

# TOMMY CHRISTIAN & HIS ORCHESTRA

By Jerry Rothstein

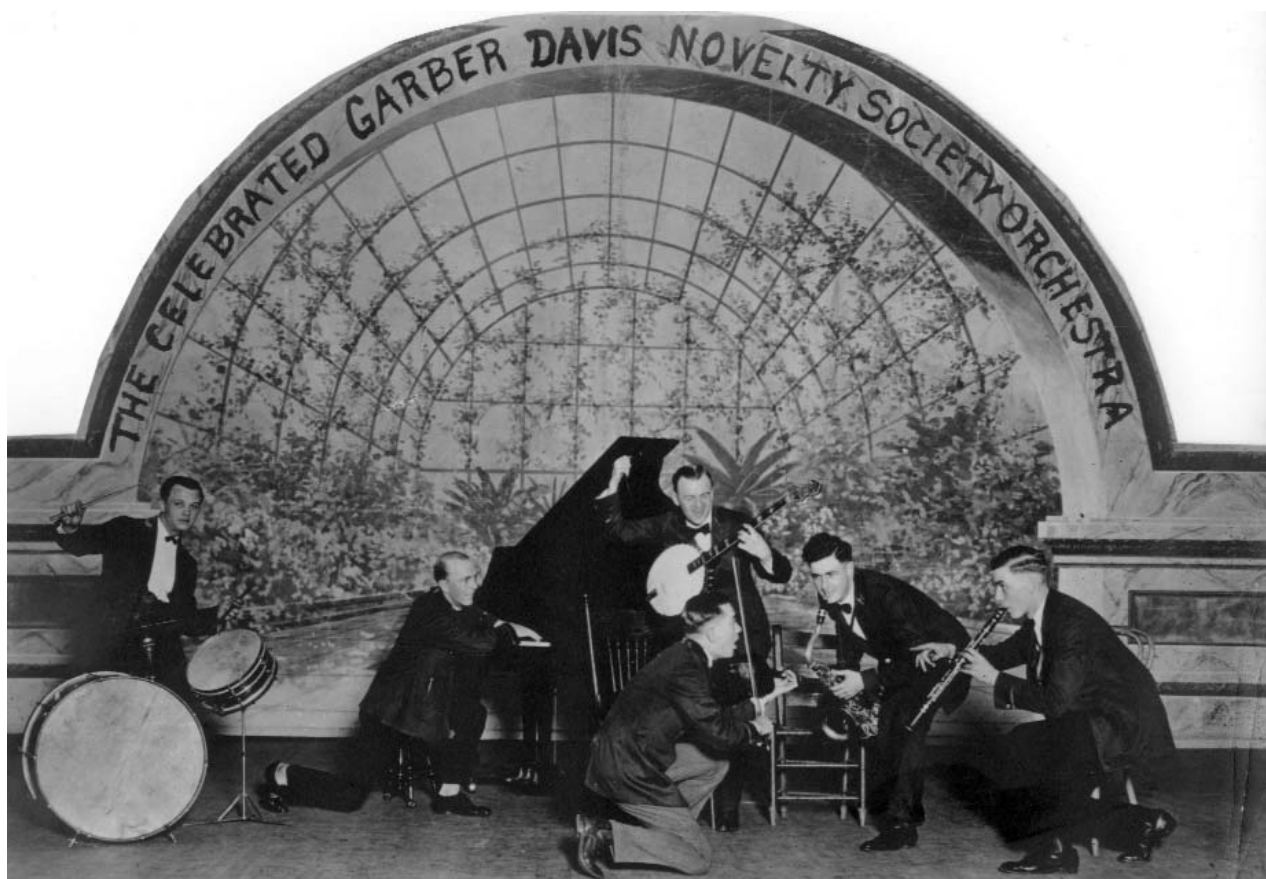
Tommy Christian, who left the Garber-Davis Orchestra as a sideman saxophonist, embarked on leading his own dance and stage band from 1924 through 1935; and again briefly in the late 1930's. Although Tommy's fame was surpassed by the likes of Fred Waring, Guy Lombardo, Ozzie Nelson, and many others, his band had great potential in the 1920's. This was evidenced by Tommy's triumphant success at the Roseland Ballroom in New York in 1925, through his band's forays into talking pictures in 1929. Unfortunately, the majority of his records, acoustically-recorded on primitive equipment on the Harmony label (a budget label subsidiary of Columbia), and the choice of material recorded, rarely give the band the opportunity to showcase the great talent they obviously had.

