

## Oh Brother Green, Pray Come to Me To Charlie Green aka Trombone Cholly

By Tom Buhmann

The words in the title above from an old Civil War Confederate ballad were running through my head as I tried to cut through the shroud of myths and make the real Charlie Green materialize.

He was already a legend when he died, and soon after rumors spread that he was alive and working in Europe. It turned out to be the trombone player Jake Green, who lived in Holland during the 1930s. Charlie Green was also known as “Big Green” or “Long Green” and the legend made him grow into unlikely proportions as over 7 ft. tall.

Apparently, he could be fearsome. Rex Stewart related in much detail how Charlie Green ran him out of the Fletcher Henderson band through constant heckling and bullying, and how he would intimidate younger band members by brandishing a huge revolver<sup>1</sup>. In direct contrast to this, trombonist Dickie Wells called Charlie Green one of the grandest fellows ever and that there was no way of making him angry<sup>2</sup>, and banjoist Ikeay Robinson recalled:

*“Green would play and just knock me out, I think he was the greatest trombone player I ever played with....Big Green found out that I liked to drink too, so we started to be running buddies....Big Green liked me a lot but a lot of people didn’t like him because he was rough. He thought I was a prince, we used to run together a lot; he always said he wouldn’t ever run with anyone who couldn’t play<sup>3</sup>”*

The legend includes his death. It was for long considered an unshakeable fact that Charlie Green froze to death on his Harlem doorstep, because he had lost his key and decided to remain seated outside until someone would open the door to let him in. That story was taken for a fact until Doctor Frederick Spencer discovered that Charlie Green, a forty-two year old colored musician was admitted to Harlem hospital on November 19, 1935 and died there on November 27 from tuberculosis<sup>4</sup>. I shall deal further with how the froze-to-death-on-his-doorstep legend might have come into existence at the conclusion of this article.

It has never been possible to establish with any certainty when and where Charlie Green was born, but it has been assumed that he was born around 1900, and some references still reflect that. However, Dr. Spencer’s discovery of a death certificate that gives his age at the time of death as forty-two points to a birthdate in 1893, and other references have picked that up. It has not been possible to identify Charlie Green in the 1910 or 1920 Federal Censuses, nor has any Draft Registration Card from WW1 turned up, so it seems that there are no primary sources to his birthdate, birthplace or early life. Most sources however concur, that his musical



career began in Omaha, Nebraska.

### Omaha and jazz

When the Great Migration from the South got under way, Nebraska and, in particular Omaha, had the distinction of being one of the fastest growing black communities in the Midwest. The black population in Nebraska grew rapidly during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in 1920, 10,315 individuals living in Omaha were black<sup>5</sup>.

Most of the immigrants worked in the slaughterhouse and meatpacking industries that rivalled Chicago and eventually overtook it as the center for the livestock trade. By 1910, up to 10,000 pieces of livestock were landed in Omaha every day though the

services of the Union Pacific Railway that consequently also provided work for large numbers of southern immigrants<sup>6</sup>.

The majority of the black residents lived in Omaha’s “Near North Side”, that was a mix of a working-class residential area and a vice district, and the immigration flood had barely started when black entertainers followed to explore the opportunities for work in the dance halls and clubs that opened in the black section. A few came, in line with the tradition, by the Mississippi/Missouri River waterway, but most arrived by rail.

New Orleans bandleader Dan Desdunes arrived in 1904 and began organizing bands and musical events. He led a 30-piece brass band as well as smaller cabaret groups, and is said to have used the term “jazz” to describe his music as early as 1917. Desdunes has been described as “the father of negro musicians in Omaha” because he inspired an active and unique black musical life in both black, white and mixed quarters of the town that drew on both out-of-town names and local talent<sup>7</sup>.

Among the best of the local talent was trumpeter Frank Shelton “Red” Perkins, who came to play a role in Charlie Green’s early career. In 1923, Perkins named his band The Original Dixie Ramblers and under that name, they remained active into the 1940s and became known as one of the better territory bands.

### Charlie Green’s early career

Today it is generally assumed that Charlie Green was born in Omaha, Nebraska. Without any primary sources to back up that assumption, Omaha is not the most likely candidate,



*Red Perkins Dixie Ramblers, c. 1927, after Charlie Green's tenure with the band.*

considering its geographical position and the low number of black people, who lived there in the 1890s. The available sources refer in general terms to Green taking an early inspiration from the music in religious tent shows<sup>8</sup> and to his gaining experience with brass bands and carnival bands, but that could have happened anywhere.

