

## A PORTRAIT OF GEORGE LEWIS

By HORACE MEUNIER HARRIS

The man who has been variously called "The Father of Revivalism", "The King of Traditional Jazz" and "The Frail Figurehead for Hardline Jazz Revivalism", was born Joseph Francois Zenon in New Orleans over a century ago. He was called George by his grandmother for luck, while he took his father's middle name, Louis, and anglicised it. From the time in 1942 when he was chosen to accompany the newly discovered pioneer Bunk Johnson, until his death in 1968, he justly created an important niche in jazz history. He recorded many times and all his performances were consistently satisfying and worthwhile.

I well recall the profound effect the emergence of Bunk had on American jazz lovers back in the 1940s, being in correspondence with a number of them and receiving copies of the magazines of that era, Gene Williams's *Jazz Information* and Gordon Gullickson's *The Record Changer*. However, I would like to explain the impact that the New Orleans Revival had on contemporary jazz lovers in England.

I was brought up on a diet of the English dance bands in the 1930s, then I became aware of Nat Gonella and his Georgians. Nat was a fervent admirer of Louis Armstrong and my eyes were opened. I had already purchased some nine inch gramophone records in Woolworth's, but I now became a devotee of the Parlophone Rhythm Style series, the HMV Swing Series and the jazz issues on Brunswick - collectively, the Hot Fives and Sevens, Bix and Tram, Nichols and Mole, the big bands and small groups of the 1930s, not forgetting the Duke.

Even now, I have no problem recalling the dramatic impact upon myself and my jazz collector friends caused by the arrival of the first 78rpm records on the *Jazz Man* and *Jazz Information* labels, by Bunk Johnson and his Band, with George Lewis on clarinet. The initial details appeared in *The Melody Maker's* "Collectors' Corner" on September 25, 1943, during the Second World War. The following year Cliff Jones reprinted in his magazine, *Discography*, the rave reviews by Staff Sergeant George Avakian, which came from *The Jazz Record*.

I was much taken by Avakian's assessment: "George Lewis's flowing style - Jimmie Noone roughed up - is so completely in accordance with everything you've read that a newcomer to jazz should be able to say, 'That's New Orleans clarinet'". The records arrived sporadically, acquired by exchanging discs by post with American jazz aficionados, as foreign currency to purchase them was not available in wartime, or for long after. The occasional sent parcel never arrived, lost with a merchant ship in the Battle of the Atlantic.

At first the music was difficult to digest, being poorly recorded, by amateurs using portable equipment, with dubious balance, compared to what we accustomed to, and the discs were pressed from indifferent quality shellac. Bunk had not resumed playing for very long and often had to pull out of ensembles and rest his lip. Even so, Bunk, George and Jim Robinson shone through like beacons of truth. At that time it was Bunk who mesmerised us, the others being in supporting roles, since our ears were not accustomed to the collective three-part polyphony of the front line. We were more used to a string of solos, Chicago style. For that reason my favorite amongst the 1942 recordings was, and still is, *Franklin Street Blues*.

Late in 1944 a collector friend, Robin Brand, returned from a fortuitous army posting to Washington, D.C., where his uncle, Viscount Brand, was at the British Embassy. He triumphantly brought back with him the five twelve inch records by George Lewis on *Climax* and these were an even bigger revelation, being better recorded and featuring George throughout. I then realised his greatness and wallowed in them.

These were followed by the first of William Russell's *American Music* pressings, on a plastic material called Vinylite, and we marveled at their quiet surfaces. Whatever Bunk thought of his recording companions, I considered them perfect. Above all, to this day I found George's original trio version of *Burgundy Street Blues* perhaps the most exquisite and moving jazz masterpiece I have ever heard, while his many choruses on *St. Philip Street Breakdown* were full of excitement and joy.

In case you consider the reactions of my contemporaries and myself to be excessive, you must remember that for a long time we were starved of live jazz from its country of origin. Jazz arrived in Britain in 1919 with the long stay in London by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, which had a profound effect upon our local dance band musicians. They were followed by others: Sidney Bechet with Will Marion Cook's Southern Syncopated Orchestra; Frank Guarente with Paul Specht; Fred Elizalde, who imported a coterie of New York jazzmen such as Adrian Rollini; Bunny Berigan with Hal Kemp; Muggsy Spanier and Jimmy Dorsey with Ted Lewis. These led to Louis Armstrong's visit in 1932 and Duke Ellington and his Orchestra in the following year, both appearing for a couple of weeks at the prestigious London Palladium.