Carl Kilmer Tommy Christian was born in Brewton, Alabama on May 4, 1902 to Confederate Civil War veteran, physician James Clark and Mary Francis Christian. By the age of 10, Tommy, or Kilmer as he was known to his family, took up the clarinet, eventually switching to the saxophone. Before embarking on a full time musical career, Tommy worked as a shipping clerk in a furniture store, and then as a salesman in a grocery store. It was soon after that Tommy got a job in a Montgomery, Alabama cabaret playing drums and, after that, moved on to a road show where he played saxophone, drums, and did small acting parts. By 1920, Tommy settled in Carrollton, Georgia,

where he worked as a theater musician and became a member of the Freemasons.

Tommy became a member of the Garber-Davis Orchestra in 1921, led by violinist Jan Garber, where he was featured as saxophone soloist, and shared the sax section with future Los Angeles danceband leader Caryle Stevenson. Tommy toured with the Garber-Davis Orchestra through Bridgeport, Connecticut and Washington D.C. from the band's home base at the Ansley Hotel in Atlanta. Tommy also took part in the first Garber-Davis recording sessions for Columbia in 1921 and Victor in 1923.

*Variety* announced in June of 1924 that Tommy had left the Garber-Davis organization to form his own band. "*Tommy Christian and His Band, Nine altogether...*, and *An ideal dance combination...*" was booked by agency National Attractions, Inc. to tour Pennsylvania through the remainder of 1924. They commenced their first band tour playing at various ballrooms and dance pavillions through Pennsylvania towns such as Williamstown, Huntington, Uniontown, and Gettysburg. Aside from the band's Pennsylvania tour, we find Tommy's band booked for one evening in a Sunday Night Concert vaudeville review at B.F. Keith's Theater in New York City on September 28, 1924. National Attractions, Inc. was one of the first agen-



Tommy Christian (far right) with the Garber-Davis Novelty Society Orchestra in 1921. Carlyle Stevenson is the saxophonist. Mark Berresford Collection.



cies to book dance orchestras into orderly, specific regions, that eliminated a previously haphazard booking system.

Tommy's band was booked for another tour, primarily in the middle-west states, by National Attractions, Inc. through October of 1925, mainly in Gettysburg, playing such venues as Natural Springs Park, a Portsmouth Society Dance in Portsmouth, Ohio, and a dance at Clermont Hall in Kingston, New York. On one particular date on Valentine's Day, February 14, 1925, Tommy Christian also appeared as a guest saxophone soloist with Ted Weems and His Orchestra for the Gettysburg Academy Junior and Senior Prom in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

By November 1925, the Roseland Ballroom in New York City had implemented a program to feature other dance bands as guests for a two-week period, to supplement Roseland's resident Fletcher Henderson & His Orchestra. The Tommy Christian & His Orchestra - now being managed by the Arthur Spizzi Agency, Inc., NYC - made such a triumphant hit at the Roseland, that the band's stay was extended through the remainder of November. The band also cut their first recordings, *That Certain Party* and *Show Me The Way To Go Home* for Columbia Records' budget Harmony label on November 19, 1925. Tommy's band personnel at this time were Bill McMurray and Lewis Corbett, trumpets; Billy Fitzgerald, trombone; Murray Beeson and Irish Callen, saxes; Jimmy Cooper, banjo; Ralph Gerard, bass; Carrol Metcalf, drums; and Charles Wullen, piano/arranger/manager.

Tommy Christian & His Orchestra, billed as "The Sensation of the South," was riding high from their success at the Roseland Ballroom, with *Variety* announcing their stay at the Roseland through May 1 of 1926. But, by the end of his November 1925 engagement at the Roseland, *Variety* reported that Tommy Christian had suffered a nervous breakdown, and that the remainder of the band's immediate engagements were led by band manager/saxophonist/arranger Murray Beeson until Tommy's recovery.

After Tommy's apparent recovery, his band embarked on another tour of Pennsylvania, and by October of 1926, Tommy's band was booked into the Trianon Ballroom in New York City, which lasted through to January 1927. While at the Trianon, Tommy emcee'd dance contests; and his band could now be heard over WMCA in New York City and WFBH in Hoboken, NJ direct from the Trianon. Tommy's saxophone

solos were also broadcast from the Trianon as "TOMMY CHRISTIAN, saxophone specialist." It was also about this time that Art Barnett joined Tommy's band as drummer, doubling as singer; band comedian, and composer (*Who Is It Who?*). Tommy's band was now being managed by Creatore, Lenetska, & Martin, Inc., NYC.

