

The
TROMBONE
of
FREDERIC H. JOHNSON
“KEG”

Born: Dallas, Texas, Nov. 19, 1908
 Died: Chicago, Illinois, Nov. 8, 1967

Introduction:

Keg Johnson, elder brother of tenorsax player Budd Johnson, was a personal and quite underrated trombone performer, certainly deserving a soloography.

History:

First lessons from his father, a cornetist. Later studied with Booker Pittman's mother (Mrs. Portia Pittman, daughter of Booker T. Washington). Did day work in local Studebaker car factory and 'gigged' on various instruments until specialising on trombone from 1927. Worked with the Blue Moon Chasers in Dallas and William Holloway's Merrymakers, then toured with Ben Smith's Blue Syncopators. With Terrence Holder's 12 Clouds of Joy in Dallas (early 1929), remained to play in Jesse Stone's band. Later played in George E. Lee's band, then worked with Grant Moore before settling in Chicago. Played in Eli Rice's orchestra (1930), briefly with Jabbo Smith, then with Cassino Simpson's band for 'Dixie on Parade' revue (1931). With Ralph Cooper's orchestra at Regal Theatre, Chicago, and Clarence Moore (early 1932), then short spell with Eddie Mallory before touring (and recording) with Louis Armstrong until July 1933. Moved to New York, played in Benny Carter's orchestra, then with Fletcher Henderson from January to December 1934. Joined Cab Calloway in January 1935 and remained with Cab until the summer of 1948 (except for brief absence early in 1940). With Lucky Millinder (1948-50) – short while with tenorist Gene Ammons in 1949. Worked in Eddie Wilcox band (1951), then moved to California. With Benny Carter (1952) and briefly with Duke Ellington (1953), then left full-time music to work as a house decorator. Continued to do regular 'gigs' (some on guitar) with various leaders including Sammy Franklin, tenorist Wardell Gray, and Harvey Brooks, etc. Moved back to New York in late 1950s, with Eddie Barefield band (late 1959), then with Gil Evans (1960), also 'depped' for Wilbur De Paris in summer of 1960. In 1961 joined Ray Charles' orchestra, remained in that band for six years, dying suddenly whilst on tour (ref. John Chilton: "Who's Who of Jazz").

KEG JOHNSON SOLOGRAPHY

LOUIS ARMSTRONG & HIS ORCHESTRA Chi. Jan. 26-28, 1933

Louis Armstrong (tp, vo), Zilner Randolph, Ellis Whitlock (tp), Keg Johnson (tb), Scoville Brown, George Oldham (cl, as), Budd Johnson (cl, ts), Teddy Wilson (p), Mike McKendrick (bjo, g), Bill Oldham (tu, b), Yank Porter (dm).

Twelve titles were recorded for Victor, five have KJ:

74895-1	High Society	Straight with orch 16 bars. (F)
75102-1	Some Sweet Day	Duet with (vo-LA) 16 bars. (M)
75103-1	Basin Street Blues	Soli 6 and 8 bars. (SM)
75105-1	Snowball	Solo 8 bars. (SM)
75106-1	Mahogany Hall Stomp	Solo 12 bars. (FM)

Chi. April 24 & 26, 1933

Similar. Eleven titles, four have KJ:

75422-1	Laughin' Louie	Solo 8 bars. (F)
75422-2	Laughin' Louie	As above. (F)
75424-1	Dusky Stevedore	Solo 8 bars. Break. (F)
75479-1	I Wonder Who	Solo 16 bars. (M)
75480-1	St. Louis Blues	Solo 12 bars. (FM)

Keg Johnson has one of the most important requirements for being remembered for his contributions to jazz music; he has his own sound and style and can easily be identified by his special vibrato. His soli here are not sensational, but KJ is a solid performer with his own things, as for instance in "... Stevedore". His most prominent solo on these sessions is "I Wonder ...". Note that his two soli on "Laughin' ...", although neither particularly successful, are quite different.