In this context, it is interesting that several early (pre - 1960) reference works identify Charlie Green's birthplace as New Orleans. The source for this is unknown or lost but, in theory, it makes sense that he may have picked up his first musical inspiration in the Deep South and later came to Omaha with his family during the great migration in the early 1900s<sup>9</sup>.

The earliest documented piece of information regarding Charlie Green's musical career however has no reference to Omaha. In 1919, we find him in Sam Wooding's Society Syncopators in Atlantic City, a five-piece band that included the legendary Jack Hatton on trumpet. During the course of their stay in Atlantic City, the band was promoted to accompany "the two Ethels" - singer Ethel Waters and dancer Ethel Williams for a run at the Philadelphia House<sup>10</sup>.

In 1920, Charlie Green joined bandleader and trumpeter Frank 'Red' Perkins in a four-piece group of trumpet, trombone, piano and drums that worked in dancer Leroy

Broomfield's club in Omaha. Between 1921 and 1923 they played primarily at the Monarch Gardens in Omaha, and it was during this period that Charlie Green became a musical inspiration for the Jimmie Lunceford trombonist Elmer Crumbley (b. 1908)<sup>11</sup>. Also during this period, Red Perkins added Joe Drake on alto sax and clarinet, retained Charlie Green and replaced the pianist and drummer. He named his group the Melody Five and bought a 1916 Ford for the purpose of doing out of town engagements.

In 1923, Perkins regrouped by taking over a local group, The Omaha Night Owls. He extended his group to six pieces and changed the name to The Dixie Ramblers<sup>12</sup>. It must have been at this time that Charlie Green left Perkins to seek new career opportunities.

Walter C. Allen wrote that Charlie Green had played with Red Perkins for three years before he joined Fletcher Henderson in 1924<sup>13</sup>. Frank Driggs and Thomas J. Hennessey shortened his time with Perkins by one year (1921-23) and that fits nicely with the recollections of pianist Tom Whaley, who was later to become Duke Ellington's close collaborator and copyist. He recalled leading a band called Whaley's Serenaders around 1923-24 in the New York City area that had among its members Charlie Green and saxist Nelson Kincaid<sup>14</sup>. The Whaley band played regularly in Brooklyn, and also in the pit of Harlem's Lafayette Theatre<sup>15</sup>.





*Fletcher Henderson & His Orchestra, 1924. L-R: Charlie Green, Howard Scott, Ralph Escudero, Elmer Chambers, Charlie Dixon, Kaiser Marshall, Coleman Hawkins, Don Redman. Mark Berresford Collection.*

If this development of Charlie Green's career is accepted, it makes better sense why Fletcher Henderson got the inspiration to include Charlie Green in his New York-based orchestra if Green was not working in Omaha at the time, but right on Henderson's doorstep in Manhattan. Against this speaks the recollection of Elmer Crumbley, who said that in 1924, he worked in Dan Desdunes' orchestra, together with Charlie Green<sup>16</sup>, but Red Perkins' musicians often joined Desdunes' mighty brass band at concerts, and it could possibly have been a gig that Charlie Green had with Desdunes prior to joining Whaley's Serenaders.

It is more difficult to fit into the story a recollection that bassist Walter Page made in an interview that was published in the magazine *The Jazz Review*. Walter Page referred to Wellman Braud as his main inspiration and told that Braud came to Kansas City in 1921 with John Wycliffe's band from Chicago with Tommy Ladnier, trumpet, Charlie Green, trombone, Clarence Lee, violin, possibly Willie Lewis on piano and Wycliffe on drums<sup>17</sup>. However, in the transfer announcement in the *International Musician* there is mention of an Edward Green, so this could be the reason for the confusion.

### Joining Fletcher Henderson

The Fletcher Henderson orchestra became a permanent organization from early 1924 when they were hired to accompany the show at the Club Alabam on W. 44<sup>th</sup> Street between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. In mid-July 1924, the orchestra moved from Club Alabam to the Roseland Ballroom on

Broadway and, from then on, the unmistakable sound of Charlie Green's trombone is heard on the Henderson band recordings.

Fletcher Henderson was possibly in the course of the Club Alabam job beginning to appreciate both the musical and commercial value of good soloists in his band. He had seen and heard how Coleman Hawkins had developed in his band, and he had made several attempts to get trumpeter Joe Smith into the band, and the hiring of Louis Armstrong shortly after was a logical step in the same direction.

Henderson's trombone player at Club Alabam had been Teddy Nixon, a reliable but not very imaginative musician. A comparison of his playing on, for example, Henderson's recording of *Steppin' Out* for Emerson in January 1924, with any later recording featuring Charlie Green is ample illustration of the difference.

