

# So You Want To Get To Know Doc Berendsohn?

## 20 Essential Recordings by a New Orleans Jazz Pioneer

by Colin Hancock

The multi-instrumentalist Bernhard "Doc" Berendsohn left us with some fun and fascinating recordings made in the short window of his time living in New York in the late 10s and early 20s. His records leave us with a mix of hard-driving New Orleans style cornet, fluid proto-Rap and declamatory gaspipe clarinet, and bel-canto saxophone work, but throughout it all the phrasing and musical intentions are all Doc. Still, for the untrained set of ears, pinning him down can be tough. This set of 20 of his finest sides aims to make it a bit easier, and introduce listeners to someone else who "was there" at the beginning of our music.

### 1. *Slow and Easy* – "Louisiana Five" (Columbia, 1919)

Although Doc Berendsohn's only made two commercial recordings on the cornet (both with the "Louisiana Five" in 1919 for Columbia Records), they reveal a lot about his musicianship, and the role of the cornet in New Orleans music before the "Original Dixieland Jass Band". Clean, and full of attack and raggy anticipatory syncopations, his sound on the brass instrument would later inform his declamatory approach to the clarinet. *Slow and Easy* follows a melody nearly identical to the old New Orleans favorite *Don't Go 'way Nobody*, a tune closely associated with Buddy Bolden. Berendsohn and clarinetist Alcide "Yellow" Nunez share the lead duties, sometimes doubling, sometimes alternating second duties. Berendsohn really steps out during the middle of the performance.

### 2. *Zowie* – "Lindsay McPhail's Orchestra of Chicago" (Olympic, 1921)

Berendsohn's first recording on the clarinet occurred in New York as a member of Chicago pianist Lindsay McPhail's ensemble. Performing McPhail's raggy, multi-strain piece *Zowie*, Berendsohn once again splits the lead duties, but this time from the clarinet chair. His plummy tone and distinctive articulation are in full display, as is his unique blend on New Orleans tinged novelty. Many of the tricks and effects he uses on this recording were likely a part of McPhail's arrangement, instructed by the leader for Berendsohn to play. But make no mistake, his breaks in the patten and at the end of the piece are true New Orleans, as is the trombonist (could it be Siegmund?).

### 3. *Memphis Blues* – "Lanin's Southern Serenaders" (Arto, 1921)

W. C. Handy's *The Memphis Blues* was already an oldie by the time "Lanin's Southern Serenaders" recorded it in the summer of 1921, and their performance of the tune is as comfortable as a nicely broken in pair of shoes. Berendsohn's ensemble counterpoint is phenomenal here, lacking any of the novelty of the McPhail session, and showing that he was more than capable of playing more seriously. His solo over the final strain towards the end of the record shows a more fluid tone than usual, and his soaring ensemble in the chorus that follows further proves this.

### 4. *Shake It and Break It* - "Lanin's Southern Serenaders" (Emerson, 1921)

Perhaps Berendsohn's most famous recording is the "Lanin's Southern Serenaders" rendition of xylophonist Lou Chiha Frisco's multi-strain masterpiece *Shake It and Break It*. The band's rendition of the tune is tightly executed and intricate,

with Berendsohn's playing particularly memorable. His clarinet floats, skips, and "pops" over Phil Napoleon's lead and Miff Mole's gliding trombone.

### 5. *Aunt Hagar's Children Blues* - "Lanin's Southern Serenaders" (Emerson, 1921)

Flip your copy of *Shake It and Break It* over and you'll hear W. C. Handy's *Aunt Hager's Children Blues*. Another of Berendsohn's most famous recordings, the clarinetist is given a few solo spots to shine during the main theme of the tune. This is another highly rehearsed performance, executed crisply and further proof of the quality of Berendsohn's playing.

### 6. *Wimmin (I Got To Have 'Em That's All)* – "Bailey's Lucky Seven" (Gennett, 1921)

Sam Lanin's recording group "Bailey's Lucky Seven" made their recording debut by teaming up Berendsohn with alto saxophonist Loren "Mac" McMurray. The two musicians worked closely together for the next year, and were heavy influences on each other from the start. *Wimmin'* is a reed extravaganza. After Mac leads the verse with Berendsohn's weaving clarinet lines wailing and running amuck, the clarinetist switches to either alto or c-melody saxophone for the melody. As Berendsohn moans it out, now Mac is doing the dancing around. Embellishing Berendsohn's tart lead with infectious syncopated slap tonguing. For the next chorus, Mac switches back to lead as Berendsohn switches again to his clarinet. After another verse, the two go all out, culminating with a fine New Orleans-style phrase laid out by Berendsohn at the very end.

