

The
CLARINET
and
Altosax
of
WILLIAM THORNTON
BLUE

Born: Cape Girardeau, Missouri, January 31, 1902
 Died: Trenton, New Jersey, April 1968

Introduction:

I have to admit that William Thornton Blue was only an exciting name to me for many years. However, after finishing the clarinet solographies of Jerry Blake and Ed Inge, my good Swedish friend Bo Scherman pointed out that Blue was the logic follow-up. A brief listening session convinced me that he was completely right. What then was more logical than to ask my French friend Jean-François Pitet (curator of the website devoted to Cab Calloway and his musicians: www.thehidehoblog.com) to work with me and make this WTB solography!

History:

His father (his exact namesake) was a music teacher and conductor of the Pythian Brass Band in St Louis. Learned music with his friend (and future successor in Cab Calloway's orchestra) Arville Harris. Started his career in P.G. Lowery circus and vaudeville orchestra. Had his own trio in St. Louis in 1920 before joining Billy King's Road Show in 1921 and for a short time with Wilson Robinson's Bostonians (which later became Andrew Preer's Orchestra, the Cotton Club Orchestra, the Missourians and... Cab Calloway's orchestra.) Worked on the steamers with Charlie Creath and joined Dewey Jackson from 1924 to 1927. Left his hometown for New Orleans in 1925 to work with Fate Marable on the Steamer *St. Paul*. After Jackson, permanently joined the Cotton Club orchestra headed by Andrew Preer. In the fall of 1928, went to France to play (on tenor sax) with Noble Sissle orchestra, Otto Hardwick, Johnny Dunn and Sidney Bechet. Back in New York, joined The Missourians who played at the Savoy as the featured band. Remained with The Missourians when Cab Calloway took the baton until the first months as the Cotton Club's featured orchestra. Left in early or fall 1931, replaced by Arville Harris, for Dave Nelson's orchestra and Charlie Elgar's band. His career ended abruptly since he had mental disorders before 1931. Remained in mental institutions in New Jersey until his death in 1968 (J-F. Pitet).

Message:

Postscript of June 2, 2021: Important feedback to the first version of this WTB solography! First a long and interesting mail from Phil Schaap, among other things pointing out the impact on WBT from the famous Frank Teschemaker and his clarinet on Dec. 1927 recordings by McKenzie's and Condon's Chicagoans. Then I received from Karl-Bernhard Rau the 16 pages "The Recordings of WTB - An Annotated Tentative Personnel-Discography" with detailed analysis. I quote the following:

STYLE: In his early recordings with Ch. Creath he is limited to play a traditional lead role in the band as common in the South. From the Dewey Jackson recordings on he can be observed developing into one of the most interesting and almost genial clarinet cum alto player of his time. His style is exuberant, often almost bizarre, containing very fast arpeggios, rapid changes of register, the use of unusual chordal notes and a sharp and hard attack. His style is almost boppish – Charlie Parker might have taken delight in Blue's playing – and expressionistic, and very much his own thing.

TONE: His tone is strong and sharp, with a hard attack, full sounding, often using dirty growl effects.

VIBRATO: Strong and fast vibrato with high amplitude.

TIME: Urgently driving, swinging.

PHRASING: His phrases are not singable, but mostly sharp-cut, often disrupted and divergently continued.

On the basis of this feedback, and relistening, I have made this new solography. It will definitely be open for further comments, so just go ahead!!

WILLIAM THORNTON BLUE SOLOGRAPHY

CHAS. CREATH's JAZZ-O-MANIACS **St. Louis, ca. Dec. 2, 1924**
Charles Creath (tp, dir), Charlie Lawson (tb), William T. Blue (cl), Sam Long (as), William Rollins (ts), Cranston Hamilton (p), Pete Patterson (bjo), Floyd Campbell (dm, vo-4782).

