

Who Was Nan Blakstone?

By Barry McCanna



If the name Nan Blakstone does not register with many jazz collectors, it's because the lady in question made only two recordings which fall into that category. In fact, as I discovered when I began trying to find out more about her, she is remembered better for a rather different type of music, namely risqué songs.

She was born Naomi Ewald in San Antonio in May 1902, attended Oklahoma University, and then Chicago Musical College. At some point she adopted the stage name Nan Blackstone, but later dropped the C to avoid confusion with a magician of the same surname. According to James Gavin's book "Intimate Nights", Nan began her cabaret career in New York speakeasies during the Prohibition era, during which she allegedly drank a glass of gin containing wood alcohol. He says she was lucky to escape with her life, but all that remained of her voice was a "hoarse whisper"!

References to her professional career begin in 1926, when she appeared in *The Far Cry* at the Liberty Theatre in New York. She also provided entertainment at the Strand Theater in Lexington, Kentucky, when from 4th to 6th April she gave four shows a day, to complement the showing of *The Crown of Lies* starring Pola Negri. She was billed as "Queen of the Blues Songs – Broadway's Crooning Bluebird Singing the Latest Songs".

On 25th May 1927, accompanying herself on the piano, and with a small studio group under the direction of Leroy Shield, she recorded the following four numbers for Victor in Chicago, which were passed for release initially, before that decision was countermanded –

BVE 40946 Maybe You'll Be The One to Care
BVE 40947 That's How I Know I Love You
BVE 40948 Counting The Days
BVE 40949 So Tired

10th April 1929 found Nan Blakstone at RCA Victor's Church Building Studio in Camden, NJ, where she recorded four takes of a short film soundtrack disc for Columbia Pictures, which was released under the title "*Snappy Co-eds*". The Victor file shows the following medley of songs: *I Ain't Taken Orders from No One* (sic); *That's My Weakness Now*; *She's Funny that Way*;

More Than Anybody; That's My Weakness Now. She was accompanied by a 6-piece studio orchestra comprising Max Berger, trumpet; Louie Martin, sax; Billy Witkin, violin; Louis Spielman, piano; Dick Cherwin, bass; and Harry Rosenberg, drums. The film soundtrack can be heard at <https://soundcloud.com/vitaphone/01-snappy-coeds>

In February 1930 she appeared in Ruth Selwyn's unsuccessful musical *Nine-Fifteen Revue*, which closed within the week and is remembered only because it starred Ruth Etting, who introduced the Harold Arlen & Ted Koehler hit song *Get Happy*. Later that year Nan featured in the third *Gaieties* production, which played at the Guild Theatre and ran for 158 performances. A contemporary newspaper photograph of her was captioned "Singing of Nan Blackstone Garrick Gaieties comedienne puts pep into hit at Guild Theatre".

The 1930 US Census listed her as Nan Blakstone, lodging at the Hotel Belvedere, West 48th St, New York. The following year she appeared at the Club Argonaut in New York City with the celebrated Jean Malin, whose speciality was known as a "pansy act". On 16th June 1931 she recorded two tests for Brunswick, namely *Queen Isabell* (sic) and *Hit or Miss*, but nothing came of it. By the end of the year she was in London, but her name does not show up in the record of passenger lists, possibly because she travelled via the Continent (later publicity for Gala Records claimed that in addition to London she'd performed also in Paris and Shanghai).

She was due to appear at the Monseigneur Restaurant, before which she recorded the two numbers referred to at the beginning, namely *I'll Putcha Pitcha in the Paper* (mx. 206) and *All for the Sake of Love* (mx. 208). The session took place on 30th December 1931; she was accompanied by Nat Gonella, trumpet, Stanley Black, piano, and Bill Harty, drums, and the songs were issued on Oriole P-107. On the face of it, this was a somewhat obscure outlet, but Stanley and his "Oriole Modernists" (including Nat Gonella) had recorded already for the Levy label a little earlier that year. Both songs have been reissued on the Retrieval CD "The Young Nat Gonella 1930-



Photo courtesy of Charles Hippisley-Cox

1936" (RTR 79022), and on a two-CD compilation entitled "Underneath the Harlem Moon" (REXX 336).

