

The
PIANO
of
OSCAR DENNARD

Born: St. Petersburg, Florida, June 13, 1928
Died: Cairo, Egypt, 1960

Introduction:

I remember very well when my good friend, late John Bergh, almost half-a-century ago played for me some of the titles from March 1959 (now issued on CD). They made a profound impression, and we agreed that Oscar Dennard's genius must be one of the best kept secrets of modern jazz piano development. We will never know what he really could do, and what he could have been ...

History:

Attended Gibbs High School in St. Petersburg, Florida, later lived in Memphis, Tennessee and Des Moines. Very quickly developed a unique talent for music and mainly for piano and arrangement work. Had close association with bassist Jamil Nasser whom he met in Memphis in 1950, when the latter played with B. B. King. Moved to New York in 1954 and joined Lionel Hampton's orchestra, where he stayed until the beginning of 1958. During his time with Hampton, he was becoming a well regarded emerging talent on the piano and also displayed his fabulous talent for arranging. In 1958 Nasser convinced Dennard to leave Hampton and go overseas with trumpeter Idrees Sulieman, drummer Buster Smith and himself. The group started its tour in Paris in April 1958 at the Chat Qui Peche, then went to Tangier, Tunisia, Marseille, Aix-en-Provence, St. Gallen, (postscript of March 2020): Basel and Zürich, and then to Egypt. Contracted typhoid fever and died in 1960. He is buried in Cairo at Zein Eldin Cemetery (ref. liner notes CD: "The 4 American Jazz Men in Tangier").

OSCAR DENNARD SOLOGRAPHY

OSCAR DENNARD TRIO**NYC. Jan. 9, 1956**

Oscar Dennard (p), Joe Benjamin (b), Osie Johnson (dm).
Ten titles were recorded for Henson, unissued.

LIONEL HAMPTON & HIS ORCHESTRA**Paris, Jan. 28 & 30, 1956**

Bigband personnel including Oscar Dennard (p), Billy Mackel (g), Lionel Hampton (vib, p, dm, vo, ldr), Robert Mosley (vo).

Twenty titles were recorded in concerts at Olympia, OD can be heard on eight:

Gladys	Solo 4 choruses of 12 bars. (FM)
Memories Of You	Acc. (vib). (S)
Hallelujah	Solo 64 bars. (F)
Battle Of Saxes	Intro with (g) 16 bars. (M)
Blues For Sacha	Acc. (vib/g). (S)
Where Or When	Acc. (vib). Solo 8 bars. (S)
Clopin Clopant	Acc. (vo-RM). (S)
Hey Ba-Ba-Rebop	With (g) 32 bars. (M)

Oscar Dennard, the most legendary of all legendary modern pianists, starts his career in the Lionel Hampton organization. An odd choice one might say, because his visions obviously are very far from the fascinating but frantic vibraphone factory. Possibly by luck, he gets several opportunities to show his capabilities on this first concert. The highlight is his indescribable solo on "Hallelujah", just go to spotify and listen for yourself! On "Where ..." he also shows his originality in a brief but beautiful solo. His blues choruses on "Gladys" are also something out of the ordinary. Otherwise he joins the crowd on "Hey ..." and is heard doing good background work on several other items. A promising debut!!

LIONEL HAMPTON & HIS RHYTHM**Paris, May 1 & 2, 1956**

Lionel Hampton (vib, p, arr), Oscar Dennard (p), Billy Mackel (g), Peter Badie (b), Albert Gardner (dm).

Twelve titles were recorded for Philips, issued as "Hamp In Hi Fi":

Ole Dole Doff	Acc. (vib). (M)
It's A Long Way To Tipperary	Acc. (vib/p). (F)
La Vie En Rose	Intro 4 bars. Acc. (vib). (S)
Toen Onze Mop Een Mopje Was	Acc. (vib). (M)
Tire L'Aiquille	Acc. (vib). (S)
Sarie Marais	Acc. (vib). (FM)
Vieni Sul Mar	Acc. (vib). (S). Acc. (p). (F)
Dans Le Prisonier De Nantes	Intro 2 bars. Acc. (vib). (S)
Die Lorelei	Duet/Acc. (vib). (FM)
I Kiss Your Hand, Madame	Duet/Acc. (vib). (S)
Zeg Kwezelken Wildet Gij Dansen	Acc. (vib). (FM)
Londonderry Air	Duet/Acc. (vib). (S)

Knowing the previous concert, his first studio session is a great disappointment. A quintet should offer lots of possibilities, but the choice of tunes is queer, and Hampton takes everything for himself. Certainly, OD is heard a lot accompanying the vibraphone, but there is no possibility to express his own far reaching ideas properly. Listen closely though one can hear interesting details. The two brief introductions on "La Vie ..." and "Dans ..." are well worth listening to!