By the time Tommy's band played a stage review at the Allyn Theatre in Hartford, Connecticut, for the week of November 20, 1927, the *Hartford Courant* boasted, "Boy!... You Want To Hear TOMMY CHRISTIAN'S Band Play It!." A typical review, written in the *Hartford Courant* for this engagement stated: "Tommy Christian's band, the youngest of its size ever to crash Broadway, is continuing its triumph at the Allyn Theater. How that band can play!" This review concludes, "The act is different, sparkling, refreshing, and Tommy is a buoyant and engaging master of ceremonies." This review also mentions Tommy's bands use of mellophones for an interesting effect; and what may be the first mention of Tommy's drummer [Art Barnett] doing his "Grand Opera" parody and imitating trying to start a flivver on a cold day.

The year 1928 could be considered a red letter date in the career of Tommy Christian & His Orchestra - it would be from this year, and every year through 1933 that Tommy's band would play entire summers at the Palisades Amusement Park Ballroom in Cliffside Park, NJ, and the band would tour vaudeville during the winter at Loew's theaters, mainly in New York. Most of the Palisades Ballroom appearances were broadcast over WPAP (WHN) radio in Cliffside Park and, by 1932, a CBS station hookup broadcast Tommy's band over the entire east coast.

The Loew's theater dates, first commencing at the Palace Theatre in Washington D.C. for the week of October 8, 1927, presented Tommy emceeing a small vaudeville review live on stage as an added attraction for the motion picture feature - ten to fifteen members of Tommy's band, and a small group of assorted vaudeville acts. A typical Loew's stage review had Tommy as master of ceremonies of "TOMMYLAND" at the Loew's Temple in Birmingham, Alabama, for the week of January 18, 1928, featuring Tommy Christian And His Dixie Melodists. An October to December 1933 engagement at Loew's Orpheum Theater in New York had Tommy Christian introducing a young vocalist from Arcadia, Louisiana, by the name of Teddy Grace.

1929 would also be a memorable year for Tommy Christian. Tommy Christian & His Collegians starred in RayArts (Raytone) sound feature film that year called *Howdy Broadway* and in the film short *Pep & Personality*. These films, presumably made at the same time, were produced by Raymond Johnson's RayArt Pictures, which specialized in silent B-movie westerns, with *Howdy Broadway* taking advantage of the current 1929 musical film releases with Broadway in its title (*Broadway Melody*, *Goldiggers Of Broadway*, etc.).

*Howdy Broadway's* plot has Tommy Christian playing himself as a student in Burdette University, where he is the college's rowing champion and leader of a snappy dance band. The college widow talks Tommy into playing at a speakeasy because of a Broadway producer in attendance, and after the speakeasy is raided, Tommy is expelled from Burdette U. Tommy and his band then head for Broadway, becoming a success at a night club, and finally marries his original college sweetheart. *Howdy Broadway* was directed by Charles J Hunt, and the cast included Ellalee Ruby, Lucy Ames, Johnny Kane, Jack J. Clark, Diana Mullen, Daisy Dean, Art Barnett, Mart Britt, James Parrish, Ted Keith, and Mona Soltis.

Of the two tunes that were published (Shapiro, Bernstein, & Co.) from *Howdy Broadway*, ***Atta Boy Old Pal! Old Sock! Old Kid! Old Thing! Old Gold! Old Baby!***, was written by Billy Moll and Tommy Christian, and ***I Want You To Know I Love You***, was written by Art Terker and Tommy Christian. The rest of the tunes featured in *Howdy Broadway* were ***Youre Gonna Be Blue, Gazoozum Gazoo***, by Val Trainor and Tommy Christian, ***Sophomore Strut, Gypsy Love***, and the title tune ***Howdy Broadway***. West Coast bandleader Tom Gerun recorded a fine, hit version of ***Atta Boy Old Pal! Old Sock! Old Kid! Old Thing Old Gold! Old Baby!*** in Los Angeles on February 3, 1930, issued on Brunswick 4755.