BENNY CARTER & HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. Oct. 16, 1933

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

Four titles were recorded for Columbia, one has KJ:

265160-1	Devil's Holiday	Solo 32 bars. (F)
265160-2	Devil's Holiday	As above. (F)

On "... Holiday", KJ gets a full chorus for himself (although JCH is present ...), but he starts out timidly and does not seem very confident in his soloing. However, again, the two takes are quite different, a plus for that!

FLETCHER HENDERSON & HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. March 6, 1934

Bigband personnel including Claude Jones, Keg Johnson (tb).

Four titles were recorded for Decca but no KJ.

HENRY ALLEN & HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. July 28, 1934

Henry Allen (tp, vo), Keg Johnson, Claude Jones?? (tb), Buster Bailey (cl), Hilton Jefferson (as), Horace Henderson (p), Lawrence Lucie (g), Elmer James (b), Walter Johnson (dm).

Four titles were recorded for Melotone, no trombone solo on 15474-1 "How's About Tomorrow Night" but:

15471-1	House In Harlem For Sale	Solo 8 bars. (SM)
15472-1	Pardon My Southern Accent	Soli 8 and 16 bars. (M)
15473-1	Rug Cutter's Swing	Solo 8 bars. (F)

Fine feeling on the lovely "House In Harlem ..." and swinging happily along on "... Accent", the opening of his longest solo is quite confident. Also "... Swing" indicates that KJ is maturing now.

FLETCHER HENDERSON & HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. Sept. 11&12, 1934

Henry Allen, Russell Smith, Irving Randolph (tp), Claude Jones, Keg Johnson (tb), Buster Bailey (cl), Hilton Jefferson, Russell Procope (as), Ben Webster (ts), Fletcher Henderson, Horace Henderson (p), Lawrence Lucie (g), Elmer James (b), Walter Johnson (dm).

Eight titles were recorded for Decca, two have KJ:

38598-A	Limehouse Blues	Soli 8 and 8 bars. (F)
38605-A	Memphis Blues	Solo 16 bars. (F)
38605-B	Memphis Blues	As above. (F)

NYC. Sept. 25, 1934

Same, plus Benny Carter (as). Four titles, two have KJ:

38724-A	Rug Cutter's Swing	Solo 8 bars (last (tb)-solo). (FM)
38728-A	Liza	Solo 16+8 bars, (as-RP) on bridge. (F)

Keg seems more confident now, and he seems to thrive in the fast tempi quite well. He can be well satisfied with his contributions here, his highlight is "Liza". Note also that the two takes of "Memphis ..." is different, showing that he is a true improviser within his limitations.

BENNY CARTER & HIS ORCHESTRA

NYC. Dec. 13, 1934

Personnel including Benny Morton, Keg Johnson (tb).
Four titles were recorded for Vocalion, but no KJ.

CAB CALLOWAY & HIS ORCHESTRA

1936 – 1937

Personnels including Keg Johnson (tb).
Numerous sessions for Brunswick/Variety/Vocalion/Okeh/Columbia, starting according to Brian Rust May 21, 1936, the following items have KJ:

NYC. May 21, 1936

Irving Randolph, Lammar Wright (tp), Keg Johnson, Claude Jones, DePriest Wheeler (tb), Garvin Bushell, Andy Brown (cl, as), Ben Webster, Walter Thomas (ts), Benny Paine (p), Morris White (g), Milt Hinton (b), LeRoy Maxey (dm), Cab Calloway (vo, ldr).

19304-1	Love Is The Reason	Soli 8 and 2 bars. (M)
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NYC. March 3, 1937

Same.

146-2	My Gal Mezzanine	Solo 6 bars. (FM)
156-1	Peckin'	Solo 8 bars. (SM)

NYC. Aug. 31, 1937

Same except Doc Cheatham (tp) added, Chu Berry (ts) replaces Webster.

