

Boy Meets Horn



by
Rex Stewart

Edited by Claire P. Gordon

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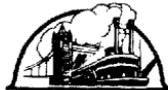
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REX STEWART

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Claire P. Gordon



Bayou Press

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REX STEWART
by
Elmer Snowden

I have been asked before to write a few words about "REX" but I never did, because I am not a writer, and I felt that it would be better for both Rex and me if I just told what I knew to some writer. Well, after reading some of the things that I am supposed to have said, I am going to try and set the record straight for once and for all time.

I first knew Rex in Washington, D.C. that was back in 1920, and I had just about the most popular band in town, in my band was Otto Hardwick, Art Whetsel, Eddie Ellington, who became known as "Duke Ellington" later. We played all of the Dance Halls and worked almost every night. One night we were playing Murrays Casino and a band of younger fellows came in to audition or try out for some dates. That was a crazy bunch of kids led by a piano player named Ollie - Blackwell. They called themselves the "Clown's Band" and sat on the Floor or jumped up on the piano while playing. We did not think much of them, but we did notice Bernard Addison the Band-Man, and the kid in short pants, who did not blow good, but he sure was loud!!! Well the years passed and the next time I saw Rex, we both were in N.Y. There had been the split up of my original Washingtonians and I was playing at a Ballroom named the "BALCONADES," in my band I had Jimmie Harrison on trombone, and he told me how good "Rex", was playing, I couldn't believe it, but Jimmie insisted so often that I told him to bring Rex down and let me hear him. That was in 1923, and when the boy came down he was hired, and stayed with me until 1926, when I made him join "Fletcher Hendersons Orchestra". Now when I say that I made him go with Fletcher-I mean just that. Rex was loyal to me, so loyal that he did not want to leave me even for more money, and the prestige of taking "Louis Armstrong's place in the Greatest Big Band, of that time." Looking back over the years I realize now that "Rex" always had something to offer, when he was with me, he developed amazing technique that was the foundation of Roy, Dizzy, Clifford Brown, and others. Then I watched him grow into a High Noteer with Fletcher Henderson, influenced of course by Louie. And DOGGONE!, if he did not come up with still another style when he went with "Duke", because I never heard anybody else play entire melodies using half-valves! I haven't heard Rex for years except on records, but I wouldn't be surprised, if he did not come up with something new again.

In closing, I would like to say that it is a pleasure to write about a good friend, a great musician, like Rex Stewart.

Sincerely
Elmer Snowden

Elmer Snowden

A Few Words from the Editor

Many will wonder how this book came to be written. How is it possible to publish the autobiography of a musician who has been dead for over 20 years? These are the facts. During the last decade or so of his life, Rex Stewart spent a great deal of time writing. Since his typing was of the hunt and peck variety, loaded with typos, and his spelling was entirely original, I was his willing assistant, collaborator and associate for most of his published works. He and I had worked on about ten chapters of the autobiography before his death. These pages I had typed and edited from his hand-written manuscript and he had then revised. The remainder was on many legal pads, plus scraps of paper, scribbled notes on envelopes and so on. In his will, he left me all his writing and I knew he counted on me to finish the autobiography.

After his death, I farmed out the remaining hand-written pages to be typed and tried to induce a writer friend of his to tackle the autobiography. It really was an insuperable task. The material was shipped back to me, some having meanwhile been xeroxed by another would-be compiler, and now the pages were in haphazard order, a jumble of hand-written, typed and copied pages.

The box full of his writings sat on a high shelf in my closet for several years, waiting for the word processor to be invented as well as for me to have the time to plow through these thousands of words of notes, put them into appropriate time-frames, and select the best writing (at least 10,000 words do not appear in the book as they are in some way a duplication of other material or not relevant). This is an appropriate time to give much deserved credit to my friend and Ellington expert Steven Lasker. It was he who inspected the contents of the "Rex" box and persuaded me to begin work on the book.

Subsequently, he researched dates, spelling of artists' names, etc. For his invaluable input and encouragement, my wholehearted thanks.