After he made it to Broadway, we can also begin to get a clearer picture of 'Big' Charlie Green. Rex Stewart described him as a big bruiser and that it would take some courage to joke with him.

*"He was 6 foot plus, his manner was rough and loud, and he always appeared ready for a fight at the drop of a wrong word. He was slightly cock-eyed and the more saturated he was with his bathtub gin the more his eye seemed to move all around in his head. He became even more frightening when he would brandish his six shooter, which kept company with his gin in his trombone case. All of the younger fellows were*



Fletcher Henderson's band playing for the Arabian Nights Ball, Roseland Ballroom, probably November 18, 1925. Note Charlie Green's empty chair - down in the basement on the phone to his wife? L-R: Coleman Hawkins, Ralph Escudero, Buster Bailey, Joe Smith, Don Redman, Elmer Chambers, ?Russell or Luke Smith, Kaiser Marshall, Fletcher Henderson, Charlie Dixon. Mark Berresford Collection.

slightly wary of the big one's moods, and the more potted he recognized a kindred spirit with his rough manners and became, the less we would have to say to the man, not bluntness. wanting to get shot."<sup>18</sup>

Shortly after Charlie Green joined Henderson, he was enrolled as accompanist for the various blues singers that Henderson recorded with, and he became one of Bessie Smith's favorite backing musicians. No doubt, she also

Green's first remarkable accompaniment for Bessie Smith was *Salt Water Blues*, recorded July 31, 1924. On September 26, 1924 the sterling pair, Joe Smith and Charlie Green, recorded their first joint effort with The Empress. That was the coupling *Weeping Willow Blues* and *The Bye Bye Blues*. Also Green's humorous rough solo on Trixie Smith's *Praying Blues* from the same period is quite exceptional.

With Fletcher Henderson's orchestra, Green quickly made a favorable impression on several recordings from July-August 1924. On *Where The Dreamy Wabash Grows* and *Charley My Boy*, he shows a good rhythmic feeling and he contributes fine details on the Vocalion version of *Hard Hearted Hannah* and on *The Meanest Kind Of Blues*. But above all, it is his preaching, bluesy solo on *The Gouge Of Armour Avenue* that tells us that a new and remarkable artist had made his appearance.

Charlie Green had left a wife in Omaha, and the slightest insinuation of what she might be doing while he was away from her would put him in a jealous rage, and he would make a beeline back to Omaha. Coleman Hawkins could be a merciless heckler who would spare no efforts if he could irk Big Charlie:

"I used to rub it in terribly. I used to - Fletcher asked me to stop doing it down in Roseland 'cause I messed it up two



or three times down there. We'd get to play and then we'd come out on the platform, you know, it is cool there and everything, and I'd start just conversation going, I'd be talking about musician's wives and things like that: "I don't know why this happens with musicians' wives all the time..." and if there was Big Green, he'd be right there. Great big guy too and I'd be talking just loud enough for him to hear, and I started telling: "Well, you just can't trust them", and things like this and all this stuff. He'd listen you know, honest to Goodness, he'd leave us. Just gradually he'd go downstairs, he tiptoed. I tiptoed behind him afterwards and there he is, in the telephone booth. He calls up and like I said, several times this happened, he called up and there was no answer and he'd go straight out, leaving the trombone, the trombone would be right there on the bandstand, he'd leave it."<sup>19</sup>

Fletcher Henderson's docile manner meant that he would put up with Charlie Green's sudden absences and similar forms of outrageous behavior from his bunch of prima donnas. They knew they were the best, they were paid better than other colored bands and they were living in style. Talk about today's rock bands wrecking bars and breaking-up hotel rooms, - Charlie Green told Dickie Wells:

"We'd be coming to a small town with all these big cars, and outside of town, we'd start speeding up to around seventy, eighty miles an hour, and start shooting at chickens, cats and dogs as we went through town - anything but people. The chickens would be flying and running, dogs barking and people screaming - it was like the Wild West."<sup>20</sup>

## Louis Armstrong and beyond

When Louis Armstrong joined Henderson's band in October 1924, he quickly rose to the position as the band's primary soloist, inevitably at the expense of some of those who had been featured soloists before that, and when Buster Bailey joined shortly after, this tendency became even clearer. It was mostly Coleman Hawkins, Don Redman and the trumpet players Elmer Chambers and Howard Scott who had to live with less time in the spotlight but not so Charlie Green, who was able to hold his ground in the company of the newcomer, as demonstrated on *Go 'Long Mule* from Armstrong's first session with Henderson. Charlie Green was not intimidated by Armstrong's colossal talent because Armstrong could not outdo him as a blues player, and it was on the blues that Green really shone.