LIONEL HAMPTON & HIS ORCHESTRA**Madrid, June 30, 1956**

Bigband personnel including Oscar Dennard (p).

Seven titles were recorded for Victor, one has piano solo:

Lovely Nights In Spain	Acc. (as). Acc. (vib). (S)
Hot Club Of Madrid Serenade	Solo 32 bars. (F)

Pretty original piano playing on "... Serenade", but not really suited to Hampton's music world. Note also prominent background on "... Spain".

LIONEL HAMPTON & HIS ALL STARS **NYC. Aug. 1956**
Lionel Hampton (vib, marimba, p- "... Hands"), Oscar Dennard (p), Oscar Pettiford (b), Gus Johnson (dm), (vo-ens- "... A Train").

Six titles were recorded for Jazztone:

My Man	Acc. (vib). Solo 16 bars. (SM)
Too Much	Acc. (vib). Solo 64 bars. (F)
Line For Lyons	Acc. (vib). (SM)
Loch Lomond	Solo 16 bars. (SM)
Look, Four Hands	Intro. Acc. (p). (F)
Take The A Train	Acc. (b). (M)

same date

Personnel as above with Ray Copeland (tp), Jimmy Cleveland (tb), Lucky Thompson (ts) added. Ten titles ("... Choo" and "... Hurry?" are like two takes of the same title, but the latter is longer):

Lionel's Choo Choo	Solo 24 bars. (F)
Romeo's Gone Now	Solo 12 bars. (SM)
Dark Eyes	Solo 32 bars. (FM)
Deep Purple	Intro 4 bars. (SM)
Ghost Of A Chance	Intro 4 bars. Acc. (ts/vib/b). (S)
Over The Rainbow	Intro 4 bars. Solo 32 bars. (S)
When You're Smiling	Solo 32 bars. (M)
Summertime	Intro 4 bars. (M)
Raindeer	Solo 32 bars. (FM)
Undecided	Solo 16 bars. (M)
What's Your Hurry?	Solo 36 bars. (F)

This is OD's most important session in the first stage of his career, where he still has not moved far away from the tradition. This is a typical mainstream session, and he is adapting his modern oriented style nicely to the surroundings. His beautiful solo on the slow "... Rainbow" cannot hurt anybody, nor can his fine playing on "Loch ...", "Undecided" and "My Man", though one is not likely to connect the text of "... Smiling" with OD's version. His introductions on "Summertime" and "... Chance" are less conventional though, and increasing the tempo makes the special characteristics of OD's style come through. The fast "Too Much" is a typical example of this. Run and buy Fresh Sounds' double-CD, there is a lot of other artists also here with great contributions!!

OSCAR DENNARD **NYC. Summer 1957**

Oscar Dennard solo (p).

Probably around fourteen titles were recorded in Idrees Sulieman's apartment, 49 minutes of solo playing. Available on YouTube. Not all of the titles have been identified, but for those of you who want to check out this treasury, here is some information:

15:54-22:24	Tenderly	6:30. (S)
22:43-27:02	Polka Dots And Moonbeams	4:19. (S)
27:03-28:38	Yesterdays	1:35. (S)
28:44-30:02	Bess, You Is My Woman Now	1:18. (S)

Postscript of Feb. 20, 2023, written by Charles Iselin: Although perhaps not as important as the long-rumored surviving Henson session, this set of recordings represents a huge discovery and revelation in Oscar Dennard's music. We hear the pianist in an informal, intimate, and introspective setting that is not replicated in the remainder of his discography. To my ears the recordings are split into three broader groups. The first few titles such as "Boplicity" and "What is This Thing Called Love" are hard-hitting bebop vehicles firmly rooted in that style. However, Dennard seems to play with the rhythm underlying his soli, incorporating a funkiness to the left hand, switching between a walking bass line and blocked

chords techniques. There is an experimental feel to the session, as he switches between rhythmic inflections and harmonic patterns with ease, sometimes seeming to play in different styles simultaneously. The second grouping of recordings with "Invitation" leading into "Tenderly," "Polka Dots And Moonbeams," "Yesterdays," and "Bess, You Is My Woman Now" sees a slowing of the tempo. There is a change in mood, as these performances are more in a ballad style, less focussed on dazzling technique and more introspective and relaxed. The recordings are imbued with some sadness based on the way the repertoire is played, but Dennard doesn't lose its sharpness, switching between whole chords and intricate boopish melody lines in his right hand. To me, the highlight is the unidentified tune (an original?) that comes after "Bess ..." which feels the least hurried and showy, and perhaps the most emotional of all the performances. The final category are the humorous technical exercises played for his small audience - first a boogie woogie in a classic style, then a version of "Three Blind Mice" as performed at the concert two years later. Although there is an element of musical satire here, the technique and beauty on display during these short etudes cannot be denied, and Dennard seemed to understand what made these ways of playing attractive.