Incidentally, I have been asked why the reminiscences only go up to 1948. That is because Rex believed that the events in his life and the music business both underwent a significant change at that time. His intention was to write a sequel incorporating the later years. For the reader's information, in spite of ill-health (high blood pressure and diabetes) these later years were a busy time for him. Most likely, he would have written about having had a small (unsuccessful) food operation in upstate New York, being music director for a New York radio station and playing dixieland music with Eddie Condon before moving to California in 1960. On the West Coast, he contributed jazz reviews regularly to the *Los Angeles Times*, was a disc jockey on local Los Angeles radio, played an occasional gig (many with Stuff Smith), wrote several articles for *Downbeat* (most of which were compiled as *Jazz Masters of the Thirties*), lectured at colleges, did some fancy food catering, composed music, was involved in an oral history project and coached a few advanced cornet pupils. His notes say that he wrote articles for the American magazines *Esquire*, *Jet* and *Downbeat* as well as for *Melody Maker* (England), *Le Jazz hot* (France) and *Estrad* (Sweden). He died suddenly on 7 September 1967, not having started work on the proposed sequel.

In this entire autobiography, only about 500 words were not written by Rex. These consist of further explanations, connecting sentences and such. Basically, this is a book by and about Rex Stewart. I hope the reader will enjoy reading it as much as I did while putting it together.

Claire Gordon
Los Angeles, California, July 1990

Prologue

A book is a printed work on sheets of paper bound together, usually between hard covers. I cannot guarantee that this alleged book will be bound together but I can assure you, dear reader, the work is harder than the covers that I hope the book will be bound with. Possessing no starry-eyed illusions as to the magnitude of this self-imposed task, still I labored under the compulsion to add my thoughts, experiences and recollections. Dealing mainly with segments of a musico's life, I trust this work will prove amusing, informative and even thought-provoking. And before continuing I do want to point out that this account is factual. And although some of the incidents border on the fantastic, they actually happened – and to me.

Yes, my little book is a sort of catharsis and at the same time it proved to be a tenuous thing in substance as it evolved. And I felt a rosy glow of relief, plus a sense of great accomplishment after finding my way out of the maze of memories, despite the obstacles of trying to talk like a third trumpet player and at the same time like a writer. I can go no further without thanking the following enemies and friends, associates, tutors and mentors. And if the above is not quite explicit, let me put it this way: I consider my scope is enlarged by each contact with humanity, whether friend or enemy. As long experience has taught me, the roles are interchangeable and varying from time to time. But they all have been my inspiration and I hereby dedicate this book to Fletcher Henderson, Louis Armstrong, Douglass Gorseline, Happy Caldwell, Paul Whiteman, Duke Ellington, Boris Via, André Hodeir, John Norris, Francis Thorne, Richard C. Green, Ted Stromin, Billie Holiday, Claire Gordon, Margie Stewart, Paul Draper, George Simon, Hugues Panassié, Salvadore Nepus, Benny Carter, Budd Schulberg, Eddie

Condon, Joe Glaser, Elmer Snowden and, with special thanks, Henry Felsen. These names represent a fair cross-section of my friends (and enemies) and I want to thank them collectively for the privilege of having known them.

These thoughts, these dreams, have been built into a marvelous montage which emerges from my consciousness in such torrents that I pause and wonder how could all this have happened to me? Yet, the ten thousand or more one-nighters, as I recall them, kept step with the days – the hungry days, the well-fed days. Nor can I slight the mountains of triumph or the valleys of despair, the glorious acceptances mingled with the humiliating rejections. Separable? Oh no, they are joined, as twins, side by side in the kaleidoscope of my life as a musician, which has been truly a pot-pourri of mirth, madness and melody.

