EDDIE LANG – THE FORMATIVE YEARS, 1902-1925

Part Two - The Mound City Blue Blowers in London

By Nick Dellow

Introduction

In the first part of this article, Eddie Lang’s early life and career were examined, up to the point where he joined the Mound City Blue Blowers. Part Two of the article details the Mound City Blue Blowers’ two month engagement at London’s Piccadilly Hotel, with additional appearances at music halls and night clubs. Two dance band recordings made in London at the time of the tour, both of which feature guitar solos that are stylistically and tonally similar to those that Lang recorded with the Mound City Blue Blowers in New York, are examined in detail. Evidence is presented that supports the proposition that these solos are the work of Eddie Lang.

Before we continue to examine Eddie Lang’s career, there are a few aspects relating to Part One that need to be addressed:-

• On New Year’s Day 1924, the Scranton Sirens opened at the Beaux Arts Cafe situated in the Majestic Hotel in Philadelphia, not the Beaux Arts Cafe in Atlantic City. The Sirens did play in Atlantic City later that year, at the Cafe Follies Bergere, as outlined in Part One. However, they began at this venue on June 14th, 1924, not June 24th as stated.

• Chris Ellis (The Netherlands) highlights the fact that Barbara Stanwyck did not partner Frank Fay until 1928, so Eddie Lang could not have joined their vaudeville act in New York in 1923. In fact, in 1923 Stanwyck was a chorus girl in the Ziegfeld Follies. Coincidentally, Lang’s wife Kitty – whom he met in 1920 while working in Charlie Kerr’s band – was also a Ziegfeld girl.

• During the early years of his career, Lang’s name was often given as “Lange”, sometimes written as such by the guitarist himself. The “e” seems to have been dropped in 1925, perhaps after Lang’s passport was issued, and was not used again.

• Brad Kay (USA) suggests that the kazoo-like sound produced by Al Jolson and Gene Greene in their respective recordings, as discussed in Part One, was made by the performers pursing their lips to create the buzzing effect, rather than the sound being produced by the use of a kazoo. The technique is known as “mouth trumpet” or “mouth trombone”.

The London engagements

Through their Brunswick and Vocalion recordings and their stage appearances in New York and Atlantic City, the Mound City Blue Blowers became hugely popular, both delighting and perplexing audiences with their repertoire of hot stomps, blues and dance numbers played on “novelty” instruments. The New York Sun of March 11th, 1925 reviewed the band’s performance as part of an accompanying feature to a headlining film of the day:-

“A comb, a drinking glass, two cigarette cans perforated by a nail, a banjo and a guitar, all manipulated by the Mound City Blue Blowers, are proving to be the musical feature of Joseph Plunkett’s prologue of an East Side alley scene for Colleen Moore’s “Sally” at the Mark Strand Theater this week. The Blue Blowers, widely known as Brunswick record artists and along Broadway, “stopped the show” Sunday night. They played four numbers and the packed theater howled for still more”.

The band’s popularity had by this time spread via recordings to Europe, with their Brunswick recordings being issued in England on the Brunswick Cliftophone label. After captivating American audiences, a European tour was the logical next step, and it wasn’t long before offers were being made, as Jack Bland recalled: “The Blue Blowers were going big at that time, and we got an offer to play the Piccadilly Hotel in London”, [7]. Numerous American musicians had already crossed the Atlantic to play at exclusive hotels and night clubs for enticing amounts of money, which, it has to be said, they often subsequently spent on the alcoholic drinks not so readily available back home! A trip to Europe would also provide the bandleader Ray Miller – the Mound City Blue Blowers’ manager – with the sort of opportunities for publicity that he thrived on. By mid-March 1925, plans were well underway.

The engagement at the Piccadilly Hotel was a fairly lengthy one, running from April 12th to June 10th, 1925. It was booked through the William Morris Agency, 1493 Broadway, New York, with Ray Miller independently managing the band though his offices at 139 West 47th Street, New York. The William Morris...
office had strong connections with London’s entertainments industry. It had an exclusive arrangement to supply American acts for appearances at the Piccadilly Hotel, situated in the heart of London’s West End, as well as the newly opened Kit Cat Club (which was under the same management as the hotel). In this respect, William Morris dealt directly with a London agency ran by Major E.O. Leadlay and Harry Foster. Leadlay also acted as the manager in charge of entertainments at the Piccadilly Hotel, in a similar fashion to William De Mornys at the Savoy Hotel (see “Bert Ralton and His Havana Band” in VJM 166 for details of De Mornys’ career). All these venues specialised in catering for the needs of wealthy Londoners and visiting Americans keen to sample London’s night life in a prohibition-free environment.

None of the band had passports when the London trip was initially arranged. These were applied for and issued on receipt of proof of USA citizenship, with the members of the band vouching for one another. Banjoist Jack Bland vouched for Lang’s application, recalling some 20 years later: “We had to get birth certificates to go to England, and Langie didn’t know whether he was born in Philadelphia, Atlantic City or Italy”. The confusion didn’t stop there: for some reason, on his passport nomination Lang gave his address as 1918 Forest Street, St Louis. The other members of the band emanated from St Louis, but Lang did not: at the time, his registered address was actually 738 St Albans Street, Philadelphia, his parent’s home.