Although RayArt Pictures was based in Los Angeles, California, both *Howdy Broadway* and *Pep & Personality* were filmed at the Metropolitan Studios in Fort Lee, New Jersey, during Tommy's stint at the Palisades Amusement Park Ballroom. *Howdy Broadway* made its debut on October 16, 1929, and *Variety* reported that the film would play various movie theaters, starting in St. Louis, accompanied by Tommy Christian and his Orchestra live on stage. *Howdy Broadway* is probably the most obscure musical in movie history, and there is only one known print of this film.

Tommy's two-reel band short, *Pep & Personality*, has Tommy introducing four musical numbers, and leading his band on a dressed stage. Of the four numbers, ***Who Is It Who*** and ***Tommy Christian Stomp*** are the two hot tunes which really show off Tommy's band at its best, even better than his 78rpm Harmony sides. The other two numbers are, ***The One In The World***, sung by Mart Britt, and the ***Grand Opera Parody***, as performed by drummer Art Barnett.

***Pep & Personality***, as reported by *Variety*, was instrumental in getting Tommy Christian & His Orchestra an engagement at the Mounds Country Club in East St. Louis, Illinois from September 21, 1929 through January 3, 1930. The Mounds Country Club was a swanky night club and gambling casino that was opened by the notorious St. Louis gangster William Patrick "Bow Wow" McQuillan on April 6, 1929. Tommy's own composition ***Gunnar Jim*** was a featured tune with his band at The Mounds Country Club as well as Tommy's radio broadcasts on KMOX (St. Louis) from the Mounds.

After a January through early February run at the Gibson Hotel in Cincinnati, Ohio, Tommy's band became the resident orchestra for the Paramount Grill at the Paramount Hotel in New York City from March 31 through June 24, 1930. During this engagement they were to be heard over WABC. During the run at the Paramount Grill, Tommy's band appeared at the Imperial Theatre in New York for the midnight benefit show *Give A Job for Aid Broun*. It was also during the Paramount Grill engagement that Tommy and pianist Blaine Stone composed the tune, ***Along The Highway Of Love***. This tune was no doubt featured by Tommy's band at the Paramount Grill, but it was also featured in the 1930 Warner Brothers film *Office Wife* starring Joan Blondell. Unfortunately, ***Along The Highway Of Love*** wasn't recorded by Tommy's band, but it was recorded by Johnny Walkup's Orchestra, which was issued on Champion 16108 and Gennett 7300.

Tommy Christian's band personnel during the 1929/1930 period were Phil and Ted Fischer, trumpet; Art Manners, Harold Lawson, James DeAngeles, clarinet/sax; Victor Deangelis, accordion; Paul Close and Mart Britt (vocal), banjo; Carl Pickel and Blaine Stone, pianos; Harry Rich, bass; and Art Barnett, drum/vocals/comedy routines.

Adrian Tei, first saxophonist/vocalist with Tommy's band during the 1930/1931 years, recalled that Tommy's band personnel at that time included Phil and Ted Fischer trumpets; Bill Robertson, trombone; Ezelle "Easy" Watson and Jackie Martin, saxes; Fred Tupper, violin/sax; Mart Britt, banjo/vocal; Herb Lessner, bass; Buck Kelly, drums; and Webster "Webby" Gillen, pianist/arranger. Adrian also recalled that *"Tommy Christian's band wasnt big..., and...the work was hard and the pay was bad..."* On one occasion, Adrian recalled that Tommy had turned to him to write a distinctive theme song for his band's broadcasts from the Palisades Amusement Park Ballroom. This resulted in the theme song sounding like Dracula! Adrian commented that, "It was a bitch for me on lead clarinet. If he [Tommy] had lasted, he would have found it tough to replace me on that theme."

Adrian said that the last time he saw Tommy Christian, who was drinking with some friends, was for only one minute, on



Tommy Christian & His Orchestra, c. 1926. Author's Collection.

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Broadway in 1935 where ...he smiled and had a missing tooth! It could be surmised that this statement gave rise to the rumors in record collector circles that Tommy Christian had died a homeless derelict in New York City in the 1950's or 1960's. Adrian Tei passed away in Valley Stream New York on May 31, 2004 at age 94.