How unfortunate that most musicians get so worn out from the constant struggle to earn a living that they become inarticulate, their memories beclouded and all illusions lost. But, as I mentioned before, I have nothing to lose. I am not on any way-out kick nor am I an alcoholic. And although I do not consider myself a writer, I feel that I can spell out these pertinent thoughts just for the record. One truth I have discovered: it's much easier to blow a horn than to write about when, why and how. Which is why I hasten to disavow usage of the word. And while I am being humble (for the moment) I might as well beg your indulgence for any unavoidable lapses into the vernacular of my trade. No doubt most laymen are aware that musicos have a private language of their own. Anyway, it is my sincere hope that this self-imposed catharsis will be accepted in the spirit of informative fun or something.

THE RAVAN'S establishment was perhaps the most BIZARRE, of all of the places of that type that I HAVE EVER KNOWN, AND I ONLY BECAME EXPOSED TO HIS OPERATION, BY CHANCE, AS HE ~~was~~ ^{did} CATERED TO THOSE WITH BEAU COUPE BUCKS. ONE MORNING ABOUT 4 OR SO A PARTY OF 6 PEOPLE DESCENDED UPON THE CLUB WHERE I WAS WORKING. AND WE WERE DAMN SORRY TO SEE THEM FALL IN, (AS IN THOSE DAYS, THE BAND PLAYS ON UNTIL EVERY LAST CUSTOMER, LETT.) BUT, ~~DAVE~~ ^{DAVE} FRANK WAS THE epitome of OBSEQUIOUSNESS, WHEN THEY ORDERED WINE, SO WE BEGAN PLAYING, IN BETWEEN OUR YAWNS, A BUNCH OF BROADWAY SHOWTUNE CRAP. BUT WE MIGHT AS WELL BEEN THE FURNITURE, FOR ALL OF THE ATTENTION THAT THE PARTY PAID US. UNTIL ONE OF THE WOMEN CALLED OUT, TO HELL WITH THAT ~~CRAP~~ ^{CRAP}, GET THE LEAD OUTO YOUR A---, PLAY US SOME BLUES, DONT EVEN KNOW THE BLUES). WE SQUEED IN TO SOME DOWN TO EARTH BLUES, AND THE PARTY GOT GROOVY, ESPECIALLY AFTER ONE OF THE FELLOWS PUT A HUNDRED DOLLAR BILL ON THE PIANO. ON AND ON, WE PLAYED THE BLUES AND THE PIANO BECAME INCREASINGLY DECORATED WITH BILLS - 10'S, - 20'S, - 50'S - WE DIDNT EVEN CARE, WHEN WE QUIT, THIS WAS A BONANZA NIGHT, BASED ON THE BLUES, HAPPY CAULWELL, TURNED TO HERB GREGORY, OUR TROMBONE MAN, SAYING MAN, COME ON WAKE UP. N' PLAY SOME MORE BLUES, KEYHOLE BLUES, OLD BLUES, NEW BLUES, DIRTY "RED BLUES - WITH ALL OF THIS DOUGH IN FRONT OF US, WE'RE GONNA PLAY THEM BLUES, UNTIL - UNTIL - FAT SHEET, UNTIL, NO - NOT - ONE. THE PARTY FINALLY BROKE UP, AND ONE GUY SAID TO HIS WOMAN, HONEY, WHY DONT WE GO BY THE RAVAN'S, WE'LL GO, AND TAKE THIS HORN MAN. SHE AGREED, AND OFF WE WENT, LITTLE DID I KNOW WHAT I WAS GETTING INTO, AND I DIDNT CARE, NOT WITH ALL OF THAT MOLA FLOATING AROUND.

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1

Go-Get-It

To paraphrase Aesop's fable which said the race goes not to the swift but to the one who endures, I figure to qualify as an endurer. Going back to 1921, when I was one of the seven young members of Ollie Blackwell's Clowns, I stayed in music all my life.

1921 was a momentous year for us members of Ollie Blackwell's Ragtime Clowns because we were actually part of a show! The group ranged in ages from 21 down to 14. Blackwell was 21 – and I was 14. Yes sir, to a man we felt that we were knocking at the door of destiny. We saw *Go-Get-It* shimmering in bright lights over the marquee of the Howard Theater. This theater, in Washington, DC, was named after General Howard, an abolitionist hero of the negro people. I will always remember that fateful day. Although you could not have found our names among those shimmering lights that spelt *Go-Get-It*, still, in the lower left-hand corner of the program, there it was! "Ollie Blackwell's Ragtime Clowns." That was us and we felt about ten feet tall. After all, we had been selected to do the show over all the professional musicians around town.