Then in 1935 the British Ministry of Labour announced that they would allow no further permits for American bands to perform in Britain, due to a lack of reciprocity by the American Federation of Musicians, who had, amongst others, refused permission for Jack Hylton and his Orchestra to tour in America. This lamentable state of affairs continued for the next 20 years. For example, when Glenn Miller's Army Air Force Band and Sam Donahue's U.S. Navy Band were stationed in Britain during the war, they were only permitted to perform before audiences comprising allied services personnel.

I was an occasional writer on jazz subjects, even in those far off days, and being aware that Bunk was receiving maximum publicity in print I felt that it was time for George Lewis to be given similar treatment. I realised that nothing of consequence had been written about him, although he himself had contributed a short piece, called *Play Number Nine*, to Art Hodes and Dale Curran's magazine, *The Jazz Record*, which appeared in their January, 1946, issue.

I asked my American correspondents what they knew about George. Linton A. Foersterling of St. Louis sent me a pen portrait, while Orin Blackstone in New Orleans, whom I was assisting with additions and corrections for his four volumes of *Index to Jazz*, provided first-hand local information. With their help I compiled the feature which follows.

It first appeared in the December, 1946, issue of the Belgian *Hot Club Magazine*, translated into French by the joint editors and very keen collectors, Carlos de Radzitzky and Albert Bettonville. No photo of George was available to them, so the article was illustrated by the well known picture of Bunk and the Superior Band, circa 1910, together with a photo taken in much later years of Baby Dodds sitting at the drums.

The article was accompanied by my freshly compiled George Lewis discography, then totalling only 75 sides. Compare this with the second edition of Lennart Falt and Hakan Hakansson's impressive *Hymn to George*, with 195 pages of recording information!

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was entitled:

PORTRAIT OF GEORGE LEWIS

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"This is the portrait of a man who is indisputably the finest black clarinetist alive today. Such a categorical statement is not merely assertion, but is based upon acknowledged fact, with proof on gramophone records to back it. He is so much a part of all that is great in New Orleans jazz, that it seems astonishing that he is a comparatively young man. One assumes that Lewis is at least as old as Bunk Johnson, Papa Mutt Carey or Alphonse Picou, whereas he was born on July 13, 1900, and he is therefore nine days younger than Louis Armstrong. [Or so we understood 60 years ago]

"Without any family influence Lewis showed an intense interest in music from his earliest youth. Certainly his parents showed no musical talent, and as far as he knows there were no musicians amongst his antecedents. He marched in the "second line" of the parades as early as 1907, while a little later his musical tendencies were given further encouragement when his family moved to a house directly at the rear of Hope Hall, one of the venues for the many Creole parties and dances that were a feature of colored entertainment in the city of New Orleans.

"When he reached the age of nine he prevailed upon his mother to provide the money for a musical instrument. She gave him 25 cents to purchase a toy fiddle, but instead he bought a toy flute, with which he followed the parades in earnest, taking a prominent part with the other youngsters in the "second line". In 1916 he could afford to pay four dollars for a real, though rather decrepit, clarinet, from a pawn shop, and he continued his self teaching.

"In the following year he joined the Black Eagle Band at Mandeville, across Lake Pontchartrain and about 50 miles from New Orleans. Soon after he met and played with Isadore Fritz, admittedly his most important single influence on the clarinet.

"For three years from 1920 Lewis played with the famous cornetist Buddy Petit and the trombonist Earl Humphrey, at Covington, Louisiana, and in the twenties that followed he appeared with many historically famous bands, alongside such team-mates as Lee Collins, Punch Miller, Red Allen and Kid Rena. In 1929 he went to Crowley to join the Evan Thomas Band and played his first engagement with the great Bunk Johnson - assuredly a milestone in the career of any sufficiently fortunate musician.

"During the thirties George Lewis remained in New Orleans, playing whenever he could, at a variety of dance dates and for the Tulane Brass Band and the Tuxedo Brass Band. He maintained his livelihood by stevedoring at the docks, unloading the coffee ships that came into New Orleans from South America.

