

EDDIE LANG – THE FORMATIVE YEARS, 1902-1925

By Nick Dellow

Jazz musicians who live short lives often leave the deepest impressions. There is something about their immutable youth, echoed through the sound of distant recordings, that encapsulates the spirit of jazz. One thinks of Bix and Bubber, Murray and Teschemacher, and Lang and Christian. Of these, guitarist Eddie Lang left the largest recorded testament, spanning jazz, blues and popular music generally.

Whether his guitar was imparting a rich chordal support for other instrumentalists, driving jazz and dance bands with rhythmic propulsion, or providing a sensitive backing for a variety of singers, Lang's influence was pervasive. Django Reinhardt once said that Eddie Lang helped him to find his own way in music. Like his contemporary Bix Beiderbecke, Lang's defining role as a musician was acknowledged early on in his career, and has been venerated ever since.

As is often the case with musicians who are prolific, there are gaps in our knowledge. This article attempts to address some of these, with particular attention being paid to Lang's early career. In the second part of the article the Mound City Blue Blowers' visit to London in 1925 is discussed in detail, and possible recordings that Lang made during the band's engagement at the Piccadilly Hotel are outlined and assessed. More generally, Lang's importance as a guitarist is set in context against the background of the guitar's role in early jazz and dance music.

The Guitar in Early Jazz and Blues

The crucial role of the guitar in early New Orleans bands is stressed by H. O. Brunn in *The Story Of The Original Dixieland Jazz Band*:

"[The guitarist] would shout out the chord changes on unfamiliar melodies or on modulations to a different key. And the last chorus was known in their trade as the "breakdown," in which each instrumentalist would improvise his own part. It was through this frequent "calling out" of chords by the guitarist than many New Orleans musicians of that day, otherwise totally ignorant of written music, came to recognise their chords by letter and number; and though they could not read music, they always knew the key in which they were playing. This thorough knowledge of chords was one of the most distinguishing features of the New Orleans ragtime musicians, who perceived every number as a certain chord progression and were quick to improvise within the pattern."
[1]

One of the most important guitarists working in these early New Orleans jazz – or "proto-jazz" – bands was Charlie Galloway (c. 1865 to c. 1914). Galloway became disabled as a child, possibly through polio or spinal tuberculosis, and relied on crutches for mobility. He progressed as a musician and overcame physical adversity; by the 1890s, he was leading a dance orchestra in New Orleans. Within its ranks were two musicians who would later play in Buddy Bolden's band: clarinetist Willie Warner and string bass player Bob Lyons.



Galloway and Bolden lived in close proximity and often met to work out simple instrumental arrangements of popular street songs of the day, which they would then apply to their own bands, with the instruments playing either the melody of the song or a harmonically related part. Mostly this was worked out by Galloway using the guitar, and in doing so simple arrangements could be applied to combinations of "orchestral" instruments such as the clarinets, cornets and trombones that were increasingly being used by New Orleans bands such as Bolden's.

Other important guitarists who played in early New Orleans bands included: Dominick Barocco and Joe Guiffre (Jack Laine's Reliance Band), Bud Scott and Coochie Martin (John Robichaux's Orchestra), René Baptiste (Manuel Perez's Imperial Orchestra), Lorenzo Staulz (Buddy Bolden's band) and Louis Keppard (Tuxedo Brass Band and the Magnolia Orchestra).

Hawaiians were equally important in introducing the guitar into the American popular music arena. Guitars were imported by South American cowboys of Portuguese descent into Hawaii in the 19th Century. Two Portuguese luthiers, Manuel Nunes and Augusto Diaz, established a guitar trading business and shop in Hawaii in 1879, possibly to serve the cowboy trade. Native Hawaiians soon took to the guitar and subsequently adapted it to their own melodies, using alternative tunings known as "scordatura" or "slack key". Hawaiian guitarists were

touring the West Coast of the USA by the late 19th Century.

Hawaiian music – usually played on “Hawaiian” shaped guitars using a steel slide – became extremely popular during the First World War period and remained so throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Amongst the Hawaiian steel guitarists of the 1920s and 1930s who found fame in America were Sol Hoopii, Joseph Kekuku, Frank Ferera, Sam Ku West and “King” Bennie Nawahi.

The Hawaiian style of playing also crossed over into the blues genre, with several early blues guitarists adopting the slide guitar. W. C. Handy, the “Father of the Blues”, recalled an encounter with a blues guitarist around the beginning of the 20th century:

“One night in Tutwiler, as I nodded in the railroad station while waiting for a train that had been delayed nine hours, life suddenly took me by the shoulder and awakened me with a start.

A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly: “Goin’ where the Southern cross’ the Dog”. The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard.” [2]

Despite its crucial role in early New Orleans bands, the guitar made few inroads into the mainstream dance band and jazz scene that mushroomed in popularity after the First World War. Though the Original Dixieland Jazz Band didn’t use a stringed instrument, the small white Dixieland bands that sprang up to cash in on the jazz craze the ODJB created often used a banjo in their rhythm section in place of a piano, with the Frisco Jass Band being the first such outfit to employ a banjo on recordings (for Edison in 1917). By the early 1920s, the banjo was more or less ubiquitous in jazz/dance bands.