I'll admit that I was mystified when we youngsters latched on to the *Go-Get-It* show over all the well-known bands and entertainers of the time. I figure we must have been hired because we were the cheapest, because we sure weren't very good – just a group of green, inexperienced kids. Maybe our naivete was refreshing, and the fact is we *had* to be kids to have the nerve to play dance music all dressed up in clown suits. Come to think about it, though, it was a pretty good gimmick.

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Anything went as part of the act, including bad notes, of which there were a-plenty.

Naturally, we were overjoyed at the chance of earning all of that money, 15 whole dollars a week! And there would be no more getting run out of the hall, which often happened when we dared to ask for the \$1.50 that we earned on most jobs. Everything looked great, but I was a bit worried because, with the exception of Perry Smith our violinist, none of us could read music. Not only that, we only played in B flat, E flat and A flat – some keys for singers. This was because Ollie, our leader, was self-taught and couldn't read. But it turned out all right. There was little written music. We woodshedded our way through with many rehearsals and were off to a flying start. The group was piano, drums, banjo, violin, C-melody sax and cornet. The most important man in the group was the violinist Perry Smith, who was 18 at the time. This beloved compatriot deserves much more credit than he has ever received, and I, for one, propose thanking him in print. Perry taught us the melodies, the correct harmonies and directed the group. If it had not been for his help on the music, I guess I would still be in Washington. What a drag to think how constricted my life would have been without the broadening influences of my travels and the people I've met and the things I've seen.

The other fellows in the band were Ernest Hall, our 19-year-old clarinetist from Pops Johnson's band, the same kid group where I had started learning to play; Bernard Addison, who played banjo quite well for his 18 years and later became well known; Ollie, our leader, who played piano and was the oldest at 21. I was the cornet player. There was Tommy Edlin, aged 19, a horn player, and Jim Blair, a triple-talented man whose first instrument was kazoo, a sort of musical gadget with a sound like blowing on a comb with tissue paper. Jim's home town was La Plata, Maryland. He had several talents. One was consuming great quantities of corn liquor, and besides kazoo his other instruments were violin and trombone, which he played quite badly even by our standards. Despite his playing several instruments, nevertheless he was eased out of the band.

Luck was with us all the way during that period. Our

drummer, Tommy Wood, had recently married and was not planning to make the tour with us. We were worrying about this one day when Tommy was late for rehearsal. Just then, the candy butcher, whom we all knew as String Beans, wandered in, sat at Tommy's drums and said, "You are looking at the world's greatest show drummer. I'll take this deal down for you." We liked his work and know-how so much that we all agreed to chip in so he would have the salary he demanded of \$35 a week, and prevailed on String Beans to come along.

It was intended that *Go-Get-It* start with two weeks at our local DC playhouse, the Howard Theater. This theater usually featured revues with casts of 40 to 60 people and was the starting point of a chain of theaters. We were scheduled to follow the usual route, going on to two weeks at the Royal in Baltimore, followed by one week at the Crispus Attucks in Norfolk. Then we would settle in for a long run at the Gibson in Philadelphia and wind up the East Coast tour with two months at the Lincoln, New York City. After that the show was to go west, all the way to Chicago. At least that was what Mr John Mason and Mr Slim Henderson (our bosses) told us.

John Mason's claim to fame is that he is the person who created the comedy routine *Open the Door, Richard*, which later was a song hit for Dusty Fletcher. Anyway, while they sat in the dressing room with us, these two gentlemen told us youngsters all about our potential careers, starting with the musical opus *Go-Get-It*. We were in seventh heaven as we listened to the great showman explain how the colored people were ripe to break away from the traditional vaudeville-type show. Mr Mason and Mr Henderson were sure this experiment was bound to wow the public who were tired of the same old TOBA stuff, which usually consisted of loosely strung together skits and songs. On the other hand, *Go-Get-It* was a revue held together by a plot. It had a story line about two crooks trying to get rich.

