. 6, 1933**

Max Kaminsky, Freddy Goodman, Ben Gusick (tp), Floyd O'Brien (tb), Mezz Mezzrow (cl, as, arr), Benny Carter (tp, as, vo, arr), Johnny Russell (ts), Teddy Wilson (p), Clayton "Sunshine" Duerr (g), Pops Foster (b), Jack Maisel (dm).

Four titles were recorded for Brunswick, all have JR:

14272-A	Free Love	Soli 4 and 16 bars. (M)
14273-A	Dissonance	Solo 8 bars. (M)
14274-A	Swinging With Mezz	Solo 18 bars. (M)
14275-A	Love You're Not The One For Me	Soli 4 and 4 bars with orch. (M)

On this date Russell certainly has the opportunity to show how he likes to play in medium tempo. His soli differ somewhat in quality, best is "... Mezz", showing him to advantage in a really well constructed and original piece. "Love ..." and "... Love" are sensitive and pleasant without displaying greatness, while "Dissonance" is rather primitive and with minor technical defects.

WILLIE BRYANT AND HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. Jan. 4, 1935**

Robert Cheek, Richard Clark (tp), Edgar "Pudding Head" Battle (tp, vtb, arr), John Haughton, Robert Horton, George Matthews (tb), Glyn Paque (cl, as), Stanley Payne (as), Johnny Russell (ts), Teddy Wilson (p), Arnold Adams (g), Louis Thompson (b), Cozy Cole (dm).

Four titles were recorded for Victor, three have JR:

87265-1	Throwin' Stones At The Sun	Soli 4 and 4 bars. (M)
87266-1	It's Over Because We're Through	Solo 16+8 bars, tp on bridge. (SM)
87267-1	A Viper's Moan	Solo 8 bars. (M)

The first of five recording sessions, representing half of Russell's total output with Willy Bryant and his orchestra. He has developed considerably during the year since the Mezzrow session, and there are several good soli to be heard. Particularly one notes "It's Over ...", where he presents the theme in a very personal and sympathetic way. The phrasing is staccato, seemingly primitive, but on closer listening it reveals itself as very deliberate with a lot of fine melodic details. Also "... Sun" and "... Moan" contain brief but attractive soli.

WILLIE BRYANT AND HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. May 8, 1935**

Personnel as Jan. 4, 1935, but Eddie Durham (tb) replaces G. Matthews, Ben Webster (ts) and Benny Carter (tp, arr) added.

Four titles were recorded for Victor, three have JR:

89818-1	Long About Midnight	Solo 16 bars. (FM)
89819-2	The Sheik	Solo 16 bars (last (ts)-solo). (FM)
89820-1	Jerry The Junker	Solo 12 bars. (FM)

Three good soli in fast medium tempo, among which "Jerry ..." catches our attention. Inflamed by Bryant's shout, Russell makes the solo really swing. Something similar happens in "... Midnight", while "The Sheik", which is the weakest of the three, compensates by offering an interesting comparison with Ben Webster's style of the middle thirties.

WILLIE BRYANT AND HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. Aug. 1, 1935**

Personnel as above except Otis Johnson (tp), George Matthews (tb), Ram Ramirez (p) and Ernest Hill (b) replace Cheek, Durham, Wilson and Thompson. Four titles were recorded for Victor, but no JR.

PUTNEY DANDRIDGE AND HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. March 2, 1936**

Richard Clarke (tp), Johnny Russell (ts), Teddy Wilson (p), Arnold Adams (g), Ernest Hill (b), Cozy Cole (dm), Putney Dandridge (vo). Four titles were recorded for Vocalion, all have JR:

18741-1	Sweet Violets	Intro 8 bars. Solo 16 bars. Weak obbligato with (tp) 80 bars. (M)
18742-1	Dinner For One, Please James	Intro 4 bars. Solo 8 bars. Weak obbligato with (tp) 32 and 8 bars. (SM)
18743-1	A Beautiful Lady In Blue	Solo 16 bars. Weak obbligato with (tp) 64 and 32 bars. (FM)
18744-1	Honeysuckle Rose	Obbligato with (tp) 32, 32 and 16 bars. Duet with (tp) 16 bars. (M)

This is Russell's only smallband session, and it is a pity that he gets no chance to prove his talents. Mostly he is heard together with Clarke as a faint background accompaniment to Dandridge, and even if one perceives good music, there is little of importance. The three soli have an even, pleasant quality without reaching up to the standard of his best works.

