

The
VOCAL
of
OVERTON ALSTON
“OVIE”

Solographer: Jan Evensmo
Last update: Feb. 10, 2014

Born: Washington DC. Dec. 14, 1905
Died: 1989

Introduction:

Ovie Alston was a very personal vocalist with Claude Hopkins' orchestra, one of the most pleasant in his decade (my opinion), and he certainly needs and deserves to be remembered! Thanks to my friend Arne Johnsrud who opened my eyes to this fine artist!

History:

With trombonist Bill Brown and his Brownies in New York 1928-30. Joined Claude Hopkins in 1931 and remained until forming his own band which made its debut at the Apollo, New York, in November 1936. Subsequently led own big band at the Plantation (1937), the Ubangi Club (1938), and the Roseland Ballroom (1939-41). For 1941-42 service tours his band was fronted by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, then resumed leading big band at the Roseland Ballroom (1942-47). Led at Murraine's Club in 1947, then from 1948-52 regularly at Baby Grand Café, New York – working every summer at the Nassau Hotel, Long Beach. Continued leading own band for private engagements in the 1950s (ref. John Chilton).

Message:

Ovie Alston was also an excellent trumpet player, but the treatment of this side of his artistry will take place in another context later.

OVIE ALSTON VOCAL SOLOGRAPHY

BILL BROWN & HIS BROWNIES **NYC. Dec. 26, 1929**

Ovie Alston (tp, vo), Billy Hicks (tp), Bill Brown (tb, dir), Gene Johnson (as), Rupert Cole (as, bar), Hubert Thompson (ts), Norman Lester (p), Donald Tathim (bjo), John Kirby (tu, b), Raggie Brown (dm).

Two titles were recorded for Brunswick, one has OA:

31743 Zonky Vocal 32 bars. (FM)

Ovie Alston's vocal is rougher on this early performance compared to the Claude Hopkins period later, but his personal sound is nevertheless easily recognizable.

CLAUDE HOPKINS & HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. May 24, 1932**

Claude Hopkins (p, arr, dir), Ovie Alston (tp, vo), Albert Snaer, Sylvester Lewis (tp), Fernando Arbello (tb), Edmond Hall (cl, as, bar), Gene Johnson (as), Bobby Sands (ts), Walter Jones (bjo, g), Henry Turner (tu), Pete Jacobs (dm), Jimmy Mundy (arr).

Four titles were recorded for Columbia, two have OA:

152199-1 I Would Do Anything For You Vocal 64 bars. (FM)

152202-1 How'm I Doin'?' Vocal 32 bars. (FM)

NYC. May 25, 1932

Same plus Henry Wells (tb).

Four titles were recorded for Brunswick, one has OA:

11894-A I Would Do Anything For You Vocal 64 bars. (FM)

NYC. Jan. 13, 1933

Same except Fred Norman (tb, arr, vo) replaces Wells. Orlando Robertson (vo).

Five titles were recorded for Columbia, four issued, one has OA:

152352-2 He's A Son Of The South Vocal 32 bars. (FM)

NYC. March 9, 1933

Same. Seven titles were recorded for Brunswick, one has OA:

13134-A Ain't Misbehavin' Vocal 32 bars. (FM)

NYC. Dec. 11, 1933

Same. Two titles were recorded for Brunswick, but no OA.

NYC. Jan. 11, 1934

Same. Four titles were recorded for Columbia, one has OA:

152667-2 Ain't Misbehavin' Vocal 32 bars. (FM)

The vocal of Ovie Alston has the key components of jazz, originality and swing, and although mostly forgotten today, it deserves to be remembered. Cool and warm at the same time, it has the ability to touch our nerves even today. The Claude Hopkins orchestra certainly benefitted from his personality, and although he was a first rate trumpeter, his singing was his most prominent asset. Although there are very slight differences between the alternate versions of the same tune, like "... Anything ..." and "Ain't ...", he should be considered a true jazz performer.

