

Bunk Johnson

AN APPRECIATION

BY *harold drob*

Harold Drob is a New York jazz fan who was responsible for Bunk Johnson's last recording date, which he calls the only sessions to be made with a band entirely of Bunk's own choosing. Sides from this 1947 date are receiving belated first release this Fall, as an LP on the Columbia label.

(In this first of two articles, Drob, who came to know Bunk quite well, gives his impressions of the man, reveals some little-known facts about his "revival" career, and details the gradual growth of the author's own appreciation of Bunk. In next month's issue he will describe the recording date.

The Record Changer considers this a unique and undoubtedly controversial jazz document. It is also a fascinating personal study of the "education" of a non-untypical jazz fan. - The Editors)

One of the most vital and important experiences in my life has been the appreciation of Bunk Johnson and his music. I believe that virtually all of this recordings and much that has been written about him in the past have misrepresented the man and his abilities. As far as I am concerned, the only accurate and complete evidence of his abilities as a trumpet player and a leader are to be found in his last series of recordings, made in December, 1947. To explain why I believe this to be so, I am presenting the following story.

I sincerely wish that I were able to make this explanation through any medium other than a first person narrative. Believe me, I have tried many approaches, and have resorted to this method only after all others failed. I hope that the reader will be able to glean the significant facts about Bunk and

his music from this account, and bear them in mind when listening to Bunk's last records. Accept or reject the music on them according to your own standards. My intention is to explain the motives which led to the making of these recordings, not to sell Bunk Johnson as a musician. I leave that to Bunk himself.

I saw Bunk Johnson for the first time on January 8, 1946, at Stuyvesant Casino. I will never forget the date - and I remember it only partly because I was discharged from the army that day.

This was the first band composed entirely of New Orleans musicians that I had ever heard. I immediately accepted the entire band, and perhaps was even more impressed with the others than with Bunk. But I was sure that he was the best trumpet player that I had ever heard in person, because he always played what I considered to be correct lead in ensembles. I was not as sure of how the trombone and clarinet parts should sound, but being a rabid Dixie New Orleans fan I wanted to hear "tailgate" trombone and a full, flowing clarinet. The more complicated the trumpet part, the more confused the ensemble sounded to me. I wanted the trumpet to play the melody in the most direct way in order to give the other horns the opportunity to play as elaborately as they wished. (At some time in the past I had come to the conclusion that Louis Armstrong was the most disrupting force in New Orleans music, because he gave up playing lead and played his complex solo style in ensembles. His tremendous influence on other trumpet players even made New Orleans horns like Lee Collins and Punch Miller follow him away from the traditional lead style.) Bunk was for me therefore, strictly on the strength of his lead.

I was at Stuyvesant every night that week, which ended the engagement. I was so overwhelmed by the music that I never thought about any shortcomings that the band might have. I understood that they would be back in town in a month or so, and passing time found me eagerly awaiting their return. In the meantime, I had their records to listen to, especially the

AM sides, which were closest to the sound of the band as I had heard it.

The first indication I had that anything was wrong was shortly before they returned for the second Stuyvesant engagement. I ran into the late Gene Williams, sponsor of the first engagement. He had just returned from Los Angeles, where he had heard Kid Ory's sound for the first time. Gene remarked that now he "understood what Bunk meant when he talked about a band" and that he realized that the band with George Lewis and Jim Robinson was no band at all. All this was way over my head. I had records of Ory's band and didn't like them very much. They seemed much less spirited than the AM Bunks; they sounded arranged rather than freely improvised. Gene finally admitted that I probably could not understand what he was talking about and only would if I could hear it for myself, since the records of Ory's band did not sound like the band at all.

I did learn that Bunk was dissatisfied with his band, that almost immediately he had wanted to replace Robinson with Sandy Williams, and that Bunk couldn't stand playing with Baby Dodds. This also made no sense to me; I was sure Jim was a far greater trombonist than Sandy and that Baby was the greatest drummer in the world. I guess it was then that I began to build up a personal dislike for Bunk, even though I had only had a few typical jazz-fan-type conversations with him. I attributed his dissatisfaction to jealousy (Jim, George, and Baby had large followings) and a mean nature.

