

**The**  
**GUITAR**  
**of**  
**WILLIAM LEWIS**

Solographer: Jan Evensmo, assisted by Nick Rossi  
Last update: Nov. 28, 2016, Dec. 12, 2022

Born: Birmingham, Alabama, July 24, 1915  
 Died: Cleveland, Ohio, April 24, 1965

*Introduction:*

I became interested in William Lewis after obtaining and listening to some Jerry Newman acetates from Monroe's 1941, realizing that not only Charlie Christian tried to develop jazz guitar up there!

*History:*

Family moved from Alabama to Cleveland, Ohio by 1920. Attended East Tech High School. Married Jessie Mae Cook in 1934 while working as a laborer, at one time employed by the WPA. Briefly played with Zack Whyte's orchestra sometime before 1938. Formed the "Four Shades of Rhythm" in Cleveland in either December 1939 or January 1940. Based on census and military draft information, he was both divorced and working regularly at Cleveland's Cedar Inn by 1940. By late September 1940, print advertisements appeared for the group featuring bandleader Lewis and his "electric" guitar. By the end of the year, the group was appearing seven nights a week at the Cedar Inn and continued to do so into the spring of 1941. While touring throughout Ohio in late April and early May 1941, Benny Carter discovered Lewis who subsequently moved to New York and started working with Carter in/around June. Upon arrival, Lewis jammed at both Monroe's and Minton's, while Down Beat officially placed him in the Carter orchestra by July 15, 1941. In October, he recorded for Bluebird with Carter and opened at Kelly's Stable on 52nd Street with the bandleader. Moved with the Carter band to the Famous Door in December of the same year, although he was shortly after replaced by John Collins. Recorded with pianist Sam Price for Decca in January 1942 and was drafted shortly after. Lewis entered the U.S. Army on February 17, 1942. After the war, he returned to Cleveland, reactivated the "Four Shades of Rhythm" in early 1946, and formed his own quartet; both of whom were active in the area by that summer. In spite of personnel issues, Lewis continued with the "Four Shades of Rhythm" into June 1947, but unfortunately left shortly before the group made their debut recordings in Chicago for Vitacoustic. By this time, Lewis was also active in the Chicago area and continued to be so throughout 1948 and 1949, where he performed with his own trio and recorded with Cleveland-based bandleader Gay Crosse for Victor in August 1949. While Lewis remained active through much of the 1950s, his activities became more obscure. He led his own trios and quartets in Cleveland area through 1957, through which organists Carl Wilson and Johnny "Hammond" Smith passed (ref. Nick Rossi, 2022).

*Message:*

My deepfelt gratitude to Nick Rossi (guitarist-bandleader-historian) for his impressing research on the life of William Lewis! Also should be mentioned the important article: Marv Goldberg: "The 4 Shades of Rhythm", note also his significant online "R&B Notebooks".

## WILLIAM LEWIS SOLOGRAPHY

**JAM SESSION** **NYC. June 1, 1941**  
 Roy Eldridge (tp), William Lewis (g) with Monroe's Uptown House Band.  
 Recorded at Monroe's by Jerry Newman. Johan Helø collection.

Honeysuckle Rose Pt 1	Solo 32 bars. (FM)
Honeysuckle Rose Pt 2	Solo 16+8 bars, (p) on bridge. Solo 64 bars. (FM)
The Man I Love	No solo.

Interesting guitar playing on this Monroe date! The solo on part 1 is disturbed by loud talking, but there is also some fine guitar accompaniment. On part 2, the playing is more experimental with chording. William Lewis seems to be a promising guitar player to be followed closely.

**JAM SESSION** **NYC. June 1941**  
 Willie Lewis (g), unknown (p), Ebenezer Paul (b), George Thomas (dm).  
 Recorded at Monroe's by Jerry Newman. Jan Evensmo collection.

9:00	Oh! Lady Be Good	Intro 8 bars to solo 2 choruses of 32 bars. Acc. (p) 1 chorus to solo 9 choruses. Acc. (p/b) 2 choruses. Soli 2 and 1 choruses to coda. (F)
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This session is the main treasure in the WL solography. He is heard prominently almost through all of the nine minutes with good sound, and he shows he is an eager, inspired and competent improviser. Most of the time he plays single string, but then he suddenly he can switch to a chord chorus. The accompaniment does a good shop in swinging this "... Lady ...", and it is one important example of the Monroe jam sessions.

