

“Wild Cat Blues”--Clarence Williams' Blue Five (1923)

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Essay by Thomas L. Morgan (guest post)*



Clarence Williams

Clarence Williams was the most successful African American music publisher of his time. He blazed a trail of entrepreneurship in the American recording industry that was unmatched. Highly energetic and adept at all sides of the music business from writing, publishing, and performing to managing other artists, his business acumen took him from his rural Louisiana roots to work with the major jazz and blues recording artists and labels of the time.

Williams was born on the outskirts of Baton Rouge in Plaquemine, Louisiana, on October 8, 1898. In 1915, Williams and Armand Piron started the first black-owned music publishing company in New Orleans. Piron was vital to Williams as a partner. Williams said: “Piron had one of the best orchestras in the city, playin' at the best hotels. Piron was important to me because he could write the songs down for me.”

Williams moved his publishing company to Chicago in 1918 and then to New York in 1920. It was in New York that Williams started recording. Williams understood and took advantage of the growing interest in blues music by white-owned record companies. The success of early jazz recordings can be clearly linked to Clarence Williams, who was more highly skilled as a businessman than he might have been as a musician. Yet it was his knowledge of the new music called jazz, and the people best able to play and record it, that gave this roots music the push which allowed it to become a world famous art form. He worked his way into the industry by becoming a talent scout for a number of recording companies, thus giving him the power not only to find musicians and record them but, in the process, to develop the early career of the most famous of female blues singers, Bessie Smith.

The songs Clarence Williams wrote were popular across the United States; as a composer, he wrote lyrics and music with artists such as Fats Waller, King Oliver and Armand Piron. Some of his compositions like “Royal Garden Blues” and “Sugar Blues,” done in the traditional New Orleans style, have become classics.

As a vocalist, pianist and jug blower Williams recorded hundreds of songs in a recording career that lasted almost 20 years. His early group, Clarence Williams' Blue Five, was said to have been the inspiration for Louis Armstrong's historic Hot Fives and Sevens recordings.

Clarinetist Sidney Bechet plays a large part as the soloist in “Wild Cat Blues.” Bechet was born in New Orleans in 1897. He was a child prodigy who started playing clarinet at the age of eight.

He sat in with trumpeter Freddie Keppard before taking lessons with Lorenzo Tio, who taught many other New Orleans clarinetists at that time. Bechet played with many other jazz greats both in street parades, dance halls, and at picnics and parties. As a youngster, Sidney Bechet remembered Clarence Williams' business sense and experience. According to Bechet:

Clarence Williams and I toured through Texas with Louis Wade. Louis played piano, I played clarinet, and Clarence sang. Much of the time we plugged early numbers that Clarence had written, numbers that everyone knows today. We played every kind of date-dances, shows, and one-night stands. We even played in ten-cent stores to sell sheet music.

Bechet traveled to Chicago in 1917, working with other New Orleans musicians who had moved to the Windy City including King Oliver and Tony Jackson. In 1919, he toured Europe with the Southern Syncopated Orchestra. A year later, he swapped his clarinet for a soprano saxophone, which he played for the rest of his career.

Bechet returned to the states in 1922 and was working with various jazz groups when he was asked to record by Clarence Williams.

“Wild Cat Blues” was an explosion in early jazz recording. It is the product of a music business mastermind. Clarence Williams had launched the career of Bessie Smith and put together the musicians behind her recordings. Now he focused on his old friend, Sidney Bechet, a powerhouse musician whose expertise rivaled that of another New Orleans native, Louis Armstrong.

Clarence Williams' Blue Five recorded “Wild Cat Blues” in New York City on July 30, 1923. The group consisted of Thomas Morrison on cornet and Sidney Bechet on soprano sax. Clarence Williams leads the session and plays piano. Trombonist John Mayfield is thought to also be on the session as well as Buddy Christian, who plays the banjo. The recording contains a number of firsts. It was the first composition of Thomas “Fats” Waller. Waller and Williams share the writing credits. It has been said that Sidney Bechet recorded before “Wild Cat Blues,” but those recordings were never issued, making “Wild Cat Blues” the first extant recordings by Bechet. At the time Bechet's nickname was “Wild Cat.”

On the recording, Williams' piano stays out of Bechet's way as do the rest of the musicians. In the recording, Bechet exhibits the forceful approach which would remain his signature for the rest of his career. It is also the first alto saxophone solo on a jazz recording. Present-day acclaimed New Orleans clarinetist Evan Christopher describes Bechet's approach to his solo:

[M]ore evident than his emerging eminence as a soloist is the originality of his startling sound. Once we recognize that he is channeling vocalists and trumpet players more than his mentors on his own instrument, we can begin to appreciate his prodigious contributions to the style-specific vocabulary of the clarinet and saxophone in New Orleans music as well the jazz tradition that followed.

Both Williams and Bechet had long recording careers in jazz. Williams recorded regularly into the 1940s. Bechet recorded into the 1950s mostly in Europe, having moved to France in 1951.

Thomas L. Morgan is a Pensacola-based jazz historian and radio producer. His latest book was “Historic Photos of New Orleans Jazz” (2009). His first book, “From Cakewalks to Concert Halls: An Illustrated History of African American Popular Music: From 1895 to 1930,” was awarded second place in the Ralph Gleason Music Book Awards for the best music books published in 1992. Morgan hosts Jazz Roots (<http://jassroots.com>), the premier web site for

early jazz and the history of black music at the beginning of the Twentieth Century as well as “Today in Louisiana Music History” on Facebook which celebrates the musicians of Louisiana.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.