The situation is neatly summarised by David K. Bradford:

“By the time New Orleans style jazz bands began to be widely recorded, the tenor banjo – which was louder and crisper sounding, and recorded better than the guitar on early recording equipment – had replaced the guitar in many bands. As a result, we have only a fairly small sample of what the guitar sounded like, and how it was played, in the earliest New Orleans ragtime and jazz bands, and then only from comparatively later recordings.” [3]

Developments in the construction of banjos during this period reflected the predominance of the instrument in the popular music field. The instrument’s body and its resonator were enhanced to increase the instrument’s volume so that it could be heard above the dominating brass and woodwind instruments of ever larger bands. Various models were available, with the plectrum banjo finding preference in the early years, but the tenor banjo becoming increasingly popular after 1910, particularly following Irene and Vernon Castle’s introduction of the Tango in the USA in 1913.

Eddie Lang - Early Life and Influences

Eddie Lang was born Salvatore Massaro on October 25th 1902 in Philadelphia, to Dominic and Carmela Massaro, Italians from Monteroduni, a small town about 110 miles south-east of Rome, who had emigrated to the USA in the 1880s. The Massaro family settled in the Italian district of South Philadelphia, and eventually raised nine children, of whom Salvatore was the youngest.

In an article published in the September 1932 edition of the British magazine *Rhythm*, Eddie Lang described his father as a “maker of guitars in the old country” [4]. The extent to which Dominic could apply his trade as a guitar maker in the New World would have been curtailed by the fact that he did not speak more than a few words of English. It has also been suggested that he was illiterate, something that would have been commonplace in the 1880s, not only amongst immigrants but the indigenous population too. According to the 1910 census, Dominic’s occupation was “labourer, railroad”. By the 1920 census, he had elevated his station in life to “railway foreman”, suggesting that not only was he a reliable employee but also that both his written and spoken English had progressed commensurately.

As was the case with many Italian families, the Massaro children began to play musical instruments at an early age:

“Most people start their musical education at an early age, and I, being no exception, started at the very tender age of one and a half years. My father was a maker of guitars in the old country, and he made me an instrument that consisted of a cigar box with a broom handle attached, and strong thread was used as the strings.” [4]

When he was a few years older – probably seven or eight years old – Salvatore was given a more conventional guitar, made by his father on a scale small enough for the youngest Massaro offspring to reach all the frets.

Eddie Lang’s parent’s home was at 701 South Marshall Street, Philadelphia, in the heart of the Italian district. The family lived here until at some point (probably just after the First World War when Dominic was promoted) they moved to 738 St. Albans Street, just round the corner. This is the address given for the family in the 1920 census. Giuseppe ‘Joe’ Venuti lived nearby, on 8th Street, off Clymer Street.

Venuti and Lang were close in age - Eddie was 13 years old and Joe was 12 - and they both attended the local James Campbell School, where they were also *both* taught to play the violin - the first instrument of choice for formal music training. Lang started on violin at 8 years old and continued until he left school aged 15.

The violin that Lang began his musical education on was acquired through an unusual set of circumstances. At some point in his early childhood, Lang was involved in a serious accident. Columnist Ed Sullivan – later to find fame on television – stated that he had been “Hit by a Philadelphia street car when he was a kid, and was forced to bed for a year, and with the money his family received, they bought him a violin”. [6] Lang suffered from sporadic periods of illness throughout his life, most of which seem to concern his digestive system. According to Jack Bland, the banjoist of the Mound City Blue Blowers,

Lang *“didn’t like to drink because he had a bad stomach and was afraid he’d get ulcers”*. [7] It has not been possible to verify if this poor health arose as a direct result of the accident he suffered as a child. Lang’s medical records were unfortunately destroyed in a fire. [8]

James Campbell School had two outstanding professors of music: Professor Ciancarullo, with whom Lang studied for three years (Ciancarullo had previously played with the Naples Symphony Orchestra), followed by tuition under Professor Luccantonio. Under their tutelage, Lang was given a thorough grounding in music, including theory and harmony. This formal musical education also introduced him to European classical composers: Lang developed a particular fondness for Debussy and Ravel. It is said that he also attended the Settlement Music School in Philadelphia, but it is not known if the lessons he had here were for violin or guitar. In fact, whether he had any formal lessons on the guitar is difficult to ascertain. Lang himself stated that he *“fooled around with a guitar at home”*, [3] indicating that he was self-taught, while other sources suggest that he may have had lessons from at least one or possibly two uncles who were guitar players. If his father was a guitar maker, as Lang states, then it is likely that he gave his son lessons. Moreover, within the close-knit Italian neighbourhood that Lang grew up in, there would have been other experienced guitarists who could have taught him.

The manner in which Italian children were taught music was emphasised by Joe Venuti:

“Formal training? I think a cousin started to teach me when I was about four. Solfeggio, of course. That’s the Italian system



James Campbell School in Philadelphia, where both Eddie Lang and Joe Venuti were pupils. Photo courtesy Ray Mitchell.

under which you don’t bother much about any special instrument until you know all the fundamentals of music. It’s the only way to learn music right. Later, when I started to study fiddle seriously, I had several good teachers.” [5]

The informal way the guitar was taught at the time would have emphasised its role as an accompanying instrument, whereby mostly bass notes on the main beat would be followed by chords on the weak beats interspersed with occasional bass runs. This technique was not only applied to vocal accompaniments but also in marches, waltzes, tangos....and blues and jazz.

Venuti and Lang practiced together and a musical camaraderie soon developed, as Venuti recalled:

“Eddie and I were kids in the same neighbourhood in Philadelphia. We went through grammar school and high school together. We used to play a lot of mazurkas and polkas. Just for fun we started to play them in four-four. I guess we just liked the rhythm of the guitar. Then we started to slip in some improvised passages. I’d slip something in and Eddie would pick it up with a variation. Then I’d come back with a variation. We’d just sit there and knock each other out.” [5]

Venuti also stated that their practice sessions would sometimes last up to 10 hours a day, and they would often exchange instruments to further hone their skills. Later on, when appearing in vaudeville, Lang and Venuti would also sometimes swap instruments, with Lang playing violin and Venuti playing guitar or mandolin!