LIONEL HAMPTON SEXTET **NYC. Aug. 13&14, 1957**

Bobby Plater (fl, cl, as, ts), Lionel Hampton (vib, p, dm, vo), Oscar Dennard (p), Billy Mackel (g), Julius Brown (b), Wilbert Hogan (dm).
Thirteen titles were recorded for Audio Fidelity, OD can be heard faintly behind Hampton on most titles, and there are two piano soli:

Just One Of Those Things	Solo 32 bars. (FM)
Lullaby Of Birdland	Solo 8 bars. (M)

A session far from my taste, rather lousy. OD's allotted background contributions are not remarkable, but there are two interesting soli.

LIONEL HAMPTON & HIS ORCHESTRA **Stuttgart, Jan. 5 & 6, 1958**

Bigband personnel including Oscar Dennard (p), Cornelius "Pinochio" James (vo- "... Woman").

Ten titles were recorded for Bertelsmann, four have OD:

The Move	Solo 32 bars. (F)
Round Midnight	Acc. (vib) 32 bars to solo 16 bars to acc. (vib) 24 bars to coda. (S)
Confirmation	Soli with orch 32 and 12 bars. (M)
New Orleans Woman	Acc. (vib). Acc. (vo). (M)

OD opens "The Move" with a fine solo, but "Confirmation" is even more exciting, and his background on "... Woman" is not exactly usual. The highlight is however, not unexpected, "... Midnight", played by vib/p/b only. Although OD's and Hampton's music worlds are very different, still they manage to create a magnificent version of this famous tune. OD lays fascinating constructions behind the vibes, and his solo is just as personal, original, beautiful and at the same ugly as some might receive it.

LIONEL HAMPTON & HIS ORCHESTRA **Brussels, Feb. 17, 1958**

Eddie Williams, Art Hoyle, Eddie Mullens, Dave Gonzales (tp), Lou Blackburn, Wade Marcus, Larry Wilson (tb), Bobby Plater (cl, as), Leon Zachery (as), Andy McGhee (ts), Lonnie Shaw (bar), Oscar Dennard (p), Billy Mackel (g, vo), Julius Browne (b), Wilbert Hogan (dm), Pinocchio James (vo), Lionel Hampton (vib, p, vo, ldr).

RTBF Telecast, nine titles:

The High And The Mighty	Acc. (vib). (S)
Hamp's Piano Blues	Acc. (p-LH). (M)
The History Of Jazz	Acc. ens. (S)
Blues into Hot Club Blues	Acc. (vib). Acc. (vo-LH). (M)
I Found A New Baby	Solo 64 bars. (F)
The Chase	Solo 48 bars with LH talking. (F)
Brussels Sprout	Acc. (vib) 36 bars. (FM)
Stick Ahoy	No solo.
Gladys	Acc. (vib). (F)

Postscript of March 2020: A very valuable addition to the OD Solography. It is evident that the concerts offer better opportunities for OD than the studio sessions,

and there are several highly notable contributions here. The extremely fast introduction to “The Chase”, as well as the solo on “... Baby” played by ‘our dixieland boys’ and having stride sections, are new and very important discoveries, and there is lots of fine cooperation between OD and the boss on many items. Note: From LH’s talk, it seems that the performance also contained a “Round Midnight”; unfortunately not shown in the TV program. June 10, 2020: The TV-program opens with LH playing but we can see OD close in the background, then how they are sitting together at the piano on the “... Piano Blues”, and the visual highlight of seeing him striding the “... New Baby”!!

TIMEX ALL STAR JAZZ SHOW /

LIONEL HAMPTON & HIS ORCHESTRA

NYC. April 30, 1958

Personnel including the Lionel Hampton Orchestra with a large number of artists added on “St. Louis Blues”.

CBS telecast, five titles, piano is heard on several occasions, but it seems necessary to have access to the visual show to form any precise opinion of who’s who here. Postscript of April 20, 2020:

Real Gone And Crazy Acc. (p) 64 bars. (F)

This comes from Mario Schneeberger; Hampton solos on piano while OD accompanies him in the low register.