CLAUDE HOPKINS & HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. April 6, 1934**

Same/similar. Two titles were recorded for Brunswick, one has OA:

15043-A My Gal Sal Vocal 32 and 16 bars. (FM)

NYC. May 3, 1934

Same. Four titles, two have OA:

15161-A Everybody Shuffle Vocal 32 bars. (FM)

15162-A Don't Let Your Love Go Wrong Vocal 32 bars. (FM)

NYC. Sept. 14, 1934

Personnel as above except Hilton Jefferson (cl, as) added.

Five titles were recorded for Decca, one has OA:

38669-A Chasing All The Blues Away Vocal 32 bars. (F)

NYC. Oct. 22, 1934

Similar. Four titles, one has OA:

38870-A Walking The Dog Vocal 32 bars. (FM)

NYC. Nov. 9, 1934Personnel as above except Snub Mosley (tb) replaces Arbello.
Two titles, but no OA.**NYC. Feb. 1, 1935**

Same. Three titles, but no OA.

OA's vocal continues to be one of the main attractions of the Claude Hopkins recordings. There are delightful vocal interpretations here, and dig his scat on the bridge on "... Shuffle"! Only too bad there never are any ballads or otherwise slower tempo items, surely they would have been noteworthy!

CLAUDE HOPKINS & HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. Oct. 18, 1935

Personnel probably as, or similar to, above.

Transcriptions, eighteen titles, three have OA:

Yankee Doodle Never Went To Town Vocal 12+34 bars. (M)

Sweet Horn Vocal 64 bars. (F)

Everybody Shuffle Vocal 32+16 bars. (FM)

NYC. ca. Nov. 1935

Same/similar. Several sessions, date possibly earlier, twelve titles, three have OA:

You Stayed Away Too Long Vocal 26 bars. (M)

Put On Your Old Grey Bonnet Vocal 32 bars. (FM)

Chasing My Blues Away Vocal 64 bars. (F)

Note: "Chasing All The Blues Away", "Sweet Horn" and "Chasing My Blues Away" are different names of the same tune.

late 1935

Same/similar. Film soundtrack "By Request", one title has OA's vocal:

Chasin' The Blues Away Vocal 32 bars. (F)

Several nice vocal items on the last Hopkins sessions, "Sweet ..." / "Chasing ...", obviously one of his favourite numbers, is also long enough to give space to some nice scat, also on "... Shuffle". A movie version of "Chasing ..." is of course an event in itself!

OVIE ALSTON & HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. Oct. 14, 1938

Ovie Alston (tp, vo, dir), Sylvester Lewis, Robert Cheek (tp), Ray Hogan (tb), Ben Richardson (as, bar), Floyd Blakemore (as), Cliff Glover (ts), Claude Hopkins (p), Rudolph Williams (g), Abe Bolar (b), George Foster (dm).

Four titles were recorded for Vocalion, three have OA's vocal:

23584-1 Twinkle, Twinkle Vocal 32 and 16 bars. (FM)

23585-1 Ja Da Vocal 32 bars. (FM)

23586-1 Walkin' The Dog Vocal 16 bars. (M)

NYC. Oct. 21, 1938

Same. Four titles, two have OA's vocal:

23606-1 Home-Cookin' Mama Vocal 32 bars. (FM)

23607-1 How Much Do You Mean To Me? Vocal 32 bars. (M)

Most probably this Claude Hopkins oriented session for Vocalion is presented under Ovie Alston name for contractual reasons. It represents a nice goodbye to one of the finest and most personal singers of an era long gone. His laidback style is so different from what is the trend today, that there is slight chance Ovie Alston will be a role model for young vocal talents in the overseable future!

OVIE ALSTON & HIS ORCHESTRA NYC. 1946

Ovie Alston (tp, vo), Sylvester Lewis (tp), Fats Green (as), Freddie Mitchell (ts), Joe Smith (dm), Jack Allyn, Thelma Baker, Bobby Baker (vo).

Four titles were recorded for Urab, not available.

No further recording sessions.

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