The fact that Lang received over a decade of tuition under well respected professors of music should dispel any notions that he was a poor reader. However, throughout his career Lang often “busked” his way through a number, relying on his naturally musical ear to navigate his way through the chord progressions. The fact that his innate musical skills were fine-tuned by years of theory and harmony training seemed to negate the notion held by other musicians that Lang was some sort of musical genius, and so his formal tuition was rarely considered part of the magic formula.

A typical reaction concerning Lang’s skills is that expressed by Paul Whiteman. Lang was a member of Whiteman’s gargantuan band of top musicians in 1929-1930, during and just after the making of *The King Of Jazz*, in which Lang is briefly seen playing together with Joe Venuti. Whiteman later reminisced:

“To my mind Lang was one of the greatest musical geniuses we ever had in the band. I never saw him look at a note of music. I don’t even know whether he could read or not. It made no difference. What’s the use of bothering with those pesky black blotches when you can anticipate the next chord change five bars in advance? No matter how intricate the arrangement was, Eddie played it flawlessly the first time without having heard it before, and without looking at a sheet of music. It was if his musically intuitive spirit had read the arranger’s mind, and knew in advance everything that was going to happen.” [9]

Even Joe Venuti, who knew better, was not averse to perpetuating the myth that Lang didn’t read music:

“I’ll tell you something you haven’t heard before. Eddie Lang

didn't read a note of music. He could hear it so what was the point of writing it for him. He had a great ear. When he used to play something intricate, people who used to know that he was just a "faker" used to bet he could not do it again. But he remembered every note he ever played. If he played a great thing once he knew it. And he was a brilliant rhythm man." [10]

Although Venuti and Lang played together in bands in Philadelphia before Lang joined the Mound City Blue Blowers, their most productive, and certainly best known, musical association belongs to the period after Lang's return from London in June 1925 as is therefore outside the scope of this article.

Salvatore Massaro adopted the name 'Eddie Lang' as a teenager, after a popular basketball player in the local South Philadelphia Hebrew Association league, a sportsman who had almost certainly changed his own name from that given to him at birth. This Anglicisation of names was especially common with the children of immigrants, who often spoke English as their first language and usually had a greater desire than their parents to acculturate within the host country's mainstream society. Eddie's older brother Alexander was more often known as Thomas or Tom (he appears on the 1920 census as Thomas, with no mention of Alexander), and a sister – Magdalena – was known as Eadie. Incidentally, both Tom and Eadie were guitar players, though they did not achieve anything remotely like the success of their more illustrious brother. Alexander's passport gives his occupation as "chauffeur", and the 1920 census lists him as a 'factory worker', which indicates that he was an odd-job man, willing to take on work wherever he could find it. Eadie apparently worked during the 1930s as a guitarist, but there are no further details.

Growing up in Philadelphia, Lang was exposed to a wide variety of folk music. Beyond the Italian folk songs that would have been ever-present, there were other sounds that the young Lang would have encountered. Philadelphia played host to a variety of immigrant communities, each importing their own indigenous folk music: amongst these were Poles, Germans, Irish and Jews.

Added to this rich source of folk music was blues and jazz. The city had the largest African-American population north of the Mason-Dixon line, and was one of the most important cities in the Northern states for both visiting and itinerant blues and jazz musicians and singers. It even had its own black symphony orchestra. A number of African-American-owned entertainment



Charlie Kerr & His L'Aiglon Orchestra, 1923. L-R: Joseph DeLuca (tb), Leo McConville (t), Mike Trafficante (bb), Albert Valante (vln), Bob McCracken (p), Eddie Lang (bj/g), two saxophonists - Jerry DeMasi (sax), Vincenzo D'Imperio (sax) - but unsure which is which, Charlie Kerr (ldr, d). Photo courtesy of Enrico Borsetti via the Bixography Forum.

venues were a feature of the bustling, lively South Street in South Philadelphia. This was a cosmopolitan environment, with few venues having colour bars, where black and white performers were often within earshot of each other, affording the opportunity for musicians to pick up new ideas from each other.

South Street is nowadays known for its bohemian atmosphere – especially in the stretch between Front Street and Seventh Street – but it was traditionally a middle class thoroughfare, dominated by fashionable tailors' shops. The atmosphere started to change in the late 19th century as theatres and bars began to open up along the street. Amongst these were black-owned theatres, most notably the Standard and the Dunbar. Founded in 1914, the Standard was the more famous of the two, reaching its peak during the 1920s but subsequently falling victim to the economic crash, closing in 1931. The theatre was owned and managed by the influential and charismatic John T. Gibson, a black entrepreneur who had tapped into the burgeoning market for black vaudeville acts. The venues he owned in Philadelphia became an important part of the TOBA circuit. Playing the New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington (DC) circuit was known as "going around the world" by black entertainers.

Lang lived just a few blocks from South Street, and it was to South Street that both he and Venuti would go to hear black performers playing and singing. The inspiration derived from such experiences can be heard in Lang's blues playing, particularly in his bending of single strings to create "blue notes".