When the band returned to Stuyvesant this impression of Bunk became more pronounced. I became very friendly with Lewis and Slow Drag and everything that they told me bore out my suspicions. To them Bunk was a nasty old man who was trying to make them unhappy and show them in a bad light by playing tunes that were unfamiliar to them and using keys they had never played in before.

By now I was aware that there were factions in the band. Like many other fans, I held Bunk entirely responsible for the disunity. I thought Lewis and Robinson

could handle the New Orleans repertoire and did not particularly care to hear the pop music that Bunk insisted on playing. I could in no way condone Bunk's failure to limit himself to the type of music the others could play. I remember being especially intolerant of the answer Johnson gave a fan who requested a tune, "I could play it for you but the rest of the band doesn't know it." I thought that a leader should defend his men, not attack them in public, and that he should have said, "We don't know it."

For a while I tried to stay away from the Stuyvesant, but something made me keep coming back. Finally I realized that I was coming to listen to Bunk, and Bunk alone. I stopped listening to the rest of the band and was able to get my kicks from the old man, who was usually playing well and often superbly. But George and Drag still had a strong influence on me. I was aware that Bunk could not work with these people, but I had no idea which musicians he could work with, if any, and I thought that with a trumpet player like Kid Howard, George Lewis and the others would have a great band.

After the band closed for the second time their records no longer satisfied me. That same disunity was there, though I had never realized it before. But Bunk had me hooked. So, when I found out that he was to play a concert at Orchestra Hall in Chicago in September, 1946, I went out to hear him. It was a fiasco. Bunk arrived two hours late and didn't even try to play well. But I was learning things. Bad as Bunk was at the concert, the band (Howard, Preston Jackson, Don Ewell, Johnny Lindsey, and Snags Jones) gave him very sympathetic support. This was the first evidence I had of a band working with the lead, instead of every man going his own way.

I was still very much confused and come back to New York trying to make a little sense out of the whole thing. I wanted to hear Bunk, but could not understand why he was apparently making it so hard for me to hear him properly.

Then Gene Williams went to San Francisco to promote Kid Ory's band. A good friend of mine, who heard this band, tried to describe it in a letter. The best he could do was say that they played together much in the way that Jelly Roll Morton's band played on *Black Bottom Stomp*. He called it the greatest musical experience that he had ever had. By now I had no choice but to go out to 'Frisco and hear for myself.

My first reaction to the Ory band was that it was either the best or the worst I had ever heard. They certainly played together, but on first hearing seemed too slick, every routine was so patly worked out. Then I realized that the second performance I heard of a tune was different from the first and that the slick sound was the result of *always* playing together, making every performance sound very tightly arranged. Mutt Carey played excellent lead. He could play many different styles, always with the utmost of restraint, and the band understood him perfectly. It was a revelation to hear them. They could really play every kind of music and all of it was most enjoyable. They played pieces like *Mood Indigo* and *Sophisticated Lady* without losing any of the Ellington flavor, while adding their own New Orleans touch. They played Lunceford-type and swing tunes, like *Tuxedo Junction* and *Christopher Columbus*, using the familiar arrangements as a basis. They did hit parade and cowboy tunes, waltzes and rhumbas; they played every tune as the average square would expect to hear it, but with a flavor and swing all their own. The melody was always prominent and the things they added were always in keeping with the nature of the tune. Bunk's Stuyvesant band had sounded the same no matter what tune it was playing, with no difference in approach between *Milenburg Joys* and *You Always Hurt the One You Love*. But this band used every dance band idea that I had ever heard before and made them part of their way of playing.

One day I was fortunate enough to catch one of their rehearsals. They started with a stock arrangement and rehearsed

that until they could perform it flawlessly. Then they put the music aside and began to take liberties with the arrangement. But they did not attempt to insert their own ideas until they were sure that they knew exactly how the tune went and what each man's part was supposed to be. Mutt was the real leader of this band once they started playing. Ory might decide what they were going to play but Mutt set the pace. Gene was right: the records of this band did not demonstrate their abilities. On their records they played only Dixie, and never got a chance to show all the other styles of music they could handle. Now the Bunk Johnson side of the story was starting to make sense. I could now imagine how Bunk's band, if composed of versatile and sympathetic musicians, would sound. I could understand how unhappy he must have been with the limited Stuyvesant group. For the first time I had an idea of the sort of circumstances under which I wanted to hear Bunk play.