### 7. *Muscle Shoals Blues* – "Harry Raderman's Jazz Orchestra" (Okeh, 1921)

Mac and Berendsohn were teamed up together again at the Okeh studios in October of 1921, resulting in some of their best work together. *Muscle Shoals Blues* gives Berendsohn tons of great breaks, ensemble, and even two back-to-back solo choruses on the second strain of the melody. Notice the clarinetist's trills and mild use of gaspipe effects on his breaks. Berendsohn was clearly a showman in addition to a fine musician, and this recording shows just how much fun he must have had filling both roles.





*Bailey's Lucky Seven in Gennett's New York Studios, February 10, 1923. Courtesy of Mark Berresford. Probable personnel ( L-R):- Sam Lanin (pretending to blow clarinet), unknown, not Loren McMurray [he died in October 1922] or Benny Krueger), Nick Lucas (not Eddie Lang as has been conjectured), Phil Napoleon (with back to camera), Joe Lanin, Miff Mole, Jules Levy Jr. Note the cymbal on the stool in front of Lucas - played by Sam Lanin? I'm grateful to Elizabeth Knight, granddaughter of Joe Lanin for identifying him as the pianist.*

**8. *How Many Times* – “Bailey’s Lucky Seven” (Gennett, 1921)**      **10. *On the Gin, Gin, Ginny Shore* – “Bailey’s Lucky Seven” (Gennett, 1922)**

Berendsohn’s fluid clarinet counterpoint on the “Bailey’s Lucky Seven” rendition of *How Many Times* strikes listeners within the first few seconds of the tune. His lines intertwine beautifully with the rest of the band, particularly alto saxophonist Loren McMurray. Their gliding interplay makes the entire record a treat, from the buoyant first statement of the chorus, to the chorus with Berendsohn’s saxophone lead and Mac’s counterpoint, to the breaks in the final ride-out.

**9. *In My Heart, On My Mind, All Day Long* – “Bailey’s Lucky Seven” (Gennett, 1921)**

One of the best opportunities to hear Berendsohn’s hearty and soulful saxophone sound is on the Bailey’s Lucky Seven recording of *In My Heart, On My Mind, All Day Long*. Unlike most Bailey’s Lucky Seven recordings to feature Berendsohn, the record emphasizes his horn more than McMurray’s thanks in part to the recording balance (Berendsohn was likely placed closer to the horn due to his solo), as well as the nature of the arrangement the band uses. Berendsohn emanates a staid and almost melancholic solo with light playing behind him from Mac. Then during the final chorus, he switches to some beautiful and quintessentially New Orleans-school clarinet.

A big hit in early 1922, *On the Gin, Gin, Ginny Shore* has seen many fine versions, but few reach the syncopated jauntiness that the Bailey’s Lucky Seven version achieves. It also gives us a great opportunity to hear Berendsohn’s ability to create an musical arch with his playing. His clarinet playing sparkles in the first chorus, and after a smooth statement of the melody on the saxophone in a duet with Loren McMurray, his playing becomes bubbly in the verse, before borderline acidic in a fiery out chorus.

**11. *I Wonder Blues* – “Bailey’s Lucky Seven vocal by Chalk Smith” (Gennett 1922)**

It’s a shame that Doc Berendsohn didn’t record with more vocalists, but the few recordings he did make with them are excellent. One such example is the strutting and loose Bailey’s Lucky Seven rendition of *I Wonder Blues*. While Berendsohn doesn’t step out into the forefront, his supple and tasteful ensemble playing adds a lot to the texture and overall bounce of the recording.

**12. *Kicky Koo (You For Me, Me For You)* – Bailey’s Lucky Seven (Gennett, 1922)**

The beautiful sentimental pop song *Kicky Koo* shows Berendsohn’s abilities as a section man on saxophone, as well

as his improved agility on the instrument during his time with Lanin. From his crisp break towards the beginning of the tune, to his finely executed counter-rhythms with McMurray behind the trombone and banjo solos, Berendsohn pushes the band throughout the performance. His quick switch to clarinet towards the end is also a nice touch.

**13. Lonesome Mama Blues – Lanin’s Famous Players (Federal, 1922)**

The late Kansas City composer Billie Brown scored a posthumous hit with her composition *Lonesome Mama Blues*. During a rare Sam Lanin-organized session for Federal Records with Berendsohn and Mac again on reeds, the tune was given one of its finest treatments. Though Mac gets the solo, Berendsohn’s ensemble playing is gorgeous, particularly during the second statement of the chorus after his saxophone duet with Mac. The quality of the recording also provides a fine chance to hear Berendsohn’s woody vibrato, another nod to his New Orleans roots.