She opened at the Monseigneur on 26th January 1932, and was such a success that her engagement was extended. Which begs the question why she did not record with Roy Fox? Particularly since she recorded two further numbers for Oriole later that year, possibly with her own piano accompaniment, namely *You are Too Beautiful* and *What Have We Got to Lose?* which were issued on Oriole SP-492.

On her return to America she appeared in the revue *Forward March* by Lew Brown, Ray Henderson & David Freedman which opened in October 1932. Gavin's book places her at the Club Abbey speakeasy on West 54th Street on 24th January 1933, the night racketeer Charles Sherman was murdered on the premises by bootlegger Dutch Schultz, who took a bullet in the shoulder during the proceedings.

She was back in London the following year, having travelled first class on the *Aquitania*. The passenger list showed her as Ewald, Naomi, known as Blakstone, Nan, her age was given as 30, and her address as the Savoy Hotel. On 11th May 1933 she recorded *You're Getting to be a Habit with Me* (mx. CE 6068-1) and *I'll Putcha Pitcha in the Paper* (mx. 6069-1), with pianist Austin "Ginger" Croome-Johnson, which was issued on Parlophone R.1536. Her family recalls that during one of her stays in London she gave a performance for Edward, Prince of Wales, who returned the favour by giving her a Yorkshire terrier puppy, which became her constant companion.

She had returned to America by early 1934, and on 6th April she recorded two numbers at the ARC studios, singing to her own piano accompaniment. They were *I Can't Find a Place to Do It* (mx. PB. 15136A) and *Modern Romeo* (mx. PB. 15137A), issued on the Liberty Music Shop label, L-161. During that year she appeared at the Caveau Basque, the Casino Town Club, (where she appeared with Bruz Fletcher) and the Petit Palais, moving to the Clover Club in Los Angeles, which took her into 1935. She married Heine Brand in October 1935, and he produced her next recording session, around March 1936, while she was appearing at the Colony Club in Chicago. It took place at the Decca studios, and six songs were waxed as follows:

- 9848-A Isabella - the Queen BL-202
- 9849-A Myrtle Isn't Fertile Anymore BL-201
- 9850-A I'm Not in the Way of My Family (I'm Just in the Family Way) BL-200
- 9851 I've Got It Again BL-200
- 9852-A Stardust BL-201*
- 9853-A I'm The Laziest Gal in Town BL-202

* Referred to specifically on pp. 35/6 of Will Friedwald's book "Stardust Melodies" as the oddest treatment of the song he's ever encountered.

NOTE: The 78s were marketed in albums by Liberty Music Shops, and bore stickers rather than LMS labels. Single H. Brand discs, probably produced for lobby sales and coupled differently from the LMS series, appeared in the early 1940s.

Nan appeared at the Yacht Club in New York later in 1936, but suffered a setback the following year, when she sustained facial injuries in a car accident. As a result she was in hospital for a couple of months, and required extensive facial surgery. In his book Gavin is less than gallant about this setback, which he claims "left the already unattractive entertainer even uglier, and privately she cringed every time she looked in a mirror". She resumed performing after a couple of months, albeit somewhat handicapped by dental and spinal problems.

Apparently she mocked her own appearance on-stage, telling the audience "I hope you're aware that I'm known as the Helen of Troy of the East Side. My skin is so bad that Cary Grant has named me 'The Face that Launched a Thousand Pits'". Despite the setback, by 1939 she was commanding 500 dollars a week at the Little Eva Club on the west coast, at which point she



appears to have stylised her surname as Blakstone (later her name was shown as nan Blakstone). Other venues included the Moulin Rouge at the corner of Bourbon and Bienville Streets in

New Orleans in 1941 (possibly coinciding with Sharkey Bonano's residency), and the Chase Hotel in St. Louis.