Also accompanying the band for the trip were Lang’s brother Alexander and McKenzie’s wife Marie. Alexander - also known as Thomas or “Tom” - played the guitar, but not professionally; his passport lists his occupation as ‘chauffeur’ while in the 1920 census it was ‘factory worker’. However, if Lang felt too ill to perform, Alexander would sometimes sit in for him on guitar, if he was available.

Alexander ostensibly acted as tour manager during the band’s trip, in charge of day-to-day arrangements, publicity and the like, but his capacity in this respect was at best vague – and it was certainly short-lived! In fact, the principle reason for his going to Europe seems to have been to meet up and chaperone two young Italian nieces who were emigrating to the USA. His passport shows that he was granted an Italian visa on March 31st. He only stayed in London for a few weeks, leaving on April 24th, 1925 to travel onto Italy, via Boulogne, to collect the nieces.

Lang’s visa for visiting England wasn’t granted until the day the band left, which was Wednesday April 1st. The crossing was made on the Cunard line’s RMS Mauretania, departing from New York. Passenger records give the following details:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<tr>
<td>Milton Bland</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salvatore Massaro</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alexander Massaro</td>
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<td>Performer</td>
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<td>William McKenzie</td>
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<td>Performer</td>
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<td>Marie McKenzie</td>
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<td>Housewife</td>
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<td>Charles Slevin</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performer</td>
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The Mauretania arrived at Southampton docks on Tuesday April 7th, 1925 and the band, along with McKenzie’s wife and Lang’s brother, travelled by boat train to London’s Waterloo station.

Jack Bland recalled the band’s voyage:-

“On the way over we had a few bucks saved, and we ran into
a great dice shooter who proceeded to take everybody’s money, betting he could throw the dice against the wall and throw ten or four. Finally we reached England. First thing happened when we got off the boat, Lang wanted to go back immediately. The English fog hit him and his hands turned purple and he got scared”. [7]

Bland’s reference to Lang’s hands turning purple because of the fog is perhaps a slight exaggeration, but it provides another indication that Lang’s illness as a child following the street car accident, as reported in Part One, continued to weaken his constitution as an adult. There are certainly indications that Lang was often worried about his health. Indeed, it is said that during the trip over, he did not often venture on deck for fear of sea-sickness.

An advert in the April 8th, 1925 edition of Variety confirmed that the Mound City Blue Blowers were to open at the Piccadilly Hotel on Monday, April 13th. The London Hippodrome is also mentioned, but as far as can be ascertained, the band did not perform at this major venue, appearing instead at several traditional music halls. For the first week that they played at the hotel, the band doubled at the Stratford Empire music hall in east London, followed by a week at the Holborn Empire, with performances twice nightly, starting at 6 pm and 9 pm. [17]

The band’s performance at the Stratford Empire music hall on April 13th was reviewed in the April 16th edition of The Stage:-

“The first appearance of the Mound City Blue Blowers in England is hardly calculated to set the Thames on fire, for we were unable on Monday to discover anything in their act which might not be done as well, and perhaps better, by English artists. Neither was the turn well presented. The four concerned played the banjo, guitar and other instruments, and if their programme description of “America’s Latest Novelty” is correct, the United States must be rather behind the times”. [18]

The reviewer’s disparaging remarks echo Jack Bland’s recollections of the band’s reception on “the halls”:-

“We played the first number real fast, “Tiger Rag”. Nobody understood or clapped or anything, and the orchestra leader looked at McKenzie, so McKenzie took a spit at the leader and said: “Which way do we go, boys?” and out we went. We finally got through the first show, and we wanted to cancel the whole thing but the agent said: “All you have to do is play ‘Red Hot Mama’ (sic) and they’ll learn it and sing it with you and everything will be OK. So we played “Red Hot Mama” the rest of the week”. [7]

Nearly a decade later, in a tribute to Lang published shortly after his death, The Melody Maker related the guitarist’s wry account of the proceedings:-

“Lavishly advertised, the group opened to a packed house and swung cheerfully into its first number. Its completion was
Miller was probably the instigator of the publicity notices for the band that appear in Brunswick’s record supplements for June 1925 and August 1925. He had considerable “pull” at Brunswick, being one of its major artists. The June 1925 supplement includes a photo of the band aboard the Mauretania, with the caption: “Off to Europe on the Mauritania (sic) to do their stuff before the few remaining crown heads of Europe. We fully believe that George of England will present them with the crown jewels when their “blue notes” startle the classic shades of his historic halls”. The August supplement also includes a photo of the band, but this one was selected with less consideration since it is a publicity shot taken before Lang joined the combination!