I had heard dubs of some of the Jelly Roll Morton Library of Congress sides, and found that I agreed with Jelly's definition of jazz, especially that "Jazz music is to be played soft and sweet, with plenty rhythm. When you got your plenty rhythm and plenty swing it becomes beautiful. . . . You never distort the melody. You always have the melody going some kind of way. . . . Jazz is a style of playing that can be applied to any type tune, it merely depends on your ability for transformation." The Ory band was a most simple and direct example of all that Jelly had to say.

On my way back East I learned that Bunk was to play at a session at the Twin Terrace in Chicago. I arranged my trip home so that I could make it. I walked in as Bunk was warming up and the first few notes I heard made me feel entirely at home.

This session was another fiasco. Bunk was in with a group that made no attempt to play with him and acted as if every one of them was the leader. But his own playing was great. Now I had to talk to Bunk Johnson. He was the greatest musician I had ever heard and I had to get

his ideas first hand. Under the pretext of bearing regards from Gene Williams and Bunk's other friends I had seen in San Francisco, I struck up a conversation with the old man. Bunk told me how important ragtime music was to him and that he hoped to be able to come back to New York with a band that would be able to play this music. He said, "Ragtime is standard and due to come back. It takes a real good band to play ragtime properly. A good reading band."

Back in New York, I spent a great deal of time with Gene Williams, and learned from him the Bunk Johnson story, beginning with his rediscovery. I think it important now to go back and tell that story as I pieced it together from what I learned from Gene (and later on from Bill Colburn, Bill Russell, and Bunk himself):

When Gene and the others went to New Orleans in the spring of 1942 to record Bunk, their approach was purely a historical one. They were trying to document the last feeble notes of an old man who had apparently once been a great trumpet player. Bunk was already in his sixties. He hadn't played at all for eight years and, in the bargain, needed false teeth to play at all! They also believed that Bunk came from an era in which all the musicians were unschooled and played no written music whatsoever. They thought that Bunk would only be able to play the tunes that have become identified with New Orleans: blues, rags, and stomps. Their sole intention was to try to recapture the good old days that Bunk talked about in his letters. Furthermore, they had expected to have to lead Bunk by the hand. He was obviously out of touch with New Orleans, having retired years before to New Iberia, and they would have to attend to all the details, including the choice of a band and tunes.

What they found was overwhelming. Bunk was anything but feeble, physically or mentally, and had his own ideas about what he wanted to do. Imagine their surprise when right off the bat this old

veteran said that he wanted to record *Deep in the Heart of Texas!* What kind of material was that for a man who had been a member of Buddy Bolden's Band? They told him that they wanted to record him playing as he did in the old days and would like him to make some of the old favorites and a couple of blues. (Bunk told me that he tried to explain that as far as he was concerned when you played the blues once that was enough, because the blues was only one tune no matter what you called it. But they insisted on two blues.)

Bunk was very happy to get the chance to make a comeback, and he did not press them to do as he wished. He told them that he would be very glad to go to New Orleans and get a band together. He was sure that he could get Big Eye Louis Nelson, for one. Big Eye was immediately vetoed because his clarinet playing had been disappointing on the Kid Rena records and they hoped to find a younger and stronger clarinetist. There was one musician on the Rena records who had knocked them all out and they wanted to record some more of him. This was Jim Robinson. They thought that Jim would salvage the records in case Bunk was real terrible. When Bunk realized that he would have to play with Robinson, Gene told me that he immediately said, "If Jim Robinson is to be the trombone player then I know just the clarinet player for this band: George Lewis." That is how Bunk first became connected with these two "emergency musicians," as he called them. Bunk picked Decou and Young and wanted Johnny St. Cyr. St. Cyr was not available, so Lewis' buddy, Lawrence Marrero, was used instead.

In spite of the fact that neither the band nor the tunes were to his satisfaction, Bunk reached a peak on these records that he never duplicated again until his very last ones. Then Williams and Russell began the "Bunk Johnson is the greatest" campaign.

There is no denying that on these initial records George and Jim play far better than they ever did with Bunk later, and that the rhythm section was better than later ones. The records were most unusual and

the jazz-fan world accepted the fact that Bunk was still a very fine New Orleans trumpet player. It was only natural to connect him with the band. Only a few people knew that he had not chosen Lewis and Robinson, and nearly everyone thought of George and Jim as being in the same class with Johnson.