Two titles were recorded for Okeh:

8781-A	Pleasure Mad	Solo with ens 32 bars. (FM)
8782-A	Market Street Blues	Solo with ens 12 bars. (SM)

The energetic clarinet playing on "... Mad" is believed to be by WTB and shows an artist with well developed technique and fine jazz feeling. On "Market ..." an altosax solo of 12 bars by Long, leads into a fine clarinet solo, consequently played by WTB. Promising debut!

CHAS. CREATH's JAZZ-O-MANIACS **St. Louis, March 1925**

Personnel same as above with Leonard Davis (tp) added.

Four titles were recorded for Okeh:

9018-A	I Woke Up Cold In Hand	With ens. (S)
9019-A	King Porter Stomp	With ens. (FM)
9020-A	Every Man That Wears Bell-Bottom Britches	With ens. (SM)
9021-A	My Daddy Rocks Me	With ens. (SM)

Only faint clarinet ensemble, of no particular interest.

CHAS. CREATH's JAZZ-O-MANIACS **St. Louis, ca. Nov. 3, 1925**

Charles Creath (tp, dir), Sonny Lee (tb), Horace Eubanks, William T. Blue (cl, as), William Rollins and another (ts), Cranston Hamilton (p), Pete Patterson (bjo), Zutty Singleton (dm), Lonnie Johnson (vln, vo-9427).

Four titles were recorded for Okeh, no WTB on 9428-A "Down In Lover's Lane" but:

9426-A	Market Street Stomp	With ens. (FM)
9427-A	Won't Don't Blues	(as)-Duet with (tp) 24 bars. (SM)
9429-A	Grandpa's Spells	With ens. (F)

The recording quality is pretty good here, and the clarinet can be heard clearly on "... Stomp" and "... Spells", highly competent. The altosax on "... Blues" may be WTB but there is so little to compare it with, thus we cannot be sure.

DEWEY JACKSON's PEACOCK ORCHESTRA **St. Louis, June 21, 1926**

Dewey Jackson (cnt, dir), Albert Snaer (tp), William Luper (tb), William T. Blue, Cliff Cochran (cl, as), Willie Humphrey (cl, ts), Burroughs Lovingood (p), Pete Robinson (bjo), Pops Foster (tu), Floyd Campbell (dm, vo).

Three titles were recorded for Okeh, no WTB on 3415 "She's Crying For Me", but:

3417	Capitol Blues	Solo with (vo) comments 12 bars. Breaks. (SM)
3419	Go 'Won To Town	Solo 12 bars. (SM)

Forceful and creative clarinet soli here! "Capitol ..." indicates an artist with personality and original ideas, while the intense solo on "... Town" may bring the thoughts to Johnny Dodds.

ANDY PREER & THE COTTON CLUB ORCHESTRA **NYC. Feb. 1927**

Personnel is debated here in various sources, candidates for (cl) and (as) are William T. Blue, Andrew Brown, Davey Jones, Walter Thomas and George Scott. One title was recorded for Gennett, 513-A&C "I've Found A New Baby" but no (cl)/(as) soli anyway.

CHAS. CREATH's JAZZ-O-MANIACS **St. Louis, May 2, 1927**

Charles Creath (tp, dir), Dewey Jackson (tp), Albert Wynn (tb), Horace Eubanks or William T. Blue (cl, as), William Rollins (ts), Burroughs Lovingood (p), Pete Patterson (bjo), possibly Floyd Campbell (dm).

Two titles were recorded for Okeh:

80823-B	Butter Finger Blues	With ens. (M)
80824-A	Crazy Quilt	With ens. (FM)

faint in the background but unmistakably WTB, but is the earlier sub-tone solo also his? Brief but nice WTB contributions also on "... Traffic" and "... Blues".

HENRY ALLEN & HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. Feb. 18, 1930**

Henry "Red" Allen, Otis Johnson (tp), J. C. Higginbotham (tb), William T. Blue (cl, as), Charlie Holmes (cl, as), Teddy Hill (cl, ts, bar), Luis Russell (p), Will Johnson (bjo, g, vo-58582), Pops Foster (b), Paul Barbarin (dm, vib).