Promoting the band in Brunswick catalogues, alongside the recordings they made before the London trip, was no doubt a cost effective publicity exercise, but the expensive full-page Variety adverts, of which several appeared during the two months the band was away on tour, seem misplaced. The Mound City Blue Blowers were barely mentioned in the either the British stage or mainstream press and would have certainly benefited from similar publicity in London-based media.

The Mound City Blue Blowers played at the Piccadilly Hotel almost every night except Sundays from April 13th until June 6th, 1925, and became popular with the younger well-heeled elite who patronised the hotel, as well as with London-based dance band musicians. The band occasionally played at venues other than the Piccadilly Hotel, though after the poor reception “on the halls”, further music hall appearances were not actively sought – or offered. Instead, the band restricted its extra-curricular activities to playing to appreciative audiences at exclusive private parties. Amongst those members of the higher echelons of society whom the Mound City Blue Blowers could count on as fans were, not surprisingly, Edward Prince of Wales and his brother Prince Henry, both of whom were well known devotees of ‘hot’ music. Lang recalled Prince Henry’s enthusiasm in particular: “We played at some very exclusive parties, at one of which Prince Henry was a guest. I remember distinctly how amused he was by our novelty orchestra”. [4]

Amongst the few public appearances that the band made outside of the Piccadilly Hotel was one at a party given at the Kit Cat Club to celebrate the Epsom Derby horse race, announced in The Times of May 25th, 1925. The Kit Cat Club was owned by the proprietors of the Piccadilly Hotel, so the appearance did not contravene the band’s contractual obligations.

Wider audiences knew little of the Mound City Blue Blowers, though the normally strait-laced BBC did broadcast the band on one occasion. This took place on May 28th 1925 at 11.30-12.00 pm, when the BBC broadcast a live performance of the cabaret at the Piccadilly Hotel. A fascinating insight into this early ‘outside broadcast’ – and the impact the band had on enthusiastic ears – is provided by Harry Francis, a drummer during the 1930s and later Assistant General Secretary of the Musicians Union:-

“\"My earliest recollection of Eddie Lang goes back to 1924 [sic], a couple of years before I entered the music profession, when he came to London with the original Mound City Blue Blowers, who appeared in cabaret at the Piccadilly Hotel, and also recorded a couple of titles for the old Brunswick label. I heard a relay broadcast from the hotel via the old British Broadcasting Company, with the aid of my crystal set, and was knocked for six by hearing, for the first time, jazz performed on the guitar. I
England, Lang related only positive memories of his trip:

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music from the 1890s through the “banjo bands” such as the
novelty. The banjo had played a central role in British popular

acknowledged by all the great guitarists of the idiom, both living
and dead, who have followed in his footsteps”. [21]

Lang was certainly the main attraction as far as the coterie of
British musicians who followed the Mound City Blue Blowers
around town were concerned. His guitar playing created a
minor sensation amongst British banjoists during the trip, and
within a few weeks of his arrival they were knocking on his door
asking for private guitar lessons or, at the least, demonstrations
on an instrument still regarded by many as something of a
novelty. The banjo had played a central role in British popular
music from the 1890s through the “banjo bands” such as the
Savoy Quartet that dominated popular syncopated music in the
years during and just after the First World War; the six string
guitar was something completely new and different.

Possessed of an affable and easy-going nature, Lang gave
guitar tuition and advice freely, which only created even greater
demand for lessons! It eventually reached the point where he
couldn’t sleep for banjoists pestering him at all hours.

For the first month or so after the band’s arrival, Lang shared
rented rooms with Jack Bland in the West End of London; Bland
recalled an amusing incident when they first met the landlord:-

“Langie and I lived together. We went up to hunt for an
apartment in Germaine Street [Jermyn Street]. We asked the
price of the apartment and the attendant said “Seven guineas,”
and Langie said “You wouldn’t by any chance be gettin’
personal?”” [7]

The answer to the problem of the unannounced nocturnal
musicians came by way of Nigel Newitt, a British dance band
banjoist who had befriended Lang soon after his arrival. He
suggested that Lang move out of the West End and decamp to
his flat at 9 Great Russell Street, in North Holborn, just far
enough away from the hurly burly to discourage visitors. Here,
at least, there was the chance that he might get some sleep!

Despite the overwhelming attention he received while in
England, Lang related only positive memories of his trip:-

“I would like to mention here that I was very much impressed
by the charming manner in which the English musicians
received us. They were very kind, and showed us all the
worth-while places of interest”.[4]

By way of returning the compliment, Lang was still
remembered with affection many years after the band departed:
“Musicians who met him in England still speak of his charm
and the easy manner in which he wore his laurels” wrote one
commentator shortly after Lang’s death.[22]

Jack Bland also spoke about Lang’s popularity during the tour:-

“In London, Langie took his guitar to the London Sporting Club
and played, and they made him and me charter members. That
really meant something, because the Sporting Club was
composed of sportsmen who could bet up to a million without
putting up the money. Langie was one of the best card players
in the country. He could play any kind of cards”. [7]

Bland is almost certainly referring here to the National Sporting
Club, which was situated at 43 King Street, Covent Garden; no
trace of a club named the London Sporting Club has been
found. The National Sporting Club was indeed famous for its
wealthy patrons gambling large sums of money on the boxing
matches that were regularly held at the club’s premises.