**JAM SESSION** **NYC. unknown date**  
 Scubby Durs (tp), Herbie Fields (cl?, ts), probably (not on acetate label) William Lewis (g), unknown (rhythm).  
 Recorded at Monroe's by Jerry Newman. Johan Helø collection.

On The Sunny Side Of The Street	Solo 32 bars. (M)
Rose Room	No solo.

A fine laidback single string solo on "... Street", and with almost certainty it must be WL here.

**JAM SESSION** **NYC. Sept. 22, 1941**  
 "Popeye" (tp), George Johnson (as), Allen Tinney (p), William Lewis (g), Ebenezer Paul (dm), unknown (dm).  
 Recorded at Monroe's by Jerry Newman. Jan Evensmo collection.

11:35	Cherokee	Solo 8 bars. Soli 2 and 1 choruses of 64 bars. (F)
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This acetate starts right into an altosax solo, and in fact this is George Johnson's item with five separate choruses, while the trumpeter seems to have things done before the recording starts. WL first tries to start a chorus but has no amplification and is halted after 8 bars. On the second try the amplification is still not right but after a few bars it is working. Altogether three choruses of a fast "Cherokee", and although WL is no Christian, it is interesting to witness how the musicians on various artistic levels met at Monroe's to try out new concepts.

**JAM SESSION** **NYC. Sept. 22, 1941**  
 Harry Edison (tp), George Johnson (as), Dick Wilson (ts), Count Basie (p), William Lewis (g), Ebenezer Paul (b), Spencer Drayton (dm).  
 Recorded at Monroe's by Jerry Newman.

Hold The Phone / Picturize This	No solo. (M)
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**BENNY CARTER & HIS ORCHESTRA** **NYC. Oct. 16, 1941**  
 Benny Carter (tp, as), Nathaniel Williams, Emmett Berry, Rostelle Reese (tp), James Archey, Benny Morton, John McConnell (tb), Ernest Purce, George James (as), Ernie Powell, Alfred Gibson (ts), Sonny White (p), William Lewis (g), Charles Drayton (b), Berisford Shepherd (dm).  
 Four titles were recorded for Bluebird, two have WL:

66792-1	Sunday	Solo 8 bars. (FM)
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66794-1 Back Bay Boogie Solo 24 bars. (F)

My first encounter with WL was this session, and when you listen to his brief but well conceived solo on “Sunday”, you will understand why. The fast “Back Bay ...” is perhaps not the most suitable vehicle, but he executes his two blues choruses very professionally.

**SAM PRICE’S BLUESICIANS**

**NYC. Jan. 20, 1942**

Herman Autrey (tp), David Young (ts), Sam Price (p), William Lewis (g), Vernon King (b), O’Neil Spencer (dm), Mabel Robinson (vo-70187,88).

Four titles were recorded for Decca:

70187-A Me And My Chauffeur Solo 16 bars. (FM)

70188-A I’ve Got Too Many Blues No solo. (SM)

70189-A It’s All Right, Jack Solo 32 bars. (F)

70190-A Blow, Katy, Blow No solo. (SM)

WL gets two solo opportunities here, and particularly “... Jack” shows him to advantage in a breakneck tempo. “... My Chauffeur” is more modestly played. This may be the last we hear from William Lewis, an interesting voice but gone as soon as snow on a summer’s day.

**GAY CROSSE**

**Chi. Aug. 16, 1949**

Eddie Harris (tp), Jewell Grant (as), Gay Crosse (ts, vo-1181-83), Charlie Ross (p), William Lewis (g), John Latham (b), Walter Carson (dm).

Four titles were recorded for Victor:

1181 Saturday Night Fish Fry Obbligato all through. (FM)

1182 It Ain’t Gonna Be That Way Brief obbligato parts. (SM)

1183 Swallow Dollow Obbligato 8 bars. (M)

1184 Pelican’s Hop Solo 32 bars. (M)

Two interesting guitar items here, no doubt by our WL as presented above; active background playing on “Saturday ...” and a typical and well constructed full solo on “... Hop”.

No further recording sessions.

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