WILLIE BRYANT AND HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. April 9, 1936**

Richard Clarke (tp), Jack Butler, Taft Jordan (tp, vo), John Haughton, George Matthews (tb), Glyn Paque, Stanley Payne (as), Charles Frazier (fl, ts), Johnny Russell (ts), Roger Ramirez (p), Arnold Adams (g), Ernest Hill (b), Cozy Cole (dm), Willie Bryant (vo, dir). Six titles were recorded for Bluebird, three have JR:

99973-1	All My Life	Solo 8 bars. (M)
99974-1	The Right Somebody To Love	Solo 8 bars. (FM)
99975-1	The Glory Of Love	Solo 8 bars. (M)

There is not much to be heard from Russell on this date except one really magnificent solo, brief as it is, on "All My Life". It is an extraordinarily sensitive and personal piece and, on occasions like this, one is reminded of the numerous musicians who deserved great acclaim but for different reasons never received it. "... Somebody ..." is also a pleasant construction, while "... Glory ..." is rather ordinary.

WILLIE BRYANT AND HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. June 3, 1936**

Personnel as April 9, 1936. Four titles were recorded for Bluebird, three have JR:

102003-1	Mary Had A Little Lamb	Solo 8 bars. (FM)
102004-1	I Like Bananas	Solo 16 bars. (FM)
102005-1	Cross Patch	Solo 16+8 bars, orch on bridge. (FM)

Three fine soli here, and particularly the relatively long ones on "... Bananas" and "Cross ..." offer excellent studies of Russell's typical staccato phrasing. Compared with his soloing on the first Bryant records he now sounds more experienced and mature, but the general style is the same as three years earlier.

BOBBY MARTIN**AND HIS ALL-STAR ORCHESTRA****Hilversum, April 1938**

Bobby Martin (tp, vo, dir), Bill Coleman, Jack Butler (tp), Billy Burns (tb), Glyn Paque (as, vo), Ernest Purce (as, arr), Johnny Russell (cl, ts, vo), Roger Ramirez (p), Bobby McRae (g), Ernest Hill (b), Kaiser Marshall (dm), Thelma Minor (vo). Five titles were recorded for Brunswick, two issued, they have JR:

Crazy Rhythm	Solo 8 bars. (F)
Let's Dance (Make Believe Ballroom)	In vocal trio 32 bars. Solo 6 bars. (FM)

Two brief soli. "... Dance" is quite successful while "... Rhythm" is rather mediocre.

BOBBY MARTIN AND HIS ALL-STAR ORCHESTRA**France, 1938**

Personnel probably similar to April 1938.

From the film "Alibi" with Erich von Stroheim, Albert Prejean, Louis Jouvet, Jany Holt and others.

Bobby Martin's band plays in a nightclub where important sequences of the film take part. It can be seen several times but only in brief glimpses with the exception of a feature number by Martin himself. Russell is seen playing at least once. There is a lot of music, but unfortunately on most occasions the superimposed dialogue is so strong that it is difficult to analyze musical details. The basic soundtrack would definitely have merited an LP-issue, but not the mixed one. Russell is heard playing at least four times. The soli are in (F)-tempo with duration 32, 8, 32 and 16 bars respectively, and the first one is "Devil's Holiday". He seems to be in good shape, but detailed comments cannot be given due to "foreground noise".

WILLIE LEWIS AND HIS NEGRO BAND**Zurich, June 19, 1941**

Willie Lewis (as, vo, dir), Louis Bacon, Henry Mason (tp), Billy Burns (tb), Ernst Hollerhagen (cl, as), Johnny Russell (cl, ts), Denis Chappelet (ts), Alfred Siegrist (p), Peter Angst (g), June Cole (b, vo), Tommy Benford (dm).