The Mound City Blue Blowers had lost none of their popularity
in America during their absence, and consolidated their appeal
through further recordings for Brunswick/Vocalion, as well as
numerous live appearances. They were often contracted to play
four or five numbers as part of the added features between
movies in large cinemas; Lang was especially popular with
audiences, as Jack Bland recalled:-

“I would like to mention here that I was very much impressed
by the charming manner in which the English musicians
received us. They were very kind, and showed us all the
worth-while places of interest”. [4]

Ironically, their success led to the eventual break-up of the
band, though the Mound City Blue Blowers name was
resurrected occasionally for recordings organised by McKenzie.
Jack Bland again:-

“The Mound City Blue Blowers finally broke up. McKenzie got
rich – had a lot of money, and wanted to go to St Louis. So
Langie went with Venuti as a team.” [7]

London recordings

Harry Francis’ comment that the Mound City Blue Blowers
“recorded a couple of titles for the old Brunswick label” seems
to suggest that the band took part in recordings while in London. There is, however, a degree of ambiguity in his statement, in that it could be referring to the band’s records made in New York but issued in England on the British Brunswick Clifffophone label. Perhaps he thought that these were recorded in London; however, British Brunswick did not commence domestic recording operations until 1927.

The confusion is compounded by the fact that Eddie Lang himself claimed that the band recorded whilst in England, stating in Rhythm magazine in 1932 that: “We also made several records, which sold very well”. No such recordings by the Mound City Blue Blowers have come to light. Were they made but remained unissued? Rumours have circulated for years that the Mound City Blue Blowers made test pressings while in London and that each member of the band was given a copy, but threw them overboard during the return trip home. This implausible story probably finds its origin in an equally unlikely tale that appeared in the mid-1930s in an article penned by the pioneering female British jazz critics Betty Edwards and Mary Lytton under their nom-de-plume B. M. Lytton-Edwards:-

“It was not a good sailor and stayed below during the Atlantic crossing. Even a short trip to France made him unhappy. He was told he would have to pay customs duty on his Blue Blowers records, and Eddie, no French scholar, thought the sum mentioned so excessive that he dropped the records overboard before reaching Calais”, [23]

The original story, if there was one, was undoubtedly subject to more than a fair degree of journalistic license! Theories and suggestions about Eddie Lang making recordings whilst he was in London as a member of the Mound City Blue Blowers cannot be dismissed altogether, however. Indeed, there are at least two recordings that contain guitar solos that indicate the presence of Lang, even though his colleagues are absent. Could these be the “several records, which sold very well” that Lang spoke of in the Rhythm article?

The recordings are:-

**Savoy Orpheans:**

*Hayes, Middlesex, recorded May 4, 1925*

Bb-6081-2  *Blue Evening Blues*  HMV B-2035

**Gilt-Edged Four:**

*London, recorded between c. June 3-7, 1925*

A-2171  *Best Black*  Col 3704

**Blue Evening Blues**

In the liner notes for the Retrieval/Challenge CD *Everybody Stomp (1923-1927) - The Savoy Orpheans, Savoy Havana Band and The Sylvids (RTR 79070)*, which was issued in mid-2012, the author of this article stated that the guitar solo on the Savoy Orpheans’ *Blue Evening Blues* was highly reminiscent of Eddie Lang. Indeed, suggestions that Eddie Lang might be the guitarist on this side had been circulating amongst collectors and enthusiasts for some time, and a comment to this effect was even made on YouTube in 2006. Obviously, further research into the likelihood of Lang’s presence on this recording was required and this was thus undertaken by the author, with the help of those named in the references given at the end of this article.

Recorded on May 4th, 1925, *Blue Evening Blues* features a 32 bar guitar solo very much in Lang’s style, with bending of the strings to create “blue notes” and a one bar break half way through the solo that contains a phrase identical to one Lang plays in a break on the Mound City Blue Blowers’ Vocalion of *Panama* (Vocalion 14977), recorded on December 12th, 1924 in New York. The two other titles recorded by the Savoy Orpheans during the same session as *Blue Evening Blues* do not contain any guitar work; instead, a banjo is heard and this sounds very much like the band’s regular banjoist, Pete Mandell.

As Eddie Lang was in London when *Blue Evening Blues* was recorded, the notion that it is he who solos on this side is at least a practical possibility, aside from the subjective aural evidence provided by the record itself. Certainly, there are no other examples of such advanced blues-influenced guitar playing on a British dance band recording up to this point in time, or indeed for several years afterwards (that is, apart from *Best Black*, the other British recording discussed in this article). One should bear in mind that the guitar was still regarded as a novelty instrument, which makes a guitar solo of such length on a dance band recording made in London at that time even more extraordinary. As to emphasise the unusual nature of the recording, its coda is rounded off with a declamatory single bent “blue note” played by the guitarist; again, the style is pure Lang.

