

# Willie Lewis meets some fragile Egos

by Anthony Baldwin



No doubt we all have our own visions of the hereafter, but personally I would settle for one that included a box of A-list Gennett Electrobeams, plus the statutory 72 virgin OKeh or Columbia laminates, preferably from early stampers.

As for collector's hell, I see it in terms of a Hieronymus Bosch canvas of impenitent shellac thieves and serial overgraders, eternally forced to watch their prize Paramounts being frisbeed into the flames by cackling demons, to strains of the complete vocal works of Dick Robertson. Alternatively, perhaps shellac Hades is where every record is an outstanding unissued side, but so badly recorded and hopelessly worn as to be unlistenable. If so, I believe I've already been there.

Last year, Alexandre Litwak of the Paris-based CEMJAZZ<sup>1</sup> archive sent me a number of 20cm centre-start aluminium home recordings for identification. Among these were what appeared to be four excerpted 1937 French broadcasts by the legendary Willie Lewis orchestra. Between 1934 and 1938 the band had been a fixture at the plush 'Chez Florence' nightclub in the Montmartre district of Paris, where it included such illustrious sidemen as Jerry Blake, Benny Carter, Bill Coleman, Big Boy Goudie and Herman Chittison.

Herman "Ivory" Chittison (1908-1967) first appears on the radar in 1928-31 as a member of fellow-Kentuckian Zack Whyte's Ohio-based 'Chocolate Beau Brummels'. While Chittison was very much his own man, his nimble modern style bore the stamp of both Earl Hines and Art Tatum. Significantly, Tatum was already broadcasting from station WSPD in Toledo, Ohio by 1928. Chittison was in Europe from 1934 to 1940, mainly with Willie Lewis, but also with Louis Armstrong's 1934 touring band, and in 1939 with the Harlem Rhythm Makers in Egypt. Despite recording 14 solos and numerous band sides in

Paris before WW2, he never seemed to achieve much recognition in the U.S. An eight-year stint from 1943 as "house pianist" on the CBS radio series "Casey, Crime Photographer" did little to change this, although Chittison was consistently respected by his peers. As Art Tatum once remarked, "Yep. He sure is a bad cat."

In 1937 bare aluminium as an instant playback medium was already something of a dinosaur, because the nitrocellulose-coated Pyral and Presto "acetate" discs introduced a couple of years earlier offered far better fidelity. However, the archival disadvantage of acetate is that it is chemically unstable, and ultimately it just disintegrates. Bare aluminium discs were never exactly hi-fi, but, unlike acetate, they do not fall apart a few decades later, although the metal itself is soft and easily damaged. Ominously, a couple of these Egovox discs bore a pencilled note on the label that read: "250gms début [start], 300gms ensuite [thereafter]" — the recordist's recommended tracking weight! I could not help wondering how much music would be left in the fragile groove after repeated exposure to a hulking 300gm tone-arm.

'Chez Florence' catered to a well-heeled but distinctly un-hip clientele that, by all accounts, was only interested in polite conversation, tasteful seduction and anodyne background music. Charles Delaunay, founder of the famous 'Swing' label, was more succinct: "There was nothing exceptional about it, except the bill. In fact, you could have died of boredom."<sup>2</sup> Given that these home-recordings might represent the only surviving evidence of the Willie Lewis band outside the confines of the recording studio, I was keen to hear how they sounded.

The faintly Freudian 'Egovox' was a French home-recording system, patented in May 1932 by a Paris firm with the rather unlikely name of *Accessoires Pratiques Pour Automobiles*. Essentially, it was a worm-gear attachment to any standard gramophone turntable, with a mechanical coupling to the soundbox. The latter served as both a cutting stylus and primitive mike — at which you bellowed through a small megaphone supplied as part of the kit. The retail price was 48 francs (roughly \$2, or 10/- sterling, at the 1932 exchange rate), rising to a dizzy 57 francs in 1937. Even by the standards of the day this cannot have been a very significant outlay.

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The downside was that if you wanted to do more than yell rhyming couplets at your machine à la Tom Edison, you needed to invest in the optional 60-franc electromagnetic cutting head. This was then connected to your radio's extension-speaker socket to allow you to make off-air recordings and the like. As might be expected at that price, results were unpredictable. Indeed, according to contemporary reports, there was a 50-50 chance of the radio blowing a fuse.

In the circumstances, the anonymous swing fan who cut the four Willie Lewis sides seems to have been something of a hero, having captured near-complete off-air versions of *Sweet Sue*, *Organ Grinder's Swing* and *Chinatown, My Chinatown*, plus a solo version of *I Got Rhythm* by Herman Chittison.

Unlike lacquers or acetates, aluminium recordings are indented rather than truly cut, and the audio is correspondingly rough. The Egovox grooves were typically shallow, in several places crumbling to nothing. Each of the thin metal wafers was also slightly buckled, so it was something of a challenge just to get them to track at all.

Using a .0040" stylus, the fattest in my bottom drawer, I nursed the tone-arm across the various skips and retracks at half-speed, to avoid the thing flying off into outer space. After bringing the resulting audio document up to 78 rpm digitally, I spliced the bits and pieces together on the screen. What was immediately apparent was that there was an incremental pitch difference of more than a full tone between the start and finish

of each side. Clearly, our swing fan's clockwork turntable had not had enough torque to cope with the increasing drag of the recording head, as it crept inexorably towards the edge of the aluminium blank.