Amongst the black blues players who lived in Philadelphia and plied their trade along South Street was guitarist Bobby Leecan. Leecan is listed in both the 1920 and 1930 census as living at his parent's house at 7239 Paschall Avenue, Philadelphia (in the 1920 census he is listed as a "piano player – odd jobs"!).

What Leecan sounded like in the early 1920s we cannot be certain, since he did not record until later in the decade, but a comparison of the blues recordings Leecan made with those of Lang reveals some stylistic similarities. For example, Leecan's guitar playing in the ensemble passages on Fats Waller/Thomas Morris' *Red Hot Dan* (Victor 21127) features single string counter melodies intermingled with strumming chords and an overall blues feeling. Another typical example of Leecan's work is his guitar backing to Margaret Johnson's vocal on *Second Handed Blues* (Victor 20652). Compare this, for instance, with Lang's guitar on *Doin' Things* (OKeh 40825) by Joe Venuti's Blue Four.

It is quite possible that Lang heard Leecan in Pennsylvania in the early 1920s. At the very least, Leecan's recordings provide evidence, albeit circumstantial, that black blues players who performed in Philadelphia were a source of inspiration for the young Eddie Lang, who displayed an empathy for the blues beyond that of most of his white contemporaries of the time.

Lang's natural ability to assimilate different types of music and weave them into his own unique style, creating something highly original in the process, was similar in approach to that of Bix Beiderbecke, and in this respect it is no coincidence that they both had absolute perfect pitch. Jack Bland, the banjoist in the Mound City Blue Blowers, remembered Lang's

phenomenal ear: "He had the best ear of any musician I ever knew. He used to go into another room and hit an "A" and come back and play cards for fifteen minutes, and then tune his instrument perfectly. I've seen that happen." [7] This exercise would have presented no problem for Bix either. Incidentally, like Lang, Bix was also a superb card player!

Early Professional Work

Eddie Lang's first paid job was in 1918, as a banjoist in a band directed by local drummer Chick Granese, in which 15 year-old Venuti was already a member. The outfit played at Shott's Cafe at 12th and Filbert Streets, Philadelphia. Though Lang was hired as a banjoist, within a few weeks he was also being featured on guitar. This job was followed by short term dates at various bars and cafes in Philadelphia around 1919 and early 1920, which provided the young guitarist with plenty of opportunities to absorb the disparate musical styles that emanated from such venues.

In 1920, Lang moved up in the local dance band world, joining Charlie Kerr's Orchestra, one of Philadelphia's top bands of the time, playing at Al White's Dance Hall at 10th and Market Streets and later, in 1921, at the Café L'Aiglon. Lang stated that he joined the band as a violinist, [4] but soon doubled on banjo and guitar. He was already gaining a reputation as a banjoist and guitarist, to the point of being specially featured in "stop choruses" on banjo that demonstrated his prowess. As Richard DuPage noted:

"This type of solo was a departure from the traditional rapidamente thrumping of triplets and syncopated full chords in which banjoists, influenced by pre-war minstrel shows and

ragtime, framed their concepts of jazz. Eddie's single string virtuosity pointed in a new direction." [11]

In mid-1923, after making his recording debut with Kerr's band for Edison, Lang left to join the vaudeville team of Frank Fay and Barbara Stanwyck (the latter was later to find fame in Hollywood) in New York, but soon returned to Philadelphia because of illness, presumably the digestive system condition that he had suffered from since his childhood accident.

After a few weeks, Lang recovered from his bout of illness and returned to New York, joining trumpeter Vic D'Ippolito's band at the Danceland ballroom. The band folded after a final performance on New Year's Eve, 1923. D'Ippolito joined Ted Weems' band for six months and Lang joined the Scranton Sirens, a local band through which many dance band and jazz luminaries passed, including the Dorsey Brothers, Billy Butterfield, Bill Challis and Russ Morgan. When Lang joined, the band was directed by Billy Lustig and known as "Billy Lustig and his Sirens Orchestra". On New Year's Day 1924, the band opened at the Beaux Arts Café in Atlantic City for a two-week engagement, subsequently touring a series of one-nighters. Billy Lustig and his Sirens then returned to Atlantic City and opened at the Cafe Follies Bergere on June 24th, 1924.

Appearing in Atlantic City at the same time, at the nearby Beaux Arts Café, were the Mound City Blue Blowers, a novelty band featuring a kazoo, paper-and-comb and banjo, and riding high on the success of their Brunswick records. One evening, late into the night, the Mound City Blue Blowers were jamming away, when Lang walked in and asked to join in. As Richard Hadlock noted:



Billy Lustig and his Sirens Orchestra (left to right): Sid Trucker (cl, ts), Billy Lustig (vln, ldr), Ted Noyes (d), Irving "Itzy" Riskin (p), Russ Morgan (tb), Vic D'Ippolito (t), Eddie Lang (g), Alfie Evans (as), Mike Trafficante (bb). Photo courtesy Josh Duffee via the Bixography Forum.

BILLY LUSTIG

AND HIS

SIRENS ORCHESTRA

WISH TO ANNOUNCE THEIR OPENING AT THE

CAFE FOLLIES BERGERE

BOARDWALK AT NEW YORK AVENUE

ATLANTIC CITY'S NEWEST AND MOST EXCLUSIVE RENDEZVOUS OF ENTERTAINMENT

ANTHONY LA ROSA, BERNARDO MONFRINO, Props.
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JUNE 14th, 1924

PERSONNEL

Piano—IRVING RISKIN
Banjo—EDDIE LANGE
Drums—TED NOYES

Saxophone—AL EVANS
Saxophone—SID TRUCKER
Saxophone—JIM CROSSAN

Trumpet—VICTOR D'IPPOLITO
Trombone—RUSS MORGAN
Bass—MIKE TRAFFICANTE

Violinist and Director—BILLY LUSTIG

Courtesy Joe Moore.