His best recordings from the first years with Henderson were his accompaniment to blues singers: Bessie Smith, Trixie Smith (*Praying Blues*), Ma Rainey (*Toad Frog Blues*, *Countin' The Blues*), Maggie Smith (*Box Car Blues*, *Western Union Blues*), Clara Smith and Ida Cox. Benny Morton who succeeded him in Henderson's band said: "Charlie was a great blues artist. He played the blues so well, you had to listen" and trombonist Quintin Jackson simply stated: "He was the greatest blues trombone player I ever heard"<sup>21</sup>. In this context, it is telling that trumpeter Bob Shoffner recalled that when Charlie Green was in Chicago with the Henderson band, he always came to sit in with King Oliver's band<sup>22</sup>.

## Freelancing

More than one veteran who was active on the New York musical scene in the 1920s has told that competition was stiff, but that work was also plentiful. Some newcomer could blow you out of your job one day, but the next evening you would be sitting on another bandstand in a different band, getting the same pay or even better. In such an ever-shifting environment, it becomes extremely difficult to track down individual musicians' careers.

In Charlie Green's case, he left the Fletcher Henderson band around April 1926 and was replaced by Benny Morton<sup>23</sup>. This became the beginning of a peculiar rotation that was to continue through the next few years, where Green, Benny Morton and Jimmy Harrison replaced each other in various bands. In one interview<sup>24</sup>, Morton said that Fletcher Henderson directly encouraged the competition between the three trombonists.

In the spring of 1926, Charlie Green replaced Jimmy Harrison in June Clark's group at The Tango Gardens in New York<sup>25</sup>. When he left June Clark, Green was replaced by Joe Williams, who specialized in blues accompaniments in a similar style to Green's. Apparently he left to go back to Omaha to chastise his errant wife, but it seems that he returned to the Henderson band later the same year, as the eight-bar trombone solo on the Dixie Stompers recording of *Brotherly Love* from October 20th sound convincingly like him<sup>26</sup>. According to some accounts<sup>27</sup>, he was also present in the Henderson brass section at the legendary band battle at the Roseland between the Henderson and Jean Goldkette bands on October 13, 1926<sup>28</sup>.

In December 1926 Charlie Green was due to join the band of bandleader Dave Peyton, opening on December 4th at the Chicago night spot the Café De Paris, but he must have skipped the opening since the *Chicago Defender* of December 18th carried an appeal for him to get in touch with the paper's editor for information to his advantage. It remains unclear if the appeal was successful, but the *Chicago Defender* of January 22 1927 announced that "William (sic) Green, trombonist, formerly with the Fletcher Henderson orchestra will join Dave Peyton's Café De Paris orchestra Jan. 25 as solo trombonist"<sup>29</sup>. Again it seems to have been wishful thinking on the side of Dave Peyton, because trumpeter Demas Dean recalled that he and Charlie Green were in the Savoy Bearcats together at the Savoy Ballroom in early 1927<sup>30</sup>.

The Henderson orchestra was out of town playing in Detroit and Chicago during the same period, but was back in New York in time for Joe Smith and Fletcher Henderson to accompany Bessie Smith together with Charlie Green on four sides, including Charlie Green's justly celebrated feature *Trombone Cholly* on March 3, 1927. This recording session cannot however be taken as a sign of Charlie Green rejoining the Henderson band. There is no doubt, that Jimmy Harrison and Benny Morton were Henderson's trombone section for the remainder of 1927. It is in fact difficult to track Charlie Green's movements during this period. He was seemingly in Chicago in May with Louis Armstrong's Sunset Café orchestra





and back in New York in August with Fats Waller, but apart from that, we have to move forward to 1928 before we can pick up his trail.

Lew Leslie's show *Blackbirds of 1928* was originally planned as a feature for Florence Mills, but when she died in November 1927, the show had to undergo a complete overhaul. Violinist Allie Ross conducted the band that had been rehearsing for the show and, in order to keep the band together, Lew Leslie got the band booked into the Ambassadeurs Nightclub in New York as *The Blackbird Revue* from early January 1928. Charlie Green was in the first edition of that band, as was trumpeter Demas Dean, who Charlie Green enlisted for two Bessie Smith sessions as a replacement for Joe Smith<sup>31</sup>. Shortly after this, we find Charlie Green in the orchestra that accompanied the *Keep Shufflin'* show, (written by James P. Johnson and Fats Waller)<sup>32</sup> and in the recording studio with Bessie Smith to make her classic *Empty Bed Blues*, before he eventually returned to the Fletcher Henderson fold.