A table card exists which proclaims that she would remain on indefinitely in the Melody Lounge of the Cocomanut Grove. Assuming that this refers to the Boston nightclub, it must predate November 1942 when the club was devastated by fire, with a disastrous loss of life. Some time during 1942 she was booked by Lindsay's Sky-Bar in Cleveland, Ohio, allegedly to replace an unnamed scandal-ridden group. Also in 1942 she recorded an unaccompanied recitation on a long-playing record entitled *Merchant Seaman's Voyage into Courage* for Stanford Zucker's office. His agency in Madison Avenue managed vocal and vaudeville artistes, as well as dance bands, but it's not known whether anything came of it.

At the end of May 1942 the famous Onyx Club on New York's 42nd Street re-opened, and Richard Manson's column in *The New York Post* proclaimed "The star spot in the revived playground falls to saucy Nan Blakstone, whose mischievous pianologues have been a café staple since she was sponsored by the late Jean Malin at the old Club Abbey of the wicked days of night life." Also on the bill, in second spot, was Billy Daniels. By this time Nan and Heine Brand had divorced, and she'd married Ronald Aaron Gerard.

The Band Year Book for September 1942 carried a full-page photo with the caption "The Dazzling Nan Blakstone. Currently in 5th month! Tommy Joy's Ace of Clubs, Blandina St., Utica, NY." Also shown in the Year Book was a block advertisement under the heading "Decca Recording Series", featuring four records available through Liberty Music Shop or the Savoy-Plaza Hotel, New York. Some were identifiable as similar to those waxed in 1936, namely -

The Story of Myrtle/I've Got it Again
The Way of my Family/Romeo and Juliet
The Original "Stardust"/Isabella and Columbus
Can't Find a Place/Laziest Gal in Town

An undated press cutting from "Man about Boston" (probably mid to late 1942) refers to her new young manager-husband.

The article highlighted that she was currently held over at the Shangri-La, to be followed with a return to "Montreal's Gayest After-Dark Rendezvous, Café Esquire." It singled out for special mention her rendition of Cole Porter's *Love for Sale*, and the fact that she was now a redhead. She crossed the Canadian border in the winter of 1942, and one review of her performance at the Café Esquire read "Nan Blakstone could bring a Montreal audience to an unheated barn".

For a period of six months during 1944 she ran her own venue, the Club Carousel at 8 West 52nd St. New York. She also published a collection of her special material under the title "Nan Blakstone's Party Room". I referred earlier to the somewhat salacious content of her act, which appears by and large to have escaped censure. She did however encounter a problem at La Conga in New York in 1943, presumably being asked by the management to tone it down. But the acme was reached during a run at the Satire Room of the Hotel Fensgate in late 1944, when controversy over her act ended her booking three weeks early. A hearing was conducted by the Watch & Ward Society, as a result of which she was officially declared "banned in Boston", which probably increased her drawing power elsewhere! It did not prevent her from returning to the same venue in 1947.

In 1946 she returned to Montreal to star in *20th Century Girls on Revue* at The Gayety, prior to starring on Broadway in Irving Kaye Davis' play with music "Cap and Gown." That November found her at the Midtown Café, New York, with piano accompaniment provided by Hank Finney, who had led a pit orchestra in Detroit. In the meantime, as presaged in *The Montreal Gazette*, several new recordings were made in New York around January 1946, and were released in an unnumbered Gala album entitled "The World's Greatest Interpreter of Sophisticated Song". The level of sophistication can be judged from the titles from the first session -

- *** Rears its Ugly Head (Gala B.1013)
- A Lady's a Lady no Matter what Cooks (Gala B.1014)
- Little Richard's Getting Bigger (Gala B.1015)
- Who Brought Me Home (Gala B.1016)
- Riding Academy (Gala. B.1017)
- Cobwebs (Gala B1018)