"In casual jam sessions, the uncommon sound of Lang's guitar added harmonic flesh and rhythmic bones to the rather rickety sound of the little group." [12]

The Mound City Blue Blowers would from then on visit the Cafe Follies Bergere regularly to listen to Lang play solos on banjo and guitar. After a few days, the Mound City Blue Blowers' banjoist Dick Slevin walked up to Lang and offered him \$200 a week to join the band. Lang initially turned the offer down but with the encouragement of Lustig's sidemen eventually accepted. He joined the Mound City Blue Blowers in New York in time for the band's opening night at the Palace Theater. Lang's stage rehearsal with the Mound City Blue Blowers in New York almost didn't happen: turning up an hour or so late, Lang's voice was heard from way up in the balcony of the Palace Theater: "Hey, are you boys down there?" Lang had entered via the fire escape and lost his way through the labyrinth of back stage corridors! [7]

The Mound City Blue Blowers

The Mound City Blue Blowers were formed in St. Louis in 1923 and initially consisted of Red McKenzie on paper and comb, Dick Slevin on kazoo and Jack Bland on banjo. By the Autumn of 1923, the trio felt sufficiently well rehearsed to play in public, and secured a job playing in-between sets at St. Louis' Turner Hall.

The Mound City Blue Blowers traded on the novelty of their instrumentation and this aspect was undoubtedly the key to their success. However, even through the hokum instruments of Slevin's kazoo and what McKenzie called his "hot comb" there was genuine feeling, especially when it came to interpreting the Blues.

Eddie Condon later said, somewhat mischievously, that Red McKenzie only used strips of newspaper from the *New York*

World to wrap around his comb! It is also said that Slevin attempted to play paper and comb, but found that the vibrations of the paper tickled his sensitive lips, and so he stuck to the kazoo. The novel trio would retire to Bland's apartment almost every evening with a bottle or two for informal jam sessions, as well as to rehearse the numbers they would later record and/or perform in public.

In the late 1930s, Red McKenzie reflected on how the band came into being:

"I was a bellhop in the Claridge hotel [St Louis] and across the street was a place called Butler Brothers' Soda Shop. Dick Slevin worked there and there was a little colored shoe-shine boy who used to beat it out on the shoes. Had a phonograph going. I passed with my comb, and played along. Slevin would have liked to play a comb but he had a ticklish mouth, so he used a kazoo. He got fired across the street and got a job in a big soda store. He ran into Jack Bland, who owned a banjo, and one night after work they went to his room. He and Slevin started playing. They got me. Gene Rodemich's was a famous band at that time. His musicians used to drop in at the restaurant where we hung out. They were impressed and told their boss. He took us to Chicago to record with his band, as a novelty.

When we got to Chicago we went down to the Friars' Inn. About 1924 it was. Volly de Faut and Elmer Schoebel were there. Isham Jones was at the place and he asked us what instruments we were playing. He had us come to his office next day, and set the date for Brunswick. That was the time we made "Arkansas Blues" and "Blue Blues". They say it sold over a million copies. Brunswick put us in a cafe in Atlantic City called the Beaux Arts. I met Eddie Lang in Atlantic City. In New York, The Mound City Blue Blowers played the Palace in August, 1924."

In the early 1940s, Jack Bland was interviewed by Art Hodes and recalled:

"I was working in a soda fountain in St. Louis and one day a fellow came in and asked for a job. He got the job but wasn't so good as a soda clerk. That night he went out with me to the place where I was staying. I had a banjo; he saw it and enquired if I could play it. I said yes, a little, so he pulled a 'kazoo' out of his pocket and we stomped off. It sounded pretty good, so that night we went to the Arcadia Dance Hall....banjo, kazoo and all.

After the dance we took a couple of girls home; they lived in North St Louis. After leaving the girls we stopped at the Water-Tower Restaurant and we ran into Red McKenzie. We sat there and played until the owner ran us out of the place; then we got onto the Grand Avenue street car with the whole gang and a donkey conductor who liked music. We played for two round-trips until Dick Slivin [sic], the kazoo playing soda clerk, got into an argument with the conductor." [13]

McKenzie's comment about a recording session with Gene Rodemich's band is perplexing, since there are no Rodemich recordings featuring the trio. In *Jazz and Ragtime Records*, Brian Rust notes: "...the Mound City Blue Blowers are said to have appeared with this band, as they may have done on the stand, but not in the recording studio." A kazoo can be heard on *Mobile Blues* (Brunswick 2599) but it does not sound like Slevin and was probably played by one of Rodemich's own sidemen.

The answer is provided by Jack Bland, who told Art Hodes: "Then our next adventure was to go to Chicago to take a chorus on a record with Gene Rodemich. The night before we were supposed to make the record we went down to Mike Fritzel's place, known as the Friar's Inn, where the Brunis brothers [Merritt and Henry] had the band. They asked us what we were doing in Chicago. We told them that we could make some funny kind of a noise so they got us out on the floor to play.

Right in the middle of our second number a fellow walked out on the floor and said, "What kind of music is this?" It happened to be Isham Jones.

We told him that we were going to take a chorus on a record with Gene Rodemich the next day. He told us to go to a Turkish bath and 'get yourselves hoarsed up so you can't play those freak instruments.' And he pressed some folded money into McKenzie's hand, and said, "I will get you a date on Brunswick Records by yourselves.'