After his band's 1928-1933 run at the Palisades Ballroom (the Palisades Ballroom was under new management by 1934, and the May 14, 1934 issue of *Billboard* announced that Julie Wintz would be Musical Director of the Silver Anniversary Band for the 25th anniversary of the ballroom) and Loew's theaters, Tommy Christian's orchestra provided dance music for the night club review "Flashes of 1934", which played at the Silver Gardens in Cincinnati, Ohio from December 24, 1933 through to January 31, 1934. "Flashes of 1934" then played the Saravin Cafe in Buffalo, New York through February of 1934. Tommy's band itinerary finished out 1934 with a floor show at Soden's Grove Pavillion in Emporia, Kansas; the Trocadero Ballroom in Denver, Colorado, the Warnoco Ballroom in Greeley, Colorado, Capital Beach Park, and the Marigold Club in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Tommy's band played a series of band dates in 1935, including a Louisville engagement, where Tommy was presented with the Honorary Order of the Kentucky Colonels by Governor Ruby Lafoon on January 23. After that, Tommy's band itinerary, featuring vocalist Blanche Rochelle, finished out 1935 with appearances at the Trianon Ballroom in Cleveland, Ohio, Chilowee Park near Knoxville, Tennessee, the Coliseum Ballroom in Ceres, New York, and Enna Jettick Park in Auburn, New York, before the band's apparent break-up.

According to clarinetist and former President of American

Federation of Musicians Local 148-462, Atlanta, Karl E. Bevins, Tommy became a sideman for the Atlanta-based Harry Hearn band. Karl recalls, around 1935 or 1936, that he was one of the musicians who replaced Tommy, and some other band members, that left the Harry Hearn band at short notice, "...for some Florida outfit." Prior to this, Karl had been a member of the Georgia Tech Campus Band. Karl also recalled that, "...I met him [Tommy] casually a few times," and that "...he was well thought of by his fellow musicians in Atlanta."

In the latter part of 1936, Tommy became a studio musician for various movie studios in and around Hollywood, California. Although it is not known exactly why Tommy made this move, the position of a Hollywood studio musician was considered a very prestigious and highly-coveted job at that time. Just as the exact reasons for Tommy becoming a Hollywood studio musician is unknown, the same could be said for his reasons for leaving the comparable security of film studio work to reorganize his band. It could be speculated that Tommy's leaving movie studio work may have had something to do with AFM Hollywood Local 47's rule that out-of-state musicians could not obtain full time work until after one year of joining Local 47. This was to pacify the local Californian musicians, who felt they had priority for studio band jobs over the out-of-state musicians. There was also favoritism shown toward local musicians by Local 47's contractors.

For whatever reason Tommy left studio work, a blurb appeared in the March 6, 1937 issue of *Billboard* stating: "TOMMY CHRISTIAN, on the Coast for some time doing picture work, has reorganized his orchestra, and goes under the Rockwell-O'Keefe banner." From available information, it appears that Tommy's new band was booked in Ohio at least through June of 1938, and that they featured the popular 1937 tune *Vienna Dreams*, by Irving Caesar and Dr. Rudolf Siecynski. The original sheet music of this tune features a head-shot of Tommy on the cover; and copies turn up on eBay quite frequently. Although he is listed as saxophonist in the AFM Directory of Musicians of Greater New York (Local 802) for 1939 and 1940, it is not known if Tommy was doing any band-leading, or whether he was working as a sideman. Tommy no longer appears in the above-mentioned New York Local 802 directory after 1940.

In 1941 and 1942, Tommy organized Tommy Christian & His Dixielanders, with himself as Musical Director. This was a small group that Tommy put together to provide music for a series of musical reviews that toured movie houses in Anniston, Alabama, Lumberton, North Carolina, and perhaps in other cities in the southern states. These reviews, such as the "Chicago Follies," "Glorified Girls," "Follies Of the Day," and the "Keep Smiling Review," provided the movie theater patrons with a live stage show before the main movie feature, just like the vaudeville reviews Tommy and his band did for the Loew's theaters in the 1920s. It was probably around the early part of 1942 that Tommy was either drafted or enlisted in the U.S. Army, where he ultimately attained the rank of Sergeant during WWII.

After Tommy's one year stint in the U.S. Army, little is known of his life, or his musical activity, after WWII. By the late 1940's, Tommy became a resident of Greenville, South Carolina with fourth wife Reba E. Christian. There is a possibility that he could have had a small group that played at the Cotton Club Restaurant on Wade Hampton Avenue in Greenville, but this has not been confirmed.

Tommy Christian died on June 18, 1951, aged just 49, after a six-month illness, at his home on 204 N. Laurens Street in

Greenville. He is buried at the Woodlawn Memorial Park in Greenville where his tombstone reads, "C. K. Tommy Christian May 4, 1902 - June 18, 1951", Musical Director." The left side of his tombstone is engraved with the seal of the American Federation of Musicians; the right side is engraved with the compass and square of the Freemasons.