Some time later Bunk went out to California by himself. He tried to explain his requirements to Colburn, Blesh, and his other sponsors, but no one seemed to understand what he was talking about. Bunk was put to work once a week with a band that consisted of the remnants of Lu Watters' Band. They generally refused to play any tune written after 1930, and were still developing as musicians. Colburn, who had the advantage of having heard Ory's band, which experience the eastern Bunk followers lacked, realized Bunk's position before anyone else. But by the time he did, Bunk was back East.

Next was Boston and Sidney Bechet. Bunk often talked to me about that deal. He really thought that he was going to get a chance to play some good music with Sidney. Bunk went to Boston with the highest hopes. He even went so far as to bring some sheet music with him. When Bunk pulled out his music, Sidney apparently thought he was trying to take over the band. Bunk tried to explain that he was only trying to help make it a better band, but he was told in no uncertain terms that Sidney was the leader and that his suggestions were not welcome. This attitude antagonized the old man. In addition Bechet had no intention of giving up the soprano sax for the clarinet during Bunk's stay with the band – although Johnson had understood he would do so. Bunk had no desire to compete with what he called "the fish horn," and at first went so far as to refuse to play whenever Bechet picked it up.

Things kept getting worse and Bunk began drinking on the job. The climax came when Sidney instructed the bartender in the place not to serve Johnson. Bunk told the bartender: "I'm not a child. I'm 65 years of age and if I want to drink some whiskey I

know how to find the nearest bar." Having found the situation completely hopeless, Bunk went back home, still without having had a decent opportunity to play.

Gene Williams, who was a witness to the Boston deal, decided that the time had come to let Bunk be the leader of "his own band." By that, Gene meant the band Bill Russell had recorded in New Orleans with Lewis, Robinson, Slow Drag, Marrerro, and Baby Dodds. However, Bunk in no way considered this "his band." He tried to explain that he could get a band together to play "some fine dance music for the dances," but Gene was adamant. Finally Bunk agreed, but in a letter to Williams insisted that this would be "Bunk Johnson's Olden Time Band" and not his dance band, since these fellows could only play the old time tunes.

Bunk still tried to show Gene his dissatisfaction in every way possible. He even traveled to New York by himself, to show that he didn't feel he belonged with the others. After two weeks, he wanted Williams to send Jim Robinson home and hire Sandy Williams. Baby Dodds was carrying on and playing a lot of solo drums; when Bunk suggested, firmly that Baby stop all those "explosions," Baby answered back. Bunk wanted him fired, too. Gene wouldn't do it. Since Williams had hired the whole band, Bunk felt he could not single-handedly fire any man he hadn't hired in the first place. Bill Colburn came to town and explained to Gene that this was not the band for Bunk. Gene decided to send the band home and go to California to hear Kid Ory's band, Colburn having insisted that only by doing so could he fully understand. Bunk went home expecting to hear from Williams within a month.

While Williams was in California, Benjamin Menshell, the owner of the Stuyvesant Casino, who had realized how great a draw the band was, approached Bunk about returning to play. Having written to Williams and received no reply, Bunk began to dicker with Menshell. Menshell was afraid that without Lewis and Robinson it wouldn't be successful, and insisted on

them. Bunk was able to pick his own pianist and drummer. He hired Don Ewell and intended using George Thompson, who had been Bechet's drummer when Bunk was in Boston. But Thompson was not available. Bunk didn't know any drummers in town, but knew that Kaiser Marshall had played with Henderson. On that recommendation Bunk hired him, but Kaiser was off on some kick of his own and played so badly that Bunk had to fire him. One night Marshall was so far off in his own world that Bunk had to bang on his bass drum in order to get his attention. That night he gave Kaiser notice.

That fills in the gaps in the Bunk Johnson story up to the time that he finished his second engagement at the Stuyvesant Casino. At that time, Gene Williams was looking for the money to sponsor a band of Bunk's own choice. Gene had a mystical approach to Bunk and looked for hidden meanings in everything the old man had to say. But, as I later found out, his quotes were accurate even though he distorted their meaning. From him I learned that Bunk's musical ideas were no different from those of Morton and Carey. They boiled down to these requirements for a band: (1) a group of good reading musicians, (2) careful rehearsals, (3) a repertoire that includes everything in the line of dance music, (4) the band must play for dancing, (5) the melody is the most important thing, (6) there must be a leader who gives direction to the band, and (7) the others must be willing and able to follow the leader.