We didn't show up for the Rodemich records and two days later recorded *Arkansas Blues* and *Blue Blues* for Brunswick as the Mound City Blue Blowers." [13]

Arkansas Blues and *Blue Blues* (Brunswick 2581) were recorded at Brunswick's Chicago studios on February 23rd, 1924 and proved to be, as McKenzie stated, an instant hit. The novelty format quickly led to several other groups emulating their style. Amongst these were the Goofus Five, featuring the multi-talented Adrian Rollini on goofus (later on bass sax), drummer Stan King doubling on kazoo, Tommy Fellini on banjo and mixed race cornetist Bill Moore. Vernon Dalhart and Ed Smalle were other performers who took up the kazoo and jumped aboard the novelty bandwagon set in motion by the Mound City Blue Blowers, as did Boyd Senter, better known as a saxophonist and clarinetist possessed of an altogether idiosyncratic style.

Viola McCoy is one of the few black singers to have recorded on kazoo, surprisingly so considering that the instrument had been used by black performers since the late 19th century.

McCoy's kazoo playing on *Michigan Water Blues* (Columbia A3921), recorded on May 24th, 1923, predates the Mound City Blue Blower's first recording by nine months.

The Goofus Five's Stan King wasn't the first drummer to play kazoo. The ODJB's Tony Sbarbaro was a habitual user, as photographs show, though he recorded on the instrument with the ODJB only once, on the ODJB's 1921 recording of *Crazy Blues* (Victor 18729). For years, Sbarbaro's chorus on this side was thought to have been played by Eddie Edwards, who was known to have used a "kazoo mute" in the bell of his trombone for novelty effect, but there is no doubt that this is Sbarbaro, struggling slightly with the vagaries of the kazoo's pitching and as a result sounding slightly out of tune.

In fact, the first appearance of the kazoo on recordings predates the ODJB by almost a decade. The earliest known recording is *Rum Tum Tiddle* (Victor 17037), made at Victor's Camden studios on December 22nd 1911, on which no less an entertainer than Al Jolson, on his first recording session, buzzes away on the instrument. The following year, ragtime singer Gene Greene played the kazoo on several of his Pathé recordings made while in England, including his own composition, *Mocking Bird Rag* (Pathé 5369), this also being first known example of the use of the kazoo on a recording made outside the USA.

The kazoo would undoubtedly have been familiar to audiences a good deal further back than these recordings, with an antecedence probably well established in vaudeville by the early 1900s. Its earliest use as an instrument in syncopated music is likely to be found in black "spasm" bands of the late 19th century, where the kazoo would have both carried the melody and been used to "scat" across blues themes, with banjos and / or guitars providing a rhythmic accompaniment. In fact, banjoists and guitarists would often double on kazoo when a novelty effect was required, as 1920s recordings such as those by the Dixie Jazzers Washboard Band / South Street Trio show. Bobby Leecan can be heard playing kazoo on several of these sides.

The kazoo craze didn't take off to anywhere near the same extent in Europe, though there were kazoo bands of a spasm variety, and there is at least one record, made in London, that clearly demonstrates the influence of the Mound City Blue Blowers. This is *The Only, Only One* backed by *Do You Remember The Love Nest* (Aco 15727) by the Irving King Trio. Irving King was a pseudonym for Reg Connelly and Jimmy Campbell, the composers of *Show Me The Way To Go Home* – a huge hit of the time, and a perennial "drinking anthem" ever since. Connelly is almost certainly the pianist on the Aco recording (he is named as accompanist on Aco recordings by other artists), and Campbell the 'kazooist', but the identity of the banjoist is not known.

The paper and comb (or tissue and comb) used by Red McKenzie on Mound City Blue Blowers recordings is also likely to have been used in spasm bands dating back to the late 19th century, though as far as the author is aware there are no recordings on this "instrument" made before Red McKenzie buzzed down the recording horn! McKenzie would also scat sing, usually projecting his voice into an ordinary water tumbler.

Considering the huge sales that resulted from *Arkansas Blues*



The Mound City Blue Blowers, 1924. L-R: Dick Slevin, Jack Bland, Eddie Lang, Red McKenzie. Photo courtesy Ray Mitchell.

and **Blue Blues**, Brunswick's attitude towards the Mound City Blue Blowers was surprisingly apathetic. The company apparently felt they would be a one hit wonder and as a result weren't overly keen to record the band again. However, the Mound City Blue Blowers had an ardent supporter in Frank Trumbauer, already established as an outstanding "hot" saxophonist and at the time a member of Gene Rodemich's band. In fact, Trumbauer was one of the musicians in the Rodemich band who heard the Mound City Blue Blowers and had told the bandleader how impressed they were.

Trumbauer was far from pessimistic about the Mound City Blue Blowers' prospects and persuaded Brunswick to change their minds, as Phil Evans outlined:

"Gus Haenschen of Brunswick Records was in St. Louis during March 1924 in search of new talent to record. Tram tried to persuade Gus to record the Mound City Blue Blowers, but his requests were met with Gus's belief that the recording of Arkansas Blues they had made in Chicago in February was sufficient. Tram held fast to persuading Gus to record the unit again, and finally Haenschen said that he'd do so with the stipulation that Tram be on the recording date." [14]

With Trumbauer temporarily added to their ranks, on March 13th, 1924, the Mound City Blue Blowers entered the Brunswick studios for their second recording session. For technical reasons, the session failed to produce a side suitable for release, so the band plus Trumbauer went back the next day and re-made **San** and **Red Hot**, which were subsequently released on Brunswick 2602. The record was another hit for

the band, though neither this nor any other record made by the band would equal the sales of **Arkansas Blues / Blue Blues**.

