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Black Music Research Journal, Volume 30, Number 1, Spring 2010, pp.  
85-92 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press



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## THE JAZZ KINGS AND OTHER SPIN-OFF GROUPS

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HOWARD RYE

The band known to history as The Jazz Kings is the best known of the many groups formed by former members of the Southern Syncopated Orchestra in London after their departure from the orchestra. This is largely because New Orleans clarinetist Sidney Bechet was a member (see Figure 1).

The Jazz Kings had an intimate but still not fully elucidated relationship

*Figure 1. Left to right, Pierre DeCaillaux, George Mitchell Smith, Sidney Bechet, Joe Caulk, Manfred Coxito, Benny Peyton. Photo courtesy of Mark Berresford.*



with the twelve-piece group which George Lattimore had previously supplied to the Portman Rooms under the leadership of Frank Withers. It is not absolutely certain when this engagement began. The *Tatler* reported in its issue of September 10, 1919 (no. 950, xiv, "Round and About Notes") that "a Thé Dansant will be held daily from 3.30 to 6.00 p.m. and the evening functions are timed from 8.30 to 12 midnight. A special feature of the Portman dances will be the continuous double band, ensuring an uninterrupted flow of music. The Portman Rooms contain one of the finest ball-rooms in London, which is capable of accommodating 800 dancers." The *Tatler* does not mention the Portman Syncopated Orchestra by name until the issue of October 15, 1919 (no. 955, xii, "Round and About Notes") by which time the Thé Dansant was not starting until 4:00 p.m. However *Town Topics* had already reported (October 11, 1919, 2, "Shows and Autre Choses") that "so great was the crowd that the large salon, accommodating 800 dancers, was found to be insufficient, and the overflow found its way into the smaller salon, where the services of a second band of the Portman Syncopated Orchestra had to be requisitioned." There is no real clue how this is to be interpreted. Evening dress or uniform was essential at night. During the afternoon sessions, dance instruction was given by M. Jean Castanet. The October 1919 issue of *London Amusement Guide* (hereafter LAG) (i/6, 34, "Dancing Notes") described the orchestra as "a combination of New York dance players, who are not only excellent musicians, but sweet singers as well."

The only known members of the orchestra or orchestras at the Portman Rooms are trombonist Frank Withers, reported as the leader by Norris Smith (*Chicago Defender*, January 30, 1920, 7), saxophonists Mazie Mullins Withers and Fred Coxito, violinist George Mitchell Smith, and banjoist Henry Saparo. The last three referred to their membership in the course of affidavits sworn in Lattimore's various legal cases (see Rye 2009).

It was reported by LAG for December 1919 (i/8, 44, "Dancing Notes") that beginning on December 1 the dances would require membership, and members and guests only would be admitted. The evening sessions would in future run from 9:00 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. Soon afterwards the management decided to dispense with the services of the African Americans, and the musicians arrived for work on December 20 only to be informed by the manager, Mr. Rockover, that their services were no longer required (Chancery Division 1920 L No. 175, Affidavit 99). Lattimore himself said he was approached on that same day to provide a band for the Embassy Club (Chancery Division 1920 L No. 175, Affidavit 79), but Benny Peyton testified that Lattimore approached him on December 18 (Chancery Division 1920 L No. 175, Affidavit 96), which must be true if, as Peyton stated, Lattimore declined to entertain the personnel suggested by Peyton because some of them were working in the band at the Portman Rooms. The engagement was originally intended to

start on December 22 and run for three weeks but in the event the opening was postponed until New Year's Eve.

- 31 Dec 19      Opened at Embassy Club, 6–8 Old Bond Street, London [Chancery Division 1920 L No. 175, Affidavit 96; confirmed by *Dancing Times*, January 1920], billed as “The Syncopated Orchestra.”

Original personnel: Sidney Bechet, clarinet; Fred Coxito, alto saxophone; George Mitchell Smith, violin; Pierre DeCaillaux, piano; Henry Saparo, banjo; Benny Peyton, drums.

- 19 Jan 20      Band transferred from Lattimore's management to DeCourville's (i.e. Peyton assumed leadership) [Chancery Division 1920 L No. 175, Affidavit 96, §3]. John George Russell, clarinet, replaced Bechet [Chancery Division 1920 L No. 175, Affidavit 79, §15]. It may be noted that this is three weeks from the originally intended opening on December 22, 1919 and hence the end of the period for which Lattimore had originally contracted. There is unfortunately no available evidence as to the date when Bechet rejoined the band.