LIONEL HAMPTON & HIS ORCHESTRA

ca. 1958

Bigband personnel including Oscar Dennard (p). Concert, eight titles issued on Ades, one has OD:

Round Midnight Solo with orch 32 bars. (S)

A very different version of “... Midnight”, this time with a full piano chorus with the band, without Hampton ‘interfering’, but equally exciting!

A. K. SALIM

NYC. Sept. 26 & Oct. 6, 1958

Collective personnel for both sessions: Nat Adderley (cnt), Joe Wilder, Paul Cohen (tp), Buster Cooper (tb), Phil Woods (as), Seldon Powell (fl, ts), Sahib Shihab (bar), Eddie Costa, Oscar Dennard (p), George Duvivier (b), Wilbert Hogan, Philly Joe Jones (dm), A. K. Salim (arr, dir).

Seven titles were recorded for Savoy, issued as “Blues Suite”, one has OD:

Blue Shout Solo 24 bars. (F)

Two very interesting blues choruses here! Postscript of March 2020: Mail from Fernando Ortiz de Urbina: “As part of my research on Eddie Costa, I spoke to Savoy producer Ozzie Cadena some years ago, and he was adamant that the personnel was the one of the record sleeve. That means that OD is *not* on that record. Besides, the solo on “Blu-Shout” with that rumbling sound on the lower register of the piano, is characteristically Eddie Costa’s”.

LIONEL HAMPTON & HIS ORCHESTRA

NYC. Dec. 1, 1958

Ed Pazant, Bobby Plater (as), Andrew McGhee, Leon Zachery (ts), Lonnie Shaw (bar), Lionel Hampton (vib, p, dm, vo), Oscar Dennard (p), Billy Mackel (g), John Nixon, Jamil Nasser (b), Wilbert Hogan (dm).

Five titles were recorded for Columbia, issued as “Golden Vibes”, but no OD soli.

same date

Lionel Hampton (vib, p, dm, vo), Oscar Dennard (p), Billy Mackel (g), John Nixon, Jamil Nasser (b), Wilbert Hogan (dm).

Eight titles, but no OD soli.

This is a very soft session, and although one occasionally is able to hear piano behind the vibraphone, the session has minimal interest for OD.

JESSE POWELL

NYC. ca. 1959

Eddie Williams (tp), Henderson Chambers (tb), Jesse Powell (ts), Norman Thornton (bar), Oscar Dennard (p), Peck Morrison (b), Wilbert Hogan (dm).

Twelve titles were recorded for Jubilee, issued as “Blow Man Blow”:

Jesse’s Theme Intro 8 bars. Acc. (ts). (FM)

Blue And Sentimental Intro 4 bars. Acc. (ts). (S)

Cross In The Green Acc. (ts). (F)

I Cover The Waterfront Intro 4 bars. Acc. (ts). (S)

I’ve Got You Under My Skin Intro 8 bars. Acc.(ts). (M)

Love Is Here To Stay Solo 16 bars. (SM)

This Is Always	Acc. (ts). Solo 8 bars. (S)
My Silent Love	Intro 4 bars. Acc. (ts). (S)
Que Paso	Acc. ens. (M)
No Tomorrow	Intro 4 bars. Acc. (ts). (S)
But Beautiful	Intro 4 bars. Acc. (ts). (S)
Just Chips	In ens. Acc. (ts). Solo 8 bars. (M)

This session was a very nice surprise! Although it is a vehicle for strong and exhibitionistic Texas tenorsax playing, OD is on all the time, and there are ample opportunities to study his style. He seems to do everything different from anybody else, always unexpected, even in the comping, note for instance "Blue ..." and "... Beautiful", and I am a bit surprised that Powell chose such an unconventional artist as his companion. OD plays an intro on almost all items, and they are highly fascinating, note in particular "... Theme" and "Blue ...". He gets a few soli, "... To Stay", "... Chips" and the magnificent highlight "... Always". On this session alone it is possible to understand his legendary status.