620-2	Queen Isabella	Solo 8 bars. (FM)
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Leaving Smack for Cab does not seem to give any particular progress for KJ, he is not featured much, although his few contributions are good enough. He is taking the bridge on Randolph's solo on "... Isabella".

CHU BERRY & HIS STOMPY STEVEDORES

NYC. Sept. 10, 1937

Irving Randolph (tp), Keg Johnson (tb), Chu Berry (ts), Benny Payne (p, vo-624), Danny Barker (g), Milt Hinton (b), Leroy Maxey (dm).
Four titles were recorded for Variety, no trombone solo on 624-1 "My Secret Love Affair" but:

622-1	Chuberry Jam	Soli 4 and 16 bars. (FM)
623-1	Maelstrom	Soli 8, 4 and 4 bars. (M)
623-2	Maelstrom	As above. (M)
625-1	Ebb Tide	Solo 16+8 bars, (p) on bridge. (FM)

We grew up with this session, dynamic and heavy at the same time, and it still survives the passing of time. The cream of the Cab orchestra is present, and KJ is in his best shape. His soli on "... Jam" and "Maelstrom" are strong and confident, and "Ebb Tide" is so typical his style.

CAB CALLOWAY & HIS ORCHESTRA

1937 - 1938

Personnels similar to above, including Keg Johnson (tb).
List of KJ soli continues:

NYC. Sept. 22, 1937

Broadcast.

	Queen Isabella	Solo 8 bars. (FM)
		NYC. Dec. 10, 1937
694-1	A Minor Breakdown	Solo 8 bars. (F)
694-2	A Minor Breakdown	As above. (F)
		NYC. Feb. 16, 1938
	Broadcast, Bill Savory collection.	
	Unknown Title	Solo 8 bars. (M)
		NYC. Feb. 26, 1938
	Broadcast, Bill Savory collection.	
	Oo-Oo-Boom	Solo 4 bars (NC). (FM)
		Minneapolis, May 28, 1938
	Broadcast, two titles have KJ:	
	Don't Be That Way	Solo 16 bars. (M)
	I Never Knew I Could Love Anybody	Solo 32 bars. (F)
		NYC. Oct. 17, 1938
	Broadcast, Bill Savory collection.	
	Honeysuckle Rose	Breaks. (FM)
		NYC. Oct. 31, 1938
	Broadcast, Bill Savory collection.	
	Honeysuckle Rose	Breaks. (FM)

On "... Anybody" KJ takes one of his best and most colourful soli, dig this one! An interesting alternate broadcast version of "... Isabella" a few weeks after the studio recording.. Two takes of the exciting on "... Breakdown" are also well worth playing.

CAB CALLOWAY & HIS ORCHESTRA **1939-1942**

Personnels similar to below, including Keg Johnson (tb).

Meadowbrook, NJ. July 27, 1940

Broadcast, one title:

	Boog It	Solo 8 bars. (M)
		NYC. Aug. 5, 1940

Dizzy Gillespie, Jonah Jones, Lammar Wright (tp), Tyree Glenn (tb, vib), Quentin Jackson, Keg Johnson (tb), Jerry Blake, Hilton Jefferson, Andy Brown, Chu Berry, Walter Thomas (reeds), Bennie Payne (p), Danny Barker (g), Milt Hinton (b), Cozy Cole (dm), Cab Calloway (vo, ldr).
Recording session for Okeh:

27803-1	Boo-Wah Boo-Wah	Solo 8 bars. (FM)
27803-2	Boo-Wah Boo-Wah	As above. (FM)

NYC. Nov. 3, 1941

Same except Shad Collins, Russell Smith (tp), Ted McRae (ts) replace Gillespie and Berry.