If the guitar solo is by Eddie Lang, then *Blue Evening Blues* is the only known side amongst the vast number that the Savoy Orpheans recorded during the 1920s that features a musician who was not a regular Savoy sideman. That is, if we accept that the guitar solo is not played by a member of the Savoy Orpheans or one of the other musicians who were employed to play in dance bands at the Savoy Hotel or its sister hotels, the Berkeley Hotel and Claridges.

The personnel of the Savoy Orpheans at the time the recording
was made as was follows:-

Debroy Somers dir: Vernon Ferry, t / Billy Lyne, t / George Chaffin, tb / Herb Finney, as, cl / Thomas “Spatty” Timothy, as, cl / Ray Starita, ts, cl / Reggie Batten, vn / Billy Thorburn, p / Pete Mandell, bj / Fred Underhaye, bb / Ronnie Cubertini, d

In addition to the Savoy Orpheans, the Savoy Hotel had a second dance band, the equally well known Savoy Havana Band, directed at the time by Cyril Ramon Newton. The Savoy’s sister hotel, the Berkeley, employed the smaller Boston Orchestra, led by saxophonist Howard Jacobs, and Claridges featured a band directed by Al Collins. These bands consisted of a mixture of top American and British musicians who formed a pool of sidemen that could be drawn upon for recording sessions; as a result, musicians from one band sometimes appeared on recordings listed as by another band within the Savoy group.

Pete Mandell, the Savoy Orpheans’ banjoist at the time, had been a member of the band since its inception in October 1923. He can be ruled out as the guitarist on Blue Evening Blues since he can be clearly heard playing banjo behind the guitar solo. Mandell was a talented banjoist – very much of the strident, no-nonsense variety – and he solos on several recordings by the band. He also recorded banjo solos in his own right – such as Banjomania – none of which sound anything like Eddie Lang. As far as is known, Mandell never recorded on guitar. Similarly, the banjo playing of the Savoy Havana Band’s Dave Thomas comes nowhere close to Lang in style, and there are no known examples of him playing guitar on recordings either.

That leaves the Boston Orchestra’s Joe Brannelly. Brannelly was a Bostonian of Irish descent who came over to London in 1922 with fellow Bostonians, saxophonist Howard Jacobs. Brannelly stayed in England for the rest of his life, eventually becoming bandleader Bert Ambrose’s right hand man and ‘fixer’. Brannelly was a well-respected banjoist who recorded extensively, but there are no indications on either the dance band or solo recordings he made on banjo that provide any evidence that he was influenced by Lang. However, as with many other banjoists at the time, Brannelly began doubling on guitar following the rise in popularity of the instrument, and then we do begin to detect the possible influence Lang in his playing. Typical of his guitar solo work is that heard in You Don’t Like It - Not Much by the Rhythmic Eight (Zon 5062), recorded on November 29th, 1927. Here, as on other tracks, he plays a four string tenor guitar, an instrument he stuck to throughout his working life, never making the move to the six string guitar. His solo on You Don’t Like It - Not Much contains some Lang-like phrases and some neat single-string work with note bending, but it is much stiffer, less rhythmic and less imaginative than Lang. It is highly unlikely that Brannelly would have been playing with the fluidity of Lang in 1925, when Blue Evening Blues was recorded. His tone is also different from that heard on the Savoy Orpheans side.

Therefore, with no further candidates, we inextricably return to Lang. If it is Lang, though, how did he come to play on Blue Evening Blues? There are several possible explanations, none of which are particularly satisfactory. Perhaps one or more of the musicians in the Savoy Orpheans heard the Mound City Blue Blowers in London and managed to pull a few strings to allow a few strings to be pulled by Lang! However, the leader of the Savoy Orpheans, Debroy Somers, wasn’t overly enamoured by jazz, beyond peppering up-tempo sides with solos now and then. In fact, the idea of Debroy Somers agreeing to let Eddie Lang sit in on just one side so that he could play a 32 bar solo appears unlikely on the face of it. Recording sessions were booked in advance and held to strict timetables, and Somers was a man of military precision who took a pragmatic stance when it came to the production of dance music. Having said that, doubtless he would have been appreciative of Lang’s skills as a musician and was quite possibly aware of the stir he was causing in London’s dance band circles during the Mound City Blue Blowers’ visit. It is not entirely beyond the boundaries of reality to conjecture that Somers may have made an exception and been persuaded to allow Lang to sit in on this recording.

One might also ask why Lang would have bothered travelling to HMV’s studios in Hayes, Middlesex, just to record this one side anonymously. One suggestion is that a recording fee would have come in handy for Lang, especially since the Mound City Blue Blowers were not exactly blown off their feet with work during their London tour. Hayes is but a few minutes by train from London’s Paddington station and the HMV studios were just a few minutes’ walk at the other end.