IDREES SULIEMAN QUARTET **NYC. March 1959**
 Idrees Sulieman (tp), Oscar Dennard (p), Jamil Nasser (b), Buster Smith (dm).
 Four titles were recorded at private party:

9:18	Invitation	Solo ca. 5:30 to acc. (tp). (S)
2:40	These Foolish Things	Acc. (tp). (S)
9:11	Wee	Solo 64 bars. (F)
8:56	Circular Breathing Blues	Intro. Solo 16 bars (NC). (S)

same date

Oscar Dennard solo (p). Two titles:

5:15	Round Midnight	Intro to solo 64 bars to coda. (S)
6:42	Piano Improvisation / Variation on Three Blind Mice	Solo 6:42. (S/F)

Now we have reached the essence of OD's art. I find it very difficult to describe it, being so different from any other jazz pianist. Who else could create a "... Midnight" like this; starting with twelve strong chords like a church bell for introducing just that hour, and then continuing with a beautiful, dramatic solo, as far from soft as you can get at the it, and then repeating the bell in the end. This was my first encounter with OD, and I never forgot it. "Invitation" is also a highly thrilling item, with the piano solo occupying the first half, a flowery conception. "Wee" is strange but not that exciting. However that is the intro on the slow "... Blues", and too bad his solo is cut short in the second chorus.. Finally one should note the second solo feature, "... Blind Mice", almost seven minutes of far out improvisation, beautiful and ugly, pushing the keyboard to the limits of strength. This session alone is enough to make anybody legendary, and one can only wish that the sound quality had been closer to something normal.

LESTER YOUNG BAND **Paris, March 11, 1959**
 Lester Young (ts), Oscar Dennard, Rene Urtreger (p), Jimmy Gourley (g), Jamil Nasser (b), Buster Smith (dm).
 Broadcast from Blue Note, one title:

5:36	D. B. Blues (NC)	Solo 30 bars (NC). (M)
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Unfortunately, the incompleteness of this item is in the middle of the proceedings and involving the piano solo. After Pres' two choruses on his 56 bars tune, and a guitar chorus with some audible piano accompaniment, then comes a piano solo which definitely is OD. His exciting originality is easily identifiable, but when the bridge is almost completed, the performance is cut, continuing with Pres' concluding riffs and a drum solo.

IDREES SULIEMAN QUARTET **Tangier, Morocco, July 1959**
 Idrees Sulieman (tp), Oscar Dennard (p), Jamil Nasser (b), Buster Smith (dm).
 Seven titles were recorded at Radio Tangier International Studio:

6:49	All Of You	Solo 32 bars. (M)
11:20	Confirmation	Solo 3 choruses of 32 bars. (FM)
4:25	Pinky	Solo ca. 2:00 to acc. (tp). (S)
12:22	Stella By Starlight	Solo 3 choruses of 32 bars. (M)

9:53	Visa	Solo 4 choruses of 12 bars. Soli 4, 4 and 4 bars. (M)
4:25	Tour De Force	Solo 28 bars. (M)
12:04	Tangier Blues	Solo 12 bars. Acc. (tp). Solo 36 bars. Acc. (b). (S)

Quoting from Jacques Muzal's liner notes: "This release is a tribute to one of the masters of the modern piano, Oscar Dennard, one of the most underrated and little known pianists of our time. However, he was admired by the greatest musicians of his time, and afterwards. No one who heard his music could resist being amazed by Dennard's playing". Another: "His playing was so intricate that one could hardly believe only two hands were playing on that piano. We were all mesmerized by Oscar". This session is made in a studio and thus with good recording qualities, and the quartet as such is a very exciting one with fine trumpet. From the very first item there are piano surprises; in "All ..." the start is almost minimalistic but changes mood; in "Confirmation" the third chorus is an unexpected block chords construction; "Pinky" is slow and beautiful and note how he comps Idrees! Possibly more conventional on "Visa", rolling chords on "... Force" and surging slow blues on "Tangier ..." (and if you are interested in circular breathing, study the trumpet on the latter). Finally, the session highlight as well as piano must after some consideration be "Stella ...". No more shall be said about the ill-fated genius Oscar Dennard, find out yourself!

No further recording sessions. Postscript of March 22, 2020: Yes, there is one:

OSCAR DENNARD **Zürich, early Winter 1960**

Oscar Dennard solo (p)

Two titles, probably recorded privately in a Zürich apartment:

What Is This Thing Called Love?	2:09. (FM)
Yesterdays	1:35. (S)

Mario Schneeberger sent me this (slightly reformulated): "Oscar Dennard played with the NEW YORK JAZZ QUARTET (personnel as above) in Restaurant Glock in Basel, Switzerland, Jan. 31, 1960. I have seen him around the same time in the Cafe Africana in Zürich, with the same group, where he had a month's engagement". He also sent me these two items coming from a Zürich friend. Brief as they are, they confirm that Oscar Dennard now are in a music world nobody before him have trespassed. An originality without limits but not accessible for all friends of jazz. These titles have never been played like this.

... 000 ...