### Charlie Green's second Fletcher Henderson period

The Fletcher Henderson band that Charlie Green would rejoin had opened at the Roseland Ballroom in March or early April 1928 with Jimmy Harrison and Benny Morton on trombones. The second band on the program was Billy Lustig's Scranton Sirens, including a young Jack Teagarden, fresh in town from Texas. This was where Teagarden and Jimmy Harrison discovered each other and founded their mutual admiration society, before Teagarden left the Scranton Sirens at Roseland on April 22. Eventually Jimmy Harrison also moved on and went to Charlie Johnson's orchestra at Small's Paradise.

Most writers agree that the trombone solos on the Fletcher Henderson Dixie Stompers recordings of April 6, 1928 are not by Jimmy Harrison and most likely by Charlie Green, who possibly made the session as a temporary or permanent

replacement for Jimmy Harrison. There is no need to wonder why Benny Morton was bypassed in this turnover, because Morton himself told Stanley Dance that Charlie Green would come in as an occasional replacement during Morton's two years with Henderson and always insisted on taking the solos<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, when Danny Barker settled in New York, he was told:

*"When this cross-eyed bum feels like playing with Henderson's band at the Roseland, he came into The Band Box just at the time when about ten of the greatest trombone players were having a cutting contest. You never heard such blowing in all your life. They saw Green when he came in and what blowing! I'm telling you it was a bitch. Well, Green stood at the bar, drinking a big water glass full of gin. Somebody hollered, "Come on Green – play your horn".*

*"Green ignored the hollering. Then Kaiser Marshall grabbed up one of the trombones and handed it to Green. Green took the horn and held it as he swallowed a glass full of gin. He just looked at all of them, each of them a hell of a trombone player. Someone yelled, "Big Green is skeered" That did it!"*

*"Green walked slowly to the center of the floor and looked at the cats with his cross-eyes. One eye was looking at heaven and the other was peering deep down in hell."*

*"I'll never forget this until my dying day and the good lord up in heaven is my secret judge. Green said one word to the piano player, "B flat". Then he played My Buddy in waltz time; three choruses of My Buddy. Hot damn he played. The waltz was so pretty and so sweet that it made tears come to your eyes."*

*"After the way Green played My Buddy he took every ass by surprise. He's a slick bastard. Then you know what happened? All them hell of a trombone players, and they was all masters, they slowly and nicely put all the trombones in their cases, where they belonged, especially when the master Big Green is around."*<sup>34</sup>

From June to October 1928 the Henderson band went on a lengthy tour that took them all the way to Oklahoma. A listing of the band's personnel from a job in Newport R. I. in August names both Charlie Green and Benny Morton on trombones<sup>35</sup>. Benny Morton stayed with Henderson until the end of the tour and then went to Chick Webb's orchestra. For a period then Charlie Green was Henderson's sole trombonist, until Jimmy Harrison rejoined in early 1929. About the same time, Cootie Williams was brought in as first trumpeter for a short tour and, thinking that he had only been hired for the tour, he did not report for work after the band's return to the Roseland. It turned out to be a misunderstanding as Cootie later told Helen Dance: *"Was that band mad. They had no first trumpet....Big Green didn't see it like that, and he almost scared me to death."*<sup>36</sup>

Charlie Green's second term with Henderson ended in with the wholesale firing of Henderson's musicians from the production of the ill-fated *Great Day* production in June 1929<sup>37</sup>. He was picked up by James P. Johnson and included in the band that provided the music for Bessie Smith's movie

short “*St. Louis Blues*” that was shot at that time in New York and, about the same time, he played in a band that drummer Zutty Singleton led at the Lafayette Theatre.

## To the bottom

In the autumn of 1929, the world was looking disaster straight in the face in the form of the Wall Street Crash. The crash would detonate a financial crisis that sent millions into poverty, and among those that were most exposed were the people of color in the United States who had not been able to bolster themselves against hard times. That would include Charlie Green - at this time almost certainly an incurable alcoholic with a rough disposition that brought him few friends and, though still an exceptional trombonist, no longer reigning supreme in a musical landscape that now included Jimmy Harrison, Claude Jones, J. C. Higginbotham, Benny Morton, Miff Mole, Tommy Dorsey and Jack Teagarden – to mention just a few.