"However, 1939 commenced an era of "discovery" for New Orleans jazz, centred around the publication of the book *Jazzmen*, edited by Frederic Ramsey and Charles Edward Smith, and the magazine *Jazz Information*, edited by Eugene Williams. The following year, Heywood Broun, Junior, visited New Orleans to make recordings of Kid Rena and a band for his *Delta* label. In 1942, Dave Stuart, William Russell, Bill Colburn and Eugene Williams met in the city to build a recording band round Bunk Johnson, whose whereabouts they had discovered, after many years of obscurity. The latter unhesitatingly named George Lewis as his clarinetist and the familiar series on the *Jazz Man* and *Jazz Information* labels were the result.

"Poor tonal qualities and bad recording balance mar these records; in addition, Bunk had not yet gained his former dexterity and frequently dropped out of the three-part choruses to regain his failing lip control. George Lewis is the real genius of these 1942 recordings, because of the magnificent way in which he continuously inspired the front line and took over the lead on clarinet whenever Bunk stopped playing. Regrettably, the recording balance is worst on the *Jazz Man* records, while on the *Jazz Information* sides Albert Warner, an adequate parade trombonist but useless in a small improvising band, obscured much of Lewis's work. I hear that Warner has since changed to trumpet and is now playing in a very satisfactory manner.

"The following year the *Climax* recordings by George Lewis and his New Orleans Stompers were made in that city by William Russell for the well known *Blue Note* company. Bunk Johnson was in San Francisco, appearing at several concerts arranged by the critic Rudi Blesh, and a little known, though extremely fine, trumpet player, Avery "Kid" Howard, was chosen for the session. Jim Robinson, the excellent trombonist on the *Jazz Man* discs (whose only previous appearances on wax were for Sam Morgan's Jazz Band on Columbia in the middle 1920s, and the Kid Rena records on *Delta* mentioned above) fortunately replaced the mediocre Warner.

"These records were highly successful and the printed praise they have received is justly in proportion to their marvellous quality. Indeed, it seems doubtful they could be surpassed, until one has heard the 1944 recordings issued on Russell's own *American Music* label, for in these Bunk, Lewis and Robinson have immortalised their epoch.

"These sides by Bunk Johnson's Band are as near perfect as is possible. The recording balance and quality are remarkably good, when one considers that these were also cut with portable equipment. The new plastic surface material, Vinylite, is admirably quiet, and if one listens to these records with full amplification they radiate a fine imaginative "atmosphere" of New Orleans. George Lewis is superb at all times, whether interweaving between trumpet and trombone in true polyphony, or playing poignantly liquid solos that bring a lump to one's throat.

"By this time, Bunk had regained his mastery of the trumpet and throughout his lead is strong and spirited. Robinson's "shouting" trombone blends with ease, and is especially featured on one side (for which Bunk drops out) entitled *I Scream, You Scream, We All Scream For Ice Cream*, a joyous stomp, based on a popular song of the twenties. Another side is by a trio of George Lewis, clarinet; Lawrence Marrero, banjo; and Alcide "Slow Drag" Pavageau on string bass, playing *Burgundy Street Blues*, the same melody as Lewis used for *Dauphine Street Blues* in his *Climax* series. It is a slow blues, full of sad, simple grandeur, and is more moving than all the jazz trios one has ever heard.

"Encouraged by the initial success of these records, William Russell and Eugene Williams called the same men together again, and brought them to New York City where (with the addition of Alton Purnell on piano) they opened, as Bunk Johnson and his New Orleans Band, on September 28, 1945, at the Stuyvesant Casino - a large, old-fashioned ballroom on New York's lower east side - at 140, Second Avenue.

"After that historic opening they played nightly (except on Mondays) from nine o'clock to one o'clock, for more than three months, until January 12, 1946. This engagement was a wonderful thing for jazz (and Bunk) as it proved that real New Orleans jazz is still vigorously alive, and suitable for dancing, and by white Northerners too! During their stay in New York the band made more recordings, this time for *Victor* and *Decca*, and also something new in their recording activities: as the accompanying band to a vocalist - Sister Ernestine B. Washington - for the *Jubilee* label.