Riding above all these theories is the aural evidence, the most compelling aspect of which is the one bar break that occurs halfway through the guitar solo, which, as mentioned earlier, is virtually identical to a break Lang plays on the Mound City Blue Blowers’ earlier recording of Panama (Vocalion 14977). Could the break have been played by another musician who had heard the Mound City Blue Blowers’ side? It’s unlikely, since Panama wasn’t issued in the UK until 1926, when it appeared on the Guardsman label (as by the Original Black Band). There is also the possibility that Lang brought a copy of the Vocalion record over to London during his trip and played it to British guitarists, and possibly demonstrated the break on his guitar as well. However, the break on Blue Evening Blues is so close to the Vocalion and is played with such Lang-like feeling, that when this aspect is added to the bent blue notes and advanced approach heard elsewhere in the solo, the aural evidence quickly reaches the point where Eddie Lang becomes by far the most likely contender for the guitar work heard on this side – far more likely, in fact, than the possibility of a banjoist within the Savoy’s pool of musicians – or any other London-based musician – learning to play Lang’s style of jazz guitar and closely matching its subtle idiosyncrasies and genuine blues inflections, all within a short space of time.

One last, admittedly minor, detail concerning the guitar player on Blue Evening Blues is that just before he plays the one bar break referred to above there is the sound of a little vocal grunt. You have to listen very carefully to catch it, but nonetheless it is there.

Blue Evening Blues is not the only recording made in London in 1925 that has a long solo that sounds very much like the work of Eddie Lang......

**Best Black**

For a number of years, the author has owned a copy of Best Black by the Gilt-Edge Four and often wondered if the excellent blues-tinged guitar solo it contains could be another example of the work of Eddie Lang recorded during his stay in London. As with Blue Evening Blues, more research was needed, and the results are presented here.
The Gilt-Edged Four was a British Columbia ‘hot’ studio band led by American saxophonist Al Starita. It was formed not long after Al Starita left the Savoy Orpheans in early May 1925, shortly before he took up leadership of the resident band at the new Kit Cat Club in the Haymarket, London.

Though the original recording ledgers for British Columbia are no longer in existence, by comparing the matrix number against those of other British Columbia sides of the same period, the Gilt-Edged Four’s Best Black can be determined with reasonable accuracy to have been recorded between June 3rd and June 7th, 1925 (not “mid June” as stated in Jazz and Ragtime Records, 6th edition). This range of dates was between a week and three days in advance of the Mound City Blue Blowers’ return home to New York, which was on June 10th, 1925. Best Black was subsequently issued on Columbia 3704, with My Sugar from the band’s following session (late June 1925) on the reverse.

The 32 bar guitar solo on the Gilt-Edged Four’s Best Black is stylistically and tonally a close match to the 32 bar guitar solo played by Eddie Lang on the Mound City Blue Blowers’ earlier recording of the number, which was made at Vocalion’s New York studio on January 26th, 1925 and issued on Vocalion 14978 as by McKenzie’s Candy Kids. In addition to the guitar solo itself, both recordings of Best Black also include single-string counter melodies played in a similar style, with a distinctive descending phrase repeated several times. In the case of the Gilt-Edged Four’s version, the counter melodies are played underneath the 32 bar alto sax and trumpet solos that are also a feature of the side. Lastly, the Gilt-Edged Four’s version has a single-string one bar break in the coda, featuring strongly emphasised blue notes. Incidentally, the chords strummed towards the end of the 32 bar solo on the Gilt-Edged Four side can only be produced on a six string guitar.

The chart given on the previous page highlights the similarities, and also the differences, between the guitar solo Lang plays on the American Vocalion and the guitar solo in the Gilt-Edged Four’s version of the number. The main “blue notes” are indicated in the chart by the u-shaped curves above the notes (the majority of these blue notes are bent from G to Ab) or by way of ties across notes, though micro-bending of the strings is evident elsewhere in the solos in a way that is too subtle for annotation. There are enough differences to indicate that the Gilt-Edged Four’s guitar solo is not just a case of slavish plagiarism. In fact, only five bars of the 32 bar solo are identical when compared to the Mound City Blue Blowers’ version, though the overall structure of the solos is very close in terms of conception and execution.

It is not just the guitar playing on the Gilt-Edged Four side that deserves our attention. The trumpet solo is also of considerable

Musical comparisons between the guitar solos on Best Black by the Mound City Blue Blowers (top) and the Gilt Edged Four (bottom). Transcribed by Frank van Nus.
interest, and also required further research. It has long been assumed that Max Goldberg was the trumpet player on all the Gilt-Edged Four’s sides, and he is listed as such in all discographies that include the band’s recordings. However, in a taped interview conducted in Australia in the 1970s, Max Goldberg categorically stated that he is not on the Gilt-Edged Four’s earliest recordings, recalling that “They used an American from New York for a couple of sides before I got there”. Goldberg couldn’t remember the trumpet player’s name but, as Mark Berresford points out, aural evidence clearly points to Julius Berkin, a highly regarded New York trumpeter who played in England at various times during the 1920s. Mark has made a study of Berkin’s work for several years and notes that a comparison with solos that he recorded earlier in 1925 in New York with Joseph Samuels and Nathan Glantz (The New Syncro Jazz Band’s Big Bad Bill and Glantz’s Good Bye Ain’t Always Gone are good examples) demonstrate beyond any reasonable doubt that he is the trumpet player on the Gilt-Edged Four’s first two sessions (the band’s third recording session, with Goldberg replacing Berkin, took place in December 1925).