The recordings of Tommy Christian and His Orchestra consist of the nineteen sides the band recorded for Columbia's budget Harmony label; and one solitary release on Columbia's budget Clarion label. These sides, recorded in Columbia's New York City studios, were made between 1925 and 1927, with one last recording session in 1930. Like any other dance band of the period, Christian's recorded repertoire offers a wide variety of pop tunes, novelty, hot jazz, and even a few waltzes, which were still in vogue in the 1920's. Like the other dance bands that appeared on Harmony, Tommys recordings were pressed simultaneously on Velvet Tone for the 5 & 10 Cents trade; on Diva for the W.T. Grant stores; on Silvertone for Sears-Roebuck Co.; and quite possibly on Puritone for the Strauss & Schram, Inc. stores (Chicago, IL 1928-1931).

As mentioned previously, Tommy Christian's first Harmony release, *That Certain Party* and *Show Me The Way To Go Home* (Harmony 75-H), was recorded in New York City on November 19, 1925, during the Tommys triumphant engagement at the Roseland Ballroom in New York City. Both of these hot sides, which include rousing vocal refrains by the members of Tommy's band, also cross over into the pop tune and novelty categories.

A high proportion of the band's Harmony records were of tunes of a "novelty" nature, including *Bolshevik*, *Oh How I Love Bulgarians*, *How Could Red Riding Hood ?*, *Heaven Help A Sailor On A Night Like This*, *Beedle-Um-Bo*, *Elsie-Shultz-En-Heim*, *If My Baby Cooks As Good As She Looks*, and *If I Didn't Know Your Husband*, which to some extent probably reflect the type of material the band specialized in in their theatre and stage work. While drummer/band comedian Art Barnett provides the vocals for the last three tunes, all these sides have hot second chorus ensemble and solo work.

Of all these tunes, *Heaven Help A Sailor On A Night Like This* stands out as the most amusing of the novelty tunes; and it is the best recorded with Tommys band having an especially crisp ensemble sound with the extra added wind sound effects.

*Swamp Blues* (Harmony 427-H) is the true jazz number of the collection. As the title implies, it's a slow tempo blues number featuring a trumpet solo, a trombone solo, and another muted 'gurgling' trombone solo, along with clarinet breaks. The rest of the collection, before Tommy's last 1930 recording session, is made up of the instrumental pop tunes:- *Sam The Old Accordion Man*, *Proud (Of A Baby Like You)*, *When I'm In Your Arms*, *'Deed I Do*, *Song Of The Wanderer*, and the two obligatory waltzes, *Ting-A-Ling* and *In A Little Spanish Town*.

The last recording session by Tommy Christian and His Orchestra took place on November , 28, 1930 in Columbia's New York City studios. There they recorded *What Good Am I Without You*, issued on Harmony 1249-H, *Something To Remember You By*, issued on Clarion 5185; and *You're Diving Me Crazy*, which was rejected. *What Good Am I Without You* and *Something To Remember By* have an excellent sound quality due to the use of the Western Electric recording system, that was now (very belatedly) employed by Columbia for their budget labels.

Christian appeared on was the coupling issued as Roy Wilson and His Georgia Crackers on Melotone (M 12026). The two tunes that were recorded in New York on October 30, 1930, were *Deserted Blues* and *Swamp Blues*; and both numbers are provided with vocals by the band's banjoist Mart Britt. The personnel for this recording session is as follows: Ezell Watson, clarinet/leader; Jack Purvis and two others, trumpet; Tommy Christian, Pat Davis, Ray Watson, clarinet/saxes, Eddie Stiles, piano, unknown violin; Mart Britt, banjo/vocal, unknown brass and string bass, and possibly Whitey Kaufman, drums.

This extremely rare coupling of *Deserted Blues* and *Swamp Blues* is a mystery to many collectors, but the recording session was probably just an opportunity to moonlight under a pseudonym for another record company, as was common among many known, and unknown bands and musicians at the time. It is especially interesting to note that the Georgia Crackers arrangement of *Swamp Blues*, with the exception of Mart Britt's vocal, is remarkably similar to Tommy Christians 1927 Harmony *Swamp Blues* recording, right down to the 'gurgling' trombone solo - an effect allegedly produced by blowing the trombone whilst the bell is submerged in a bucket of water!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Probably the rarest and most unusual recording that Tommy *Author's collection*