Trumbauer's stay with Gene Rodemich's band proved to be short-lived, and he joined the Ray Miller Orchestra on or about March 21st, 1924. "Red McKenzie was forever telling me to get out of St. Louis, and I guess, indirectly, he was responsible for my joining Ray Miller's Orchestra", Trumbauer later recalled. [14]

By May 1924, the Mound City Blue Blowers were part of Ray Miller's stage show, and on May 31st opened with the Miller band at the Beaux Arts Cafe in Atlantic City. In later years, Ray Miller claimed to have discovered the Mound City Blue Blowers, but in fact the truth is somewhat different, and once again it was Frankie Trumbauer who proved to be pivotal:-

"I tried to get Ray to bring the Mound City Blue Blowers to Atlantic City as an added attraction, but he wasn't interested. It wasn't until I offered to pay their transportation and expenses that he realized how serious I was and that they must be great.

Ray sent for them, and they were an absolute smash! He was so enthusiastic about them that he wanted to give me something for bringing the boys to his attention. I wasn't interested in making money on three guys from my home town, so I turned him down." [14]

Lang's first recording with the Mound City Blue Blowers – and his first recording on guitar – was **Tiger Rag** (Brunswick 2804), recorded on December 10th, 1924. On the session mate, **Deep Second Street Blues**, Lang's empathy with the blues

tradition can be clearly heard from the first note of his solo, which is mainly played single string. To add contrast and a modernistic touch, Lang also strums a chromatic chord progression across two bars during his solo, from the tonic to the subdominant (C7 to F7, or I to IV), specifically C7-C#7-D7-D#7-E7-F7. Rapidly strummed chromatic chord sequences like this are typical of Lang's work, both in solos and during ensemble passages. On up-beat numbers, such as *Tiger Rag*, he often uses the lowest string on the guitar to play a "walking" bass line in either 2/4 or 4/4 time, sometimes slightly anticipating the beat and at other times ahead of it, creating tension. By comparison, conventional banjo players' staccato on-the-beat style seems anachronistic.

Lang also used harmonics – generated by barely touching the strings - to achieve overtones that provided an added effect, one that was virtually impossible for banjoists to emulate since the instrument does not lend itself to this technique.

In all, Lang played guitar on 14 issued recordings by the Mound City Blue Blowers, as follows:-

Red McKenzie, comb / Dick Selvin, kazoo / Eddie Lang, guitar / Jack Bland, banjo

New York, December 10, 1924

14438 *Tiger Rag* Br 2804

14440 *Deep Second Street Blues* Br 2804

New York, February 9, 1925

14872 / 74 *Gettin' Told* Br 2849

14875 / 76 *Play Me Slow* Br 2849

New York, March 24, 1925

597-W; 15775 *Wigwam Blues* Br 2908

New York, March 25, 1925

612-W; 15778 *Blues in F* Br 2908

New York, December 12, 1924

14470; 288 *When My Sugar Walks Down The Street*

Voc 14977

14472; 290 *Panama* Voc 14977

New York, January 26, 1925

334 *Best Black* Voc 14978

336 *Stretch It, Boy* Voc 14978

New York, August 7, 1925

1068W *The Morning After Blues* Voc 15088

1070/71W *Happy Children* Voc 15088

New York, September 1, 1925

1642/44W *Hot Honey* Voc 15166

New York, October 29, 1925

E-16795 *If You Never Come Back* Voc 15166

Note: All Vocalion sides issued as McKenzie's Candy Kids

The Demise of the Banjo and the Rise of the Guitar

Through the Mound City Blue Blowers' recordings and stage appearances, Lang quickly became recognised as a unique musician amongst his peers and, as a result, the guitar started to be re-evaluated as an instrument in dance band and jazz environs. As Bix did for brass sections, so Lang's guitar style was changing the way rhythm sections functioned.

Until Lang's arrival on the scene, guitarists recording syncopated music were easily outnumbered by famous banjoists, amongst whom were Eddie Peabody, Fred Van Eps, Harry Reser and Roy Smeck (the "Wizard of the Strings"), all of whom were steeped in the ragtime and novelty syncopated music tradition. For these banjoists, jazz was more or less another "novelty" to add to their repertoire.

Sam Moore was one of the first white guitarists to record syncopated music as a guitar soloist. In his *Laughing Rag*, recorded for Gennett, Okeh and Victor in the early 1920s, he bends the strings on his eight string Octo-chorda guitar in a way that suggests that he was well aware of Southern folk music and the Blues, a factor also hinted at in a news item in the Columbus (Georgia) Ledger of April 9th, 1924: "*Among the most appreciative of Sam Moore's audiences are the negroes who go north... [they] often talk to the performer from the galleries, which makes the act 'go big'...*" [15]

Laughing Rag has an introduction that reminds one of the sort of chromatic progressions that Lang would later use. However, in this case they are played in a ragtime manner and, unlike typical Lang, they progress downwards, E7 - Eb7. We should bear in mind that Moore was from a previous generation to Lang, born in Monticello, Florida, in 1887. Furthermore, though the title reflects the ragtime craze, *Laughing Rag* owes as much to the Hawaiian steel guitar tradition, emphasised by the fact that Moore uses a metal slide.