Charlie Green wandered from one short time gig to the next, and we can easily imagine that he spent most of his time in those holes-in-wall gin mills where the roughest moonshine was the preferred refreshment. Shortly after Danny Barker had arrived in New York around 1930, he saw Charlie Green sitting in one of these “smoke dungeons”:

*“There seated in a corner in that stiff, still zombie position was Big Green. His eyes were open; he was cross-eyed. One eye was focused on the ceiling and the other on the floor.”*<sup>38</sup>

Green could still strike an impressive figure though. Banjo player Ikey Robinson recalled when he first met him in 1930:

*“He would come on to the bandstand and he would never dress like the rest of the band; if we wore white shirts and black ties, he’d come on with a ruffled shirt and a green tie. He would never dress like us. If we were in tuxedos, he’d be in striped pants and a green coat, but he was such a good musician, that people just said to let that oddball go, because he sure could blow.”*<sup>39</sup>

Ikey Robinson had come to New York from Chicago by way of Sammy Stewart’s orchestra. Some of the members of the band wanted to go back to Chicago and they were gradually replaced with New York musicians, and Charlie Green was one who played in Sammy Stewart’s band at the Arcadia Ballroom. Before that, in the last months of 1929, he had played in Benny Carter’s orchestra, including Russell Procope, alto and clarinet, Bob Carroll, tenor and Joe Turner, piano, also at the Arcadia Ballroom. In early 1930 he had toured around Boston with an orchestra, led by Russell Wooding that included Fats Waller on piano and Kaiser Marshall on drums.<sup>40</sup>

The depression had not quite killed Charlie Green’s recording career. There were still three Bessie Smith sessions to come on March 27 and April 12, 1930 and June 11, 1931. In addition to that, he may also possibly be present on a session with Fats Waller’s ‘Buddies’ on December 18, 1929 where there is a second trombone besides Jack Teagarden. Most discographies name J. C. Higginbotham, but the trombone solo on the title *Won’t You Get Off Please* sounds

nothing like him and Charlie Green who has also been suggested, is a much more likely candidate.<sup>41</sup>

According to Russell Procope, Charlie Green was a member of Chick Webb’s orchestra at the same time as he, that is from the fall of 1930 until early spring 1931.<sup>42</sup> Following that, in the spring 1931, he played with Elmer Snowden, and in June the same year he was included in the band that Jimmie Noone put together for a month’s engagement at New York’s Savoy Ballroom. He toured the Boston area with bandleader Charlie Johnson in the fall of 1931 before joining McKinney’s Cotton Pickers, probably towards the end of 1931.

His stay with McKinney’s Cotton Pickers was apparently very short. The story is told by Rex Stewart, that William McKinney had made it plainly clear, that in his band there was a fine for being late, no drinking was allowed and carrying any kind of weapon was strictly forbidden. When Charlie Green joined the band in Detroit he was late because he made a stop to buy some gin and when McKinney discovered that, along with the revolver that Green had in his trombone case, he gave him two weeks’ salary and train fare back to New York.<sup>43</sup>

Green joined the band that Lucky Millinder was fronting which used to be “Doc” Crawford’s orchestra, playing at the Harlem Uproar House. He also did gigs with Sam Wooding, freshly back from Europe and trying to get a new foothold in the New York area and Big Charlie played for a while with Don Redman’s new band at Connie’s Inn.

We do not know in what order he did these gigs. However then the tolerant and easy-going Chick Webb made an opening for Charlie Green to return to his band, and he was with Webb when his orchestra accompanied Louis Armstrong on what turned out be Charlie Green’s last records, in December 1932. Apparently, he stayed with Webb’s band for a good while; trombonist Sandy Williams told Stanley Dance that Green was still in the band when he joined Webb in July 1933.<sup>44</sup> Later in 1933, he joined Benny Carter at Harlem Club (Connie’s Inn renamed) and was still with Carter at the Apollo Theatre and the Empire Ballroom during the first half of 1934, where he shared trombone duties with Dickie Wells.