Berkin is an excellent improviser, highly adept with mutes, and his hot, growling style and bending of notes provides an empathetic counterpart to the blues playing of the guitarist in Best Black. Berkin’s highly individual style is also clearly evident on Hot Miss Molly and I Can’t Realise, which, like Best Black, were recorded at the Gilt-Edged Four’s first session. Don’t Bring Lulu and My Sugar, from the band’s second session, contain further Berkin solos, as well as some neat alto sax playing by Starita (Edgar Jackson, the editor of the Melody Maker, once described Al Starita’s alto sax solos as “a perfect example of refined but arresting modern extemporisation”). All these sides, with the obvious exception of Best Black, feature the banjo playing of Len Fillis. Joe Brannelly replaced Fillis on banjo for the band’s fourth session, sometimes playing four string tenor guitar with the band as well.

Over the period of its studio-bound existence, from June 1925 to September 1927, the Gilt-Edged Four was often enlarged beyond the original four members, sometimes reaching as many as seven musicians, not including the vocalist! Al’s brother Ray occasionally played tenor sax and their younger brother Rudy joined them on xylophone on later sides.

Though he couldn’t remember the name of the New York trumpet player who preceded him, Max Goldberg did recall the names of the guitarists/banjoists that were members of the Gilt-Edged Four at various times: “Joe Brannelly was on guitar, and before him was Eddie Lang. Eddie was the first one. Len Fillis played the guitar as well”. This astounding recollection was made without any provocation or mention of Lang’s name by interviewer Jack Forehan. Goldberg’s affirmation provides further evidence in support of Lang’s presence on the Gilt-Edged Four’s recording of Best Black. Presumably, Goldberg had been told about Lang – and indeed Berkin – by Al Starita or one of the other musicians in the band who had played on the first session, during which Best Black was recorded. Indeed, there seems to be no other reasonable explanation for how Goldberg would otherwise have obtained information regarding the presence of Eddie Lang and the “American from New York” on sessions recorded before his arrival.

Accepting the aural evidence and Max Goldberg’s comments, the personnel of the Gilt-Edged Four’s recording of Best Black is most likely to be as follows:-

Julius Berkin, t / Al Starita, as / Sid Bright, p / Eddie Lang, g

Other musicians specifically remembered Julius Berkin being in London at the time. American drummer Eddie Gross Bart (known at the time as Eddie Grossbart), who came to England in January 1920 and stayed for the rest of his life, recalled meeting Berkin at the Kit Cat Club while Ted Lewis and his Band was appearing there during an extended engagement (from July 6th until September 15th, 1925). Gross Bart already knew Berkin well, having worked with him in New York some eight or nine years earlier. Berkin next resurfaces in England on September 13th, 1926, arriving at Plymouth from New York aboard the RMS Mauretania with fellow musicians Barney Sorkin (sax), Ephraim Hannaford (trombone) and Henry Edelson (banjo) to join Ambrose’s Orchestra at the famous Embassy Club. Amongst the other musicians in the band was Eddie Gross Bart! Unfortunately, Ambrose’s Embassy band did not record or broadcast during this period, prompting the Melody Maker to ask, in its November 1926 issue, “Why isn’t this talented band recording and broadcasting?” The answer was due in part to the Embassy’s owner Luigi Naintre’s reluctance to compromise the band’s ‘exclusivity’.

Berkin returned once more to the USA in July 1927 and subsequently worked for a time in B.A. Rolfe’s Lucky Strike Orchestra, recording with the band for Edison and also broadcasting with it. This effectively rules out his participation on the 1928 Ambrose HMVs on which he is shown as being present in the standard discographies (which give his first name as “Leslie” for some reason). From the mid-1930s to the late 1950s Berkin worked regularly in bands on transatlantic ocean
was Lang’s own composition. Apart from the Vocalion version, the Gilt-Edged Four’s interpretation is the only contemporary commercial recording of the number. This begs the question: was Best Black ever published and made available as sheet music? The answer appears to be a definite “no”. According to the US Library of Congress files, the composition was registered as “unpublished” but with the copyright held by the Brunswick-Balke-Collendar Company, filed on April 18th, 1925. Interestingly, the Columbia label of the Gilt-Edged Four’s version gives the composer of Best Black as “Ed Lang” whereas the American Vocalion states “[Frank] Carle and [Red] McKenzie”, as does the entry in the Library of Congress file. The implication here is that the Gilt-Edged Four sourced the number directly from the composer.