- 30 Jan 20      Lattimore granted injunction to stop the band performing [*The Times*, January 31, 1920, 4].

- 3 Feb 20      Injunction lifted [*The Times*, February 4, 1920, 5]. The band had presumably not played in the meantime.

Announcements for “The Syncopated Orchestra” continue in *Dancing Times*, February 1920; March 1920; April 1920; May 1920; June 1920.<sup>1</sup>

- 10 Aug 20      Fire at Embassy Club [London Fire Brigade report]. *Dancing Times* [September 1920] notes that the club was closed after the fire until mid-September. The fire was at 8:40 a.m., so August 9 was the last date on which the band played.

- 3 Oct 20      Opened at Hammersmith Palais de Danse, London, as The Jazz Kings [*Dancing World*, October 1920, 4, 20].

Personnel: Sidney Bechet, clarinet; Fred Coxito, saxophone; George Smith, violin; Pierre DeCaillaux, piano; James Caulk, bandolin; Benny Peyton, drums.

This engagement continued (probably continuously) until August 31, 1921, but announcements in the December 1920

1. Jean-Christophe Averty reports that the Jazz-Band du Majestic Hotel de New York appearing at the Paris Apollo from February 13, 1920 to April 17, 1920 is The Jazz Kings (Averty 1969), but it is now known that this is a reference to a band led by Seth Weeks, most of whose members later worked as The Red Devils (Rye 2010).

- LAG name The Rag Pickers and The Broadway Sextette, which might indicate an interruption in The Jazz Kings' tenure at that time.
- c. Dec 20 Began doubling at Rector's, 31 Tottenham Court Road, London, opposite The Red Devils, an African-American band comprising Sam Richardson, saxophone and banjo; Roscoe Burnett, clarinet and banjo; Elliot Carpenter, piano and leader; Opal Cooper, banjo; Creighton Thompson, drums and vocal. Sidney Bechet is recalled to have sat in with The Red Devils (Goddard, 1979, 64; Rye 2010).
- c. Feb 21 End of engagement at Rector's [still advertised in *LAG*, iii/26, February 1921, 4.
- 22 Feb 21 The Jazz Kings played at the wedding of American musician Eddie Gross-Bart to Ray Seval at The Great Synagogue, Duke Street, London.<sup>2</sup>
- 1 Apr 21 Played at both an All Fools dance at Hammersmith Palais de Danse, London and a Grand Bal Masque at Rector's, London [*Dancing World*, May 1921, 8, 32].
- 31 Aug 21 Presumed (and latest possible) date of closure at Hammersmith Palais de Danse, London.
- 1 Sep 21 Opened at Birmingham Palais de Danse. "The Jazz Kings from the Palais de Danse, London" [*Birmingham Mail* advertisement, September 1, 1921].
- 10 Sep 21 End of engagement at Birmingham Palais de Danse, recalled as lasting ten days ["Where Rhythm Aces Once Played," *Melody Maker*, February 1931, 165].
- Oct 21 Apollo Theatre, Paris [*BMG*, February 1922], probably from October 10 as Pierre De Caillaux was issued with travel documents on October 5. De Caillaux remained in Paris.
- Jan 22 At Hammersmith Palais de Danse, London [*BMG*, February 1922].
- Personnel: Fred Coxcito, Sidney Bechet, reeds; Bert Romaine, piano; George Smith, violin; James Caulk [*sic*], ban-dolin; Benny Peyton, drums.
- Pianist Bert Romaine, who was reported to have recently replaced Pierre De Caillaux, has been assumed to be British, but is a biographical blank.

2. Berresford, Mark, "From New York To London—Eddie Gross-Bart's Story," *Storyville* 102 (August–September 1982), 213. The exact date of the wedding has been confirmed from the contemporary Hebrew press (translations courtesy Louise Meltzer). Gross-Bart, who at the time spelled his name "Grossbart" (Rye 2010), reportedly told another researcher that Sidney Bechet played at his wedding with The Red Devils and it may be that members of both bands were in attendance.