At this time, Charlie Green’s death from tuberculosis and the effects of his alcoholism was only 17 months away and his physical condition must have obviously deteriorated. Bandleaders like Chick Webb and Benny Carter, who would ignore lapses in conduct if a musician was talented, did not use him anymore, and probably with good reason, as events in connection with his job with Fess Williams at the Savoy Ballroom tell. Fess Williams recalled to Frank Driggs:

*“Charlie Green was a guy nobody wanted to hire because he got drunk, would start fights in the band and nobody could predict what he was going to do. I go to him one day and say, “Listen Charlie, I have to put on a trombone. I know your reputation, but I know you can play like hell. I am going to put you to work, but I don’t want you starting any fights in my band”.*

Fess Williams goes on to tell, that he hired him, but Charlie Green made excuses for himself and got Sandy Williams from Chick Webb's band, who was on the other stage to play his parts and Green finally admitted to Fess Williams that it was his drinking that prevented him from doing the job.<sup>45</sup>

It seems that Charlie Green was unable to work much in the last part of his life but, apparently, he did play in bands under the leadership of trumpeter Louis Metcalf. Information that he was also back with Fletcher Henderson during this period is possibly related to a situation, where Henderson had a gig but was band-less and therefore borrowed Louis Metcalf's band. As far as we know Charlie Green's last job was in 1935 in a band that drummer Kaiser Marshall led at the Ubangi Club at 7<sup>th</sup> Ave. and 131<sup>st</sup> Street (formerly Connie's Inn and the Harlem Club). The band possibly also included trumpeter John "Bugs" Hamilton and alto sax Louis Jordan.

According to the death certificate that Dr. Spencer discovered, Charlie Green died in the Harlem Hospital on November 27 1935. There is no contemporary account of his death and it is a mystery where the story that he locked himself out and froze to death on his doorstep came from. However the publication of Danny Barker's autobiography "Buddy Bolden and the Last Days of Storyville" in 1998 provide us with at least one possible theory. Danny Barker tells that in one of the gin mills that Charlie Green frequented there was a drummer who passed away while sitting in a corner. In order to avoid any embarrassment for the establishment, the owner and a couple of the regulars carried him outside and positioned him sitting on the doorstep in front of a house to be 'found' by the landlady or someone passing by. The scheme worked, so much so that it became a joke in the speakeasies in that area that customers should take it easy with their drinking unless they wanted to end up like the poor drummer.<sup>46</sup>

To me it seems a plausible theory, and that, over time, the telling and retelling of this story might have become so entangled with Big Charlie Green's fate that fantasy overtook fact.

Any additions and/or corrections will be greatly appreciated. They can be emailed to the author at [tom.buhmann@mail.dk](mailto:tom.buhmann@mail.dk) and if published it will be with full credit to the source.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Rex Stewart: Boy meets Horn pp. 93-95

<sup>2</sup> Dickie Wells: Night People p.14

<sup>3</sup> Peter Carr: The Ikey Robinson Story, Storyville Yearbook, 2002-3 p. 45

<sup>4</sup> Frederick J. Spencer M. D.: Jazz and Death pp. 236-238

<sup>5</sup> Glasrud & Wintz: The Harlem Renaissance in the American West p.7.

<sup>6</sup> Glasrud & Wintz: The Harlem Renaissance in the American West p.124.

<sup>7</sup>Dan Desdunes, sometimes known as Clarence Desdunes, is possibly even better known as a civil rights activist. In New

Orleans, he preceded Homer Plessy in breaking the Louisiana separate car act that segregated public transportation and later was confirmed by the US Supreme Court in the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case with the notorious "separate but equal" ruling. Desdunes' half-sister was Mamie Desdunes, known to jazz aficionados for her connection to Mamie's Blues / 2:19 Blues.

<sup>8</sup> Quoting an unknown source, multi-instrumentalist Clint Baker in a 2019 interview stated that Charlie Green had acknowledged an early inspiration from Holy Roller preachers, that visited his home state (Interview in blogspot on [www.facebook.com/michael.jazzlives](http://www.facebook.com/michael.jazzlives))

<sup>9</sup> Without attaching greater importance to it, it is worth to note in the passing, that Bessie Smith on the recording of the song, that is supposed to be a portrait of Charlie Green, *Trombone Cholly*, sings "he came from way down south"

<sup>10</sup> Barclay Draper in Storyville 87 p. 90; Chip Deffaa: Sam Wooding in Voices Of The Jazz Age p. 8

<sup>11</sup> Elmer Crumbley, quoted in Storyville no. 35 p. 164 from an earlier interview in Coda.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Driggs: Red Perkins and his Dixie Ramblers, Jazz Journal , November 1964 pp. 14-16. This article was based on an interview with Red Perkins and is clearly the main source to what can be found in later reference works, like Thomas Hennessey: From Jazz to Swing, Albert McCarthy: Big Band Jazz and Ross Russell in Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest.

<sup>13</sup> Hendersonia p. 113.

<sup>14</sup> They were not necessarily members at the same time. Nelson Kincaid was in Europe and sailed home from France on May 31 1924, Howard Rye in The Frog Blues and Jazz Annual no. 1 p. 62

<sup>15</sup> Whaley in Stanley Dance: The World of Duke Ellington p. 42

<sup>16</sup> Elmer Crumbley, quoted in Storyville no. 35 p. 164.