To explain about TOBA, these initials stood for Theater Owners' Booking Association and there were about 20 or so members all over the country. Started by S. H. Dudley, this was a loose-knit organization of negro theater-owners, reflecting the growing awareness of entertainment as a release from

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everyday life. They were able to book acts for 20 consecutive weeks, often beating down the price of good talent because, if an act wouldn't work for less money than they could get from the white theaters, they couldn't have the 20 weeks. This was standard business practice and poison for some of the fine talent of the time.

This reminds me that it is strange that there's never been any historical mention about the East Coast and its being the center of musical activity. That is a pity because there were so many dance halls, oyster houses, honky-tonks, beer halls and so on which provided employment for them.

I still remember some of the outstanding acts. There was Boots Hope, who was a truly original ventriloquist. He worked in Chinese make-up speaking pidgin English. Then there was Wilton Crawley, who was famous for dancing with a lighted coal oil lamp on his head. And that's not all – he played the clarinet at the same time! Another personality was Jack Wiggins, "the fastest tap-dancer in the world," as he billed himself. He would open his performance by having a pretty girl come on stage holding out this 100-dollar bill. He bet the money every show that nobody could dance faster than he did. And there were never any takers. I'm sure you've never heard of all the talented people but they were there, spreading joy, as the saying went.

There was a lot of music and bands around Washington at that time. Some of the better known were Doc Perry (whose piano man was Eddie Ellington – before he was called Duke), Elmer Snowden, Sam Taylor and Gertie Wells. Professor Miller had the best doggone military band in town outside of the US Marine band. Then there was Cliff Jackson, Emory Lucas, the Eglin Brothers, Tommy Miles, Jim Blair and Caroline Thornton, to name a few more people you probably never heard of. Only a few old-timers will recall Marie Lucas, who had the greatest ladies' band with at least one male member. Juan Tizol, who later played trombone with Ellington, was with this band. There was a trumpet player, Dan Johnson, nicknamed Georgetown, who was so great that every band wanted him when they heard that horn. Nor shall I ever forget the

Washington Bell Hops. Mose Duncan's Blue Flame Syncopators and Ike Dixon were out of Baltimore. There were the Hardy Boys from Richmond, Virginia. Pike Davis was a wonderful trumpet player and "Baltimore" was a great show drummer; Allie Ross was a violin prodigy and Catherine Perry was another violin great. I couldn't help wondering why we had been chosen over all these accomplished professionals to play this extravaganza *Go-Get-It*. We had a right to feel pretty cocky. Our salary of \$15 a week was big money. Why, at that time grown men were raising their families on far less!

It was all new to me. I was due to start high school that same fall. I had started playing hooky from school to take some of the engagements Ollie Blackwell got for the group. Gradually our price went up and I was earning a dollar and a half. I used to proudly give Mother the dollar and bought myself oysters and pie and cake at school. And I began to feel my oats as I stood on the corner and said, with great nonchalance, "Well, I'll see you fellows when I get back from La Plata or Indian Head." The kids would gape. Some envious youngster would ask, "But won't you be in school tomorrow?" And I would retort with scorn, "School! I haven't got time for school when I can make three dollars for two nights. I can go to school anytime." But I was never so wrong. My school days were just about over and I never did return for any length of time. At that time, I was overwhelmed with the feeling of being a man and almost independent, coupled with the knowledge that in two nights of playing music I could make as much as my mother did at the theater! She played piano at the Blue Mouse, the neighborhood stage and movie house theater, and earned, as I recall, about two dollars a week. And actually that was a fair salary back at that time.