**14. Nobody Lied – “Bailey’s Lucky Seven with Cliff Edwards” (Gennett, 1922)**

The explosive rendition of *Nobody Lied* by Bailey’s Lucky Seven is one of the finest versions of the tune ever recorded for several reasons. Cliff Edwards’ eefing vocal effects are a welcome change from the usual instrumental nature of the band’s repertoire, as is the use of a guitar by the band’s banjoist behind him (possibly Nick Lucas, a regular with the group). McMurray contributes a fantastic slap tongue break in the first chorus and his lead playing is just killer. Berendsohn is equally important, employing some of his finest saxophone counterpoint to Mac’s lead, and executing his parts perfectly. Of course, it wouldn’t be a “Bailey’s Lucky Seven” record without some of his crazy clarinet antics towards the end of the performance, which starts with a spine-tingling high Bb.

**15. Hot Lips – “Bailey’s Lucky Seven” (Gennett, 1922)**

One of Berendsohn’s most wild and memorable clarinet choruses occurs at the end of the “Bailey’s Lucky Seven” recording of Henry Busse’s *Hot Lips*. Mixing his New Orleans roots with a novelty and mildly gaspipe style, his rhythmic inflection is as pointed as it is fluid, with emphasis on the syncopated nature of his phrases.

**16. What More Do You Want? – “Dixie Daisies” (Cameo, 1922)**

The first few sessions by the “Dixie Daisies” on the fledgling Cameo Records label featured Berendsohn in some of his best ensemble playing. The clarinetist’s lines on the Isham Jones composition *What More Do You Want?* prance in syncopated glory, almost taunting the melody. His sound is whimsical and carefree, yet locked into a solid chugging groove propelled by the band’s rhythm section. This approach nods both to his New Orleans roots and to a similar approach taken by Loren

McMurray on his sides with Mike Markels’ Orchestra. Berendsohn’s burst of energy coming out of the piano solo lights the rest of the record up.

**17. ‘Way Down Yonder in New Orleans – “Dixie Daisies” (Cameo, 1922)**

In a nod to his hometown, Berendsohn’s performance with the “Dixie Daisies” of *‘Way Down Yonder in New Orleans* (one of his last on record) stays close to his musical roots in that city. The clarinetist entwines relaxed counterpoint lines during the verse, then switches to even more serpentine low register accompaniment to the saxophone’s melody during the chorus. His reedy low register solo, a favorite device of the clarinetist, is a highlight, as are his energetic breaks during the bridge of the final chorus.

**18. Beale Street Mama – “Sister Harris and Her Nubian Five”**

Accompanied by a contingent of the “Dixie Daisies”, vocalist “Sister” Lillian Harris made a series of stellar records for Pathé Actuelle in early 1923. Of these, *Beale Street Mama* offers the best playing by Doc and some of his most relaxed on record. His fluid style comes to the forefront, particularly during the ensemble chorus in which he plays a beautiful and rhythmically exciting break. He also shows his capabilities as an accompanist, playing just the right amount to back Harris’ vocalizing.

**19. Sugar Blues – “Sister Harris and Her Nubian Five”**

It’s virtually impossible to imagine a bad performance of the classic blues selection *Sugar Blues*. One of the most underrated versions surely must be Lillian Harris’ rendition for Pathé. Unlike her version with the “Original New Orleans Jazz Band” for Plaza (which is also great!), she takes the Pathé with the “Dixie Daisies” at a nice “trot” tempo. Berendsohn’s fluid playing weaves around the rest of the band, and once again he throws in a break straight out of the New Orleans tradition during a fine band ensemble chorus.

**20. Bees Knees – “Dixie Daisies” (Cameo, 1923)**

For fans of Berendsohn in a more fluid manner, his playing on the “Dixie Daisies” version of the Ted Lewis and Ray Lopez (a fellow New Orleans pioneer) song *Bees Knees* is a real treat. His reading of the stock parts is smooth, but it’s when he improvises counterpoint that his abilities to play in a more relaxed way than he is often given credit is really shown. Rather than a fiery last chorus, he playing is calm and assured, making the band glide rather than cascade.

Many of these recordings will soon be available on the upcoming Archeophone release *The Moaniest Moan Of Them All*, dedicated Doc’s friend the alto saxophonist Loren McMurray. See <https://www.archeophone.com/catalogue/loren-mcmurray-moaniest-moan/> for further details.

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