<sup>17</sup> Jazz Review vol. 1, no. 1 p. 12. Lindström & Vernhettes: Travelling Blues pp. 46-47. Wycliffe's normal trombonist at this time was Hugh C. Swift.

<sup>18</sup> Rex Stewart: Boy Meets Horn pp. 93-94

<sup>19</sup> Coleman Hawkins, A Documentary, Riverside RLP 12-117/118

<sup>20</sup> Dickie Wells: Night People p. 44

<sup>21</sup> Stanley Dance: The World of Swing pp. 285 and 296. Quintin Jackson also recalled that besides being a tremendous blues player, Charlie Green also played a beautiful waltz.

<sup>22</sup> Klaus-Uwe Dürr: A conversation with Bob Shoffner, Storyville 140 p. 67

<sup>23</sup> Green is clearly present on The Dixie Stompers version of *Jackass Blues*, recorded on April 14, but absent on the Columbia recording of the same tune by the full band from May 14.

<sup>24</sup> Jazz Journal, February 1974 p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> K. B. Rau suggests that Charlie Green and June Clark are backing Mary Stafford and Caroline Johnson on their Pathé Actuelle/Perfect recordings from March 30 1926 and that Green in theory might also be on Perry Bradford's Columbia coupling from April 21 1926 (see the June Clark- and Mary Stafford-sections in [www.harlem-fuss.com](http://www.harlem-fuss.com)). Aural similarities notwithstanding, March 30 seems a fraction too early if Green as assumed was still with Henderson by mid-April.

<sup>26</sup> Walter C. Allen: Hendersonia p. 194. Jan Evensmo and Ola Rønnow in their Benny Morton-solography ([www.jazzarcheology.com](http://www.jazzarcheology.com)) suggest that solos that are usually ascribed to Morton could be by Charlie Green instead, one example being Brotherly Love and another could be *Swamp Blues* (Paramount, April 1927).

<sup>27</sup> See as example Richard Sudhalter's Bix, Man and Legend p. 184



<sup>28</sup> This may be the period that Quintin Jackson refers to in *Dance: The World of Swing* p. 296 where he says that Charlie Green was called back into the Henderson band to replace Jimmy Harrison, because Harrison couldn't read so well.

<sup>29</sup> Walter C. Allen: *Hendersonia* p. 179

<sup>30</sup> Demas Dean: "Travellin' Man, *Storyville* no. 72 p. 211. This would probably rule out John R. T. Davies' suggestion, that Charlie Green is present on Fletcher Henderson's coupling of *Baby Won't You Please Come Home* and *Some Of These Days* from January 19, 1927 (Liner notes to *Timeless Historical* CD CBC 1-069).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* p. 212

<sup>32</sup> *Keep Shufflin'* opened at the Eltinge Theatre in New York on February 27, 1928.

<sup>33</sup> Liner notes to the LP Decca DL79227.

<sup>34</sup> Danny Barker: *Buddy Bolden and the last days of Storyville* pp. 158-159

<sup>35</sup> Walter C. Allen: *Hendersonia* p. 222

<sup>36</sup> *Down Beat*, May 4, 1967 p. 20

<sup>37</sup> Walter C. Allen: *Hendersonia* pp. 228-231

<sup>38</sup> Danny Barker: *Buddy Bolden and the last days of Storyville* p. 157

<sup>39</sup> The Ikey Robinson Story, *Storyville Yearbook*, 2002/2003 p. 45

<sup>40</sup> Laurie Wright: *Fats Waller* p. 61, quoting from *International Musician* of February 1930.

<sup>41</sup> See the liner notes to the *Fats Waller* LP RCA (F) 741.094. Oddly the discussion about the second trombone player only appears in the French language version of the liner notes.

<sup>42</sup> *Dance: The World of Swing* p. 156. Procope claims that he joined Chick Webb during the winter 1929/30, but Walter C. Allen gives the later date in *Hendersonia* p. 568.

<sup>43</sup> Rex Stewart: *Boy Meets Horn* pp. 116-117. See also John Chilton: *McKinney's Cotton Pickers* p. 38

<sup>44</sup> *Stanley Dance: The World of Swing* p. 68

<sup>45</sup> Frank Driggs: *Goodbye Fess*, *Storyville* no. 67 pp. 22-23

<sup>46</sup> Danny Barker: *Buddy Bolden and the last days of Storyville* (edited by Alyn Shipton) pp. 154-157



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