Four titles were recorded for Victor:

58581-2	Sugar Hill Function	Intro 8 bars. (FM)
58582-2	You Might Get Better, BYNGW	Solo 14 bars. (M)
58583-2	Everybody Shout	Solo 18 bars. (FM)
58584-2	Dancing Dave	Intro 4 bars. Straight 18 bars. Coda 4 bars. (SM)

WTB gets the honour of opening this magnificent session with a confident and technical intro on "... Function". His major contributions are however "... Better ..." and "... Shout". With the session made the previous day in the same studio, these are almost the only clarinet soli by WTB recorded under professional circumstances, the Victor of 1929, miles before most other recording companies, thus the sound is very good. Quoting John Chilton in his book on Allen: "Newcomer WTB plays a nimble 16-bar clarinet solo, almost living up to his self-bestowed title "The Reputed Blue". We can be thrilled by a very persistent and original artist, but we may also perhaps get a glimpse of a personality on the edge of having control, possibly a forewarning of something leading to his early departure from the jazz world. "... Dave" is not particularly interesting, not much improvisation here, but quoting JC again: "Blue's rendering of the melody shows him at his best".

CAB CALLOWAY & HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. July 24, 1930**

R. Q. Dickerson, Lammar Wright, Wendell Cully (tp), DePriest Wheeler, (tb), William T. Blue (cl, as), Andrew Brown (cl, ts, bcl), Walter Thomas (cl, as, bar), Earres Prince (p), Morris White (bjo), Jimmy Smith (tu), Leroy Maxey (dm), Cab Calloway (vo, ldr).

Three titles were recorded for Brunswick, two issued, no WTB on 33355-A "St. Louis Blues" but:

33353-A	Gotta Dam Good Reason Now	Soli with orch 16 and 4 bars. (M)
33353-B	Gotta Dam Good Reason Now	As above. (M)

On the first Calloway session we find a very important tune in "Gotta ...", because although WTB is well hidden in the orchestra, we can clearly hear his inventive clarinet playing, and even more important, the presence of two takes tells us that he was a great improviser. The details are clearly different, note for instance the opening phrase!

CAB CALLOWAY & HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC: Oct. 14, 1930**

Personnel as above.

Two titles were recorded for Banner:

10134-1	Sweet Jennie Lee	Possibly (as)-Solo 4 bars. Soli with orch 16 and 6 bars. (F)
10134-2	Sweet Jennie Lee	As above? ()
10134-3	Sweet Jennie Lee	As above. (F)
10135-2	Happy Feet	Solo 30 bars. (FM)
10135-3	Happy Feet	As above? ()

This is one of the greatest WTB sessions! "Happy ..." is definitely WTB's masterpiece, where his intense and original style really gets the chance to be exposed. Is there really a second take of this one!? "Sweet ..." has great solo over ensemble where WTB does not sacrifice any musical ideas. Too bad the recording qualities prohibit any comparison between the takes. WTB's work on clarinet perfectly fits with Calloway's scats, singing and voicings; dynamic, unconventional, powerful and very entertaining. If their paths had lasted longer, both would have made a great duet in studio and on stage ...

CAB CALLOWAY & HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. Nov. 12, 1930**

Personnel as above.

Two titles were recorded for Domino, no WTB on 10245-1&22 "Yaller", but:

10246-1	The Viper's Drag	With (tb) 8 bars. (M)
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NYC. Dec. 17, 1930

Same. One title, 10330 "I Got Rhythm", but unissued.

CAB CALLOWAY & HIS ORCHESTRA

NYC. Dec. 23, 1930

Personnel as above with Harry White (tb) added.

Five titles were recorded for Brunswick, no WTB on 35878-A "Is That Religion?" and 35882-A "St. James Infirmary" but:

35879-A Is That Religion? Acc. (vo). (M)
 35880-A Some Of These Days (as)-Solo 8 bars. (cl)-Solo 10 bars. (F)
 35881-A Nobody's Sweetheart (cl)-Solo 18 bars. (FM)

This may very well be WTB's last session! Such a shame, because there are two great clarinet soli here, showing that he had all his artistic capabilities intact. Exciting brief solo on "... Days", and quoting Gunther Schuller on the magnificent "... Sweetheart": "Blue's shrill, bright and very eccentric clarinet (...) in all its raspy dirty overblown effectiveness".