Nick Lucas (Dominic Nicholas Anthony Lucanese) was another white guitarist that recorded syncopated music as a soloist before Lang. Though he was younger than Moore by several years, having been born in 1897, his style was also set in the ragtime tradition and his early recorded solos have a similar novelty appeal, despite the later appellation "the grandfather of the jazz guitar" (the model of guitar that Gibson built for him in 1923, with an extra deep body, is still popular today amongst jazz musicians). Lucas' melodic single string work interspersed with short staccato strumming of chords is echoed to a certain extent in Lang's later recordings, though as with Moore, his approach is far closer to ragtime than jazz. Lucas' introduction to *Pickin' The Guitar*, recorded June 1922 (Pathe 020794) and October 20th, 1923 (Brunswick 2536) is about the closest he comes to being modernistic. This number also features strummed chords, played in a manner similar to those heard in *Runnin' Ragged* (Okeh 41361), recorded by Venuti's Blue Four in 1929. In *Teasin' The Frets* (same dates and catalogue numbers as above), Lucas plays a repeated rhythmic passage starting with a diminished 7th chord followed by the root: F#dim - C (in classical harmonic analysis this progression is notated as #IV-I). This was a fairly common progression in ragtime.

Another guitarist who made records in the early 1920s in advance of Lang was Sylvester Weaver, an underrated blues player who sadly left few recordings for our appreciation.

Weaver was black, hailing from the Smoketown neighbourhood of Louisville, Kentucky, where he was born on July 25th, 1896. His *Guitar Blues* (OKeh 8109), recorded for OKeh on November 2nd, 1923, was the first outing by a blues guitarist on record, at least as a solo instrumentalist. Like Moore, Weaver plays slide guitar, but his bending of strings emphasises the blues to a far greater extent.

In small degrees, the banjo started to lose out to the guitar in dance and jazz bands – and as an accompanying instrument for vocalists. Apart from Lang's direct influence, there was an important technical development that also precipitated the switch to the guitar: the introduction of microphones. The use of the condenser microphone revolutionised the recording industry because it allowed a far wider range of frequencies to be captured compared to the old acoustic method of playing or singing down horns. The introduction of the microphone also made it much easier for the guitar's softer tones to be properly reproduced. Moreover, singers could project their voice in a more natural way, without having to belt out each syllable.

A new era had arrived. As one banjoist stated: "*The old order is changed, and something has turned up that definitely is better. The new style is nothing more nor less than the use of phrases constructed from decidedly more ambitious rhythms than the plain four-in-the-bar, but the rhythms have to be such that they produce that swinging lift which is the real basis of modern rhythmic style.*" [16]

The changeover to the guitar was not instantaneous by any means. One problem was that banjoists were used to playing a four stringed instrument with a different tuning to the six-stringed guitar. A compromise was often reached in the early days by banjoists adopting the four-string plectrum guitar (also known as the tenor guitar), which emulated the tuning they were used to.

A new generation of guitarists started to come to prominence as a result of these changes, including Carl Kress and Dick McDonough, but Lang remained the supreme master of the instrument and was in constant demand for recordings and on radio up until his death in March 1933.

Some banjoists stuck obstinately to their chosen instrument, though eventually even diehard banjoists made the switch, or at least doubled. Notable banjoists who left it late to change included Fred Guy, a stalwart of Ellington's band, who didn't take up the guitar until 1932. Paul Whiteman's famous banjoist Mike Pingitore was another late developer, also only starting to double on guitar around 1932.

Changes to the design of the guitar itself also facilitated its increasing popularity. Soon after the death of their founder Orville Gibson (1856-1918), the firm that bore his name set up a team to work on the development of an archtop guitar that had greater volume and "cutting power". The archtop that Gibson's Lloyd Loar designed in the early 1920s led to the L-range (named after him) of guitars that were much louder than the standard archtop ranges. The six string guitar could now compete, at least in terms of volume, with the banjo.

Archtop guitars differ from the alternative flat-top guitars in that their bodies are larger and have a violin- or mandolin-like shape, and have fronts and often backs carved from a solid billet of wood. Lang initially used the Gibson L-4, starting in late

1925 or 1926, moving to the L-5 by 1930 (adverts in 1929 show him still playing an L-4). The main difference between the two models is that the L-4 has a round sound board hole and the L-5 has the distinctive violin-inspired f-shaped hole design.

Before switching to the Gibson L- range, Lang played a flat-top guitar. Flat-top guitars look very much like classical guitars of European design, but with larger bodies. Like archtop guitars, they also have a reinforced neck and stronger structural design, since they use steel strings as opposed to the gut strings of classic European style guitars.

There is some confusion concerning the make of flat-top guitar that Lang used while he was a member of the Mound City Blue Blowers. A photograph of the band in their familiar white shirts and trousers forms part of an advert for Vega Co instruments, which appeared in the March 15th, 1925 edition of the *Metronome* magazine. A photograph taken in the same studio at the same time, but with slightly different poses, is reproduced in this article. The guitar is seen more clearly in this photograph and looks to be Martin rather than a Vega model. The answer to this conundrum may lie in the way that Vega acted as a company. Vega Company began in Boston in the 1880s and subsequently became known for its range of banjos after taking over the banjo makers A. C. Fairbanks in 1904. The Vega name also appeared on a variety of guitars and ukuleles, as well as brass instruments (following the 1909 purchase of the Standard Band Instrument Co). Some of the guitars were made by Vega themselves but others were bought in. This begs the question: did Martin make guitars for Vega? It seems that Eddie could have been playing a Martin-built, but Vega-labelled, flat-top guitar. (*To be continued.*)

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