Up until the current research conducted for this article, it was generally assumed that the guitar heard on the Gilt-Edged Four’s version of Best Black was the work of Len Killis, who was one of the founding members of the band. Killis was a South African who moved to London in 1923 and soon gained a reputation as one of the best banjoists around. Following Lang’s arrival, he also began to play the guitar, becoming a Lang devotee, even going so far as to state that “Lang has no greater admirer than myself”. [16]

Such was Killis’ admiration and interest in Lang’s guitar playing that when, in 1927, he was asked by the Melody Maker to write a series of technical articles, he started off with an article that attempted, only partly successfully, to explain the technique of single-string note bending. The text acknowledges Lang’s influence:-

“The first artists to introduce this “pulling the strings” effect to this country were Eddie Lange (sic), of the Mound City Blue Blowers, and Frank Reino of the Vincent Lopez Band. The former is considered the world’s finest exponent of modern guitar playing and the latter is probably the world’s finest banjoist. The effect is more easily obtained on the guitar than the banjo”. [25]

Indeed, the technique of note bending does not really lend itself well to the banjo, though it is of course possible.

Amongst Killis’ solo recordings, one in particular – Meadow Lark, recorded in early 1927 – does clearly indicate the influence of Lang. It contains single-string passages in which notes are bent to achieve something approaching the blues effect Lang was known for (interestingly, in Killis’ article he does not mention the blues when he discusses “pulling the strings”). In addition, there are some Lang-like chromatic chord progressions. However, the entire effect is rhythmically on the stiff side and even the bent notes played in the single-string passages have a textbook quality about them. In other words, they lack the feeling and spontaneity that is immediately evident in the guitar solo in the Gilt-Edged Four’s Best Black, as well as in the guitar work heard elsewhere on the side (i.e. in the improvised single-string counter melodies under the other soloists). One is left in no doubt that the recording of Meadow Lark is very much the work of Len Killis, but equally that Killis is not responsible for the guitar solo in Best Black.

Another version of Best Black was also recorded in London around the same time as the Gilt-Edged Four’s version. This was not issued, but a 10 inch test pressing exists. The number is played as part of a medley of tunes (along with Yes Sir, That’s My Baby and I’ll See You In My Dreams). This remarkable one-off test “rehearsal” was discovered by Brian Rust in a junk shop in Harrow, North London, in the 1960s and is now in Mark Berresford’s collection. Obviously, the recording was not intended to be released, as it has fluffs and false starts and the musicians are heard talking and encouraging one another. In fact, with its combination of spontaneity and casual informality it could be regarded as an early “jam” session, perhaps the first ever to be recorded! The recording company has not been determined and there is no indication on the plain pink label; however, it looks like it might be a British Vocalion test. It features Al Starita on alto sax, fellow American and Savoyard Van Phillips on clarinet (his name is hand written on the label, and one of the musicians shouts “Phil!” [presumably his nickname] during his clarinet solo), Sid Bright on piano and a banjo (or possibly a tenor guitar) that sounds as if Len Killis could be the musician responsible. The banjoist/tenor guitarist plays the melody of Best Black in a solo that features single-string work and simple strumming. There is no bending of the notes, so consequently the solo lacks the blues feeling prevalent in both the Mound City Blue Blowers’ Vocalion and the Gilt-Edged Four’s Columbia of Best Black. It is also rhythmically stiff. Obviously, the musician responsible either heard the American Vocalion or British Columbia recording of Best Black or witnessed Lang himself playing the number while in London. The recording at least demonstrates how a dance band musician working in London would attempt to play in the Lang style, and how difficult it was to carry it off with any real conviction.

London recordings - conclusion

The assertion that the guitar solos heard on the Savoy Orpheans’ Blue Evening Blues and the Gilt-Edged Four’s Best Black are by Eddie Lang is based on aural evidence provided by the recordings themselves, plus other circumstantial evidence concerning such aspects as Lang’s whereabouts at the time the
recordings were made and the fact that the trumpet player Max Goldberg, who recorded many sides with the Gilt-Edged Four, named Eddie Lang as the band’s first guitarist. In the author’s opinion, Eddie Lang is by far the most likely candidate for both solos. It should be noted that the majority of collectors, researchers and musicians the author has contacted have also concluded that the guitar solos should be attributed to Eddie Lang, though many of these also sound a wise cautionary note in applying such attributions. Indeed, despite the strong evidence presented above, this should not be regarded as an open and shut case. It should remain open to further research and the possibility, perhaps, of other undiscovered Eddie Lang recordings coming to light.

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[8] Jazz and Otolaryngology: The Death of Guitarist Eddie Lang, Dr. David L. Mandell, Bixography website (http://bixography.com/langmedicalreport.html)

Sound files of the recordings discussed in this article can be found on the VJM website - www.vjm.biz/sounds.html