My mother could understand my wanting to be a musician because she and all the rest of the family were so musical. There was always music in our home. One way and another, I had always been exposed. I've read of kids having early recollections of being in a theater trunk. My first memory was hearing organ music. It was nice and warm where I was and I heard beautiful sounds all around me. The memory persisted for years, so I

asked my mother about it. She told me that I was two years old when I attended my first concert – in a box behind the organ! Every member of the Johnson family played instruments and, along with other talented people, were in demand for concerts. My grandmother, grandfather, Aunt Dora, Uncle Fred and mother were all musicians. Grandpa, Grandma and Mother played organ; the others were accomplished on one or more instruments, too. That night they were all performing and, as this was in the days before baby sitters, they had to take me along.

My Uncle Fred was the first person I ever heard playing ragtime. Although my grandmother frowned on what she called the “Devil’s music,” Uncle Fred would play for me as much as he dared. One of his favorites was a tune called *The Preacher and the Bear*, which turned up again 45 years later in jazz music, and it seems strange to me that during those intervening years the bear got lost! The first ragtime piece that I learned to play from reading the notes was *Cuban Moon*. The rest of the tunes came easy, especially since I could learn by ear, and later Mother helped me by teaching me from her sheet music. At the theater she played tunes like *K-K-K-Katy*, *When You Wore a Tulip*, *Walking the Dog*, *Hello, Ma*, *Zip, Zip, Zip* and other popular songs of the day. She alternated these with semi-classical music, Viennese waltzes, the *Poet and Peasant Overture*, some Bach, etc. As a result of her well-rounded musical background, Mother Jane was considered one of the best piano players in town, which was something to brag about because there were many movie theaters and, although each had a good piano player, needless to say, the others were mostly men.

After I had been with Ollie Blackwell for a while, we had a Saturday night job playing a dance at the Eye Street Hall, which was located in the red-light district of Southwest Washington. This was a lowdown district, even lower than Foggy Bottom. All of the pimps and whores were out for a good time. And all of the hod carriers, washerwomen, cooks and housemaids were there forgetting their cares and woes for a while.

“I’m stomping off, let’s go,” Ollie shouted. We played “Get way back and snap your fingers, get over Sal and don’t you

linger, one step, two step all round the hall.” These were the words to a popular ragtime tune. Ollie Blackwell’s Clowns were popular along with the song that night at Eye Street Hall. I was happy about that and even happier to know that, when we got paid, I’d have plenty of money. I intended to buy a lot of fried oysters, ice-cream sodas, ginger bread and hot dogs – all of the favorites of a growing 14-year-old. Yes, the truth of the matter is that most of my earnings went into food. Nevertheless, I was a skinny kid then, with pipe-stem legs, and I have the snapshots to prove it. But I had already nearly attained my full height of 5 feet 6 inches, and weighed about 125 pounds. Even though I’ve never grown any taller I’ve expanded considerably in girth over the years. Mostly, I’ve weighed 100 pounds more!

As a growing lad, I was bicycle mad. For a short time, when we lived away from Georgetown, there was a neighborhood grocery store owned by Mr Parks, an Irishman. I talked him into hiring me as a delivery boy and buying me a bike. But then, when we moved back to Georgetown, no more bicycle. I had pleaded and begged but I see now that this was a stupid, unrealistic demand because there was not bicycle money in our house. Besides, my mother was afraid I’d get hurt and my Grandpa wouldn’t go against her wishes. Although the music bug had certainly bitten me at that time, nevertheless for a few years I would have sold my soul for a bicycle.

It must have been fate that sent Danny Doy asking me to play cornet in his seven-piece band at that time. As chance would have it, Doy had a cycle that he could lend the cornet player who lived in Georgetown so he could get to rehearsal way over in the northeast. So that’s how I got a bike again. Later, when Danny turned his group over to Ollie, I kept the bike to go to the Clowns’ rehearsals in Southwest Washington. This was a wild area. There’d be all kinds of interruptions during rehearsals, like a brawl or some woman screaming “He’s going to kill me.” Once the police shot it out with bootleggers, right across the street from Ollie’s house! It was the closest thing to New Orleans’s Storyville at that time.

As for Georgetown, these days it is a swank section of our nation’s capitol, but the time I write about, 1921, Georgetown