"At the close of their engagement Bunk, George Lewis and the others returned to New Orleans for a rest, and Art Hodes took a highly successful six-piece band into the Stuyvesant Casino for nearly three months. On April 10, 1946, Bunk's band again opened there and is once again "stompin' 'em down", this time with a slightly changed personnel: Bunk Johnson, trumpet; Jim Robinson, trombone; George Lewis, clarinet; Don Ewell, piano; Slow Drag, string bass; Kaiser Marshall, drums.

"Thus, you will see that the great front line has been preserved, but the energetic Baby Dodds has had to retire from regular employment because of high blood pressure. The new management of the Stuyvesant Casino thinks a six-piece band is sufficient and will not employ a banjo player, so Lawrence Marrero was left behind in New Orleans. The new pianist is more satisfactory than Purnell, his style being very "raggy" and reminiscent of Jelly Roll Morton.

"Today, Bunk Johnson has been deservedly awarded his rightful place in jazz as the epitome of the New Orleans heyday, and Lewis is his perfect complement. Let us hope they never return to obscurity, for, thinking of George Lewis in terms of poetry, jazz clarinet and stevedoring do not scan!"

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I added some flavor to the above by incorporating the following direct quotations:

Lynn Foersterling "His tone is thin and wonderfully impressive. Seeing him, you are impressed that he is as relaxed as his music: perhaps an observation that can be made of most great musicians. He is a slight figure, looking a bit unlike the photograph that has appeared so often in print, and stands with his feet slightly apart, fingering the keys of his ancient clarinet, and looking absent-mindedly down the black barrel of the instrument. When, in conversation, he recalled the great names of New Orleans music, he seemed unaware of their greatness, or else had simply assumed for so long that they were (and are) great, that the usual enthusiasm of comparison was not necessary."

Orin Blackstone "His style represents the acme of New Orleans clarinet, full of invention, with an exciting tone and unerringly rhythmic. It is his only instrument; he can of course play the saxophone but he has no interest in it. Employing tremendous drive in his playing, he is a faultless foil to Bunk's trumpet, and it is wonderful that they should be back together again".

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Somewhat expanded and corrected, my article subsequently appeared in 1949 in Max Jones's bi-monthly magazine produced in London, *Jazz Music*, while it was translated into Danish by Hans Jorgen Pedersen and Erik Wiedemann, the editors of the Copenhagen *Jazz Information*, for their April, 1950, issue.

George Lewis went on to international recognition and toured many countries of the world, remaining a modest and unassuming man to the end. His humility was out of all proportion to the stature and fame he acquired in the world of New Orleans jazz. There have been and are many other fine New Orleans clarinetists, but the beauty and simplicity of George's playing put him in a class of his own. To

describe the quality of his playing in words is not easy, without resorting to flowery phrases similar to the pretentious prose adopted by writers on wine. To appreciate him it is necessary to listen to him. Fortunately his recorded legacy is enormous, with much of it available on the *GHB* and *American Music* labels issued by George Buck in New Orleans.

My personal favorite from the later period, however, is the Manchester Free Trade Hall concert in 1957, with Ken Colyer's Jazzmen, partly because of the enthusiastic atmosphere engendered by the audience. It is available as a CD on the *504* label. This was George's first visit to England - he later brought a band with him. As *The Melody Maker* put it at the time, "Tears streamed down his cheeks as veteran New Orleans clarinetist George Lewis flew in to Manchester Airport on Monday. But they were tears of joy at the welcome accorded him by Ken Colyer and his Band playing *Just a Little While To Stay Here*."

His influence upon contemporary clarinet players in the New Orleans idiom was enormous. As an example, Butch Thompson wrote "(In 1962) I became a George Lewis acolyte, something I shared with others around the world, among them Sammy Rimington from England." I saw and heard him several times, but never had the opportunity to meet him face to face, although those who did testified to his charm and modesty. Some years ago, however, I was able to have dinner in New Orleans with his first manager and lawyer, Nick Gagliano, and he confirmed that George was a lovely man and a pleasure to deal with. George's subsequent manager, Dorothy Tait, under pen names, wrote his biography based on her personal reminiscences. A more detailed and penetrating account of his life by Tom Bethell was later published, which is much recommended.

Reading again my impressions of sixty years ago, I would not today change a word.

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\* (What happened to Sweat? H.M.H.)