

BLUES FOR JELLY ROLL & FATS

By Steven Lasker & Lewis Porter

Discographical Background (Steven Lasker)

Jelly Roll Morton's first record release, from 1923, was **Big Fat Ham** [recte **Big Foot Ham**]/**Muddy Water Blues** (Paramount 12050). The identity of the saxophonist on this date has been the subject of considerable speculation. In *Mr. Jelly Lord* (1980), Laurie Wright writes that:

The personnel quoted is based on that given by Morton to [Alan] Lomax. At that time he named the alto sax player as 'Harris'; and discographers since that time have assumed that this must be Arville Harris. More recent research has established that this is, to say the least, unlikely, and has also established that one Charles Harris was active in Chicago at the time, did make records, and that the man heard here is probably the same as the man now believed to be him on other records from this period, notably those with Lovie Austin.

This 'recent research' had appeared in *Storyville*, which Laurie both published and edited.



Per Ralph Gulliver ('Can't We Talk It Over?', *Storyville* 66, August-September 1976, p. 211):

---- Harris. The altoist is listed with Morton and Lovie Austin groups, and has been dubbed Arville. Nothing I have read puts Arville Harris in Chicago, and I believe this is more likely to be Charles Harris, now identified with Erskine Tate, Millard Thomas and probably W.C. Handy earlier. Aural comparisons are not really possible, but I think that logic backs Charlie Harris rather than Arville.

Per Chris Hillman ('Paramount Serenaders, 1923-1926', *Storyville* 68, December 1976-January 1977, pp. 53-54):

The saxophone player who appears [as a member of 'Lovie Austin and Her Blues Serenaders'] on this [February 1924] session [with Edmonia Henderson] and subsequently [in March 1924 sessions with Ma Rainey and Ida Cox, and in April 1924 sessions with Ma Rainey, Ethel Waters and Ida Cox] has been identified by Walter C. Allen as having the surname

Harris, but the assumption that this is Arville Harris as given in *Jazz Records* and elsewhere appears to have no basis in fact, nor is the man heard here in the same league as Arville Harris's later playing. Recently in *Storyville* 66, Ralph Gulliver put forward the theory that this was Charles Harris, who was known to have been in Chicago at this time and who worked and/or recorded with other groups, among them Erskine Tate and Millard G. Thomas. As Ralph points out, comparisons are difficult due to the nature of the work here and on the other recordings, but we have compared with a Millard Thomas coupling and find it quite possible that the work on that group and here is by the same man. The instrument has variously been given as soprano, alto or tenor saxophone, but we were agreed that here (with the possible exception of the first title, where it may be soprano) it is alto throughout.

Based on Mr. Gulliver's theory, Charles Harris has been shown as the alto player on Morton's first session in all editions of Brian Rust's *Jazz Records* since its fourth (1978), in Laurie Wright's *Mr. Jelly Lord* (1980), and elsewhere.

To Mr. Gulliver's statement that 'nothing I have read puts Arville Harris in Chicago', I would add that nothing I've read places him anywhere else in 1923, and offer my opinion that Morton's record of **Muddy Water Blues** contains audible evidence of Arville Harris's presence in Chicago on the day of its recording.

Contrary to Mr. Hillman's assertion that 'the man heard here' isn't 'in the same league as Arville Harris's later playing', the 12-bar sax solo heard on Morton's **Muddy Water Blues** is to my ears uncannily similar to another sax solo played by Arville Harris, on a well-known record from 1929, **Harlem Fuss** by 'Fats Waller and His Buddies' (Victor V-38050).

I recently asked Dr. Lewis Porter, the eminent Professor of Jazz Musicology (Ret.), to compare the two solos. To his credit and our great fortune he was glad to oblige. His expert findings follow below.





L-R: Eddie Barefield, Arville Harris, Andrew Brown, Walter 'Footh' Thomas, c.1934. Courtesy of Oklahoma Jazz Hall Of Fame.

Musical Analysis (Lewis Porter)

Both are blues solos in the key of concert E-flat and at about the same tempo. The two solos are quite similar melodically. The second phrase on both recordings is identical, and it is a key phrase, not an incidental part of this person's blues chorus (repeated several times on the Morton especially, but also on the Waller).

As for other saxophonists who have been suggested:

1. Charles Harris is an unknown quantity. I don't know if even our late friend John Chilton found any bio info on him, and I don't know anyone who has made a study of his playing, which is mostly in ensembles. (That is what Hillman and Gulliver mean by mentioning that comparisons are 'difficult' and 'not really possible'.)
2. Stump Evans (suggested as a possibility on the Jelly Roll Morton *Ragtime - Blues - Hot Piano* website at www.doctorjazz.co.uk) on the other hand was a very distinctive player, one of my favourites, and this is not he.
3. There is also the alternative that it is a player lost to history — an option that is too rarely considered, in my opinion — but in this case the clear similarity to the Waller recording with a confirmed Arville Harris solo points us to this particular artist.

On another matter, our friend and my fellow musician Dan Weinstein pointed out that these solos sound as though they are played on tenor saxophone, not alto. Following his lead, I:

- First confirmed that the musical ranges of these solos would fit either horn.
- Then re-listened closely not only to both solos but to the other recordings from these sessions (including the alternate take of *Big Fat Ham*), and not only to the sax solos (such as those in the middle of both takes of *Big Fat Ham*), but to the saxophone work in the ensembles (please focus, for example, on the saxophone work from about 2:30 to the end of *Muddy Water Blues*).
- Consulted with my colleague, the fine saxophonist Dan Levinson, and I also re-listened to confirmed tenor and alto saxophone recordings of the era, just to have the sounds fresh in my ear.
- Also considered C-melody sax, which is very close to tenor, but I heard nothing to suggest C-melody over tenor.

I take full responsibility for the resulting opinion, which is that all of the sax work on both sessions is played on tenor saxophone.

Conclusion

Both solos are played by Arville Harris (with thanks to Steven), and both are played on tenor saxophone (with thanks to Dan Weinstein and Dan Levinson).

Note: The authors have not studied the 1924 recordings with Lovie Austin and the blues ladies Ida Cox, Edmonia Henderson, Ma Rainey and Ethel Waters, so we offer no opinion as to which Harris, if any, was present on those sides.