Quite possibly no further recording sessions. However, it is not clear when WTB left the Cab Calloway orchestra, to be replaced by Arville Harris. J-F. Pitet believes he left early 1931. However Wendell Cully (Culley) in interview states that Harris joined Cab earlier while WTB was still there, the latter not quitting until late autumn 1931. We therefore list below sessions and (cl)-soli which may be played by WTB. Feedback will be most heartily welcomed!

CAB CALLOWAY & HIS ORCHESTRA

NYC. Feb. 17, 1931

Personnel may possibly yet include William T. Blue (according to Wendell Cully), or he is replaced or joined by Arville Harris.

Two titles were recorded for Banner, but no (cl) soli.

NYC. March 3, 1931

Same/similar. Two titles were recorded for Brunswick but no (cl) soli.

NYC. March 9, 1931

Same/similar. Three titles were recorded for Perfect, 10482-2&3 "Mood Indigo", 10483-1&3 "Farewell Blues" and 10484-3&4 "I'm Crazy 'Bout My Baby", the two first have (cl)-soli but not sounding like WTB (according to Cully).

CAB CALLOWAY & HIS ORCHESTRA

NYC. April 20-21, 1931

Suggested personnel by Bear Family booklet may include William T. Blue (cl, as) or Arville Harris (cl, as), Andrew Brown (cl, as, bcl), Walter Thomas (as, ts, bar). Five RCA unissued 12", released as "Live from the Cotton Club", but no (cl) can be heard. Altosax solo on "I'll Make Fun For You" has no resemblance to WTB.

CAB CALLOWAY & HIS ORCHESTRA

NYC. May 6, 1931

Personnel may possibly yet still include William T. Blue (according to Wendell Cully).

Three titles were recorded for Perfect, one has (cl), suggested by Cully to be WTB:

10603-3 The Levee Low-Down (cl)-Solo 8 bars. (FM)

NYC. June 11, 1931

Two titles were recorded for Brunswick, one has (cl):

36803-A Black Rhythm (cl)-Solo 2 bars. (SM)

NYC. June 17, 1931

Two titles were recorded for Perfect, one has (cl), suggested by Cully to be WTB:

10710-2 My Honey's Lovin' Arms As below? ()

10710-3 My Honey's Lovin' Arms (cl)-Soli with orch 18 and 6 bars. (M)

NYC. July 9, 1931

Three titles were recorded for Perfect, two have (cl), suggested by Cully to be WTB:

10726-1 It Looks Like Susie (cl)-Solo 8 bars. (FM)

10726-3 It Looks Like Susie As above? ()

10727-2 Sweet Georgia Brown (cl)-Solo with orch 32 bars. (F)

NYC. Sept. 23, 1931

Two titles were recorded for Brunswick, both have (cl) soli, 37220 suggested by Cully to be WTB, but also 37221:

37220-A	Bugle Call Rag	(cl)-Solo with orch 16 bars. (FM)
37221-A	You Rascal You	(cl)-Solo 16 bars. (M)

Looking at the identification problem from a purely musical point of view, not evaluating other possible evidence photos and memories, it does not become easier. It seems that all five clarinet soli above are played by the same artist, and they have quite the same sound and violent phrasing compared to the soli we are sure of. Now Arville Harris was an excellent clarinet player, and possibly quite influenced by WTB, so the matter rests here.

Postscript of June 2, 2021: The conclusion now seems to be: WBT had mental disorders early, making him unreliable in his work for the Cab Calloway orchestra. He may have quit early in 1931, or he may have stayed on, possibly until autumn and played in his better health periods. However, Arville Harris became Cab's 'visible' clarinet player, and one thing we all agree on: There are no WTB soli on record in 1931 or later.

Definitely no further recording sessions, regardless of what some discos may tell you!!

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