Two subsequent titles were cut in Detroit later that year, namely *Horse with a Buggy Behind* and *Lady Godiva and the Peeping Tom* (coupled on Gala 1019). A half-column advert in *Billboard* for 20th April proclaimed her as "Nitelite's Darling" and listed the six earlier titles as being available either singly or in an album for \$3.50 (although the first was shown as *Lady Godiva and the*



Peeping Tom). Pictured in the same ad were Dwight Fiske, Belle Baker, Willie Howard and Lee Wiley, all of whom had recorded for Gala. A further eight titles were recorded back in New York, the first four with Artie Fields & his Orchestra, the second four with piano accompaniment, as follows -

- I'm the Laziest Gal in Town/Elevator Song (Gala 1020)
- Ragged But Right/Get Yourself a Past (Gala 1021)
- Isabella the Queen/Emmoine Looks Back at his Army Days (Gala 1022)
- Blakstone's Admission of Being a Good Girl/Catherine, Madcap Empress of Russia (Gala 1023)

The records appear to have sold well, indeed at a later stage at least half-a-dozen were re-issued by Gala in 45 rpm format, but the deal with Ben Lane of Gala Records went sour, possibly because he used a questionable accounting system to economise on royalties. Gerard began collaborating with Detroit writer Haviland Reeves, a stringer for *Billboard* magazine, to try to secure an agreement with a more trustworthy company, but despite initial interest nothing came of it.

On the up side, during 1947 Nan had a highly successful run at Ruby Foo's club in Montreal. The Canadian Raymond Ladouceur (known professionally as Ray Ladd) was added as second pianist, and subsequently participated in recording sessions, an activity cut short when he was intercepted by the US immigration authorities. In late November, together with her second pianist, Nan cut six sides at the Universal Studios in Hollywood, which were released as an album by the Frederick Lee Corporation under the title "Private Collection; Gems of Sophistication".

- PC 101 The Throttle Murder Mystery (Authentic Report) 070 A
- PC 102 The End of the Honeymoon (Factual) 070 B
- PC 104 Mrs. Studdiford Van Pelt (The Diplomatic Dinner) 071 A
- PC 105 The Horse With the Buggy Behind 071 B
- PC 106 Blakstone's Frustration (Can't Find a Place To Do It) 072 A
- PC 107 A Gentleman of the Press 072 B

NOTE: It's claimed that the last title is also known as *I'll Putcha Pitcha in the Paper* from *The Third Little Show* (1931), but I cannot find anything to substantiate this.

A second collection was recorded in December, which duplicated the six titles recorded by Gala in January 1946, and was issued as "Private Collection of Nan Blakstone" (Random Album II). A further session in December, again using Raymond Ladouceur (shown as "Ramum" on Jubilee) on second piano, produced what was known as "The Hush Hush Album", which featured the following six tunes, coupled as shown -

- Life on Donkey Island HH 1B, Jubilee HH 1
- Blakstone's Torch Song HH 3A
- He Should Have Been a WAC HH 3B
- Blakstone's Secret Passion HH 2B, Jubilee HH 1
- My Boyfriend Elmer HH 2A
- Let's Fall in Love HH 1A

The Hush Hush Album foundered due to a combination of insufficient working capital and haphazard distribution. The sides were reissued subsequently by Jubilee Records as one side of a long-playing record, with four numbers by Dwight Fiske on the reverse, and entitled "Tongue with Cheek". A total of 39 tunes was cut at the late 1947 sessions, but many remained unissued probably because the record industry was in the doldrums.

In June 1949 Nan Blakstone suffered a stroke, but recovered sufficiently to be back performing at the Catalina Lounge in Houston by the end of that year, although from then on she appears to have been in semi-retirement. She died suddenly of a cerebral haemorrhage on September 24, 1951, aged just forty-nine.

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