By now this was exactly the kind of a band I wanted to hear. But Gene refused to take any practical viewpoint and seemed to think that he could raise money for Bunk without having any concrete plan of operations. Neither he nor Bill Colburn, who joined Gene in New York, ever had any success with their fund-raising attempts.

In the meantime, Bob Maltz brought Johnson to New York to play at the concerts Maltz was beginning to sponsor. Bunk gigged around at concerts and various

hapless jam sessions. It was at this time that I really got to know him personally.

By this time I was prepared to find an entirely different man than the one I had originally pictured. I could justify all the actions that I had found detestable before. I felt I had a tremendous advantage over those people who tried to help him in the past, and was ready to approach the man, confident that at least I would not repeat any mistakes that anyone had made before. I became a regular visitor of Bunk's and talked to him a great deal. My respect for Bunk Johnson increased with each succeeding visit. His personality was as engaging as his music. Louis Armstrong once said, "Just to hear that man talk sends me." His memory was fantastic and he could recall incidents that had happened fifty years before in the greatest detail. His truthfulness has often been doubted, but he never told me a verifiable story which I found to be at all untrue when I checked it.

His personal pride and integrity were unusual. Having complete faith in his abilities, he would never compromise himself, no matter what the situation. He never played anything other than what he considered the correct way to play trumpet in a band. He was never able to understand why he was expected to play the same tunes night after night. The jazz fans, who clamored for *High Society*, *Sister Kate*, and *Careless Love* set after set, annoyed him. He wanted no one, least of all non-musicians, to tell him how to play. Bunk told me that he once quit Pete Lala's Café, a choice job in New Orleans, because Lala objected to Bunk's wearing a blue shirt. "A man tells you how to dress and the next thing you know he's telling you how to play."

His trumpet style was as pure and direct as possible. He never used mutes or tried for freak effects. At one time he had doubled on saxophones, but he told me he gave up the instrument when slap-tonguing became popular. He thought it incorrect to play sax that way and preferred not playing it at all. His music reflected his way of life. He did his bet,

provided that he was dealt with honestly. He was a man of his word and expected everybody else to be the same. When a man didn't treat him in the way he expected, Bunk felt under no obligation to keep his end of the bargain. If he was treated as if he were a fool he acted like one. The punishment for doing him wrong was often far from fitting the crime, especially in the case of people who did not know him well, and in many cases harmed Bunk's reputation as well as the wrong doer. John Schenk, promoter of the Chicago Orchestra Hall fiasco, had asked Bunk to pick his band. Bunk replied that that he did not know any Chicago musicians but would be willing to play with anyone except Baby Dodds. When Bunk received a copy of the program he noticed that Dodds was also to appear. So he arrived in Chicago two hours after the concert was scheduled to begin and gave his minimum performance. The only way you could do business with Bunk was according to his rules. Actually all that he demanded was that you appreciate what he could do and be honest with him. These were the only conditions under which he would perform at his best.

At 68, he was the physical equal of a man of 30. He never considered himself to be old and, even though he referred to himself as "old man Bunk," wanted no special consideration because of his age. He thought that Miff Mole and Mutt Carey played well "considering their ages." These men were years younger than Bunk. But if somebody said that Bunk played well for his age he became indignant. He was extremely proud of his every accomplishment, physical or mental. Bunk once asked me to help him move. When I arrived everything was already knocked over Bunk's stand. Seeing his ready picked and ready to go. Even though he had been living on the fifth floor, he carried everything, including his trunk, down the stairs by himself. Actually all that he had wanted me to do was to get him a cab and direct the driver to his new home.

Bunk had an acute sense of humor and had a steady flow of truly amusing jokes and stories. It was impossible to be angry

with him for any length of time; he could always divert you with his humor. He seemed to enjoy life to the fullest extent. His vitality was contagious and following him around required more activity than most people forty years younger were ordinarily willing to expend. His mind was as keen as any I have come across. He was, without question, the most fascinating person I have ever known.