- Feb 22           At Birmingham Palais de Danse, for a month ["Where Rhythm Aces Once Played," *Melody Maker*, February 1931, 165].
- Sep 22           At Rector's, 31 Tottenham Court Road, London [*Dancing World*, October 1922, and confirmed by Sidney Bechet's Home Office file, National Archives Ref. HO45/24778].
- William D. Burns reports the personnel [letter, *Chicago Defender*, September 30, 1922, 6] as: Rudolph Dixon (saxophone), George Smith (violin), Joe Caulk (banjo), Benny Peyton (drums). He does not include Bechet in The Jazz Kings personnel although he refers to him as "Basshay" elsewhere in the letter.<sup>3</sup>

Rudolph Kemp Dixon, one of the two African-American members of The Jazz Kings not formerly with the SSO (the other being William Edward "Kid" Cole, see below), born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, June 10, 1895 or 1896, said when he registered for the draft in 1917 that he was a naturalized citizen born in Argentina. He was working at Bryn Mawr Hospital, East Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. He also said he served for a year as a naval musician. His mother swore an affidavit to his Philadelphia birth and the 1896 birth year for his January 20, 1920 passport application, at which time it was reported that the Pennsylvania authorities could locate no record of his birth, having searched from 1894 to 1896. In the 1910 census he is an inmate at the House of Refuge, apparently an orphanage located in Thornbury, Pennsylvania, southwest of Philadelphia. He was a band corporal in the U.S. Army, serving in France from June 1918 to February 1919. By his own account he arrived in London on July 9, 1920. He was a member of Bert Ambrose's band at the Embassy Club (see above) in 1921 and in November 1921 replaced Edmund Jenkins in The Queen's Hall Dance Orchestra. He returned to Ambrose's reformed band at the Embassy Club in late December 1922. He worked in Paris in early 1923 but rejoined Ambrose at the Embassy Club, London in spring or summer. The date of his return to the United States has not been located. He died July 28, 1944 and is buried at Long Island National Cemetery.

- 2 Sep 22       Sidney Bechet arrested following an altercation with a prostitute (Chilton 1987, 45–54) and sentenced at Clerkenwell Police Court to fourteen days' imprisonment with a recommendation for deportation. An appeal was dismissed on October 13, 1922. Benny Peyton organized a petition against the deportation. Manfred Coxito and Joe Caulk were among the signatories. He was deported on November 3, 1922, sailing to New York City on SS *Finland* from Southampton [National Archives Ref: BT27/996].

3. "Basshay, who was playing at the Pekin in 1918, has truly made the Englishman sit up and take notice with his clarinet."

Nov 22 Still at Rector's and last confirmed there in December 1922, when the personnel is reported as Freddie Cocksedo [*sic*] (saxophone), George Smith (violin), Kid Cole (piano), Joe Kaulk [*sic*] (banjo), and Benny Peyton (drums) ["Back Home," *Chicago Defender*, December 16, 1922, 7].

William Edward "Kid" Cole, born Baltimore, Maryland, February 11, 1885, had been leading a band called Kid Cole's Crackerjacks at the Grafton Galleries, London with George Archer on drums. Earlier in 1922 he had been touring as Cole & Robinson with a child dancer, Willie Robins. The re-formed Crackerjacks played in Paris and Berlin in the mid-1920s often with Joe Caulk as a member. In 1929–30 they played in Cannes on the French Riviera. Kid Cole returned to the United States in January 1934.

Benny Peyton continued to tour as leader of bands of varying compositions under the name of The Jazz Kings across Europe during the 1920s and 1930s.

Members of the Southern Syncopated Orchestra took part in many small groups which played for dancing in London clubs in the early 1920s (see Figure 2). The majority of these groups seem to have been ephemeral and as they mostly appeared in clubs which either did not need to advertise or preferred not to, and as there was as yet no specialist or professional press devoted to the dance band scene, information on these bands is only fitfully available. Those bands which involved Arthur Briggs are considered

Figure 2. The 5 Musical Dragons, with Mope Desmond (Caleb Jones Quaye) at the piano. He died on January 27, 1922 in a freak railway accident. Photo courtesy Suzy Kester.





in the essay on Briggs (see “James Arthur Briggs” by Horst P. J. Bergmeier and Rainer E. Lotz in this volume).