Ten titles recorded for Elite Special, seven have JR:

1886	What Will I Do	Solo 16+8 bars, (cl) on bridge. (FM)
1887	Happy Feet	Solo 16 bars. (FM)
1888	Baby Ain't You Satisfied	Solo 16+8 bars, (cl) on bridge. (FM)
1890	Roses of Picardy	Solo 16 bars. (FM)
1891	Les Bateliers De La Volga	Solo 12 bars. (FM)
1893	Swinging At "Clez Florence"	Solo 16 bars. (M)
1894	I Ain't Got Nobody	Soli 4, 4 and 8 bars. (FM)

It is very interesting to meet Russell again, apart from a brief encounter with Bobby Martin, 5 years have passed since his recordings with Willie Bryant. His style is mainly the same, only more experienced, his sentimental characteristics are more prominent and the phrasing is somewhat more legato. It is a pity that most of the tunes are taken at the same fast medium tempo, and that the orchestra is rather dance music oriented. It is therefore impossible to get a good composite picture of Russell's musical standard. There is little reason to single out any of the soli, except perhaps "What ...", which contains some particularly charming details.

WILLIE LEWIS PRESENTS:**Zurich, June 19, 1941**

Johnny Russell (ts), Alfred Siegrist (acc), Heyo Scholl (g), June Cole (b, vo), Tommy Benford (dm).

One title was recorded for Elite Special:

1896	Lady Be Good	Solo 32 bars. (FM)
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Russell presents the tune here, and he does not go deeply in his improvisation. However, the record is important as a study of his style. Note particularly his use of a consciously sentimental approach in the bridge, which must be said to be completely personal, whatever the listener's subjective feelings towards it may be. The author of this solography finds it very charming.

WILLIE LEWIS AND HIS NEGRO BAND**Zurich, June 27, 1941**

Personnel as July 1941.

Six titles were recorded for Elite Special, five have JR:

1920	Christmas Night In Harlem	Solo 8 bars. (FM)
1922	Christopher Columbus	Soli 16 and 8 bars. (FM)

1923	I've Found A New Baby	Solo with orch 32 bars. (FM)
1924	After You've Gone	Solo 42 bars. (FM)
1925	Body And Soul	Solo 32 bars. (SM)

Russell's last recording date with the Lewis orchestra contains an item of very high rating, "Body And Soul". He has recorded no other solo which may be compared to this one, most of his production is concentrated around the fast medium tempo, and after listening to "... Soul" we may regret this very much. The solo is very sensitive and well constructed with an originality inferior to none. His sentimentality is very marked, but in my opinion only in a most charming way, a memorable solo! In addition to this, "... Columbus" has two unusually quiet but attractive soli and "... Harlem" offers a nice little piece, while "... Baby" and "... Gone" belong among his more ordinary works.

WILLIE LEWIS PRESENTS:

Zurich, June 27, 1941

Henry Mason (tp-1927,1929), Johnny Russell (cl, ts), Alfred Siegrist (p-1927, 1929, acc-1926), Peter Angst (g), June Cole (b), Tommy Benford (dm), Florence Mason (vo-1927,1929).

Three titles:

1926	Margie	Tenorsax solo 32 bars. Clarinet solo 32 bars. (FM)
1927	Some Of These Days	Very weak clarinet obligato with (tp) 32 and 32 bars. Clarinet solo 16 bars. (FM)
1929	My Blue Heaven	Very weak clarinet obligato with 32 and 32 bars. Clarinet solo 32 bars. (FM)

This last session comes as a big surprise, presenting Russell as a clarinet soloist for the first and, to my knowledge, only time. The reason for the surprise is not only the instrument itself, but the use of it. Through three record sides he manifests himself as a very interesting clarinetist. His style is very personal, combining his sentimental tenorsax style with a swinging clarinet style, perhaps not brilliant like for instance Goodman, but intense and sensitive. Note in particular his beautiful "singing" obligato parts on "... Days". His phrasing is easily recognizable, and particularly the end of "Margie", the best of the soli, is completely revealing. The tempi on these sides are perhaps a little too fast, obviously he lacks practice, because his soli are definitely not without defects of a technical nature. However, they make at least this author wish for much more!

No further recording sessions.

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