31641-1	Tappin' Off	Solo 6 bars. (FM)
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Four years and a total of 30 bars, not exactly an evidence of confidence to Keg and his trombone art. To be honest, the soli are not that exciting either, but again and positively, comparing two takes as on "... Boo-Wah", his soli are always different.

CAB CALLOWAY & HIS ORCHESTRA **1942-1945**

Personnels including Keg Johnson, Tyree Glenn, Quentin Jackson (tb).

No KJ soli on the Columbia recording sessions, but there are some on the numerous AFRS programs, listed below:

Aug. 15, 1944

AFRS ONS 384:

	One O'Clock Jump	Soli 8 and 8 bars. (M)
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AFRS ONS 356 or 357:		Sept. 8, 1944
Magic In The Moonlight	Soli 4 and 4 bars. (M)	
One O'Clock Jump	Soli 8 and 8 bars. (M)	
AFRS "For The Record":		Sept. 18, 1944
Cruisin' With Cab	Solo 8 bars. (M)	
AFRS ONS 661 from Club Zanzibar: No (tb).		July 2, 1945
AFRS ONS 717 from Club Zanzibar:		July 8, 1945
Russian Lullaby	Probably solo 16 bars. (FM)	
AFRS ONS 733 or 773 from Club Zanzibar:		July 9, 1945
Zanzi	Probably solo 8 bars. (FM)	
AFRS ONS 703 from Club Zanzibar:		July 10, 1945
One O'Clock Jump	Soli 8 and 8 bars. (FM)	
Broadcast from Club Zanzibar:		July 13, 1945
One O'Clock Jump	Soli 8 and 8 bars. (FM)	
AFRS ONS 690 from Club Zanzibar:		July 15, 1945
Zanzi	Probably solo 8 bars. (FM)	
AFRS ONS 675:		July 16, 1945
Russian Lullaby	Probably solo 16 bars. (FM)	
<p>The recording qualities are not always the best for the soloists in these programs, but KJ is certainly on the stage, the "One O'Clock Jump"s are certainly his. Please volunteer information or viewpoints! Postscript of Sept. 2023: Note a few additions above!</p>		
IKE QUEBEC SWING SEVEN		NYC. July 17, 1945
Buck Clayton (tp), Keg Johnson (tb), Ike Quebec (ts), Ram Ramirez (p.) Tiny Grimes (g), Grachan Moncur (b), J. C. Heard (dm).		
Four titles were recorded for Blue Note, three have KJ:		
246-0	I Found A New Baby	Solo 32 bars. (F)
246-1	I Found A New Baby	As above. (F)
247-0	I Surrender Dear	Solo 8 bars. (S)
247-1	I Surrender Dear	As above. (S)
249-0	Cup-Mute Clayton	Solo 8 bars. (M)
<p>The session is a fine mixture of Cab Calloway musicians and other prominent artists of the day. KJ is still in good shape, does not seem to have lost any of his personality, even with so little soloing in the past years. He swings merrily on "... Baby", and the takes are quite different. On "... Dear" he takes the bridge in IQ's solo, and "growly" on the master take, not far from Bill Harris in the second" as DanM writes it.</p>		
CAB CALLOWAY & HIS ORCHESTRA		1945-1950
Personnels similar to before.		July 30, 1945
AFRS ONS 809:		
Russian Lullaby	Probably solo 16 bars. (FM)	

Sept. 7, 1945

AFRS ONS 727:

One O'Clock Jump

Soli 8 and 8 bars. (FM)

1946

From Swing House LP 15:

Airmail Special

Solo with orch 16 bars. (M)

IKE QUEBEC SWING SEVEN**NYC. Sept. 23, 1946**

Shad Collins (tp), Keg Johnson (tb), Ike Quebec (ts), Ram Ramirez (p), John Collins (g), Milt Hinton (b), J. C. Heard (dm).