Bertin Salnave recalled a band comprising Roger Jean-Paul on clarinet, Sidney Bechet on soprano saxophone, himself on saxophone, Mope Desmond on piano, and Pete Robinson on drums, appearing at Rector’s (see above) during one of the SSO’s lay-offs (Demeusy 1978, 214). He also recalled a band at the Savoy Club with “Maken” (Cyril Mickens) on trumpet, himself on saxophone, Mattie Gilmore on piano, Paul Wyer on violin, Santos Rivera on double bass, and Buddie Gilmore on drums (Demeusy 1978, 215). It is difficult to accept this recollection at face value since Santos Rivera left Britain on November 13, 1919 before there were any lay-offs, and Cyril Mickens did not arrive until March or April 1920. Salnave also said he appeared at the Embassy Club (see above) in late 1921 with Jacob Patrick, trombone; Sidney Bechet, clarinet and soprano saxophone; George Ruthland Clapham, piano; and Andy Clarke, drums and dancing (Demeusy 1978, 216). This band, which was led by Clapham, had previously appeared in Oslo with two English musicians playing violin and double bass in place of Bechet and Patrick.

After severing his connections with the SSO, Buddie Gilmore led a band at Ciro’s Club, Orange Street, London from September 13, 1920.<sup>4</sup> It was still there in December and possibly into January 1921 (*Dancing World*, January 1921, 25). Paul Wyer is believed to have been a member of this band (Walker 1994, 10). From April 1921, Buddie Gilmore’s Syncopated Orchestra went into Hammersmith Palais de Danse opposite The Jazz Kings.<sup>5</sup> The following month Buddy Gilmore relocated to Paris, joining the version of the SSO that played at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Paul Wyer took a group into Moody’s Club in Tottenham Court Road, which included Milford Warren, trumpet; John Forrester, trombone; and Al Young, drums, from the SSO, augmented by English pianist Ronnie Munro. There were probably other members also (Walker 1994, 10). Forrester left for Paris in fall 1921, and was replaced by Ellis Jackson, direct from the current version of the SSO (see “Southern Syncopated Orchestra: The Roster” by Howard Rye in this volume). Wyer in turn left for Paris early in 1922. Jackson became the leader of the band at Moody’s. Wyer was replaced as musical director first by Jack Goldy and then by Victor Vorzanger. It was through this connection that Warren, Jackson, and Young came to record as members of Victor Vorzanger’s Broadway Band from July 1922.

4. The unconfirmed exact opening date is from Averty (1969). His source is unknown. Averty gives November 17, 1920, as the closing date of the engagement, but there are contemporary reports of the band’s presence there after this, so this date can only represent a temporary interruption if it has any foundation at all.

5. *LAG*, iii/28, April 1921, 8 reports that “two well-known American orchestras, The Jazz Kings and Buddie Gilmore’s Syncopated Orchestra, play alternately at each end of the hall.”



After the departure of Buddie Gilmore's band from Hammersmith Palais de Danse, the band playing opposite The Jazz Kings there was the Original Coloured Dixieland Band.<sup>6</sup> Nothing is definitely known of the composition of this group, but it would be a good guess that SSO alumni were involved. Announcements in *LAG* continue until December 1921, at which point that magazine ceased to carry Hammersmith Palais de Danse announcements. During The Jazz Kings' absence in Birmingham, and possibly at other times, they played opposite Mitchell's Syncopated Orchestra, also described by *LAG* as an American group but mainly made up of British musicians led by (white) American Eddie Gross-Bart.<sup>7</sup> The Coloured Dixieland Band was recalled as playing at the Birmingham Palais De Danse after The Jazz Kings' engagement there.<sup>8</sup> On November 1, 1921 they played for a "Royal" Gala Night at the Hammersmith Palais de Danse, organized in conjunction with the proprietors of *Royal Magazine*.<sup>9</sup> Prizes were offered for the best fancy dresses made of old covers of *Royal Magazine*.

In late 1921, *The Era* (November 2, 1921, 14) reports survivors from the SS *Rowan* playing at the Casino de Danse, Finchley Road, London. It does not say which musicians were involved.

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6. *LAG*, iii/29, May 1921, 6, exactly repeats the previous month's report with just a name change: "Two well-known American orchestras, The Jazz Kings and the Original Coloured Dixieland Band, play alternately at each end of the hall."

7. Berresford, Mark. "From New York To London—Eddie Gross-Bart's Story," *Storyville* 102 (August–September 1982), 214.

8. "Where Rhythm Aces Played," *Melody Maker*, February 1931, 165.

9. "Public Dances," *LAG*, iii/34, October 1921, 10.