The first priority was to establish the correct speed and pitch for each number, as none of them seemed to be very close to 78 rpm. *Sweet Sue* and *Organ Grinder's Swing* presented no great mystery, as Willie Lewis had made studio recordings of both titles for Pathé in 1936, and these could be used as a reference. However, after determining the approximate playback keys, I found that the two relevant numbers were not just similar, but actually identical to the commercial issues, right down to the solos. Then the penny dropped: they were simply the respective sides of Pathé PA-1030: *Organ Grinder's Swing* had been aired by the Paris PTT station on June 6, 1937, and *Sweet Sue* on October 4 by the popular Poste Parisien. Perhaps our anonymous young swing fan could not afford to shell out for the issued 78. Anyway, this effectively disqualified those two tracks from further scrutiny.

*Chinatown* was clearly a very different animal, principally because Willie Lewis had never recorded it commercially. This was an unequivocally live performance, complete with announcements, from the band's regular half-hour Saturday night radio show on Le Poste Parisien. The original 1910 piano/vocal sheet music is in C major, but John Nesbitt's 1930 arrangement for Fletcher Henderson and its simplified 1931 Louis Armstrong spin-off are both in Eb. On the Willie Lewis



Willie Lewis and His Orchestra at the Continental Cabaret, Cairo, 1938: (L to R) Herman Chittison, Wilson Myers, John Mitchell, Ted Fields, Willie Lewis, Jack Butler, Joe Hayman, Bill Coleman, Frank "Big Boy" Goudie, Billy Burns (behind Goudie). Photo courtesy of Richard Hadlock.

# Chittison's "I Got Rhythm" confirms his reputation as one of the leading pianists of the day.

aircheck, too, instrumental timbre and vibrato were at their most credible in Eb.

Pitchwise, Herman Chittison's *I Got Rhythm* was more of a conundrum. For reasons best known to himself, Gershwin wrote the tune in Db, but the preferred jazz key has since tended to be Bb. However, to my ear the piano seemed tonally wrong in Bb, so I took it up to C, which sounded more natural. Luckily, under the back announcement Chittison noodles a few bars of the band's signature tune — Benny Carter's *Just A Mood* — in C, which is the same key as on the Willie Lewis Pathé recording of the tune: case closed.

The next question was how to maintain pitch and speed. As already mentioned, the discs started off soberly enough, but gradually gathered momentum, finally disappearing into unintelligible chipmunkery by the end of each side. Perhaps some whizzkid out there has developed a piece of software to cope with pitch variation, given the number of 78s ruined by sticky cutting-lathes (e.g. as on Ellington's catastrophic 1933 British Decca session). However, if such an app exists, I don't have it.

For the first half of each side there was a perceptible rise in pitch about every 8 bars, i.e. roughly 10 seconds. Thereafter, it was about every 5 seconds, but by the last grooves it was more like every quarter-second. I ended up chopping the two documents into increasingly small chunks, and digitally repitching each of these by ear as I went along: crude, I confess, but effective.

Having edited up the repitched sides, I tried to eq the distorted, tubby audio as best I could, in an attempt to correct the obvious mismatch between the cutting head and the radio's audio output. Together with the runaway pitch and the worn aluminium grooves, it certainly amounted to a transfer job from hell. Still, at least I can claim that, whereas the original discs were largely unplayable and in part absolute gibberish, my two resulting sound files are more or less listenable.

Both numbers come from the October 2, 1937 Poste Parisien broadcast. Chittison's dexterous *I Got Rhythm* confirms his reputation as one of the leading pianists of the day. Afterwards the announcer gushes, "*Chittison a véritablement attrapé le rythme!*" [Chittison really has got rhythm], before introducing the next tune: *L'heure de la danse chez Florence* [Dancing time at the Chez Florence]. This was presumably the French title for *Swingin' At The Chez Florence*, which the band would record for Dutch Panachord in May 1938.

The Willie Lewis version of *Chinatown*, in the timeless words of Mr. Waller, is a killer-diller from Manila, and a good deal less genteel than most of the band's studio work. It is taken at Louis Armstrong's frenetic Okeh tempo and includes brass voicings of some of Satchmo's 1931 solo figures. Our amateur recordist missed the opening, so we come in halfway through Willie's vocal. This is followed by an astonishing 32-bars of stride from Chittison, and then a modulation into C for a succession of breakneck ensemble choruses for the remainder of the piece.

Radio in Europe in the 1930s meant by definition AM broadcasting, mostly on medium and long waves. Short waves were used to cover major distances, for instance by the BBC Empire Service or the Philips PCJ international station in Holland. However, then as now, even medium-wave signals carried a long way during hours of darkness. As the Willie Lewis programme aired at 10.25pm, Poste Parisien's 80kW transmitter could be picked up throughout much of Europe and North Africa. It was duly heard in Alexandria by Athanash Pastroudis, the eponymous Greek caterer whose fashionable pâtisserie and restaurant were later to be immortalized in Lawrence Durrell's 'Alexandria Quartet' novels.

Monsieur Pastroudis also owned a glamorous sea-front bar and nightclub called 'Le Monseigneur'. To have Willie Lewis play live at the club was obviously much more convenient than wrestling with static and fading over the Mediterranean. Accordingly, the band was booked there for the 1937-38 winter season. They sailed from Marseille on December 17 and spent the next three months entertaining the social elite of Egypt. Such is the power of radio.

You can hear parts of the wayward Egovox discs on the VJM website at <http://www.vjm.biz/articles.html>

Many thanks to Richard Hadlock for the band photos.

## NOTES.

<sup>1</sup> CEMJAZZ is a non-profit sound and document archive, initially sourced from the collections of the late Olivier Brard, Gérard Conte and Michel Pfau.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Delaunay *Delaunay's Dilemma* p.126. Edition W, Paris, 1985.