Four titles were recorded for Blue Note, three have KJ:

292-1	The Masquerade Is Over	Solo 8 bars. (F)
292-4	The Masquerade Is Over	As above. (F)
292-5	The Masquerade Is Over	As above. (F)
293-2	Basically Blue	Solo 12 bars. (S)
295-2	Zig Billion	Solo 24 bars. (FM)
295-4	Zig Billion	As above. (FM)

The second Blue Note session also has some fine trombone by Keg. He plays the slow blues nicely on "... Blue", "with a mute, and full of slurs and thrills, could almost pass for Dickie Wells" as DanM puts it. "Zig ..." is also a blues but uptempo, and swinging with determination.

CAB CALLOWAY & HIS ORCHESTRA**Jan./Feb. 1947**

Bigband personnel including Keg Johnson (tb), Sam Taylor (ts).

Movie "Hi De Ho", one item has KJ:

Kabla

Straight 16 bars. (FM)

Postscript of Sept. 2023: KJ can be seen playing on the screen (YouTube!)!!

MILT HINTON**Detroit, Oct. 28, 1947**

Jonah Jones (tp), Keg Johnson (tb), Hilton Jefferson (as), Sam "The Man" Taylor (ts), Dave Rivera (p), Milt Hinton (b), Panama Francis (dm), Emile Jones (vo).

Eight titles were recorded for Staff, 608 "Humba Rhumba" / "Meditation Jefferese" not available, of the rest two have KJ:

Cle-Hops

Solo 16 bars. (M)

If You Believed In Me

Straight intro 8 bars. (S)

Typical and interesting solo on "Cle-Hops", while "... Me" has at most academic interest.

CAB CALLOWAY & HIS CAB JIVERS**NYC. May 5, 1949**

Jonah Jones (tp), Keg Johnson (tb), Bernie Peacock (as), Sam "The Man" Taylor (ts), Dave Rivera (p), Milt Hinton (b), Panama Francis (dm), Cab Calloway, Eugenie Baird (vo).

Four titles were recorded for Hi-Tone/Signature, no KJ on "Baby, It's Cold Outside" and "The Huckle-Buck" but:

2072	I've Got The World On A String	In ens coda. (S)
2073	Why Can't You Behave?	Brief obligato parts. (S)

Postscript of Feb. 27, 2020: The Signature record is in fact 15293, not 15243 as given in discographies. The latter is no Cab but Johnny Long, thus the two items above thought not being issued. However, it is quite awful ... KJ can be heard though on both sides, but academic interest only.

KJ does not appear again until 1960 with Ray Charles. During a five-year period he participates in several recording sessions, playing basstrombone, and any soli would be highly unlikely. Last recording session in 1964. One real jazz session in this period though:

BUDD JOHNSON QUINTET**Englewood Cliffs, NJ. Dec. 2, 1960**

Keg Johnson (tb), Budd Johnson (ts), Tommy Flanagan (p), George Duvivier (b), Charlie Persip (dm).

Seven titles were recorded for Swingville, issued as “Let’s Swing”, no KJ on 2749 “Serenade In Blue” but:

2743	Someone To Watch Over Me	Intro 4 bars. In ens (mute). (S)
2744	Uptown Manhattan	Solo 32 bars. (M)
2745	Downtown Manhattan	Solo 4 choruses of 12 bars. (M)
2746	Falling In Love With Love	Solo 32 bars. In ens. (FM)
2747	I Only Have Eyes For You	Break. Solo 36 bars. (FM)
2748	Blues By Budd	Duet with (ts) 24 bars. Solo 36 bars. Duet with (ts) 24 bars to coda. (S)

Fourteen years have passed since the last Keg Johnson solo, but we are pleasantly surprised, he has not lost much of his capabilities (Ray Charles obviously has kept him in shape), contributing professionally to a fine mainstream session. Four titles in medium tempo and up are performed to satisfaction, but what we will have as the last and important contribution from this original trombone player is the slow “Blues ...”, a beautiful piece of music with so much love between the two brothers, a fine memorial.

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